

Position paper

European Cohesion Policy opens up to open data

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1. Background

European Cohesion Policy (or Regional Policy) is the second-biggest EU policy after agriculture with a budget of EUR 347 billion for the period 2007-13.

Availability of Open Data on projects and beneficiaries funded by Cohesion Policy helps foster transparency in the use of public resources in Europe, to improve decision making and policy design, to encourage the creation of new tools and services for citizens.

The European Union currently lacks common initiatives such as Recovery.gov or USAspending.gov to track government spending in detail and at large. In particular, in the case of Cohesion Policy, there is no single point of access to data on funded projects and beneficiaries, and the responsibility for data publication is up to each single EU Region and National agency acting as Managing Authority of Structural Funds. Current regulations identify only three basic fields as mandatory for online publication: name of the project, name of the beneficiary, total value of the project. This implies that hundreds of Managing Authorities are free to decide how much information is to be published and the format of the downloadable datasets. According to a recent study published by the Italian Public Investment Evaluation Unit of the Department for Cohesion (Reggi, 2012), the quantity and quality of information differ greatly among different types of Managing Authorities (regional, national), geographical locations and types of back office organizations. Most public agencies are focused on compliance with current regulation (61%). The others are pursuing two different strategies. A first group is focused on quality, openness and re-use of data (18%), while a second group is committed to making data accessible by non-technically oriented citizens by providing visualizations and interactive tools (21%).

Besides, other bottom-up initiatives such as *FarmSubsidy* for EU Common Agricultural Policy or journalistic investigations such as *ft.com/eufunds* by the Financial Times have seemingly managed to achieve more impact than official government efforts.

2. What is new in 2014-2020 Cohesion Policy regulations

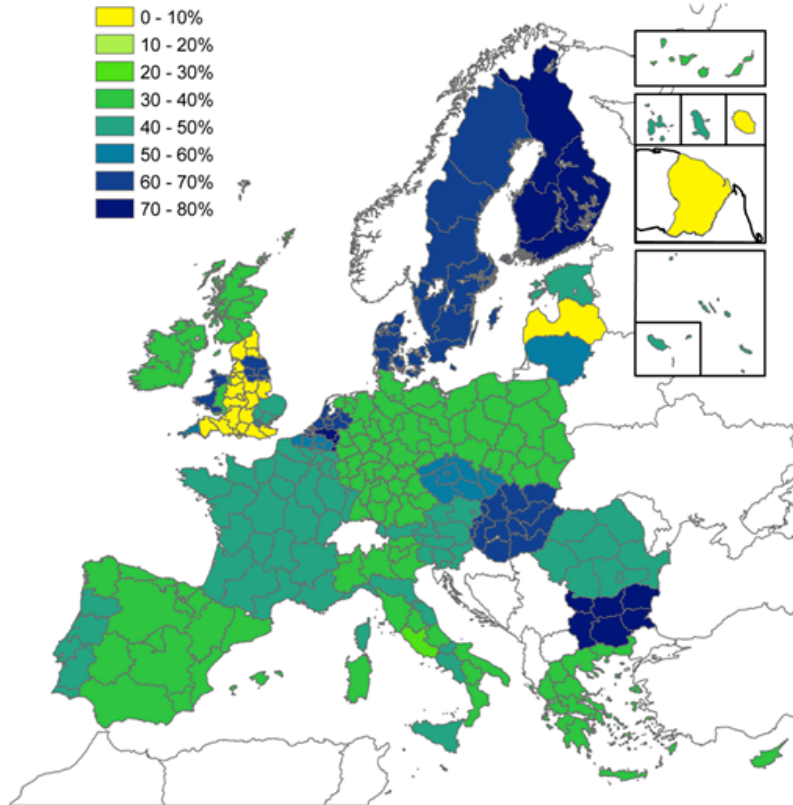
EU Commission has issued a proposal for a reform of cohesion policy in the programming period 2014-2020. Proposed rules for data publication include:

- the use of open formats (CSV, XML)
- an extension of current minimum set of information to be provided, which now includes the location of beneficiaries, implementing periods, main topic/field of intervention, date of last update
- the provision that published datasets shall be accessible through a single website at national level.

Even though future Cohesion Policy would benefit from even stricter rules on data publication (e.g. on the license for re-use of published data), proposed provisions represent a step to the right direction.

