



EUROPEAN COMPETENCE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION "ESF SOCIAL INNOVATION+"

This initiative is implemented under the EaSI strand of the ESF+

WORK PROGRAMME

CoP	Employment Education and Skills
Programme year	2023
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Social Innovation and transnational cooperation is an imperative.

ESF Social Innovation+ 2022–2027 aims at facilitating transnational cooperation to boost the transfer and scaling up of innovative solutions aimed at reducing inequalities across the EU, especially in the policy areas of employment, skills and social inclusion.

Transnational cooperation activities, including mutual learning and capacity building, will be organised in the framework of the following Communities of Practice (CoPs): (1) Employment, Education and Skills, (2) Social Inclusion, (3) Social Innovation, and, at a later stage, (4) Migrant integration and (5) Material deprivation (Ex FEAD community). Mutual learning activities will also be organised and supported within the EU-Roma network and the network supporting the implementation of the ALMA initiative in the Member States.

The ambitious objectives of the ESF Social Innovation+ action must be placed in the very challenging societal context of 2022. The European economy was slowly recovering from the Corona pandemic resulting in an overheated labour market and new work patterns. The social and interpersonal consequences of the lockdowns and stress caused by the pandemic are not yet completely understood. The recovery process stopped abruptly in February 2022, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Millions left the country looking for a safe haven, budgets for military equipment boomed, and policy agendas shifted dramatically across the globe. An unprecedented energy crisis, high inflation, rising poverty and interruptions in the industrial supply chains challenge the EU societies and our way of living.

An additional layer of complexity was added on top of the numerous challenges pre-dating this crisis, such as the lack of personal assistance schemes and supported decision-making, or affordable and supported housing; also lack of effective family support, availability of long-term care services, limited access to the labour market for people excluded from society, and shortage of staff in social services. Social budgets are under pressure, and inclusion is rarely on top of the political agenda. While there is evidence that social protection schemes and social services play an important role in mitigating the effects of the crisis, many societal actors and institutions, despite being on the frontline, are geared down to a survival mode.

The pre-crisis policies of the EU provide a solid framework to address the social innovation and social inclusion challenges ahead. The work of the CoPs will connect the ESF+ regulation and funding to the wider policy context and assist in refocusing when needed.

These policy frameworks especially relevant for the Social Inclusion CoP are:

- European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan
- ESF+ regulation and Common Provisions Regulation
- EU Semester
- Child Guarantee
- EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- The Care Strategy
- European Platform on Combatting Homelessness

Although the post-corona era, the war, and the rising poverty risks bring extraordinary challenges, they also create the needed sense of urgency regarding social renewal and innovation. 'Business as usual' will no longer work. Rethinking local development, having everybody on board and at work, equipped with the skills of tomorrow, is a necessity. Participatory approach should be the instrument for achieving that.

Social Innovation, transnational cooperation, and EU funding are part of the answer in such difficult times, and they will help ESF+ Managing Authorities (MAs) to better address societal challenges in their national and regional programmes.

By bringing together experts, practitioners, researchers, decision- and policy-makers, innovators and entrepreneurs, who share common concerns or interests, the CoP activities will allow actors to identify proven solutions that can be upscaled and transferred across Europe. The best initiatives in the fields of employment, education, skills, and social inclusion could thus be spread across more regions, so that more people could benefit from them.

Expanding the best initiatives in the fields of employment, education, skills, and social inclusion, in order to benefit to more people and territories. The work done by the CoPs should contribute to the best possible use of the ESF+ budget.

RATIONALE

This CoP on Employment, Education and Skills (CoP EES) responds to the priority areas of the ESF+ concerning the support of young people in obtaining skills and employment and the support of the working-age population in meeting the challenges of the green and digital transitions. The implementation of ESF+ operational programmes for 2021-2027 started in a turbulent period, where the COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, and the ensuing rise in energy prices have created unforeseeable new challenges to European economies and labour markets. These new challenges call for additional attention to monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment mechanisms in the implementation of ESF+ projects in order to ensure that the activities are relevant and effective in the changed economic and social context. The CoP EES has a great potential for identifying and sharing innovative organisational and policy solutions in responding to the old and new challenges.

