



Peer review:

How to boost local resilience by small scale funding?

Final report

19-05-2022

provinsje fryslân
provincie fryslân



1. Context

Since 2014 the Province of Fryslân has been working with the IMF fund, a special funding instrument for local initiatives that boost the quality in life in their surroundings. To improve the policy behind this instrument and to gain insight into the working method of several European partners, we applied to host a peer review last January. This final report aims to provide insight into the recommendations and follow up actions of the two-day meeting.

During the first part of the two-day meeting, we introduced the IMF as a funding method and elaborated on the Frisian context. From there on, we zoomed in on the sub-questions we had presented on beforehand in our background paper. On the second day, our partners presented their recommendations. Together with them and some local stakeholders, we formulated some striking conclusions and follow up actions.

1.1. Motivation of participation

By hosting this peer review we hoped to gain new insights regarding the involvement of the wider civil society. Other regional development funds have interesting project assessment, impact assessment and/or citizen engagement strategies, from which we would love to learn. Insights obtained by the peer review can be integrated in the next official evaluation of the IMF policy (end 2022). In the near future we hope to develop an assessment framework and an all-inclusive governance toward resilient communities together with other EU regions.

At the same time, the success of the IMF can be an inspiration for policy improvements in many EU regions. In Europe rural areas struggle with employment rates, demographic change and living standards. This situation is apparent in the EU's rural development policy and the various Interreg projects that go into these issues (i.a. P-IRIS and OSIRIS). As the problems in EU rural areas are quite similar, regions can learn from each other.

In conclusion, our ambition was to start a fruitful peer review with European partners that are more or less facing the same policy questions and challenges with their funds. For us this peer review was the start of a long-lasting, continuous learning process and productive partnership.

1.2. Policy challenge

As a governmental body we see how society is changing rapidly and how citizens want to have more agency in their community with little governmental interference. Considering how the rural areas of Fryslân have to deal with demographic change (population reduction), cooperation and connectedness within the quadruple helix (as the IMF aspires to stimulate) is of the utmost importance.

Although the IMF has proven to be a successful instrument for improving the quality of life in a Frisian village, city or region and increase citizen engagement, we do see some challenges for the future of the fund and the way we work out our policy. This peer review aims to deliver strategic input concerning civil society, community resilience and demographic change to the program preparations groups of future EU-programs. With the feedback of European peers and the integration of 'lived experience data' we are confident that we can provide solutions in identifying better accessible management instruments and administrative structures.

For this peer review, we have phrased the following main and sub-questions:

Main question:

How to involve the wider civil society within the IMF?

Sub-question 1:

How do we reach and approach target groups that do not know the IMF, how to identify their needs and keep them activated within the community?

Sub-question 2:

What indicators or methods can the Province of Fryslân use to measure the (societal) impact of (IMF) community projects?

2. Participants

Peers		
Alette Skov-Hansen	Municipality of Syddjurs, Denmark	Rural Development Consultant
Alexander Krings	Ministry of the German-speaking community, Belgium (East Belgium)	Senior Advisor for Territorial Development
Emilija Stojmenova	University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Electrical Engineering	Assistant Professor
Lieselot Vandebussche	Free University of Amsterdam, Department of Political Science and Public Administration	Assistant Professor

Province of Fryslân		
Nynke van der Hoef	Province of Fryslân	Managing Director of the IMF
Khoji Wesselius	Province of Fryslân	Strategist Team Europe
Tieneke Clevering	Province of Fryslân	Project Leader IMF
Gerwin van Dijk	Province of Fryslân	Programme Manager Organizational Development
René Monnikhof	Province of Fryslân	Governance Strategist
Gerwin van Oene	Province of Fryslân	Project Advisor IMF
Immie Jonkman	Leeuwarden-Fryslân 2028 - LF2028 (LF2028)	Programme and marketing advisor at LF2028
Ingrid van de Vegte	Frisian Social Statistics Bureau (FSP)	Director of the Frisian Social Statistics organisation
Gerda Bos	N/A	Member of one of the regional IMF platforms
Tako Popma	N/A	External Expert

Interreg Europe		
Ana Mihaljevic	Policy Learning Platform	Policy Officer
Marc Pattinson	Policy Learning Platform	Thematic Expert in Research and Innovation
Thorsten Kohlisch	Policy Learning Platform	Project Manager

3. Policy recommendations

Because of the corona measures, it was not possible to host a peer review on-site for a long time. We did however decide to postpone until an on-site meeting would be possible, since we strongly felt that the output would be way more fruitful. After two years we were finally able to host the two-day meeting in Fryslân.

