

Focus group discussion - Study pilot on the engagement of civil society in Interreg

15/11/2023

Online, 9:30 – 12:30 CET

Meeting summary

Participants

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Agenda topics

- Introduction
- Preliminary findings
- Tour de table
- How can Interact support the activity and next steps

Introduction - Interact

Aim of the pilot

The aim of this pilot is to present a comprehensive picture of the existing level of engagement of citizens and civil society in Interreg programmes (mapping exercise). In addition, the study aims to identify factors that encourage the involvement of citizens and civil society in Interreg programmes and come up with feasible approaches (methods and tools) to help Interreg programmes enable engagement with citizens and civil society.

The process

Interact, with the support of EPRC, developed the contents of an online questionnaire covering the following:

- the level of engagement of citizens and civil society in Interreg programmes;
- the intensity of engagement of citizens and civil society in Interreg programmes;
- the factors that encourage and/or hinder the engagement of citizens and civil society in Interreg.

The online survey addressed all the Interreg programmes from June to September 2023. Following the online survey and paired to the programmes' representatives feedback, Interact conducted several semi-structured interviews from October to November 2023.

Preliminary findings – EPRC presentation (see the presentation attached)

EPRC presented an overview on the ongoing work in civic and CSOs engagement efforts targeted to Interreg programmes. The aim is to produce a manageable and practical report outlining state of the art, successes and challenges in civic engagement and civil society involvement in Interreg programmes.

The presentation covered the advantages and challenges of civic engagement in Interreg programmes, recognizing constraints including time and resource constraints, balancing representativeness, and addressing language and capacity differences.

Civic engagement in Interreg programmes can cover a wide range of activities and a range of participants. For the purposes of this research the following definitions have been adopted.

“Civic engagement refers to the active engagement of (organised and unorganised) civil society in decision-making that concerns issues of public interest”.

“Civil society involves citizens taking voluntary action not under the direction of any authority with power from the state, examples include community groups, non-governmental organisations, indigenous groups, labour unions, business organisations, professional associations, foundations, schools, universities, cultural institutions and faith groups.”

This definition of civic engagement and civil society organizations was discussed, leading to an exploration of various levels of engagement, from information provision to co-design and decision-making processes. The presentation highlighted the evolving landscape of civic engagement, incorporating new technologies (i.e online platforms) and innovative approaches (small-scale projects and/or small project funds).

At the project level: the involvement of civil society organizations, was emphasized in the communication and capitalisation activities. In addition, the role of Interreg programmes in supporting projects and encouraging civil society to engage through monitoring, mapping, administrative measures, and digital platforms.

The presentation delved into programme-level activities, including the use of specific policy objectives to promote citizens' engagement and cooperation touching also on the importance of new European initiatives, like the European Bauhaus, and how they can influence project selection processes.

The final part of the presentation raised questions for further discussion, addressing topics such as the role of civil society organizations in monitoring committees, targeted support for their involvement, and capacity building for beneficiaries.

Tour de table and key discussion points

The discussion covered various aspects, including challenges faced by the programmes in engaging with civic and civil society organization, concerns about citizen participation, and possible approaches.

Key points raised during the discussion:

- Challenges related to capacity and competing priorities that NGOs face, leading to varying levels of engagement. The challenge of sustaining interest beyond the programme design phase is acknowledged (as per Art.8 CPR Regulation 2021/1060).
- Policy Objective 5 (PO5) was designed as the instrument for citizen engagement, with a genuine intent to bring programmes closer to citizens. However, there are many challenges Interreg programmes face to fully exploit the potentials of such instrument and there is a need for its simplification. This need can be addressed during the consultation process on the future of Interreg in post 2027.

In addition, the need for an effective use of PO5 was emphasized and a separate focus on civic and civil society engagement funding was suggested aiming at supporting instruments fostering citizen engagement more effectively.

Another avenue to steer citizens engagement in Interreg programmes and projects in the current programming period is ISO1, even though the implementation of this specific objective varies between programmes.

- Interreg programmes are already successful in engaging civic and civil society organizations. It is important to distinguish between civil society and citizen engagement and citizens are more effectively engaged in projects driven by topics directly relevant to their local surroundings.
- In certain contexts, for example transnational programmes, active citizens' engagement at the programme level is challenging due to the vast territory covered and the need of balancing local and transnational approaches. Nevertheless, successful project examples focusing on citizens' engagement and exchanges on strengthening civil society were highlighted. For instance, a participatory budgeting project for more liveable areas in BSR (9 countries) or the Central Europe community platform opened to all, with matchmaking and knowledge-sharing functions, and through which it is possible to join a partnership.
- The potentials for capitalisation efforts to drive a shift in programme attitudes: changing or adding a new focus to capitalisation efforts in a way that capitalisation activities could include citizens' involvement or put territories in the spotlight.
- The need for more efforts to stimulate local NGOs to collaborate across borders was also emphasized. When linkages between civil society organizations are established, they tend to be more topic-driven and regionally anchored. Where civil society

participation doesn't occur organically through a bottom-up approach, a top-down approach with specific calls for citizen participatory projects could be implemented by the programmes. As an example, cross-border energy communities and projects can support the development of cross-border local communities

Potential steps and expectations for engaging with citizens and civil society organizations

- The need to communicate Interreg's strong engagement with civil society in projects to demonstrate the (high) number of civil society organizations involved in Interreg projects and advocate for a stronger recognition of Interreg's contributions in view of discussion on the future of cohesion policy and to clearly demonstrate distinct, added value of Interreg.
- Put in place specific actions at the programme level, including the continuation of the process of engagement, facilitating involvement through online platforms, and preparing calls that focus on participatory approaches, especially in small towns and rural areas.
- On the short-term: focus on sharing good practices among Interreg programmes. On the long-term: exchange and discuss on potential improvements of Policy Objective 5 (PO5) to enhance citizen participation.
- The need for a (more) practical and inspirational approach to tools like the playbook prepared by OECD pilot study was also highlighted.
- The need to extend the discussion to a larger group of Interreg programmes.
- The idea of sharing project examples for a compilation/repository was welcomed.
- Next group discussion: during the Interreg Knowledge Fair (IKF), 5th – 7th of March 2024.