

How the European Social Fund helps solve local social problems, and more

By Dor Wolff *

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The purpose of the ESF is to support sustainable growth through investment in people. I saw its potential and some of its significant achievements while working for four years with an ESF funded programme in London, England. In this paper, I outline the work and history of the ESF illustrated with experiences from my time working in the programme.

The UK popular press characterises payments to the EU as a tax on hardworking Britons that disappears into an un-audited gravy train driven by wasteful Brussels bureaucrats. This is far from reality: For some 60 years, European states have been allocating regional funds to support local employment and address social challenges, and the results have been significant. The European Social Fund (ESF) is an example of how federal resources can be successfully applied to solve regional problems.

In essence, the fund focuses on supporting local regional governments and bidders such as NGOs in providing training, support and funding to address local social needs. In the UK it has been focusing on:

- Young people not in education, employment or training;
- Families with multiple problems;
- Young Offenders;
- People with low skill levels.

The benefits and rewards of projects funded by the ESF occur on several levels:

- The personal level of participants whose lives have been changed thanks to ESF funded projects, and the ripple effects such changes have on families and social groups.
- The local social effects which result when these challenging social groups have been helped out of cycles of unemployment, crime and abuse, and given a chance to be making a positive change for the local environment in which they live.
- The positive national effects by which fringe social groups become a reduced burden on the national budget, and become more active, contributing participants within society.

* *Dor Wolff has been working with an ESF funded programme in London for over four years; he has a degree in International Relations and Sociology from the University of Sussex*

A brief history

The European Union (EU) has been investing in people since it first came into being as the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957.

“The Treaty of Rome established the European Social Fund (ESF), which was initially deployed to help workers in economic sectors that were modernising their production processes. Grants were offered for short- term re-training courses so that workers could learn new skills. The ESF also made money available for resettlement to help unemployed people relocate for work. It is estimated that ESF support helped one million people get back to work between 1960 and 1973 (Investing in people: Volume 7 p. 9; 2014).

Since then, the ESF has developed and adapted to the changing challenges faced by the EU member states, and to the evolving political and economical landscape of the EU and the world. The ESF moved from its early relocation and retraining objectives to funding more vocational purpose courses during the early 1970's. An illustration of this can be found in the ESF support for agricultural workers. More and more agricultural workers had been made redundant due to technical innovation in that sector. In time, these made their way to the ever-expanding urban areas of the EU. The ESF helped them in re-training and finding new jobs. In the 1980's the ESF needed to reinvent itself once more, and focused on fighting financial inequalities in the poorest regions of Europe such as Greece, Portugal and the southern areas of Italy and Spain.

During the 1990's the ESF geared itself toward the demands of the single market, and in 1994 it set its sights on making sure that as many people as possible could find work. Since then the ESF has made several other adaptations to accommodate the different needs of the EU member states, and is now funding job-focus programmes. It is also funding language courses to help immigrants integrate with the job market. Thus, for its entire existence, the ESF has been used as a key channel to allocate financial backing to projects across a broad spectrum of needs and locations within the EU.

Academics distinguish between several social models across the EU- the Anglo Saxon model, the Nordic model, a continental model and a Mediterranean model (Social Europe 2006; 118). Each particular model is used and directed by the government of each member state according to what it sees fit and useful to support its own most immediate social issues. The fund is not directly involved in the decisions on how to tackle these problems; it is rather allocating the funds, which the local agencies in turn direct into programmes, to NGO and local authorities working within the state. Therefore the ESF could be seen supporting ex-offenders programmes in Liverpool, teaching English as a second language to immigrants in London, or helping disabled people in Gdynia, Poland, to find work.

Recent ESF funded projects in the UK

The 2007 to 2013 England ESF programme invested a total £2.5 billion of European funding in jobs and skills. By the end of November 2013 there had been over 4 million participants starting on the programme. Positive results include:

- 384,000 unemployed or inactive participants had been helped into jobs;
- Over 150,000 participants have gained basic skills;
- 438,000 participants have gained qualifications at National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) level 2 or above;
- 418,000 disadvantaged young people have been helped to enter employment, education or training (Gov.UK: 2014).

