

LOMBARDY

GENERAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lombardy is one of the most developed regions in Italy, producing about 21% of national GDP. Therefore, it is not among the major beneficiaries of EU regional policy support. The allocation from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF, €485 million in the programming period 2014-20) were mainly focused on strengthening technological Research&Development&Innovation projects, promoting SME competitiveness and supporting the transition to a low-carbon economy. The allocation from the European Social Fund (ESF, €485 million in the programming period 2014-20), on the other hand, concerned actions in the fields of education and training, employment and social inclusion.

From 2007 on, the allocation of funds was only partially consistent with what had been planned by regional authorities. The economic crisis, whose most intense effects in terms of job losses occurred, in Lombardy, after 2010, required a reorientation of financial resources from competitiveness issues towards the reinforcement and support of the regional system of social shock absorbers.

In general, the assessment of the actions funded by Cohesion policy is positive. For the programming period 2007-13 the outcomes were in line with the expectations, especially for the actions undertaken in the field of workforce adaptability, social inclusion, human capital and transnational and interregional cooperation. The evaluation of actions in the occupation area is, in general, less positive, since the number of individuals (and in particular women) reintegrated in the job market was lower than the target.

Regional officers and stakeholders recognise the positive effect of EU regional policy on regional development. Nevertheless, they identify as a relevant issue the administrative complexity and length of the whole procedure. On the one hand, regional officers pointed out that the overlapping of EU and national rules generate confusion and a heavy work load for the local administrations. On the other hand, this is mirrored in the opinion of the stakeholder representatives, who complained about the delay of the calls for funding, the poor clarity of the



rules for the submissions of proposals, the over-regulated nature of these rules. An issue pointed out by both groups concerns the attitude of EU officers, particularly careful for the respect of the administrative requirements, and much less interested to the outcome of policy actions.

The communication of the actions undertaken by the regional authorities significantly changed in the last years. While in the programming period 2007-13 every directorate within the region had its own model of communication with stakeholders. Since 2016, these relationships are instead regulated by a regional law. Moreover, from the programming period 2014-20 onwards the communication plans of the ERDF and ESF became strongly integrated, focused on the same objectives, based on the same strategies and implemented with the same procedures. Also the budget devoted to communication almost doubled in the current programming period.

The evaluation of the regional communication strategy by the regional administration officers is quite differentiated. Those directly involved in communication actions have a positive perception, while the opposite holds for the others. Among the stakeholders' representatives the assessment of the communication strategy tends to be neutral or positive. Nevertheless, they point out, as a point of weakness, the lack of targeting different groups with different communication tools.

Another weak point, despite the effort made by the public administrations in increasing the use of internet and the social media, is the limited effectiveness of these tools. The examples of good practices in communication provided by the regional officers are all about physical communication events. This issue is quite evident from the results of the citizens' survey. Only 18.1% of the respondents received information on Cohesion policy through the social media. Even if in Italy the use of social media is lower than the EU average this result is quite surprising, given that only other two regions included among the COHESIFY case studies performed worse.

The main source of information on Cohesion policy is still, in the case of Lombardy citizens, the national press and TV. This may convey some issues since, according to the perception of regional officers and stakeholders, Italian mass media tend to report mostly the unsuccessful stories of Cohesion policy. This is due, according to their opinion, to the fact that scandals and episodes of corruption or wasting of public money attract the attention of the audience much more than the best practices. The negative tone generally used by the media is confirmed by the framing analysis of the Italian media provided by CUT, showing that more than 20% of the analysed news items has a negative valence.

This evidence could help explaining the relatively low level of satisfaction of Lombardy citizens with respect to the impact of Cohesion policy on their region. It is worth noting that this dissatisfaction is apparently not due to an intolerance towards EU institutions and integration. In fact, the number of citizens in favour of EU integration is higher than the average level of the case studies analysed. This result is consistent with the evidence collected from the focus groups, where most of the respondents claimed to be in favour of strengthening EU integration in fields not covered by the current agreements, such as the fiscal norms and the military forces.



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Summing up, the case study analysis suggested that the following policy actions are crucial in order to improve citizens' perceptions of Cohesion policy:

- Despite its simplification in the last programming period, the bureaucracy related to the different phases of EU projects is still too complex, representing an obstacle for an efficient implementation of Cohesion policy. A revision of the administrative requirements, at both EU and national level, should be undertaken;
- At the same time, the attention of EU institutions for the fulfilment of the administrative requirements has to be accompanied by a more careful evaluation of the outcomes of policy actions. Even if in the last years this issue gained importance in the discussion of the future of Cohesion policy, the perception of local policy-makers is still that the first task to be accomplished concerns the respect of bureaucratic procedures, rather than the supply of effective projects.
- The communication strategy adopted until now seems to be characterised by some weaknesses. In particular, as emerged from the interviews among stakeholders, it should be more differentiated in order to reach the different types of citizens and potential beneficiaries.
- The communication on the social media must be strengthened and improved, given the low visibility reached until now. It is worth mentioning that such a redefinition of the communication strategy does not necessarily involve an increase in the budget devoted to this field, since the social media are substantially cheaper than other more traditional, forms of advertisement. Rather, what is necessary is a strategic and qualitative change in the communication actions.

