

MINUTES

GOVERNING BOARD

MEETING

25 NOVEMBER 2016

1. Adoption of the agenda

The Board adopted the agenda for the meeting.

2. Introduction

The ETF Governing Board (GB) meeting took place in Brussels on 25 November 2016. Michel SERVOZ, Director General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission (EC) chaired the meeting. During his short absence, due to other obligations, Bernard BRUNET, Head of Unit (DG NEAR), took over the chair.

The EC was also represented by Stefano SIGNORE, Head of Unit (DG DEVCO), Kiril Kiryakov (DG EMPL), Christophe MASSON (DG NEAR) and Jean-Paul HEERSCHAP (DG DEVCO).

The Chair welcomed the new GB members: Kaloyan DAMYANOV (Bulgaria), Amalie SCHMIDT (Denmark), Carina LINDEN (Sweden), Manuel VELLA (Malta) and Santa OZOLINA (Latvia). He also introduced the newly nominated partner country observers: Nigar ISMAYILZADE from Azerbaijan, Dragana SAVIC from Serbia (but absent) and Monia RAIES MGHIRBI from Tunisia.

Elena-Venera IONITA represented the ETF staff committee.

Representatives from Czech Republic, Luxemburg, Poland, Portugal and the United Kingdom were absent.

Mr Jean-François MEZIERES, independent member representing the European Parliament, was not present.

In his opening remarks, the Chair announced the agreement reached in the Council the day before on the Skills Agenda and the Skills Guarantee, renamed “Upskilling pathways”. He informed that although the title had changed, the substance of the initiative remained the same.

3. Follow-up to the previous meeting

i. Minutes of previous meeting

Micheline SCHEYNS (Belgium) asked whether the VET facility mentioned on page 11 of the minutes was already adopted and if yes, what the role of the ETF would be in this facility.

Jean-Paul HEERSCHAP (DG DEVCO) explained that the facility had been adopted on 11 November, in time to start in the first quarter of 2017. The role of the ETF will be one of technical backstopping during the lifetime of the project. DG DEVCO returned to this issue in its oral report in the afternoon.

Madlen SERBAN (ETF) stressed that ETF is available to contribute to the VET facility and to present its expertise to the members of the consortium representing multilateral cooperation institutions in the EU Member States.

The Board adopted the minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 June 2016 without further comments.

ii. Follow up on action points and written procedures

The follow up points and the actions developed by the ETF to achieve them as well as the list of the written procedures since the last Governing Board meeting were presented by the chair.

No comments or questions were raised.

4. Single Programming Document (SPD) 2017–20

Madlen SERBAN (ETF) gave a brief overview of where ETF stands in the process of adopting the SPD. She referred to the cascading logic of the ETF's planning approach beginning with the ETF Strategy 2014-20 approved by the Governing Board in 2012. Under this Strategy, the ETF put in place its Mid-Term Perspective 2014-17, followed by the SPD 2017-20. The SPD structure follows a standard format for all agencies, and includes both the multi-annual perspective 2017-20 (sections I and II) as well as detail on the actions for 2017 (section III).

These strategic documents in turn guided the ETF's operational planning in the projects and partner countries. In this respect, she referred to the detailed Strategic Project Implementation Plans and the Country Strategic Perspectives made available to the Governing Board for information.

Madlen SERBAN stressed the importance of ensuring that the ETF's work continuously adjusts to changing EU priorities, partner country contexts and relevant international policy developments. In this respect, she presented two tabled documents on the contribution of ETF to the recently published European Commission Work Programme 2017. She also stressed that the partner country contexts take into account the outcomes of the Torino Process 2016. Finally, she underlined the importance of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 for the work of the ETF, given the interrelationship among policy areas including quality of education, employment, healthy communities and multi-level governance, poverty and gender, and climate change.

The SPD also took into account the outcomes of the external evaluation of the ETF.

The SPD distinguished between high and low priority countries, as decided by the Commission services. Forced by the budget reduction and staff cuts, the ETF put in place a structure of negative priorities in order to get the best return from its limited resources, by considering the country priorities. However, the Director underlined that the ETF proposes to include all countries in the Torino Process, and respond positively to requests for support from the EU.

