



OPERAČNÍ PROGRAM
LIDSKÉ ZDROJE
A ZAMĚSTNANOST

FINAL REPORT

Evaluation of Learning Network on ESF Transnational Cooperation 2014-2020

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Abbreviations

CF	Common Framework
EC	European Commission
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
FA	Flexible approach
IB	Intermediate body
IdA	Integration through exchange
LN	Learning network
MA	Managing authority
MS	Member state
TNC	Transnational cooperation

Summary

The evaluation was implemented in three consecutive phases – preparatory, research and reporting phase. As appropriate methods for this evaluation were chosen desk research and questionnaire survey. Desk research introduced two main documents that reflect the activities of the Learning Network on ESF Transnational Cooperation 2014-2020 (LN on ESF TNC) - ***Common framework for TNC 2014-2020*** and ***Transnational cooperation under the European Social Fund 2014-2020 (explanatory guide for Managing Authorities and Intermediary Bodies)***. Questionnaires were distributed via email to 13 members of the network. Out of these, nine questionnaires returned, sent by representatives of Italy, Spain, Sweden, Poland, Flanders, Germany, the Czech Republic, United Kingdom and European Commission. Six of the participants expressed their hope to create modalities of TNC for further practical application. External barriers were led to changing planned outcomes and results of the network. The members reported that their participation in the network will inform their practice in the area of TNC and improve their performance in fulfilling their tasks within respective MAs. The members also valued the ability to build up better partnerships with other MSs. All the respondents expressed their expectations regarding usefulness of the network to other stakeholders. The participants also commented on the network's organization. Six of them appreciated effectivity of its management and leadership. On the other hand, five members found cooperation with the EC difficult. Overall, the network was seen as very well working mainly thanks to excellent organization, functioning consensus-building and cooperation and excellent preparation of meetings; however, not all of the planned activities were implemented due to the external barriers. The network was not able to meet up and work according to its initial schedule due to rotations in EC hierarchy and subsequent change of the Commission's attitude towards some of the network activities. Despite all obstacles most of the members found the network's results very useful for 2014-2020 programming period and believe that the good cooperation will continue.

Introduction and context

Learning Network on ESF Transnational Cooperation 2014-2020 is a successor of the Learning Network on Transnational Cooperation in ESF and the former groups and networks that worked on implementation aspects of the transnational actions under the ESF in previous programming periods.

Eight Member States (MSs) are formally represented in this network,¹ while personnel from others regularly attend meetings on an informal basis.²

The main objective was to match the different approaches to TNC from the 2000 – 2006 and 2007 - 2013 programming periods and to suggest reasonable, effective and smooth implementation modalities for transnational cooperation in 2014-2020 programming period. That means to reduce the rigidity of the mechanism established for the implementation of EQUAL and avoid lack of institutionalised coordination across MSs.

Methodology

As appropriate methods were chosen desk research and questionnaire survey.

Evaluation process

The evaluation was implemented in three consecutive phases, carried out from February to June 2015. The Preparatory Phase in March was used to find out background data about the LN on ESF TNC, to define goals and research modalities of the evaluation and to specify particular questions and success indicators. A kick-off meeting with the network members was held on 17th March in Prague in order to establish a cooperation mechanism for the evaluation. During the Meeting of the Learning Network on ESF TNC 2014-2020, held on 24th March in Prague the evaluation process was developed in terms of tentative timeframe and methods and issues covered.

During the Research phase in April and May, the evaluator carried out profound desk research of all available sources:

- Baseline Study on Transnational Cooperation in the EU
- Description of Action - Annex E.5 to grant application under call for proposals VP/2012/005 – Reinforce learning networks for a more effective implementation of transnational actions under the ESF 2007-2013
- Transnational cooperation under the European Social Fund 2014-2020 (explanatory guide for Managing Authorities and Intermediary Bodies)
- Explanatory note TNC 2014-2020 and the Common Framework
- Common framework for TNC 2014-2020

¹ Czech Republic, Finland, Belgium (Flanders), Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden, UK (England and Northern Ireland separately)

² Italy, Lithuania

- Minutes TNC Network meeting
- Proposals of the Working Group on Transnational Cooperation post 2013

Then, questionnaires were designed and distributed to the network members. Their answers were then analysed and evaluated in the context of other existing data.