The digital and green transitions are dramatically changing the skills demand of European economies— at such speed that traditional adjustment mechanisms embedded in public education and training, and adult learning systems are unable to keep up with. More generally, current labour shortages are a challenge to the European labour market, also accentuated by demographic change, globalisation and the need for increased resilience in view of the impact of COVID-19. With the European Year of Skills, the Commission proposes to

give a fresh impetus to upskilling and reskilling of working-aged adults by setting out four specific objectives. The first objective of the Year is to improve the focus of existing investments to make them more relevant in addressing skills and labour shortages. The second objective focuses on making actual skills acquisition and development more relevant to the needs of the labour market, in close collaboration with social partners, public and private employment services, companies, education and training providers. The third objective brings together people's aspirations and skills sets that companies need. It is about improving the matching of aspirations of both people and companies. The fourth objective focuses on attracting people from third countries with the skills needed by the Union.

The war in Ukraine generated a rapid rise in migration into neighbouring countries and beyond, straining the capacity of integration services in the affected countries. While migration may potentially create opportunities for mitigating labour shortages, the uncertainty about when and how the war will end makes it especially difficult to integrate this new flow of immigrants. The war has also impacted energy prices, which hits energy-intensive sectors directly, and all other sectors via rising inflation and falling real wages. This has increased the risk of an economic slowdown and a rise in unemployment.

These challenges greatly increase the value of sharing information, expertise and innovative solutions across Member States, as mutual learning can improve the speed and effectiveness of policy adaptation.

While the earlier work of the CoP EES has accumulated considerable knowledge and information on the key priority areas of the ESF+, there is a need for further work both in deepening this existing knowledge and updating it in view of the more recent challenges and innovative responses across Member States.

The CoP EES can maximise support to its members by identifying the topics and sub-topics that are directly relevant to most or all MAs and by ensuring the active involvement of members in shaping the agenda of the CoP EES and in its activities. This can be achieved by applying the guiding principles of implementation of the European Competence Centre for Social Innovations (demand-orientation, empowerment, partnership, collective learning, and thematic focus).

OBJECTIVES

The work programme for 2023 aims to support CoP EES members in finding structural, institutional solutions to the old and new challenges identified above and also aims to contribute to the objectives of the European Year of Skills. CoP EES activities will focus on three main topics:

- 1 Transition management through modernising employment services. How can our employment services improve in terms of supporting labour market transitions people make in life, and what is the role of the community in this respect? How can we ensure that workers as well as jobseekers have access to and participate in necessary re- and up-skilling measures? How can public employment services (PES) reach their broadened clientele? How can they harness digital tools to provide timely and accurate information about the labour market and training opportunities? How can they build and sustain the motivation of vulnerable groups to participate in training? What other services do PES need to provide (or ensure via cooperation with other organisations), in order to reduce labour market barriers for the inactive? How can tools such as Individual Learning Accounts and micro-credentials be used to support transition management?

In increasingly volatile labour markets, individuals experience multiple, frequent transitions during their lifetime and need support in navigating the fast-changing job market, and in updating and gaining skills. How can the ESF+ support the development and broadening of traditional employment services to respond to this challenge?

- 2 Targeting of the ESF support to vulnerable youth. How to ensure that the ESF+ resources for youth are focused on those who need them most? How to make sure that young people who have never been employed or lack work experience will be reached by public employment services? Can the ESF+ support/complement other existing schemes for youth, especially mobility schemes? How can mobility be improved (by taking into account early experiences of ALMA implementation) in vocational and adult education as well as for those that are currently not in employment, education or training (NEET)?

The scarring effects of economic crises are deepest for youths lacking work experience, skills and networks. The effectiveness of ESF+ resources invested in supporting youths critically depends on targeting: are measures directed to those that really need support and do they reach all of them? While the ESF+ provides sufficient resources to cover all those in need of support, MAs need to ensure that implementing organisations have the right incentives and capacity to reach out and sustain the motivation of the most vulnerable youths. Sub-topics may include the design of outcome indicators and monitoring systems, techniques of involving local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), etc.

- 3 Improving the resilience of education and training systems in order to support reskilling and upskilling. How can innovations and solutions developed by the ESF+ be used to improve the resilience of education and training systems to be able to better deal with economic and social challenges posed by the rapid changes of labour market needs? How can we use skills intelligence to inform the content of re- and upskilling programmes, ensuring their relevance for current needs and the future labour market?

