

Against mental borders

Borders are often a result of the past; culture is one of the possibilities to overcome the negative effects of them. This applies especially for the areas around the former Iron Curtain. Especially here the importance of EUREGIOs, being a cross-frontier cooperation of communities, towns and local institutions, has been intensified in the last couple of years. Because of still existing various prejudices and fear of communication special efforts are required. EUREGIOs turn out to be in a way cross-cultural contact points, functioning as mediators and supporters for a good cross-frontier neighbourhood.

Having good neighbour relationships cannot be taken for granted. In addition to carrying out projects "mental borders" have to be removed. The process of emotional understanding can be supported by common cultural activities and projects, which lead step by step to a socio-economic conglomerate.

Cultural and communication projects have to be justified firmly in times of shortage of public funds. In cross-frontier cooperation these projects are, however, the basis for understanding each other.

The following results derive from the projects presented at the EUREGIO meeting 2000:

- Cultural activities help to remove barriers in cross-frontier connections, which cannot be carried out simply by some "managers", because this task requires too much sensitivity and consideration. The unanimous view of the meeting's participants was that they had to learn how to understand interfering but never congruent spatial effectiveness in case of

cross-frontier cooperation, which applied for administrative districts as well as interpersonal barriers (mentality, differences in conceptions of the world).

- Apart from a certain sensitivity, intuition and respect especially patience is necessary. Striving for experiments and openness towards unconventional approaches has never turned out to be a disadvantage in concrete working with partners on the other side of the borders.

- Although there are no recipes for successful cooperation some general principles for cross-frontier project work can be deduced

1. Concrete common projects are the result of "communicating". Main task of cross-frontier work is therefore the opportunity of getting into contact and getting to know each other across borders.

2. No cooperation without confidence. Cross-frontier cooperation cannot be forced in an area with great historical and economic differences. It has to grow slowly and to be redeveloped. Therefore measures in order to set up confidence are necessary. Contact points accepted by both sides - like e.g. the EUREGIO - make sure that both sides take profit out of it and that nobody is given preferential treatment.

3. The principle of partnership is important. Projects and events are consequently carried out in two languages in order to improve communication and to do away with reservations towards one-sided national points of view.



4. Preparation time has to be considered. Working on small projects (People to People/Small Project Fonds) makes understanding easier. If their points of view are too diverse or if the task turns out to be unrealistic, breaking off the project is possible without high expenses and disagreements.

5. Patience and low expectations have a decisive influence. There is rarely short-term success in this rather difficult cooperation. In comparison with the efforts made in these projects the first results are rather poor; positive effects are gained only after a couple of years.

6. Support has to be organized. Focal points are important. EUREGIOs are established in order to function as supports. They take up the role of "balancing risks", of turning away difficulties of cross-frontier cooperation and facilitate cross-frontier communication by providing translation and interpreting services.

7. Regional projects can often produce multiplier effects and synergies. This applies more and more also for cross-frontier cooperation. The actual social surplus does not only consist of cross-frontier projects making sure an additional budget for a project, but also independent innovations in border areas.

Due to their difficult situation border areas have always been forced to develop special qualities, which give a competitive edge:

- treating differences in culture and mentality
- being prepared for partners, who "think and act differently"
- extensive usage of telecommunication in order to inform markets in a better way and to get in touch with consumers more easily
- the ability to communicate in different languages
- self-organization and development of common rules within EUREGIOs, flexible acting in difficult situations

In Central Europe it is essential to intensify especially these qualities as "human factor". There is nothing else behind the keyword of "learning regions". They are also considered to be a chance for those areas, which have to cope with great structural changes or other important social transformations like e.g. regions moving (mentally) closer together, which had been separated by an impermeable border for decades. Culture in this case is of crucial - or even decisive - importance.