Within the last phase, Reporting, the final report was drafted, sent out for network members' comments and finalized.

Desk research

The grant application for Learning Network on ESF Transnational Cooperation 2014-2020 was submitted in 2012, proposed for funding under the Call for Proposals VP/2012/005. The project is described by following characteristics:

- **Financing** –90,676 EUR (79,98%) from the EC via a grant, with 22,700 EUR (20,02%) coming from the state budget of the Czech Republic; mostly for service providers and travel costs;
- **Content** – focused solely on TNC post 2013, and in particular on developing the Common Framework;
- **Duration** –24 months starting from 1st April 2013
- **Activities** are divided into 3 groups for 1) management, 2) the Common Framework, 3) communication and dissemination

Successful implementation of the LN depends on a number of factors (indicated as **assumptions** or risks in the grant), some of which are not under the control of its members; the principal addressee here is the EC.³

The work of LN was strongly oriented on proposals of TNC modalities and implementation. Following documents were created as two main outcomes:

The first document ***Common framework for TNC 2014-2020*** sets up modalities for TNC based on the Art. N. 10 of ESF Regulation. Proposals have been presented to the Ad-hoc Group (in October 2011, June and December 2012, June 2013), while wider audience was consulted during two so-called TNC Learning Seminars (September 2011, September 2012). The positive responses were received there and 93 % MSs would like to participate under the proposed conditions. Based on this feedback and requests from MSs, the LN agreed with EC to prepare a presentation, explanatory note and a description of Common Framework implementation modalities for the ESF Committee on 26 September 2013 in Vilnius. MSs welcomed these documents and did not have any major observation or comments to it.

The second document ***Transnational cooperation under the European Social Fund 2014-2020 (explanatory guide for Managing Authorities and Intermediary Bodies)*** serves as a guide for all stakeholders who would like to implement projects in the field of TNC. This guide starts with an overview of the situation regarding TNC during the 2014-2020 programming period; it continues with an outline of different modes of implementation and a sketch examples of interesting TNC activities. The document finishes by a list of contacts, websites and tools. The authors of the guide would like

³ Meeting of the Learning Network (LN) on ESF TNC 2014-2020; 8 and 9 April 2013, Prague; Minutes

to acknowledge the inputs received over the years from various institutions and personnel, without which the work of the TNC Learning Networks would not have been possible. Of particular note here were the contributions from ESF MAs, IBs and NSIs from Belgium (Flanders), the Czech Republic, England, Finland, France, Germany (federal level), Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Northern Ireland, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

There are two approaches to TNC with informal designation a **Common Framework** (CF) and **flexible approach** (FA).

Common Framework should be based on institutionalised EU-level collaboration between MAs/IBs from different MSs around limited number of Common Themes with support from a platform at the same level. Unlike the EQUAL, the participation is to be entirely optional. Eight Common Themes are developed according to information received from individual MSs and agreed by the ESF Committee in June 2014, covering Employment, Inclusion, Youth Employment, Learning and skills, Social Economy, Governance and Public Administration, Simplification and Partnership. Coordinated calls are not expected under certain Common Themes since they will primarily concern the transfer of know-how and good practice between the MSs, e.g. Simplification.

EU level platform, integral part of CF, should comprise the bodies and tools indicated in the table below.

Table 1 – EU level platform: bodies and tools

Bodies and tools comprising the EU-level platform

Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> European Commission (EC) Technical assistance hired by the EC (EC TA) Thematic Networks (one for each Common Theme) Individual MAs/IBs
Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EU-level partner search database Central TNC website

Source: Transnational cooperation under the European Social Fund 2014-2020 (explanatory guide for Managing Authorities and Intermediary Bodies)

Roles and responsibilities of the bodies are briefly and clearly shown in the matrix attached in Annex n.1.

