

Conclusions

From the KISS ME Interregional Meetings in Varaždin, Düsseldorf & Barcelona

Three interregional meetings of the KISS ME project have taken place until now: in Zagreb & Varaždin, 4 – 6 October 2017; in Düsseldorf, 7 – 9 May 2018; and in Barcelona, 7 – 9 November 2018. At these meetings, project partners and their local stakeholders were brought together in order to share experience from their respective regions. At the second day of the meetings, a workshop session took place during which several stakeholder presentations were held on different topics. After each presentation, there were active discussions among the participants.

The topics covered by the stakeholder presentations at these meetings were the following:

Varaždin:

- Effective policy instruments for cross-border SME cooperation: Grants, Vouchers, Financial Instruments
- Effectiveness of cross-border business support facilities: Joint Competence / Excellence Centres, Business Incubators, Technology Parks
- Cross-border / regional innovation / SME Development strategies vs. national strategies

Düsseldorf:

- Development agencies in a cross-border context: their work, benefits and challenges
- Clusters

Barcelona:

- Intellectual Property
- Entrepreneurial dimension of SMEs: how to help them get bigger?

We would like to thank all the participants for the interesting presentations, the active discussions and the valuable inputs given during the workshops. The insights gained from the workshop session present an important input for the project, its upcoming activities and results.

A list of presentations can be found in the annex.

Conclusions

1) INTERREG A CBC Programmes:

The INTERREG A CBC programmes significantly contribute to the improvement of cross-border cooperation between a variety of actors, such as municipalities, universities, development agencies, NGOs, etc., and help them to build stronger networks. In this context, however, all regions seem to face similar challenges, such as actually reaching and encouraging a bigger number for SMEs and other actors, and motivating them to engage in cross-border cooperation and to use of the INTERREG A funding.

The following possibilities for programme improvements have been identified:

- **Shortening bureaucratic processes:**
Deconstructing bureaucratic barriers might increase the engagement of SMEs and other actors. This is particularly relevant with regard to the period for project application assessments and period for the reimbursement of costs. These factors often hinder SMEs to participate in INTERREG A programmes.
In addition, the possibilities for INTERREG A Programmes to engage with and apply E-Government processes should be taken into consideration more strongly.
- **Pre-financing:**
Related to the point above, pre-financing of state contribution and establishing other financial support schemes (targeted loans) to some extent could help the project partners, e.g. SMEs, to implement their projects without heavy financial difficulties and would present major incentives for SMEs to engage in the programme. This could be done, e.g., through the planning of financial allocations of the project calls according to the Programme's implementation strategy, based on the real current needs. Proactive tools should be applied to effectively meet the allocation figures.
- **Programme Communication:**
In order to reach the broader public and to engage more actors in cross-border cooperation, it is necessary to improve the communication tools of the programme. In doing so, more attractive and engaging communication tools, such as below-the-line tools, which are more target-group oriented, should be considered.
In this context, programme branding involving the public more deeply into the programme and thus, creating a stronger sense of cross-border identity can be a useful tool. This could also include more matchmaking events for ideas and actors across borders. In addition, concrete programme results and programme related events should be better disseminated. For a proper dissemination of results, special funds could be allocated to this purpose in future programmes.

- **“Share of Experience platform” and “Cross-border ambassadors”:**

Often, SMEs consider it too bureaucratic and complicated to get involved in cross-border cooperation. Encouragement illustrating the benefits of participating in CBC and INTERREG are more credible if they come from other entrepreneurs of SMEs than from public organisations, governments or agencies. Therefore, entrepreneurs who work or have worked cross-border successfully should take the role of “cross-border ambassadors” and function as contact points for other entrepreneurs who have questions concerning cross-border work. Moreover, it would be helpful to have a platform on which entrepreneurs who work cross-border and entrepreneurs who are hesitant to do so could come together to share their experience in CBC.

2) Cluster

Cluster policies seem to be a success factor in those regions, in which the Cluster infrastructure is well developed. It is easier for clusters to promote cooperation and innovation on a regional, national and international level than for SMEs on their own due to their stronger bargaining power and network. However, considering that clusters are still underdeveloped in some European regions, such as the Hungarian-Croatian border region, the successful transfer of “knowhow” about Cluster infrastructures between European regions could enhance the development of these infrastructures in regions where clusters are underdeveloped.

