

- BRIEF ANALYSIS -
Of selected 'burning issues'
by partnership implementation
(ZSI, September 2010)

In summer 2010, COP members shared know-how on partnerships via a brief online-questionnaire in order to gather expertise on selected 'burning issues' by partnership implementation such as formal or informal partnerships approaches and bottom-up versus top-down approaches; some of which emerged during discussions at earlier 'COP meetings and PEO explorations' (see <http://partnership.esflive.eu/>).

The questionnaire was completed by eight COP key stakeholders who either are responsible for the implementation of partnerships within ESF-Operational Programmes, policies and actions or involved in the COP with an expert status. The analysis in hand summarises the experts' views aiming at getting a better insight into COPs' partnership models in order to build a basis for further investigations.¹

Five COP key stakeholders referred to specific partnership models which are implemented in the following EU-countries: AT, DE, IE, PT and SE. The partnership models are the Austrian TEPs-Territorial Employment Pacts, the Local Social Capital and Local Empowerment Programme ("Stärken vor Ort") in Germany, the Irish Local and Community Development Programme, the Portuguese New Opportunities Programme as well as the Structural Fund Partnerships in Sweden.

The surveyed partnership models concern partnership as a governance mechanism (ESF Reg., Art. 5; 2 models) as well as partnership in the form of territorial alliances / projects (ESF Reg., Art. 3; 3 models).

1. Formal or informal partnerships?

Partnership models are implemented by following formal (defined as binding agreements between partners) and informal approaches (flexible arrangements between partners). All partnership models surveyed follow a highly formal approach, i.e. all respondents appraise the use of 80% and even higher formal approach with binding arrangements.

COP key stakeholders were asked to share expertise on advantages and disadvantages when implementing formal and informal approaches (n=8). Advantages of the **formal approach** are observed in the 'clear' framework and rules (stated by 75% of respondents) and the stronger responsibility of partners (37.5%). Other advantages encompass result orientation, financial commitment, linkages to regional strategies, strong legal power and power to influence at the policy level, visibility of the partnerships as well as improved

¹ Results of the survey will also feed into the Partnership Learning Manual which will be published in 2011.

monitoring. Disadvantages of formal partnership approaches comprise enhanced resources and administration efforts (25%) and inflexibility (37.5%).

In contrary, 62.5% of respondents encounter flexibility and 50% participation as advantages of **informal partnership approaches**. Informal partnership approaches may also strengthen creativity and innovation (25%). One respondent informs that *“partnerships are 'nearer' to citizens and local problems”* when implemented informally. However, 50% recognize an unclear focus, vague roles and undefined/less defined responsibilities by informal partnership models.

Even though a highly formal approach is followed by majority of respondents, a combination of formal and informal ways are applied as demonstrated by one respondent:

“The rules of eligibility of projects financed by the partnerships are fixed by law and central guidelines. But the local partnerships are free to decide which project will be approved and carried out.”

2. Single source or combined source funding?

Single source funding (referring to one funding source such as the Operational Programme including the co-funding by structural funds) dominates within the five models in respect to providing financial support for partnership structures. Nevertheless, an equal share between combined and single source funding is observed for funding partnerships' projects.

Half of the respondents (n=8) regard the **single source funding** model as requiring less reporting and administration than by implementing combined source funding. Other advantages attributed to single source funding models comprise enhanced efficiency and effectivity (25%), clear funding knowledge as well as the possibility of participation from poor communities. In contrary, dependency of the 'one' financiers, missing own incentives and scope limitation are recognised as disadvantages.

Twenty-five percent of respondents state that **combined source funding models** are subject to greater sustainability, enhanced funding resources and improved cooperation with stakeholders. Other advantages include innovation, diversity of learning sources as well as wider ownership and shared responsibility. Respondents mainly refer to administrative burdens such as different timetables and conditions, higher administration and facilitation costs as well as obstacles in handling different reporting requirements and timeframes when asked about disadvantages of the combined source funding model.

3. Small-scale or large-scale projects?

Two surveyed partnership models implement large-scale projects (> 50.000 €), one small-scale projects (< 50.000 €) and one follows a balanced approach with mixed project sizes (no domination of either small- or large-scale projects). Projects are not at all implemented within the fifth partnership model.