Figure 1 shows the level of compliance of current datasets with future 2014-2020 regulations (data refers to Operational Programmes co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund). EU Member States and Regions are far from full compliance with future regulations, with only a few exceptions (e.g. Bulgaria, Finland) none of which reaching 100%. Much has to be done both from a technical and a cultural point of view.

Figure 1 – ERDF Operational Programmes by level of compliance with proposed 2014-2020 regulations (October 2011)

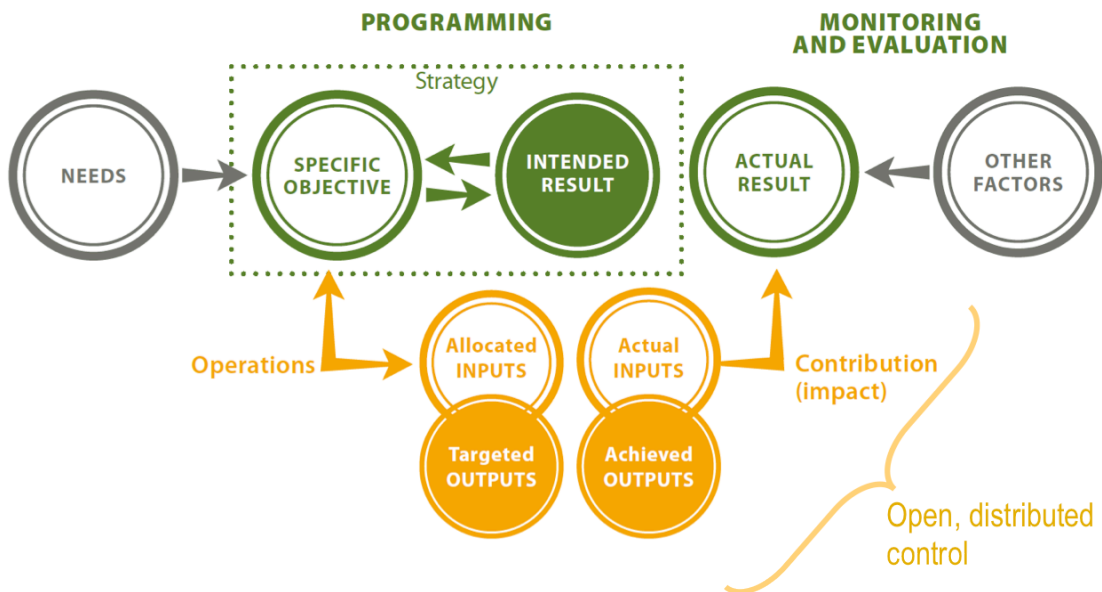


Source: Reggi, 2012

3. Italian Cohesion Action Plan: a milestone towards greater openness

The Italian Cohesion Action Plan, agreed with the European Commission in 2011 and periodically updated, establishes a “dedicated national fund” for well-identified development projects in Southern Regions, funded through reductions of national co-financing. The reprogramming of EU co-financed funds goes ahead, aiming accelerate and, notably, improve funds use and pioneers the “new result-oriented programming methods” that will be adopted in 2014-2020. The Action Plan for Cohesion also champions a public, complete availability of project data under the rationale that the efficiency and effectiveness of regional policy would benefit greatly from improved transparency about how, where and when public money is spent. The citizen and civil society in general would act as a powerful source of control and suggestions for further improvements in policy design. Citizens’ control should focus on results of public policy by comparing targeted and achieved outputs with final outcomes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – EU Cohesion Policy cycle



4. The impact of Open Data on Policy Making: lessons learnt from experience

Benefits of open data on policy making include:

- **Open data help break down internal barriers and data silos.** Open data can improve interoperability within and between administrations and tiers of government
- **More and better analysis to inform policy making.** The citizen and intermediaries such as data journalists or research institutions have access to an unprecedented amount of information on policy monitoring and results. This will reduce information asymmetries between Government and its constituency. As an example, the role of professional policy analysts and evaluators may change into an “anyone can do it” scenario.
- **Demand-driven policy design.** Collaboration triggered by open data availability offers new tools and opportunities to substantially improve Government’s capacity to understand citizen’s needs and the demand of services.

5. Open questions

- Raw data are useless for non-technical citizens. How much money should Governments invest in own visualizations and applications? How to design data visualizations from a public value perspective?
- Initial interpretation from government officials is fundamental. Interactive visualizations and tools to collect feedback from the citizen meet policy analysis (official reports, scientific analysis, etc.)
- Metadata: towards a common scheme for EU Funding data?

6. Bibliography

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