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**INTERMEDIATE REPORT ON THE RESULTS ACHIEVED AND ON
QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE ASPECTS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE FUND DURING THE PERIOD 2005 - 2006**

INTRODUCTION

This Commission staff working document contains an intermediate report on the results achieved and on qualitative and quantitative aspects of implementation of the European Refugee Fund during the period 2005 – 2006.

The Council Decision 2004/904/EC of 2 December 2004 establishing the European Refugee Fund for the period 2005 to 2010, the Fund's basic act, introduced three important new features: strategic guidelines for the period 2005-2007 were adopted; more precise rules for management and control systems were laid down; and, finally, provision was made for quicker take-up of programme funding.

Part 1 of this working document is an overview of the budgetary and financial implementation of the Fund during the first two years of the programming period. Part 2 analyses the implementation of national programmes co-financed by the Fund over the same two-year period. It is based on Member States' replies to a common questionnaire, which the Commission supplied with a view to collecting harmonised information across all Member States. The Member States' replies constitute the evaluation report on the implementation of actions co-financed by the Fund, which they had to submit no later than 31 December 2006, in accordance with the basic act. Finally, part 3 includes a number of comments and recommendations from the Commission staff, in the light of experience gained through implementation of the Fund during the first two years of the current programming period.

Both the Member States' replies and this report focus on the implementation of programmes but not on an evaluation of the results and impacts. This is because, at this early stage of implementation of the current programming period (2005-2007), only one of the three annual programmes has been completed so far and, even for that annual programme, the results and the very first outcomes will only be known towards the end of this year, after submission of the final reports on programmes by all Member States. As for the other two annual programmes, one is ongoing (2006) and the other has just started (2007).

Finally, the figures collated for this report are generally average values, which, for lack of space, do not always reflect deviations from the Community trend. Wherever possible, slight variations or divergences from the average are mentioned.

1. BUDGETARY AND FINANCIAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FUND IN 2005 AND 2006

The financial reference amount for implementation of the Fund, as set out in the basic act, was €114 million for the period 2005 and 2006.¹ In line with the Council Decision, 93% of the Fund's appropriations are to be allocated to the Member States to implement national programmes co-financed by the European Union and carried out under shared management. The remainder, i.e. up to 7% of the Fund's resources, can be used for Community Actions implemented directly by the Commission; they include, in particular, innovative actions or actions of interest to the Union as a whole, as well as assessment and technical assistance undertaken by the Commission.

1.1. National programmes

All Member States of the Union, including the new Member States that joined the EU on 1 May 2004, have participated in the implementation of the Fund in 2005 and 2006, with the exception of Denmark in accordance with the Protocol on the position of Denmark annexed to the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community.

1.1.1. Key figures

The budget appropriations made available from the Fund for national programmes amounted to €43 200 593.14 in 2005 and €46 288 323.78 in 2006. The amounts actually committed for programmes approved by the Commission were €43 169 204.71 in 2005 and €45 200 066.41 in 2006. Overall, nearly all the budget resources available to national programmes have been used up (99.9% in 2005 and 96.9% in 2006). The very small difference between budget appropriations and the amounts actually used is explained as follows: in 2005, the Slovak Republic did not use a small part of its allocation and, in 2006, Ireland and the United Kingdom were in the same situation.

When the additional resources provided by the national, regional and local budgets and by the beneficiaries themselves are added to the contribution from the Fund, the total costs of all operations funded through the national programmes amounted to €83 303 061.17 in 2005 and €91 326 598.10 in 2006. Over the two years (2005 and 2006) taken together, in the EU as a whole, the ERF contributed to operations with total costs of more than €174 million, as shown in Table 1 below. The ERF contribution accounted for slightly more than half of that amount.²

¹ This is an indicative amount. The annual appropriations are set out in the budget. See below

² The Fund's contribution to projects supported may not exceed 50% of the total cost, except for the Cohesion Countries, where this is increased to 75%. As a result of the Fund's different contribution rate for each of the two groups of Member States, the global figure for all EU Member States together was 51%.