57.1% of respondents stating on advantages and disadvantages of small- and large-scale projects (n=7) acknowledge receiving higher impact when partnerships implement **large-scale projects**. Enhanced visibility of partnerships (28.6%) and a *“more global political approach”* are recognized as additional advantages. However, large-scale projects *“can be detached and lack grassroots links”*. 28.6% observed the loss of innovation capacity, high risks if big projects fail and less 'real' engagement when partnerships implement large-scale projects.



Interestingly, enhanced innovation and experimentation is also credit to partnerships implementing **small-scale projects** (28.6%). Respondents, furthermore, state that with this format end-users needs are met (28.6%), the approach is inclusive for a wide range of partners (28.6%) and has greater effects in the local area (42.6%). In contrast, limited effects of projects on policy, lower capacity of the partnership as well as higher administration costs in relation to the output are stated as disadvantages. Notable, small-scale projects are only implemented within one of the surveyed models.

4. Bottom-up or top-down?

COP key stakeholders estimated to which extent a bottom-up or a top-down approach is practiced in their country (n=5) with the result that overall top-down approaches dominate: Two respondents scored for either 70% or 90% top-down approach and one respondent stated that within the partnership model she/he refers to a 100% bottom-up approach is being followed. In two of the surveyed countries a 50% balance between bottom-up and top-down approach is applied as stated by one respondent:

“The partnerships follow centrally planned approaches; coming from the top to the small organizations in the territories with close links to the national network of education and employment.”

Respondents (n=7) observe an ensured coherence with real needs (85.7%) by following the **bottom-up approach**. Other positive characteristics comprise wider promotion and deeper stakeholder engagement, higher chances for long-lasting change and sustainability as well as clearer roles, tasks and functions since they are defined by all partners from the start. There are “*no doubts on the purpose of the partnerships*” observed if a bottom up approach is applied. COP key stakeholders assume that more time is needed to build and develop partnerships (28.6%) and that projects may not be in line with the national framework. One respondent also informed that bottom-up build partnerships may loose momentum and focus.

Advantages of the **top-down approach**, in contrary, relate to less time required, common rules and clear frame (28.6%) as well as better linking to national planned resources. The provision of a strong framework for action and the assumption that “*top-down approaches go further in setting cooperation conditions than partners would voluntary do*” are additional advantages. A risk is seen that top-down approaches are “*detached from realities of target groups*” since it is more difficult to fit end-users' needs (85.7%). It is assumed that they “*may become bureaucratic*”, top-down approaches are confronted with minimised commitment of partners and offer “*less freedom and space in actions*”.

5. 'Horizontal' and/or 'vertical' partnerships

Three partnership models are implemented horizontally at either the local or regional level with formal agreements to partners at the national level. The two other models are characterised by a 'full-matrix' approach with either formal agreements between partners on all levels and across levels or with formal and informal agreements. The cooperation across multiple levels within the partnership models is managed in two cases by an intermediate body. One respondent declared:

“The rules of eligibility, monitoring and evaluation are organised on the national level, but the local level has high degrees of freedom in project selection and implementation and is responsible for setting up and carrying out the local action plan.”



Conclusion

The brief analysis demonstrates that the ‘burning issues’ surveyed are of interest to both groups, the ones referring to partnership models as a governance mechanism as well as those who practice partnerships in the form of territorial alliances/projects. Interestingly, the observations provided by the respondents on the ‘burning issues’ do not vary significantly between the two groups.

Since respondents comprise (national) COP key stakeholders which are responsible for the implementation of partnerships within ESF-Operational Programmes, policies and actions all partnership models surveyed, unsurprisingly, follow a **highly formal top-down approach with cooperation across multiple levels** practiced within all five models. Single source funding models are predominantly used for providing financial support to partnership structures.

Top ranked cross-cutting issues concern the following:

- **coherence with local and target groups’ needs;**
- **‘clear’ framework and rules for partnerships;** as well as
- **flexibility in partnership implementation.**

The need for a clear framework and rules for partnerships - credit to formal approaches – is, however, accompanied by enhanced flexibility and participation which refers to informal approaches. Ensured coherence with real needs is also recognized as major advantage of the bottom-up approach and mirrors the risk seen within the top-down approach to be “*detached from realities of target groups*”. Thus, the **need for stronger linkages to the ‘ground’** is acknowledged by the majority of COP key stakeholders for more than one ‘burning issue’.

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