



**NEW WAYS, EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES: THE MID-TERM  
EVALUATION OF THE EQUAL PROGRAMME FOR THE  
NETHERLANDS**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

This study was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment

Jaap de Koning  
José Gravesteyn-Ligthelm  
Linda van den Boom  
Hassel Kroes  
Mirco Goudriaan

SEOR  
Rotterdam, January 2004

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Content of the EQUAL programme and aim of this evaluation</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Content of the programme	1
1.2	Aim of the evaluation and data sources	3
<b>2</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1	Introduction process	4
2.2	Development partnerships and empowerment	5
2.3	Innovativeness	6
2.4	Transnational cooperation	7
2.5	Added value	8
2.6	Dissemination and mainstreaming	9
2.7	Summary table	10
<b>3</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>13</b>

# 1 CONTENT OF THE EQUAL PROGRAMME AND AIM OF THIS EVALUATION

## 1.1 CONTENT OF THE PROGRAMME

The EQUAL-initiative of the European Commission offers all EU Member the opportunity to cofinance projects that aim to develop *innovative approaches* in fighting discrimination and inequality in the labour market. The forms of discrimination and inequality dealt with may either involve certain categories of workers or the jobless, or both. The projects subsidized under the EQUAL programme are basically small-scale experiments. When the innovation developed in a project has proved successful, it is supposed to be incorporated in mainstream policy. This so called *mainstreaming* process will then imply the application of the innovation at a larger scale than the project.

Projects have to fall into one of the nine themes as defined by the Commission. There are four pairs of themes, each one forming a pillar. Only theme I stands alone.

### ***Employability***

- a. Facilitating access and return to the labour market for those who have difficulty in being integrated or reintegrated into a labour market which must be open to all;
- b. Combating racism and xenophobia in relation to the labour market;

### ***Entrepreneurship***

- c. Opening up the business creation process to all by providing the tools required for setting up in business and for the identification and exploitation of new possibilities for creating employment in urban and rural areas;
- d. Strengthening the social economy (the third sector), in particular the services of interest to the community, with a focus on improving the quality of jobs;

### ***Adaptability***

- e. Promoting lifelong learning and inclusive work practices which encourage the recruitment and retention of those suffering discrimination and inequality in connection with the labour market;
- f. Supporting the adaptability of firms and employees to structural economic change and the use of information technology and other new technologies;

### ***Equal opportunities for women and men***

- g. Reconciling family and professional life, as well as the reintegration of men and women who have left the labour market, by developing more flexible and effective forms of work organisation and support services;
- h. Reducing gender gaps and supporting job desegregation;

### ***Asylum-seekers***

- i. Helping the integration of asylum-seekers.

To improve the quality of the projects and to stimulate exchange of ideas between countries, projects have to cooperate with at least one foreign EQUAL project. This is called *transnational cooperation*.

EQUAL is the follow-up to the previous Community Initiatives ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT. The latter also focused on innovation, transnational cooperation and mainstreaming, but the experiences with these initiatives induced the Commission to carry through some important changes. Evaluations of ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT had shown that under these programmes mainstreaming only happened in dribs and drabs. In order to enhance mainstreaming under EQUAL, projects are obliged to establish development partnerships (DPs). A DP should involve key players in policy implementation that are interested in taking over the innovation. The involvement of potential users of the innovation is believed to lead to fine-tuning between the innovations and the needs of the users. One also expects the formation of DPs to facilitate the mainstreaming process. Under ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT mainstreaming only happened in dribs and drabs. Furthermore, projects should involve those targeted for support in their DP or find alternative ways to involve them in the governance of the project. This is called 'empowerment'.

Table 1 contains quantitative information on EQUAL, for the Dutch EQUAL programme as a whole as well as for each pillar separately. This table shows the number of projects that received a ministerial order (95 in total), the available budget (97 million EURO in total), the actual exploitation of the available budget (80,4 million EURO, or 83 percent of the available budget), the average number of DP partners (six for EQUAL as a whole), the average number of transnational partners (three for EQUAL as a whole) and the realised percentage of the aimed number of participants<sup>1</sup> (slightly more than one third of the planned number for EQUAL as a whole). Pillar I accounts for the largest number of projects as well as the largest part of the budget (approximately 40 percent). Pillars II, III and IV each takes care of one fifth of the projects. Pillar II represents the smallest share of the budget (13 percent), as a consequence of a comparatively low average subsidy per project. On the basis of the degree to which the planned number of participants has been realised, pillar III is the worst performer.

