

Recommendations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework

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Recommendations for improved transnationality, social policy experimentation and social innovation in ESF+

These recommendations represent the views of the staff of the ESF Transnational Platform Team and are not to be regarded as the official position of the European Commission. ESF Transnational Platform is a project managed by AEIDL.

Key recommendations:

- Transnationality should be continued in the frame of ESF+. This was a clear message from the conference “Investing in people – The way forward” in Sofia. In the next programming period, **a percentage for social innovation and transnationality should be ring-fenced** - which should be **obligatory for all Member States (MSs)** - to foster mutual learning and exchange of good practices. This would also contribute to developing and consolidating a European identity among citizens of different MSs and would make the financial support the EU offers to its citizens more visible.
- However, although transnationality can foster innovation, it does not automatically create social innovation. The two concepts have to be very clearly distinguished.
- Transnationality should have a more prominent role in the next programming period. It should be better used not only to exchange ideas, practices, and policies, but also to **develop and test new approaches between different MSs** (example of EE and FI having organised joint training for high officials on service design). At the same time, sharing of best practices and mutual learning through transnationality should also be enhanced.
- The **European Commission should facilitate the better involvement of the political level** and higher officials of MSs and MAs in transnationality and in engaging in meaningful partnerships at national, regional and local levels. Political willingness and champions in administrations and MAs are necessary to foster genuine transnationality and to put in place dynamic partnerships, which otherwise tend to become box-ticking exercises. This includes facilitating MAs commitment when they decide to become lead a Thematic Network. Officials participating in the meetings of the transnational Thematic Networks are not necessarily represented by MA managers who sit on the Monitoring Committees. In MAs there is too much focus on indicators and results-based measurement rather than on learning, testing and transferring good practices from other countries.
- The European Commission should also facilitate that the **officials who participate in the Thematic Networks are active in the policy areas that are being discussed** during the meetings, and that participation is not limited from the Ministry responsible for the ESF, for instance by raising the issue at the ESF Committee.
- In the current programming period, with so many Operational Programmes (OPs) it has been difficult to focus on common objectives and priorities in the framework of transnationality. If in the next programming period the number of OPs is not decreased, an idea could be that MAs from one MS cluster different projects on common themes and then facilitate contacts with project promoters from other countries on the same themes, in cooperation with MAs from other countries and Technical Assistance.
- **“Retro-innovation” should have a place in transnationality.** Project promoters often feel that they are in the position of reinventing the wheel. If one project works in one country, it should be replicated in another country to see if it is transferable. For

example, good ESF projects on deinstitutionalisation, homelessness and early school-leaving should be disseminated and replicated elsewhere, so as to encourage more focused spending of ESF for social inclusion.

- **ESF+ could contribute to scaling up good practices funded not only by the ESF, but also by other programmes** such as EaSI and Erasmus+. In the same way, good practices funded through the ESF could be scaled up using other programmes. The reason is that project promoters tend to apply for the same funds.
- **ESF+ could more strategically use transnationality to have a greater focus on programmes that add value**, build on lessons learnt, and encourage experimentation and innovation that would otherwise not take place.
- **One online search portal** could be developed **to improve access to information about projects**, experiments and social innovations, for all EU funds and across all funds.
- More effort should be made by the European Commission, the ESF Committee, MAs and technical assistance to **ensure better mainstreaming of results across projects and countries**. Interviews with beneficiaries on lessons learnt and short videos about projects could also increase dissemination and mutual learning.
- **Key features of the Equal programme**, such as flexibility, partnership approach and transnationality, should be reproduced in ESF+. Equal also had **a three-step process** (partnership building at national/regional level, implementation, mainstreaming) which was very useful and which could be replicated.
- It is essential to **fund cross-sectoral partnerships** (horizontal and vertical) and networking, as well as new types of partnerships, and enable all actors to be involved in programmes. Grants should be allocated to the aim of developing partnerships at local level, involving users and small organisations, as was done with Equal.
- **Sustainability of interventions** should be ensured. Sustainability beyond EU funding needs to be part of the planning from the beginning. Pilot projects showing a positive impact should be made sustainable with appropriate funding.
- Transnationality could be improved by:
 - organising capacity building for Managing Authorities (MAs) through Technical Assistance and supporting exchanges and mutual learning
 - setting up support structures
 - combining social innovation and transnationality together (although social innovation should be possible also at national level only)
 - ensuring more flexibility in the rules and fostering trust towards beneficiaries
 - strengthening exchange and collaboration between practitioners at national and transnational levels
 - more peer-reviews could be organised.
- A major tool that is lacking in the transnationality of this programming period is the **creation and animation of “shadow” thematic networks at national level**, bringing together ESF project managers and relevant stakeholders to share good practice and approaches to tackling common issues. This seemed to work better in the past. Another reason is that there are limited dedicated funds for the involvement of national stakeholders in the work of the transnational networks. At the same time, it seems that MAs’ funds for transnationality are not spent. The Commission could facilitate a better use of funds by MAs, including for this purpose.

