How to improve Active inclusion policies and the use of European funds

Recommendations from the Transnational Learning Network "Active Inclusion"

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Riassunto: Con lo scoppio della crisi economica e l'aumento del rischio di povertà, le raccomandazioni della Commissione europea per una società più inclusiva acquistano maggiore rilievo nella vita dei cittadini europei, in particolare di quanti vivono ai margini della società e con maggiore difficoltà di inserimento. La cooperazione transnazionale e un uso più strutturato dei finanziamenti europei possono aiutare gli Stati Membri ad attivare percorsi comuni verso un futuro migliore. Questo è stato l'obiettivo della rete di apprendimento transnazionale Active Inclusion, finanziata dalla Commissione europea per favorire lo scambio e l'individuazione di elementi di successo per migliorare le politiche di inclusione dei soggetti maggiormente svantaggiati. L'articolo presenta i principali risultati e rielabora le raccomandazioni prodotte dai partner con l'inestimabile contributo di ricercatori, autorità competenti, valutatori, ONG e esperti provenienti da diversi Paesi europei. L'ISFOL ha condiviso il proprio know-how partecipando alle attività di scambio e di analisi. Il Progetto Cooperazione Transnazionale dell'ISFOL ha partecipato al Comitato di Pilotaggio e al Gruppo di Ricerca fornendo un notevole contribuito nella definizione e nello svolgimento delle attività di indagine.

Parole chiave: Cooperazione internazionale; Fondo sociale europeo; Inclusione sociale

Behind the scene: social impact of economic crisis and the main challenges for Member States

"Active inclusion" is about enabling all people, particularly those more disadvantaged and far from labour market, to play an active role in society and live in dignity. This concept is at the heart of the main European Union recommendations and strategies for social and employment development. It is doubtless that its value has increased

with the outbreak of the 2008 economic recession and the highest record of unemployment and poverty ever reached in most European countries. To help Member States in tackling the early social impact of the crisis, in 2008 the European Commission recommended (C(2008) 5737) the development of comprehensive active inclusion strategies combining three main strands: adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services. These recommendations were then supported by the launch of the "Europe 2020 strategy" (COM(2010) 2020 final) aimed at increasing employment and social cohesion through a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Nevertheless the economic crisis and consequent budget constraints have put a strain on the fight against social exclusion in all EU countries with a tragic increase of risk of poverty[1] rates and serious negative impact on the more vulnerable groups, mainly families and children.

According to Eurostat data, children (aged 0-17) are the group more at risk of poverty or social exclusion in most EU-28 countries with a rate of 27.6% compared to 25.3% of the adult population (aged 18-64) and 18.3% of the elderly (aged 65 or over) in 2013. Evidence tells us that the risk of poverty average for children has particularly risen along with the worsened situation of their parents. Indeed children living in single parents or large households[2] as well as those whose parents'level of education is low, tend to be more exposed to poverty due to low incomes of their family or unemployment issues. The crisis and the consequent increase in unemployment levels have also aggravated the risk of the homelessness[3] rate in most parts of Europe affecting mainly women and families but also young people, migrants and other disadvantaged groups. Long-term unemployment, health problems and inadequate support for people leaving care facilities, hospitals, prisons or other public institutions are typical factors that lead to an increase in poverty and homelessness.

Latest available data show a slow economic recovery and fall in unemployment nevertheless "EU 2020" strategy objectives are still challenging particularly those related to employment and poverty:

[1] Eurostat glossary database: at risk-of-poverty are considered those persons with an income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income. They cannot afford: i) to pay rent or utility bills, ii) keep home adequately warm, iii) face unexpected expenses, iv) eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every second day, v) a week holiday away from home, vi) a car, vii) a washing machine, viii) a colour TV, or ix) a telephone.

[2] The risk of poverty rate for households with: single parents is 49.8%, two adults with three or more dependent children is 30.8%, three adults or more with dependent children is 28.4%.

[3] Eurostat glossary database: beyond sleeping rough, homelessness may include situations of living in temporary, insecure or poor-quality housing.

Table 1. Europe 2020 Indicators (eu-28)

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	eu 2020 target
Employment rate- age group 20-64, total *(% of population)*	70.3	68.9	68.5	68.5	68.4	68.4	**75.0**
Early leavers from education and training, total *(% of population aged 18-24)*	14.6	14.2	13.9	13.4	12.6	11.9	>**10%**
Tertiary educational attainment, total *(% of population aged 30–34)*	31.2	32.3	33.6	34.7	35.9	36.9	**≥40.0**
People at risk of poverty or social exclusion *(million people)*	116.6	114.5	117.0	120.4	123.1	121.4	**96.6***

* At risk of poverty or social exclusion headline indicator refers to people either at risk of poverty, or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. Poverty should be reduced by at least 20 million of people.
Source: Eurostat

Despite the last optimistic progress a quarter of EU-28 population is still at risk of poverty and a divergence between Member States keeps being evident with highest rates in Bulgaria (48.0%), Romania (40.4%), Greece (35.7%), and lowest levels in Finland (16.0%), the Netherlands (15.9%) and the Czech Republic (14.6%)[4]. Early School Leaving (ESL) levels remain alarming and concerns about 5.5 million people in Europe, over 40% of whom are unemployed. It peaks at 23.6% in Spain, 18.9% in Portugal and 16.8% in Italy while some countries are even below the "Europe 2020" target (i.e. Lithuania 6.3% and Sweden 7.1%).

