

Regional policy



Relevance of gender in the policy area

EU regional policy is an investment policy that targets all regions and cities in the European Union. In recognition of its importance, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (EU) devotes 5 articles to “economic, social and territorial cohesion” (Articles 174 – 178). The policy aims to reduce the economic, social and territorial disparities between EU regions by supporting job creation, competitiveness, economic growth, improved quality of life and sustainable development.

Regional policy is embedded within the Regional Cohesion policy and gender equality is considered under this framework. Regional policy has a strong impact in many fields. Its investments help to deliver many EU policy objectives and complement EU policies such as those dealing with education, employment, energy, the environment, the single market, and research and innovation.

Regional policy is delivered through 3 main funds: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). Together with the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), they make up the European Structural and Investment (ESI) funds. Gender equality is addressed in the objectives of the ESI funds.

Gender equality is formally mentioned in the Regional Cohesion policy in relation to promoting economic development and pursuing women's empowerment.

Promoting gender equality is important in reducing regional economic and social disparities and for ensuring the long-term development of regions, which are the 2 main objectives of the Cohesion Policy. Failure to overcome gender disparities means that the development objectives of growth, competitiveness and employment cannot be fully achieved. The economic theory of gender equality recognises that gender equality is an essential precursor for promoting economic development. A lack of gender equality between women and men implies that human resources are not being used to their greatest extent for the development of the economy, and society at large. In economic terms, gender equality means "utilising everyone and letting everybody – both men and women – be assets on which to build development through e.g. employment in the labour market, higher education, research, innovation and entrepreneurship".

Gender equality thus broadly means women and men experience a city and its services and infrastructures differently. According to the World Bank, women's and men's priorities are often not the same for basic services such as urban housing, water and sanitation, solid waste management, and public transport. Applying a gender lens to ERDF funds and the Cohesion Fund when focusing on these intervention areas is essential to achieve gender equality in urban areas.

In term of investments, improvement in physical infrastructures can reduce at least 3 significant barriers that reinforce gender inequalities:

- women's lack of free time due to the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities
- women's exclusion from many local economic opportunities
- women's lesser presence in, if not complete absence from, well-resourced networks and important decision-making arenas.

However, the literature on gender equality in regional development reveals that developing infrastructure is not enough. Besides the lack of adequate infrastructures access to infrastructures, where they exist, is particularly relevant for people who may be exposed to a greater risk of social exclusion, such as women. Literature on gender equality and infrastructures emphasises that in looking at women's access to infrastructures, it is important to consider the needs of women and men in the informal sector. Poor women, living in unplanned settlements, are generally less mobile and therefore more affected than men by living in overcrowded conditions and households. They are also more exposed to the risks of uncollected waste and the stress of looking after children in unsafe places. Thus, the provision of safe places for children to play and of social and cultural infrastructure contributes to advancing gender equality.

Investments affect women and men differently, according to their different positions and roles in society. This is true of 'hard-core' infrastructure investments into facilities such as roads, water supplies and railways, as well as of 'soft' investments into skills development in the job market and education. For example, if the EU invests strongly in sectors such as the automotive sector, aeronautics, engineering, space, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, there is a major risk that gender gaps will increase, as women workers account for only 20% of the workforce in these sectors and tend to work in lower-qualified and lower-paid jobs. However, if investments are made from a gender equality perspective (e.g. investing also in vocational training for women, childcare infrastructure), they will contribute to gender equality and will increase its effectiveness in terms of inclusive growth. Inequalities persist between women and men across most of the policy areas encompassed by the Cohesion Policy (e.g. the labour market, education and training). The EU's strategy on equality between women and men is focused on promoting innovation, supporting job creation, increasing employment rates among women and men, and supporting the development of a higher-skilled labour market across the EU through ESI funding. Applying a gender lens to these areas is crucial to ensuring a fair and successful process of recovery.

Despite the relevance of gender equality in the Regional Cohesion policy area, there are still gender gaps to be tackled via regional policy and ESI funds. These are (i) fragmented/insufficient use of the gender mainstreaming approach in ESI funds, and (ii) weak involvement of women in participatory processes relating to the programming and implementation of the ESI funds.

