

# Building up skills for social inclusion

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# 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**. As the **leading network of Diaconia in Europe**, we connect organisations, institutions and churches providing **social and health services and education** on a Christian value base in over 30 European countries.



We bring members together to **share practices**, **impact social policy** and **reflect on Diaconia in Europe today**.

## Building up skills for social inclusion

Eurodiaconia is a network of 45 organizations in 32 European countries providing social services and working for social justice. Founded in the Christian tradition we work to ensure that our societies provide opportunities for all people to live in dignity, well-being and realize their full potential within communities. **Eurodiaconia members are providers of training services and skilling interventions which often target people with lower employability or requiring specific support to reach work and social inclusion;** e.g. long-term unemployed persons, young people, migrants, persons with disabilities, persons with mental health issues or recovering from an addiction. In these cases, skills are a bridge towards inclusive jobs, either in mainstream labour markets or supported employment.

Skills are defined as the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems<sup>1</sup>. More importantly, skills also materialize the intrinsic value inherent to each person. From this perspective, the promotion and continued development of skills is key to help each individual achieve its full potential and make a positive contribution to society.

Employment constitutes a primary space to enable such potential to be fulfilled. In this regard, skills play a very important role as levers for employability and the inclusion of people in community life through quality jobs. **However, the scope of skills goes well beyond employment, as do people's capabilities. In this regard, Eurodiaconia members also provide and stress the importance of non-formal, informal and life or soft skills.** Besides

their transferability to labour markets, such skills are crucial to achieving the personal development of its recipients and have in many cases a positive collective impact -for instance, in the case of skills for social and community activities or volunteering-.

This paper aims to stress how a wider approach to skills is essential in order to create smarter, more resilient societies where individuals are better equipped to achieve the overarching goal of their social, psychological and personal fulfilment. To do so, higher investment in skills is needed, striking the right balance between specific attention towards groups of people for whom the lack or inadequacy of skills means higher risks of social exclusion and the needs of broader groups. In light of this, Eurodiaconia would like to stress the following recommendations informed by our members' experience in the provision of skills -as shown in the examples accompanying our messages-:

- **Skills have a mixed but complementary dimension as levers for employment, social inclusion and participation grounded on both economic and rights-based rationales.** Skills are, on the one hand, a springboard to knowledge, personal development and, through that, better employment prospects. On the other hand, skills are primarily used and economically rewarded in labour markets, where workers contribute to productive processes. Eurodiaconia understands these as two sides of the same coin and, for this reason, sound investment in skills should ensure that none of the two dimensions is disregarded.

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<sup>1</sup> Cedefop (2014), *Terminology of European education and training policy: a selection of 130 terms*, EU Publications office, Luxembourg. The same

definition is used in the European Qualifications Framework.

- **Looking at the skill needs of all people is a right as well as economically wise.** All people have skills and should, accordingly, have access to develop these and acquire new ones. Acknowledging this is important to prevent competition for skilling actions among different target groups. In this regard, it is essential to strike the right balance between the skill needs of specific groups in more vulnerable positions and those of broader groups (e.g. young people).
- Also, low employability is often less associated to an inadequate stock of skills than to other needs calling for different types of social service interventions. **For this reason, it is important that skilling interventions and social services go hand in hand in order to ensure the overall coherence of actions towards a well-defined outcome.** Therefore, access to skills, education and training should be mainstreamed and fully integrated into a broad understanding of access to quality and affordable services as a key principle for active inclusion.
- In most cases, skilling actions add to people's prior competences and skills in an incremental way. For this reason, **the recognition of existing skills is vital to increase the effectiveness (and cost efficiency) of subsequent skilling interventions.** Such a recognition should encompass the full range of competences, including those acquired in non-formal learning settings. Non-formal skills should, in this regard, stand on an equal footing than formal skills. First, they play an equally key part to raising people's skills levels. Secondly, non-formal skills are relatively more common among people who are more prone to social exclusion risks, for instance because of lower opportunities of access to education in the past.
- **Skilling actions should also take a holistic approach over the full cycle of intervention.** Supplying the right set of skills may not be enough to ensure positive and sustainable outcomes for users. In some cases, the accompaniment of newly skilled persons onto their new jobs or activities is essential to ensure a successful contact with the demand side of skills and minimize the failure rate of interventions. **Post-skilling service stages are therefore very important to ensure successful outcomes for users and guarantee the effectiveness of investments made on skills.**
- **Such accompaniment may also take place in the framework of social enterprises,** which often represent a first stepping stone towards effective placements in mainstream labour markets, as the experience of many Eurodiaconia member organizations shows.
- Skills are key to ensure equal opportunities in life or improve the employability prospects of people. But a fair starting point for all need not guarantee the right outcomes for all. Market hazards can impact skill levels in negative ways **but social protection systems should play an important role in preventing and correcting such hazards.** Access to quality social services and adequate social protection works in a complementary manner as the best possible safeguard for skill levels.
- **Funding authorities, service providers and employers should share a commitment to investing in the skills of care professionals.** European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and direct funds should be instrumental to achieving high skill standards in the sector. For instance, through the Blueprint for

