



MAPPING

EURODIACONIA MEMBER INPUT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND

August 2016

Executive Summary

This report highlights the experiences and European Social Fund projects of eight Eurodiaconia members in six countries: Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, the Czech Republic and Romania. It showcases ESF-funded projects of members for different target groups and provides feedback on the implementation of the fund. The projects presented include labour integration measures for parish workers, single mothers, migrants and youth as well as social inclusion projects for disadvantaged children and people with disabilities.

Generally, the ESF was perceived to be a valuable tool in fighting social inequalities in the respective countries, allowing Eurodiaconia members to pursue projects they would otherwise not have been able to fund. Nevertheless, Eurodiaconia members also expressed criticism of both technical and content-based aspects, mentioning for example the complex application and reporting requirements and the insufficient options to offer projects beyond employment initiatives, despite the introduction of the rule that 20% of the ESF have to be earmarked for social inclusion activities.

Why this report?

The European Social Fund (ESF) is one of the most important tools of the European Union to support social aims on the national and local level, especially since 20% of member states' resources under the ESF have to be allocated to promoting social inclusion and combating poverty which are key topics for diaconal actors. The ESF promotes employment and social inclusion by assisting people in finding jobs, integrating disadvantaged people into society and ensuring fairer life opportunities for all. Every year, the ESF helps about 15 million people to find work or to improve their skills and competencies. Eurodiaconia published a comprehensive briefing for members¹ and also a fact sheet² on the ESF to provide more information on the topic.

The aim of the report is to collect feedback on the use of the European Social Fund by Eurodiaconia members and to showcase project examples funded under the ESF. The information from our members on how the implementation of ESF projects is being carried out can be used as a valuable feedback for the responsible institutions on the European level while at the same time providing other social service providers with information on how the fund is used in different countries and contexts.

¹ Eurodiaconia (2014). European Social Fund: Briefing for Members. Available at <http://www.eurodiaconia.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/briefing-for-members-european-social-fund-2014-2020-june-2014.pdf> (EN).

² Eurodiaconia (2016). Fact-Sheet European Social Fund. Available at https://gallery.mailchimp.com/c8b6557048b4ed4b9b1764f8d/files/Factsheet_ESF.pdf (EN)





Who is Eurodiaconia?

Eurodiaconia is a dynamic, Europe-wide community of organisations founded in the Christian faith and working in the tradition of diaconia, who are committed to a Europe of solidarity, equality and justice. We represent 47 members in 32 countries. Our members include churches, non-statutory welfare organisations and NGO's, providing social services to hundreds of thousands of individuals across Europe on a not-for-profit basis.

Many of our members are leaders in their countries on the provision of social services and many are partners with local and regional authorities and national governments in the fight against poverty and exclusion. As providers of social and healthcare services and social justice actors, Eurodiaconia members offer practical support to people at risk of poverty and social exclusion and are in a unique position to evaluate the social impact of EU and national policies on vulnerable individuals.

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Mapping of ESF projects

Helsinki Deaconess Institute – Social rehabilitation for youth

Project information

Organisation: Helsinki Deaconess Institute
Country: Finland
Project Title: Vamos Lahti
Duration: 2016 – 2017 (2 years)
Focus: Social rehabilitation for youth
Website: <https://www.vamosnuoret.fi/>

The Helsinki Deaconess Institute ran different projects under the European Social Fund, one of them was 'Vamos Lahti'. The project fell under the Priority Axe 5 of 'Social Inclusion and Combatting Poverty' and ran for a two-year term from 2016 to 2017. Regionally, it was positioned in Southern Finland and managed by the Häme Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment.

Vamos Lahti was a joint venture project of the Helsinki Deaconess Institute, the City of Lahti Adult Social Services and the Lahti Diaconia Institute. The project developed a social rehabilitation process in the City of Lahti for youth from 25 to 29

years who experienced a difficult situation in accessing the labor market. Social rehabilitation was used to enable people who have become severely socially excluded to participate again in society by strengthening bases of their social functional capacity and social interaction. The project activities improved the social involvement of the youth and integrated volunteer work into a social services and NGO-shared service platform.

