

Summary

15 YEARS INTERREG/ETC IN AUSTRIA: RETROSPECT AND OUTLOOK

For more than 15 years Austria has now participated in INTERREG/ETC programmes and deliberations concerning the new programming period have already been initiated. Therefore a decision was taken within ÖROK to reflect on this participation, draw a quantitative and qualitative balance and based on this experience draw conclusions for the ETC objective 2014+ from an Austrian perspective.

This was the task of the project „15 years INTERREG/ETC in Austria“ and four guiding questions were formulated in this respect:

- (a) What were the results and impacts of INTERREG/ETC programmes and what constituted their value-added (in institutional or professional terms)? How sustainable are the projects and (organisational) structures that have been supported?
- (b) How relevant are these achievements in the context of the developments that have taken place in the period 1995–2009 (e. g. contributions in selected thematic areas)?
- (c) Which contributions can likely be expected from on-going ETC programmes for achieving the objectives of the Austrian NSRF (STRAT.AT) – not only for Priority 4 (territorial cooperation)?
- (d) Which lessons can be drawn for the future, notably concerning improved co-operation across the EU and within Austria?

In order to be able to respond adequately to these questions, first of all an impact model was drawn up in collaboration with the project steering group and subsequently a series of impact assumptions were formulated. These served to prepare the question grids for interviewing key actors and projects. In addition, data from all projects that were funded by INTERREG/ETC programmes since 1995 has been processed and analysed. Moreover, a thematic analysis was conducted in four key areas and impulse papers were elaborated on two "horizontal" aspects of importance for the future of ETC ('European Level' and 'Institutional Framework'). All these assessments and contributions were reflected in three synthesis workshops with selected INTERREG/ETC actors. Finally, the project's preliminary findings and recommendations were presented at a STRAT.AT *plus*-Forum and discussed with a broad range of actors.

With respect to **results and impacts**, the quantitative balance of this policy area was impressive: Since 1995 a total of 2.813 projects with Austrian participation have been funded, most of them in cross-border programmes and in particular in programmes with the 'New Member States (EU 12)'. As a consequence, EU funds (predominantly ERDF) totalling 392,82 Mio. Euros were directly dispersed in Austria via INTERREG/ETC programmes. Economic development (especially tourism) has been the dominant thematic funding area from the very beginning, but its relative importance is declining and meanwhile environmental topics are funded almost equally.

In qualitative terms the survey of key projects revealed that – to a large extent – they have reached their objectives and could also improve the quality of their co-operation. The expected effects were mostly achieved, notably cross-border respectively transnational effects and sustainable results. However, since the selected sample predominantly consisted of "good practice" projects, these findings should not be interpreted as being representative for the achievements of all supported INTERREG (III) projects.

Achieving continuity revealed to be the core factors with respect to the **sustainability** of supported projects – depending on the situation either the support of follow-up projects or continuing funding (of organisations/entities) can be an adequate approach. Important factors for achieving sustainable impacts are: reaching the expected target groups, involving relevant multipliers, obtaining visibility of projects respectively their results and embedding the co-operation with partners in institutional terms. The structures that have been supported through INTERREG/ETC so far (EUREGIOs) depend to a large extent on these financial means with respect to their current core tasks. However, the most important factor for sustainable co-operation structures is not continuous funding, but the political willingness of co-operation partners.

With respect to the likely **contributions to the objectives and strategy areas of the Austrian NSRF (STRAT.AT)**, the financial means of ETC projects predominantly concern STRAT.AT Priority 2

”Attractive Regions, Location Quality“, followed by Priority 1 ”Regional Knowledge Base and Innovation“. But this quantitative analysis has also revealed that two thirds of the ERDF resources available for Austrian partners through these programmes cannot be attributed to any of the STRAT.AT priorities 1–3. One of the reasons for this cleavage is the difficulty in adequately integrating cooperation programmes in national strategic planning.

Concerning their **value-added**, the immaterial effects can be considered the essence of INTERREG/ETC. In professional terms this value-added predominantly consists of the implemented projects as well as the exchange of knowledge and experience. Important value-added in institutional terms were co-operations and networks, the establishment of (programme) structures and stabilizing the collaboration of institutions. The profile and the unique features of this funding scheme have become clearer, which also made demarcation to other EU programmes easier. The EU Commission and the partners appreciate the important and competent contributions by Austria in this policy area. Specific strengths of Austrian actors that were mentioned in the survey are pragmatism coupled with responsibility, the courage to undertake risks and the capacity to engage in finding compromise solutions.

