

## Trainings-Action Strategies in Portugal | SME

Gerir, Conhecer e Intervir



PROGRAMA OPERACIONAL DE  
ASSISTÊNCIA TÉCNICA  
FUNDO SOCIAL EUROPEU



GOVERNO DA REPÚBLICA  
PORTUGUESA



UNIÃO EUROPEIA  
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# Abreviations

<b>AEP</b>	Portuguese Business Association
<b>AIMinho</b>	Business Association of Minho Region
<b>AIP</b>	Portuguese Industrial Association
<b>CAP</b>	Confederation of Portuguese Farmers
<b>CCP</b>	Portuguese Commerce and Services Confederation
<b>CEC/CCIC</b>	Entrepreneurial Council of Centro / Chamber of Commerce and Industry Centro
<b>CEDEFOP</b>	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
<b>CSF</b>	Community Support Framework
<b>EEE</b>	European Employment Strategy
<b>EO</b>	Equality of Opportunities
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>GE</b>	Gender Equality
<b>IAPMEI</b>	Portuguese Agency for SME and Innovation
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technologies
<b>IEFP</b>	Institute of Employment and Vocational Training
<b>INE</b>	Statistics Portugal
<b>MPP</b>	Logical Framework Matrix
<b>NSRF</b>	National Strategic Reference Framework
<b>PAIPDI</b>	Action Plan for the Integration of People with Disabilities or Impairments
<b>PEIS</b>	EU Social Inclusion Process
<b>PNAI</b>	National Action Plan for Inclusion
<b>PNE</b>	National Plan for Employment
<b>PNI</b>	National Plan for Equality
<b>POEFDS</b>	Operational Programme for Employment, Training and Social Development
<b>POPH</b>	Human Potential Operational Programme
<b>QCA</b>	Community Support Framework
<b>QREN</b>	National Strategic Reference Framework
<b>SME</b>	Small and Medium Enterprise
<b>SWOT</b>	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
<b>TAOP</b>	Technical Assistance Operational Programme

# Presentation

This publication is the practical and visible outcome of a research project/study successfully submitted by Quaternaire Portugal to the Technical Assistance Operational Programme (TAOP) under the scope of the European Social Fund (ESF).

The Training-Action projects are part of ESF intervention heritage over the last three programming cycles of Community support. Throughout that period, the intervention model and the methodological strategies followed have consolidated and specialised on a sectorial basis, thus shaping several intervention programmes whose guiding approaches had a growing specific identity.

Within ESF, Training-Action as a model consisted in a conceptual break in terms of training interventions; it became the main paradigm of the effort to bring the training responses close to the enterprises' development needs, particularly to micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

On the verge of the final stage of the third Community programming cycle where the (co)financing of such programmes was framed, it is today possible to say that the methodological evolution and the practical learning achieved in the meantime are significant. Nonetheless, a lot of that learning has been confined to the players involved, namely to those who took part in the conception, in the implementation and in the evaluation of this type of programmes, and it is rendered formal in the methodological roadmaps and in the working instruments created by the managing entities.

The organisation of the achievements reached in the different experiences and, mostly, the intersection of the learning outcomes was yet to fulfil.

Over the last few years, Quaternaire Portugal coordinated and joined several external evaluation studies which assessed the Training-Action programmes supported by ESF; consequently, this publication aims above all to capitalise and reflect on the experience accumulated by Quaternaire Portugal in terms of evaluation of Training-Action<sup>[1]</sup> projects and programmes managed by a great diversity of promoters (especially entrepreneurial associations) spread all over the national territory.

In societies and public administrations with a weak culture of accountability, just as prevails in the economies in Southern Europe, the evaluation practices tend to be fragile and are not taken into consideration in the normal political decision-making processes.

This publication is not the outcome of a meta-evaluation exercise; instead, Quaternaire Portugal's proposal is to write a think piece both conceptual and methodological where the main theoretical streams confront the existing practice and with the results from the external evaluation processes, so to indicate in which direction the Training-Action model can follow.

This exercise was possible due to TAOP-ESF support and due to the availability of several intervenents in the system (Intermediate Bodies, Entrepreneurial Confederations, Financing Bodies,...) to participate in a collaborative reflection. In fact, such possibility respects one of the fundamental principles of Quaternaire Portugal's organisational culture – to transfer the accumulated knowledge through a reflexive praxis.

Apart from this presentation, the publication is organised as follows:

- Chapter 1 places the Training-Action model within the public policies on business support;
- Chapter 2 expands the distinctive identity that characterises Training-Action;
- Chapter 3 describes the evolution path followed by Training-Action in Portugal;
- Chapter 4 presents a roadmap of critical subjects;

Finally, chapter 5 anticipates which room for improvement the Training-Action model has.

At last, thanks are due to all the intervenents in Training-Action Programmes who used different means to share their own participant or managerial experience, hence enriching this publication.

<sup>1</sup> Some of these studies were developed in partnership with the team from IESE (Institute for Social and Economic Studies).

# 1. Background of the model within the public policies on business support

The conformity between the vocational training processes and the business strategies and needs has been under questioning by the public policies on vocational training. In a system clearly dominated by the (public and private) training offer and where the demand expresses itself so poorly, the co-financed vocational training is often pointed out as accepted, rather than desired and understood by the enterprises as an investment that must produce a compatible return when compared to the investment effort. This criticism obviously calls in the training providers that have done much to minimise that problem. The efforts towards a better identification of the business needs and the search for offers which match those needs may well be credited in the system's favour. In fact, the growing number of enterprises, especially larger ones, relying on training without co-financing may be inspirational in the search for solutions to design training offers that correspond to a more effective match with the business needs. It is likely that such enterprises, whether they organise that training themselves or hire a regular training service according to their needs, develop practices to identify the needs and tend to consider those processes as an investment needy of return.

It is under this tendency that the increase in the in-company training market, for instance, should be interpreted; it is after all a straighter modality that comes closer to the real business needs and it is also a way to produce on-the-job training, thus ensuring a better conformity between training for the qualifications and training for the individual and organisational competencies. It is acknowledgeable that the proliferation of the Information and

Communication Technologies (ICT) in the training processes enables, in certain areas, the creation of training environments which can be considered quite acceptable recreations of the work station (simulation-based training). Still, even when the context is favourable from a technological point of view, the enterprises appreciate on-the-job training better because it reduces transaction costs (namely the travelling time) and enables a better contextualisation of the training environments.

In our opinion, Training-Action belongs to that broad and diverse process of bringing the training and the business needs closer together.

Regardless of the rare deflections or counterproductive aspects that may assist the real dynamic of the Training-Action programmes, we are facing a training model based on a strategic identification of business problems. Having this conception grounding immediately favours better conditions for the match between vocational training offer and demand (needs). Plus, the purpose of the model is to stimulate training and while it fosters the creation of tailor-made solutions for the actual business needs, it does not ignore that pre-existing standard training products may yet correspond to certain needs.

As in all processes, Training-Action is not free from oversimplifying vulgarities that may very well betray its innovative founding principles. It is a demanding model that requires a constructive dialogue between the person responsible for the strategic and operational analysis to the company and the person responsible for creating training products adjusted to the business needs detected during that analysis. The most frequent vice is the possibility for those two levels to fail to understand each other. So, hereto some multidisciplinarity is required, in the sense that it brings a more interactive vision regarding the areas that must intersect. To be more specific, the strategic analysis of the enterprise must be conversant with the training potentiality to intervene in that context and the training engineering must be familiar with the business strategy, so to facilitate a better integration between the two domains. These conditions do not depend upon the recruitment of super consultants and training programmers. They are achieved through processes that organise the knowledge interaction. They are an organisational challenge and Training-Action does not escape that challenge.

It is not our intention to insinuate that only Training-Action is capable of guaranteeing a better articulation between training products and processes and business needs. All continuing training modalities have to respond to that challenge and provided that the market works, the training offer valued the most shall be the exact same one that provides a better answer to that problem. In other words, Training-Action bases its fundamental principles in a model that focuses its action in that matching, in the search for conformity logic between strategic and operational intervention (consultancy) in the enterprise and continuing training practices. The latter may be the root of the problem under intervention, but they may also result from technical needs raised by the strategic and operational intervention themselves.

Attached to this specificity are certainly costs, time and governance requirements, as these programmes cannot be understood outside the Training-Action context. Sometimes, the comparison between costs, length and organisational complexity is interpreted with an excessive mechanistic lens, leading to vulgarisations of the Training-Action, so such interpretations face the serious risk of mischaracterising this training modality and killing its differentiating factors.

In order to provide a proper background on Training-Action, another dimension has to be addressed: what is the role taken by Training-Action within the public policies on SMEs support.

It is a classic issue which is quite often addressed in the literature. SMEs, especially those whose activity sector is low on knowledge intensity, pose a traditional challenge for the public policies, mainly when it comes to their potential to absorb the policy instruments. It is especially in non-integrated public policy models, in other words, models organised according to a very diverse range of policy instruments, that SMEs reveal high difficulties to integrate that panoply of instruments in their organisational crumb. Serious problems related to time, organisation and technical skills availability hamper that absorption capacity. Well, the public policies systems do not always present the necessary organisation and national coverage in order to offer SMEs the integrated intervention they wish to receive. Quite often, that desired integration is replaced by an excessive sectorialisation whose division requires resources that the SME does not have. Some progresses can be made, for instance in terms of assuring a single entrance point for the SMEs projects,

but seldom is that front office integration followed by a back office integration.

Other well known evidence is SMEs' lower propensity to invest and take part in continuing training courses. The reasons are similar in nature to the ones adduce in the previous dimension. The critical mass of human resources is scarce and the businessman role is vital to convince the SME and to coordinate the efforts and resources that the participation in such a training process demands.

There are several modalities capable of relieving the weight of this deviation and of countering that low propensity. The cluster approach is certainly one of them and an analysis to European best practices shows that, in the top dynamic and referred clustering processes, vocational training for SMEs is a relevant tool for the enterprises' dynamic efficiency. In those circumstances, it is the inter-enterprises interaction logic within the cluster that stimulates SMEs access to training, hence inducing powerful demonstration and imitation effects that shall overcome the structural factors responsible for diminishing the demand for training.

Still, one of the decisive instruments to counter those structural disincentives is keeping the SME entrepreneur involved. Without his/her awareness and involvement it is practically impossible to fight the disincentives previously mentioned.

Given this context, Training-Action provides interesting responses on how to approach SMEs.

To begin with, it may encourage more integrated ways to approach their main strategic challenges. The consultancy stage, when the strategic and operational analysis is carried out, offers a wide performance field in that area. It may very well counter the dispersive tendency that necessarily assists the SMEs attempt to get access to a multiplicity of public policy instruments. In addition, it may also provide the integrating benchmark that the SME needs to resist the dispersive temptation, by giving advice on which nuclear instruments to assemble in order to solve its problems.

Moreover, with Training-Action the SME entrepreneur can perform a starring role both in the implementation of the desired strategy and in the

consciousness of all the advantages there is to use training as a resource to complete the remaining endeavours under the scope of organisational development.

The organisational architecture assumed over time on the field by the Training-Action programmes favours that a wide range of SMEs may join the process. However, it is obvious that if the network of Intermediate Bodies and beneficiary entities crystallises and abandons the demanding task of creating a new SME demand, all the potential may be lost. The crystallisation of processes is risky because it may naturally lead to a limited capacity to take training to more and more SMEs. It is not, however, an inevitable perversity. It will always be possible to introduce a reasoning where the financing depends upon the results and these are measured according to the number of new entrepreneurs and SMEs mobilised into the programmes. It is therefore crucial to avoid the referred crystallisation of processes and prevent it from being converted into poorly competitive environments in the Intermediate Bodies, beneficiary entities, consultants and trainers.



## 2. The model's identity within the public policies on vocational training

The origin of the Training-Action programmes relies on the following general objective: to ensure a broaden participation of the SMEs in qualification procedures and reinforce their involvement in the policy instruments that guide the public investment in vocational training. Simultaneously, it situates the objective of placing the vocational training strategies in line with these enterprises' needs and specificities. This generic proposition was then translated in detail into a strategic framework, stressing the following needs:

- Implement in-company training so to restrain the accrued negative impact of the workers' absence on the productive capacity of the small business structures;
- Make the most of the competencies-based approach, in detriment to a content-based approach, supported on the association between training and the workplace;
- Persuade professionals with a strong business experience to develop the training, provided that they gather the best possible answers to the resolution of the enterprises' real problems.
- This brief strategic enunciation clearly places the Training-Action programmes in the field of the vocational training instruments. That is where its identity belongs and where the starting point for the current analysis locates.

This approach reveals not only an intention to break with the traditional models of continuing vocational training, but also the recognition that a higher efficacy in terms of development and transfer of competencies brings to light the shortcomings of theoretical in-room training, even more so in this business universe. These shortcomings reflect, on the one hand, the difficulty in adjusting the pedagogic process to the learning methods that better suit this specific audience and, on the other hand, the difficulty in identifying the exact competencies that need to be developed. The focus lines that have been identified consist in requirements for a better contextualisation of the training activity in the actual workplace.

This enunciation is clearly stated by the first generation of Training-Action programmes, framed in the “Pilot Programme on Training for SME” (created in 1996), including the Sub programmes REDE - Consultancy, Training and Support to the Management of Small and Medium Enterprises, coordinated by the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training, the Programme In PME, coordinated by the Portuguese Industrial Association, and the Programme Formação PME, coordinated by the Oporto Industrial Association, as it was called at the time.

These are the pioneering formats for the current programmatic line; consequently, it is of utmost relevance to the discussion in question to highlight the strategic foundations embraced in the creation of those formats.

With the purpose of recovering the action guidelines for those programmes, we call to this brief analysis some of the strategic and organisational coordinates adopted at the time. Those coordinates provide an illustrative representation of the approach underneath the programmes.