The two-day meeting was broken down into different sections. The first day we focused on the policy challenges and our joint expectations of the peer review. On this day, we also welcomed a few local stakeholders: Immie Jonkman (Leeuwarden-Fryslân 2028 - LF2028), Ingrid van de Vegte ((Frisian Social Statistics Bureau) and Gerda Bos (Member of one of the regional IMF platforms). In the afternoon, we discussed about the first sub-question of our background paper and the policy challenge examples of our partners. On the second day, we focused on the second sub-question. Our peers also presented their recommendations for the IMF. We concluded the day and the peer review with a summary of our joint next steps.

3.1. Key learnings of the first sub-question

When the context of our policy challenges was outlined, we received the following remarks from our partners:

- Already today, the IMF is an **inspiring policy instrument** which can serve as good practice for many regions across Europe.
- The **value of the IMF** for the future of Fryslân reaches far beyond the small-scale funding provided for local community initiatives. We note that different actors have different capabilities, and every community has assets and needs. By focusing on strengthening assets, we can ‘serve’ and also ‘solve’ needs.
- By working closely with local project owners, regional decision-makers can build closer ties with local communities, thus regaining **trust in public policymaking** and **activating key players** to tackle the broader challenges of today’s world, such as economic, health, climate and energy transitions and overall regional resilience...
- The IMF can help create **local narratives and tell stories** that connect people to these challenges.

The recommendations for the first sub-question were split up in several sections:

- Approaching target groups:
 - Many programmes rely on identifying and using **intermediaries, facilitators and network leaders** as connectors, ambassadors and multipliers.
 - By building **ties, networks and partnerships** with those municipal, voluntary and private actors (intermediaries), target groups can be accessed and activated more easily. This method can help in targeting less well represented groups.
 - As successfully applied in Slovenia, the identification of „**Local Heroes**“ can facilitate engagement and awareness raising within targeted communities – see Emilija’s ppt on the [Smart Villages project](#).
 - Engagement needs to be a constant and proactive process that requires a **continuous re-assessment** of your contact channels and where you find the beneficiaries. Success lies in delivering an evolutionary and complementary networking and animation. In simple words: we have to be visible and present in local communities. Consequently, **we have to spend time on the ground**.

- **Active coordination** of the local intermediaries needs to be ensured by the programme management, building up a network of ambassadors.
- On this basis, given their valuable local knowledge and interactions with local facilitators, the **IMF teams** can implement more pro-active approaches to „suggest/nudge“ target groups to submit an IMF or another funding application.
- Beyond funding – capacity building for local actors:
 - **Go beyond funding**... Financial support is only one element!
 - **Capacity-building: coaching, animation and facilitation support** for local actors will facilitate the engagement with target groups and lead to increased levels of community empowerment
 - **Combine non-monetary support (capacity-building) with monetary incentives:** Capacity-building and inclusive empowerment measures (soft measures and social investment support) are used in other programmes to provide integrated service packages. Consequently, funding can be made more effective and impactful and the notion of non-monetary support is seen to have real value added for local communities.
- Targeting the missing groups:
 - **Who are they?** By identifying the missing groups systematically, **tailored approaches and partnerships** can be developed with relevant intermediaries.
 - **Mantra: „One approach does not fit all!“**
 - Examples of relevant groups: **Policymakers** – setting the priorities and highlight the importance of community engagement ... **Youth** – connecting via social media, adapting to terms such as peers, regional influencers ... **Migrants / newcomers** – second generation for better community integration ... **Elderly** – scope for leverage via their interest groups ... home living, health ...
- Programme capacity building:
 - **IMF Process: project pitching** is a practice-proven means to advise, combine, shape projects towards key policy objectives and join up with other potential projects. At the same time, pitching exercises (onsite or online) can help the programme management better understand the motivation of applicants and the rationale behind their proposals.
 - **Pitching:** talking with people, co-creation with stakeholders, connections between projects to trigger synergies and new joint initiatives.
 - **Second chance:** Working with unsuccessful project owners ... follow up, shaping better projects for the targeted community ...
 - **Expert support:** consider developing horizontal measures, for example the experience from URBACT ... in which each project is allocated a budget for expert support on specific issues.
- Celebrate and promote
 - **Co-creation:** celebrate and promote project results through events and festivals co-created with the supported communities.
 - Opportunities offered by events:
 - **Visibility** of the IMF and community-led development

