

INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

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Abstract

The context for cohesion policy has changed in the light of the major challenges mentioned above. The cohesion policy has to make a significant contribution to the renewed Lisbon strategy. This is the basic idea that underpins the new legislative framework for the reform of cohesion policy for the period 2007-2013 called Community Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion.

Key words: interregional cooperation, program, cohesion policy, development.

INTRODUCTION

This Operational Program is financed in the framework of interregional cooperation in the European Union under the Cohesion policy 2007-2013. The program will enable interregional cooperation by bringing together regional and local authorities from different countries in projects to exchange and transfer their experiences in regional policy and jointly improve and develop regional policy approaches and instruments. The program will be partly-funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

This Interregional Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 builds on the experiences of the Community Initiative INTERREG IIC (2002-2006) that was designed to strengthen Europe's economic and social cohesion by funding operations that boost cooperation between regional and local authorities from across the EU, leading to a balanced development of the continent. More than 260 INTERREG IIC projects were approved involving over 2500 regional and local authorities as well as public-equivalent institutions from 49 different countries. These operations addressed a wide range of topics closely related to the implementation of European Union (EU) regional policy, largely in areas of public responsibility in regional development.[Council of Community]

The experiences from these years of interregional cooperation are positive in the sense that the programme managed to bring together many actors from across the EU, dealing with a wide variety of issues. Therefore, there is a strong need for continuity of interregional cooperation considering these results with some adjustments in the current programme related on the one hand to new global and territorial challenges in Europe and on the other

to the revised pattern and new major orientations for cohesion policy over the period 2007-2013.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Regarding the developments in the global and territorial context for drafting this operational programme (OP) for Interregional Cooperation for the period 2007-2013, it is characterised by several major developments:[*Commission Staff Working*]

- *the recent enlargement to 25 Member States (MS), with Bulgaria and Romania also set to join the Union in 2007, which has dramatically increased disparity levels across the EU;*
- *the increased globalisation of markets and the lagging situation of Europe concerning growth and competitiveness compared to the US and to some Asian countries;*
- *the acceleration of climate change and related territorial impacts;*
- *the demographic challenges and their impacts on labour markets;*
- *the trends in regional and territorial development (catching up process in central and eastern Europe.*

These developments are of strategic importance for all EU policies for the coming years. Most notably they have impacted the EU's Lisbon and Gothenburg Strategy, which in turn has shaped the strategy for EU Cohesion policy for the 2007-2013 period.

In order to face the challenges mentioned above, the EU has decided to renew the basis of its competitiveness, increase its growth potential and its productivity and strengthen social cohesion. Several steps mark out this constructive process.

In March 2000 in Lisbon, EU heads of state and government agreed on an ambitious goal: making the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion". In particular, it was agreed that to achieve this goal, an overall strategy should be applied, aiming at:

- preparing the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society by better policies for the information society and R&D, as well as by stepping up the process of structural reform for competitiveness and innovation and by completing the internal market;
- modernising the European social model, investing in people and combating social exclusion;
- sustaining the healthy economic outlook and favourable growth prospects by applying an appropriate macro-economic policy mix.

However, due to the little progress that was made a few years later in achieving the main goals of Lisbon strategy, the Commission proposed a

new Partnership for Growth and Jobs to the European Council of March 2005. The Council confirmed the policy objectives set out by the Commission and underlined the need to re-launch the Lisbon Strategy. This renewed effort required that “*the Union must mobilise all appropriate national and Community resources, including cohesion policy*”. In addition, it concluded that greater ownership of the Lisbon objectives on the ground was necessary, involving regional and local actors and social partners. This is of particular importance in areas where greater proximity is essential, such as in innovation and the knowledge economy, employment, human capital, entrepreneurship, support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or access to risk capital financing.

This renewed Lisbon strategy now forms the context for many EU initiatives and policies each contributing to achieving elements of the strategy. These include thematic policies like the initiative “i2010: European Information Society 2010” aimed at promoting the development of the digital economy and the wider use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) by citizens and businesses.[European Information Society]

More recently, the EC recommended in its January 2006 first Annual Progress Report on the Lisbon strategy that Member States ensure that Community cohesion and rural development investment is targeted towards supporting the Lisbon Strategy in general and that the new generation of cohesion policy programmes address the 4 following priority actions: 1) investing more in knowledge and innovation; 2) unlocking business potential; particularly of SMEs; 3) responding to globalisation and ageing; and 4) moving towards an efficient and integrated EU energy policy. [<http://ec.europa.eu>]

