



**European Committee
of the Regions**

**Commission for
Territorial Cohesion Policy
and EU Budget**

COTER

Application of the principles of partnership and multi-level governance in Cohesion Policy programming 2021-2027

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Executive Summary

The principles of partnership and multi-level governance are key features for the programming and implementation of Cohesion Policy and rural development. Partner involvement enhances the delivery of European programmes by providing ownership and making investments place-based.

EU regulations for Cohesion Policy and rural development require the involvement of public authorities at national, regional and local levels as well as economic and social partners and bodies representing civil society according to the partnership principle. This partnership applies to all stages in the programming process, namely the preparation of programmes, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Practices to ensure good partner involvement in these stages are further detailed in the European Code of Conduct on Partnership¹. This report presents findings on the application of the partnership principle and to what extent partners are well involved in the preparation of the 2021-2027 Partnership Agreements and programmes for Cohesion Policy and rural development.

Ongoing partnership processes have been reviewed on the basis of desk research, survey and interview findings. Particular attention was paid to the perceived selection methods of partners, perceived balanced representation of partners, involvement of partners per section of the document, challenges and benefits, conditions for good partner involvement, and expectations for implementing Cohesion Policy and rural development. Where possible, findings on the application of the partnership principle are compared with insights on the perception of 2014-20 Cohesion Policy and rural development.

The majority of 2021-27 Operational Programmes keep the same territorial focus as for the 2014-20 programming period. Hence, in most cases, the involvement of local and regional authorities in preparation of 2021-27 programmes and Partnership Agreements may be quite similar to their current involvement (Chapter 2). The territorial focus of programmes and observed changes are indicative of local and regional authorities' potential roles. For example, high numbers of regional programmes in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Belgium indicates strong roles for local and regional authorities in these countries. By the same token, the focus on national-level programmes in many eastern and smaller European countries may limit the roles of local and regional authorities in these countries. Although this overview helps to put findings in

¹ Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds

perspective, the actual involvement of local and regional authorities may only be known with the publication of final programmes towards the end of 2021.

Partner involvement is slowly improving. A majority of respondents perceived the partnership composition similar as for the 2014-20 programmes, with some modifications, as shown in section 3.1. More noteworthy, the perception on key elements for good partner involvement following the Code of Conduct on Partnership is largely unchanged since 2016. Thus, it seems that the application of the partnership principle is evolving very little, despite the fact that the need to evolve was already observed five years ago.

Partnerships contribute to some degree to making programmes specific to the local and regional context for sustainable and digital transitions. 2021-27 programmes consider local and regional specificities in relation to EU Green Deal objectives in about 45% of all cases. In 29% of the cases, local and regional specificities are considered in relation to the EU's Digital Strategy objectives (Section 3.2). Partnerships' contribution to the needs analysis and priority development parts of programmes may have contributed to the uptake of local and regional specificities in relation to these EU objectives. Moreover, the use of local and regional strategies for the development of these parts of Operational Programmes enhances the contributions of the partnership.

The potential of partnerships is not fully utilised. The application of the partnership principle faces various challenges to make Cohesion Policy and rural development more place-based (Section 3.3). Some stakeholders push for their particular interests and it remains challenging to mobilise some stakeholders. Indeed, the involvement of regional and national authorities is often perceived as over-represented whereas local authorities and societal players are more often perceived as under-represented. Adapting processes with respect to COVID-19 measures was not often perceived as a challenge. Instead, the use of online tools and techniques provides new opportunities for stakeholder involvement.

Digital solutions make it easier for a larger part of the population to join partnerships (Section 3.4), and as a result, balanced representation may be better respected. At the same time, new challenges for effective stakeholder involvement may arise through the use of digital solutions, with regard mainly to the level of stakeholder involvement and the opportunities to provide feedback.

Partnerships are less involved in the preparation of Partnership Agreements. An increasing share of partners is involved through a public consultation, notably local authorities, while national authorities remain key players to draft Partnership Agreements (Section 4.1). In line with this, a lower share of respondents assesses the representation of stakeholders in Partnership Agreements as balanced, in

comparison with Operational Programmes. Also, partnership contributions to ensure uptake of local and regional specificities are reflected less in Partnership Agreements than in Operational Programmes (Section 4.2). In fact, many partners are unaware of how Partnership Agreements consider local and regional aspects in line with the objectives of the EU Green Deal and EU Digital Strategy.

The mobilisation of relevant stakeholders remains a key challenge to reach full potential of partnerships for the preparation of Partnership Agreements (Section 4.3). Indeed, different types of players seem to be less well-represented in partnerships for Partnership Agreements than in programme partnerships. However, numerous partnership processes for Partnership Agreements may be organised in the coming months, as National Coordination Bodies may have waited for well-developed operational programmes to commence (Section 4.4).

Slowly evolving application of the partnership principle may raise questions as to whether partnerships are sufficiently effective, whether they enable place-based sustainable and digital transitions, and whether partnerships suffer from measures to mitigate the further spread of COVID-19 (Chapter 5). In short:

- **Partnerships are relevant and contribute to making Cohesion Policy and rural development more place-based.** However, continuous efforts are needed to make use of the full potential of partnerships. As such we recommend to reinforce the European Code of Conduct on partnership, stress the importance of the partnership principle, and express the need for place-specific EU programmes.
- **Partnerships enable place-based sustainable and digital transitions.** Partnerships are particularly important to shaping needs analysis and priority development sections of Cohesion Policy and rural development documents. Therefore, we recommend inter alia to make more information available in relation to European objectives and as such enhance the uptake of local and regional specificities for sustainable and digital transitions.
- **Measures imposed to contain the further spread of the COVID-19 virus delayed and postponed various partnership processes.** In general, this seems not to impact envisaged timing to finalise programmes and partnership agreements. However, COVID-19 made partnership processes more digital, which can have positive effects on stakeholder involvement. Lessons learnt on the use of online tools and techniques should therefore be capitalised on soon, notably lessons on engaging more stakeholders in partnerships.

All in all, partner involvement is slowly improving but utilisation of the full potential of partnerships is hindered by several aspects, notably the mobilisation of stakeholders. Possibly, increased use of digital solutions of stakeholder involvement and interaction could speed up this evolution and ensure that partnerships live up to their potential.

1 Introduction and context

The partnership principle and multi-level governance are key features for the programming and implementation of Cohesion Policy and rural development. The partnership principle describes a collective process involving public authorities at European, national, regional and local levels as well as economic and social partners and bodies representing civil society. This partnership applies to all stages in the programming process, namely the preparation of programmes, implementation, monitoring and evaluation². The partnership helps programmes to focus and coordinate funding opportunities, ease access to resources, provide institutional strength, capacity building and empowerment of players relevant to the funds as well as legitimacy, stability and sustainability of investments (Stott, 2018). The European Code of Conduct on Partnership provides further guidance for good partner involvement (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Key elements of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership

The European Code of Conduct on Partnership presents a framework for Member States to organise meaningful partnerships. In short:

- partners selected should be representative of the relevant stakeholders;
- selection procedures should be transparent and take into account the different institutional and legal frameworks of the Member States and their national and regional competences;
- partnerships should include public authorities, economic and social partners and bodies representing civil society, including environmental partners, community-based and voluntary organisations;
- specific attention should be paid to including groups that may be affected by programmes;
- partners should be involved in the preparation and implementation of the Partnership Agreement and programmes;
- the partners should be represented on the monitoring committees of programmes;
- effective partnership should be facilitated by helping the relevant partners to strengthen their institutional capacity in view of the preparation and implementation of programmes;
- the exchange of experience and mutual learning should be facilitated.

Source: Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 240/2014

This report presents findings on the application of the partnership principle in the preparation of 2021-27 Cohesion Policy, namely in the preparation of Partnership Agreements and programmes for the European Regional Development – ERDF; the European Social Fund – ESF+; and Cohesion Fund – CF). In addition, it presents findings of the application of the partnership principle for rural development, namely in the preparation of Strategic Plans for Common Agriculture Policy, specifically concerning the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development – EAFRD, due to the importance of rural development on regional development in general.

² Glossary for EU regional policy: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index.cfm/en/policy/how/principles/

The 2014-20 regulatory framework strengthened the legal basis for partnership and multi-level governance. This strengthening was well perceived and increased awareness and visibility of the partnership principle. At the same time, stakeholders experienced difficulties mobilising partners for the preparation of the documents (DG REGIO, 2016). During the implementation of the 2014-20 programmes, a number of Managing Authorities faced a range of problems in applying the partnership principle. Common challenges expressed refer to processes of working together, partly due to limited time and resources available to maintain the partnership. In addition, stakeholders perceive a lack of awareness, limited flexibility and time, weak representativeness of partners, lack of transparency of processes and treatment of comments, lack of support, limited learning possibilities (Scott, 2018).

Based on these experiences, a number of interest organisations called for greater emphasis on partnership and multi-level governance in 2021-27 programmes (for example, ERRIN, 2018; UEPME, 2018; EURADA, 2018; Eurochambres, 2020; SME United, 2020). Interest organisations stress particularly a need for strong partner involvement due to greater flexibility in programming as proposed by the European Commission. Interest organisations argue that programmes should take the opportunity of greater flexibility to better account for the realities and respond more effectively to the needs of players in their territories. Partnership and multi-level governance ensure better identification of specific challenges to be addressed by European funds.

The draft 2021-27 regulatory framework kept similar reference to the partnership principle as the 2014-20 regulations, although the Council wanted to reduce references to partnership in the 2021-27 regulations. Article 6 of the Draft Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) (COM(2018) 375 final) requires the organisation and involvement of the partnership for the preparation and implementation of Partnership Agreements, ERDF, ESF+ and CF programmes. Likewise, Article 94 of the Draft regulation on Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plans (COM(2018) 392 final) requires the organisation and involvement of partners in the preparation of these plans drawn up by Member States. Unlike Article 6 of the Draft CPR, the draft CAP regulation does not refer to the Code of Conduct on Partnership (Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 240/2014). Nevertheless, the partnership principle remains important for Cohesion Policy and rural development programmes, similarly as for the 2014-20 funding period.

This report addresses ongoing application of the partnership principle in 2021-27 programming. Stakeholder involvement is ongoing for the majority of programmes until their submission to the Commission. Hence, the following presents findings on the perceived processes for balanced representation of

partners, involvement of partners per section of the document, challenges and benefits, conditions for good partner involvement, and expectations of the partnership during the implementation up to January 2021. Where possible, a comparison is made with findings on the application of the partnership principle for 2014-20 Cohesion Policy and rural development.

1.1 Methodology

Findings in this report are based on document studies, results from an online survey and interviews. A number of documents collecting experiences and expectations on partnership and multi-level governance in the 2021-27 programming period were reviewed. These findings provided context and supplementary information to survey findings.

Findings from an online survey provided the basis for this report (see also the annex). This survey was performed among programme authorities and their partners for 2021-27 programmes. The survey ran from 19 November 2020 until 19 January 2021. It collected 128 insights on programme partnerships and 61 insights on partnerships of Partnership Agreements.

Survey findings present insights from a variety of players, which increases the robustness of aggregated findings at European level. 69% of the insights for Operational Programmes come from partners, mostly representing local and regional authorities (37%). 31% of the respondents for Operational Programmes represent Managing Authorities or Intermediate bodies. The remaining respondents represent national authorities, representatives of socio-economic partners, civil society organisations or representatives of research and education. 49% of the respondents replied for a programme at regional level, and 39% for a programme at national level, covering 23 different EU Member States. In addition, 12% of survey respondents provided insights on Interreg programme partnerships. Despite good overall response rates, the response rates by programmes of different funds were too low to compare survey results across different types of programmes.

Insights have been collected for 19 out of the 27 Partnership Agreements. Insights on partnerships for Partnership Agreements largely reflect partner perceptions. Only one national coordination body responsible for the coordination and running of the partnership replied to the survey. 45% of respondents for Partnership Agreements represent local and regional authorities, and 19% of respondents represent national authorities, other than the national coordination body. The remaining respondents represent socio-economic partners, civil society organisations or representatives of research and education.

The survey structure was based on the survey conducted in 2015 for a DG REGIO study assessing the application of the partnership principle and multi-level governance of approved 2014-20 programmes. As such, findings from the current study can be compared with the experience for the previous programming period.

15 phone interviews were conducted to complement the survey findings and to better capture the practices of partner involvement. 13 representatives of local and regional authorities as well as two social partners were interviewed. Interviewees represent a wide variety of European territories, i.e., two interviewees from northern, three from southern, three from eastern, two from western and three from central European cities and regions, and involved in national, regional and territorial cooperation programmes. As such, a variety of practices from across Europe were collected.

1.2 Reading guide

The next chapter presents an overview of possible Cohesion Policy and rural development programmes for the 2021-27 funding period³. This overview provides a context to understand the different levels of involvement of local and regional authorities in programming and implementation phases. Local and regional authorities are involved as Managing Authorities, Intermediate Bodies, Monitoring Committee members, or through the partnership. In each of these capacities they have different opportunities to apply the partnership principle.

Chapters three and four present main findings on the application of the partnership principle. Chapter three presents partnerships in Operational Programmes. It shows the evolution of partnerships since 2014, the extent to which local and regional authorities manage to highlight a need for territorial-specific measures for sustainable and digital transitions, main challenges for stakeholder involvement and required adaptations implemented to respect COVID-19 measures. Chapter four presents findings on partner involvement for the same themes for Partnership Agreements.

Finally, chapter five presents the main conclusions and recommendations. In short, partnerships are important for place-based Cohesion Policy and rural development. However, several aspects hinder the utilisation of their full potential, notably problems with the mobilisation of stakeholders. Such challenges were already raised for 2014-20 partnerships. In other words, the application of the partnership principle is slowly evolving. Possibly increased use

³ A complete overview of 2021-27 programmes could not be developed while the programmes and Partnership Agreements are under preparation

of digital solutions of stakeholder involvement and interaction could speed up this evolution and ensure that partnerships live up to their potential.

2 Local and regional authorities in 2021-27 programmes

The preparation of 2021-27 programmes and Partnership Agreements is in full swing. Even though the programmes and Partnership Agreements have not been approved and published yet, various sources illustrate possible involvement of local and regional authorities for 2021-27 Cohesion Policy and rural development.

2.1 Territorial focus of 2021-27 programmes

The territorial focus of Cohesion Policy and rural development programmes hints at possible stronger or weaker involvement of local and regional authorities. One may assume more involvement of local and regional authorities in regional programmes, for example as Managing Authority, Intermediate Body, Monitoring Committee member or via the partnership. Of course, many exemptions exist to this general hypothesis, depending on the governance arrangements of the programme. Local and regional authorities can be strongly involved in programmes at national level in the capacity of Intermediate Body or via well-functioning partnerships. The following presents a few programme characteristics that help to better estimate the inclusion of local and regional authorities in 2021-27 programmes.

14 Members States have likely only programmes at national level (Figure 2.1). Three groups of countries possibly with programmes only at national levels can be defined. Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechia and Slovakia are Member States that receive considerable sums of EU funds for Cohesion Policy, rural development and Just Transition and have multiple thematic national programmes. Croatia and Lithuania have similar types of funds but receive relatively more funds. Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Malta and Luxembourg have the least number of programmes and receive relatively the lowest amounts of funds among all EU Member States

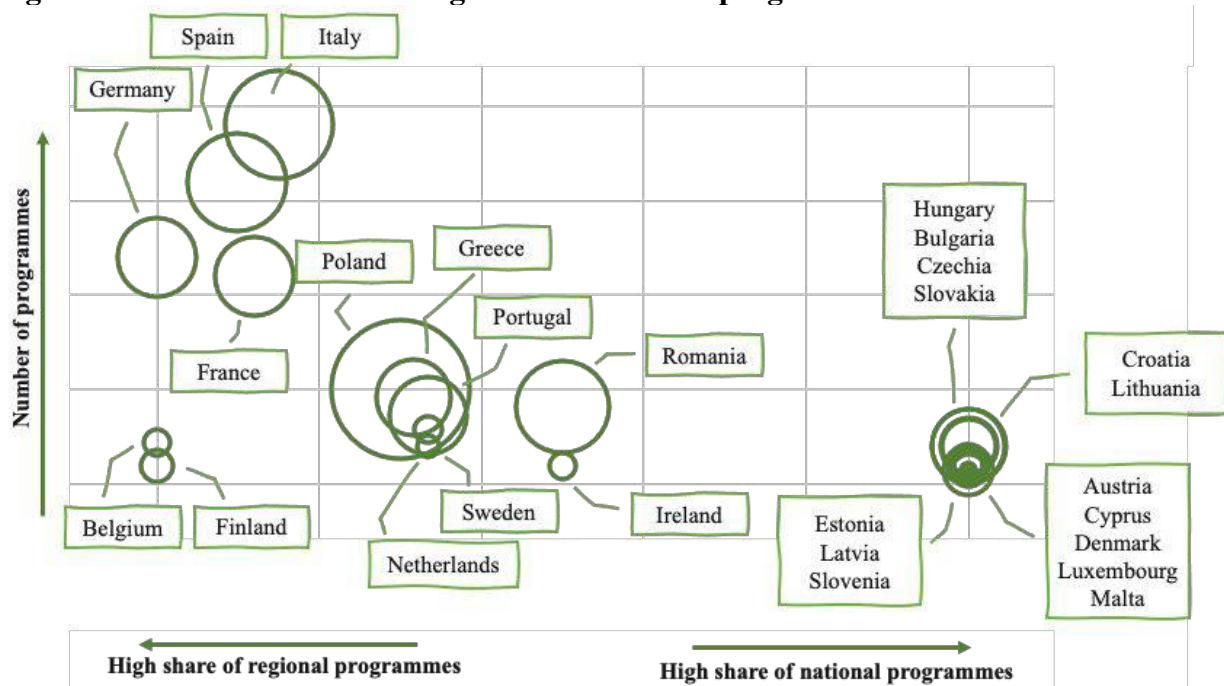
About 70% of the mainstream Operational Programmes are likely to focus on subnational territories. Regional programmes can be found in 13 out of the 27 EU Member States (Figure 2.1).

