



Estonia

# Assessment of the 2008-2010 National Reform Programmes for Growth and Jobs from a social inclusion perspective: The extent of synergies between growth and jobs policies and social inclusion policies

## A Study of National Policies

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## Summary

According to the European Commission's assessment of the progress in implementing the Estonian Action Plan for Growth and Jobs 2005-2007, Estonia has made a very good progress. Only in the employment area, in the modernisation of labour law the progress has been limited.

In the context of the analysis of components that influence the GDP growth the most, the social dimension has been strengthened in some extent in the 2008-2011 NRP compared with the 2007 IRNRP but there is no reference to the policies for social protection and social inclusion or clear reference to the social dimension.

The 2008-2011 NRP is a government's central strategy for increasing the competitiveness of the economy. Compared with the Estonian 2007 Implementation Report of the National Reform Programme for Growth and Jobs the social dimension has strengthened, but as before, social cohesion is not included in the stated goal of the policies and there is no reference to the strategies for social protection and social inclusion either. The terms such as 'social cohesion', 'social inclusion', 'social impact' etc. are not mentioned. It should be underlined that the awareness of 'feeding in' and 'feeding out' is not explicit; at the same time, the objectives and measures of the 2008-2011 NRP address well the Commission's 2008 recommendations.

The most important strengths of the 2008-2011 NRP may be considered as follows:

- emphasis on social dimension has increased;
- many important aspects of 'feeding out' are covered (flexicurity, to bring more vulnerable groups to the labour market, reconcile work and family, promote greater inclusion of older workers, etc.);
- although there is no reference in the SPSI process contribution to the growth and jobs agenda, several measures are related to bringing risk groups to the labour market, encouraging lifelong learning, reducing the number of early school leavers, reconciling work and family, etc.;
- systematic involvement of different stakeholders in the preparation and monitoring process;
- the impact of measures to promote economic growth and financial sustainability on promoting greater social protection, social cohesion and social inclusion has been taken account in some extent.

The most important weaknesses of the 2008-2011 NRP may be considered as follows:

- there is not any reference to the strategies for social protection and social inclusion in the implementation of the Lisbon agenda;
- the potential impact of higher prices, and ongoing turbulence on financial markets on people at risk of poverty and social exclusion or any other social impacts have not been taken into consideration;

- in-work poverty is not considered as a problem;
- too little attention is paid to the 'feeding in' aspects;
- attention has not not been paid to the territorial differences and regional aspects;
- very little attention has been paid to gender dimension;
- there is no clear strategy of the mutual reinforcement of two processes (growth and jobs and SPSI).

## 1. Overall assessment of implementation of the 2005-2008 NRP during the past year from social inclusion perspective

According to the European Commission's assessment of the progress in implementing the Estonian Action Plan for Growth and Jobs 2005-2007 (2005-2007 NRP)<sup>1</sup>, Estonia has made very good progress. Only in the employment area, in the modernisation of labour law the progress has been limited. The preparation of the Estonian Action Plan for Growth and Jobs 2008-2011 for the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy (2008-2011 NRP) was preceded by analysis of the effectiveness of the implemented measures of the 2005-2007 NRP. The 2008-2011 NRP provides an analysis of the components supporting Estonia's economic growth compared to other European Union (EU) Member States, which has been composed by the Estonian Government together with the European Commission. In the context of the analysis of components influencing the most the GDP growth, the social dimension has been strengthened in some extent in the 2008-2011 NRP compared with the Estonian 2007 Implementation Report of the National Reform Programme for Growths and Jobs (2007 IRNRP). This analysis underlines positive changes in employment, an increase in the number of employed and the relatively high employment rate, decrease of unemployment, high employment rate among women and elderly (aged 55-64), but compared with EU15 average there are relatively fewer men employed in Estonia and the rate of youth employment is lower, people in Estonia work (workers and the number of hours worked combined) around 30% more *per person*, the educational level is relatively high, etc. In the context of productivity growth, the attention is paid to the level of education among workers and development of their skills by contributing to in-service training and active labour market measures. The examples are some evidence of mutually reinforcing feedback between economic, employment and social policies ('feeding in' and 'feeding out'), but no special attention to show that has been paid in the 2008-2011 NRP. There is no reference to the policies for social protection and social inclusion or clear reference to the social dimension in the 2008-2011 NRP. No attention is paid to the assessment of impact of policies and programmes. Unfortunately it is impossible to provide any good examples of 'feeding in' or 'feeding out' which are supported by clear impact assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> Country-specific Integrated Recommendations. Estonia.  
<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/et/08/st07/st07275.et08.pdf>.

