AER Strategy 2024-2031

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AER Mission Statement

> *To be the voice of the regions of Europe, promoting their interests in Europe and beyond and fostering interregional cooperation for experience exchange and the development of regional policy.*

The Assembly of European Regions (AER) is a driver of **policymaking close to citizens**, of a sense of belonging to **value-based democratic regional communities**, of cohesion among citizens and political actors in wider Europe, and of socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development.

The AER **unites European regional authorities** and serves as their voice. It raises their concerns and visibility in dialogue with the EU, international organisations, national governments and the public. Since 1985, AER has **ensured regional governments have a say** in all political issues affecting them, and that political decisions are taken at the level closest to citizens, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

As the largest independent network of its kind, the AER offers its members opportunities to **participate in shaping European policy**, share their best practices at the international level and shape solutions to common challenges. AER is a community of practice, **facilitating mutual learning**, and providing our members with training and funding opportunities. It also runs its **programmes and projects** in the interest of various social groups in its member regions.

As a **non-partisan and member-driven community**, the AER brings together diverse regional governments and cooperates with other stakeholders, such as enterprise and civil society actors. We foster territorial and interregional cooperation and work across borders in a practical way to build trustful partnerships. As a **pan-European network**, the AER stands for the fruitful collaboration between regions inside and outside the EU: we represent their common interests and work to strengthen the European project.

AER Four Cornerstones and Values

1. Democracy and Citizen Participation:
AER upholds democratic principles and places the needs of citizens at the heart of its efforts. By promoting citizen participation and increasing transparency in decision-making processes, AER strives to create platforms for dialogue and engagement from all European regions and their inhabitants.

2. Solidarity and Fairness:
AER advocates for solidarity and fairness among Europe's regions, beyond cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences. With a foundation of mutual respect and equal opportunities for all, AER works to ensure that all regions can benefit from collective progress and development.

3. Sustainable Development and Cohesion:
AER is committed to sustainable development encompassing environmental, social, and economic aspects. By promoting cohesion as a political value, AER aims to ensure progress in Europe through cooperation and joint actions for a sustainable future.

4. Innovation and Regional Cooperation:
AER dares to challenge the status quo by driving forward-looking initiatives and supporting innovation in various policy areas. By fostering partnerships and cooperation among regions, AER supports regional innovation, education, and economic development to strengthen local economies and create new job opportunities.

These four integrated cornerstones and values form the foundation of AER's work, aiming to support strong, resilient, and dynamic regions that actively contribute to a better Europe and thereby a better world.

AER Vision

> *AER envisions a Europe where empowered regional governments, united in their diversity and committed to collaboration, drive sustainable development and innovation.*

What We Do

The AER consistently **aligns its activities with the needs of regional governments** and public administrations. These needs are at the centre of the AER's activities: The AER considers its members' direct interests of service to citizens and their cooperation with business, civil society, and academia.

The AER **helps its members strengthen regional democracy** and citizens' attachment to their communities, creating positive political, social, and economic effects.

The AER directs its policy activities and member services towards **achieving lasting results and sustainable developments** for the benefit of its members. In its policy work, the AER aggregates and amplifies the voices of regional politicians and authorities at European level, standing out as the most geographically diverse network of its kind. It is competitive in the concert of regional policy voices with its **diversity of themes and expertise** on various European issues.

Then again, AER continues to generate **strength through its practical services for networking its members**, mutual learning, and generating forward-looking solutions for regional administrations, partly in the framework of its programme and project activities. A focus of our work is to **drive innovation in all areas of regional development** and service to citizens. The AER succeeds as an open network that brings together the ideas and best practices of its members into viable concepts.

The AER successfully **raises awareness that the European family is bigger than the EU** and that European integration must be further deepened for the benefit of all. A common Europe is not just about practical cooperation for mutual benefits and avoiding conflicts. Our vision of Europe is based on commitments for the future that arise from the bonds of a common history, common values within the framework of democratic constitutionality, and the better prospect of success of **acting according to the principle of being united in diversity**. As the largest of the few independent regional policy organisations in Europe that transcend the EU, the handshake between EU and non-EU regions is a brand essence of the AER.

The AER is a member-driven, 'bottom-up' organisation that **shapes its work areas as an integrated and interactive network** and thus comes to be experienced as a professional and human community. The AER leadership and management recognise that the AER achieves its full potential when it calls upon and makes use of the commitment and proactive engagement of members based on their needs. Maintaining and **building strong communities around core issues** and activities is a successful way to do this.

The AER is an organisation that **keeps pace with a rapidly changing political, economic and administrative environment** and, thanks to the participation of its members, is able to anticipate their future needs. Even in times of general fragmentation and diversification of target groups and communication channels, our network will be able to **act with foresight through close contact with our members** and provide offers in problem areas that are not yet at their peak.