During my time working for an ESF-funded NGO in North London, I saw the ways this fund helps to change people's lives for the better. There were four programmes, which were run by our NGO:

- A six-months English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses;
- Two three-months courses that focused on job search and employability offering support with CV building, interview training and work experience for long-term unemployed;
- Two-week courses that focused on extensive job search and job application support for job ready customers, who had recently started to receive job seeker allowance.

One example of the way these programmes changed people lives was the case of a group of women from Sub-Saharan Africa, who were seeking asylum in the UK. They arrived for an ESOL course in our centre, and in broken English, and with some help from other participants who had better language skills, explained that not only did they not speak English, but that this was the first time in their lives they had the opportunity to attend school. The women's own families were not supportive of their participation, and the husband of one of the women had tried to order her to stop attending. With care and support from the centre support workers, and with intervention from the local community elders, she was allowed to continue. Within six months these women could converse well in English, and when they completed the course they passed the Basic English qualification test.

Another way the programme benefits the local community is by working with young ex-offenders. One such example was a young English man, who came to the centre after serving time for armed robbery. He found that life in London was very tough for an ex-offender; he was made homeless by the housing association of the building he was living in, and ended up with no fixed abode, and with no employment. He thus seemed to be destined to return to a life of petty crime and re-offending. With careful intervention by the centre advisors, new accommodation was found for him via his local council. He was then introduced to a local garage for a period of six weeks' work experience. This was done on the understanding that should he be successful in his work, a position would be available for him thereafter. The manager of the garage was impressed by the young man's willingness to learn and work hard. It was a successful and productive six weeks for both the garage manager and the young man, although it was not without some challenges along the way. At one point, an acquaintance from the young man previous life as an offender was trying to renew their relationship. It's fair to assume that without the support and long-term commitment of the programme, this young man would have found it much more difficult to withstand such challenges. He managed to rehabilitate himself and his life, and is now at work in the garage and is looking ahead to the future with renewed confidence.

The programme I worked with also looked to benefit the local community with a number of local initiatives that incorporate the long-term unemployed and local businesses, together with the local government to create a better local environment. An example can be seen in a volunteering scheme with a local recycling warehouse in North London. The programme supports a charity that recycles second-hand furniture and appliances and then offers them to people from lower income groups at next-to-nothing prices. The charity has agreed to provide the centre volunteers with a training course that would give them an NVQ in health and safety, and a good reference to successful candidates. The local government office has agreed to supply lunch vouchers to volunteers and the centre I worked for has provided the people for the scheme. The benefits of this scheme are multiple:

- Locally council residents have a recycle service for unwanted furniture and appliances, free of charge to the taxpayer.
- It also provides a solution to the low-income families within the region.
- Our volunteers received free courses that benefit them later on in their job search together with free meals.
- The charity received a continued stream of volunteers; some of them remain in contact with the warehouse beyond the agreed time frame of the volunteering course.

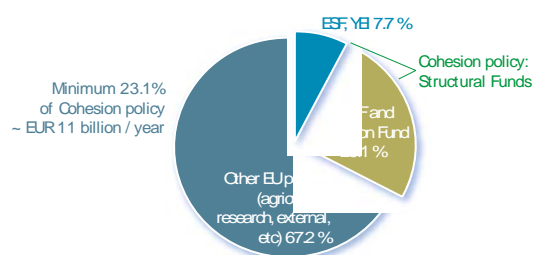
Between the years 2007 to 2013, the ESF has allocated just over £2.5 billion to support employment and regional competitiveness in England (not included are Cornwall and the isles of Scilly, which received extra funds on the convergence scheme, dedicated to develop areas where

the economy is lagging behind the rest of the EU). £403 million of this funding was allocated to London (2014 Gov.UK). This funding played a major role in the government plans to tackle unemployment; it contributed to the successful development of a new work programme, and the restructure of the benefits system. Regardless of one's political position, the positive effect of ESF funding is clear for everyone to see. The money allocated by the government is helping to run a variety of programmes, employing and training a work force dedicated to tackle unemployment and support growth through investment in people. It is these people who face the front line of unemployment and marginalised groups, and help the national effort to tackle these challenges.