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: SEOR-survey of project managers of assigned projects, March-May 2003.

*Table 1 Quantitative survey of EQUAL projects (by pillar and averages by project)<sup>a)</sup>*

	Pillar I (Employability & Asylum-seekers)	Pillar II (Entrepreneurship)	Pillar III (Adaptability)	Pillar IV (Equal Opportunities for Women and Men)	Total
Total pillar:					
Total number of EQUAL projects	38	17	20	20	95
Available budget first round (million EURO)	38,7	15,6	21,5	21,2	97,0
Realised subsidy under provision Action 1 (million EURO) <sup>b)c)</sup>	1,2	0,4	0,7	0,7	2,9 <sup>d)</sup>
Allocated subsidy Action 2 (million EURO)	33,3	10,0	18,0	16,1	77,5 <sup>d)</sup>
Realised budget under provision Action 1 and 2	34,6 <sup>d)</sup>	10,4	18,6 <sup>d)</sup>	16,8	80,4
Project level:					
Average number of DP partners	5	6	7	5	6
Average number of transnational partners	3	3	3	2	3
<i>Projects with participants:</i>					
Realised percentage of planned number of participants (weighted average)	38%	48%	21%	28%	35%

a) *In this survey, theme 1 is classified under pillar I.*

b) *110 projects got subsidy for stage 1.*

c) *The above-mentioned amounts are provisional, since not all projects have received a ministerial order for stage 1 yet.*

d) *Total of this column does not add up to total sum, because of round-off differences.*

Source: *Database Agency SZW.*

*SEOR-survey of project managers of assigned projects, March-May 2003.*

## 1.2 AIM OF THE EVALUATION AND DATA SOURCES

This first mid-term evaluation aims to evaluate the Dutch EQUAL programme and to make recommendations for improvements. As it takes place relatively early during the programme implementation, the results can be used to improve the implementation of the second round of the programme. This evaluation concentrates on two aspects. Firstly, a detailed account is given of the introduction process, where we pay particular attention to the selection of the projects. Secondly, we give a description of the projects in which we concentrate on innovative content, the composition of the DPs and the way in which transnational cooperation and empowerment have been dealt with.

The most important sources used for this report are:

- A survey among project managers of rejected projects, July-August 2002.
- The project database of the agency to which the implementation of EQUAL: was outsourced ('Agentschap SZW'; we will refer to it as 'the Agency' in the remaining part of this summary).
- In-depth interviews with key figures, June-July 2002 and July-August 2003.
- A combined written and telephonical survey among the project managers of approved projects, March-May 2003.
- In-depth interviews with project managers of 30 selected projects, April-June 2003.
- Telephonical interviews with 50 DP members, June-August 2003.
- A written survey among the projects' participants, May 2003.

When we did the fieldwork for the study most projects were in an early stage of implementation. Therefore, we can only give preliminary results with respect to transnational cooperation, labour market effectiveness, added value of the innovation compared to mainstream policy, and dissemination and mainstreaming. Regarding transnational cooperation, dissemination and mainstreaming, we can only give an inventory of the agreements made. On the basis of the survey among participants a first picture is given of the characteristics of the participants and the usefulness of the projects for them. With respect to the added value of the projects compared to mainstream policies this report focuses on the question how this could be measured in the next evaluation. In this second evaluation, a number of points that has been examined for the first round (for example the selection procedure) could be evaluated for the second round. Measuring the results of the second round could then be combined with the ex-post evaluation.

## **2 CONCLUSIONS**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION PROCESS**

95 of the 243 projects that applied for cofinancing have been approved. The large amount of applications can among other things be attributed to the good information from the side of the Agency. Problems with the previous ESF programme for objective 3 probably also played a part, because these problems stimulated applicants to apply for EQUAL subsidy instead of ESF3 subsidy. But anyway there was something to choose. However, this was mainly the case for theme A ((re)integration) and E (education). For these themes the number of projects applying for a subsidy exceeded the number that could be approved on the basis of the available budget by far. For other themes, such as theme B (combating racism and xenophobia), the number of applications was small.

