

Art of Cooperation- Practical aspects of IPA in the cross-border cooperation context panel discussion summary

The panel focused on programming processes in Interreg CBC Programmes, exploring the ways in which Interreg and IPA regulation translate into reality and facilitate cooperation of EU member and candidate countries and regions. Implemented outside or along the external EU border, Interreg-IPA and IPA-IPA CBC cooperation contributes also to the goals of IPA to assist and accelerate the EU accession of candidate countries.

The panellists and audience gained closer insight into how things have been done (experiences), how they can be done (possibilities) and what we can do next (opportunities). Overall conclusion of the panel is that effective regulation is a fine balancing act between flexibility and stability. Flexibility of the regulation facilitates cooperation among many programme bodies and structures from different countries, while stability is achieved by clearly and unambiguously defining the contours of cooperation.

Flexibility can be found in the way the programming process unravels. They emphasized that there is no universally optimal approach; instead, each Programme tailors its methodology based on its available resources, internal capacity and workload. This customization takes varied forms: in-house – with mostly MA and JS members; externalized – with specialized service providers; or combined – using both in-house and external expertise. Thus, for each Programme a different combination of methods, techniques and tools used during programming ensures time and resource efficiency, thorough knowledge of the region as well as wide consultative process, integration of multiple perspectives into the Interreg Programme and diversity of stakeholders.

Diversity of applicants and potential beneficiaries was emphasized as crucial for generating good-quality project proposals and ensuring wider impact of the programme interventions. Increasing the number and diversifying the type and profile of applicant organizations and avoiding recycled partnerships poses a challenge for many programmes, and in candidate countries it is especially pronounced. To solve this, the programme bodies have considered and used a variety of measures, methods and tools during programming and set-up of the programmes. Some tackle the diversification of applicants directly through selection of priorities and specific objectives, definition of indicative actions, indicators and types of potential beneficiaries, or opening the Programme for directly financing SMEs or establishing Small Project Fund. Other measures are less obvious, but equally important, such as the use of language and wording in naming the priorities so as to encourage rather than deter different types of organizations from applying. Flexibility of regulation allows for different territorial and administrative arrangements of the management structure of Interreg programmes balancing centralized and regional representation for most efficient use of resources and seamless integration into the existing administrative structures of a country. The panelists described and compared management structures and institutional set-up of Interreg (-IPA) CBC Programmes and highlighted the benefits of sharing, grouping/clustering MAs, JSs/JTSs, NAs and/or FLCs while ensuring regional representation through JS Antennae, JS/JTS branch offices or regional FLC offices. The set-up of the management bodies and structuring the system is important, yet not sufficient for smooth implementation of Interreg-IPA and IPA-IPA programmes. Establishing and maintaining working relationships and cooperation is implicated in every aspect of their implementation. And that is achieved through timely, frequent and honest communication and multidirectional information flows among the management bodies within one or among more Programmes. The Art of Cooperation is a timely initiative

and excellent platform to intensify such communication and promote active involvement in drafting the 2027+ regulation.