The main activities under the project included coaching and group coaching:

- The coaching examined the participants' own strengths and objectives and was designed in cooperation with employers and trainers to support young people in developing necessary skills for education, employment or training possibilities.
- The group coaching was intended for young people who want to improve their well-being and follow-up paths. The training content was determined based on the needs of the group and included study visits, discovery of strengths and team building.

The project resulted in 300 young people being included in project activities, with 180 having been able to enter into paid labor, education or work trials already. The youth participation has strengthened and they have gained useful experiences through volunteer work and peer support. The operational model of social rehabilitation and the methods of outreach social work have been developed in cooperation with the City of Lahti Adult Social Services. A quality multi professional service platform has been developed for the targeted group in cooperation with the municipality services and NGOs. In addition, the City of Lahti has introduced new participatory and empowering activities which support youth well-being and access to work and education. The material of "The Case Lahti – Experiences of Outreach Social Work" has been produced and it supports the implementation of the outreach social work concept in municipalities regionally and nationally.

In general, the project contributed to an increase in work ability and performance of the participants, and in decreasing costs for the municipality due to decreasing needs for labor market support and long-term unemployment support.



Diocese of Västerås – The role of the Church in social service provision

The Diocese of Västerås, a diocese of the Church of Sweden, has run a project called 'Actor for Welfare' from 2012 to 2014 funded by the European Social Fund and the Swedish state. The project was an educational program which provided skills development for individuals, enabling them to keep their jobs in a changing labour market. It was developed in the context of an increasing threat of losing jobs for parish workers and church-based social workers due to the fact that the church economy is slowly shrinking. Expanding the range of services from local parishes was intended to preserve employment, while at the same time reacting to the growing demand for not-for-profit service providers in Sweden.

Project information

Organisation: Diocese of Västerås, Church of Sweden
Country: Sweden
Project title: Actor for Welfare
Duration: 2012 – 2014 (2 years)
Focus: Education and skills development for parish workers
Website: <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/>

The project 'Actor for Welfare' started by mapping the competences of each individual parish-worker, which summed up to a total of about 1000 individuals in the project. Employees and vicars were asked questions about future priorities in the work of the parishes. The answers to these questions were intended to lead the Diocese in the design of educational programs within the project.

- The actual training started with a one-day introductory session in eight places, which reached 750 employees. The training introduced the concepts of social economy, a changing welfare system and the role of the church from theological and diaconal perspectives. This day also presented different creative social projects and finished with a discussion on local development with invited public sector and civil society representatives.
- The second stage was a one-and-a-half day process which was more interactive. It reached 420 employees in 25 congregations. They dealt interactively with the history and identity of the local parish, the needs and resources of the local community and worked out concrete ideas to engage in work for socially-deprived groups.
- The third stage included longer specialized courses in leadership, project management, new diaconal methods, entrepreneurship and more. There were also one-day courses on for example non-profit leadership, treatment methods, public procurement, marketing and social accounting.

In total, Actors for Welfare educated 900 employees, of whom about a hundred had a more thorough education of ten days or more. After finishing the project, the Church of Sweden estimated that about half of the parishes – around thirty – had acquired enough capacities to develop new methods of work, and that about ten parishes had developed new projects or ways to work, such as shops that offer programs for jobless, language-café for refugees, a "library" for free rental of clothes, outdoor green rehabilitation for jobless with multiple problems, a youth centre in cooperation with the municipality etc. At least two of the projects have the potential to become models to spread to other parishes.

In terms of figures this meant that Actor for Welfare fulfilled most of the goals set. In addition, researchers from the Stockholm School of Economics have shown that the project has created a more open climate in terms of discussing the societal role of the church. This might have long-term effects that are only starting to be seen: Nearly twenty parishes are today involved in different diaconal development projects with some connection to the project and its effects. At the same time important learning has been made which could offer keys to future development.