Table 1 – Total cost of ERF programmes and sources of funding, 2005 and 2006 taken together, at EU level (Consolidation of all Member States’ national programme financial plans)

Type of funding		Amounts in €	%
European Refugee Fund allocation	A	88 369 271.12	51 %
State allocations	B	51 044 997.62	29 %
Allocations from Regions	C	5 562 472.44	3 %
Allocations from Local Authorities	D	10 163 132.33	6 %
National Allocations	E = B+C+D	66 770 602.39	38 %
Total Public Allocations	F = A+ E	155 139 873.51	89 %
Private Allocations	G	19 489 785.76	11 %
Total Cost	H = F + G	174 629 659.27	100 %

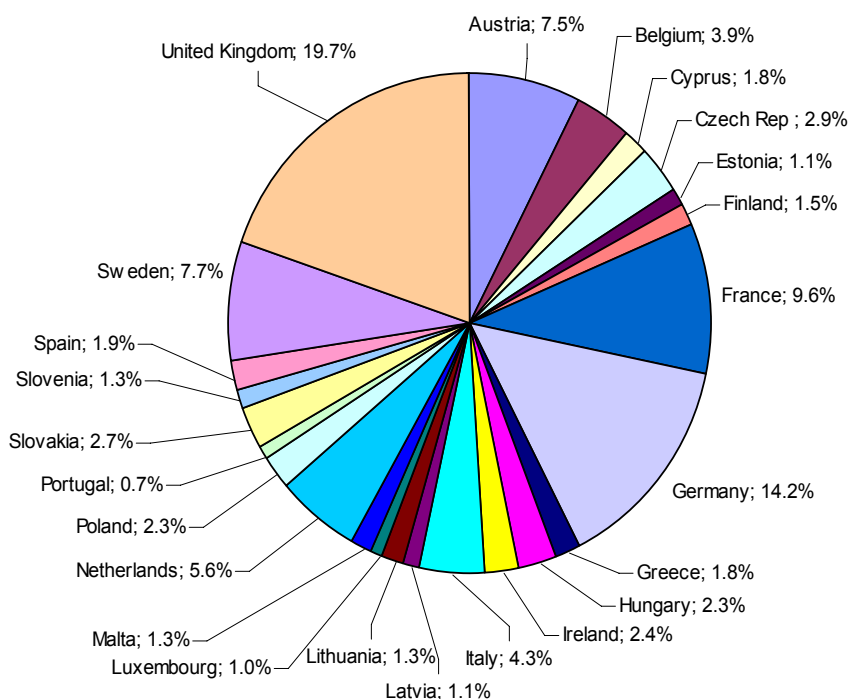
1.1.2. Distribution of ERF funding across the Member States

The Commission allocated the funds available for national programmes to the Member States according to the distribution key set out in the Council Decision establishing the European Refugee Fund. This distribution key takes account of the number of persons in the Fund’s target groups, together with the appropriate weighting coefficients. It is the tangible expression of the principle of solidarity and burden-sharing that underpins the Fund.

As can be seen from Figure 1 below, the United Kingdom, Germany and France were the three main beneficiaries of the Fund during the period 2005-2006 (both years taken together), with shares ranging from around 10% (France) to 20% (United Kingdom); these were followed by Sweden and Austria (around 7.5% each) and the Netherlands (5.6%). The three biggest beneficiary Member States were the same during the previous programming period (2000-2004) and in the same order, while the ranking of the other Member States can vary from one year to another, depending on the population of the target groups in a particular year.

Among the new Member States that joined the EU on 1 May 2004, the main beneficiary Member State has been the Czech Republic, closely followed by the Slovak Republic, Hungary and Poland. In 2004, the first year of implementation in the new Member States, Hungary was the biggest beneficiary, well ahead of Poland and the Slovak Republic. However, it should be noted that the Czech Republic did not participate in the Fund’s implementation in 2004.

Figure 1 – Distribution of ERF funding across the Member States (EU24) 2005-2006



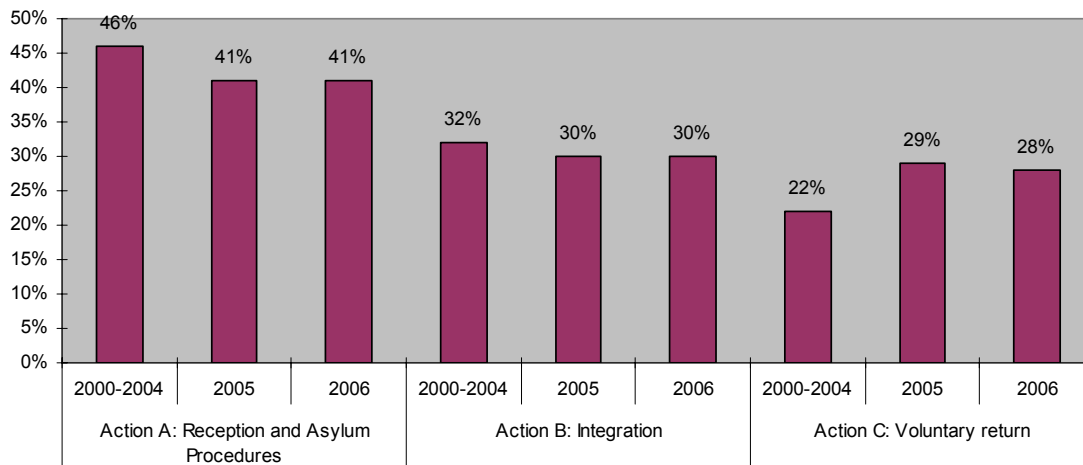
Distribution of ERF funding across eligible actions