Gender inequalities in the policy area

Fragmented/insufficient use of the gender mainstreaming approach in ESI funds

Several evaluations of the 2000 – 2006 and 2007 – 2013 programming periods reveal that gender equality has not been integrated in the ESI funds coherently and systematically at all stages of the policy cycle. According to these evaluations, the integration of a gender perspective in the context analysis is carried out unevenly among the Member States; in some cases, regional operational programmes include a specific gender analysis in the part dedicated to the analysis of the context, while in other cases no reference to specific gender inequalities and their possible causes are presented.

In the programming phase, gender equality is generally present as a broad principle, but it is rarely broken down into gender-specific objectives, or objectives that include a gender equality perspective. If it is, this is only in an ad-hoc manner. Furthermore, gender equality is often present in objectives that are immediately associated with gender inequalities (e.g. the labour market, childcare or elderly care). It is very seldom in those that are not 'immediately' related to women (e.g. energy, transport, ICT, waste). However, it should be noted that in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries, specific attention is paid to gender mainstreaming in all actions of the ESI funds.

Allocation of financial resources to gender equality is rather limited. According to a European Parliament study, during the period of 2007 – 2013 across the Member States on average only 3.7% of the total ESF resources was allocated to specific gender equality actions. The study underlines that, despite the official declarations according to which the EU 2020 Strategy was conceived as an opportunity to reform the economy in order to achieve more gender equality, and the intention to make gender mainstreaming the pivotal strategy for gender equality, [...] the gender perspective is far from being assumed in all policies, at all levels and at every stage of the policymaking process.

The implementation of a gender mainstreaming approach within the ESI funds is a widely debated issue in the literature; evaluations seem to show that the expectation of consistent reductions in gender imbalances in European societies has not been met. According to various experts, gender mainstreaming has been used instead as an excuse for neutralising positive actions, further reducing existing funds and incentives for gender equality, especially in the case of structural funds.

The selection criteria used to evaluate ESI funds applications are not generally gender-sensitive. The lack of adequate gender-sensitive criteria together with a lack of gender awareness among applicants, result in weak outcomes in terms of increased gender equality in society and the economy.

A limited set of indicators has been designed to monitor gender equality within ESI funds. These are mostly related to employment indicators and the population breakdown by sex within some of the created facilities (e.g. childcare facilities). However, there is a lack of gender-oriented result indicators on how women and men benefit from all the achievements of ESI funds. Specific evaluations of gender equality within ESI funds are rarely carried out.

Weak integration of gender equality in the implementation of the selected projects, and in particular in employers' practices

Studies identify a weak integration of the gender equality perspective in ESI funds for a number of key reasons. First, there is a lack of political commitment on mainstreaming a gender equality perspective in the ESI funds at all levels. While there seems to be a commitment at high political levels, at lower levels the adoption of a gender equality perspective is mainly associated with compliance with international commitments. There is also an absence of specific equality bodies in charge of the programming and implementation of a gender perspective within ESI funds. Furthermore, there is a weak integration between the national/regional institutions in charge of ESI funds and the gender equality bodies at both national and regional level.

Second, there is a shortage of gender competence both within the institutions in charge of ESI funds and among project applicants. This lack of adequate skills is particularly relevant in those areas that are not explicitly perceived as having a differentiated gender impact (e.g. energy, urban infrastructure, waste).

Third, there is resistance on the part of public institutions to the subject of gender equality, while there is a lack of recognition of inequality on the part of the target population and society in general. The impact of the financial crisis contributed to making equality issues a low priority at both institutional and societal levels.

Weak involvement of women in participatory processes related to ESI funds

Even though the issue of the involvement of women's associations in the programming and implementation of ESI funds receives little attention in the evaluations of gender equality in structural funds, a World Bank study underlines that gender issues have been excluded from most of the participatory development initiatives and diagnoses. This has led to policies and interventions that often reflect a poor understanding of the nature and capacities of women's groups. Indeed, women's capacity to network is smaller than that of men due to greater limitations in terms of physical mobility, resources and time. Women's networks are therefore generally small, informal, and oriented towards everyday life and voluntary community activities. Indeed, such groups in themselves are unlikely to represent a strong lobbying potential in the adoption of a gender equality perspective in regional policy.

