

SOUTHERN AND EASTERN REGION (IRELAND)

GENERAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Southern and Eastern region is the most populated and developed region of Ireland. It has benefitted from lower levels of EU regional funding since 2000. In the 2007-13 period, the Southern and Eastern (S&E) region was designated as a regional competitiveness and employment objective region (formerly Objective 2), and in 2014-20 it qualifies as a more developed region with a GDP per capita above 90% of the EU average. While the funding intensity between 2007-13 and 2014-20 has not changed, the funding allocation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 2014-20 (498 million EUR) is higher than in 2007-13 (367 million EUR). Due to its status as a more developed region in the EU, the priorities set in the Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs) 2007-13 and 2014-20 have been directed towards development goals set at the EU level. In both programming periods, emphasis has been given to the development of the Southern and Eastern region into a knowledge economy and society. Since 2007, the S&E ROPs supports developing information and communications technology, research, technological development and innovation, and entrepreneurship in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

OBJECTIVE

This report is an analysis of the implementation and communication of the Regional Operational Programmes 2007-13 and 2014-20 in the Southern and Eastern Region of Ireland. It reports on the views of stakeholders and citizens based on data collected during in-depth interviews with policy stakeholders, surveys among stakeholders and citizens, focus groups with citizens as well as secondary sources. It includes an analysis of the implications of Cohesion policy on European identity in the region.



MAIN FINDINGS

- Overall, policy stakeholders are satisfied with the implementation systems of the programme and its performance.
- There is less agreement among stakeholders how effective and important the communication activities of the programme are. Communication is among the weaker points of the programme.
- Citizens' views and a media framing analysis, suggest that, so far, Cohesion policy has not fostered European identity.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME

- In the view of stakeholders, the implementation system of the programme is effective.
- Stakeholders agree that the priorities addressed in the programme are aligned with the socio-economic needs of the region and that the programme serves the region well.
- The needs of the region exceed the value of the programme. Two fifth of the surveyed stakeholders would like to see more Cohesion policy resources for the programme.
- Stakeholders think that the implementation of the programme involves disproportional reporting, audit and control requirements given the financial allocation for the programme. According to stakeholders, **rules guiding the implementation of programmes should be differentiated based on programme's financial allocations.**
- According to stakeholders, the Monitoring Committee overseeing the programme is open. Any issue can be addressed and there is a sense of freedom to speak up. Social partners and representatives of horizontal pillars are critical participants in the Monitoring Committee meetings, since they are not involved in the implementation of any programme scheme. Yet, their active participation is constrained by time and the amount of material they need to read to be informed before the committee meetings take place.

COMMUNICATION OF THE PROGRAMME

- Between 2007-13 and 2014-20, the communication of the programme has improved. A network of national communication officers was created in 2016. Brexit has increased awareness on the importance of communication.
- The main communication tools used to promote the Regional Operational Programme by the Managing Authority are the programme website and social media, press releases, regional and local newspapers, local radio stations, as well as plaques and billboards.
- There is no congruence between the most frequently used tools of communication to promote the programme and those that citizens mentioned to be the most frequent source of information in the citizens' survey.



- Social media are being increasingly used for the promotion of the programme. However, less than a third of the surveyed citizens report to have heard of EU-funded projects through the social media.
- According to stakeholders, local and regional newspapers are the most effective tools in increasing citizens' awareness of EU Cohesion policy. This is supported by the media framing analysis, which found out that regional and local newspapers report on Cohesion policy more positively and emphasise more frequently the European dimension of Cohesion policy compared to the national media. However, less than a third of citizens have become aware of EU-funded projects through local and regional newspaper. This shows the need for the Managing Authority to actively engage with the media.
- Under the 2007-13 and 2014-20 programme, the funding is concentrated on a few investing priorities, where investments are not physically tangible. According to the managing authority, this makes communication of the programme difficult.
- According to stakeholders, communication activities should be proportional to the funding intensity of the programme. Stakeholders believe that a centrally EU-regulated communication approach does not fit regional contexts and advise against increased communication regulations at the EU-level.
- Human resources and budget allocations suffice for the realisation of activities mandated by the EU regulation, but are insufficient for further activities or for the tailoring of the programme to the national and regional context. **Only one fourth of stakeholder survey respondents are satisfied with the resources committed to communication.**
- While Managing Authorities are required to draw up communication strategies per programme, most the schemes in Ireland are delivered nationally. **There is an argument for the Managing Authorities of ERDF Programmes in Ireland to develop a common communication strategy and share the cost of external evaluation, which has not been undertaken for the last two programming periods.**
- Intermediary bodies implement the programme schemes and are responsible for the promotion of funding opportunities. The relatively small EU financial contribution to the schemes does not create an urgency among intermediary bodies to promote the European Union.
- There is overreliance on awareness from the period when Ireland was a Cohesion fund beneficiary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate communication into the early stage of the programming period and exercise communication throughout the programming period.
- Improve the communication strategy by differentiating audiences and adapting communication activities to them. Carry out an external evaluation of the Communication strategy.



- Professionalise and prioritise communication by dedicating adequate staff and budgetary resources for communication.
- Educate stakeholders on the importance of communication for multiplying the effect of communication.