Beyond these basic guidelines for the whole EU, the concentration of financial resources on the less developed regions remains essential over the period 2007-2013 considering the increase of disparities resulting from the recent EU-enlargement in May 2004 and its continuation in 2007. When looking at the separate policies that together form the Lisbon ambitions in relation to innovation and the knowledge economy, one can observe a lot of regional imbalances that characterize the present situation (for instance, the leading regions as far as research and innovation infrastructures are concerned are almost exclusively located in the EU-15 countries, whereas these structures are thinly spread in the regions of the new MS). On the other hand, there is also a significant catching up process in the territorial development of the new MS concerning some policies (for instance education).[European Information Society]

The Fourth Progress Report on Cohesion adopted in February 2006 confirmed that the enlargement of the Union presents an unprecedented

opportunity to reinforce both economic competitiveness and the internal cohesion in Europe. While enlargement represents a substantial widening of regional disparities in the EU, the report noted at the same time that some of the poorest parts of the new Member States have some of the highest growth rates.[Communication from the Commission]

More generally concerning the territorial aspects, the pattern of development perspectives challenging regional development policy in the coming decade is likely to include:

- *a continuation of the catching up process in central and eastern Europe,*
- *a stronger development of metropolitan areas both in the East and the West and growing pressures on a number of rural areas,*
- *growing negative impacts of the demographic evolution (population ageing) on regional labour markets.*

This overall situation represents significant challenges for the EU's territorial cohesion and undoubtedly calls for more intensive interregional cooperation to improve the quality of EU regional policy interventions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The context for cohesion policy has changed in the light of the major challenges mentioned above. The cohesion policy has to make a significant contribution to the renewed Lisbon strategy. This is the basic idea that underpins the new legislative framework for the reform of cohesion policy for the period 2007-2013 called Community Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion. According to these Community Strategic Guidelines, programmes co-financed through cohesion policy should seek to target resources on the following three priorities [CE]:

- *improving the attractiveness of Member States, regions and cities by improving accessibility, ensuring adequate quality and level of services, and preserving the environment;*
- *encouraging innovation, entrepreneurship and the growth of the knowledge economy by research and innovation capacities, including new information and communication technologies;*
- *creating more and better jobs by attracting more people into employment or entrepreneurial activity, improving adaptability of workers and enterprises and increasing investment in human capital.*

The new strategic framework is articulated around three objectives, namely convergence, regional competitiveness and employment, and European territorial cooperation. The latter one aims at promoting stronger integration of the territory of the Union in all its dimensions, including through interregional co-operation.

With the adoption of these Guidelines, programming sets a more strategic focus on the main EU-policy Objectives of Lisbon and Gothenburg

and the inter-regional program becomes a more strategic document. It is also tied much closer to the needs and activities undertaken under objectives “Convergence” and “Regional competitiveness and employment” since the core thematic priorities are the same and one of the main target groups is clearly made up of the regional and local decision-makers of these regional programs. One main ambition for this program is to strongly involve these authorities because it is clear that in an open, globalized economy, tackling the growth and jobs agenda must be anchored in regional and even local development strategies. This is the level where most business networks are formed and links established with centers of learning and technology and where local knowledge and expertise can best be mobilized.

The territorial component will be fully part of the 2007-2013 EU Cohesion policy, as outlined in the Community Strategic Guidelines. In that respect, the Agenda on territorial cohesion, the key product of which will be an assessment of the *‘territorial state and perspectives of the Union’* due to be adopted under German presidency in May 2007, emphasizes on the need of reinforced European cooperation. Considered in the light of the Lisbon strategy for sustainable economic growth, the key challenge for strengthening territorial cohesion implies enhancing the territorial ‘capital’ and potentials of all EU regions and promoting territorial integration, i.e. by promoting trans-European synergies and clusters of competitive and innovative activities[Council of Community]

The European Commission introduced in November 2006 plans to boost innovation by bringing European regions together into strong partnerships and to help them take advantage of experience and best practice. The Interregional Cooperation Programme is an important instrument for implementing this new initiative called "Regions For Economic Change".[European Commission]

The new initiative introduces, among others, new ways to dynamise regional and urban networks to help them work closely with the Commission to have innovative ideas tested and rapidly disseminated into the mainstream programmes. It is dedicated to discovering best practice in economic modernisation in particular in relation to projects clearly contributing to the Union’s jobs and growth agenda and spreading this to all regions in order to help stimulate their regional growth and reducing economic disparities.

CONCLUSIONS

In operational terms, the programme is concentrated around two major themes which are the priority axes of the OP, but all important existing and emerging challenges in relation to these two main themes are also fully considered.

Compared to the Interreg IIC program the range of topics for cooperation is more restricted and the programming becomes more strategic with a stronger involvement of the Monitoring Committee at various stages in order to facilitate the capitalisation process of best practice throughout Europe and beyond.

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