- As the **process of setting up coordinated transnational calls for proposals** can be cumbersome for MAs and can discourage MS from engaging in transnational calls, it is recommended that in the next programming period this process is **simplified**. A proposal could be that transnationality stays under direct management by the European Commission – which could be outsourced to an external agency.
- **Better synergies should be developed between transnationality and Macro-Regional Strategies (MRSs)**. MRSs and transnationality should be more mainstreamed in the OPs. A separate priority axis for transnationality and MRSs and innovation could be envisaged in the next regulation. MRSs are explicitly mentioned only in the CPR, while the ESF regulation only mentions transnationality.

Recommendations on the links between transnationality, social policy experimentation and social innovation:

- Transnationality should also play an enhanced role in shifting from social policy experimentation to scaling up social innovations. In order to do so, funding should be available from conception to capitalisation, including evaluation of good practices before testing them elsewhere.
- It should be avoided that administrative rules and financial requirements become a straitjacket that hinders social experimentation and innovation. Thinking and implementing outside the box should be allowed by ensuring flexibility in the rules, by also allowing the funding of integrated policy approaches with only one fund (as was possible within Equal), as submission of projects with different funds is very complex.
- ESF+ should bring added value. Therefore, the potential of ESF should be tested in more risky interventions. Failure should be allowed and funding should not be withdrawn. Projects should start from needs, which if successful should have an impact on policies. Where necessary, ESIF rules should be adapted and updated to make policy change possible.
- Co-design and co-creation of programmes in partnership is crucial to put effective approaches in place and redesign services, including integrated services. The focus should be on building sustainable solutions and better monitoring of results by the means of social indicators. Capacity building actions should support co-design and co-creation.
- An auditing and evaluation culture is needed that focuses on results for beneficiaries instead of compliance with detailed regulation and is based on simpler, more flexible and more focused procedures and tools. Participatory evaluation approaches should also be developed. Focus should be on qualitative evaluation instead of quantitative.
- A common methodology should be developed to measure social impact. The work done by the sub-group on measuring impact of the Commission's Expert Group on Social Entrepreneurship could be used as starting point.
- To measure social change, a longer timeframe for projects would be needed (in Equal it was 3 years).

Recommendations to further focus the ESF 20% earmarking on poverty and social exclusion

These recommendations are part of the report “Social inclusion indicators for ESF investments – Areas for development in addressing the 20% social inclusion target in the ESF” which has been written by Fintan Farrell and Patrizia Brandellero, ESF Thematic Experts on Inclusion, through discussions in the ESF Thematic Network Inclusion (TNI) as part of the ESF Transnational Platform. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of all the participants in the TNI, nor the views of the European Commission.

The following suggestions are put forward to secure a greater focus on socially excluded groups and people experiencing poverty, exclusion and discrimination and to further target the earmarked 20% to ensure an actual impact on levels of poverty and social exclusion.

General processes/policies:

