

Future of Interreg: Scope, content & purpose

Interreg Knowledge Fair session report | March 2024

Overview

74 Interreg practitioners joined the session – among them representatives from both Interreg units in DG Regio. It was planned as a quick interactive review of major points shaping Interreg as policy instrument. These major points are: Interreg's mission statement, its place in a wider policy system and the current thematic menu.

Methodology

The session was structured around three blocks:

- Unique selling position (USP) of Interreg (compared to other policies)
- Interreg as part of a wider policy system
- Revisiting the current thematic menu for new issues, trends and ideas for objectives that could become more prominent and better visible in future

The whole session was meant to be interactive and to prepare people for more detailed discussions in subsequent sessions.

Key discussion points

Unique selling position of Interreg

Groups were kindly asked identify a key message along the key question(s):

- What makes Interreg unique? (compared to other policy instruments)
- What are convincing arguments for its raison d'être?

Exemplary results proposed by the groups:

- Connecting people & communities in a safer & better environment for a better future
- Linking people and ideas across border
- Linking people and ideas – for a peaceful and happy life
- Power to the people without borders
- Caring for your neighbours
- Interreg: Near people, near you!

- Stronger together! (a slogan that had been used in a previous period)

The role of establishing sustainable partnerships was reconfirmed as one of the strongest advantages of Interreg in comparison to other mechanisms.

The Interact team tried to highlight that slogans should appeal to emotion. The wide use of technical language across Interreg is not supportive. But the Interact team also acknowledged that putting the unique selling position (USP) in a couple of words is near to impossible. Still, it is important that the community develops messages that are easily understood and picked up by policy makers without detailed and intimate knowledge of Interreg.

Interreg as part of a wider policy system

Interreg is part of Cohesion Policy and uses the Policy Objectives (POs) in the ERDF Regulation. Next to the POs for the period 2021-2027 Interreg specific objectives (ISOs) have been introduced for the first time. Interreg is also open to ESF type actions. Article 22 of the CPR sets out the option for CBC, TN or IR actions with beneficiaries from at least one other member or partner state in mainstream programmes. No suggestions for further detailing the scope of cooperation actions were proposed.

A few participants expressed the view that introducing more Interreg Specific Objectives, would allow for more flexibility and better management of the Interreg programmes. The current rules for thematic concentration (article 15) are perceived as restrictive by some programmes.

Next to that there are also other instruments that might potentially support Interreg such as the Regulation on European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), an eventual future Regulation to Facilitate Cross-Border Solutions, Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS).

On the question if such instruments are considered supportive for the case of Interreg the audience did not agree.

Revisiting the thematic menu

The quick surveys at the Interreg Annual Event 2023 and a survey prior to the IKF showed that the majority of programmes sees the current thematic menu as sufficient to capture the needs of the regions and countries they cover. For the majority of people present the narrow scope of Specific Objectives taken from ERDF Regulation is not perceived as limiting. However, in reality Interreg programmes tend towards broader and flexible SOs – a prime example is PO2 where the SO 2.4 is by far the broadest and hence the most popular receiving the largest financial allocation in the PO. The SO menu means that allocation was somewhat artificial, when having to choose between more narrow or more open ones. Therefore, allocation does not necessarily or sufficiently reflect reality. This is further evidenced by the types of intervention that can be considered too "limiting". The importance should be placed more on the solution proposed for the territory.

All in all, our impression is that here is a call for more flexibility overall. It would be more efficient to have more open options, maximise the potential of ISOs. This is further

evidenced by the limitations within POs, and the bridges needed to be made between them. For example:

- PO1 does not only tackle innovation from a business or technology perspective, but also should consider social dimension.
- PO3 has some missing connections if taken by itself, when considering cross-border links/corridors
- Some elements of PO2 could (and should) be found in all other POs, as environment and resilience topics should be considered across the board.

Flexibility would allow to tackle specific targets/avenues that were not initially foreseen, e.g. better respond to emerging needs/crises ("we are tackling problems that were the prominent ones at programming stage, which may need to be adapted several years into the implementation").

Regulations and articles of particular significance

Common Provisions Regulation	5 (1), 22
ERDF Regulation	3
Interreg Regulation	14, 15

Conclusions, plans for follow up

The meeting gave an overview of opinions shared on some of the key issues. Little controversy was noted. The session helped clarifying initial positions and where programmes currently stand.

The findings will be used for the post2027 report which will be discussed with colleagues from Commission to identify key threads for follow up in the coming months.

The conclusion of such follow up discussions will be presented at the next milestone event.

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