Slezska Diakonie – Improved support for people with disabilities

Slezska Diakonie ran a project called 'Podpora procesu transformace domova pro osoby se zdravotním postižením' (Supporting the transition of a center for people with disabilities) from 2013 to 2015 under the ESF Operational Program 'Human Resources and Employment'. The aim of the project was to develop tailored services for people with disabilities who have differing needs in order to make better progress. Therefore, it implemented educational activities and the publication of a handbook for staff members in order to improve personnel services for this target group.

- The project activities started off with an analysis of the current state of play of social services and a mapping of needs of people with disabilities with different support needs, based on regular meetings not only with staff but also with the target group and family members.
- The results of the analysis and the mapping were used to develop a training plan for social workers of the center which created educational activities and a transformation plan for social service provision in the facility.
- The implementation of educational activities included seminars, training modules, mediation experiences and the exchange of good practice. External experts were invited to work with current workers and to professionally support them in defining a development and transformation plan of care services in the center. The outcome of these sessions were captured in a 'Methodology for Support Staff'. This document reflected the experiences and suggestions that emerged during the activities and included among others step-by-step instructions for care methods and necessary skills and knowledge social workers should have in order to provide optimal care for people with specific care needs.
- The second outcome of the project was a concrete transformation plan which mapped the environment and conditions of service, provided an analysis of the users and their specific situation, needs and personal goals, and of the workers and their competencies and needs. In addition, the plan took into consideration the opportunities and resources in the local community and the neighborhood services provided in terms of downstream services.

Project information

Organisation: Slezska Diakonie

Country: Czech Republic

Project title: Podpora procesu transformace domova pro osoby se zdravotním postižením

Duration: 2013 - 2015

Focus: Education and skills development for staff working with people with disabilities

Website:

<http://www.ctyrlistekostrava.cz/podpora-procesu-transformace-organizace>

The project enabled workers to more effectively support people with disabilities. On the basis of continuous preparation and training of various situations, people with disabilities were able to enhance their skills and become more independent and confident so that they could eventually be moved to services with lesser support options. In 2013, two users were able to be moved to more independent living; in 2014, it was one, and three who were in the process of being moved. In 2015, Slezska Diakonie opened a new shelter for people with disabilities which enabled even greater migration towards more independent living.



Kofoeds Skole – Integration of migrants into the labour market

Project information

Organisation: Kofoeds Skole
Country: Denmark
Project title: Integrering af indvandrere på arbejdsmarkedet
Duration: 1997 - 1999
Focus: Integration of immigrants into the labour market
Website: <http://www.kofoedsskole.dk/>

Kofoeds Skole ran a project called 'Integrering af indvandrere på arbejdsmarkedet' (Integration of immigrants into the labour market) under the European Social Fund from 1997 to 1999. The aim of the project was to promote immigrants' opportunities in accessing the labour market or vocational training by providing qualifications through training, personal guidance and practical experiences. The project helped immigrants who usually had different educational backgrounds, limited knowledge of the Danish job market and a lack of insight into what is needed to write a successful application. The total number of students who participated in the project were 206 over a three year period.

The project included educational, personal guidance and practical knowledge courses. The overall structure consisted of a division into training periods and internship periods. The activities were designed in an interactive and flexible way in order to give students the possibility to provide direct feedback while adjusting the classes to their needs.

The educational activities focused on the following topics:

- Danish language classes were given as it was often a basic requirement in order to find a job on the Danish labour market.
- English language classes were provided as English was increasingly in demand on the labour market.
- Other courses addressed social and labour relations of Denmark as to provide students an insight into labour market conditions and social protection laws.
- IT courses provided immigrants with basic skills to work on a computer and different software. They taught students how to develop important documents for applications, such as a resume.
- Once a week, there were student meetings where general information on the project were provided and students were given the chance to make their views on the project known.

In all classes, conversation and dialogue were key tools to transfer knowledge to the students and to foster an active engagement of the participants. Another key method were study visits: The teachers took immigrants among others to field trips in factories, offices, schools and medical facilities.

