

SRN WORKSHOP – THE PARTNERSHIP DIMENSION

TURKU, FINLAND 5 SEPTEMBER 2006

GOOD PRACTICE IN ‘VERTICAL PARTNERSHIP’ : REGIONS AND SUB-REGIONS WORKING TOGETHER

In this workshop SRN partners explored the complementary role of regional and sub-regional organisations in the management and delivery of Structural Funds and other regeneration programmes, identifying good practices developed by the SRN partners, any barriers to effective working, and transferable elements. The scope to apply good practice lessons in the 2007-2013 funding period was also considered.

Programme implementation in the Province of Modena

Gianluca Baldoni presented aspects of the Objective 2 model for Modena, enlarging on previous presentations at the first SRN meeting and at the seminar with the S3 project. The focus was Priority II of the Objective 2 programme, ‘Concerted action for local development’, in which much responsibility for management and delivery has been devolved from the Region to the Province, with programme definition and project development and selection taking place largely at local level. This framework has been established mainly to better address the strengths and weaknesses of the eligible local areas and to promote integration of policies at territorial level.

The province and many local partners were directly involved in programming through a Programme Conference, led by the Province, with one voting member from the region. A local development plan prepared by the province in cooperation with municipalities, business associations and other stakeholders, was incorporated into the SPD. Rather than having open calls for project selection, the province has collected project bids, mainly from municipalities, held discussions with local politicians about which to prioritise, and then submitted a list of eligible projects to the Programme Conference for final approval.

The legal instrument for this arrangement is a Convention defining the relationship between Emilia-Romagna as the Managing Authority and the province.

In this system, the province is effectively ‘a decentralised part of the regional office’, with much of the Technical Assistance budget also devolved. Beneficiary organisations deal only with the Province. Within the provincial administration, 5 or 6 people manage a 14m EURO contribution for municipalities and about 6 MEURO contribution for enterprises.

For Emilia-Romagna region, this way of working fits well with the more general devolution of governmental responsibilities occurring in Italy, discussed in detail during the workshop. Italian regions have different approaches to decentralisation, with Emilia-Romagna more prepared than Marche, for example, to work in partnership with provinces. Such differences are due not only to political control but also to differing cultural traditions.

Following some ‘teething problems’ this new way of working has proved successful. It has provided beneficiaries with a relatively stable working environment, enabling the design and delivery of high quality projects, and also improved sensitivity to local needs. It has contributed to the dissemination of good practices and increased the skills of local stakeholders in dealing with complex EU rules. Some integration of projects and investments has been achieved. Often a small contribution from Objective 2 has been part of a complex package of activities, with substantial results. The approach is now used in the management of other funds, for example in the mountain region.

Keys to success from the region's point of view include :

- treating partnership as a process rather than as a result.
- Making a clear distinction between political and technical roles, with proper decision-making processes for both political and technical levels and good working relationships between politicians and officials
- Knowing which stakeholders to involve.
- Relying on the province as the coordinating body for local actions.

And from the Province's point of view :

- The institutional role of the sub-regional body in coordinating local policies.
- The province's previous experience in managing other funding programmes.
- Established links with local actors and companies, helping local stakeholders to access funds, with informal relationships important to success.
- The involvement of provincial politicians in programming.
- The involvement of sub-regional organisations from the very beginning of programming.

Key lessons Modena considers relevant and transferable to other Member States are :

- The involvement of local actors, starting with the programming phase.
- The use of provinces (intermediate bodies) not only as supporting organisations for beneficiaries but as a 'decentralised regional office' for programme implementation.

With regard to the new Regional Competitiveness and Employment programme, however, there are delays in programming and uncertainties about the role of provinces, and about whether to opt for spatial targeting. Regional and local actors have so far been unable to inject their experience on the current Objective 2 into the programming process.

Vertical partnership in Southwest Finland

Petteri Partanen, senior planning officer in the Regional Council of Southwest Finland, outlined the functions of the Regional Council and aspects of vertical partnership in the area. The region works through 5 geographical sub-regions, each of which has a board, while the regional council is directly elected. For Structural Funds management and delivery two arrangements were described.

