



 Niedersachsen Lower Saxon Ministry for Federal and European Affairs
and Regional Development (DE)

 European Union
European Regional
Development Fund

Part I – General information

Project: DIALOG - **D**ialog for **I**nnovation **A**nd **L**Ocal **G**rowth

Partner organisation: Lower Saxon Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development

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Part II – Policy context

The Action Plan aims to impact:

- Investment for Growth and Jobs programme
- European Territorial Cooperation programme
- Other regional development policy instrument

Name of the policy instrument addressed:

- Lower Saxony Operational Programme (2021-2027)

Part III – Details of the actions envisaged

ACTION 1

1. The Background:

The Lower Saxon Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development has a unique portfolio.

The ministry sees its role as a „transmission belt “, working in both directions, the EU and the different regions of Lower Saxony. The EU Ministries’ central tasks lie in:

- Regional Development and EU-Funding,
- Representation of Lower Saxony in Berlin and Brussels.

In respect to EU Funding the ministry holds the role of managing authority and strategic coordinator of EU Funding for Lower Saxony. In that context, the ministry is also responsible for the development and maintenance of the RIS3 as well as the setup of the operational programme.

The Operational Programme in Lower Saxony (Niedersachsen) 2014-2020 connected different funds and comprised various funding regions. The merging of ERDF and ESF funds in one Multifund Programme marked a substantial change in Lower Saxony from the previous programming period.

Through the combination of ERDF and ESF in one programme and through the joint strategic approach aiming at improving the developments in the different parts of Lower Saxony, synergies and efficiency were obtained. With a regionalized and integrated approach, the programme was able to help addressing the needs and potentials of the region and hence to generate growth and employment. The overall success of the Multifund programme led to the adaptation of the before mentioned approaches for the new funding period (2021-2027). In order to further improve the efficiency of EU funding, the ministry set up the Lower Saxon EU-Funding strategy.

The mandate of the Land Government for the Lower Saxon Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development in 2018 was:

- o to develop an optimal and broadly accepted funding landscape,
- o to apply funding as efficiently and well-coordinated as possible,
- o to implement a funding environment that fosters the efficient exhaustion of all funding resources and
- o to simplify funding as much as possible.

The application of the EU-Funding strategy already proved to be successful since it led to the aggregation of funding instruments, despite the rise of EU-Funding for the upcoming period.

Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) is an exemplary instrument for broadly accepted funding. As a result of the strategy process, Lower Saxony was able to establish two ITI Instruments in the European Funding System („Zukunftsregionen“ and „Resiliente Innenstädte“). Furthermore, „Zukunftsregionen“ is an instrument combining EFRD and ESF and is helping to apply funding as efficiently and well-coordinated as possible. In order to mitigate the consequences of the corona pandemic, the program “Resiliente Innenstädte” (resilient inner cities) was implemented.

At the same time, the strategy of the Multifund Program supports the objectives of the government in the field of innovation defined in the Lower Saxon Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3). The setup of the RIS3 strategy flanked the process of the setup of the EU-Funding strategy and the operational programme and is still ongoing as a living document.

Another important task of the ministry is the transmission of regional interests to the EU and its institutions as well as explaining regional consequences of EU decision making to the Lower Saxon citizens and other regional stakeholders from the private sector, scientific communities, municipalities, syndicates etc.

As a cross-sectional ministry, the Ministry is looking at all European political fields and needs, constantly trying to find comprehensive, creative and efficient solutions for Lower Saxony.

It becomes obvious that horizontal and vertical communication with a multitude of stakeholder groups is key to the work of the Lower Saxon Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development.

Therefore, the ministry is constantly striving to improve its skills when it comes to gathering information from Stakeholders as well as moderating and transmitting information to the diverse stakeholder groups. Its main goal is to find sustainable solutions for the citizens and to ensure the efficient use of EU funding.

A big incentive for the ministry to participate in DIALOG, was the fact that the ministry wanted to reflect the processes for the setup of the operational program and the interlinked processes of the setup of the EU Funding strategy and RIS3. In order to analyse the actions of the ministry with regards to participatory processes and to transfer the knowledge from the interregional project exchange, the ministry hired a project manager. The aim was to kickstart a thorough process of reflection and learning

through the interregional exchange and to create a steady feedback loop from the project activities to the setup of the Operational program and back. The lessons learned from the case study analysis and the interregional exchange should then be quickly transferred to the design process of the Operational Program 2021-2027.

The overarching aim for the new Operational Program was for it to lead to more efficient funding instruments that are better tailored to the needs of the beneficiaries. Therefore, the transfer of knowledge for the improvement of participatory processes was crucial.

DIALOG – Project

The official start of the DIALOG-project was in August 2019 at an important point in the work of the Lower Saxon Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development. Three parallel and interdigitating processes took place that together with the work within the partnership significantly shaped the Design of the Lower Saxon action plan.