Concerning future INTERREG A CBC Programmes, the support of cross-clustering or the building of transnational clusters could be interesting approaches.

3) Language

Language still presents major barriers for CBC. Especially in regions, in which there are huge differences between the national languages, this majorly hems cross-border cooperation. Moreover, English proficiency for the use as working language is not as self-evident as some policy makers think. These language barriers cause high costs in the phase of project building as well as at later stages of project implementations, also with regard to potential that remains unused due to this barrier.

In order to overcome this barrier, future INTERREG programmes should focus more on language and cultural differences and make them eligible parts of INTERREG projects. This could be done, e.g. through the reservation of specific funds within the INTERREG programmes for deconstructing language and cultural barriers. Deconstructing these barriers will ultimately lead to more projects and better implementation of the programme.

4) Culture and History

Just like language, also culture and common history can present major barriers for CBC. Both factors can influence the willingness for people and also entrepreneurs to orientate across the border. This is particularly relevant in regions, in which the two bordering countries have developed very independently from each other. One example is the Hungarian-Croatian border region: due to the common history, people and entrepreneurs tend to orientate themselves more towards the Bosnian and Serbian border in spite the only recent war instead of considering the step across the border to Hungary which has been very independent historically and seemingly “has nothing in common” with Croatia. Differences in language can additionally enforce these cultural and historical barriers, as it is evident in the Hungarian-Croatian border region as well. Although this is a rather strong case with rather big differences, cultural and history are also important factors in border regions between two or more seemingly “similar” countries.

In order to overcome this barrier, future INTERREG programmes should be more aware of cultural and historical differences and make them eligible parts of INTERREG project. This could be done, e.g. through the reservation of specific funds within the INTERREG programmes for teaching intercultural communication skills.

5) Trust

Trust is key for successful cross-border cooperation. In order for companies and clusters to work with other partners across borders, it is necessary to have accountable and reliable partners, and to build trust between the partnerships. It is a precondition for actors to engage in cross-border cooperation and to generate innovations.

A possible way to foster the building of trust within programmes could be more face-to-face events, possibly also with a thematic focus to attract partners with similar backgrounds. As illustrated in previous conclusions of the KISS ME project, personal meetings are a more sustainable way to build trust and solid partnerships than communication via email or telephone.

6) “INTERREG Family”

Due to the particularity of the INTERREG programme, e.g. with regard to application processes, specific regulations and funding preconditions, it is easier for actors who have already been involved in INTERREG projects to engage with the programme repeatedly. They are familiar with the programme’s specific set up and its regulations, and already have an established network of partners across the border. On the one hand, this enables partners across borders to establish a long-term commitment and thus, bears the potential for long-term developments. On the other hand, however, this also bears the risk of excluding actors that have not been involved in the INTERREG A programme yet and limits the programmes

efficiency and “popularity” to a circle of actors who already knows about the benefits of the programme. The challenge, therefore, is to expand the circle of actors engaging with the INTERREG programme ideally involving both experiences actors and “newcomers” in joint projects.

7) Influence from the political level

Political influence plays a role in cross-border and interregional cooperation, and its implementation. Both CBC programmes and interregional cooperation programmes are influenced by and depending on the level of involvement and interest of higher political levels. This is relevant both with regards to inner political matters which might be prioritized over cross-border and interregional matters, and with regards to project decision and approval procedures which might not always appear to be transparent and coherent.

8) Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and incubators

RDAs and incubators are important instruments to foster regional economic development in all KISS ME project regions. Many SMEs benefit from the RDAs business support, their networks and expertise. The RDAs in the KISS ME project regions all apply different tools and different focuses, e.g. with regards to support schemes, (public) venture capital, manpower, cluster focus, and their focus on start-ups.

This illustrates that RDAs and incubators should be designed to effectively address the needs of the market in the respective region and respond to regional market failures. Moreover, the discussion within the KISS ME framework highlighted that the work and set up of RDAs and incubators should be based on a good analysis of the most relevant market failures and business actors in the region, and that they should be sufficiently equipped with the relevant mandate and resources.

