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Impact Evaluation of the Social Fund Programme 2014–2020

Summary

The Social Fund Programme 2014–2020

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The National Social Fund Programme 2014–2020

The national Social Fund Programme aims to increase growth and employment in Sweden. Funding is granted through the programme to projects within three different programme areas and six specific objectives. In the period 2014–2020, the programme has had a turnover of SEK 12.8 billion, and has co-financed 867 projects. A large proportion of the project owners state that they would not have had the opportunity to implement the project if they had not received co-financing from the fund.

The horizontal principles of gender equality, accessibility and non-discrimination should be integrated into all work within the European Social Fund. The fourth principle, of ecological sustainability, should be taken into account in specific calls for applications. The projects approved through the programme's calls for applications should, as a whole, contribute to objectives and expected results on an individual, organisational and structural level.

Social Fund Programme impact evaluation

The Swedish ESF Council engaged SWECO to evaluate the impact of the national Social Fund Programme for the programming period 2014–2020. The evaluation has not merely taken an accountability perspective, but has also aimed to contribute knowledge prior to the next programming period.¹

Four evaluation criteria have provided a framework for the evaluation: goal fulfilment, impact, relevance and effectiveness. In addition to the four evaluation criteria, the horizontal principles and integration of these into the programme implementation have constituted an area of special focus in the evaluation.

The data collection has consisted of document studies, research overviews, interviews with key people, surveys to projects and coordinators in the ESF Council, quantitative impact analyses of individual data and case studies of a few selected projects.

1 Anyone interested in a more detailed comparison can download the entire final report: [Effektutvärdering av det nationella socialfondsprogrammet \(esf.se\)](https://www.esf.se/effektutvardering-av-det-nationella-socialfondsprogrammet)



Programme-wide conclusions and recommendations





Programme-wide conclusions and recommendations

Follow up all objectives or delimit the programme's ambitions

Some of the programme-wide conclusions that can be drawn, and recommendations that can be made, relate to the programme management. The first of these is to develop the programme's control and follow-up so that it covers all objectives or to delimit the programme's ambitions. This recommendation is made against a background of the fact that there are objectives at individual, organisational and structural level but that follow-up primarily takes place at individual level, for example through participant statistics or financial outcomes. When it comes to objectives set at organisational and structural level, the follow-up is not so clear.

Invest in clearer implementation strategies

Another conclusion is that clearer implementation strategies are required to show how all of the programme's objectives should be achieved, and how prioritisation should be carried out. In this context, there should also be a description of how important actors who are critical to the implementation should be involved and engaged. The existing national and regional action plans involve some level of operationalisation of objectives, but are too broadly formulated to work as effective tools for governance and prioritisation.

Reduce complexity

The requirements and expectations the projects should fulfil are many and sometimes contradictory. The conclusion is that more realistic expectations of the projects are required. By reducing the number of objectives and requirements the project must fulfil, efficiency can increase and implementation improve. For example, it is common that individual projects to have a methodology-development purpose, volume objectives for the number of participants, the objective of achieving impact on individual, organisational and structural level, and that they should work with horizontal principles. If individual projects can focus more clearly on one or a few dimensions, the implementation will be less complex and it will be easier to succeed with what has been planned.

Make a clearer division between application and methodology development projects.

Making a clearer division between application and methodology development projects, and limiting the number of purely methodology development projects, can be another way of simplifying and increasing the efficiency of project implementation. As it can be difficult for individual projects to have an effect on a structural level, it can be worth eliminating this requirement in a number of cases. Structural impact can instead be achieved through specific strategies and on an overarching level in the programme.

Improve and develop support to the projects

One important aspect of the conclusions relates to how the support to the projects can be improved and developed. Some of the conclusions relate to the coordinator's role. Support given to the coordinators should be developed in order to increase uniformity and achieve less variation in interpretation when it comes to the application of various regulations. The Social Fund should also continue with the work begun to simplify the administration of participants.

