

RECOMMENDATIONS

of the Grassroots Europe network on the targeting and monitoring of EU support for education and social inclusion

Education inequalities in Europe call for better targeted and more efficient EU policies

As a recent report authored for the European Commission affirms, “opportunities for and benefits from learning are far from equally distributed across the European Union. **There are major disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes both across but also within Member States.** Access to learning opportunities, success at school and chances of higher education and further learning all remain socially and spatially divided. **Millions are left behind (...)**, a tremendous loss of potential for the EU”^{*}. This evidence on the persisting major education inequalities across Europe calls for the improvement of the targeting and efficiency of EU funds for education and social inclusion.

Why guidebooks matter?

The European Social Fund (ESF) represents a very significant opportunity to reduce existing social divisions and inequalities in education. However, the success or failure of the social inclusion policy goals of these funds depend largely on the mechanism and rules that govern their access and implementation.

In this market for service delivery the European Commission defines a set of general goals that are translated by the Managing Authorities **at national level into complex rules framed in the guidebooks for call for proposals**, as well as in the procedures to be followed to apply for these funds. These guidebooks determine the service market characteristics through regulating the type of services to be provided, the conditions to participate to the competition for funds, the criteria and the success indicators and the administrative procedures to be followed. These regulatory provisions impact heavily on how effectively and efficiently do these funds reach out and improve the life of hard-to-reach children and their communities. **The poor articulation of the regulatory measures set in the guidebooks significantly limits the potential benefits of the EU structural instruments in achieving its social policy objectives**^{**}. Service contracts

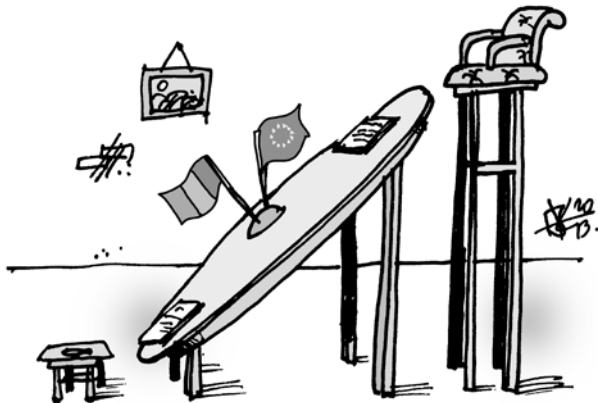


* Jan Trzuszczński, Director-General, European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture in the "MIND THE GAP - EDUCATION INEQUALITY ACROSS EU REGIONS"- An independent report authored for the European Commission by the NESSE network of experts.

**For further evidence please see *Odds Against the Odds. The education selectivity effects of the European Social Fund (to be published in February 2014)* developed as part of an international research assessing the extent of the gap between the social policy objectives set through regulatory competences in multi-level governance, and the structure of incentives it breeds in practice, with a broad range of implications for the capacity of the government to control for an equitable distribution of services at the community level. The project was funded by the Education Support Programme of the Open Society Foundations. For further inquiries and copies of the volume please contact: Daniel Pop at: Daniel.Pop@opensocietyfoundations.org

tend to concentrate in urban areas hosting management capacity and not in the communities where service needs are high. As a result, we observe a tendency for ESF funds implementers to concentrate in few urban hubs that are remote from the communities of need ESF funding seeks to reach. This in turn, the limited success of community grassroots civil society to compete effectively for ESF funds disempowers them in their ability to assist their own communities, and often make them low-key partners of remote, but successful service-contracting entities.

Why engaging directly grassroots civil society in ESF funding matters?



Firstly, community level organizations are the best placed to reach out and represent the most vulnerable groups of societies, those that are hard-to-reach, are most at risk of marginalization and social exclusion. Secondly, they possess invaluable knowledge on the realities of the implementation of diverse social inclusion policies in their own communities. Thirdly, they can rely on community legitimacy in developing specialized holistic strategies that seek to foster inclusion at local community level. Consequently, it is of outmost importance that in the new ESF programming measures are adopted in view of capitalizing on the community legitimacy of grassroots civil society.

