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Strengthening communication on structural funds in the post 2020 programming period

Calabria's contribution to the debate on the future of Cohesion Policy



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Introduction

Cohesion policy is the EU's main investment channel with a financial envelope of 351.9 billion euro for the 2014-2020 cycle. Together with national co-funding it represents – on average – 15 % of total public investment in the 28 member states. The main objective of the European and Structural funds is to reduce social, economic and territorial inequalities within the EU, but they have also contributed to stimulating growth and competitiveness, as well as helped fight against poverty and social exclusion. All these results are tangible evidence of the benefits of the European project.

However, recent opinion polls, periodically run by Eurobarometer, have shown that European public opinion does not have full knowledge of cohesion policy, even though in most Member States it generally has a good opinion of its positive impacts. Structural funds are frequently depicted negatively by the media and often, its projects and results never make the headlines or are completely ignored by the press.

In reaction to this situation, the unanimous consensus at European level – as agreed during the General Affairs Council on 25 April 2017 – is that cohesion policy needs to strengthen its visibility and improve its image vis-à-vis citizens and policy makers. This objective takes on an entirely new significance in the light of Eurosceptic and nationalistic trends that have been on the rise – to varying degrees – in all European countries. Cohesion policy has a significant potential, still not fully exploited, to positively influence the public perception of the EU by explaining its added value and the benefits of its policies.

In this context, communication on structural funds will play an ever growing role. The next programming cycle must ensure that communication is considered as a key principle of cohesion policy and a central element of its implementation. Improved communication, however, will only be entirely successful if a general reform process of cohesion policy is carried out in order to strengthen – instead of weakening – its ability to intervene at territorial level with a financial envelope at least equal to the current one, new focus on its primary goal of reducing territorial inequalities and a higher degree of involvement of decentralised levels of government. An increased use of place-based and result-oriented strategies – as was already done during the 2014-2020 cycle – must be achieved, and a higher degree of complementarity between various cohesion funds must be assured. Furthermore, wider synergies must be ensured between these funds and EU directly managed funds.

Preparation of the post 2020 rules

The 2014-2020 programming cycle has given communication a more prominent role as shown – in particular – by the inclusion of provisions on communication in the main regulation. A detailed analysis of their implementation, identifying strengths and weaknesses and listening to suggestions as to how to improve communication in the future, is indispensable with a view to establishing the post 2020 rules in terms of communication. This exercise must be based on the use of a number of tools and within the framework of a strong participatory process with the organisation of ad hoc public consultations, comparing and reflecting

initiatives within the framework of the Inio and Inform networks, conferences and public events at local and European level.

The post 2020 legal framework

A greater focus on communication in the context of post 2020 cohesion policy must be reflected in a wider and more detailed regulatory framework compared to the past, while fully respecting the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity. This objective, however, must not be pursued with an approach that is exceedingly prescriptive. To this aim, as in the case of the model adopted for the application of the partnership principle in the current programming period, the idea of a European code of conduct on communication activities should be explored. Such code would need to be approved as a delegated regulation and will set out objectives and criteria for organising and implementing communication activities. The code would be implemented on top of the minimum communication requirements incorporated in future regulations, by providing a wider set of principles and good practices, thus better defining the responsibilities of managing authorities and beneficiaries. Furthermore, a general ex ante conditionality could be established so as to guarantee that the Member States and managing authorities quickly organise adequate communication activities. The European Commission could also publish more detailed guidelines containing communication techniques and methods.



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Improving access to information

The general transparency on the funds has considerably improved thanks to the publication obligations, introduced by regulations of the 2014-2020 cycle, regarding the creation of a single national web portal providing information on, and access to, all operational programmes in that Member State, including the lists of operations supported under each operational programme, and information about the timing of implementation of programming. From this point of view, the Italian experience with the portal called “Open Coesione” can be considered as a good practice at European level. The focus on transparency must be further consolidated in the post 2020 cycle, by including more detailed obligations at the level of single operational programmes and by ensuring an adequate level of compliance no later than six months as of the beginning of the programming period. In order to enhance the impact of the funds, Member States and managing authorities must be encouraged to propose online tools that allow all users to be informed and to monitor progress made and results achieved by single programmes.