For the themes where the available funding was not sufficient to subsidize all the applying projects, projects have been selected on the basis of criteria regarding their content. Furthermore, the Agency used the expertise of external experts to judge the projects. These are potential improvements compared to ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT, where a 'first come, first served' philosophy was used. Unfortunately, these potential improvements have hardly been realised. Firstly, the selection criteria were applied in such a way that those essential to EQUAL, particularly innovative content and mainstreaming, hardly played any role in practice. As a result, a number of approved projects have a relatively low score on these points. No minimum requirements were

imposed on the projects<sup>2</sup>. This lack of minimum requirements even had more serious implications for the themes where low number of applications left no opportunities for the Agency to choose. In these cases sometimes even projects with a weak profile have been selected. The involvement of external experts did not work out as expected, mainly because many experts were staff members of the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (we will refer to it as 'the Ministry' in the remaining part of this summary) who did not consider themselves sufficiently competent in the concerning field. A number of them even refrained from giving advice. In other cases the Agency overruled the judgement of the external experts. Finally, we observe that projects were not systematically reviewed on gender mainstreaming (apart from themes G and H concerning equal opportunities for women and men). In spite of the intention to recruit external experts for this job, it never happened in practice.

The final ministerial orders were delayed and came about much later than planned in advance. Some projects received their ministerial order even very late. This is caused by a number of reasons. Firstly, one did not take into account that projects tend to submit their application at the latest possible date. Because the deadline was set late, the Agency had little time left for the selection process. Consequently, planning shifted up. Furthermore, capacity problems played a part on the side of the Agency. At the time, the Agency did not have an official status, which made it difficult for them to recruit additional staff. Another delaying factor was that initially many projects provided only part of the required data. Thirdly, the Netherlands did not make it easier for itself by including all nine themes in its EQUAL programme, which is not required by the European Commission. And finally, the relatively large number of projects that received a provisional ministerial order contributed to the high workload of the Agency. These last two points will play a part during the whole further implementation of the EQUAL programme.

The delay in issuing final ministerial orders caused a lot of uncertainty and stress for both applicants and as well as for other organisations (such as the ones involved in the DPs). As a result, especially smaller (commercial) organisations without a larger, institutionalised apparatus faced financial risks.

The high administrative burden is a general complaint of projects. In their view more energy is put in checking the rightfulness of the projects, than in reviewing their effectiveness and added value. In defence, the Agency emphasises that it has to obey the rules imposed by EQUAL and the control exercised by external supervisory organisations (e.g. Dutch Audit Office, Brussels). Given the constraints the Agency has to deal with, there are few possibilities to reduce the administrative requirements. Furthermore, it is impossible to assess projects on quality and results without a considerable amount of information. However, in our view it is still important to try and find ways to reduce the administrative burden for projects, as this burden may increasingly deter potential applicants in the future.

## **2.2 DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS AND EMPOWERMENT**

Although it is too early to determine whether the introduction of DPs effectively fosters mainstreaming of the innovations that are developed in the projects, our first impression is clearly positive. In the majority of the DPs, organisations are involved that, in

---

<sup>2</sup> Although projects had to fulfil the formal criteria set out by EQUAL.

principle, can take over the innovation and that can ensure mainstreaming. By far the most of the project managers are positive concerning the involvement and the role of the majority of DP partners. This involvement is also visible in the (relatively high) frequency of contacts. In a few DPs, DP partners play an active part in the project's implementation.

But this positive picture must be put in perspective. Firstly, 25 percent of the projects did not make any arrangements with respect to mainstreaming. This percentage is (too) high, even if one considers the fact that at the time the majority of projects do not have any concrete results. Secondly, 30 percent of the projects did not involve representatives of their target group(s) in the DP (or organisations that represent them), although this is one of the requirements of the EQUAL programme. This does not necessarily mean that a project does not comply with this requirement as it may also involve its clients directly in the project's governance. Thirdly, some projects have so many organizations represented in its DP, that it makes the DP hardly workable. Probably, only those organisations should be involved in the project that can play an important role in empowerment and mainstreaming, and no others.