External challenges imply rapid and unexpected changes in the volume and content of training needs, straining the flexibility and adaptive capacity of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Adult Education (AE) systems. On a small scale, the ESF+ offers innovative approaches to training and training design in this respect, but with limited impact on changing 'mainstream' education and training. Exploring and exchanging good practices could also have implications for the effective financing and quality assurance of VET and AE systems.

The above three topics are intended to define the (relatively broad) areas where CoP EES members are likely to face challenges. During the 2023 programme, we aim to work on a few more narrowly defined subtopics within these areas that are of particular interest to CoP EES members. The subtopics will be selected on the basis of the mapping reports (see the section on activities and outputs) and feedback from CoP EES members during the on-line conference, as well as of their written comments to the draft work programme. We will consult co-chairs and chairs to create a shortlist of subtopics by the end of February and will share it with CoP members in the form of an on-line survey.

To illustrate the concreteness of subtopics, here are some examples: (a) what techniques are best suited for involving NGOs in outreach to vulnerable groups, (b) what outcome measures can create the right incentives for outreach and/or better targeting, (c) how to measure the contribution of social enterprises to improving employability, (d) what are effective ways of needs-based targeting in regional or personal terms, (e) how to increase flexibility in the use of the ESF+ in view of unexpected challenges in labour market inclusion, (f) how to open up apprenticeships to asylum seekers, (g) how to get adults in precarious jobs into longer periods of reskilling, e.g. using Individual Learning Accounts, (h) how artificial intelligence can be used to improve skills matching or the tracking of graduates or training participants.

CoP EES activities in 2023 will aim to contribute to mapping inefficiencies in the existing institutional setup and practices in these areas, mapping innovative ESF+ activities that tackle these inefficiencies, and fostering a dialogue between members and the wider expert community on potential directions for further innovation. The CoP EES aims to build on existing knowledge accumulated in the previous cycle of the CoP EES as well as outside it, and to facilitate sharing information and cooperation with existing other networks of expertise, such as the Network of European PES that are working on related topics.

COP PARTICIPANTS: KEY TARGET GROUPS

The primary target group of the CoP EES includes managers and experts of MAs at the national and regional level, as well as those of line ministries, intermediate bodies, and implementing organisations working in relevant policy areas. The CoP EES also aims to engage the wider expert community, including experienced practitioners and independent experts in training and employment services, mainly by reaching out to existing expert networks. Social partners and their international networks are also included as a secondary target group. Some of the outputs of the CoP EES will also be relevant for academic researchers as well.

Involving the broader expert community helps reduce the risk of reinventing the wheel and increases the impact of the CoP EES on policy improvement.

PROPOSED APPROACH TO ENSURING MEMBERS' INVOLVEMENT

Our strategy for ensuring members' involvement follows the guiding principles of implementation. The strategy itself will be further refined with the help of CoP EES chairs. At this stage, we have outlined the following elements:

- Topics and subtopics are discussed with, and refined in view of the response of, CoP EES members in order to ensure buy-in.
- For each event, the potential target group that may best benefit from the event is carefully defined, and clearly communicated to chairs and co-chairs to ensure reaching the intended target audience.
- A Steering Group, composed of the chair and co-chairs of the CoP EES (see the details below), external experts, representatives of the Commission, and of the European social fund agency (ESFA) will meet quarterly to discuss the progress and outputs of CoP EES activities, and to propose adjustments as necessary.

Chairs/Co-Chairs are the principal spokespersons of the CoP EES. Co-chairs are CoP EES members who are particularly committed to leading sub-themes, sub-groups, hosting study events, etc. The chair is elected by the steering group from among the co-chairs.

Co-chairs and the chair will participate at quarterly meetings where we discuss plans for future activities and evaluate the outcomes of past activities in the CoP EES. Co-chairs will also be encouraged to come forward with suggestions for working groups and to take the lead in the COP's work on particular sub-topics.

Co-chairs and the chair of the CoP EES will represent the needs and views of CoP EES members and are expected to actively contribute to shaping the work of the CoP EES. We aim to invite CoP EES members to indicate their interest in becoming co-chairs in early 2023, and to nominate the co-chairs for 12 months. Further co-chairs can be nominated later on, as new sub-topics emerge.

Peer reviews and study visits may be organised on-line or on-site, depending on the topic and the expected costs of an on-site event, considering both material costs and travel time. However, we aim to ensure that at least two meetings a year are held on site, giving CoP EES members an opportunity to meet in person and in an informal setting as well. Coffee breaks and dinners have an important role in strengthening informal connections between the members of the CoP and fostering members' involvement.