Actions entitled to support from the Fund cover three areas:

- Reception conditions and asylum procedures
- Integration of persons whose stay in the Member State is of a lasting and/or stable nature
- Voluntary return, provided that the persons concerned have not acquired a new nationality and have not left the territory of the Member State.

As can be seen from Figure 2 below, the breakdown of ERF funding across the three Actions was 41% for reception and asylum procedures, 30% for integration and 29% for voluntary return, both in 2005 and in 2006 (all figures are rounded up). Compared to the previous programming period (2000-2004), the 2005-2006 period shows a decrease in the share of the first area, a minor decrease in the share of the second area and a relatively strong increase in the share of the third area (from 22% during 2000 – 2004 to 29% in 2005 – 2006). This shows the increased overall focus of Member States' strategies on voluntary return. On the other hand, the trend relates to the share of each area, not to the amounts; it should therefore not be concluded that the Member States have reduced their budgets allocated either to reception or to integration, but rather that they have significantly increased the amounts they have allocated to voluntary return.

Figure 2 – Distribution of Community funding at EU level by Action (rounded figures)



There are significant differences across Member States in each area's share, in connection with each Member State's situation and strategy, as can be seen from Table 2 below. For instance, Portugal, Malta, Italy, Poland, France, the Slovak Republic, Cyprus, Latvia and Luxembourg channelled two thirds of their ERF allocation, or more, into reception and asylum procedures. Finland, Ireland and Slovenia earmarked more than 50% for their ERF allocations to integration. Finally, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands allocated a significantly higher share of the ERF than the EU average to voluntary return.

Table 2 - Distribution of ERF funding at Member State level by Action (2005-2006)

(See Figure 2 above for the definition of Actions A, B and C)

Country/Action	Austria	Belgium	Cyprus	Czech Republic	Estonia	Finland	France	Germany	Greece	Hungary	Ireland	Italy	Latvia	Lithuania	Luxembourg	Malta	Netherlands	Poland	Portugal	Slovak Republic	Slovenia	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom	Total EU
Action A	36%	60%	70%	32%	58%	28%	70%	39%	62%	58%	20%	78%	70%	51%	68%	80%	20%	77%	81%	70%	49%	50%	43%	4%	41%
Action B	41%	20%	30%	37%	35%	70%	22%	37%	32%	28%	62%	12%	25%	43%	34%	13%	40%	17%	6%	17%	51%	35%	43%	19%	30%
Action C	23%	20%	0%	32%	7%	4%	9%	24%	6%	14%	18%	10%	5%	5%	0%	7%	40%	6%	13%	13%	0%	16%	15%	77%	29%

In the Member States that joined the EU on 1 May 2004, a larger than average share of ERF funding was dedicated to reception and asylum procedures during the period 2005-2006. Although the overall share of allocations across the three areas remained relatively stable in 2005 and 2006, for individual new Member States there are some rather marked changes. For example, Hungary increased its allocations to reception and asylum procedures appreciably, from 45% in 2005 to 71% in 2006. At the same time, the country decreased its share of funding to both integration (from 34% to 22%) and voluntary return (from 21% to 7%). A similar trend was visible in Malta, where 68% of Community funding went to reception and asylum procedures in 2005, while in 2006 this was increased to 89%. At the same time, Malta's initial allocation of 16% to voluntary return decreased to zero.

1.1.3. *Share of ERF funding allocated to Technical Assistance measures under the national programmes*

One of the new provisions included in the ERF Decision for the programming period 2005-2010 was the possibility offered to the Member States of allocating, as part of their national programmes, increased amounts to Technical Assistance measures, in order to facilitate the management of programmes. The ceiling was raised to 7% of each Member State's yearly allocation, plus €30 000.