Gender equality policy objectives at EU and international level

As mentioned previously, regional policy is mostly tackled at European level. Responsibility for regional policy is divided among EU institutions and EU Member States. EU institutions set the general framework for regional policy by laying down the common strategic framework for Cohesion Policy and defining the regulations and investment priorities of Cohesion Policy funds (ERDF, ESF and Cohesion Fund). Following the common strategic framework (CSF) and ERDF/ESF/Cohesion Fund regulations, Member States sign a partnership agreement with the European Commission that afterwards translates into specific ERDF/ESF/Cohesion Fund programmes. Successively, these programmes are negotiated with and approved by the European Commission.

EU level

In the regional policy field, European institutions and EU Member States have made their commitment clear to ensuring the mainstreaming of the gender perspective in the European Structural Funds, the operational tool of regional policy at EU level.

European Commission

Since the 1994 – 1999 programming period, the European Commission has been taking action to ensure the promotion of equality between women and men in structural funds (ERDF/ESF/CF).

Following the Amsterdam Treaty, which strengthened focus on the achievement of equal opportunities, a dual approach was promoted for mainstreaming gender within Cohesion Policy funds. The dual approach implies the use of vertical priorities – that is, a priority that is essentially contained within the aims and activities of a specific programme – and horizontal priorities specifically integrating equality objectives into all general policies and measures. This approach characterised both the 2000 – 2006 and the 2007 – 2013 programming periods. With the adoption of the 2014 – 2020 regulations, the European Commission has taken further action to consolidate gender equality in the Cohesion Policy funds (ERDF/ESF/CF). Indeed, in order to ensure a proper mainstreaming of the gender perspective in the 2014 – 2020 Cohesion Policy, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men drafted an Opinion on gender equality in the Cohesion Policy 2014 – 2020, identifying shortcomings and priorities to guide the definition of the new Cohesion Policy regulations.

The main provisions on gender equality in the 2014 – 2020 Cohesion Policy are included in Article 7 of the Common Provisions of the funds, which foresees that

Member States and the Commission shall ensure that equality between men and women and the integration of gender perspective are taken into account and promoted throughout the preparation and implementation of programmes, including in relation to monitoring, reporting and evaluation

Furthermore, according to the same article “Member States and the Commission shall take appropriate steps to prevent any discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation during the preparation and implementation of programmes”.

The main European Commission gender equality priorities in regional policy are included in ESF regulations:

- increasing the sustainable participation and progress of women in employment;
- combating the feminisation of poverty;
- reducing gender-based segregation;
- combating gender stereotypes in the labour market and in education and training;
- promoting the reconciliation of work and personal life for all as well as the equal

- sharing of care responsibilities between women and men;
- reducing inequalities in terms of educational attainment and health status;
- facilitating the transition from institutional to community-based care, in particular for those who face multiple forms of discrimination (e.g. women).

Furthermore, the increased relevance of gender equality in the 2014 – 2020 programming period is included in the ex ante conditions laid down in the Commission and Member States' partnership agreement. Accession to Cohesion Policy funds depends on this being fulfilled. Accordingly, the gender equality ex ante conditionality consists of the existence of administrative capacity for the implementation and application of EU gender equality law and policy in the field of ESI funds. The criteria to be respected for its fulfilment are:

- 1 | arrangements in accordance with the institutional and legal framework of Member States for the involvement of bodies responsible for gender equality throughout the preparation and implementation of programmes, including the provision of advice on gender equality in ESI funding-related activities; and
- 2 | arrangements for training staff in the authorities involved in the management and control of the ESI funds in the fields of EU gender equality law and policy as well as on the subject of gender mainstreaming.

There is a strong link between the European Structural and Investment Funds and other legal and non-legal tools for promoting gender equality at both EU and Member State level. The 2010 – 2015 Strategy for Equality between Women and Men foresees among its priorities:

- 1 | supporting the promotion of gender equality in the implementation of all aspects and flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 strategy, especially as regards the definition and implementation of relevant national measures (through technical support as well as through the structural funds and other major funding programmes such as the Seventh Framework Programme for Research; and
- 2 | promoting gender equality in European funds, and in particular in the ESF funds to support Member States to implement operational programmes. This includes measures for increasing women's participation in the labour market and reducing gender segregation in career selection and professions as well as enhancing lifelong learning.

The 2011 – 2020 Gender Equality Pact outlines objectives and contains descriptions of the gender gaps to be tackled by the Cohesion Policy and the Structural and Investment Funds, such as closing the gender gaps, combating gender segregation in the labour market and promoting better work–life balance for women and men.