Also, we aim to be engaging and respond to the needs of the community, e.g., by inviting NEETs, apprentices, and other relevant participants to the events.

PROPOSED ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS (RESULTS)

Activities and outputs will vary across the three topics, depending on the identified needs of the CoP EES. For each topic, we will prepare a brief mapping report which identifies the key issues where MAs need support, map the existing resources, and recommend appropriate activities.

The types of activities and outputs will include those previously used (peer reviews and recommendation paper, study visits and checklist of key features, peer-to-peer trainings, webinars, mapping of good practices, toolkits, etc.) and some new types identified by the topic briefs as effective formats (e.g. podcasts or hackathons).

In the first year, apart from the three mapping reports, we aim to implement:

- three peer reviews (one in each topic) to map possible and actual solutions to the issues identified in the mapping report;
- two study visits which showcase a particular good practice implemented in a MA;
- one peer-to-peer training which allows a small group of motivated CoP EES members to receive hands-on training in a tool or practice developed by another member organisation;
- one webinar intended to share lessons and good practices among a wider audience.

The lessons of these activities will be summarised in practice guides, recommendation papers, checklists, summary of lessons and resources, and toolkits.

The “summary of lessons and resources” is a new format not previously used: it is a one-page document that sums up the key lessons of an event or activity and guides the interested reader to existing further resources (including links) on the topic.

DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

The recordings of on-line events (podcasts and webinars) will be disseminated via the CoP EES Newsletter/ reports and made available at the MS Teams Community of Practice on Employment, Education and Skills platform, ESF + Transnational Cooperation Platform, and other upcoming channels of communication, such as the SI+ website and social media.

Toolkits and review papers (mapping of good practices or of existing empirical evidence) will be disseminated via the same channels and also in academic and policy circles, such as on Researchgate in order to reach a wider audience. The executive summaries of selected outputs (based on the recommendations of CoP EES chairs) will be translated into selected national languages in order to reach a wider group of policy practitioners.

Good practices identified during CoP EES activities will be shared with other expert networks via strategic meetings with the representatives of relevant networks at least once a year, and also by opening some of the on-line events for the members of these networks to attend.

TEAMWORK ORGANISATION AND LOGISTICS

A Taskforce Team consisting of the Lead Thematic Expert, CoP coordinators, Chair/Co-chair involved, will be responsible for coordinating, implementing, and monitoring the activities of all CoPs. The European Competence Centre for Social Innovation will ensure that the CoP EES Taskforce has appropriate resources to perform its tasks.

The Taskforce will report on the implementation of the activities of CoPs and will ensure regular exchange and coordination between all CoPs involved. The CoP EES Taskforce will also systematically exchange with bodies implementing/monitoring social innovation-related activities under other relevant EU programmes, such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, COSME, ERDF, and EAFRD.

The implementation of the CoP activities will be managed by the ESFA.

A funding allocation for CoP/network members will be provided for the flight/train and accommodation to participate in on-site events of the Centre.

WORK SCHEDULE

Time	Activities/ meetings	Output
November/ December 2022 (on-line event)	Elaboration of the work programme, a conference to discuss it	Work programme for 2023
January 2023	Setting up of the Steering Group, first meeting of the Steering Group and election of the Chair, setting up of potential sub-groups	
January 2023	Thematic expert(s) prepare a mapping report on the sub-themes	
February 2023	The mapping reports are discussed by the Steering Group and finalised by the authors	Mapping reports
March 2023	Peer review on selected issue(s)	Recommendation paper
April 2023	Peer review on selected issue(s)	Recommendation paper
May 2023	Peer review on selected issue(s)	Recommendation paper
June 2023 (on-site event)	Mid-term event: Crosscutting topics. Annual meeting of CoPs.	Report
September 2023	Study visit on a selected sub-theme	Checklist
October 2023 (on-line event)	Webinar	Summary of lessons and resources
October 2023	Study visit on a selected sub-theme	Checklist
November 2023	Peer-to-peer training (topic TBS)	Output feeds into the related checklist or toolkit (depending on the topic)
November/ December 2023 (on-line event)	A joint plenary session Elaboration of the work programme, a conference to discuss it	Work programme for 2024
Jan-Feb 2024	Study visit on a selected sub-theme	Checklist