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SUBCOMMITTEE III ON FREE MOVEMENT OF PERSONS AND
SUBCOMMITTEE IV ON FLANKING AND HORIZONTAL POLICIES

EEA EFTA COMMENT ON THE FUTURE OF THE
PROGRESS PROGRAMME (2014-2020)

The EEA EFTA States are looking forward to the Commission's proposal for a successor to the current Programme on Employment and Social Solidarity – Progress. The EEA EFTA States participate fully in the Progress Programme and have found it to be an extremely useful tool. We believe that it should be an essential element in achieving the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy and would like to present our views on a possible successor instrument which builds on past success.

These comments refer in part to the questions asked in the public consultation on a possible successor instrument to Progress and in part to the questions on the draft recommendations from the Key Stakeholder Working Group on a post-2013 Progress Programme, presented to the Progress Committee at its meeting on 11 April 2011.

A separate financial instrument

The EEA EFTA States are of the opinion that the continuation of most of the current activities under the Progress Programme will be best served by a standalone instrument. As the current activities financed under the Progress Programme are now becoming widely known by the participating countries and other stakeholders in the Programme, we would recommend that most of the established brand names of activities within Progress be continued.

The EEA EFTA States have found the Programme to be very beneficial in terms of creating a European Platform for mutual learning, an extended knowledge base and direct policy input in the fields covered by the Programme. We are concerned that changes in the governance of the Programme(s), with greater emphasis on synergies with other financial instruments, such as the European Social Fund, could potentially limit participation in programme activities of countries beyond the geographical scope of the European Union. In order to open for a continued participation of the EEA EFTA States in the activities under Progress, we would

therefore invite the Commission to take this into consideration when deciding the future of the Programme.

Continued commitment to the strands of gender equality and non-discrimination

The EEA EFTA States believe that the five current strands of the Progress Programme contribute to a clear division between policy areas as well as providing for the integration of cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and anti-discrimination. The EEA EFTA States would like to emphasise that many of the challenges, and possible answers, facing the labour market and European societies overall, are closely linked to these dimensions. Therefore, we would recommend that these cross-cutting issues be given a clear place in the new programme that goes beyond the mere implementation of a mainstream strategy. This can for instance be done by allocating parts of the budget to activities containing these cross-cutting dimensions, and by closely monitoring their follow-up.

Mutual learning

The EEA EFTA States would like to highlight the importance of the mutual learning activities between participating countries, such as the peer review activities. The EEA EFTA States believe that peer reviews constitute an excellent methodology for the exchange of experiences and good practices, which in turn feed into policy making.

The EEA EFTA States have contributed actively to the mutual learning processes in the context of activities under the Progress Programme as hosts, presenters and participants. We would like to highlight the usefulness of mutual learning activities for further work in the Social Protection Committee and Employment Committee, in which we have also been given the opportunity to participate and present good practices. We therefore believe that these activities should be continued in the successor programme and possibly strengthened through better coordination between its different strands. We also think that there is potential for increased transfer of knowledge by better aligning the themes under the various strands in order to create synergies and reduce overlap.

Support for evidence based policy making

The EEA EFTA States would also like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Progress funding to the development of statistics and comparable research within the different strands of the Programme. These activities are important for creating a common ground where mutual learning can take place and indicators can be developed. We believe that further work can be done in terms of establishing comparative studies and evaluations of policy measures undertaken in the different participating countries to the Progress Programme. In this context, we would also highlight the need to further improve the dissemination of the results of the studies financed by the Progress Programme.

As the EEA EFTA States are highly integrated into the common European labour market, we believe that statistics and descriptions of our labour market situation could be a relevant supplement to the analysis of EU Member States undertaken by various publications, such as Employment in Europe. We would encourage the Commission to further improve the coverage of EEA EFTA States in the statistics and description of policy measures, where appropriate.

We would also like to use this opportunity to thank the Commission for the efforts made during the course of the Progress Programme to increase the visibility of EEA EFTA participation in the yearly programmes and in the relevant calls for tender and calls for proposals.

Furthermore, the EEA EFTA States believe that cooperation with other international institutions, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the International Labour Organization, provides valuable input into the processes of establishing evidence based policy making, bringing in additional expertise and evidence from policy making from a broader range of countries. We would therefore like to support the further development of such inter-institutional cooperation within the framework of a successor programme to Progress.

Broader inclusion of stakeholders in activities

In relation to the administration of grants, the EEA EFTA States encourage stakeholders to establish or take part in projects constituted under the calls for proposals. However, many of the stakeholder organisations find it challenging to navigate their way around all the administrative requirements set for users of the Programme. The development of facilities that could assist stakeholder groups in finding project partners and ease the administrative burdens may be worth exploring in order to lower the threshold for stakeholders to participate in these activities. To further assist interested stakeholders in their planning of future activities, it could also be useful to have some calls for proposals with a larger degree of continuity of thematic approach from one year to the next.

Anchoring activities with the public authorities

The EEA EFTA States value highly the restricted calls for proposals and recommend that certain activities continue to be directed towards the relevant public authorities. It is our opinion that these projects may contribute more *directly to policy making* as the public authorities in the participating countries have a vested interest in the project.

Conclusion

The Progress Programme has funded a large number of useful projects which have benefited many people across Europe. As such, the EEA EFTA States would welcome the continuation of the Programme as a standalone instrument, which allows for our sustained participation. We emphasise the importance of a clear focus on cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and anti-discrimination. Furthermore, in our view it is important to base policy decisions on adequate and reliable information that includes statistics from the entire EEA. Broad stakeholder participation is also essential to the successful functioning of the activities under the Programme and should be encouraged. Finally, we believe that restricted calls for proposals have proven to be highly beneficial and that this practice should be continued. We look forward to working closely with the EU in the further development of this important programme.
