

**To Invest in People and Skills
Empowering through Co-operation and Networking in the Danube Region**

13 - 14 June 2012, Vienna

Conference report

1. Preamble

On 13 and 14 June 2012 the international stakeholder conference: "To Invest in People and Skills. Empowerment through Cooperation and Networking in the Danube Region" was held in Vienna, Austria, as part of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) – Priority Area 9 (PA) "To Invest in People and Skills". Funding was supplied by European Union funds, the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (Austria) and the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture (Austria). The organisers (these were the Priority Area Coordinators within the framework of the EUSDR) pursued the objective of widening and deepening discussions and existing cooperation ventures in the fields of education and the labour market in the DR. Accordingly, the conference programme focuses on providing sufficient space for exchanges and discussions. Roughly 160 participants – from all 14 Danube Region countries, non-governmental organisations active in the field of human capital building, education and labour market experts, researchers, international donors and media representatives – worked on joint issues and possibilities of future cooperation at strategic but also project level in plenary discussions and particularly in eight thematic working groups. These project ideas in particular aimed to adequately respond to the needs and challenges in the Danube Region and to foster smart, inclusive and sustainable growth.

The contents of the conference's contributions and work stages were oriented towards the Priority Area's objectives which are to improve cooperation within education and labour market policies, foster creativity and entrepreneurship and support strategies of lifelong learning and mobility. Furthermore, the Priority Area encompasses topics of social inclusion of marginalised groups, migration and gender equality.

Following a brief outline of the central aspects of the keynote speeches held, this report focuses on the one hand on the participants' statements about the willingness to carry out related projects, project ideas and already planned projects and on the other hand on strategic considerations and future potential for the Danube Region. The report is rounded off in the Annex by a compilation of activities to secure findings within the framework of the conference.

2. Objectives and structure of the conference

The general objective of the conference was to enhance EUSDR cooperation both at strategic and operational levels, in particular in the fields of education and labour market policy. It tried to support the coordination and interaction between PAs, line ministries, NGOs, EC, EU programmes and other experts with diverse backgrounds. Thus, the conference aimed at identifying policy areas and project options for the Danube Region

that contribute to overcoming the impact of the global economic crisis in the short term and to building prosperity through smart, sustainable and inclusive investments in education and training, the labour market and marginalised communities.

In particular, the conference will improve the information flow and transfer good practice in the design and implementation of policies and projects among actors in the Danube Region in the fields of education and the labour market. It tried to highlight key policy issues with long-term impact on the prosperity of the Danube Region and how to generate synergies and create links between different networks. It aimed at creating a basis for the development of new projects and networks in the field of education and the labour market kick-off thematic working groups corresponding to the PA9 work plan.

The conference was opened by high-level representatives of the member states and the European Commission. Federal Minister Mr Rudolf Hundstorfer (Federal Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria) pointed out that the Strategy for the Danube Region – alongside the Strategy for the Baltic Sea – constitutes the second macro-regional strategy of the European Union and comprises a total of eight EU member states and six non-EU member states, many of which are situated directly on the Danube, others are connected with the Danube by tributaries. All participants from these countries were equally welcome at the conference. Because with all its strategic orientation, this Priority Area (PA) in particular focuses on the people in the Danube Region and therefore on what is so vital for everyone on the labour market, that is skills and qualifications. Mr Hanspeter Huber (Director General on behalf of Federal Minister Schmied, who was prevented) emphasised on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture, Austria, that the needs of people are at the centre, with the special objective of facilitating and promoting empowerment. Such empowerment requires cooperation within networks and exchange of expertise and best practice. He added that education, arts and culture are major promoters of a dynamic economy. They generate growth, encourage innovation, entrepreneurial spirit and social cohesion. The alarmingly high youth unemployment rate in many European countries shows that new paths must be found to ensure the young generation will not become a lost generation. In this connection Austria could make an important contribution with its excellent VET system in particular and also provide people with the experience gained here, and is also willing to do this. Mrs Loretta Handrabura (Vice Minister of Education, Republic of Moldova) and Mr Wolfgang Streitenberger (European Commission, Directorate General Regional Policy) also held opening speeches and stressed the importance to really get the EUSDR moving with specific prospects and an implementation-oriented action strategy.