Table 3 below shows to what extent Member States have used their maximum permissible allocation for Technical Assistance. It is clear that the increased ceiling was welcomed by many Member States: 13 Member States out of 24 earmarked more than 90% of the maximum they were allowed to allocate for Technical Assistance, and among these, 10 Member States used up their Technical Assistance allocation in full. On the other hand, Cyprus, France, Malta and Slovenia used only a part of it and allocated the remainder to Actions.

Table 3 – Percentage of the maximum permissible amount allowed for Technical Assistance (i.e. 7% of a Member State's allocation + €30 000) actually used for these measures by each Member State, 2005-2006

Member State	Austria	Belgium	Cyprus	Czech Republic	Estonia	Finland	France	Germany	Greece	Hungary	Ireland	Italy	Latvia	Lithuania	Luxembourg	Malta	Netherlands	Poland	Portugal	Slovakia	Slovenia	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom	Total EU
	99%	77%	36%	53%	100%	100%	28%	100%	43%	100%	72%	48%	100%	100%	83%	27%	100%	61%	100%	97%	21%	100%	100%	98%	81%

Community Actions

Under Article 8(1) of Decision 2004/904/EC, at the Commission's initiative, up to 7% of the Fund's annual available resources may be used to finance transnational actions or actions of interest to the Community as a whole concerning asylum policy and measures applicable to refugees and displaced persons.

Community Actions in 2005 and 2006 were implemented through two annual work programmes of the Commission, which refer to important policy documents, i.e the Hague Programme and the Communication on practical cooperation.³ In particular, the programmes provide for the co-financing of measures to put in place structures that bring national asylum services together, with a view to facilitating practical cooperation towards three main objectives: achieving an EU-wide Single Procedure; the joint compilation, assessment and application of Country of Origin Information; and how Member States can work more together to address particular pressures on asylum systems or reception capacities resulting from factors such as geographical location. The projects are marked by their innovative aspects, in terms of content, target group and partnership.

In this context, the Commission allocated grants through two calls for proposals published in the period 2005-2006.

³ COM (2006) 67 final

Table 4 below shows a summary of the projects selected and of their budgetary implications.

Table 4 - ERF Community Actions in 2005 and 2006
Number of projects selected and budgetary implications

ERF Community actions								
Year	Total available budget (for grants) €	No of proposals received	No of proposals financed	For selected projects				% of budgetary execution
				% of proposals selected out of total received	Total eligible costs €	ERF contribution €	Co-financing %	
2005	2 250 000	26	8	31%	2 067 166	1 576 038	76%	70%
2006	3 144 067	18	10	56%	2 685 093	1 820 310	68%	58%

The projects selected for funding under Community actions generally focused on the implementation of Community legislation and good practices and on the setting-up of transnational cooperation networks. The majority of project leaders were non-governmental organisations and the target groups were young people, vulnerable people and persons who have been resettled.

The under committed amount is mainly due to the insufficient quality of certain proposals. Even if some appropriations were unused it was decided not to select projects below a certain level of technical quality.

The main weaknesses of the rejected proposals were an undemonstrated awareness of the context, an inappropriate approach and/or methodology, and poor value for money.

It appears that projects leaders at national level were not always aware of the financial possibilities under Community actions and therefore it is envisaged to organise as wide an information campaign as possible on the call for proposals, on successful projects and on best practices.

There is still some room for improvement and more efficient use of the Fund:

- Mechanisms for collecting and disseminating information should be improved both within the Commission departments in charge of the Fund and in the responsible authorities in each Member State.
- A better link needs to be established between Community actions and national programmes.

In addition to the grants described above, the Commission contracted several operations through public procurement procedures, i.e. two operations in 2005 to set up a common portal for national authorities on the exchange of Countries of Origin Information (€464 921.20) and a new European Refugee Fund website in 2006 (€340 905).

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL PROGRAMMES IN 2005 AND 2006

This chapter is based on the replies provided by the Member States at the end of 2006 to a questionnaire supplied by the Commission in preparation of this Report. The chapter includes an overview of the contents of the national programmes, an analysis of their implementation and of the projects selected for funding, information and publicity actions, and finally an assessment by the Member States of implementation of the ERF programmes during the two years under review.

2.1. Overview of the national programmes

The main activities, as planned in the national programmes approved by the Commission, can be summarised as follows.

2.1.1. Reception and Asylum Procedure

The actions programmed will mainly provide support for reception and accommodation capacity (creation and/or improvement), direct material, social, medical and psychological assistance, and legal advice to asylum seekers, including assistance during the asylum procedure. Across the Member States, there has been a high focus on people with special needs, such as unaccompanied minors, women, sick people (notably HIV), disabled persons and victims of torture. In addition, significant support was provided to organisations dealing with asylum seekers, in an effort to improve their skills and means of action (“capacity building”). A number of Member States also programmed support measures under three other legislative instruments that are part of the Common European Asylum System, namely the Dublin Regulation, the Qualifications Directive and the Asylum Procedure Directive.