Statistics show that the lower the educational level of people, the higher the unemployment risk is, from here the importance stressed by EU directives about tackling ESL and improving education measures. In 2013 the unemployment rate of people aged between 25 and 64 who have attained at most a lower secondary education was 18.2% compared to 6.6% unemployment average rate of those with a higher education qualification. Since 2008 low skilled workers unemployment as well as long-term unemployment have doubled in EU-28 reaching historically high levels, and this trend keeps increasing. In 2014 expected duration of unemployment periods raised from 10 months before the economic crisis to 17 months, the number of discouraged workers increased as well mainly in Italy, Cyprus, and Slovenia.

[4] Data extracted by Eurostat statistics, last update in January 2015.

The economic crisis has particularly impacted on youth unemployment[5] with a rise from 15.2% in 2008 to 22.2% in 2014. Despite a recent slow decrease in proportions[6] youth unemployment overtakes the EU-28 average in all Member States and in some countries it even exceeds the double of other age groups unemployment. The only Member State with a rate below 10% is Germany (7.7%) whilst the highest levels are recorded in Spain 53.2%, Greece 52.4% and Italy 42.7%. The proportion of young people who do not look for employment or an education qualification has increased causing the "NEET phenomenon" (young people Not in Employment, Education or Training). Latest Eurostat data estimate 15.3% of young NEET (aged 15-29) were not employed in 2014 while 10.8% of NEET would like to work but meet with difficulties in finding employment. Young women are more affected than young men: in 2014 the EU-28 average was 17.1% for females and 13.5% for males.

This gender gap is particularly evident in the "at risk of poverty or exclusion" index. In 2013 the EU-28 gender gap was at 1.8% with an average of "at risk of poverty" index of 23.6% for men and 25.4% for women. Contrary to the other most at risk of poverty groups, women are those more exposed to poverty at any age.

Table 2. Gender gap in poverty and social exclusion risk (eu 28)

At risk of poverty and social exclusion risk index	2010	2011	2012	2013
Women (% of total population)	24.8	25.4	25.7	25.4
Men (% of total population)	22.6	23.2	23.7	23.6
Young women (% of population aged 18-24)	30.4	31.6	32.6	32.7%
Young men (% of population aged 18-24)	28.2	28.4	30.6	31.1%

Source: Eurostat

Despite improvements in Member States policies, the Gender Equality Index[7] and the latest research show how parenthood still has the main impact on women unemployment rates. Indeed women remain the main carers of children in most Member States usually because of a lack in care services. This may lead to unequal work-life balance for men and women and to an increase in part-time work contracts for women with negative consequences on career progression opportunities. Gender differences and

[5] The youth unemployment rate is the number of people aged 15 to 24 unemployed as a percentage of the labour force of the same age. For further details please refer to: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Youth_unemployment

[6] Last Eurostat records fix youth unemployment rate at 20.6% in May 2015.

[7] The Gender Equality Index is a tool proposed by the EC and developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality. It provides scores for each Member State and presents the EU average in the following areas: work, money, knowledge, time, power and health. For more information see http://eige.europa.eu/content/activities/gender-equality-index

inequalities also persist in education, overall in terms of tertiary education and lifelong learning. Raising the rate of employment for women is one the aims of "Europe 2020" strategy and the main solution to reduce gender gaps in the "at risk of poverty" rates.

On the whole the profile of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion has changed and widened in these last years with a huge economic and administrative impact on social protection systems. More than ever before the implementation and improvement of the three active inclusion pillars are pivotal to break the cycle of disadvantage and inactivity traps.

EU Member States'Challenges

The last EC Report "Labour Market and Wage Developments in Europe 2015" shows 3 main stages in implementation of Member States'reforms: from 2008 to 2009 policies aimed to mitigate short-term impact on employment and incomes; from 2010 measures focused on making labour markets more capable to adjust; since 2012 Member States have been strengthening efforts to tackle the higher and higher social impact of the crisis by better targeting active employment policies, expanding social benefits and reducing the tax wedge.

Early effects of these measures can now be noted though the results are still too weak and recovery varies across policy areas and between Member States. Greater challenges mainly remain in the field of social protection and services (i.e. health-care, housing, social benefits, etc) due to the increase of needs in these areas and national cost cuts with the greatest impact on vulnerable people. Furthermore the ineffectiveness of some policies (for example those aimed to reduce early school leaving or youth unemployment) can be due to a lack of comprehensive strategies, evidence-based policies and prevention.

Besides the several EU tools and initiatives, in 2013 the European Commission launched the "Social Investment package" (COM(2013) 83 final) with the aim of supporting Member States in implementing active inclusion pillars and reaching the EU 2020 inclusion objectives. It particularly stresses the importance of preventing exclusion and disadvantage by modernising welfare systems, integrating and mutually reinforcing measures on the active labour market, social protection, provision of services like housing, lifelong learning, rehabilitation and healthcare. It also stresses the importance of enhancing cross-sectorial cooperation and synergies among different stakeholders at all levels, to improve cost-effectiveness and the use of EU funds.