Firstly, the Pilot Programme grants nuclear importance to the development of the managing role and, as a consequence, to the entrepreneurs' involvement in the strategies to develop competencies. The reference to the competencies is not innocuous, from a methodological point of view; in fact, it reveals the Programme's ambition in adding value to the learning strategies developed under the scope of the continuing training, whose organisation was based on conventional approaches – in class and using content-based training norms –, rarely assuring that the competencies required by the enterprises were actually learned. In other words, the Programme prioritises the need to invest

on the qualification of the managerial role in SMEs and it recognises that the training practices to date did not guarantee the desired efficacy in terms of development of competencies.

Secondly, the Programme explains the choice for an integrated approach encompassing dimensions such as diagnosis, preparation of an action plan and Training-Action in the enterprise. The enterprise's global approach and how these tools are combined and put into practice constitute strategic resources stressed by the Training-Action programmes. The combined use of training and consultancy/advice methodologies is also explicit. Taken together, the incorporated instruments make it possible to develop in a single intervention almost the entire training cycle: diagnosis, planning, training and assessment. The integration of the assessment component only gained higher explicitness in the current programmes. This approach promotes the articulation between the planning and implementation components.

Still at the level of the action guidelines, training-advice is definitely the key-element to put the Training-Action concept into practice.

It is worth recovering some of the references that explain better, as far as the programmatic formalisation is concerned, how the use of training and advice was framed; the expression consultancy is commonly used as an alternative to the word advice, leaving some room for ambiguity concerning what the concept conveyed. It is important to mention that the advice function was developed from the entrepreneur, so to ensure a comprehensive approach to the enterprise's reality, and it was accepted (as the Evaluation Study on the "Pilot Programme on Training for SME" clearly stated) that not only the dimensions training and advice were articulated, but the advice component had a pedagogic intention.

However, the advice activity (consultancy), the defining arm of the model, is characterised by a significant ambiguity in terms of understandings and practices, thus becoming a real Gordian knot for the model's implementation. It is either considered as an advising activity, focused on the development of competencies, or considered a consultancy activity, that agrees on an exogenous approach to promote change through the incorporation of advising services. The training-advice methodology (consultancy), an idiosyncrasy of the founding model, does not seem to have reached an adequate level of

consolidation and consensus throughout the programme's course of implementation. According to our interpretation of the orientation given at its origin, the proposed programmatic framework refers to the concept of Training-Action discussed later on.

Concerning the programme's global organisation model, the intensification of the network performance is worthy of distinction; that logic is disseminated from a chain of agents run by the management Intermediate Bodies. That chain of agents relies on the network of business associations as a fundamental link for the Programme's national dissemination and it is simultaneously a fundamental pillar for the articulation with the economic activity and the enterprises' mobilisation. The last level of the implementation chain consists in the model of subcontracting training and consultancy services applied by the network of associations. The logic behind the functioning of the implementation chain strongly encourages the externalisation of activities inherent to the Programme's execution, thus disclosing the empowerment of the associative scene as a sideline.

Lastly, regarding the training organisation, it is important to mention that the Pilot Programme defines as assumptions the identification of the consultant-trainer profile, stressing the importance of his/her business experience and the fact that the training is developed according to the advising approach.

As regards a critical reflection on the model and on its inclusion in the range of vocational training policies, three identity aspects assume an increased interest due to the challenges they pose on the operationalisation side: the Training-Action methodologies, the competencies perspective when planning the training and the integration of all the different action plans provided. These aspects are considered determinant for the model's consolidation and, for that reason, catch the attention in the following stage of our reflection.

The terms ruling the approach proposed by the funding statement of the Training-Action programmes refer to some theoretical concepts that try to emphasise pedagogic models that, in turn, tend to demarcate themselves from the traditional training logics. At a more conceptual level, these can be referred to the concepts of Training-Action, on-the-job learning and coaching, for example.

The Training-Action concept postulates that learning is the outcome of experiential activity, i.e., of actual doing, which is oriented by the purpose of solving a problem or carrying out a defined project. According to this perspective, the time to train and the time to do come up as overlapping activities, so the learning is built as the action develops and unfolds into related interactions. Training-Action takes place in context and it is guided to ensure know-how, although the required knowledge and behavioural learning resources are not neglected, and it privileges the perspective of the development of competencies. According to Guy Le Boterf “Training-Action is a training modality that tries to come as close as possible to the construction of competencies. Through its achievement in problem or real projects solving, Training-Action is actually a privileged opportunity to experiment the combination and mobilisation of pertinent resources (knowledge, know-how, ...) to create and use competencies (1998:144)”<sup>2</sup>.

This conceptual approach emphasises the implementation of an action as a form of learning – learn by doing -, the construction of competencies by the linkage to the result and the competencies development in context as a condition for the pertinence of the competencies under development. In that sense, training and action are inseparable and this word reflects the relationship established between exercise and learning. To sum up, training by doing. The identification of a problem to fix or a project to carry out results from the diagnosis stage and is a fundamental condition for the action to be strategically guided according to the enterprise's needs.

It is exactly in this perspective of reinforcement of the training opportunity from problem solving or from implementation of new projects that the logic beneath the integration of the three functions present in the programme - diagnosis, planning and operationalisation – becomes preponderant from the action's perspective.

<sup>2</sup> «La formation-action est une modalité de formation permettant de s'approcher le plus possible de la construction des compétences. Par sa finalisation sur le traitement de problèmes ou de projets réels, elle constitue une remarquable opportunité pour entraîner à la combinaison et à la mobilisation de ressources pertinentes (savoirs, savoir-faire, ...), pour créer et mettre en œuvre des compétences».

Another conceptual approach to the pedagogic diversification within continuing training refers to the concept of on-the-job learning. The concept's mobilisation is associated with a change in the paradigm: instead of a formal and discontinuous approach to training, it proposes an informal, experiential approach, built "real-time". As Garavan (in Matsuo, 2002: 196) suggests "workplace learning represents a set of processes that occur within specific organizational contexts and involve acquiring and assimilating integrated clusters of knowledge, skills, values and feelings that result in fundamental changes in the foci and behaviours of individuals and teams".

Notwithstanding the lack of clear consensus, the concept of on the-job learning refers the combination between the formal and informal dimensions of the training process and submits itself to the goal of allowing an effective change of behaviours in the organisational environment. While underlying the role of informal learning, this concept merges with the concept of Training-Action in terms of valorisation of the exercise contexts; however, to a certain extent, it amplifies the importance given to the outcomes of that learning. Put differently, it emphasises even more the dimension related to the transfer of learning into organisational practices while at the same time it distinguishes the informal nature of the learning process.

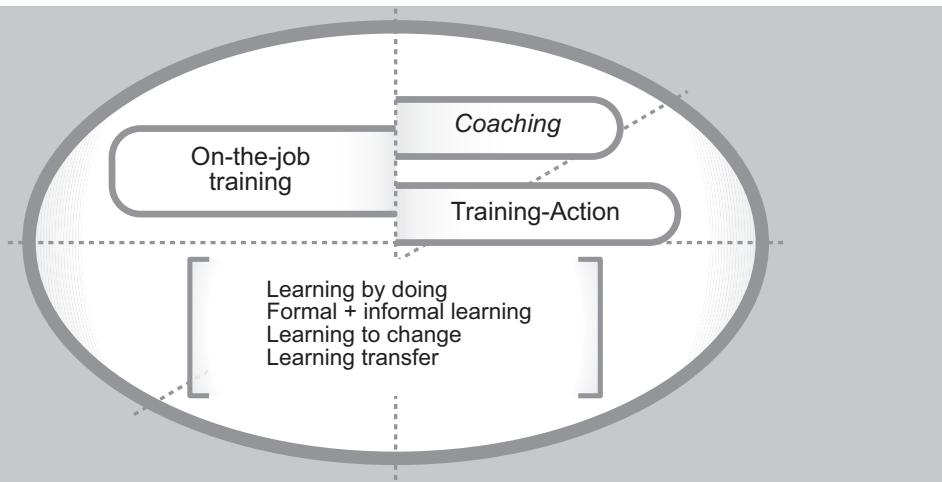
The concept of coaching is in line with the diversification of pedagogical strategies at the level of the professional development of active employees. In fact, the coaching, which is increasingly popular mainly due to North-American authors, concentrates some attributes that relate it closely to the Training-Action strategies. Immediately, the increasing mobilisation of coaching for the development of the executives' competencies, including SMEs executives. Afterwards, the orientation for organisational change and, for that matter, the intention to promote know-how improvement through a continuous and accompanied personal development.

Although the coaching echoes this convergence zone, it is traditionally limited to the development of the managerial role, so it does not always focus on the result and organisational change dimension. As a matter of fact, in accordance to Ives (2008), we can consider that the coaching splits into two categories: i) coaching oriented to the personal development and focused on the improvement of the professionals' competencies; ii) coaching oriented to the performance and focused on stressing the outcome of problem solving and

of achieving certain organisational goals. This dimension is a clear concern for the Training-Action Programme, but it is not always emphasised with coaching.

A complementary perspective makes it possible to recognise that coaching promotes a mediation strategy between the individual and the problem. Such mediation aims at promoting the professional's autonomy and, in that sense, it walks away from the advice arm. Therefore, as the same author puts it “the coach does not take the client's spot and provide an answer, the mission is to ask questions, listen and mirrors so that the client can perform his/her own diagnosis and implement his/her own solutions.<sup>[3]</sup>”

**FIGURE 1 FOUNDING CONCEPTS OF THE TRAINING-ACTION PROGRAMMES**



Getting back to the reflection on the programmatic line in force during the first cycle of Training-Action programmes, we confirm that such programmes confer a central role to the articulation between advice and training. In other words, the response strategy advocated by the proposed programmatic framework corresponds to the combination of consultancy (interpreted as advising) and training. The interpretation of the exercises that evaluated those measures provides some analytic clues that deserve to be explored, given the theoretical references presented.

<sup>3</sup> «Le coach n'a pas la réponse à la place du client; il a pour mission, par ses questions, son écoute et son rôle miroir, de permettre à son client de porter son propre diagnostic et de mettre en oeuvre ses solutions.»

In the light of its programmatic framework, the interventions developed at the time promote integration between the advice and training dimensions subject to problem solving and winning over goals identified during the diagnosis stage. However, the practice reported by the studies does not always coincide in full with that reality. In fact, the association between the advising and training dimensions in which, somehow, one is obtained by the other, does not fully achieve results, as we assist to operationalisation strategies where these dimensions go beyond association and reach complementarity.

The emphasis varies according to the programme and the supported enterprise, but the advice function is usually linked to the preparation of the diagnosis, action plans and to the entrepreneur's development under the consultant's activity and the training function is usually linked to the entrepreneur's empowerment to intervene in his/her enterprise, but very grounded in theoretical training with a formal profile. At the same time, the consultancy arm often comes up related to the development of performances which, to a large extent, are the result of a largely autonomous performance from the consultant.

From a terminological point of view, the subsequent cycles for this type of programme (within Community Support Framework 2000-06/QCA III and National Strategic Reference Framework/QREN) tend to achieve a higher convergence with the Training-Action concept. All the reports from the evaluation exercises converge and evidence the extension of some ambiguity in the practices, established in the first cycle of the programme. We continue on section 4 the reflection on the degree and profile application of the conceptual model.

### 3. The course of implementation of the Training-Action programmes in Portugal

As previously mentioned, historically, Training-Action is inseparable from vocational training to and in micro and SMEs.

This modality, whose origin dates back to the 80s of last century, supported by some experimental initiatives under the scope of transnational projects, has gained brilliance the moment it was framed in the Community Support Frameworks, from 1996 onwards, with the Pilot Program on Training for SME<sup>[4]</sup>. The implementation of this initiative was, at an early stage, threefold. IEFP, Institute of Employment and Vocational Training, AEP, Portuguese Business Association and AIP, Portuguese Industrial Association, have created for that purpose three autonomous sub-programmes: Sub-programme REDE, Sub-programme Formação PME and Sub-programme IN PME, respectively. The Sub-programme REDE was awarded by the European Union, in 1999, the vocational training “Best Practice” recognition, while in parallel it was also distinguished by the Directorate-General for Enterprise of the European Commission, in 2002, as one of the 5 European Best Practices provided by Public Employment Services to micro and SMEs.

Given the internationally renowned success and the relevance and pertinence for the national context, supported by a business structure with a high representativeness of micro and SMEs characterised by human, technical and organisational weaknesses and, quite often, managerial and organisational weaknesses from the entrepreneur who lacks specific competencies,

<sup>4</sup> Approved on the 27th June 1996 and entered in the minutes of the Monitoring Unit for the Programme on Vocational Training and Employment.

Training-Action continued to benefit from the support from Community funds. In particular, from POEFDS<sup>[5]</sup> for the period comprehended between 2000 to 2007 and, currently, under the scope of NSRF<sup>[6]</sup> as mechanisms to support the expansion of its offer.

It is also worth mentioning that, within the POFC - Operational Competitiveness Programme, it is possible for the approved projects to combine the intangible investments<sup>[7]</sup> with vocational training investments, as long as these may have a complementary nature to the remaining investments and may contribute for the development of the project's remaining investment typologies. It is a way of undertaking vocational training in the enterprises together with the productive investments, although it does not necessarily respects the spirit beneath the creation of the Training-Action model.

Readdressing the Pilot Programme on Training for SME, it is clear that the financial package invested and the number of enterprises involved is increasing ever since, and it is expected that the execution numbers for the OP currently in force will continue to contribute for that effect until 2014, the closure year for NSRF.

**TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF THE TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRAINING ACTION PROGRAMMES CO-FINANCED BY ESF WITHIN THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT FRAMEWORKS**

Community framework	OP	Time span	Number of participating SMEs			Financial implementation	
			Training	Consultancy	Total	Millions euros	%
CSF 1994-99	PESSOA	1996-1998	-	-	499 (*)	18,0	77%
CSF 2000-06	POEFDS	2000-2008	11.605	22.087	-	129,1	95%
NSRF	POPH	2007-2011	-	-	7.533	97,8	89%
	Pro-Emprego	2007-2011	-	-	33	0,2	N.d.
	Programa Rumos	2007-2011	-	-	568	4,5	

Source: Evaluation study on the "Pilot Programme on Training for SME"; POEFDS Final Implementation Report; POPH Implementation Reports, RUMOS Implementation Reports, Pro-Emprego Implementation Reports.