An EU project group, in place since 2000, brings together 6 different funding authorities. It can advise project developers, meets frequently and has an informal operating style. The group is described as non-hierarchical rather than region/sub-region. It discusses and jointly decides on which budget is most appropriate for each viable funding application. Final decisions on funding are taken by the regional council, but a statement from the sub-region about each application is crucial in decision-making.

The Project Net of Southwest Finland is a web-based, searchable data management system covering all projects submitted to the different funding programmes.

For the next funding period, South Finland's Operational Programmes for both ERDF and ESF are well advanced. Elected representatives from all localities, and social partners, are involved in programming. Consultants have not been used for drafting. Final approval will be the board of the elected Regional Council. The ERDF Operational Programme will include spatial targeting, with 65% of the funds going to fewer designated 'challenging regions' than previously. 5% will go to development of large cities, principally Helsinki and Turku. The remaining budget is thematic, based on the national 'Centres of Expertise' programme.

Shorter interventions illustrating further points

Since there is no participation by sub-regional bodies in Structural Funds programming or management processes in **Barcelona**, **Xavier Tiana Casablancas** and **Josep Rodriguez Lopez** presented an example of a project involving cooperation between the region and sub region. The Catalan Strategy for Employment (Estrategia Catalana per l'ocupació – ECO) is a new regional employment strategy based on an ESF Article 6 funded pilot project to develop a local Territorial Employment Pact. The initial idea came from the Diputació de Barcelona, but implementation involved the combined efforts of the regional and provincial authorities and a wide stakeholder partnership. The Catalan Region coordinated the project and subsequent regional employment strategy, since it has formal competence for employment matters.

Despite such practical cooperation, and generally good working relationships between regional and provincial officials, the opportunities for provincial involvement in programming for the next funding period have up to now been very limited.

Good practice exchange

SRN partners were asked to identify aspects of the presentations given in the workshop which they consider to be good practice and which might be transferred to their own situations.

The Project Net of Southwest Finland was singled out by Bristol, Cumbria and Tampere as a practical and accessible management tool relating to a range of funding programmes applying in a defined geographical area.

South West Finland's EU project group was of special interest to Cumbria and Modena for its focus on management and on communication with beneficiaries over the whole life of the funding programmes concerned.

The Programme Conference in Modena, in contrast, was a one-off, taking place near the beginning of the programme period. However, the Conference and associated Convention were attractive, for example to Barcelona, because of the involvement of a range of local stakeholders, including private sector representatives. Such a mechanism would in principle be transferable.

Both the EU project group and the Programme Conference and Convention in Modena are systems for joint working at sub-regional level that demonstrate real cooperation between the partners. Although these are relatively open structures, the arrangements are formalised so that roles and responsibilities are clear.

Further points from discussion & some conclusions

Discussion focused on the importance of good cooperation between the region as the Managing Authority and sub-regional bodies.

The idea of partnership as a process is attractive. Even if powers and responsibilities are not devolved, the right kind of partnership will enable the local level to contribute good ideas. A formal mechanism for partnership is needed, with clear distinction of roles and responsibilities.

Several partners commented that the inter-governmental coordination of several different EU funds – as illustrated by the EU project group – is easier in a medium-sized organisation or locality than in a large region. Similarly, the focus on a specific sub-regional territorial unit, such as the province, makes it easier to bring all relevant actors together and to achieve integrated implementation of plans and projects. In other words, size matters when it comes to coordinating different funds in programme delivery.

Some approaches are 'good practice' regardless of the context in which they are delivered. Examples include involving many partners in management and delivery from the start of funding programmes; avoiding the use of external consultants to draft Operational Programmes; fostering personal contacts; and ensuring transparency and democratic accountability in programming.

Looking to the future, SRN partners were disappointed that, in most countries, sub-regional organisations are not being given much opportunity to contribute to the preparation of the new Operational Programmes, despite some proven good practice in regional/sub-regional working in the current period.

The reduction of EU funds may lead regions to decide not to devolve management to sub-regions on grounds of efficiency. Devolving responsibility to sub-regions is administratively more complex and could absorb scarce resources.