

EU investment in jobs, education and social inclusion must be managed in partnership with regions and cities

Rapporteur Catuscia Marini: “The next EU budget must put citizens first and keep the European Social Fund (ESF) as a part of regional policy without turning it into a lever for top-down financial receipts.”

Between 2007 and 2014, 9.4 million Europeans gained employment and 8.7 million obtained a qualification thanks to the support of the European Social Fund (ESF) and the partnership between the EU and national and regional governments. The European Committee of the Regions is mobilising its efforts to ensure that [these achievements](#) are duly taken into account and the fund will not be cut in the forthcoming EU long-term budget, or diverted to incentivise heavily centralised measures.

The ESF is the main EU instrument supporting employment policies, worth more than [€80 billion for the years 2014-2020](#). Its aim is to reduce disparities between and within European regions and cities by promoting job creation, work productivity, equal opportunities and social inclusion. Its priorities include boosting the adaptability of workers and enterprises; improving access to employment, facilitating the transition from school to work and enhancing vocational training; helping disadvantaged groups to find jobs; fighting against poverty; and reducing the numbers of early school leavers.

The fund’s crucial role in Europe’s future was pointed out by EU local and regional leaders in the opinion on the [Mid-term review of the ESF preparing the post-2020 proposal](#), led by the president of the Umbria region and chair of the CoR PES Group, **Catuscia Marini** (IT/PES).

“ We want the next EU budget to put citizens first and to provide a concrete European response to social challenges. The European Social Fund is the most effective tool in the hands of local and regional authorities to provide these responses. This is why the European Committee of the Regions strongly opposes any plan to create a new fund, outside the framework of cohesion policy, supporting a top-down coordination of Member States’ macroeconomic policies, without any link to the actual needs of local communities “ said Ms Marini, stressing that: *“ The ESF must remain one of the European Structural and Investment Funds and a key element of cohesion policy, in order to harness every possible synergy with other structural funds, in particular with regional development and rural development funds .”* A call that was fully shared by EU Regional policy commissioner **Corinna Crețu** during a debate with President Marini, held at the CoR ahead of the plenary vote.

The key challenges of the next decade – from skills adaptation in sectors facing digitalisation to reducing early school-leaving, and from helping migrant workers integrate to ensuring that jobseekers and employers are well matched – can be addressed effectively only by taking account of specific

local needs and by mobilising local actors. For this reason, the Committee wants the ESF to remain a key element of [regional cohesion policy](#), jointly managed by means of partnerships between European institutions, Member States, regional and local governments and the economic and social players in the areas concerned.

This is particularly important in light of the reform proposals put together in the context of the preparatory work for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the financial plan setting expenditure ceilings for all EU policies in the years 2021-2027. Current options include merging the ESF with other tools aimed at fostering employment and human capital (i.e. the Youth Employment Initiative and the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund) in order to create an “umbrella fund” with common rules. Such a fund would support the implementation of the country-specific recommendations formulated every year by the European Commission in the context of the European Semester (a procedure for the coordination of macro-economic policies across the EU).

In such a scenario, the joint programming scheme that currently involves the European Commission, national governments and regions, would be replaced by contractual arrangements whereby ESF funding was released to Member States under the condition that they achieve the targets for structural reforms set throughout the European Semester process.

This option is strongly rejected by CoR members, who propose instead to improve the link between cohesion policy and EU macro-economic governance by structurally involving local and regional authorities as partners in the European Semester process, relying on territorial analysis and territory-specific recommendations whenever possible.

As for the integration of other funds into the ESF, local leaders stress that this will produce positive synergies only if the regional dimension is well preserved and the creation of the “ESF umbrella” does not lead to an overall reduction in the resources devoted to employment and social inclusion.

According to the Committee, reducing ESF resources would openly contradict the recent launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights, jeopardising any chance of turning it into a reality. Indeed, according to the CoR, the Pillar’s [20 key principles](#) should be well reflected in the programmes supported by the ESF over the next years.

Note for editors

The ESF is a key tool for EU cohesion policy, the future of which is currently under threat due to the financial impact of Brexit as well as the need to fund new measures in the fields of defence, security, and migration. To make the case for a stronger cohesion policy after 2020, the CoR, together with leading EU territorial associations, has launched the **#CohesionAlliance**: a grass-roots movement open to anyone who believes that EU cohesion policy must continue to act as a pillar of the EU’s future. Since its launch in October last year, the Alliance has continued to attract new signatories every day, including regional and local authorities, business associations, academia, trade unions and think tanks.

More information about the #CohesionAlliance initiatives, statements and position papers are available at <http://cohesionalliance.eu>

Contact:

Pierluigi Boda

Tel: +32 2 282 2461

Mobile: +32 473 85 17 43

pierluigi.boda@cor.europa.eu