European Parliament

Promoting the use of Structural and Investment Funds to enhance gender equality is also a priority of the European Parliament. The EU Strategy for Equality between Women and Men Post-2015 calls on the Commission to support Member States in the increasing use of the structural funds for investment in public childcare and care for the elderly, as a core strategy to increase women’s participation in the labour market.

In terms of the European Social Fund, the European Parliament’s influence has grown over the years. Under the Maastricht Treaty, the parliament was required to give its assent to the general provisions governing the funds, whereas under the Treaty of Amsterdam, the adoption of implementing rules for the ESF is subject to the co-decision procedure. Thanks to the European Parliament’s action, in the current 2014 – 2020 programming period the ESF will account for 23.1% of the total EU Cohesion Policy funding, and 20% of each Member State’s ESF allocation will have to be spent on social inclusion. This is particularly relevant for women, considering they face a higher risk of social exclusion than men.

Policy cycle in regional policy

How and when? Regional development and the integration of the gender dimension into the policy cycle

Below, you can find useful resources and practical examples for mainstreaming gender into regional development. They are organised according to the most relevant phase of the policy cycle they may serve.

Practical examples of gender mainstreaming in regional

development

Germany

In March 2009, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs set up the Agency for Gender Equality within the ESF – a support structure for achieving more gender equality as a desired outcome of the European Social Fund. The Agency is based in Berlin. A team of experts advises the responsible actors on different levels of implementation of the ESF, with the goal of mainstreaming gender equality into the ESF programmes and their respective projects. The Agency promotes this aim by offering ongoing support to ministries involved in programming and monitoring the ESF and implementation bodies. The Agency offers training and counselling, publishes studies on ESF topics, offers detailed information on gender mainstreaming in the ESF via the Internet, networks with national and international bodies and organisations and provides gender budget analysis.

Spain

The Institute for Women is an autonomous institution of the General State Administration, currently operating under the Secretary of State for Equality at the Ministry of Health, Social Policies and Equality to support gender mainstreaming within structural funds. The institute plays a double role in EU funds in Spain:

- As an intermediate body it is in charge of implementing measures aimed at promoting equality between women and men. For example the institute develops a number of activities aimed at strengthening gender mainstreaming in ESF implementation through transnational and interregional exchange and collaboration.
 - It is also a national body responsible for ensuring compliance with gender mainstreaming in the operations co-funded by the funds. In this case several activities are organised, such as the Equality Policy Network which is a forum for debate and analysis to improve a real and effective integration of gender perspective in operations co-financed by the structural funds (ESF and ERDF) and the Cohesion funds.
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Italy

Several actions have been taken over the years to ensure gender mainstreaming in the structural funds programming and implementation. Some of the most relevant ones are:

- Technical assistance to Regional Managing Authorities of EU funds to promote the equal opportunity principle and gender mainstreaming in the programming and implementation of EU structural funds.
 - The design of VISPO guidelines for assessing the gender impact of designed structural funds policies.
 - The set-up of gender tasks forces for the Regional MAs in order to ensure the integration of the gender equality perspective in all the initiatives undertaken by the Regional Operational Programmes.
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UK

The Gender Equality and Equal opportunities Mainstreaming Plan for England and Gibraltar 2007 – 2013 (revised in 2014) aims to:

- 1 | reinforce and support the commitments made in the 2007 – 2013 England and Gibraltar ESF Operational Programme to mainstream gender equality and equal opportunities;
 - 2 | provide the national ESF Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities Sub Committee with a management tool and point of reference for assessing progress in mainstreaming gender equality and equal opportunities;
 - 3 | propose objectives which support the achievement of equality targets and to contribute, in particular, to increasing the female participation rate for the second half of the programme period.
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Sweden

During the programming period 2007 – 2013, the Swedish Managing Authority financed the project ESF Jämt whose purpose was to assist other ESF funded projects with implementing gender equality. Between 2009 and 2012 8 project supporters and a national coordinator worked in ESF Jämt to make gender equality a central feature of selected European Social Fund projects and projects applying for funds. The methods used by the project supporters include:

- initial talks and an introduction to gender equality
- concrete advice and ideas on how to integrate a gender equality perspective into the projects
- basic training and workshops in gender equality and gender mainstreaming.