The practical sessions focused on transferring relevant skills needed for finding employment:

- Students were taught presentation skills, focusing on how to best present themselves facing a potential employer. Therefore, expected behaviours and body language were discussed and analysed.
- Another element of this module was the analysis of job advertisements. Students were encouraged to look deeper into the respective company and requirements in order to critically evaluate their chances.
- A business research session has also been an essential element of the preparation for job search as immigrants were taught the importance of researching about the companies they wanted to apply for.
- Fictive job interviews were held to prepare students for the actual meeting with employers. The other students watched the situation and supported in sharing advice and observations.
- A job folder with the valuable information collected was distributed, including knowledge on how to write a resume and a cover letter, what to be aware of regarding personal appearance and others.

The project helped approximately 70 percent of participants to find employment or education. About a third was brought into ordinary or supported employment, another third entered education and the remaining third continued preparatory services. In addition, each student could gain valuable personal qualifications as well as confidence and greater awareness of their opportunities.



Aufbaugilde Heilbronn – Vocational training options for single mothers

Project information

Organisation: Aufbaugilde Heilbronn gGmbH, Diakonie Baden-Württemberg

Country: Germany

Project title: Zukunft und Perspektive für alleinerziehende Frauen

Duration: 2012 – 2014

Focus: Integration of single mothers into vocational training opportunities

Website:

<http://neuearbeit.de/index.php/9-angebote-fuer-arbeitssuchende/121-teilzeitausbildung-fuer-frauen>

Aufbaugilde Heilbronn was involved in an ESF-funded project as one partner among four called 'Zukunft und Perspektive für alleinerziehende Frauen' (Future and perspective for single mothers) in cooperation with local job centres and companies from 2012 to 2014 in Baden-Württemberg. It provided projects in the North-East of Baden-Württemberg, the other partners did so in other parts of the region. Baden-Württemberg hosts about 12,500 single mothers below the age of 45 without a vocational education. They are at high risk of staying dependent on social security and of falling into poverty and social exclusion, being unable to shoulder the stress of child care, income generation, household and vocational training alone. The project filled this gap by providing gradual guidance for mothers into part-time vocational training programs while supporting them in their daily tasks. The participating women were supposed to decide for suitable work in different areas of work through internships. They received intensive guidance and support.

The concrete activities included coaching and training for the women in combination with profiling, case-management, language support, organized child care and counseling services in different areas such as health, education, debt management and development of personal perspectives. The project offered space for up to 150 women. The way to vocational training was divided into three steps: the preparation, the search for a vocational work place and the entrance into either direct vocational or gradual vocational training:

- The preparation phase included an analysis and mapping of competences and the development of a career plan for the single mothers. They received training to develop among others social, methodic, application and communication skills.
- The search for vocational training programs supported women in choosing a suitable vocation and in finding respective internships and work placements.
- The entrance into vocational training could follow two ways: Firstly, women could choose to start a regular vocational education which combined working in a company and attending vocational college. In this option, women could choose between all available training possibilities. The second option provided a gradual qualification through practical education in companies without college education. The choices of occupations were limited, including for example training as a painter, sales woman and ware house operator.

After two years, 145 women were able to participate in the project; it could successfully integrate 47,5% of the participants (75 women) into the job market. 34 were mediated into part-time vocational training, five entered into full-time vocational training; seven women chose for gradual vocational training, 21 have a fixed commitment to starting vocational training in the near future, two were guided into employment and six started a subsequent educational program.



Fundatia Crestina Diakonia – Afterschool support for disadvantaged children

Project information

Organisation: Fundatia Crestina Diakonia
Country: Romania
Project title: Pas cu Pas- Previne Abandonul Scolar cu Programul AfterSchool
Duration: 2010 - 2012
Focus: Educational activities for disadvantaged children
Website: <http://diakonia-pascupas.ro/>

Fundatia Crestina Diakonia was involved in a project called 'Pas cu Pas- Previne Abandonul Scolar cu Programul AfterSchool' (Step by Step – Prevention of school dropout through the afterschool program) under the ESF Operational Program Human Resources and Development, Priority Axis 'Life-long learning and Labor market' from 2010 to 2012. The project developed a social program of education for children living in rural areas in low living standards. Many children in these areas only receive little educational support and drop out of school already after primary level to help their families with the household and income. The project aimed at decreasing the long-term dropout rates while increasing the academic performance in rural areas. Therefore, both parents and children from the local community were involved in the project.

