

Post 27 Discussion Paper

External cooperation | Annex Interreg Strand D – Outermost Regions programmes

November 2024

Please note | This discussion paper was produced for the Post 2027 Harvesting event, taking place in Brussels on 25-26 November 2024. It is a tool to stimulate discussion and engagement on the topic. It does not represent an opinion of Interact, Interreg or any other actor. For more information about the Harvesting process, please see the Post 2027 section of [Interact.eu](https://interact.eu)

The future of Interreg in the EU Outermost Regions

Overview

The inclusion of Strand D in Interreg 2021-2027 formally recognised the unique position and challenges of Interreg programmes in the EU Outermost Regions. Initial steps have been achieved towards their consideration as “external borders” programmes. As providers of local solutions in their respective corners of the globe, they are a key instrument to support regional integration, for their territories and citizens, and for the EU as a whole.

Now that the future of Interreg is being shaped, some important considerations have been highlighted in this document, based on shared reflections with the current five Strand D programmes, paving the way for a more integrated and efficient cooperation post-27 in the Outermost Regions and with their neighbours.

This document is an Annex to the Discussion paper on External cooperation.

Methodology

The information serving as basis for this document has been collected through various exchanges directly with programme teams, and through events and activities:

- Network meetings of the Interreg Outermost Regions programmes facilitated by Interact from October 2023 to December 2024.
- Written contribution from the Conference of the Presidents of the Outermost Regions (19 November 2024)
- Harvesting event (Brussels 25-26th November 2024)

Key strengths of Interreg OMR programmes to be built upon

- Strand D programmes appreciate that their singularities are recognised. Indeed, they play a crucial role in redefining Outermost Regions (OMR) as strategic assets for the EU (rather than simply remote peripheries) fostering regional integration.

- A specific strand needs to be maintained, reflecting their specificity that goes beyond cross-border and transnational dimensions.
 - The consideration of Interreg OMR as “external borders” programmes is also seen as a key recognition. This was initiated in 2021-2027 with their inclusion with IPA and NEXT programmes in the joint reflection on the external dimension in post-27 and needs to be consolidated further.
- Strong coordination and relationship-building with cooperation partners, which differs depending on the geographical area and context, e.g. with intergovernmental organisations and with non-EU countries bilaterally. EU Delegations have also a key role to play in supporting the awareness and alignment of the EU’s external action in those territories.
 - There is a need to deepen the coordination between DG REGIO and DG INTPA on the strategic vision and funds available in the same space. The neighbourhood dimension is supported by strategies at EU level - which is somewhat lacking for Outermost Regions - allowing for a better integration of Interreg in this framework.

As an example, Interreg managing authorities are not directly involved in the development of EU external policy, whereas EU Delegations take part in monitoring committees of Interreg programmes. How could this be improved?

- Boosting knowledge and awareness towards stakeholders (INTPA, EEAS, EU Delegations). This is progressing well, but requires a lot of effort by programme teams.
 - Ideally programmes should not have to keep proving the benefits of cooperation, despite ever changing personnel, to build sustainable relations and pedagogy. Ensure information about Interreg is passed on to new staff.
 - By consolidating OMR’s position as external border programmes, this will reinforce the message that “our neighbours are EU neighbours”, and therefore help raise awareness with partners in EU Delegations.

What are the potential improvements? Main past and present challenges in implementing Interreg OMR programmes

- Need for structural solutions in post-27 to support the participation of third country beneficiaries in Interreg projects. Difficult to secure and budget external funds - finding the right interlocutors for the mobilisation of funds.
 - NDICI allocated to Strand D programmes in Implementing Act. This implies joint preparation work between REGIO, INTPA and Managing Authorities, both from regulatory and operational aspects.
 - Important to establish timeline and levels of responsibility.
 - Article 10 “Cross-fund provisions” of the current Interreg regulation already sets the framework and justification for IPA and NDICI funds to be transferred to Interreg programmes. Strand D should be treated on the same basis in that respect, and be able to use such operational framework in practice.
- Several Interreg external programmes already have experience in combining ERDF with other funds. Can a similar model as NEXT and IPA for OMR be considered, with blending of funds?

- The OMR context makes it difficult to consider as this would imply an alignment with EU financial rules in third countries (ERDF and PRAG), signature of financing agreements by third (non-EU) member states and increase of technical assistance, and more broadly would imply the creation of a management system in countries that have no relation with EU processes/aspiration and no existing experience or capacity to develop such systems. For these reasons, this solution is not advisable to implement in OMR context.
 - The most appropriate model will be discussed, taking into account the experience of articulation of NDICI and EDF funds by Managing Authorities of Interreg OMR programmes (indirect management) in 2021-2027 period.
 - Important to keep in mind the objectives of simplification and flexibility, and the implications of such model in OMR context. As such, it could be suggested that the new Interreg regulation foresees a specific article for strand D, whereby all provisions pursuant to OMR programmes are laid out – instead of mentioning exceptions and exemptions in other articles.
- Lack of coordination of available funds in the cooperation area can turn into competition between them, although objectives, topics and target audience are similar, making Interreg somewhat less attractive for potential beneficiaries from third countries and reducing programmes' ability to contribute to key challenges for their territories.
 - Agree on the dividing/sharing lines, and align plans jointly from the outset.
 - In practice, this could be addressed by adopting an approach based on geographic area and project logic between the different players, sharing a common vision and strategy for the area (instead of considering Interreg as a stand-alone tool among others).
 - Outermost regions to be recognised in the external cooperation strategies, Global Europe (particularly in light of EU-Africa strategy global gateway).
 - What would be the benefits for Interreg, and the next steps to make it happen?
 - By consolidating OMR's position as external border programmes, this will reinforce the consideration of Interreg as a provider of solutions for regional integration.

Key messages – call to action. How should the post-2027 framework address the current challenges?

- A demand to the European Commission, to please keep a dedicated focus on our strand D programmes, that go beyond transnational and cross-border cooperation.
- To formally recognise Interreg Outermost Regions programmes as external cooperation programmes, and to provide a strategic framework for OMR (as it is already the case in other regions with external Interreg programmes, e.g. Neighbourhood, Mediterranean, IPA...), in order to truly fulfil their scope of regional integration.
- To use the opportunity provided by having a dedicated strand, to benefit from a specific financing model for Strand D, with a systematic and practical combination of ERDF and NDICI funds, giving programmes a tangible opportunity to cooperate with third partner countries from the outset.

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Furthermore, understanding and knowledge evolves throughout the programming period. If you spot something out of date or inconsistent, please contact us at communication@interact.eu

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Author(s) Nicolas Garnier

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