The ETF works at system level for structural changes in the country and does not provide technical assistance as such, but remains focused in line with the absorption capacities of the different countries as set by impact assessments.

The ETF has embedded communication activities within the operational activities of the ETF to increase its outreach to as many stakeholders as possible in the partner countries.

The intervention logic was introduced by Peter GREENWOOD (ETF). Aligning the work of the ETF into a robust logic and connecting all of ETF's activities was one of the key recommendations of the external evaluation.

The logic starts from a general objective (which refers to ETF's mandate in terms of the contribution the ETF is expected to make in the context of the EU external relations through VET) to specific objectives (the thematic policy areas in which the ETF is active, recognisable through the strategic projects as the basis of the ETF's operational activities). These operational objectives generate a series of outputs and outcomes. The measurement of the ETF's impact has two dimensions. Firstly, the ETF measures its intermediate impact over the four years of the SPD cycle in terms of improved access, attractiveness and relevance, and policymaking capacity of the VET system. Secondly, over the seven years of its strategic cycle, the ETF will measure the contribution of the VET system to social and economic development in the partner countries.

Since 2012, the ETF has a performance management framework using key performance indicators (KPIs) which have been included in the SPD. The KPIs include standard indicators defined by the Commission services for all agencies in support to the budget discharge procedure (Indicators 1-4 and

9-15), as well as specific indicators for the ETF's operations (Indicators 5-8). The KPIs represent the top level of the ETF's performance management, under which there is a cascade of different quality and productivity indicators measuring performance in the ETF's internal processes.

After preliminary adoption by the Governing Board, the ETF will send the SPD including detailed information on 2017 actions and budgets to the budgetary authorities by 30 November as input to the European Parliament decision on the 2017 EU budget in December. The ETF will present the SPD with details on the 2017 work programme to the European Parliament in the annual hearing in the Employment and Social Affairs Committee. The final adoption of the SPD including the detailed work programme 2017 will take place in January according to the ETF Regulation when the ETF will also disseminate the SPD, strategic project plans and country strategic perspectives in the public domain.

The SPD represents a rolling programming framework and already includes first indications of the ETF priorities for 2018. The ETF will send the SPD, updated with any new policy initiatives and with final budget performance figures for 2016, to the Commission to launch the budget procedure for 2018 by 31 January 2017.

Michel SERVOZ (DG EMPL) expressed his satisfaction with the tabled document on aligning the ETF's work with the EC WP 2017 priorities.

Karol JAKUBIK (Slovakia), representing the current Presidency, reported the comments from the Governing Board. The Board representatives considered the SPD to be robust as it reflected all relevant developments in VET systems and labour markets in the partner countries and the EU. It also reflects the real actual needs for development, including the strategic approaches and projects. He mentioned some slight comments and observations: 1) the projects concerning migration would benefit from more detail; 2) the SPD presents a lot of actions and projects, but a clear indication of how realistic they are as compared to the budgetary and other needs and/or restrictions would be needed; and 3) clarification was requested on the cooperation between ETF and Eurofound for the upcoming years.

Micheline SCHEYNS (Belgium) welcomed the document and congratulated ETF for its quality. Her questions related to the budget, stressing that even with negative priorities, the ETF might not be in a position to satisfy entirely the priorities of the partner countries, and that this might impact on the quality of the service provision. She also questioned the assumption of a 2% increase in future budgets.

Dimitris PSILLOS (Greece) asked for further detail to justify the ratio of over 2:1 between staff and operational expenditure as reported on page 45.

Micheline SCHEYNS (Belgium) requested more information on the future cooperation between the ETF and Cedefop in the area of qualifications. She noted that qualifications were now labelled as a negative priority in Cedefop's WP.

On the question related to migration, Madlen SERBAN (ETF) replied that the ETF addressed only the skills dimension of migration. The ETF had integrated migration and skills across the strategic projects and as such maybe this was less visible in the SPD. She provided more information on the different aspects of migration dealt with by the ETF (readability and portability of skills, recognition of skills and qualifications, quality assurance, pre-departure measures, legal and circular migration, mobility partnerships).