The two keynote speeches which prepared the background for further discussions sketched a differentiated picture of the countries, which are viewed as one within the overall framework of the DR. Mr Vladimir Gligorov (The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies) spoke about the topic “The Human Face of Development” and Mrs Dessy Gavrilova (Founder and Chair, The Red House Centre for Culture and Debate, Sofia) about “When economic growth is not enough”. These two speeches showed that there are the two poles of macroeconomic analysis on the one hand and the attempt to look at individuals on the other hand. Against the background that countries in the DR reveal a considerable diversity in many respects (development, economic power, innovative performance, and much more), certain common features also become apparent however. The following two aspects were identified as key tasks: an active labour market policy (with special emphasis on youth unemployment, labour force participation, and gender disparities) as the basis for development of society as a whole while keeping an eye on specific individuals.

The countries of the DR share a rich historical and cultural heritage, but at the same time there are certain weaknesses in terms of their joint development. The following factors were mentioned in this connection: weakness in institution building, nationalism and re-nationalisation, emigration and brain drain.

It seems essential, however, to note in particular that macro-economic parameters do not tell the whole story because people live individual lives in micro-economic situations. Data on happiness and fulfilment reveal that in many countries of the DR considerable efforts will be required to support a positive picture of one's own life and promote the life of future generations. One major lever mentioned to achieve this goal is that trust in social and political institutions needs to be strengthened, possibly even newly discovered. It is also essential to enable creative, positive views of the future. But this can by no means be achieved with isolated activities or short-term measures. Only approaches that integrate individual, local, regional and supra-regional objectives and activities allow sustainable development in a positive direction. A positive and confident view of the future makes activities of solidarity more easily possible and pushes mechanisms that marginalise or exclude certain groups into the background.

Other major inputs for the conference participants came from the expert panel which focuses on issues of funding. Mrs Marlene Hahn (METIS Vienna), Mrs Eva Nussmüller, (European Commission, DG Regional Policy), Mr Łukasz Wardyn (European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) and Mr Klaus Körner (European Commission, DG Education and Culture) provided general and also practical information about support options and related developments in this field.

Following a short summary provided by General Rapporteur Mr Peter Schlögl, the EC representative Mrs Eva Nussmüller (European Commission, DG Regional Policy) and the three Priority Area Coordinators Mr Ion Gumene, Mr Jürgen Schick and Mr Roland Hanak concluded the formal part of the conference by expressing their thanks for the intensive work done within the framework of the conference and giving an outlook on the next steps.

3. Results from the working groups

One major part of the conference was the current and future creation of project networks, which are being implemented in the countries of the DR or are being prepared.

Presentations and discussions in the eight working groups revealed clearly and comprehensively that the list of relevant projects¹ compiled before the conference can still be supplemented by a large number of additional projects. The working groups applied different working modes but the results of the working groups are a very broad range of **new project ideas** and activities in an early stage of development (policy, provider level and also cross-cutting issues) or the establishment of further-going workshops on specific topics. The groups worked to identify key thematic fields and to develop further collaboration or project plans in these thematic fields.

¹ Danube Region Strategy People & Skills: Projects, Networks & Initiatives, June 2012 (online available <http://www.peopleandskills-danuberegion.eu/pages/projects>)

WG 1 To enhance performance of education systems through closer cooperation of education institutions, systems and policies (Moderator: Johanna Rasch, Vienna Rapporteur: Predrag Lažetić, ERI SEE Interim Secretariat, Centre for Education Policy, Belgrade)

First of all, the following success-critical factors for current and future projects were identified: macro-regional impact of the project, good leadership, involve leadership of school principals (for projects in VET²), joint ventures between education institutions and companies (for projects in VET), perceived added value, have a mobility component in the project, peer review and mutual learning component, be realistic and not overburden institutions, clear monitoring and evaluation plan developed from a very early stage, show concrete results, start even if you do not have funding at the beginning. In addition, six projects conducted by the participants were identified, three of which were further developed in small groups:

- Strengthening Evidence-Based Policy-Making in Education in the Western Balkans through the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE). Proposal to be funded under multi-beneficiary IPA for 2013
- Capacity-Building for Teachers of VET in the Danube Region - Project on in-service teacher training in VET; initial planning workshop organised by the Baden Württemberg Ministry
- Developing a Network of University Brands of Excellence, promoted by the University of Ruse in Bulgaria

WG 2 To foster cooperation between key stakeholders of labour market, education and research policies in order to develop learning regions and environments (Moderator: Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria; Rapporteur: Barbara Willsberger, L&R Social Research, Vienna)

To increase innovative capacities of the labour force in the Danube Region, new forms of partnerships and cooperation among key stakeholders (labour market, education and training, research and employers) need to be further developed. An impressive range of good practice projects was mentioned by the working group members, e.g. active labour market measures, competence and vocational trainings, research activities, implementation of databases, mobility and exchange programs, networks and co-operation projects and lots more.

The members of the working group agreed on the following five central topics which are significant for successful transitions between phases of learning and of work: regular exchange of information on youth unemployment, career guidance, labour market mismatch of skills/qualifications, preview and early recognition of qualification requirements (forecasting) and local partnerships for employment.

To ensure that work on these topics can be continued, it was suggested to organise working group meetings twice a year. But also some other instruments were suggested:

- Develop a "virtual tool box": discussions in the working group demonstrated, that for some institutions/countries there is a demand for an ongoing information exchange. Therefore a toolbox, which provides different information in the internet, e.g. project descriptions, curricula, research reports etc. was suggested.

² Vocational education and training

- Create a support-platform for project providers: especially within the Danube Region Strategy the financing of projects is difficult, due to different financing instruments as IPA, ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), ESF (European Social Fund) and others. It is a challenge to combine these different funding-schemes for projects esp. when they follow a cross-boarder approach. Therefore a support platform, which provides information about financing possibilities, about developing of project tenders, about possible partners etc. could be helpful for project providers to foster local and national developments.

Two meetings of the working group a year for information exchange are planned. To prepare these meetings an executive committee to be established, will develop the agenda and also an action plan per year. Zagreb was so kind as to propose to host the first meeting in autumn this year.

WG 3 To support creativity and entrepreneurship (Moderator: Doris Regele, Vienna; Rapporteur: Denise Loughran, European Training Foundation, Torino)

The appreciation and encouragement of entrepreneurship and creativity, which constitutes a prime source of innovation, is an important prerequisite for businesses, in particular for small and medium-sized companies, and thus for Europe's competitiveness and similarly for individual development (incl. career guidance) and satisfaction in life. The working group used the conference to exchange expert experiences and, at the same time, to create networks at personal and institutional levels. One expected overall impact of the EUSDR is seen in the task of information "brokerage". This could and should benefit smaller institutions in particular.

One session of this Working Group was dedicated to the presentation of ongoing and planned projects fostering entrepreneurship and creativity, such as:

- Empowering Young People - Connecting Europe (EUSDR-Pilot Project; Lead: AT – MoE)
- ECO NET - Support for Training Firms in SEE (Lead: AT - KulturKontakt Austria)
- SMART i.e. - SMART Training Network for Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Emerging Sustainable Economic Sectors (Lead: AT - European Office, Vienna Board of Education)
- Creativity and business – unlocking the potential (Lead: BG - Human Resources Development Agency)
- Danube learning Journey: One project idea from Germany fostering social entrepreneurship as well as sustainable development and learning (Lead: DE ThinkCamp association)
- ET-Struct: Economic Educational Territorial - Structure (Lead: AT – European Office, Vienna Board of Education)

Project leaders concluded that they had to seek synergies among projects, especially with the EUSDR pilot project "Empowering Young People – Connecting Europe."

Especially for the members of this working group it was important to establish contacts with other PAs of the EUSDR, apparently because the topic was strongly perceived as a cross-cutting theme.