The "Transnational Learning Network Active Inclusion": aims and work methodology

Against a stagnant economic and social background in 2012 the EC - DG Employment and Social Affairs - launched a "Call for Proposal" (Call for Proposals VP/2012/005) to strengthen transnational cooperation among Member States under the European Social

Fund and to boost inclusion policies through mutual learning. The Transnational Learning Network "Active Inclusion" (AI) was one of the successful networks. It targeted a new and very ambitious aim: to support the exchange of inclusion practices and policies not just on one disadvantaged target group but on several in order to find out approaches able to manage different needs and – in line with the main EU recommendations and the "Social Investment Package" – to develop coordinated social strategies rather than isolated interventions. Indeed, the crucial view of AI was that marginalised individuals cannot be classified under one single target group as they usually present multiple needs. Specifically through a complex research process, AI tried to find out evidence of policies and practices able to offer the best chance for enhancing employment and preventing stigmatisation of more socially excluded groups. Particular attention was also referred to the use of European structural funds in order to formulate suggestions to ESF Managing Authorities on how to improve the quality of structural funds programmes thus to contribute to the development of policies and interventions.

Public and private organisations from 7 countries – Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Sweden, United Kingdom and Northern Ireland – joined the project and made up a Steering Group. The International Development Team of the National Offender Management Service – NOMS (agency of the Ministry of Justice, UK) led the network with the support of a Research Board made up of: NOMS, ISFOL (Transnational Cooperation Unit), University of Bucharest, Birmingham City Council, Northern Ireland ESF Managing Authority, NIACRO (Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders). The Research Board was responsible for planning research activities, designing tools, analysing data, co-writing the Final Research Report. Due to its know-how in transnational networks and research, the Transnational Cooperation Unit of ISFOL played an important role in designing the network, carrying out research findings and supporting the exchange among EU stakeholders through the organisation of a peer review meeting for 40 EU experts on Youth interventions (Rome 4-5 December 2014) and the final conference of the project (Rome 19-20 May 2015) for 100 representatives of EU ministries, ESF Managing Authorities, private organisations and universities.

Partners agreed to set the analysis of practices and policies on some of the most vulnerable groups in order to pick out what strategies and tools work best for tackling employment difficulties, overtaking barriers and making employers aware of the workforce potential of this pool of individuals. The 3 following large groups were identified and analysed:

- **Disaffected Youth/neets (under 25)** with focus on: Inclusion and Empowerment; Not in Employment, Education and Training
- **Marginalised in communities**: The Homeless; Drug and Alcohol Addicted; Offenders and ex-offenders; Mental health, physical and learning difficulties
- **Troubled Families**: Multigenerational/Long-term unemployment, Offenders families, Anti-social behaviour, Educational problems

Due to "Europe 2020" and the EC Recommendations on active inclusion, the network decided to focus on interventions that invest in people to improve employabil-

ity[8] and employment[9] opportunities. Thus, looking at approaches tackling all the 3 active inclusion pillars, particular attention was referred to aspects like: education, adaptation of competences to the labour market demand, the improvement of health conditions, gender aspects, and age. At the same time particular attention was referred to interventions and strategies helping disadvantaged people in getting more and better jobs, promoting for example links with business, creation of entrepreneurship or self-employment, quality of services.

The research process followed two parallel typologies of activities: an extensive systematic review of existing studies and two rounds of exchange meetings designed to analyse practices and extract good lessons. By integrating the latest and updated studies with an analysis of practice, the network aimed to produce a comprehensive overview of key elements and approaches able to increase adaptability and social inclusion of disaffected groups.

Taking into account the main gaps and needs in active inclusion policies, research and the analysis of practices aimed to find out significant elements and input under the following key points:

- **innovation:** in terms of approaches, tools, methods and service provision that use fresh ways to extend employment and raise skills
- **lessons learnt:** both in terms of what to do and not to do when tackling vulnerable groups inclusion
- **transferability:** weighing up the option and obstacles in transferring part or the whole intervention
- **finance**: information on successful or critical aspects related to the combination of different funds, the use of ESF and its possible improvement

Information on practices were collected across Europe through a questionnaire designed on the above 4 criteria, it also required detailed information on partnership, aims, methods adopted to combine the 3 Active inclusion strands, involvement of beneficiaries and a gender dimension. The survey was sent out to NGOs, ESF Managing Authorities, Government departments, Universities and Research Institutions of 35 European States for a total of 292 returns from 17 countries.

Throughout two rounds of transnational meetings (Platform 1 and Platform 2) ESF experts, evaluators, researchers, NGOs and practitioners from across Europe drew on their own experience and knowledge to discuss and review collected interventions. The aim of the 2 platforms of meetings was to gradually select interventions, initially

[8] The term "Employability" refers to the value of a person in the labour market, depending on a series of factors such as demands from labour market and some personal attributes making people more likely to gain and retain employment. Personal characteristics can refer to: objective aspects (age, sex, health conditions, and place of residence), flexible availability of the person, professional competences and skills.

