

# HELPING THE EXCLUDED USING ESF

## REPORT ON THE WORKING GROUP PRODUCING THE CONSULTATION DRAFT

### Background \*

ESF is a national Programme but with Regional management. The high level Objectives of the Programme are set in a National Operation Programme, which has been set to give “flexibility” in delivery. Each Region has a Regional Monitoring Committee (RMC) which agrees a high level strategic document to shape the Programme within its region. The RMC is a cross-sectoral Partnership, (where full Third Sector participation is – uniquely – guaranteed by EU Regulations). In the last, 2000-07, Programme the governing plan was called a Regional Development Plan (RDP), in the current, 2008-13, programme it is called a **Framework**.

The East Midlands RDP 2000-2007 had a ring-fenced £50m Priority for Social Inclusion which was governed by a Community Empowerment Strategy. That is a strategy of identifying projects “designed by the target communities themselves and founded on their participation and control.” It was staggeringly successful.

The consultation draft on the first Framework (2008-10) recognised this success, explained Community Empowerment and was accompanied by a consultation question: **“How significant a part of Priority 1 should this (Community Empowerment) be when it comes to allocating funding?”** Although the sector made a massive co-ordinated response to this question, those submissions were never analysed and no indication of the required scale of Community Empowerment activity was included in the final Framework.

The Third Sector formally refused to sign off the consultation and only agreed to let the Framework go forward on the understanding that GOEM seek an assurance from each Co-Financing body (mainly the LSC and JC+) to implement Community Empowerment. There is no evidence that they have honoured those assurances.

### The 2011-13 Framework

The time has come to revise the Framework – or “refresh” it as the Guidance puts it. The RMC tasked a working group (composed of the Co-Financing bodies; emda; ESP; EHRC; the FE and Third sectors) to formulate a new version of the Framework. This was mainly to take into account Labour Market changes and “support economic recovery”.

I attended the two meetings of the Working Group and corresponded by e-mail with other members in between, particularly on the issue of redrafting the chapter on Priority 1 (*Extending Employment Opportunities*) which includes the endorsement of Community Empowerment referred to above.

Again I sought to raise the issue of how Community Empowerment would be realized if no mention of the relative scale of it was included in the Framework. I proposed that a minimum level of contracting be set for Community Empowerment activity.

At first the proposal was misconstrued in a variety of ways: as proposing an allocation for “specific actions” or “for specific target groups/communities” or “going against the CFO model”. However I was able to counter all these suggestions by pointing out that Community Empowerment was a *method* that could be applied to all activities and had operated under Co-Financing for 6 years in the last programme, allocating perhaps £40m. It offered a strategic response to the challenge of achieving one of the Objectives of the

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\* For a fuller account of the background see “COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN ESF - BACKGROUND”



Programme in the East Midlands: *“Economic inclusion, which aims to overcome the barriers or market failures that prevent people from participating fully in the regional and local economy.”*

At this point in the Working Group meeting I was asked explicitly if I thought Community Empowerment was compatible with the major CFOs procurement systems. I answered that although there were significant problems they could be solved through intelligent and imaginative commissioning, as had been done in the last programme, and we (the Third sector) knew how to do.

Others disagreed and expressed the view – with regret in most cases – that the CFO procurement systems were flexible enough now to respond to this type of challenge.

This produced, what seems to me to be, a more fundamental discussion on the role of the Framework. I expressed the view that the Framework should set out the priorities and needs of the region and reflect regional experience and expertise in methods of addressing them. This should be – literally – the Framework to which the CFO plans should conform, and I had confidence that if required to do so the CFOs could inflect their commissioning practices to achieve it. Everyone else thought this unrealistic, that in practice the Framework had to conform to the core business and procurement practices of the CFOs.

While I dissent from this view, I have to concede it was the consensus of all those that spoke at the meeting.

Therefore no mention of allocation, or any other means of identifying the volume or scale of Community Empowerment, will be contained in the draft Framework.

While it is open to the sector, or anyone, to comment on this within the consultation, I believe there is no chance whatever of overcoming the logic that the Framework must ‘serve’ the CFOs rather than direct them. I also have no confidence, without being directed in this way, that there will be any Community Empowerment activity in the programme in the future.

This raises several questions:

- Although there is a glowing endorsement of Community Empowerment in the Framework it signifies little in reality, isn’t it just window dressing?
- The – considerable and unprecedentedly successful – experience and expertise of the sector has been lost at the strategic level of the Programme. How is it to be fed in?
- If the Framework conforms to the business practices of the CFOs how can it “provide sufficient steer for the development of CFO plans”, as it is required to do?
- If the Framework is in reality subservient to the CFO plans does the regional partnership, embodied in the RMC, mean anything? More specifically, how is the Third Sector to fulfill its role as a full partner in the **design** of the Programme as guaranteed by EU regulations?

I believe we in the sector must consider how to register these principled objections to the Framework’s position and logic, as well as to its content.

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