Regulations and administration are still a major challenge for many projects, particularly civil society organisations and private industry. There is a risk that many potential project owners are deterred from seeking project funding from the Social Fund due to the administrative burden. It is also important that the work with the horizontal principles in the programme as a whole, and in the individual projects, is facilitated by means of well-developed central support and guidance that can help with operationalisation and concretisation.

Reinforce the conditions for evaluation and more advanced studies

A number of the conclusions and recommendations relate to evaluation of the projects and programme. The conditions for evaluating both projects and the programme as a whole should be reinforced. This can be done by setting clearer requirements for evaluations, having more adapted evaluations, more cluster evaluations, more evaluations with a longer time limit and more impact evaluations with proven methods so it is possible to determine the value of the new methods being tested. One recommendation is also to carry out more advanced studies, for example with regard to steps towards employment and groups in difficulties on the labour market.

Many of the projects appreciate the process support they receive, but there is overlap in the support provided by the ESF Council and the project evaluators. It is therefore important to review the ESF Council's offering. It is also important to work towards the ESF Council taking greater responsibility for the content and results of the project evaluations, so that the issue is not entirely given over to the project.

Horizontal principles in the Social Fund programme





Horizontal principles in the Social Fund programme

The horizontal principles

The Social Fund programme has overarching objectives of integrating the horizontal principles of gender equality, accessibility, non-discrimination and ecological sustainability. The idea is for the objectives to be integrated into the programme as a whole and for each project to formulate its own objectives and methods to achieve the intentions of the programme. The overarching objective is also for integration of the horizontal principles to contribute to goal fulfilment both for the project and for the programme as a whole.

Non-discrimination and equal working conditions.

The aim is for the projects to foster non-discriminatory perspectives in their activities by using a knowledge of discrimination in the design and implementation of the project.

People with disabilities participate in working life.

The aim is for the projects to foster an accessibility perspective in their activities by identifying and eliminating obstacles to accessibility and thus making it possible for people with various disabilities to participate in the project measures.

Gender equality on the labour market.

The aim is for the projects to foster an equality perspective in their activities by using a knowledge of the how gender affects the individual's conditions on the labour market in analyses and during the implementation of the projects.

High level of ambition but weak governance

The evaluation shows that, despite a high ambition level, work with the horizontal principles has been characterised by weak governance and a lack of consensus on the purpose and objectives of working with these principles. This has led to unclear setting of requirements for projects, and differences in implementation both in regional application and between projects.

The degree of integration has varied

There are major differences between different projects when it comes to the degree of integration of the horizontal principles, where some projects have implemented very extensive measures while others have integrated the horizontal principles to a lesser extent.

The evaluation also shows that it has been challenging for the projects to integrate the horizontal principles and to find suitable and appropriate activities. Clearer setting of requirements, clearer instructions and more support material would probably have resulted in higher goal achievement and better results and impact. However, the knowledge support provided within the area of horizontal principles has been perceived as useful, or very useful, by around half of the projects.

In relation to the integration of horizontal principles, the following aspects have been identified as success factors:

- High levels of competence within the project group regarding gender equality and other horizontal principles.
- Project objective and purpose closely related to creating a more gender equal, discrimination-free and/or accessible labour market within a limited area or activity.

Horizontal objectives have contributed to measures that would not otherwise have been implemented

Despite challenges having been identified regarding implementation of the horizontal principles, the evaluation of the programme shows that the horizontal principles have contributed to measures that would not otherwise have been implemented relating to gender equality, accessibility and measures against discrimination. This includes a number of different types of measures such as knowledge building measures, active measures to even out the gender distribution of participants and gender-divided statistics. Other helpful approaches are reviewing measures from a discrimination perspective and methodology development, for example to become better at meeting new groups or to work with broader recruitment. Above all, many of the projects have worked with the gender equality perspective.

