



## Briefing Paper

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# Strengthening the Partnership Principle in Border Regions:

For greater cross-border cooperation

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## Strengthening the Partnership Principle in Border Regions: For greater cross-border cooperation

### Summary<sup>1</sup>

The European Commission's *White Paper on the Future of Europe*<sup>2</sup> prompted renewed discussion about the future of cohesion policy and its partnership principle. In the current debates there is widespread agreement that the partnership principle must be further improved. In the view of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, the required improvement of the partnership principle relates to the need for greater active participation of citizens in the development, implementation and evaluation of Cohesion Policy, leading to a truer bottom-up approach that can ensure the policy's full potential is enabled. It is our contention that a Partnership Principle with greater active citizen participation will contribute to bringing citizens closer to the structures of governance, including the institutions of the European Union. However, it is also a principle that needs to have a much clearer cross-border vision where it operates in border regions, enabling citizens to participate on a cross-border basis in its application. This can only be achieved through improved communication between governance structures and citizens in general, but – in the case of border regions – through better cross-border communication between those structures in the different jurisdictions, and between these and their citizens.

### Policy recommendations

- *Strengthen the Partnership Principle and the democratic legitimacy of the process by strategic involvement of citizens on a voluntary basis.*
- *Integrate a clearer cross-border dimension into the Partnership Principle.*
- *Create possibilities for cross-border citizen participation in border regions as part of the Partnership Principle.*
- *Support the communication between governance structures and citizens, including cross-border communication between governance structures and citizens in the different jurisdictions involved in cross-border cooperation.*

### 1. Introduction

This paper examines the potential added value of citizen participation in Cohesion Policy as part of the Partnership Principle. Our aim is to ensure greater success of Cohesion Policy funds and programmes by closing the gap further between governance structures and citizens.

<sup>1</sup> This Briefing Paper was authored by Dominik Knappe from the Hochschule für öffentliche Verwaltung, Kehl, during his internship at the Centre for Cross Border Studies.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission "White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025" (2017), [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white\\_paper\\_on\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_europe\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf)

The Principle of Partnership has developed through the ongoing process of the implementation of the EU's cohesion policy. The development of regional policy and distribution of its funds has always been through a partnership process.<sup>3</sup> These Partnerships cover 'the whole programming process' and 'should lead to better programme outcomes and help ensure that money from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) is spent efficiently'.<sup>4</sup> The principle is currently 'positioned as both a vehicle for promoting democracy and for assisting policy coherence through alignment of objectives between different levels of governance'.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately this process may have lacked sufficient levels of citizens' involvement from the beginning. For the 2014-2020 programming period stakeholders were invited into the ESIF policy design and implementation process and the Commission introduced a European Code of Conduct on Partnership which aimed to strengthen the principle somewhat.<sup>6</sup> However, the Partnership Principle remains an unfinished element, and completing it ultimately means fully integrating the citizen level into the principle and therefore the whole process. To give the reader a quick overview over the Partnership Principle, we have attached a short summary of the European Commission's final report on "The Implementation of the partnership principle and multi-level governance in 2014-2020 ESI Funds" below.

This paper first assesses the current status of the Partnership Principle and shows the challenges to overcome in order to achieve better partnerships. It then analyses if bottom-up local development strategies such as Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) could provide for the strengthening of the Partnership Principle, before assessing how the EU's development challenges have been approached previously and shows that there is still much room for improvement. This will provide a broad overview of the present context and lay the ground for the discussion about future challenges and further development of cohesion policy and the Partnership Principle, which will include how that Principle maintains its relevance in the post-Brexit landscape on the island of Ireland, and especially Northern Ireland. This paper concludes by setting out our vision for a stronger Partnership Principle as the foundation for a better cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation in Europe, and what may be the policy implications.

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission, [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/p/partnership](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/p/partnership)

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/p/partnership](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/p/partnership)

<sup>5</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership: "Review of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)" (2018), <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d26c92e2-9abc-11e8-a408-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-76185486>, p. 3

<sup>6</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership, p. 3

*European Commission (2016): Implementation of the partnership principle and multi-level governance in 2014-2020 ESI Funds, Final Report*

THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE is implemented very differently across the EU. Implementation depends on national administrative structures and cultures, the technical and financial capacity of the partners, the political circumstances in the country/region/locality, territorial specificities and distinct local contexts.

