

# The ESF Transnational Platform Legacy

The European Social Fund's Transnational Platform (ESF TP), managed by AEIDL, is coming to the end of its four-year duration. In May it held its final conference that allowed the team to showcase its achievements and to discuss with policy-makers and stakeholders how best to advance transnational cooperation in the next programming period (2021-2027).

*Marianne Geater, AEIDL, ESF Transnational Platform*



The conference *ESF Transnational Cooperation: including and empowering people throughout life* took place on 21 and 22 May 2019 in Brussels. It brought together close to 300 participants from ESF managing authorities, policy-makers, the European Commission, stakeholders at EU and national levels, project promoters and beneficiaries.

The objective of the conference was to disseminate the lessons learnt from ESF transnational cooperation and to exchange on how the ESF and transnationality can concretely support the experimentation of approaches to tackle unmet social and labour market needs, as well as pressing societal challenges.

The conference challenged participants to explore how we can all build on the success of the ESF TP, alternating between project presentations, thought-provoking panel sessions with high-level speakers and 18 workshops. The workshops covered a wide range of issues such as job-

carving, active ageing, microcredit and financial institutions, diversity, green entrepreneurship, life-long learning, synergies with Erasmus+, health equity, social innovation and much more.

### **A future-proof ESF+**

As Andriana Sukova, Deputy Director General, DG EMPL, pointed out during the opening session of the first day, the added value of the ESF is that it is present at every stage of life helping EU citizens find the place they deserve in society. In the next programming period, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) will continue to invest in people to offer them quality education, equal access to the labour market, fair working conditions, social inclusion and social protection. The idea, to quote EU Commission for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen, is to make the ESF “future-proof”. According to Mrs Sukova, the European Commission’s proposal for the next multiannual financial framework should go a long way towards achieving this goal.



### **Boosting coordinated calls and transnational cooperation**

During the current programming period (2014-2020) mutual learning through the 9 thematic networks of the ESF TP has been highly successful. On the other hand, few Member States took part in coordinated calls aimed at getting countries to launch transnational projects. Loris di Pietrantonio (Head of Unit, ESF and FEAD: Policy and Legislation, DG EMPL) recognised that coordinated calls “were not working” and there was a need for an “upper coordination level”. As Sirpa Liljeström from ESF Finland pointed out: “we in Finland always thought transnational cooperation was important and we wanted to be part of it but it was not as easy as expected”. She insisted that nonetheless project promoters remain enthusiastic about transnational cooperation, a sentiment shared by many conference participants. A Slido poll carried out during the opening session showed that most participants backed the idea that transnational projects should be reinforced in ESF+.

Ms Sukova said transnational projects have a high European added value and a great potential for social innovation to help the EU face future challenges. The European Commission is therefore proposing that in future transnational cooperation is organised at EU level. €200 million will go to transnational cooperation which will be coordinated by a managing authority. This managing authority will help Member States “identify the challenges and identify the solutions already on the ground and see how to further replicate successful pilot projects around Europe,” explained Mr di Pietrantonio.



### **Time for simplification and partnerships**

This new system, together with the work already carried out by the different thematic networks, should ensure more countries participate in coordinated calls under ESF+. For example the Simplification Thematic Network has been working on Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) to smooth the way for transnational projects by making ESF procedures easier.

For Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director of Social Affairs at DG EMPL, “the time has come for SCOs. It should become a reality”. She said 2021-2027 should be about simplification, flexibility, better arrangements and being brave enough to pilot projects that might not succeed. “We should take more risks and more chances that we used to”.

Easier procedures should also make it easier for small NGOs to participate in the ESF and ensure no one is left behind.

Mrs Sukova thanked the ESF TP for all the work it has carried out in recent years and pointed to a new publication by the Learning and Skills TN on [Digital Skills](#) which she called “inspirational useful reading” as the EU looks to better equip its workforce for the changing labour market of tomorrow.

All the 9 TNs have one thing in common: they fostered strong partnerships which many, if not all, speakers identified as the key to success.

Green MEP Jean Lambert said: “Partnership needs a reflection within the Semester process because this is now going to be a key part of how ESF+ is working”. Catherine Naughton, Director of the European Disability Forum and Vice-President of the Social Platform, called on managing authorities to develop the idea of coproduction and building things together. “Be open to stakeholders, build their capacity to participate”. She said working with the knowledge and commitment of civil society was essential for an efficient and targeted policy. Lieve Verboven from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) suggested that existing partnerships should be broadened beyond civil society, the private sector and governments to include unions and employers. “Partnerships do matter. To have strong partnerships is the key to success”.

To ensure that the good practices and the mutual learning that took place during the current programming period are not lost and are carried forward in ESF+, the ESF TP recently published [\*Lessons learned from Transnational Cooperation\*](#). This publication consolidates the lessons learned from transnational cooperation since 2015. It was written by the ten Thematic Experts of the Transnational Platform, Valentina Caimi, Team Leader of the ESF TP and Caroline Meyers of ESF Flanders.



*The ESF Transnational Platform Team.*