Note: (\*) the enterprises joining Line 2 of the Sub-programme Rede are not included.

5 Measure 2.2 Organisational training and development / Typology 1 – Training/Consultancy for SMEs, within CSF/2000-06.

6 POPH – Human Potential Operational Programme, Measure 3.1.1 – Training-Action, from the Operational Programme Rumos Typology 1.2.3 and from PRO-EMPREGO – Action-type 3.2.2.

7 As part of the following incentive systems: Innovation incentive system; Qualification or internationalisation of SMEs; Administrative modernisation support system; Collective Action.

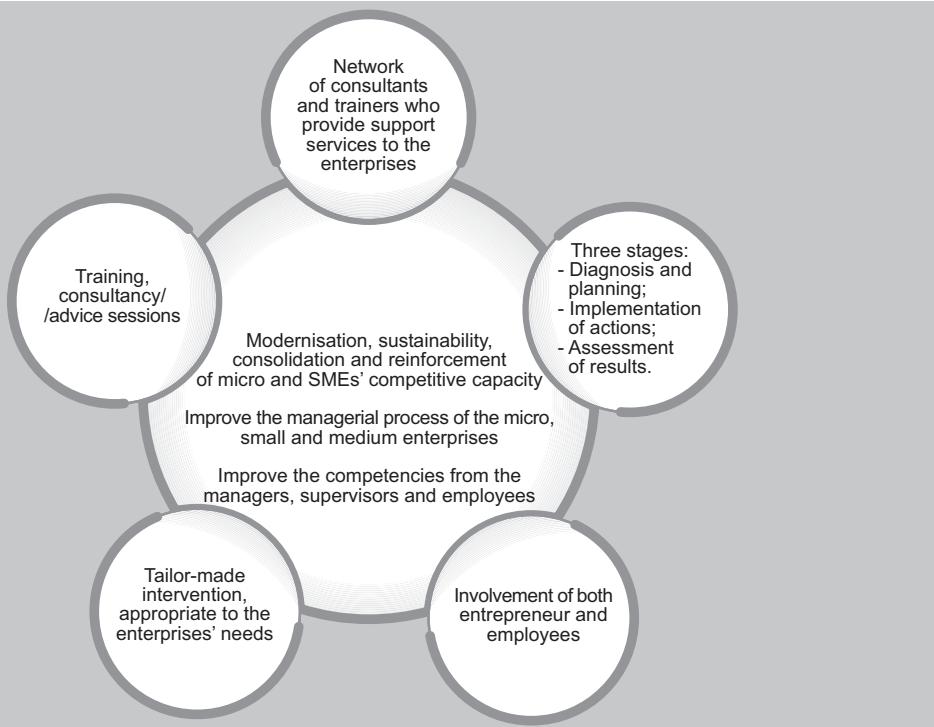
Training-Action for SMEs is in itself an instrument of public policy foreseen in the basic regulation of the National Qualifications System<sup>8</sup>. The programmes that are being implemented for almost two decades within this training modality aim as ultimate goal the modernisation, sustainability, consolidation and reinforcement of the micro and SMEs' competitive capacity. The formulation of the current regulation ruling this training modality is clear about how this goal must be fulfilled and how it precedes an improvement in the competencies of managers, supervisors and other employees, together with an improvement in the enterprises' managerial processes.

Considering a short-term horizon for the global intervention – approximately one year – the model foresees as a possible resource the combination of instruments, for instance, training courses for the entrepreneur, training courses for the employees and consultancy measures. As a consequence, after the diagnosis, the methodology dictates the conception of an action plan with the most efficient outline for the operationalisation and combination of the instruments with the enterprise's own resources, having as leading guideline a roadmap of objectives related to organisational development; according to the management terminology, those objectives must be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound (SMART).

The model follows a multistage implementation sequence, so after the diagnosis and the intervention planning, the actions are put into practice and, at last, the immediate results achieved are assessed.

The main agents who provide technical support to the intervention in the micro and SMEs via Training-Action are the consultants and the trainers – or the consultant-trainers – responsible for a direct articulation with the entrepreneur and the employees in order to accomplish the intervention.

<sup>8</sup> Decree-Law no. 396/2007 of 31st December.

**FIGURE 2 GLOBAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRAINING-ACTION PROGRAMMES**

At this moment there are seven Training-Action programmes being implemented in mainland Portugal, managed by different institutions which take the role of Intermediate Bodies; this managerial role is established in contracts of delegation of powers signed with POPH. In addition, in the Autonomous Regions of Azores and Madeira, there are two other Training-Action programmes being implemented: the Consultancy-Training to micro and SMEs and the Training-Consultancy, respectively.

**TABLE 2 TRAINING-ACTION PROGRAMMES IN FORCE WITH NSRF**

Promoter	Programme
Portuguese Business Association (AEP)	Formação PME (Training SME)
Business Association of Minho Region (AIMinho)	QI-PME Norte (Quality and Innovation in SME North)
Portuguese Industrial Association (AIP)	MOVE PME (Modernise, Optimise and Value SME)
Confederation of Portuguese Farmers (CAP)	Programa Formação – Ação para PME (Training-Action Programme for SME)
Portuguese Commerce and Services Confederation (CCP)	Dinamizar (Streamline)
Entrepreneurial Council of Centro / Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Centro (CEC/CCIC)	QI-PME Centro (Quality and Innovation in SME Centre)
Portuguese Agency for SME and Innovation (IAPMEI)	Academia PME /Programa de Formação-Ação (SME Academy / Training-Action Programme)
Pro-Emprego	Consultoria-Formação a microempresas e PME (Consultancy-Training to microenterprises and SME)
Rumos	Formação consultoria (Training consultancy)

These programmes are based in a common model because they are all inspired by the legal framework ruling the ESF Programmes of NSRF; however, it is possible to find some specificities that set them apart, particularly in terms of the conceptual and methodological model they pursue and in terms of the operating context.

Overall, some of these Programmes have assumed a regional nature, while others comprise all the eligible regions in the Mainland. Something similar happens with the economic activity sectors: different sectors have programmes oriented to give an answer to the development needs of their business structure. That is the case of the agriculture sector, industrial and supporting services sector, commerce and services sector. Meanwhile, other programmes have a broader scope from this point of view.

The fact that the sectors are a priority for those programmes led by entities whose missions are devoted to enterprises from a specific economic activity sector does not mean that the training offer is standardised, in the sense that the developmental themes or the target functional areas are not predefined, exception made to what happens in the agriculture sector or with the IB that have defined developmental areas and results considered critical for micro and SMEs in general.

Generally speaking, the Programmes do not define in which or in how many functional areas shall change be fostered, although some of the Programmes do differentiate intervention conditions according to the interventions on single or multiple functional areas of the enterprises.

On average, the interventions in the enterprises last in total 12 months. The total number of hours per intervention varies especially in accordance to the size of the enterprise, the nature of the intervention and the number of functional areas included. The total length is, normally, above 100 intervention hours and inferior to 300 hours.

In most cases, the interventions in the enterprises are under a mix of three major activities: training for entrepreneurs, training for employees and consultancy. Only one Programme differentiates itself from the norm because it only considers training activities and it complements the entrepreneurs' development by providing coaching activities to that participant.

The intervention methods in the enterprises used in the development of each of these activities promote the training for the entrepreneurs through the organisation of inter-enterprise seminars where management topics with a broad scope are discussed; other Programmes include explicitly a complementary approach taking place in-company and with the entrepreneur alone.

As far as training for employees is concerned, it can either be specific training designed to meet each enterprise's needs or combined with training courses regulated by the National Qualifications System, which corresponds to the execution of modules from the Certified Modular Training. Only one of the Programmes is specifically oriented to promote intra-enterprise training for employees; the remaining Programmes offer the choice between intra- or inter-enterprise training, according to what suits it best.

Regarding the activities of consultancy, two different intervention typologies can be identified; on the one hand, the nature of the intervention and, on the other hand, the intervention methods.

As regards the nature of the intervention, two typologies can be identified, according to the description in the table below.

**TABLE 3 TYPOLOGIES ACCORDING TO THE NATURE OF THE INTERVENTION WITHIN THE TRAINING-ACTION PROGRAMMES IN FORCE WITH NSRF**

Typology	What is it?	How can it be demonstrated?
Typology A	Both the product and the result of the intervention are clearly defined a priori and the consultancy activities are developed so to support the achievement of that final result from the diagnosis up to its implementation. It is a standardised training[9].	The Programme managed by CAP is a perfect example; the support to the implementation of a technological tool for agricultural management is pre-defined in advance, so the consultancy process is in charge of analysing the enterprise's entry point in terms of management and use of supporting software, namely regarding the proficiency of the entrepreneur in using technological tools for that purpose and the characteristics of the farm; an action plan is designed to enable the regular use of the referred tool. Other examples are: MOVE PME and ACADEMIA-PME.
Typology B	Both the product and the result of the intervention depend exclusively upon the outcomes of the organisational diagnosis and the implementation strategy designed later on, together with the entrepreneur. This option favours that each case is treated differently because of its specificities. It is an individualised training[10].	The Programme Dinamizar is an example of this typology because the decision on which functional areas to include, which interventions to select and which final product to get depend entirely upon the results of the diagnosis. There are other cases to illustrate this typology: Formação   PME, QI-pme Norte and QI-pme Centro.

<sup>9</sup> According to the Law no. 18363/2008 of 9th July "Standardised training-action, with the purpose of providing training and consultancy services defined according to characteristics and needs shared by the recipients from the same activity sector and similar size, based on the assessment of needs and on strategic plans with a sectorial scope"

<sup>10</sup> According to the Law no. 18363/2008 of 9th July "Individualised training-action, with the purpose of providing training and consultancy services defined according to the recipients' specific needs, based on the assessment of their individual needs and designing an intervention strategic plan to meet those needs, considering the integration of managers, heads of departments and workers in the training to be developed under coordination of a consultant-trainer".

**TABLE 4** **TYPOLOGIES OF INTERVENTION METHODS  
WITHIN THE TRAINING-ACTION PROGRAMMES IN  
FORCE WITH NSRF**

<b>Typology</b>	<b>What is it?</b>	<b>How can it be demonstrated?</b>
Typology A	The supporting tools for the business diagnosis carried out during the consultancy stage are pre-defined and their use is mandatory.	This is the case for the Organisational Skills Assessment and the Benchmarking used under the scope of the Programmes QI-pme Norte and QI-pme Centro and the Logical Framework Matrix and the SWOT Analysis in the case of the Programme Formação  PME
Typology B	The supporting tools for the diagnosis are not pre-defined, so the consultants can call the ones they consider more suitable for the characteristics of the enterprise and the entrepreneur. However, the management entity makes available databases, methodological manuals and/or relevant information on the different approaches that can be developed.	This situation can be exemplified by the Programmed managed by IAPMEI.
Typology C	The tools are not pre-defined, so the consultants can select and apply those they think fit for each enterprise; still, the management entities provide no support or specific technical counselling on this subject.	This is what happens, for example, in the Programme Dinamizar.

Regarding Typology C mentioned in the table above, the profile and the competencies of the team of consultants intervening on the Programme is especially critical and relevant, because it has to be able to combine their knowledge and competencies in order to adjust the intervention methodology to the enterprise's characteristics; in turn, in the two alternative typologies, the intervention team shall have expertise on the pre-defined methodologies.

Despite the freedom of action in the way consultancy inputs are introduced in the enterprises, all the Programmes currently in force define a battery of three compulsory outputs for each intervention: Diagnostic Report, Action Plan, and Assessment Report.

These elements are the final products of the interventions and the way their content is structured provides inputs for the regulation of the intervention carried out by the management entities.

The framework below shows and summarises the main characteristics of each Training-Action Programme in force during the period 2007-2011.