Responsibility for monitoring, dissemination/mainstreaming and evaluation of **individual contracts** comprising TNC partnerships shall rest with project promoters and their respective MAs/IBs, and should be laid down in the contracts themselves.

Flexible approach

Given the necessary restrictions imposed by the Common Framework, it is anticipated that the majority of TNC during the present programming period will be implemented under the flexible approach. In this case TNC will be driven by individual MSs (rather than the EC), will not be restricted to the Common Themes, and will not benefit from an EU-level platform. Examples of institutionalized TNC are The Learning Network on Transnational Mobility Measures for Disadvantaged Youth and Young Adults (TLN Mobility) or Baltic Sea Network – ESF (BSN-ESF).

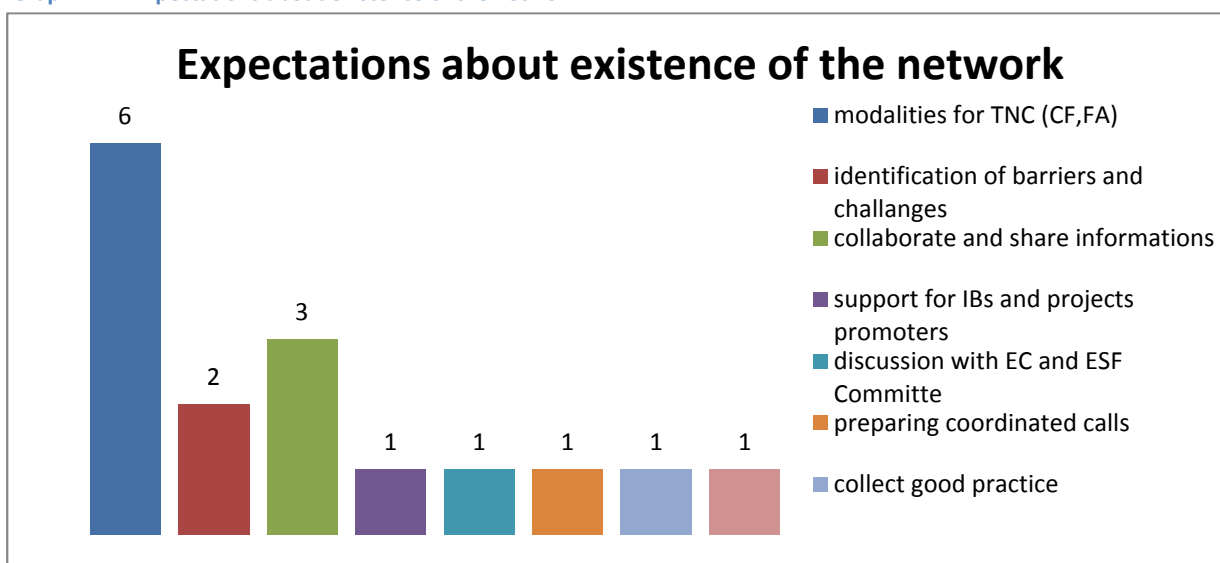
Questionnaire survey

The evaluation questionnaires were distributed via email to 13 members of the network. Out of these, nine questionnaires returned, sent by representatives of Italy, Spain, Sweden, Poland, Flanders, Germany, the Czech Republic, United Kingdom and European Commission. The information gathered is summarized below.

Expectations about existence of the network

All the members joined the network with certain expectations regarding the network's performance and benefits it would bring. Six of the participants expressed their hope to create modalities of TNC for further practical application. Three members also presumed the network will allow for cooperation and information sharing among the representatives; two of them also hoped for identification of barriers and challenges within TNC. Some of the members also noted their expectation to collect good practice, provide support to the EC, IBs and project promoters, foster discussion with the EC and ESF Committee members and to prepare coordinated calls. For more details see the Graph n.1 below.

