



**Eurodiaconia**  | Connecting faith  
and social justice  
through action

# REPORT ON THE USE OF EU FUNDS (MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK 2021-2027)

**2023**



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# Eurodiaconia

2023

This report focuses on the use of EU funding among Eurodiaconia's members during the current program period (2021-2027), both at the national and transnational levels. It provides an overview of projects implemented by members, highlights the challenges they have encountered, and offers recommendations for the European Commission.

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# WHO WE ARE

Eurodiaconia is a European network of churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice.

## OUR ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

- Love
- Courage
- Dignity
- Hope
- Trust

## OUR MISSION AND VISION

Inspired by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where social injustice is eradicated and each person is valued, included and empowered to realize their fullest potential, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Eurodiaconia is a network of churches and Christian organisations that provide social and health care services and advocate for social justice. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe.

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# WHY THIS TOPIC

The objective of this report is to gather insights into how Eurodiaconia members utilize EU funds, highlighting exemplary projects that have successfully secured funding within the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. Additionally, the report seeks to shed light on the gaps and challenges encountered by Eurodiaconia members in navigating EU funds at both national and transnational levels. Beyond that, the report aims to present the perspectives and recommendations of our members, offering valuable insights to assist organizations in overcoming obstacles when applying for EU funds.

Many Eurodiaconia members are leaders in their countries in the provision of social services, partnering 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 uniquely positioned to evaluate the social impact of EU and national policies on vulnerable individuals.

Eurodiaconia members are actively involved in both national and transnational projects funded by the European Union. Their preferences for transnational projects lean towards Erasmus+, and the European Solidarity Corps. For national calls for proposals, the European Social Fund + (ESF+), and the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) emerge as their top choices.

Members emphasize the added value that EU financing brings by facilitating activities on a larger scale. This added value is particularly beneficial when addressing complex social challenges that require a comprehensive and coordinated approach. The utilization of EU funds is vital for Eurodiaconia members as it not only offers financial support but also enables them to address diverse social challenges, collaborate on transnational projects, and innovate in their approaches. The importance lies not only in the funding itself but in the broader opportunities and impact it creates for advancing social welfare and justice.

However, there have been some challenges in applying and participating in EU-funded projects. Firstly, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our members experienced a halt to their activities at the national and transnational levels. It was hard for them to focus on EU funding and the pursuit of international collaborations. Most of their efforts were utilized to keep their current projects afloat. They experienced some budget cuts and delays in payments under national calls for proposals. Moreover, the delay in negotiating the Multiannual Financial Framework has cast a veil of uncertainty over the landscape of project development. This uncertainty was exacerbated by delays in approving national programs, creating a domino effect where the absence of approved programs has resulted in a dearth of new calls for proposals. Consequently, the initiation of fresh EU projects was severely curtailed, with only a small number coming to fruition.

Finally, Eurodiaconia members' statistics indicate an increasing reliance on private funding to complement state support for social services. The entry of private for-profit entities, especially in instances where public procurement tenders prioritize the lowest pricing, prompts concerns about the standards of social service delivery. The funding mechanisms significantly influence the development, delivery, and overall quality, accessibility, and sustainability of social services.

In essence, while celebrating the successes and positive impact of EU funds on social initiatives, it is crucial to acknowledge the dynamic challenges that organizations face, especially in the ever-changing landscape shaped by external factors like the pandemic and delayed policy negotiations. The insights gathered from Eurodiaconia members' experiences serve as a valuable foundation for future discussions, enabling Eurodiaconia to advocate for more efficient processes, timely fund disbursement, and simplified legal frameworks, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of EU funding for social welfare and justice.

# 1. AN INTRODUCTION TO EURODIACONIA

## MEMBERS USE OF EU FUNDING

Eurodiaconia members have successfully utilized EU funds for various project types, ranging from short-term training opportunities for social facility staff to long-term vocational training initiatives for marginalized groups. Additionally, projects have focused on education for children and social rehabilitation for youth, showcasing the versatility of EU funds.

The data collection process for this report was divided into two distinct phases. The initial phase encompassed a broader survey aimed at capturing a general overview of how Eurodiaconia members engage with EU funds in the current Multiannual Financial Framework. This phase allowed for a wide-reaching assessment of the landscape, identifying common trends and challenges. The subsequent phase involved more detailed and focused interviews. The organizations involved in the data collection of the study varied significantly in size, ranging from umbrella organizations with 32 members to those with 2700 service units.

Going into more details, the report is structured into two main sections. The first section focuses on Eurodiaconia members' utilization of EU funds at the national level within the current Multiannual Financial Framework. In the initial phase, we provide an overview of the challenges faced by members in accessing EU funds nationally; this data was collected through a survey. The second phase features in-depth interviews with four members, highlighting successful projects and specific recommendations that emerged from these initiatives.

The second section follows the same structure but shifts its focus to transnational projects. In the first phase, we present an overview of challenges encountered by members in applying for transnational projects directly managed by the European Commission under the current MFF. The second phase consists of three interviews in which members share their experiences and offer specific recommendations.

Despite extensive efforts to gather insights, the report highlights a limited number of Eurodiaconia members actively participating in national and transnational projects under the current MFF, signalling relatively low engagement within the Eurodiaconia network in EU-funded initiatives during this funding period.

As stated before, several factors may contribute to this observed limitation. Firstly, navigating the intricacies of EU-funded projects, especially at the transnational level, often involves significant administrative burdens and complexities. Members face challenges in terms of understanding and complying with the diverse requirements, regulations, and reporting procedures associated with transnational projects. The administrative workload, coupled with limited resources, also acts as a deterrent for some members, impacting their willingness or ability to actively participate in such endeavours. Moreover, the ongoing impact of external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, influenced members' priorities and resource allocation. The pandemic prompted a shift in focus towards sustaining existing projects and responding to immediate challenges, diverting attention and resources away from pursuing new project initiatives.