The share of Member States with programmes at subnational is more or less equal per fund, but highest for ERDF and multi-fund programmes and lowest for EAFRD and ESF programmes. All CF programmes or CF programmes in combination with ERDF are at national levels. Prevailing governance systems, the size of the country and volume of EU funding are most important factors explaining differences in the share of subnational programmes per Member State:

- Large EU countries and countries with federal and decentralised systems propose programmes at regional levels, notably in Belgium and Germany. Finland proposes regional multi-fund and EAFRD programmes for its mainland and autonomous region of Åland.
- A majority of programmes in France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Romania are at regional levels; these countries also receive considerable sums of EU funds for Cohesion Policy, rural development and Just Transition. Few sector-specific Cohesion Policy programmes at national level complement regional programmes in these countries.
- ERDF programmes are the only programmes at regional levels in the Netherlands, Ireland and Sweden. In the first two countries, all ERDF programmes are at regional levels. Sweden also proposes a national ERDF programme.

Programmes at subnational levels are likely to be performed by regional authorities. Only one example of a local authority as Managing Authority is known. This concerns the regional Operational Programme for West Netherlands. The municipality of Rotterdam is the Managing Authority of the 2014-20 programme and is likely to continue in this role for the 2021-27 programme. In few cases city regions such as Berlin, Bremen or Brussels are responsible for the implementation of programmes.

Figure 2.1 Balance between regional and national programmes for 2021-27 EU funds*



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021*

**Based on preliminary programme information December 2020. The European Commission had not yet published the list of approved programmes. Interreg programmes have not been considered in this Figure. The size of the circle represents estimated budget shares for Cohesion Policy, EAFRD and Just Transition Fund per Member State (Bachtler et al., 2020)*

Regardless of the geographic focus of programmes, governance arrangements define the level of involvement of local and regional authorities in the end. Until the finalisation of programmes, these are unknown. Examples of diverse governance arrangements for 2014-2020 funds illustrate the diversity of possible levels of involvement.

Few programmes at national level have a regional focus. Local and regional authorities may act in these cases as intermediate bodies, developing and implementing the programme in their territory. The Slovakian Integrated Regional Operational Programme is one example of such a programme. Also, national programmes in Austria and the Netherlands, among others, have strong regional influences. For example, regional authorities in Austria act as intermediate bodies for the implementation of Austrian programmes and are as such strongly involved in the development and selection of concrete actions.

By contrast, some authorities of programmes at regional levels have less autonomy for programme implementation due to strong national coordination. In these cases, national agencies support the implementation of regional programmes, for example by joint monitor systems and e-cohesion systems. The implementation of regional 2014-20 ERDF programmes was strongly coordinated at national levels in Spain and Sweden and to a lesser degree in France (Gløersen & Corbinau, 2019).

2.2 Observed changes for Cohesion Policy and rural development programmes

Programme websites and draft Partnership Agreements suggest that the majority of 2021-27 programmes will have the same territorial focus as the 2014-20 programmes. Few changes have been observed that impact directly the involvement of local and regional authorities in Cohesion Policy and rural development.

Some changes refer to rural development programmes (EAFRD). These become part of the CAP Strategic Plans, following the draft regulations. As such the rural development programmes become less visible next to the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (CAP Pillar I). At the same time, the draft CAP regulations keep a reference to partnership and multi-level governance, even though the EAFRD does not fall under the draft CPR anymore. Uncertainty about future rural development programmes is also expressed by interviewees. Interviewees suggest

the elaboration of a CAP Strategic Plan at federal level in Germany. How this will impact decentralised implementation of the rural development programmes (EAFRD) is yet unknown (interviews Böhm and Rosenthal, 2021).

The most notable changes are found in Romania, where currently, seven Operational Programmes are being implemented for EAFRD, ESF, ERDF and CF. Each of these programmes invests in activities across the country. For the next period, the draft Partnership Agreement proposes 16 Operational Programmes, in addition to the CAP Strategic Plan covering EAFRD. Nine of these programmes are expected at national level, each with a specific thematic focus. The other eight programmes are expected at regional levels, supported by ERDF. This implies an incremental change. Romanian regional authorities are currently strongly involved as intermediate bodies in the national Operational Programme for Regional Development. In this capacity, they are already involved in priority setting and selection of concrete actions, tasks that they will also have as Managing Authority of the 2021-27 programmes.

In France the number of regional programmes will largely decline. The 2021-27 regional programmes will be at the level of the regions following the 2016 reform and merger of old regions.

The number of Polish regional programmes remains the same as for the 2014-20 funding period. One observable change regards the geography of the national programme for Eastern Poland by including Mazowieckie, with the exception of Warsaw and its nine surrounding counties.

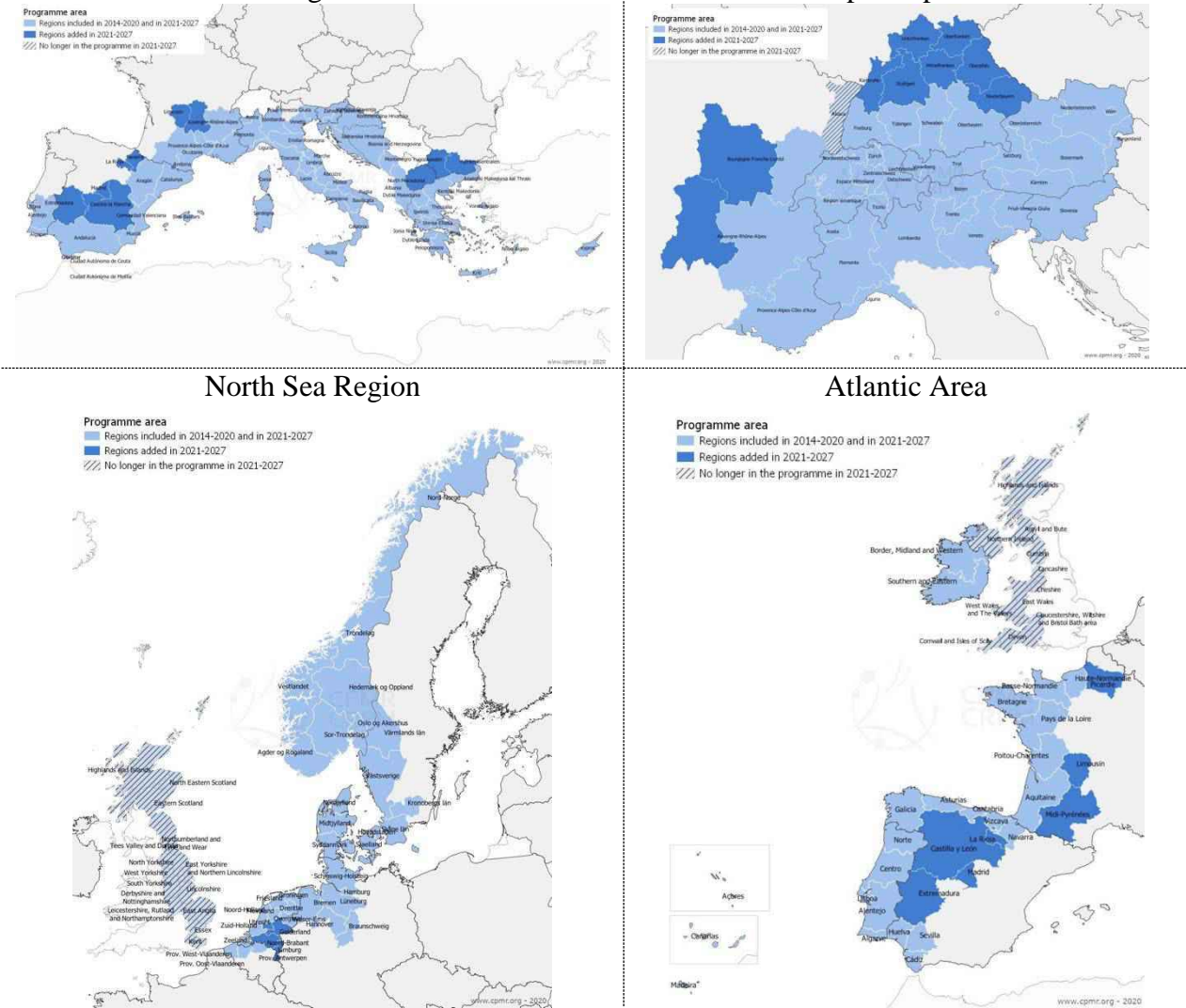
A few 2014-20 programmes could not be found among proposed 2021-27 programmes. No information was found for the continuation of the Hungarian “Territorial and Settlement Development” and “Competitive Central Hungary” programmes and the Czech “Prague Growth Pole” programme. The exclusion of these from the 2021-27 programmes may imply less strong involvement of local and regional authorities, given that these programmes focused directly on subnational territories.

Several changes of programme geographies are observed for Interreg programmes. The continuation of the cross-border programmes for the 2Seas and Channel is still uncertain due to BREXIT. For the same reason, the UK will no longer be part of the North-West Europe transnational cooperation programme. At the same time, a few Dutch and German regions will be added to the programme (NWE, 2021). Also, other transnational cooperation programmes may cover more regions in the 2021-27 period. Regions are added to the MED, Alpine Space, North Sea Region, and Atlantic Area programmes (Figure 2.2). In total,

more regions may be covered in Interreg programmes in the next funding period, despite BREXIT.

Other observed changes concern mostly the thematic focus of national programmes. As a result, Croatia may have three programmes instead of one for Cohesion Policy: an ERDF programme “Competitiveness and Cohesion”, a multi-fund programme (ERDF-CF-JTF) “Integrated territorial programme”, and an ESF+ programme “Efficient human resources” (interview Barbaric, 2021). In general, the proposed thematic focus of national programmes will be amended in line with new policy objectives at the European level and with recent development needs in the countries. Examples of these changes have been found for Hungary, Bulgaria, and Slovakia.

Figure 2.2 Possible geographic changes to transnational coordination programmes



Dark blue shaded regions will be added to the programme geography for the 2021-27 period

Source: CPMR, 2020a

2.3 Observed changes in relation to new EU funded programmes

For the 2021-27 period, EU regulations propose several new types of programmes, such as those for the Just Transition Fund as well as those in relation to “Next Generation EU”. Next Generation EU (COM(2020) 441 final/2) proposals include a combination of different types of support providing up to EUR 750 billion for the 2014-20 and 2021-27 programmes. Some support will be provided via ERDF or ESF+ and therefore they are directly relevant for this study.

- The Just Transition Fund (JTF) (COM(2020) 22) will be implemented under shared management by Member States and the European Commission. ERDF and ESF+ resources will be made available for territories most challenged by EU carbon neutral ambitions and the effects of the EU Green Deal. Member States will prepare one or more territorial Just Transition Plans, outlining the transition process until 2030. As such, these plans closely follow the requirements for regular Cohesion Policy programmes. Hence, the involvement of the partnership could be imagined for the preparation and implementation of these plans.
- RescEU focuses on civil protection and humanitarian aid and will be funded via ESF+. Where applicable, the fund will be implemented under shared management. Hence, the involvement of the partnership could be imagined for the preparation and implementation of programmes under this fund.
- The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is – financially – the main instrument under ‘Next Generation EU’. The RRF will be directly managed by the European Commission and provides financial support to improve the resilience and adjustment capacity of Member States. It is closely linked to the governance framework of the European Semester. Member States request support from RRF and submit national recovery and resilience plans consistent with their National Reform Programme, National Energy and Climate Plan, Just Transition Plan, Partnership Agreement and Operational Programmes under EU funds and Country Specific Recommendations. Even though national recovery and resilience plans are technically not bound to the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, stakeholder involvement has an added value. Indeed, the regulations recommend the inclusion of local and regional authorities in consultations. A recent consultation by CoR and CEMR showed poor inclusion of local and regional authorities in the preparation of national plans. Nine out of eleven respondents reported that their organisation had little or no impact. Several umbrella organisations of local and regional authorities made

attempts to get involved but remained unsuccessful, partly due to unwillingness of national authorities (CoR & CEMR, 2021).

- The EU4Health Programme (COM(2020) 405) will be directly managed by the European Commission and makes use of several instruments such as the ESF+, the European Regional Development Fund, and Horizon Europe, the Digital Europe Programme, and the Connecting Europe Facility. These programmes may not be directly subject to the European Code of Conduct on Partnership; nevertheless, their implementation may benefit from partnership processes.
- REACT-EU is part of Next Generation EU and enables an extension of 2014-20 European Structural and Investment Fund programmes. Hence, the ongoing partnerships remain active.

In a few cases, specific programmes are being proposed for the Just Transition Fund, funded via ERDF, or RescEU, funded by ESF+, notably in Poland and Bulgaria. In other cases, it remains unclear how the new types of programmes will be addressed in the different Member States, as also observed by Eurochambres (2020). Possibly, Just Transition and RescEU funds may be integrated into existing programmes.

In short, Next Generation EU provides opportunities for partnership involvement. However, first impressions indicate that the opportunities are not fully seized. Moreover, strong involvement of EU and national authorities may limit opportunities for local and regional authorities to ensure that investments via these programmes fit their specific development needs (Böhme & Lürer, 2020).

Another risk with Next Generation EU relates to their application and accountability rules. They may be simpler to apply than the rules for Cohesion Policy or rural development. This may make Next Generation EU more interesting for players than Cohesion Policy or rural development (CPMR, 2020b).

3 2021-27 Programme partnerships

Regulations for Cohesion Policy and rural development require the use of partnerships with balanced representation of partners in the preparation and implementation of programmes. The Draft Common Provision Regulation even specifies the need to respect the European Code of Conduct on Partnership. Consequently, programmes must respect balanced representation of local and regional authorities as well as other societal partners and ensure that they can adequately provide inputs to the programme. The following illustrates how partnerships have evolved since the preparation of 2014-20 programmes, the extent to which local and regional authorities manage to safeguard the consideration of territorial specificities, the main challenges for stakeholder involvement, and the effects of COVID-19 on stakeholder involvement.

3.1 Evolution of the application of the partnership principle

The partnership principle is generally well respected for the preparation of 2021-27 programmes, similarly as for 2014-20 programmes when the partnership principle was strengthened via the Code of Conduct. At the same time, the application of the partnership principle for 2014-20 programmes experienced some challenges, notably, the mobilisation of stakeholders (DG REGIO, 2016).

A comparison of key partnership elements between the 2014-20 and the 2021-27 programmes shows few changes (Table 3.1). Smaller differences in percentage figures may be explained by fewer responses to the survey on 2021-27 partnerships. For both programming periods, a little over half of survey respondents assess partnerships as well balanced, without any stakeholder group under- or over-represented; a large majority perceive the selection procedure as transparent and consider the time for assessing documents in preparation for meetings sufficient; and about 70% of respondents perceive that feedback is treated equally between partners. In short, it seems that partner involvement is hardly improving despite (1) the guidance presented in the Code of Conduct and (2) the need to do so, as observed five years ago.

Changing partnership processes takes time. Many partnerships rely on established cooperation practices and experience for stakeholder involvement, as was also concluded for the preparation of 2014-20 programmes (DG REGIO, 2016). Indeed, 21% of respondents did not perceive any changes to the partnership compared with 2014-20. In these cases, stakeholder involvement may be based on standing cooperation of public authorities across different levels and between public authorities. Regular meetings may give involved stakeholders the

impression that the partnership is working well, while they remain unaware of the possible absence or under-representation of partners.

Table 3.1 Perceived application of selected key partnership elements for the preparation of 2014-20 and 2021-27 programmes

	2014-20 ⁴	2021-27
Well balanced representation of stakeholders	59%	56%
Transparent selection procedures	81%	87%
Sufficient time for assessment of documents and preparation for participation	86%	88%
Equal treatment of feedback to the programme	74%	70%

Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings DG REGIO, 2016 for 2014-20 data.*

Box 3.1 Established partnerships in Finland

Partnerships for the preparation of Finnish Cohesion Policy programmes have changed very little from the experience in 2014-20 programmes. Regional authorities maintain good partnerships in the region and with national authorities. These partnerships are useful for preparing not only EU programmes but also national and regional policies. Long-term experiences contributed to the development of formal and informal relations among the colleagues directly involved in the preparation of Finnish Cohesion Policy programmes. As a result, authorities keep each other updated on progress and new insights on regulatory requirements. Through well-established partnerships, preparatory measures run smoothly and can be adapted quickly to new requirements.

