

Commission Guidance Note on the 4th objective of the EUSALP Action Plan

Contribution of the European Commission for the 2nd Executive Board meeting
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1. The EUSALP governance according to the Action Plan

The EUSALP governance has two dimensions. The *first dimension* is the governance for the strategy itself. This is the dimension that all four macro-regional strategies have in common. In addition, there is a *second EUSALP governance dimension* which is accommodated in the cross-cutting policy area "governance, including institutional capacity" and that is part of the fourth objective. This dimension, which belongs to the peculiarities of the EUSALP, is a unique feature that the other three macro-regional strategies do not have. The Action Plan makes already a general description of this objective and calls for its further development: "The Executive Board should decide how to build this new model step by step and who should be responsible for it. This or these person(s) should also ensure coordination with existing regional cooperation organisations, as appropriate, and develop a monitoring and evaluation framework"¹. Especially against this background, the Commission stressed in the first meeting of the Executive Board that a *work programme* for the fourth objective needs to be elaborated.²

a. The first dimension

Like the other strategies the EUSALP has three inter-related levels of governance, along the three levels described in the Commission report on governance³: (1) a General Assembly/political level, (2) an Executive Board/coordination level, and (3) nine Action Groups/implementation level. The **General Assembly** is composed of (a) representatives from the participating States (according to each internal governance system), (b) representatives from all the regions included in the strategy, (c) the European Commission (as coordinator/facilitator), and (d) the Alpine Convention (as observer); MEPS might participate upon invitation. The General Assembly is mainly responsible for laying down the general

¹ See page 52 of the Action Plan.

² In the minutes it is stated on page 3 under "3.2 Objective 4 Governance": "The EC highlighted the importance of the Objective 4 on governance and emphasised that a work programme for this objective should be elaborated."

³ Report from the Commission concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies COM (2014) 284 final.

political guidelines for the strategy. It furthermore has the possibility of organising ministerial meetings in order to create the necessary political awareness for the strategy.

The ***Executive Board*** is composed of (a) seven national delegations headed by the National Coordinators, (b) the European Commission as an independent facilitator and coordinator, and (c) the Alpine Convention as well as the Alpine Space Programme as advisors. The Executive Board is in charge of the overall horizontal and vertical coordination of the EUSALP. This includes inter and intra-objective coordination and vertical coordination inside each country.

The nine ***Action Groups*** are composed of representatives from national, regional and local administrations – mostly empowered with decision making capacity (DMC) – as well as so-called "*advising guests*" that can enrich the expertise that is needed for an effective implementation work. The Action Groups are the main drivers of day-to-day implementation.

b. The second dimension

The *second dimension* is inter alia described in the following words in the Action Plan: "*The Alpine Region already has a long tradition of cooperation. A high diversity of structures is already operating in the area with a wide variety of governance systems. Countries, regions, policy strategies, sectors, and funding resources should avoid compartmentalisation – be it between sectorial policies, actors or different tiers of government. There is a need for an approach that encourages participants to overcome not only national frontiers, but also sectors and barriers in order to allow thinking that is more strategic and imaginative concerning the opportunities available. This strategic approach should also ensure consistency between existing initiatives, avoiding duplications and providing an alignment to existing financial instruments.*

In addition to the guiding principles adopted by the Council and described above, the governance system that will be designed in EUSALP also needs to take into account some specific features of the Alpine Region and of the Strategy."⁴

In particular, as a reply to the needs expressed in the public consultation: "*The creation of a permanent stakeholder platform should be envisaged in order to strengthen the involvement of civil society, including cooperation of consultative networks or platforms already in place*".⁵

This dimension of building a new model of macro-regional governance could be called "*institutional embedding*" or "*embedding of existing cooperation structures*" and is quite ambitious as it requires a change of the way of working at each political, institutional and administrative level. It means inter alia that the added value of the existing alpine cooperation structures needs to be consistently integrated into the different governance layers of the EUSALP process. It is obvious that this exercise is of utmost importance when it comes to the nine Action Groups. This is certainly a core challenge for the EUSALP and also one that can be extremely beneficial if it is addressed in the right way as this can lead to "*multiplier effects*" on the implementation level. However, there is not only the necessity to launch the concrete implementation of the three thematic objectives of the strategy (actions 1-9), but also the imperative to do the same for *all parts* of the cross-cutting objective (a sound macro-regional governance model for the Region – to improve cooperation and the coordination of action).