## 2. NATIONAL CALLS FOR PROPOSALS

In gathering data on the use of EU funds we asked our members the following:

- Have they applied to any EU funds under the current Multiannual Financial Framework and provide an example of a project implemented under the indicated fund?
- Are they more familiar with international programs or accustomed to working under national calls for proposals?
- What their main challenges are in applying to EU funds?
- What issues related to funding need to be addressed?

Respondents to the survey have identified the following challenges when applying to national calls for proposals under EU funds from the current MFF:

### 1. **Application Phase:**

National calls for proposals are often aligned with the specific needs and priorities of the local context. Social services organizations, deeply embedded in their communities, possess a comprehensive understanding of these needs. This familiarity facilitates the design of projects that directly address local challenges. Moreover, national calls for proposals enable organizations to respond swiftly to local emergencies or pressing social issues, demonstrating agility in addressing immediate needs and adapting interventions based on rapidly changing circumstances.

### 2. **Coordination and Collaboration:**

Coordination in national projects is logistically simpler than managing transnational initiatives. Social services organizations have existing partnerships with local entities, facilitating smoother coordination and enhancing the likelihood of project success.

### 3. **Language Barrier:**

National projects are typically conducted within a shared linguistic and cultural framework. This reduces potential barriers related to language, communication, and cultural nuances, making it more straightforward for organizations to convey their project goals and understand the context in which they operate. **LELB Diakonija Latvia** acknowledges a preference for engaging with national calls for proposals due to overcoming language barriers and the suitability of these calls to their local context.

#### 4. **Staff Involved:**

International projects often require more extensive resources, both in terms of finances and human capital. Smaller social services organizations find it challenging to allocate the necessary resources for transnational projects, making national calls for proposals a more feasible option.

#### 5. **Delays in Reimbursement:**

Across the board, respondents express their frustration with the extended period between submitting project reports and receiving reimbursements. Furthermore, access to cash advances while awaiting funds is often restricted to organizations with sufficient financial capacity. The frustration expressed by respondents regarding the extended waiting periods between submitting project reports and receiving reimbursements indicates a systemic issue within the reimbursement process. This extended waiting period can significantly impede the financial stability of organizations, affecting their ability to plan and execute subsequent projects. Organizations often rely on timely reimbursements to cover operational costs, pay staff, and invest in ongoing initiatives. Prolonged waiting periods can disrupt these financial plans, leading to challenges in sustaining day-to-day operations and implementing new projects. **Fundatia Filantropia Timisoara** in Romania has encountered challenges related to payment delays and reimbursement in various projects conducted under national calls for proposals. These issues have added complexities to the financial management aspect of their initiatives, impacting the smooth execution of their projects. The cumulative effect of delays in reimbursement extends beyond operational challenges and can have broader financial implications for organizations. It impact their creditworthiness, ability to attract additional funding, and overall financial sustainability.

#### 6. **Requirements Compliance:**

National regulations and compliance requirements are usually more familiar and accessible to local organizations. International projects involve navigating complex legal and administrative frameworks, which can be a barrier for social services organizations with limited capacity for such complexities.

## 7. **Managing Authority Interactions:**

While 30% of respondents had no strong opinions about their interactions with managing authorities, 10% expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of communication and support received from these entities. Members emphasize the importance of establishing a two-way communication flow, where managing authorities actively seek input from applicants, understand their specific needs, and work collaboratively to streamline processes. This approach could lead to a more supportive environment, ensuring that managing authorities are not only providers of funds but active partners in the success of funded projects. **Diaconia Valdese (Italy)** on this topic, highlights as a way forward to provide clearer and more standardized instructions to national agencies for managing European funds at the national level. This ensures better and more consistent information, fostering a homogeneous approach across diverse national agencies throughout Europe. All the same, the quality of communication and support from managing authorities is crucial to fostering a more positive and collaborative relationship between Eurodiaconia members and managing authorities. The dissatisfaction that sometimes emerged from this interactions stem from various issues, including unclear guidelines, unresponsiveness to queries, or perceived challenges in navigating the application process.

## 8. **Monitoring Phase:**

Monitoring and evaluating projects on a national scale are generally more manageable. Social services organizations can more easily track the impact of their initiatives and provide the necessary documentation for reporting and accountability.

In essence, while national projects offer certain advantages, members also express the need for clearer instructions, standardized information, and improved communication with managing authorities to enhance the overall effectiveness of EU funding applications. The challenges highlighted underscore the importance of addressing administrative complexities, language barriers, and aligning EU calls with the diverse needs of social service organizations.

In this second section, we gathered information through in-depth interviews with four Eurodiaconia members regarding projects implemented under national calls for proposals from the current MFF. We specifically asked them to provide concrete examples of their work, share the specific challenges they encountered, and offer potential recommendations.

## 2.1 OULU DEACONESS FOUNDATION, FINLAND

The Oulu Deaconess Foundation is committed to promoting equality, social justice, and the well-being of individuals and communities. By combining professional expertise with a caring and compassionate approach, they strive to make a positive impact on the lives of those they serve.

### **Current EU-funded projects**

At the moment, they have 14 on-going EU funded ESF and ESF+ projects at the moment. Specifically, the Foundation of Oulu Deaconess Institute has projects under EU funding 2023 for a total amount of 2,9 million €.

#### 1. *From workshops to working life-European Social Fund + (ESF+)*

Target groups: Young people, partially able to work and others with a weak labour market position who need support for employment and getting attached to services that promote employment.

Project goals:

1) To search, find, develop and try different customized paths in ODL Start-up workshops to promote and speed up the employment and education of the target group

- The activities help the target group to progress concretely from different service paths towards employment and schooling and speed up labour market transitions and attachment to work life.

- People participating in the project are offered a job training service, work trial, wage subsidy and apprenticeship positions, as well as opportunities for further study

2. Development of start-up workshop activities

- With the help of the project, ODL will be diversified and developed to meet the various service needs of customers. In their current form, the start-up workshops only serve those who are guided into rehabilitative work activities customers, services will also be developed during the project for other target groups, e.g. customers who need enhanced

support for a work trial or wage support period.