Sectoral Cooperation on Skills<sup>2</sup> incorporated by the New Skills Agenda. In this regard, Eurodiaconia recommends that the Blueprint

thinks of the health and social care sector as one, seizing the opportunity to boost an integrated approach in the provision of care.

## Skills are both an Asset and a Right

The provision of skills to all persons in the form of technical and vocational training, continuing training, apprenticeships or retraining is a fundamental right enshrined in basic EU legislation<sup>3</sup>. Skills also have a key importance to ensure the objectives of 'full employment and social progress' mentioned in article 3 (3) of the Treaty of the European Union. Skills, therefore, have a mixed but complementary dimension as levers for employment, social inclusion and participation grounded on both economic and rights-based rationales. However, EU (and national) policies have often failed to recognize such comprehensive reach of skills and tended to emphasise the employment dimension only<sup>4</sup>.

Indeed, skills boost economic performance through increased productivity, as enhanced skills levels enable individuals to undertake more complex tasks, work more effectively and produce higher value products. Skilled workers can also generate new ideas which enable smart growth -including through self-entrepreneurship. In turn, investment in innovation and technology yields higher benefits when combined with skilled

labour. More and better skills, therefore, pay off for workers, businesses and society alike.

**From the same logic, however, inadequacy and inequalities in skills are inefficient and should be addressed as an economic issue as well.** Firstly, gaps in education and skills represent a waste of human capital and a missed opportunity for economic growth. Secondly, skills inequalities are a good predictor of lower opportunities and poor employment performance, announcing future poverty risks and exclusion. The preventative element of investing in skills should be fully recognized.

## Ensuring the adequacy and relevance of skills

The New Skills Agenda<sup>5</sup> constitutes Europe's most recent and ambitious attempt to boost human capital levels in the EU in light of the context sketched above.

The assessment made by the Agenda on the current state of skills in Europe highlights two main phenomena. On the one hand, a large number of Europeans still lack basic skills, as 70

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<sup>2</sup> The Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills aims to increase individuals' skills and prepare them to fill job vacancies. Specifically, the Blueprint will design sector-specific skills solutions based on an industry-led approach in partnership with training and education actors.

The Blueprint will initially be piloted in six sectors that are experiencing severe skills shortages: automotive, defence, maritime technology, textile-clothing-leather-footwear, space (earth observation) and tourism. Health care is mentioned as a potential sector for the second wave.

<sup>3</sup> European Social Charter, revised, 1996, art. 9 and 10; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, art. 14

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the European Pillar of Social Rights, [COM \(2017\) 250 final](#) and [Staff working document \(2017\) 201 final](#), emphasises education, training and lifelong learning as key elements to maintain and acquire skills which enable people to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market. Stress is made on the special needs of people with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

<sup>5</sup> [COM \(2016\) 381/2, A New Skills Agenda. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness.](#)

million people lack adequate reading and writing skills and/or have poor numeracy and writing skills. As a result, this group is most prone to low-skilled jobs which are usually associated to low quality work arrangements, lower salaries, increased exposure to unemployment and, hence, social exclusion.

Many of Eurodiaconia members' initiatives on work inclusion<sup>6</sup> are in fact focused on people with low skill levels. These people may not always fit -immediately at least- the mainstream labour market and standard active labour market policies may not be effective on them either.

For instance, the [Aufbaugilde in Heilbronn](#) is an NGO affiliated to **Diakonie Baden-Württemberg** in Southern Germany that works for the most marginalized who cannot fit the mainstream labour market due to very low skill levels and low attachment to labour markets. The *Aufbaugilde* aims to provide professional assistance that gives users a organized day structure and supports them in all their personal needs. After long years outside the labour market, some of these users have lost the more basic attitudes needed to become employable: they need to be trained to become accountable and responsible for their job, consistent in their commitment and on time. In these cases, the objective of getting these people back to the labour market is often not attainable immediately.

