



Ex-Post Evaluation - INTERREG III 2000-2006

PROGRAMME: INTERREG III C WEST ZONE

Greening Regional Development Programmes (GRDP)

Project Good Practice Study

Project study: Greening Regional Development Programmes (GRDP)

1. General Information

GRDP (Greening Regional Development Programmes) is a "network" type of operation under INTERREG III C West Zone.

Keywords: Environment, risk prevention, energy and natural resources".

Region: Europe

Programme/strand: INTERREG III C West Zone.

Duration: The project had an initial duration of 3 years (July 2004-June 2007), extended by 4 months for project closure purposes.

Funding: The approved budget of the operation was €1,581,906, of which €973,410.12 (62%) represented ERDF funds. The project was financed under the cooperation topic: "Exchange of types of activities supported under Objective 1 and 2 of the Structural Funds", and cooperation theme: "Environment, risk prevention, energy and natural resources."

Lead Partner: The project was led by the Environment Agency for England and Wales, South West England Region (UK) and involved a Europe-wide network of 17 legal partners from 8 EU Member States (UK, Austria, Spain, Italy, Malta, Poland, Hungary and Greece), plus 17 associated partners.

2. Project Aim

The aim of GRDP was to raise awareness of integrated approaches to environmental planning in regional development policies, strategies and programming and share existing best practice. It sought to promote the networking of regional, local and national authorities, as well as environmental organisations, development agencies and research institutions, and to harness their experience of implementing Structural Funds with a view to developing a common European methodology for integrating environmental sustainability horizontally across regional development programmes.

3. Project Description

The project was planned around three core components: management and coordination; joint work on interregional topics; and the development, communication and dissemination of the project deliverables. The partners sought to demonstrate to organisations involved in regional development the clear benefits of integrating environmental considerations into their development policies, acknowledging that our natural surroundings are both an opportunity and an asset, which need careful management to secure long-term economic benefits.

The partners intended to start by taking stock of their previous experience and existing good practice of integrating environmental sustainability within their current regional development programmes. Subsequently, the baseline for developing a common project methodology for mainstreaming environmental issues would be set up and various principles defined. Work topics were to be decided upon and thematic seminars planned, in addition to other formal and informal events. The

partnership envisaged holding one seminar per topic, complemented by web-based discussions, to transfer principles and establish a common methodology.

The interregional topics to be addressed included identifying good practice in incorporating the environment in development strategies, implementing Structural Funds post-2006, identifying economic arguments for environmental mainstreaming, and then going ahead with mainstreaming in future regional development programmes. The project aimed to produce an audit of baseline information on the status and operation of environmental issues in partner regions, inter-regional seminars for knowledge transfer, joint seminar reports, a common project methodology, a best practice guide, a project web-site, communications material and a final conference, to be accompanied by a signed GRDP convention that would contain a set of principles for mainstreaming for the partners to work with in future.

4. Political and Strategic Context

In the 1990s environmental and sustainable development issues were rising up the political agenda worldwide, and taken on board by international organisations, national, regional and local governments, and the European Union (EU). One of the major priorities of the EU is to support social and economic restructuring across its member states, which it does using the Structural Funds. All EU 2000-2006 programmes benefiting from such financial support were expected to take on board the EU's environmental and sustainable development objectives.

The GRDP project idea was born in March 2003, when representatives from the Environmental Agency of England and Wales attended a Conference in Cantabria on Environment and Structural Funds. The idea of 'promoting the integration of environment in the current and future Structural Funds programmes through the exchange of good practices' was proposed by the Environmental Agency and two other conference participants, namely, the Spanish and Italian Environmental Authorities. The project network was then officially established as a result of discussions carried out by a core group of partners (Ministries of Environment of Italy, Austria and Spain, Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) and the Exeter Environment Agency), and a series of further institutions identified via the INTERREG IIIC Partner Search Forum in 2004.

