



## Safeguarding the European Social Fund in the MFF 2028–2034: Europe’s Investment in People

To the EU Heads of State and Government,

We, the undersigned organisations representing employment, the social economy, philanthropy, social inclusion, fight against poverty, equality, carers, and public services and workers in those services, across the European Union, write to you with urgency and conviction.

For decades, the European Social Fund (ESF) – as enshrined in the Treaty - has been the EU’s main instrument for jobs and social cohesion. It has driven investments into employment, training, equality, skills development, the social economy and for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Beyond its social mission, The ESF also strengthens Europe’s competitiveness and sustainable growth. By concretely supporting the creation of employment — particularly for groups at risk of labour market exclusion such as persons with disabilities, migrants, NEETs, and longterm unemployed — the ESF strengthens Europe’s human capital and labour force and ensures that no talent is wasted. Moreover, by investing in the social economy, the ESF nurtures one of Europe’s most dynamic and resilient sectors, which generates inclusive jobs, fosters innovation, and contributes directly to the Union’s competitiveness.

**The ESF is a fundamental pillar of the European model. A strong ESF is therefore not only a matter of social justice, but also a strategic investment in Europe’s economic future.**

As you prepare the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034, we call on you to safeguard and strengthen the EU budget by restoring the ESF’s structure and financial allocations.

Current MFF proposals - notably the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPP) and ESF Regulations - risk eroding the legacy of cohesion policy.

The proposed MFF 2028–2034 aims to modernise EU funding through simplification and performance-based approaches. But it leaves critical gaps that threaten inclusive growth,

competitiveness and cohesion. As they stand, the current proposals present three risks for the efficient execution of EU funding:

1. **Dilution of thematic focus:** the integration of the ESF into broader Partnership Plans, without a clear definition of its scope, objectives, or allocation of resources, risks sidelining the specific needs of investments into social objectives.
2. **Lack of defined objectives:** while the social principles must remain horizontal, Regulations need to ensure clarity and predictability for the financial allocations to fulfil their objectives.
3. **Governance ambiguity:** the absence of dedicated managing authorities for ESF interventions could weaken stakeholder participation and accountability.

Without clear social objectives in the NRPP Regulation and greater precision in the ESF Regulation, the sustainability of effective models from past programming periods is at risk.

Unless these shortcomings are resolved, the Union risks undermining its own commitments - as enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights and in its overarching objectives for competitiveness and sustainable growth.

The ESF has been pivotal in turning these commitments into tangible outcomes: fostering quality employment and protecting the workforce, reducing poverty, advancing equality, and strengthening the social economy as a driver of innovation and resilience. Diluting its role would not only endanger social cohesion but also weaken Europe's global competitiveness by neglecting its most valuable investment — **its people**.

At this critical juncture, Member States – alongside the European Parliament - must act to restore the value of the ESF and secure the continuation of its proven successes. In pursuit of a competitive and inclusive Europe, we urge you to integrate the following proposals into future negotiations:

1. **Preserve thematic focus:** reintroduce detailed thematic priorities within the NRPP Regulation to ensure targeted support for inclusive growth, employment and labour market access, social inclusion and poverty reduction, skills development and lifelong learning and support for the social economy.
2. **Align with the 14% earmarking provision:** establish a clear link between the direct allocation of 14% of resources for social objectives under the NRPP Regulation and the future ESF. This should provide Member States with concrete guidance on eligible actions, prevent the dilution of social policy interventions, and avoid short-terminist operations - thereby ensuring sustained, long-term investments.
3. **Restore ESF strategic objectives:** reinstate the ESF's original content, clearly specifying its core objectives and investment priorities, in line with previous programming periods, and explicitly including employment, social inclusion, skills development, and support for the social economy.

4. **Link objectives to performance indicators:** ensure that ESF legal provisions and defined objectives are directly tied to social indicators in the Performance Framework, enabling strategic planning and measurable impact.
5. **Enable dedicated managing authorities:** Include provisions in the ESF Regulation that allow Member States to establish and maintain dedicated managing authorities for ESF programmes, ensuring continuity and strategic depth.

The ESF is not merely a financial instrument; it is a symbol of Europe's commitment to solidarity, equality, and inclusion. Preserving its integrity within the MFF 2028–2034 is essential to ensure that the Union delivers on its promise of a fairer, more cohesive society.

We urge you to reinstate the ESF as the Union's primary instrument for social cohesion, ensuring no one is left behind and that investment in people remains central to Europe's future.

### Signed by:

European Disability Forum (EDF)	European Network of Cities and Regions for the Social Economy (REVES)
European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD)	European Network of Social Integration Enterprises (ENSIE)
AGE Platform Europe	European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR)
Caritas Europe	ILGA Europe
CEC - Acting for Social Inclusion	Lifelong Learning Platform - European Civil Society for Education
COFACE Families Europe	Philea
Eurocarers	RREUSE
Eurodiaconia	Samaritan International
European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)	Social Economy Europe (SEE)
European Council of Associations of General Interest (CEDAG)	Social Platform
European Federation of Hard of Hearing People (EFHOH)	Social Services Europe
European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)	
European Food Banks Federation (FEBA)	