**Table 5 Specific characteristics of the Training-Action Programmes in force with QREN for the period 2007-2011**

Promoter/Programme	Eligible regions	Priority economic activities	Nature of the intervention	Typologies of intervention	Length	Number of hours	Intervention methods in the enterprise
Portuguese Business Association (AEP) Formação PME	North Center Alentejo Algarve	Nonspecific.	Individualised Training-Action.	- Integral Formação PME: intervention in several functional areas within the enterprise. - Specialisation Formação PME: intervention focused on one specific functional area.	12 months	Total: 150h to 340h, according to the enterprises' typology and size. Note: Consultancy lasts longer than training: - intra-enterprise - Specific - Inter-enterprise	Training for entrepreneurs: - Modular/ Seminars strategic management, Innovation management, Sales and marketing management, Human resources management (management) - Inter-enterprise - Training for employees: - Specific or Certified Modular Training - Consultancy. - BCO, Organisational Skills Assessment - Benchmarking
Business Association of Minho Region (AMINHO) QREN Norte	North	Industry and support services to industry	Individualised Training-Action.	Intervention in a variable number of functional areas.	12 months	Total: 288 h Training for the entrepreneur: 68 h Training for the employees: 50 h Consultancy: 170 h	Training for entrepreneurs: - Modular/ Seminars strategic management, Innovation management, Sales and marketing management, Human resources management (management) - Inter-enterprise - Training for employees: - Specific or Certified Modular Training - Consultancy. - BCO, Organisational Skills Assessment - Benchmarking
Portuguese Industrial Association (API) MOVE PME	North Alentejo Algarve	Nonspecific.	Standardised Training-Action. Themes: 1) Business Management 2) Quality and Health at Work and Food Safety 3) Ergonomics of Processes 4) Internationalisation 5) Energy and ECO-Efficiency	Typology 1: Micro enterprise: intervention area focused on Strategic and operational management. Typology 2: Small and medium enterprises with multiple intervention areas	24 months	Total: 173 h Typology 1: 26h. Note: in both cases, training lasts longer than consultancy.	Training for entrepreneurs: - Specific/Coaching - Intra (micro) or inter-enterprises (PME) - Training for employees: - Specific - Inter-enterprise - Consultancy - not applicable.
Confederation of Portuguese Farmers (CAP) Programa Formação - Ação para PME	North Center Alentejo	Enterprises from the livestock production or crop production sectors	Standardised Training-Action. Theme: 1) Agricultural management	Intervenção focada numa única área funcional específica.	12 months	Total: 102 h Training for the entrepreneur: 72 h Consultancy: 30 h	Training for entrepreneurs: - Use of the software for agricultural management. - Inter-enterprise. Training for employees: - not applicable. - not applicable.
Portuguese Commerce and Services Confederation (CCPS) / Diamariz	North Center Alentejo Algarve	Commerce and services sectors	Individualised Training-Action.	Intervention in a variable number of functional areas.	12 months for micro 15 months for SMEs.	Total: 258h Training for entrepreneurs: 25h Training for employees: Consultancy: Micro 60h to 30h SME: 90h to 160h	Training for entrepreneurs: - Modular/ Seminars Strategic Management, Operational Customer Service and Sales - Inter-enterprise - Training for employees: - Specific or Certified Modular Training - Consultancy - not applicable.
Entrepreneurial Council of Centro / Centro Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Centro (CC/CCI) / QI PME Centro	North	The sectors include industry and support services to industry	Individualised Training-Action.	Intervention in a variable number of functional areas.	12 months	Total: 288h Training for entrepreneurs: 68 h Training for employees: 50 h Consultancy: 170 h	Training for entrepreneurs: - Modular/ Strategic management, Innovation management, Sales and Marketing management, Human Resources management (management) - Inter-enterprise - Training for employees: - Specific or Certified Modular Training - Consultancy - BCO, Organisational Skills Assessment - Benchmarking
Portuguese Agency for SME and Innovation (APMEI) / Programa Académico - Programa de Formação Académica / QI	Industrial sector.	Autonomous Region of Azores	Standardised Training-Action. Themes: 1) Internationalisation 2) Financial Management and Organisation 3) Innovation and Creativity Management 4) Management of Production Processes 5) Strategy, Business Management and Organisation 6) National and International Business Marketing 7) Segmentation of Products and Services 8) Management of Clients 9) Management of Talents and Human Capital 10) Information and Knowledge Management	Intervention in a variable number of functional areas.	9 months	Total: 162h; Training on different themes: 98h; Training in e-Learning: 8h Personalised training: 56h	Training for entrepreneurs: - E-learning; ICT - Inter-enterprise and intra-enterprise (e-learning) Training for employees: - not applicable. - Consultancy - not applicable.
Pro-Emprego Consultoria-Formação a microempresas e PME	Autonomous Region of Madeira	Nonspecific.	Individualised Training-Action.	Intervention in a variable number of functional areas.	8 months	Total: 150 h Theoretical/practical training: 75h Individualised on-the-job training (consultancy): 75 h	Training; Information not available. Flexible
Rumos/Formação consultoria	Autonomous Region of Madeira	Nonspecific.	Individualised Training-Action.	Intervention in a variable number of functional areas.	12 months	Total: 150 h a 300 h Note: the training component represents 30% to 50% of the project's global length.	Training; Divers according to the project. Consultancy; Flexible

## 4. Thematic roadmap for a critical reading

### 4.1 The identity concept

In the light of the conceptual approach proposed by the Training-Action model, the implementation strategy followed by the programmes to support SMEs under analysis show a limited use of the principle training by doing and, for that reason, a fragile integration between the advice and training components. As a matter of fact, the background for the intervention, indicated as a requirement to adjust the response in terms of development of competencies, is accompanied by a complementarity between the advice and training functions, occurring at a two-stage pace, which does not correspond exactly to the indication that the advice shall be oriented towards a direct intervention on the performance (one-stage pace).

Similarly, real-time learning – in the context of the professional activity – capable of inducing autonomy, placed as a distinctive conceptual element in this model, still remains an under-represented practice. In fact, the “rotation” between the advice function and in-class training creates a certain emptiness regarding the development of on-the-job learning strategies (live exercise).

In addition, the observed practices place the problems and the proposals for action mainly as a result achieved by the actions taking place during the programme, leaving partly unexplored their use as a pedagogical framework for the development of competencies.

Therefore, instead of privileging on-the-job learning through a fusion of

methods for building real-time, informal and strongly experiential learning, the practice reveals the significant combination between formal moments of consultancy and training. The significance of in-class training, whether inter- or intra enterprises, and its combination with moments of consultancy whose orientation for building learning is clearly insufficient, limits, although not transversally, the likelihood between practice and the original conceptual model.

The way the expected outcomes of the projects are defined also contributes for the dimension of learning transferability in the form of a change in the behaviours of both individuals and the teams they belong. The efficacy in the promotion of that assimilation of new practices, as underlined by the conceptual approach to on the-job learning, challenges the capacity to state adequately the nature of the outputs targeted by the programmes. The explicitness of the competencies to use is, consequently, fundamental, thus forcing to guarantee the adequate focus on outcome indicators that mirror the actions in context. The results of the projects that were evaluated show with high visibility the difficulty to fully apply this perspective of behaviour change.

The way the diagnosis stage is developed and the outcome it produces is determinant to reach a better bond between action and the development of competencies. In fact, in addition to the identification of problematic areas and investment areas, it is relevant to map the necessary competencies to guarantee the organisation has an inner responsive capacity. This result will ease the Training-Action organisation.

It is also at this level that the mediation perspective, accentuated in particular by the coaching approach, concentrates an additional value. In fact, this approach highlights how important the mediation processes are for the learning activity, so they are included as dynamics of personal interaction directed towards the goal of transforming behaviours through the development of competencies. The relationship dimension, the support in the self identification of both problems and solutions and the encouragement of autonomy are key aspects in this approach.

The competencies approach is a structuring axis for all these intervention models, given the fact that it is determinant to connect the diagnosis to the training strategy and the latter to the assessment dimension. In other words,

in terms of professional development, the approach chosen to answer the encountered problems shall be explained in competencies, so to ease the approach to their development within the professional context and, later on, the assessment of how they are incorporated in the performance.

The ultimate reflection included in this section readdresses the approach to the integrated nature of the Programme. As previously mentioned, the planned intervention logic predicts the articulation and inseparability between the diagnosis, the preparation of the action plan, the training and the action in the enterprise to induce change. To preserve the competencies approach right from the result of the diagnostic process and to assure a strategy of competencies upgrade through training in context are valuable resources to foster the desired integration.

As a consequence, more than the pre-determination of diagnostic methodologies or the arrangement of training responses, what really matters is an adequate technical preparation from the consultants and the trainers, so to allow the construction of unique projects focused on training by doing. One of the greatest challenges to the empowerment of the intervention model used in the Training-Action programmes is, indeed, the capacity to build a collective know-how at the level of the fieldwork teams, so to materialise a single culture of performance around the methodological lines referred above.

The results from the evaluation studies evoke, however, an additional reflection on the instruments that belong to the intervention project. In a significant number of situations, the emerging problems required action plans whose efficacy demanded that the intervention would go beyond a plan to develop competencies and included also other type of investments. The productive diversification – encompassing the need to invest in new technology – and the internationalisation strategies – requiring mechanisms to enter and consolidate new markets – are just two examples of circumstances where the development of competencies alone does not fulfil the efficacy conditions of a plan to qualify the enterprise. Moreover, some of the premises inherent to Training-Action mechanisms, in particular training in context and by doing, are threatened whenever the development of the contexts that require such new learning lack investment plans that are beyond reach with the enterprises' resources alone, while the intervention plans are taking place.

This glimpse offers a clear opportunity to question and discuss the evolution of the Training-Action programmes towards models where the reinforcement of the action frameworks is also achieved through the combination of supports to the development of human resources and supports to investment.

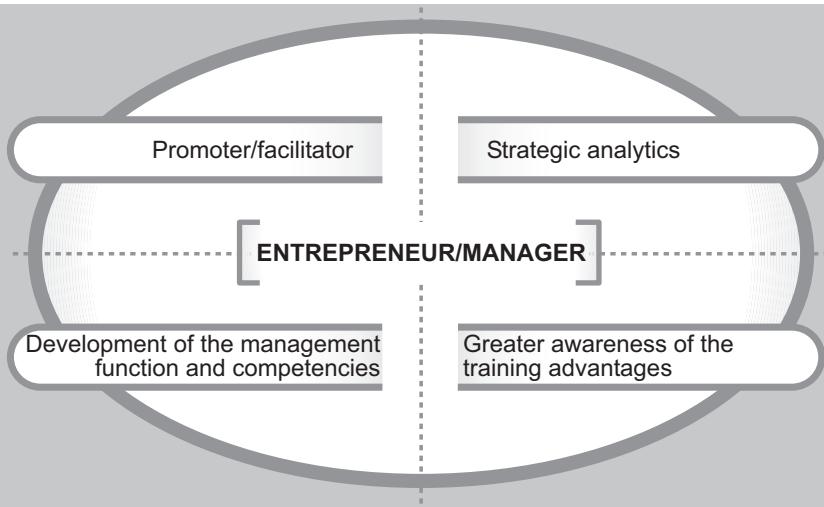
## 4.2 Involvement and participation of the entrepreneur

Ever since their origin, the Training-Action programmes promote their intervention in micro and SMEs having the entrepreneur as main agent. The Programme REDE, for example, admitted the centrality of this role and its importance for the success of each project, considering the participation and the involvement of the entrepreneur under various forms. Immediately, through the preparation of the diagnosis and the action plan, but also through the presence in on-the-job training or through the participation in meetings with other entrepreneurs.

The programmes currently in force are distinguished from one another by the number of training hours dedicated specifically to the entrepreneurs, by the training modality they use (face-to-face or e-learning, intra- or inter-enterprise) and by the specific instructions related to the entrepreneur's involvement in diagnosis, planning, mobilisation of employees and monitoring of the Training-Action project's development in the enterprise.

Being the main agent of change in the organisation, it is common that the programmes promote the entrepreneur as sponsor of those changes, because the entrepreneur has the ultimate responsibility to decide, together with the consultant, the type of changes that shall be introduced in the organisation; at the same time, the entrepreneur shall play the role of promoter and facilitator next to the employees, so to see change through.

**FIGURE 3 PARTICIPATION OF THE ENTREPRENEUR/MANAGER**



A good performance of the entrepreneurs in this role is not enough to guarantee the sustainability of the changes induced by the Programmes. The weaknesses in their entry qualifications, namely in terms of business management, reveal the need for a more structured approach to the entrepreneurs' participation in the Training-Action programme, particularly through the development of their competencies.

As a matter of fact, in 2010 emerged the need to provide training for entrepreneurs. Especially for that reason, a specific programme was created within NSRF/POPH, called Training for Entrepreneurs. A significant part of the entrepreneurs is joining both initiatives (Training-Action for micro and SMEs and training for entrepreneurs), hence revealing that the model devoted to Training-Action alone does not answer the entrepreneurs' needs in terms of managerial competencies, modernisation and innovation of their enterprises.

Furthermore, it must be taken into consideration that although the general goals of the Programmes emphasise in particular the improvement of the management conditions in micro and SMEs, it is common to register cases where the interventions take place in other functional areas of the enterprises.

In some cases, for example in Formação | PME, the intervention model differs in situations where the intervention focuses on one single functional area and in situations where the intervention spreads over multiple functional areas of the enterprise.

Despite the fact that most Training-Action Programmes currently in force encompass training for entrepreneurs, specifically in Management as mentioned before, there are evidences showing that the entrepreneurs also attend other training courses on technical or behavioural topics during the dedicated interventions. This happens because it is common in micro and SMEs for the entrepreneur to monopolise decision-making positions in the different areas (production, sales, procurement, debt collection, etc.), which conjugated with the small dimension in terms of number of employees and the weaknesses in the entrepreneurs' qualifications, makes it hard for the entrepreneur to invest in his/her own training. The participation in Training-Action programmes is then an opportunity to do so.

However, in a scenario where the number of hours is limited, it is necessary to point out that depending on the entrepreneurs' entry competencies, it may be necessary to consider the trade-off between the consolidation of competencies in one single functional area and the development of basic competencies in multiple functional areas. It is during the intervention itself, when the action plan is designed, that these choices must be made.

### 4.3 The horizontal priorities

At national level, the (i) National Plan for Employment (PNE) now incorporated in the National Reform Programme, (ii) the National Action Plan for Inclusion (PNAI), (iii) the National Plan for Equality (PNI) and the (iv) Action Plan for the Integration of People with Disabilities or Impairments (PAIPDI) are currently identifying and supporting intervention lines whose purpose is to reduce the imbalances found in the participation of women and men in several domains, including the professional one, as well as the weaknesses in terms of labour inclusion, in detail:

**TABLE 6 MEASURES / LINES OF ACTION FROM THE STRATEGIC PLANS AIMING AT GE AND EO**

Plan	Axis/Area	Measure/Action line
European Employment Strategy / National Plan for Employment (EEE/PNE) / Europe 2020 / National Reform Programme	Inclusive growth	Line of action – Qualify for competitiveness and social cohesion
EU Social Inclusion Process / National Action Plan for Inclusion (PEIS/PNAI) / Europe 2020 / National Reform Programme	Inclusive growth	Line of action – Promote equality of opportunities and fight discriminations
National Plan for Equality (PNI)	Strategic area no. 2 – Economic independence, labour market and organisation of professional, family and personal lives	25 Promote the implementation of plans for the equality in organisations in general (...) 26 Promote best practices in gender equality, namely the ones that contribute to reduce wage asymmetries, in both public and private sector enterprises, as well as in the organisations as a whole (...)
Action Plan for the Integration of People with Disabilities or Impairments (PAIPDI)	Axis no. 2 “Education, qualification and promotion of labour inclusion”	Line of action no. 2.2.1 “Intervention in programmes that focus on personal and professional development”

The regulation of the intervention typology that corresponds to the Training-Action framework within NSRF/POPH enunciates as one of its goals “the promotion of training oriented (...) to processes that lead to the reduction of disparities between men and women in the workplace (...). After reading the goals of the seven programmes designed by the Intermediate Bodies, it is possible to conclude that they do not include this intention. Consequently, the diagnostics and the action plans implemented in micro contexts (in the enterprises) under the scope of the Training-Action Programmes, do not include horizontal initiatives that promote the integration of policies to induce Gender Equality (GE) in the policies of human resources management, as a relevant element for the organisational development.

