

# **The Agenda for Participation in EU Macro-Regional Strategies and the Partnerships for Participation**

*Disclaimer: The Agenda for Participation in the Macro-Regional Strategies and Partnerships for Participation is a rolling document that is subject for discussion at the National Participation Days in the Macro-regional Strategies as well as at the macro-regional Participation Days in 2017. The document will be further developed based on the results of the discussion as well as based on the results of the planned activities within the Participation Partnerships.*

## **I. The Agenda for Participation in EU Macro-Regional Strategies**

The Agenda for Participation in Macro-regional Strategies (MRS) was developed by an international group of relevant MRS stakeholders and key actors to vitalise EU MRS and to tackle Euroscepticism, Eurosclerosis and nationalism. The group has a longstanding experience in developing and implementing MRS and European Policies at all governance levels and in diverse socio-political environments. The Agenda for Participation is a key tool to successfully implement and develop MRS and European integration by widening the basis of MRS through structured and transparent participation of local actors and civil society.

The Agenda for Participation will start in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) with the launch of five Participation Partnerships based on the workshops to be held at the 4<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day in Budapest on 17 October 2017 and concrete action plans guiding the work of the Partnerships.

The Participation Partnerships shall strive to involve other MRS and European institutions, organisations and programmes as well as transnational or supra-regional bodies. The Agenda for Participation Network will report on the progress of the Participation Partnerships and the desired links and inclusion of the other MRS at the 5<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day in Sofia 2018.

## 1. The Macro-Regional Approach

Macro-regional Strategies (MRS) are an integrated framework endorsed by the European Council in order to respond to specific needs of so-called ‘functional’ regions beyond the national scope and below the supra-national threshold. They have the potential to establish sustainable links between Cohesion, Enlargement and Neighbourhood policies of the EU as well as respective sectoral policies. MRS can play an important role in the implementation of the EU 2020 strategy and translate its targets into a territorial framework. This also applies to other sectoral strategies. Furthermore, MRS foster and improve multi-level governance as well as governance as such, as they are catalysts for institutional change, fostering the process of Europeanisation, democratisation and reform within and outside the Union.

The innovative approach of MRS is that they combine cross-sectoral strategies with a place-based approach in order to strengthen territorial cohesion. The place-based approach aims at empowering regions by developing specifically adapted solutions and implementing them through participatory governance. MRS work towards regional and trans-border cooperation, implementing multi-level and transnational governance approaches, and thus helping to narrow the social, economic and political gaps between their participating states. The concept of better governance includes the active and structured participation of civil society and local actors, which is a core element of place-based policy-making and a pre-condition for the success of macro-regional strategies.

Another unique feature of MRS is that they are an interface between European integration and EU Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, and could be strategies to foster social and economic development, better governance and improved living conditions in outer border areas of the EU, in (potential) candidate and neighbourhood countries by building up joint capacities, competences and cooperation structures.

Despite promising plans and potential opportunities, MRS face severe challenges in achieving both the core tasks of implementing European regional and cohesion policy and the wider aim to foster European values and integration.

According to the experience of MRS stakeholders, successful MRS would profit from the following developments:

- Active political support and ownership for an effective integration of MRS in policy-making and policy implementation from top-down;
- Stronger and institutionalised participation of local actors and civil society organizations at the local, regional and municipal level in order to enable an sustainable bottom-up approach in order to shape needs-based policy solutions and gain a critical mass of stakeholders for the long-term implementation of MRS;
- Support for the implementation of place-based strategies as key aspect of functional regions;
- Adequate funding and legal instruments adapted to the needs of implementing stakeholders, including a consistent inclusion of MRS into a revised delegated regulation for the European Code of conduct on partnerships (ECCP);
- The mobilisation of media and the larger public as well as opinion leaders and the political level;
- Stepping up institutional capacity wherever needed.

## **2. The Role of Civil Society and Local Actors in the Macro Regional Strategies**

The participation of civil society and local actors is at the core of European democratic values and good governance. In 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon (Art. 9-13 TEU) reinforced democratic principles such as participation of civil society and local actors, but the implementation in practice is still mostly at a tentative stage, probably because it would mean a thorough change in the political cultures.

In the context of the financial, economic, political and social crisis shaking up the foundations of the European Union, the decline of the citizens' trust in political systems at all levels is evident, as are its dramatic consequences. For a continuing stable and sustainable social and economic development in Europe, participation must be high up in the political agenda. MRS can serve as experimental area for participative processes overcoming traditional sectoral policies, hierarchies and boundaries through developing new forms of cooperation.