⁴ See page 47 of the Action Plan.

⁵ See page 52 of the Action Plan.

2. The current state of affairs of the EUSALP governance

The implementation phase of the EUSALP has started quickly and smoothly. This expresses the strong willingness of the involved actors to work together in the region. An important reason for this fast launch is certainly that most of the seven EUSALP countries are not only involved with their national/federal administration, but also with their regional ones. It is even to say that the main involvement often comes from the regional level, and supplementary it must be added that this regional commitment regularly stems from *several regional administrations* of one country. This combination of national and regional clout is undoubtedly one of the main features of the EUSALP which makes it to a *new type of strategy*. However, there are still some deficiencies with regard to both governance dimensions.

a. The first dimension

Looking at the political and the coordination level it can be observed that the involvement of the seven countries is at the moment quite heterogeneous. Some states are participating with the national level and even a number of regions, whereas others are a bit floating with the process. Furthermore, some of the regions that have at the beginning embodied the 7+7+1-principle (the seven states Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland, *seven regions*⁶ and the European Commission), have partly decreased their involvement and others supervened. With regard to this all relevant players should pay attention as the strategy is a long-term process, continuity in political support is crucial, including by providing sufficient resources and clear mandates for the implementation of the strategy. This will also be very much needed when it hopefully comes (here and there) to the integration of the EUSALP objectives in the countries' political priorities.

Concerning the nine Action Groups it can be said that the first meetings have been very promising with a proactive attitude among the participants. Altogether these Action Groups comprise approximately 225 members with a diverse background. This is indeed a very positive fundament for effective implementation work. However, some Action Groups have not yet found their ideal composition. All in all, they are heterogeneous in terms of composition, the involvement of the countries/regions, the working styles, lighthouse topics, decision making etc. Therefore, it is partly still applicable what the European Commission had repeatedly communicated at the beginning of the year 2016. Notably that a balanced composition of the Action Groups is very important. This means e.g. to have sufficient representatives coming from the regional and the national level of the respective administrations. It also means – strictly speaking – that there should be a large representation from all concerned countries/regions. In other words ideally each Action Group should have some people from either national or regional level of the seven countries (except Liechtenstein and Slovenia for obvious reasons). Certainly, it has to be taken into account that the administrative capacity of the participating countries differs. In addition, people coming from non-governmental organisations are also very much welcome. They can *inter alia* bring in new perspectives. They can underpin the legitimacy of the groups to the outside world. They can – and there is for example a link to the second dimension – also build bridges to other alpine cooperation structures. However, a balanced composition of the Action Groups is an inevitable precondition for an effective implementation. This applies for the members with "*decision making capacity*" but also for all so-called "*advising guests*". If all nine Action Groups have a balanced composition and are at the same time constantly and sufficiently attended by the members/guests, is certainly a point, the Commission will be carefully looking at in 2017.

⁶ These were Bayern, Graubünden, Lombardia, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano, Rhône-Alpes und Tirol.

Furthermore, it seems to be the case that a number of Action Groups as well as the 2017 Bavarian EUSALP presidency want to focus on the development of so-called (lighthouse) projects. Especially in that regard it must be underlined that the intertwining with the political level is highly important and that the results of these projects need to be long-lasting.

Moreover, it is very positive that many Action Groups have already agreed upon their (framework) work programme and that a couple of Action Groups collaborate with other Action Groups of their objective as well as with those that address other policy fields. This spirit is also demonstrated by the quick setting-up of the AlpGov project whose "*main objective is to support effective and efficient EUSALP implementation in a systematic transnational approach through designing and testing appropriate governance structures and mechanisms mainly on the level of Action Groups (AGs)*".⁷ This cooperative spirit is also expressed in the fact that the project partners have decided to establish a Board of Action Group Leaders (BAGL) that shall ensure a permanent exchange of knowledge and experiences among the Action Groups. This is also prompting the suggestion to enhance the linkages of EUSALP and INTERREG for the next Multiannual Financial Framework. A quick adoption by the Executive Board of a harmonised set of core rules applying to all Action Groups should also contribute to a smooth start of their work.

