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

2013/2173(INI) - 02/04/2014 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 590 votes to 18 with 11 abstentions, a resolution 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?’

Improve the rate of employment of older people: Parliament recalled that in 2012 the employment rate for people aged 55 to 64 was less than 50 % in the European Union (54.4 % for men and 41.8 % for women) and in certain Member States it dropped to as low as around 30 %. This trend could be caused by a number of factors such as outdated skills and qualifications, employers’ attitudes towards older workers, difficulties with reconciling professional and family life, and declining health.

It s 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. Parliament 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. It 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, Parliament 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, Parliament 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. Generally, Parliament regretted the lack of reliable and qualitative data produced by Member States.

Make older workers a priority: Parliament 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. It was 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, Parliament 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: Parliament called for measures to assess not just employability but also progress in terms of skills (including 'soft' skills), higher self-esteem and greater motivation. It also called for **all barriers that hamper active ageing to be removed and for lifelong learning to be supported.**

It was 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.

Parliament 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. It 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.

Parliament 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: Parliament 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, Parliament 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.