[9] With the term "Employment" the network refers to all those interventions and tools getting disadvantaged people into work through more and better jobs opportunities (e.g. employment services, agencies, link with business, self-employment,…).

assessing and scoring them against a set of indicators provided by the network and implemented by experts input (during Platform 1). This subsequently led to the advancing of the analysis of more interesting interventions under further key elements suggested by experts (during Platform 2). Successful organisations themselves were invited to present their own interventions and suggestions during the final conference of the project. The ongoing "Systematic Review" and meetings outcomes were then combined in a final research with a range of recommendations to policy makers.

The Expert view: approaches and tools to improve social inclusion of more disadvantaged groups

If in 2013 most of the European Member States policies showed an unbalanced implementation of the three active inclusion strategies, the most of the practices analysed by the "Learning Network Active Inclusion" presented comprehensive approaches reflecting recommendations from the European Commission and confirming theories developed by literature for social inclusion of vulnerable groups. Furthermore useful suggestions on innovative tools and evaluation methods for supporting social inclusion of more vulnerable people have emerged by the analysis of interventions. This paragraph tries to summarise and develop just the main evidence based findings and lessons, while details on literature, practices and specific target group strategies can be found in the "Final Research Report" of the network that will be soon released by NOMS.

One of the main learning points emerged by the analysis of practices is that there are no simple solutions to complex problems. Actually most of the vulnerable groups present multiple needs and face similar barriers in entering the labour market and society. Interventions collected by AI are based on this acknowledgment and show the importance of implementing broad strategies to respond to complex needs. Furthermore some of these interventions were designed for multiple target groups showing that analysed approaches can be successfully adapted to different typologies of marginalised persons on condition that some key "rules" are respected. These rules can be summarised under 3 main stages: prevention, engagement, support.

Preventing the escalation of needs: individual first approach and sustainability of interventions

It is doubtless that preventing the escalation of needs is essential in reducing social and work exclusion. Nevertheless in approaching vulnerable people it is crucial not to forget the distinctiveness of the person and his/her peculiar needs. Indeed evidence shows that the person centrality and the whole person approach keeps being pivotal for successfully supporting vulnerable people in facing different and difficult obstacles. This approach is based on a preliminary analysis of individual needs in order to tailor interventions to them (it is a "needs driven" approach) and make people job ready.

As recommended by the EC, cooperation with multi-level agencies (i.e. schools, prisons, health care services, housing, job and training centres, etc…) and integration between services are essential for the right implementation of the whole person

approach. Not only can it help to link with vulnerable people but also to design and deliver coordinated strategies able to manage multiple needs with a positive impact on work inclusion. Nevertheless, as also outlined in the report produced by the "Network of the Independent Experts on Social inclusion" established by the EC, participants criticised a lack in coordination of multiple agencies in most States though some good examples can be found. For instance the "Hartz Reform" implemented in Germany was cited as a good example of how state job centres can be unified with local welfare centres to provide a full package of services (i.e. housing and health care) thus improving the persons situation and job readiness. Though this reform has mainly reached long-term unemployed people, what was stressed by experts is that it was based on the "individual first" approach meaning interventions based on real needs of single persons. Particularly this reform introduced a contract between the jobseeker and the job centre which defines what each part promises to do and "sanctions" (in terms of benefit cuts) if the job seeker fails to meet his side of the bargain. This reform also forecasts dedicated and trained case managers for more complex cases in order to develop personalised paths.

Although bureaucracy and complexity of national systems still stand in the way of a coordinated integration of state services, most analysed practices show that large and inclusive partnership networks made up both of public and private local providers (i.e. local authorities and public agencies, NGOs, employers, potential funders, etc.) can work in designing broad interventions based on local context needs and tailored services. To give an example, the "Programa Escolhas" intervention (implemented in Portugal) engaged nearly 1000 different organizations (NGOs, City Councils, private companies, teaching institutions, Children Protection Commissions, etc) in order to provide services and support children and the youth from the most vulnerable communities. Obviously when working with such large partnerships it is necessary to set clear roles and transparent rules for successfully governing all processes nevertheless practices show that innovation and creativity can play a key role in setting procedures to organise and manage these complex networks. An interesting example comes from the "Coloured Roofs" practice (implemented in Italy) where developers themselves independently managed the leased assets of houses to prevent the homelessness of more disadvantaged groups. For the good governance of large partnerships the "networks manager", a trained and key figure responsible for supporting inter-agencies cooperation and the effective delivery of comprehensive strategies, is a particularly important role.

What results to be imperative in almost all analysed interventions is the proximity of services. This helps to deliver accessible assistance and to make the engagement with beneficiaries easier, particularly with those having the greatest and complex needs. Proximity of services also allows implementation of early interventions engaging with people at risk of social exclusion in time to prevent an escalation of needs. An example is the "Family Space" practice (implemented in Italy) which reaches offenders'families in prison. For most vulnerable cases (i.e. offenders, young offenders, drug users, etc) the ability to identify a risk situation and to promptly manage it, can make a difference in life perspectives. In these cases experts stress the importance of prioritising those individuals assessed as at medium-high risk.