Activities for children

The project activities included three types of activities for children: First of all, children were taught minimum hygiene behavior. They received lessons in hygiene by being lead through daily washing routines of hands, teeth and body. Children furthermore could participate in different after school activities, for example in homework support, sports, craft sessions, trips and games. They were meant to support children in addressing shortcomings in their educational performance in various school subjects and increased their social and communication skills outside of the formal educational system. Depending on the curriculum, educational activities were conducted daily for the development of skills and competencies needed in the future, such as English, IT, sports, music, science, religion and others. The project also included organized trips and visits to different location such as gardens, zoos and museums, as well as the organization of a National Arts Camp where children could participate in workshops on for example pottery, puppetry, dancing and singing.

Activities for parents

Parents of the children were also involved in the project activities: They received social assistance through home visits of teachers and social workers, they could participate in parent meetings where the educational performance of their children was discussed and they were offered thematic seminars on the importance of education in shaping children's physical and psycho-emotional development.

Activities for social workers and teachers

Another target group were the pedagogical and social workers who received training on special education methods for disadvantaged children designed to increase their theoretical knowledge and enhance the professional competence. The course content addressed diversified topics such as learning therapy, learning motivation, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia and ADHD/ ADHS. The training was held interactive, offering several games and tests where teachers and social workers were able to gain a better understanding of the situation and perception of disadvantaged children which enabled them to develop an improved management of difficult situations.



Swedish City Missions – Partnerships for labour market integration

The National Association of City Missions in Sweden are currently involved in an ESF-funded project called Partnerskap för integration och arbetsmarknad genom det civila samhället/ social ekonomi (Partnerships for the integration into employment through civil society and social economy) as a partner. The project involves a range of different Swedish actors who gather to develop project ideas and partnerships.

- In a first phase, the participating organisations develop an initial draft idea and look out for partners. The project idea will be further developed and presented in context of the partnership exchange where all partners of the project gather.
- After the exchange, the second phase begins in which the formed groups of organisations elaborate further on the ideas until they are ready for implementation. The ideas will then be submitted to a project management team which is in contact with government officials working on the ESF. They are the ones who decide on new calls for implementation, in the ideal case taking into consideration the ideas developed by the partnering NGOs. The developed project call is then open to all Swedish actors to apply for.

The project developed in cooperation with the Swedish City Missions focuses on the development of second hand businesses to integrate people furthest away from the labour market into work. It shall be based on collaboration of public authorities, the community, civil society organisations and social economy. The second hand business shall act as an example of how to develop business from different starting points, offering unemployed people several forms of job training and tutoring. The involved parties shall do so in five stages: First of all, knowledge on how businesses are conducted nowadays and how labour integration measures can be developed and improved shall be collected. Secondly, the involved organisations raise awareness of the business development idea and think about a strategy of how quality assurance and validation of skills can be ensured. In a third stage, current challenges for people furthest way from the labour market shall be examined, as well as ways to improve the collaboration between the public, civil society and economic sector. In this context, also the needs of the commercial sector and how the trainee shall fit into those needs will be looked at. The fourth stage shall aim at identifying different potential models for business development around second-hand operations. The fifth stage shall find common criteria for civil society's and social economy's role in the on-the-job training.

A full year is planned for collecting knowledge and for conducting the feasibility study. During the implementation phase, further tests and models are planned to be picked up at regional and local level which include both public authorities and civil society actors to ensure the successful operability of the project.

Project information

Organisation: Sveriges Stadsmissioner
Country: Sweden
Project title: Partnerskap för integration och arbetsmarknad genom det civila samhället/ social ekonomi
Duration: 2015 onwards
Focus: Building partnerships for social integration and economy
Website: <http://www.piacs.se/>



Eurodiaconia member experience with the ESF – An assessment

1- Sweden

Church of Sweden

The Diocese of Västerås of the Church of Sweden has been involved in an ESF project from 2012 to 2014 called 'Actor for Welfare' which focused on large-scale skills training for staff, including about one thousand participants. The outcome and learning process of the project was perceived to be highly successful, yet the technical requirements and proceedings required for the ESF caused frustration. The time to prepare the project implementation was short, also because much learning was needed as new ways to work were introduced. The reporting requirements were too detail-oriented and left little room for reaching goals in the organisation's own way. In addition, there were some communication problems with the person in charge at the managing authority of the project, although overall support for the funding was available and helpful.