Graph n.1 – Expectations about existence of the network



In average the network met members' expectation with rate of 62 %. The main element leading to fulfilling the abovementioned expectations was particularly good level of collaboration and cooperation among individual member states. In the members' view, the network's performance in terms of bringing anticipated benefits was externally impeded. External barriers were led to changing planned outcomes and results of the network, mainly activities of the TNC Steering Group (EC decided that this body will not be created so one of the key activities of the Network could not have been done) and consequently linked to this – communication and dissemination activities.

Knowledge acquired during networking

The members reported that their participation in the network will inform their practice in the area of TNC and improve their performance in fulfilling of their tasks within respective MAs. They also noted

they will benefit from deeper knowledge of cooperation with the EC and CF practice as well as from better understanding of the content of documents and joint activities. The members also valued the ability to build up better partnerships with other MSs and the possibility to report various trends within TNC practice to their respective MAs. In average the knowledge acquired during networking are useful in member's work with rate of 82 %.

Use of the results

All the respondents expressed their expectations regarding usefulness of the network to other stakeholders. In their opinion, the results will be used by particular member states, especially their managing authorities, and other entities.

Strong and weak points of the network organization

The participants also commented on the network's organization. Six of them appreciated effectivity of its management and leadership; two also noted on professional experience of other representatives. Two members also valued practical outcomes of the network's meetings.

Graph n.2 – Strong and weak points of the network organization



On the other hand, five members found cooperation with the EC difficult, one also noted on discontinuity of his work. One member sees the previous experience and problems as the barriers of the work. Two of them did not see any inconvenience within the organization.

Effectivity of organizational and decision making structure in implementing the network's activities

Overall, the network was seen as very well working mainly thanks to excellent organization, functioning consensus-building and cooperation and excellent preparation of meetings. On the other hand, not all the activities were implemented, some of the decisions were influenced by the EC and the email communication between the meetings during the one-year break of the work was seen as inefficient.



- DEMOCRATICAL
DECISION MAKING
- CONSENSUS
- EXCELLENT
ORGANIZATION
- EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP



- NOT ALL ACTIVITIES WERE
IMPLEMENTED
- DECISIONS INFLUENCED BY EC
- INEFFICIENT E-MAIL
COMMUNICATION DURING THE
BREAK

Main obstacles of the realization of activities

From the point of view of the participants, there were several obstacles hindering the realization of the network activities. Firstly, they were not able to meet up and work according to their initial schedule due to rotations in EC hierarchy and subsequent change of the Commission's attitude towards the network. The members also felt lack of support from the EC side, stemming from communication problems and uncertain realization of the Common Framework by the EC. They also noted that there was a divergence of view between the network members and the EC regarding the network's role.

Space for comments to obstacles

"National co-financing of the project might have been a problem. Co-financing by the Czech budget was approved more by accident and because relevant people were not interested in details. In current situation, extra expenditures from the state budget wouldn't be probably possible and so such a project would not be probably possible to implement as partner MSs also did not have a possibility to cover the national co-financing."

"The role and contribution of the partners (Member State Authorities and IB's) was undermined by the EC which demonstrated a clear lack of respect and acknowledgement of the input and commitment given and thus hugely undervalued the contribution."