Monitoring and evaluation

In order to pursue the objective of improving the effectiveness of communication activities, more emphasis must be placed on monitoring and evaluation of the latter. In this context, current rules only provide for general obligations and, therefore, actions and efforts are implemented unevenly on the field. The post 2020 cycle should, on the contrary, provide for a more detailed and uniform implementation approach to measure progress and results of communication activities, basing it first and foremost on the



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obligation to include a certain number of common targets and indicators in the communication strategies (or programmes), and - possibly - specific indicators identified with the cooperation of the European Commission. The result-oriented approach of this programming period must be applied to communication activities. In general, concerning the evaluation, the emphasis on the progress of the implementation and macroeconomic effects of the programmes, must be complemented by appropriate indicators that would help identify improvements determined by specific interventions (for ex: activated services for citizens or enterprises) and the long term impact of actions carried out during previous programming periods.

Innovating communication

Post 2020 cohesion policy must resort to innovative and interactive communication tools by fully exploiting digital technologies and social media channels that are extremely widespread and can reach different targets way beyond the catchment area of traditional media. In this light, it would be desirable that future regulations provide, for each programme, for the drafting of a specific strategy concerning digital and social media platforms that would be implemented alongside the communication strategy. This new approach to communication should be accompanied by a partial rethinking of the way in which human resources dedicated to these activities are recruited. Indeed, managing authorities should invest more highly in “new” job profiles (ex: social media manager, digital manager, event and campaign manager, etc.). Furthermore, managing authorities should organise continuous training activities, in particular on web and social communication. The European Commission, in turn, for the next programming period, should provide a



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number of guidelines on the functioning and organisation of communication structures of managing authorities on top of the rules that already exist for the designation of information and communication officers. For example, managing authorities could be asked to recruit a digital manager and a social media manager.

A more open and participatory dimension

A more developed implementation of the partnership principle within the framework of post 2020 cohesion policy, through the consolidation of what was already done during the current programming period with the code of conduct, is an important prerequisite for improving its visibility. In this respect it is important to make sure that future communication strategies for every single programme provide a detailed description of how managing authorities intend to involve social and economic partners, as well as civil society, in communication activities. Post 2020 programming should, more in general, see the implementation of a wide range of measures whose objective would be to give cohesion policy a more open and participatory dimension. One such measure could be the obligation for managing authorities to organise a “pre-publication” phase for all the calls, allowing for a certain period of time in which inputs and remarks could be examined before actual publication of the calls themselves. It would also be a good idea to systematically involve schools and universities – the former within the framework of education and citizenship and the latter to encourage them to use the results of cohesion policy in their curricula, workshops and research activities. Other initiatives could be the setting-up of community-based monitoring activities and “bottom-up” evaluations such as what was



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organised in Italy under the name of Monithon. In order to facilitate the exchange of know-how and good practices, the Inform and Ino networks should be strengthened by creating a European platform that would allow a deeper and more regular interaction between managing authorities, Member States and European Commission.

More powers to beneficiaries

Beneficiaries are key players when it comes to communicate the funds. With managing authorities, they are the main communication interface with territories and citizens. This function must be further enhanced by strengthening their awareness through the devolution of more responsibilities and with more assistance on part of managing authorities within the framework of a general streamlining of administrative burdens. A first step could be the obligation to include a chapter on communication in the project application forms, making it a decisive factor during the evaluation phase. It would also be desirable for future regulations to update information obligations for beneficiaries, by providing for a wider and more innovative spectrum of tools to give more visibility to the EU financial support. Furthermore, managing authorities could play a more active role in the beneficiaries' communication strategy by providing them with training and evaluation activities (for ex. questionnaires), and organising initiatives to showcase the more virtuous projects.



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