In service development, different labour demands are taken into account, and workshop operations are developed in such a way that transitions from workshop operations to the labour market would be low.

3. Development of employer cooperation from workshops towards open and temporary labour markets

- The purpose is to promote the intersection of work and the workforce, especially taking into account industries suffering from labour shortages. At start-up workshops, it is possible to offer opportunities for employment and skills development, e.g. nursing, kitchen, for the cleaning service and real estate sectors and as a new project as a start-up function for the nature/environment sector.

4. Development of competence identification and study

- The purpose is to develop and create more learning environments in different fields, where you can make visible and develop their existing skills or complete vocational qualifications related to different fields as a form of study.

The project's quantitative goal is to provide services to a total of 270 jobseeker-clients during

implementation. The goal is for 60% of customers to find the service/after the procedure, towards a meaningful continuation path employment or advancing to the labour market.

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### **Main identified struggles when approaching EU funds**

- Difficulties adapting to the new funding period
- A limited international network poses challenges in finding partners for calls for proposals that require international collaboration
- The dynamic and intricate nature of EU regulations is highlighted as a major struggle. The complex and ever-changing regulatory environment makes it challenging for the Foundation of Oulu Deaconess to navigate and comprehend the requirements, adding complexity to the process of applying for international funding.

### Some specific recommendations

- Provide clearer and more consistent communication regarding EU funding programs. This includes offering detailed guidelines that are easily understandable and accessible. Clarity in communication can help organizations like the Foundation of Oulu Deaconess navigate the complex regulatory landscape more effectively.
- Recognize the challenges associated with transitioning to a new funding period. Consider offering extended transition support, including informational sessions and guidance to help organizations adapt to the latest Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). This support can ease the transition and mitigate challenges associated with changes in funding structures.
- Acknowledge the complexity of EU regulations and offer financial support for external expertise. This could involve providing funding for organizations to seek professional assistance, such as experts in proposal writing or legal advisors, to navigate and comply with intricate EU requirements.
- Recognize that organizations may face limitations in their international network. Promote flexibility in consortium building by allowing diverse forms of collaboration, including partnerships with organizations that bring unique perspectives and expertise, even if they are not part of an extensive international network.



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We advocate for recognizing that organizations may face limitations in their international network. Promoting flexibility in consortium building is crucial, allowing diverse forms of collaboration. This includes partnerships with organizations that bring unique perspectives and expertise, even if they are not part of an extensive international network. Such flexibility fosters innovation and inclusivity in project development.

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## 2.2 ECUMENICAL HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION, NOVI SAD, SERBIA

Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization (EHO) is a development organization which, through practical activities, i.e. writing and implementing projects, contributes to building a just society in which diversity is respected. Human rights, equality and human dignity, peace and reconciliation, interfaith cooperation, solidarity, social justice and inclusion, sustainable development, accountability, efficiency and transparency, and a participatory way of working are the core values of EHO and guide the organization in its work.

Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization target groups are vulnerable and marginalized people whose human rights have been violated and/or discriminated against. In its effort, the organization works directly with children and youth, people with disabilities, the elderly, migrants, Roma and Roma women, people with health problems, unemployed, girls and women, young church leaders and civil society organizations.

### **Current EU-funded projects**

EHO built and work for an inclusive *Raska - EU support to social housing and active inclusion*. The project is under the European Union Support to Social Housing and Active Inclusion Programme - EU SHAI framework. It provides financial support in the form of housing allowances to the beneficiaries, social and educational support to children and adults, and job opportunities to the unemployed. The project promotes the integration of Roma families and the community through intercultural activities, social gatherings, workshops and trainings. It is being implemented by EHO in partnership with the local authorities, local NGOs, social services and other relevant stakeholders. Through the project, EHO is working to reduce poverty, address discrimination and promote the inclusion of vulnerable families and individuals in the local community. The project is supporting 25 vulnerable families with housing support and active inclusion measures. Out of these 25, for 18 Roma families new social apartments are build, for 2 Roma families social houses will be both and for 5 families with PWD and/or women victims of violence and 2 Roma families, houses are reconstructed.

## **Main identified struggles when approaching EU funds**

- Since Serbia is an accessing country to the EU, all EU funds are channelled through local self-governments/municipalities (LSG's) who are obligated to apply and secure co-financing for EU funds. Being an NGO, EHO cannot directly submit applications to access EU funds. EHO can only access funding if there is a previously established cooperation with a LSG.
- A lack of expertise in developing project proposals and navigating the complex EU funding process.
- A lack of resources: to finance the co-financing share of a project or to cover the overhead costs associated with submitting and managing EU-funded projects.
- Postponed payments: delays in payment from the EU can cause cash-flow problems and hinder the progress of projects.
- Unclear information: The information available in the EU funding landscape can be complex and not always clear or up-to-date.

## **Some specific recommendations**

- Increase the transparency of decision-making in the funding programmes
- Ensure that there is a balanced approach to the distribution of funds, taking into account the needs of both large and small organisations.
- Provide more support to organisations that focus on the most vulnerable populations
- Ensure that there is an effective monitoring and evaluation system in place to assess the impact of the funding programmes.



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EHO emphasizes the need for a balanced approach in the distribution of funds, recognizing the diverse needs of both large and small organizations. A fair and equitable allocation of resources ensures that organisations, irrespective of size, can contribute meaningfully to the overarching goals of EU funding programmes. This inclusivity promotes diversity in project implementation and facilitates a more comprehensive response to environmental health challenges.

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## 2.3 SWEDISH CITY MISSIONS, SWEDEN

Swedish City Missions (Sveriges Stadsmissioner) is a network of charitable organizations operating across Sweden. The City Missions aim to address social issues, alleviate poverty, and provide support to vulnerable individuals and communities throughout the country.

The primary mission of Swedish City Missions is to provide practical assistance, support, and care to individuals and groups facing various challenges. The organizations embrace a holistic approach that combines social, emotional, and spiritual aspects to help improve the well-being of those they serve.