Nevertheless, the Church of Sweden highly valued the funding as the operational programme broadly covered fields of interest for the organisation and enabled it to work in new areas on a scale that would not have been possible otherwise. In general, the programme enables civil society to do a better job and stimulates new ways of cooperation. In order to further improve the usefulness of the ESF, more time to prepare the application and more openness to combine different programme areas would be valued.

The National Association of City Missions in Sweden

The National Association of City Missions in Sweden has been involved in an ESF project fostering partnerships with other actors. Generally, the programme was evaluated positively as a possibility to evaluate effects, learn about new ideas and develop actions. However, the procedure to apply and implement ESF projects were deemed overly bureaucratic. The application and reporting process should be simplified in order to enhance the ability to develop new ideas and to apply creative approaches. In this context, the City Missions acknowledged the efforts that have already taken place by developing a website and simplifying the process on how to apply. Nevertheless, the call and the requirements for applying are still considered too bureaucratic. Furthermore, the excessive involvement of different NGOs and partners caused problems with the implementation of the project.

Regarding the operational programme, the City Missions stated that it covers fields of interest of the organisation. Nevertheless, it does not cover all areas which the City Missions have identified as priority needs in the country: Especially homelessness should receive a greater attention in the programme, and not solely employability. Social inclusion in general is important but mostly neglected in the calls. The rule that 20% of the ESF's budget has to be used for social inclusion activities thus is not perceived to be sufficient yet.

Ecumenical EU Office

The Ecumenical EU Office did not participate in an ESF project directly, but assisted other organisations in the application process. They consider the ESF to be a valuable tool, especially with view to providing necessary in-service trainings, stressing that for example the training for staff facing a changing society would have hardly been financed otherwise.

The Ecumenical EU Office nevertheless also expressed criticism with the operational programme as it does not include poverty as such, but mainly focuses on people outside of the labour market. Also the complex procedure in managing the project was highlighted, specifically with view to the financial reporting and dealing with the National Agency for Employment which was time-consuming.



Germany – Aufbaugilde Heilbronn

Aufbaugilde Heilbronn, a diaconal service provider of the umbrella organization Diakonie Baden-Württemberg, has been working with ESF projects for several years. From 2012 to 2014, they have been involved in a project supporting single mothers in finding vocational training. They highly value the ESF funding as an important part of the organization's project financing that enables them to bring innovative programs on track which could not have been funded with national support. The operational program covers important fields for the Aufbaugilde and the targets match with what the organization has identified as priority needs in the country. In addition, it enables the promotion of cooperative projects with other diaconal institutions of Baden Württemberg.

Aufbaugilde Heilbronn also expressed critical points with view to technical procedures: They consider the time for handing in applications as too short and the co-financing procedures as too complicated. In order to simplify the process, the administration and co-financing should be eased. Specifically for smaller projects up to 50,000€, the amount of administrative and preparatory work is not reasonable and very time consuming as NGOs can hardly bring own money into the project to stem potential extra costs associated with handling the workload.

Czech Republic – Slezska Diakonie

Slezska Diakonie has been involved in ESF projects since 2004, using the fund for investment as well as non-investment projects. There have been various topics that have been supported by the ESF in the organisation, including professional education, quality of social services, services for youth, investment projects like reconstructions of buildings and purchasing new equipment, services for abused women, support for people with disabilities on the labour market and many more.

Slezska Diakonie considers the ESF to be a useful tool for NGOs and social service providers to be able to provide innovative and creative activities, to improve infrastructure and to provide professional trainings for staff members. An added value is specifically given due to additional money for social investment and innovation and to pilot new initiatives and ideas, as well as due to the support that can be provided in increasing quality and work possibilities in the social sector. In general, the ESF allows Slezska Diakonie to offer services and facilities on a much larger scale than before. Also the communication on the national level and the coverage of the full amount of costs was deemed positive.