Research also shows that large and strong partnerships lead to flexibility in funding. This allows the organisation to adapt interventions to possible new needs and challenges (i.e. the practice "Growing Lives" implemented in UK showed around 7 sources of funding). Experts stress the importance of sustainability and flexibility of interventions both in terms of funding and strategies, measures should allow to test strategies and to correct them if necessary. They particularly suggest the "virtuous cycle": preliminary evaluation – prioritisation – planning – implementation – inside evaluation of impact. Evaluating interventions from inside through "self-reflection" methods would allow the developers and users to learn from failures and address interventions management. According to experts external evaluation should be carried out only in a second phase, it should be more rigorous and robust in order to learn from experience and build evidence based interventions and policies.

A part from individualising and responding to objective needs (i.e. house, health care, education), the "individual first" approach and the design of interventions cannot preclude the analysis of personal aspirations, self-confidence and motivation of beneficiaries. Hence to be effective the wrap-around approach must include the "empowerment model/philosophy", this is about reinforcing not just employment skills ("hard skills") but also the so-called "soft skills" such as self-esteem, motivation, social skills, team work, respect of procedures. Particularly individuals must be empowered to take control of their career path and to make real choices over it. One of the most effective ways to implement this model is to actively involve the target group in the decision-making process from the early stages of interventions. They achieve this by defining needs, designing, implementing, managing and evaluating their own interventions. Indeed this would allow beneficiaries to acquire consciousness of their own problems and take control of them. For example allowing young people to organise and coordinate fundraising activities for financing their own interventions or to take part in social initiatives (i.e. volunteer work) can build self-esteem and consciousness of their value in civic matters. Furthermore, involving beneficiaries in the management of interventions could lead to find out innovative solutions and strategies. To be consistent with empowerment philosophy, final findings show the importance for organisations to adapt their leadership, structure and culture to new models of decision making and management of staff.

Engagement: the environment and staff factors

Engaging with the most vulnerable people can be very challenging. As said above, most analysed practices count on the geographical proximity to the target group, so that for example some interventions are planned in schools, prisons or in deprived neighbourhoods to reach more vulnerable people and communities. Besides services, further informal approaches can be used to reach beneficiaries and support their empowerment, one of the most recommended is the "soft approach". This is about keeping a comfortable environment for example by contacting vulnerable people via their social networks (friends, families, etc). According to experts'experience these informal contacts allow case managers to implement different "circles of intervention" that reflect the "natural system": friends and families may play a key role in providing

first help in facing and solving any kind of conflict or social problem, leaving the management of complex issues to professional staff in a second stage. Issues related to vulnerability conditions or social discrimination can be better understood and shared if debated within the school, family or community context.

In some cases (i.e. young offenders) keeping links with the original environment or families can be risky due to possible negative dynamics such as a criminal aptitude of friends or re-enactment of old roles in families (for instance it is proved that high expectation or suffocating nature of care can restrict the access of young ex-offenders to a new identity). So sometimes families themselves may be beneficiaries of educational or empowerment interventions. It is also important not to forget that families of vulnerable groups, in particular families of offenders and more specifically sex offenders, are more likely to meet with stigmatization and employment barriers leading to long unemployment periods, poverty and the risk of homelessness. Literature shows that families with complex needs (so-called "troubled families") should be threaded as a whole, as a vulnerable unit to which tailored and holistic approaches should be provided as well as for other vulnerable groups. In this respect the "Systematic review" produced by the network refers to two interesting studies carried out in United Kingdom between 2007 and 2012: the first one was produced by the "Department for Communities and Local Government" and the second one by the "National Centre for Social Research". Both studies evaluated the impact of different tailored interventions on some samples of families providing evidence of significant improvements in reducing anti-social behaviour, risk of homelessness, risks to the community, disengagement with crime, solving employment or training problems. Unfortunately the "Active Inclusion Network" was able to collect just 12 interventions dedicated to "troubled families" across Europe, this could suggest a lack of targeted interventions on families as a whole. However, as well as for other vulnerable groups, most of collected interventions start from a comprehensive family needs assessment and provide different tailored services like: mentoring, housing, education, training, childcare, job placement, incentives, motivational support. Analysed practices demonstrate a huge potential for innovation in this area so for example the "Integrated Outreach Support" intervention (implemented in UK) adapted meetings and services to convenient venues and time for the users using tools like family conferencing services.

The above analysed aspects obviously suggest Staff as a critical factor for successfully engaging with vulnerable people and designing tailored interventions. They must be trained professionals (mentors, case managers, employment specialists, clinical teams) able to build up positive interactions based on trust and respecting what experts call the "right rhythm" of relationship. This also requires awareness of different needs, behaviours and related backgrounds of beneficiaries. Staff have to possess consistency, resilience and user orientation to successfully engage with the most vulnerable groups and improve their attitude to work ("job readiness"). A part from needs, they have to be able to recognise beneficiaries'aspirations and potential in order to establish more realistic job goals. Research shows that "individual first" approach predominates on "work first" approach, indeed getting "job readiness" may imply different elements due to the complexity of vulnerable people conditions. So for instance when working

with people at risk of poverty preventing homelessness may take priority over other needs in order to guarantee the necessary right frame of mind and spatial stability for receiving interventions and services (i.e. education or health care). Drug users need to be supported in challenging their selfish attitude and personal ecology before being work placed. The "one-stop-shop" approach – where all services are available in close proximity and where a case manager negotiates and coordinates all inputs – seems to work effectively with different target groups, particularly with female offenders and drug users. The importance of building a comfortable environment for beneficiaries is also stressed in the ESF funded project "Andra Chansen – Second chance" (implemented in Sweden), aimed at young people aged 16-20 at risk of leaving school and education early. In this last intervention motivation of staff resulted to be effective in supporting beneficiaries towards education and employment.