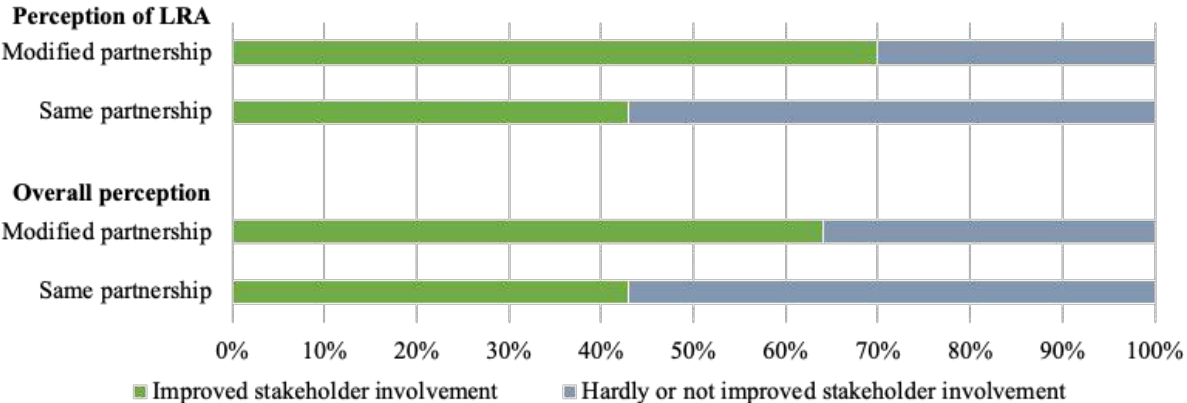
Source: *Based on the interview with Keisanen, 2021*

Even though current perceptions on the application of the partnership principle is comparable to the perceptions for 2014-20 programmes (Table 3.1), a majority of survey respondents perceive changed partnerships for the preparation of 2021-27 programmes (Figure 3.1). 9% of the respondents perceive that the partnership is completely new, either via an open call for partnership or via a pre-selection of the Managing Authority. Among these are three representatives of Managing Authorities, namely for the regional Operational Programme for Western Macedonia in Greece, a national Polish ESF+ programme, and a national Bulgarian ERDF-CF programme. The majority of respondents (70%) perceive that the partnership is largely the same but with some modifications. Survey respondents who perceived a change of partnership compared with 2014-20 are generally more positive about the application of the partnership principle than survey respondents who perceived no changes. Few survey respondents did not see any improvements in partnership involvement in the last seven years. This concerns partly respondents that perceived that partnership remained the same as well as respondents that were only involved via public consultations until now.

⁴ Survey respondents’ perceptions on partnerships in 2014-20 programmes were weighted by programme. For example, survey respondents of 59% of all programmes perceived no under- or over-representation of partners and therefore assessed the partnership as balanced. Fewer replies to the survey for 2021-27 only allowed for aggregation of survey respondents’ perceptions at European level.

Modifications to partnership compositions are mostly for the better. 64% of respondents who perceived a modified partnership felt that stakeholder involvement had improved compared with the 2014-20 experience (Figure 3.1). This percentage is even higher among local and regional authorities (LRA). 70% of survey respondents representing local and regional authorities perceived a modified partnership and stakeholder improvement. Among respondents who perceived the partnership unchanged, 43% felt that stakeholder involvement had improved.

Figure 3.1 Perception of improved stakeholder involvement by perceived changes in partnerships⁵



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=80)*

Box 3.2 Improved partnership approaches for Croatian programmes

Lessons learnt from 2014-20 partnership processes improved stakeholder involvement for the preparation of 2021-27 Croatian Cohesion Policy programmes, according to a representative for the Osijek-Baranja development agency.

The interviewee described that new EU Member State staff at the national ministry had insufficient capacities and experience to guide partnership processes in the preparation of the 2014-20 programme. As a result, the process was run by external consultants who were less aware of the particularities of some of the partners. Clearer roles of the national ministry and regional development lead to improvements in partnership processes, according to the interviewee.

For the preparation of 2021-27 programmes, regional development agencies were engaged as facilitators of participatory processes in their respective territories. Regional development agencies helped to actively involve counties and cities in the preparation of programmes. In doing so, they were guided by representatives of the Ministry in charge of preparation of the programmes and currently acting as Managing Authority for the 2014-20 Cohesion Policy programme.

Source: *Based on the interview with Barbaric, 2021*

⁵ In 2016, among survey respondents who identified a new or modified partnership, 60% perceived that stakeholder involvement had improved compared with 2007-13 practices. Thus, the perceived effect of changes between the two periods is similar.

Modifications contribute to making programme partnerships more balanced⁶. Of respondents who perceived stakeholder involvement as (generally) improved, 59% perceive stakeholder representation as balanced. In particular, representation of local and regional authorities is perceived as improved. Overall, 54% of respondents perceive that local and regional authorities are well represented in programme partnerships. This share increased to 63% among survey respondents who perceived the partnership as changed.

Changed partnerships positively affected the way feedback is treated. 70% of survey respondents representing programme partners have the impression that comments are considered and treated the same way for different types of partners. This share is higher among respondents who perceive that stakeholder involvement has improved compared with 2014-20 practices (Table 3.2). Only one survey respondent does not have the impression that comments are treated equally.

Table 3.2 Perceived equal treatment of comments by programme partners against the perceived change of stakeholder involvement⁷

	Improved stakeholder involvement	Mostly improved	Hardly or not improved
Equal treatment	38%	17%	26%
Mostly	54%	83%	26%
Hardly	8%	0%	44%
Not at all	0%	0%	4%

Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=52)*

Modified partnerships positively affected the perceived involvement of local authorities in programme preparation. Programme preparation generally involves several rounds of drafting, review and discussion, consultations and sharing information. Partner involvement generally differs between these stages with few players involved in drafting and many players involved via public consultation. Survey results show that the involvement of local and regional authorities in programme preparation changed to some degree between 2014-20

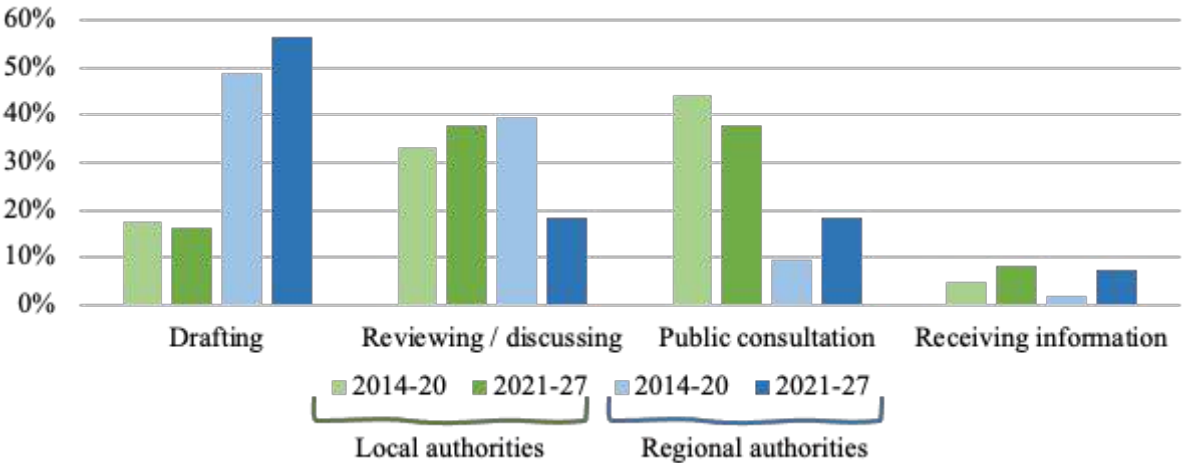
⁶ Balanced partnerships consider proportional involvement of different types of players. Programme authorities apply different methods to define proportionality, making it sometimes difficult to assess for the partners, and thus survey respondents, whether the partnership is balanced. Programmes may define a balanced representation for example based on decision making powers of partners, according to the size of territory or population a partner represents, interest in the policy field, or other criteria. If such criteria are applied the partnership may look imbalanced in total numbers but be proportionate.

⁷ In 2016, the majority of respondents who perceived improved stakeholder involvement also perceived that comments were treated equally. Only the degree to which respondents perceived equal treatment of comments differs from the current assessment. In 2016, 55% of respondents perceived equal treatment and improved stakeholder involvement. 25% perceived equal treatment and mostly improved stakeholder involvement. 31% perceived mostly equal treatment and improved stakeholder involvement, and 68% perceived mostly equal treatment of comments and mostly improved stakeholder involvement.

and 2021-27 (Figure 3.2). Slightly more local authorities (green shades) were involved in reviewing and discussing the programme and less were involved via public consultation. More regional authorities (blue shades) were involved in drafting programmes and public consultation. Fewer regional authorities were involved in reviewing and discussing draft programmes.

Changes become more pronounced among survey respondents who perceived changes in partnerships. Respondents that perceived the partnership as improved assume that 20% of the local authorities are involved in drafting the programme. And 50% is involved in reviewing and discussing the draft programme. Survey respondents that perceived an improved partnership assume thus stronger involvement of local authorities in programming⁸.

Figure 3.2 Changed involvement of local and regional authorities in the development of 2014-20 and 2021-27 programmes



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=84)

All in all, changed partnerships are generally well perceived. However, a comparison of key elements for good partnership involvement between programming exercises for 2014-20 and 2021-27 programmes shows only small changes. In other words, partner involvement is improving slowly. Changes are small, and it takes time before changes in partnerships result in improved partnership processes.

3.2 Partnership contributions to ensure local and regional specificities for sustainable and digital transitions

Local and regional authorities are crucial for making place-based investment decisions in line with EU sustainable and digital ambitions, as spelled out in the EU Green Deal and EU Digital Strategy. The partnership is one way to make sure that specific challenges for local and regional authorities are considered to achieve

⁸ Possibly survey respondents who observed changes in partnerships overestimate changes.

these ambitions. In fact, the European network of cities and regions for the social economy even calls to update the Code of Conduct on Partnership providing common criteria, detailed indications, procedures and tools to enhance the implementation of the partnership principle in favour of better consideration of local impact and needs (REVES, 2018). Indeed, transforming European societies to sustainable and digital places requires joint efforts, not least due to diverse starting points and impacts of these objectives among Europe's territories, as highlighted in numerous reports for the European Committee of the Regions (e.g., Borett et al., 2020; McNeill et al., 2020; Gancheva et al., 2020; and Gancheva et al., 2019). Joint efforts require the involvement of representatives of different policy fields, municipal, regional, national, EU and other authorities, as well as various society groups (Territorial Agenda 2030, 2020). Hence, the application of the partnership principle may be beneficial to achieve these sustainable and green transitions.

Local and regional levels are considered for sustainable transitions in the preparation of 2021-27 programmes. 45% of respondents perceive that either local and regional instruments or the local context are in line with EU Green Deal objectives (green shades in Figure 3.3). Interviewees involved in partnerships of Dutch and Irish EAFRD programmes emphasised that green processes and climate change were among the main topics discussed. An interviewee for the Austrian-Italian cross-border cooperation programme acknowledges that climate change and the shift to a circular economy have been pressing issues in the region and in discussions of the partnership. Programme authorities took these aspects on board in the draft programme by proposing a specific priority axis focusing on climate change and adaptation. The shift to the circular economy has been included as a specific objective under another priority axis focusing on innovation (Interview Stampfer, 2021).

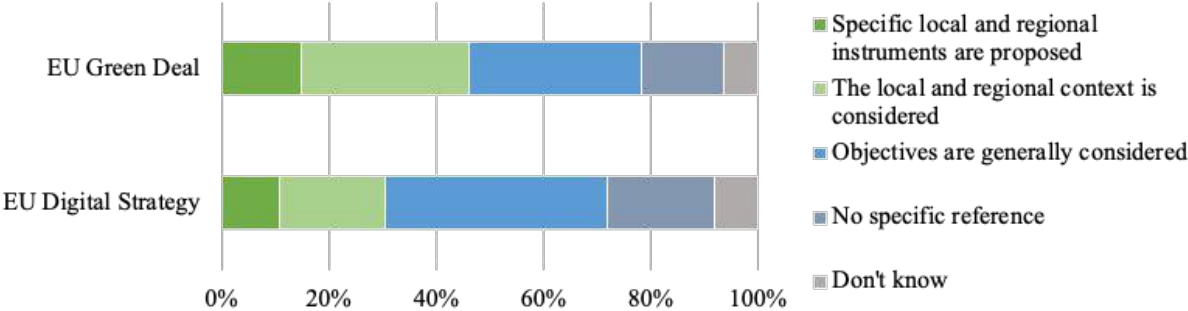
Local and regional instruments are particularly relevant for the EU Green Deal objective of “achieving EU climate ambitions for 2030 and 2050”, followed by “accelerating the shift to sustainable” and “smart mobility and building and renovating in an energy- and resource-efficient way”. Survey respondents perceive that programmes least frequently refer to the Green Deal's objective of a “fair, healthy and environmental-friendly food system” (see also Box 3.3).

Local and regional aspects are considered to a minor degree when addressing EU objectives in line with the EU digital strategy. 29% of respondents observe that either local and regional instruments are proposed or that the local context is considered in line with EU Green Deal objectives (green shades in Figure 3.3).

Local and regional instruments are particularly perceived for the EU Digital Strategy objective for a “fair and competitive digital economy”. Only a few

respondents assume that local and regional aspects are considered for the objective of “Europe as a global digital player” (see also Box 3.3).

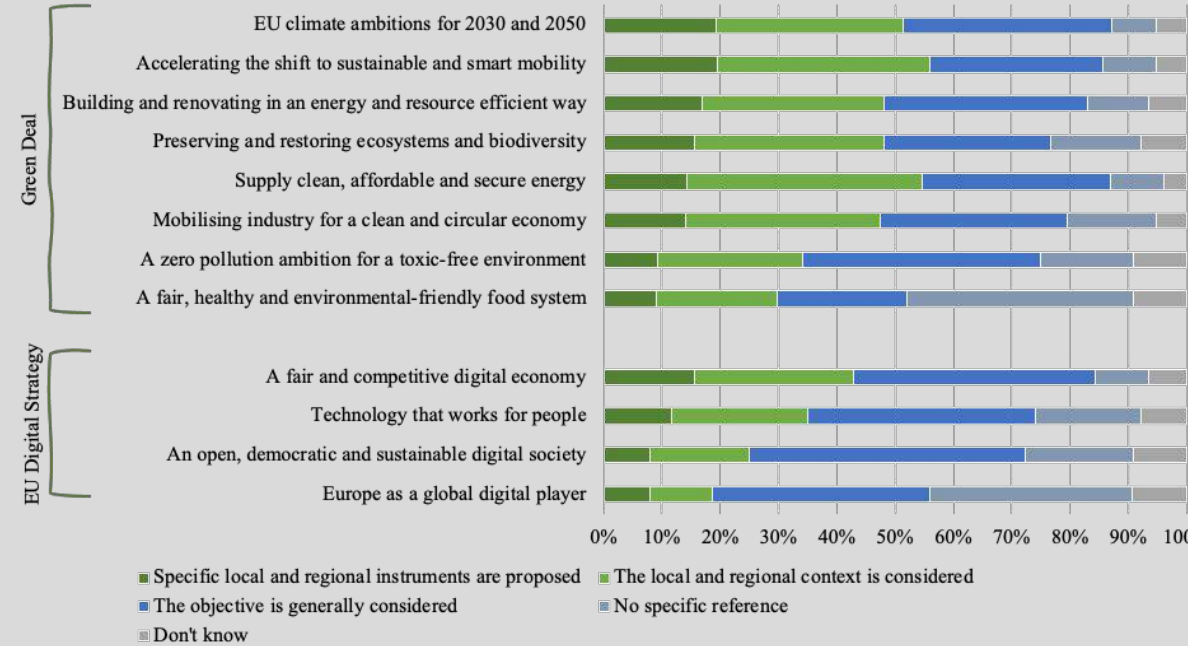
Figure 3.3 Perceived relevance of local and regional levels to achieving EU objectives



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=79)

Box 3.3 Perceived relevance of local and regional levels to achieving EU objectives via Operational Programmes

Perceptions on local and regional aspects differ slightly per objective of the Green Deal and Digital Strategy. The figure below details the overall perceived relevance of local and regional levels by objective of these documents.



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=79)
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

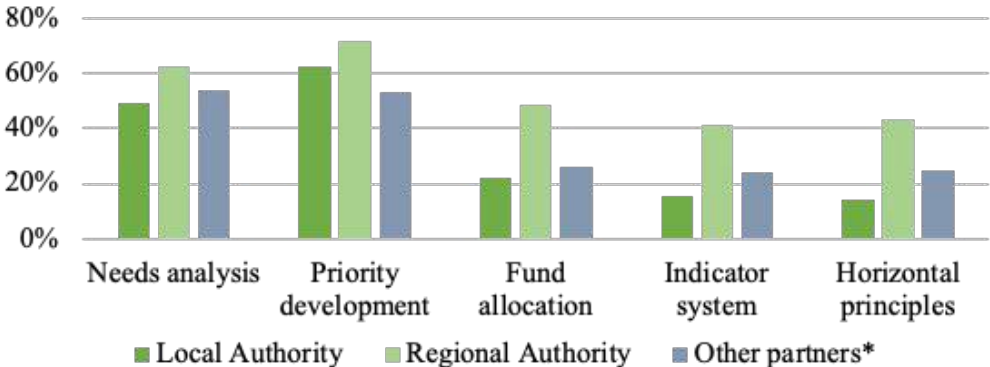
Partners particularly express needs for local and regional specificities to sustainable and digital transitions for the needs analysis and priority development parts of Operational Programmes. Partnerships are predominantly used for the needs analysis and priority development parts of programmes. A higher number of partners and a larger variety of different stakeholders perceive that they contribute to these parts of the programme (Figure

3.4). Less involvement of partners in other parts of Operational Programmes increases risks that territorial specificities become inconsistent between parts of operational programmes. Only regional authorities are still well involved in the development of fund allocation, indicator system and horizontal principles parts of programmes.

In general, local and regional authorities are well involved in the development of different parts of the programme. Hence, they have the possibility to contribute to integrated programmes in line with EU sustainable and digital ambitions. Even though fewer local and regional authorities are involved for fund allocation, indicator system and horizontal principles parts of programmes in total number, local and regional authorities remain relatively important partners for these parts of the programme, due to even lower involvement of other types of partners, notably societal players, for these parts of the programme.

Local and regional authorities are least involved for the development of the programmes in national and sector specific programmes. In these programmes they are mainly involved for the needs analysis and priority development.