WG 4 To support lifelong learning and expand learning mobility (Moderator: Herbert Strobl, Vienna; Rapporteur: Dana Stroeie, National Centre for VET Development, Romania)

Comprehensive LLL strategies and their implementation have been identified as a priority for the development of knowledge societies and mobility and measures to facilitate mobility were pointed out in the working group as key factors supporting lifelong learning. But making these effective and increasing their impact for individual learners remains an ongoing challenge. Besides mobility programmes at the individual level, the countries in the Danube Region intend to coordinate the development of national qualifications frameworks. Specific ongoing activities and projects in the fields of learning mobility and European reference tools are the following:

- Capacity-Building Mobility Programme (Lead: AT, Task Force Fostering and Building Human Capital) 2008 (annual cycles): Strengthen administrative capacities, promotion of regional cooperation through international mobility stages for civil servants
- CEEPUS - Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies (Lead: Joint Committee of Ministries, Central Cepus office in AT) May 2011 – April 2018: Multilateral exchange programmes for university studies (university networks operating joint programmes; covers grants for teachers and students)
- Academy of VET (Lead: DE - Akademie der Beruflichen Bildung): VET schools cooperation to enhance the skills of trainers, instructors and managers
- Development of National Qualifications Frameworks (Lead: HR) Oct 2011 – Dec 2012: Emphasis on the recognition of prior learning and cooperation on quality assurance of the assessment
- Modernisation of the VET system in Serbia (lead: Serbia) Oct. 2009 – March 2013: Support the modernisation of the VET system and strengthen institutional capacity (develop the NQF; QA mechanism, support continuous VET, teacher training)
- In-service teacher training for inclusive education (Lead: Moldova) 2010 – 2013: Develop a methodological framework and a regional network of inclusive educational promoters
- Training on the competence-based assessment for VET teachers (Lead: RO – National Centre for TVET) June 2011 – May 2014: Develop and implement training programmes for VET teachers in competence-based assessment
- Improving quality assurance in VET through school networks (Lead: RO National Centre for TVET) September 2010 – May 2014: Develop a strategy for EQAVET implementation in a national context and support VET school networking in specific domains

WG 5 To promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through education and training (Moderator: Ulrike Lehner-Stift, Vienna; Rapporteur: Edina Elter, Ministry for National Resources, Hungary)

The major challenges which were named by the members of the working group were: reducing unemployment, matching labour market demand and supply, improving equity of the education system, and targeted support to vulnerable, most disadvantaged groups, how to encourage people to active participation, development of adult training in order to better adapt to labour market needs, active ageing, increasing diversity of pupils, students and migration.

- EdTWIN - Education Twinning for European Citizenship (AT, CZ, HU, SK, Lead: European Office of the Vienna Board of Education). Main focuses: languages, school partnerships, quality of teacher training, VET (<http://www.edtwin.eu>)
- CoDes - Schools and Communities - Working together on Sustainable Development (AT, DE, HU, RO, SI, with 25 partners in consortium from several countries, Lead: Stiftung Umweltbildung Schweiz/Swiss Environmental Education Foundation). Research on success factors and obstacles of projects, improve "collaborative knowledge-building" and the competencies relevant for science learning (<http://comenius-codes.eu>)
- ACES - Academy of Central European Schools (16 participating countries). Support active citizenship among schools, pupils and teachers, support intercultural dialogue. Thematic focus: last year: active citizenship, volunteering; this year: media literacy (<http://www.aces.or.at>)
- Danube Networkers. Cooperation among participants from 7 countries. Focus: lifelong learning, target group: elderly people (www.danube-networkers.eu)
- Danube Civil Society Forum (cooperation among 87 civil organisations. Focus: all questions important for the Danube Region (environmental protection, cultural cooperation) (www.danubesategy.eu; www.svetidunav.rs)
- Tempus Public Foundation. Multilateral cooperation projects on LLL. Focus: school leadership and management (www.tpf.hu)

WG 6 To improve cross-sector policy coordination to address demographic and migration challenges (Moderator: Jörg Leitner, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria; Rapporteur: Tanja Dedovic, International Organisation for Migration, Vienna)

Experiences and consequences of migration-induced social, economic and cultural changes and possible responses in the framework of urban and rural development were the topic of this working group. The group committed itself to enhance efforts to develop knowledge on the status quo, on drivers and impacts of migration flows (also re-immigration) and demographic change, to develop a basis for enhanced cooperation of different policies at all levels of governance. Especially labour market issues and regional development were discussed in depth. And also the need to balance urban and rural development, ageing population, immigration policies, integration of migrants and active labour market measures for the youth, elderly and the minorities were topics of discussion in framework of social inclusion and skills management. The members of the working group presented various projects and activities and exchanges about objectives and successes became possible. The group agreed on continuing cooperation.