#### COMPOSITION OF THE PARTNERSHIPS

In Member States where the documents show that certain types of partners are missing, the partnership is not necessarily perceived as **unbalanced**. In Member States where there is a perceived lack of some types of partner, this can, to some extent, be explained by **high expectations** in respect of the involvement of partners. The survey respondents see **population representativeness** as being least balanced, indicating most frequently that not all relevant stakeholders have been involved.

#### PARTNERS AND THEIR INTEGRATION

About 25% of the survey respondents responded by noting that their inputs had been treated **hardly or not at all equally**. Public authorities generally have a more positive perception of the treatment of inputs compared, for example, to partners from civil society and/or social and economic partners.

#### PARTNERSHIPS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION PHASE

The least involved group in the implementation process is that of 'other partners', which mainly consists of the **general public**. In addition, civil society and social/economic partners are often also 'hardly involved'. The general picture shows that public authorities, especially from the national and regional levels, are generally **overrepresented at the expense of the general public**, civil society and the social and economic partners.

#### EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION PROGRAMMES

Public authorities are also slightly overrepresented in ETC programmes at the expense of civil society and social/economic partners. Civil society and social/economic partners are involved to a lesser degree. Difficulties remain in involving partners from the civil society sector. The biggest one illustrated is that a smaller core group consisting of public authorities **appointed by the National Coordinating Bodies** invites a broader partnership from civil society, interest groups and the general public to participate. This complex multi-level partner identification process grants them a strong mandate to form the partnership. This might provide over time a stable and conservative group structure, which non-public partners may find **difficult to enter**. Today's partnerships are mainly built on previously established structures. There are several cases, where a **small group** of public authorities have a **significant influence on the composition** of the partnership. Other difficulties mentioned were restrictions by the regulatory framework and in particular the **thematic concentration** and the **lack of individual institutional capacity to get involved**. Additionally, expressed was the very limited focus on capacity-building actions of programme coordinators.

#### GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF PARTNERSHIPS/ MAIN CHALLENGES

The mobilisation of partners remains a challenge in a wide range of countries due to low interest or capacity. Difficulties relating to partners seeing beyond their own interests. Partners perceived the **representativeness of the partnerships** to be one of the main challenges. For EU-level interest organisations one of the main challenges is that many countries **lack a real culture of partnership**; hence authorities and partners struggle to find their roles. The partnership principle requires new thinking from both authorities and partners. Personal contacts and more traditional lobbying are still often perceived to be more successful than just participating in partnerships.

## 2. A stronger Partnership Principle as the foundation for a better cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation

Partnership has been one of the key principles of the EU's cohesion policy. It implies close cooperation between public authorities at national, regional and local levels and with the private and other sectors. The EU's understanding of this Partnership Principle is seen in close connection with a multi-level governance approach and the principles of subsidiarity<sup>7</sup> and proportionality.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development has stressed the particular importance of the partnership principle, community-led local development and of the bottom-up approach regarding EU cohesion policy goals in Northern Ireland, whilst also recognising that 'more must be done to increase general awareness and visibility of the impact and necessity of EU funding in Northern Ireland'.<sup>9</sup>

- EU cohesion policy today still has a significant role in sustaining peace in Northern Ireland and in facilitating cross-community reconciliation.<sup>10</sup>
- 'In addition to the more general cohesion policy funds, Northern Ireland has benefited in particular from **special cross-border and inter- and cross-community programmes**, including the PEACE Programme'.<sup>11</sup>
- The success of EU cohesion funding is viewed to partly derive 'from the fact that it is seen as neutral money that is not directly linked to the interests of either community'.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the Committee took the view that the 'general awareness and visibility of the impact and necessity of EU funding in Northern Ireland' must be increased.<sup>13</sup> However, the Committee's conclusions in relation to the need to increase levels of general awareness 'about the impact of EU-funded projects for the peace process and the economic development of the region' may not have gone far enough.<sup>14</sup> It could be argued that greater awareness can only be really achieved through the greater involvement of the general public in the whole process of the development and implementation of cohesion policy, of which EU funding in Northern Ireland is an instrument.

