

Assembly of European Regions

Political report

Information and access to
European funding



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André Reichardt
AER Vice-President

First Vice-President of the Regional Council of Alsace (F)



The rapporteur's foreword



Dear Sir, Madam,

European funds have always been of paramount importance for European regions, and now more than ever at this crucial time when future programmes are being planned for the period from 2014.

The work undertaken by the Assembly of European Regions (AER) in order to identify the good practices concerning information on European funds in European regions, and to suggest some recommendations in order to facilitate their access by the regional actors, is not only appropriate and crucial for the future.

That is why the Alsace Region, with its particular position considering its experience in managing European funds and also as the only regional managing authority in France for the ERDF 2007-2013 programme, decided to lead on an AER report on information and access to European fundings.

In this respect, I would like to thank all regions that have participated actively to the elaboration of this document:

- Champagne-Ardennes (F)
- Krapina-Zagorje (HR)
- Madeira (P)
- Picardie (F)
- Sisak-Moslavina (HR)
- Wallonie (B)

This report goes in the same direction as initiatives implemented in the Alsace Region to help as many regional actors as possible to participate in European programmes, beyond the sole structural funds, and by trying to provide information about all the European funding opportunities, so that all Alsatian projects can find a funding.

The report on information and access to European funds, undertaken by the AER, clearly shows what are the points of satisfaction as well as the points that need improvement on these matters. I hope that these findings, based on the practical experience of regional actors, will be taken into account by European decision-makers for their work on the content of the next programming period from 2014 onwards.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'André Reichardt', written over a horizontal line. Below the signature, the name 'André REICHARDT' is printed in a small, black, sans-serif font.

André Reichardt

AER Vice-President

First Vice-President of the Regional Council of Alsace (F)

Context

In the current context of economic crisis and budgetary restrictions at every level, the resources available to the regions to provide all the services that their citizens expect from them and to revitalise their territories are withering away.

This makes European funding a more and more important source of potential income. Yet the 2014-2020 multi-year financial framework proposed by the European Commission provides for a stagnation, or even a drop, in funding under Cohesion policy (ERDF and ESF, cohesion funds) and Rural Development policy (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, EAFRD), specifically for the most developed regions, and an increase for the sectoral programmes and INTERREG.

It is therefore becoming vital for the regions to move more and more towards the sectoral programmes. Contrary to the structural funds that are allocated to each Member State in the context of the Multi-annual Financial Framework, after a decision by the European Council, the thematic calls for projects are competitive programmes, with no guarantee of allocation per Member state. These programmes are sometimes better suited than the structural funds to targeted actions, making it possible to build partnerships with civil society, the economy, academia, etc. Finally, the actions conducted in the framework of the European projects complement the regional development strategies.

However, if the regions and the regional players are to make the best use of these funding opportunities, information on their existence and their specific features needs to be improved. The creation of strategic frameworks, such as Horizon 2020 for research and innovation, for the forthcoming 2014-2020 planning period is a move towards better coordination of programmes whose targets and objectives intersect. This makes it possible to maintain a diversity of approaches without increasing the action frameworks.

Despite these efforts, it is more essential today than ever before to enable the regions and the regional players to gain better access to the European programmes in order to carry out their development strategies. The AER is increasingly solicited by its member regions and the European Commission to draft guidebooks aiming to support **potential beneficiaries** for targeted programmes or calls for projects.

Among the Community funding programmes, those falling under Cohesion policy (ERDF and ESF, cohesion fund) and Rural Development policy (EAFRD) are relatively familiar to the regions, like the INTERREG programmes to support cross-border cooperation in the regions concerned. All the other European programmes (INTERREG programmes to support trans-national and interregional cooperation, and sectoral programmes) are less well known, or if they are known about, they are much harder to access.

On the one hand, it is difficult to identify the most suitable programme (every year sees the publication of 350 to 400 **calls for European projects**, at both Community and national level).

Plus, these programmes are very competitive, and setting up projects calls for compliance with rules which are sometimes hard to understand without additional explanations. Finally, in a general sense, whether in the case of the structural or sectoral programmes, the level of complexity and bureaucracy associated is such that they require support, without which the **potential beneficiaries** shy away from them.

■ ■ ■ Observations, good practices and recommendations

■ Observation 1: The European programmes are not always well known to the players on the ground

Information on the sectoral funding programmes is available from multiple sources, compartmentalised, scattered and reserved – because of its complexity – for the seasoned public. The very existence of these programmes is unsuspected by most of the players on the ground and the public at large. Depending on the regions in Europe, this lack of recognition is found within associations, small and medium-sized enterprises, local authorities and public institutions, but also citizens in general.