The future for the ESF

The next six years will see the ESF continue its role as an integral part of the EU plan to confront poverty, unemployment and social exclusion within its member states (Social Europe guide v. 7 2014; 13).

Chart 1.1 Cohesion policy as a share of the EU's budget 2014-2020



Source: *Investing in people: EU funding for employment and social inclusion June 2014.*

In the next programme time frame, the ESF will also focus on good governance, and acknowledge the concern that without good governance the allocation and distribution of the fund's money could suffer. Keeping in mind that the number of EU member states is growing, and the fact that good governance might be a work-in-progress for some of the newcomers to the EU, it recognises the importance to support this as part of its six yearly programme.

“Weak administrative structures can seriously hamper a country's economic development and reduce the efficiency of public spending, be it from local, national or European sources. In addition, public administrations in some EU countries need to be more responsive to people's needs and develop a culture that is open to change and innovation. At the same time, the capacity building of stakeholders who are charged with delivering employment, training and social policies and programmes – including partners and civil society bodies – needs to be further built up. ESF funding is therefore being used to promote good governance by helping Member States improve the quality of their public administrations” (Investing in people 2014; 15).

There is no doubt that the ESF will maintain its commitment to support employment-related ventures as described in this paper. It is important to highlight that these ventures are not the only solutions to social exclusion, poverty and unemployment. The funding for the work that has been done must also be supported by intensive work on the national level to combat these social illnesses. It is also worth noting that the programmes are not without their critics, and that they cannot always produce the level of results that is targeted by the ESF or the local government, for a variety of reasons. Inevitably, some of the individuals who rely on these services do not end up in employment, or are unable to make a valuable change to their lives.

In June this year the DWP commented on the work programme:

“29% of the most recent participants to complete two years on the scheme had a minimum of six months in work (three for the harder to help). This is higher than the level of the earliest intakes, which was around 22%. 847,000 individuals have now completed the scheme. Around 70% (568,000 people) returned to Jobcentre Plus at the end of their two years on the programme” (Work programme official statistics June 2014). That said, these statistics do not present the full picture. The ESF funded programs also make highly positive contributions in allowing individuals to get help from professionals who care and want to help them. It gives them a place to go that is

removed from the sometime negative social surrounding they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. It also provides other added value such as work experience, structure and support in their lives that are lacking these elements. It is therefore important to keep in mind these aspects of the ESF supported programmes, together with its contribution to battle unemployment.

Conclusions

Over nearly 60 years, the work of the ESF has provided important support for positive change on the local, national and supra-national levels. It is through the fund that the EU is able to channel financial resources toward individuals who are in need of support throughout its member states. It has enabled local bodies such as NGO's, regional councils or individuals to be enlisted as social leaders to achieve targets that have been agreed with state and local governments. The fund has shown a capacity to reinvent itself and focus on the social challenges that are facing the EU as a whole, and also state and local government authorities. By being adaptable, it has maintained its essence and importance in a changing international and economic climate.

Specifically, money spent by the EU in tackling social challenges is bringing benefits to individual lives. The immigrants who are more comfortable in speaking their adopted country language are better able to integrate in society and the ex-offenders who are off the streets are now contributing to society, saving the tax payer the money needed to keep them in prison. The unemployed participants who found work, or gained valuable experience that would help them to have better chances in their next job interview, are all examples of the way the ESF is helping to support sustainable growth, tackle poverty and combat social exclusion.

The ESF provides a powerful example of how 'federal' funding can be used in an effective and auditable way. I enjoyed being part of this while working for an NGO in London and I consider that the changes we made to people's lives have, in a small way, helped make the EU stronger and more sustainable. If this model could be applied and understood more widely, I believe it would strengthen the EU's ability to help its own citizens and also project a positive image in the world.

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