Empowered local actors as well as cities and regions are key partners for the stabilisation and development of the European Project as well as of MRS. They can make an important difference in finding solutions for common national or transnational challenges.

They are key stakeholders for the development of a macro-regional and European identity, in which intercultural dialogue and solidarity are core features. The MRS provide a framework for dialogue with civil society and local actors from EU member states and non-EU member states. This offers a great potential to strengthen cooperative ties and contribute to stability inside and outside the EU.

Macro-regional Strategies could and should be testing grounds promoting democratisation and participative approaches. The involvement of organised civil society and local actors in the decision-making processes and implementation is a crucial step towards better understanding of local challenges, the development of suitable policies, and reducing costs of policy implementation at all levels. Furthermore, it could be part of the solution to the current crisis of the EU by strengthening democratic systems, multi-level governance, stable institutional and administrative capacities and ultimately rekindling the trust of citizens in the political and administrative systems.

EU as well as national policies must actively take into account the potential, challenges and needs of civil society and local actors in order to exploit their full potential to strengthen the EU. This specifically means developing better working methods, focused on cooperation, inclusion, multi-level and participative governance as well as adapting funding and financial instruments to the capacities of all relevant stakeholders of EU Cohesion and Neighbourhood Policy.

### **3. The aims of the Agenda for Participation in the Macro Regional Strategies**

The Agenda for Participation aims at the maximum utilisation of the potential of civil society and local actors to tackle successfully political, economic and social challenges many participating countries of the four European MRS share.

The Agenda for Participation aims to promote multi-level and participative governance. The cooperation between member states, regions, cities and civil society is crucial for successful development in the MRS.

It has repeatedly been stressed, as in the Commission's report 2016 on the implementation of macro-regional strategies, that a stronger involvement of civil society through consultative networks and platforms, leading to the institutionalised cooperation at all levels between the political level, administration, local actors, civil society and the social partners is a pre-condition to true European integration. While this is of relevance for all countries participating in MRS, some have made significant progress in establishing structural participation, while others are just starting the process.

It is therefore essential to further the exchange at all levels on the practical implementation of participative governance. Huge progress has been made on the networking and cooperation level in all MRS: transnational networks and platforms bolstering existing institutions and networks of the civil society, of cities, regions and universities, linking them to a European level, show the profits of working at a macro-regional level.

Civil society must be actively and institutionally involved and relevant stakeholder dialogues involving civil society and local actors at national as well as macro-regional level have been introduced in the governance of some MRS. Innumerable small and medium-sized projects involving civil society organizations, local actors and citizens have been furthered and funded and show the importance of their participation.

However, European programmes and the European Structure and Investment Funds (ESIF) are often not suitable for the financing of smaller projects, events and cooperation, and are therefore unable to enhance the implementation of MRS on the ground by a relevant group of its stakeholders - civil society and local actors. Regulations are especially difficult to implement in the territorial cooperation programmes.

In practice, this means that many local administrations, small and medium-sized cities as well as large parts of civil society organisations are unable to participate in these programmes and cannot profit from exchange of knowledge, pilot projects, peer-to-peer learning, and

cooperation. Moreover, it seems that the formulation and particularly the implementation of EU funding for public administration, local governance and civil society has not furthered ownership of the measures, and thus not improved the quality of governance in the medium term.

These problematic aspects of European as well as national funding have been brought up in many position papers from MRS, regions and city organisations in the on-going discussion about the new period of EU Cohesion Policy 2020+.

Decentralisation, simplification, improved alignment of funds, facilitated access to funding as well as participation of local actors in the development and roll-out of national and macro-regional programs are amongst the reforms that could help to put European cohesion policy on the ground.

This is of particular importance for civil society and local actors, especially – but not only – in countries with low levels of cohesion. However, the implementation of tailor-made instruments, e.g. easily accessible and administrable small project funds and seed money is crucial in all MRS member states.

To unfold the full potential of regional development and funding, it is fundamental to re-introduce a culture of mutual trust versus furthering an environment of disproportionate control and mistrust.

#### **4. The Agenda for Participation in the MRS will work towards:**

- Promoting the involvement of civil society and local actors in MRS policy making at all governance levels;
- Promoting the development and implementation of European funds adapted to the needs of civil society and local actors in the on-going planning of the EU Cohesion Policy +2020, specifically the development of easily accessible and manageable funding instruments for smaller projects, which would strengthen the involvement of

local actors and civil society in the development of all MRS.

