

Challenges and needs of EU external cooperation

Interreg Knowledge Fair session report | March 2024

Overview

Session brought together 34 Interreg practitioners to talk about the challenges and needs of future EU external cooperation. Specific discussions in different working groups were dedicated on cooperation between EU Member States and Enlargement countries (IPA), Neighbourhood countries (NEXT) and between EU's outermost regions and their neighbourhoods.

Methodology

In the beginning of the session participants were asked to answer the question: "Why cooperation on EU external borders is important?"

Main discussion during the session were taken in the following four working groups:

- IPA – enlargement
- NEXT – neighbourhood
- OMR – outermost regions cooperation
- ENI CBC – disrupted and cancelled programmes on the regions bordering Russia and Belarus

Discussion was taken around the following key questions:

- How the changing cooperation environment has challenged the external cooperation
- What would be your overarching vision for the future EU external cooperation
- Learning from the experience, how can programmes remain agile and responsive (What is working)

After working in groups, the outcomes of discussions were reported to all.

Key discussion points

IPA – enlargement

War showed the importance of accession of IPA countries to become EU Member and COVID the development gap between EU and IPA countries.

Interreg IPA programmes are considered to have increasing importance in preparing IPA countries for accession at the level of authorities for implementations of ESIF funds and at the level of beneficiaries through capacity building (trainings on project management). Specific calls dedicated for enlargement were considered. Co-financing and pre-financing

rates for IPA beneficiaries are important, especially for the new IPA beneficiaries joining Interreg IPA programmes for the first time.

NEXT – neighbourhood

Group participants considered that structural instabilities in the EU neighbourhood countries causes also instability on partner country institutions.

Participants found the current pre-financing and co-financing rate mechanisms important to be kept in the future and called for improvements / changes on the process for negotiating the Financing Agreement (to be concluded prior to programme adaptation). Specific rules for the exchange rates with the possibility to accept losses in case of significant fluctuations, as well as flexibility for N+3 rule were suggested as new developments.

Extended Neighbourhoods to reach the neighbours of EU neighbours in Africa was suggested (Mauritania, Niger, Sudan) and challenges with Marocco highlighted.

Participants also considered Partner country involvement in the consultations on EU regulatory framework important.

A key change for the upcoming period would be the negotiation of the Financing Agreement during the programming phase, so they could be signed immediately after programme adoption.

OMR – outermost regions cooperation

The inclusion of strand D for Outermost region programmes in 21-27 formalised their consideration as “external borders” programmes. Indeed they play a crucial role in redefining outermost regions as strategic assets for the EU (rather than simply remote peripheries).

Participants highlighted the need for structural solutions in post-27 and suggested that NDICI financing would be allocated to Strand D programmes in Implementing Act. This implies joint preparation work between REGIO and INTPA.

Similar model as NEXT and IPA for OMR, with blending of funds (alignment with EU financial rules in third countries and increase of technical assistance) was suggested. Participants found it important that outermost regions are recognised in the external cooperation strategies, Global Europe (particularly in light of EU-Africa strategy global gateway).

Finally participants suggested to boost knowledge and awareness towards stakeholders (INTPA, EEAS, EU Delegations). Not always having to prove the benefits of cooperation, despite ever changing personnel, build sustainable relations and pedagogy.

ENI CBC – disrupted / cancelled programmes

Participants noted that in the absence of the NEXT programmes on these borders, there are limited tools to address the specific needs of the regions in the current programming period. They emphasized the change of priorities in the regions due to the new situation - based on huge structural changes and losses (e.g., in tourism, business), as well as the new emerging needs, especially when it comes to security and civil protection. There is also a threat of potentially increasing gap within the country (regions on the external border becoming even more peripheral).

It is difficult for the regions to quickly adjust to the new priorities and requirements, as well as build strong partnerships in order to use the possibilities offered by the IR programmes that they are added to.

For the future vision participants suggested designing a new tool to address the specific needs of MS regions on external borders (a dedicated tool for regions that face similar challenges). Other suggestions were related to reconsidering geography of IR programmes, as well as to defining a new strategic area that covers MS regions that border Russia and Belarus.

Why cooperation on EU external borders is important?

Programmes considered cooperation on EU external borders important for increasing stability as well as for building trust and mutual understanding with the neighbours.

Cooperation was considered as a valuable tool to build safety, develop connectivity and combat other common challenges i.e. on environment.

Interreg's role to facilitate the candidate countries' road to EU Member was highlighted as well as programmes role as a gateway to Europe for the outermost regions.

EU regions bordering Russia and Belarus face new and particular challenges because of war. These areas being earlier active in cooperation with their neighbours, have now challenges with regional economies, safety and civil protection.

Regulations and articles of particular significance

Interreg Regulation 10, 53 - 60

NDICI regulation: 22

Conclusions, plans for followed up

Discussion with the programmes will be continued in the thematic and sectoral events as well as in dedicated focus groups organised by Interact and TESIM. Event in November is used to test the proposed recommendations before finalising the consultations on the way to the final event in March 2025 in Nova Gorica. NEXT Partner countries are consulted in a dedicated event organised in Autumn by the EC and TESIM.



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