

European Competence Centre for Social Innovation:  
ESF+ Community of Practice on Employment, Education and Skills

## Webinar

# **Bridging Gaps in Vocational Training: The Role of NGOs and the Impact of ESF Support in Europe**

Summary report

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## 1. Background Information

### 1.1 Objectives

Public training systems often struggle to meet the complex needs of vulnerable populations, including migrants, refugees, and those with low skills. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) fill these gaps by offering tailored, personalised approaches that combine education with mentoring, outreach, and additional support services. This webinar presented the results of a study examining the role of NGOs in up- and reskilling for socially disadvantaged groups across Europe and highlighted two examples of good practice from Austria and Spain.

### 1.2 Target Group

The event was open to members of the ESF+ Community of Practice on Employment, Education and Skills (CoP EES) and other relevant stakeholders, including NGO representatives from the case study countries.

### 1.3 Number of Participants

The plenary session was attended by 87 participants. The two breakout sessions attracted 34 and 23 participants.

### 1.4 Geographical and Typology Spread

Participants registered from the following 22 member states: AT, BE, BG, CZ, CY, DE, EE, ES, IE, IT, FI, FR, GR, HR, HU, LT, LV, PL, PT, SE, SI, SK.

In terms of affiliation, the participants included representatives from various organisations, such as ESF+ Managing Authorities (27), line ministries (6), implementing organisations (7), intermediate bodies (5), representatives from NGOs (10), Non-profit organisations (22), EC representatives (22) and other stakeholders (20).

## 2. Main Findings

### 2.1 Key Outcomes

The event was opened by Rasa Micevičienė (Coordinator of the CoP on Employment, Education and Skills), Laura Mangeng (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission), and Etienne Dewandeler (The European Network of Social Integration Enterprises – ENSIE).

The first presentation was delivered by Fernando Marhuenda Fluixá, Professor at the University of Valencia, Spain, and one of the few experts in Europe who has been researching the contribution of the third sector to Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Spain since the 1990s. He highlighted the crucial role of non-traditional VET providers in supporting individuals without secondary school qualifications, who often rely on non-formal VET. For many years, third-sector providers were only allowed to offer training rather than formal qualifications, but they have since become more integrated into the system.

Taking Spain as an example, he also discussed the multifaceted role of third-sector organisations, which extend beyond training to promote citizenship, social economy principles, and social inclusion. These efforts help participants transform their life trajectories and support the integration of migrants. However, significant challenges remain, particularly the need for long-term funding to ensure stability and effective planning. He questioned whether innovation should be a prerequisite for funding, arguing that effectiveness and efficiency should be sufficient. Additionally, he raised concerns about the evolving concept of employability, noting that in today's labour market, employment alone no longer guarantees social inclusion, as seen in the growing prevalence of the working poor. Finally, he pointed out that, while many NGOs are willing to collaborate, competition for funding often poses a significant barrier to cooperation.

Many of these arguments were echoed in the presentation of the study '[The Role of NGOs in Up- and Reskilling: Exploring ESF+ Supported Initiatives in Austria, Italy, Slovenia, and Spain](#)' by Ágota Scharle and Jörg Markowitsch, Thematic experts of the CoP on Employment, Education, and Skills and co-authors of the research. Using case studies from Austria, Italy, Slovenia, and Spain, an online survey, and secondary data analysis, the study explores various initiatives, including second-chance and literacy programmes, vocational orientation and job training programmes, and work integration initiatives.

The study's key findings highlight the growing significance of NGOs in VET provision, a trend expected to continue, with the ESF playing a crucial role in funding and supporting these developments. Additionally, the distinction between

formal and non-formal VET has become increasingly blurred, resulting in a more open and flexible system. However, the research also underscored notable differences in how these changes are implemented across EU Member States. In the authors' view, four major challenges need to be addressed: balancing flexibility with regulatory compliance, adapting legislative and institutional frameworks, maintaining a balance between sustaining existing programmes and fostering innovation, and building trust to enhance collaboration among stakeholders.