Figure 3.4 Perceived involvement of local and regional authorities by part of Operational Programmes*⁹



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=85)*
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers. Other Partners include representatives of national authorities, business associations or chambers of commerce, social partners, education and research partners, and civil society.

Local and regional development strategies enhance contributions of the partnership for sustainable and digital transitions. Local and regional development strategies are useful documents enabling the uptake of specific local and regional challenges in Operational Programmes. They enhance the arguments of local and regional authorities in discussions and could indirectly contribute to development of the programmes beyond partnership involvement. Local and

⁹ For the preparation of 2014-20 programmes, most partners were also involved in the priority development and needs analysis parts of the document. Similar to what is shown in the table, the share of partners in the needs analysis part is slightly lower than average for national programmes.

regional strategies also help to ensure that specific challenges to a green and digital future are considered in 2021-27 Operational Programmes for Cohesion Policy and rural development.

Box 3.4 Need for territorial data on EU objectives

Various interviewees stressed the need for territorial data for the preparation of programmes. Detailed data on low geographic scales facilitated the formulation of arguments for stakeholder inputs in the partnership and allowed for differentiation of the programme from others.

A representative from the Managing Authority of the EAFRD programme in Marche, Italy, highlights the availability of data as an important aspect for setting up Operational Programmes. The representative explained that MA and partners should have clear, clean, available and updated data on the context they are working on and that all the actors involved should know to what extent the previous programme has had an impact on the economic and social development of the territory. Without a good analysis of the context, no one can lobby, suggest, or propose wise measures and actions, or recommend any specific strategic direction over another one (based on the interview with Montresor, 2021).

A representative of a Romanian Managing Authority specified a lack of territorial data in relation to EU objectives. The representative highlights the fact that for the previous programming period, more helpful documents with clear targets were available, such as the Fifth report on the Cohesion Policy and the Europe 2020 Strategy. Also, the Europe 2020 strategy covered several areas of intervention. Currently, the EU Green Deal and the Seventh Cohesion Policy report from 2017 provide less support than the ones mentioned here for the previous programming period. The interviewee expected a strategy or a number of guidelines from the Commission to better understand what the Commission wants, in a manner similar to the previous period (based on the interview with Niculescu, 2021).

Local and regional strategies are mainly used for the needs analysis and priority development (Table 3.3). Local and regional strategies contribute to elements of Operational Programmes that are similar to the partnership (see Figure 3.4). At the same time, a relatively high proportion of survey respondents are unaware of the use of local and regional strategies in the development of programmes. This proportion is relatively higher among representatives from local authorities and non-public partners and partners involved in the preparation of programmes at national levels.

A higher proportion of respondents involved in the preparation of regional programmes are aware of the use of local and regional strategies for various elements of the Operational Programme. In addition, higher proportions of respondents assume the use of local and regional strategies for needs analysis, fund allocation, horizontal principle and indicator systems in regional programmes than in national programmes.

Table 3.3 Proportion of respondents who perceive the use of local and regional strategies per stage of programme development*

	Overall	Regional OP	National OP
Needs analysis	77%	76%	66%
Priority development	76%	73%	72%
Fund allocation	45%	51%	41%
Horizontal principles	35%	41%	28%
Indicator system	32%	39%	21%
Don't know	17%	10%	28%

Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=82, 41 for regional OP, 29 for national OP, the remaining answers include Interreg OPs or unidentified programmes)*

*Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

Partnerships only partially contribute to ensuring that local and regional specificities for sustainable and digital transitions are considered in 2021-27 programmes. To sum up, survey results hint at only partial take-up of specific instruments or consideration of territory-specific contexts in line with EU objectives for the Green Deal and Digital Strategy. Partners’ efforts to emphasise the need for territory-specific elements seem to be most successful for the needs analysis and priority development. However, less involvement of partners in other parts of Operational Programmes increases risks that territorial specificities become inconsistent between various parts of operational programmes. Moreover, not every part of developing Operational Programmes seems to be a joint effort between all types of partners. Even in cases where all partners may be represented, there may be a difference between perceived representation of partners and practical involvement of partners as highlighted by SME United (2020). In short, other means to safeguard the take-up of local impact and needs in Operational Programmes may be needed.

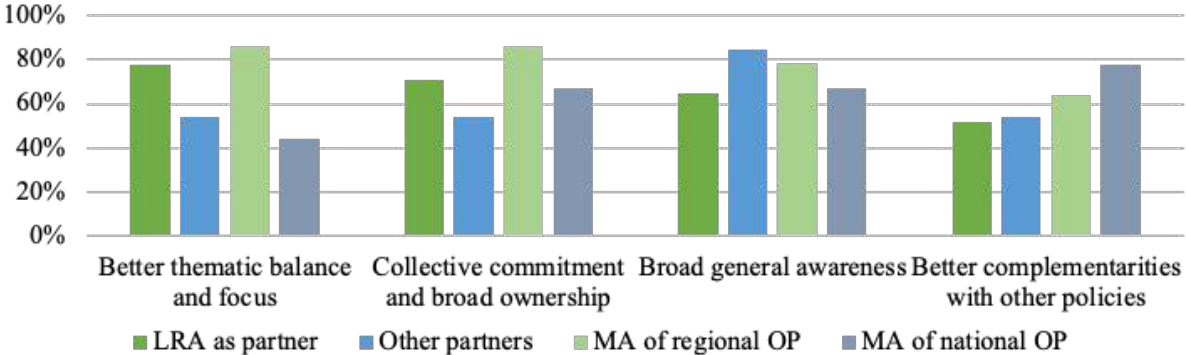
3.4 Challenges hampering contributions of local and regional authorities in programme preparation

Partnership and multi-level governance have a clear added value in enhancing the effectiveness of the implementation of Cohesion Policy and rural development. Partnership practices have the potential to enhance collective commitment and ownership of EU policies, increase available knowledge, expertise and viewpoints in the design and implementation of strategies, and ensure greater transparency in decision-making processes (Stott, 2018). Survey findings suggest different perceptions of these benefits among the players (Figure 3.5).

Collective commitment and broad ownership as well as thematically balanced programmes are most important for local and regional authorities. Survey respondents representing local and regional partners or managing regional Operational Programmes perceive “collective commitment and broad ownership, facilitating implementation processes” and “a good thematic balance and focus, meeting the needs and potential of the territory covered” more frequently as a benefit than other types of survey respondents. Other partners, such as socio-economic partners or representatives of civil society, perceive “a broad general awareness that facilitates the mobilisation of relevant stakeholders” as main benefit, for example to submit funding applications more frequently.

Representatives of regions and cities for social economy specify that the partnership process contributes to better ownership of EU Cohesion Policy and the European idea in general among EU citizens (REVES, 2018). A representative of the Managing Authority for the South Muntenia regional Operational Programme says that partnership provides a sense of belonging among participants. The interviewee highlights that eventually, partnership involvement leads to more realistic projects and interventions for which partners take responsibility (interview Niculescu, 2021). Nevertheless, various challenges to the application of the partnership principle hamper the realisation of the full benefit of these advantages.

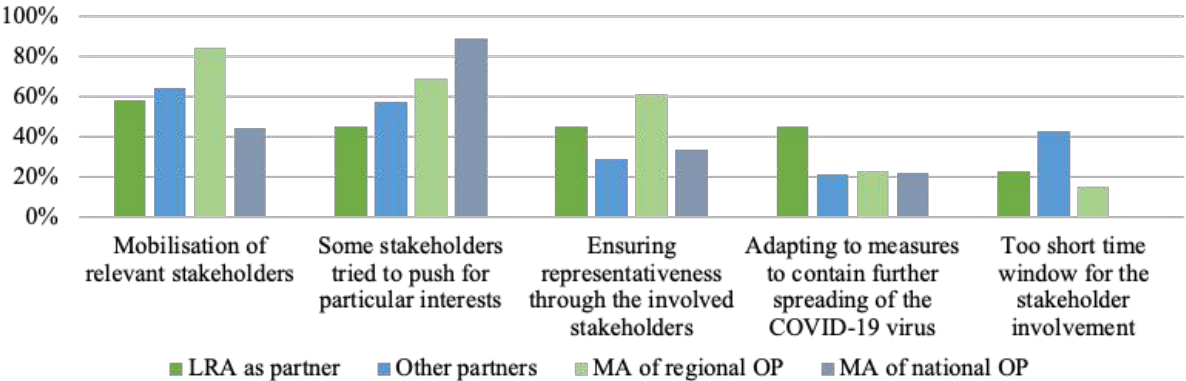
Figure 3.5 Perceived benefits of partnership involvement for the preparation of Operational Programmes*



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=84)*
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

Local and regional authorities perceive the mobilisation of relevant stakeholders as the main challenge for their involvement in programme partnerships. 58% of local and regional authorities refer to this challenge for partnership involvement. 45% of these respondents perceive the main challenges as being one of the following: stakeholders pushing for their particular interests, the challenge of ensuring representativeness of the partnership, or adapting to measures to contain the further spread of COVID-19. 23% perceive the time for stakeholder involvement to be insufficient. These responses indicate that partners representing local and regional authorities perceive challenges of programme partnerships slightly differently from other stakeholders (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6 Perceived challenges of partnership involvement for the preparation of Operational Programmes*



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=84)*
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

Some partners may be unaware of possibilities to contribute to 2021-27 programmes. Notable differences in perceptions between survey respondents representing Managing Authorities and partners indicate a lack of awareness among partners on partnership processes or processes for programme development in general. Such differences were also observed for the preparation

of 2014-20 programmes (DG REGIO, 2016). Besides different perceptions on perceived challenges, notable differences are observed regarding the perception on selection processes for partners and an appreciation of changed approaches between 2014-20 and 2021-27 partnership processes.

Box 3.5 Notable differences in perceptions by survey respondents representing Managing Authorities and partners

Survey findings showed notable differences in perception between representatives of Managing Authorities and partners regarding some questions, namely challenges, selection procedures and perceived improvement of partnerships.

33% of the partners perceive that the partnership is the same as during preparatory phases of 2014-20 programmes. None of the representatives of Managing Authorities indicated that the partnership was fully the same. Managing authorities largely indicated that partnerships were modified (92%). 58% of the partners perceived that the partnership was modified. In addition, 17% of the partners acknowledge that they do not know how partners are selected for the partnership.

In line with this, 19% of the partners perceive selection procedures as untransparent. 31% of the partners perceive it as mostly transparent and 49% perceive it as transparent. 60% of the survey respondents representing Managing Authorities perceive the selection procedures as transparent and the remaining 40% perceive it as mostly transparent.

These differences in perceptions may partly explain differences in the perceived improvement of partnerships. 52% of the partners perceive stakeholder involvement as hardly or not at all improved, compared with 27% of the Managing Authorities.

Regional and national authorities are more often perceived as over-represented, while all other types of stakeholders are more frequently perceived as under-represented in partnerships. Challenges to mobilise stakeholders seem to result in imbalanced partnerships with perceived disproportionate representation of partners:

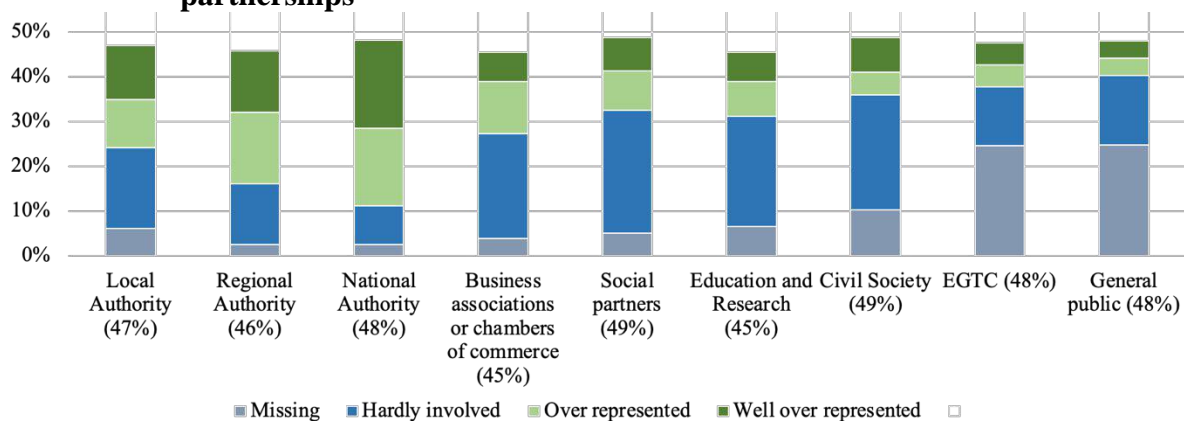
- Regional authorities are more often over-represented than under-represented in programme partnerships. 29% of the survey respondents assess regional authorities as over-represented (green shades in Figure 3.7). This percentage lowers to 24% among respondents who perceived stakeholder involvement as improved.
- National authorities are also frequently perceived as over-represented. This may hold particularly true for Interreg programmes. One interviewee illustrates that in some transnational Interreg programmes national ministries coordinate the preparation of 2021-27 programmes, while regions are marginally involved in the discussion.

- Local authorities are slightly more often perceived as under-represented than over-represented. 24% of the survey respondents assess regional authorities as under-represented (blue shades in Figure 3.7). This percentage lowers to 21% among respondents who perceived stakeholder involvement as improved.
- Non-public players are also more often perceived as under- than over-represented in programme partnerships. In particular, social partners, representatives of education and research, as well as civil society, EGTCs and the general public are perceived as under-represented in programme partnerships.

Box 3.6 Perceived under-representation of SMEs in programme partnerships

Many SME organisations encounter a lack of recognition by Managing Authorities, as they are not invited to partnership processes (SME United, 2020). Assessment on the involvement of SME organisations in 2021-27 partnerships showed their involvement in practice as partial and incomplete. “13 SME organisations from 12 Member States reported a certain degree of involvement in the design phase of 2021-2017 operational programmes (ERDF, ESF+). In addition, 4 organisations (e.g., in Croatia, Portugal and the Netherlands) signalled the non-existence of partnership” (SME United, 2020: 1). Also, representatives of chambers of commerce see room to improve the representation of SMEs in regional and rural development programmes, particularly for policy fields in which SMEs are key players (Eurochambres, 2020).

Figure 3.7 Perceived imbalanced representation of types of partners in Programme partnerships



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=83)*

The perceived disproportionate representation of national and regional authorities may be explained by their stronger levels of involvement in the preparation of programmes. National and regional authorities act as Managing Authorities, Intermediate Bodies, or coordinating agencies.

Perceived under-representation of local authorities and non-public authorities may be partially explained due to the involvement of umbrella organisations.

Interviewees illustrate the use of such organisations to promote single interest entities. For example, the municipality of Pesaro, Italy, was represented by the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities (FAIC) in the elaboration of the Interreg ADRION programme. The FAIC consulted their members via a general online questionnaire prior to their involvement in programme preparation. Similarly, the metropolitan city of Nice, France, was represented via the regional (NUTS3) authority, Département des Alpes-Maritimes, in the preparation of cross-border cooperation programmes. Umbrella representation of local authorities may reduce the administrative costs of partnership involvement and may simplify coordination of the partnerships. However, this also requires clear and frequent consultations and exchanges of experience between the members and the umbrella organisation, to ensure that interests are well transferred to partnership processes. Moreover, the resulting perception of under-representation may increase tendencies to push for specific interests in the partnership.

Box 3.7 Stepwise approaches for local authorities to ensure uptake of inputs

Estonian local authorities use stepwise approaches to ensure that their inputs are considered in the programme. National authorities are largely responsible for the preparation and implementation of the Estonian programme for Cohesion Policy. The ministry of Finance acts as Managing Authority and different line ministries act as Intermediate Bodies. Prior to the official partnership process, the association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities interacts with the different line ministries to voice the interests of local authorities for the next Cohesion Policy programme. In this way, they aim to influence the various responsible ministries early in the process. Eventually, it becomes easier for the association to put forward their inputs on behalf of local authorities during final consultation rounds or workshops, since they have already been discussed with the different line ministries.

Source: Based on the interview with Johanson and Trei, 2021

Partners pushing for interests and insufficient time for partnership processes are mainly perceived as challenge by partners other than local and regional authorities. In particular, Managing Authorities of programmes at national level perceived these challenges (89%) (Figure 3.6). Interviewees also highlighted some stakeholders pushing for their particular interests. A representative of Romania’s rural development programme specified that some partners made proposals more aligned with their organisation’s interest than with the objectives at a national level (interview Rebege, 2021). An intermediate body representing a regional authority specified the challenges of reaching a common line among a diverse set of players, each emphasising their own interest in the programme. These became pronounced in newly established regional coordination processes (“regionale Handlungsebene”) in which partners discuss different regional relations to national programmes. The expectation is that these challenges will diminish with time as the regional coordination processes mature (interview Stampfer, 2021).

Interviewees also expressed other challenges for stakeholder involvement. One challenge that can emerge is a change in national objectives and focus of the programme, for example, as the result of changing governments and political orientations (interview Tiriduzzi, 2021). Lastly, the participation of partners relies on individual capacities. When involved players are unable to participate in certain meetings, this can present challenges to the progress made between meetings. To address this issue, the Managing Authority for the South Muntenia regional Operational Programme encourages each partner to identify an alternate to the main person involved in partnership processes (interview Niculescu, 2021).

Too short time windows for stakeholder involvement were least often perceived as challenge (Figure 3.6). 82% of the programme partners had access to documents and information in time to prepare their inputs for 2021-27 programmes. Only representatives of local authorities and civil society perceived the preparation time for inputs to be barely or not at all sufficient. 28% of local authorities and 50% of civil society representatives assess preparation time as insufficient, compared with 18% on average among partners.