In order to promote this priority, some Programmes take into consideration in the analysis of the applications submitted by the entities which are managing the intervention on the field (the so called Beneficiary Entities), their experience in the promotion of GE. This dimension is included in the Check-list of the on-the-spot visits carried out to control the financing, regarding the training

courses provided within the Programme. Notwithstanding, neither the sequence given to the need to meet these requirements nor the results achieved by the interventions regarding GE are clarified.

As far as Equality of Opportunities (EO) is concerned, neither the initiative regulation nor the Training-Action programmes enunciate orientations towards the transversal inclusion of this dimension in the approach to micro and SMEs.

## 4.4 Network of entities and players

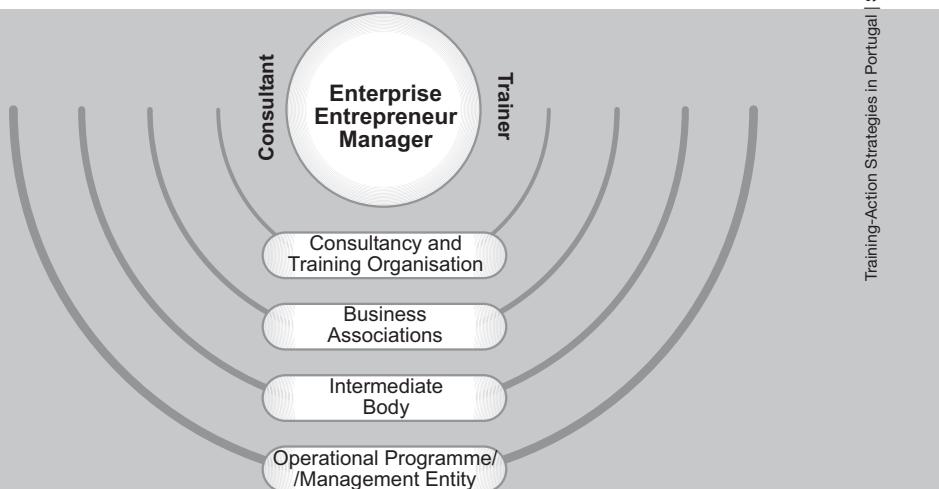
The network of players involved in the promotion and development of the training-action programmes to the enterprises presents a combination of various organisations; the dominant configuration points to two major groups. The entities responsible for the programmes' dissemination and organisation and the entities with direct action next to the enterprises.

The first group encompasses operational programmes and the corresponding management entities in charge of the programmes' dissemination and the financing within the respective intervention measures and typologies, as well as the Intermediate Body, corresponding to the organisational solution adopted during the NSRF to meet the principle of decentralisation in the management of Community funds.

The Intermediate Bodies (seven business associations with a national and/ or regional scope in current NSRF) are mainly in charge of the programmes' administrative and financial management, including the selection of Beneficiary Entities.

The second group of entities is responsible for the organisation and the development of a direct action next to the enterprises and mobilises particularly business associations with a local/ regional and sectorial scope, development associations, centres of entrepreneurship, training entities with a business scope and technological centres. Generally speaking, these entities sign contracts with consultancy and training service providers and with teams of consultants and trainers to work directly in the enterprises, thus creating an additional level in the system of players.

**FIGURE 4** NETWORK OF ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN THE TRAINING-ACTION PROGRAMMES IN FORCE WITH NSRF



This type of configuration of the network of entities involved in the training-action programmes prevails in most programmes developed in the Mainland, whereas in the Islands the network of players is simpler, especially due to the absence of the Intermediate Body.

It is clearly a multi-players system whose main virtue has to do with the starring role given to the business associations and to the organisations that keep strong proximity ties with the enterprises and with the entrepreneurs / managers. This aspect is fundamental to ensure their motivation for training, but at the same time it poses several challenges, especially due to the high number of organisations and individual players involved in the fieldwork, namely trainers and consultants.

Indeed, this dispersion by a plurality of agents, especially in terms of Beneficiary Entities and the organisation of the teams on the field, brings about risks to the capacity of incorporation of the methodological frameworks that support the action in the enterprises and to the technical and pedagogical coordination and management of the intervention's quality. The already long

history of the training-action programmes and the growing consolidation in the technical capacity of the teams on the field allows the mitigation of some of these risks, but the management of the system of players involved in the programmes is definitely one of the central aspects in the quality conditions of the action in the enterprises.

## 4.5 Attraction and selection of enterprises

Traditionally, micro, small and medium enterprises are resistant to training, despite the unanimous recognition of its value and despite its potential relevance, given the most recent problems in the labour market, especially the aging workforce and the growing demands for new knowledge and competencies.

Recent studies reveal that the difficulties in bringing small companies into training are not primarily related to the lack of time or the costs, but to the scarce recognition of how needful and useful training is for the enterprise's activity and success (CEDEFOP, 2010)[11]. Consequently, the expectation that the innovative format of the training-action programmes works as the main pull factor for the first training experiences in the enterprises is not consistent with the enterprises' dynamic in joining continuing training.

Therefore, the procedures adopted at the level of attraction of the enterprises to the Programmes are being improved and tend to reinforce a line of greater proximity and personalised contact, an attempt to convince the entrepreneurs of the Programmes' interest, in detriment of more general publicity strategies. On the other hand, the sales arguments try to be more incisive and call the attention to the differentiating dimensions of this training modality.

These strategies do not make it possible to overcome the difficulties in the recruitment of enterprises, so quite often the selection process is basically about checking the enterprises' eligibility criteria. As a consequence, it is common to find in the Programmes' trainers and consultants a trend of opinion which emphasises as improvement area the programmes' need to assure

<sup>11</sup> Encourager la formation continue dans les entreprises: repenser les stratégies? CEDEFOP, 2010

greater commitment and effort from the entrepreneurs and greater care in the selection process.

The definition of strategies that make it possible to assure levels of commitment and involvement from the entrepreneurs is, therefore, one of domains where the programmes have room for improvement, even more so because some of the evaluation studies confirm that, after the first experience as participant in training-action programmes, the entrepreneurs / managers reveal a significant availability for the lifelong learning strategies, materialised, for instance, by the participation in the training programmes for entrepreneurs.

## 4.6 Monitoring and assessment function

The monitoring and the assessment of training-action programmes are played in different plans and levels and present dissimilar realities as well.

The monitoring consists in the systematic collection and analysis of information related to the execution of the programmes. Its role is very important in terms of continuous follow-up and management. The registered practices indicate distinct realities, depending on the programmes, but the collection of information to support the administrative and financial management, in line with the financing demands, is a common dimension to all the monitoring practices.

Procedures to provide a broad vision to more qualitative aspects of the intervention in the enterprises are less usual. The exceptions are the Intermediate Bodies and the beneficiary entities furnished themselves with information systems directed to collect information on the more qualitative outlines of the intervention in the enterprises, especially the type of beneficiary enterprises and the characteristics of the training and consultancy sessions, as well as those that include in their monitoring strategy regular visits to the enterprises.

The dimension of the projects' implementation monitoring carried out by the beneficiary entities regarding the training and the consultancy entities and their

teams of consultants and trainers is also an area with less structured practices; as a result, a huge responsibility over the quality control of the interventions in the enterprises relies on the field teams.

Consequently, it is not always possible to draw a precise portray of the various training-action programmes, but it is truth that the lack of information influences not only the processes' visibility, but also their capacity to monitor and manage the quality requirements. This situation is partly understandable given the existing constraints regarding the necessary resources to put into practice systems to collect information that keep the procedures going. On the other hand, this reality can be confronted with the richness of the material made available by the products developed in the direct action with the enterprises, namely the diagnostics and action plans, whose systematization may confer more transparency to the operations and their outcomes.

Given this context, the programmes' external evaluation gains strong prominence. The operational programmes and their respective management entities and the Intermediate Bodies assume that the external evaluation is an essential instrument within the management system. However, if on the one hand the desired interactivity between monitoring and evaluation is not always fully accomplished, on the other hand the specificity of the various monitoring, internal evaluation and external evaluation functions cannot be mixed.

From the players' perspective (Intermediate Bodies, Beneficiary Entities and consultancy and training teams), the allocation of financial resources to the programmes' headings related to internal monitoring and evaluation does not favour a more active intervention in these domains, which influences the quality of the training and contradicts the specificity of the training-action. Notwithstanding, the importance of agreeing on a common conceptual background for all the programmes shall not be minimised, because it would allow the alignment in their formalisations, but would also favour the monitoring and evaluation goals.

## 4.7 Achieved results

From the external evaluation studies to the different Training Action programmes emerge the interventions' effects in the participants, i.e., the entrepreneurs and their employees, and in the organisations where they belong.

Most of the times the action plan for each enterprise does not include an objective reference to the quantitative targets to achieve in terms of individual and business performance, so the studies begin in most cases by collecting the perceptions from different players (entrepreneurs, employees, consultants, trainers, beneficiary entities, management entities). The qualitative methods (interviews, focus-group and case studies) and the quantitative methods (inquiry) complement the Programmes' management indicators.

Given this context, the following lines present, for certain domains, a synthesis of the results that are, overall, common to all the Programmes. For greater detail and accuracy, this reading shall be complemented with the respective external evaluation studies.

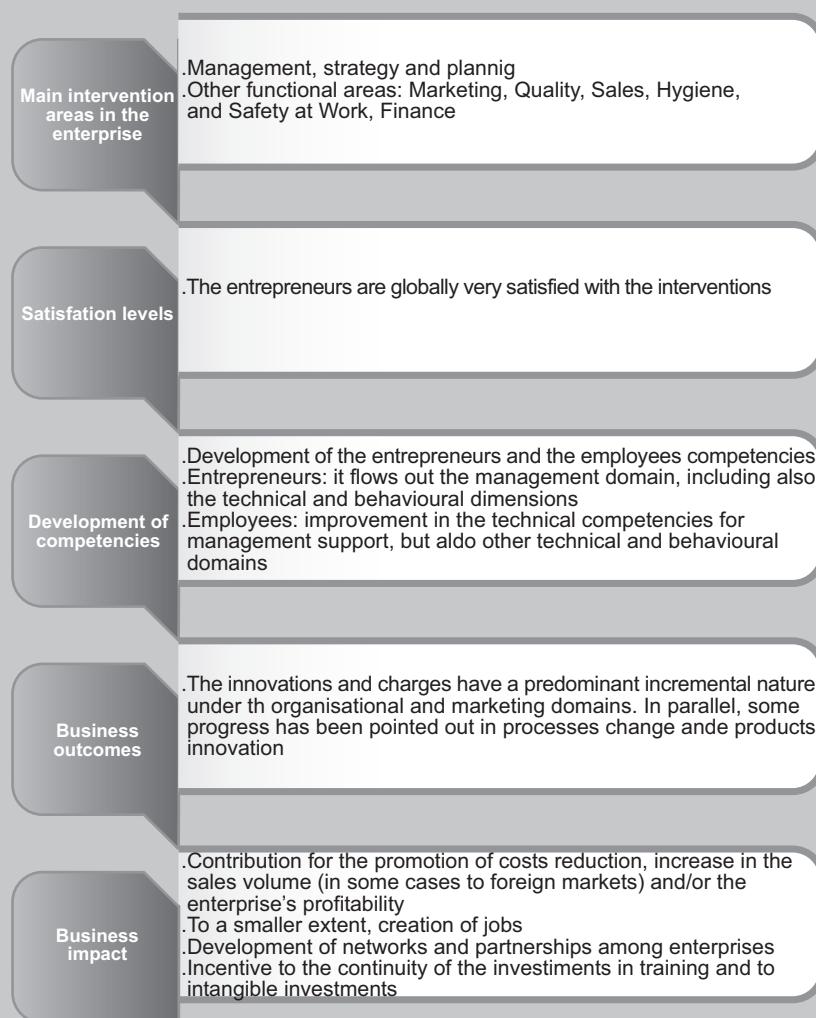
First of all, it is important to consider that the evaluation exercises demonstrate that the thematic and functional dispersion of the Programmes' focus areas leads to results that are situated beyond the improvement in the management processes of micro and SMEs, expanding the regulatory framework that guides the intervention. Other areas such as sales, marketing, quality, hygiene and safety at work or finance are among the areas that characterise the main intervention scopes in the enterprises.

The focus and the depth in the Programmes' results are not homogeneous, it is possible to find differences inter- and intra Programmes.

As far as the development of the participants' competencies is concerned, particularly from the entrepreneurs, there are various situations: while some Programmes show better results in the development of operational management competencies over strategic management domains, for some others is the exact opposite. However, it is important to notice that the competencies developed or consolidated by the entrepreneurs flow out of the business management domain, including in parallel technical and behavioural

areas. Generally speaking, it is also possible to register evidences that prove the development of employees' competencies in behavioural areas, side by side with the technical areas.

### FIGURE 5 EFFECTS PRODUCED BY THE TRAINING-ACTION PROGRAMMES IN FORCE WITH NSRF



The external evaluation studies also reveal that the training-action Programmes are actually inducing meaningful changes in the participant enterprises. In some cases, these changes have a structural nature and, for that reason, they tend to last longer, to be sustainable and with higher potential to influence the performance and the competitive position of the enterprises. In other cases, the changes have a more instrumental character, they focus on specific functional areas and make support tools available (for instance, clients' and suppliers' records and databases, as well as tools to assess clients' satisfaction; marketing plans, products / services leaflets, logo, site, profiles in social networks, newsletter and other elements related to the enterprise's communication and image; tools to assess the employees' performance and training plans; management maps, tools to costs allocation, maps of expenditure and receipts; templates to make procedures right; development of new ideas / concepts of services and products; strategic plans and action plans).

