



Future of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) in the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework

**Recommendations by
CEC – Acting for Social Inclusion**

www.cecacasbl.org



Introduction

As discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) progress, the future of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) remains central to the EU's ability to foster social inclusion, employment, and cohesion. CEC – Acting for Social Inclusion, a Brussels-based European network, brings together national and regional organisations dedicated to advancing social and professional integration.

CEC contributes to strengthening European cooperation by addressing barriers to employment. Its members provide tailored, integrated pathways that combine skills development, practical work experience, and direct connections to labour market opportunities, ensuring support is both personalised and aligned with economic realities. Drawing on this collective experience across Europe, CEC highlights the vital role of ESF+ in supporting individuals facing multiple and intersecting challenges to employment.

The recommendations below are grounded in field experience, where effective socio-professional integration depends on flexible, long-term, and person-centred approaches rather than rigid or short-term measures. They also emphasise the need to maintain a strong, visible, and adequately funded ESF+, alongside accessible implementation, balanced governance, and meaningful partnerships with civil society.

Section I – Future design, objectives, governance, and implementation of the ESF+ under the next MFF

Many people engaged in socio-professional integration (SPI) face multiple and overlapping barriers – such as unstable housing, health issues, administrative difficulties, childcare constraints, and limited mobility. Linear and short-term pathways to employment are therefore often unrealistic. The future ESF+ should reflect this reality by supporting longer and more flexible pathways, recognising intermediate progress, and enabling effective coordination between stakeholders. It should avoid rigid frameworks based on predefined administrative categories and instead focus on what effectively supports individual progression.

Recommendation 1 – Preserving a strong and visible ESF+

The proposed integration of ESF+ into National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) represents a major shift in cohesion policy. While it may improve coordination between EU instruments, it also risks weakening the social dimension of EU action. In particular, replacing a dedicated ESF+ budget with a general social spending target (around 14%) could lead to a real decrease in investment, as the proposed envelope is lower in real terms while covering a broader scope.



A strong, autonomous and adequately funded ESF+ must therefore be maintained as a central pillar of the EU's social dimension. Its resources should be increased, its visibility preserved, and its focus on social cohesion clearly reaffirmed. In addition, minimum allocations for social inclusion and vulnerable groups should be retained to ensure that funding effectively reaches those most in need.

Recommendation 2 – Ensuring effective governance and territorial balance

The effectiveness of the ESF+ relies on strong multi-level governance and the partnership principle. The increased centralisation implied by NRPPs risks marginalising regional and local actors, despite their essential role in identifying needs and delivering tailored responses.

The future framework should therefore:

- preserve shared management with regional and local authorities,
- ensure meaningful participation of civil society and local stakeholders,
- and guarantee a fair territorial distribution of funds.

Richer regions fear being disadvantaged if access to funds depends too heavily on national-level planning rather than regional input. The proposal guarantees a minimum for less-developed regions, which could reduce the relative share available to more developed areas despite high social needs. Specific eligibility criteria for urban regions at high risk of poverty and social exclusion would be relevant, if not necessary, to ensure fair distribution.

Recommendation 3 – Improving accessibility and implementation

Civil society organisations are essential for reaching vulnerable groups, building trust, and delivering tailored solutions. However, their participation is often limited by complex procedures, heavy administrative requirements, and financial constraints. This tends to favour larger organisations with stronger administrative capacity.

The future ESF+ should ensure more accessible and predictable funding through simplified procedures, proportionate requirements, improved pre-financing, and reasonable payment timelines. Dedicated access points and support for grassroots organisations, including through consortia, should be strengthened.

Simplification should extend to reporting, justification, and audit systems through wider use of simplified cost options and proportionate controls. Administrative requirements must not outweigh social impact, particularly in flexible and person-centred interventions.



Greater coherence between EU funds, a single digital interface, and more integrated, longer-term programming would further improve accessibility and effectiveness.

Recommendation 4 – Focusing on impact, inclusion and innovation

The ESF+ should maintain a clear focus on social inclusion, quality employment, and social cohesion, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights. It should prioritise those furthest from the labour market and support investment in skills and human capital, particularly in the context of economic and social transitions.

Implementation should place greater emphasis on results and social impact, including qualitative indicators such as well-being and inclusion. Support for social innovation and local experimentation should be maintained, especially where national systems are insufficient.

Recommendation 5 – Adapting to labour market transformations

The future ESF+ should help manage labour market transitions by bridging the gap between declining industries and growing sectors such as technology, green energy, and healthcare. It should support workers as automation and AI reshape jobs by investing in targeted training, reskilling, and lifelong learning, given the rapid evolution and obsolescence of skills. Additionally, it should equip individuals with the digital and technical competences needed for the green and digital transitions.