32% of programme partners assessed that hardly enough time is allocated to consultation processes and 4% perceive it as not enough time at all. A respondent specified that the time was sufficient, but that 21 days for the process would have been better. The European Code of Conduct on partnership recommends making documents available 10 working days in advance (Article 11, Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 240/2014). Two other respondents specify that there were too few opportunities for consultation and that the consultations are not specific enough. SME organisations expressed having experienced delays in consultation processes and last-minute invitations, as well as a lack of capacity to devote to the process, a lack of experience, or a lack of examples of good practices, as well as a high level of complexity due to regulatory texts and their interpretation (SME United, 2020).

Box 3.8 Facilitating efficient meetings through preparation

The experience of stakeholder involvement in preparation for Croatian Cohesion Policy programmes illustrates efforts by the Managing Authority to provide partners with the necessary information.

Working group leaders from the Managing Authority send material well ahead of the meetings to the involved partners to allow them time to familiarise themselves with the material and prepare comments. Initial feedback from the partners is shared with the working group leaders of the Managing Authority prior to the meeting. Subsequently, the meetings can focus on discussion of the various partners' inputs. Partners and the Managing Authority jointly discuss which aspects to consider and which elements to disregard for the programme.

Overall, this process is well appreciated and considered transparent. Also, it creates a sense of ownership among partners. The only challenge concerns the number of working groups

some of the partner organisations are involved in and the number of documents being shared, which can make the partnership processes rather time-consuming. Some staff involved in regional and local governments indicate that it became difficult to dedicate sufficient time and resources to reviewing all documents, providing feedback and discussing them. The interviewee assesses the workload currently as manageable but can imagine a more efficient organisation of working groups in the future.

Source: based on the interview with Barbarić, 2021

All in all, challenges and benefits differ by type of partner, and partners and Managing Authorities have different perceptions of the main challenges and benefits of partnerships. One solution to this could be the set-up of various thematic partnerships, for example by Policy Objective, as suggested by Mr Tiriduzzi, representative of Umbria region, Italy, and as was observed for the preparation of the Lithuanian Cohesion Policy programme. A thematic breakdown of the partnership by topic makes the entire process better balanced thematically. In addition, grouping partners with similar thematic interests may deter some stakeholders from pushing specific interests. It may also facilitate the provision by Managing Authorities of targeted information, such as territorial data or regulatory requirements. In total, it may require additional efforts on the part of the Managing Authority to set up and facilitate these processes, but partners may feel that they can relate better to the Programme. Eventually that would generate better ideas for the Programme as a whole.

3.5 Effects of COVID-19 on partner involvement

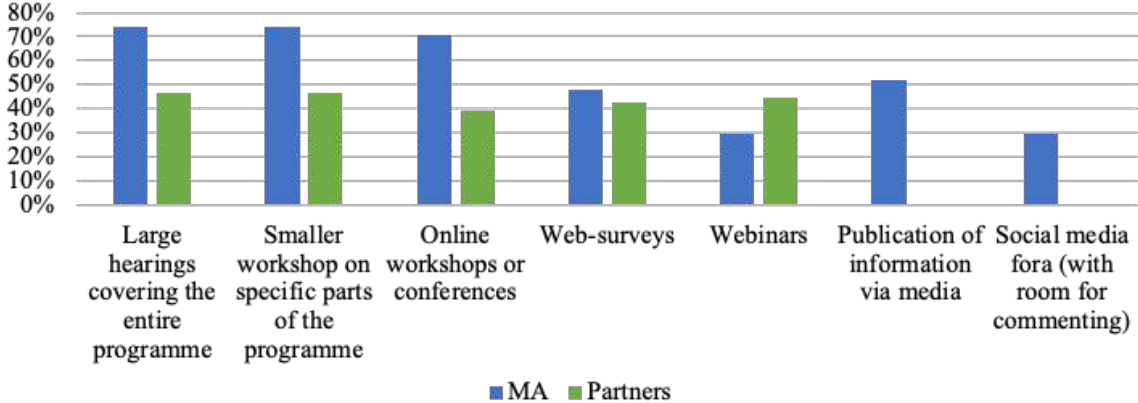
Measures to contain the further spread of COVID-19 have considerably changed partnership processes. Although many partnership processes started in 2018, important parts of the processes were scheduled for 2020. Due to COVID-19 measures, many of these processes have been organised via online platforms and media. This change was not perceived as a major challenge for partnership processes (see section 3.3). Instead, it could bring new opportunities for partner involvement.

The use of online activities increased compared with the preparation of 2014-20 Operational Programmes. 85% of respondents perceived the main influence of COVID-19 on partnership processes to be a necessary shift to digital solutions.

Possibly as result of COVID-19, more online channels and fora are used for partnership involvement for the preparation of 2021-27 programmes than 2014-20 programmes. On average, 36% of survey respondents perceived that online channels were used to involve the partnerships (Figure 3.8). This concerns particularly online workshops or conferences, web-surveys and webinars and to a lesser degree social media. On average 43% of survey respondents perceived that larger hearings covering the entire programme, smaller workshops on specific

parts of the programme and public information via traditional media were the communication channels used. Partners are less aware of other possibilities to contribute to programme preparation. The proportion of partners perceiving the use of large hearings, smaller workshops and online workshops is considerably lower than among representatives of Managing Authorities (MA). Moreover, only survey respondents representing Managing Authorities indicated the use of traditional and social media. Partners seem to be unaware of these possibilities to contribute to programme preparation.

Figure 3.8 Perceived use of channels and fora for partnership involvement in the preparation of 2021-27 Operational Programmes*



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=81)*
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

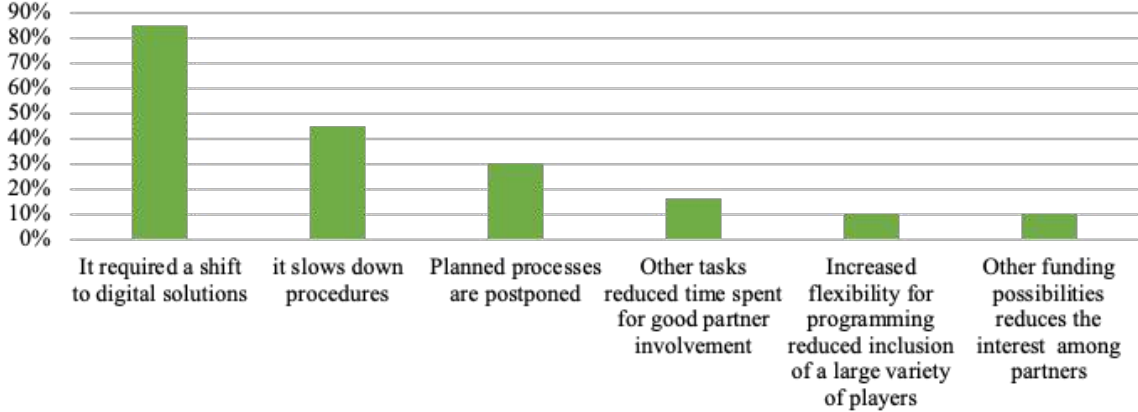
Box 3.9 Smaller workshops by theme to enhance the effectiveness of stakeholder involvement

Within the preparation of a single programme, the representation of different partners may also change per topic or policy objective discussed. In preparation of the Lithuanian Cohesion Policy programme, ten different working groups have been formed per policy objective. The representation of different partners changes for each of these working groups, as illustrated on the programme’s website (Lithuanian Ministry of Finance, 2021). Similar approaches are also applied elsewhere. An interviewee specified that the organisation of separate sessions per Policy Objective within each partnership meeting made it possible to tackle matters relating to each specific Policy Objective in more detail and more effectively. Subsequently, conclusions were discussed in a final common session (interview with Tiriduzzi, 2021). REVES argues to find the right balance of partners according to the specific subject and competence and asks the European Commission to verify this, at least for the Monitoring Committees. Civil society organisations could assist the Commission in this task (REVES, 2018).

COVID-19 measures also forced partnerships processes to slow down or being (temporarily) postponed. The preparation of 2021-27 Operational Programmes faced several challenges, besides a required shift to digital solutions for stakeholder involvement in the preparation. 45% of survey respondents perceived that processes slowed down and 30% perceived that processes were

postponed (Figure 3.9). In some cases, participatory processes were paused for months (CEMR, forthcoming). For example, the public consultation of Polish Programmes and the Partnership Agreement was scheduled for November 2020 but was postponed until 18 January 2021. Comments on the assumptions presented in the Partnership Agreement can be submitted until 22 February 2021¹⁰.

Figure 3.9 Effects of COVID on partnership processes



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=86)*
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

COVID-19 increased the risk of spending less time on good partner involvement. A survey respondent specifies that the gap between meetings increased, making it harder to assess the follow-up of comments provided in earlier meetings: “It should be ensured that stakeholder comments are taken seriously. In November 2019, one workshop was organised. The next (digital) monitoring committee meeting was not held until December 2020. More meetings are necessary to discuss the content of the new operational programme.” Indeed, delays in combination with lack of clarity about regulations and funding allocation increases the workload in some regional authorities, particularly, regional authorities acting as interlocutor between local and national authorities. Delays and uncertainty make it difficult to exchange information between the different levels that would facilitate good partner involvement. A DG REGIO study estimated that many programming tasks could accumulate in 2019 (DG REGIO, 2016). In reality, delays, new programmes, and delayed regulations seemed to have led to a peak of workload in 2020. All these aspects coming at the same time increase the workload (Bachtler et al., 2020). At the same time, the timing for finalising the programmes has not changed (ibid.) (see also Box 3.10).

¹⁰ As indicated on the webpage for European Funds in Poland on 31 January 2021: <https://www.funduszeuropejskie.gov.pl/> COVID was possibly not the only reason to postpone the public consultation. In coordination with the national recovery plan for the RRF, Poland included health as a thematic field for Cohesion Policy. This also took time (Bachtler et al., 2020).

Box 3.10 Accumulating workload for programme authorities

Currently, policymakers responsible for Cohesion Policy face several difficult tasks in parallel. One is bringing the 2014-20 programmes to a successful conclusion, in many cases adjusted through CRII/CRII+ in response to the crisis. Although most resources have generally been committed, spending rates are as low as 35-40 percent in countries such as Spain, Greece, Croatia and Romania (Bachtler et al., 2020).

A second task is to complete the programming for 2021-27 in the new circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis, and with potential competition for ‘good projects’ from the Recovery & Resilience Facility (Bachtler et al., 2020). Moreover, in several Member States the allocations under the Next Generation EU might be similar to or larger than the total budget of the Cohesion Policy and rural development programmes. The simultaneous programming and implementation of such massive sums through a variety of instruments could generate complexities as well as delays and overlaps. Moreover, provisions governing the Recovery and Resilience Facility and React-EU could in the long-term put the core principles of cohesion policy into question (CPMR, 2020b). However, as shown in Figure 3.9 only 10% of the survey respondents assume that other funding opportunities (such as RRF) decrease the interest of partners in Cohesion Policy and rural development.

Lastly, policymakers need to programme the use of REACT-EU intended as a ‘bridge’ between the two programme periods (Bachtler et al., 2020).

A shift to online stakeholder involvement changed key elements for adequate partner involvement to some degree. The appreciation of timely reception of documents to prepare for meetings is comparable between 2014-20 and 2021-27. Therefore, the major shift to online means for stakeholder involvement did not affect this key element of good partner involvement. At the same time, a shift to online solutions reduced the time for public consultations. In line with this, a larger share of survey respondents assessed a short time window as a challenge in the present survey than in the 2016 survey, namely 20% now and 11% previously. In both cases a too short timeframe was the least frequent mentioned challenge (see also section 3.3).

Online meetings may attract partners that otherwise would not be able to join partnership activities. In particular, organisations that previously could not travel to join physical meetings may see opportunities to join meetings from a distance. Indeed, the regional representative for the Dutch Strategic Plan covering EAFRD was surprised by the high number of participants in recent online meetings (interview Smarius, 2021). Survey results also show that a high proportion of partners are aware of web-surveys and webinars (Figure 3.8). This may reflect higher participation rates of partners via online means. In addition, it may explain the challenges observed by some of the interviewees, i.e., too many participants for interactive discussions in online meetings.

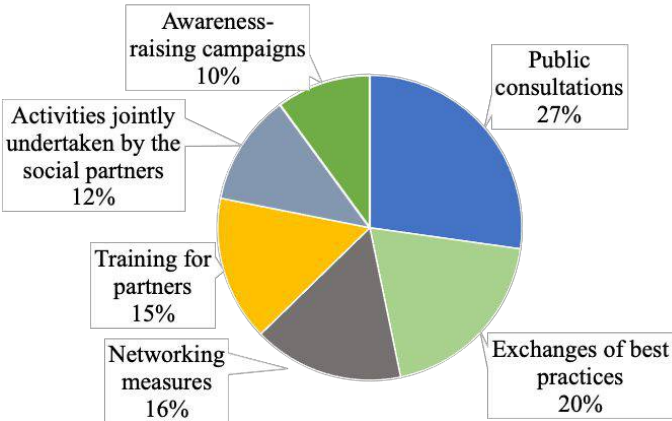
Facilitating online processes requires different approaches to stakeholder involvement. Although numerous Managing Authorities and partners did not see

many issues related to the use of online platforms for stakeholder involvement, several stakeholders noted challenges in the facilitation of online processes. Online meetings with too many players make it difficult for partners to express their views and for Managing Authorities to collect feedback (Interviews Curran and Rebege, 2021). This may increase the risk of certain partners pushing for their interests. Indeed, online meetings demand different facilitation techniques and tools to guide the discussion than those called for in physical meetings. In the rush of setting up online meetings, these aspects may not always be well considered. A lack of specific online facilitation techniques and tools also reduces the level of interaction. Indeed, stakeholders expressed that the level of interaction was reduced due to a shift to online meetings (interviews Niculescu) or that meetings were shorter (Stampfer, 2021). Another important element that may be overlooked in online meetings concerns the possibility of informal exchanges. These exchanges between partners and Managing Authorities, as well as among partners, sometimes result in innovative ideas that were previously not considered and that make the partnership more effective (Eurochambres, 2020). Online meetings make such informal exchanges almost non-existent.

The use of online communication and interaction tools may remain important in the future, not least due to ongoing travel and meeting restrictions. For many players in Cohesion Policy and rural development, a build-up in experience due to COVID-19 highlighted the added value of online activities. Hence, online techniques and tools may also be key to strengthening the capacities of partners for their involvement in programme implementation. Indeed, a different set of actions is perceived to be used to strengthen partner capacities for the implementation of 2021-27 programmes compared with 2014-20 programmes.

Most survey respondents perceive that programme authorities will use public consultations, followed by exchanges on best practices and networking opportunities (Figure 3.10). Each of these activities can be easily organised online, for example via an online survey or conference with the possibility of providing quick feedback via online polling tools, or webinars among peers to exchange best practices. Fewer survey respondents perceive the use of awareness-raising campaigns, activities to undertake jointly by partners, or training sessions for partners. The latter was the most frequently perceived activity by survey respondents for 2014-20 programmes (DG REGIO, 2016). Indeed, training activities are often provided through physical and interactive workshops. Possibly, insufficient experience has been built up to provide such activities online.

Figure 3.10 Perceived actions to strengthen capacities of programme partners*



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=76)*
*Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

Thus, the recent shift to using more digital solutions provides opportunities for stakeholder involvement now and in the future. Digital solutions make it easier for a larger part of the population to join partnership processes, creating a more balanced representation that may be better respected. At the same time, new challenges for good stakeholder involvement may arise as a result of using digital solutions. These challenges concern mainly the level of stakeholder involvement and opportunities to provide feedback. Specific digital techniques and tools exist to address these issues and ensure that the level of interaction remains the same as in physical meetings. Persons responsible for stakeholder involvement and partnership processes may wish to further their knowledge on digital techniques and tools to fully benefit from digital solutions.

4 2021-27 partnerships for Partnership Agreements

Partnership Agreements describe the main policy objectives, funding allocation, financial resources and a summary of actions proposed to reinforce administrative capacity to implement five funds¹¹ that fall under the Common Provisions Regulation (COM(2018) 375 final). One Partnership Agreement is being prepared per EU Member State. These documents function as coordinative documents.

Lessons from the preparation of 2014-2020 Partnership Agreements show a variety of approaches to achieve this across Europe. In some countries, Partnership Agreements inform Operational Programmes. Hence, their development starts before the development of programmes. In other cases, Partnership Agreements and programmes are developed in parallel. In a few cases, Partnership Agreements are developed based on well-advanced Operational Programmes, notably in federal countries or countries with a high level of regional autonomy to develop their Cohesion Policy programmes. In these cases, partnership processes may be less advanced or in early phases. This may partially explain lower response rates to the survey concerning Partnership Agreement than to programme surveys. Nevertheless, the findings are comparable to findings from 2016 (DG REGIO, 2016), so the sample may be sufficiently representative.

4.1 Evolution of partnerships

Partnerships for Partnership Agreements are less established than partnerships for Operational Programmes. In some countries, national bodies in certain countries are less accustomed to coordinating the preparation of programmes for Cohesion Policy. This concerns mainly countries that have decentralised systems for Cohesion Policy (see also section 2.1). Instead, in many cases the same partnership as for the preparation of 2014-20 Partnership Agreements or in preparation of national policy documents is used.

About 76% of survey respondents perceive that partnership for the 2021-27 Partnership Agreement is the same as last time. An Italian respondent specifies that the partnership is the same as before, but with a few new partners. 22% of the respondents perceive that the partnership is based on cooperation for national policy development (Box 4.1) or the national reform programme. The remaining 2% of respondents assume that the partnership is new.

¹¹ ERDF, CF, ESF+, Just Transition Fund (JTF) and the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF).