- Improving the knowledge base in macro-regions through:
  - Furthering the sharing of best practices and cooperation between civil society and local actors as well as between the MRS in joint frameworks and platforms;
  - The introduction of national and macro-regional hearings (Participation Days) as structured dialogues between all stakeholders;
  - The development of new formats of cooperation between the key decision-makers/ implementers and civil society together with local actors;
  
- Encouraging, via the MRS governance, a notable change in the member countries' political and administrative culture, furthered top-down by adequate leverage through EU funding and political support and bottom-up by the strengthening of civil society and local actors.

## 5. How will the Agenda for Participation be implemented?

- **Through the instrument of National Participation Days** – or national hearings – in the member states of the macro-regional strategies that gather actively involved, interested, and/or potential stakeholders of the macro-regional strategies at national level. The National Participation Days specifically address civil society organisations and networks, local actors including academia, local and regional public authorities as well as national institutions and experts active in the macro-regional governance (e.g. National Coordinators, Priority Area/Policy Area Coordinators, Horizontal Action Leaders, Action Group Leaders, Steering Group members, Working Group members of the macro-regional Priority Areas/Policy Areas/Action Groups etc.)
  
- **Through macro-regional Participation Days** that serve as the main meeting of civil society in the framework of macro-regional strategies and are usually organised as pre-events to the Annual Fora of the macro-regional strategies. The open format of Participation Days brings together experts and high-level representatives of regional organisations, institutions and networks representing civil society, academia, cities and

regions from the macro-regions in order to facilitate and enhance exchange and cooperation. The macro-regional Participation Days were launched in 2014 with the Danube Participation Days in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. In 2017, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region also established this format.

- **Through the development of a range of macro-regional partnerships.** Within these partnerships, MRS stakeholders will work together to ensure that participation of civil society and local actors is strengthened in the MRS governance. The partnerships will focus on the implementation of participation and multi-level governance in a range of topics relevant for MRS, coordinated and supported by the institutions of the EU macro-regional strategies, stakeholder platforms and other European and international institutions.
- **Through the Agenda Report** which gives an overview of participatory policies at European level, the situation of participation in the MRS and presents the roadmap for the roll out of the Agenda for Participation and the Participation Partnerships. The Agenda Report is developed through the initiative of the Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF) and EUSDR-Priority Area10 (cooperation and capacity building) with a working group composed of experts from EUSBSR Horizontal Action Coordination, the Central European Initiative (CEI), the EESC-ECOSOC and the EU Interact Programme. The Agenda Report will be presented and discussed at important macro-regional and European conferences and events. The Agenda should serve as a road map for participation in the MRS in the coming years.
- **Through regular progress reports from the MRS** to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council about progress made in the implementation of participative governance in the member countries of the MRS as well as in MRS governance. Results of these reports should be integrated in the report of the European Commission on MRS, which assesses MRS-developments every two years.

First partnerships are proposed along the following themes:

- **Participation: The perspective of research**
- **Participation: Building MRS on local governance and multi-level governance**
- **Participation: A key factor of social innovation and sustainable development**
- **Participation: Designing 2020+ with Local Actors and MRS**
- **Participation: Empowering Roma**

## 6. Next steps towards the implementation of the Agenda for Participation in MRS

The process towards the implementation of the Agenda for Participation and its Participation Partnerships will start with the presentations of a work-in-progress report at the EUSBSR Participation Day in Berlin, followed by a meeting of the EESC-ECOSOC committee, several National Participation Days in EUSDR countries, and finally a first session of the partnerships as working groups of the of the 4<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day in Budapest on 17 October 2017.

Further presentations of the Agenda for Participation and the Partnerships for Participation will be launched 2017, first results will be presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day and the 6<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Sofia (BG) in 2018.

## II. The Partnerships for Participation in Macro Regional Strategies

### 1. What is the aim of the Partnerships for Participation?

Working on concrete challenges, solutions and goals, the Participation Partnerships are transnational, open platforms. They operate as frameworks for information, cooperation and implementation of participatory processes and policies in the MRS. Acting transversally, they should be facilitating joint MRS responses and actions to common challenges.