Projects aimed at improved skills supply





Projects aimed at improved skills supply

One overarching objective for the Social Fund has been to improve skills supply on the Swedish labour market by improving competences in employed people based on the labour market's needs and by facilitating transitions from education to the labour market. This prioritisation has been made against the background that the Swedish labour market faces major challenges when it comes to matching and skills supply.

Result and impact of skills development projects

During the programme period, 378 projects have been granted funding (of which 72 within PA 1.2, without participants) and 232,738 participants have taken part in various types of skills-building measures. As a response to the challenges presented by the 2015 refugee crisis, funding has been targeted at implementing skills development measures with a view to reinforcing the reception system for those newly arrived in the country.

Some of the projects within the programme area (those within objective area PA1:1) should more specifically contribute to reinforcing competence amongst employed people, but also amongst those furthest from the labour market, based on the labour market's needs. These projects aim to satisfy the labour market's needs for labour while also ensuring that work organisations have a broader recruitment base and are more sustainable.

Regarding the composition of participants, it can be observed that the projects succeeded in reaching some target groups better than others. The majority of the participants have been employees in the public sector, and the programme has only to a limited extent reached employees in the private and non-profit sectors. The projects have also reached women and Swedish-born people to a greater extent than men and those born outside the country. Target groups with a weak position on the labour market are also those groups that have been reached to a smaller extent by project measures. This applies not least to unemployed people, who are one of the target groups for this type of project.

In practical terms, the projects have contributed to a number of different results and impacts on the individual, organisational and structural levels. Above all, these are the following:

- The participant objectives set have been reached (apart from the objective of reaching unemployed participants).
- The quantitative objectives set for the share of people to have achieved an improved labour market situation have been exceeded, and a smaller share have obtained some type of qualification.
- The impact analyses carried out indicate positive impacts and that these impacts are clearest for participants with lower incomes and for those who have participated to a greater extent.
- The measures have contributed to competence strongly relevant to work, new knowledge and expanded networks for participants.
- Many measures which would not otherwise have been implemented have been put in place for a more sustainable working life, broader recruitment and against discrimination.

Some of the programmes within the programme area (PA1:2) aim to achieve increased cooperation and connection between education and working life. They are also intended to develop workplace learning. The results these projects are expected to produce are methodology development for cooperation between industries, training coordinators and authorities relating to learning in the workplace. They are also intended to improve access to learning in the workplace and to satisfy the labour market's need for competence.

The quantitative objectives which have been set for the number of projects have been achieved and exceeded. Given the projects' nature, other parts of goal fulfilment are difficult to estimate within the framework of the evaluation, as they largely involve building up cooperations and other structural measures which often only have an impact over the longer term. Different types of studies which have been carried out both within the framework of the evaluation work (and studies which have been carried out other than by the evaluators) reveal a number of successful examples. The evaluators' conclusion is also that there are indications that validation projects such as BOSS can produce positive impacts over time.

Challenges and success factors

When it comes to implementation of the skills development projects that aim to reinforce competences amongst employed people (and those furthest from the labour market) based on the needs of the labour market, a number of challenges and success factors have been identified. The challenges include reaching participants in the private sector and civil society, and reaching foreign-born and unemployed people. The evaluation has also identified a number of success factors:

- Active ownership and engagement in critical parts of the organisation such as management and HR are important success factors for the development of organisations that learn.
- Support to small and medium-sized companies so that they can better handle the administration required to operate the project.
- A project leadership with a close relationship to participating companies, which requires time, commitment and the right competence.
- The project being run by a project owner with a legitimate position amongst the cooperation partners.
- The analysis phase being sufficiently long and extensive work being carried out to identify the needs present.

Regarding projects aimed at increasing cooperation between education and working life, the evaluation shows that the challenges of cooperation have affected a number of the projects. It also shows that there are challenges when it comes to achieving impact on a structural level in relatively short projects. Experience from the projects within this objective area also demonstrate a number of success factors:

- The projects that succeed best often have joint, clear objectives for the cooperation and they do not view the cooperation as a goal in itself but as a means.
- The projects that succeed best often involve strong ownership from the project owner and the various parties cooperating in the project.
- Conditions are also improved for both short-term and long-term impact if the projects are strongly anchored in the development work carried out within the project owner's and cooperation partners' organisations.