Recommendations of grassroots civil society

The Grassroots Europe network*, sharing EU's strong commitment towards building a more inclusive Europe, **recommends that**, in order to achieve better targeted and more efficient social cohesion policies, **the EU should turn special attention to the way in which guidebooks formulate the call for proposals** as well as **enhance the monitoring of the effectiveness of the commissioning cycle** at the Member State levels. Strengthened consultations and programming methodology with grassroots civil society should be put in practice (by means such as monitoring reports, direct EU-NGO consultations), in order to contribute to:

1. More focused and community centered interventions:

The overly general definition in guidebooks of vulnerability to social exclusion in education leads to a large segment of the population being eligible for support (e.g. all women, all people in rural area, etc.). This paired with narrow budgets leads to limited program focus and, thus, sub-optimal level of investment and intervention and a lack of systemic approach to addressing the challenges faced by those marginalized or at disadvantage.

RECOMMENDATION: definition of vulnerability needs to be more specific to the local context, and it should build on the results of comprehensive regional development plans jointly defined by an inclusive constituency of local stakeholders with special attention to the point of views of underrepresented vulnerable groups.

* A network supported by the Open Society Foundations Education Support Program and the Europe for Citizens Programme of the EU brings together more than 100 European civil society organizations from eight European countries (Hungary, Romania, Austria, Latvia, Italy, Albania, Croatia, Germany) working at grassroots level with marginalized children and their communities. For more information please visit: www.grassrootseurope.org.

2. Mutual interlinking of strategic and grass-roots interventions.

European Social Fund (ESF) driven interventions are often disconnected from national education policy making and implementation processes. To different degrees, the implementation of specific ESF educational and social exclusion objectives is pushed to the background by the efforts of the national governments to use such financing to substitute national funding for school operation and modernization.

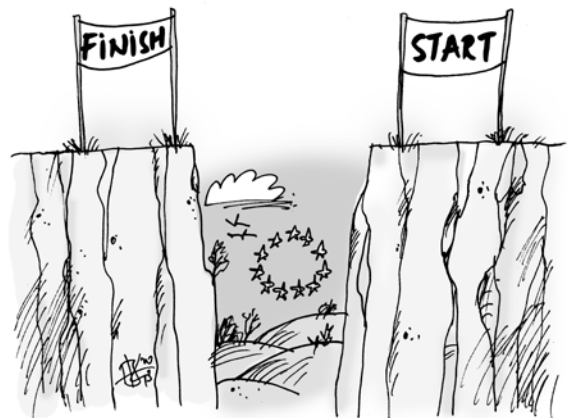
RECOMMENDATION: enhanced data collection and monitoring of the integration of ESF funded interventions into broader educational processes.



3. Reducing the significant regional disparities

in the allocation of ESF funds and social integration opportunities. The most disadvantaged areas systematically get proportionally less EU funds than capital cities and their regions. There is a significant decoupling between the location of social inclusion needs and service provider location.

RECOMMENDATION: the multi-annual programming and that of the commissioning cycle have to better account for territorial disparities identified in each of the countries, possibly in the form of regional calls for applications with budgets which take into account the various differences in social and economic development of the regions.



4. Furthering the administrative simplification agenda of the EU

leading to the reduction of: over-formalised procedures, multiple bureaucratic barriers and disruption in funding. Significant delays in assessing applications, contracting, and reimbursing contractors. Varying extents of gaps in the implementation of specific measures, such as implementing a funding line in 2 years, or announcing calls with years apart, are disruptive and weaken the capacity of service providers to develop the organizational competences to effectively deal with the needs of beneficiaries.

RECOMMENDATION: in the area of education and social inclusion it is particularly important to replace sporadic interventions and project-based thinking by long-term planning and continuity.



5. Further enhancing multi-stakeholder partnerships as project implementation methodology.

The competition created by the market mechanism impact on the extent to which inter-institutional and inter-sectoral partnerships are formed to provide public services. Given that project activities usually take place after and out-of-school, the national education system limitedly benefits from the intervention and methodologies developed with ESF funding.



RECOMMENDATION: Inclusive stakeholder partnership as project methodology mechanisms should be used to ensure that project intervention results are mainstreamed into the national education system. It could be useful, in some areas of intervention, to introduce incentives for schools and grassroots organizations to jointly apply for projects.

6. Setting up small funding schemes to facilitate the access of community grassroots civil society to ESF funding.

Social service market entry barriers are set too high, which makes community grassroots civil-society organisations to not be eligible applicants and thus be either left out from development opportunities, or be sub-ordinate to larger and remote service contractors.

RECOMMENDATION: To set up a grassroots civil-society funding line under the national ESF programmes dedicated to the support of low-scale actions in hard-to-reach vulnerable communities by grassroots civil society organizations.



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www.grassrootseurope.org