

POLICY PAPER

Transnational and Interregional Cooperation under the new ESF programming period and in the framework of the integration of European regional development policies

Brussels, March 2011



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Preamble

This paper aims to contribute to the current reflection on future orientations of the European Social Fund (ESF) in the field of **Transnational and Interregional Cooperation**.

The European Commission stated that “to achieve transformational change, the *Europe 2020 strategy will need more focus, clear goals and transparent benchmarks for assessing progress*. This will require a strong governance framework that harnesses the instruments at its disposal to ensure timely and effective implementation” (Europe 2020 Strategy. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth: 29). It also stated that “regional and local authorities should implement the partnership, closely associating parliaments, as well as social partners and representatives of civil society, contributing to the elaboration of national reform programmes as well as to its implementation” (31).

These principles should also be applied to Transregional and Interregional cooperation.

1. Promoting cooperation between regional governments

- 1.1. The Regions believe that the new Regulation should ensure that transnational cooperation **continues to be part and parcel of the ESF**, by primarily focusing it on the concrete development of cooperation measures supporting the final beneficiaries of the foreseen actions, and also by focusing it on the development of mutual learning measures and the exchange of good practices.
- 1.2. In the future, **all the regions of the Union should be able to avail themselves of an operational programme** allowing them to develop a cooperation policy between the Regions. Cooperation between the Regions will be the political answer to the economic relationships that already interlink the different local productive systems and their related labour markets. Regional governments cooperate with each other both to foster the internationalisation of their economies and societies, and also to adopt political decisions based on the evidence generated by experiences carried out elsewhere.
- 1.3. Reinforcing interregional cooperation is a prerequisite in order to overcome some of the weaknesses of the Lisbon strategy and **adopt a more decentralised community strategy for growth and employment** leveraging on the potential of regions and cities, which, due to their competencies, are the main driving forces for innovation, research and education in Europe. (CoR, White Paper of the Committee of the Regions on the multilevel governance, 2009:22)
- 1.4. Interregional cooperation is also required for the implementation of the community objective of **territorial cohesion** and, therefore, for the future of common policies. As underlined by the Committee of the Regions, the scope of territorial cohesion has to comprise three dimensions: a corrective dimension, aimed at “reducing existing disparities”; a preventive dimension to “improve the coherence of sectoral policies having

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- a territorial impact”; and a third dimension which has to be an incentive “strengthening territorial integration by fostering cooperation” (CoR: 24).
- 1.5. An increased level of cooperation would be hindered by the use of rigid instruments that would not take into consideration the different specific ways in which the ESF is managed in the different countries. The new instruments have to be closely related to the operational Programmes and to the programming of each country/region. For all these reasons, it is necessary to be open to **a wide range of implementing instruments** – which have been partly tested during the 2007-2013 programming period – allowing for transnational cooperation to be actually implemented.
 - 1.6. By way of example, during the current programming period, many States and Regions have experienced the usefulness of resorting to a **system of cooperation agreements (also bilaterally) between States/Regions**. These agreements are intended to develop cooperation on issues bearing an interest for different countries/regions, in the framework of the strategic orientations that these states/regions are committed to achieve through the European Social Fund.
 - 1.7. The topics will be those **referred to by the European Social Fund and foreseen in the various operational Programmes**. Each State/Region autonomously identifies its own priorities which can then be shared with other States/Regions according to the undersigned agreements.
 - 1.8. In order to ensure that transnational cooperation policies are effectively implemented, it is necessary to find ways of coordinating and integrating the different European funds (ERDF, LLLP), thus overcoming the current scattering of funds amongst multiple non-harmonised decision-making centres. **All the European funds and programmes as a whole should be guided by a multilevel governance approach**, particularly with regard to education, training and employment policies which fall within the competencies of regional Governments and Local Authorities.

2. Fostering territorial cooperation and supporting it through solid services

- 2.1. The Commission can play an important role in promoting cooperation between Member States and Regions, while respecting the priorities contained in the Programmes. It can also do so by strengthening the role of Contact Points, provided they are open to all the political stakeholders in charge of Operational Programmes. There should be three types of basic instruments:
 - a. Incentives and meetings aimed at **promoting several cooperation networks**, which can either be of institutional and thematic nature, or connected to specific economic sectors. The Regions, particularly those encountering greater difficulties in giving an international dimension to their ESF programmes, should be assisted to establish relationships with other regional Governments and managing authorities. No region should be left without support.
 - b. Networking services between Regions which are ready to engage in interregional cooperation policies. It is necessary to minimize the difficulties associated with the setting-up of institutional partnerships. **Supporting the establishment of partnerships** should ensure the availability of a series of specialised share points capable of connecting different institutional stakeholders according to their own priorities.

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- c. Benchmarking services leading to the drafting of **Regional Joint Reports on the implementation of each of the Europe 2020 targets** in the fields of social, education and labour policies included in the Operational Programmes. The Regions should be able to make use of a statistical tool covering all their policies related to the Europe 2020 Strategy and enabling them to make a comparative analysis of the impact of their regional policies. In this respect, it will be possible to develop forms of Soft Open Method of Co-ordination fostering policy learning and policy transfer processes with regard to the different priorities of the same regional policies.

3. A European middle-term plan to enhance investments over the next three years

- 3.1. Given the flexibility of the ESF Regulation, Member States have chosen different ways to implement transnational cooperation in their Operational Programmes:
 - 47 Operational Programmes in 7 Member States have a priority axis on transnationality;
 - 6 Member States have included dedicated measures in one of their programmes;
 - For more than half of the Operational Programmes, Managing Authorities have adopted an horizontal approach giving the possibility to fund transnational activities in one or several priority axes.
- 3.2. The next few years preceding the actual start of a new programming period (2014) will have to be characterised by the **revitalisation of the support functions which are necessary to favour joint work between interested regional and national governments**. It would be unreasonable to wait until the next programming period before implementing adequate strategies to relaunch Transnationality. It is necessary that the right conditions are urgently created so that the Regions can maximize the results obtained from such investments, thus avoiding waste or reallocation of resources.
- 3.3. For all these reasons, we call upon the Commission to urgently define an **Action Plan in order to enhance the positive results obtained during the first difficult programming period** and adopt actions capable of maximising the resources and the results that will be deployed over the next three years. This Plan should include concrete support measures, services and actions aimed at promoting cooperation between the authorities in charge of operational programmes.
- 3.4. The experience gained during the 2007-2013 programming period is showing that the **ESF can be used to stimulate demand and increase the opportunities to study, work and do business abroad**. At the same time, the ESF can play an important role in giving new momentum to those policies which are capable of ensuring the right of citizens to live and work in another European country and which support internationalisation processes, particularly for small enterprises. The coming years have to be used to ensure that all the authorities which have chosen Transnationality as their priority axis can benefit from the added-value it will generate in the near future.

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