Box 4.1 “Estonia 2035” paving the way for the Partnership Agreement and Cohesion Policy programme 2021-27

“Estonia 2035” is the country’s long-term development strategy that guides the state budget and planning of large investments, including EU funding until 2035. The development of this document started in 2018 and ran until spring 2020 and included large scale participatory approaches. This document, among others, builds upon future expectations by nearly 14,000 Estonians, more than 1% of all inhabitants, as well as contributions by socio-economic partners, business representatives, local authorities and the association of Estonian cities and municipalities. The latter submitted, subsequently, among other things, various proposals for future actions to consider in the document.

The development of Estonia’s Partnership Agreement and programme for Cohesion Policy started around the same time as the processes to develop Estonia 2035. Partly due to this overlap, “Estonia 2035” has been considered as the leading document for the preparation of the other documents. As a result, stakeholder involvement was limited for the development of the Partnership Agreement, partly also since it has a similar strategic character as “Estonia 2035”. Stakeholder involvement for the preparation of the Operational Programme focused on possible concrete actions, since main development paths are already addressed in “Estonia 2035”.

Source: Based on the interview with Johanson and Trei, 2021

A smaller share of survey respondents assesses the representation of stakeholders as balanced. A comparison of key partnership elements for 2014-20 and 2021-27 Partnership Agreements shows little change (Table 4.1). A key difference is that fewer respondents perceive the partnerships as being well balanced. 42% of respondents assessed the partnership as balanced. This proportion is considerably lower than for Operational Programmes (see also sections 3.1 and 3.3).

Table 4.1 Perceived application of selected key partnership elements for the preparation of 2014-20 and 2021-27 Partnership Agreements

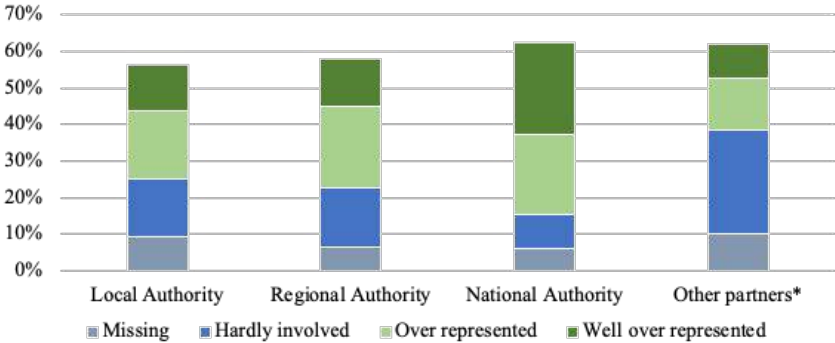
	2014-20 ¹²	2021-27
Well balanced representation of stakeholders	54%	42%
Transparent selection procedures	82%	85%
Sufficient time to assess documents and prepare for participation	79%	85%
Equal treatment of feedback to the programme	67%	76%

Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings DG REGIO, 2016 for 2014-20 data.

¹² Survey respondents’ perceptions on partnerships of 2014-20 Partnership Agreements were weighted by Member State. For example, survey respondents of 54% of all Partnership Agreements no under- or over-representation of partners and therefore assessed the partnership as balanced. Fewer replies to the survey for 2021-27 only allowed for aggregation of survey respondents’ perceptions at European level.

Survey respondents perceive in particular that national authorities are over-represented in the partnerships. Local and regional authorities are more frequently perceived as being over-represented (Green shades in Figure 4.1) than under-represented (Blue shades in Figure 4.1). Survey respondents perceive particularly non-public authorities as under-represented in partnerships. 16% of respondents perceive even the involvement of civil society organisations as missing.

Figure 4.1 Perceived imbalanced representation of types of partners in Partnership Agreements



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=32)
 *Other Partners include representatives of national authorities, business associations or chambers of commerce, social partners, education and research partners, and civil society.

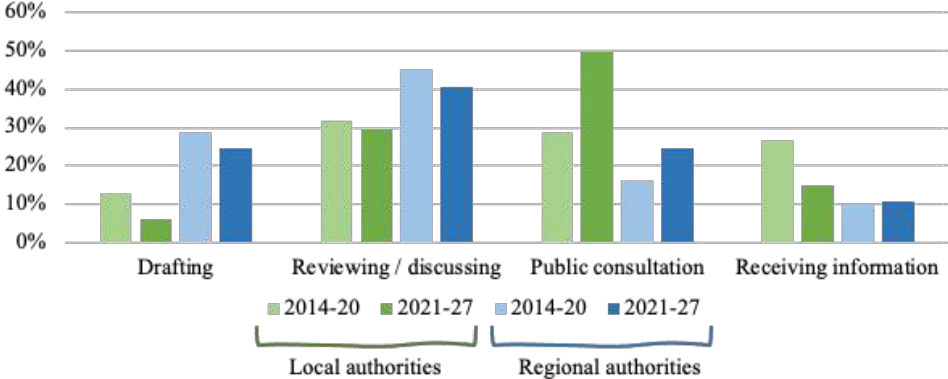
Despite strong over-representation of national authorities in partnerships and strong level of involvement for developing the Partnership Agreements, 76% of the survey respondents perceive that comments are treated equally (Table 4.1). 22% of respondents perceive that comments are hardly treated equally, and one respondent assesses the treatment as not equal at all. The share of respondents that assessed the treatment of comments received as unequal among partners is relatively higher among local authorities and representatives of civil society organisations. One respondent specifies that the discussion was “somewhat untransparent”. For the respondent, it was not clear how feedback was used.

Increasing shares of partners are being involved via public consultations.

Some partners consider this type of involvement too limited to express their comments and views, as expressed by SME associations (SME United, 2020). Among local authorities, 50% are involved in the preparation of 2021-27 Partnership Agreements via public consultations (dark green shades in Figure 4.2). This was 29% for 2014-20 Partnership (light green shades in Figure 4.2). Also the share of regional authorities that were involved in programming via public consultations increased, namely from 16% in 2014-20 to 24% for 2021-27 Partnership Agreements. This implies more involvement via public consultations and less via reviewing and discussing and drafting the document. Possible reasons may explain the differences, for example the fact that not all processes for 2021-27 partner involvement are concluded yet (see also the introduction to this chapter), a shorter timeframe for partner due to COVID (see also section 4.4, or a

less balanced sample of survey respondent. For both periods, national authorities are the main drafters of Partnership Agreements.

Figure 4.2 Changed involvement of local and regional authorities in the development of 2014-20 and 2021-27 Partnership Agreements



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=37) DG REGIO, 2016 for 2014-20 data¹².*

Bottom-up approaches secure a coordination between Cohesion Policy and rural development. The departure of EAFRD from the CPR and hence the formal obligation to consider rural development in Partnership Agreements may negatively affect the coordination between Cohesion Policy and rural development. Examples from interviews illustrate how this risk is mitigated at local and regional levels. In Austria and parts of Germany they work for example with large regional partnerships in which multiple funds and programmes are discussed. “Regional action levels”¹³ in Austria bring together a variety of partners at local and regional level to discuss European programmes, this includes Cohesion Policy and agricultural policy. Similarly, the “contact and advice centres”¹⁴ in Brandenburg, Germany, bring together various players to discuss European Structural and Investment Funds. These established networks for 2014-20 programmes continue for the preparation of 2021-27 funds and continue to include rural development. Hence, local and regional authorities apply different practices to continue encouraging coordination between Cohesion Policy and rural development. How this is organised across Europe and how rural development is considered in Partnership Agreements demands more research based on the final documents.

All in all, stakeholder involvement for Partnership Agreements seems less dynamic than stakeholder involvement for Operational Programmes. Indeed, the coverage of many funds and a larger variety of policy fields may make stakeholder involvement more challenging for Partnership Agreements. At the same time,

¹³ Regionale Handlungsebene, [Regionale Handlungsebene - Raumordnung und EU-Regionalpolitik in Österreich - Österreichische Raumordnungskonferenz - ÖROK \(oerok.gv.at\)](https://www.oerok.gv.at/)

¹⁴ Kontakt- und Beratungsstelle zur Begleitung der EU-Fonds (KBS+) <https://berlin-brandenburg.dgb.de/beratung/kbs-plus>

partnership processes may be planned for 2021, focusing on coordination between funds and programmes on the basis of advanced drafts of Operational Programmes. This may suggest even stronger involvement of Managing Authorities (national or regional authorities) in partnerships for Partnership Agreements. As a result, the already perceived imbalance of partnerships for Partnership Agreements may become even more imbalanced. Nevertheless, Partnership Agreements are important documents that specify policy priorities, funding allocation and actions to strengthen administrative capacities across five funds. Consideration of local and regional specificities for these elements could enable better use of these funds. Stronger involvement of partners in the preparation of these documents may not only reflect the partnership in light of main priorities but may also help to place the focus on local and regional specificities.

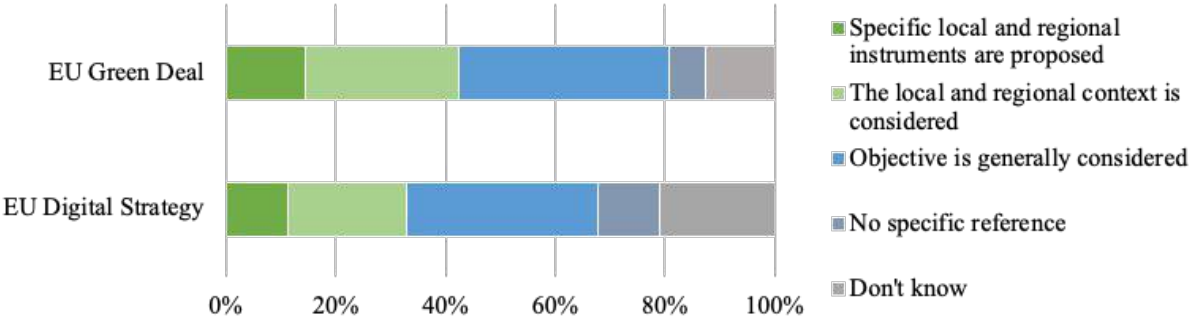
4.2 Local and regional specificities for sustainable and digital transitions

Like Operational Programmes, Partnership Agreements have the potential to make sure that the transition to sustainable and digital societies considers specific challenges at local and regional levels. Local and regional contexts may be considered in each of the document's sections.

A higher proportion of survey respondents are unaware how EU objectives in line with the EU Green Deal and the EU Digital Strategy are considered in Partnership Agreements, compared with how they are considered in Operational Programmes. Among the respondents that are aware, the largest proportion perceive that objectives are generally considered (Figure 4.3).

Local and regional aspects are more considered in line with EU Green Deal objectives in Partnership Agreements than EU Digital Strategy objectives. In most cases the local and regional context is considered and in a few cases the Partnership Agreement proposes specific local and regional instruments. The objectives that are most often perceived to consider local and regional levels in the Partnership Agreements resemble those for the Operational Programmes: namely, “supply clean, affordable and secure energy”, “accelerating the shift to sustainable and smart mobility” and “EU climate ambitions for 2030 and 2050”.

Figure 4.3 Perceived relevance of local and regional levels to achieving EU objectives



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=32)

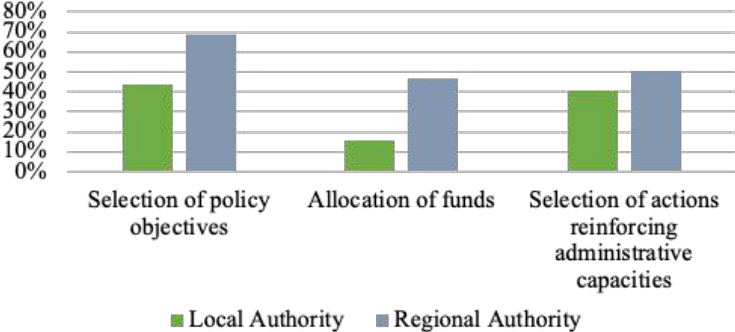
Local and regional authorities contribute mostly to the selection of policy objectives in Partnership Agreements.

A respondent specified: “In Slovakia five public consultation rounds via video conference were organised and it was possible to submit proposals to the national coordination body for the selection of policy objective of the Partnership Agreement. To date it has not been possible to provide inputs for the other parts of the Partnership Agreement”.

Indeed, 69% of respondents assume that regional authorities are involved in partnerships for the selection of policy objectives in Partnership Agreements. 44% of respondents assume that local authorities are involved in this part of Partnership Agreements. Local and regional authorities are also contributing to the selection of actions reinforcing administrative capacities.

A higher number of regional authorities than local authorities are involved in the allocation of funds (Figure 4.4). This may be particularly regional authorities that act as Managing Authorities or Intermediate Bodies, roles that only a few local authorities undertake. In general, the allocation of funds is perceived as mostly a task of public authorities. Only a few survey respondents assume that other types of partners are involved in the preparation of this part of Partnership Agreements (Figure 4.5).

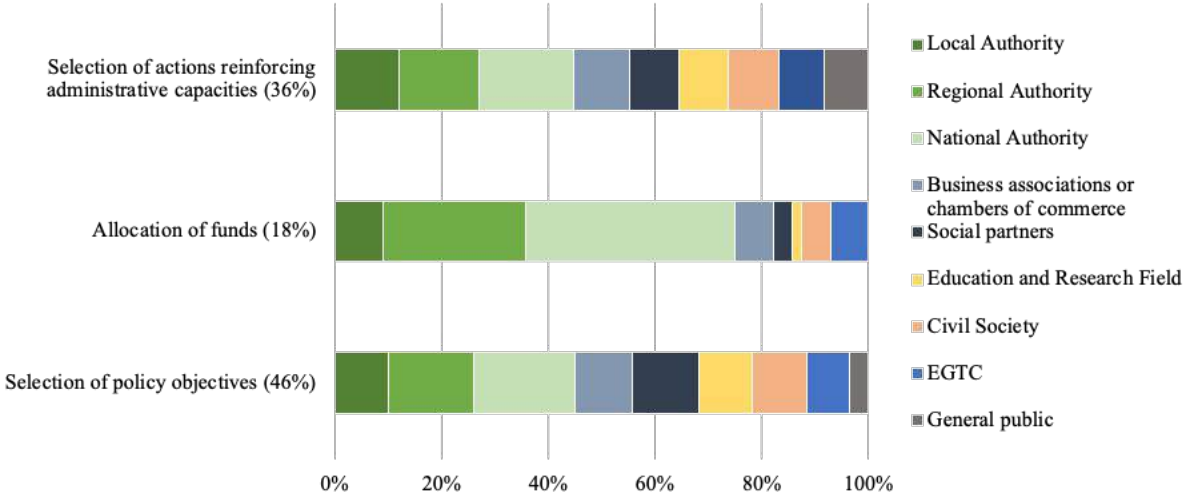
Figure 4.4 Perceived involvement of local and regional authorities by part of Partnership Agreements*



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=32)

*Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

Figure 4.5 Perceived partnership involvement by part of Partnership Agreements*



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=32)
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

The use of local and regional strategic documents is more uncertain for Partnership Agreements than for Operational Programmes. 47% of respondents are unaware of the use of such documents in the preparation of Partnership Agreements, compared with 17% of respondents for Operational Programmes. The potential of local and regional strategies to supplement partner involvement for Partnership Agreement development is thus relatively low. Survey respondents who are aware of the use of local and regional strategies say that they are used for the selection of policy objectives. Half of them say that they are also used for the allocation of funds or selection of actions to increase administrative capacities.

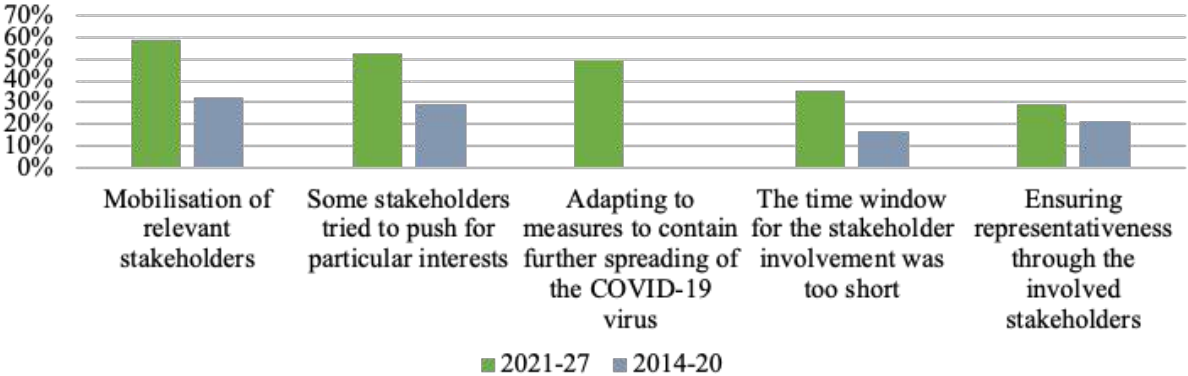
Partnership contributions to ensure the uptake of local and regional specificities in Partnership Agreements are lower than for Operational Programmes. To sum up, survey results hint at partial take-up of specific instruments or consideration of territory-specific contexts in line with EU objectives for the Green Deal and Digital Strategy. In fact, many partners are unaware how Partnership Agreements consider local and regional aspects for the transition to sustainable and digital societies, even though Partnership Agreements may be important documents ensuring coordinated actions across different funds. For example, investments via ERDF for sustainable solutions may be supplemented by ESF+ investments, ensuring that stakeholders are well trained for the implementation of such solutions or that the impact of the investments are equally balanced across territories. Additional efforts of National Coordination Bodies and Managing Authorities may be needed to highlight such possibilities at local and regional levels while implementing the Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes.