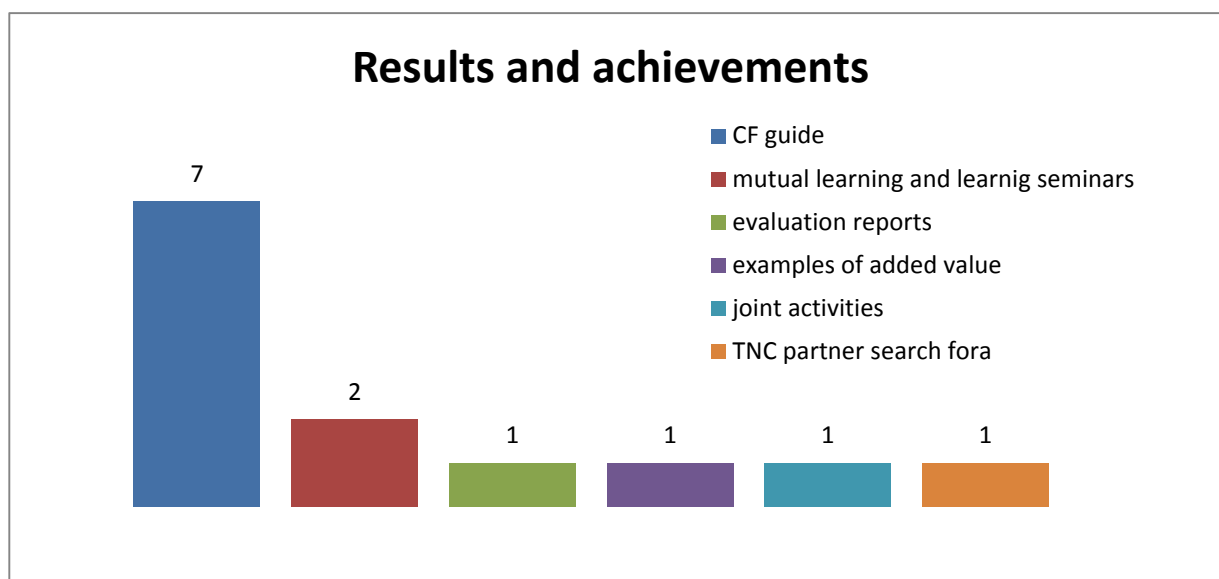
Communication

The communication among the network members was assessed as very efficient. The communication with EC was seen as rather difficult, particularly after its reorganization.

Main achievements and results of the work

Most of the members found the networks results very useful for current programming period. Seven of them noted the importance of creation of the Common Framework guide and flexible approach. Two of the members also valued mutual learning and information sharing seminars. Others mentioned the joint TNC activities, partner search fora, evaluation reports and examples of added value. This led to establishment of cooperation, deepening knowledge and finding partners on the field of TNC.

Graph n. 3 – Main results/achievement of the network



As unexpected result was mainly noted the discouraging effect on the network's members due to the differences observed between the latter and the EC as regards certain elements of the common framework. On the other hand, the members believe that good cooperation will continue and the modalities can be used also for flexible approach to TNC.

Members would like to disseminate the results through further events, meeting and seminars, website, support structure for TNC within the MA and the ESF Committee.

Most of the respondents would be interested in further participation in a similarly oriented network, but only if there is a clear vision of transnational cooperation on both sides – MSs as well as the EC. Similarly, they do not intend to cooperate with the same EC officers. The leader of the network would not continue on the same position.

The members noted that the reasons for further participation in a network would be the possibility of improving TNC, value of a personal contact and mutual inspiration and conviction of the added value of TNC which is seen as very beneficial instrument.

“The outcomes could have been greater and potentially more sustainable but the results and impact of the TLN were severely compromised which was disappointing.”

Space for other comments

“Working in the Network was a great opportunity for personal and professional growth, thanks both partners and Commission.”

“Thanks to Marketa and her team for their huge effort, professionalism and warmful leading!”

“If the Common Framework should work it's important to include the opinions of those who are going to implement it, that is the MS.”



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“The proposals and recommendations given by the network were developed by the MS and thus reflect what they think is necessary in order to successfully implement TNC.”

“If the EC does not take this into account there is a real danger that MS will not participate in the Common Framework.”

“Thanks a lot to the Czech Team for doing a great job under difficult circumstances.”

“I was extremely honoured and privileged to be able to participate in the work of the network.”

Conclusions and recommendations

The Learning Network on ESF Transnational Cooperation 2014-2020 created a strong foundation of transnational cooperation across European Union and helped its members to understand related issues better. Establishing partnership among the member states was a very important part of the network existence. The work of LN should lead to early institutionalized cooperation under Common Framework roofed by EC. However, this is endangered due to a change of EC opinion, divergence of views on the role of LN and very slow procurement for the EC technical assistance body. Despite huge effort of all members the Common Framework is still not established and its very slow start can discourage MSs to participate.