- Ensure that a **Poverty reduction target** is maintained as part of the general framework shaping the present and future ESF programme, in order to ensure visibility and ambition for the fight against poverty and social exclusion and to ensure that the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is aimed at a reduction in poverty (Pillar Principles no. 6, 11, 12, 19 etc.) and inequality (Pillar Principle no. 3).
- Increasing levels of in-work poverty demonstrate that while employment remains an important vehicle of social inclusion, it is not the panacea to social problems, nor it is enough to protect people from hardship. On the one hand, there are people in our societies who cannot work for a shorter or longer period of time, or need adjustments and reasonable accommodations in order to be able to take up a job in the open labour market. On the other, earning a wage is not always sufficient to protect employed people from experiencing poverty and social exclusion. For these reasons it is recommended that **social inclusion be recognised as an objective in its own right** and not just an objective in relation to employment. Therefore, the system of social indicators should be well balanced in order to take into account the importance of this objective and to ensure a) that it is well represented in the system of common indicators (annex I), at least, and b) that a good monitoring/evaluation system is set up to ensure that the impact of actions in terms of social inclusion can be well measured and evaluated.
- **Earmarking of European Social Fund spending towards promoting social inclusion and combating poverty** must continue. It is recommended that, as a minimum, 30% of ESF spending in the future funding period is ring fenced for combating poverty, social exclusion and discrimination while ensuring that in real terms the funding available for this objective is at least on a par with the current ESF programming period.
- The **Active Inclusion approach** for measures fighting poverty, exclusion and discrimination, should be encouraged in order to support all vulnerable groups that are facing poverty and are excluded from the labour market. This includes persons with disabilities, homeless people, ethnic minorities, people with drug and alcohol dependency, family carers and other long-term unemployed people, prisoners and ex-prisoners and those who need support in access to services, including community-based services, and social protection, as well as in participating in society (e.g. families - including single parents, children, older people, migrants, ethnic minorities, undocumented people etc.) and people living in geographical or communities of interest experiencing poverty, exclusion or discrimination.

- **For the purpose of ensuring a clearer focus, it is recommended that in the context of ESF spending the following definition of Social inclusion** be used: *“Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights”*¹.
- Ensure that **ex-ante conditionality** in relation to social inclusion is maintained, strengthened and given more prominence and monitored for actual impact both at the regulatory and programming level. Currently an ex-ante conditionality is applied on the existence and implementation of a national strategic policy framework for poverty reduction aiming at active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. These strategic policy frameworks are currently drawn up in the preparation phase of the programming, which by definition is a time-limited and intensive period when it is difficult to achieve deep stakeholder engagement. The new ESF period should encourage these National strategies to be further developed during the implementation period of the Funds, with active stakeholder participation supported using the Funds. This should also include engagement in the implementation, evaluation and review of the strategies. Furthermore, poverty reduction should be decoupled from social inclusion. Exclusion is not a problem only in countries with high levels of poverty. For example, institutionalisation exists throughout the EU and not only in the twelve Member States to which the ex-ante conditionality is currently applicable. The next programming period should therefore secure that this ex-ante conditionality applies to all Member States.
- Investment under all thematic objectives should be aligned to the ex-ante conditionality on social inclusion. Currently, investments in institutions continue under the thematic objectives on energy efficiency, digitalisation and transport.
- Develop a focus not only on programmes tackling individuals who experience poverty, exclusion or discrimination but also a focus on inclusive **community development**. The Community Led Local Development instrument should be used as a model to develop area-based social inclusion strategies based on a needs analysis to address geographical communities and communities of interest (for example: children and adults in institutions, Roma/Travellers, people with disabilities, single parents..) who experience high levels of poverty and exclusion.
- Employment and training will remain a key focus for ESF. In the new period the focus must be on the **quality of the employment** addressing concerns about low wages, precariousness of contracts, an over-focus on activation, and the priority given to economic aims as opposed to people’s needs. A clear focus must be put on narrowing the gap to the labour market for those currently far from the labour market. Data should be collected on vulnerable groups and their access to projects aiming to improve the quality of employment, with special regard to persons with disabilities, women, migrants, Roma and others.
- The current approach to **investing in social economy and social enterprises** should be kept and developed in the next MFF with the objectives of promoting social inclusion, fighting poverty and supporting the integration in the labour market and the other wide range of economic activities in which social enterprises are now present. We underline the importance to continue this kind of support and we ask Member States to further increase this focus in the next programming period. Relevant investment priorities for social

¹ European Commission (2002), Joint Report on Social Inclusion 2002, Brussels

economy should include the three main objectives of Social Inclusion, employment and Education.

