The Interreg MED is an EU-funded programme which aims to boost transnational cooperation among Mediterranean countries.

Through the use of innovative methods and solutions related to the circular economy, the programme wants to deal with the specific elements of the region and help it cope with rising challenges ranging from a low carbon economy to the protection of natural and cultural resources.

Speaking to EURACTIV on the sidelines of the event “MEDforYOU: Unfolding a strong narrative for policy change” organised in Athens on 25 October, several stakeholders presented pilot projects related to agriculture, circular economy, blue growth and sustainable tourism.

In this Special Report, we will look at how Interreg MED has contributed to the region’s sustainability but also at the programme’s future in the EU’s next seven-year budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework, considering the planned cuts.
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An EU-funded project aims to push for green and circular economy policies in the Mediterranean, in light of an alarming study which recently pointed out that temperatures in the region are escalating much faster than the global average. EURACTIV.com reports from Athens.

Interreg MED Green Growth Community is a community of projects in the framework of Interreg-MED Program. Its main objective is to exchange green growth-related knowledge involving more than 100 partners, from public institutions to SMEs and regional authorities.

The projects focus on different sectors of the economy, ranging, among others, from the agri-food sector to waste management and smart cities.

Mercè Boy Roura, a researcher at the Green Growth Community (GGC), told EURACTIV that climate change is now a reality and needs immediate answers.

“There are different actions that can help mitigate the impact of climate change. One of them is the circular economy strategy, which requires a holistic approach in the process of transforming the way we produce and consume goods, as well as the way we manage waste,” she said.

A scientific study conducted recently by the Mediterranean Experts on Climate and Environmental Change (MedECC) found that climate change

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Another project is CAMARG, whose aim is to help Mediterranean smallholders survive from the growing competition of mass retail business models.

Using the “zero-km approach”, its aim is to shorten the path between local farm producers and final consumers through an e-commerce service. In addition, it aims to increase the visibility of their high-quality products in the Mediterranean area.

The project resembles the concept of short food supply chains (SFSC), which was introduced in the last Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), providing consumers with healthy and fresh food products as well as increasing smallholders’ income.

**MEDITERRANEAN: A HOT SPOT FOR CLIMATE CHANGE**

Alessandra Sensi, from the Secretariat of the Union of the Mediterranean (UfM), an intergovernmental institution bringing together 43 countries to promote dialogue and cooperation, said the objective was to agree on a common agenda on the environment and climate change as well as blue economy.

She said in the years to come, the Mediterranean countries should grab the opportunity and take action.

“It’s an important opportunity not to miss out in order to make sure that our agenda is in line with the evidence that the Mediterranean region is a hot spot for climate change,” she told EURACTIV. She added this enhanced technical cooperation is not only limited among the European Mediterranean countries but it has also expanded to countries such as Jordan.

“Everything depends on transnational cooperation. Indeed, environmental problems have no border. So, there is no other way to tackle it than working together on an equal footing,” Sensi said.

Interreg MED Green Growth Community recently got the UfM “label” and now takes part in joint activities promoting sustainable solutions to tackle climate change in the region.

“This is actually a story of success,” Sensi said, adding that through this partnership, southern Mediterranean countries which are not part of an Interreg programme, for instance from northern Africa, will ultimately be able to join these projects.

“We are now looking into operational opportunities to coordinate with other regional programmes, but also to facilitate the process and ensure that the countries of the South which are actually currently not part of it can still join these activities.”

**THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURE**

Many GGC projects focus on the environmental footprint of agriculture and explore innovative ways to mitigate it.

RELIVE Waste is one of these projects. It involves Italy, Cyprus, Spain and Bosnia-Herzegovina and will run until mid-2020. The project focuses on livestock and particularly intensive cattle and pig farming, which severely affects climate change in the region.