Beyond the more structural or instrumental nature of the interventions, the extent of occurrence of the results achieved in the enterprises depends upon a set of other quality requirements of either the Programmes or the training-action, concerning especially the following aspects: selection of the enterprises, role of the entrepreneur, pertinence of the problems discussed (competencies and organisational), articulation between training and consultancy and the performance of the technical teams (coordination, consultants and trainers), among others.

In the interventions where the results were more successful, a set of impacts are acknowledgeable in terms of organisational performance, converted in turnover, costs reduction or even in the enterprises' profitability.

Other meaningful impacts are related to the Programme's capacity to instil the promotion of networks and partnerships among the participant enterprises, converted into business development and with a leverage impact on intangible investments, especially on training for the employees and for the entrepreneurs/ managers themselves, and on tangible ones (for example, equipment), although to a smaller extent.

The Programmes' capacity to act, simultaneously, in the enterprises' development and modernisation and in the competencies of their agents, via a tailor-made intervention in terms of needs, investments and specific conditions, both organisational and individual – of the enterprises, employees and entrepreneurs / managers – justifies the high satisfaction levels of the participant entrepreneurs , as well as their availability to enter on new training processes, thus proving the potential of this type of programmes in enhancing the enrolment of micro and SMEs in qualification processes.

## 5. Room for the model's improvement: some avenues for reflection

The purpose of this chapter is to sum up some of the ideas that come up as the most significant ones during the analysis and reflection process now completed. As a consequence, this chapter frames reflection elements related to the pertinence of the motives and the criteria underneath the launch of this policy instrument and, complementarily, the evolution clues that will contribute to reinforce the efficacy of the intervention model.

To begin with, the chapter addresses the identification of evolution margins and naturally assumes its choice for the commitment to the intervention model underneath this instrument of public policy and concentrates on a voluntary emphasis in the search for strategies that contribute to its improvement. A judgment mistake may always be present in the proposals described, but above all, it is important to consider their contribution to intensify the debate and enrich the reflection that will guide the formulation of public choices.

Overall, to strengthen the action of this type of training programmes for Micro and SMEs, to consolidate the qualification conditions of their agents and to support their modernisation and development, the privilege goes to:

- the reinforcement of the identity and the hallmark of this training modality, which implies the stabilisation on an action framework that shall not diminish the characteristic “tailor-made action”, but be an instrument to serve its asseveration and dissemination;

- the reinforcement of the strategic orientation of this type of programmes, aligning them with relevant investment domains for the competitiveness of the economy and the sectors and for the promotion of the employability of the active population; and,
- the improvement of the Programme's management mechanisms.

The following text situates the main investments considered priority.

## 5.1 The relevance of the commitment

The first topic for reflection relates to the macroeconomic and social context where the Programmes are embedded. At the same time, it is important to take into consideration the broader framework of the public policy on vocational training.

The economic context surrounding the SMEs today is no less complex than the one existing when the last generation of Training-Action programmes was launched, quite the opposite; furthermore, the challenges they face are not smoother. The competitive environment became even more demanding in a context of sharp decline in domestic demand and in a scenario where the selection effect happens under extremely strong pressure to obtain competitiveness gains and under the growing imperative to internationalise the activity. In this perspective, SMEs face now bigger challenges to their expertise, especially in terms of qualification and innovation in their action.

The structural adjustment in the Portuguese economy and the need to toughen the business activity in the tradable goods sector represents a priority that cannot do without an active positioning from the public policy.

In the human resources sphere, what was gained this far in order to promote a comprehensive requalification of the workforce registers a discontinuous and still insufficient path to enable a change in the structural qualifications matrix. At the same time, the progress targeted by the public policies so to reach a higher adequacy between the instruments and the business needs,

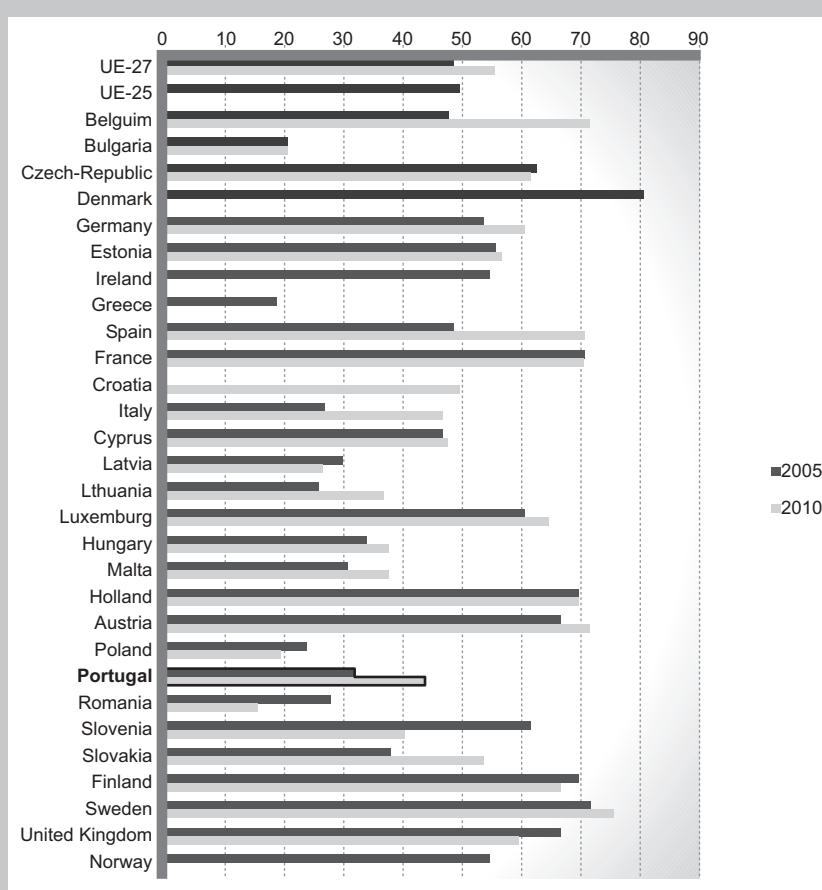
although registering relevant advances in terms of the instruments that try to articulate the training policy with the economic policy, is still substantially far from the intended goal. At this level, the limited production of innovation features in the field of methodologies and training practice stands out, aiming at a higher individualisation of the answers to the enterprises' needs. As the business structure remains stable under SMEs hegemony, this issue gains extra relevance.

All in all, data regarding the enterprises' enrolment in vocational training show that the profile of our business structure, characterised by the reduced average size of the enterprises, constitutes a blocking factor to a steadier progression in the rates that express the enrolment of both enterprises and active employees in strategies for the development of competencies.

Globally, despite the registered improvement, the enterprises' investment in training remains comparatively low considering all OECD countries. The relative proportion of the enterprises that provided vocational training in Portugal raised significantly between 2005 and 2010, from 32% to 44%, although it still differs 12 ppts from the recorded value for the EU27 average in 2010 (56%). This indicator is only above the values registered in Romania (16%), Poland (20%), Bulgaria (21%), Latvia (27%), Lithuania (37%), Hungary (38%), Malta (38%) and Slovenia (41%). In fact, compared to the group of countries from Southern Europe, Portugal occupies the least favourable position because Italy presented an enrolment rate of their enterprises of 47% and Spain a rate of 71%[12].

**12** Note that data for Greece were not available.

**FIGURE 6 PROPORTION OF THE ENTERPRISES PROVIDING CONTINUING VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN THE TOTAL OF ENTERPRISES WITH 10 OR MORE EMPLOYEES, PER COUNTRY, IN 2005 AND 2010**



Source: Continuing Vocational Training Survey | Eurostat

If we concentrate the analysis in the training participation rate according to the size – excluding micro enterprises – it is possible to verify that, together with a significant increase in that indicator, a comparable unfavourable position is still registered at European level for enterprises ranging 10 to 49 employees.

**TABLE 7 PROPORTION OF THE ENTERPRISES PROVIDING VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN THE TOTAL OF ENTERPRISES WITH 10 OR MORE EMPLOYEES, IN PORTUGAL AND IN EU27, ACCORDING TO THE SIZE OF THE ENTERPRISE, IN 2005 AND 2010**

		Portugal		UE-27	
		2005	2010	2005	2010
Proportion of the enterprises providing vocational training in the total of enterprises (%)	Total	44	65	60	66
	10 / 49 employees	39	61	55	63
	50 / 249 employees	70	86	78	81
	> 250 employees	91	97	91	93
Proportion of the enterprises providing continuing vocational training in the total of enterprises (%)	Total	32	44	49	56
	10 / 49 employees	27	39	44	52
	50 / 249 employees	63	74	68	73
	> 250 employees	88	92	84	89

Source: Continuing Vocational Training Survey | Eurostat

The statistic data available also underline that SMEs invest less in formal/structured vocational training strategies.

This information is most certainly related to the difficulties encountered by SMEs to finance the participation of their employees in training programmes, concerning the direct costs with training itself, but, above all, the difficulties faced at organisational level when the employees are released to attend training and with the difficulty to motivate them to join. The issues regarding training organisation are, then, extremely relevant in the universe of a SME.

The collected evidence underline the importance to reinforce the effort to build public policies directed to intangible success factors for the enterprises and to strengthen their efficacy regarding the purpose of assuring requirements that foster the participation of SMEs. The reinforcement of solutions emerging from informal strategies with reference to the actual contexts where the professions are exercised is an option that cannot be missed.

In this regard it is worth mentioning that at the level of the development of training instruments, in particular referring continuing training, the panoply of regulations associated to the implementation of ESF does not reveal a friendly configuration to promote innovation and it has an inducing effect of a certain crystallisation of practices. It is understandable that the balance between the need to control the projects and keep transparency in the financing mechanisms and the search for flexibility margins required to achieve innovation is not easy to reach; still, it is believed that there are significant improvement margins at this level.

One of the options to follow consists in adjusting the eligibilities to a more flexible framework regarding the training strategies.

The job protection is yet another plan of major importance to take into account in the evolution of Training-Action. Never in a recent past the public policies, in particular the ones that ambition an intervention in terms of job creation, have faced such a serious scenario regarding the unemployment rates and, indeed, regarding the degradation of the normative framework of employment protection. This reality reinforces how important it is to diversify the qualification strategies and, with higher strategic property, to put into practice answers that bring qualification of the active population and reinforcement of

the enterprises' competitive capacity closer together. A stronger contribution from continuing training to the employability of the active population encounters, in the possibility to strengthen the enterprises reactivity and their sustainability, an important starting point.

In association with the qualification of the enterprise comes the qualification of the employee and, thereby, the promotion of his/her employability. How the Training-Action instruments respond to the issue of actives' qualification and to the reinforcement of their employability gains redoubled relevance when it is more and more difficult to keep active the policy instruments that pointed to this goal, whether from adult education or initial qualification.

In this area, two intervention plans deserve to be privileged: the qualification of the employees and the qualification of the entrepreneur. Regarding the employee, it is important to adjust his/her competencies to the demands of both the workstation and the new production contexts, thus contributing to his/her employability. Regarding the entrepreneurs, it is necessary the development of several levels of competencies, the management ones and the technical ones, equally relevant in smaller enterprises, and the interpersonal ones, such as network (entrepreneurs who have never come close to their peers because they do not find the opportunity or the time to do so, etc.).

The degree of relevance given to the qualification of the managerial functions within SMEs shall not be read as a simple item in the purposes associated with the training policy at stake. In fact, as relevant literature on this matter points out, both the construction of a better competitive framework and the implementation of a strategy to reinforce the professionalism of the enterprises' human resources, apart from being interdependent, depend a lot on the evolution of the SMEs and on the bolstering of their management capacity.

Still within the general framework topic, it is not worthless to consider the severe worsening of the financing conditions for enterprises, small- and medium-sized in particular. This circumstance stresses the difficulties felt by SMEs to pursue investment strategies inherent to qualification and change projects, even more so because, commonly, the intangible and medium/long return domains are depreciated when compared to the domains where the

return is more immediate. Although the recent past has brought improvements in the statement of a positioning especially oriented for medium term strategic plan, the crisis may have “pushed” the enterprises to a redefinition of priorities.

This enunciation underlines how important it is to continue the public policies that support the qualification and modernisation of SMEs and to search for forms of methodological and pedagogic innovation, capable of strengthening the efficacy of the training policies regarding the qualification of the active population.

## 5.2 The profile of the participant enterprises

Considering the Programme’s performance data in all its several editions, presented in Table 1, and the number of existing enterprises in Portugal in the defined target-group, above 300 thousand (349 thousand in 2008, Statistics Portugal) it becomes obvious that there is a large spectrum of enterprises that can still be intervened. The results evidenced in the evaluation studies to the different Programmes suggest that the mobilisation strategy supported in the decentralisation of the networks of operators, close to the enterprises from a territorial perspective, is actually an added value to grant Training-Action the capacity to enlarge its intervention area.

In addition, the data presented above show that the investment in human resources development is especially difficult to implement in smaller scale enterprises (between 10 and 49 employees, according to the available data). It is also in this segment of enterprises that the evolution and maturation of the management practices faces greater demands regarding the development of competencies.

Still, if the analysis to the context reveals a set of needs that justify the relevance of the intervention in SMEs, especially in smaller ones, the implementation dynamics and the results of the Programmes’ evaluation studies suggest the benefit of reflection upon the typical profile of the enterprises involved in the measure. In fact, the implementation of some of the Programmes reveals, within the participant enterprises, a prevalence of

very small enterprises, particularly of micro enterprises, partly with a reduced number of employees (i.e., three or less employees). Well, the analysis and the reflection performed underline the advantage to keep an open and comprehensive perspective regarding the profile of the enterprises to involve, but the implementation data indicate that it is useful to slightly correct the average dimension of the enterprises involved in the Programme. This interpretation is placed in a horizontal plan, but we accurately acknowledge that the differences between sectors and sub-programmes (corresponding to the management responsibility of the different IB) are significant.