In relation to cooperation with other agencies, in particular Eurofound but also Cedefop, she referred to the annual programmes concluded with these agencies, which include activities organised and attended by the three agencies together for the first time. For 2017, the focus will be mainly on social dialogue at enterprise level (see Eurofound), based on data provided by surveys done by the two

named agencies. As for cooperation with Cedefop, social dialogue will focus on sectoral developments that will also add to our cooperation on qualifications. Madlen SERBAN also mentioned that the continuation of cooperation with Cedefop on the Global Inventory, done in cooperation with UNESCO would be worthwhile continuing. This work is a presentation of what the two European agencies are doing and gives worldwide visibility to EU policies and instruments.

As a reply to the questions related to budget, Madlen SERBAN (ETF) said that the ETF is the only agency funded through Heading IV of the EU budget – Global Europe. Studies carried out by DG DEVCO had confirmed that the ETF provides excellent value for money. In October 2016, the ETF produced a reflection paper for the Commission on how the ETF might contribute to maximising EU support to the countries in the field of VET. The ETF, as an objective, neutral, independent and non-commercial EU agency, helps add value to the substantial investments from the EU budget allocated to pre-accession, neighbourhood and development instruments under Heading IV. In this context, increased ETF budget will bring significant returns.

As regards the ratio between the staff and operational budgets, the Director underlined the fact that ETF staff deliver its operations and functions. The ETF hires external experts only to provide very specific in-depth information and expertise related, for example, to the local context in partner countries. Therefore, the Board should consider staff expenditure as a core part of operational expenditure, and not as a separate cost. Furthermore, the ETF receives approximately €4.5 million for 29 countries, while some partner countries receive between €5 and €150 million from the EU budget. As stated in the 2016 External Evaluation, the ETF's limited resources mean that it can only provide the functions in its mandate to selected priority countries.

Finally, the Director observed that given the high volatility in the EU and partner countries, it was difficult to predict the priorities of 2018 and consequently, whether the 2% added inflation rate would turn out to be a correct assumption or not.

After this discussion, the Governing Board adopted the 2017–20 SPD.

5. ETF Draft Budget 2017

Henrik FAUDEL (ETF) presented the 2017 ETF draft budget, which is in line with EC financial programming and follows the evolution of the EU external relations activities.

The 2017 draft budget is based on an overall contribution of €20,144,000 for both commitment and payment appropriations, composed of €19,771,000 contribution from the EU budget and €373,000 from the recovery of surplus related to the 2015 budget execution.

The ETF's budget for 2017 is at the same level in nominal terms as all the previous budgets since 2011.

Title 1 (staff costs) represents 68% of the budget, Title 2 (infrastructure) represents 9% while Title 3 (operational activities) amounts to 23%. The budget does not include any contributions under Title 4 following the conclusion of the GEMM project at the end of 2016.

The staff costs capture a reduction to 88 temporary agent posts by the end of 2017 as part of the 10% cut in agency establishment plans decided by the EU institutions. The ETF initially estimated a 1% increase to cover the annual salary adaptation and the correction coefficient in the budget. In November 2016, the Commission announced an overall increase of 1.9%. This higher than expected increase will be compensated through unforeseen departures and other savings on staff costs.

The changes in Title 2 are largely due to the new budget structure and the size of the different merged chapters compared to last year. A tender for global outsourcing of facility services is on the way,

included in the budget line on building associated costs. The actual increase in Title 2 comes from a planned extraordinary upgrade in the obsolete ETF utility systems (cooling, heating, electricity). In addition, the ETF has budgeted for a new stakeholder relationship management tool to replace the old ETF contacts database. Increased digitalisation costs cover improved delivery of ETF operational functions, the costs of deploying the Commission personnel management system, SYSPER, and the Commission directive on e-Communication. The ETF will finance the extraordinary GB meeting to select the new ETF director in spring 2017 through funds left over from 2016.

Karol JAKUBIK (Slovakia), representing the current EU Presidency, explained that Board Members had questioned the cost of Board meetings and the need for a 2% increase for meetings, but this was explained by the need for the extra GB meeting and the 2% inflation rate increase. The ETF had already adequately responded to both issues in the presentations.