It is also proved that employing people with the same target group's background, both to design programmes and engage with target groups (peer support), may be an advantage for designing and implementing the right interventions aimed to all analysed groups. Furthermore through the involvement of "peer support", beneficiaries can learn about similar experiences and discover new strategies to solve their often similar problems. For example according to experts the 27% of homeless people employed as support officers in the "Growing Lives" project (implemented in UK) represented an "inspirational role models" for beneficiaries.

A further aspects to be considered is that stigmatization and discrimination often prevent the inclusion of the most vulnerable groups, like offenders due to their criminal record or drug users for their risk of relapse. Involving local employers and communities in designing and managing interventions is essential to break downs social barriers and support the transition from education/training to labour market. It is also crucial to support employers with recruitment, training and retention of staff with multiple and special needs. For example they should be flexible to accommodate family crisis, prison visits and childcare arrangements. Besides public awareness campaigns, further innovative ways should be implemented to link with local employers and communities.

Most of the analysed practices involve local employers either as private entrepreneurs or as a representative of the social economy. For instance, the "Ready for work" project (implemented in UK and Ireland) involves employers both in planning interventions and in supporting beneficiaries during the pre-placement and post-placement stage. So employers take part in different exercises that prepare individuals to undertake a job interview (i.e. mock interviews) or provide mentoring support after job placement.

On the whole evidence shows that an ideal intervention should have a mixed workforce made up of professionals, beneficiaries and also the general public in order to share knowledge and coach each other (to build the so-called "social capital"). Particularly it can improve public awareness and perception of vulnerable groups as well supporting innovation in strategies and tools.

Skills development, training and job placement are the typical steps to engage vulnerable people with the labour market but what is particularly important for experts is to link training/education programmes to real local job opportunities. The active involvement of employers can help in designing training paths able to give a long-term

and concrete employment prospective. Accredited courses and access to lifelong learning keep being effective in facilitating work engagement, particularly for those groups (i.e. people with health difficulties or disabilities) usually employed in low-skilled jobs and more vulnerable to unemployment. For these particular groups, attention has to focus on aspects like adapting work and training schedules, equipment and personalised support after job placement.

Literature supports the principle of immediate job placement after training. Furthermore according to experts training on the job (work placements) could be more useful than long training courses, particularly for some groups with specific problems (i.e. intellectual disabilities, or people under treatment). On the other hand, literature and evidence show us that an immediate job placement ("work-first" approach) can trap most vulnerable groups in low skilled employment with the risk of low incomes and thus dependence on social welfare support and risk of in-work poverty. Thus a gradual movement from "little employment" to "more employment" characterised by a progressive development both of "soft" and "hard" skills results in the best approach to support people with complex needs in the transition into work and into better-paid jobs (i.e. homeless, drug users, disabled people).

Long-term support and new forms of employment to successfully meet complex needs

In conclusion due to complex needs of vulnerable groups, experts recommend long-term support before and after any employment intervention. For example in the early stages of interventions aimed at young people it is suggested a more than 6 months support period from a case manager/advocate/mentor, with optional access after the users'needs have been met. Furthermore some specific groups, like those addicted to drugs or alcohol and people with severe mental health conditions, need more support and motivational input due to their particular psychological and health state. Experts also stressed the importance of proceeding step by step allowing people to make mistakes and to learn from those, this could be of significant importance especially to people with behavioural problems. Thus for example offenders should not be put back into prison or expelled from the programme at the first mistake. A positive attitude and solid support can have a strong impact on employment prospects particularly for women.

Employment is an important motivational and empowering factor. Evidence shows us that sheltered forms of employment, stable employment and long term assistance programmes can decrease the risk of crime, addiction relapse and general social exclusion for most vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, analysed practices show that some forms of jobs such as social economy and self-employment have positive effects on job satisfaction and can help beneficiaries to move from sheltered jobs to the open labour market. An interesting example is provided by the Lithuanian project "MY Guru": a work rehabilitation programme for drug addicted people where beneficiaries met important social and life changes outcomes through a rapid job placement in a "Salad Bar". Particularly experts recognised social farming as an innovative form of enterprise with a huge potential in solving more than one need at lower costs. Practices show us that social farming can improve health as well as employment inclusion for different

target groups like the homeless, drug addicted, ex-offenders, mental disabilities, young adults at risk, etc. For example the "Social Farming for Community Growth and Development" project (implemented in Italy) was multi targeted and principally showed very positive outcomes in reducing the use of psychiatric drugs and hospitalisation of mental disabled people and drug addicts. Self- financial sufficiency of social enterprises is one of the most important aspects if we consider the need of sustainability and flexibility of inclusion interventions. A further important aspect to be considered is the potential of social farming in involving local communities and facing discrimination.

Innovating, evaluating and transferring

With reference to innovation, experts considered it as a new/fresh way to do things. As already observed above, in order for innovation to happen, some aptitudes and processes are necessary. For example taking small steps, removing the fear of failure, adopting "self-reflection" methods to learn from mistakes and change the course of interventions, allowing the "right rhythm" of relationship, planning creative ways to break down institutional barriers and involve local communities/beneficiaries/families/private sector in the decision making. These are all aspects that can lead to innovation.

