

Final Event: Outcomes of the Preparatory Action on Eastern Macedonia and Thrace and the way ahead

Xanthi, 21st October 2015

Summary Report



21st October 2015

Final Event, Xanthi, Greece

Main Outcomes

The event held in Xanthi on the 21st of October 2015 was the first of two concluding events envisaged for the European Parliament Preparatory Action on the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. The second one has been scheduled to take place in Brussels on the 18th of November 2015.

The primary aim of this event was to take stock of what the project has achieved whilst reflecting on the key challenges for the future. The event was conceived as a way to listen to the concerns of stakeholders, in order to reflect on how to best support local development and resilience in times of uncertainty, as now faced by the region.

A welcome was given by the Governor of the region, in which he underlined how RIS3 has the potential for change in the region, thereby stressing the importance of the Preparatory Action and of the continuation of this process. This further emphasised the importance of high level political commitment to the process. Following further welcome remarks by the Head of the Regional Council for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, JRC-IPTS, and DG REGIO, the event was split into three main sessions. In the first, JRC-IPTS presented the main aims and perceived outcomes of the Preparatory Action, the challenges ahead for RIS3 implementation, as well as outlining the outlook for the day. The Special Managing Authority (MA) of the Regional Operational Programme presented their view of the outcomes, which was very much in line with the IPTS presentation.

Dr Yiannis Toliás, engaged by JRC-IPTS as a local expert, then set out the main outcomes and next steps of the working group on mobility. Similarly, Dr Effie Amanatidou, also working on behalf of JRC-IPTS, set out the main outcomes and next steps of the working groups on governance. A brief question and answer session followed.

The second session was a round-table discussion, reflecting first on the activities of the past years and then on future developments. The event finished with a short session of concluding remarks by Dr Mark Boden (DG JRC-IPTS), Mr Georgios Peroulakis (DG REGIO) and Vasileios Pitsinikos (REMTh MA).

The event attracted approximately 40 stakeholders, representing various agencies of the regional and the national government, higher education institutions and public research organisations, chambers of commerce, associations of employers.

There was a remarkable consensus, among participants, as to the positive contribution and achievements of the preparatory action. These include: the basis for the first calls to be launched under OP, the development of a number of potentially fruitful research and innovation based projects and collaborations, a deeper understanding of RIS3 and increased trust among

stakeholders, together with momentum in the entrepreneurial discovery process. From a methodological point of view the Preparatory action has enhanced capacity for handling participatory policy processes, and provided the basis of a more widely applicable methodological approach. Also important are the various legal, administrative and technical barriers to RIS3 implementation that have been identified. Compounded by the fragile economic situation, efforts to address these challenges need to ensure that the work conducted so far translates into an optimal management of RIS3 and related ERDF resources.

The issues arising in the round-table discussion are set out below.

A look at the past: achievements of the European Parliament Preparatory Action

The discussion started with a **review of the EDP process** (EDP focus groups and Project Development Labs). It was generally agreed that the Preparatory action achieved the following:

- **Mobilisation of a critical mass of researchers and business people (600+ people).** It was commonly acknowledged that the EDP events managed to mobilise a significant part of the research and business communities in the region. The business community was especially surprised by this success and stressed that, for the first time, they felt that the public administration was seriously interested in their work. It was also the first time that the interaction was managed in such a systematic, structured and constructive way.
- This in turn created high **expectations on the side of stakeholders**, which is in itself remarkable given the current pressures on the business community.
- Overall there was appreciation of the **business community** of the opportunities the EDP offered to create **links with the research world**. As a side effect of the EDP focus groups, there is already some concrete evidence of **network formation**. For instance in Drama a network of accessible local wineries was formed and is seeking appropriate research bodies to form collaborations. Similarly, the EDP event on Marble also had an impact in changing people's mind-sets from surviving the present to thinking about the future.
- Learning how to apply the EDP methodology was also deemed relevant. It was widely acknowledged that the EDP is a continuous process and the Managing Authority already progressed with organising further EDP focus groups (they led the organisation of the marble event, and have since organised two further workshops).
- Stakeholders also stressed that EDP process has to be in synergy and not incompatible with the ESIF regulations.

The round table also appreciated the work conducted under the **governance and human resources working groups**. The following points were made:

- The **Managing Authority expressed its commitment to implementing the suggested RIS3 governance system**. The governance system is now at the stage of being formally approved and the new structures are to be in place shortly. In this context, it is important to stress that the coordination across the regional and national levels is very important for governance and implementation of RIS3. The process has been hindered partly due to the pending reform of Law 4310/2014, which establishes the Regional Councils for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, as the previous version of the Law is still valid, the region can go ahead based on the current legal framework and react to changes along the way.
- Stakeholders appreciated the formation of a specific proposal for human resources mobility that was jointly agreed by representatives of the academic and business communities. Implementation of this proposal is underway with the establishment of a common unit across the academic institutions of the region that will be responsible for mobility activities.

Finally, some **more general points** were raised:

- **Networking** with other regions, experts and critical friends was highly appreciated as it allowed exchanging experiences, good practices, tested methodologies, etc.. The suggestion was made to include more representatives from the business sector among critical friends.
- The Preparatory action served as an **accelerator in understanding public subsidies, investments**. This knowledge did not exist in the Regional Authorities in the past as they were not directly involved in designing and managing research and innovation support measures.
- The Preparatory action allowed an **early and timely debate on technical and administrative aspects between the region and national bodies**. It also boosted effective communication with the Ministry of Education and Research.

A look at the future: challenges of RIS3 implementation

Whilst acknowledging the achievements, the round table discussion pointed out several areas that still need attention. Specifically:

- There are persisting **incompatibilities that need to be resolved between the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**.
- There are pending issues in the implementation and management of public subsidies that inevitably affect RIS3 measures as well.

- Further clarification is needed on how best to **translate EDP results into calls for proposals** as well as in designing monitoring and evaluation indicators for RIS3. The region is willing to learn from other peers how to tackle these issues.
- It is necessary to set up an on-going mechanism for incorporating ideas for proposals not collected through the previous EDP focus groups, as the **EDP is an on-going process** and its understanding needs continuous refinement.
- In general stakeholders appreciated the need of becoming more proactive. For instance, **chambers** could potentially help businesses in identifying their needs as well as in training and in finding collaborators. They could also produce more systematic intelligence on businesses' activities. At the same time, the **research institutions need to create bridges** to cross the gap in communicating and collaborating with industry.
- **Business associations and chambers need to take a more proactive role in EDP implementation.** In this regard, a toolbox offering advice and guidance would be useful.
- The **EDP was carried out to some degree detached from the overall context of the financial crisis.** To this end the following exercise should take into serious consideration the existing framework including measures like capital controls, heavy taxation and difficulties in access to finance. These are likely to affect RIS3 implementation seriously.
- Despite the positive results a **'common language' between the research community and businesses has not been established yet.** The added value of the EDP needs to be evaluated also in relation to the resulting ideas for proposals. In particular, one should explore whether the ideas that emerged through the EDP are different from those enabled through the running O.P.

As a final remark there was a positive attitude towards a follow-on activity about the implementation of the suggested actions in governance and mobility and of the EDP as a whole. People in the region expressed their willingness to continue to work and share experiences with other regions not only to receive feedback but also to provide first-hand knowledge now that the first round of implementation is a reality.