1. The EU-Funding strategy was at the final stage of its setup leading to a process of matching the declaration of the different Lower Saxon ministries' EU funding instruments to the newly developed strategy.
2. The setup of the operational programme started. At the same time, the unit responsible for the EU Funding strategy had to make sure, the managing authority sufficiently considered the strategy for the setup of the operational programme.
3. The setup of the RIS3 took place, which later amounted to the alignment with the operational programme as well as a concept for the monitoring and evaluation of the RIS3.

Three processes organized by different units with very ambitious strategic and methodological goals took place in the ministry.

The goal of the DIALOG project was not only to filter the lessons learned from these activities for the case study description but also to share the lessons learned for the improvement of the ongoing processes of the development of the operational programme. At the same time, the project served as a tool to foster the alignment of the strategies with the development of the operational programme. Through the comprehensive analysis of the different interlinked process, the following strength and weaknesses for the ministry could be identified:

Strengths:

- Broad knowledge of management and methodological design of stakeholder participation processes
- High methodological competencies within the ministry
- Willingness to apply innovative approaches to participatory processes
- High awareness of the importance of stakeholder participation for the development of effective funding instruments
- Aggregation of a multitude of processes for the Lower Saxon Regional and European Affairs within one institution

Weaknesses:

- Scattered methodological knowledge
- Scattered knowledge of event and project management
- Insufficient mapping of the knowledge within the ministry
- Insufficient knowledge of the different processes of stakeholder participation within the different units of the ministry and therefore lack of use of synergies and strategic alignment of participatory processes
- Project management in need of improvement esp. when it comes to cross-unit collaboration and the respective organisation of cross-unit communication and distribution of tasks
- Lack of documentation and communication of lessons learned
- No systematic approach to the routinely trial and error of unfamiliar and innovative approaches when it comes to methods and tools for stakeholder participation and the composition of stakeholder groups.

Taking these findings into account, activities were started to interlink the so far three parallel processes as follows:

A major aim of the operational program 2021 to 2027 was to go beyond the legalistic rationale for participatory processes and to create meaningful exchange with the relevant Stakeholders in order to create a better and more efficient funding environment as well as more efficient and well-tailored funding tools.

The documentation of the successful practices with regards the Design of the EU-Funding Strategy and RIS3 (2021-2027) for the DIALOG case study description, revealed the importance of continuous, detailed and consistent time and stakeholder management in order to develop and apply innovative methodologies to the participation processes.

On the other hand, the analysis of the strategy for the setup of the new Operational program revealed a lack of precise and consistent project time- and communication

management within the organising team which added to the enormous workload and put the application of new participatory methods at risk. With regards to the Operational Program (2021-2027) that a high willingness to apply innovative approaches with regards to the participatory processes fronted with the insufficient application of project management tools.

Hence, we started to communicate the lessons learned from the case study analysis and the project partner feedback quickly back to the team responsible for the design of the operational program. We transferred project management knowledge to the team and introduced them to project management software for thorough time and resource planning. This proved to be very beneficial for the overall project management and also for the interlinked processes, like the EU-Funding strategy and RIS3. The ongoing feedback loop through Stakeholder meetings and the DIALOG survey (and with it the introduction to a variety of methods for participatory processes) helped shaping the participation processes for the setup of the Operational Program 2021-2027). The responsible unit confirmed the positive impact the DIALOG project had on the final outcome of the new Operational Program.

Altogether, the sharing of lessons learned from the EU Funding strategy, RIS3, the project partner feedback and the communication and implementation of project management tools for the operational programme proved to be very impactful.

The exchange with the different units of the ministry and the observation of the processes for the setup of the EU Funding strategy and RIS3, revealed most of the above-mentioned strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, it brought to light the importance of good project management and a well structured timeplan in order to create the space to develop actionable strategies and systems to achieve the goal of making meaningful participation happen.

This led to first considerations of implementing systematic lessons learned workshops and the implementation of project management tools to extend, further systemise and professionalise the activities the DIALOG project had started.

Additionally, the DIALOG survey – developed by the projects' scientific committee – revealed a very heterogeneous knowledge and use of different tools and techniques of stakeholder participation within the ministry.

The DIALOG model on participatory processes and methods led to a series of workshops and a more intense exchange with the responsible employee for the RIS3. Beyond the impact, the project had on the RIS3 through the improved processes for

the setup of the new Operational program and the DIALOG peer review process, the model on participatory processes and methods led to new and improved planning of the participatory methods with regards to the RIS3. The project management organised a workshop for the RIS3 responsible employee and helped with the adaptation of the strategic and methodological considerations to the RIS3 participatory processes. This exchange- together with the action plan tool- helped the employee to arrange the future participatory processes for the continuous improvement of the RIS3 and therefore the new Operational Program (Political Goal 1)

The action plan was designed in order to continuously improve the system of stakeholder participation in the ministry beyond the participation in DIALOG. A system for systematic knowledge management - based on the DIALOG model for participatory processes and the lessons learned from the case study description- for stakeholder participation was established by the project management.