## 2. Assessment of the 2005-2008 NRP from the perspective of social inclusion

### 2.1. Overall assessment

The Estonian Action Plan for Growth and Jobs 2008-2011 for the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy (2008-2011 NRP) aims to increase the Estonian work force productivity to 80% of the European Union (EU) average, to increase scientific and development activities up to 2% of GDP and the growth of employment to 70.5% - the 2008-2011 NRP is the government's central strategy for increasing the competitiveness of the economy. In this context, the 2008-2011 NRP, compared with the 2007 IRNRP has strengthened the social dimension. Formally it is directly expressed in nearly twice as many pages as in the 2007 IRNRP dedicated to the achievement of the social dimension related objectives (14 pages in the 2007 IRNRP and 26 pages in the 2008-2011 NRP). Of more significance is, of course, that more attention has been paid also to the content of social dimension although, as before, social cohesion is not included in the stated goal of the policies and there is no reference to the strategies for social protection and social inclusion either. Although the Social Inclusion Strand of the Estonian 2008-2010 National Strategy Report for Social Protection and Social Inclusion (NAP/inclusion) provides clear links to the Lisbon strategy's goal of improving the skills of the labour force, increasing the flexibility of the labour market and improving the quality of working life, the 2008-2011 NRP contains no reference to the social inclusion process. The terms such as 'social cohesion', 'social inclusion', 'social impact' etc. are not mentioned. In the context of the long-term aim of the Estonian economic policy the increase of income level close to the level of the old EU member states is mentioned.

At the same time, the objectives and measures of the 2008-2011 NRP address well the Commission's 2008 recommendations.<sup>2</sup> Compared with the 2005-2007 NRP, the evidence of contribution of growth and jobs policies to achieving social inclusion objectives ('feeding out') and of contribution of social inclusion policies and programmes to achieving the growth and jobs goals ('feeding in') has increased, e.g. improvement of the support to disabled who work and at the same time, reduction in the number of people receiving benefits, etc. Indirect assessment of the impact of policies has been made, e.g. the impact of the reform of active labour market measures to positive changes in employment indicators. However, it should be underlined that the awareness of 'feeding in' and 'feeding out' is not explicit.

The 2008-2011 NRP analyses the causes of the slowdown of economic growth and gives a 2008 summer forecast by the Ministry of Finance:

- in 2008, economic growth will drop to -1% (in 2005 and 2006 around 10%, in 2007 6.3%) and in 2009, economic growth shall increase again reaching 2.6% due to the renewed growth in domestic demand and increased exports. According to the basic scenario of the Bank of Estonia's 2008 autumn forecast, Estonia's GDP will decline even more (by 1.8% in 2008 and by 2.1% in 2009)<sup>3</sup>;

<sup>2</sup> Concerning social dimension, two challenges were identified: reinforcing active labour market policies and increasing the supply of skilled labour by implementing a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy that responds to labour market needs; reducing labour market rigidities by urgent progress towards labour law modernisation and by promoting flexible forms of work.

<sup>3</sup> Economic policy statement of Eesti Pank. Economic forecast for 2008-2010. October 22, 2008. Bank of Estonia. [http://www.eestipank.info/print/en/press/Press/kommentaariid/Arhiiv/\\_2008/\\_215.html](http://www.eestipank.info/print/en/press/Press/kommentaariid/Arhiiv/_2008/_215.html).

