

Fulfilling the promise of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth will require action to be taken at all levels. Differences in prosperity and living standards both within and between Member States must be reduced, which will help to avoid further imbalances and economic shocks in the incoming years.

It therefore makes sense to connect cohesion policy to the new growth strategy, aligning the Structural Funds to the seven flagship initiatives.

Amongst the EU Structural Funds, the European Social Fund (ESF) in particular will have a key role to play in supporting the objective of reducing unemployment and social exclusion. To stimulate the debate on the future challenges of the ESF and how to best connect this important financial tool to the new strategy, the European Commission organised a high level conference on 23-24th June 2010 “Shaping the future of the ESF - ESF and Europe 2020”.

There was a wide participation from public authorities, social partners, NGOs and academics. Among the key speakers were Mr László Andor, Commissioner for Employment and Social affairs, Ms Pervenche Berès, President of the European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social affairs and Mr Xavier Prats Monné, Director of employment policy, Lisbon strategy and international affairs.

Commissioner Andor emphasized the fact that the ESF has made a very valuable contribution to implementing the Lisbon Strategy in the last ten years and will contribute effectively in the future provided that it is fully aligned with the Europe 2020 strategy and that ownership and partnership among the actors concerned is reinforced. This means that there is the need to put in place systems to

monitor the performance of the actions supported by the ESF.

Ms Berès stressed the fact that a reform of the structural funds should focus on the lessons drawn from the past and should be linked to the other elements on the table, for example the next financial perspectives and the conclusions of the task force on economic governance set up by European Council President Herman Van Rompuy and the proposed sanctions for countries that break public debt and deficit limits.

Several CEDAG members present at the conference found it a valuable opportunity to discuss and to learn from the experiences of the last funding period, for instance the need to cut down the administration costs and to find a good balance of top-down and bottom-up approaches to realize more effectiveness for the new ESF-period.

From the perspective of CEDAG members from non-EU countries who participated at the conference, it was important to learn about best practices funded by the ESF in the perspective of reproducing similar projects in their countries.

In this sense, it seems relevant to find a way to pass all the experience of ESF of all this years also to future member countries, thus laying down the basis for a successful cohesion policy in the future.