However, this value-added is severely dampened by the increase of (formal) requirements, which has also negative effects on the attractiveness and outreach of ETC programmes. These risk becoming ’minority programmes’, whose benefits are limited to a (too) small circle, with a tendency towards repeated support of the same actors and similar projects. Moreover, at some deficits were noted at project level, notably with respect to the quality of co-operation (even ’alibi partnerships’) and their strategic orientation.

INTERREG/ETC programmes have been of high **relevance**. They have not only taken the respective contextual developments in the supported thematic areas properly into account, but have also succeeded in developing adequate approaches. Therefore many important contributions were funded through this policy area (this holds at least true for the thematic areas that were analysed within this project). The relevance of ETC projects also depends whether they are adequately embedded in their respective territorial context, the available financial resources (but also local or small projects can be important and obtain high visibility) and the regulatory framework (e. g. eligibility rules, control requirements).

But here as well one should not lose sight of some major problems and deficits: This notably concerns the regulatory framework, where it is important to

pay attention that the formal requirements will enable the participation of essential partners in the future (e. g. enterprises, small private actors). Concerning resources the financial means required for co-financing projects considered to be of relevance should be assured, also at federal level. Last, but not least, it is crucial to achieve a joint understanding with the programme partners of what is regarded relevant. In the light of experience this will likely be a continuous task and challenge.

In the framework of this project some **recommendations for action** were developed in collaboration with the Steering Group. These were discussed both with INTERREG/ETC actors and more broadly at the final STRAT.AT *plus*-Forum. They were grouped under three main headings:

→ *Strengthen the strategic focus and profile of ETC programmes*

Programme implementation should be guided more thoroughly by strategic considerations, whereby a balance must be struck between thematic concentration (in the respective regional context) and considering EU-priorities or higher-level strategies. This will also require ’top down’ decisions on strategic projects or joint criteria, pro-active project development and new approaches for identifying suitable projects (e. g. targeted calls on strategic topics). In addition a more deliberate demarcation, but also connection and linkage of ETC programmes will be needed: On one hand this concerns the articulation between the various ETC strands (notably cross-border and transnational), on the other hand the connectivity with other EU programmes or funds (e. g. Regional Competitiveness and Employment, Rural Development, ESE, FP7) and national programmes. The territorial demarcation of funding areas should largely be maintained continued, but functional collaboration across programme areas should be made possible.

→ *Simplify (the) regulatory framework and programme administration*

In the future as much as possible should be regulated at European level, which will require that the EU Commission draws up standard requirements and instruments for all ETC programmes (per strand), e. g. eligibility rules, templates for applications and contracts. What cannot be regulated at EU level should be done at programme level – together with the partners. Here the programmes and Member States should make better use of their room for manoeuvre (e. g. applying simplified procedures, introducing simplifications for small projects, speeding up the decision-making process). Finally, ETC

programmes should gain more recognition and their formal co-ordination needs to be improved. This not only holds true for the EU, but also for the national level (e. g. by establishing an ETC Working Group within ÖROK).

→ *Communicate and inform in a more targeted and broader manner (Visibility and 'Capitalisation')*

Basically, ETC programmes should be used for establishing and strengthening institutionalized platforms (for co-operation or articulation of different actors). Information and publicity activities of ETC programmes should be more focused and differentiated (with respect to topics, target groups, territories). The results of ETC projects should be disseminated more systematically, notably addressing those actors who are not directly involved but of relevance. In addition, specific actors have to be approached and animated to participate in ETC projects. Finally politicians and the broader public should be informed more thoroughly about ETC.

On all these items possible actions and activity areas have been compiled, structured according to their addressees. In addition the report contains the main recommendations of external experts on thematic and horizontal areas.

The Austrian experience has also been placed in a wider European context, drawing upon the findings of two recent analytical works (ex-post evaluation of INTERREG 2000–2006, INTERACT *Study towards cross-programme evaluation of cross-border cooperation in Central and South-Eastern Europe*).

This comparison has revealed that many of the problem areas and challenges are not specific for Austria, notably with respect to the co-operation with the EU 12 (formerly called 'New Member States'). The recommendations of this project largely coincide with those of the INTERREG ex-post evaluation and the tendencies that have emerged from the cross-programme analysis of the INTERACT study.

Note: An English translation of Chapter III is provided in the annex (page 80)