Swedish City Missions rely on a combination of public funding, donations, and partnerships with local authorities and organizations to sustain their operations. Their work is carried out by dedicated staff members, volunteers, and supporters who are committed to making a positive difference in the lives of those in need.

### **Current EU-funded projects**

*Vem är jag imorgon?* – Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund

It is a project that builds on a previous project, where Stockholm City Mission developed a conversation method aimed at people with rejection decisions. Through the discussion groups, the target group is given the opportunity to process the migration process together with others and explore possible courses of action after a rejection decision.

The project aims to develop and disseminate a working model for cohesive support for people with rejection decisions. The purpose of the model is to create the conditions for the target group to prepare for the next step in the asylum process by providing access to neutral information and a context where the individual can reflect with the support of others. The efforts in the project consist of a combination of individual support, discussion groups, legal advice and specialized return counselling, with the goal that the target group should be able to make an informed decision about the next step in the asylum process.

Making a decision on voluntary return is a complex process that requires preparation and room for reflection on possible courses of action. The project is built on the belief that a better

understanding of one's individual asylum decision, and the asylum process in general, can lead to a higher degree of acceptance among the target group.

### **Main identified struggles when approaching EU funds**

- The perceived complexity and bureaucracy in the application process for ESF+ projects hinder the City Missions' ability to smoothly apply for and implement initiatives.
- Excessive involvement of different NGOs and partners has posed challenges in the implementation of projects. Coordination issues and potential conflicts arising from multiple stakeholders' participation may impede the smooth execution of the initiatives.
- The mismatch in focus areas may limit the organization's ability to contribute effectively to social inclusion initiatives, which are integral to their mission. While social inclusion is deemed important by City Missions, it is not adequately emphasized in the calls for proposals.
- Despite efforts to simplify the application process, the City Missions still find the calls and requirements too bureaucratic. This perception could deter potential applicants, potentially excluding organizations with valuable contributions to make.

### **Some specific recommendations**

- Simplify the application and reporting process in order to enhance the ability to develop new ideas and to apply creative approaches
- Add requirements for cooperation between different sectors
- Offer targeted training and project support that enables more actors in civil society to dare to apply for funding
- Offer specific calls that can only be applied for by civil society organisations



Figure 1 picture by Stockholm City Mission

## 2.4 DIAKONIE DE LA TOUR, AUSTRIA

Diakonie de la Tour collaborates with national and international partners, including government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations, to implement their programs and services effectively. They also actively engage in advocacy and policy dialogue to shape social policies and contribute to the development of inclusive and equitable societies. Overall, Diakonie de la Tour is committed to making a positive impact on individuals' lives, promoting social justice, and creating a more inclusive and compassionate society for all.

Diakonie de la Tour current EU projects fall under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. They usually work under national calls for proposals, which involve EU programs implemented at the national level under a national authority such as the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Migration.

### **Current EU-funded projects**

Project Name: "Femme.plus – Empower, Employ, Emulate Me" Funding Program: Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF)

Activities:

#### 1. German Classes:

The project includes German language classes as a foundational element. Language proficiency is a key factor in successful integration, and these classes aim to provide refugees with the language skills necessary for effective communication in the Austrian context.

#### 2. Vocational Training:

Vocational training opportunities are offered to equip refugees with practical skills that enhance their employability. This includes training programs tailored to the needs of the labour market, helping participants acquire specific skills for sustainable employment.

#### 3. Childcare Support:

Recognizing the challenges faced by refugee families, the project provides childcare support during course times. This not only facilitates the participation of parents in training and language classes but also ensures the well-being of children, contributing to the overall success of the program.

Objectives:

- Empowering and Assisting in Integration:

The overarching goal is to empower and assist refugees in their integration process. This involves addressing various aspects, including language proficiency, vocational skills, and socio-pedagogical support.

- **Qualification and Prospect Formation:**

Through targeted qualification initiatives, the project aims to enhance the qualifications of participants. Prospect formation involves providing insights and information about potential opportunities in the Austrian labor market.

- **Sustainable Employment:**

A key objective is to support participants in finding further education opportunities or entering into sustainable employment relationships. This involves not only providing skills but also facilitating initial contacts with the Austrian labor market.

- **Holistic Socio-Pedagogical Care:**

Recognizing the importance of a holistic approach, the project offers socio-pedagogical care. This encompasses support and guidance in the individual living environment of participants, addressing broader aspects of their integration journey.

- **Russian and Ukrainian Support:**

The project acknowledges the linguistic diversity among participants and offers coaching, advice, and other support services in Russian and Ukrainian. This ensures effective communication and understanding, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive environment.

**Expected Outcomes:**

- Improved language proficiency among participants.
- Enhanced vocational skills and employability.
- Successful integration of refugees into the Austrian labor market.
- Increased access to further education opportunities.
- Positive socio-pedagogical impact on participants' living environments.

**Overall Impact:**

The broader impact of the project lies in its contribution to the successful integration of refugees. By addressing language barriers, providing vocational training, and offering comprehensive support, the project aims to empower participants to build sustainable livelihoods and actively participate in the Austrian community.

## **Main identified struggles when approaching EU funds**

- The additional resources and time required to prepare and submit applications for international calls for proposals compared to national calls has posed a challenge. This can be attributed to the need for greater documentation, adherence to specific guidelines, and coordination with multiple partners across different countries.
- The increased competition associated with international calls for proposals heightens the pressure on applicants to develop strong and innovative proposals that stand out among the crowd.
- The need to secure additional resources or find alternative means of financing can become more pressing for international calls for proposals since the funding available per partner is often limited. This can present a significant hurdle for organizations like Diakonia de la Tour, as the financial requirements of their projects may exceed the funding allocated to each partner.
- Demanding deadlines when dealing with EU funds have posed a challenge for Diakonia de la Tour. The strict timelines imposed by funding programs can put pressure on organizations to meet application submission dates and project implementation milestones. This requires efficient planning, coordination, and resource allocation to ensure compliance with the established timelines.

