



Vladimír ŠPIDLA

Member of the European Commission responsible for employment, social affairs and equal opportunities

Launch of the 2007 - 2013 England European Social Fund Programme

~~Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort~~

QE II Centre

London, 29 October 2007

Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you first of all to James for his colourful portrait of what the ESF is all about. I have to say my experience is rather similar to yours here in England.

Often, When I speak about European social and employment policies in the various member states of the European Union people also ask the same question: *What Can Europe do for me?*

At such occasions, I like to refer to the European Social Fund and say the following:

- Through the ESF the European Union co-finances training and counselling activities that help you in finding a job in case you are unemployed.
- If you have a job, ESF-activities can help you to update your skills and thus improve your employability, no matter if you are low-skilled or high-skilled.
- Furthermore, if you have problems finding suitable employment, for instance because you are disabled or old, the ESF can support either support you in finding and retaining a suitable job, or can help in creating one.

Of course, there are many other good examples. Today in London and tomorrow in Wales I will be visiting some projects where I will certainly learn more about the good work of the ESF, particularly here in the UK. James has just given, I think, about a dozen examples. I am sure that most of you here, who work for implementing the ESF, could easily add a dozen more.

All these examples have one thing in common: In helping people through ESF funded activities, we bring Europe closer to the citizen. And isn't our event today, the launch of the ESF programme in England, and also Gibraltar, for the period 2007-2013, the perfect occasion to show how the European Social Fund can add enhance their lives?

Of course, we all know that ESF programmes or projects rarely catch the attention

of the press headlines. And, as James has said, 'Brussels-bashing' may be popular among certain media, not just in the UK. Yet, this is the occasion to stress that the ESF has quietly but efficiently helped to change the lives of millions of people all across the European Union. We estimate that

- *every year, the fund helps 9 million people throughout the Union, including 1,2 million older workers;*
- *And thanks to the ESF about 2 million unemployed people per year manage to start a new job – and a new life.*

In a nutshell, the ESF, whose 50th anniversary we celebrate this year, contributes to building the social face of Europe.

Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As from this year, we have the opportunity to make the contours of Europe's social face more visible. The new programming period for the structural funds has started at an important moment. Economic growth has picked up all over the EU, the unemployment rate is at its lowest for a decade, and seven million jobs are expected to be created from 2006 to 2008.

The Lisbon Strategy, under whose umbrella the European Union's heads of state and government had decided to conduct reforms to boost employment and growth, while promoting social cohesion, is starting to bear fruit.

It is the vocation of the structural funds, of which the ESF is a part, to support these reforms. The funds financially underpin the EU's commitment to growth, more and better jobs, and to social and regional cohesion and link up all levels of decision-making and policy implementation in support of these reforms. This is possible, because the funds do not just involve the EU-level and the Member States governments, but also the regions, local authorities, business, trade unions, the voluntary and community sector and many more actors. And the ESF in particular can help to ensure that growth all over Europe is socially sustainable and provides more and better jobs for the people.

So, talking about the ESF, how does it help people in England ?

All in all, the programme aims to support almost 1.8 million people. Almost half of the beneficiaries will be workers who want to gain a qualification; the other beneficiaries are expected to be mainly unemployed or inactive. We expect that about 335,000 workers will gain a qualification, and about 200,000 unemployed or inactive people will take up employment as a consequence of our support.

These targets are very ambitious. But we believe that they can be achieved given the unique and tailored nature of the support provided by the ESF programme. We believe in ambitious targets because they provide an incentive for programme and project managers to make effective use of the more than 3 billion Euros, or more than £ 2 billion pounds that the ESF programme will devote to England over seven years.

Of course, this amount is a reduction against what was available for the previous seven years. However, it is still a significant amount which can make a difference to many people's lives. Here, I think in particular of certain groups of society, where employment rates are comparatively low, such as lone parents, older workers, ethnic minorities, young people, people with disabilities and adults with low or no skills.