The objective is to convert livestock waste into organic high-value commercial fertilisers through the use of innovative technologies. The result, according to the project, will not only lead to smart growth but will also create new business opportunities.
Aristoil, an EU-funded Interreg MED project, has been trying to boost the competitiveness of the Mediterranean olive oil sector by providing innovative methods to identify the “healthiest” part of it. EURACTIV.com reports from Athens.

Olive oil has been the flagship product of the Mediterranean for centuries. Although the region has been the largest olive growing area worldwide, growing competition from non-Mediterranean seed oil has put olive oil producers in the region in a difficult position.

The Aristoil project covers 3,000 producers from five countries (Italy, Greece, Croatia, Spain and Cyprus). It started in October 2016 and is expected to end in January 2020.

Speaking to EURACTIV on the sidelines of the event “MEDforYOU: Unfolding a strong narrative for policy change” organised in Athens on 25 October, Emilia Arrabito and Maria Krimnianoti, two experts on the project, said the narrative behind is dual.

“The main aim of the Aristoil project is to help producers in the olive oil chain find an added value in their product and then reach out to new markets,” Arrabito said, adding that regular production is not usually profitable due to the high production cost.

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Arrabito said the project’s primary objective was to inform 3,000 producers about the existence of an EU regulation which recognises the olive oil with enhanced health-protecting properties.

For this reason, the experts conducted research using a mobile olive mill of small capacity, with which they collected samples from different producers directly from the field and from specific trees and also in several periods (September-October) when normal olive mills are not even open.

The samples were then sent to the Universities of Athens, Cordova and Split, which helped set the general guidelines for producers. The universities analysed the criteria of the chemical substances “from action to packaging”.

“Olive oil is fat, but there is that 5% of the product that can be very useful for our health to prevent maladies, cancers and can also be used as an anti-inflammatory,” Arrabito added.

Krimnianoti explained that producers are not aware of how to exploit this regulation and increase the value of the product.

“So, what we did was to inform about the EU law and then examine the factors that affect the presence of these precious substances in the oil. In addition, we created some guidelines for the producers. And if they follow these guidelines, they can produce a quality product that can be sold at an increased price,” Krimnianoti said.

**A ‘MED’ COOPERATIVE**

The next step of the project is to help olive oil producers reach out to new markets for their “healthy olive oil” through a Mediterranean cluster or cooperative.

“The aim is to create a network, a cluster where they can produce quality products which are certified from a technical point of view and then place them on the market,” Arrabito said.

She added that supermarkets should not be the only markets to target but also pharmacies and little shops which offer natural alternatives to tackle a headache for instance.

Krimnianoti produces this olive oil in Greece and used to sell it as regular oil to wholesalers.

“But now that we realised that’s it is different compared to the rest, we are trying to develop a new product,” she said.
EU project: Mediterranean fishermen seek additional income via tourism

By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com

Faced with steadily declining fishing stocks, Mediterranean fishermen are exploring new ways to improve their income. An EU-funded Interreg MED project plans to help fishermen to do so through tourism. EURACTIV.com reports from Athens.

TOURISMED is a project which seeks to introduce fishing tourism in coastal territories of Italy, Cyprus, Greece, Albania, France and Spain. According to the project, this is a way to “promote a sustainable approach to tourism, while fostering the preservation of the marine ecosystem and the traditional fishing culture of the Mediterranean region”.

“It is basically an idea on how to give fisherman in the Mediterranean Sea an opportunity to have an extra income from tourism,” Alessandro

The project lasted 30 months and has now come to an end. But fishermen have continued their touristic activities and tourists can use a mobile application to book their fishing holidays. [Shutterstock]

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Melillo, an expert working on the project, told EURACTIV.

Melillo came up with the idea after he spoke to fishermen in Sicily as well as his personal desire to enjoy his stay in the region. He said it’s not a typical project that is being written behind closed doors.

“We collected information about fishermen’s needs. They told us that the quantity of fish in the Mediterranean Sea has been dramatically reducing. With the fish they catch every month they cannot survive”, he said.

