



New partners in Interreg projects Outcomes Paper

04-05 December 2024

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Ljubljana | Slovenia



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Background

On the 4th and 5th December 2024, Interact facilitated a workshop, attended by representatives of Interreg programmes and stakeholders, to address the topic of "New partners in Interreg projects".

One of the biggest challenges that Interreg programmes are facing is the limited number and variety of project partners participating in their programmes. In many ways, the "Interreg world" is perceived as rather hermetic and prone to complicated and demanding procedures. On top of that, many times programmes compete with other instruments (e.g. mainstream programmes). As a result, many programmes suffer either from lack of projects in general or complain about having the same partnerships applying over and over. It is a serious challenge which may directly affect the overall programme performance (in terms of indicators) or at least compromise innovativeness of the submitted project ideas.

On the other hand, even if a programme may be successful in attracting newcomers, it does not necessarily mean the end of the story. Many times, this is the moment when the real challenges start: the challenge of providing new organisations with effective support. It is never a good idea to leave such partners without increased supervision and dedicated support.

As such, the workshop focused on addressing the following key questions:

- Which organisations are underrepresented in Interreg programmes?
- What are the barriers preventing these organisations from participating?
- What good practice is available for attracting these organisations and supporting them during project implementation?
- What challenges are the inexperienced partners facing during their project implementation?
- What methods and solutions can the programme explore to support inexperienced partners facing these challenges during project implementation?

The findings gathered during the workshop are presented below.



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Which organisations are underrepresented in Interreg programmes?

Participants identified that the following organisations are underrepresented in their programmes:

Type of organisation	Added value organisation would bring to programmes
Small and medium size enterprises (SMEs)	Necessary for meeting some programmes' strategic goals and indicator targets; Promote innovation in partnerships; Promote efficiency in partnerships, in terms of meeting deadlines and accurate forecasting.
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)	Bring specific expertise and represent specific target groups; Close to the local level; Sometimes represent key stakeholders and decision-makers; Some programmes' gap analyses have identified NGOs as less represented compared to other types of organisations.
Youth organisations	Young people are a key target group for some programmes; Young people contribute valuable skills and perspectives to projects.
Grass roots organisations, in particular in rural areas	Necessary for ensuring benefits of programmes are equally distributed; Some programmes' gap analyses have identified rural areas as less represented.
National agencies, including emergency services	Depending on their competences, project activities may require the authorisation of national agencies.
International organisations	Introduce innovation from outside the programme area; Instrumental in dissemination of project results.
Organisations from underrepresented regions	For some programmes, there are regions in their programme areas that are underrepresented. Therefore, inclusion of organisations from these regions is necessary for ensuring benefits of programmes are equally distributed.

There was also recognition that new organisations, in themselves, have a clear benefit to Interreg programmes, by contributing new ideas, fresh perspectives and healthy competition.



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What are the barriers preventing these organisations from participating?

Participants identified the following barriers that prevent underrepresented organisations from participating in their programmes.

Barriers were divided into those which are:

- “internal” to potential applicants, and
- “external” (barriers that relate more to rules and practice of programmes).

“Internal” barriers	“External” barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organisations are not aware that funding opportunities exist; - Organisations’ lack of financial and human capacity - Organisations’ lack of skills and knowledge to complete applications; - Organisations may lack confidence in their ability to apply successfully; - There may be language barriers - Organisations may not be able to find suitable partners in neighbouring countries; - Organisations may not see the benefit of cooperation: they may perceive potential partners as competition; - Organisations may not be able to make “imaginative leap”: their project ideas remain as having only local benefit rather than being ideas that benefit the programme area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programme priorities/specific objectives aren’t considered relevant or don’t reflect target groups’ needs and objectives; - Programme support may not be available or may only be provided in larger urban areas; - Programme requirements may prevent participation or make it more difficult; - Programmes may have a reputation for administrative burden; - Other funds may be perceived as more attractive.



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What are the identified solutions to approach underrepresented organizations/institutions in Interreg programmes?

Potential solutions to the following four types of organizations were identified:

Small and medium size enterprises (SMEs);

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs);

Youth organisations;

Grass roots organisations, in particular in rural areas.

The solutions were based on the following categories:

- Communication activities
- Simplification measures
- Direct support
- Other

Small and medium size enterprises (SMEs)	
Communication activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use targeted channels (also online based e.g. LinkedIn, etc.); - Approach local umbrella organizations; - Lead by examples, present good practices and benefits from already implemented projects; - Support partner search measures (dedicated only for SMEs);
Simplification measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of SCOs; - Clarify and support and simplify applications of the State Aid rules (both de-minimis and GBER); - Design simplified version of the application form dedicated for project with SMEs (AF which would take under consideration SMEs needs and concerns); - Shorten period of reimbursement to projects; - Preparatory costs to be paid immediately after project approval/contracted; - Preparatory activities (e.g. seed money schemes) financed by the programme to develop new ideas (without preconditions for project to be approved).
Direct support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use B2B support organizations; - Consultations on the level of regional and national authorities; - Use of external experts to support SMEs involvement;
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support in pre-financing - Dedicated calls for proposals for projects involving SMEs; - Stable rules for SMEs involvement in projects; - Make programme more service oriented by improving inefficient and reduce unnecessary procedures.



