

BUILDING AN EVIDENCE BASE FOR COHESION POLICY POST-2020

Implementation of the partnership principle and multi-level governance during the programming phase of the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds

OBJECTIVE

The overall objective of this study is to assess how the partnership principle and multi-level governance have been implemented in all 28 Member States (MSs) during the programming of the ESI Funds.

KEY MESSAGES

- * The partnership principle is implemented very differently across the EU.
- * The application of the partnership principle has improved in the 2014-2020 ESIF period as compared to previous programme periods.
- * The European Code of Conduct on Partnership contributed to this improvement.
- * Working in partnership on ESIF programmes or Partnership Agreements (PAs) is generally perceived as a benefit.
- * Almost all programmes have planned actions to involve partners during the implementation process.
- * The informal dialogue with the Commission was perceived as more useful in the context of a programme rather than a PA.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

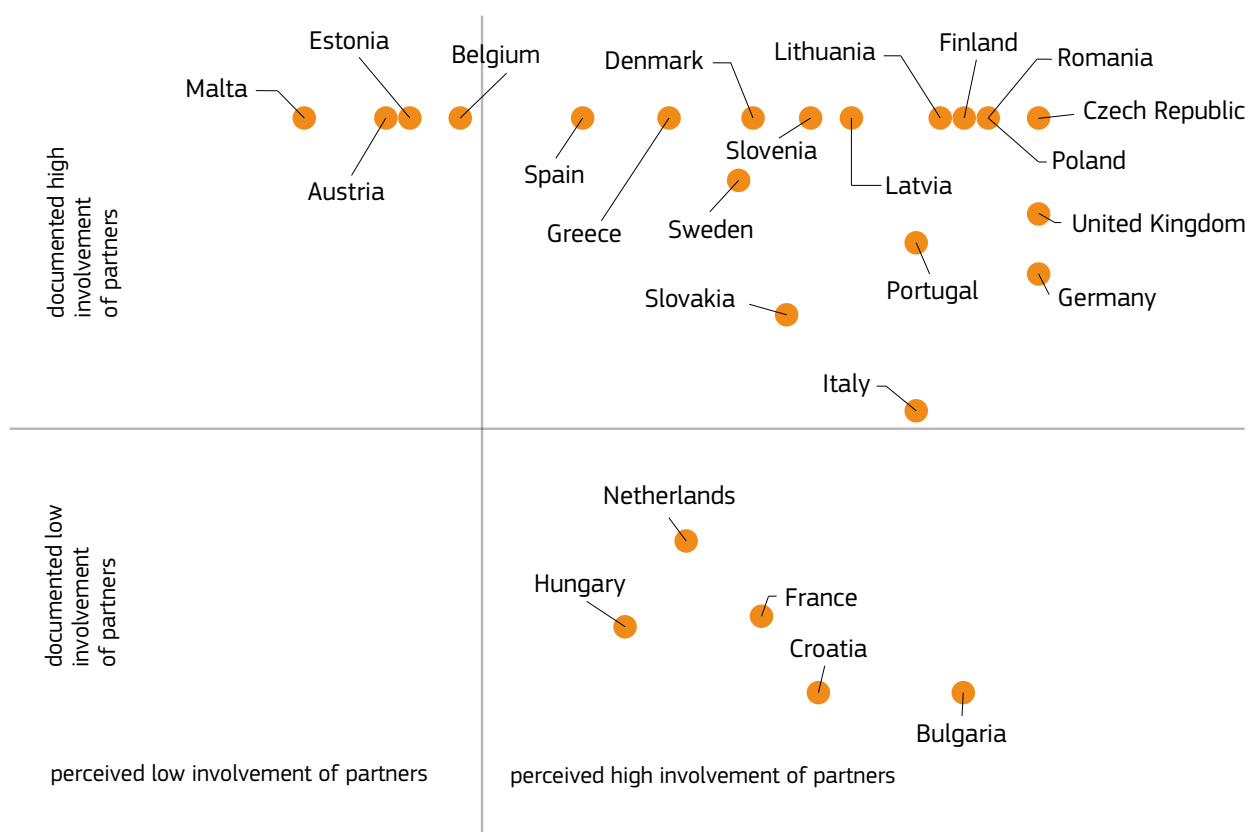
The study fulfilled the following specific objectives:

- ▶ Provide a synthesis of how the partnership principle and multi-level governance are reflected in all PAs and programmes financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (including European Territorial Co-operation - ETC programmes) and the Cohesion Fund (CF), including multi-fund programmes.
- ▶ Provide an assessment of the implementation of the partnership principle and multi-level governance during the programming phase.
- ▶ Provide conclusions on strengths and weaknesses with regard to the application of the partnership principle and multi-level governance during the programming phase and an assessment of the performance of the different MSs with regards to this new element in the regulatory framework.

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- ▶ **The partnership principle is implemented very differently across the EU.** Implementation depends on national administrative structures and cultures, the technical and financial capacity of the partners and the political circumstances in the country/region/locality.