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<sup>7</sup> The principle of subsidiarity says, that 'in areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the Union shall act only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States, either at central level or at regional and local level, but can rather, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved at Union level'.; Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12012M%2FTXT>

<sup>8</sup> The principle of proportionality ensures, that 'the content and form of Union action shall not exceed what is necessary to achieve the objectives of the Treaties'.; Article 5(4) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12012M%2FTXT>

<sup>9</sup> European Parliament, Committee on Regional Development: "Report on the impact of EU cohesion policy on Northern Ireland" (2018), <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-%2F%2FEP%2F%2FTXT%2BREPORT%2BA8-2018-0240%2B0%2BDOC%2BXML%2BV0%2F%2FEN&language=GA>  
p. 9

<sup>10</sup> European Parliament, Committee on Regional Development, p. 11

<sup>11</sup> European Parliament, Committee on Regional Development, p. 11 (emphasis added)

<sup>12</sup> European Parliament, Committee on Regional Development, p. 8

<sup>13</sup> European Parliament, Committee on Regional Development, p. 9

<sup>14</sup> European Parliament, Committee on Regional Development, p. 11

The Thematic Network on Partnership reviewed the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP) recently.<sup>15</sup> It stressed that the focus on partnership should be continued and strengthened further in the next programming period. Better partnerships would ultimately enable more to be done than is the case at present ('Doing more with better partnerships'), with funds maximising their impact. The review also identified the existing obstacles that need to be overcome in order to realise this aim. These include a general 'lack of awareness of the ECCP and its principles', the 'absence of adequate participation channels for genuine stakeholder engagement in programme design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation', a 'lack of diversity in selection of partners', insufficient transparency, and a 'limited exchange of learning' efforts.<sup>16</sup>

Specifically, the preference for the involvement of the 'usual suspects' instead of 'non-traditional partners', such as the end users or local level stakeholders targeted by programmes, was expressed as a major concern.<sup>17</sup> This tendency leads to resources and perspectives remaining untapped which could otherwise improve the policy and its overall impact. The Network further acknowledged demands for 'greater diversity in partner selection' and that civil society representation in the process is weak.<sup>18</sup> It was also noted as a Partnership principle implementation challenge that some procedures in the process are not transparent to the public.<sup>19</sup> Increasing the general public's awareness and involvement will contribute towards greater transparency, legitimacy, stability and sustainability of cohesion policy.

'A democratic policy mandate is gained through **broader stakeholder involvement**, more **participatory approaches** to problem-solving and the generation of social capital. The **inclusion** of different organisations, groups and citizens in design, implementation and monitoring processes contributes to the durable and positive change that is the basis of a more cohesive society.'<sup>20</sup>

The report was also critical of the 'limited exchange of learning' efforts between partners, emphasising how dynamic relationships between diverse actors across different levels and a vital exchange of learning efforts can bring stronger impact at policy level.<sup>21</sup> Therefore dynamic exchanges of learning about working in partnership across multiple levels have to be promoted.

Partnership should also be understood as a process of working together which will positively reinforce social bonds and create social capital. A healthy and successful partnership is a constant learning process based on the values of diversity, collaboration and mutual trust. Working together with common interests but with different perspectives is the ideal case of partnership, reflecting the EU's core values. How important this is for the border regions on

<sup>15</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership: "Review of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP)" (2018), <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d26c92e2-9abc-11e8-a408-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-76185486>

<sup>16</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership, p. 10-12

<sup>17</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership, p. 11

<sup>18</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership, p. 10-11

<sup>19</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership, p. 11

<sup>20</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership, p. 6 (emphasis added)

<sup>21</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership, p. 12

the island of Ireland and how we should deal with such values post-Brexit will be discussed later.

### 3. Community-Led Local Development as a template?

Territorial cohesion is another essential part of cohesion policy, and one that offers further support for bottom-up local development strategies, especially through Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).<sup>22</sup> This methodology is used in rural areas across the EU to engage local actors in the development and application of co-financed strategies for regional development.<sup>23</sup> The main aim of CLLD is to encourage the local community to develop local partnerships in which they create and implement an integrated development strategy that builds upon regional capital.<sup>24</sup> CLLD is based on the application of different principles. These include:

