

European Competence Centre for Social Innovation

Participation of the people concerned in ESF+ ecosystem

Summary Report

23 September 2025 (online)



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1. Background information

1.1 Objectives

The event explored ways to meaningfully include representatives of the target groups: children, persons with disabilities and persons experiencing homelessness. The outcomes of the event are presented in a comprehensive Guidance Note (Annex C), with dos and don'ts for working with end beneficiaries and the final target group. The checklist and promising practices are also included in the Guidance Note.

The event aimed to:

- provide tools to implement the partnership principle with a focus on involving the end beneficiaries;
- collect and share models of promising practices;
- present perspectives of the Managing Authorities (MAs) on risks, challenges and opportunities when including people concerned in all project/initiative cycles.

1.2 Target group

The event, organised for members of **the Community of Practice on Social Inclusion (CoP SIncl)**, brought together public authorities, MAs, NGOs, project developers and representatives of the final target groups.

1.3 Number of participants

Total number of attendees: **54**.

1.4 Geographical and typological spread

Participants from **17 Member States** attended the event: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Participants included: MAs, Intermediate Bodies, implementing organisations, the Competence Centre for Social Innovation, NGOs, representatives of the final target group (children and persons with disabilities).

2. Main findings

2.1 Key outcomes

The event comprised three types of activities:

- **Strategic context and legislative framework.** Representatives of the European Commission outlined current policy priorities, providing updates on the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Commission's renewed focus on social priorities in both regional and national planning. The regulatory architecture surrounding the partnership principle in ESF+ was provided. The participatory requirement in relation to Article 8 of the Common Provisions Regulation and the European Code of Conduct on Partnership was presented. It stipulates the involvement of a diverse range of partners at all stages: design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Also, it was repeatedly stressed that genuine participation must move beyond mere compliance, with best practices and common shortcomings being revealed.
- **Best practices** included presentations on how to meaningfully include children, persons with disabilities and persons experiencing homelessness. Representatives of end beneficiaries (a child representative and a representative of persons with disabilities) shared their insights and experiences. The core requirements for the respectful and effective engagement of children were presented. It was emphasised that disabled persons and their representative organisations are equal partners, not simply stakeholders. It was also stressed that effective involvement demands resources. Homelessness was presented as not merely an individual problem, but a collective, structural challenge for the entire neighbourhood or locality. Furthermore, key success factors for the involvement of persons experiencing homelessness and communities were presented.
- **Discussion.**

2.2 Participant feedback during the event

Participants gave positive to very positive feedback overall. The involvement of all stakeholders (the European Commission, MAs, NGOs, project promoters and end beneficiaries) in developing the agenda, presenting and participating in discussions during the event contributed effectively to achieving its objectives. The high level of engagement and open communication was greatly valued.

2.3 Impact

The insights, models and recommendations generated during the event will inform higher standards of meaningful participation in ESF+ programmes and projects, ensuring that interventions are more closely aligned with the real needs and rights of end beneficiaries. Collective learning from a variety of contexts and lived experiences will drive improvements in the design, delivery and monitoring of social inclusion initiatives. The multi-stakeholder approach of the event not only amplifies good practice among MAs and partner organisations, but also strengthens networks for disseminating innovative solutions and ensuring widespread impact. Ultimately, the event serves as a catalyst for making ESF+ ecosystems more responsive, accessible, efficient and accountable in the future.

3. Lessons learned

3.1 What went well

The event was notable for its seamless combination of expert presentations, in-depth discussions, and vivid illustrations from real-life examples. A key success factor was the direct involvement of end beneficiaries (children and persons with disabilities, as well as testimonies from individuals with lived experience of housing exclusion) which enriched the knowledge exchange and highlighted authentic perspectives. The specific recommendations shared by people with lived experience complement and enhance existing approaches, helping to deepen understanding of how to work with final beneficiaries in an inclusive and respectful way. The diversity of speakers and active engagement from participants across disciplines and countries fostered a productive environment in which practical lessons and transferable models were shared.

3.2 Recommendations for future online events

Future events should continue to prioritise balancing theoretical input with lived experience, drawing on a wide range of stakeholders and Member States engaged in ESF+ delivery. The representation of all beneficiary groups should be intentionally planned, including both mainstream and smaller organisations. Promoting ongoing interactivity always helps to deepen engagement.