Stéphane KUNZ (France) requested more information on the staff cost savings mentioned earlier, and whether these were due to part-time work, rotation, or other ways of working. Henrik FAUDEL (ETF) replied that the estimates are based on "historical" experience from the number of staff on parental leave and on part-time work, and were already deducted from the initial budget. The ETF also has a budget for interim staff to partially compensate for unforeseen absences. Maternity leave or illness do not reduce the ETF's budget consumption as salary payments for these staff members continue.

Ingrid MÜLLER-ROOSEN (Germany) requested more clarification on budget line 2.03. (Page 7), and whether the costs indicated were solely the result of the grouping of budget lines. Henrik FAUDEL (ETF) replied that this was partially the case, explaining that the budget line is new and merges costs related to cleaning, reception and surveillance. It also reflects an actual increase in costs related to the maintenance of the building and €100,000 for work on the utility systems.

The GB members adopted the 2017 ETF Draft Budget.

6. ETF 2016 Amending budget

Henrik FAUDEL (ETF) presented the second amending budget for 2016. On the revenue side, interest earnings were added under miscellaneous. On the expenditure side, five budget transfers had taken place so far, but one or two more may still be required to optimise the ETF operational and budget performance.

No comments were raised.

The Governing Board adopted the ETF 2016 amending budget.

7. Human Resources Implementing Rules

Henrik FAUDEL (ETF) introduced five human resources-related documents.

No questions nor comments were raised.

The Governing Board adopted the five human resources implementing rules and decisions.

8. Progress with the ETF External Evaluation

Kiril KIRYAKOV (DG EMPL) informed that the Commission had approved the final evaluation report in October 2016. The final report confirmed the findings presented in the June GB meeting. The evaluation confirms that the ETF is on the right track and that it is successfully discharging its mandate as stipulated in its founding Regulation. In the meantime, DG EMPL has launched a joint evaluation of its four agencies (Cedefop, Eurofound, EU-OSHA and ETF) to take place in 2017. This evaluation will focus on identifying synergies and potential overlaps among the agencies with a view to improving the

overall contribution of the agencies to the EU. The contractor will directly integrate the recent external evaluation findings into the joint-evaluation. Nevertheless, the contractor may approach some GB members to collect opinions on broader issues such as potential synergies between the four agencies. The contractor will evaluate the other three agencies individually.

Micheline SCHEYNS (Belgium) provided feedback from her role as Governing Board observer. She referred to the extra meeting that took place with the contractor to take on board the Board's comments, such as the integration of more case studies and the inclusion of the intervention logic. These are now in the report and used as a basis for the SPD. She is very satisfied with the contractor's work and with the results for the ETF, which are a solid and good basis going forward.

Madlen SERBAN (ETF) presented the ETF's reply to the external evaluation which she considered very helpful for the ETF's performance. She outlined the ETF action plan indicating the agency's preliminary responses to the evaluation recommendations and which have largely been included in the SPD

Karol JAKUBIK (Slovakia) informed that Members had not raised any particular comments during the informal GB meeting. Members expressed appreciation for the positive way in which the ETF is moving according to the external evaluation.

Micheline SCHEYNS (Belgium), who had been absent during the informal meeting, made four comments. Firstly, she welcomed the intervention logic but advised that the indicators for impact assessment would need to be further refined in order to facilitate future evaluations. However, she stated that constructing impact indicators in the area of education and training was a challenging task. Secondly, she suggested that future evaluations should also take into consideration the risk factors as formulated in the SPD. Thirdly, regarding the recommendation about enhancing the ETF's visibility, she argued that the ETF is very visible in VET provision, qualifications, governance, but not so visible in labour market and entrepreneurship issues. She encouraged the ETF to become more visible in labour market and entrepreneurship, given the ETF's focus on human capital development. She argued that a strong general education basis was fundamental for a strong VET system. Fourthly, she asked whether the mega-evaluation of the agencies could suggest improvements to the common approach among agencies and to their founding regulations.

Carina LINDEN (Sweden) congratulated the ETF for the positive evaluation report. She agreed that the Torino Process is a key activity for the ETF, but noticed some room for improvement mentioned by ECORYS, and asked whether this could be further elaborated.

Peter VAN IJSSELMUIDEN (Netherlands) referred to the last sentence of the evaluation summary in relation to cost-effectiveness, including the costs related to the Governing Board. He suggested that these costs, representing only 1% of the total budget, should be included in the next Annual Report.