## **Some specific recommendations**

- Acknowledge the fact that some member states rely on EU funding, which is often intended for pilot actions, to establish long-term projects that they cannot fully fund on their own. EU funding, initially designated for pilot actions, becomes crucial in kickstarting sustainable projects. Acknowledging this reality emphasizes the role of EU funding as a catalyst for long-term positive change. This recognition can lead to more flexible funding models and support mechanisms to help member states transition from pilot projects to enduring initiatives.
- Utilize Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) as much as possible, as they provide a welcome approach to project accounting. Emphasizing the utilization of SCOs can reduce administrative burdens, enhance efficiency, and improve the overall financial management of projects, as well as contribute to a more effective project implementation by allowing organizations to focus on achieving project objectives

rather than navigating complex financial processes.

- Consider focusing on specific results of implementing actions, such as placement rates, to ensure that tangible outcomes are achieved, rather than emphasizing project outputs based on checklists, instructions, and policy papers. This approach ensures that projects are evaluated based on their real impact, providing a more accurate assessment of success.



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Recognize that certain member states depend on EU funding often designated for pilot actions, to establish sustained projects beyond their independent capacity. Prioritize the utilization of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) whenever feasible, as they offer a streamlined approach to project accounting. Shift the focus from project outputs based on checklists and policy papers to concrete results, such as placement rates, to ensure tangible outcomes are realized through action implementation.

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### 3. TRANSNATIONAL CALLS FOR PROPOSALS

This section provides an overview of the challenges confronted by Eurodiaconia members when applying for transnational calls for proposals directly managed by the EU. Initially, we gathered information through a survey, utilizing the same set of questions as in the previous chapter, and consolidated the responses into various key points.

#### 1. Challenges for first time applicants:

First time applicants struggle with the intricate nature of the application process. The need for supportive tools indicates a demand for user-friendly resources. Some feedback highlights the hurdles faced by first-time project applicants, lacking familiarity with the application procedures. They express the need for supportive tools, such as presentations, to better comprehend the application process. Additionally, they find some application questions excessively technical, not aligning with the practical experiences of field operators. **Vida Nueva (Spain)** emphasizes the lack of expertise as a significant barrier, especially in understanding the intricate details of transnational calls.

#### 3. Staff involved:

Assembling an efficient project team remains a concern for more than half of the respondents. This challenge highlights the necessity for training programs to equip internal staff with the skills required for effective project management. The call for dedicated administrative roles emphasizes the need for specialized expertise within project teams.

For 55% of respondents, assembling an efficient and proficient project team is a notable concern. Frequently, teams comprise internal staff members who may lack the requisite training to effectively manage project processes.

The intricate and time-consuming nature of application forms points towards the potential benefits of streamlining and simplifying documentation requirements. Limited in-house resources pose a challenge for nearly all respondents highlights the resource constraints faced by organizations in managing funding applications. This constraint is further exacerbated by the majority facing insufficient funds to adequately train their personnel.

**Episcopal Reformata Din Ardeal** (Romania) affirms that implementing international projects presents increased complexity, demanding a certain level of international engagement within the organization. This entails having staff with proficient English skills, a willingness to travel, and an eagerness to take on challenges beyond their regular routine. However, achieving this level of internationality is not uniformly present across all sectors of their organization.

#### **4. Obstacles in the Application Process:**

Tight project submission deadlines, mentioned by 30% of respondents, call for a reconsideration of timeframes. Issues related to organization eligibility, unclear project guidelines, and insufficient co-funding require clearer communication from funding bodies. Challenges in identifying suitable project partners highlight the need for enhanced matchmaking mechanisms and networking opportunities. The identification of insufficient co-funding as a challenge for 40% of respondents. Clear guidelines on co-funding requirements can assist applicants in planning and securing necessary financial resources, contributing to overall project feasibility. **Associação Baptista Shalom (Portugal)** reveals that insufficient financial resources pose a challenge in meeting mandatory co-funding requirements, hindering the successful implementation of projects.

#### **5. Report Composition Struggles:**

A small part of our respondents highlight that operators face substantial difficulties when composing project reports. They frequently mention the burden of administrative tasks, the challenge of collecting documents from project partners, and the need for credible evidence of actions and milestones achieved.

The mention of a substantial burden of administrative tasks indicates that the process of compiling project reports is not only time-consuming but also involves a significant amount of paperwork and documentation. This administrative workload can divert valuable resources and time away from the core activities of organizations, affecting their overall efficiency. **Diaconia Valdese (Italy)** shares concerns about the substantial burden of administrative tasks, particularly in the context of compiling project reports. The requirement for credible evidence of actions and milestones achieved underscores the importance of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, placing an additional responsibility on organizations to implement thorough tracking and reporting systems throughout the project lifecycle.

Following the collection of data from the initial survey, our focus shifted to conducting a more comprehensive examination of Eurodiaconia's members who successfully applied for transnational projects within the current funding period. Additionally, we sought insights from members, encouraging them to provide recommendations for the European Commission based on their on-the-ground experiences and perspectives.

### **3.1 SLEZSKÁ DIAKONIE, CZECH REPUBLIC**

Slezská Diakonie annually organises various projects which secure or complement its activities and also brings innovation and positive change into the organisation in favour of our clients, employees and our facilities. Thanks to the support of the Moravskoslezský region, we organised a number of projects. Among the most significant belong an investment project to replace old windows in our day-care centre EDEN Český Těšín, a project to purchase a lift in the centre KARMEL Tichá or projects to acquire vehicles. Non-investment projects backed by the Moravskoslezský region were aimed at educational activities, events for clients, volunteering, mass education or reconstruction. Apart from the support of the regional authorities, we make use of regular support from foundations and endowment funds. The Czech Ministry of Agriculture also provided us with funds to set up a new building for our food and material aid. We also use subsidies from the Ministry of Health or a programme of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs for families.