- Platform for local communities to tell their stories (consider creative **story-telling** formats)
 - Occasion for **policymakers** to connect with local communities
 - Engage with communities in an innovative way and **co-shape the future** of the IMF with them
 - **Do not just keep adding**: consider joining pre-existing events to maximise impact and „go where targets gather “ ... **link with existing actions** such as the legacy programme of the European Capital of Culture project.
 - Use the occasion of events to organise **rewards / recognition approaches** ... such as the identification of “Local Heroes” ...
- Complementary engagement methods
 - Linking with other policy or regional activities 2028 ... for example linking to ARCADIA Legacy events. Target groups can be approached through **artists working locally** ... Using culture can be a good way to interact and raise awareness.
 - **Target students** to work on regional roots ... An exercise that can be co-designed with regional higher education institutes.
 - University methodology – **engage with the students** to develop the IMF methodology ... Engage with relevant programmes such as LEADER that has a dedicated focus on youth and young professionals.
 - **Digital communication tools and platforms** are in place ... and can be used to approach certain target groups (younger groups, associations) that are more at ease with such tools.
 - **Home sweet home! Hospitality** and **soft-landing support** to activate the potential of returners for local development ... **database** CRM of contacts/firm ... international mobility for helping professionals to return ... networks to keep in touch.
 - Policy continuity
 - The IMF target groups include politicians ... and it is important to recognise that the return on IMF project investment is an interconnected **mix of tangible and intangible elements**:
 - **Concrete impact** on the ground
 - **Activation** of local communities through concrete and collective action
 - IMF support and the expression of acknowledgement for local initiatives offering new **communication channels** and regaining of **trust** between political and local community levels
 - Successful local projects as low-hanging fruits with the potential to create appetite and build the motivation, resources and know-how for **larger-scale regional projects** ...
 - Politicians can help develop a **new IMF narrative** that is not just about money but more towards community development and resilience.
 - **Therefore, policy governance** (and funding) continuity is important ... and as you say in Fryslân - keep the “plough straight”!

The recommendations above can be roughly for the first question can be summarized by the following overarching remarks:

- **IMF 2.0:** societal trends and the community needs of the target groups should be the driving force of the evolution of the IMF programme, leading to greater community empowerment and resilience.
- The development of an **asset-based community development method**, using tools such as SWOT and local workshops. In fact, every community has assets and needs. Community engagement tools can help create and enhance knowledge of the community needs (asset mapping). By truly connecting to identified local assets, the effectiveness and efficiency of the invested funding will be enhanced, ‘solving’ genuine needs on the ground.
- Contact and join people where they are to be found. Adapting to **community habits** will result in better engagement results and overall better investments.\
- **From IMF to IMS (S = support):** consider combining the grant scheme with networking and capacity-building measures to strengthen the commitment, resilience and project management skills of local communities over the long-run.
- **Project development process:** project pitching prior to the formal application process is a good means to advise, combine, shape projects towards key provincial policy objectives and join up with other potential local projects to avoid duplication and maximise complementarities.
- A **long-term strategy** helps to determine short-term actions. Co-create the strategy with your beneficiaries and use the expertise of your IMF teams for the creation of long-term partnerships with local intermediaries (reminders: “we come to you!”; “no one-size-fits-all approach”).
- Help create a programme narrative that reflects the community challenges based on concrete and **local stories**, so every citizen can relate to that story.
- **Mantra:** „We are coming to you. We are here to help you!“

3.2. Key learnings of the second sub-question

The collection of programme monitoring information is an important element of policy implementation. Indicators need to reflect the objectives of the funding and the individual project objectives. Some relevant recommendations include:

- **Participatory monitoring and evaluation:** involve stakeholders and beneficiaries in the definition and monitoring of relevant indicators. Such an approach would seem to be well aligned with the IMF philosophy. Consider the [SEROI process](#) presented by Emilija for process operationalisation.
- It is important to consider **all relevant policy dimensions:** economic, social and environmental and propose appropriate indicators.
- Deliver messages through a better “evaluation and monitoring narrative”, taking into account **lived experience data:** support shift from programme monitoring to impact assessment: shifting from outputs to outcomes.
- Use **personal stories** to communicate evaluation results.
- **Engage policy makers / political actors earlier** in the IMF process: design, selection and evaluation – including direct contact with beneficiaries/success stories, for instance via events co-created with the target groups.
- Use (inter alia) storytelling and lived experience data to **demonstrate** how IMF can deliver (concrete) impacts of the political agenda.
- Make **value concepts** visible and explicit ...
- Co-design **IMF indicators** with local communities that are better aligned with SDG’s and other policy goals.