Next steps:

- Next Meeting will be held in the first week of November 2012 in Beograd hosted by Serbia.
- The participants of the Working Group will send additional projects to the Priority Area Coordination staff for labelling those as projects of the Danube Region strategy PA 9.

WG 7 To fight poverty and social exclusion of marginalised communities in the Danube Region, especially the Roma communities (Moderator: Mirjam Karoly,

OSCE/ODIHR - Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues; Rapporteur: Dominique Bé, European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion)

To reach out to the whole population of the Danube Region, specific focus must be on empowering particular groups at risk of poverty and on ensuring access and equal opportunities for them. Children, old people, mentally and physically disabled people, immigrants, homeless people, or representatives of marginalised ethnic groups are the most vulnerable. Actions to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty need to complement each other, applying an integrated approach (education, social security, housing, etc.). Special attention must be paid to Roma communities. Hence the coordination of efforts between existing initiatives and actors such as the Roma Decade (2005-2015), European Roma Platform for Roma Inclusion, EURoma network and NGOs active in this field in the Danube Region is indispensable for improving the situation for Roma. But this must by all means involve the affected group itself, because only in this way will there be greater acceptance of measures and sustainable integration will be seen as successful (for example in connection with the construction and maintenance of social housing). But it must also be ensured that Roma are seen as positive by society, which could be supported by role models and mentoring programmes (also in the public sector).

There is an interest in pursuing WG activities, also involving partnering / twinning of projects and analysis of survey data (to better design projects). In addition, it is seen as important that documentation is enhanced and that the working group is enlarged to include Roma NGOs. A possible work procedure could be to run a virtual exchange platform and workshops.

WG 8 To promote gender equality on the labour market, especially in payment
(Moderator: Ester Bergmann, Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria; Rapporteur: Nadja Bergmann, L&R Social Research, Vienna)

Equality between women and men is one of the European Union's founding principles. Therefore this topic was also integrated into the WG's work to support equal opportunities for women and men on the labour market; situations of discrimination, educational stereotypes, labour market segregation, precarious employment conditions, involuntary part-time work and the unbalanced sharing of care responsibilities with men must be overcome.

The working group prioritised the topics to be able to tackle the diversity of the issue. In this process, the following three aspects were identified as those on which further work will be done in future working group meetings. In-depth information exchange in particular will form the basis for activities.

- national strategies
- parental leave
- (flexible) working time

Dialogues with neighbouring countries in particular aim to enable an in-depth understanding of implemented steps, measures, and progress achieved. The Austrian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection will support upcoming meetings, one this year and two in the next year. The next meeting was agreed to take place in Bratislava in October 2012. The following agenda and contributions were committed: Exchange and discussion about national gender equality strategies, presentations of the National Action Plans on Gender Equality of the Slovak Republic and

Austria, a presentation of the developing-process of a gender equality action plan in the Czech Republic and also exchange and discussion on parental leave schemes and working time arrangements to reconcile work and private life, as well as discussion about developing a joint project in these fields.

4. Overall Results

4.1. Working Groups

Intensive and varied work in the working groups revealed that activities and initiatives within the framework of the DR Strategy do not have to start from the scratch. The following aspects are repeatedly named as providing important support for joint activities:

- preparatory meetings
- seed funding
- conferences, project fairs (information brokerage, identifying partners)

With a view to the modes of work applied in the projects, networks and initiatives, it can be seen that there is no lack of methods: learning mobility, peer learning, networking, dissemination of results, exchange of good practice and more. The creation of an inventory aiming to create a 'DR set of tools' could help enhance clarity and systematise cooperation to support planning and implementation for project promoters and partners.