Furthermore, projects have to spend a lot of time in finding suitable partners and in ensuring a well functioning DP. Compensating DP partners for the time invested in the project appears to be a major problem in practice. Although the rules allow for this kind of compensation, these are quite demanding from an administrative point of view. Some DP partners are of the opinion that the costs involved are so high that they decided to refrain from compensation. This illustrates once more the importance of looking critically to this legislation and considering simplification of this legislation on some points.

### **2.3 INNOVATIVENESS**

EQUAL distinguishes itself positively from its predecessors ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT, because EQUAL has a greater focus on specific target groups. These are either groups with a weak labour market position or groups that do not have any access to paid work at all, for instance specific groups disabled persons, specific groups minorities, persons seeking political asylum, etcetera. Even a pillar such as entrepreneurship, which has a relatively high percentage higher, educated participants, deals with specific groups. Focussing on specific groups is consistent with the central goal of EQUAL, i.e. developing relevant innovations to combat discrimination and inequalities on the labour market. Descriptions of ESF3 projects also give the impression that the EQUAL programme has a greater focus on specific target groups than the ESF3 programme. However, two remarks are in place. The first remark refers to the groups participating in EQUAL projects. With ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT it frequently happened that the group actually participating in the project differed from the target group defined in the project proposal. On the basis of a survey among of participants that gave us a very preliminary picture, our impression is that with EQUAL this is less the case. Our second comment is that we don't have detailed information on the characteristics of the participants of the ESF3 programme. Therefore, we cannot fully exclude the possibility that the participants in the EQUAL programme have similar characteristics as those taking part in the ESF3 programme. It seems very important to us to have a closer look at this point in the future.

Concerning the degree of innovativeness of the projects we don't see large differences between EQUAL on the one side and ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT on the other side. Just as ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT the degree of innovativeness of the projects seems to be limited. The majority of the projects are only innovative within a local or regional



context. Another observation is that many projects consist of a lot different activities. Often the degree of innovativeness of the individual activities is unclear. But owing to the big number of activities it is extremely difficult to determine the innovativeness of each activity separately. Project managers seem to think that: it is better not to focus on one activity, but to undertake as much activities as possible, because then there will always be one that succeeds. This also explains why most of the project managers find it difficult to specify what is new in their project. Even in the in-depth-interviews, where they could express themselves more easily this proved to be very difficult. It is striking, that no less than two-third of the project managers did not make any inquiries into what was going on elsewhere nor involved others for that purpose. It is only on the basis of their own experience that they claim that their own project is 'innovative'. However, we doubt whether the majority of the project managers have the disposal of such a broad view on the policy field involved. Even within the EQUAL programme, there are several projects that look similar to other EQUAL projects with respect to content and target groups. We admit that it can be useful to test various variants of the same idea and look afterwards which variant works best. But this requires some kind of co-ordination (for example to avoid that projects do exactly the same thing or to make sure that one is able to compare the results).

However, in spite of the limitations probably a few projects are truly innovative. These projects could lead to major improvements in important fields of policy. Because in EQUAL mainstreaming is better organised than in ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT, there is now a greater probability that these innovations will be used more effectively.

Finally we want to make the following comment about innovativeness. It is very difficult to get hold of the concept of innovation. Moreover, the European Commission neither defined the concept clearly, nor made suggestions for procedures to recognize and select innovative projects. The Dutch approach of this concept satisfies the guidelines set by the European Commission.

## **2.4 TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION**

Most projects place low priority on transnational cooperation. More priority is given to organising the DPs and to successfully implementing their own (national) activities. Owing to this, the transnational cooperation element has so far been less successful for EQUAL than it was for its predecessors ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT. Possibly, projects will have more time for transnational cooperation in a later stage of the project. However, then, it will be more difficult to reinforce the cooperation with the foreign partners later. Therefore it is possible that transnational cooperation will remain a less important aspect in the EQUAL programme. Based on experiences with EMPLOYMENT this would be a loss for at least some types of projects. During the EMPLOYMENT-programme, transnational cooperation proved to have a positive effect on the quality-level of projects. Managers of EQUAL projects themselves are mainly positive about the benefits of transnational cooperation. However this positive attitude seems to be based on the potential benefits of transnational cooperation rather than the actual cooperation at this point in time.