Strengthening the use of Social Indicators:

There is already a huge number of social indicators being used. Thus, the inclusion of additional social indicators or the adjustment of existing indicators must be carefully considered. It is therefore important to focus suggestions on the high-level indicators (common indicators included in the ESF Regulation that all countries have to report on). These high-level indicators could be strengthened from the perspective of social inclusion by the inclusion or adjustment of the existing indicators to include:

- The number of participants engaged that are at or below the risk of poverty and social exclusion indicator
- The extent to which the measures taken has lifted participants above the 40% or the 60% at risk-of-poverty rate
- The number of participants engaged who experience severe material deprivation². For participants aged below 18, child-specific indicators of material deprivation shall apply.³
- % of participants from identifiable disadvantaged groups (e.g. children, disabled persons, lone parents, homeless people, children/minors/adults living in institutions, ethnic minorities, Roma/Travellers, prisoners/ex-prisoners, long term unemployed, people living in segregated settings.....)
- The number of participants who have left institutional-type care settings
- % of participants from geographical areas experiencing high levels of poverty and exclusion
- % of participants who regard the intervention as having improved their situation and their chances to overcome poverty, exclusion and inequalities
- % of participants who reach employment and who self-assess their employment as a quality job.

² The severe material deprivation rate represents the proportion of people living in households that cannot afford at least four of the following nine items: 1) mortgage or rent payments, utility bills, hire purchase instalments or other loan payments; 2) one week's holiday away from home; 3) a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent every second day; 4) unexpected financial expenses; 5) a telephone (including mobile telephone); 6) a colour TV; 7) a washing machine; 8) a car; and 9) heating to keep the home adequately warm.

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3888793/5853037/KS-RA-12-018-EN.PDF/390c5677-90a6-4dc9-b972-82d589df77c2>

Recommendation for changes to Article 5 of the Common Provisions Regulation (1303/2013)

These recommendations have been drafted by Leda Stott, Expert of the Thematic Network on Partnership through discussions in the ESF Thematic Network on Partnership as part of the ESF Transnational Platform. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of all the participants in the Thematic Network, nor the views of the European Commission.

Article 5: Partnership and multi-level governance

1. For the Partnership Agreement and each programme, each Member State shall in accordance with its institutional and legal framework organise a partnership with the competent regional and local authorities. The partnership shall also include the following partners:

- (a) competent urban and other public authorities;
- (b) economic and social partners, **including representatives from Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs), and social economy enterprises;**
- (c) relevant bodies representing civil society including environmental partners, non-governmental organisations, **academic, research and other educational institutions,** bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination, and **non-traditional actors representing vulnerable and marginalised groups and end users at the local level.**

2. In accordance with the multi-level governance approach, the partners referred to in paragraph 1 shall be **actively** involved by Member States in the preparation of Partnership Agreements and progress reports throughout the preparation, implementation and monitoring of programmes. **Involvement should go beyond consultation and enable all stakeholders to contribute fully and meaningfully in programme cycles. Particular efforts should be made to integrate the local voice in programme decision-making through place-based, bottom-up and participative approaches such as Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).**

3. A **revised** European Code of Conduct on Partnership **shall** set out **and strengthen** the framework within which the Member States, in accordance with their institutional and legal framework as well as their national and regional competences, shall pursue the implementation of partnership. The code of conduct, while fully respecting the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, **shall establish and share principles, measures and good practices for:**

- the transparent procedures to be followed for the identification of relevant partners including, **where appropriate, umbrella organisations, networks and coalitions representing end users and target groups that address specific areas relevant for the investment priorities chosen,** in order to facilitate Member States in designating the most representative relevant partners, in accordance with their institutional and legal framework;
- the involvement of the different categories of relevant partners set out in paragraph 1 in the preparation of the Partnership Agreement and programmes, the information to be provided concerning their involvement **with clear timeframes, expectations for different partner contributions and consideration of barriers that might impede participation in particular contexts and programme phases;**

- the formulation of the **rules of membership, engagement and internal procedures** in monitoring committees to be decided, as appropriate, by the Member States or the monitoring committees of programmes in accordance with the relevant provisions of this Regulation and the Fund-specific rules, **including the active representation of the European Commission;**
- cases where the managing authority involves the relevant partners in the preparation of calls for proposals and in particular good practices for avoiding potential conflicts of interest in cases where there is a possibility of relevant partners also being potential beneficiaries;
- **the full** involvement of relevant partners and stakeholders in the preparation of progress reports and in relation to monitoring and evaluation of programmes in accordance with the relevant provisions of this Regulation and the Fund-specific rules so that **partners are involved more proactively and appropriately;**
- how the competent authorities of the Member States may use the ESI Funds, including technical assistance **and other relevant means, to provide partnership skills training for managing authorities, partners and stakeholders** as well as to build and **strengthen the institutional capacity of those partners who are unable to contribute effectively to ESIF programmes and projects due to lack of resources, skills, confidence or adequate time**, in accordance with the relevant provisions of this Regulation and the Fund-specific rules;
- the promotion of **learning exchanges within, between and across multiple levels so that the knowledge gained from partnership experiences (both good and bad) is used to inform future developments.**

The provisions of the code of conduct shall not in any way contradict the relevant provisions of this Regulation or the Fund-specific rules.

