

## Multi-regional Operational Programme to combat discrimination

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Structural funds remain one of the key EU instruments to tackle not only regional, but also social inequality. The funds' contribution to social inclusion is being challenged/transformed in the new programming period (2007-2013) by:

- loss of the EQUAL programme and "mainstreaming" of its key principles (including partnership, innovation, transnationality, focus on excluded groups) through the new programmes
- strong link with the Lisbon agenda (perceived primarily through a "growth and jobs" approach)

This takes place in a context marked by the newly formulated partnership principle in structural funds regulation (article 11), which acknowledges more specifically partnership with civil society organisations and NGOs.

The relevance and transferability of the programme and policy to other countries can thus be assessed with regard to three key aspects:

- 1) **Making Structural Funds a sound tool in the fight against exclusion**
- 2) **Ensuring an effective follow-up of EQUAL**
- 3) **Proving a framework that allows sound partnership with NGOs**

### 1. **Making Structural Funds a sound tool in the fight against exclusion, and strengthen the link with the EU social inclusion strategy**

Since the creation of the European Social Fund in 1957, Structural Funds have made a considerable contribution to tackling social exclusion through the EU. This was primarily ensured through the European Social Fund, which allowed tackling exclusion through measures likely to bring people back into work, but also allowing for a wider integration and empowerment of excluded groups. More recently, the European Social Fund but also significantly the European Regional Development Fund's contributions have gone beyond this, by providing support for capacity building for social NGOs, social economy initiatives and inclusive entrepreneurship approaches, infrastructures linked to social inclusion.

The 2007-2013 round of Structural Funds is marked by an increasing link with the Lisbon Strategy (not yet in place when the previous round was being elaborated), which raises a number of questions regarding the place given to social inclusion (with a strong focus on "growth and jobs" first, at the expense of the Lisbon's social pillar). It is therefore crucial to ensure that Structural Funds keep on being targeted at measures supporting a holistic vision of inclusion, which include:

- “positive” activation measures (training, employability, lifelong learning, but also access to childcare and other services);
- measures allowing wider integration and empowerment of excluded groups (through for instance development of soft skills, targeted social services);
- capacity building for social NGOs (in particular for convergence areas);
- social economy initiatives and inclusive entrepreneurship approaches;
- infrastructures linked to social inclusion.

Besides, it is crucial to ensure strong coordination structures and processes that would enhance the coherence between the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on social inclusion, the Lisbon, Employment Strategy and the structural funds. However, given the very nature and objectives of Structural Funds, such a contribution cannot be limited to a narrow vision of Lisbon and ought to fully integrate its social strand, which the funds have traditionally contributed to support. Further attention should be paid to the link between the OMC SPSI (Social Protection and Social Inclusion) objectives and priorities and the National Reform Programme and the Structural Funds process.

- *The programme appears as particularly positive in that it acknowledges that the fight against exclusion has to be tackled through holistic strategies, as well as the need to link it strongly with the NAPs inclusion, and to involved the ERDF beside the European Social Fund as a tool for inclusion.*
- *However, it is also crucial to insist on the need for better complementarity between the NAPs inclusion and the OPs in terms of process, structures and evaluation.*

## 2. Ensuring an effective follow-up of EQUAL, and combining mainstreaming and targeted approaches

The loss of the EQUAL programme appears as a major concern regarding the approach to social inclusion to be adopted within Structural Funds. Indeed, while inclusion should be an overall objective of the funds and in particular of the ESF, this should be complemented by more targeted measures involving excluded group. Putting a strong focus on partnership with civil society, outreach to excluded groups and transnationality, EQUAL had managed to make such an approach a reality in a number of countries.

There will be no CIPs in the new round, but the Community Strategic Guidelines expressly required that these principles be mainstreamed in the new round of Structural Funds. At this stage of the elaboration of programming documents, EAPN national networks report that there is little evidence of the effective mainstreaming of the principles of the EQUAL programme and the types of action it supported.

- The elaboration of a specific Operational Programme on Exclusion within the 2007-2013 programming period can thus be considered a source of inspiration, building on the success stories of EQUAL, particularly in terms of outreach to excluded groups through specific targeted approaches, but also partnership and alliances with NGOs. In the new programming period, Spain is one of the few countries to have devoted a specific Operational Programme to the issue of discrimination and exclusion.

- However, it will be crucial to ensure as well a trans-national dimension in the programme, so as to keep a real European dimension in the fight against exclusion and keep learning on each others' practices.

### 3. Proving a framework that allows sound partnership with NGOs

The new article 11 of the general Structural Funds regulation recognize explicitly partnership with non-governmental organisations, which should cover both governance (dialogue with management authorities and consultation on programming document, participation in monitoring committees and evaluation) and delivery of the funds.

The project presented appears particularly positive in that it acknowledges the added value of NGOs being involved in such a partnership (democracy, transparency, better delivery of the funds, outreach to excluded groups) but also the obstacles they face to make this partnership effective:

- Lack of information about the funds' potential for NGOs
- Lack of resources in application rounds (including partnership and transnational brokerage, project planning and drafting) and following them up (audit, reporting, dissemination, etc.)
- Difficulty to use the funds for "micro-projects"
- Level playing field with government agencies and lack of acknowledgement of NGOs' specificity and added value in delivering projects
- Financial obstacles (including financial risks, need for match-funding, pre-financing)
- *While the project acknowledges the need for specific approaches such as training and accessible financial mechanism, it is yet to deplore that it is this time not implemented through the system of global grants, which had been used successfully in the past<sup>1</sup>. Such a system should now be used among others in the UK, Hungary, Czech Republic, Portugal.*

<sup>1</sup> Global grants involve the managing authority entrusting the management and implementation of an operational programme to one or more intermediate bodies (which might be local authorities, regional development bodies, but also non-governmental organisations). This allows better reaching out to small and local organisations and overcome financial obstacles, as global grants systems often also include facilities in terms of co and pre-financing. Global grants are particularly welcome by social inclusion NGOs and their added value can be summarised as follows:

- "easily understood and accessible application systems and procedures;
- 100% up-front financing;
- 'light touch' monitoring and reporting requirements (...);
- quality, hand-on and practical support provided to applicants and grant recipients".