According to the project managers a bottleneck in transnational cooperation is that different countries use different deadlines with respect to the delivery of the transnational partnership agreements. In the Netherlands the deadline was relatively late. Owing to this fact, a number of projects were too late for an agreement with their initially intended partners. This can also reduce the benefits of transnational cooperation.

With respect to the kind of cooperation, projects most often mention less intensive forms of cooperation such as exchange of knowledge and experiences. Working together on a common goal or implementing each other's methods is mentioned less often, although these cooperation forms are still mentioned by a rather large part of the projects. These more intensive forms of cooperation are accompanied by higher expectations of the benefit entailed by transnational cooperation by project managers. The same applies to the existence of a functional allocation of tasks between partners. These relationships however do not necessarily prove that more intensive forms of cooperation yield more benefits. It is also possible that projects that expect more benefits from transnational cooperation put more effort to it. In principle, EQUAL demands for every project a 'transnational product' as a result of cooperation. So far a rather high percentage of projects do not seem to have defined such a product.

## **2.5 ADDED VALUE**

Mainstreaming of innovations seems useful only when it leads to an improvement of the already existing policies. Therefore it is important to evaluate projects on their added value compared to existing policies initiatives with similar goals. Ex ante, with a programme such as EQUAL, one cannot expect all projects to succeed. Experiments can (and are allowed to) fail. At most, one can expect the overall benefits of the successful projects too exceed the costs of all projects (including the costs of the non-successful projects). One might even impose this on every single theme.

It has to be said that activities of self-evaluation planned by projects are generally insufficient to measure the added value of projects. Even basic results (such as the transition rate to jobs in case of reintegration projects for the jobless) are often not measured. We have studied the extent to which the EQUAL-evaluation could contribute to measuring the added value of projects. In view of this we looked in detail how information can be obtained about the results of projects and how benchmark analysis could be carried out to make the comparison with mainstream policy.

A survey among participants of projects is the main source of information. For a large number of projects (roughly one-third) the same questionnaire can be used as the one that was used in this interim evaluation, extended with some project specific questions. In addition, existing sources such as the Monitor Comprehensive Approach (MCA) can serve as a benchmark for a reasonably large number of projects (assuming the data is made available by the owner –in the case of MCA this is the Ministry). However, the fact remains that performing benchmark analyses on all projects is a labour-intensive activity and often requires a project-specific approach. With respect to a number of projects only a qualitative approach is possible owing to their specific character such as aiming on improvements of 'systems'.

At the time the evaluation was carried out, the implementation of most projects had not progressed enough to enable us to measure their results reliably. A survey among participants of projects was held to get a first impression of the results for EQUAL as a whole. The results from this survey confirm the strong emphasis of projects on specific target groups. Furthermore, the survey showed that the vast majority of participants find participation useful or very useful. For the relatively small group of people that already left a project (less than 25 percent of the total number of participants). This difference remains when we make a correction for differences in personal and project characteristics. Probably, the explanation for this result is that a participant knows best what the effects of the projects are after completion of the project. Based on the results we estimate that for 30 percent of the participants that left the project, their situation

improved compared to the situation before participation. We are unable to determine the extent to which this improvement is due to the project, and what the improvement would have been when participating in a mainstream policy measure. This is why a benchmark analysis is so important.

Although the response to the survey among participants was reasonable (a total response of 350 out of 23 projects) the cooperation of both projects and participants has been disappointing. In the paragraph on recommendations we will return to the question how this can be improved in future evaluations. The low response is also a reason for considering the results as preliminary.

## **2.6 DISSEMINATION AND MAINSTREAMING**

To begin with we observe that not everyone involved knows the meaning of the terms dissemination and mainstreaming. Some project managers consider both terms as synonyms, meaning 'providing information on the project'. Others consider mainstreaming to be the dissemination of concepts. An example of this is a project, which aims at improving the position of senior workers in the labour market by influencing the attitude of employers, employees and others concerning senior workers. The manager of this project considered realising this aim itself to be mainstreaming. However, setting up a local agency, that tried to influence local society about senior workers through all kinds of activities, was the true innovative aspect of this project. In this case mainstreaming would mean setting up such an agency in other regions after it has proved successful in the project.