4. Key takeaways: areas for improvement in the ESF+ ecosystem

- **Structural, cross-sector collaboration:** Stronger interministerial and interdepartmental cooperation is essential to address complex social needs and deliver integrated solutions.
- **Tailored responses for specific groups:** The voices and needs of children in need, persons with disability and persons experiencing homelessness require much more targeted attention within ESF+ actions.
- **Field experience for programme design:** MAs and programme teams would benefit from hands-on field experience, such as targeted internships, to deepen their understanding and improve the relevance of their interventions.
- **Nurturing cultures of involvement:** A participatory mindset should be cultivated intentionally. ESF+ can accelerate this process by developing practical involvement tools and promoting attitude shifts at all levels.
- **Embedding sustainability:** Sustainability principles must be incorporated from the start, ensuring that successful initiatives transition from pilots to mainstream policy and practice.
- **Sufficient and stable funding:** Securing adequate resources in the next Multiannual Financial Framework is critical to the continued effective implementation, particularly of flagship policies such as the European Child Guarantee, Anti-Poverty Strategy, Community Living and deinstitutionalisation.
- **Capacity building including the introduction of a culture of listening:** Cooperation and co-creation with stakeholders should be nurtured and promoted throughout the ESF+ ecosystem.

5. Next steps

5.1 Follow-up actions

The final report, including all presentations, will be shared with the CoP members and participants. The lessons learned will inform the 2026 action plan, and participant feedback will shape future events. The Guidance Note will be prepared and disseminated among the CoP members. It will also be accessible to use freely on the CoP's webpage.

5.2 Future events

- **18 November** – Online event: *'Sharing Visions, Challenges and Practices in Impact Measurement'* (Joint online event with the CoP on Social Innovation)
- **2 December** – Online event: *The Promotion of Deinstitutionalisation and Community Living Through ESF+*

Annexes

A. Agenda of the event

B. Presentations

C. Guidance Note on Meaningful Engagement with End Beneficiaries and Final Target Groups in ESF+ Programmes

Annex C. Guidance Note on Meaningful Engagement with End Beneficiaries and Final Target Groups in ESF+ Programmes

This Guidance Note is the outcome of an online event organised by the Community of Practice on Social Inclusion (CoP) on the Meaningful Involvement of the People Concerned-the final target group-throughout the entire ESF+ ecosystem and project cycle, held on 23 September 2025.

Beyond the legal requirements of the partnership principle established in the ESF+ and the Common Provisions Regulation¹, which invite and oblige Managing Authorities (MAs) to work closely with other stakeholders², impact assessments also demonstrate that well-designed and properly implemented partnerships enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions.

Furthermore, timely and structured cooperation and co-creation with the people concerned-or with their representative organisations-lead to a deeper understanding of the issues at stake and greater acceptance of planned interventions.

Capacity-building is key for enabling stakeholders to effectively participate in consultations. According to the European Commission, support for capacity building represents 0.77% of the total ESF+ allocation, targeting both social partners and civil society organisations. There is a continued need to learnin and exchange how countries that have received European Semester Country-Specific Recommendations in this area have implemented them in practice.

By summarising a wealth of data such as [Inforegio – Compendium of Good Practices on Partnership](#), promising practice models, statements, and viewpoints in a practical **Checklist** and a set of **Dos and Don'ts**, this Guidance Note presents the findings in a clear and accessible format.

1 Articles 8 to 14 of the [REGULATION \(EU\) 2021/1060 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021](#).

2 The partnership principle should be applied throughout the fund life cycle, from preparing Partnership Agreements and national programmes to participating in monitoring committees and contributing to evaluations. The organisation and implementation of partnership shall be carried out in accordance with the [European Code of Conduct on Partnership](#)