On the other hand, investing in skills does not always pay off for everybody due to growing mismatches in skills. As the New Skills Agenda acknowledges, many people (and increasingly so, young people) work in jobs which do not require their full set of skills. In turn, a significant share of employers find difficulty in employing people with the skills they need to grow and

innovate. Skills and skilling interventions do not operate on a vacuum and are usually linked to the demands of labour markets. Such demands are dynamic by definition and mismatches may arise when the supply of skills is not adjusted to the demand. To counteract this, our members usually capitalize on their knowledge of local and regional realities to match the supply and the demand of skills.

This assessment touches upon the two key but sometimes conflicting dimensions of skills. Skills are, on the one hand, a springboard to knowledge, personal development and, through that, better employment prospects. On the other hand, skills are primarily used and economically rewarded in labour markets, where workers contribute to productive processes. Eurodiaconia believes that these should be two sides of the same coin and sound investment in skills should ensure that none of the two dimensions is disregarded.

Looking at the skill needs of *all* people is, therefore, essential as well as economically wise. In fact, skilling interventions pay off most when employability is lowest. In some cases, low employability is less associated to an inadequate stock of skills than to other needs calling for different types of social service interventions. A personalized and holistic assessment of needs is essential to identify the right interventions for each user. The availability of a different range of services eases a more holistic approach to interventions. As providers of a diverse and overarching menu of services, diaconal organizations are well placed to offer such a response.

For this reason, it is important that skilling interventions and social services go hand in hand

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<sup>6</sup> Eurodiaconia, [Services for work and social inclusion of long-term unemployed persons. Good practice from Eurodiaconia members](#), 2016.

in order to ensure the overall coherence of actions towards a well-defined outcome. In fact, access to skills, education and training should be mainstreamed and fully integrated into a broad understanding of access to quality and affordable services as a key principle for active inclusion<sup>7</sup>.

In most cases, skilling actions add to people's prior competences and skills in an incremental way. For this reason, the recognition of existing skills is vital to increase the effectiveness (and cost efficiency) of subsequent skilling interventions. Such a recognition should encompass all skills and competences, including those acquired in non-formal learning settings. Non-formal skills should, in this regard, stand on an equal footing than formal skills. First, they play an equally key part to raising people's skills levels. Secondly, non-formal skills are relatively more common among people who are more prone to social exclusion risks, for instance because of lower opportunities of access to education in the past.

### An integrated and person-centered approach to skills

The skill gaps, learning curves and potential achievements of different user groups are as diverse as every individual. Training and learning is a bilateral, mutually reinforcing process. Therefore, a clear understanding of users' starting capacities and aspirations is central to the success of any skilling action. Interventions should, therefore, adapt to individual

circumstances of users based on relevant information acquired on their aspirations, interests and abilities for work. In turn, users should equally be supported to make informed and realistic choices about work and future career development as guided by the professional advice of educators. This is one of the areas emphasized by the [Casa del Lavoro](#) project run by **Diaconia Valdese** in Italy. As a non-profit support service to employment centres, *Casa del Lavoro* stresses the key importance of personal case management and teaches basic skills for job search. A team specialized in employment integration provides training in editing a curriculum vitae and using web platforms for job research.

In general, any skill assessment and subsequent action should take a positive approach to people's existing skills and overall potential. This approach will have a most positive impact, especially on users who are stereotyped as most challenging or least employable. For instance, in the case of persons with disabilities, the design of any skilling intervention should avoid focusing on what persons with disabilities cannot do and explore instead what they can do. A similar alternative lens should be applied to all other groups of users.

The interlinkages between different types is equally key to guarantee the success of skilling interventions. In fact, investments on 'hard' or formal skills are likely to be less effective if they

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<sup>7</sup> This is in line with the 2008 [Recommendation for the Active Inclusion of those furthest from the labour market](#) already set out the three interrelated conditions for active inclusion; e.g. inclusive labour markets, adequate income support and access to quality services, where skills naturally belong to. The 2016 [Council Recommendation on the integration of long term unemployed people in the labour market](#) stressed the risk of social exclusion currently faced by more than 10 million EU citizens who have been

unemployed for a year at least. The Recommendation was assessed positively by Eurodiaconia because it called for the early registration of jobseekers to employment services, ensure a personalized, in-depth individual assessment and guidance and provide job-integration agreements. However, skills were missing from the Recommendation and the New Skills Agenda came to fill such a gap.

are not part of a more comprehensive skill mix which also includes informal and soft skills.

An example of this approach is the [Agency for Supported Employment and Social Rehabilitation \(APZ\)](#) is a project developed by the **Diaconia of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren (DECCB)** aimed at supporting people with learning disabilities or mental illnesses, empowering them to increase their independence and improving their social integration. The service aims to increase their level of autonomy in several spheres of life. First, it provides them with self-care training in cooking and personal hygiene to allow them to be self-sufficient; secondly, it helps their integration into labour markets, both in terms of preparation to work (learn how to fulfil responsibilities, how to properly communicate at work and how to present themselves, write a curriculum vitae and travel to the workplace), and in learning a job through workshops organized in cooperation with employers.