This means that the sectoral funding programmes tend to be used above all by the people who already know about them, which limits the number of **potential beneficiaries** and thus the impact of the Community programmes.

The difficulties are less visible when it comes to the structural funds, because the regions, as managing authorities, for example, in Belgium, supply detailed information, via points of contact and internet sites, to the **potential beneficiaries**. Campaigns to communicate the structural funds can also be financed by those same funds, and are implemented as an obligation by all the **managing authorities**.

■ Good practices

The structural funds are often better known when they are implemented on the ground by the regional players. Such is the case, in particular, in Alsace, where the Region is the sole French regional authority to be a **managing authority** for the ERDF section of the 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment' programme. Field workers have been deployed right across the regional territory, organising information actions for the players in their territory. This is possible only because the staff concerned benefit from European cofinancing via the programme's technical assistance.

In Wallonia, which is the **managing authority** for the ERDF and ESF sections over the period 2007-2013, the **calls for projects** were launched on a decentralised basis, thanks to 3 information sessions in 3 cities and the creation of an assistance office. This made it possible for a large number of projects to be filed. In addition, a 60-second TV spot at peak viewing times was financed to raise awareness among the public at large and the **potential beneficiaries** about the opportunities offered by European funding.

In Picardy, with the aim of simplifying access for associations to European funding, the regional council set up a Europe 'reflex' within the associations, in partnership with the CPCA (Conférence permanente des Coordinations Associatives) and the regional prefecture (SGARE – General Secretariat for Regional and European Affairs).

This upstream approach, intended for the backers of projects which would otherwise be limited to local or national funding, has allowed them to familiarise themselves with the European funding sources.

■ Recommendations

- Disseminate the information on the ground, as close as possible to the local players, identifying the multipliers and providing funding for those intermediaries.
- Offer clearer, detailed and integrated communication tools with regard to the sectoral programmes and **calls for proposals** (platforms, alerts, newsletters, etc.). These communication campaigns should target not just the **potential beneficiaries**, but also the public at large.
- Improving local governance thanks to platforms designed to mobilise the local players and remove the received ideas held by the **potential beneficiaries**.
- Set up regional advisory platforms based on training actions, working groups, field teams and communication tools.
- Simplify the information, which remains difficult to access without prior experience.



■ Observation 2: It is hard to identify the most relevant programmes when starting simply from a project idea, before looking for further information

The distinction between the sectoral programmes and the structural funds, or sometimes between the sectoral programmes themselves, is not always relevant for a player on the ground. Yet the information is always given by programme. (Whether on the internet or in the information journals or 'infodays').

The lack of coordination between the structural fund programmes and the sectoral funding sources, and the frequent lack of a strategic link and integration within a single policy, at all levels of governance, makes the task of identifying the programme best suited to a project even harder.

In addition, even if the structural and sectoral funds do often pursue common objectives, especially in the competitiveness regions, the latter suffer from a much lower profile than the former. This means that we see the sectoral opportunities being under-used.

■ Good practice:

The Regions of Alsace and Champagne-Ardenne, in partnership with the Lorraine Region, organise thematic information sessions, rather than programme-based sessions. The aim is to show the players in these three regions all the European programmes offering support for actions in a given sector (such as energy, education/training, research/innovation, the environment and biodiversity, etc.). Interested players can then conduct more research with the facts at their fingertips.

■ Recommendation

In the actions to provide basic information on European programmes, the important thing is to start with a multi-programme thematic approach.

It is equally necessary to make sure that all the programmes are genuinely legible and transparent: for example, the publication of the projects approved, with details of the name of the partners, the amount of the funds allocated, the objectives and the impacts of the actions, etc., so that the value of any given programme for a particular project can be compared and evaluated.

Finally, creating synergies between the structural and sectoral funds – for instance in terms of the various points of contact – would make it possible to give the beneficiaries appropriate guidance depending on the type of project and the need for funding expressed.



■ Observation 3: It is hard to establish quickly whether or not the programme identified is suited to the project idea.

The information is often spread across an internet presentation page, an applicant's guide, a beneficiary's guide, the subsidy application form, etc. In addition, with regard to the sectoral programmes, much information is available only in English.