Checklist for efficient and effective involvement of the final beneficiaries

	<p>Identify the right stakeholders (spokespersons, organisations, representatives of the target group, and subgroups), because the target group may be more complex in composition than initially assumed.</p>	<p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Include organisations working with and for children: NGOs, social service providers, organisations hosting children's councils and/or children's and youth parliaments, parents' organisations, care-leavers' associations, and self-advocates.</p> <p>Map and include diverse organisations representing persons with disabilities (social, intellectual, physical), networks of families, and homeless support centres. It is essential to understand and respect the diversity of people with disabilities.</p>		<p>Organise and provide training and information in accessible, and, where appropriate, child-friendly formats. Ensure that relevant documents are provided in 'easy-to-read' versions.</p> <p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Provide training materials in accessible language and formats, e.g. 'easy-to-read' guides for people with intellectual disabilities, child-friendly materials by Eurochild, and visual summaries for homeless people.</p> <p>The EU Child Guarantee Game and child-friendly explainer serve as an example of a 'child friendly' accessible document, developed by Eurochild and Eurochild Children's Council.</p>
	<p>Develop a comprehensive system for implementing the partnership principle, ensuring participation of the final target group. Include feedback mechanisms at different administrative levels (national, regional, local), such as national advisory committees for children, disability councils, housing NGOs, and others.</p>	<p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Czechia has developed a transparent, inclusive, and efficient mechanism under which the MA is required to establish a platform to ensure compliance. Within this framework, the schedule and content of planned calls are discussed with relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>The National Participation Office at the Ministry of Children, Disability and Equality in Ireland facilitates child participation in public policy-making.</p> <p>Germany's Child Guarantee Action Plan has created youth teams that meet regularly to present proposals directly to policy-makers.</p>		<p>Outline and implement a mechanism for preventing conflicts of interest.</p> <p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Use transparent partner selection and require declarations of interests from all representatives. MAs should ensure clear criteria for involving homeless, disability, or child networks in ESF+ monitoring committees and other consultative bodies.</p>
	<p>Create trust and confidence between ESF MAs and different organisations within the ecosystem.</p>	<p>Examples and comments</p> <p>There is a risk that innovation and development of the proposed method will be limited if the project does not consider the ecosystem's potential.</p> <p>The ESF Council in Sweden organises regular meetings with all stakeholders throughout the year, apart from call-specific consultations, empowering municipal actors and promoting peer learning among projects.</p>		<p>Allocate funding for the capacity-building of end beneficiaries. Build stable and ongoing relationships with representative organisations, going beyond the ESF+ agenda. Keep them informed through regular communication channels.</p> <p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Fund participation via grants enabling local children's councils (e.g., Malta), national disability councils, social housing networks, and others.</p> <p>Slovenia's National Disability Council secures state funding for advocacy and project work linked to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability through systematic engagement with parliament, ministries and the government, and by setting up protocols for cooperation with every political party.</p>
	<p>Involve different final target groups from the very beginning and throughout all stages of the process: design, development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.</p>	<p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Ensure the principle 'nothing about us without us' by including beneficiaries from the start. For example, engage with Eurochild's Children's Council, organisations working with children, persons with disabilities, and homeless associations through each phase of the process. Consult with end beneficiaries themselves, such as children, through national and local children's councils.</p>		<p>Allow flexibility for changes and modifications in programming, objectives, and timelines based on input from partners.</p> <p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Adapt programme priorities when consultations reveal new needs. For example, adjust objectives or schedules for accessibility improvements based on feedback from disability or child networks.</p>
	<p>Clarify roles and responsibilities of all partners within the partnership. Define the domain and scope of the cooperation clearly.</p>	<p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Ensure each actor understands its role. For example, Ireland's Participation Framework assigns clear responsibilities to government units, MAs, and children's participation councils.</p>		<p>Develop a realistic timeline to ensure that feedback from consultations is effectively incorporated into the proposed measures.</p> <p>Examples and comments</p> <p>Implement consultation calendars and feedback tracking systems, such as Ireland's National Participation Framework, ensuring comments from children, homeless support NGOs, and disability councils are integrated before adoption.</p> <p>The MA in Czechia starts preparing a new call roughly four to five months before the date of announcement, offering structured methodologies for transparent consultation and inclusive scheduling, providing NGO platforms to shape calls for inclusion and anti-poverty interventions.</p>

Dos and Don'ts

DO

Build trust through respectful, ongoing relationships.

Improve the existing website and social media channels to ensure transparent and accessible communication. Regularly organise information meetings and exchanges at national, regional, and local levels.

Use plain language and multiple communication formats.

Provide and support training and capacity-building for participants and facilitators. Allocate funding for this purpose.

Allow voluntary and safe participation, ensuring that beneficiaries can withdraw at any time.

Prioritise inclusivity by identifying and addressing barriers faced by marginalised groups.

Always give real feedback to participants on how their input has influenced decisions.