4. The Commission shall notify the delegated act of **this Article and the European Code of Conduct on Partnership** simultaneously to the European Parliament and to the Council by **(insert date)**. That delegated act shall not specify a date of application that is earlier than the date of its adoption.

5. An infringement of any obligation imposed on Member States **by this Article and the European Code of Conduct on Partnership shall** not constitute an irregularity leading to a financial correction pursuant to Article 85.

6. At least once a year, for each ESI Fund, the Commission shall consult the organisations which represent the partners at Union level on the implementation of support from that ESI Fund and shall report to the European Parliament and the Council on the outcome.

Initial recommendations for changes to Common Provisions Regulation (1303/2013) and European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)

These recommendations have been drafted by Leda Stott, Expert of the Thematic Network on Partnership through discussions in the ESF Thematic Network on Partnership as part of the ESF Transnational Platform. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of all the participants in the Thematic Network, nor the views of the European Commission.

Between February 2017 and February 2018, the Thematic Network on Partnership conducted a peer review of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP). The aims of the review were to assess the usefulness of the ECCP; learn more about the challenges encountered in its implementation, and develop recommendations to embed the partnership principle into the next European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) programming period (2021-27). Data was gathered from a review of available literature; feedback from members of other Transnational Thematic Networks⁴ and from the ESIF Structured Dialogue process,⁵ and from a survey conducted amongst European Social Fund (ESF) Programme Monitoring Committees (PMCs). The review also sought to raise awareness, promote consistency of approach to implementing the ECCP across the ESIF⁶ and offer examples of how the partnership principle can add value to programmes and positively impact policy-making. This short paper provides a summary of initial recommendations derived from our findings. It will be followed by a more detailed report that includes illustrative examples of the partnership principle in action.

The rationale for partnership

The reasons for a focus on partnership in the ESIF have been well-documented.⁷ Working in partnership we can achieve improved:

- **Focus and coordination:** By harnessing the perspectives and resources of different societal actors the gaps, needs and priorities relating to Europe's development challenges are more clearly identified, and approaches that better incorporate the perspectives of end users and target groups created to address them. Policy coordination can also be synchronised so that the reach of projects and programmes is expanded and duplication avoided.
- **Access to resources and innovative approaches:** A range of diverse contributions can be obtained from different stakeholders to address particular problems and challenges, and to develop more creative and dynamic approaches to societal challenges.
- **Institutional strengthening, capacity building and empowerment:** Through opportunities for building and improving strategic, operative and human capacity to overcome resources/size/skills limitations, those who are disadvantaged and/or marginalised can gain a stronger voice in the political arena and assume a more proactive role in addressing issues that affect them.

⁴ Responses were received from Managing Authorities and other stakeholders in Belgium/Flanders, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden, as well as at EU level.

⁵ From members such as CEE Bankwatch, European Network for Independent Living (ENIL), EuroChild, European University Association (EUA), German Social Welfare Organisations, Lumos and REVES.

⁶ Feedback was received from PMC members in the following Member States: Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden.

⁷ See: [Guidebook: How ESF Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies Support Partnership](#), 2008.

- **Legitimacy, stability and sustainability:** A more democratic policy ‘mandate’ is gained through broader stakeholder involvement, more participatory approaches to problem-solving and the generation of social capital. The inclusion of different organisations, groups and citizens in design, implementation and monitoring processes contributes to the durable and positive change that is the basis of a more cohesive society.