In the same vein, [Kofoeds Skole](#) in Denmark applies the pedagogical model of help through self-help. Putting education and training (or retraining) at the heart of its inclusion strategy, **Kofoeds Skole** is fully organised in the form of a school, with student-users and specific internal rules. The main school in Copenhagen runs fifteen workshops in a variety of fields. In order to increase independence of its users and their social integration, **Kofoeds Skole** gives its “students” the opportunity to run most of the school’s maintenance, while contracts with local businesses are taken up where the students can apply the learned skills. Some workshops also produce goods that can be sold to other school’s residents and/or external buyers. The school has its own currency, which is used to reward the work of the “students”.

Skilling actions should also take a holistic approach over the full cycle of intervention. Supplying the right set of skills may not be

enough to ensure positive and sustainable outcomes for users. In some cases, the accompaniment of newly skilled persons onto their new jobs or activities is essential to ensure a successful contact with the demand side of skills and minimize the failure rate of interventions. Post-skilling service stages are therefore very important to ensure successful outcomes for users and guarantee the effectiveness of investments made on skills.

Such accompaniment can also take place in the framework of social enterprises, which often represent a first stepping stone towards effective placements in mainstream labour markets. For instance, [Fairhaus](#) is a social department store created by **Diakonie Düsseldorf** which has developed into a chain and employs people with special difficulties to re-enter labour markets and has a focus on persons with disabilities.

In a similar vein, the [Ergon](#) project run by the **Gothenburg City Mission** counts with a chain of second-hand shops where the production of workshops is sold. The [Aufbaugilde in Heibronn \(Diakonie Baden-Württemberg\)](#) has also established a ‘supported labour market’ for long-term unemployed people within the social economy in areas such as handcraft, second-hand markets, food industry and food service, supermarkets, logistics, etc.

These examples stress how social enterprises are ideal settings for bridging the gap between skilling interventions and work inclusion, especially in cases where attachment to labour markets is more frail. Effectiveness is usually enhanced when the same provider has provided interventions and runs social enterprises. This minimizes adjustment period, as there is a clear assessment of users’ fitness to the social enterprise setting.



## Skills go hand in hand with social protection

Providing the right set and level of skills might not be a guarantee for an adequate performance in labour markets or life. Skills are key to ensure equal opportunities in life or improve the employability prospects of people. But a fair starting point for all need not guarantee the right outcomes for all. Market hazards can impact skill levels in negative ways but social protection systems should play an important role in preventing and correcting such hazards. In this regard, unemployment benefits are key stabilizers of skill levels, shielding job seekers from inefficiencies prompted by suboptimal job matchings in terms of skill content. Unemployment schemes which are both adequate and durable in time are, therefore, necessary to safeguard skill investment and prevent suboptimal skill matches.

However, unemployment benefits are not accessible to all workers. There are significant protection gaps for workers transitioning between education and employment, lacking a sufficient contribution build-up or without a contribution history at all. In these cases, social protection systems should still guarantee that large investments in education and skills of young people are not depreciated during such transition.

Skill levels and their relevance can also be affected by individual, non-market related circumstances. For instance, during transition periods like maternity and child rearing, when absences from labour markets due to lack of available, quality childcare may result in skill obsolescence and a weaker position at the workplace. Women returning to the labour market after a period of caring duties in fact constitute a focus group among our members. [Renatec](#), an NGO working under the umbrella of **Diakonie Düsseldorf**, has designed a 're-entry career' programme for this group, providing a 6-month

accompaniment into the labour market. This includes personal coaching, a 'skill target' planning, promotion of personal branding and support in time and family management. In the same vein, the [Ergon](#) project of the **Gothenburg City Mission** in Sweden stresses the supply of childcare services, as many service users are single parents struggling with the lack of available and affordable childcare. Again, access to quality social services and adequate social protection works in a complementary manner as the best possible safeguard for skill levels.

## Investing in a diverse set of skills in the social service sector

Social services know well the importance of life skills or soft skills. Work organization and self-management, communication and interpersonal skills, also with an increasingly intercultural range of users, problem solving, innovation and creativity, the ability to understand and empathize are key requirements among service practitioners. There are already established as part of the diverse, comprehensive and complex skill mix required from professionals in the social sector. They also take on a high level of personal responsibility and autonomy, managing health, physical and psychosocial well-being, support of growth and development, caring and rehabilitation.