When Melillo, who used to live in the centre of Sicily, moved to the coastal area of Trabia, he found he could not access the beach due to the high number of illegal buildings and private beaches. “The public beach is literally 200 square meters,” he noted.

“I wanted to enjoy the sea as a tourist and fishermen could not survive. Then I said let’s put these two problems together and find a joint smart solution,” he said.

“When we contacted partners in other countries we realised that the problems fishermen are facing are more or less the same and, thus, the project was initiated,” he added.

THE IMPLEMENTATION AND RED TAPE

He said in the beginning that fishermen questioned their capacity to transform themselves into tourism operators. In addition, in countries such as Albania and Cyprus, the concept of fishing tourism was not even familiar.

The project partners created training material and conducted training courses in every country. In some cases, the project had to face bureaucratic issues, considering that in many countries national legislation demanded a special fishing tourism license.

The partners also provided fishermen with equipment, mainly related to safety, as well as certification.

“Fishermen are doing their normal job and at the same time describe to tourists stories from their local region. In some cases, where the national legislation allows it, tourists can also fish and get this experience too,” Melillo said.

He said tourists were excited in every country and then the partners created a business model, a sort of guidelines that have to be used to invest in this sector.

The project lasted 30 months and has now come to an end. But fishermen have continued their touristic activities and tourists can use a mobile application to book their fishing holidays.

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EU official: Interreg is an ‘engine’ of regional cooperation but needs simplification

By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com

Interreg is an important engine of cooperation and trust among countries, but to address ongoing challenges such as migration or Brexit, it needs to be simplified and better coordinated and have less red tape, a high-ranking EU official told EURACTIV.com.

“It’s the financial engine of cooperation beyond borders. In the Mediterranean Sea, for instance, the countries are trying to fight together climate change and address the causes of pollution. One can see the technical need for cooperation,” said the official, who asked not to be named, adding that this financial engine stipulates investments with own resources.

Another important element of Interreg, according to the official, is to build trust.

“The second pillar of the territorial

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cooperation is to reinforce trust and confidence primarily among EU citizens, but also with the neighbours. Nearly 300 million people live around the Mediterranean Sea and they have to work together to face common challenges,” the EU official added.

Interreg is one of the key EU instruments supporting cooperation across borders through project funding. These projects can range from cooperation among member states, candidate countries or potential candidate countries to regional cooperation such as with third countries in the Mediterranean region.

For the EU official, Interreg has been one of the most successful examples of reinforced cooperation as a way to transpose all EU policies on a well-defined geographic area.

“It promotes a new innovative form of governance with strong political accountability,” the official said, emphasising the multi-level governing approach among the central governments, local authorities, private sector and civil society.

THE BUDGET CONSTRAINTS

However, in light of new challenges such as migration and Brexit, in the new programming period (2021-2027) the European Commission has proposed cutting the funds for the cohesion policy and according to the official, this will negatively affect Interreg as well.

In an interview with EURACTIV.com on 25 October, Younous Omarjee, a French MEP and chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Regional Development (REGI), urged the EU Parliament not to accept cuts on the cohesion policy budget and called on the incoming European Commission chief, Ursula von der Leyen, to be on its side.

However, it seems there is little appetite among member states to challenge the proposed cuts.

“The problem is in the Council. There, I expect that, first of all, France and President Macron will defend cohesion. Germany should too, with at least the same energy as they defend the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Because as much as we need a strong CAP, we also need a strong Cohesion Policy: these two are related,” he said.

The EU official noted that the discussion is now in the hands of the EU Council adding that the Interreg priorities for the next programming period are fully aligned with the political priorities of the new EU executive.

“We believe that the new political priorities of the new Commission leader are reflected in all Interreg-related policy objectives so far,” the official said.

SIMPLIFY, SPEAK TO EACH OTHER

No matter what the new budget will be, for the EU official, it’s crucial for the new Interreg to be simplified.