- an **area-based approach** to ensure that funding is concentrated in a defined area with specific challenges;
- a **bottom-up approach** in which the **local community** identifies the needs and challenges faced in its area, and proposes solutions and defines projects to address these;
- an **integrated approach** that includes different actors and sectors working together with a single strategy; and
- Partnerships **involving** important actors from the **public, private and civil society** sectors working together.<sup>25</sup>

At this point, it is important to point out the importance and possibilities of a **cross-border perspective to an area-based approach**. Border regions are exceptional areas with peculiar and unique challenges. The scope of funding in a border region needs to be concentrated on both sides of the border, where both sides face the same obstacles that can only be overcome by working together. CLLD can be established in all ESI Funds in future programming periods as part of local strategies.<sup>26</sup> However, and notwithstanding that CLLD and the Partnership Principle can be seen as discrete instruments of the EU's cohesion policy, it should be possible to more clearly and strategically **combine elements of the CLLD with the current Partnership Principle**.

Originally LEADER<sup>27</sup> had been a local development method 'to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas'.<sup>28</sup> The LEADER method was then progressively developed

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<sup>22</sup> European Commission (2014),

[http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/community\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/community_en.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> European Commission (2014), p. 2

<sup>24</sup> European Commission (2014), p. 3

<sup>25</sup> European Commission (2016), <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/content/clld-useful-approach-esf>

<sup>26</sup> European Commission (2014), p. 3

<sup>27</sup> LEADER 'was introduced as a Community initiative financed under the EU Structural Funds. [...] The main concept behind the Leader approach is that, given the diversity of European rural areas, development strategies are more effective and efficient if decided and implemented at local level by local actors, accompanied by clear and transparent procedures, the support of the relevant public administrations and the necessary technical assistance for the transfer of good practice.';

[https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/publi/fact/leader/2006\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/publi/fact/leader/2006_en.pdf), p. 6-8

<sup>28</sup> The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld_en)

and extended ‘under the broader term Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)’.<sup>29</sup> The LEADER approach to community-led local development is a proven, ‘effective and efficient tool in the delivery of development policies’ at sub-regional level,<sup>30</sup> and ‘has shown to have a great potential to explore innovative solutions addressing the challenges faced by local communities’.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, partnerships developed under CLLD are ‘designed to build on the community’s social, environmental and economic strengths or assets’.<sup>32</sup> But CLLD is primarily a **complementary tool** ‘to other development support at local level’.<sup>33</sup>

The basis of the Partnership Principle on the other hand was already present in ‘the Rome Treaty of 1957, when the European Social Fund was established’ and is ‘claimed to be a cornerstone of the cohesion policy’.<sup>34</sup> However, it only became an approved instrument ‘pertaining to other funds’ in 1988 and has thenceforth been further developed and defined with time.<sup>35</sup> The Principle ‘evolved from the model of cooperation between the European Commission and Member States to the model of cooperation between regions’, taking into account different partners and relevant bodies representing civil society.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, it has to be distinguished in ‘the vertical (EU – Member State) and horizontal (involving a number of interested parties) principles of partnership’.<sup>37</sup> As a key element of multi-level governance ‘the principle of partnership is a mutual commitment to cooperate within the scope of programming, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation’ of Operational Programmes of the cohesion policy, which are made by governmental administrations and non-administrative partners.<sup>38</sup>

It would be desirable to take the basic principles of CLLD and apply them to the partnership principle, because they reflect the fundamentals of a well-balanced partnership between the community, governance structures and other sectors. This would therefore improve the current principle, e.g. in predominantly rural areas, cross-border regions or in terms of partner selection.

#### **4. There is still much room for improvement**

While the importance of representation in decision-making processes at different levels and the importance of working in cooperation have been improved by the ECCP, there is still room for further improvement to address the EU’s development challenges. These are notably rural-urban inequalities; shifts between industries, economic sectors and regions;

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<sup>29</sup> The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld_en)

<sup>30</sup> European Commission (2014), p. 2

<sup>31</sup> European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/emff/clld\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/emff/clld_en)

<sup>32</sup> European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/emff/clld\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/emff/clld_en)

<sup>33</sup> European Commission (2014), p. 2

<sup>34</sup> Business Centre Club – Employers Organisation, Trade Unions Forum, Confederation Lewiatan, All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions, Employers of Poland, Polish Craft Association, “The Principle of Partnership in the Implementation of EU Funds in Poland and the implementation strategy for the years 2014-2020” (2014), [http://konfederacjalewiatan.pl/en/\\_files/publications/ENG\\_BKZP.pdf](http://konfederacjalewiatan.pl/en/_files/publications/ENG_BKZP.pdf), p. 5