The goal was to use the DIALOG model for participation processes and methods and apply the idea behind its most crucial concepts into a questionnaire for the reflection of planned participatory processes. Additionally, the questionnaire was complemented by the lessons learned from the case study description and was designed to set incentives and some guidelines for basic project management

The action plan will continuously impact all participatory processes in the ministry but especially the RIS3 and hence the innovation goals of the Operational Program in 2021-2027.

2. Action - Establishment of a knowledge management system for the stakeholder participation within the Lower Saxon Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development

The action plan consists of a knowledge management system for stakeholder participation within the ministry. In order to improve the communication about tools and techniques of stakeholder participation, a knowledge management system was established.

The plan contains the following specific activities:

- Checklist and questionnaire as a guideline for stakeholder management, project management and the reflection of adequate methods and tools for participatory processes as a basis for inner-ministerial exchange. To be filled out by each unit before/whilst organising participatory processes as a tool for exchange.

- Exchange of the questionnaire with the different units of the ministry.
Discussion of the questionnaires within the units in order to identify possible links for further exchange with the respective organizing unit (esp. with regards to choice and composition of stakeholder groups and the methods of stakeholder participation)

The concept of the inner-ministerial exchange with the tool of a questionnaire (s. annex) was developed by the DIALOG project management in order to materialize the lessons learned from the interregional exchange. The exchange approach and its questionnaire' tool is the direct application of the model for participatory methods developed within the DIALOG project. The model was written as a contribution of all partners and their experiences whose core is participation. This concept has been entered in the Lower Saxony action plan and its general principles of social dialogue were adapted to the ministerial context. Furthermore, the field surveys and the workshop addressed to local stakeholders gave relevant inputs on how to develop a tailor-made action improving the quality of the participation process. The lesson learned was mainly based on the analysis of the model, which is not a one-fit-all one but it should consider the needs of the actors involved.

Additionally, of particular relevance for the development of the Action plan were the core elements of the following best practices presented by other partners, namely from the Internal Area of Tesino (Trentino) the bottom-up approach and from SUSTATOOL (Flanders) the possibility to have a tool that allows a continuous improvement and an accessible management process articulated in phases (eg. analysis, reports, etc.), which can be seen as an added value.

The different heads of unit as well as employees were informed about the respective concept and tool and shaped the tool with their feedback. The very comprehensive questionnaire serves as a tool and checklist at the same time, helping the different project managers to tackle important questions about time planning, collaboration, stakeholder composition as well as tools and methods for stakeholder participation. The excel file allows the extraction of information for different purposes (communication to the head of the ministry, communication to different units, self-management).

The process of sharing the information about stakeholder participation will also lead to the harmonization of the communication with the stakeholder groups and the harmonization of the different fields of work of the ministry (regional development and European affairs).

The tool needs to be presented to the following units with their respective tasks:

Abteilung 1 Regionale Entwicklung, EU-Förderung – *Regional Development and EU Funding*

- Referat 101 Grundlagen der regionalen Entwicklung, Regionale Strategien und Prozesse, Koordinierung der Ämter für regionale Landesentwicklung
- Referat 102 Metropolregionen, Innovation
- Referat 103 Verwaltungsbehörde EFRE und ESF, ELER-Koordinierung
- Referat 104 Interreg, Öffentlichkeitsarbeit EU-Fonds, Kommunikationsbeauftragte/r

Abteilung 2 Europa - Europe

- Referat 201 Europarecht
- Referat 202 Europäische Fachpolitiken
- Referat 203 Europäisches Informations-Zentrum (EIZ), Öffentlichkeitsarbeit zu Europa
- Organisationseinheit 204 Repräsentation und Interessenvertretung des Landes Niedersachsen bei der Europäischen Union - Brüssel -

The process of reflecting the ministries actions with regards to the design of participatory processes revealed the broad methodological and conceptual knowledge in the ministry in the field of stakeholder participation. The processes and intentions for participation differ largely between the units. Observing the impact, the DIALOG-driven actions had on the setup of the Operational Program, it became clear how beneficial the exchange of knowledge between the different units can be. The constant exchange of knowledge in the field of participatory processes will lead to a compounding effect on the overall knowledge and skills with regards to participatory processes. This will continuously impact all participatory processes in the ministry but especially the RIS3 and hence the innovation goals of the Operational Program in 2021-2027.

