

European Solidarity Fund, implementation and application

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted the own-initiative report by Rosa ESTARÀS FERRAGUT (EPP, ES) on the European Union Solidarity Fund, implementation and application.

Members recall that the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF) is the main instrument for **demonstrating Union solidarity by providing significant financial support for Member States or regions affected by serious disasters**. The EUSF is widely seen as one of the most satisfactory instruments available to the European Union since it is the clearest, most decisive and most significant expression of European solidarity with its citizens in the face of a difficult situation. Nevertheless, the EUSF is in need of reform. In 2005, the Commission issued a proposal for a new EUSF Regulation which was widely supported by Parliament but the [text](#) proved unacceptable for the majority of the Member States. As a result the proposal was withdrawn by the Commission.

The EUSF, nevertheless, needs revision to be made more flexible so as to improve how it operates. This is why Members have undertaken a detailed review and have prepared a series of proposals for changes.

Implementation of the EUSF: Members consider that **the time currently taken to mobilise the fund is unacceptably long** and accordingly point to the need to improve the effectiveness and speed of the administrative procedures required for its mobilisation, which entail intervention by three European institutions before approval can be granted (with the result that these procedures excessively delay and prolong the time taken to assist Member States affected by a disaster).

They also point out that the majority of applications (63 %) were submitted under the exceptional category of 'regional disaster', and that 66 % of them were rejected following assessment by the Commission. In the case of what are considered 'slowly unfolding' disasters, the current provisions of the regulation pose legal and practical difficulties for mobilisation. Members therefore call on the Commission consider showing greater **flexibility** with regard to the deadline set for submitting applications, so that particular attention can be paid to ensuring that such damage can also be covered by the EUSF.

Recommendations for improving the EUSF: like the Commission, Members consider that, in view of the current economic crisis, **the proposed amendment to the rules should not pose any additional burden** on the budgets of either the Union or the Member States. They consider that opposition from a number of Member States, fearing that significant changes to the legal basis of this instrument would entail higher financial outgoings, is unjustified and has restricted the adjustment of the 2002 Regulation. They also point out that, regrettably, disasters in the European Union's regions have increased significantly in number, nature, severity and intensity since the Fund was created. In this regard, they wonder whether a clearer and more precise definition of the concept of disasters might help to reduce the scepticism felt by many of the Member States that are opposed to in-depth reform of this EU instrument.

Among the major improvements to the EUSF, Members call for:

- **a reduction in the time taken to provide aid:** Members highlight the need to simplify the bureaucratic procedures necessary to mobilise this EU instrument with a view to **reducing the time that elapses between the point at which the disaster occurs and the point at which the Member State or region affected receives aid**, which in some cases extends for more than a year. They welcome the Commission's proposal to contribute to the simplification of the procedures relating to this financial instrument so as to

reduce delays. They call on Member States to analyse their administrative procedures and identify and remove possible bottlenecks that might bear an obstacle to faster mobilisation of assistance to the affected regions.

Member States are also called upon to cooperate closely with local and regional authorities at all stages of implementation, in order to ensure that **Union assistance is visible** and effective on the ground.

Members find the Commission's proposal in relation to merging grant decisions and implementation agreements between the Commission and Member States interesting and appropriate once Parliament and the Council have made the financial resources available, since it would save time and therefore allow a more rapid response.

They endorse the idea that introducing the possibility to pay advances as soon as the affected State has applied for assistance is also a viable option for speeding up the process of making aid available (for example in the form of a fixed percentage of the total aid likely to be allocated). This funding would have to be returned to the Union budget in the event that the application was not accepted.

- greater clarity as regards scope and definitions: Members call on the Commission to **define the scope and area covered by the Fund clearly**, removing any possible legal uncertainty as to its scope and avoiding a situation where Member States submit applications under pressure from their citizens even though they know their applications will have to be rejected. Members take the view that, where a disaster has 'cascading' effects, the 'collateral' damage should still be covered by the Fund.

Members call for clarification in regard to:

- the eligibility of disasters at regional level, by introducing a simple and objective criterion that will make it possible to assimilate them to other disasters;
- the criterion based on the income threshold could be used as a general basic criterion for all types of disaster (in the case where it is set as an indicator for determining the eligibility of a regional disaster, it should be adjusted in line with regional GDP in the last year for which official figures are available, applying a pre-defined weighting factor).

Members take the view that the proposed damage threshold of 1.5 % of regional GDP at NUTS 2 level for the purpose of defining the eligibility of a regional disaster would clarify expectations as regards whether or not a potential application for mobilisation of the fund will be eligible. They also point out, therefore, that such a high threshold will not provide the response that citizens expect. It will therefore not prevent frustration among the victims of a disaster, who will, on the contrary, continue to condemn the Union's actions and accuse it of **lacking sensitivity towards its citizens**.

Members also recall that disaster prevention plays a vital role. They call for the following to be taken into account:

- **drought will continue to be regarded as a type of disaster that is eligible for the EUSF** taking account of the fact that this is a lasting structural problem which is difficult to square with the deadlines for applications set;
- **Mediterranean natural disasters**, mainly due to climate change.

Members stress that the regions should have sufficient flexibility in the forthcoming financial framework 2014-2020, and that they should be able to redistribute the resources allocated to them so that they can boost the resources available in the event of a disaster. Lastly, Members call for: (i) a better definition of the damage covered by this instrument in the event of a natural disaster; and (ii) greater complementarity with other funding instruments, such as the Structural Funds.