



The European Social Fund (2014-2020): a strategic financial instrument for Prison Systems development in Europe

by Pedro das Neves

With the exception of a few northern countries, prison systems in Europe are characterized as being closed traditional systems, coping with an environment of constant pressure. Severe budget cuts, the over occupation of prison facilities, the degradation of the social and psychic health and increasingly dangerous behaviours of the inmates lead to the degradation of the material conditions of detention influence everyone “living” inside prison walls. Management models and practices in prisons, its politics towards outside cooperation with the community, its internal physical conditions, the relation established between inmates, security staff, re-education staff and prison directors, are conditioning elements of positive or negative behaviours that may block or support inmates social reintegration.

In 2009 more than 9,8 million people were held in penal institutions throughout the world as pre-trial detainees or as sentenced prisoners. In the European Union there are nowadays, more than 700.000 citizens under custody of the prison service across 2500 prisons. It is estimated that around 50% of those are in need of core rehabilitation interventions to improve its employability. Approximately 35% are low skilled needing labour market oriented training and qualifications. About 15% need skills upgrade in order to cope with modern production processes demanded by external employers.

Furthermore, each day, more than 400.000 employees all over the 27 EU member states ranging from civil professionals as psychologists, educators, psychotherapists, social workers, administrative staff, teachers, trainers, workshop masters, nurses and doctors to security agents (military or civilians according to each country), prison governors and their deputies – work to ensure safety to society and to provide opportunities to inmates that will ease their reinsertion process back to society. Regardless of their engagement towards this noble mission, the organization of the prison system is dependent of a multiplicity of actors that compel to a continuous balance of apparent conflicting needs, objectives and interests. **As in hospitals in which the organisation of the work developed and the qualification of its experts has a direct consequence in the life-death or**

well being of patients - the work and specific action of prison professionals has a direct impact in inmates life, their attitudes and behaviours prison and after release.

The on-going increase in prison population in most European countries poses very difficult situations to prison management and governments. The Council Framework Decision 2008/909/JHA of 27 November 2008 (on the application of the principle of mutual recognition to judgments in criminal matters imposing custodial sentences or measures involving deprivation of liberty for the purpose of their enforcement in the European Union) and its consequences on the increase of imprisonment rates and the 2011 European Green Paper “Strengthening mutual trust in the European judicial area – A Green Paper on the application of EU criminal justice legislation in the field of detention”¹ reinforce the need for **cooperation in the field of development of common practices and procedures.**

Several EU reports focused on reinsertion, training for inmates and staff² conclude about the importance of inmates training, work and support during the transition period in order to ensure better chances of reinsertion into working life outside prison, but also about the complexity of managing and developing prison staff to ensure this aim.

Inmates training, staff training, social reinsertion, employment, organizational innovation and transnational cooperation are keywords of the European Social policies supported by the European Social Fund, being this a strategic financial instrument for Prison Systems development in Europe.

But what is the European Social Fund (ESF)?

The ESF is the European Union’s main financial instrument for supporting the improvement of employment opportunities, promote education and life-long learning, enhance social inclusion, contribute to combating poverty and develop institutional capacity of public administration. The particular aim of this fund is to support the creation of more and better jobs in the EU, which it does by co-funding national, regional and local projects that improve the levels of employment, the quality of jobs, and the inclusiveness of the labour market in the Member States and their regions. The fund is managed through seven-year programming cycles and its strategy and budget is

¹ COM(2011) 327 final, Brussels, 14.6.2011

² ESF Policy Forum in Warsaw; “Prison Management” cycle of Conferences promoted by the European Institute of Public Administration in Bratislava; the EQUAL Initiative conclusion reports “Passport to Freedom”; the background paper on “Prison Education – Context, trends and policy issues” and the report of the Grundtvig Budapest conference “Pathways to Inclusion – Strengthening European Cooperation in Prison Education and Training”; the conclusions of the International Corrections and Prison Association (ICPA) 2010 Knowledge Management Pre-conference on E-learning and Staff Training, organized this year by the Belgium Prison System; the European panels of ICPA 2010 and 2012 International Conference; the ExoCOP recommendations and the Berlin Declaration and many other initiatives supported or directly organized by different European Commission.

negotiated between the EU Member States, the European Parliament and the EU Commission.

The implementation of the ESF on the ground is achieved through projects, which are applied for and implemented by a wide range of organisations, both in the public and private sector. These include national, regional and local authorities, educational and training institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the voluntary sector, as well as social partners, for example, trade unions and works councils, industry and professional associations, and individual companies.

The current programming cycle of the ESF runs from 2007 to 2013 under the banner 'Investing in People'. Over this period, it is investing around €75 billion – close to 10% of the EU budget – on employment-enhancing projects. The beneficiaries of ESF projects are varied and include for example, individual workers, industrial sectors, trade unions, public administrations or individual firms. Vulnerable groups of people who have particular difficulty in finding work or getting on in their jobs, such as the long-term unemployed, women, handicapped people, drug addicts and inmates are a particular target groups. As an indication, it is estimated that over 9 million individuals from these vulnerable groups are helped each year through participation in ESF projects.

How will it work in the period 2014-2020?

Considering that almost 23 million people are today unemployed and over 113 million are estimated to be living at risk of poverty or exclusion in Europe. Social and employment issues are a primary concern of European citizens, and an area where more is expected from the Union. Additional challenges that the Union faces relate to shortfalls in skill levels, under-performance in active labour market policy and education systems, social exclusion of marginalised groups, and low labour mobility.

On 6 October 2011, the Commission proposed the rules that determined how the ESF would work in the 2014-2020 period. The proposal is part of an overall legislative package for the Union's future cohesion policy. It will allow the ESF to continue providing concrete support to people who need help to find a job, or to progress in their current job. With the new proposal, the role of the ESF will be reinforced:

- there will be a minimum share of the budget allocated to each category of regions that will be higher than before (at least 25% for less developed regions, 40% for transition regions and 52% for more developed ones). This share corresponds to at least **€84 billion for the ESF**, compared to the current €75 billion.
- member States will have to **concentrate the ESF on a limited number of objectives and investment priorities in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy**, in order to increase impact and reach a critical mass.

- a minimum share of **20% of the ESF will be dedicated to social inclusion actions and a greater emphasis is placed on combating youth unemployment, promoting active and healthy ageing, and supporting the most disadvantaged groups and marginalized communities** such as Roma (inmates included).
- there will be **greater support will be provided to social innovation**, i.e. testing and scaling up innovative solutions to address social needs, for instance to support social inclusion;
- the **participation of social partners and civil society, in particular Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), will be further encouraged** in the implementation of the ESF, through capacity building, the promotion of community-led local development strategies and the simplification of the delivery system;
- **rules governing the reimbursement of projects by the ESF will be simplified**, in particular for "small" beneficiaries, who make up at least 50% of recipients of ESF funding – NGO's, small- and medium-sized enterprises and others;
- **equipment linked to investments in social and human capital will become eligible** for support from the ESF;
- **ESF can be used as a guarantee for loans taken by Member States' bodies**, in order to finance measures within its scope of intervention.

While negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework for the whole EU budget are taking place, the Council and the European Parliament will be examining the proposals presented by the European Commission. The proposals should be adopted at the end of 2012 in order to allow the start of a new generation of cohesion policy programmes in 2014.

For further information on how to access ESF funding for prison systems development in your country or explore transnational cooperation opportunities, please contact us by e-mail ips@prisonsystems.eu or by phone **+351 217 976 005**

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