<sup>35</sup> Business Centre Club, p. 5

<sup>36</sup> Business Centre Club, p. 5

<sup>37</sup> Business Centre Club, p. 5

<sup>38</sup> Business Centre Club, p. 4



unemployment among young people, elders and migrants, and gender segregation in the labour market.<sup>39</sup>

The Review paper of the Network proposes some approaches in order to strengthen the partnership principle. In particular ‘the inclusion of the perspectives, knowledge and experience of diverse stakeholders in an ongoing manner throughout programme cycles’ and ‘greater efforts to connect different funds, institutional levels, sectors and policy arenas’ were suggested.<sup>40</sup> Others have concluded that dependent on the specifics of the participatory process the influence of citizen participation on policy is mostly limited to providing ideas and suggestions.<sup>41</sup> The involvement of citizens into the process could lead to valuable contributions and positive effects on some aspects of democracy.<sup>42</sup> People would ‘feel more responsible for public matters’ and be encouraged to listen to a diversity of opinions.<sup>43</sup> This could also mean however, ‘a sense of public engagement is a precondition for participation’.<sup>44</sup>

Previous approaches to strengthening the partnership principle have proved insufficient and have only been able to bring about minimal successes, if any. Therefore, it’s time to think outside the box in finding ways to make a stronger and better impact at policy level. Mutually reinforcing formal and informal dimensions between public society and the previous actors of the partnership principle are needed.

## 5. The Partnership Principle in a post-Brexit context

While the negotiations between the UK government and the EU are still ongoing at the time of writing, we should, nevertheless, and based on past experiences, be able to **think about a possible future framework for cross-border cooperation** on the island of Ireland and its partnerships post-Brexit.

Northern Ireland is currently facing development challenges common to other parts of the EU. A look at the last ‘Urban Rural Report: Northern Ireland 2014/15’<sup>45</sup> from March 2017 reveals that rural-urban inequalities persist in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland economy is strongly interlinked with and dependent on the economies of the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the UK.<sup>46</sup> While Northern Ireland’s unemployment rate of 4.3% is above the UK average (4.0%), it’s lower than the EU’s (6.8%) and the Republic of Ireland’s

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<sup>39</sup> European Commission: “Labour market and wage developments in Europe, Annual review 2017” (2017), <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2df2eaca-b3b0-11e7-837e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>40</sup> The Thematic Network on Partnership, p. 14

<sup>41</sup> Ank Michels & Laurens De Graaf: “Examining citizen participation: local participatory policymaking and democracy revisited” (2017), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03003930.2017.1365712?needAccess=true&>

<sup>42</sup> Ank Michels & Laurens De Graaf, p. 877

<sup>43</sup> Ank Michels & Laurens De Graaf, p. 877

<sup>44</sup> Ank Michels & Laurens De Graaf, p. 878

<sup>45</sup> Department for Communities: “Urban Rural Report: Northern Ireland 2015/15” (2017), <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/urban-rural-report-northern-ireland-2014-2015>

<sup>46</sup> Office for National Statistics : “Patterns of Northern Ireland trade by destination, products and business characteristics: 2012 to 2016” (2018), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/internationaltrade/articles/patternsofnorthernirelandtradebydestinationproductandbusinesscharacteristics/2012to2016>

(5.9%).<sup>47</sup> Regarding gender segregation in the labour market, the average gender pay gap of all employee jobs in 2017 in Northern Ireland is lower than in all other parts of the UK.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, it remains to be an issue to be addressed in Northern Ireland.<sup>49</sup>

The questions asked should be how these challenges will look like post-Brexit, particularly in border regions. How important are cross-border cooperation and Partnership as a process of working together for the Ireland-Northern Ireland border region to address these challenges? Would it be possible for Northern Ireland to participate in the EU's territorial cooperation programmes after Brexit? What should be preserved from the current methods, instruments or concepts employed in the implementation of EU programmes and policies?

**The future nature of the Ireland-Northern Ireland border**, no matter how hard or soft it might be, could undo decades of progress of cross-border cooperation and the peace process on the island of Ireland.

