

The engagement of civil society in Interreg

Interreg Knowledge Fair session report | March 2024

Overview

One of Interreg's assets is proximity to citizens and civil society. What are the levels of engagement, what factors drive good engagement, and what approaches are feasible to improve the way we work together?

Methodology

In January 2024 Interact published a study titled “The engagement of civic and civil society in Interreg”.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study 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.

Main findings

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. However, 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 opened on to an exploration of various levels of engagement and three pillars of engagement were considered (as identified by the OECD):

- 1) information,
- 2) consultation, and
- 3) engagement.

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.

Focus was put also on the “systemic” levers for citizens engagement at the programme level, namely:

- **programme management** – the partnership principle and the technical assistance activities;
- **programme priorities and tools** – ISO1, SPF, small-scale projects and PO5.

The participants were invited to reflect and discuss on the following questions:

- How do you consider engaging with citizens and civil society in your programme?
- What are your perceptions and potential next steps?
- Which stage(s) of the programme’s lifecycle are you willing to explore to ensure citizen and civil society engagement?

Key discussion points

- Communities should be inclusive, all the programming cycle should involve civil society (CS), also as a source of new ideas and to fine tune the roll out of projects, which are meant to serve the peoples, hence CS;
- Fostering engagement with both citizens and civil society constitutes a democratic practice;
- Optimizing programmes’ efficiency: Engaging with civil society across the entire programme life-cycle improves the efficiency of Interreg programmes and projects;

- 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;
- Collecting and highlighting projects which demonstrate tangible impact and engage with citizens and/or civil society;
- Increasing Interreg visibility: Strengthening awareness and understanding of Interreg's mission and activities;
- Promoting civil society engagement: Acknowledging the natural alignment of civil society with the Interreg programmes and projects and leveraging tools to facilitate their involvement. Recognizing the significance of youth organisation in this context;
- Identifying areas for improvement: Emphasizing the need for increased encouragement of civil society participation in MC, particularly in transnational (TN) programmes;
- Advocating direct financial support: Suggesting direct financial support for civil society, including training and capacity-building initiatives, as a viable strategy;
- There is a need to develop tools and approaches that fit the Interreg context;

Next steps

Interact will continue the discussion and exchange with programmes with the aim to:

- ✓ Establish a comprehensive repository featuring exemplary projects that actively engage with both citizens and civil society organizations. This compilation serves as a valuable resource for sharing best practices among various Interreg programs. Access the compilation through the following [link](#).
- ✓ Ease the search on keep.eu by implementing a simple keyword feature. This enables users seeking Interreg projects focused on citizen and/or civil society engagement to access relevant information efficiently. To achieve this, Interact will collaborate with Interreg programmes to identify projects addressing this theme. Only after obtaining approval from the respective programmes will the identified projects be labelled as '**CSO engagement**' or '**citizen engagement**'.
- ✓ Communicate Interreg's strong engagement with civil society in projects to demonstrate the (high) number of civil society organizations involved in Interreg projects by showcasing short videos featuring testimonials from citizens and civil society organisation. Promoting these videos in interreg.eu and other social media platforms to amplify outreach.
- ✓ Address the demand for a more practical and inspirational approach towards tools such as the playbook developed during the OECD pilot study.

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