■ Good practice

The Alsace Region has set up a one-stop internet information portal on all the programmes. The information is accessible by theme, and then the broad strokes of the programmes are presented. This makes it possible to find out at a glance whether the programme is right or not (eligible structures, eligible expenses, eligible actions, etc.). However, this action requires a lot of updating work (given the large number of different programmes, and different **calls for projects** within a single programme), the cost of which cannot be borne by a territorial authority: this work should be done at Community level.

■ Recommendation

The European Commission should bring in a single internet information portal on European funding. This portal would set out all the **calls for projects**, whether managed by the Commission, the executive agencies, the national agencies or the structural fund management authorities. The information would be laid out in accordance with an identical grid. Work on posting it on line would be done by the structures in charge of the programmes, and the Commission would handle only the technical maintenance and translation workload. This would make it possible to drive down the costs around the information on European funding (which today is duplicated across a number of sites in many countries), and increase chances for all the European applicants, who would have the same information at the same time, in their own language, while maintaining the separation of the tasks between the structures.



■ **Observation 4: The rules for setting up a project are hard to understand**

The forms are not always clear, especially with regard to the eligible expenses. The information is sometimes redundant between several documents, or conversely some key issues are not addressed and the answers are given only if you question the management structure direct (e.g. on the 'Youth in action' programme, or on the processing of mileage allowances). These answers are therefore informal and expose the beneficiary to the risk of a different interpretation if a check is made subsequently.

This often makes it difficult to persuade **potential beneficiaries** to draw up files. In particular, small structures are actually very frightened by the administrative burden, the project engineering required and the legal uncertainties, which are major obstacles, especially when the regulatory bases, particularly in terms of State aid, are constantly evolving and too often imprecise.

In the countries in the process of acceding to the EU, or the most recent members, there is a major lack of **administrative capacity**, which raises the question of institutional reinforcement and training at all levels of governance.

■ **Good practice**

The joint technical secretariat of the Upper Rhine INTERREG programme has created a single document, the 'Beneficiary's guide', which gives all the information required to set up a project, file the request, and then manage the project. This gives the interested players a one-stop shop for all the information they need.

Moreover, in the case of the eligible expenses, a model table is available in Excel, thereby simplifying the completion of the form (instead of the Word table often supplied in certain sectoral programmes, or – even more complicated – the mere indications given in the text of the call for projects).

■ **Recommendation**

It is necessary for the information on the programmes to be gathered together and accessible all at once, because the information needed to manage a project is equally necessary if it is to be set up properly (for example, the rates of cofinancing for certain expenses, the flat rate payments applicable, etc.).

Thought also needs to be given to the **calls for projects**, so as to limit confusion, improve the communication tools, and harmonise the deadlines and publication dates for the calls for proposals, for the sake of reducing the anticipation difficulties faced by many local players with little experience.



■ **Observation 5: The calculation rules differ widely from one programme to another**

These distinctions are difficult to understand for the players entering files across several programmes, because after all, what is involved is always public Community money, which – in principle – follows the same financial regulations.

Moreover, the differences are not always comprehensible – for instance, in the structural funds, the costs of permanent staff are eligible, whereas they are not always eligible in the sectoral programmes. Yet the time spent by someone in implementing a project is time that is not used for other public structure missions; that time should therefore be eligible to be paid for by the European programme, as it is additional work, even if the person is a public official.

■ **Good practice**

The Alsace Region, as the **management authority** of the ERDF side of the 'Regional competitiveness and employment' programme and the INTERREG Upper Rhine programme, has striven to align the rules on these two programmes, in the areas where the managing authorities have some room for interpretation, so that the beneficiaries in Alsace are not faced with these differences between programmes implemented in the same territory.

■ **Recommendation**

We need to harmonise the rules between the programmes, making sure to factor in the actions conducted and their purpose, and not the status of the beneficiary structures or the type of expenses.



■ **Observation 6: It is hard to identify the people who can provide information and help about the European funding**

The Commission, the agencies or the national points of contact, the managing authorities, are the only structures identified in the texts of the **calls for projects**. These people are not always accessible, whether for want of time or for linguistic reasons. Moreover, it can be intimidating for a local player to contact the Commission or a European agency. This means that many structures do not respond to these **calls for projects**, which limits their impact and the equality of treatment between the European players.

