

Interreg for people: Engaging European citizens

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 with citizens? Together, 34 representatives from Interreg programmes exchanged on these questions and shared their experiences and ideas on how to boost the citizens engagement in their programmes.

Methodology

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

The main focus of the study was on the “active engagement of (organised and unorganised) civil society in decision-making that concerns issues of public interest” and three pillars of engagement were considered (as identified by the OECD):

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

This information was used to kick off the discussion with the participants.

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

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

The session also featured a video compilation showcasing project examples implementing citizen engagement activities, supplemented by testimonials from programmes, shedding light on shared approaches and encountered challenges.

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

- Why is it important to engage with citizens?
- What are the challenges you find?
- How do you overcome these challenges? and

- What do you need to do to get to the next level of engagement?

Key discussion points

Programmes testimonials

Representatives emphasized the inherent challenges in engaging citizens, particularly in transnational programs. However, they underscored the pivotal role of project activities in bridging this gap, empowering municipalities, NGOs, and other beneficiaries to foster meaningful engagement. For programmes it can be easier to empower those who can make the change and set the frame – they are the programme’s ambassadors with citizens.

Discussion

Participants discussed on the complexities of maintaining a territorial dimension while engaging citizens across borders. Success stories, such as hackathons organized by the Baltic Sea Region programme, exemplified effective engagement strategies. The programme also develops pilots to test ideas and have ‘pilot check-ups’ to get information on the progress. Another idea that is to use big campaigns such as Europe’s Day, etc. Emphasis was put also on the importance of taking proper efforts outside the Interreg bubble and the relevance of the plain language.

The significance of establishing distinct levels of engagement—information, consultation, and engagement—was underscored.

While not every project is mandated to engage citizens, programmes must exercise caution to manage expectations effectively. Overcoming challenges such as language barriers, frustration with program rules, and limited awareness necessitates targeted communication, capacity-building initiatives, and reliance on cross-border associations. Moreover, adding specific provisions in the post 21-27 Regulatory Framework and provision of resources for training and outreach were highlighted as important steps towards achieving the next level of engagement.

- **Why is it important to engage with citizens?**

- Long term impact of project activities;
- Give a concrete idea of what EU is giving to citizens;
- To develop a European identity and share European values;
- To raise awareness of Interreg and the importance of EU;
- To strengthen sense of belonging to community and understand their needs;
- To ensure that the results of action are needed, useful and appreciated;
- To make sure we act in the interest of the citizens and to achieve change;
- Democratic legitimacy.

“A lot of people are angry and engaging with them is a way to translate that anger into something more constructive that contributes to a solution for their anger”.

- **What are the challenges you find?**

- Language barriers;
- Frustration of potential beneficiaries with programme rules;
- Lack of information – citizens not knowing about opportunities;
- Limited knowledge about Interreg and capacity constraints;
- Finding the right tools, communication channels and words to explain and motivate to engage;
- Apathy, lack of interest or lack of trust that changes can happen;
- Need to focus as citizens are very different and interested in different issues.

“The lack of project reports has made us lose touch with what happens at project level, making it harder for us to reach citizens”.

- **How do you overcome these challenges?**

- Targeted communication through existing local-based organisations;
- Workshops, training and clear communication;
- Relying on cross border associations to boost initiatives on the ground within projects;
- Experience exchange, learning from mistakes and social listening to understand needs and follow trends;
- Showing the proximity of some challenges beyond the border, cultural and linguistic differences in a concrete way;
- Finding possibilities in the Interreg regulation;
- Using the SPF and small-scale projects instrument
- Improving training and resources;
- Adding specific provisions in the post 2014-2020 Regulatory Framework.

“We should speak in plain, non-technical language and use social media channels, as well as existing platforms and organisations that are in contact with citizens (multipliers)”.

- **What do you need to do to get to the next level of engagement?**

- More events in border regions targeted specifically towards citizens;
- European focus in education;
- More opportunities to share good practices;
- Involve IVY volunteers to help reaching citizens;
- Bring out new citizens' needs;
- A lump sum for CBC participatory budget;
- Simplification: simplified cost option for volunteering in Interreg;
- Keep flexible frames;
- Include citizens participation in the calls or have specific calls to address citizens engagement;
- Improve their involvement in Monitoring Committees activities;
- A toolbox with ideas and good practices on how to engage citizens in Interreg

“We incorporate this engagement in the terms of reference of our calls for projects. The involvement of IVY volunteers also helps getting in touch with citizens”.

Reflections, plans for followed up

The session provided room for exchange with programme representatives on citizens engagement in Interreg. Engaging citizens is the logic historical evolution for Interreg programmes. By involving citizens programmes and projects ensure better results and larger outreach because Interreg projects are made for people and people know best what they need.

Discussion with the programmes can be continued in dedicated sessions organised by Interact. The event in November will be used to further develop recommendations before finalising the consultations on the way to the final event in March 2025 in Nova Gorica.

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