- Successful projects often include close cooperation with labour market parties and the involvement of HR and the organisation's management.
- In successful projects, they often work with different types of operational activities at the same time that they are looking forwards and working with strategy development

Recommendations

The success factors that have been identified relating to the implementation of skills development projects should be taken into account when new projects are started and implemented. The evaluators have also provided the following recommendations for skills development projects:

- To increase the proportion of non-profit and private actors in the implementation of the project.
- To reach unemployed and foreign-born people with skills-building measures to a greater extent.
- An overarching conclusion that can be drawn about skills development projects are that the impacts are clearest for individuals with a lower income and for those who participate to a greater extent. This conclusion should be borne in mind when planning forthcoming projects within this area.



Projects aiming to give support to those furthest from the labour market





Projects aiming to give support to those furthest from the labour market

During the programming period, one of the priorities within the framework of the programme has been giving support to groups who are far, or particularly far, from the labour market. This has been carried out against the background that Swedes generally have a high level of employment, but that there is structural unemployment. Structural unemployment mostly afflicts groups that find it difficult to enter the labour market, such as foreign-born people, those with low education levels or people with some type of disability. The objective is for individuals participating in the projects to enter employment or training, or to come closer to the labour market.

Results and impacts for projects aimed at those far from the labour market

The Social Fund has succeeded well with enabling projects in these objective areas. In total 489 projects have been financed. The funding allocated has to a large extent been used, which indicates that there is both a need and an interest from potential project owners to implement this type of project. The Swedish Public Employment Service and municipalities are common project owners and cooperation partners for this type of project. It is less common for the Swedish Social Insurance Agency to implement projects (even if they are often present as a cooperation partner) and the same applies to various civil society actors.

Projects have also succeeded well in recruiting participants and the objectives set for the number of participants have either been reached or exceeded. Overall a total of 143,468 individuals have participated in the project. The following characterise the participants in these projects:

- When it comes to different categories of participants, it can be observed that the programme has succeeded well in reaching foreign-born individuals. 50% of participants are foreign-born in the objective area aimed at reaching participants who are far from the labour market. A full 70% of participants are foreign-born in the objective area aimed at reaching participants who are particularly far from the labour market.
- The gender distribution is relatively even for projects aimed at individuals far from the labour market. Amongst projects aimed at participants who are particularly far from the market, there is an over-representation of female participants.
- The programme has not succeeded as well at reaching participants from the target group of those on sick leave who need support to re-enter work – the number of participants in this group is low in relation to the total number of participants. Nor has the programme succeeded well at reaching the target group of people with a disability that results in a reduced working ability. This may be because the Swedish Social Insurance Agency participates in a number of the projects as a cooperation partner but that it is less common as a project owner.
- Finally, it can be said that the projects aimed at individuals who are far, or particularly far, from the labour market, have to a high extent succeeded in reaching people with a low educational level.

Increasing transitions to employment is one of the objectives for this type of project. Six months after the end of measures, almost 23% of participants in the project for people far from the labour market had entered employment (the objective was 28%). The same applies to the group assessed as being particularly far from the labour market (the objective was 24%). This means that quantitative objectives for transitions to employment have not been achieved for these types of project. It can even be noted that there are large differences between men and women, and that there are significantly more men than women who have moved on to employment. The biggest differences are visible for projects aimed at the groups particularly far from the labour market. Results also show that foreign-born men are one of the groups with the most transitions to employment in these types of project.

Increasing the proportion of people who enter education is also an important objective for projects aimed at people far, or particularly far, from the labour market. Unlike the case with transitions to employment, the objective was exceeded by some margin for both types of project. The objective was for at least 1% of participants to enter education, but more than 10% of participants in projects for people far from the labour market achieved the objective of a transition to education. The corresponding figure for those particularly far from the labour market was close to 7%. Unlike the case for the objective for transition to employment, the gender differences are negligible.