- the current account deficit will decrease significantly in 2008 due to the modest increase in domestic demand and imports and will be 11.4% of GDP in 2008, and continue gradual decrease over 2009-2012;
- average inflation rate will be 10.7% in 2008 and will slow down to 6.3% in 2009;
- average real wage growth will slow to 4.2% in 2008 (was 13% in 2007) and in following years, the wage and labour productivity growth will grow more compatible.

Acceleration of inflation that started in the second half of 2006 has been discussed mainly in connection with its impact on the potential adoption of euro. The 2008-2011 NRP has stated that in order to bring the adoption of euro closer, several excise rates were increased to the minimum EU level in 2008 in order to avoid additional administrative price pressures at the time when Estonia is more likely to satisfy the inflation criteria. Data have been provided according to which the consumer price index will be influenced by increased excise duties by 1.5% in 2008 and by 0.8% in 2009. The price of energy has been discussed only in respect to the competitiveness of the economy. The potential impact of higher prices, and ongoing turbulence on financial markets on people at risk of poverty and social exclusion or any other social impacts have not been taken into consideration.

## 2.2. 'Feeding out'

### 2.2.1. *Employment and 'feeding out'*

The 2008-2011 NRP provides several measures to increase access to employment and enhance employability, which considerably promotes greater social inclusion, although this has not been mentioned directly as a target, all objectives are directly to increase the competitiveness and economic growth.

In connection with the implementation of flexicurity principles a justified viewpoint is presented in the section 'Education and labour market' of the 2008-2011 NRP that owing to the modernization of the active labour market policy in 2006, Estonia has developed high-quality labour market services for unemployed people (six new active labour market measures and updating the principles of providing them) and social guarantees and security of workers are improved (unemployment insurance benefits), whereas development of the flexibility of the labour market has not been so successful. The measures to promote greater flexibility are balanced by measures to ensure security and avoid the risk of falling into poverty and social exclusion. The primary concern of the government is stated to be development of the skills of the work force through an effective and adaptable education system as well as lifelong learning methods that help to achieve necessary flexibility in the labour market and in work relations, as well as reducing the gender gap without endangering the security of employees in order to adapt to economic changes and support an increase in productivity.

Although Objective 8 'Improve the skills of the labour force' is unambiguously connected only with the increase of competitiveness, multi-dimensional measures presented within the framework of six sub-objectives (ensure better conformity between the labour market and education; popularize sciences and technology; reducing number of early school leavers; encourage lifelong learning; bring risk groups to the labour market; simplify the use of highly qualified foreign labour and invite Estonians working abroad to return) help prevent poverty and social inclusion of the risk groups

(long-term unemployed, non-Estonians, disabled persons, young people with a low educational level, etc.).

The measures presented within the framework of the Objective 9 'Increase the flexibility of the labour market and improve the quality of working life' seek to increase the secure flexibility and transparency of labour relations and ensure a working environment that supports the health of employees. These measures help to promote flexible work forms to focus on people for whom it is impossible to reconcile normal working hours and a full-time job with their obligations (e.g. disabled persons, parents of small children, elderly, etc.), as well as reconcile work and family (formulate further principles to help reconcile work and family life; create supplementary kindergarten places; pay a *per-capita* allowance to parents of kindergarten children to finance childcare services and pre-primary education by local municipalities that do not guarantee kindergarten places). In connection with that the Estonian work environment is still considerably below the EU average, it is very important that in addition to measures that make the work environment safer, occupational health and safety insurance would be created.

The 2008-2011 NRP contains measures to bring more vulnerable groups (e.g. jobless households, working poor, lone parents, people with a disability, non-Estonians) to the labour market:

- broaden the range of active labour market measures for inactive people and employed disabled persons;
- develop measures to support national labour market services (such as social rehabilitation, career-related psychological counselling, job clubs) and implement them for risk groups (e.g. young people, long-term unemployed, etc.) of the unemployed and job-seekers;
- formulate a mechanism to compensate for additional work-related expenditure (incl. transport) and implement it for disabled people (working allowance);
- create a disability-related information and aid centre; create and develop counselling centres for people with special needs and those close to them;
- reform the rehabilitation system for disabled people to encourage employment;
- develop an integrated care system, creating a solid network of nursing homes and formulating social services, incl. day centres, child day care and nursing care, in order to enable working-age people with a care giving responsibility to enter the labour market;
- increase the competitiveness of non-Estonians by ameliorating their language skills (Estonian language lessons, Estonian language lessons integrated within vocational in-service training and re-education, labour force exchange programs, etc.);
- conduct a political analysis to prepare reform of the system of social, employment and health care services (active and passive labour market measures, rehabilitation services, social security measures, health insurance, etc.), and allowances and benefits that encourage employment.