The five countries that set aside the largest proportion of their ERF allocation for this area were Italy, Poland, Latvia, Slovakia and Cyprus in 2005, and Portugal, Italy, France, Malta and Poland in 2006.

2.1.2. Integration

The overarching goal of the actions programmed is to empower refugees and to make them self-supportive and autonomous. Activities focus on the provision of direct assistance to beneficiaries in terms of housing, material assistance, education and training, information services and socio-psychological support. In most Member States, refugees’ access to the labour market is regarded as the key factor to integration and thus receives particular attention. Capacity building is a third important aspect of integration, through the purchase of equipment and construction/improvement of facilities and training of staff providing assistance to beneficiaries, networking and partnership building.

The five countries that allotted the highest proportion of their ERF allocation to integration were Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Lithuania and Slovenia in 2005 and Ireland, Finland, Slovenia, Austria and Sweden in 2006.

2.1.3. *Voluntary Return*

The primary aim of the actions programmed is to help potential returnees make informed decisions about returning to their country of origin and to provide them with assistance to do so. Activities include information, counselling, education and training of beneficiaries with a view to reintegration, assistance in the practical organisation of repatriation, logistical and financial assistance in the case of return, and assistance for successful reintegration in the country of origin. As for the other areas, capacity building is also supported, including assistance to those working with the target groups, and cooperation with local and international organisations in third countries, etc. Many Member States point out in their programmes that there is high potential for improving the return process.

The five countries that dedicated most of their ERF allocation to voluntary return were the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Germany and Austria, both in 2005 and in 2006.

Implementation of national programmes

Except in a few cases (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia for the 2005 programme, Hungary and Slovenia for the 2006 programme), Member States organised only one call for each annual programme. Some countries (e.g. France, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Italy and the Netherlands) already published their calls for proposals for the 2006 programme in 2005, whilst others issued the call in the second half of 2006 (e.g. Estonia, Portugal). The UK was the only country which did not launch any call for proposals in 2006, as all their projects were multi-annual projects selected in 2005 and continuing in 2006.

A total of 934 project proposals were received from the 2005 calls for proposals, which resulted in 547 projects selected and 543 contracts. Of the latter, 150 relate to reception, 142 to integration, 200 (the largest category) are combined reception and integration projects, and finally 51 relate to voluntary return. A total of 591 project proposals were received the 2006 calls for proposals, of which 378 were selected.⁴ 130 projects relate to reception, 121 to integration, 88 are combined reception and integration projects, and 39 are return projects.

The drop in the number of proposals received in 2006 is explained by the selection in 2005, in several Member States (for instance Germany, the United Kingdom, and Ireland), of multi-annual projects, a new possibility offered by the ERF during the programming period 2005-2010. As a result, a significant proportion of the 2006 allocation - all of it in the case of the United Kingdom - was already used up by projects contracted in 2005 and continuing in 2006. Accordingly, the Member States concerned have limited the scope of the 2006 calls for proposals so that projects selected do not exceed their yearly allocation still available for new projects.

An analysis of the information provided by the Member States on the outcome of calls for proposals leads to the following conclusions:

⁴ At the time of replying to the questionnaire in the second half of 2006, some Member States had not yet completed the contractual phase, and therefore the number of projects finally contracted is not known. However, as can be seen for the 2005 programme, the difference between the number of projects selected and the number of contracts is usually very small.

- A predominant number of projects are in the category of combined reception and integration projects (2005 and 2006 combined). Conversely, Member States have reported that it is much more difficult to attract proposals in the field of voluntary return.
- Germany is the Member State with the highest number of proposals received and projects funded, accounting for nearly 40% of the number of all projects funded in the EU in 2005.
- Except where the number of proposals submitted/projects selected is very small, and all projects are selected, there is genuine selection, with selection rates ranging from some 30% to 65%. Subsequently, nearly all projects selected were contracted.

Finally, the average yearly number of projects selected/funded during the first two years of the current programming period (925 in total, or 463 per year) is slightly higher (+ 15%) than in the previous programming period 2000-2004 (2 050 in total over 5 years, i.e. 410 per year). This is broadly in line with the increase in the ERF yearly budget appropriations (around €45 million yearly for the national programmes during the current programming period, compared to €36 million yearly during the previous one).