Poland

The implementation of the gender mainstreaming approach is ensured by obliging every application for funding to include an in-depth analysis of the situation of women and men. The evaluation of the project application is made according to minimum standard requirements, specified in the Project Evaluation Charter. The application is excluded from consideration for funding when it fails to achieve a minimum of 2 out of the 6 stated minimum standards. The minimum standards consist of the illustration of the real gender proportion in the project's problem area or increasing the presence of under-represented groups. The analysis of the real situation of men and women in the project must illustrate with appropriate data the situation of gender equality in the project's problem area, stressing the existence of any equality barriers. The actions planned in the project must adequately respond to the analysis of this situation, should address the barriers and take into account, if possible, the differences in needs of men and women. Also the expected results in the project must take into account the gender analysis. Finally, the applicant must also explain how s/he is going to provide for gender equality in the management of the project.

Timeline

1957

Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, [EEC Treaty](#).

1957 - 1957

1975

[Regulation \(EEC\) No 724/75](#) of the Council of 18 March 1975 establishing a European Regional Development Fund.

1975 - 1975

1986

The [Single European Act](#).

1986 - 1986

1992

[Treaty of Maastricht](#) on European Union.

1992 - 1992

1993

[Council Regulation \(EEC\) No. 2081/93](#) of 20 July 1993 amending Regulation (EEC) No. 2052/88 on the tasks of the structural funds and their effectiveness and on coordination of their activities between themselves and with the operations of the European Investment Bank and the other existing financial instruments.

1993 - 1993

1993

[Council Regulation \(EEC\) No. 2083/93](#) of 20 July 1993 amending Regulation (EEC) No. 4254/88 laying down provisions for implementing Regulation (EEC) No. 2052/898 as regards the European Regional Development Fund.

1993 - 1993

1993

[Council Regulation \(EEC\) No. 2084/93](#) of 20 July 1993 amending Regulation (EEC) No 4255/88 laying down provisions for implementing Regulation (EEC) No. 2052/88 as regards the European Social Fund.

1993 - 1993

1994

[Cohesion Fund](#).

1994 - 1994

1999

[Presidency conclusions](#) – Berlin European Council 24 and 25 March 1999.

1999 - 1999

1999

[Council Regulation \(EC\) No. 1260/1999](#) of 21 June 1999 laying down general provisions on the structural funds.

1999 - 1999

1999

[Regulation \(EC\) No. 1783/1999](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 1999 on the European Regional Development Fund.

1999 - 1999

1999

[Regulation \(EC\) No. 1784/1999](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 1999 on the European Social Fund.

1999 - 1999

1999

[Council Regulation \(EC\) No. 1264/1999](#) of 21 June 1999 amending Regulation (EC) No. 1164/94 establishing a Cohesion Fund.

1999 - 1999

1999

[Council Regulation \(EC\) No. 1265/1999](#) of 21 June 1999 amending Annex II to Regulation (EC) No 1164/94 establishing a Cohesion Fund.

1999 - 1999

2000

[Presidency Conclusions](#) Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000.

2000 - 2000

2000

The [Lisbon Special European Council](#) (March 2000): Towards a Europe of innovation and knowledge.

2000 - 2000

2001

[Council Regulation \(EC\) No. 1447/2001](#) of 28 June 2001 amending Regulation (EC) No. 1260/1999 laying down general provisions on the structural funds.

2001 - 2001

2002

[Commission Regulation \(EC\) No. 1386/2002](#) of 29 July 2002 laying down detailed rules for the implementation of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1164/94 as regards the management and control systems for assistance granted from the Cohesion Fund and the procedure for making financial corrections.

2002 - 2002

2003

[Council Regulation \(EC\) No. 1105/2003](#) of 26 May 2003 amending Regulation (EC) No. 1260/1999 laying down general provisions on the structural funds.

2003 - 2003

2005

[Communication to the spring European Council](#) of 2 February 2005. Working together for growth and jobs. A new start for the Lisbon strategy.

2005 - 2005

2006

[Council Regulation \(EC\) No. 1083/2006 of 11 July 2006](#) laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999.

2006 - 2006

2006

[Commission Regulation \(EC\) No. 1828/2006](#) of 8 December 2006 setting out rules for the implementation of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006 laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and of Regulation (EC) No. 1080/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Regional Development Fund.