The Participation Partnerships shall have the following common aims and functions:

- **To mobilize:** by activating a broader range of local actors and NGO's, involving international and European organisations and institutions, gaining effective multipliers for a MRS strategy process implemented bottom-up and top-down, as well as to develop concrete initiatives and projects;

- **To involve:** dedicated and knowledgeable partners at the political and administrative level of MRS member states in the partnership to enable the implementation of actionable policy proposals, projects and initiatives, furthering a change of cultures through dialogue;
- **To empower:** by creating a setting that facilitates the transnational interaction of relevant societal actors and organisations, nurturing exchange and new expertise as well as effective mechanisms for translating positions and ideas in joint, transnational actions, enhancing the capitalisation of ideas, knowledge and projects.

## 2. How do the Participation Partnerships work?

The thematically defined Participation Partnerships jointly develop a concrete action plan depending on their structure, topics and funding. The processed challenges, needs, aims and activities should be relevant to all MRS.

All activities are based on the principle of participation and its implementation at all levels. They could consist in:

- the development and/or implementation of pilot projects
- the development and/or implementation of a methodology
- the organisation of one or more events/round tables, to exchange and disseminate information and develop cooperation
- the involvement of new groups of stakeholders in on-going pilot activities or projects to broaden and further implementation and dissemination.

The members of the Participation Partnerships should represent local actors, organized civil society, the administrative and the political level from involved MRS member states as well as experts from International and European organisations, institutions, and academia.

Each of the Partnerships for Participation are to be coordinated by a lead partner able to ensure continuity and professional, target-oriented development, communication and networking for the implementation of the Partnership Action Plan as well as reporting to the Agenda for Participation Network. The Partnerships should meet at least once a year.

### **3. What is the Agenda for Participation Network?**

Although autonomous in their activities and agenda, the Partnerships for Participation will be part of the Agenda for Participation Network, involving a common website, regular consultations, joint crossover meetings and readiness to contribute to MRS events.

The Agenda for Participation Network consists of representatives of Danube Civil Society Forum, EUSDR/Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”, EUSBSR, EUSALP, EUSAIR, Interact, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), interested National Coordinators and the thematic coordinators of MRS as well as the Partnership Coordinators.

The “Agenda for Participation” network acts as a steering group for the Partnerships for Participation and the implementation of the Agenda for Participation; it is the link to the governance of the MRS and the European level, to both of which it reports.

It will strive to ensure, based on the overall aims and principles of the Agenda for Participation in the MRS, that the working groups are enabled to report on their work and progress at the respective MRS Participation Days, National Participation Days and to the Annual Fora, as well as to the MRS governance structures and the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of Regions, and the EESC.

The sustainable impact and quality of the results of the Participation Partnerships and the Agenda for Participation will correlate with the continuity of the work and therefore with the funding opportunities of the organisations participating in the Partnerships and the Network. Lobbying for the Agenda for Participation and adequate funding for its activities will be one of the main tasks of the Agenda for Participation Network.

### **4. Developing the Partnerships for Participation 2017/2018**

The Partnerships for Participation are planned to start in 2017 around the following topics:

- **Participation: A research perspective**

The Partnership will work on theories, research and good practices promoting participatory governance in order to enhance capacities for multi-level governance in the macro- regions, developing measures and actions for the strategy.

- **Participation: Building MRS on local governance and multi-level governance**

The Partnership will develop, based on the new guidelines for Participation developed by the Council of Europe, concrete measures for the implementation of Participation at the local level.

- **Participation: A key factor of social innovation and sustainable development**

The Partnership will identify innovative, co-creative and trans-sectoral approaches in order to sustain long term top-down (thinking) and bottom-up (acting) processes (developments).

- **Participation: Designing 2020+ with Local Actors and MRS**

The Partnership will look at participatory structures that integrate civil society and local actors regional development and EU funding instruments (Partnership Principle) in regard to challenges, good practices and opportunities within the ongoing discussion on EU Cohesion Policy 2020+.

- **Participation: Empowering Roma**

The Partnership deals with participatory approaches to empower vulnerable groups in the macro-regions in order to enable their participation in the shaping of their social and political capital.

The Programme of the 4<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day in Budapest on the 17<sup>th</sup> October 2017 will feature working groups on the above mentioned topics.

The participants of the working groups, building the core group of the Participation Partnerships, shall develop - as a result of the working group - a first draft outline of their respective action plans and decide on the scope, structure, participants and possible financing of their Partnership.

The outline of the five action plans will be presented in the plenary of the Danube Participation Day, added to the Agenda Documents and will be used, next to the Eisenstadt Declaration, the Baltic Sea Declaration and other basic documents as a roadmap for the implementation of participation in the MRS. Furthermore, the Agenda for Participation and

the Participation Partnerships should be discussed and presented the 4th Danube Participation Day held in Budapest 17 October 2017.