Compared to ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT a clear improvement of EQUAL is that the Ministry is more in control over dissemination and mainstreaming. To achieve this higher level of control both a special commission on mainstreaming as well as National Thematic Networks (NTN's) have been appointed. In addition, an instrument (the 'screening fiche') to identify good practices is under development. The mainstream commission wants the NTN's (most of which have just started) to play an important role in this process. Members of the NTN's indicate they are not yet entirely sure about the role of the mainstream commission. The same is true for some aspects, such as the development of the screening fiche, of the role to be played by the NTN's and their own role in the process. Also it is not clear what they can expect from the Agency as to the supply of information about projects. More communication on these subjects between the mainstream commission and the NTN's is needed.

So far, there has hardly been any dissemination and mainstreaming. Most projects have simply not yet reached the stage at which dissemination and mainstreaming make sense. However, at this stage one does expect from projects to have developed at least a good idea about how to handle both aspects. However, on the basis of our results, we conclude that as yet a considerable percentage of the projects (approximately 25 percent) did not think these matters well through. They seem to assume that mainstreaming will happen automatically through the DP, which is doubtful. Three out of four projects, however, made arrangements with the DP, which might be expected to play an active role in dissemination and mainstreaming of the results.

In a number of interviews the aspect of property rights has come up. Especially when a commercial organisation carries out the project and invests in it, the tendency is to keep the results of the project for one's own. This, of course, is not favourable to mainstreaming. This is an important point that should be further investigated as in the Netherlands implementation of labour market policies is increasingly outsourced to the

private agencies. From the point of view of mainstream it would be desirable that a public organisation takes care of the cofinancing and that the information on the innovations developed is generally accessible.

## **2.7 SUMMARY TABLE**

Table 2 gives an overview of the most important outcomes.

Table 2

	Source	Outcomes
Introduction phase	<p>Analysis project database of the Agency, January 2002;</p> <p>SEOR-survey among project managers of rejected projects, July-August 2002;</p> <p>In-depth interviews with key figures, June-July 2002;</p> <p>SEOR-survey among project managers of approved projects, March-May 2003;</p> <p>In-depth interviews with project managers of 30 selected projects, April-June 2003.</p>	<p>The supply of information by the Agency has been well organised and contributed to the large amount of proposals. The potential improvements of the selection procedure (relevant criteria plus use of experts from outside) however did not work out very well. The main themes 'innovation' and 'mainstreaming' played only a minor role in the selection for phase 1. For example, the aspect of innovation has been a decisive factor in only 10 percent of the proposals.</p> <p>General complaint by project managers is the administrative burden, which according to them is too high. This may scare away potential proposals in the future. It has to be said that the administrative burden is partly due to European rules from Brussels. The Agency has to follow these rules and thereby is limited in its freedom of action.</p>
Development Partnerships (DP) and empowerment	<p>SEOR-survey among project managers of approved projects, March-May 2003;</p> <p>In-depth interviews with project managers of 30 selected projects, April-June 2003;</p> <p>Telephonical interviews with 50 DP members, June-August 2003.</p>	<p>First impression is positive. Most project managers are satisfied about the involvement and cooperation within the DP.</p> <p>Some remarks based on the survey among project managers: 25 percent of the projects does not have made agreements about the strategy on mainstreaming, 30 percent does not have representatives of their target group involved in their DP. The latter however does not necessarily imply there is no empowerment since target groups can also be involved on the client level. Based on the interviews with project managers and representatives of other organisations it appears that some find the size of the DP too large. This has a negative impact on the functioning of the DP. Apart from that DP partners also find the administrative burden of EQUAL time-consuming and demanding.</p>
Innovative level	<p>SEOR-survey among project managers of approved projects, March-May 2003;</p> <p>In-depth interviews with project managers of 30 selected projects, April-June 2003;</p> <p>Telephonical interviews with 50 DP members, June-August 2003;</p> <p>Project bundle.</p>	<p>The innovative level of projects under EQUAL seems limited. Most projects are innovative in a local/regional context or for a specific target group at most. There was not many research carried out by third parties on demand of projects to determine the innovative level of their project. Nonetheless there are some projects that seem very innovative.</p> <p>It has to be said that innovation is a very difficult concept to grasp. The European Commission does not define it, nor did the Commission make suggestions on how to recognize and select innovative projects. The way the Netherlands handled the concept is in line with the existing guidelines.</p>