Partnership in current ESIF regulations (2014-20)

ESIF regulations for the 2014-20 reinforce the importance of the partnership principle with calls for new and improved avenues for integrating stakeholder views into policy design and implementation, and the promotion of more robust connections between policy and practice. The **Common Provisions Regulation** (1303/2013) establishes guidelines for both Partnership Agreements and programmes across the ESIF. While stressing the importance of respect for the principles of subsidiarity, proportionality, and different institutional and legal frameworks, Partnership Agreements in each Member State are required to support an integrated approach to territorial development and alignment with the EU Growth Strategy “in cooperation with its partners, and in dialogue with the Commission” (Clause 20). Article 5 of the Regulation focuses on partnership and multi-level governance and calls for the inclusion in Partnership Agreements and programmes of representatives from “competent regional, local, urban and other public authorities, economic and social partners and other relevant bodies representing civil society, including environmental partners, non-governmental organisations and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination, including, where appropriate, the umbrella organisations of such authorities and bodies.” The Commission also commits to sharing key principles and good practices that facilitate assessments of the implementation of partnership and its added value in Member States.

The partnership guidelines outlined in the Common Provisions Regulation are reinforced in the **European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)**. The ECCP is a delegated act which provides common standards for partner involvement in ESIF Partnership Agreements and programme preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Reiterating the need for wider stakeholder involvement across national, regional and local levels to maximise the impact of funds, the key provisions of the ECCP include adequate and appropriate representation of partners mentioned in Article 5 of the Common Regulations (see above) that take competence and capacity for active participation into account (Arts.2-4). Consultation processes with relevant partners are to be conducted in an accessible and timely manner with clarity of information on involvement (Arts.5-9). Membership rules and procedures for monitoring committees are outlined and a call is made for assessment of partner roles in partnership performance and effectiveness during the programming period (Arts.10-16). Strengthening of the institutional capacity of relevant partners is encouraged through capacity building activities that target social partners and civil society organisations involved in programmes (Art.17). Finally, emphasis is placed on the importance of disseminating good practice examples and exchanges of experience in order to promote learning about partnership across the ESIF. The vehicle proposed for this is a transnational thematic network on partnership (Art.18).

Challenges to implementation of the partnership principle

Initial findings from the ECCP review show that while a number of Managing Authorities (MAs) have made real efforts to promote the partnership principle, others have faced a range of problems in its implementation. An important concern is the marked lack of awareness of the ECCP and its principles.⁸ Poor familiarity with the ECCP is translated into a focus on box-

⁸ This may be due to the fact that the ECCP was finalised too late to fully inform the development of Partnership Agreements and Operational Programs the 2014-20 programming period.

ticking rather than the embedding of partnership principles in programmes and projects. The lack of systemic and holistic partnership approaches across ESIF; more robust connections between the levels of policy and practice, and stronger links to an overarching sustainability agenda, is also of concern.

Most of the challenges mentioned in the ECCP review relate to the nature of participation channels and limited opportunities for genuine stakeholder engagement in programme design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. These include concerns around:

- **Representativeness:** Lack of diversity in selection of partners and the involvement of 'usual suspects' rather than 'non-traditional partners', including end users targeted by programmes, who might add new resources and perspectives.
- **Transparency:** Accessible information channels and options for stakeholder engagement are still limited with weak connections and information flow between MAs and Monitoring Committee members, and between national, regional and local levels.
- **Ongoing involvement:** Meaningful stakeholder involvement is often weak, particularly during programme implementation, and frameworks for regional and local engagement, as well as informal involvement, are poor. Moreover, many partners lack the information and skills needed to adequately pursue the establishment and maintenance of 'good' partnership connections.
- **Lack of support:** Not enough attention is given to factors that impede the full and meaningful participation of all partners and stakeholders in programmes and projects. Institutional strengthening and capacity-building efforts are often fragmented and there is also a lack of investment in training and support facilities for working in partnership.
- **Poor assessment and review systems:** Effective systems for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the partnership principle are generally absent. Participatory monitoring and evaluation systems that demonstrate the added benefit of working in partnership are also impeded by lack of resources and/or access to appropriate methodologies and enhanced review systems.
- **Exchange of learning:** Efforts to promote dynamic exchanges of learning about working in partnership across multiple levels have not received full attention, with a particular challenge being ways to make a stronger impact at policy level.

First recommendations to the European Commission

The focus on partnership, and its endorsement in the ECCP, is welcomed and should be continued and strengthened further in the next programming period by including specific provisions in the new Common Provisions Regulation on ESIF. However, in order to ensure the cohesion, ownership and long-term commitment necessary for a **sustainable development** agenda that integrates economic growth, social progress and environmental protection, and transfer of knowledge and learning from across Member States, increased endeavours should be made to **raise awareness about the ECCP**.