For those projects aimed at supporting people far from the labour market there are no objectives for transitions to labour market policy programmes. However, more than 30% of participants moved on to a labour market policy programme. For those projects aimed at individuals who are particularly far from the labour market, the objective was for 52% of them to go on to a labour market policy programme, which was not achieved as around 33% took this step.

The projects also aim to develop, implement and disseminate new methods. Even though many of the projects have explicit ambitions to develop and disseminate methods, it is unclear which methods give the best outcomes because the projects and project evaluations are often not organised in such a way that impact evaluations using proven methods can be carried out. The fact that implementation strategies are weak and recipient capacity is limited also contributes to limiting the longer term impacts of the projects' methodology development. The projects also aim to develop support for the unemployed and to achieve a more effective cooperation at system level. Many labour market projects have worked to broaden cooperation, which has benefited individuals with complex needs who are in need of coordinated support. The work to develop cooperations in the projects has contributed to increased understanding and knowledge transfer between organisations, even if the long-term impacts are unclear.

In summary, it can be said that the differences in impact between the different types of projects aimed at people far from the labour market are small. They indicate that it is difficult to judge the target groups in advance and to determine whether they are "far" or "particularly far" from the labour market. This is not least the case when many of the participants are foreign-born or have recently arrived in the country, because for example language can be an obstacle when carrying out assessment. The impact analyses that have been carried out indicate weak or negative impacts in the short term, but positive impacts in the longer term. This is particularly true for foreign-born women.

Challenges and success factors

The projects within this objective area take the form of a number of different types of projects, together with a diverse range of methods and target groups. The fact that participant targets for these projects have been both achieved and exceeded is an indicator that there is a need for and a significant interest in implementing this type of project. The projects have in common the fact that they often contribute a resource-intensive, individualised and close support, which is considered to be a success factor by the evaluators. The evaluation has shown that close cooperation together with intensive and individualised measures have contributed to positive impacts at individual level. *This means that the Social Fund's project supplements the ordinary offering, as groups in need of reinforced support can receive it to a greater extent and a number of groups of individuals who would otherwise have had no access to measures have been reached.* This applies not least to groups who are particularly far from the labour market and who often risk receiving no measures at all. The Social Fund has also had the opportunity to mobilise resources to support different types of project owners in meeting the 2015 refugee crisis, which has also been a success factor.

Projects within these objective areas have also faced a number of challenges. As previously mentioned, they have reached sick and disabled individuals to a lower extent. There is no uniform way to assess steps towards employment, which means that we still lack knowledge about what works for the groups that do not move into employment or studies. Another challenge is that there are relatively large groups of participants who have low progression despite the fact that they have been exposed to individualised and resource-intensive measures.

Recommendations

On the basis of the evaluation, the following recommendations are made for projects aimed at those far from the labour market:

- More projects should be organised in a way that make it possible to evaluate the impact of new methods using a proven evaluation method.
- There is a great deal of knowledge from research about which measures are effective. Projects within this area should focus more on applying things that are known to be effective. Nor do all projects need to aim at methodology development.
- More knowledge is required about what works for the individuals who move between projects and labour market policy programmes without showing progression.
- Regarding projects and measures aimed at individuals who are far from the labour market, the measures should be targeted at the individuals and groups where they are assessed as giving the clearest impacts and added value.



Projects aiming to reduce youth unemployment





Projects aiming to reduce youth unemployment

One important priority for the Social Fund has been providing support to projects that in various ways aim to reduce youth unemployment. This priority has been done against the background of increased youth unemployment receiving attention from researchers, investigators and other actors. Youth unemployment issues were high up the political agenda in the early part of the programming period. Projects aiming to reduce youth unemployment fall under two different programme areas (PA2 and PA3).