In-work poverty is not considered as a problem in the 2008-2011 NRP, probably because the real wage growth in recent years has been remarkable (10.9% in 2006 and 13% in 2007). However, it is underlined that wages of Estonian researchers at current prices are among the lowest in the list of EU25 Member States.

To increase access to employment and promote greater social inclusion of older workers it is envisaged to include elderly in the target group benefiting from labour market training normally only offered to unemployed people.

Probably because the number of SMEs in Estonia is relatively small for the size of population compared to other EU countries and Estonia is still characterized by rather rigid and outdated labour legislation and very low use of flexible forms of work (e.g. part-time jobs, telework), the role of SMEs in the contribution to creating employment for those distant from the labour market has not been regarded as important to identify in the 2008-2011 NRP.

### *2.2.2. Economic growth, financial sustainability and 'feeding out'*

The 2008-2011 NRP takes into account the impact of measures to promote economic growth and financial sustainability on promoting greater social protection, social cohesion and social inclusion in some aspects. Since 2002, the government sector has had a surplus (2.9% of GDP in 2006). A budget for 2008 was established with a surplus of 1.3% of GDP. Mainly due to decrease in real estate operations and a decrease in consumption tax revenue decreased remarkably and so as to ensure the budget balance for the government, the Parliament passed a supplementary budget for 2008, which reduced expenditure in the state budget. A surplus-oriented fiscal policy has enabled the government to decrease the central government's debt burden to 3.5% at the end of 2007.

The 2008-2011 NRP states that the largest contribution to the long-term sustainability of fiscal policies has been an increase in employment rates and during the past two years, nearly 50,000 more taxpayers (approximately 7% of total employment) pay social taxes. So they helped to improve the financial state of the state pension insurance and the Estonian Health Insurance Fund. Despite the relatively large pension insurance fund reserves, the Estonian pension insurance system is in a relatively weak sustainable financial position. To improve the long-term resilience of the pension insurance system several recent changes have been made (the reserves of the pension fund have been increased, the pension index system was changed, the gradual harmonization of the retirement age for men and women; supplementary measures for financing pension insurance); a couple of new measures are planned for 2008-2009 about which it cannot be said that they directly ensure greater social cohesion.

The measures to improve the long-term sustainability of the health insurance are substantially related to developments in the health-related behaviour of the population (the government approved in 2008 the development program for public health for 2009-2020). At the same time, the measure to update the conditions for paying social allowances to the disabled persons should improve support to the disabled who work and at the same time reduce the number of people who receive benefits, hence ensuring greater social cohesion.

The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund has been in surplus every year since the expenses have been lower and the receipt of premiums better than expected. In the 2008-2011 NRP, the forecast concerning the financial situation of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund is

rightly connected with the new Employment Contracts Act, which will establish additional obligations for this fund.

It is difficult to find any efforts made to address territorial differences and regional gaps and their impact on social inclusion. Some indirect examples could be support to the investments of micro-enterprises to diversify their economic activity in rural areas; support to the regional e-learning centres.

In the 2008-2011 NRP, the price of energy has been discussed only in the context of increasing the environmental sustainability of energy production and the competitiveness of economy, whereas it has been mentioned that under a fast price rise the competitiveness might fall and directly influence employment.