While there is ongoing debate with the Thematic Network on Partnership about the extent to which implementation of the ECCP should be mandatory, our findings confirm the importance of an emphasis on the **quality of implementation of partnership principle** and the **inclusion of the perspectives, knowledge and experience of diverse stakeholders in an ongoing manner throughout programme cycles**. To ensure this, greater efforts are required to connect different funds, institutional levels, sectors and policy arenas, as well as better integrate social, economic and environmental perspectives in partnership approaches, proposals and projects.

To implement the partnership principle more meaningfully, an **improved balance between compliance with rules and procedures and the flexibility to generate partnership**

solutions in specific and changing contexts needs to be promoted so that partners and target groups can contribute more meaningfully to the achievement of positive change.

A reinvigorated ECCP with an emphasis on 'doing more partnership better' is needed for this. As well as a **more vibrant depiction of the added value of working in partnership**, meaningful examples of how partnership works in practice should be shared from both programme and project perspectives in different contexts. The **revised ECCP should also be available in good time** so that its guidance can be fully integrated in the forthcoming programme round (2021-27).

The principles enshrined in the ECCP should be made more robust with clarity around:

- What **representativeness** means, and who decides on who is being represented, with encouragement of greater diversity in partner selection and clear procedures for including partners such as: Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs); social economy enterprises; academic, research and other educational institutions; civil society organisations representing youth, people with disabilities, migrants and environmental issues as well as non-traditional partners representing vulnerable and marginalised groups and end users; and networks, coalitions and partnerships focusing on specific areas that are relevant for the investment priorities chosen, particularly at local level. More attention to representation from gender equality and non-discrimination bodies is also necessary. In addition, greater consideration should be given to the relevance, timing and 'fit' of diverse inputs in different contexts and programme phases, with selection based on the most appropriate partners for particular themes and focus areas.
- **Transparency and accessibility** so that educational and other barriers that might be an impediment to engagement are carefully considered. Emphasis should also be placed on transparency in decision-making processes with clearer guidance around timeframes, expectations and opportunities for partner input. MAs should be able to demonstrate that diverse views have been carefully considered and explain the reasons why a particular decision or action has been taken. Furthermore, in addition to rules of procedure for the composition of Monitoring Committees, review processes should provide more clarity around rules of engagement.
- **Ongoing involvement** in all phases of programme development. This needs to be made more explicit so that, in addition to involving partners more fully in the preparation of the Partnership Agreements, Operational Programmes and calls for proposals, and in Monitoring Committees, deeper partner engagement is promoted during implementation. Participation of relevant partners and stakeholders should be foreseen when governments are designing specific strategies required to fulfil ex-ante conditionalities. It should also be made clear that involvement of partners must go beyond consultation and that concerted efforts are needed to integrate the local voice in programme cycles through place-based, bottom-up and participative approaches such as Community Led Local Development (CLLD) and co-production.
- The use of ESIF, through technical assistance and other relevant means, to provide partnership skills training for managing authorities, partners and stakeholders, and to **strengthen the institutional capacity** of those partners who are unable to contribute effectively to ESIF programmes and projects due to lack of resources, skills, confidence or adequate time. It is very important that capacity building for stakeholders is reinforced in the next programming period with clear indicators and budgets for this, especially if the thematic objective of enhancing the institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders is not included in the new regulations.

- **Review and assessment** processes that involve stakeholders more proactively and appropriately, and include European Commission representation on Monitoring Committees. Annual implementation reports should be discussed in the Monitoring Committees with stakeholders, published online and made available for comments. Implementation reports should also share information on how ex-ante conditionalities have been fulfilled and underpin programmes. Learning from review processes should be fed back more coherently into practice with better reporting on the added value of working in partnership in different contexts and at different levels.
- Beyond a commitment from the European Commission and Member States, the responsibility of **all stakeholders** to improve **exchange and learning** about the application of the partnership principle. More proactive information exchange within, between and across multiple levels and funds is necessary for this. Beyond simply making good practices available, ways to learn more strategically from partnership successes **and** failures should be encouraged through measures such as training and peer reviews, with a focus on using the knowledge obtained to inform and improve future developments.