9) Advice on Intellectual Property (IP)

Having basic knowledge of IP matters is important for SMEs, specifically with regard to their internationalisation process. However, SMEs often do not see the need to engage with IP and consider it too expensive to work with an IP agent. Therefore, the services of public IP agents working with regional development agencies or regional / local authorities can be successful instruments to foster and support SMEs and their internationalisation process. As public agents, these IP agents provide this service free of charge and can give advice on IP matters unbiasedly and independently because they do not earn money from the patent taxes etc. Moreover, they can help SMEs to get basic knowledge of IP by organising regional workshops and can match the SMEs with the appropriate IP agent fitting their particular branch when the SME decides to pursue a patent.

Follow-up questions to tackle at upcoming meetings

- How could the participation of universities within cross-border and interregional programs be utilized in the best way?
- What makes a region successful when it comes to innovations? What is a good innovation climate? What is the key? Conditions for cooperation? (business, academy, institutes and public actors) Culture? Wealth or not wealth?
- How are the KISS ME regions working on the preparation for the new program period? (Both dialogue with regional stakeholders, national authorities and the EU).
- Will the good practices collect within the project be of relevance to the Commission and other EU bodies / regional bodies involved in the shaping of the next programme period? Should we consider and discuss the idea of organising a dissemination event or a similar event in Brussels, demonstrating different models for SME involvement? Maybe our Brussels based offices representing our regions could help us. Also the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), where Hedmark, Värmland, the Euregio Rhine-Waal and the Province Gelderland are members, is also an arena for such dissemination.

Annex: Presentations

Varaždin

- B Light: Fostering value added business cooperation between SMEs operating cross-border
- Sanja Jovic, HAMAG-BICRO
- Increase the innovation capacity of the border region: successful involvement of SMEs in INTERREG projects
- Stephanie Koch, Transfer agency University of Applied Sciences Münster
- Euroregional Innovation Strategy and the new RIS3 strategy of the Balearic Islands
- Tanit Mir, EGTC Eurorégion Pyrenees-Mediterranean
- Smart Specialization Strategy of the Balearic Islands
– Pep Lluís Pons, Government of the Balearic Islands
- SME involvement in the INTERREG Sweden-Norway programme
- Annica Westerlund, INTERREG Sweden-Norway, Jämtland County Administrative Board

- The Academy for Smart Specialisation
- Erika, Akerberg, External Relations, Grants & Innovation Office, Karlstad University
- Cross-border business facilities: cases from ecoINSIDE as a cross-border Living Lab for green business development in Inner Scandinavia
- Ola Rostad, WP Sustainable building, Tretorget AS

Düsseldorf

- Development Agencies in the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme
- Maaïke Büchner, East Netherlands Development Agency Oost NL
- Development Agencies in the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme
- Angel Alava-Pons, Business Development Agency Duisburg
- Cluster policy of the Balearic Islands Government
– Pep Lluís Pons, Government of the Balearic Islands
- Cluster Policy in Catalonia
- Alba Sanchez, ACCIÓ, Government of Catalonia
- Paper Province Cluster, a forest-based Bioeconomy Cluster in Inner Scandinavia
- Paul Nemes, Paper Province Cluster
- INTERREG V-A Hungary-Croatia Cooperation Programme 2014-2010
- Andrea Kakas, Joint Secretariat INTERREG A HU-HR Programme
- Supporting SMEs on the border area of Croatia and Hungary
- Dóra Agócs Göndöcsné, BMFU Development Agency Hungary
- Development Agencies in the INTERREG A Hungary-Croatia programme
- Melita Birčić

Barcelona

- Introduction to the Workshop
- Xavier Bernard-Sans, EGTC Eurorégion Pyrénées-Méditerranée & Mireia Borrell Porta, Government of Catalonia
- European Cooperation in the Euroregion Pyrenees-Mediterranean
- Eduardo Lorda, Agency for the Management of University & Research Grants, Government

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of Catalonia

- The Intellectual Property mission at a Regional Agency for Economic Development Occitanie
- Amandine Lesage, Development Agency of the Region Occitanie (AD'OCC)
- Briskr: Health and Hightech Generator
– John Schalken, SMB Facilities & Support in Life Science
- How to encourage internationalisation of SMEs?
- Maša Tomašić, Public Institution for the Development of the Međimurje County (REDEA)
- A region open for business
- Ružica Šimon, Public Institution County Development Agency of Osijek - Baranja County
- The perspective of the SMEs
- Lisa Johansson, Entrepreneur SME Sweden