*Table 2*

	Source	Outcomes
Transnational cooperation	SEOR-survey among project managers of approved projects, March-May 2003; In-depth interviews with project managers of 30 selected projects, April-June 2003; Telephonical interviews with 50 DP members, June-August 2003.	The impression exists that transnational cooperation plays a less important role in EQUAL compared to especially EMPLOYMENT. Projects rather spend more time on the DP. This is a loss since transnational cooperation proved itself useful during the EMPLOYMENT-programme.  A bottleneck is the fact that there were different deadlines in different member states regarding the delivery of the transnational partnership agreements. In the Netherlands the deadline was relatively late. As a consequence a number of projects was too late for an agreement with their initially intended partners.
Added value of EQUAL projects	In-depth interviews with project managers of 30 selected projects, April-June 2003; Telephonical interviews 50 DP members, June-August 2003; Reference material.	To determine the added value of EQUAL projects compared to mainstream policy it is necessary to evaluate projects. It seems that the self-evaluation activities as planned by projects generally are insufficient to measure this added value. A combination of a survey among project participants and a benchmark analysis (for example by means of the MCA) seems one way to determine the added value.
Dissemination & Mainstreaming	SEOR-survey among project managers of approved projects, March-May 2003; In-depth interviews with project managers of 30 selected projects, April-June 2003; Telephonical interviews with 50 DP members, June-August 2003. In-depth interviews with key figures, July-August 2003.	The Ministry is more in control of these two aspects, which is an improvement compared to ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT. More communication however is needed between the mainstream commission, the NTN's and projects. At this moment, most projects are paying little attention to dissemination and mainstreaming, because they are still in an early stage. In addition, it appears that about 25 percent of the projects still does not have made sufficient arrangements about dissemination and mainstreaming.
Gender mainstreaming	Interviews with key figures, July-August 2003.	Based on the guidelines from the community initiative EQUAL, project proposals ought to be judged on gender mainstreaming (in addition to innovative level). In practice, this did not take place (apart from pillar 4: Equal Opportunities).

### 3 RECOMMENDATIONS

In the second round of EQUAL the selection procedure should be adjusted in such a way that those projects are selected that are most promising in terms of innovative content and mainstreaming. A project proposal should only be accepted if there is reasonable certainty that a new tool, measure or instrument will be developed that differs sufficiently from existing practices. Furthermore, there must be sufficient reason to expect that this new approach is more effective or efficient than existing ones. With respect to mainstreaming, proposals should contain sufficient guarantees for the involvement of committed DP partners, which are either themselves able to apply the innovation on a larger scale or can induce other actors to do that. Obviously, also the other requirements set by regulation have to be satisfied (for example regarding transnational cooperation and empowerment).

It is recommendable to involve experts from outside in the selection phase. The external experts involved in the NTN's can play a role in this. However, in our view a good judgment of innovative content for each theme requires a larger group of experts. This will raise the costs of the selection process, but these higher costs may be outweighed by better project results owing to a better selection of projects. Perhaps already during the information phase preceding the selection, communication towards potential projects is needed about the importance of focussing on a single aspect or a few aspects in which the project really deviates from mainstream policy (and from other EQUAL projects). Projects must be able to indicate clearly what is new about their project. Furthermore, projects must be required to give sufficient evidence that they are aware of what is going on elsewhere in the same policy field. Indicating 'we know this from our own experience' is insufficient.

Reducing the number of themes can be considered. The current EQUAL programme seems to advocate the idea of 'letting hundred flowers blossom'. It is true that EQUAL is less one-sided 'bottom-up' than ADAPT and EMPLOYMENT and that it contains a few large projects that have a 'top-down' approach. We believe that the share of such larger projects in the programme should be increased. One would expect that organisations, responsible for labour market policy know the deficits of current policy and that they are able to indicate where innovations are needed most. This does not only apply to the Ministry, but also to organisations such as UWV<sup>3</sup>, municipalities and branch organisations. Also independent experts can participate in identifying aspects of current policy where innovation is needed most. This means that the selection process in EQUAL must be preceded by a phase in which weaknesses in mainstream policy are identified.

