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INTERREG Partner Search Forum

A Europe-wide INTERREG IIIC Partner Search Forum will take place on the 12th and 13th of May. Hosted by the City of Vienna, and organised by the four INTERREG IIIC secretariats, the event aims to bring together local and regional representatives from across the EU and accession countries to meet potential partners, share ideas, and find out more about the programme and its funding opportunities. Particular emphasis will be given to the challenges and opportunities of interregional cooperation in an enlarged Europe and across its new borders. Further information is available at:

http://www.interreg3c.net/sixcms/list.php?page=general_en#events
or from any of the Joint Technical Secretariats.

Future management of the Structural Funds: how to divide responsibilities?

How, from 2007, can the methods for managing the Structural Funds be modified without impacting on the Community added value of structural policy, or the responsibilities of the Commission with regard to control? On the 3 and 4 of March last, more than 500 representatives of national administrations, management authorities, and local authorities discussed this complex question with the European Commission.

In 1999, policy reform clearly emphasised decentralisation with regard to management, while also reinforcing the control exerted by the Commission. But, in reality this system lends itself to criticism. Some denounce the superposition of control procedures. Some reproach the Commission for too much regulation, while others are concerned about the consequences of a single system of management, taking into account the forthcoming enlargement with ten new States with very different administrative contexts.

Introducing the seminar, Michel Barnier, Commissioner for Regional Policy, said that halfway through the 2000-2006 programme period, it was now time to consider the future rules of management. According to Mr Barnier, it is important to draw up a moderated assessment of this issue based on the first three years of the current period. Some positive points are evident, such as the benefits of multi-annual programming, the setting up of partnerships, and the progressive integration of a culture of evaluation. But, he added, a major weakness remains: the absence of real decentralisation. Consequently, according to Anna Diamantopoulou, Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, the situation is clear: "the current system is too complex", "reform is unavoidable".

On the basis of this contrasting analysis, Michel Barnier identified three great challenges to be confronted to progress this reform. How to better clarify the respective responsibilities of the Commission, the Member States and the Regions? On the one hand, greater decentralisation must be given to the Member States and to the Regions, but this transfer of power should not undermine article 274 of the Treaty, which gives the Commission ultimate responsibility for the execution and the good management of the budget.

The second great challenge: is it necessary to maintain a uniform system of management or is it possible to have more differentiation, according to the allocated amounts and respective capacities of the different Member States? And the third question: currently, the Commission concentrates its action on the control of expenditure; in the future shouldn't it be more concerned with the evaluation of results, and policy and strategic objectives?

The participants in the seminar then divided into three workshops which approached three different themes: How should responsibilities be divided between the Commission, the Member States and the Regions? Is a uniform or differentiated system needed? What is the best method of implementation? On the whole, nearly 250 delegates (i.e. one in two participant) contributed to these very informative debates. While the points of view expressed were very diverse, four key ideas emerged. The importance of flexibility, in adapting to diversified needs, but the necessity to preserve common rules of management for the essential principles.

Admittedly, the need for changes was strongly emphasised. Nevertheless, the majority of the speakers would prefer an evolution to a revolution. Subsidiarity is desirable, but it should not lead to renationalisation or to the absence of rules for the utilisation of Community funds. Nobody questioned the need for controls. It is however advisable to avoid in future the multiplicity and the sluggishness of the procedures.

More detailed information is available at the following address:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/sources/docconf/responsibilities/index_en.htm

Action needed on gender mainstreaming

A recent Commission Communication on gender mainstreaming in the programmes financed by the Structural Funds between 2000 and 2006 highlights the need for greater support for and monitoring of gender mainstreaming activities.

Published on the 6th of February 2003, the Communication provides an overview of the extent to which gender mainstreaming has been taken into account in the Structural Funds programming for 2000-2006. It gives an inventory of progress, including examples of good practice, and also identifies areas where progress is slow. The Communication covers all four Funds (ERDF, ESF, FIFG, and EAGGF) and the programmes of Objectives 1, 2 and 3.

In terms of supporting further action in this area, some of the key recommendations put forward include that:

- Member States are requested to clearly identify the funding allocated to specific gender mainstreaming activities, and the projects and programmes contributing to gender mainstreaming.
- Additional points will be allocated in the selection criteria to those projects which contribute to gender equality, e.g. with gender balanced participation.
- Member States are requested to establish awareness-raising measures, encourage the use of gender equality

expertise, and provide training in gender mainstreaming for Managing Authorities, members of Monitoring Committees, programme and project managers and partners.

- Member States are urged to ensure, notably through their Managing Authorities, that sex-disaggregated statistics and gender impact assessment become an inherent component of Structural Funds interventions.

The Communication also recommends that the Commission and national authorities should co-operate to develop mechanisms for systematic collection and dissemination of information and best practices, for instance through good practice guides or manuals. The recommendations will now feed into the mid-term review of the Structural Funds. The Communication is available in PDF format on the Eur-Lex site: http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/search/search_dpi.html

Please use the following search criteria: "Year: 2002", and the referring number: 748.

Structural Funds play key role in developing the Information Society

The results of a recent evaluation carried out on behalf of the European Commission show that the Structural Funds make a significant contribution to the development of the Information Society in less favoured regions.

About 7.3% of the Structural Funds is allocated to investments in support of this priority, and the evaluation concludes that these investments are making an important contribution to the overall objectives for the development of the information society, as defined by the European Council of Lisbon in 2001.

The evaluation was based on information from 150 regional programmes and three national operational programmes on the Information Society. The results show that significant variations exist between the regions concerned in terms of per capita expenditure on information and communication technologies (ICT) support, ranging from

EUR 0.6 (Lower Saxony-Germany) to EUR 358 (Border, Midlands and West region-Ireland).

The evaluation also highlights examples of good practice, but draws attention to the fact that in general, success has been limited by weaknesses in planning and delivery. In the context of the mid term review for the Structural Funds' programmes, the Commission and the Member States will assess current programmes in order to improve their relevance and effectiveness.

The full text of the study can be found at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/doc/information_society.pdf



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