On a negative side, Slezska Diakonie mentioned several flaws that need improvement. First of all, the bureaucratic procedures were criticised for being overly complex, lengthy and inflexible: the administrative rules were deemed too long, the rules for tendering too strict, and the rules for public support in some of the priorities as too limited which caused problems specifically for big NGOs. Furthermore, the changes in rules and staff of the responsible ministry during the implementation period caused confusion, as well as the limits in program rules regarding the eligible and ineligible costs and the limits in budget. Also the controls of papers and indicators were deemed too strict as it aggravated the possibility to change something in the project and to work with the most excluded people on an anonymous basis, thereby conveying the impression that the interest in administration was higher than in the real content of the project. Nevertheless, compared to the added value which the ESF brought, Slezska Diakonie stressed that the existing burdens were reasonable.

Concerning the operational program, the national strategy was said to address important topics and match the operational program to these topics, but also left out important ones such as support for elderly people, hospice and long-term care and building connections between different sectors such as social, health care and education. In general, the scope of the ESF was deemed to be not sufficient as there were many projects but only little financial means. In this context, also the limited possibility for continuity after the project has finished was mentioned as a negative point.



Finland – Helsinki Deaconess Institute

The Helsinki Deaconess Institute (HDI) has been involved in different ESF projects in the last years, such as social rehabilitation services for youth. It highly values the ESF because it is one of few possibilities in Finland to fund large-scale projects and because it has greatly encouraged the organization to facilitate employment for marginalized people. The ESF has developed positively according to the HDI in the past ten years as the managing authorities improved information delivery, consultation days, e-services, managing tools and administrative procedures. The operational program of the ESF in Finland addresses areas of interest to the organization as well as priority needs in the country in general by promoting competitiveness of SMEs and encouraging employment, education, inclusion and innovation, thereby providing important opportunities for the public and private sector as well as NGOs.

Negative feedback regarding the ESF was the decrease in the amount of funds allocated in Finland as well as the overly focus on the promotion of employment, thereby neglecting other major problems such as aging. Another key point mentioned was the need for greater flexibility in order to be able to answer to changing priorities rather than to be constrained by a set of fixed objectives for a seven year period.

Denmark – Kofoeds Skole

Kofoeds Skole used to be involved in ESF projects around inclusion and employability of migrants which was well-funded for years. Nevertheless, the ESF has changed and the current operational program of the fund for Denmark does not cover any fields of interest for Kofoeds Skole anymore. The target group is not included in the program as it is administered by Danish business authorities who mainly focus on people in employment, training and retraining and not on people far from the labor market. That is a reason why Kofoeds Skole does not apply for the ESF anymore.

Other negative points mentioned were the need for detailed administration and the difficult reporting and documentation requirements. In order to improve the ESF, less bureaucratic procedures and a renewed focus on those farthest away from the labor market is necessary.

Romania - Fundatia Crestina Diakonia

Fundatia Crestina Diakonia in Romania was involved in an ESF-funded project on after-school care for disadvantaged children from 2010 to 2012. The ESF generally covers areas of work the organization is interested in and addresses issues which Diakonia has identified as priority needs in the country. The ESF was perceived as positive insofar that it enabled the organization to carry out activities with a larger number of people and offered possibilities to invest in infrastructure. It furthermore enabled the staff to develop knowhow and strategic thinking. As the organization employed staff to handle the project, the administrative amount was easily manageable.

On a negative note, the organization experienced problems with the receipt of money, the communication with the national agency and the evaluation of the project. The signed financial agreement with the central office in Bucharest did not guarantee the receipt of money: After each reporting period, the next amount of money was only transferred after 12 months, so Fundatia Crestina Diakonia had to implement the scheduled activities by investing own funds which caused long-term financial problems for the organization. The last reimbursement was only scheduled to be paid in July 2016 although the project ended in 2012. The communication with the responsible staff of the National Agencies was insufficient: During the implementation period, the project staff of Fundatia Crestina Diakonia received opposing information from officers in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca. They brought forward different suggestions and opinions, and the situation was further complicated due to the fact that project officers as contact persons were changed several times during a two years project, as were rules of implementation and reporting. The evaluation process was perceived to be too lengthy.