Dimitris PSILLOS (Greece) wanted more details on the ETF's impact. Furthermore, he observed that while the ETF cooperates with a range of EU, national, bilateral and multilateral stakeholders, social partners were under-represented.

Monia RAIES MGHIRBI (Tunisia) suggested making greater use of digital communication tools, expressed surprise at the low reaction rate to the on-line consultation survey for the evaluation and requested a more important role for the focal points in the partner countries. She confirmed the conclusions of the external evaluation based on her direct experience with the ETF in Tunisia.

Michel SERVOZ (DG EMPL) confirmed that the President of the Commission had requested the joint evaluation. The purpose is to analyse synergies and duplication of tasks in response to the concerns of European Parliament that there are too many agencies and too much overlap. The evaluation will be done very thoroughly with due consideration to all issues and options. This process would be

finished by the end of 2017. He also acknowledged the lack of impact indicators, not only for the ETF but also for EC funds in general, for example within the European Social Fund.

Madlen SERBAN (ETF) confirmed that the Commission had proposed some of the indicators, in particular those related to the discharge procedure and the budget allocation to enhance comparability across agencies over time. Some other indicators are mainly qualitative rather than quantitative, and help associate the ETF's work with the progress of reform in the partner countries, although an explicit and direct attribution is not feasible. The ETF has started a discussion on how to attribute impact with bilateral organisations from Member States which will be concluded in 2017.

On the cumulative effect of the Torino Process, one important aspect is continuity. VET systems do not change overnight and reforms, such as in qualifications, need constant effort over years. In addition, the levels of development vary from one country to another, suggesting that the importance of contextualising the capability and readiness of a country to absorb the changes.

Concerning stakeholder cooperation, she explained that the ETF has a structured approach addressing the interests of its partners. These may range from exchanging information and network building to joint methodology development and joint fieldwork. The ETF has a variable geometry of partners but, as a matter of principle, it works with employer organisations, trade unions etc. when they are present in a partner country.

She confirmed that digitalisation to enhance the outreach of the ETF's work would be one of the priorities in the short term.

The concept of focal contact points does not exist in all ETF partner countries, but it is indeed an issue of accountability for all those participating in ETF activities. She promised to look at the suggestion and see how best it could be implemented.

On the question of how the ETF fits into the mega-evaluation, Kiril KIRYAKOV (DG EMPL) informed that each evaluation is based on a pre-defined set of questions, and the type and set of questions already covered by the ETF external evaluation will not be repeated, but will instead be asked to the other three agencies. As regards the ETF, specific questions concern cross-cutting issues, such as the way the ETF interacts with the other agencies in terms of efficiency, individual policy areas, and distribution of roles and responsibilities.

He observed that the ETF external evaluation had not recommended any change to the ETF's founding Regulation. However, the joint evaluation may put forward suggestions for change, especially in cases where there is a risk of overlap.

Maximising the impact as mentioned in the external evaluation implied structured and systematic cooperation between Commission and the ETF to embed the results of the ETF's policy advice and policy learning processes within the Commission external assistance activities for example as an observer in EU policy dialogue missions.

He noted that the External Evaluation had not identified the ETF's work with social partners as a weakness. Indeed the report indicates that the ETF works increasingly with the social partners. Unlike the other three agencies, the ETF does not have a tripartite Board. However, social partners are nevertheless important stakeholders for the ETF, and the evaluators consulted with social partners in the partner countries.

On the question related to the cost of the Governing Board, the issue was not so much about minimising costs, but about the visibility of the costs.

He agreed with the comment on the limited response to the public consultation. However, he reminded the Board that the EC and the ETF websites published the online public consultation. Given the type of external evaluation, it was not surprising that there was limited public reaction. Furthermore, the online consultation was only one of the elements of the external evaluation, while more importance was attached to the comprehensive stakeholder analysis, case studies and questionnaires.

Michel SERVOZ (DG EMPL) thanked Micheline SCHEYNS (Belgium) for her active involvement in the external evaluation as the representative of the GB.

9. Progress with the recruitment of the ETF Director

Michel SERVOZ (DG EMPL) noted the end of the mandate of the actual director with regret.