The AER **achieves growing results in partnership and fairness** with European institutions and like-minded organisations. It builds on its reputation as a reliable partner. We identify common goals despite differences, form coalitions and, especially in times of crisis, testify that we are **pulling together with others to solve the major issues of the future**. The AER also further develops its institutional partnerships with the EU, the Council of Europe, the United Nations and other international organisations, while strengthening its character as an independent, member-driven network.

Europe: A Landscape of Challenges and Opportunities

We operate in a world and continent confronted with unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Climate change and environmental degradation threaten the well-being and livelihoods of millions across Europe. Artificial intelligence and technology continue to change the way we work and connect with each other. Population ageing and decline have major impacts on economic growth, fiscal sustainability, health and long-term care, well-being and social cohesion. Additionally, social and economic inequalities are widening.

Rising extremism and polarisation along with citizens increasingly feeling disconnected and powerless to influence decisions that affect them, and the spread of disinformation are threatening democracy across Europe. Conflicts are also increasing in scale, with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine causing political and economic instability, heightened security concerns, and military tensions across the continent.

However, if the challenges facing Europe are great, so are the opportunities. The potential for social, economic and environmental transformation is greater than ever. By harnessing this potential, we can create new, sustainable jobs, foster greater social fairness, and build a more prosperous future for all across all regions of Europe.

We recognise the need to be responsive and agile in supporting our members as they address complex challenges and seize emerging opportunities. Additionally, we assist them in managing the trade-offs resulting from necessary transitions due to climate and other challenges. Through a dynamic network that leverages our shared knowledge, experiences, collaboration, and collective action, we aim to empower European regions to lead a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient future, and to amplify their voice at both European and global levels.

Core objectives

The core objectives of AER's work are to:

- **Defend, promote and advocate for the interests of the regions**, both at the various political levels and through practical cooperation.
- **Influence political decisions** that affect the development of European regions.
- **Develop opportunities** for interregional cooperation.
- **Promote the involvement** of members in our network and their collaboration.
- **Compare approaches and results** and share best practices.
- **Facilitate open debate** to identify common solutions.
- **Empower young people** to engage in regional development by raising awareness of their potential and fostering active youth participation.

Our Strategic Objectives

General Goal: Build a Stronger, Diverse, Innovative, Dynamic Member-driven Network

- Provide enhanced opportunities for human-centred connection, coordination and collaboration to facilitate continuous learning, support innovation and drive positive changes in policies and practices.
- Encourage deeper collaboration among members on critical issues to enhance their knowledge, expertise and impact.
- Create innovative and inclusive spaces (aligning with the current and future challenges and opportunities; proposing new and adapted solutions; experimenting in our ways of working) that facilitate exchange, learning and joint action, leading to greater collective impact.
- Enhance learning and impact by leveraging diverse perspectives, expertise and experiences within the network.

- Leverage digital tools to connect and collaborate to enhance in-person activities or when in-person participation is not possible.

Enhance Peer Learning for Regional Policy Innovation

- Position AER as a leading catalyst for change and innovation at the European level by leveraging its unique peer learning methodologies and fostering strong relationships with its members.
- Facilitate community in a hybrid world, taking advantage of both online and in-person possibilities and thus creating a continuum in the experience of regional stakeholders with the network.
- Facilitate thematic exchanges among AER members to spark collaborative policy development and drive innovative policy solutions and practices.
- Engineer peer learning pathways in co-creation with regions through working groups or projects, enabling policymakers to foster innovation and maximise impact.
- Establish AER as a laboratory for regional innovators in the public sector, providing a platform to test ideas, seek peer support, access guidance and resources, and foster collaborations to enhance regional policies and practices.
- Facilitate the emergence of spin-off initiatives from the working groups, including the creation of EU-co-funded projects and advocacy efforts.
- Measure and evaluate the impacts and outcomes of interregional peer learning for regions, identifying key success factors.
- Engage with leading organisations and researchers on innovation in the public sector, interregional collaboration and peer learning to enhance AER's reputation as a preeminent authority in the field.

Influence Policy Change

- Convene more ambitious and effective advocacy and more proactively convene members to address policy challenges through enhanced joint action.
- Reinforce the AER's role and reputation as a voice for the European regions by identifying priority areas that align with AER's mission and the needs of the member regions and focus on those where AER has an added value in leading on and supporting members.
- Influence policy change by combining direct engagement with policymakers and relevant institutions, evidence-based advocacy and monitoring & evaluation of advocacy impact.
- Develop data-driven policy documents leveraging member insights to strengthen their impact.
- Support members' engagement with the national, European and international policy levels to drive impactful change.
- Use communications to champion members' work, give greater visibility to AER messages and build public pressure for policy change.
- Better connect with influencing coalitions that support AER ambitions and extend our network base beyond local and regional stakeholders to include NGOs, businesses and academic institutions.
- Use communications to champion members' work, give greater visibility to AER messages and build public pressure for policy change.