5. Project Implementation

The project kicked-off in December 2004 in Bath, UK. Before that, all partners participated in four meetings organised throughout the project development phase. After the kick-off meeting, partners prepared their regional 'audit' reports, assessing their own practice regarding the greening of regional development policies, which provided input for a first report entitled, '*Green Growth*'. This publication helped refine the focus of the project and gave the partners an overview of the different experiences so far across partner regions and effectively guided all actions conducted throughout the project.

A meeting in Vienna in May 2005 provided an opportunity to present '*Green Growth*' to all partners and discuss it. This resulted in the GRDP Declaration, '*Learning from our Experience in Integrating the Environment into Regional Development Programmes and Looking Ahead*'. In first two years of the project, three other technical seminars were organised, in the UK, Hungary and Greece, and seven technical reports were produced. The last seminar, entitled '*Integrating the Environment into a Future Regional Development Programme*', in November 2006 in

Patras, Greece, laid the foundations for the toolkit and charter, which were eventually launched at the final conference in April 2007 in Logroño, Spain. The GRDP toolkit '*Beyond Compliance: How Regions can Help Build a Sustainable Europe*' was designed to help public sector bodies throughout Europe to incorporate environmental issues into their development programmes. The GRDP Charter '*Regions for Sustainable Change*' could be signed by all organisations interested in sustainability.

Dissemination activities included presentations at meetings and events, articles, the creation of local web pages and newsletters targeting key people in their region, and the organization of local seminars. Additionally, two newspaper articles in the Marche Region and two in Malta were published. GRDP related news appeared in the INTERREG IIIC newsletter (nr.4, December, 2004). After the project, smaller events were held to target the new member states in May 2007 in Budapest. Overall, the 18 partners and most of the associated partners took part in 12 events in the UK, Spain, Greece, France, Belgium, Poland and Italy to promote project results.

The project budget was fully spent on three components: 'Common Management and Coordination costs' (about 70%), 'Joint Working on Interregional Topics and Development of the Final Product' (20%) and 'Communication and Dissemination' (8 %) of the total budget. In short, managing such a large network required significant management and coordination efforts.

6. Project Results

Overall, the project contributed to the Commission's (DG Regio and DG Environment) own dialogue about how to make the use of the Structural Funds more 'sustainable'.

The project produced an audit "green growth" report, gathering good practice and tips from across the partnership, 4 seminars organised, 7 technical reports published, 1 project website (www.grdp.org), a GRDP toolkit '*Beyond Compliance: How Regions can Help Develop a Sustainable Europe, GRDP Charter: "Regions for Sustainable Change"*', 2 brochures, posters for each event and a final conference in April 2007 (Source: Project Closure Report, Environment Agency of England and Wales, 2007, p.2)

Three important reports were drafted. Firstly, the '*Handbook on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for Cohesion Policy 2007-2013*' was translated into several languages including Hungarian and Polish. It was endorsed by the Commission and promoted among Managing Authorities of the 2007-2013 Operational Programmes. It was used widely by partners, for example, as the main methodological instrument for the Strategic Environmental Assessment of four out of seven of the 2007-2013 Operational Programmes in Romania. In Austria, it influenced the exercise to establish the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) and the mainstream programmes, and was used in the planning process of the cross-border programmes. In Italy and Sicily it was used to carry out environmental impact assessments for regional programming programmes in 2007-2013, with partners even refining the methodology in consultation meetings with the relevant environmental authorities. In Greece, it was used successfully for three operational programmes (OPs) in 2007-2013: Competitiveness and Entrepreneurship, Crete and Aegean Islands, and Improvement of Accessibility.

A second report was '*Greening Projects for Growth and Jobs*' while a third included the final GRDP toolkit '*Beyond Compliance: How Regions can Help Build a Sustainable Europe*', which aimed at helping public sector bodies incorporate environmental issues into their development programmes.

In general, the project induced a reciprocal learning process for all partners, plus a significant number of other organisations, who strengthened their international project experience. The message was also spread in their regions that involvement in EC co-financed projects can be politically beneficial. Additionally, GRDP induced specific organisational learning and change in England regarding the financial management of EU co-financed projects, contributing to the establishment of a National External Funding Governance Team within the Environment Agency for England and Wales and South West England, whose expertise could be used in future to offer services to other governmental departments, in order to help them with financial bids, claims and audit preparations.