In terms of EU the project of overall reconstruction of the centre BETEZDA Komorní Lhotka counts as the most significant one. Furthermore, reconstruction of the day-care centre EDEN Český Těšín has been approved. From the group of non-investment projects, we successfully finished the project "Supporting caretakers in the Beskydy region" which will also get a follow-up project "Together in uniqueness" to reform psychiatric care was launched and there was also a project called "Quality services thanks to quality age-management" or a project "Supporting social integration in housing in the Moravskoslezský region" as well.

#### **Current EU-funded projects**

1. Dementia Friendly Communities in the Czech Republic – Erasmus+

Dementia Friendly Communities (DFC) is a global initiative that centres around promoting dignity and respect for individuals living with dementia and its symptoms, emphasizing that life doesn't end with a diagnosis, but rather enters a different phase. The project's key principles include treating those with dementia as full-fledged members of society, early diagnosis to delay disease progression, and educating the general public to identify and assist those with dementia. It also advocates for positive awareness of dementia as a new phase of life, involving individuals with dementia in decision making, and creating supportive networks in local communities. The project involved international cooperation, knowledge exchange, and practical application of DFC concepts in Slezská Diakonie and their region, aiming to improve quality of life for people with dementia through education, support, and community engagement.

2. *Good practice in HR and PR for strengthening the attractiveness of professions in social services*  
- Erasmus+

The main idea of the project: Support the transfer of good practice, experience of working with schools, personnel policies of organizations that are aware of the need to ensure enough employees in terms of quality, but also quantity, to ensure the functionality and quality of social services in the near future.

- Objectives of the project:
  1. Exchange of experience and learning from good practice in the field of HR, cooperation with schools and strategies for sufficient generational change in social services
  2. Development of competences of HR professionals in the field of personnel work, career counselling in the framework of cooperation with schools, with the employees themselves, who are the bearers of professions in the social field
  3. Development of cooperation at local and international level in transferring examples of good practice and learning to create strong HR policies for recruiting and retaining employees in social services
- Internships in both organizations will be aimed at:
  - strengthening bilateral know-how in the area of connecting HR,
  - working with young people in schools in relation to the potential of the social worker profession and building its prestige,
  - sharing experience working with schools,
  - supporting the transfer of good practice in the area of HR, including measures for

intergenerational change, support for ensuring quality social services thanks to quality people.

### **Main identified struggles when approaching EU funds**

- Their main struggle in applying for calls for proposals at an international level is that the structure is hard and there is a lot of administrative work
- A lack of a level of English that is high enough to understand the intricate application process
- Strict evaluation criteria
- Financial constraints since the cost of travel, accommodation and other expenses can be expensive
- Challenges in understanding the application process and the requirements to be successful in the application

### **Some specific recommendations**

- The European Commission can increase the accessibility of EU funds and prevent lengthy and onerous application processes by streamlining the application and reporting processes and ensuring that the Member States establish reasonable and clear administrative criteria,
- Even better, public authorities could plan national, regional, or local training sessions on how to use financing programs like ESF+ money.
- Suitable calls for proposals for increasing the capacity of NGO service providers should be initiated.



Figure 2 picture provided by SLEZSKA DIAKONIE

## 3.2 DIACONIA VALDESE, ITALY

Diaconia Valdese took part to several EU projects mainly in the framework of Erasmus plus, European Solidarity Corps and Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund programmes. They are currently involved in EU funded projects under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. As far as it concerns EU projects, they are mainly active in two areas: youth, refugees and asylum seekers.

### Current EU-funded projects

1. At the time of the survey the Diaconia was finishing to implement two European Solidarity Corps (ESC) project that were postponed because of Covid:

- Title: *'M[EA]N-Sharing lives for an inclusive and intercultural community*
- Title: *10 Million colours*

The primary objective of these projects is to actively engage and involve young people in initiatives aimed at combating racism. To achieve this goal, both projects have strategically incorporated the participation of numerous long-term European Solidarity Corps volunteers. The volunteers play a crucial role in the Waldensian Church placement in Italy, contributing their time, skills, and passion to make a positive impact. The involvement of European Solidarity Corps volunteers extends to various activities, including interactions with young individuals, refugees, and asylum seekers. Through their participation, these volunteers become instrumental in fostering a sense of unity, understanding, and collaboration among diverse groups.

The projects recognize the power of youth engagement as a driving force in addressing issues related to racism, promoting inclusivity, and building bridges between communities. By actively involving volunteers in activities that span working with young people, refugees, and asylum seekers, the projects aim to create meaningful connections and experiences. These interactions not only contribute to the fight against racism but also provide valuable opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. The engagement of European Solidarity Corps volunteers adds a dynamic and diverse dimension to the projects, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing societal challenges.

2. They are also involved as partner in two KA2 projects from Erasmus + program;

- Title: *Make change yourselves: Turning Challenges to Your Advantage!*

This project unfolds through a series of online and in-person meetings involving a group of experts. The primary objective of these interactions is to collaboratively devise a comprehensive learning path tailored for social workers, with a specific emphasis on fostering the inclusion of young people facing fewer opportunities. The learning path is a structured curriculum designed to equip social workers with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively address the challenges and needs of marginalized youth.

Furthermore, the project actively implements the devised learning path through a series of four seminars and online sessions. These interactive sessions serve as platforms for knowledge transfer, skill development, and the exchange of best practices among participating social workers. The combination of in-person seminars and virtual sessions ensures flexibility and accessibility for a diverse range of professionals.

As a culmination of these efforts, the project plans to organize a final event in the fall of 2023. This event will serve as a pivotal moment to showcase the outcomes, share insights gained through the learning path, and facilitate networking and collaboration among participants and stakeholders. The holistic approach of the project, encompassing expert consultations, structured learning activities, and a concluding event, underscores its commitment to advancing the inclusivity of social services for young people facing various challenges.