Indeed, notwithstanding England's economic success in recent years and the fact that its employment rates exceed the targets set by the Lisbon strategy, certain groups remain at a disadvantage at the English labour market. Earlier this year, and in the context of the Lisbon Strategy, the European Council agreed that the major challenge for the UK is the need to improve basic and intermediate skills in order to raise productivity and improve job prospects for the most disadvantaged.

Furthermore, in spite of England's overall economic success, there still are considerable regional and sub-regional differences in the labour market. Pockets of unemployment exist. They are mainly to found in big cities and - somewhat scattered - in a number of rural areas.

So, there is still work ahead for all of us! Now we are all facing the challenge to make its implementation a success story, and the Commission will provide every possible support for this.

Before I conclude, let me stress six factors which will be crucial for success: they are regional flexibility, ownership, partnership, innovation, transnational cooperation, and communication to the public.

- Firstly, **regional flexibility** will allow the programme content to be adapted to the specific needs of every region in England. The programme is a national one but will be regionally delivered. Thus, the regions are crucial players in its implementation. We have already seen some regional flexibility during the programme drafting phase. For instance, some regions such as North West and East of England have opted to allocate a higher share of funding to the skills priority. London, in contrast, has allocated more monies to the employment priority. The Commission is now eager to see regional flexibility work in practice.
- The second factor is **ownership**. We need to continue and encourage a sense of ownership in the programme amongst project managers and providers. Naturally, the programme will be implemented by a large range of providers. Here, I want to highlight the importance of the Voluntary and Community Sector. Given that the programme will aim to support some hard-to-reach groups, I believe the participation of the Voluntary and Community Sector will be essential. Community grants are one way to allow small third sector organisations to continue being involved in programme implementation.
- **Partnership** is the third success factor. It is formalised in the Regulations governing the Structural Funds. But partnership should not to be reduced to being a regulatory requirement. I am convinced that it is a necessary pre-requisite in order to turn projects, and the programme, into a success. The Rover crisis – in which ESF successfully intervened thanks to real partnership working at all levels - is a very good example where the wider partnership contributed to the positive achievements of a project.
- The fourth and fifth factors are **Innovation and transnational cooperation**. I have visited a number of projects, here in England and elsewhere in Europe, which demonstrate the significant added value of innovative ESF projects. Also, the transnational dimension of the ESF is an important new principle in the current programming period. I would therefore like to encourage in particular the project and programme managers to devote special effort to searching for innovative and transnational solutions in the framework of their activities.
- Finally, there is also a challenge which relates to public opinion in England. Sometimes, the media portrays European funding as overly bureaucratic or cumbersome. In this programming period we as the Commission, in cooperation

with the Member States, have endeavoured to simplify the rules and regulations governing ESF. The UK minister when speaking at the cohesion forum held in Brussels recently called for rigid audit and monitoring structures to make sure that European tax payers' money is not wasted, and I completely agree. I believe that the programme we are launching here today needs to be an excellent example of how ESF funding can be well spent. Therefore, it will be a challenge for programme managers **to demonstrate and communicate to the public** that the rules governing European funding are not there to make the life of citizens more difficult, but they are solely designed to protect tax payers' money. And as I said at the start, in helping people through ESF funded activities, we bring Europe closer to the citizen. We don't just shift money around! Today we have heard, and will hear more, about the true value of the ESF. The European Social Fund is offering opportunities to improve people's lives by engaging in training, education and personal development. This is how the ESF brings Europe to the citizens.

Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The England programme was among the first 15 to be adopted by the Commission. Altogether, we expect to have 117 programmes in the entire EU.

The quick adoption of the English programme was only possible because of very good cooperation between the Commission and the English authorities before and during the negotiations.

I assure you, that we shall continue to support your efforts and will co-operate closely and constructively with you.

Your success will be our success.

The better we deliver the ESF, the better we will show the social face of Europe to our citizens.

I wish you my best in this new endeavour.