4.3 Challenges hampering contributions of local and regional authorities

While partnerships for Operational Programmes are slowly evolving, reliance on experiences from the previous Partnership Agreement or the development of national development strategies negatively influences perceptions on stakeholder involvement for Partnership Agreements. Unadapted partnership processes for the preparation may have contributed to exacerbating the differences among partners.

Indeed, a higher proportion of survey respondents perceive challenges for partnership involvement, compared with the preparation of 2014-20 Partnership Agreements. In particular, the mobilisation of relevant stakeholders and some stakeholders pushing for their own interests are perceived as challenging for partnership involvement. In addition, 49% of survey respondents perceived measures adapting to COVID-19 as challenging.

Figure 4.6 Perceived challenges of partnership involvement for the preparation of 2021-27 and 2014-20 Partnership Agreements*



Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=36) DG REGIO, 2016 for 2014-20 data.*

*Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

Another challenge may be changing governments or administrations. New people or different Ministries responsible for partnership processes and the development of Partnership processes make it difficult to build on lessons learnt. Moreover, new colleagues may lack understanding of territorial specificities or the specific needs of local and regional authorities (CEMR, forthcoming).

In particular, partners representing socio-economic and civil society organisations are critical towards stakeholder involvement in the preparation of Partnership Agreements, notably with regard to the mobilisation of relevant stakeholders and balanced representation of the partnerships (Table 4.2).

Different perceptions on the challenges for partnership involvement in the preparation of Partnership Agreements reflect partly the unbalanced involvement

of partners in these processes. The under-representation of socio-economic and civil society players in partnerships may explain their frequent indication of “mobilisation of relevant stakeholders” and “ensuring representativeness” as main challenges (Table 4.2). Local and regional authorities may perceive these aspects less frequently as a challenge, since they are relatively better represented in the preparation of Partnership Agreements. Authorities responsible for the preparation of Partnership Agreements and coordinating stakeholder involvement may be unaware of these challenges, until they are made visible.

Table 4.2 Perceived challenges of partnership involvement for the preparation of Partnership Agreements*

	LRA	Other partner*
Mobilisation of relevant stakeholders	55%	63%
Some stakeholders tried to push for particular interests	45%	25%
Adapting to measures to contain the further spread of COVID-19	45%	13%
Too short time window for the stakeholder involvement and/or difficult to fit in the process of drafting the document	36%	63%
Ensuring representativeness through involved stakeholders	18%	88%

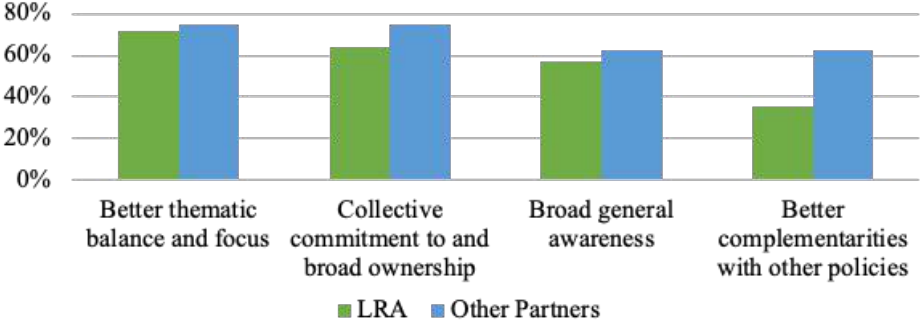
Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=36)*

*Respondents could indicate multiple answers. Other Partners include representatives of national authorities, business associations or chambers of commerce, social partners, education and research partners, and civil society.

Local and regional authorities and other partners perceive the benefits of partnerships similarly. Partners representing local and regional authorities perceive better thematic balance (71% of the respondents) and collective commitment and ownership as most relevant (64%). 63% of other types of partners also perceive better complementarities with other policies as important, whereas only 36% of respondents representing local and regional authorities perceive this as relevant.

One respondent specified that all pre-defined benefits are relevant but that current processes do not meet these standards. According to the respondent, “The consultation process by the national coordination body only allowed for general feedback. Feedback could mainly be provided via Managing Authorities of Operational Programmes who are more involved in the development of the Partnership Agreement. A dialogue with different relevant stakeholders for the Partnership Agreement, including socio-economic partners, was missing.”

Figure 4.7 Perceived benefits of partnership involvement for the preparation of Partnership Agreements*



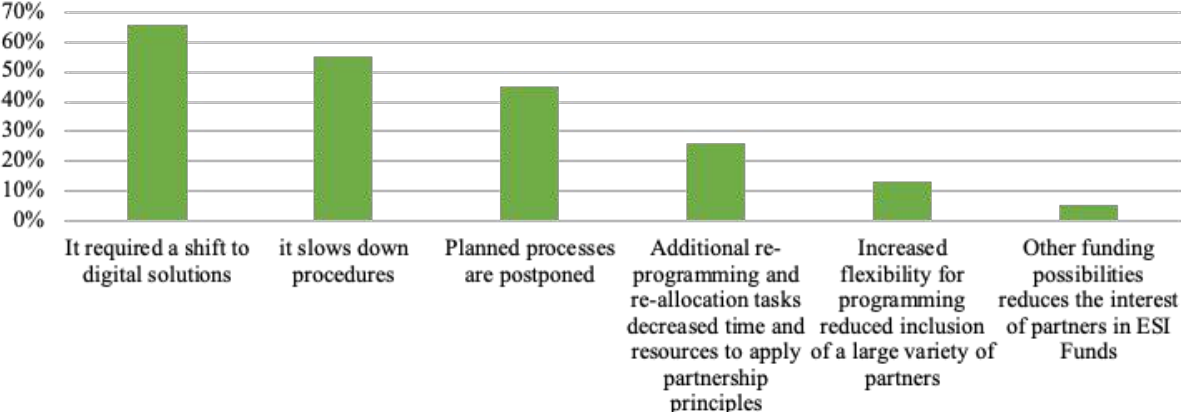
Source: *Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=39)*
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

Imbalanced representation of partners is thus a main challenge for stakeholder involvement for Partnership Agreements. Although this may affect local and regional authorities less, indirectly it may also harm the take-up of local specificities in priority development, fund allocations and the development of actions to strengthen administrative capacities. After all, local and regional authorities are in many cases the first contact points of socio-economic and civil society organisations for strategic development queries.

4.4 Effects of COVID-19 on partner involvement

Measures imposed to contain the further spread of COVID-19 forced many national coordination bodies to offer digital solutions for stakeholder involvement in the preparation of Partnership Agreements. 66% of the survey respondents perceive this as the main effect of COVID-19 on Partnership Agreement processes. 55% perceived that the processes slowed down, and 45% perceived that processes were postponed. Fewer respondents assumed that time and resources to apply the partnership principle decreased due to additional re-programming and re-allocation of tasks, a reduced inclusion of a large variety of partners due to increased flexibility, or a reduced interest of partners in ESI Funds (Figure 4.8). Despite these changes, most partners perceive that enough time has been provided to prepare for their involvement and for consultations.

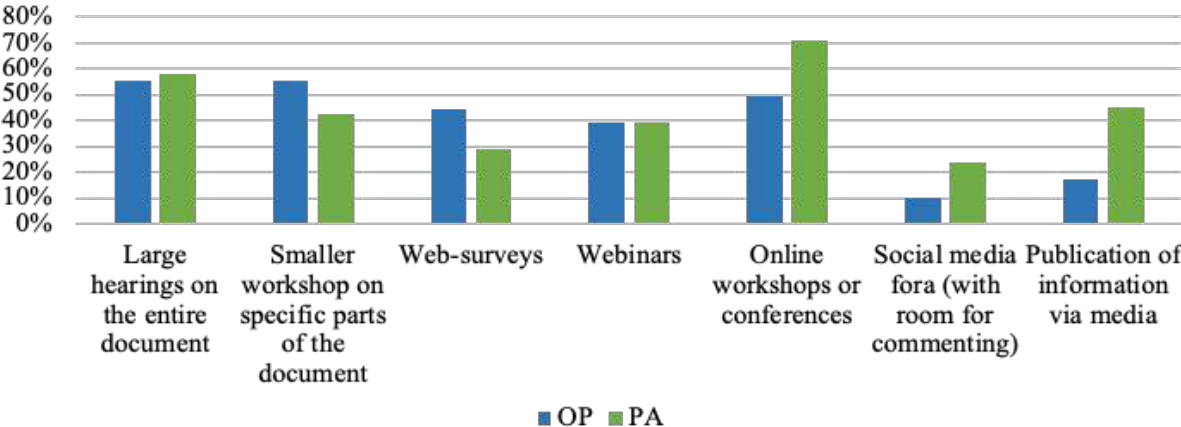
Figure 4.8 Effects of COVID on partnership processes



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=39)
 *Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

More digital solutions were used for stakeholder involvement to prepare Partnership Agreements than to prepare for Operational Programmes. A higher proportion of survey respondents involved in Partnership Agreement partnerships cite the use of online workshops and conferences, social media and publication of information in traditional media (Figure 4.9). One respondent specified the process of collecting feedback for defining Partnership Agreement priorities. “During an online event, partners could react to priorities by expressing their degree of relevancy via polls (sli.do).” This decreased the level of actual interaction, according to the survey respondent.

Figure 4.9 Perceived use of channels and fora for partnership involvement in the preparation of 2021-27 programmes and Partnership Agreements*



Source: Spatial Foresight, 2021. Based on survey findings (n=81 for Operational Programmes n=38 for Partnership Agreements)

*Respondents could indicate multiple answers.

Opportunities of online stakeholder involvement techniques and tools are not (yet) taken-up for the preparation of Partnership Agreements. All in all, survey findings suggest that stakeholder involvement for the preparation of Partnership Agreements include fewer partners than Operational Programmes. Moreover, the representation of different partners is less balanced. Partners who were involved could express their feedback mainly via online consultations. Effective organisation of such events could have enabled the inclusion of many players relevant for the Partnership Agreement, since partners can save time on traveling to meeting locations. However, survey findings suggest that only a few opportunities for in-depth interaction were provided in these online consultations. It may be that some potential partners are unaware of participatory processes for the preparation of Partnership Agreements. Some individual partners might be represented via umbrella organisations or organisations at higher geographical levels, without being aware of this. Also, processes of stakeholder involvement are ongoing, partly due to COVID-19 delaying and postponing processes. It may be that final consultations for the Partnership Agreements planned for 2021 are more inclusive and allow for more interaction than is suggested by the survey results.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the partnership principle is considered for the preparation of 2021-27 Cohesion Policy and rural development programmes and Partnership Agreements. However, comparing current experiences with experiences from 2014-20 does not show major progress on the application of key elements of partnerships as expressed in the Code of Conduct (sections 3.1 and 4.1), despite the need to make progress and the major efforts by Managing Authorities and National Coordination Bodies organising partnerships to do so. Hence, one may wonder whether partnerships are sufficiently effective, whether they enable place-based sustainable and digital transitions, and whether partnerships suffer the effects of COVID-19.

5.1 Are partnerships sufficiently effective?

Partnerships have a number of benefits for the development and implementation of Cohesion Policy and rural development as described in sections 3.3 and 3.4. At the same time, findings suggest that on the one hand partnerships well represent different public authorities and societal players while on the other hand, the level of involvement of different types of partners differs. In particular, the level of involvement of the partnership raises the questions whether they are sufficiently effective to ensure place-based programmes.

Partnerships help to make Cohesion Policy and rural development place-based. Sections 3.2 and 4.2. illustrate how local and regional authorities as well as other societal players help EU investments for sustainable and digital transitions addressing specific territorial issues. They do so by highlighting specific challenges in relation to EU objectives in their territories and by translating generic instruments to territorial contexts. Not only do partnerships contribute to place-based decision-making processes, but local and regional strategies are also used, particularly for the needs analysis and priority development.

At the same time, partnership processes are one of many activities for the preparation of programmes and Partnership Agreements. Little evolution of partnerships (sections 3.1 and 4.1) and limited possibilities for interaction and discussion of draft Partnership Agreements (sections 4.1 and 4.4) suggest that partnership processes are not a key priority for National Coordination Bodies, despite considerable efforts from players to organise partnership processes. Moreover, it is unclear to what extent partnerships are used to make Next Generation EU programmes place-based (section 2.3). Evolving programme partnerships and higher shares of different stakeholders involved in reviewing and

discussing draft programmes (section 3.1) suggest that this is less of an issue for their development.

To make sure that partnerships continue making Cohesion Policy and rural development place-based, we recommend reinforcing the European Code of Conduct on partnership, also highlighted by several interest groups (SME United, 2020; CEMR, forthcoming). Therefore, we propose:

- **EU institutions** (1) to amend the 2014 European Code of Conduct on partnership to stress the importance of partnerships for place-based policy processes and to stress that partnerships are beneficial for all EU programmes, including Next Generation EU programmes; (2) to launch a study assessing the time and efforts needed for partnership processes compared with the benefits of better place-based programmes in 2024, building on 10 years of experience since the launch of the Code of Conduct on partnership.
- **CoR** to stress the importance of partnerships for place-based policy processes, notably for Partnership Agreements, and share good practice examples with EU institutions and local and regional authorities.
- **Managing Authorities and National Coordination Bodies** to keep up a regular reflection on the applicability of partnerships:
 - Is the partnership still well balanced in relation to the topic in focus?
 - Are partners missing or over-represented for the topic in focus?
 - Are communication means sufficient to offer lively interaction with the partnership?
 - Do partners have necessary information and knowledge to provide value inputs to the programme?
 - Which capacity building activities are most in demand by the partnership to improve the quality of their inputs?
 - Are partners well-informed about the processes and influence of their inputs?

Regular reflection on the partnership keeps it dynamic and relevant to the programme and Partnership Agreement. Breaking down the partnership into smaller groups, for example thematic working groups, may make it easier to keep partnership processes dynamic. Even though it may take efforts to maintain the partnership, eventually partnership processes make the implementation of Cohesion Policy and rural development more place-based and effective. After all, representatives of potential beneficiaries are the safeguard that objectives are aligned with development and investment needs.

- **Other local and regional authorities** express the need for place-specific EU programmes, including new programmes for Just Transition and in relation to Next Generation EU. Local and regional authorities shall particularly express these needs when they observe incompatibilities between EU co-funded programmes and local and regional development strategies.

The potential of partnerships is not fully utilised to make substantial contributions to Cohesion Policy and rural development. A few practicalities hinder utilisation of the full potential of partnerships to contribute to place-based Cohesion Policy and rural development. The mobilisation of stakeholders remains one of the main challenges for partnerships (sections 3.3 and 4.3). In particular, societal players as well as local authorities are frequently perceived as under-represented in partnerships (sections 3.3 and 4.1). At the same time, these types of players perceive different benefits of partnerships (sections 3.3 and 4.3). Local and regional authorities perceive predominantly the opportunities to contribute to thematically balanced and focused (on specific territorial needs) programmes and Partnership Agreements as the main benefit, followed by general ownership of Cohesion Policy and rural development. Societal players perceive mostly opportunities to ensure complementarities between funds and programmes or to ensure that relevant programme priorities are considered in Cohesion Policy and rural development as the main benefit. Targeted communications by type of player identifying the specific added values of partnerships may contribute to mobilising more stakeholders.

Emphasising the importance of representative bodies in partnership is another possibility to address under-representation of local authorities and societal players. Many smaller entities do not have the capacities to be directly involved in many partnerships, even though several programmes are relevant for them. This concerns particularly businesses and local authorities. Instead, these types of partners are often indirectly involved in partnerships, either via umbrella organisations or via entities at higher geographical levels. Also, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) or Local Action Groups for Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) can play this role. Even though partnerships may include only one representative of such organisations, in practice they may represent the voice of many partners.

Another practical obstacle for using the full potential of partnerships to contribute to place-based Cohesion Policy and rural development derives from poor timing (sections 3.3 and 4.3). Currently the Code of Conduct recommends notifying partners at least 10 working days before meetings and sending documents 10 working days in advance (article 11, Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 240/2014). Many local and regional authorities are simultaneously engaged in

multiple processes, e.g. for multiple programmes or multiple working groups per programme. As such, they have to process information of different kinds. In many cases, this all comes at the same time, making it impossible to thoroughly go through the material, become familiar with the proposals, imagine possible counterproposals and more fitting territorial specificities, and prepare arguments as to why this should be considered in the programme. As a result, many players may push for obvious interests in the partnerships.

To address these obstacles and make sure that partnerships contribute better to making Cohesion Policy and rural development place-based, we recommend:

- **EU institutions** to amend the European Code of Conduct to extend the recommended time to share documents or notify partners about meetings to 15 working days.
- **CoR** to set-up a platform and endorse a European Community of Practice on Partnership (as referred to article 18 of the Code of Conduct) to making practical examples of aspects hindering partnerships and enabling place-based policy processes more visible and share them with EU institutions.
- **Managing Authorities and National Coordination Bodies** (1) to differentiate the communication on partnership involvement by type of player and consider giving more weight to contributions of representative bodies; (2) to start with stakeholder involvement processes at an early stage of programmes; (3) to use opportunities provided, such the DG REGIO Peer-2-Peer scheme¹⁵, to exchange ideas to engage stakeholders in programmes.
- **Other local and regional authorities** to keep on stressing the need for sufficient time to prepare inputs for partnership processes.

5.2 Do partnerships enable place-based sustainable and digital transitions?

Partnerships partially manage to enable place-based sustainable and digital transitions (sections 3.2 and 4.2). Different activities at the European level, for programmes and Partnership Agreements, and at local and regional levels could improve the uptake of place-based solutions for sustainable and digital solutions via partnerships.