Elevate AER Programmes

- Strengthen members' engagement and collaboration within the AER Programmes, increasing political involvement and developing their advocacy dimension.
- Summer Academy:
  - Increase the political and institutional representation at the European level, spotlighting the AER and our regions' expertise and best practices to European policymakers.

- Secure the full participation of all Summer Academy Organising Committee members in future editions, to enhance their visibility at the event and the level of collaboration between regions.
- Eurodyssey:
  - Spark political interest in Eurodyssey among AER member regions and beyond and foster the commitment to join the programme to enhance the opportunities for international cooperation across regions.
  - Expand Eurodyssey's reach through a targeted membership strategy.
- Youth Regional Network:
  - Encourage regions to appoint youth representatives to the YRN, to increase representation and enhance intergenerational collaboration within the network.
  - Secure co-funding to enhance the network visibility and outreach, and the opportunities for young people in AER member regions in particular for their engagement with regional representatives.

Deliver Innovative Projects

- Develop projects on key regional policy topics that address members' priorities and needs, and where our network offers the greatest value
- Leverage projects to foster member engagement and collaboration, creating opportunities for policy learning through mutual learning, exchange of practices and capacity-building activities, research and publications, and expert support for policy development.
- Contribute to policy development at both the regional and EU levels by generating valuable insights and policy recommendations through our projects.
- Engage in projects that extend benefits to members within and beyond project consortiums, ensuring impactful outcomes for the wider AER membership.
- Capitalise on projects to cultivate strategic partnerships with thematic networks and organizations, enhancing our network's reach and strengthening our value proposition.
- Enhance member regions' participation in European projects, building their capacity in project design and development.
- Support the financial sustainability and accessibility of projects for participating regions, creating value for both AER and its members.
- Uphold accountability and transparency in our work, ensuring member regions are well-informed and at the forefront of opportunities arising from our project initiatives.

How we will deliver on our strategic objectives

Building a Robust Governance Structure

We recognise the critical role of a strong governance framework in realising our strategic objectives. Therefore, we are dedicated to constructing a resilient structure that fosters decisive decision-making, transparency, accountability and continuous enhancement.

To achieve this, we will delineate clear roles and responsibilities, cultivate open channels of communication and engagement, strengthen accountability mechanisms and embrace continuous monitoring and improvement.

We will also cultivate a leadership that inspires, engages and mobilises to promote joint learning, exchange and action.

Secure Sustainable Funding

To achieve our ambitious strategic goals and deliver lasting results for the years to come, we are committed to establishing a sustainable and diversified funding base. Moving beyond membership fees, we will actively seek to grow grants across relevant programs and funding instruments, both within and beyond the EU programmes. This strategic approach will empower us to secure the resources necessary for financial stability and long-term operational sustainability.

Elevating our communications strategy

We will adopt a more strategic approach to our communications, building a stronger brand and delivering high-quality communication and impactful events.

We are committed to better using diverse communication formats and channels to more effectively inform and engage members and stakeholders within our network. This will strengthen AER as a space for mutual learning, collaboration and collective action.

By leveraging a wide range of media outlets and tools, we will amplify the voices of regions, raise the profile of their issues, and showcase our work. This approach will expand our reach and impact, inspiring our audience and encouraging them to join our collective voice for impactful policy change.

Investing in our People

We are committed to further developing our team, and equipping them with the necessary skills and resources to effectively contribute to achieving our strategic objectives.

We will also improve our ways of working to enhance efficiencies and effectiveness across all aspects of our operations. This includes regularly reviewing and improving processes, leveraging technology solutions to streamline workflows, fostering a culture of continuous improvement, and developing accountable management to drive progress towards our goals.

Working principles

The AER embodies the following working principles:

- **Decision-making** based on the interests of the members.
- Further development of **AER as a member-driven network** with governance by the members.
- Alignment of activities with the current **political priorities** developed by the AER Bureau.
- **Transparency**: The AER acts transparently to focus on defending the interests of all member regions.
- **Professionalism, commitment and co-responsibility**.
- **Flexibility, agility and proactivity**.
- **Efficiency** including cost efficiency and a balance of available resources and impact, which includes prioritisation of activities.
- **Promoting engagement with and between members**, including developing targeted communities of peers from different regions.
- **Conscious choice of exchange formats** and communication channels in our network (personal and digital) to foster communication and knowledge transfer with and between members.
- **Orientation towards innovation and sustainability** as well as the use of suitable technologies.
- **Respect for diversity**, including in the ways members contribute to the common work.
- **Specialisation of employees** for specific member requests and corresponding delegation by management.