Result

The first group of projects aims to help young women and men between 15 and 24 who are far from the labour market to enter employment studies (objective area PA2:2). These projects have also had a clear methodology development purpose. They are intended to reduce drop-outs from secondary school and to contribute to the development and implementation of new ways of working. The projects have also been intended to achieve well-developed support for young people at system level, and to ensure that relevant actors cooperate more effectively at system level.

Despite the significant interest in issues relating to youth unemployment, the participant goals set for this type of project have not been achieved (possible reasons for this outcome will be explored later in this section). When it comes to the participants, a clear gender division can be observed and there are significantly more young men than young women who participate in this type of project. Somewhat fewer than 30% of the participants were born outside Europe.

Six months after the end of the measures, almost 18% of the participants had moved on to employment. It was more common for young men to move on to employment than young women. For young unemployed people, and people who neither work nor study, to move onto studies has been an important objective for the programme. The objective has been for around 15% of young people participating in this type of project to move on to education. As was the case for projects aimed at people far or particularly far from the labour market, this objective was exceeded by some margin. More than 30% of the participants moved on to education. Somewhat fewer young women than men went on to education, even though the differences were small. A large group of young people also moved on to a labour market policy programme, and the objective of 11% transition was exceeded slightly.

The impact analyses that have been carried out show a weak income development for the young people participating in the project in relation to the matched control group. The weak income development is not explained by the fact that a high proportion are participating in studies, that may be due to the fact that most projects in the objective area are intended to prevent drop-outs rather than to get young people into paid work. Nor are there any major differences between different categories of participants.

The measures offered by the projects have been characterised by being individualised and consisting of resource-intensive activities. The projects have therefore supplemented ordinary measures. They have above all involved organisations being able to focus on developing their treatment and follow-up for the groups of students who risk dropping out and developing organisations alongside the school for these groups. The project within this area have also contributed by emphasising issues that relate to treatment, absence and school drop-out on the agenda, both at a local and national level.

The other group of projects is aimed at young people who neither work nor study. They have not focused on method development, but have been exclusively application projects. These constitute a separate programme area (PA3). They have been intended to directly influence the participating individuals' transitions to employment and studies. The funding for these projects has been earmarked for participants resident in the areas South Sweden, North Middle Sweden and Middle Norrland – regions where youth unemployment was high. These application projects have in certain respects resulted in more positive impacts for participants than the methodology development projects. They have also succeeded better when it comes to achieving participant volumes than has been the case for the other youth projects.

Challenges and success factors

One reason for the difference between these two areas when it comes to participant recruitment is that the measures within the application projects began at an early stage during the programming period, when there was a significant interest in the issues. Another reason may be that the significant interest generated by youth unemployment issues in the early 2010s resulted in many different measures aimed at youth unemployment and young people who neither work nor study, together with Delegation for Young People into Work measures, and that there was therefore a level of “saturation” regarding interest in implementing projects aimed at young people. Other possible explanations are that the economic boom reduce youth unemployment and that the issues have not been prioritised by politicians later in the programming period. One challenge when it comes to this type of project has therefore been failing interest even though there is still a need to work with the issues.

Another challenge that has been identified within the framework of the evaluation is that in Sweden upper secondary school is an optional form of schooling, and that it is assessed to be an institutional obstacle in the work to prevent school drop-outs. The evaluation shows that good treatment of students who are in difficulty at school and measures to prevent school drop-outs need to be integrated into the school’s way of working from the students’ early years in the school. One success factor that has been identified within the framework of the evaluation is that anchoring in the school management and on a political level promotes long-term impacts when it comes to long-term work against school drop-outs.

Recommendations

Based on the work with the evaluation, the following recommendations are made for projects aimed at youth unemployment:

- Projects against school drop-outs should not be limited to the later years of compulsory schooling and upper secondary school.
- Projects that have a methodology development purpose in relation to school drop-outs and treatment should be anchored in the school management and at the political level.