Analysed practices also showed innovation and effectiveness in using games, information technology (IT), social media, art-based activities and sport competitions, both to engage with young people and to improve their self-confidence. IT tools can be used to collect information on needs, aspirations, strengths and the progress of different beneficiaries embarking on a programme. Education is the field where creativity and innovation can be used more for testing new formal, informal or semi-formal teaching methods. For instance in the practice "I Choose" (implemented in Lithuania) IT games usage demonstrated a very positive impact in improving beneficiaries'social skills and basic competencies such as career planning, communication and time planning.

IT tools can particularly help work with some specific target groups such as the deaf or blind and can build trust in public services and authorities. Furthermore IT tools can be also used for planning, monitoring and evaluating interventions, calculating social return on investment or cost saving. So for example the "Whole System Approach Toolkit" of the project "Supporting People: Housing Support Programme" (implemented in UK) allowed the facilitators to calculate effectiveness of the programme's services using a range of measurements including: financial and other quantitative data, but also qualitative information such as individual case studies.

Most of the analysed practices were multi-funded but in some cases innovation was found in using the so called "Single pot" approach: it is about using new and a wide variety of small financial elements under one single stream. Thus for example the "Re-Start" project (implemented in Italy) dedicated to offenders, was funded by public institutions, banks and further private providers. The "Single pot" approach, together with more in-kind contributions from beneficiaries and communities (i.e. time and facilities), could help interventions overcome the current "budget cuts" caused by the economic crisis (most analysed practices mentioned financial difficulties) and help to achieve a more sustainable impact. The less rigid budget lines of this approach allow

more flexibility in using funds, nevertheless such a large financial stream requires good coordination and transparency from developers.

Diversifying and identifying new funding sources seems to be a priority for the future. As already said, promoting a large partnership with public and private actors can help to ensure flexibility and long-term funding. Nevertheless further creative methods such as crowd funding, involving private investors, setting up funding committees, direct payment from the beneficiaries, developing multi-sourced arrangements, should be explored further. Finally according to experts view, policy makers, practitioners and funders should turn their funding logic and culture to a more risk taking behaviour to test not just services but pilot initiatives. ESF already plays a crucial role in implementing and piloting interventions though it should allow longer and sustainable interventions in order to produce significant impact on inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Independent evaluation plays an important role in this respect, practices with the best social and economic return are more likely to receive financial support in the future. Experts stressed the importance of building evaluation processes during the whole project life in order to learn from experience and ensure sustainability. Evaluation should be rigorous and focus both on "hard outcomes" (related to employment) and "soft outcomes" (i.e. increased level of education, barriers removal, etc). Central and local state authorities should be involved in evaluation processes in order to be informed about successful elements and immediately mainstream them. Transnational Cooperation funded under ESF was recognised by experts as an effective framework for debating, comparing and analysing interventions with Member States and key stakeholders, with the aim of transferring and spreading best practices. Furthermore the "Social Return on Investment" method was identified as effective to prove the social value of interventions. It includes qualitative, quantitative and comparative information, and it is able to highlight environmental changes in relation to how they affect people's lives.[10]

Most of the approaches analysed by the AI network and listed in this section may be transferred to other vulnerable groups due to the flexibility of their principles, nevertheless in transferring these general principles to other countries it could be necessary to consider the social, economic and cultural context. Particularly funding issues and schemes may change from country to country. More generally experts stressed that the more self-sufficient the more transferable the intervention is.

Recommendations of the Learning Network Active Inclusion to Member States and ESF Managing Authorities

On the basis of the above findings and approaches – to be considered as recommendations to interventions'developers – some important recommendations can be drawn out and addressed to Member States. These can be summarised as following:

1. **Employers**: Member States should involve employers in the design of policies. They should also financially incentivise employers to hire vulnerable people and to keep

[10] For more information visit: <http://www.thesroinetwork.org>.

them employed for a long time. It is recommended to adopt models and policies able to overcome discrimination in entering the labour market of the most vulnerable groups, see for example the "Discriminatory or Right Based Model" and the "Spent Convictions Model" adopted by some countries to recognise discrimination on the criminal record basis. Fixing when and in what circumstances the criminal record is relevant for employers could be also a good option.

