the future of cooperation

Jose Palma Andres, Director with responsibility for Territorial Cooperation, Macro-Regions and North-West Europe in DG Regional and Urban Policy tells us about some expectations of the new generation of ETC programmes.

By Aleksandra Rapp, Project Manager, INTERACT

The legislative package for Cohesion Policy has been adopted since December, including — for the first time — a regulation especially dedicated to the ETC programmes. Comparing the new regulations with the 2007-2013 period, what — in your opinion — are the most important changes that future ETC programmes should bear in mind?

The first important change is the recognition of European Territorial Cooperation (hereafter ‘ETC’) as one of the two cohesion goals 2014-2020, along with Investment for Growth & Jobs, and the necessary complementarity between both these goals, including the opportunity to include cooperation within otherwise national strategies (Article 96(3)d of Regulation 1303/2013 laying down the common provisions for all structural funds or ‘CPR’). Like all Structural funds, ETC is governed by the CPR but it is more specifically governed for the first time by the specific provisions of its dedicated regulation (Reg. 1299/2013).

The second important change is probably, as for the whole cohesion package and all instruments under the 2014-2020 multi-annual financial framework, the paramount result orientation. In other words, the duty of all programme partners, and to start with, of the Commission, is to ensure that, whatever we do, ‘we make the most of every Euro’.

This means concentrating the limited European Union intervention on the agreed strategic priorities most likely to bring about the desired change for each programme area, in line with the thematic objectives and investment priorities the European Parliament and the 28 Member States have defined, as the legislative body, for the programming period

2014-2020, in order to restore and boost growth throughout the EU territory.

The programming of future is entering the decisive stage and ETC programme stakeholders are aiming for the best possible solutions for their programme areas. In your opinion, what makes ‘a good ETC programme’?

In terms of programming, clearly, a good ETC programme is a programme with a clear and focused intervention logic, setting out, with all programme partners, the change we want to have achieved by 2023 in terms so concise that my grand-mother would have understood them, with measurable targets so clear that my grand-children will be able to say, 9 years from now, ‘yes, Grandpa, you did it’.

For cross-border cooperation, a good programme should be tuned with the maturity of the border area. On many borders, where there is a decades-long track record of successful cooperation, there is a need to move up a gear and shift from one-off events to projects aimed at more sustainable and lasting structural operational ties between different governance entities, including the harmonisation of legal provisions on both sides of the border, coordination of policy interventions or institutional integration. Cooperation in Scandinavian countries is a clear illustration of such a stage of maturity, where cooperation constitutes a laboratory of new ideas and innovative approaches. On other borders, there remains a need to invest in the first stepping stone of trust-building that will gradually pave the way for more ambitious regional development.

Transnational programmes cover larger territories with a view to achieving a higher degree of territorial integration, strongly supporting and leveraging, as the case may be, the development and coordination of macro-regional and sea-basin strategies.

Finally, a good interregional programme — like ESPON, URBACT, INTERREG Europe and INTERACT — should be key to facilitating cross-border and transnational cooperation programmes, via efficient analysis, networking and knowledge sharing.

You personally have a very long experience with ETC and in general with regional policy — could you give some advice to the ETC programmes on the dos and the don’ts that you have learnt from the previous periods that can help them to prepare ‘good ETC programmes’?

Experience has clearly demonstrated that good ETC programmes rely on good programming, that is to say:

a) on a clear strategy for the development of each programme area as a whole, based upon an analysis of needs and opportunities;

b) management & control structures and procedures that are as simple as possible, agreed ex ante between all participating countries. If there is no such clarity right down to details (as you know the devil is in the details), then programmes will be in trouble, first at the implementing stage, then at closure, with potentially dramatic consequences for programme partners and beneficiaries.

2 Including competent urban and other public authorities, economic and social partners, relevant bodies representing civil society, including environment partners, non-governmental organisations, and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination.
For many programmes, setting the implementation provisions is one of the most challenging parts of the programming process. This is especially true in case of ETC when there is a need for cooperation among different Member States which have different national settings that have to be accommodated in a single programme. In your opinion, how can that process be eased? Is there anything that can facilitate ensuring an effective management and control system and smooth implementation of the future programmes?

The best way to address this challenge is to have prior written confirmation by ALL participating countries of their agreement to the contents of the cooperation programme — including management and control structures. This written agreement should also cover a commitment to provide the co-financing necessary to implement the cooperation programme — prior to the submission of any programme to the Commission. This confirmation needs to be signed by the competent representative of each participating Member State and, when they have accepted the invitation to participate in the cooperation programme, third countries or territories.

Why do you think it is so important to have the agreement on these issues before the programmes are even approved?

This prior agreement is fundamental to avoid partners being permanently confronted with administrative processes instead of programme content implementation later on and so to ensure timely implementation. And, as it is not easy to foresee all details ex ante, the Commission has provided a tool, called ‘aide-mémoire’, to help programmes define and agree on the strategy for 2014-2020 and the set-up of the management and control system on time. It is a very detailed list of questions to be addressed, based on experience.

In your opinion, how will the common eligibility rules simplify the programmes?

For ETC programmes, which by definition require cooperation between at least 2 countries, the application of national rules creates a lot of complications as these rules usually differ. This issue is of particular importance in the domain of eligibility of expenditure, where the same expenditure item on one side of the border is considered eligible, but this is not necessarily the case on the other side of the border.

In view of this, the ETC Regulation empowered the Commission to lay down specific rules on eligibility by means of a delegated act regarding 5 expenditure categories: staff costs, office & administrative expenditure, travel & accommodation costs, external expertise and services costs and equipment expenditure. The ETC Regulation also establishes a clear hierarchy of norms: first EU rules as laid down in the regulations and the delegated act; then additional rules adopted by each monitoring committee for the programme as a whole; and finally national rules that shall apply only to matters not covered by EU or programme rules.

The common Union eligibility rules make the life of programme authorities and beneficiaries easier. The main advantage is the harmonisation of rules across programmes and reduction of legal uncertainty, which should result in decreased error rates. For each expenditure, a list of expenditure items has been set out and a list of ineligible items applicable across all programmes has been established. The complicated issue of staff costs has been addressed in a comprehensive way covering e.g. different types of personnel employed by the beneficiary: full time, part-time with a fixed % of time worked per month, part-time with a flexible number of hours worked per month or on an hourly basis. At the same time, a simplified method of calculation of hourly rates has been laid down.

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Talking about practical issues, how is the EC supporting the ETC programmes in their 2014-2020 programming? How can INTERACT also provide some support?

As I said before, good interregional programmes should facilitate the programming and implementation of cooperation programmes, and even feed into the reflection for each future programming period. And this is what the four INTERACT Points — in Viborg for North-West Europe, in Turku for North-East Europe, in Valencia for South-West Europe and in Vienna for South-East Europe — in their constant interaction with the 2 Commission cooperation units and programme partners are particularly good at and should continue doing.