“One of the biggest challenges is to simplify the administrative burden of the management of the programme. We are talking about many countries, a small budget and heavy bureaucracy.”

Audits suggest that Interreg performs significantly well compared to other programmes, with extremely low levels of administrative mistakes, which can allow more automated processes.

According to analysts, the Commission has indeed made “ambitious” proposals to simplify the programme but the EU official warned about the need for effective implementation.

“I expect the member states to maintain the spirit because the risk in the implementation is always to add additional requirements. This may be better in terms of security but more complex to implement,” the official said.

The official added that another challenge is to facilitate cooperation among various Interreg programmes.

“Some programmes are very large, transnational, while some others are smaller, like the cross borders. And it’s very important that they speak to each other in order to push for the same objective and work together.”

“The same applies to the Interreg programmes covering third countries, in this case, the countries of the neighbourhood and the ENI CBC MED programme, which was for operational reasons designed quite separately.”

“All these different programs need to come somehow closer and this is part of our proposal to have the same regulation for both sides and one single service, the DG Regio, to manage everything so that we can promote well-aligned cooperation,” the official concluded.
A n EU-funded Interreg project promoting microgrids technology has managed to help consumers produce renewable electricity on their own. But the ultimate objective to enable reselling the power to their neighbour has been hindered by regulatory obstacles.

Although the technology is there, it cannot be fully developed in practice, because EU member states have not yet implemented the relevant EU legislation.

Pegasus, an Interreg MED project, was launched three years ago and ended last month. Its main objective was to test the development of microgrids technology in order for consumers to be able to produce electricity through renewables and create local energy communities, selling it to neighbours or to the grid at a guaranteed price.

“We wanted to promote the efficient use of microgrids in rural areas and islands. Eleven countries involved in the project and all partners were from the Mediterranean region,” Ivana Ostoic, an expert involved in the project, told EURACTIV.

“We managed to prove that the use of microgrids for prosumers has both financial and environmental value, 

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as well as a positive social impact, as local workers were predominantly employed,” the Croatian expert added.

She explained that microgrids are basically local electricity networks, which allows participants to sell the electricity generated from renewables, such as solar, thermal or hydro, directly to neighbours.

But during implementation, the partners were faced with regulatory problems in different EU countries.

“We proved that technically there are no problems at all. But EU member states have not integrated into national law an EU Directive that allows people to be electricity prosumers so that they can sell the energy as individuals,” Ostoic said.

“Except France, where they now have some minor changes in their legislative framework, in all other countries there is no legislation,” she said.

She added that if one wants to be an electricity prosumer, technically he can, and basically sell it just to the grid. "You cannot sell it directly, for instance, to your neighbour."

According to Ostoic, the creation of these local energy communities will change mindsets and enable savings on costs and additional fees that consumers currently pay in their regular energy bills.

She cited as an example the Adriatic municipality of Preko, where a state-owned building generated electricity and sold it to another public building. Through this process, money was saved and was then used by local authorities to provide hot meals for older citizens.

“How many buildings can we use and do the same?” the mayor of Preko asked, according to the expert.

**CONSUMERS: DRIVERS OF ENERGY TRANSITION**

The EU legislation, particularly the reviewed Renewable Energy Directive, has set the framework that will allow citizens to engage more actively in the energy transition and benefit from it.

A European Commission spokesperson told EURACTIV that member states have to transpose the directive by 30 June 2021.

“This transposition has to result in the establishment of an enabling framework promoting and facilitating the development of renewables self-consumption and renewable energy communities,” she said.

After the transposition deadline, the Commission will check that member states have completely and correctly transposed the provisions of the Directive, the EU spokesperson said.

“Consumers are the drivers of the energy transition,” the spokesperson underlined, adding that new technologies such as smart grids, smart homes and battery storage solutions make it increasingly possible for energy consumers to become active players on the market.

“Renewable energy deployment is transforming the European energy system. Such a change will require an important shift in the energy system, with an increasing role played by citizens,” the EU official said.
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