The information on the Programmes' implementation highlights a relative over-representation of micro enterprises with a small number of employees in some of the Programmes, while at the same time the indicators gathered during the evaluation exercises lead us to underline that the size of the enterprises does matter from the point of view of the potential efficacy of the supported projects. Indeed, the conditions to implement the methodology and the Programme's goals are not favoured by very small organisational contexts, with a deficit of structuring and organisation and with many overlapped functions. The intervention in organisational contexts with a certain degree of structuring regarding the various functions within the enterprise and the activities associated with the different workplaces constitutes a useful condition to the application and consolidation of on-the-job training practices. Therefore, in our perspective, a new programming cycle would benefit from the opening and transversality of Training-Action to all segments in the SMEs universe, at the same time it would also benefit if it took into consideration the purpose of raising the average size of the participant enterprises.

This is, however, an orientation line that shall be articulated with other innovation tips regarding the profile of the supported projects and that will be addressed later on. Meanwhile we would like to refer as a possibility that small-sized enterprises may privilege interventions focused on the development of organisation and management competencies.

Regarding the profile of the participant enterprises as well, the enunciation on economic policy adds an information that we consider shall not be omitted from the programming strategy, i.e., the relevance to combine the importance given to tradable goods sectors, as they trigger the countries' competitive development, with the support to enterprises from other sectors which are

huge in terms of job protection and economic and social cohesion. In fact, it is through the promotion of the national productive base that a relevant part of the adjustment in the Portuguese economy shall become effective. As a consequence, without compromising the Programmes' coverage, we believe that they should guarantee a proper representativeness of these sectors in the implementation dynamic. On the other hand, the services producing sectors, especially at a local basis, such as commerce and services to the enterprises, have an increased importance in the promotion of the local job markets and in the reinforcement of the economy, according to an integrated development perspective.

Simultaneously, the articulation between the priorities of the economic policy at regional level and the activity sectors of the supported enterprises emerges as a crucial element to obtain a better strategic regulation of the Training-Action model.

### 5.3 The implementation model

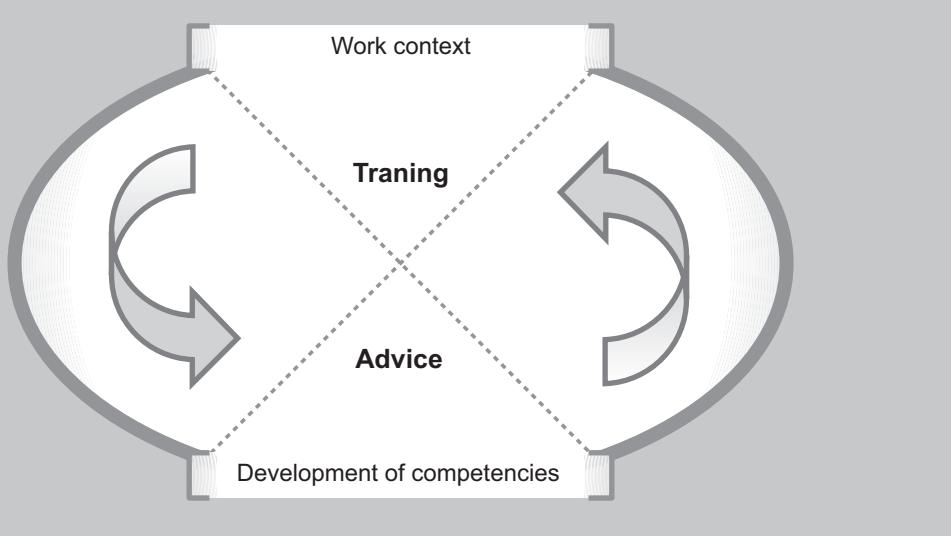
The equation of the implementation model shall not be distant from the strategy's goal, quite the opposite; it shall take shape from it. In this perspective, we consider important to underline that Training-Action answers directly to the concerns regarding SMEs: to support their modernisation, to raise their management capacity and to involve the active employees in lifelong training strategies.

Training-Action is, then, a training intervention targeting the promotion of the enterprises' intangible success factors. The development of competencies is, therefore, what triggers the change processes it intends to initiate. To establish as a goal the capacity to induce change in a context of SME with serious weaknesses in terms of organisation, management and even organisational culture causes the programme to face the challenge of promoting the right balance between the ambition of the objectives and the plausibility of the results within reach.

Regarding the intervention strategy, the reflection so far draws attention to the utility of stating on-the-job learning principles at implementation level, putting an end to the fallacious methodological separation – when compared to the basic theoretical models referred – between training and consultancy. Hence, it is believed that the idea of being built as a tailor-made training programme requires more than the alignment between the training areas and the priorities in the diagnosis. As a matter of fact, the model's identity shall also be established due to the better capacity to bind the training to the professional performance, i.e., to the activities that materialise the intended learning.

Following this line of reasoning, the modality shall declare the perspective of training by doing, disinvesting in the representativeness of more conventional strategies of in-class training for heterogeneous groups and strengthening the capacity to individualise the training plans. The bottom line is that this guideline aims to strengthen the model's identity, grounding in the innovation of the learning strategies the main efficacy resource to develop the competencies of SME actives.

According to the perspective explained hereby, it does not seem to have room for a profound distinction between the functions training and consultancy, with the subsequent consequences on the associated financing mechanisms, once the advice is part of the process to develop competencies. Therefore, although having different profiles, the technicians involved accept the responsibility to put into practice a process to develop competencies which is, mostly, a training process. If we apply thoroughly the methodological principles we defend, more than an imprecision of boundaries, what we have is an artificial separation between the two components. That artificiality seems to be amplified by the financing criteria used in the current model.

**FIGURE 7 ARTICULATION TRAINING AND ADVICE**

This option points to the acclaim of a single measure regarding the extent of the intervention in the enterprise; in other words, there is one enterprise's action programme and it conciliates the training and advice dimensions. Consequently, the establishment of a distinction within the main intervention areas would have to be between on-the-job training, predominant within this proposal, and in-class training, privileged for themes and results commonly achieved. In addition, the standard cost to finance the implementation should be based on the same distinction, i.e., training cost variable according to whether the training takes place in the enterprise or in a classroom.

This option does not mean, however, that the financing of other resources – apart from training and competencies' development – that may be relevant for the change processes cannot be financed by public support. In fact, the accomplishment of investments in those resources will determine the efficacy of the projects themselves and, for that reason, shall be guaranteed. What we are looking for, mainly, is the individualisation in the investment areas to consider, so that the nature and the mission of the training intervention can

be better protected. At the same time, this hypothesis guarantees a better convergence between the intervention's scope and the objectives and rules of the European Social Fund.

### ***Exemplification***

Let's take the example of a SME whose diagnosis indicates that the priority shall be a change and innovation in the marketing and sales practices. As it may correspond to the adoption of new products/ranges, new concepts to reference the offer, new markets and segments of target audience, new dissemination and distribution channels, among others, the project to be implemented gathers actions of diverse nature that must be taken into consideration.

Therefore, it may be necessary to define a new strategy, select and differentiate the offer, identify target markets, develop and use new online sales tools, create and produce new products, assess markets, and so on and so forth.

The enterprise's qualification to set such a challenge in motion may encompass the investment in the development of the human resources competencies together with investments in the development of other resources. The focus on the development of competencies will enable, for instance, to define the following strategy, to qualify the productive area so to guarantee new products or services, to prepare the resources in the sales areas to run and use new online sales tools, adjusting the price policy and producing contents, among other competencies that may be related to the action plan. These are development areas that shall be addressed in a Training-Action programme where on-the-job training is preferred and the development of the necessary competencies to a good implementation of the strategy and the objectives planned is pursued.

Notwithstanding, the full implementation of this type of strategy may require the achievement of resources/services that may go beyond what is reasonable to proceed with the enterprise's internal human resources. An example of this situation is the preparation of a market study or the creation of a website to support the e-commerce. In fact, in these cases, choosing a service supply may be the most logic solution because, in most cases, there is no interest for the enterprise to assume the development of such competencies.

In this case, what we propose is not the omission of the support strategy regarding this investment component; instead we propose that this component may be supported by incentive measures/lines to the enterprises in articulation with the Training-Action programme. Consequently, it would be possible to answer a set of meaningful objectives: i) the methodological empowerment of the training dimension (including the advice dimension and the strategies to develop competencies based on informal approaches such as networking, for example) in order to facilitate its consolidation as a resource for the promotion of competencies; ii) the guarantee that support instruments exist to provide the enterprises investment conditions adjusted to a good implementation of the plan; and, iii) the possibility to articulate and prioritise the incentives to the enterprises with the projects to develop competencies that strengthen their efficacy.

In this perspective, the action plan may have a broader scope than the one pursued by the training strategies. In fact, the definition of a change and business innovation project implies the consideration of all the different dimensions that are essential for that project, including the employees' training. To clarify what goes under the training domain and what belongs to other type of investments, guaranteeing as much as possible that the two domains get together, is an important result to impute to the planning stage. To make a proper delimitation of the boundaries in terms of implementation strategy will contribute to reinforce the projects' clarity and the efficacy of their management.

In section 2 of the publication, when the model's identity is addressed, the importance of an integrated approach promoted by Training-Action is also underlined. In other words, the association between diagnosis, planning and implementation within the same project is enhanced. Naturally, this is a structural attribute of the model that shall be preserved.

The involvement of the entrepreneur/manager is mandatory and here relies an emblematic condition of how the model was originally designed; moreover, given the results achieved and given the purpose mentioned above to bring the relationship between advice and training closer, it constitutes an essential condition for the success of the interventions. The involvement of the entrepreneur is a guarantee of the existence of a change sponsor who stands up for the change project around the remaining employees. This is the only way to motivate them to cooperate in the introduction of the necessary changes as well. In that sense, the involvement of the entrepreneur/manager shall be compulsory and an eligibility requirement for the enterprises to receive the supports. The projects develop having as "entry" the participation of the entrepreneur; this perspective indicates that the dominant model for the approved projects shall encompass the training for entrepreneurs combined with training for employees.

The importance of the involvement of the entrepreneur in a Programme of this kind is recognised, due to the fact that he/she is the main decision-maker regarding the changes associated to the Programmes' intervention, so what matters now is to assure that his/her participation is carried out with as much efficacy as possible. The role of the entrepreneur is crucial to lead the internal processes, so, generally speaking, it is worth considering a reduction in the number of hours for inter-enterprise in-class training for entrepreneurs and compensate it with the definition of training minima associated with intra-enterprise training.

The results collected throughout the evaluation exercises suggest, as a complement, that there might be beneficial to consider more operational and simpler methodological strategies. As a matter of fact, the use of heavy methodologies and with complex procedures is not always adequate for less structured and markedly informal organisational contexts. In many of these cases, the choice for simpler and more operational methods to promote the preparation of the diagnosis turns out profitable in terms of adequacy and

timing, with an impact on the project's global economy.

It is also understood to consider the possibility of transforming the diagnosis and the action plan in independent products from the training process. In this scenario, the project would be centred in the consolidation of the management competencies related to that objective and the outputs regarding the diagnosis and the action plan would constitute a basis to justify a submission to investment projects especially conceived to support business updating. Once again, the training condition of this process would be a crucial condition to guarantee the projects' "methodological legitimacy". This approach, more delimited and articulated with the development of management competencies, as previously referred, may constitute an important reply option for the micro enterprises.

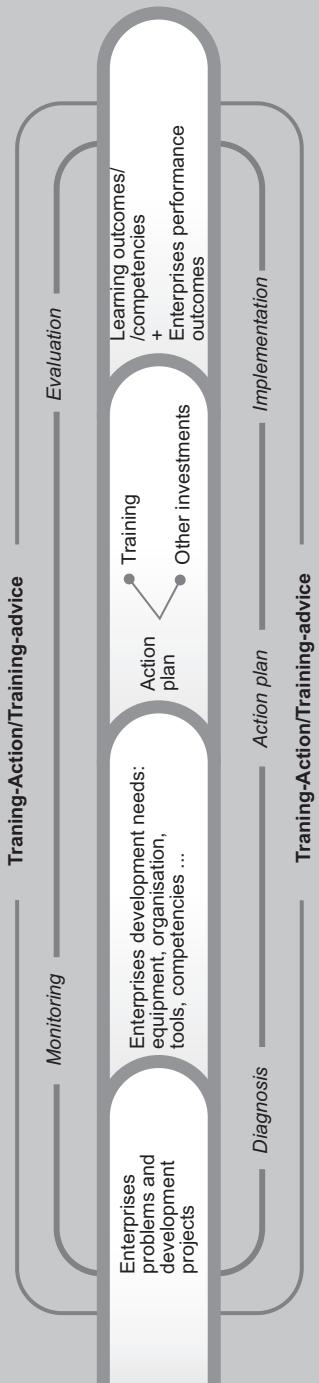
Still at a methodological level, future interventions, whether at the diagnosis, the action plan or the training that corresponds to that plan, shall value in their development an approach based on the competencies, thus magnifying the capacity to answer not only to the enterprises' needs, but also to their language. At this level it is important that the plans of action relate the desired results in terms of business performance with the competencies required for their achievement. From a methodological point of view, this option demands the diagnostic and planning instruments to be guided by the need to identify the critical competencies to promote the mediation between the identified problems and the defined objectives; in addition, it matters to place the competencies to be promoted within the enterprise's professional field.