2.2. Examples of projects funded

2.2.1. Reception and Asylum Procedure

Member States budgeting the highest proportion of their allocation on reception and asylum procedures (see above) placed particular emphasis on projects on education, such as facilitating home education and vocational training (Italy), legal assistance (Poland and Slovakia), language proficiency (Portugal), leisure and sports activities (Latvia and Slovakia) and the rehabilitation of victims of torture (Cyprus).

Refurbishing existing and constructing new reception centres is mentioned in several cases. In relation to capacity building, these Member States also put special emphasis on the training of those working with asylum seekers, including legal representatives and practitioners, in order to improve asylum procedures. This includes intercultural learning and staff exchanges, as well as the development of guides and other learning tools. In Cyprus, training is also intended to promote the knowledge and skills of staff to identify asylum seekers who were victims of torture and refer them to appropriate services or centres. Portugal has drafted a guide on the asylum procedure and is translating it into different languages, while Poland has set up an information database.

Other national specificities include the creation of information centres (Malta), purchasing equipment and even developing software as part of their reception facilities, such as computers to be used by staff or by asylum seekers (Slovenia) and the development of a database to register asylum seekers and refugees (Portugal). In Germany, projects have sought to enhance the knowledge of practitioners in relation to migration-specific health, psychological and social care. A project in Finland is developing a cooperation model between reception centres and high schools in order to organise educational activities for young unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees who are too old for mainstream school.

It is interesting to note that projects in some Member States are paying more attention to empowering their target group (e.g. the Netherlands, Ireland, Finland), which includes the organisation of courses, intercultural and recreational activities as well as mentoring and peer group models.

2.2.2. *Integration*

Projects relating to education and training activities focused, among other things, on the development of specific educational and vocational programmes addressing the specific needs of newcomers, language courses and computer literacy. Finland also funded projects which focus on the integration needs of refugee families and children, such as establishing homework clubs, meeting rooms for young refugees and summer camps. It has also launched a training programme for refugee networks and organisations to enhance their capacity and contribution to the integration of the target group. In Luxembourg projects promote a positive image of refugees among the host society and organise the education of young refugees who are too old to attend the national educational system.

A project in Italy is experimenting with ‘art therapy’ to help beneficiaries express themselves better and gain confidence. Malta is setting up a support line offering specialised assistance to asylum seekers and Latvia is developing an electronic education system. The Netherlands is experimenting with a refugee Health and Knowledge centre, while in the Czech Republic a project has developed the concept of ‘integrative housing’, i.e. the combination of integration and accommodation.

An Irish project aims to further the contribution and effectiveness of NGOs in relation to the integration of refugees, while in Austria projects deal with the specific integration needs of unaccompanied minors and with refugee women looking for jobs. In Slovenia a project addresses the creation and upgrading of computer systems.

To facilitate access to the labour market, projects develop skills assessments to help beneficiaries present a better profile of themselves to employers (e.g. Poland) and organise information meetings for employers.

To raise awareness of the plight of refugees, a Polish project is developing a newspaper, written and produced by refugees, and a film festival. Spain is increasingly studying the main factors of successful integration and the obstacles encountered. This will allow them to assist their beneficiaries more effectively, when developing integration pathways, and avoid institutional dependency.

2.2.3. *Voluntary Return*

In terms of information and advice, projects organise information campaigns, information sessions and face-to-face contacts to raise awareness of the options of return and attract beneficiaries to take part in return projects. The information provided primarily relates to the situation in the country of return, in terms of the social and economic situation, education and employment opportunities (Czech Republic). Germany is developing its return support centres that started in 2005, providing a comprehensive package of services to prepare beneficiaries for repatriation. The Czech Republic is extending the coverage of such information centres or services. A project in the Netherlands is providing counselling and support in the native language of beneficiaries. Some countries are providing education and

training to increase the returnee's employment possibilities in the country of return (e.g. the UK).

Projects also focus on activities in relation to the actual return, such as the organisation of travel, provision of financial aid to cover expenses made before, during and after repatriation and assistance to reduce the bureaucracy of the administrative procedures for return (e.g. the UK). With regard to reintegration, activities include the monitoring and follow-up of beneficiaries once they have returned (often through local organisations with links to or in networks with stakeholders in the countries organising the return) and the provision of information and support in the country of return (e.g. Czech Republic).

It should also be mentioned that Member States often fund programmes and activities developed by the International Office for Migration (IOM).