4.2. Strategic Considerations and Future Potential

The strategically relevant findings obtained in the course of the conference about the future development of activities in the PA can be presented in terms of past achievements, future potential, and challenges.

The conference clearly and convincingly showed that the following has been achieved in the first year of activities of the EUSDR:

- a higher level of transparency on relevant project activities and a clustering of knowledge
- willingness to cooperate
- a consistent bottom-up approach ensures that the claiming of ownership of projects and ideas is secured and that not only funding alone fosters the topics.
- best use of existing cooperation projects

The following can be derived as **future potential** from what has been achieved in the past:

- It can clearly be seen that activities in PA 9 enable the development of a long-term coordination framework which promotes decentralised, but also coordinated work.
- The previous work mode supports needs-oriented information and knowledge management which is not geared towards the mere collection of data, but towards operational benefit.
- It needs to be highlighted in particular that cooperation between educational and labour market policy-makers and the stakeholders involved can take a central position. National policies and European

initiatives can be developed and implemented with better coordination here while taking into account the interests of the people.

- By focusing on the situation of the DR, targeted mainstreaming of specific target groups is possible, where the Community policy is geared towards regional and local requirements.

Irrespective of what has already been achieved and of the promising approaches, there is no doubt that some **obstacles** still need to be considered:

- Existing programmes at local, regional, national and Community level mostly differ in terms of their regional focus or refer to the different legal situations in the DR countries (EU member states, non-EU member states). This occasionally leads to challenges for innovative partnerships as this creates barriers for joint actions.
- Where sustainable development is to be initiated it is necessary to undertake efforts to go beyond isolated projects, independently of funding with project budgets of limited duration and the associated project partnerships.
- It can rightly be pointed out that continually reinventing the wheel in projects and initiatives should be avoided. On the other hand, social innovations are mostly connected with a certain need for social recapitulation and adaptation. This requires time and, very importantly, communication. It is necessary to deal with this problem creatively and this should not be confused with inefficiency.

5. Overall Conclusions

As well as the findings obtained in the course of the conference in terms of contents, which cover a very wide and varied range of topics, it is also worth making some basic comments:

- Some ideas and projects from the various working groups have many similarities and related objectives. The Priority Area Coordinators should reflect on the extent to which it is possible to create synergies between related action lines in terms of contents. This might be achieved by providing mutual information (observation, creation of structured networks) or by operational cooperation, as well as merging of activities.
- Some of the treated topics are strongly connected in terms of content and should by no means be analysed in an isolated manner (such as issues of mobility and the qualification frameworks). On the other hand, the topics are so intrinsically complex and some also address and involve other actors that it does not seem realistic to work on them jointly. Consequently it would be necessary to secure coordination efforts at strategically decisive points of development rather than plan for over-complex work arrangements.
- The demand for professional exchange and interest in meetings to develop ideas and support collaboration is highly visible. Moreover, new forms of learning and easy communication on a day-to-day level are of high value for representatives and experts.
- The previously chosen work mode of the PA Coordinators, which has put the ownership of initiatives and on the other hand common success

strongly at the centre, seems to provide a sound basis for future cooperation. Personal contacts in different work stages of the conference have made a valuable contribution in this respect.

- Many very ambitious ideas were raised and the EUSDR was seen as a renewed chance to address them. It should however be repeatedly examined to what extent the DR scope can give answers to questions about realistic next steps, where the issues require solutions at local, national state or European level. Learning from others and joint development can make very important contributions here but will not replace policies.
- In the further work process it should be examined if all the major stakeholders or also experts are sufficiently integrated into the processes. In the upcoming process, a systematic or thematic enrichment of the ongoing working groups could be important (experts from public employment services, for example).
- The creation of networks and cooperation projects, which were addressed by many participants, possibly require the roles for participation to be specified more clearly. On the one hand, this could provide clarity about the character of cooperation, on the other hand this might however also increase the willingness to participate if the tasks or roles of individual actors are clarified as early as possible (leaders, promoters, strategic partners, observers, for example).
- To further enhance the visibility of the EUSDR and to support the involved actors and stakeholders, the adoption of a communication strategy for the specific PA or for all PAs could be envisaged.