By June 2017, a new director has to be selected, and the procedure has started. A vacancy was published with a deadline of 9 September, and 197 applications (50 females) were received from 25 Member States. The preselection took place and thirteen candidates were interviewed on 16 November, leading to a shortlist of five remaining candidates. They will be invited for tests in an assessment centre and for a second round of interviews. At the end of the procedure, the EC will propose a shortlist of at least three names. The Board will finalise the selection at an extraordinary meeting at the Centre Borschette in Brussels.

Peter VAN IJSSELMUIDEN (Netherlands), the GB observer for the selection, confirmed that the pre-selection was working well.

The Chair agreed that the pre-selection committee were doing a good job. He is convinced that the right person for the job will be found.

Micheline SCHEYNS (Belgium) asked whether the gender distribution of the preselected 13 and the remaining 5 candidates could be disclosed. The Chair could not divulge this kind of detail at this point, given the confidential nature of the selection.

11. Any other business

The Chair reminded the Board members who had not yet done so to provide their CV and declaration of interest as soon as possible. The European Parliament requires the publication of these documents on the website.

The Chair also invited the Board members to complete the evaluation form of the meeting.

12. Date of next meeting

An extraordinary Governing Board meeting was planned to take place in Brussels on 3 March 2017 (subsequently moved to 26 April) for the selection of the new ETF director.

The next regular meeting of the Governing Board will take place in Torino on 9 June 2017, back-to-back with the ETF international conference on the Torino Process.

Follow up actions:

- To take stock of the follow up to the external evaluation findings in the next GB meeting.

ANNEX

10. Oral reports

Progress on Commission policies and programmes that have an impact on the ETF

For DG EMPL, Kiril KIRYAKOV (DG EMPL) provided a short update on developments in DG EMPL in the area of policies, which have an impact on the ETF's work and focused mainly on the European VET Week, planned for 5-9 December 2016 in the context of the new "Skills Agenda for Europe" initiative. The European VET Week is organised for the first time ever in the form of a series of events in Brussels with parallel activities in all Member States and in ETF partner countries. Up to now, 563 activities are registered. The initiative aims to improve the attractiveness, relevance and image of VET, and to challenge the assumption of VET as a second choice. Excellence and quality will be showcased, as will the many opportunities offered by VET. VET will be promoted as a desirable option for people at all ages. The focus will be put on the quality of the VET provision, on upskilling and reskilling during the lifecycle, on lifelong learning opportunities enhancing social inclusion, diversity and active citizenship. The VET week should become an annual event.

Stefano SIGNORE (DG DEVCO) focused on

- 1) The European External Investment Plan announced through a Communication released in June under the new "Partnering Framework" approach, with the broad objective of addressing the drivers of regular migration. Concrete proposals were tabled on 13 September. There were three objectives for the plan. Firstly, it would boost private investment and enhance the capacity of the private sector to create more jobs through the mobilisation of additional means for Africa and the Neighbourhood. In particular, he mentioned the establishment of a European Sustainable Development Fund to provide political leverage and a financial guarantee for development. Secondly, it would improve the business environment; and thirdly, it would provide technical assistance to allow for a higher number of bankable projects.
- 2) A proposal for a New Consensus for Development has just been tabled, a framework in which the EU and the Member States will implement the new commitment stemming from the 2030 development agenda. The different thematic areas, or "Five P's", in which the 17 DGs have been clustered, are prosperity, people, planet, partnership and peace. This is an attempt to create links between the different DGs, and show how (a lack of) progress in one area has impact on other areas. The New Consensus for Development has the ambition a) to do more (through the identification of areas where key drivers with a strong impact on development have not been sufficiently addressed, such as youth, gender equality, migration and mobility, climate change, fragility and conflict); b) to do better (to work in a more coordinated way between the EU level and the Member States) and c) to do differently (to look at other drivers for development, and at more innovative ways to engage cooperation with e.g. emerging and middle income countries). The Council and European Parliament will discuss the proposal soon.
- 3) The "Post-Cotonou" as a proposal for a new framework starting after 2020 to replace the current agreement expiring in February 2020.