Involvement of partners in the programme drafting process



- ▶ **Application of the partnership principle has improved in the 2014-2020 ESIF period compared to previous programme periods.** This positive trend was emphasised by both partners and MAs, specifically when it came to national programmes addressing specific policy fields and transnational cooperation/interregional programmes.

The assessment of partnership based on document analysis and the online survey shows that in decentralised and federal MSs, satisfaction with the partnership approach tends to be higher than in other MSs. At the same time, smaller centralised MSs tend to provide better accounts of their partnership work in the programme documents and PAs.

- ▶ **The European Code of Conduct on Partnership contributed to this improvement.** Although the CoC only entered into force after programming had started and is not legally binding, it is largely appreciated and served as a benchmark, contributing to clarifying the role of partnerships and application of the partnership principle. Nevertheless, some of the stakeholders, in particular MAs, perceive the administrative rules on the consultation process as cumbersome, i.e. too standardised, leaving little room for national adjustments.
- ▶ **Working in partnership on ESIF programmes or PAs is generally seen as beneficial.** The added value, as reported, lies in:
 - Ensuring that experience and technical know-how is considered during decision-making processes, enabling better thematic balance and focus;
 - Strengthening commitment and ownership and thus facilitating policy implementation;
 - Introducing complementarities with other policies, strategies and funding sources.
- ▶ **Given the complexity of the topics at stake and the diversity of partners involved, partnership is not without its challenges.** Working in partnerships is not always easy as different partners coming with different perspectives and possibly conflicting interests need to be managed. Indeed, running productive partnership approaches comes with a management cost. Overall, and irrespective of country size, duration of EU membership or the constitutional responsibilities of sub-national authorities, mobilisation of partners remains the greatest challenge across a broad range of countries.
- ▶ **Generally, partnerships appear to be balanced.** According to the documents, the absence of some types of partners is not necessarily reflected in the perceptions of stakeholders when answering the survey and interviews. There is also, in some cases, a discrepancy between the actual and the perceived representation of certain partner groups, e.g. concerning local authorities (explained in part by the fact that local authorities in many countries are represented through umbrella organisations).
- ▶ **Countries that joined in or after 2004 have established new partnerships more often,** both for programmes and PAs, compared to countries that joined before 2004. The latter group of countries have sought to build on existing partnerships. While exceptions do exist, there are also discrepancies between what the documents stated and the perceptions of the survey respondents. Moreover, it should be noted that some survey respondents might not have access to a complete overview of this matter.
- ▶ **There is a wide range** of participation processes – partly addressing different types of partners – including monitoring committees, combinations of public online consultations and targeted consultations, as well as thematic seminars and meetings.

- ▶ **Almost all programmes have planned actions to involve partners during the implementation process, mainly by involving them in committees.** Nevertheless, some over-representation of public partners is expected. As regards **capacity-building**, partners' perception is quite positive, despite a low number of planned capacity-building actions mentioned in the documents (national sector-oriented programmes seldom mention activities for institutional capacity-building, whereas in 34% of ESF-funded programmes resources will be allocated to enable social partners to participate or to build NGO capacity).
- ▶ **In some cases, the results derived from ETC programmes deviate from those deriving from Investments in Growth and Jobs (IGJ) programmes:**
 - Partnerships are mainly built on previously established structures. In several cases, a small group of public authorities strongly influences partnership composition.
 - Stakeholder identification was perceived as generally more transparent in ETC programmes.
 - Civil society and social/economic partners are involved to a lesser degree.
 - In general, partners have been directly involved in the drafting process and the uptake of comments from partners worked satisfactorily, even if some programmes mention a lack of institutional capacity and a low level of commitment among partners as limitations.
 - There are usually planned actions on how to involve partners during the implementation process, e.g. through topical or geographical expert groups.
 - Limited focus, although at the same level as IGJ programmes, on capacity-building action.
- ▶ **The informal dialogue with the Commission was perceived as more useful in the context of a programme rather than a PA.** More specifically, informal dialogue with the Commission has facilitated the understanding of new requirements (e.g. in Denmark) while also providing relevant feedback. Hence, such dialogues contributed to better adherence to best practices and to better representation of all types of partners in the processes, one such example being that of Ireland. However, in countries that did not consider the implementation of partnerships to be problematic (e.g. the Netherlands) the partnership principle was not the main subject of discussion although it was included in the dialogue.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study is based on:

- ▶ A desk review of all 28 PAs and 292 programmes financed by the ERDF and the CF, including multi-fund programmes co-financed by the ESF (all 216 IGJ and 76 ETC);
- ▶ 511 responses received through a web-survey targeted at individuals from MAs, national coordination bodies and partners involved in partnerships for developing programmes and PAs. The survey covers all 28 PAs and 222 programmes (156 IGJ and 66 ETC);
- ▶ 88 interviews with selected key players at programme level, national level and with EU-level interest organisations, as well as a focus group with Commission representatives.

More information:

Full study: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/how/studies_integration/impl_pf_esif_report_en.pdf

More info on the EU Cohesion policy: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy