



DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES
POLICY DEPARTMENT B: STRUCTURAL AND COHESION
POLICIES

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**Strategic coherence of Cohesion Policy:
comparison of the 2007-13 and 2014-
20 programming periods**

STUDY

Abstract

The aim of this study is to assess the evolution and implementation of the strategic coherence of Cohesion Policy in 2014-20. Based on documentary analysis and interviews with Member State authorities, the study finds that there have been overall improvements compared to the previous period, but it also highlights a series of EU and domestic challenges in ensuring a strategically coherent approach between different European Structural and Investment Funds and with other EU policies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strategic coherence is a central element of the 2013 reform of Cohesion Policy for the 2014-20 period. This study provides a critical assessment of the evolution and implementation of the strategic coherence of Cohesion Policy, based on documentary analysis and interviews with Member State authorities responsible for the programming of the 2014-20 Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes. The focus is on four areas considered to be crucial for the strategic orientation of Cohesion Policy: EU strategic frameworks; national strategic frameworks; thematic concentration; and the programme architecture, governance and administration.

EU strategic frameworks

A regulatory innovation for 2014-20 is the use of an umbrella Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) covering five Funds in different policy areas. The Common Strategic Framework, which is an annex to the CPR, is a broader, better justified and more coherent strategic framework than the Community Strategic Guidelines for 2007-13. The CSF has been welcomed by those responsible for programming in the Managing Authorities as a practical and useful asset, although its influence on the programming process is secondary to national strategic frameworks.

National strategic frameworks

The newly introduced Partnership Agreements are strategic plans with priorities covering the five European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF/ESI Funds). They are negotiated between the European Commission and national authorities and provide more scope not only to coordinate the different ESI Funds, but also to coordinate these with other EU and Member State policies. In practice, national coordination arrangements vary significantly between Member States, not least in terms of their formality, but Managing Authorities are cautiously optimistic that the structures and systems planned or introduced will exploit synergies and lead to greater coordination than in 2007-13. Member States have also been active in implementing the partnership principle during the programming process. They established partnership-based steering bodies or working groups to develop all or part of the PAs and OPs. Public consultation events were complemented by web-based forms of consultation and information dissemination. The Country-Specific Recommendations appeared to have played a limited role in preparing national strategic frameworks, but Member States were mostly able to address them.

Thematic concentration

The new requirements for thematic concentration in 2014-20 have had a major impact on programming in most Member States. There is a significant increase in ERDF/Cohesion Fund allocations to Thematic Objectives 1-4 (RTDI, ICT, SME Competitiveness and Low-Carbon Economy), while infrastructure investment is less prominent compared to 2007-13. Negotiating the allocation of resources to different objectives has not been easy; many Member States are critical about the scope available for balancing thematic concentration with support for domestic priorities. Managing Authorities agree in principle with special ring-fencing provisions (sustainable urban development, ESF shares), but would like more flexibility. Regional differentiation of ring-fencing rules is not felt to be useful, as the regional categories are too rigid and do not reflect regional specificities.

Programme architecture, governance and administration

The CPR for 2014-20 has been widely welcomed and is expected to bring more coherence and coordination to the planning and implementation of ESI Funds. However, many Managing Authorities consider that it does not go far enough given that there are still separate Fund-specific regulations (especially for EAFRD).

There are significant changes in programme architecture in many Member States, compared to 2007-13, which should facilitate better institutional coordination across the Funds; the scope for multi-Fund OPs is regarded as a welcome option in most Member States, but concerns remain regarding administrative complications (e.g. due to separate regulations). Integrated territorial approaches are potentially useful instruments to ensure strategic coherence at the local/regional level. Finally, the role of the Commission in supporting the objectives of strategic coherence is regarded predominantly positively. Yet, there has been some criticism of the consistency and coherence of positions and advice across different DGs. In fact, despite efforts to improve inter-service consultation and cooperation within the Commission, Managing Authorities consider that the continued 'sectoral approach' to the ESI Funds at EU level (with different departments responsible for different Funds) constrains a coordinated approach.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The Common Strategic Framework has provided a clear statement of EU objectives and priorities.
2. The Commission's Position Papers provided national authorities with a clear understanding of the Commission's likely negotiating position.
3. Thematic concentration will be achieved, at least at the programming stage.
4. There is concern about a progressive 'transformation' of Cohesion Policy into a thematic policy that is in danger of losing sight of its cohesion purpose.
5. Greater strategic integration and coordination of Funds management should be achieved.
6. The partnership principle appears to have been widely respected during the programming process.
7. There is little sign of simplification.
8. The efficacy and utility of the options for integrated territorial development is not clear as yet.
9. There is a relatively high regard for the Commission's role during the negotiations.
10. The preparation of the policy reform process for 2014-20 was relatively open and inclusive, at least compared to 2007-13.

On the basis of these conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- There would be merit in considering a **more collaborative approach** between the European Commission and Member States in developing both the Common Strategic Framework and the Position Papers.
- There is a **need to go much further on integration of the ESI Funds** and coordination between the Commission Directorates-General.
- **Application of the partnership principle during the implementation phase** of the programmes should be monitored by the EP.
- **Strong EP oversight and scrutiny** of the strategic coherence and performance of Cohesion Policy is recommended.
- **Closer coordination within the European Parliament** is required, notably greater inter-committee dialogue among the four committees in charge of the ESI Funds.