'Borders exist in the way different legislation, policies and associated practices (e.g. with respect to citizens' rights, immigration, or trade) are applied within and between states'.<sup>50</sup>

New obstacles to overcome will be created, although it's still unclear how they will be constructed, but if an economic border were to be established, for example, it would damage 'North-South cooperation, and undermine political relationships on the island and between this island and Great Britain'.<sup>51</sup>

It is also important to note that as one of its co-guarantors the UK government has the responsibility to protect the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA) with its three interdependent strands in all its parts.<sup>52</sup> This means that the Agreement's North-South and East-West dimensions and the future of the cross-jurisdictional institutions (such as the British-Irish Council and the North-South Ministerial Council), provided for in the Agreement, cannot be compromised. This means there will be a continued imperative for cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland and, therefore, the continued relevance of the concept of partnership. The significance of cross-border cooperation will not diminish as a result of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, as noted by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's report on the border, which stated: 'The institutions and safeguards created to

<sup>47</sup> NISRA: "Labour Force Survey" (2018), <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/labour-market-and-social-welfare/labour-force-survey>

<sup>48</sup> Office for National Statistics: "Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) – Gender pay gap by age-band by region, 1999 to 2017" (2018), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/adhocs/008633annualsurveyofhoursandearningsashegenderpaygapbyagebandbyregion1999to2017>

<sup>49</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service: "What is the gender pay gap in Northern Ireland?" (2018), <https://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/2018/03/08/gender-pay-gap-northern-ireland/>

<sup>50</sup> CCBS: "Brexit and the UK-Ireland Border, Briefing Paper 1: A Roadmap" (2017), <http://crossborder.ie/site2015/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Brexit-and-the-Border-BP1-with-Exec-Summary.pdf>, p. 5

<sup>51</sup> CCBS: "Brexit and the UK-Ireland Border, Briefing Paper 3: Changing Trade Relations and Regulations" (2018), <http://crossborder.ie/site2015/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BP3-with-Executive-Summary.pdf>, p. 2

<sup>52</sup> See also: CCBS: "Brexit and the UK-Ireland Border, Briefing Paper 4: The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the negotiations on the UK's withdrawal from the EU" (2018), <http://crossborder.ie/site2015/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Briefing-Paper-4.pdf>

manage cross-border and cross-community relations will remain the **corner stone of peace and stability in Northern Ireland** after Brexit'.<sup>53</sup>

The values of diversity, collaboration and mutual trust in Northern Ireland post-Brexit will be more important than ever. To safeguard these values different actors need to contribute at different levels at the same time. But in which form, way and intensity will most likely depend on the outcome of the Brexit negotiations and the approval and ratification of a withdrawal agreement. Today, Northern Ireland benefits from the European Structural Funds, which raises the question of how this funding will be adequately replaced. In any case, the UK Government and Northern Ireland's devolved administration (whenever it is once again functioning) have to invest in cross-border cooperation, the peace process and support those who will be impacted the most as a result of Brexit. This is due to the fact, that Strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement obligates all signatories to support cross-border and all-island cooperation in various policy areas.

Overcoming issues which arise from the existence of the border should be maintained as a priority. In addition to that, Northern Ireland and its border region could still participate in EU cross-border programmes, as they share a border with the Republic of Ireland, an EU Member State. This would follow the example of other non-EU countries, such as Switzerland's or Norway's participation in the current Interreg V programmes.<sup>54</sup>

The UK Government's position paper on 'Northern Ireland and Ireland' from August 2017<sup>55</sup> did not address continued funding for the Interreg or other EU programmes. It only expressed the Government's commitment 'to peace and reconciliation programmes and to sustaining cross-border cooperation'.<sup>56</sup> However, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has called on the Government to clarify if 'it will seek to continue funding for cross-border projects under the Interreg programme post-2020'.<sup>57</sup> In its response to the Committee's report,<sup>58</sup> the UK Government reaffirmed its commitment 'to develop and agree future programmes with the EU beyond the end of the MFF', but also acknowledged that they were still negotiating 'the exact funding mechanisms with the EU'<sup>59</sup> and 'the mapping

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<sup>53</sup> House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: "The land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland" (2018), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmniaf/329/329.pdf>, paragraph 120 (emphasis added)