Section II – Views on the following aspects of the ESF+ in the next MFF

Recommendation 6: Focusing on strategic priorities

The ESF+ should maintain a strong focus on social inclusion, employment, and skills, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, while ensuring flexibility to adapt to national and territorial contexts.

1. Youth employment and inclusion

Priority should be given to apprenticeships, dual education systems, mobility schemes, and digital upskilling. Strengthening the Youth Guarantee remains essential to support sustainable labour market integration.

2. Gender equality and labour market participation

Increasing women's participation requires investment in childcare services, flexible reskilling pathways, entrepreneurship support, access to STEM careers, and measures to combat workplace discrimination.



3. Social inclusion and fight against poverty

The ESF+ should reinforce support for those furthest from the labour market, including young people, older workers, migrants, and persons with disabilities. In the context of demographic ageing and persistent territorial inequalities, investment in long-term care and family support services remains essential.

4. Skills, lifelong learning, and labour market transitions

Large-scale upskilling and reskilling efforts should be supported, alongside the development of national skills ecosystems focused on digital, green, and transition-related sectors.

5. Just transition and territorial cohesion

Targeted support is needed for regions and communities most affected by economic restructuring and environmental transitions to ensure a socially fair transition.

6. Social innovation and the social economy

The ESF+ should strengthen support for social innovation and the social and solidarity economy, including scaling up effective local initiatives.

Key considerations for implementation :

- Safeguarding investment in people: Social infrastructure investments should not reduce funding for direct support to individuals.
- Inclusive eligibility and targeting: Programme rules should remain flexible and avoid restrictive definitions that exclude vulnerable populations.
- Balanced objectives: ESF+ priorities should address not only labour market outcomes but also broader social goals such as poverty reduction and social inclusion.
- Adaptation to SPI realities: Programmes should support comprehensive, person-centred approaches that address structural barriers such as housing, health, and mobility.

Recommendation 7 – Simplification and reduction of administrative burdens

Administrative complexity remains a major barrier, particularly for small and grassroots organisations. Excessive paperwork, unclear rules, duplicative controls, and long reimbursement delays reduce efficiency and impact.

To address this, the ESF+ should prioritise:

- wider use of simplified cost options,
- proportional and harmonised controls,
- stable and predictable rules with clear guidance,
- full digitalisation of procedures,
- improved pre-financing and faster payments,
- accessible entry points for small organisations.

Without these measures, organisations risk prioritising compliance over quality, innovation, and personalised support.



Recommendation 8 – Effectiveness and impact of ESF+ funding

The ESF+ is most effective when it supports locally anchored, individually tailored interventions. Territorialisation and flexibility are essential to adapt to local realities and respond to complex needs.

An integrated approach—combining employment, housing, health, and mobility services—is key to developing sustainable pathways. The programme should follow a social investment logic, prioritising prevention and long-term outcomes.

To enhance impact, the ESF+ should:

- recognise intermediate progress (“distance travelled”),
- support retention and follow-up,
- fund the real costs of intensive accompaniment,
- ensure stable and predictable funding.

Monitoring frameworks should include qualitative indicators such as improvements in basic skills, social stability, and progression toward further learning or employment.

Recommendation 9 – Partnerships and the role of civil society organisations

Civil society organisations are essential for outreach, engagement, and continuity of support, particularly for vulnerable groups. Their territorial anchoring and community trust enable programmes to effectively reach those most in need and to test innovative solutions.

Effective implementation requires the mandatory involvement of local authorities, civil society organisations, social economy actors, and social partners. Governance frameworks should avoid over-centralisation and ensure genuine co-construction of programmes, fair access to funding, and consideration of operational realities.

Sustained partnerships require adequate time and resources for coordination and follow-up. Civil society organisations should be involved throughout the entire programme cycle to enhance the relevance and impact of interventions.



Conclusion

The ESF+ 2028–2034 must remain a strong, visible, and adequately funded instrument at the core of Social Europe. Its effectiveness will depend not only on financial resources, but on its ability to reach and empower the right actors.

This requires simplified procedures, balanced governance, and genuine trust in locally rooted organisations. By supporting flexible, long-term, and integrated approaches—and by recognising real social progress—the ESF+ can deliver meaningful and lasting inclusion in a rapidly changing economic and social context.

Contact CEC

Isabelle Van de Gejuchte

Director

isabelle.vandegejuchte@cecasbl.org

www.cecasbl.org