Furthermore, as an answer to Micheline SCHEYNS (Belgium) under point 3 above, he referred to the VET facility as an important tool to mobilise expertise and engage with countries in DG DEVCO's remit. He informed the Board that the Commission had adopted the financing decision on 11 November and would finalise contractual issues by the first quarter in 2017. He thanked the colleagues from the ETF for the excellent collaboration so far, and counted on further support from ETF.

Bernard BRUNET (DG NEAR) reported on:

- The annual Enlargement Package adopted on 9 November, which confirms the main principles of the Enlargement Strategy approved two years ago. It focusses on the three fundamental pillars of enlargement. In the context of economic governance, a reform tool is being developed: the “EU Semester light” for candidate countries. The EC works closely with countries in the region to develop integrated economic reform strategies. These include a specific focus on employment and social inclusion on which the Commission systematically sought input from the ETF.
- The EC focusses increasingly on the assessment of countries in relation to their state of play and readiness to join the EU, not so much on their progress over the last twelve months. The EC is considering rebalancing the focus and put more emphasis on progress through a dedicated methodology.
- On country specific issues, he noted significant progress in Albania. The Commission had recommended opening negotiations with Albania following its recognition as a candidate country in 2016. However, some deviations have been observed for Turkey and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.
- For the Enlargement Package, the EC is moving to an annual cycle released in spring and no longer in autumn. The next Enlargement Package is therefore to be expected in spring 2018, and not in 2017.
- The ENP is in the implementation phase of the decision adopted in November 2015, focussing on differentiation and on priority countries (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova for the East; Tunisia, Jordan and Morocco for the South). As an example, the Commission adopted a specific Communication on 29 September for Tunisia that emphasised the importance of EU relations with the country. This resulted in a significant increase in resources and a stepping up of initiatives in the area of employment and regional development.
- The Commission had drafted and recently adopted partnership priorities (documents defining the main areas of joint interventions) with Jordan and Lebanon. Similar initiatives were on their way with Egypt, Algeria, Palestine and Israel. In the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU is defining new types of contractual relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- As next steps, there is an intention to prepare a Communication from the EC and the EEAS in spring 2017. The Communication will review the progress of the implementation of the renewed ENP policy, putting more focus on its general implementation rather than detailed country reports.
- Concerning relevant innovations in the financial instruments, the EU has established a certain number of Trust Funds and financial facilities in the ETF partner countries. These included the EU Trust Fund for the crisis in Syria, which now covers also countries surrounding Syria (such as the Western Balkans) affected by the refugee crisis, the Trust Fund for Africa (including North Africa) and a facility for the refugee communities in Turkey.
- For both Enlargement countries and the Neighbourhood, the EC is revising the indicative financial programming and strategy documents for all the countries. In the case of the Neighbourhood, this implies outlining new multi-annual financing documents with the priority interventions for the coming years. These will be established in close cooperation with the partner countries and eventually submitted to the Member States in the relevant committees. The ETF will be associated and consulted when employment, VET and related issues are on the table.

On the question from Edit BAUER (independent expert from the European Parliament) as to whether the EP resolution adopted the previous day on a disruption of negotiations with Turkey would result in immediate consequences, Bernard BRUNET replied that the Council had decided last week not to

suspend negotiations with Turkey, despite the worrying developments. When the Council meets again, new discussions will definitely take place in the light of the recently adopted EP resolution.

Trends and developments at the ETF

Madlen SERBAN (ETF) briefly introduced the “Trends and Developments” at the ETF, focusing mainly on administrative information, and the “Spotlights” publication, with more case studies.

Following discussions at the last Board meeting, Anastasia FETSI (ETF) presented the relationship between the ETF’s work and the new Skills Agenda.

The new Skills Agenda is relevant for the partner countries, because the key messages are related to boosting employability, competitiveness and growth, with an emphasis on skills formation and skills visibility. Furthermore, the partner countries have similar problems as the EU but the solutions to these problems may be different. Partner countries have a genuine interest to know what is happening in the EU, and how the different challenges the EU is facing are addressed. This is very relevant for the candidate countries, but also for the countries, which have specific agreements with the EU (association agreements, DCFTAs, Mobility Partnerships), in which education and employment elements are included.