- **Diversify indicators** to reflect the stakeholders' capacity to engage/connect with major societal challenges.
- **Transparency:** monitoring reports are sent to interested parties and are published online. Put spotlight on the data, observations and conclusions which are of **practical value** for stakeholders and decision-makers.
- **Let's be patient:** It can take time to shift from a focus on project implementation to an evaluation approach focused on impact monitoring.
- It is also important to consider diversifying approaches, for example reporting or monitoring a **trend/policy direction rather than exact figures**, as some degree of ambiguity is unavoidable.
- Let's not forget to **"try and make life as easy as possible for project managers"** (i.e. those who deliver data): by ensuring consistent approaches, continuity and facilitating data/indicator collection.

4. Follow-up actions

Writing a joint Interreg application	Applying for Interreg funding	Running the Interreg project. The peer review process will be a key element in this part.
February, March & April 2022	May 2022	January 2023 – January 2027

The peer review was an important milestone in our process to reform and optimize our IMF policy. The exchanges with the peers reconfirmed and strengthened our motivation to work strategically with European partners on the challenge of building resilient communities. At the moment, we are preparing our joint Interreg application. Taking into account the priorities and recommendations discussed during the peer review, the objective of the application has been formulated as follows:

Resilient Communities, where citizens and civil society are empowered to co-deliver regional policy, are a key ally for rural/peripheral regions to develop their territories in response to policy challenges like the digital and climate transitions and socio-demographic change.

To facilitate Resilient Communities, 3 elements are key:

1. **Engage** communities in policy design and implementation, by innovating participation practices and activating hard-to-reach groups and areas (e.g. elderly, remote villages)
2. **Empower** communities to become actors (not just consumers) of regional policy through forms of financial and non-monetary facilitation
3. **Demonstrate** and communicate impact of regional policy to community and regional leadership. Going beyond statistics to 'lived experiences' of citizens.

GOCORE aims to increase the capacities of our rural/peripheral regions to involve their communities as active partners in the development and implementation of their regional policies.

The project has the following operational sub-objectives:

1. Identify, develop and exchange policy governance tools, approaches and practices to create and facilitate Resilient Communities as partners in the development and implementation of regional development policies, focusing on three areas:
 - a. Community engagement in policy design and implementation
 - b. Empowerment - financial and non-monetary facilitation of community actors to co-deliver policy relevant actions

- c. Demonstration of value and impact of regional policy to community.
2. Prepare and implement concrete improvements in the governance of partners policies based on this exchange and learning, in cooperation with regional stakeholders.
3. Disseminate these practices and experiences to other EU regions.

5. Conclusions

We found the peer review to be a very useful instrument to review policy challenges, working methods and findings. The two-day meeting with several partners has allowed us to take a step backwards and to look at the IMF with a different perspective. For us, this was an important step in the process of applying for Interreg funding.

Many recommendations and suggestions have been made, as one can read above. We will definitely take all remarks into consideration when improving and changing our policy. But all in all the conclusions that we found most striking are as follows:

- Investing in citizen participation should not be considered as an “extra” duty, but rather as the basic element of our governmental body. A community that actively starts projects to enhance the livability of their own society, seems to be more social and connected. Especially in difficult times, for example during the corona pandemic (FSP).
- Go and meet up with people in their own surroundings when it comes to projects about citizen participation (Denmark).
- Make sure to reward volunteers, since they are priceless. And make them your local heroes and use them for all kinds of projects (e.g. merging of small schools, installing glass fiber, etc.) (Slovenia).
- Consider changing the name of your organization. By using the word “funding” in Open Community Funding, citizens might think your organization only provides money. Whilst Streekwurk also provides advice and knowledge. **From IMF to IMS (S = support)**: consider combining the grant scheme with networking and capacity-building measures to strengthen the commitment, resilience and project management skills of local communities over the long-run (Belgium).
- Politicians can help develop a **new IMF narrative** that is not just about money, but more towards community development and resilience.
- Concrete: we use all recommendations for developing a new IMF. The current IMF will expire after 2023, which is why 2022 will be dominated by experiments and developing ideas for our new fund. We will certainly use the knowledge gained about citizens’ participation in this. Think, for example, of the local-hero approach and not inviting residents to your information evenings but being there where it happens.