The main policy impact was a greener, integrated approach to regional development policy. There is evidence that GRDP has influenced a series of national and regional programmes (*Lessons Learnt Report*, 2007, pp.9-11): In Hungary this is clear in the development of the Hungarian Operational Programmes as well as the new Rural Development Strategy. Debrecen University (GRDP partner) was entrusted with the development of the SEA of the National Action Plans (2007-2009) and used GRDP results. In Malta the application of the SEA handbook changed the approach to the ex-ante evaluation of programmes. Partners also saw the emergence of specific horizontal environmental evaluation criteria used in project appraisal. In Wroclaw, Poland project results fed into the development of the Environment Protection Programme for the Wroclaw Administrative District and Commune for 2004-2015. The region of Dolny Slask (Lower Silesia) planned to recruit an Environmental Sustainability Theme Manager (ESTM) within the management team of their OP, imitating the good practice identified in England.

Some institutional structures changed in the partner countries though it is hard to pinpoint the precise role that GRDP played in this process: In Malta GRDP helped enhance collaboration between the Environment and Planning Authority and the Structural Funds managing authorities, effectively broadening local understanding of the integrated environmental approach. In Hungary the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development were restructured. In England a series of English Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) involved in managing and using ERDF took on board the *Strategic Environmental Assessment for Cohesion Policy 2007* (SEA) handbook's methodology. The same was true in Wales where the Assembly Government is involved in Structural Funds implementation. In Sicily there was increased awareness of the need to use sustainable integrated development approaches. Finally, in Western Greece the regional managing and environmental authorities collaborated in planning regional development programmes with a representative of the regional environmental authority participating in the committees overseen by the managing authorities.

As members of the European Network of Environmental Authorities, most partners have continued to work on integrating environmental sustainability as a horizontal theme in regional development programmes. Two new projects being developed should be mentioned: firstly, REC (Hungary) initiated a follow-up project, funded by Interreg IVC, which aims to promote an EU-wide shift to carbon neutral economies. Through the project the potential to stimulate mitigation and adaptation to climate change (while delivering sustainable socio-economic growth) is developed.

Secondly, the Austrian Ministry of Environment and its counterpart in Navarra (Spain) are cooperating further on rural development topics.

7. Key Success Factors and Lessons Learnt

The project was efficient in that, with a relatively small budget, it managed to make key tools for integrating environmental sustainability into socio-economic strategies available to all EU Member States. Success was largely due to a thorough preparatory, pre-application phase, during which fruitful discussions were held between a strong lead partner, various willing partners and the INTERREG IIIC West Zone Joint Technical Secretariat.

The diversity and experience of the partnership was also important. The project brought together local, regional and national authorities and environmental organisations, development agencies and research institutions from eight EU Member States, many of whom had previously worked on Objective 1 and Objective 2 programmes. Partners were aware of the multi-cultural aspect of their cooperation and eager to learn lessons from each other's existing best practice. The practical nature of the tools developed helped the regions spread the project's key messages at a political level. The involvement of EU representatives was also considered key, as it helped achieve wider recognition of project outcomes, greater acceptance from stakeholders, and a higher political profile for the partner regions.

Regarding project management, complying with INTERREG rules and different national legal provisions, such as auditing, was challenging and time-consuming both for the lead partner and project team. INTERREG-related reporting mechanisms were felt to be demanding and, consequently, the application process very time-consuming. The lead partner observed that cooperating as a large partnership means relatively high management and coordination costs. The project managers learnt that dissemination activities and project's closure take considerable time and that, in this respect, it was essential for the JTS to offer administrative and advisory support. They also advocated an external (impartial) evaluation of technical results.

On a more operational note, project activities were felt to be most effective when small, thematically-specific working groups of a few partners met informally to work on reports and organise technical seminars. On such occasions, communication was smoother and meetings more efficient, with partners feeling a stronger sense of ownership of the project task they led, and responsibility for its related performance.