Estimated targets

Indicators used by the Member States in the national programmes were not completely harmonised and therefore great caution is required when it comes to estimating the results that projects could achieve upon completion. With this in mind, a very rough estimate of the possible outputs for projects to be funded under the 2005 and 2006 programmes is given in Table 6 below, which is based on Member States' programme estimates. It covers only persons to be provided with direct assistance. Other activities under the actions mentioned, such as actions benefiting persons in charge of target groups, are not taken into account.

Table 6 – Estimates of persons to be provided with direct assistance under the reception and integration actions and persons provided with information and advice on return under the voluntary return action in the national programmes for 2005 and 2006 (Member States' forecasts)

Action	2005 programme forecasts	2006 programme forecasts	2005 + 2006 programme forecasts
Reception and Asylum Procedure	32 000	53 000	85 000
Integration	23 500	23 000	46 500
Voluntary Return	25 200	18 100	43 300

Information and publicity

At Member States level, the logo of the Fund is placed on documents providing information about the programme and fund concerned. Many Member States have also developed websites with information on the ERF to increase visibility. These websites also provide useful information on projects to the wider public, thus helping to promote the transparency of the programme. Calls for proposals are often publicised on websites. The same applies to newsletters, brochures, leaflets, posters and other material.

Many Member States are also in regular contact with the media to disseminate information on the various activities developed as part of the ERF. Several have launched conferences or other events to provide information on the programmes and to present the results and outcomes (e.g. Spain, Ireland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg and Poland). ERF

programmes sometimes participate in national events of a more general nature on migration policy (Luxembourg, Italy). Hungary set up a mobile ERF exhibition.

At project level, information and publicity activities include displaying the ERF logo on equipment procured for the project and any information material published (e.g. France, Luxembourg, Portugal), creating websites (e.g. Latvia), making posters (e.g. Greece) organising workshops or information sessions (e.g. Poland, Spain), distributing booklets to local institutions (Italy) and contacting the local media (e.g. Luxembourg). In Lithuania, projects make use of TV programmes to enhance the visibility of the Fund and the various activities. In a number of Member States, the beneficiaries are obliged in the contract to mention that ERF II is co-financing their activities and to ensure the logo is made visible in all situations (e.g. Germany, France, Latvia, Sweden, Slovenia, etc.). Publicity and visibility guidelines have been drafted for this purpose.

Assessment of the national programmes in 2005 and 2006 by the Member States

The questionnaire sent to the Member States' authorities included a chapter where they were asked to provide their opinion on the national programmes. Their replies can be summarised as follows.

2.2.4. Assessment of implementation

In 2005, the first year of implementation, most Member States experienced problems with regard to the implementation of their national programme because of the delay the programme encountered in starting, including the time necessary for the Commission to table implementing rules. The delayed approval of programmes, compared to the time schedule that had been envisaged, had repercussions on the next steps of implementation, including calls for proposals, project selection and contracting, and availability of funding for the projects. As a result, some projects have had to cut down the type and size of the activities planned, due to lack of time.

On a more positive note, most Member States nevertheless consider that they were able to catch up and 17 out of 24 expect to implement the 2005 programme in full by the end of the eligibility period. Practically all Member States expect nearly all projects to have achieved their targets by the end of the contractual phase, Cyprus and Estonia being the only ones not expecting to.

In the case of Cyprus, implementation of the 2005 programme is not going according to the original programme schedule on account of a number of activities not being carried out, either because there were no proposals submitted for those activities or because the proposals submitted were not eligible for funding. In addition, one project stopped two months earlier than planned and therefore cannot meet its targets. As for Estonia, several expected results described in the annual programme for 2005 will not be achieved due to the small number of projects. Of the other Member States reporting difficulties implementing the programme, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands had to size down a number of projects before contract signature to accommodate a shorter implementation period. In Latvia, the number of proposals received was small. Lithuania provided detailed information on the projects funded, but did not comment on implementation of the programme as a whole. Finally, one of the

original funded projects in the United Kingdom was unable to secure matched funding and was therefore closed without accessing ERF funds.

Implementation in 2006, as reported by Member States, seems to be more satisfactory, although all contractual procedures had not yet been completed at the time Member States replied to the questionnaire. As a result, seven of them were unable to report the expected achievement of the programmes by the end of the programming period. Of the others, only four (France, Latvia, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) did not expect to implement the programme in full, due to late approval of the 2006 programmes, or to local circumstances in the case of France. On the other hand, many Member States reported improvements compared to 2005.

