

Good afternoon everyone.

First of all, I would like to thank Regione Calabria for inviting me to this meeting.

Today I will briefly illustrate the difficulties that a journalist faces when they talk or write about cohesion policy and structural funds.

Also, I will propose a couple some possible solutions on how to make communication more effective.

To start off, I'd like to point out that it's not easy for a non-expert journalist to understand policies and programmes that are difficult to measure and produce outcomes in the long term.

In addition, it takes a lot of homework. Just think that the partnership agreement 2014-2020 between Italy and the European Commission is over 350 pages long.

But these are neither excuses nor good reasons to give up. In fact, good journalists do their homework and explain difficult things in simple language. That's what we do.

But journalists are not the only problem – I believe. There are other reasons for the low visibility of cohesion policy.

When European institutions announce cohesion-policy measures and release information on them, they often fail to capture the interest of citizens.

One problem is that information is often too abstract, often doesn't spell out how the measures can make a difference in our daily lives.

European institutions often give aggregate figures; list thematic objectives; and stress investment priorities. Ordinary people cannot see the impact all this will have on their everyday lives.

Moreover, journalists who first receive the information released by DG Regio and the other Commission departments are based in Brussels and work for mainstream newspapers. In time, they too lose sight of the impact on individual regions and the men and women in the street.

Communication would be more effective if the Commission reached out to local newrooms and media outlets, which don't have the resources to send correspondents to Brussels or establish direct contacts there.

In fact, most local media receive information on the European funds from regional and local administrators. And this is another problem, because they often tend to blow their own horn.

Chances are that local-government officials will claim cohesion policy funds have reached the region thanks to them. They would downplay the role of the European Commission, or forget it altogether – especially when it's an *elected* official who does the talking.

I could give you plenty of examples of divergent – if not conflicting – interests between Brussels and the regions, but I'm sure you can recall a few yourselves.

In contrast, Europe and the EU get centre stage when the news are about fraud and corruption.

The risk here is that European funds become a synonym to fraud in the eyes of the public opinion.

This asymmetry introduces a structural bias.

The press uses absolute figures to report fraud and this creates the impression that corruption is widespread. But in reality the proportion of fraud compared to the overall amounts of cohesion funds is minimal – including in Italy.

Just to give some figure, the financial impact of irregularities detected by Member State and OLAF in the areas of Structural Funds and Agriculture for the period 2013-2016 in ITALY was 1.63% of payments

Financial recommendations as % of payments 0.25% (total EU is 0.43%)

What does this all mean?

I believe we have to rethink cohesion-policy communication, adopting a “place-based approach”. The phrase was coined by Fabrizio Barca, former Italian minister of territorial cohesion and big expert

of the matter, to describe a new approach for cohesion policy in general.

This approach means that if we really want to reach citizens, information must be produced and spread locally, close to where EU funds are invested, projects are carried out and citizens live, study and work.

So, these are the problems I can identify. Now, I would like to make two practical suggestions.

First, we should establish new channels of communication between the Commission and local media. This is already happening in part and the Open Days are a good example. But clearly this is not enough.

Second, we should hold Open Days in different regions every year, starting from the regions that receive more European resources.

Every year, the journalists that come to Brussels for the Open Days are bussed to see successful projects at the outskirts of the city.

This is fine, but there are many more successful projects in other parts of the EU. And local people there often don't know about them and don't know they are European projects.

Events such as Open Days, organised in different parts of Europe – even on a smaller scale – would give visibility to the whole of cohesion policy.

They would make a case for the impact it has in each and every region, promote transparency and create efficiency incentives for local governments.

These look like simple ideas, but I know it's not so simple to make them happen.

For one thing, **cohesion policy is a tangle** of five different, sometimes overlapping, funds. Perhaps the rules and the overall structure could be streamlined.

I realise this is a tall order. In the meantime, it would be easier for the people to make sense of cohesion policy if the Commission used clearer language in its official documentation and in the material for the press.

In sum, I am advocating a two-pronged approach.

- On the one hand, simpler instruments and clearer communication from Brussels to the local media;
- On the other, more transparency and efficiency from local governments, in the funds management but overall in communicating objectives and result.

My proposals are modest, but I hope they can help show to the people that the EU delivers when it comes to solidarity and cohesion – two of the fundamental values of our Union.

Thank you.