

Position Paper

European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

Perspective of the Local Councils' Association

On behalf of the Maltese
Delegation at the European
Committee of the Regions



**Assocjazzjoni
Kunsilli Lokali**

Local Councils' Association Malta



Introduction

The Local Councils' Association (Malta), representing the 68 Local Councils and the 6 Regional Councils across Malta and Gozo, together representing 476 democratically elected members, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion regarding the future implementation and governance of the ESF+.

The Association firmly believes that ESF+ must move closer to residents and communities. Local and Regional Government should not simply be viewed as beneficiaries or project implementers, but as strategic partners and protagonists in the drafting, governance, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of ESF+ programmes.







National Associations of Local Government as National Contact Points

The Local Councils' Association strongly believes that National Associations representing Local Government should serve as national contact points for ESF+ implementation.

National Associations are uniquely positioned to:

- support local implementation of ESF+ priorities;
- coordinate territorial needs;
- disseminate information;
- strengthen local administrative capacity;
- and bridge the gap between national authorities and local communities.

Equipping National Associations with the right tools, resources, and technical support would strengthen the effectiveness and outreach of ESF+ at community level and ensure that European social investment reaches residents directly.



Local and Regional Authorities as Protagonists in ESF+ Programming

The Association strongly advocates for Local and Regional Authorities to play a formal role in the writing and programming of ESF+ operational programmes.

Local Government structures are closest to residents and therefore best positioned to identify:

- territorial inequalities;
- social exclusion trends;
- vulnerable groups;
- and emerging community challenges.

National priorities cannot continue being designed solely through centralised approaches. Local and Regional Authorities must be involved in identifying the social realities affecting the communities they democratically represent.



Local Councils as the Closest Layer of Government to Vulnerable People

The LCA represents 68 Local Councils and 6 Regional Councils across Malta and Gozo. This territorial reach makes local government uniquely positioned to identify social exclusion at neighbourhood level, often before situations reach other NGOs for support.

Local Councils are often the first institutions to identify:

- loneliness;
- poverty;
- social isolation;
- mental health challenges;
- youth exclusion;
- and vulnerable families.

The Association therefore argues that ESF+ social inclusion strategies must be co-designed with Local Government and not simply delivered through national structures.

Territorial Disparities Require Territorial Solutions

The Association rejects the concept of “one size fits all” approaches to ESF+ implementation.

Special attention must be given to:

- the realities of small island states;
- regional disparities;
- district-level inequalities;
- and locality-specific challenges.

The Maltese ESF+ programme already recognises territorial disparities between Malta and Gozo, including commitments to earmark at least 10% of ESF+ funding for Gozo.

Regional Councils should therefore be formally entrusted with a stronger monitoring and governance role to ensure:

- territorial earmarking is effectively implemented;
- national targets are being achieved at local level;
- and funding reaches communities most in need.

The Association notes that AROPE (At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion) rates vary considerably between districts. This data clearly demonstrates that national projects alone cannot fully address localised poverty pockets and territorial inequalities.

Local Councils as Connectors and Mobilisers

The LCA sees Local Councils as catalysts capable of mobilising social initiatives within communities and remaining responsive to changing societal realities.

Local Councils should act as:

- trusted connectors;
- facilitators of access to services;
- community mobilisers;
- and intermediaries between residents and social support organisations.

This is especially important for vulnerable individuals who may not approach formal institutions directly.

Residents First – Better Quality of Life” as an ESF+ Community Model

The LCA’s strategic vision “Residents First – Better Quality of Life” is centred around multi-stakeholder collaboration and community empowerment.

The initiative aims to bring together:

- Local Councils;
- NGOs;
- schools;
- youth groups;
- residents;
- and community stakeholders to work collectively towards improving quality of life within localities.

This model aligns directly with ESF+ objectives related to:

- social inclusion;
- active citizenship;
- participation;
- community wellbeing;
- and local empowerment.

The Association therefore believes ESF+ should actively support and scale territorial community partnership models.



Capacity Gap: Local Councils Need Better Access to ESF+

The Association acknowledges an important reality: unlike larger NGOs and institutions, many Local Councils lack the administrative capacity to independently apply for and manage ESF+ projects.

Challenges include:

- limited human resources;
- lack of dedicated EU funding personnel;
- complex reporting requirements;
- and administrative burdens.

The LCA therefore proposes:

- dedicated ESF+ calls specifically accessible to Local and Regional Councils;
- simplified application and reporting procedures;
- technical support mechanisms;
- and recognition of the LCA as a coordinating umbrella structure for multi-council ESF+ projects.

Without simplification, many smaller communities risk remaining excluded from direct access to European social funding.

Social Inclusion Happens in Physical Community Spaces

Effective social inclusion requires accessible, welcoming, and inclusive physical spaces

Local Councils manage:

- community centres;
- public spaces;
- neighbourhood infrastructure;
- parks;
- and community facilities.

The Association therefore argues that ESF+ social inclusion objectives should be better connected with ERDF territorial investments and community infrastructure development.

Local Government represents the natural bridge between social policy and territorial implementation.

Democratic Legitimacy and Territorial Reach

The Local Councils' Association brings a unique perspective to ESF+ discussions through:

- democratic legitimacy;
- territorial representation;
- and direct proximity to communities.

No other stakeholder represents all 68 local communities and 6 regional territories simultaneously.

While organisations and NGOs provide specialised services to vulnerable groups, the unique contribution of Local Government lies in:

- territorial reach;
- democratic accountability;
- community trust;
- and the ability to mobilise communities at grassroots level.

Conclusion

The Local Councils' Association firmly believes that the future success of ESF+ depends on stronger decentralisation, territorial governance, and meaningful involvement of Local and Regional Authorities.

European social investment must move closer to residents and communities.

Local Government structures are uniquely positioned to transform ESF+ objectives into tangible community impact through democratic legitimacy, territorial knowledge, community trust, and direct engagement with residents.

The Association therefore calls for:

- stronger local government participation in ESF+ governance;
- recognition of National Associations as strategic national partners;
- territorial approaches adapted to small island realities;
- stronger monitoring roles for Regional Councils;
- simplified access for Local Councils;
- and stronger alignment between European social policy and local community realities.

Only through stronger local and regional participation can ESF+ fully achieve its objectives of inclusion, resilience, participation, and improved quality of life for all communities across Malta and Gozo.







Assoċjazzjoni Kunsilli Lokali

Local Councils' Association Malta