b. The second dimension

To develop both dimensions of the EUSALP governance is an imperative that is set-out in the Action Plan and large expectations exist in the area amongst the stakeholders. If this is done properly, it has the potential to raise the political importance of the region as a whole. It is for example very positive that the EUSALP has quickly aroused a lot of interest among the European parliamentarians. This has finally led to the formation of the "*Friends of EUSALP*" who have met for the first time on 13 January 2016.⁸ This momentum should be kept and it should be discussed if a more formalised linkage of the European Parliament to the EUSALP governance system is possible and/or wanted; be it on the level of the General Assembly or the Executive Board. Further involvement of MEPs coming from the alpine region could amplify the significance of the EUSALP both on EU decision-making level and in the MEPs constituencies.

With regard to the Action Groups it can be determined that some of them already went ahead and invited a number of core stakeholders that can be beneficial for the work of the Action Group itself but also for the respective actors. This is positive as it shows that the EUSALP has already contributed to an improved culture of cooperation which helped bringing together stakeholders that were not or only loosely connected until then, and better linking and involving existing transnational institutions. On the other hand it is also a challenge, because representatives need to get together which in some cases never cooperated before in this manner. With regard to this it might be helpful – and also an example of good objective coordination – to exchange among the Action Groups about best practices to involve additional stakeholders. Since it is absolutely clear that some Action Groups will need strong links to structures of the national level; otherwise it will be extremely difficult to change something on the ground.

Still under development is also the so-called stakeholder platform that shall be aiming at the involvement of interested stakeholders – including civil society, academia, NGOs, municipalities etc. – and the strengthening of their participation through consultative networks

⁷ See p. 1 of the project description, A.2 Project summary.

⁸ The second meeting took place on 18 April 2016 in the Brussels office of Lombardy region and the third meeting on 21 June 2016 again (like the first one) in the Representation of the Euroregion Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino.

or platforms. This tool needs to be made operational and effectively linked to the work of the Action Groups and to the Communication strategy as one part of the AlpGov project. Finally, the Action Groups have to develop tools how the output of this platform can be introduced into their implementation work.

3. Practical Recommendations

In sum, concrete ideas *on the basis of the Action Plan* are needed, how the whole EUSALP governance system can be fostered and developed with all its parts. Therefore, the European Commission had stressed in the first meeting of the Executive Board that a *work programme* for the fourth objective needs to be elaborated (see above). This happened also against the background that the European Commission will also have to report about its implementation in the next single report at the end of 2018. The simple question in 2018 will be: "*Has Objective 4 been implemented as described in the Action Plan?*"

Therefore, what is needed is to take concrete and operational actions to organise a good governance system in the EUSALP. Hence, the development of the above mentioned work programme. To do so, the *European Commission in its role as facilitator* would propose the following:

1. *Preparation of a questionnaire* to the Executive Board members and the Action Group Leaders with questions like:
 - a. How are you implementing the Action Plan in your country/region, and with whom?
 - b. What has been done so far and by whom?
 - c. What still needs to be done and by whom?
 - d. What are the (main) problems encountered?
 - e. Any other comments?
2. Based on the results of the reply to the questionnaire shared among all members, and analysed by the European Commission, a *series of workshops* could be organised that would result in the agreement on a joint work programme, identifying the type of actions to be carried out, the operators concerned, the timeline, as well as the definition of some simple indicators allowing assessing their progress.
3. The possible *timeline* of the process could be as follows:
 - a. the European Commission to build the questionnaire (in a way that questions are short, clear, concise, not subject to different interpretations, and call for concrete replies) by end October 2016.
 - b. Asking for replies by end November 2016.
 - c. Analysis by the European Commission of the replies by mid-January 2017.
 - d. Organisation (possibly with the support of INTERACT or other) of e.g. three workshops between February and April 2017, with a view to feeding the drafting of the work programme, which could hopefully be ready before summer break 2017, and agreed on/endorsed by the EUSALP General Assembly.

This should give all EUSALP stakeholders more clarity about the implementation of objective 4. It should e.g. also answer the question if the objective shall continue to be only in the hands of the respective EUSALP presidency or if we should upgrade it politically and give it the status of a proper Action Group. Overall, we need steps forward to make EUSALP more convincing (also for the home base) and more committed in the countries and regions.