

COMMUNITY INITIATIVES -WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Once again various community, statutory and voluntary organisations are submitting applications for funding to the European Union's (EU) Community Initiatives, such as Horizon, Now, Youthstart and Adapt. The Initiatives are aimed at strengthening cohesion within the EU through the achievement of a more balanced economic and social development.

The first three are different strands within the "Employment and Development of Human Resources" Initiative and are intended to contribute to the achievement of Objective Three of the EU's structural policies for the period 1994-1999. This Objective is aimed at combating long-term unemployment and facilitating the integration into working life of young people and other persons excluded from the labour market, for example, the disabled, drug addicts, travellers and ex-offenders. The aims of the Employment/Human Resources Initiative are the following:

- development of human resources
- improvement of working patterns
- the revival of employment
- support for equal opportunities for women in the labour market

The Adapt Initiative is a response to the changes taking place within labour markets and production systems at a global level. This Initiative relates to Objective Four of the EU's structural policies. Objective Four is aimed at facilitating the adaption of workers to industrial changes and to changes in production systems. Adapt is intended to assist enterprises in order to improve their production systems, to access new markets, to develop new products and to enable the workforce to be trained in new areas where skills are in demand.

The Initiatives are intended to support only pilot projects, which will operate on average for two years, the aim of which is to explore new methods of working on a small scale in order to test their effectiveness to address particular social and economic problems. The funding is not intended to form long-term core financing for the projects involved in the Initiatives.

The key criteria for the approval of funding is that of innovation. Projects must show that the actions that they intend to undertake are innovative. Projects are not funded to simply extend an existing service/ action or to duplicate an approach being pursued elsewhere. This raises particular difficulties for community/voluntary organisations involved in the Initiatives who have difficulty accessing financial resources to maintain existing services. A number of community/voluntary organisations have received funding for "innovative" projects over the period 1991-1994, as part of the Employment/Human Resource Initiative. The funding for these projects has now stopped and the question which needs to be asked is, what happens to the innovative actions after the Initiative ends? Do they just stop and are the lessons ignored? Do organisations in order to access more financial resources simply think of more innovative ways of addressing the same problems and apply for more funding?

The funding community organisations receive from the Initiative tends to become an intrinsic part of their operation. If an organisation has access only to relatively small and insecure amounts of money and then becomes involved in the Initiative it could receive funding of £200,000 for two years. This would tend to change the whole profile of the organisation. The funding would enable it to develop organisational skills and employ staff. They would undertake a series of actions which may prove effective in addressing a particular social/economic problem.

When the funding ends it will have a detrimental effect on the organisation as a whole. Without access to continued funding the alternative is for the organisation to think of a new innovative activity and apply to the Initiative once again in the hope of receiving more funding. Without some way of integrating the lessons learned from the Initiative, the experiences gained and the potential value of the projects are now lost to the community. How can this situation be remedied?

Clearly a structure is needed to allow organisations involved in the Initiatives to access resources in order to consolidate the innovative activities over the medium to long-term. This is necessary to ensure the maximisation of the benefits provided by the Initiatives, which gives organisations the opportunity to explore new methods of addressing serious social and economic problems.

Long-term benefits will be sustainable only if there is a structure through which the lessons from the pilots can be used to influence more mainstream national and EU policies, and resources are put in place to maintain those elements of the Initiatives which are demonstrated as being effective. Unless such a structure is established and, importantly, that participating projects are aware that the positive aspects of the pilots can be integrated into mainstream actions, then the effectiveness of Initiatives such as those above will be limited.