The competencies approach hereby upheld meets in the intervention logic of the Training-Action Programmes an important trump for its establishment. In fact, the competencies approach quite often raises, in the theoretical models and in practice, an opposition between the perspective that values the development of individual competencies and the perspective where the identification of the workplace's specificities prevails. The perspective emerging from the synthesis of these two, the one that emphasises the relationship established between the individual and the work context to the construction of the professional competency, finds in the Training-Action strategy an added methodological value. In fact, the exit for the referred duality is, precisely, the belief that the competencies, regardless of the mobilised breadth of resources (knowledge, skills, attitudes,...) are built in the practice.

This is precisely the perspective offered by Training-Action. On the other hand, this is the perspective that will more easily allow circumventing the methodological difficulties that the competencies approach under the scope of vocational training still presents.

The development of a large scale programme to train trainers/consultants would give an extremely relevant contribution to disseminate and level the technical capacity of these agents to act in terms of diagnostics building and action strategies guided by competencies. This is considered a sphere of intervention where the Intermediate Bodies can emerge as facilitators of those learning areas oriented to the network of trainers with intervention in each Programme. Otherwise, the methodological belongings to differentiated theoretical approaches and the experience acquired in other action models, namely those related to the common business consultancy and to in-class training, will prevail and tend to impose hegemonic practices that in their essence diverge from the methodological root of the Training-Action model. This methodological dissonance between the learning built, also, in the training and consultancy practices and the differentiated interpretation proposed by the Training-Action methodologies constitutes one of the constraint facts to a full affirmation of this model.

This intervention area refers to the purpose of strengthening and accelerating the construction of a collective know-how in terms of the teams on the field and materialise, as previously referred, the purpose of developing, regarding methods and practices, an unique performance culture.



**FIGURE 8 GLOBAL SCHEME OF THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE TRAINING-ACTION MODALITY**

## 5.4 The establishment of goals and results

The evolution line proposed for the action model of the Training Action considers an increased flexibility in the action's methodological framework, especially regarding the contemplated training interventions, the diagnosis' strategy and positioning and, even, the global organisation of the training projects. The counterpart to this increased flexibility at intervention level shall be a higher degree of formality and clarity in contracting the objectives. Indeed, the empirical evidence collected throughout the evaluation exercises explicates that the degree of formalisation in the projects' objectives and expected outcomes is often neglected and weakens the capacity to guide and monitor the projects. In these cases, the action unfolds without its sense being sufficiently clear and stated. Well, it is expected that the action flexibility enables efficacy gains that shall be potentiated through a better definition of the objectives targeted at each project and of the expected results. This is, also, condition for a better development of the monitoring and evaluation function.

Therefore, the projects' expected outcomes should explicitly state a reference at two levels: i) the learning/competencies results to be disseminated and that shall be clearly checked under the projects' evaluation; and ii) the results related to the enterprise's performance, mediated by the acquisition of new competencies. In the results related to the performance it shall be possible to clearly distinguish those which are likely to be measured in the short term and those that require a longer period (for example, evolution in the turnover and profitability) and that shall be assessed by evaluation programmes especially designed to guarantee its measurement beyond of the project's implementation deadline.

## 5.5 The thematic approach

The reinforcement of a thematic approach, previously tested in some of the Programmes currently being implemented, constitutes another valuable option in that it eases the model's methodological maturation. In fact, a delimitation of the intervention areas suggests the achievement of efficacy gains in the consolidation of knowledge and know-how by the teams of trainers. Even if this option may somehow limit the exploitation of a wider specification of the intervention projects to the circumstance in each enterprise, it does not jeopardises the individualisation of the answers, provided that it is an option grounded in a true correspondence between the problems and concerns of the participant enterprises and the considered themes; moreover, it may even contribute to qualify even more the action strategy. This option makes it possible to go deep on the issues referred under each theme, it draws boundaries and focuses the projects on the enterprises and it enables a selection of trainers based on a perspective of specialisation. On the other hand, strengthening the choice for a thematic approach allows the establishment of a greater articulation, *a priori*, between sectorial difficulties and the scope of the intervention projects in the enterprises.

Programming by subject areas may more easily be conciliated with a greater investment on the programming and training engineering, thus creating favourable conditions to a clearer explanation of the intervention methods and practices and, consequently, to an easier improvement of the hiring logics.

It is worth mentioning that the perspective described above takes into consideration the fact that the thematic scope of the Programmes was broader than the remission granted in the regulatory framework for the qualification of the management processes. In fact, it does not make sense to have a restrictive understanding of what the qualification of the management processes is; likewise, it is pertinent to conclude that the qualification of the SMEs includes the improvement of the response capacity in broader areas than the referred one.

## 5.6 The articulation with other investments

The articulation between support to training and to investments from a different nature is considered a relevant suggestion for the evolution of the model, in the sense that it creates conditions for a greater impact on the intended change and innovation processes. On the other hand, this is a privileged condition to favour the involvement of medium-sized enterprises in the Programmes. Consequently, the possibility to encompass projects that combine the financing to qualification strategies with incentives to the business modernisation and innovation via “ERDF-like” investments is considered advantageous.

In terms of delivery, and considering valid the principle that projects on organisational change require diversity in the type of investments requested and that the intangible side of those investments is often depreciated, it is advisable to consider the possibility to support preferably projects that combine the focus on the development of competencies with intangible investments. Provided that precedence is established, it should protect the effectiveness of the training investment and, therefore, the organisations' equipment with the necessary competencies for the development of their change processes.

Expediting an articulation framework between Training-Action and the incentive systems to enterprises, capable of rendering a better strategic and methodological definition of Training-Action and a greater coverage for each of the business projects, constitutes the ultimate and crucial evolution to favour the efficacy in change projects. At organisational level, it is worth considering two financing lines within the same line of support to the enterprises, in favour of the articulation of the financing under the same application and the same project.

## 5.7 Mainstreaming priorities

This is an intervention area where the Programme has a significant improvement margin. According to the knowledge accumulated during the evaluation studies, the capacity to add the transversal priorities in the projects is quite scanty. As a consequence, the options available regarding the evolution of the model are one step back in the path that has to be walked in order to establish these priorities with an adequate level of relevance in the enterprises' action plans.

A first and fundamental barrier that shall be lifted is related to the technical capacity of the teams working for the entities responsible for incorporating these issues in the projects. For these strands in particular, the advice function is at this level a crucial requirement to achieve a greater awareness of the enterprises towards these matters. Therefore, approaching these topics in a training programme directed to the network of trainers/consultants of the programme will be very useful. This is absolutely critical so that at the level of the diagnostic the enterprises' weaknesses in terms of transversal priorities can be properly assessed.

Other lines of action to take into consideration suggest the conception of thematic lines of action that shall be included in the projects. To this view, the concerns with gender equality and equality of opportunities in SMEs would be addressed in modeled tools used in the diagnosis and in the training strategies, ideally in combination with the remaining interventions. The whole purpose of modelling the intervention is to facilitate its implementation, with the ambition that the reinforcement of the teams' technical abilities may promote the opening to new practices. It is recommended to consider a closer intervention of the Intermediate Bodies in this planning dimension, including the valorisation of sectorial approaches. At the same time, this topic shall have greater presence in the moments dedicated to the monitoring and follow-up of the programmes' implementation.

The creation of sub-programmes specifically directed to respond the policy objectives associated with the transversal priorities is an alternative option. However, it would bring about increased mobilisation difficulties that would demand an additional investment in the dissemination and mobilisation strategies and, even more so, the possibility to associate to its implementation strategies of business certification that would promote the reinforcement of the competitive position of the participant enterprises.

## 5.8 The management and institutional model associated with the programme's implementation

A nuclear idea regarding the evolution of the management and institutional model associated with the programme's implementation leads first of all to the valorisation of the decentralised model that corresponds to how the Programme is organised. According to this perspective, it is considered suitable the continuation of the network model that articulates the Intermediate Bodies (IB) with the Business Associations that establish on the field the proximity to the enterprises.

The model's advantages are significant given the way it permitted an effective management decentralisation, mainly through the contracting of managerial and monitoring responsibilities with the Intermediate Bodies, but also in the way it promoted the projects' sectorial and territorial contextualisation, reaping the benefit of the closeness effect guaranteed by the associative structure.

However, apart from the purpose of saving the network action within the Programme's implementation, it is considered that the responsibilities and the intervention capacity of the IBs should be reinforced regarding the monitoring of the programmes and the promotion of a greater strategic monitoring of their implementation. Obviously, this option suggests the need to consider a financed framework and rules adjusted to the promotion of the technical qualification of the IBs and to reinforce all the resources they mobilise.

The reinforcement of the capacity to act regarding the programming engineering of the sectorial projects, the strengthening of its intervention regarding the methodological qualification of the network of operators and trainers and the reinforcement of the monitoring functions constitute the areas to include in the reinforcement of the technical capacity of the IB.

Together with the reinforcement of the IBs intervention regarding the Programmes' regulation and the qualification of the players, it is considered necessary to judge the creation of pockets of training operators with the beneficiary entities and, at a second level, with the IBs. The creation of the pocket would be the outcome of an accreditation process capable of validating the technical capacity to intervene in this modality, preserving the validation of the operators' methodological and sectorial skills. The interest of the training entities would be freely expressed – explaining domains and geographical areas – and the final selection of the enterprises would result from calls launched locally, but with a closer monitoring from the programmes' management level.

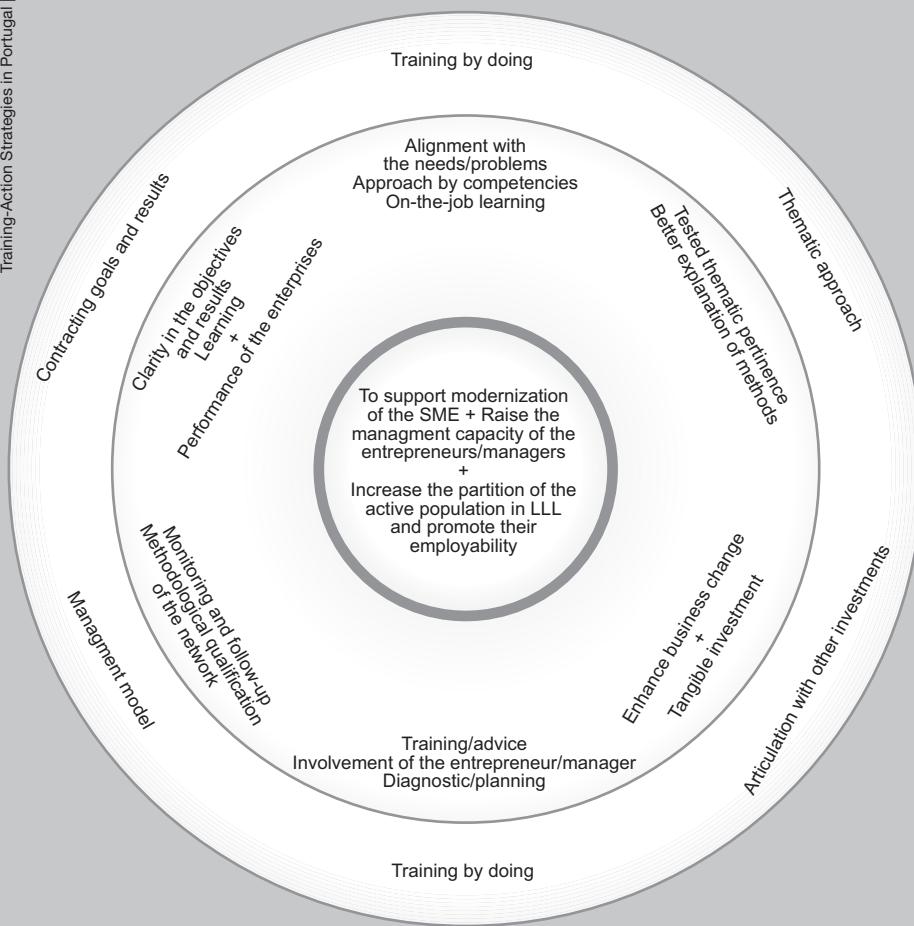
Still at this level, it is suggested that the training of the teams may be a responsibility of the beneficiary entities, without compromising a set of guidelines defined (and monitored) at a higher level, by the Intermediate Bodies.

What has been referred above translates the focus on a better framework for the constitution of the network of operators to join the Programme which results, to begin with, from the recognition of the need to evolve into a methodologically higher performance level and, secondly, from the importance given to a more strategic regulation of the supported interventions. Notwithstanding this aspiration, it is considered that it would be beneficial for the Programme's operationalisation framework to consider and promote a higher qualification of the sectorial and regional associations in the implementation of activities to monitor the projects and, indeed, in the possibility to build technical teams that may take the lead of some of those intervention projects. This is a relevant option in the attempt to get an additional positive result regarding the qualification of the business associative structure and, also, to favour and enhance a framework for closer relationship between the enterprises and the business associations.

The evolution of the programme towards a plan of higher effectiveness in the development of competencies in the enterprises suggests the usefulness of reinforcing the guarantee to produce the expected outcomes through the hiring mechanisms. Therefore, to consider the contracting of the expected outcomes in the enterprises as an underlying condition to their involvement in the Programmes is a relevant topic for future thinking. A more precise explicitness of the expected result areas, mainly regarding changes in the trainees' behaviour and changes in the physical dimensions of the enterprise capable of measuring changes caused directly by the interventions, is actually pertinent as a background to the follow-up that the IB can carry out, as well as to the (self-regulation) that the performance of the Beneficiary Entities may introduce.

Still regarding the assessment of results and accountability, the difficulties encountered in the construction of a common reading map for the impacts, capable of enhancing a clearer communication of the Programmes' results altogether, justifies a greater coordination between IBs in order to discuss and expedite a common reading frame. The preparation of this common reading frame for the programmes' impacts will guarantee a clearer and assertive communication around the Training-Action effects, both at level of the enterprises that constitute the target audience of the Programmes and at level of the monitoring and evaluation of public policies.

**FIGURE 9 SUMMARY OF THE SUGGESTIONS FOR THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRAINING-ACTION MODEL**



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