The abovementioned skill challenge adds to a context where the supply of care professionals is scarce and featured by high geographical mobility. In this regard, there has to be a clear prioritization of qualifications and skills in order to overcome the tension between the pressing demand for care staff and the need to ensure quality services provided by highly qualified staff. Clearer comparability of qualification, training and skills standards in the sector are, therefore, key. Eurodiaconia's research on '[The education, training and qualifications of nursing and care assistants across Europe](#)' constitutes a step in that direction. is intended to form the basis for

better comparability of health and care assistants professionals in the selected different countries

In line with the transition towards a person-centred approach to services and more integrated care, investment in skills for care professionals should further enable their mobility between care areas, taking people's needs as their focal point. Such skilling efforts should include ICT and assistive technologies. Funding authorities, service providers and employers should share a commitment to investing in the skills of care professionals. European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and direct funds should be instrumental to achieving high skill standards in the sector.

### The key role of volunteers<sup>8</sup>

NFPOs often involve volunteers, and even though NFPOs may be professionalised, volunteers are still extremely important and are vital to the sustainability of many of their services. On one hand volunteers are in particular the main agents when it comes to social inclusion through their engagement with those at risk of social exclusion. On the other hand, volunteering provides people that are at risk of being socially excluded with ways to feel useful and connected to society.

Eurodiaconia members experience how volunteering is also a tool of empowerment by providing a platform for getting people back into education or employment and in general, tapping into people's potential. Volunteering activities are part of informal and non-formal learning for people at all ages and at all stages of their lives. It contributes to personal development and to learning life skills and competences, enlarging

social contacts, building self-esteem and in doing so, enhancing employability which when it leads to quality work, can help bring people out poverty and social exclusion. Eurodiaconia believes that volunteering contributes to competitive labour markets by providing lifelong learning opportunities which, in turn, fulfill essential social aims. In light of this, the validation and recognition of skills and competences is key to promote, on the one hand, the potential for social inclusion of volunteering and, on the other hand, ensure the positive impact of volunteers on services.

### Key Recommendations

- 1) A wide approach to skills is essential in order to create smarter, more resilient societies where individuals are better equipped to achieve the **overarching goal of their social, psychological and personal fulfilment**. Employment constitutes a primary space to enable such potential to be fulfilled **but skills should also be developed in light of their positive collective impact** -for instance, in the case of skills for social and community activities or volunteering-.
- 2) **Looking at the skill needs of all people is a right as well as economically wise**. All people have skills and should, accordingly, have access to develop these and acquire new ones. Acknowledging this is important to prevent competition for skilling actions among different target groups. In this regard, it is essential to strike the right balance between the skill needs of specific groups in more vulnerable positions and those of broader groups (e.g. young people).

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<sup>8</sup> Eurodiaconia, [The added value of not-for-profit social service providers. Recommendations for enhancing their support](#), 2015.

- 3) An excessive focus on a short-term economic return to skills should not overlook the fact that **skilling interventions also pay off when employability is lowest**. In these cases, skills can enable a transition to paid employment, fiscal contribution and social participation.
- 4) In some cases, low employability has less to do with an inadequate stock of skills than with other needs calling for different types of social service interventions. For this reason, it is important that **skilling interventions and social services go hand in hand** in order to ensure the overall coherence of actions towards a well-defined outcome.
- 5) In most cases, skilling actions add to people's prior competences and skills in an incremental way. For this reason, **the recognition of existing skills is vital to increase the effectiveness (and cost efficiency) of subsequent skilling interventions**. Such a recognition should encompass the full range of competences, including those acquired in non-formal learning settings.
- 6) **Skilling actions should also take a holistic approach over the full cycle of intervention**. In some cases, the accompaniment of newly skilled persons onto their new jobs or activities is essential to ensure a successful contact with the demand side of skills and minimize the failure rate of interventions. **Post-skilling service stages are therefore equally important to ensure successful outcomes for users and guarantee the effectiveness of investments made on skills**.
- 7) **Social enterprises are an ideal framework for such accompaniment**, representing a first stepping stone towards effective placements in mainstream labour markets.
- 8) **Skills** are key to ensure equal opportunities in life or improve the employability prospects of people. But a fair starting point for all need not guarantee the right outcomes for all. Market hazards can impact skill levels in negative ways **but social protection systems should play an important role in preventing and correcting such hazards**. **Access to quality social services and adequate social protection works in a complementary manner as the best possible safeguard for skill levels**.
- 9) **Funding authorities, service providers and employers must share a commitment to investing in the skills of care professionals and guarantee that social investment yields the highest possible impact**.

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