2006 - 2006

2006

[Regulation \(EC\) No. 1080/2006](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Regional Development Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1783/1999.

2006 - 2006

2006

[Regulation \(EC\) No 1081/2006](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Social Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1784/1999.

2006 - 2006

2006

[Council Regulation \(EC\) No. 1084/2006](#) of 11 July 2006 establishing a Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1164/94.

2006 - 2006

2008

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion: [Turning territorial diversity into strength](#).

2008 - 2008

2010

Communication from the Commission Europe 2020. [A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth](#).

2010 - 2010

2013

[Regulation \(EU\) No. 1303/2013](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006.

2013 - 2013

2013

[Regulation \(EU\) No. 1301/2013](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Regional Development Fund and on specific provisions concerning the investment for growth and jobs goal and repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1080/2006.

2013 - 2013

2013

[Regulation \(EU\) No. 1304/2013](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Social Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No. 1081/2006.

2013 - 2013

2013

[Council Regulation \(EU\) No. 1300/2013](#) of 17 December 2013 on the Cohesion Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No. 1084/2006.

2013 - 2013

2014

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions the Urban Dimension of EU Policies: [Key features of an EU urban agenda](#).

2014 - 2014

2014

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Guidelines on the [application of the measures linking effectiveness of the European Structural and Investment funds to sound economic governance](#) according to Article 23 of Regulation (EU) 1303/2013.

2014 - 2014

Current policy priorities at EU level

At EU level, regional development is embedded within the Cohesion policy. Under the EU's 2014 – 2020 budget, the Cohesion policy invests €325 billion in Europe's Member States, their regions and cities to deliver the EU 2020 goals of creating growth and jobs, tackling climate change, energy dependence and reducing poverty and social exclusion.

In the period 2014 – 2020 the Cohesion policy focuses on 11 priority objectives:

- strengthening research, technological development and innovation
- enhancing access to, and use and quality of ICT
- enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs
- supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors
- promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management

- preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency
- promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures
- promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility
- promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination
- investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning
- enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration.

The Cohesion policy also aims to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between regions. In fact, areas that are naturally disadvantaged from a geographical viewpoint such as remote, mountainous or sparsely populated areas will benefit from special treatment to address possible disadvantages due to their remoteness.

Three structural and investment funds (ERDF, ESF and Cohesion Fund) support the delivery of these objectives. Even though the ERDF addresses all thematic objectives, it is mainly targeted at the following priorities:

- 1 | productive investment which contributes to creating and safeguarding sustainable jobs, through direct aid for investment in SMEs
- 2 | productive investment, irrespective of the size of the enterprise concerned
- 3 | investment in infrastructure providing basic services to citizens in the areas of energy, environment, transport and ICT
- 4 | investment in social, health, research, innovation, business and educational infrastructure
- 5 | investment in the development of endogenous potential through fixed investment in equipment and small-scale infrastructure, including small-scale cultural and sustainable tourism infrastructure, services to enterprises, support to research and innovation bodies and investment in technology and applied research in enterprises
- 6 | networking, cooperation and exchange of experience between competent regional, local, urban and other public authorities, economic and social partners and relevant bodies representing civil society.

Member States and regions are required to invest a significant part of the ERDF (between 50% and 80%) in these priority areas which receive up to €100 billion (close to 30%) of the ERDF budget.

Through the ESF, the Cohesion policy contributes to the EU 2020 priorities in the fields of employment, education and social inclusion (at least 20% of the ESF in each Member State will have to be used to support this objective). In detail, the main priorities of the ESF for the period 2014 – 2020 are:

- promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility
- promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination, including gender discrimination
- investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning
- enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders, and efficient public administration.

In addition, the ESF will also contribute to the following Cohesion policy objectives, complementing ERDF funding:

- supporting the shift towards a low-carbon, climate-resilient, resource-efficient and environmentally sustainable economy
- enhancing the accessibility, use and quality of information and communication technologies
- strengthening research, technological development and innovation
- enhancing the competitiveness and long-term sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises.

The Cohesion Fund focuses on the following investment priorities:

- supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors
- promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management
- preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency
- promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures
- enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities, stakeholders and efficient public administration through actions to strengthen the institutional capacity and the efficiency of public administrations and public services related to the implementation of the Cohesion Fund.

Want to know more?