<sup>54</sup> European Commission, [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/index.cfm/en/atlas/programmes?search=1&keywords=&periodId=3&countryCode=ALL&regionId=ALL&objectiveId=13&tObjectiveId=ALL](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index.cfm/en/atlas/programmes?search=1&keywords=&periodId=3&countryCode=ALL&regionId=ALL&objectiveId=13&tObjectiveId=ALL)

<sup>55</sup> HM Government: "Northern Ireland and Ireland" (2018), [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/638135/6.3703\\_DEXEU\\_Northern\\_Ireland\\_and\\_Ireland\\_INTERACTIVE.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/638135/6.3703_DEXEU_Northern_Ireland_and_Ireland_INTERACTIVE.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> HM Government, p. 6

<sup>57</sup> House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: "The land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland" (2018), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmniaf/329/329.pdf>, paragraph 153

<sup>58</sup> House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: "The land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, Government Response to the Committee's Second Report" (2018), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmniaf/1198/1198.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: "The land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, Government Response to the Committee's Second Report" (2018), p. 7

exercise [...] for how cross-border cooperation in policy areas dominated by EU law will continue after the UK leaves the EU'.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, the UK in a Changing Europe argues that 'to deliver on the commitments the UK has made, continued participation in key programmes and co-operation mechanisms is necessary' and that 'current and future cross-border co-operation is to be supported'.<sup>61</sup>

The conclusion that needs to be drawn from the UK Government's commitments, including above all to the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, is that there will be a **continued need for cross-border cooperation** on the island of Ireland, and therefore significant merit in ensuring Northern Ireland's post-Brexit eligibility for EU cross-border programmes and funding. Regardless of whether or not the UK Government's commitment to Northern Ireland's ability to continue cross-border cooperation activities is funded through continued participation in EU programmes or through newly established UK funding mechanisms, many of the concepts employed by the EU – including the Partnership Principle – **should be retained**, enabling us to build upon past successes.

## 6. Our vision and policy implications:

To ensure the greater success of Cohesion Policy funds and programmes we believe that it's necessary to "close the gap". The White Paper on the Future of Europe noted how 'Closing the gap between promise and delivery is a continuous challenge'.<sup>62</sup> The EU's principal approach is to inform the public about the EU's achievements to address potential misunderstandings over what the EU achieves for citizens. This will not substantially "close the gap". The solution should not principally be about telling the story locally; it should be about getting local citizens participating in making the story. This is what Cohesion Policy and its funds enable, and it could do so even more if certain measures were taken in relation to its administration and implementation and other existing measures reinforced.

Without reducing the complexity and bureaucratic and administrative burdens associated with the implementation of Cohesion Policy, and without ensuring the involvement of a range of local actors in that implementation, the gap between the EU and its citizens will only widen.<sup>63</sup>

To avoid a widening of the gap, it is important to garner the greater active **participation of citizens in the implementation of Cohesion Policy** and to ensure a **true bottom-up approach** that reinforces multi-level governance and breathes new life into the partnership principle. Also, the current complexity associated with ESIF has to be addressed for future programming periods. If the implementation of Cohesion Policy is more closely directed by actors on the ground, simplification, agility and flexibility might be more easily achieved. Therefore, there should be a common set of provisions for ESIF.

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<sup>60</sup> House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: "The land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, Government Response to the Committee's Second Report" (2018), p. 6

<sup>61</sup> David Phinnemore in The UK in a Changing Europe: "The Brexit White Paper: what it must address, Ireland" (2018), <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-Brexit-white-paper-what-it-must-address.pdf>, p. 11-12

<sup>62</sup> See also: Centre for Cross Border Studies: "Position Paper on European Union Cohesion Policy" (2018), <http://crossborder.ie/centre-cross-border-studies-published-position-paper-european-union-cohesion-policy/>

<sup>63</sup> Centre for Cross Border Studies: "Position Paper on European Union Cohesion Policy" (2018), p. 7

If the cohesion policy’s approach of thematic concentration is to be retained, it is essential not only that the specific choices of thematic objectives are made by local actors according to territorial needs, but also that the Commission, working with national, regional and local authorities, achieve an appropriate balance in terms of those implementing ESIF-funded projects on the ground. All European citizens must be seen as equal partners and part of the process. It is necessary to enhance the strategic involvement of citizens in order to strengthen the Partnership Principle and the democratic legitimacy of the process. How the citizen level as part of the partnership principle might look like is shown in figure 1 below.