In some Member States, the whole information chain regarding the sectoral funds needs to be redesigned: the information mechanisms are not sufficiently effective, and the national bodies do not deliver the appropriate support for the regional and local bodies in terms of the dissemination of the **calls for projects**. Sometimes, some bodies or information points are in place at the national level, but there is no transference at the level of all the regions.

The case of the ultra-peripheral regions needs to be taken into account in this context: experience shows that these regions have more difficulties than the others in obtaining the information they need about the existing sectoral funds. Yet there are people right across the European territory who are capable of providing advice, because they themselves have participated in a project with European funding. The potential in this network of beneficiaries is not being properly exploited.

This is due in part to the fact that it is hard to find out who is running a project with European funding close to where you are. The databases either do not exist or are not always easy to track down. The information given in these databases is not always arranged by region, but only at national level, and finally, the databases are separated by programme, whereas certain programmes cover the same theme (for example the INTERREG programmes and the Education/Lifelong learning programme for certain actions).

■ **Good practices**

The Lorraine Region has set up a network of structures, of all sorts (public institutions, associations, etc.) where people are able to provide advice on a programme and give an initial opinion – non-contractual, of course – on the projects for which another Lorraine player might be thinking about applying for funding.

The Madeira autonomous region has set up an internet site and a set of national contact points on the LIFE + programme. In response to the complexity and occasional lack of clarity in the European legislation, a site and national contact points allow the main backers of potential projects to gain ready access to the information and all the documentation necessary for the preparation of the applications, with explanations in Portuguese. In the contact points, professionals with training in the LIFE + programme support the beneficiaries in the application procedure.

■ **Recommendation**

We need to **use the expertise of the beneficiaries** in the regions, allowing the regional authorities to get to know them (thanks to a database) and to drive that network (thanks to financial resources). Removing the barriers between structural and sectoral funds would also make it possible to optimise the knowledge on both sides and to pool the resources towards more coordinated and effective information.



Conclusions

The European programmes are numerous, the application procedures are complex and different from one programme to another, the information is hard to find and the people to contact are not always clearly identified. The message coming out of all the contributions received by the AER is that information on the European funds is available, but the final beneficiaries have problems in obtaining the information that will enable them to find out about the possibilities and participate in the programmes. Accordingly, the European programmes are not being fully used by the local players in the regions.

The most important thing is to capitalise on the existing rules from one planning period to the next in order to avoid any confusion in the minds of the beneficiaries and the authorities running the programmes.

At European level, the simplification of the legislation is continuing to be the subject of intense discussions: the working programmes of the funding programmes need to be made less complex; and the assistance services need to be better tailored to the beneficiaries.

It is important not to underestimate the language barrier, which creates a participation gap in many programmes.

In a Europe which is seeking to get close to its citizens, the misunderstanding of these programmes by the public at large strips the EU of part of its added value in the minds of the citizens.

The AER will thus pursue its efforts and its role as a platform for the exchange of good practices, training and pooling of expertise, and a forum for the networking of European regions, so as to allow them to bring in innovative projects, methodological accompaniment, etc.

The AER is also in the front line in terms of passing on the messages from the present report to the European and national institutions and encouraging its member regions to grasp the proposals and good practices outlined above to improve access to European funding in their own individual territories.

Information on the dissemination of the report

This report will be sent in the first place to all Presidents of AER member regions. It will also be presented to the European commissioners in charge of regional policy, but also to the different DGs that manage the thematic programmes. The report will be disseminated to the relevant members of the European Parliament. It will be communicated to the Cyprus Presidency, to the Permanent Representations to the EU, to the Committee of the Regions and to the European Economic and Social Committee. The report will be presented at the occasion of several conferences dedicated to European funding programmes. Finally, the AER members are invited to bring this report to their national governments, and to make use of the advices and best practices contained in the report.

Acknowledgments

The AER would like to address its warmest thanks to the regions that were actively involved in the preparation of this report:

- Alsace
- Champagne-Ardennes (F)
- Krapina-Zagorje (HR)
- Madeira (P)
- Picardie (F)
- Popravljeno (HR)
- Wallonie (B)

Your region wishes to lead on an AER political report?

Inform the AER General Secretariat and fill-in the report proposal form. Once your proposal is accepted by the AER Presidium, gather about 15 regions, under the lead of a political representative of your region. Thanks to the AER secretariat support, you will be able to organise a few meetings with the ad hoc working group and to draft, in concertation with all the involved regions, a political report that will then be adopted by the AER Bureau and brought by your politician towards the relevant European and national decision-makers.

For more information



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