Breakout session one was chaired by Márton Csillag (Thematic Expert of the CoP EES). Isabel Ladron Arroyo (DG Employment, European Commission) attended as a discussant. Raúl Pérez González and Álvaro Gutiérrez Maestro, both from the Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG), presented their organisation's *Acceder Program*, one of the cases in the overall study. The Spanish case highlights the role of NGOs in facilitating outreach to marginalised communities, such as the Roma or migrants, and connecting them to vocational education and training. *Fundación Secretariado Gitano* (FSG) initially employed Roma mediators, known as intercultural agents, who were respected members of their community. These mediators received training in outreach and were educated on the foundation's services, enabling them to effectively inform their communities about available opportunities. Additionally, the Spanish experience underscores the importance of flexibility in training content and formal qualifications. While efforts have been made to align course content with formal VET frameworks, alternative approaches have also been adopted. These include collaborating with employers to identify key skills and integrating them into training programmes, as well as providing on-the-job training in work integration social enterprises (WISEs). These enterprises are marketed as high-profile employers, ensuring that the experience gained is recognised and valued in the open labour market.

The second breakout session was chaired by Jörg Markowitsch, with Farid Ramadan (*Rehabilitation Foundation – Kuntoutussäätiö*, Finland) serving as the discussant. Eva Steinheimer (*3s Research & Consulting*, Austria) provided a brief overview of Austria's *Level Up* initiative for adult basic education, while Erwin Rohrer (*ISOP – Innovative Sozialprojekte*, Austria) shared insights on how his organisation implements courses within the initiative and discussed experiences from this and other ESF-supported activities. The Austrian case highlights how smaller organisations with close ties to their target groups successfully attract participants – evidenced by long waiting lists for basic skills courses, where word of high-quality spreads quickly by word of mouth. Additionally, these organisations excel in tailoring their programmes to individual needs in small-group settings. While ESF funding has been essential for the expansion of the adult basic education initiative and remains highly relevant for organisations like ISOP – often in combination with other funding sources – it also presents certain challenges. Beyond those already identified in the study, liquidity risks were raised as a particular concern, stemming from funding arrangements with long delays before receiving final grants. In some cases, these delays also hinder organisations from responding to new funding calls in a timely manner.

## 2.2 Participant Feedback During the Event

During the Q&A session, several key issues were discussed. Regarding the importance of ESF funding, the study showed that almost all organisations rely on it, often combining different funding mechanisms to support their initiatives. When asked whether activation is the right approach, the discussion linked it to broader societal changes in post-modernity, emphasising the expectation that individuals should take responsibility for their own careers. While activation and employability strategies work well for high-performing individuals, they can stigmatise those with weaker backgrounds who lack traditional credentials, as the labour market often distrusts individuals overcoming marginalisation. The threat of declining public trust in NGOs was also raised, with no definitive solutions identified within the current study. However, umbrella organisations were seen as potential actors in improving the sector's image and fostering resilience. Finally, in response to a question about alternative funding sources beyond the ESF, solutions involving employers, such as building upon apprenticeship systems, were suggested as potential ways of securing additional financial support.

## 3. Lessons Learned

Participants gained valuable insights from two outstanding initiatives: the *Acceder Program* by *Fundación Secretariado Gitano* (FSG) and Austria's *Level-Up Initiative*, presented by ISOP – both supported by ESF+. The webinar provided a platform for first-hand experiences, highlighted successful practices, and fostered meaningful discussions on inclusive education and work integration.

The organisation of the meeting was highly effective, ensuring a smooth flow of discussions and active participation. The breakout sessions were particularly successful, attracting many participants who remained engaged until the

end, guaranteeing meaningful exchanges of insights and experiences. The use of designated discussants, prepared to step in when there were no immediate questions from the audience, contributed to the event's success. This approach helped maintain the momentum of discussions and can be repeated in future events to ensure continuous engagement.

## 4. Next Steps

### 4.1 Follow-up actions

As a follow up of the study and the event, a study visit will be organised in June 2025 to visit the *Fundación Secretariado Gitano* (FSG) in Spain.

### 4.2 Future events 2025

- 20 March: Joint event with CoPs on Employment, Education and Skills, and Migrant Integration.
- April–May: Working Group kick-off meeting (launch of a working group to develop a resource guide on outreach to youth).
- 3–4 June: On-site event in Madrid, Spain (the Role of NGOs in up- and reskilling of vulnerable groups)
- October: Social Innovation Forum.
- November: Follow-up on-site event with CoPs on Employment, Education and Skills, and Migrant Integration.

## Annexes

**Annex 1:** [Agenda of the event](#)

**Annex 2:** [Presentations of the event](#)