2. **Employment**: transition from sheltered work to the regular labour market should be supported, for example rewarding small steps towards regular employment. Establishing a dedicated social fund or a grant system to finance social enterprises and self-employment is recommended. It should be particularly important to encourage social farming due to its the adaptability to different target groups and its success in solving or preventing needs.
3. **Education**: improving lifelong learning and innovative tools to teach disadvantaged people. It is particularly important to strength links between training and work demand (improving the involvement of employers in decision making process should be part of new strategies).
4. **Comprehensive strategies**: even though analysed practices focus on local dimensions, they should be part of a wider and coordinated public strategy for social inclusion. Most countries have implemented financial and employment measures to support the work inclusion of disadvantaged people (i.e. training and placement services, social benefits, counselling, financial support for employees, etc) nonetheless services delivery systems need to be better integrated and coordinated to deliver comprehensive active inclusion strategies. Joint working protocols and clear roles could help collaboration between different institutions and agencies thus allowing cost-effectiveness in implementing interventions. Strengthening capacity building is essential in this respect, particularly investing in training for public officers (i.e. probation officers, job centre officers, etc.)
5. **Support**: Member States should guarantee long-term support after placement. For example the "Youth Guarantee" promoted by the EU should support young people after the job placement.
6. **Evaluation & Sustainability**: Member States should play a more active role in designing, co-funding, implementing and evaluating interventions. By doing so, the Member State can take a more informed and more responsible decision about how to spend money on effective and more sustainable interventions. To this end solid and transparent evaluation tools and methodologies have to be endorsed for measuring impact, social and economic effectiveness (see for example the above "Whole System Approach Toolkit" used in England and Wales). It is necessary to take into account long-term evaluation processes as mostly it is not easy to measure outcomes in a short timeframe due to complexity of needs in vulnerable people. It is necessary to invest more funds in evaluation processes in order to guarantee mainstreaming.
7. **Transferability**: the European Commission should support frameworks to share good practices among Member States, NGOs, employers, private and the public sector.

Transnational cooperation under ESF was recognized as a good tool to compare, evaluate and transfer best practices.

8. **Finance**: Member States should dedicate more stable and long-term funding streams to effective and evidence based initiatives in order to produce long lasting impact. National and European funding schemes should be more flexible in order to adapt intervention to new challenges. Particularly they should be more risky in order to support innovation and pilot interventions. A good example could be the "Social Value Act" adopted in UK and allowing a 20% failure threshold. Small NGOs should be facilitated to apply to national and European funds.

Conclusions

Evidence based findings and recommendations proposed by the "Active Inclusion Learning Network" (AI) show the path toward an effective and sustainable social inclusion for the more disadvantaged groups. Though it could be demanding to run it, cause of expenditure restrictions and low flexibility of national systems, AI network shows that creativeness and cooperation among different stakeholders can strengthen social intervention outcomes. New financial tools, larger partnerships, mixed work-force, pilot projects, new management methods, use of IT platforms can particularly help organisations in overcoming rigid positions and increasing social challenges. Member States that are facing higher risk of poverty and social exclusion can find financial support in implementing broad labour and active inclusion measures by improving the use of a large range of tools and initiatives provided by the European Union. Particularly the alignment to "Europe 2020" and active inclusion pillars can be reached through a better use and a closer synergy of European structural funds like the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, with a cost effectiveness return on social protection systems.

In the new programming period 20% of ESF will be dedicated to social inclusion. The ESF can sustain lifelong learning, traineeships and apprenticeships for re-skilling and up-skilling, education, services and administrative capacity building as well as innovative employment forms on a long term prospective. Further EU funds like the new "Fund for European Aid to the most deprived" or the "European Globalization Adjustment Fund" (EGF) can successfully finance active labour measures for disadvantaged workers. A recent EC report (COM (2015) 355 final) shows encouraging data from the use of EGF in 13 Member States (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Spain): against a total expenditure of more than €114.4 million in the 2013-2014 period, 44.9% of 18.848 workers who received assistance found new jobs or became self-employed, 6% were in education or training while 39.1% were unemployed or inactive for personal reasons. EGF has mainly been used to provide tailored assistance services to improve integration of more disadvantaged workers like low-skilled workers or jobseekers living in areas with high employment standards. It can finance a variety of measures like vocational training, upskilling and retraining measures, personalised job search assistance, temporary

financial allowances, entrepreneurship. According to the ex-post evaluation published in May 2014, EGF tailored measures are more effective than standardised packages in fostering re-employment. The added value is its ability to tackle crisis situations and – according to the new EGF Regulation (Regulation (EU) No 1309/2013) – to extend its use to workers on temporary contracts and self-employed workers. Furthermore the EC has allowed Member States to use it for measures aimed to young NEETs living in regions eligible under the EU "Youth Employment Initiative" (with a youth unemployment rate above 25%). This can support the implementation of Youth Guarantee.

In conclusion as also stressed by the latest EC recommendations and "Social Investment Package", a complementary use of EU funds as well as EU initiatives (i.e. "New Skills for New Jobs", "Youth on the move", "Youth Employment Initiative"), is essential to foster Member States efforts in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and improving life conditions. Evaluation, mainstream, capacity building, innovation, Member States cooperation, improved local partnerships, are the key for realistic changes and the improvement of active inclusion policies.

The Open Method of Coordination as well as Transnational Cooperation under ESF have been showing effectiveness in linking research to policies and in transferring practices. By putting together public and private authorities, local and national stakeholders, "Active Inclusion Learning Network" has been allowed to share, compare, analyse good practices on a large range of target groups thus increasing awareness among Member States on effective solutions and adaptable approaches to favour dignity, healthy and secure lives. Furthermore, the Social Protection Committee (SPC) of the EU Council is playing a crucial role by systematically assessing effectiveness and efficiency of Member States social systems and by providing them with guidelines for the right implementation of social policies.

The final and more detailed "Research Report of Active inclusion Learning Network" will be soon available on a dedicated website provided by NOMS and on ISFOL website, in order to spread knowledge among Member States and practitioners.

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