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/how/improving-investment/taiex-regio-peer-2-peer/

Partnerships mainly contribute to needs analysis and priority development. However, territorial specificities of local and regional authorities should be considered in all aspects of programmes and Partnership Agreements, including the funding allocation, selection of indicator systems and proposal of actions for capacity building. Lower participation of partners for these parts of the programme increases risks of overlooking territorial specificities. Of course, funding allocation benefits from the involvement of fewer partners to reduce the number of players pushing for their interests. Still, a representative sample of partners should be able to reflect on first proposals for funding allocation, safeguarding that also this part of programmes and Partnership Agreements considers local and regional contexts. Moreover, this helps feeding local and regional authorities with data and information on sustainable and digital needs, thus preparing them to better address these development issues.

Partnerships lack territorial data relevant for EU objectives in line with the EU Green Deal and Digital Strategy. Statistical data and information on low geographic levels illustrating territorial development and differences against EU-wide objectives help local and regional authorities to better position themselves in partnerships. Some interviewees perceived a lack of relevant territorial data in line with recent EU objectives for sustainable and digital societies (Section 3.3). When available, data and information should be shared with local and regional authorities to help them formulate a better argument and enhance the uptake of territorial specificities in programmes and Partnership Agreements. In doing so, the right partners for sustainable and digital transitions will be reflected in partnerships. This may imply engaging new partners or different colleagues of organisations already involved in partnerships to programmes and Partnership Agreements.

To address these challenges and make sure that partnerships better enable place-based sustainable and digital transitions we recommend:

- **EU institutions** to enable Eurostat or ESPON to collect and make available statistical data at low geographical levels, NUTS3, in line with EU objectives for the Green Deal and Digital Strategy.
- **CoR** to perform territorial impact assessments on each objective of the EU Green Deal and Digital Strategy and possibly other EU-wide strategic documents and share the results among its members, including systemic pictures of possible related factors relevant for the territorial impact.
- **Managing Authorities and National Coordination Bodies** to include a representative sample of partners in relation to all parts of Operational Programmes and Partnership Agreements. The level of representativeness

may be proportionate to the decision-making powers of players and the share of population they represent, by covering all parts of the territory geographically or thematically, e.g., experts on specific policy fields or on specific management tasks.

- **Other local and regional authorities** (1) to express their needs for place-specific EU programmes, particularly when they observe territory-specific impacts of EU activities for sustainable and digital transitions; and (2) to provide relevant data and information supporting strong evidence-based European policy processes.

5.3 Do partnerships suffer from COVID-19?

Measures imposed to contain the further spread of COVID-19 have delayed and postponed various partnership processes (sections 3.4 and 4.4). However, processes to prepare for 2021-27 are still ongoing, so possibly processes will be caught up by the time of submission of programmes to the European Commission. More importantly, COVID-19 has made partnership processes digital, introducing new opportunities and challenges to stakeholder involvement.

Digital solutions provided specific advantages for stakeholder involvement. Partners saved time on traveling to meeting locations. This resulted in more partners participating in the preparation of 2021-27 programmes and Partnership Agreements. Even partners that otherwise could not join partnership activities joined online. For greater involvement of local and regional authorities as well as other partners, the use of online tools may thus be encouraged, even beyond travel restriction measures.

On the other hand, online meetings reduce the level of interaction if they are not well organised or facilitated. In the rush of setting up digital partnership processes, many authorities applied similar facilitation techniques for interaction and discussion to what they would have used in a physical meeting. However, different techniques and tools are required for good interaction in online environments. Many local and regional authorities may be unaware of the most suitable techniques for good online meetings.

Lessons learnt on the use of online tools and techniques should be capitalised upon to make use of their opportunities in the near future, notably to engage more stakeholders to partnerships. Therefore, we recommend:

- **EU institutions** to bring together experts on online facilitation and online meetings to explore ways to increase online capacities for meetings.

- **CoR** to highlight the advantages and challenges of using online tools for stakeholder involvement among its members, to encourage the use of online means to supplement physical events, and to share innovative ways for online facilitation that ensures lively interaction.
- **Managing Authorities and National Coordination Bodies** (1) to keep using online tools for stakeholder involvement and try new ways for online meeting facilitation; and (2) to consider the use of technical assistance to increase capacities on online meetings, including specific training sessions.
- **Other local and regional authorities** to share experiences with successful online meetings, including tools and techniques used for the facilitation of lively and constructive discussions.

Thus, digital solutions for stakeholder involvement provide opportunities to speed up the evolution, making sure that partnerships live up to their potential.

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Annex

The following presents the main methodology to collect insights on ongoing partnership processes for the preparation of 2021-27 Operational Programmes for Cohesion Policy and rural development and Partnership Agreements. Key insights were collected via an online survey. The survey ran from 19 November 2020 until 19 January 2021.

Survey promotion

The survey targeted mainly individuals that are involved in partnerships of programmes and Partnership Agreements for the 2021-27 programming period. Different channels were used to reach this target group. The CoR has promoted the survey via their channels, notably via the Cohesion Alliance, as well as via its members, the national associations of local and regional authorities, and the representations of European cities and regions in Brussels. Spatial Foresight shared the survey in its network. In addition, both parties promoted the survey via social media.

Invitees were asked to respond to the survey if they are involved in the development of a 2021-27 EU fund (ERDF, CF, ESF+ or EAFRD) or Partnership Agreement. In case they were not involved they will kindly be asked to share the survey in relevant networks.

All together survey promotion led the satisfactory response rates, particularly when the holiday period and workload of programme authorities at this time of programming is considered.

Response rates

Survey findings represent 128 insights on programme partnerships and 61 insights on Partnership Agreements. Most insights were collected on first questions. The response rate lowered towards the end of the survey.

Survey findings are rather balanced across countries, by type of programmes and type of player. Insights for 19 Partnership Agreements were collected and insights reflect programmes in 23 Member States. No answers were received from Luxembourg, Lithuania, Malta and Estonia. Respondents shared mostly insights on regional programmes (49%), followed by national programmes (39%) and Interreg programmes (12%). Most insights reflect opinions of partners of which 37% representing local and regional authorities. 31% represents Managing Authorities or Intermediate bodies.

The response rate was too low to differentiate survey responses per fund (ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, or multi).

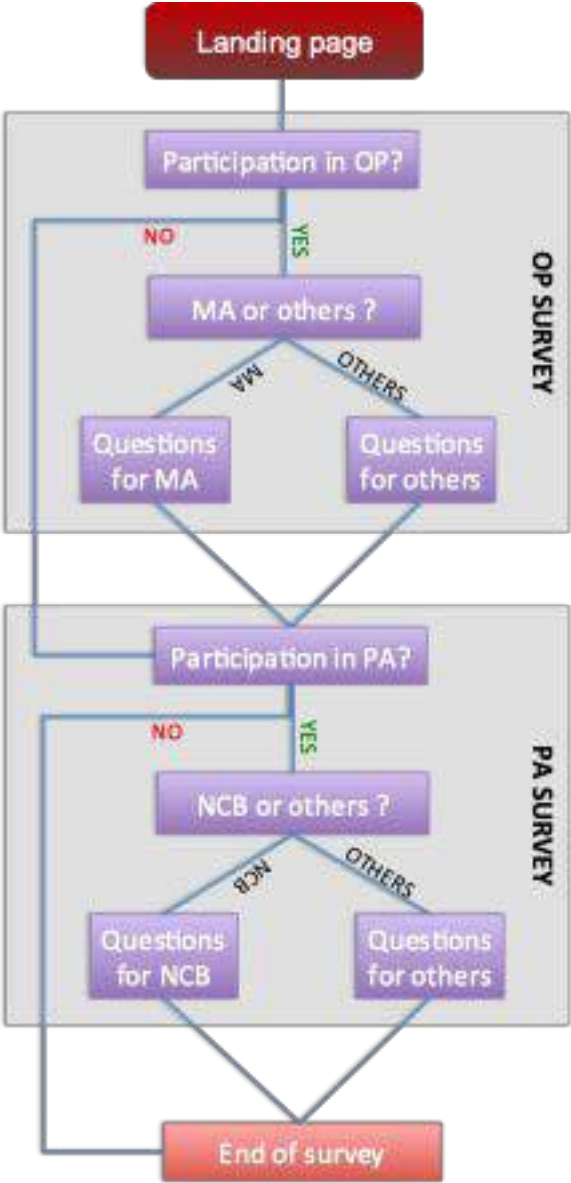
Questionnaire

The questionnaire has been split in four main parts: selection of partners, involvement of partners, conditions for good involvement, benefits and challenges and envisaged partner involvement during implementation. Subsequently, the questions have been differentiated by process and by type of player – partner or Managing Authority (MA) / National Coordination Body (NCB). The questionnaire was thus specified for 2x2 respondents as illustrated below.

After the landing page, introducing the study and aim of the survey, partners were differentiated by their involvement in programmes (OP survey) or Partnership Agreements (PA survey). Respondents that were involved in both processes first answered questions on the programmes and were after asked if they also wanted to share their experience on Partnership Agreements. After all, the partnership processes may be very different for both types of documents and the same organisation may have different roles for the preparation of either document.

Then the surveys for programmes and Partnership Agreements differentiated the questions for partners and the responsible body for partnership (MA or NCB). This way the formulations and some questions could be specified depending on the role of the respondent in partnerships.

The survey structure and questions were similar as the survey ran for the assessment of 2014-2020 partnerships for a DG REGIO study (DG REGIO, 2016). As such the findings could be compared to the previous programming period. The questionnaire has only been adapted to a minor degree to collect insights on new EU objective in line with the EU Green Deal and EU Digital Strategy as well as to capture the effects of COVID.



Selection of partners

1. How are stakeholders selected for the partnership?
 - a. Same partnership as in 2014-20
 - b. Same partnership as in 2014-20 with some modifications (e.g. new stakeholders have been taken on board)
 - c. New partnership following an open call for partnership.
 - d. New partnership following a pre-selection of the Managing Authority.
 - e. Others (please, specify)
 - f. Don't know.

2. Are involved stakeholders identified via a transparent procedure?

Yes	Mostly	Hardly	Not at all

Involvement of partners

3. In which stages of document development are you involved? (only partners)
 - a. I am actively involved in the **drafting** of the document, i.e. have written texts.
 - b. I am actively involved in the **discussion and review** of the document, i.e. through the involvement in the "Programming Committee".
 - c. I am actively participated in the **public consultation** processes, e.g. through the provision of written inputs or the participation in public consultation events.
 - d. I just **received information** about the document, but did not actively participate in the development or discussion of the Programme.
 - e. I do **not** actively participate.
 - f. Others (please, specify)

4. At which stage in the drafting process are you involved? (multiple answers possible) (only partners)
 - a. Needs analysis
 - b. Development of programme priorities
 - c. Allocation of funding
 - d. Development of indicator system
 - e. Inclusion horizontal principles
 - f. Monitoring Committee
 - g. I was not involved in the drafting process.

5. How do you experience the participation of different stakeholder groups in the development of the document? Please, indicate which stakeholder groups you perceived being involved in which way.

	Drafting	Reviewing / discussing	Public Consultatio	Receiving information	Not
Local authorities/bodies					
Regional authorities/bodies					
National authorities/bodies					

Representatives from business organisations or chambers of commerce					
Representatives from the social partners, i.e. employers' organisations and trade unions					
Representatives from the education and research field					
Civil society representatives, including umbrella organisations (e.g. NGOs, local action groups)					
EGTC					
General public					
Others, please specify					

6. Is any stakeholder group under or over represented in the partnership?

	No	Missing	Hardly involved	Over represented	Well over represented
Local authorities/bodies					
Regional authorities/bodies					
National authorities/bodies					
Representatives from business associations or chambers of commerce					
Representatives from the social partners, i.e. employers' organisations and trade unions					
Representatives from the education and research field					
Civil society representatives, including umbrella organisations (e.g. NGOs, local action groups)					
EGTC					
General public					
Others, please specify					

7. In which stage of developing the 2021-27 document are partners involved?

	Needs analysis	Priority Development	Fund Allocation	Indicator System	Horizontal Principles	Composition of MC
Local authorities/bodies						
Regional authorities/bodies						
National authorities/bodies						
Representatives from business association or chambers of commerce						
Representatives from the social partners, i.e. employers' organisations and trade unions						

Representatives from the education and research field						
Civil society representatives including umbrella organisations (e.g. NGOs, local action groups)						
EGTC						
General public						
Others, please specify						

8. Have local and regional strategies been taken onboard in programming work as concerns:

- a. Needs analysis
- b. Priority development
- c. Fund allocation
- d. Indicator system
- e. Horizontal principles
- f. Don't know

9. How does the document address the following priorities for a green and digital future?

	Specific local and regional instruments are proposed	The local context is considered	The objective is generally	No specific reference	Don't know
EU climate ambitions for 2030 and 2050					
Supply clean, affordable and secure energy					
Mobilising industry for a clean and circular economy					
Building and renovating in an energy and resource efficient way					
Accelerating the shift to sustainable and smart mobility					
A fair, healthy and environmental-friendly food system					
Preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity					
A zero pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment					
Technology that works for people					
A fair and competitive digital economy					
An open, democratic and sustainable digital society					
Europe as a global digital player					

Conditions for good partner involvement

10. The Code of Conduct on Partnership (CoC), through article 11(b) specifies that partners should have at least 10 working days to receive documents or notices for meetings.

Do you have access to documents and information in time to prepare for the participation at partnership meetings etc.?

Yes	Mostly	Hardly	Not at all

11. Is enough time been allocated for the consultation process? (Partners only)

Yes	Mostly	Hardly	Not at all

12. Which channels and fora are used for communications and consultations concerning the draft document?

- Large hearings / meetings covering the entire Operational Programme
- Smaller workshop on specific parts of the Operational Programme
- Web-surveys
- Webinars
- Online workshops or conferences
- Social media fora (with room for commenting)
- Publication of information via media (incl. print, web, radio, tv ...)
- Others (please, specify)

13. Do you have the impression that the comments of all stakeholders have been treated in the same way? (Partners only)

Yes	Mostly	Hardly	Not at all

14. How does the COVID-19 pandemic influence your involvement in the development of the 2021-27 document?

- It slows down procedures
- Planned processes are postponed
- It required a shift to digital solutions
- Increased flexibility for programming reduced inclusion of a large variety of players
- Additional re-programming and re-allocation tasks for the programme authorities reduced time spent for good partner involvement
- Other funding possibilities (e.g. reform and resilience facility) reduce the interest in ERDF, CF, ESF+ and EAFRD among partners

15. Has stakeholder involvement improved as compared to the 2014-20 Programme Period?

Yes	Mostly	Hardly	Not at all

Benefits and challenges of the partnership

16. What are the main benefits of the involvement of the partnership in the development of the document?

- a. Better thematic balance and focus, meeting the needs and potential of the territory covered through the experience and technical knowledge brought in by partners.
- b. Collective commitment to and broad ownership, which will facilitate the implementation processes.
- c. Broad general awareness, which will help to mobilise relevant stakeholders to submit funding applications.
- d. Better complementarities with other policies, strategies and funding sources available in the area.
- e. Others (please, specify)

17. What are the main challenges related to the involvement of the partnership?

- a. Mobilisation of relevant stakeholders, i.e. some stakeholder groups have low levels of interest and/or capacity to participate.
- b. Some stakeholders tried to push for particular interests which made it difficult to develop a focused and balanced document.
- c. The time window for the stakeholder involvement was too short and/or difficult to fit in the process of drafting the document.
- d. Ensuring representativeness through the involved stakeholders.
- e. Adapting to measures to contain further spreading of the COVID-19 virus, including finding online solutions
- f. (For Interreg programmes) Language barriers did not allow all relevant stakeholders to participate.
- g. (For Interreg programmes) Different national priorities made it difficult to develop a focused programme.
- h. (For Interreg programmes) Cultural / administrative differences slowed processes.
- i. (For Interreg programmes) Broad thematic and geographical coverage posed difficulties for identifying and reaching all relevant stakeholders.
- j. Others (please, specify)

Envisaged partner involvement during implementation (Programme questionnaire only)

18. Were you nominated by the Managing Authority to participate in the Programme Partnership during programme implementation and if so to which tasks? (Partners only)

- a. No
- b. Yes - Programme Implementation (e.g. stimulating funding applications)
- c. Yes - Programme Monitoring
- d. Yes - Programme Evaluation
- e. Yes – Others (please, specify)

19. Are any particular actions envisaged to strengthen the institutional capacity of the involved partners?

- a. Training for partners
- b. Networking measures
- c. Exchanges of best practices
- d. Public consultations
- e. Awareness-raising campaigns
- f. Activities jointly undertaken by the social partners
- g. Other (please, specify)

20. How do you envisage the participation of different stakeholder groups over the next years? Please, indicate which stakeholder groups you think would be involved in which way. (Managing Authorities only)

	Steering Committee	Monitoring Committee	Target Consultation Actions	Regular Public Consultation	Others	Not
Local authorities/bodies						
Regional authorities/bodies						
National authorities/bodies						
Representatives from business associations or chambers of commerce						
Representatives from the social partners, i.e. employers' organisations and trade unions						
Representatives from the education and research field						
Civil society representatives, including umbrella organisations (e.g. NGOs, local action groups)						
EGTC						
General public						
Others, please specify						

21. Do you see a risk that in the implementation process stakeholder groups are missing or over represented in the partnership?

	No	Missing	Hardly involved	Over represented	Well over represented
Local authorities/bodies					
Regional authorities/bodies					
National authorities/bodies					
Representatives from business associations or chambers of commerce					
Representatives from the social partners, i.e. employers' organisations and trade unions					
Representatives from the education and research field					
Civil society representatives, including umbrella organisations (e.g. NGOs, local action groups)					
EGTC					
General public					
Others, please specify					

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