The Skills Agenda ensures continuity in the ETF’s work, but brings also some new issues for the ETF partner countries, such as the modernisation of VET systems in particular, and skills policies more generally.

The items under priority area 1 are absolutely relevant for the ETF partner countries which have a significant percentage of low skilled adults; a relatively high percentage of young people with below average achievement in reading, mathematics and science; an significant percentage of employed graduates with jobs below their qualification level; and enterprises which complain about (mainly digital) skills availability. The ETF in its activities addresses issues of access, availability, relevance and quality of education, and focusses on VET system governance, and on how to bring the world of VET, the learners and the labour market closer together, in interaction with partners at horizontal and vertical levels. The ETF also acts on the relevance of provision, in particular on teacher training and on work-based learning across all the ETF regions; on quality assurance mechanisms and, as a new action, to link VET with innovation and create smart territories where VET is part of the development of the region. The ETF also works on key competences for entrepreneurship in VET as well as in the field of digital skills and mapping how this digital skills formation is taking place.

Under priority area 2, the ETF mainly works on the development of qualifications frameworks, on transparency issues principally and less on comparability issues. The conference ‘Getting organised for better qualifications conference’, which took place back to back with the Board meeting, was designed to make the partner countries more capable and more confident to go ahead with the implementation of qualifications frameworks. Under the recognition of skills for adults, which is particularly important for the partner countries given their overall ageing populations, their informal economies, and emigration and immigration as relatively new phenomena, the ETF works on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFILE) (mainly in the countries with mobility partnerships). In Turkey, together with the EBRD, the ETF is working on a methodology for a skills audit of refugees.

The final priority area is about improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices, but the partner countries face a slightly different situation, given that their analytical capacities to use existing information for the identification of skills is low. Donors developed a plethora of actions related to analysing skills demand, information that is then poorly analysed or stays at report level without further action. The ETF tries skills policy foresight (FRAME programme) rather than a forecast of skills and with a combination of several approaches in the skills identification. The ETF does not produce

data, but creates mechanisms of coordination to use the available information to draw conclusions on skills. The Skills Agenda also seeks to improve cooperation at economic sector level, which is extremely important for the partner countries, but by now they only develop skills sector councils for, in general, quite traditional sectors. There is still a lot to be done in this area.

Two types of challenges exist at this stage for the partner countries: to proceed with the implementation of the strategies and policies they already have and to combine the quick fixes with long-term interventions, mainly through a better use of their resources. The ETF could invest more on targeted actions for low skilled adults, on key competences (mainly in relation to qualifications frameworks and their implementation), on higher VET and on career guidance.

Bernard BRUNET (DG NEAR) was struck by the differences but also the similarities between the EU and the partner countries. Structural reforms are always difficult to implement, but clear indicators, clear objectives and a strong framework help policy makers to make progress in reforms, something the EC tries to integrate in its policy dialogue with the partner countries. Good strategies are not enough, it is important to implement them together with proper monitoring frameworks.

Update on the Slovak Presidency

Karol JAKUBIK (Slovakia) said that the highlight of the Presidency was of course the new Skills Agenda, and especially the former Skills Guarantee, now renamed Upskilling Pathways. Other topics of the Presidency concerned excellence in VET, which was the overall topic of the DGVT meeting. Under the EAfA, the Presidency focused on the introduction of apprenticeship schemes and other schemes of work-based learning. In addition, the Presidency strongly supported the fostering and development of talent starting from lower secondary education and even primary level. In December, work is still ongoing on the revision of Europass and of the EQF.

Updates on the upcoming Maltese Presidency

Manuel VELLA (Malta) introduced Malta to the audience, and explained the Maltese education system. He outlined the Presidency policies included in the agenda: the skills and mobility package, flexibility in transition between education and employment, digital technologies, refugee and migrant crises, and thinking beyond ET 2020. For schools, the exchange of good practice for better transition, inclusive education in relation to migrants and refugees, the follow up of the Paris Declaration and continuing professional development will be in focus. In the area of VET, the key topics will be access and permeability, and work based learning including apprenticeships. For higher education, the Presidency agenda will cover the modernisation of higher education, digital education and blended learning. A timetable with the different meetings was also presented.