Project outline for Interreg Europe first call:

New approaches to reach disadvantaged target groups effectively

(initiated by the Municipality of Heerlen, the Netherlands)

# Background

Access to services of general interest, such as education, training, healthcare, social care and social protection and inclusion, is difficult for vulnerable groups. It is especially so when they are in a difficult situation from multiple aspects. Marginalised individuals (such as third-country immigrants, homeless people, people with mental health problems, or even just lonely elderly) can be affected by a range of other issues such as lack of education, lack of employment, mental and other health problems, lack of mobility, basic social or language skills, crime, etc.

In such cases, social services focusing on a single aspect, operating within a traditional organisational structure, cannot reach them effectively or at all. In addition to the organisational fragmentation of social service providers, the budgets for each target are also fragmented. As a result, they cannot respond adequately to the complex problems of the target group.

Reaching vulnerable target groups with complex problems requires a new, innovative and holistic approach by social service providers to organise services around the target group. The target group has a crucial role in this new kind of collaboration, as the mix of services can only be effective if tailored to the needs of the individual. The challenge is further compounded by the fact that these target groups feel let down by society and the social service network for years or decades and that negative feedback from the past continues to weigh on the relationship. Therefore, the first step is building trust and restoring faith in change. The co-design of services tailored to individual needs can be pursued as a next step involving social service providers and the community.

Addressing the problems of these vulnerable target groups with complex issues is an investment that pays off in the medium term. Social aid provided under various headings but not necessarily effective is a significant burden on national, regional or local budgets. However, a short-term and targeted aid scheme can address these problems effectively. Prevention is, therefore, an increasingly important aspect, as opposed to ex-post fire-fighting.

# Overall objective

The project focuses on the inclusion of vulnerable target groups such as marginalised communities, low-income households and disadvantaged groups as part of the More Social Europe priority.

The project's overall objective is to improve regional development policies dealing with vulnerable target groups by exchanging experiences, testing innovative approaches, and building the capacity of partners to identify, disseminate, and transfer good practices.

Thematic objectives of the project:

* Exchanging and testing new approaches to reach disadvantaged target groups effectively
* Involving disadvantaged target groups in the co-design of effective service mixes tailored to their individual needs
* Strengthening prevention to alleviate the long-term pressure on social budgets by strengthening short-term interventions and, to this end, attracting alternative sources of funding (community and private).

# Main activities

Partners will identify their target groups and their regional development policies and policy instruments to be addressed and good practices. They will involve their stakeholders and take part in an individual and organisational learning process, resulting in increased capacity. Increased capacities will improve their policies, having an improved territorial effect. The core phase of the project will be implemented in the first three years. It will focus on exchanging experience (in seminars, workshops, site visits, staff exchanges and peer reviews) among project partners and integrating the lessons learnt from the cooperation into the regional development policy instruments.

Partners can test new approaches by carrying out pilot actions that can be either the transfer of successful practice from one region to another or a new initiative jointly designed by the project.

Partners should improve their policies by the end of the core phase. Partner regions failing to do that shall produce an action plan for policy improvement, explaining how they will enhance their policy thanks to the learning gained from the project. In the follow-up phase (lasting one year), partners will monitor the first effects of the policy improvements or the implementation of their action plans envisaging policy improvements.

# Budget

EUR 1.5-2 million funding.

Partners will receive support from ERDF funds amounting 80% of their costs in case of public bodies and bodies governed by public law from all 27 EU member states. Private non-profit bodies can receive 70% ERDF support.

# Partners

6-10 partners from 5-8 countries. The lead partner is the Municipality of Heerlen, and possible partners already identified are the municipalities of Aarhus (Denmark) and Pordenone (Italy). The envisaged partnership consists of partners responsible for regional development policies dealing with vulnerable target groups.

The primary outcome of an Interreg Europe project is to achieve policy improvement. Each project partner must choose a policy instrument that they can actively influence during the project. Policy instruments can be various means for public intervention. They can be any policy, strategy, or law developed by public authorities and applied on the ground to improve a specific territorial situation. In most cases, financial resources are associated with a policy instrument. However, an instrument can sometimes refer to a strategy or legislative framework with no specific funding.

The term 'policy improvement' refers to the implementation of new policies, change in the management of a policy instrument (improving governance), or the revision of the policy instrument itself.

Therefore, policy responsible authorities are the main target group of the Interreg Europe programme: at least 50% of the policy instruments addressed have to involve the related policy responsible authority as project partners directly. If a partner is not a policy responsible authority, they need to involve one as an 'associated public authority'.

The Interreg Programme requires projects to form a geographically balanced partnership (involving partners from North, East, South, West), each region having a varying level of existing experience on the topic addressed.

# Why is Heerlen interested?

Heerlen-Noord is an area with significant socio-economic challenges unprecedented in the Netherlands. The area lies in the middle of the Eastern Mining Area. For decades, this region symbolised progress, prosperity and development. Until the discovery of gas fields in Groningen in the 1950s, South Limburg supplied the energy of the Netherlands. With the closure of the mines that followed, a difficult time started for the city. The area changed both physically and socially. While Heerlen had previously attracted workers from 'Holland' and other parts of Europe, they now left at a steady pace. Heerlen lost its appeal, and people lost the prospect of a better life with all its consequences. House prices fell. Unemployment figures rose rapidly. Crime rates rose accordingly. Heerlen became the leader of the wrong lists.

By now, almost two-thirds of the inhabitants of Heerlen-Noord have a low income or cannot make ends meet. Nationally, this percentage is around 20%, and the average annual income there is €6,000 lower than in Heerlen South.

A newborn from Heerlen-Noord has a 29% chance of getting health problems later on. Nationally, this is 18%. Almost half of the inhabitants indicate that they feel unsafe, while in the rest of Limburg only 35%. Heerlen-Noord performs below the average level in the Netherlands in all areas. The situation is alarming and unconventional action is needed to stop this development.

Heerlen is interested in applying the Staircase to Staircase Model used in Gellerup (an underprivileged area of Aarhus). Many families living in this area are challenged by unemployment, health and social problems. The model interacts with 60 vulnerable families, using a holistic approach based on building personal relationships with the families. In these cases, the municipal employee and the family plan sustainable solutions together to address these challenges. In order to reach these employment, well-being, organisational and financial goals, the city sets up an interprofessional team that moves into the area. They literally knock on doors and ask families to define their needs and delegate only one person to a family (avoiding sending families from one municipal department to another to get help). The model has reached significant results in ensuring employment (full-time or part-time) or education, engagement in health or free-time activities or helping with various difficulties regarding children.

Therefore, Heerlen is interested in exchanging experience on the Staircase to Staircase Model or any similar model that focuses on vulnerable groups dealing with difficult situations from multiple aspects. Testing and adapting such a model to the specific needs of the vulnerable groups living in Heerlen-Noord can be one of the pilot actions of the Interreg Europe project. Lessons learnt during the implementation of the pilot action and cooperation with the project partners can be integrated into the regional development policy instruments.