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Citizens' vs practitioners' perception on the EU regional approach

Abstract: *This paper targets to juxtapose the points of view of citizens, as beneficiaries of the European programmes – on the one hand, and of practitioners – as designers and experts in charge of implementing the Cohesion Policy programmes – on the other.*

The study was conducted at the level of a sample consisting of 9 NUTS II regions of the European Union, which were selected to be representative for the complex and heterogeneous reality of the EU Cohesion Policy. The analysis of data collected from the case study regions demonstrated that, regardless of the status of the regions (competitiveness or convergence regions), there are overlaps as regards points of view of the two categories of regional actors only for a part of regional priorities.

At the same time, the study revealed that the citizens' trust in the effectiveness of the EU in targeting regional issues is higher in the case of those regional needs that are on the agenda of both categories of regional actors and it drops for those regional issues for which perceptive divergences exist between citizens and practitioners.

Keywords: *regional study, citizens' and practitioners' perception, regional needs, Cohesion Policy*

The perceptions of regional needs and effectiveness of corrective public interventions through the Cohesion Policy (CP) are the main aims of this study. The paper targets to highlight the perceived similarities and divergences among regional citizens' and practitioners' views regarding the public intervention needs and the evaluation of the CP actions in solving them.

The paper working hypothesis was: *a greater discrepancy between the needs for public intervention perceived by citizens, and the main directions of public interventions through the EU Cohesion Policy conceived by practitioners, leads to a worse EU citizens' perception of the European Policy performance.*

Table. 1 Selected case study regions

Case Study Regions	Country	Cohesion Policy objective
Burgenland	AT	Convergence phasing-out
Extremadura	ES	Convergence
Emilia-Romagna	IT	Competitiveness
Calabria	IT	Convergence
Dolnośląskie	PL	Convergence
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	PL	Convergence
Sud Est	RO	Convergence
Norra Mellansverige	SE	Competitiveness
Essex	UK	Competitiveness

Source: Aiello et al. (2017).

The outcomes of this study are based on a comparative analysis of perceptions of the two categories of regional actors at the level of nine NUTS II regions selected for the PERCEIVE Horizon 2020 project (Aiello et al., 2017). The study sample was designed according to the ability of the selected regions to represent the complex and heterogeneous reality of the EU Cohesion Policy performance and its multidimensional determinants in terms of socio-economic, political, and demographic development (Tab. 1). The sample is balanced between the regions targeted for the "Competitiveness" and for the "Convergence" objectives. Emilia-Romagna and Calabria regions account for the in-country heterogeneity in the European Structural Funds support in Italy. Norra Mellansverige (Sweden) and Essex (the UK) are other two regions under the "Competitiveness" objective. Extremadura is the only Spanish region that stayed under the "Convergence" objective in the programming period 2014-2020, whereas Burgenland (Austria) was targeted as a former "Convergence" objective region but shifted to "Phasing-out" in the 2007-2013 programming period. From the New Member States, two Polish regions (Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie) and one Romanian region (Sud Est) were selected, all of them being under the "Convergence" objective.

Methodology

In methodological terms, the comparative analysis was based on the mixed method approach that makes it possible to combine the qualitative and quantitative data on the same research topics and allows to assess the overlapping but distinct facets of the phenomenon under study (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989). In the study, the comparison aimed to identify perceptual similarities/ divergences in the hierarchy of regional needs.

The qualitative-quantitative parallelism between researched topics was introduced from the design of the data collection instruments. Contextualization, that gives a meaning to the obtained results with reference to the specific and particular context, is used for interpreting both qualitative and quantitative data in order to make them suitable for comparison.

The perceptions on the most pressing regional issues were initially separately studied at the level of each category of regional actors:

- citizens – being those who benefit from the European Cohesion Policy,
- Cohesion Policy practitioners – being responsible and/or involved experts in the design and implementation of the CP specific regional programmes).