- Title: *My Story of Resistance*

This specific project involves the engagement of long-term volunteers, including participants from non-European countries such as India and Uruguay. The inclusion of volunteers from diverse cultural backgrounds adds a global dimension to the initiative, fostering international collaboration and exchange of experiences.

Additionally, the project has successfully implemented a youth exchange component, providing young people with opportunities to interact, learn, and share insights. The culmination of these efforts is expected to be marked by a final event scheduled for 2023, serving as a platform to showcase the achievements and outcomes of the project.

### **Main identified struggles when approaching EU funds**

- A shortage of human resources and time to fully comprehend the specific requirements of each programme and complete the application process effectively
- Identifying suitable partners
- Hesitations in initiating the application process due to experiences with implementation challenges in previous projects
- A limited familiarity with transnational projects, which tend to be more intricate
- A lack of international experience, as well as a high level of English among staff members

### **Some specific recommendations**

- Provide more guidance to the national agencies to achieve a more cohesive approach among different national agencies
- Provide longer submission deadlines
- Simplify the application form where possible



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We would encourage the European Commission to give more instructions to national agencies on how to manage European funds on a national level, in order to have clearer information and also a bit more homogenous approach from diverse national agencies around Europe.

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### 3.3 DIAKONIA LATVIA

In 1996, the LELB Diaconia Center and the Diaconia Council initiated the development of the "Deacon's Position" and "Diaconia Structure at LELB" projects. These endeavours involved the active participation of diaconia workers, heads of diaconia from various deanships, pastors, and deans. During the initial phase of this collaborative effort, a comprehensive plan for diaconia work within the Latvian Lutheran Church (LELB) was created. This plan encompassed fundamental information about diaconia, its theological foundations, as well as the defined directions and tasks for diaconia activities.

#### **Current EU-funded projects**

1. "Youth Initiatives"- European Solidarity Corps

The project addresses the unique needs of mentally handicapped youth initiatives in the Madona branch, under the European Solidarity Corps program. Recognizing the specific needs of mentally handicapped youth, Diakonia Latvia has directed efforts towards addressing these unique challenges. This initiative, implemented in the Madona branch, operates under the European Solidarity Corps program. By focusing on the well-being and empowerment of mentally handicapped youth, Diakonia Latvia contributes to building an inclusive and supportive environment.

2. "Hosting International Volunteers in their community centres" – European Solidarity Corps

Through the Solidarity Corps program, Diakonia Latvia spearheads the initiative to host international volunteers in their community centres. This undertaking serves as a testament to their dedication to promoting international collaboration and volunteerism, fostering cross-cultural exchanges within local communities. Through their involvement in initiatives like these, Diakonia Latvia actively contributes to the broader goals of fostering solidarity, inclusivity, and community well-being.

3. They facilitate "Short-term mobility to Latvia"- Erasmus +

The project led by Slezska Diakonie promotes international mobility and exchange. At the core of the project lies the goal of facilitating short-term stays in Latvia for participants, aligning with the broader objectives of the Erasmus+ program. Diakonia Latvia's active facilitation signifies its dedication to providing individuals with valuable opportunities for

cultural immersion, skills development, and the exchange of ideas. By engaging in such initiatives, Diakonia Latvia actively contributes to the Erasmus+ mission of enhancing education, training, and youth experiences across European borders. Diakonia Latvia's involvement underscores its role as a key facilitator in bridging international partnerships and promoting the values of diversity, mutual understanding, and cooperation. This Erasmus+ project contributes not only to the personal and professional development of participants but also to the broader Erasmus+ objective of fostering a European dimension in education and training.

### **Main identified struggles when approaching EU funds**

- Diakonia Latvia has encountered some challenges, such as demanding deadlines and, on occasion, a lack of expertise. However, they are committed to addressing these obstacles through capacity-building efforts and collaborations.

### **Some specific recommendations**

- Provide targeted support for organizations facing challenges due to a lack of expertise. This could include mentorship programs, training sessions, or partnerships with experienced organizations that can offer guidance and support.
- Continue emphasizing the alignment of EU program objectives with the missions and priorities of organizations. Clearly communicate how EU initiatives resonate with the broader goals of promoting social cohesion, inclusion, and intercultural understanding.
- Recognize and support intermediary organizations like Eurodiaconia that play a pivotal role in assisting their members in utilizing EU funds. Ensure that such support structures receive the necessary resources and recognition to continue their valuable contributions in facilitating access to EU funding programs.



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In light of our experiences with EU funding programs, we recommend simplifying the application process, broadening the scope to include pressing social issues like homelessness, and prioritizing social inclusion within program goals. Enhanced communication, flexible co-funding options, and proactive capacity-building efforts can further empower organizations like Diakonia Latvia to leverage EU funds effectively, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and impactful Europe.

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## 4. LESSONS LEARNED FROM EXPERIENCE

In the journey through the landscape of EU-funded projects, Eurodiaconia members have garnered invaluable lessons from both national and transnational calls for proposals. Their experiences illuminate the challenges faced and the strategic approaches that pave the way for successful project implementation under the Multiannual Financial Framework.

In the area of projects under national calls for proposals, Eurodiaconia members have unearthed a wealth of insights:

- The resonance between national calls and local needs is a powerful advantage. Being deeply embedded in their communities, Eurodiaconia members leverage this familiarity to craft projects directly addressing local challenges.
- Navigating coordination and collaboration in national projects is logistically simpler. Existing partnerships with local entities foster smoother collaboration and enhance the prospects of project success.
- Smaller organizations find national projects more feasible due to fewer resource demands, both financial and human.
- Clear and collaborative interactions with managing authorities are instrumental for project success. A two-way communication flow, where authorities actively seek input from applicants, fosters a supportive environment.