2.2.5. Assessment of the programme as a whole

Although Member States experienced problems in the implementation of the programmes, mainly in 2005, their assessment of the Fund as a whole in the first two years of the current programming period is generally positive. Many Member States highlight a number of positive developments in the ERF:

- The ERF under the current programming period is an advance on the ERF as it was under the previous period. This has allowed experience accumulated in previous years to be built on.
- The move towards a more strategic direction of the Fund, which helps to target actions better.
- The new topics included in the Fund, making for a greater diversity of activities.
- The possibility of developing multi-annual projects (although only a few countries seem to have made use of this option, e.g. Belgium, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom).
- The higher innovative value of the Fund. Member States cite projects focusing on return and reintegration, as well as projects concentrating specifically on vulnerable groups.
- Increased political focus on the results of the European Refugee Fund.

Several Member States indicate that the European Refugee Fund provides real added value in terms of supporting asylum seekers and refugees in their countries, given that many of the activities promoted by the Fund are usually not provided at national level.

As mentioned earlier, the multi-annual approach is considered to be a very useful new feature (e.g. Belgium, Germany). However, some Member States have encountered problems matching multi-annual projects with the requirement to define the budget on an annual basis. Belgium comments that this reduces the financial security of multi-annual projects. Lithuania, which does not seem to have opted for multi-annual projects, states that the short duration of the projects is inhibiting achievement of the expected results.

Some Member States quote problems setting up the initial distribution of funding over the three areas of actions, due to lack of interest or insufficient capacity and know-how of organisations to implement certain types of projects. Most of all, it seems difficult to attract a sufficient number of proposals for voluntary return.

Many Member States explain that they have increased their internal capacity to manage and implement the European Refugee Fund, by way of greater resources made available for Technical Assistance, the assignment of additional human resources and improvements made to the selection procedures and communication systems. Some note greater cooperation between the different ministerial bodies working with asylum seekers and refugees.

Ireland mentions the important role the Fund plays in increasing the performance of non-governmental organisations. The United Kingdom reports that the improvements in their calls for proposals and overall management over the past year have helped them to administer high-quality and diverse projects. They have also increased their capacity to deliver advice and training for the projects, which in turn has helped projects to improve implementation. Finally, Sweden comments that the European Refugee Fund in the current programming period is, to some extent, an 'interlude' to the Framework Programme on Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows, which will again substantially change the content and themes addressed. They would be concerned if there were no possibility of drawing on the lessons learnt from this multi-annual phase in that programme.

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main conclusion to be drawn from the implementation to date of the European Refugee Fund during the second programming phase is that the Fund as such has gained a high level of acceptance and support, as well as much political recognition at EU level and in the Member States. The problems identified during the first two years are mainly implementation problems connected with the somewhat delayed implementation framework at EU level. However, it should be stressed that this was connected to the need for the Commission to set up the strategic framework required under the basic act, to ensure that national programmes were in line with this framework, and finally to check that sound management and control systems were in place in the Member States from the start of implementation.

Since all annual programmes in the current programming period, including the 2007 programmes, have been or soon will be adopted, lessons to be drawn from this review should feed into the next programming phase (2007-2013), which will be covered by the new Framework Programme on 'Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows'. Not only will these lessons be taken into account by the Commission, it is certainly in the interest of the Member States to take them on board when preparing and implementing new programmes for the Refugee, Integration and Return Funds.

The Commission has made every effort to ensure that the legal and other provisions needed for implementation of the new programmes are in place from the beginning of the new programming phase. In this context, the preparation of the Commission implementing rules, of the guidelines for each Fund under the Framework Programme and of the monitoring and evaluation methodology is well advanced. It is the Commission's intention that all provisions should be available to the Member States in time for the preparation of their draft multi-annual and annual programmes.

In the negotiation of the new programmes in the Council and Parliament and the preparation of the Commission provisions, the Commission has sought to simplify the rules and procedures wherever this was compatible with the sound and efficient management of Community funding. Internally, the managing service has also taken steps towards other Commission departments in order to plan activities well in advance and to increase cooperation. This should make it easier for the Member States to prepare programmes, on the one hand, and help to speed up their subsequent approval by the Commission, on the other.

Experience has shown that the ERF has allowed a great variety of projects to be accommodated, thereby providing for a large degree of flexibility. The new programmes will provide for at least the same flexibility. On the other hand, more emphasis should be put in each multi-annual programme in the next programming phase on a well defined strategic approach, with objectives, targets and indicators, the purpose of which will be to measure the programme's results and impacts, and to enhance the effectiveness of the combined efforts of the Community and the Member States.