

## 12th Meeting of the ESF Network in the Danube Region | 28 April 2025 | Online

### Draft Summary

#### Welcome and Introduction

*(Detailed information please find in the attached agenda – Annex I)*

**Jörg Mirtl, Priority Area 9 “Investing in People and Skills”**, Austrian Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Staff Unit Bilateral Cooperation, welcomed attendees and proceeds to highlight the network's dynamic role in fostering cooperation among EU Member States and candidate countries, marking the network's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this autumn. He reflected on key milestones, stressed collaboration across EU programmes, and emphasized current priorities like green skills and simplification. Gratitude was expressed to contributors, reaffirming the network's value as a platform for meaningful exchange.

**Claudia Singer-Smith, coordinator of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacities and Cooperation”** emphasised the long-standing tradition of the network in promoting knowledge sharing, learning, and open discussion, not just on best practices but also on common challenges. She stated the value of the network's culture of continuous improvement and expresses her commitment to expanding collaboration, especially with colleagues from candidate countries.

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#### Operationalising Green Skills for Funding

##### Lessons Learned from Developing a Catalogue for (Green) Skills – the Example of Croatia

*Martina Kaplan Štambuk, Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (Croatia) (Detailed information please find in the attached presentation – Annex II)*

Martina Kaplan Štambuk, Croatian Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, described the development of a green and digital skills catalogue as a base for the voucher-based adult education system. The initiative for a voucher-based adult education came from inefficiencies in public procurement-funded training and low lifelong learning participation. Starting in 2021, the team integrated this reform into the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, targeting both employed and unemployed individuals. The creation of the skills catalogue, essential for launching educational programs by April 2022, was supported by the ESF+ with a EUR 500.000,00 budget and included analysing the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF), classifying competencies using both professional and AI methods, and eliminating redundancies. While the catalogue enabled targeted financing within the voucher-based system, challenges included unrealistic deadlines, inconsistent occupational standards, and a lack of alignment with ESCO's mapped green skills. The speaker stressed the importance of securing ongoing funding for updates and validations, noting gaps in financing that disrupted the process and the need for experts familiar with international standards like ESCO.

## Developing an Occupational List for Green Jobs – the Example of Austria

*Adila Šahbegović, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection (Austria)*

*(Detailed information please find in the attached presentation – Annex III)*

Adila Šahbegović from Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Unit for Labour Market Statistics, explained national-level efforts to track green employment and jobs in response to growing interest in the labour market impact of the climate crisis. She highlighted two main challenges: the lack of a uniform definition of green jobs and limited data availability, partly due to the absence of an occupational register. Using a mixed bottom-up and top-down approach, a green jobs list was developed, which focused on unemployment statistics, where occupational data is more reliable. The process involved analysing thousands of occupations from the national classification and vocational systems, distinguishing between broadly climate-relevant and narrowly defined green jobs. The initial 2022 list included 350 occupations and was later expanded in 2024 after external review, correcting for overly strict criteria, such as initially excluding public transport roles. While the green jobs list is a useful tool, e.g. reflected with markers on job listings it is not an official statistic and cannot yet support analysis by employee or sector due to data gaps, and it will require ongoing updates to remain relevant.

## Defining Green Skills to Boost the Green Transition – the Example of Montenegro

*Ivana Šučur, Ministry Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue (Montenegro)*

*(Detailed information please find in the attached presentation – Annex IV)*

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Ivana Šučur, Ministry Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue Montenegro outlined national efforts to support the green transition by aligning education and employment policies with sustainability goals. With the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation and Employment Agency of Montenegro, Montenegro has been working to integrate green skills across industries vital to its economy, such as agriculture and tourism. Key initiatives included embedding environmental topics into secondary and higher education, strengthening VET systems, training teachers, and launching projects to support green entrepreneurship—especially among youth. Projects like INVEST, and SKYLA promoted recycling, green innovation, and curriculum development in energy efficiency. Montenegro has also been translating and adapting the ESCO skills framework to its national system and collaborating with Croatia for knowledge exchange. Despite challenges such as outdated legislation and institutional limitations, Montenegro has been mapping areas of economic transformation and drafting guidelines for upskilling and reskilling. The ultimate goal is to become a strong regional example of successful green transition through active government engagement, employer partnerships, and comprehensive reforms.

After the scheduled presentation a discussion followed where various topics from the participants were addressed. Defining and promoting green skills through ESF+ projects remain complex, with challenges in verifying true alignment with green objectives. Countries like Croatia are addressing this through tools such as the green skills catalogue and the new Alliance of Sectoral Councils. Strategies include using questionnaires, linking training to catalogued skills, and targeting sector-specific needs, while also tackling gender imbalances in technical roles. Efforts increasingly integrate green skills with social policies, aiming to

include vulnerable groups through eco-friendly services. As definitions vary by national context, ongoing reforms in vocational education focus on combining green and digital skills, supported by EU initiatives and international cooperation.

## **Simplified Cost Options: Approaches for Efficient Project Implementation**

*Jasmina Lukic & Sanna Erkko, Interact*

*(Detailed information please find in the attached presentation – Annex V)*

A presentation of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) was also given by Sanna Erkko and Jasmina Lukic, Interact, where an overview of SCOs used in programme funding, particularly in Interreg was given. SCOs help streamline financial management by using standardised calculations instead of actual costs. There are several types and methods to establish them:

- Off-the-shelf SCOs – Developed by the European Commission and listed in regulations; easy to apply without designing custom methods.
- Programme-specific SCOs – Created when no off-the-shelf options exist; must be fair, transparent, and auditable, with data-supported calculations.
- Copy-paste methods – Allow reuse of SCOs from similar national, regional, or EU programmes like Horizon.
- Draft Budget method – Not an SCO itself, but a way to create one; applies to budgets under €200,000 and is often used for small-scale projects.

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The most commonly used SCOs are flat rates, followed by lump sums especially for preparation costs. Although various types of SCOs exist (flat rates, unit costs, lump sums), programmes tend to rely heavily on programme-specific options. Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) are preferred over real costs because they streamline administrative processes, reduce documentation burdens, lower error rates, and ensure more efficient fund use, especially when recurring costs are present or SCOs are embedded in national schemes. They are particularly useful for small-scale or interregional projects, as seen in various Interreg programmes like HR-BA-ME, and PL-UA, which use methods such as draft budgets. While lump sums and unit costs suit clearly measurable outputs, real costs may be more appropriate when results are difficult to quantify. Although combining SCOs (e.g., flat rates with lump sums) is possible under certain conditions, programme-specific rules may restrict such combinations. Flat rates, especially for staff and administration costs, are widely recommended due to their simplicity and safety, with many programmes exploring ways to simplify thresholds and expand SCO use to larger projects. The Interact presentation offers further detailed guidance on this topic.

Future discussions will further explore the use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) within the context of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework and transnational cooperation in the ESF Network, drawing on Interreg's valuable experience. An expert opinion paper is being prepared to highlight the benefits of joint cooperation, based on the network's experience, and to outline expectations for improving transnational and macro-regional collaboration, including the need for stable and predictable funding rules. This paper aims to raise awareness rather than serve as a formal position.

Finally, the next ESF network meeting will take place in Bratislava on 25–26 September 2025, with additional focus on youth unemployment and inactivity, with plans to share experiences from setting up one-stop-shop information centres in Slovakia and to discuss how Danube Region countries are engaging youth through the ALMA initiative.