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Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)	
Communication activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use targeted (tailored) communication to present the opportunities of cooperation projects - To share success stories from successfully implemented projects (with NGOs as partners or as target groups); - Podcasts with success stories (preferably translated to local languages); - Production of videos (e.g. VLOGs) with ongoing project activities; - Networking events exclusively dedicated to NGOs; - Organising “design thinking events”;
Simplification measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Simplification of the application process for project with NGOs; - Use of SCOs; - Innovative reporting procedures (new methods): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o video reports o highlighting only the results - Only one partner (LP) addressing the cooperation need (only one partner with budget); - Other key (strategic) partners without budget – providing expertise only.
Direct support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support in pre-financing - Dedicated (full) assistance during the entire project life cycle; - NGO to NGO peer support
Other	-

Youth organizations	
Communication activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reach out to youth through the regional representatives and youth support organizations; - Explore possibility of the Interreg Voluntary Youth (IVY) initiative; - Physical appearance at youth events, refrain from using EU bureaucratic terms and language. - Use more innovative communication channels (Tik Tok, Instagram, etc.) - Involve “influencers” to promote international cooperation and possibility to join/submit Interreg project.
Simplification measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small Project Fund: Dedicated scheme to youth; - Simplify terminology (use of still bureaucratic language); - Use Interreg common indicators



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Direct support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appoint one person from programme (e.g. project officer) as a main contact person for youth organization (project ideas with youth partners); - Provide mentoring in the framework of the project (during entire project cycle);
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organize dedicated call for proposal only for project with youth component; - Involve and activate youth organizations during programming stage; - Include in the assessment criteria additional points for projects involving youth “element” (e.g. involving IVYs or youth organizations, etc.); - Involve youth organizations as associated partners;

Grass roots organisations, in particular in rural areas	
Communication activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Targeted events in the language of the country - Testimonials from newcomers
Simplification measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small scale projects; - Involve local partners as associated partners or sub-partners; - Prefinancing of project activities;
Direct support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Webinars for newcomers (include NCPs); - Involve IVYs to support and help local actors; - Dedicated trainings to newcomers on entire project life cycle;
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National network of funding stakeholders; - Synergies with “regional offices”



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What challenges are the inexperienced partners facing during their project implementation?

Participants identified challenges, the inexperienced partners facing during their project implementation and voted for the ones that have the highest risk for a programme.

Challenges during their project implementation	
Programme rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementation process; - Not understanding the programme hierarchy/roles; - Budget managing process; - Reimbursement procedures; - Designating persons involvement (e.g. controller, AS) ; - Problems with respecting deadlines, poor planning
Partnership management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenges in working in a bigger international partnership; - Assumptions from other programmes experience; - National rules, EU rules and other programme rules; - Feeling of insecurity; - Silence of partners; - Language issues; - Staff changes within experienced organisations; - Staff turnovers
Public procurement (legal requirements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public procurement rules, deadlines, procedures;
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jems and any monitoring system; - Reporting, 1st financial report; - Deadlines management; - Problems with respecting deadlines, poor planning
Other important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bureaucracy; - External circumstances; - State aid; - Indicators; - Communication

The common understanding is that, while these challenges affect all partners, inexperienced partners require additional support from programmes, as well as from more experienced projects and partners.



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What methods and solutions can the programme explore to support inexperienced partners facing these challenges during project implementation?

Participants proposed methods and solutions already applied in their programmes, as well as innovative ideas and challenges that can be explored for implementation.

Support during their project implementation	
Programme rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scoring advantage for newcomers (evaluation process) ; - Providing pre-financing (ERDF) ; - Providing advance payments; - Support capacity building; - Targeted training during the whole project duration; - Supporting committee (JS, partners, local authorities, co-financing institutions) ; - Dedicates person on the programme level for inexperienced partners; - User-friendly manuals; - Videos for process
Partnership management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In application: checkbox for newcomers status; - In person meeting (at project generation phase and before implementation phase and if lots of newcomers then many regular meetings); - Twinning: one experienced project partner with one newcomer; - JS mentoring newcomers/trainings; - Explanation of the Lead Partner (LP) Principle; - Bigger focus on newcomers in communication; - JS crosscheck the capacity of the newcomers
Public procurement (legal requirements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EX-ANTES check >in cooperation with FLC and designated national contact; - Concentrated responsivity; - Training, implementation workshops; - Include to programme manuals the fact that FLC should help and how; - Project partners involve FLC early enough; - Risk assessment by programme; - Specific expenditures in project budget; - Local support groups including the whole partnership; - External consultants to prepare procurement documents; - Procurement plan check from programme and prepared by the projects in the beginning of the project
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More targeted reporting trainings/sessions/workshops; - Video tutorials to show reporting processes; - System reminders to the LPs for deadlines (approaching the end of the period); - Pre-check the draft project report;



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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Analysing frequently made mistakes (one-page factsheets);- Project management check list for each sections of the report to specify the needed information sent to LPs;- Project manager writes the reports;- Any automatic notification to prevent delays |
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