Lessons learned from ESF experience

Eurodiaconia members involved in projects funded under the European Social Fund mostly evaluated the fund to be useful and valuable for their work despite the time consuming application and reporting processes: the Operational Programs of the respective Member States addressed issues of their concern and enabled them to do activities they would have otherwise not been able to effort on a large scale. In order to successfully be involved in an ESF-project, Eurodiaconia members have identified several key points which should be taken into account:

- The application time is short and the administrative burden high. Thus, organisations who wish to apply for ESF funding should take sufficient time for the preparation of the application form and necessary documents.
- When writing the project proposal, organisations should be realistic in their goals, specifically with view to the project budget while keeping in mind the financial capacity needed for implementation.
- In order to ensure proper financing and project management in an ESF-context, Eurodiaconia members recommended to have a person trained in writing project proposals and managing the technical aspects, or to build a team who shares responsibility for ensuring a conclusive proposal and implementation. Several organisations specifically employed an extra person for this work.
- A valuable addition for a successful ESF project was mentioned to be cross-sectorial cooperation and partnership.

Recommendations for future periods of the ESF

Despite the generally positive reception of the ESF programme, Eurodiaconia members identified a number of issues to be improved, mostly in relation to the application and reporting processes. The following observations and recommendations can be drawn from their experiences:

- Eurodiaconia members who participated in the survey repeatedly expressed the wish to have more time for writing funding proposals as the general coordination and cooperation with partners is highly time-consuming. Thus, there should be more time between the publication of a call for proposals and the application deadline.
- The administrative burden was considered to be massive and should further be reduced, specifically to give also smaller organisations a chance to apply which cannot effort to hire staff for the preparation of project applications. The general set-up of the ESF should take into consideration that small-sized NGOs can hardly contribute own money to large-scale projects.
- The entire application and reporting procedure of ESF projects was deemed to be too complex and lengthy, thereby restricting possibilities to implement innovative and creative ideas. In order to decrease the burden, less focus on details and simpler co-financing rules should be brought forward.
- Responsible staff of the National Agencies should be trained by the Commission so that they are able to offer constructive help in managing the implementation process.
- The ESF should be more flexible, both with regard to program areas and reporting requirements: In a world changing faster than ever, a greater flexibility is needed to answer to changing priorities rather than being constrained by a set of objectives fixed for a seven-year period.
- Eurodiaconia members also expressed the need to adapt the focus of the ESF: It should allow measures to support people who are furthest away from the labour market such as homeless people, and shall extend its focus further beyond employment-related topics such as health and social inclusion. The rule incorporated in the European Social Fund that 20% of its resources need to be allocated to promote social inclusion thus needs to be further developed and implemented.



Conclusions

Eurodiaconia members showcased several of their ESF-funded projects which provided examples of how to use the fund for different target groups, including children, youth, women, migrants and parish workers. Some of the funds were used to provide short-term training opportunities to promote staff of social facilities, or to find long-term vocational training opportunities for marginalised groups such as migrants and single mothers. Other projects focused on education for children and social rehabilitation for youth.

Eurodiaconia members generally perceived ESF funding as a positive means to implement large-scale projects with pilot character. They stressed the added value it provides by enabling them to implement activities for a broader target group they would have otherwise not been able to include. Several critical points were nevertheless also mentioned with regard to the procedures on the one hand and the thematic focus on the other hand. Regarding the procedures, Eurodiaconia member stressed problems such as the excessive administrative burden, delays in the transferral of money and complex rules in relation to tendering and budgeting for example. Concerning the thematic focus, Eurodiaconia members criticised the ESF's overly support of employment-based activities and its lack of openness to projects who address those furthest away from the labour market, such as homeless and migrants. Eurodiaconia members furthermore provided tips for other organisations who are interested in receiving ESF funding, and brought forward recommendations for the European Commission on what should change in future ESF periods to make working with the fund more successful.