When addressing the area of transnational calls for proposals, members have shared the following insights which showcase the positive facets that enrich their experiences:

- Transnational calls open doors to international collaboration, fostering diverse partnerships that bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and a broader impact.
- Engaging in transnational projects provides a rich learning environment. Members benefit from knowledge exchange, gaining insights into best practices, methodologies, and approaches from counterparts across Europe.
- Participation in transnational projects elevates the visibility of Eurodiaconia members on a European stage. It provides unique networking opportunities, creating connections that extend beyond borders.
- Operating in a transnational context cultivates cross-cultural understanding. Members

navigate linguistic and cultural diversities, enriching their organizational culture with a global perspective.

- While posing challenges, transnational projects offer opportunities for organizational capacity building. Members develop skills in navigating complex international frameworks, creating a more resilient and adaptable organizational structure.

In weaving together these lessons, Eurodiaconia members offer a narrative of resilience, adaptability, and strategic thinking. Their experiences serve as a compass for other organizations embarking on the dynamic journey of EU-funded initiatives.



## 5. CONCLUSION

Eurodiaconia members involved in projects funded under the European programmes mostly evaluated the funds to be useful and valuable for their work despite the time consuming application and reporting processes. In order to successfully be involved in projects, Eurodiaconia members have identified several key points which should be taken into account:

### **1. Administrative Burden and Complexity:**

Eurodiaconia members frequently cite the administrative burden associated with EU-funded projects as a significant challenge. The application processes for EU funds are often complex, requiring extensive documentation and compliance with detailed regulations.

Navigating through the intricate administrative procedures, including the submission of comprehensive proposals and adherence to strict guidelines, poses a barrier for some members.

### **2. Delays and Uncertainties:**

EU funding processes are known for their time-consuming nature. The extended timelines from application submission to fund disbursement can create uncertainties, making it challenging for organizations to plan and implement projects in a timely manner. Delays in approvals and fund transfers may impact the continuity and effectiveness of projects, leading some members to seek more responsive and quicker alternatives.

### **3. Stringent Criteria and Eligibility Requirements:**

EU funding programs often come with stringent eligibility criteria and specific requirements. Meeting these criteria can be challenging for some members, particularly smaller organizations with limited resources. The strict criteria might limit the inclusivity of certain projects and hinder the participation of smaller or less experienced organizations.

### **4. Preference for National or Private Foundations Funds:**

Given the challenges associated with EU funding, Eurodiaconia members tend to prefer seeking financial support from national funding sources or private foundations. National funds may offer a more familiar and accessible application process, reducing the

administrative burden and streamlining the timeline for securing funds. Private foundations, often more flexible in their requirements, provide an alternative avenue for securing financial support without the complexities of EU funding.

### **5. Tailored Focus and Alignment with Mission:**

National or private foundation funds may align more closely with the specific focus areas and missions of Eurodiaconia members. These funds may offer greater flexibility in addressing local or specialized needs. The ability to tailor projects to better match the priorities of national or private funders allows members to have a more direct and immediate impact on their communities.

### **6. Relationship Building and Local Context:**

Building relationships with national or private funders may be more manageable for Eurodiaconia members, especially those deeply rooted in their local communities. Local funders may have a better understanding of the context and challenges faced by the organizations, fostering a more collaborative and supportive funding relationship.

### **7. Innovation and Experimental Initiatives:**

Eurodiaconia members may find that national or private funding sources are more amenable to supporting innovative and experimental initiatives. This flexibility allows for the exploration of creative solutions to social challenges. The emphasis on innovation aligns with the dynamic and evolving nature of social services, enabling members to address emerging needs more effectively.

In summary, while EU funding remains a valuable resource, the challenges associated with its application process, coupled with the preference for more accessible and flexible options, lead Eurodiaconia members to seek support from national or private foundations. This shift enables members to overcome administrative complexities, respond more swiftly to community needs, and align their projects more closely with their organizational missions and the specific contexts of the communities they serve.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION FROM OUR MEMBERS

### 1. Timeframe and Administrative Process:

- Provide longer timeframes between the announcement of proposals and the submission deadline.
- Reduce the administrative burden through simplifications and more flexible frameworks.
- Streamline co-financing procedures and place less emphasis on intricate details.
- Streamline the application process and reporting procedures for EU funds to enhance accessibility by simplifying documentation requirements, providing user-friendly guidelines, and minimizing administrative burdens.

### 2. Capacity Building and Training

- Provide further training for the accountable staff of national agencies, enabling them to offer more effective assistance in managing the implementation process.
- Encourage public authorities to organize comprehensive training sessions on accessing funding programs, such as ESF+, at various levels (national, regional, and local). These sessions should not only cover application processes but also provide insights into effective project management and reporting.
- Provide specialized capacity-building initiatives tailored for NGO service providers can empower them to navigate funding opportunities effectively.

### 3. Flexibility and Adaptability

- Provide more adaptable EU calls for proposals.
- Provide flexibility should extend not only to the program areas and reporting requirements. Adapting to evolving priorities is deemed crucial in contrast to being bound by rigid goals set for a seven-year period.
- Regularly review and update procedures based on feedback from organizations and managing authorities.

#### **4. Alternative Financing Models**

- Encourage the exploration and implementation of alternative financing models for social services that align with EU rules.
- Promote the use of personal budgets and service vouchers, empowering service users to make choices about their support.
- Provide guidance and resources to organizations interested in adopting alternative financing models, addressing potential challenges and ensuring compliance with regulations.

#### **5. Communication and Information**

- Furnish clear and concise guidance on EU funding opportunities to managing authorities. Ensure that those responsible for overseeing funds are well-informed about available opportunities, eligibility criteria, and application processes.
- Adopt a fundamental, long-term social investment approach at the EU level. This approach should be integrated into key policy frameworks, including the European Semester, EU Funds (ERDF, ESF+), and the Recovery and Resilience Facility.
- Ensure that social investment is explicitly included in recovery instruments such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility and allocate resources to support social services as part of the broader recovery efforts.

#### **6. Periodic Review and Stakeholder Feedback**

- Establish a mechanism for periodic review and adaptation of EU funding processes.
- Solicit feedback from stakeholders, including service providers, managing authorities, and beneficiaries, to identify areas for improvement.

# Eurodiaconia

2023

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