In the 2008-2011 NRP examples are given for rapid implementation of information and communication technologies and development of the telecommunications network in Estonia: most of the Estonian schools, public sector institutions and enterprises have an Internet connection, 98% of Estonian population live in areas with access to broadband connections and good Wi-Fi networks, the number of Estonian computer users rose to 68% of entire population, the percentage of Internet users has reached 66%, every second family had an Internet connection at home, etc. A measure of the sub-objective to ensure better conformity between the labour market and education is improvement of e-learning. No particular attention to ensuring the Internet access of those experiencing poverty and social inclusion has been given in the 2008-2011 NRP.

In the 2008-2011 NRP there is no mention of the measures to promote financial inclusion to ensuring that people at risk of poverty and social exclusion have access to bank accounts and banking services, access to credits, etc.

There are no measures to address over-indebtedness amongst people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, although especially in recent months the media has covered problems of low-income people in connection with the repayment of express loans (e.g. SMS loans).

There are no measures to improve access to housing paying particular attention to ensuring the access of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

### **2.3. 'Feeding in'**

Several policies and measures being developed in the context of social protection and social inclusion (SPSI) process have been taken into account in the 2008-2011 NRP, but directly there is no reference in the SPSI process contribution to the growth and jobs agenda. These policies and measures are related to bringing risk groups to the labour market, encouraging lifelong learning, reducing the number of early school leavers, reconciling work and family, etc. The 2008-2010 NSRSPSI has addressed better the growth and jobs agenda than the 2008-2011 NRP to the SPSI process. But there is no clear strategy evident, either in 2008-2011 NRP or in 2008-2010 NSRSPSI to ensure that the two processes are mutually reinforcing.

An example of mutual strengthening of both growth and jobs and social inclusion policies in the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI concerns the support of income and employment opportunities of disabled persons. The Social Benefits for Disabled Persons Act will be amended and the social benefits of the disabled persons of employable age will be associated with employment. The purpose of the

amendment is to activate disabled persons and involve them in social life, encourage them to start employment and support those who cannot work. To achieve this objective, different systems of granting social support will be developed for different age groups. According to the concept, compensation of additional costs due to disability and support of employment of persons of employable age will continue. To prevent inequality of a disabled employee in comparison to colleagues without disabilities, additional disability-related costs of working (alternative means of transport, faster wear of prosthetic appliances, etc.) will be partially compensated. Allowance for disabled persons of employable age will be granted on case-by-case basis.

In the 2008-2011 NRP, the active inclusion agenda of combining employment activation, adequate minimum income and access to supporting services has been taken into account through several measures of Objective 8 'Improve the skills of the labour force' and Objective 9 'Increase the flexibility of the labour market and improve the quality of working life':

- include employed people in risk groups in the target group benefiting from labour market training normally only offered to unemployed people;
- enlarge the target group of the people who can receive career counselling service from the Estonian Labour Market Board from unemployed persons to employed people and inactive people;
- develop measures to support national labour market services (such as social rehabilitation, career-related psychological counselling, job clubs) and implement them for risk groups of the unemployed and job-seekers;
- reform the rehabilitation system for disabled people to encourage employment; develop an integrated care system, creating a solid network of nursing homes and formulating social services, incl. day centres, child day care and nursing care, in order to enable working-age people with a care giving responsibility to enter the labour market;
- increase unemployment benefit rates (unemployment insurance benefit and unemployment allowance) and broaden the range of beneficiaries through new Employment Contracts Act in order to increase the security of the labour market, etc.

Several measures of Objective 8 'Improve the skills of the labour force' have addressed the issue of education, training and lifelong learning (incl. measures to reduce the number of early school leavers) but the proposed education policies have been assessed mainly for their contribution to growth and jobs objectives:

- the measures of the sub-objective to ensure conformity between the labour market and education are related to improving organisation of education in order to satisfy the needs of the labour market, to improvement of educational infrastructure and e-learning, to ensure better access to education;
- relate hobby education to formal education, support individual and group study among children with special educational needs;
- formulate and establish an assistant teacher system;
- develop counselling networks (study aid centres, counselling commissions) and an integrated counselling model (local pedagogical-psychological and career counselling systems);

- offer working adults free in-service training and retraining in vocational education institutions, professional higher education institutions and informal education centres;
- popularise lifelong learning and inform the adult population of study opportunities;
- increase the competitiveness of non-Estonians by ameliorating their language skills (Estonian language lessons, Estonian language lessons integrated within vocational in-service training and re-education, labour force exchange programs, etc.

