Are tools in place to monitor the effectiveness of European Social Fund spending on older workers? Court of Auditors Special Report 25 /2012

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The Committee on Budgetary Control unanimously adopted the report by Zigmantas BALYTIS (S&D, LT) on the Court of Auditors Special Report 25/2012 entitled 'Are tools in place to monitor the effectiveness of European Social Fund spending on older workers?'

The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, exercising its powers as an associated committee under Rule 50 of Parliament's Rules of Procedure, also gave an opinion on the report.

Members recalled that several years of economic and financial crisis had meant that the European Social Fund's (ESF) measures were more important than ever as one of the tools for tackling high unemployment.

The ESF accounted for 8 % of the total EU budget during the programming period 2007-2013, was a key financial instrument intended to help Member States achieve EU employment policy and social inclusion objectives. Members noted that **older workers accounted for less than 5 % of participants in the lifelong learning activities of the ESF**, and they regretted that no reliable data was available reliable data in order to assess how effectively ESF resources were spent. They called for more transparency in this area.

'**Older workers'**: concerned by the fact that in the operational programmes, for the period 2007-2013, the definition of 'older workers' was not used consistently, whilst the Lisbon Agenda defined an 'older worker' as any person of working age between 55 and 64 years old, Members encouraged the Member States to make sure, in the forthcoming programming period (2014-2020), that the age groups used for needs analysis were the same as the age groups used in the programmes and/or in the related actions and targets. Apart from the problem of definition, the report called on Member States to rely more on quantitative and qualitative data when analysing the socioeconomic situation of older workers and to provide for a measurable causal link between actions identified within operational programmes and the objectives pursued, which would facilitate the verification of consistency among identified needs, chosen strategy and specific goals. Members regret the lack of reliable and qualitative data produced by Member States.

Make older workers a priority: Members noted that the operational programmes for the period 2007-2013 there was no priority theme included dealing with initiatives for older workers, such as 'encouraging active ageing and prolonging working lives', mainly because of differing interpretations of the form a priority of this kind should take. They were of the opinion that specific groups of workers, such as those working in shifts or in heavy industry, needed specially adapted programmes and projects that differed from those in less physical jobs, such as workers in service industries and sectors. Convinced that the experience of older workers was an asset that they could use when changing jobs, Members called on the Commission to put more emphasis on the fight against age discrimination of older workers.

Evaluation of measures on older workers in the ESF: Members called for measures to assess not just employability but also progress in terms of skills (including 'soft' skills), higher self-esteem and greater motivation. They also called for **all barriers that hamper active ageing to be removed and for lifelong learning to be supported.**

They were concerned about the fact that some of the goals and **indicators** used in the projects had no direct connection with the ESF interventions, making it difficult to assess their performance, with regard to achieving the macro-economic targets set in the operational programmes.

Members deplored the fact that the **Commission was therefore unable to report adequately** on the overall results and impact of activities aimed at improving the situation for older workers in Member States funded by the ESF. They called on the Commission to:

- improve methods of evaluation and indicators;

- reinforce the way operational programme performance was assessed through reliable performance data for the period 2014-2020;

- incorporate indicators used under the new programmes to include alerts in respect of **financial and physical factors** and use relevant performance indicators such as operational goals, result targets and specific impact targets and indicators incorporating gender.

Members also called for more precise regulatory requirements regarding the evaluations requested from the managing authorities, and for operational programmes a minimum set of topics, to be covered in the evaluation process to be defined.

Lessons from the preceding programming period: the report called for efforts to be made to ensure that lessons learned from programme management were duly taken into account in future decision making. It called on the Commission gradually to rebalance its management tools so as to move from simply monitoring compliance – on the basis of legality/regularity principles – **towards measuring the progress in achieving the target values and the performance of the use of ESF in the forthcoming period 2014-2020.** Lastly, Members encouraged the Commission to step up its collaboration with other international institutions, such as the OECD, to help Member States better define key priorities, strategies and sustainable projects eligible for ESF funding in the forthcoming 2014-2020 period.