

Interreg Knowledge Fair

Plenary session report

6 March 2024

The plenary session took place at 9am on Wednesday 6 March 2024.

Please note, this document summarises the view of Interact in what was said in the plenary session. It is not a verbatim report, and inferences of the author may accidentally have been added to the speakers original content.

Welcome from Interact

Ivana Lazic and Petra Masacova welcomed participants to the room and explained the agenda and purpose of the session.

Slawomir Tokarski, DG REGIO, Director Interreg,

Slawomir outlined the wider context and the discussion around the future of cohesion policy and the EU. He highlighted the challenges facing Europe, which were unprecedented, both the war in Ukraine and increasing trade competition was creating a very challenging global context. He also noted the impact of inflation on Europe's citizens, the challenges posed by migration, and the ongoing and expanding ascension process.

The need for strong advocacy of Interreg and its achievements is high. Interreg needs to look to other sources, such as the Recovery and Resilience Fund, and explore what efficiencies we can import. Spending at a steadier rate, rather than with peaks, would help show the stability of the fund.

He noted that Interreg is probably the most European Policy in the world.

If we build on our strengths, bring forward the findings of the evaluations of 2014-2020, and show the impact of how we have created cooperation across borders, we will be in a stronger position.

Slawomir emphasised the importance of talking to citizens in order to explore and explain our role in battling isolationist voices, in strengthen Europe in border regions.

John Bachtler, European Policy Research Centre, Director

John followed the information presented by Slawomir and updated with the insights of the Post 2027 High Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy.

He talked about the development traps that threatened many regions, which breeds both economic and political challenges which are explored in the 'geographies of discontent'.

John highlighted the challenges to the budget in particular, especially with the ascension process and the impact this would have on cohesion policy with so many regions of these countries being Less Developed Regions, with GDP much lower than EU average.

The wider debate of EU budget also highlighted challenges. With very high expectations, including to spontaneously react to new situations, often without corresponding new financial investment.

John highlighted the likely timeline ahead for the reform and regulatory timeline, with the forthcoming 9th Cohesion Report as the next milestone ahead of the EU Parliamentary Elections.

He further highlighted the challenges of balancing structural change, when faced with crisis management: of building synergies between EU funding; and of working with less money

John particularly posed five issues for Interreg to consider

- How to maximise the impact of ETC in current and future challenges
- Can Interreg build bridges between dynamic and vulnerable regions
- Scope of place-based responses, and greater diversity of interventions
- Stronger links and synergies with EU and national funds and plans
- Capitalising on 35 years of experience, and Interreg's distinct role

Interreg is the supreme example of EU added values. Interreg is as close as the EU has managed to come to create an EU policy without borders

Question to the speakers

Interact thanked the speakers for their contribution.

Ivana Lazic asked the John Bachtler *'Why Interreg is important to the future of Europe?'*

John replied that the unique delivery system, bottom-up and focused on value in shared management approaches, was very different from the top-down approaches which can over focus on how to spend the money, over what it can achieve. There is a challenge of administrative capacity to absorb EU funds, where Interreg has now 30 years' experience in streamlining this. Knowledge of what works has also been built by Interreg over the years, maybe Interreg does not have all the answers, but it has many answers to these challenges.

Ivana asked Slawomir *'How can we amplify the voice of Interreg in these discussions?'*

Slawomir replied that the year ahead offers the chance to reach out to citizens, and to bring in new beneficiaries, including more people in the Interreg community. If we can show that the EU matters and is tightly connected to the things that impact citizens, then we are showing a strength of Interreg. It is worth noting that Interreg programmes with Ukraine have received funding applications for 3 times the amount of available funding, showing there is enormous interest in Interreg funds, and ways it can really support challenging situations.

Panel discussion

Marko Ruokangas introduced the panel:

- Simona Pohlová, Deputy Head of Unit, DG REGIO, D2
- Wiktor Szydarowski, Director, ESPON EGTC
- Nathalie Verschelde, Deputy Head of Unit, DG REGIO, D1

He further invited Mercedes Acitores and Grzegorz Golda to introduce some programmes in the front row, who would be offered the opportunity to directly respond to what was said on stage.

Marko posed the question to the panel, about the position of Interreg and the programmes with the citizens.

Nathalie emphasised the way that ISO1 can create more space for programmes to engage with citizens. The how of doing this needs to be further developed, and there were good exchanges already yesterday on this. She highlighted that it is not the sole role of CBCs, who have a closer starting point, but something transnationals should also explore.

Christian from the North Sea programme responded and thanked the panel and speakers for the intervention and the focus on citizens. He noted that Interreg is not a great fund for infrastructure, but the act of cooperation and the people involved in it, this is our strength.

Marko posed the conclusion of the High Level Group and the need for place based solutions, tailored for the specificities of the territory.

Simona responded that the placed based approach, enabled by PO5, is a way to create very territory focused intervention points. There is more work to do to build this and ensure it is well connected to local citizens and communities in engaging and building these plans and interventions. There is untapped potential in PO5 for Interreg to go further here. Also in supporting CLLD and other local based initiatives.

Marko asked Wiktor, how could you, in a nutshell, explain the territorial dimension of Interreg.

Wiktor reflected that no programme or project is an island. We strive to bring change, change to citizens, or to businesses, or to society. We share territory, and we share challenges with other territories. We should reach out more to see what has worked well, and reflect on what can be adopted. This also opens the door and explore what we have achieved in regions similar to our, but maybe geographically distant.

Marko reflected the importance of shared territory reflects the ongoing challenges of building synergies between programmes

Nathalie responded by using the example of the Mediterranean where 17 programmes are cooperating to create a stronger impact. This cooperation is at all stages, not just after selection, but coordinating even at the coordination of calls stage. The INDEX tool, developed by Interact, also creates more opportunities to live the cooperation we talk about. The approach of Central Europe to build a process to work with the CBC programmes where they share their territory is another good example of this.

A participant from the Euro-Med programme reflected on the need to build practical tools to support coordination and synergies, and the need for more actions and support to implement capitalisation.

A participant from an OMR programme reflected on their range of activities and their role as bridgeheads of Europe in the global environment.

Grzegorz Golda brought together the five key questions from Slido into just two questions to the panel.

The performance-based approach, what does it mean, how can we harness it in Interreg.

The panel reflected on the key features of the RRF that can be adopted by Interreg, being a more performance-based approach. It should be possible to retain the place-based approach, whilst adopting more performance based, with milestones and requirements.

What are the future geographies and the role of TN cooperation

There is no proposal on the table regarding the number of programmes, but questions are likely to be asked about the number of programmes needed to deliver. There is no current discussion on this matter, first we need to speak up for the community and fund, and what it achieves.

Need to look at how we can adapt and change to the reflect the things we can do better, and show we are not stuck in the past, but embracing the future.

Summary

Ivana and Petra thanked the panel and the audience for participation, noted that unanswered questions can also be followed up in the future breakout rooms.

The importance of citizens, place-based, synergies were well noted and are strengths of the programmes which we will explore more in the coming sessions.

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