Gender issue has been mentioned in the 2008-2011 NRP only in connection with different employment rates, unemployment rates, inactivity rates of men and women, differences in part-time work. A reference to the reduction of the gender pay gap through development of the skills of work force may be identified as the only reference to the gender equality issue. The importance of promoting social inclusion through promoting gender equality has not considered the impact on growth and jobs objectives either.

The contribution of anti-discrimination measures to ensuring greater social inclusion and their impact on growth and jobs has not been directly considered either.

All measures of the objective to bring risk groups to the labour market are indirectly connected with the prevention of child and family poverty and social exclusion, but benefits of the measures to prevent and reduce child and family poverty and social exclusion on promoting growth and jobs have not been directly identified.

On the basis of previously presented measures it is possible to say that the potential of the social economy to create employment for people furthest from the labour market (long-term unemployed, disabled persons, inactive persons, especially persons with a care giving responsibility, non-Estonians, etc.) has been taken into account on quite a large extent.

## 2.4. Governance

### 2.4.1. Monitoring and assessment

In the 2008-2011 NRP appropriate arrangements for the preparation and monitoring of this strategy are provided, whereas a more detailed description of its preparation and the process activity plan are presented also on the webpage.<sup>4</sup> But there is no identification of the monitoring and assessment of the impact of economic and employment policies on social inclusion and social inclusion/social protection policies on economic and employment growth. From the preparation of the 2008-2011 NRP in comparison with the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI a different political approach to the 2008-2011 NRP can be identified. The 2008-2011 NRP was discussed at the government meeting, also at the European Union affairs, social affairs, financial affairs, and cultural affairs committee of the Parliament. The preparation of the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI did not cause such interest and the government has not approved the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI, justifying it that on the basis of the Republic of Estonia laws the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI is not a document the government should approve. Approval of the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI by the government would

<sup>4</sup> Majanduskasvu ja tööhõive tegevuskava 2008-2011 koostamise protsess (Preparation of the action plan for economic growth and employment 2008-2011). <https://www.riigikantselei.ee/?id=73384>; Majanduskasvu ja tööhõive tegevuskava 2008-2011 koostamise protsessi tegevusskeem (Activity plan for the preparation of the action plan for economic growth and employment 2008-2011). [http://www.riigikantselei.ee/failid/2007\\_11\\_05\\_Uue\\_MTTK\\_ajaplaan2.pdf](http://www.riigikantselei.ee/failid/2007_11_05_Uue_MTTK_ajaplaan2.pdf).

indicate its attitude towards poverty and social inclusion process. The parliamentary social affairs committee has not discussed the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI either.

#### *2.4.2. Involvement of stakeholders*

Main stakeholders (representatives of relevant ministries, social partners, experts) are involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of the 2008-2011 NRP. Involvement of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion and the organisations that represent them is not mentioned in the 2008-2011 NRP. However, the 2008-2011 NRP was from 1 July till 17 August 2008 open to public debate in the Participation web.<sup>5</sup>

#### *2.4.3. Coordination*

Although the 2008-2011 NRP does not directly mention the governance arrangements to strengthen the social dimension and the contribution of the NRP to greater social cohesion, two objectives out of nine of the 2008-2011 NRP and their measures are clearly social dimension oriented. The arrangements for the coordination of the preparation of the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI and the 2008-2011 NRP are not presented either. At the same time, the construction and content of the 2008-2011 NRP shows that during the preparation of the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI the coordination with the 2008-2011 NRP has taken place and vice versa. Considering that representatives of the same ministries participated in the preparation of both the 2008-2010 NSRSPSI and the 2008-2011 NRP, the governance arrangements of both strategies could have been clearly identified also.

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<sup>5</sup> Osalusveeb (Participation web).  
<https://www.osale.ee/konsultatsioonid/index.php?page=consults&id=57&search=majanduskasvu>.

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