Recommendation: Due to the fact that the TNC issues require long-term and systematic work of all MSs, this work should not be affected by the change of leadership in relevant part of EC. This should be treated in the relevant contract after the adoption of proposal and clarifying priorities on both sides.

Annexes

Annex n. 1 - Matrix roles and responsibilities of the bodies comprising the EU-level platform

	EC	EC TA	Thematic Networks	MAs/IBs
Membership/constitution	EC staff responsible for TNC	External contractor hired by EC	Participation obligatory for those in CF, open to others	N/A
Funding	N/A	EC's ESF TA budget	Included in the budget for the external contractor hired by the EC for TA	N/A
Coordinated calls	Considers, approves and issues timetable and parameters	Supports EC and Thematic Networks	Develops and proposes timetable and parameters to EC	Developing and launching national/regional calls respecting agreed parameters; select projects; conclude contracts
Partner search database	Considers, comments and approves specifications	Develops and proposes specifications to EC; Establishes and maintains	Considers and comments on specifications	Forwards proposals selected and other information to EC TA and/or data entry
Partner search events	Issues invitations; attends	Summarises proposals and preliminary partner matching; organisation (e.g. logistics)	Facilitation and provision of experts	Attend
Central website	Considers and approves specifications	Develops and proposes specifications to EC; Establishes and maintains	Considers and comments on specifications	N/A
Thematic Networks	Attends	Secretariat	N/A	Attend and contribute

Learning Network on ESF Transnational Cooperation 2014-2020

Final evaluation sheet

This evaluation sheet was created by Independent Evaluation Unit at Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Czech Republic, which conduct evaluation of the network. The questionnaire is a part of an Evaluation plan approved by the members of the Network on the network meeting (24th of March 2015).

Your cooperation is appreciated.

IEU MoLSA

Contact person: Jana Stará (<mailto:jana.stara1@mpsv.cz>)

1. A) Which member state do you represent?

B) Please specify the name of Managing Authority

PART I. Evaluation questions regarding process

2. What were your expectations about existence of the network?

Use as many words as necessary to express your expectations, feelings and hopes about the goals of the newly established network and your participation in it.

3. To what extent did the network meet your expectations?

(scale: 1 – it failed to meet my expectations, 5 – it surpassed my expectations):

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

Write your own remarks to qualitatively describe the above selected value. What does it mean? :

4. Will the knowledge acquired during networking be useful in your work?

(scale: 1 – it will be useless, 5 – it will be very useful):

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐

If yes or maybe (values 5, 4 or 3 were selected,) please describe, in what way will the knowledge be useful in your work?

5. Do you expect results to be used by other entities, member states, managing authorities, etc?

X1. Do you have any additional remarks related to part I focused on “process”?

PART II. Self-evaluation of the organization, including meetings, communication...

6. How do you assess the organization of the network?

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

7. To what extent the Network’ organizational and decision making structure proved to be effective in implementing the network's activities?

8. How do you assess the communication among network members?

9. How do you assess the communication with partners and EC?

X2. Do you have any additional remarks related to part II focused on “organization”?

PART III. Constrains and obstacles

10. Not all activities of your network were realized. What do you recognize as main obstacles?

11. Are you able to formulate any recommendation for future to avoid it?

X3. Do you have any additional remarks related to part III focused on “obstacles”?

PART IV. Questions regarding results

12. What do you consider as a main achievements / results of the Network?

13. Do you see any secondary or side/unexpected results of the Network?

14. Do you find the results of the network interesting and useful for the current programming period?

15. What way would you like to disseminate the results?

16. Would you be interested in further participation in a network if the topic of transnational cooperation will be continued? Why? Under which conditions?

X4. Do you have any additional remarks related to part IV focused on “results”?

Final Part: Anything else to comment?

Thank You for all your answers....