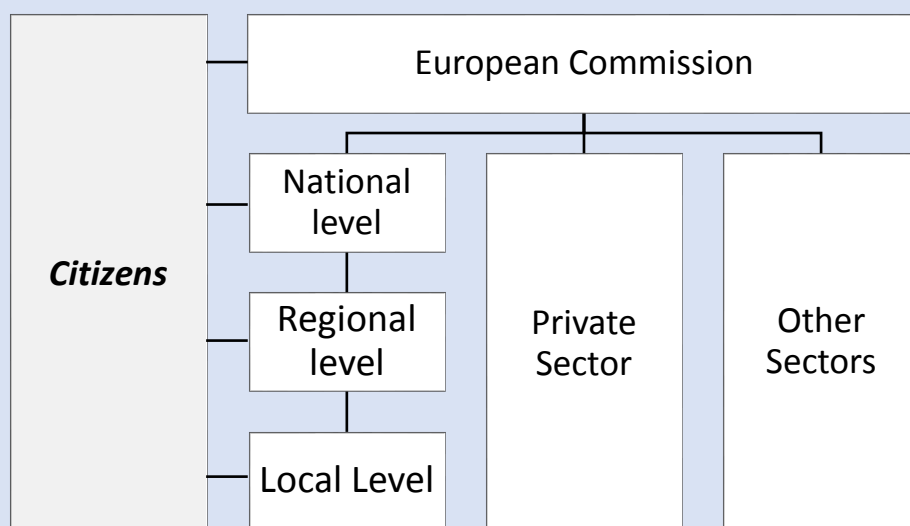


Figure 1: Our Vision for Citizen Participation on all levels as integral part of a stronger Partnership Principle

Smaller organisations and citizens would increasingly be relegated to the role of passive beneficiaries without such a balance. A further policy of thematic concentration can lead to a “concentration” of actors in the implementation of Cohesion Policy. Larger institutions and organisations would dominate the Cohesion landscape. To ensure a positive balance between larger and smaller organisations involved in the implementation of Cohesion Policy on the ground, programmes must include a mechanism for the funding of “people-to-people” projects. Additionally, European Territorial Cooperation and its programmes as a substantial part of cohesion policy have to be considered in reflections of the partnership principle. EU cohesion can be significantly increased here with such a funding mechanism.

A better cohesion policy with a stronger partnership principle is needed more than ever as an expression of European solidarity to overcome the economic, social and territorial divide by providing every citizen, wherever they live in Europe, with a tangible opportunity to experience the advantages of our European Union. Cohesion policy is the EU policy closest to the citizen with having a direct impact on their daily lives, therefore it must be better communicated as today. However, this can only be a first step to bring the citizens closer to the EU. They must also be allowed to actively participate. A better cohesion policy requires the strengthening of the partnership principle and the place-based approach by reinforcing the key role of local and regional authorities in delivering the policy by actively engaging urban and rural communities and promoting tools to trigger and support local development through integrated strategies.

## **7. Conclusions**

Partnership also means joint interests and the current principle lacks the sufficient involvement of citizens. Citizens as recipients and beneficiaries of the measures should be given the possibility of bringing their interests or views into the process. All citizens must be encouraged to be actively and closely involved throughout the whole cohesion policy cycle (programme preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation). However, Europe's unique diversity is also reflected in its many border regions. Every measure needs therefore a cross-border dimension. Especially in border regions this citizen's perspective has also to be put into a cross-border dimension.

There will be a continued need for cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland after Brexit. The lessons we have learned in past EU programme periods could still be applicable for the EU's cohesion policy post 2020 and also be valuable for good cross-border cooperation in the Northern Ireland context after Brexit. Many of the concepts and principles introduced by the EU – including the Partnership Principle – should be retained and strengthened, enabling us to build for a better future on both sides of the border.

Combining the fundamental ideas of the Partnership Principle and Community Led Local Development (CLLD) with a true bottom-up approach, while including cross-border cooperation into the formula, is our vision for a greater future cohesion policy and cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland and all over the rest of Europe. It is time to shift perspectives. This new approach will exploit untapped potentials and benefit all citizens across Europe.