Allocate time and resources to genuinely listen and adapt processes.

Include beneficiaries in monitoring and evaluation stages.

Design and promote child-friendly participation mechanisms with appropriate safeguarding protocols.

Recognise that participation requires funding, logistical support, and dedicated personnel.

DON'T

Treat end beneficiaries as passive recipients of funding. Instead, engage them as active contributors who can commit to the design and implementation of measures and programmes.

Treat participation as a tick-box exercise.

Presume one-size-fits-all approaches work for diverse groups.

Use jargon, technical language, or inaccessible materials.

Limit input to last-minute consultation.

Exclude groups due to inconvenient logistics or assumptions they won't participate.

Expose vulnerable individuals to undue pressure or personal questioning.

Ignore or fail to communicate about how feedback has been used.

Underestimate the time and resources needed for engagement.

Rely solely on formal or institutional partners. Be sure to include grassroots actors and lived-experience voices.

Neglect continuous safeguarding risk assessment, especially with children or disabled participants.

During the event, stakeholders provided practical examples, including relevant EU frameworks and already-published materials highlighting effective and ineffective approaches from their perspectives. The key dos and don'ts are summarised below.

Promising Practices and Examples

Child Participation Models: Eurochild's Children's Council. This initiative exemplifies meaningful child participation by establishing platforms where children actively contribute to decisions that affect their lives. Eurochild's model centres on empowering children as key stakeholders, ensuring their voices are heard in policy and practice through councils and structured dialogue. This approach underscores the importance of recognising children as experts of their own experience, fostering inclusive governance that reflects their perspectives in social, educational, and community development contexts.

Autonomy patterns for people with disabilities project (Italy): While funded through the Recovery and Resilience Facility, this project provides a strong model. It involves providing ICT devices and home renovations to people with disabilities, accompanied by training. The specific nature of the support (home renovation and tailored ICT) strongly implies a needs assessment and design process involving end-users to ensure the solutions foster autonomy effectively.

A helping hand for families of children with disabilities (Croatia, ESF-funded): This project, run by an association, provides support to children and families, including therapy sessions for children and coaching for parents/guardians. The project's success and high satisfaction levels stem from its ability to provide specific, tailored support (e.g. helping parents manage challenges), which points to a design process that understands and incorporates the lived experiences and expressed needs of the families involved.

Architectural Design Initiatives – AIDA (Belgium, EU-funded research): While a research project on methodology, AIDA is a strong model. It involved professional architects and designers collaborating with blind people to establish how architectural design processes can be improved by leveraging the "expertise-by-experience" of disabled people. The approach is a model for involving beneficiaries as experts in ESF infrastructure or accessibility projects.

Child and family codesign in early childhood services – KDAP centres (Greece, ESF-funded): The 'Centres of Creative Activities for Children (KDAP)' use ESF support to develop afterschool centres that combine childcare, learning support, and social inclusion for children in or at risk of poverty. The model relies on longterm relationships with children and their parents, with staff adapting activities and support based on ongoing feedback from families and children, which strengthens trust and ensures services reflect the lived realities and needs of those participating.

Housing First Pula – co-created support for people experiencing homelessness (Croatia, ESF funded): Housing First Pula provides housing and intensive support to people experiencing homelessness, combining ESF-type social inclusion funding with national and local resources. The approach is grounded in individual choice and participation: support plans are co-designed with beneficiaries. The beneficiaries decide on goals related to housing, health, employment, and community participation, resulting in 80% of participants maintaining stable housing for over 12 months and improved health and labour-market outcomes.

Personaliza (Spain, ESF-funded): This project tailors employment solutions to eradicate homelessness and offers personalised pathways to employment and housing for people affected by homelessness. Individual work plans are developed jointly with participants, who are supported to define their own employment, skills, and housing objectives, leading to high levels of job satisfaction, significant income increases, and more than half of participants moving into standard housing outside the care network.

Conclusion

The ambition of this practical guidance paper is to support the meaningful and effective involvement of the people for whom ESF+ Inclusion interventions are designed. This is not about window dressing or tokenism, but about the firm belief that public funding should be spent in the most effective way possible – and that can only be achieved when the needs, concerns, and aspirations of those at risk of exclusion are fully understood.

By ensuring that the people concerned have a seat at the table, we can design and implement better interventions – and in doing so, we also uphold human and social rights.