In order to achieve these goals, every head of the relevant units are encouraged to schedule the discussion about each circulating questionnaire with her/his employees in order to identify lessons learned as well as strategic and methodological questions that should to be discussed with the organizing unit.

Monitoring:

The implementation of the action plan will be monitored in phase 2 in order to evaluate the impact of the knowledge management system with regards to the improvement of stakeholder participation processes and hence the continuous improvement of the effective use of EU funding.

The organizing unit will regularly (every 3-6 months) get in touch with each unit to check on their ability to apply the questionnaire to their work. This process might lead to a further adaptation of the checklist to the specific needs of the employees.

Furthermore, a survey towards the end of phase 2 will monitor the impact of the tool to the processes of stakeholder participation and the exchange of knowledge.

3. Players involved (please indicate the organisations in the region who are involved in the development and implementation of the action and explain their role)

The action plan addresses the competency of our units when it comes to stakeholder participation.

Technically, all stakeholders of department 1 (Regional Development and EU Funding) and 2 (Europe) are involved in the action plan. Every head is responsible to manage the use of each circulating questionnaire with her/his employees in order to identify lessons learned and strategic and methodological questions that should to be discussed with the organizing unit.

Every organizing unit fills out the questionnaire and sends it to all relevant units of the ministry.

Within the ministry these units (internal stakeholders) cover the following tasks:

Abteilung 1 Regionale Entwicklung, EU-Förderung – Regional Development and EU Funding

- Referat 101 Grundlagen der regionalen Entwicklung, Regionale Strategien und Prozesse, Koordinierung der Ämter für regionale Landesentwicklung
- Referat 102 Metropolregionen, Innovation
- Referat 103 Verwaltungsbehörde EFRE und ESF, ELER-Koordinierung
- Referat 104 Interreg, Öffentlichkeitsarbeit EU-Fonds, Kommunikationsbeauftragte/r

Abteilung 2 Europa - Europe

- Referat 201 Europarecht
- Referat 202 Europäische Fachpolitiken
- Referat 203 Europäisches Informations-Zentrum (EIZ), Öffentlichkeitsarbeit zu Europa
- Organisationseinheit 204 Repräsentation und Interessenvertretung des Landes Niedersachsen bei der Europäischen Union - Brüssel -

In the Lower Saxon Ministry for Federal and European Affairs, the employees are responsible for the organization of a multitude of stakeholder participation processes. Therefore, the action plan addresses the knowledge management surrounding the processes of stakeholder participation (society and social parts).

Even though, the system is impactful for all the activities of the above-mentioned units of the ministry, it will prove to be especially impactful for the continuous participation processes with regards to the RIS3 for the current funding period and hence for the Innovation goals of the Operational Program 2021-27.

Improving the knowledge management for participation processes therefore influences the following external stakeholder groups:

- Lower Saxon Ministries
- Lower Saxon local governments:
 - (Rural and Urban) Districts
 - (Collective) Municipalities
 - Kommunale Spitzenverbände
- Trade associations
- Trade unions
- Entrepreneurs' associations
- Industrial associations
- Chambers
- Youth associations
- Environmental associations
- Agricultural associations
- Civil Society associations
- (Lower Saxon) Academia

Until the end of phase 2, the goal is to

- establish the use of the exchange tool within the ministry
- to strengthen the knowledge of the methodologically and strategically diverse participatory processes within the ministry
- to strengthen the knowledge of the most crucial elements of the model for participatory processes and methods
- To develop a system for the continuous improvement of the unit's knowledge with regards to the adequate setup of participatory processes (methodological and strategically).

The use of the tool will be encouraged and monitored throughout phase 2. The success will be evaluated through surveys about the use of the tools.

4. Costs

The action plan consists more in a procedural change with regards to the organisation of participatory processes. The actions will be driven by the employee's commitment to using the tool. Therefore, the costs are not quantifiable. Moreover, the actions should lead to more effective and less time-consuming processes.

On a regular basis the unit responsible for DIALOG sends out a questionnaire to monitor the use and benefits of the tool. The actions undertaken take approx. 1% of an employee's work-time based on a fulltime-position.

5. Timeframe

The aim is to develop a sustainable process that aims to continuously improve stakeholder participation. In November 2021 informative meetings with each unit were scheduled to introduce the questionnaire to the employees and to discuss possible techniques on how to fill out and use the questionnaire within the teams. The implementation of the action plan will start as soon as every unit of the departments 1 and 2 of the ministry participated in an informative meeting (by the end of December). Hence, the first questionnaires will probably circulate in February 2022. In the following year (phase 2) we will be able to adjust the tool and monitor its impact on the participation processes. After phase 2, it is foreseen to transfer the monitoring activities into regular evaluation actions.

6. Annex

- Excel questionnaire

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Stamp of the organisation (if available):