A weakness in the current design of EQUAL is the lack of good procedures for determining whether a project delivers added value compared to the existing policies. The screening fiche is a good start, but it is not sufficient. This mid-term evaluation shows that the activities planned by projects for self-evaluation are in most cases insufficient to get a reasonable estimate of this added value. This can partly be overcome by the evaluation of the entire EQUAL programme. However, it would be preferable if evaluation were part of the projects in such a way that at the end of every project we would know whether its added value is positive or not. To achieve this, every project plan should contain a section about how to determine this added value. We recommend that project approval would depend on such a plan. This means for that matter that projects

---

<sup>3</sup> The institution that takes care of social insurances of employees.

should get support with planning and implementing the evaluation. Support is also needed in finding a benchmark from current policy to determine the added value of projects. In principle, DP partners that are interested in implementing the innovation should be able to deliver the benchmark.

It is possible to give examples of projects that are likely to improve current policy measures. For example, the Netherlands lack a good profiling system for unemployed people. The current system does not work well enough. Such a system is needed to determine at an early stage of the unemployment period whether clients are in high risk of long-term unemployment and which interventions are needed to reintegrate them. Furthermore this information may serve as a source for setting targets regarding the placement results for reintegration companies (in the Netherlands the implementation of reintegration activities is largely outsourced to private companies). The development of a profiling system would be very suitable for EQUAL. However, it is only one of the possible projects. Furthermore there is the possibility to scan policy measures of other countries for initiatives which are new for the Netherlands and which seem useful, possibly after adjustment for the Dutch situation.

The high administrative burden is a general complaint. The problems with the preceding ESF-programme for objective 3 have led to a stronger emphasis on rightfulness. The Ministry and the Agency have to follow the guidelines set out by the Dutch Audit Office and 'Brussels'. Possibly this has gone a bit too far. However we realise that it is too easy to suggest that everything can be made much simpler. We believe that with respect to evaluation, the requirements should be even tighter. On the other hand we acknowledge that the complaints of projects are justified. We fear that the administrative burden will scare away potential applicants in the future. Also, we should consider the possibility that only those organisations will submit a proposal that are more able to fulfil formal requirements, but that are less able to develop good, innovative ideas.

What can be done? We think of more support by the Ministry, the Agency and other partners (particularly those involved in the mainstreaming process). When a new idea seems of great importance for improving existing policy, the parties involved should aim for a design of the experiment in such a way that it will result in a clear conclusion about its added value. Then in most cases the number of partners in the DP does not have to be so large, which saves time in finding DP partners and making the DP function. Furthermore the involved parties should give support to the evaluation design and to finding a good benchmark. Such an experimental design might imply that per project more financial resources are needed. All these remarks point to a design of EQUAL in which the focus is on a smaller number of carefully prepared experiments or where at least a substantial part of the financial resources is spent on this kind of experiments.

For the current EQUAL projects it will be difficult, if not impossible to incorporate the type of evaluation activities in the projects that would be needed to assess their added value as yet. It is recommendable though, to require at least the presence of an administration system that contains sufficient information about the participants. Although this is already prescribed in the EQUAL regulations, a considerable number of projects do not possess such a data system. In the following interim evaluation it will be possible then to send a questionnaire to participants of all projects that involve participants. For most projects a survey among participants is the most important source of information about the results. The number of cases in which such a survey is not sufficient, is small. We recommend that the Agency and the Ministry inform project managers as soon as possible about (a) the upcoming survey, (b) the fact that relating to this they have to keep an administration system of participants (if they have any) and (c) that they are obligated to take part in the survey. When the survey starts, arrangements



can be made with each single project about the way the survey will be held. It is important that the participants will be approached in such a way that the response is as high as possible. The best approach must be discussed with each individual project separately.

The most important recommendations are summed up in box 1.

***Box.1 Most important recommendations interim evaluation EQUAL***

---

- More attention to innovation and mainstreaming in the selection phase and in addition to that a greater involvement of experts from outside.
  - Greater involvement of national policy makers with respect to the design of projects.
  - Requirement that every project plan contains a section about how to determine the added value of the project.
  - Development of a profiling system for unemployed people as an example of a project with a potential national aim.
  - Reduce the administrative burden through more intensive support by the Ministry, the Agency and other partners (particularly those involved in the mainstreaming process).
  - Possible design of EQUAL: smaller number of carefully prepared experiments with a higher available budget.
-