The case study analysed the citizens' and practitioners' perceptions on regional problematic issues in the nine regions. These issues represent priorities of the Cohesion Policy at the EU level:

- *poor education,*
- *poor infrastructure and transportation,*
- *corruption and poor governance,*
- *unemployment,*
- *environmental concerns,*
- *poor wages/poverty,*
- *other problems.*

In the case of citizens, the data were collected through quantitative methods – survey on representative samples of citizens from the investigated NUTS II regions. For information collection from regional practitioners, qualitative methods were used: focus group and in-depth interviews. The quantitative (Bauhr and Charron, 2019) and qualitative (Aiello et al., 2017) data used in this study were collected in the spring of 2017 under the PERCEIVE project.

In the second methodological step, using the convergence model (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007), the two different findings regarding each category of regional actors were converged by comparing and contrasting them during the interpretation phase (Fig. 1).

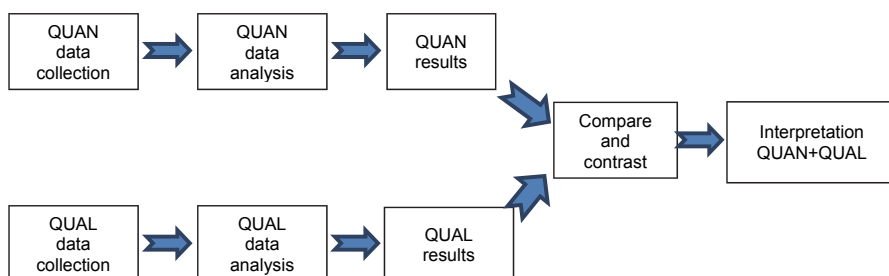


Figure 1. Triangulation design – convergence model

Source: Creswell and Plano Clark (2007, pp. 63-4).

The qualitative and quantitative data were interpreted in the context of the three categories of regions defined according to the Cohesion Policy Objectives: Competitiveness, Convergence and Convergence phasing-out regions. The comparative analysis was based on constructing tables of *perceived similarities* between the two groups of regional actors (for more details regarding the methodological approach, please see Tudor et al., 2017). By this method, the regional needs identified by the regional practitioners in the Focus groups were overlapped with the categories of pre-defined answers from the Survey (citizens' perception) in order to identify the perceived similarities and divergences between the two groups of regional actors. Through this approach, the comparative analysis aims to understand whether the EU Cohesion Policy is perceived and understood by citizens in the same way as it has been conceived by practitioners.

Results

The next part presents a synthesis of the citizens' and practitioners' views from the nine case study regions on the EU Cohesion Policy associated with the 2007-2013 programming period. This analysis will be completed by a comparative study of those two categories of actors' views in order to understand if there are different perceptions on this policy and its implementation.

Citizens' and practitioners' perceptions on the most problematic issues in the case-study regions

While interpreting the results we tried, first of all, to identify the perceived similarities/ divergences regarding the existence of each regional problem. Thus, we integrated the problem areas into:

- *Areas of perceived similarities* – those problematic issues that were pointed out both by citizens and practitioners, independently of the importance of the respective issue at the level of the region;

- *Areas of partially corroborated perceptions* – those regional issues that are reported by both categories of actors as problematic for their region, but which are more nuanced through their effects by the group of practitioners;
- *Area of singular perception* – those problems signalled out as important for the region only by one of the two regional actors.

Following this rationality, the comparative analysis describes for each category of regions (competitiveness, phasing-out and convergence regions) another perception model and perceived differences/ similarities useful for understanding the present and foreseen impact of the Cohesion Policy.

For **competitiveness regions** (Emilia-Romagna, Norra Melleansverige and Essex) the perceptions on three problems was similar: *unemployment, environmental concerns and poor wages/poverty*. For the **convergence phasing-out region** (Burgenland) similar perceptions exist between citizens and practitioners for four out of the seven problems pre-defined in the survey: *poor education, poor infrastructure and transportation, environmental concerns and poor wages/poverty*. In the case of **convergence regions** (Extremadura, Calabria, Dolnośląskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Sud Est), *poor infrastructure and transportation and unemployment* were the only two problems for which a high similarity exists between the citizens' and the Cohesion Policy practitioners' perceptions at the level of the case study regions (Fig. 2).

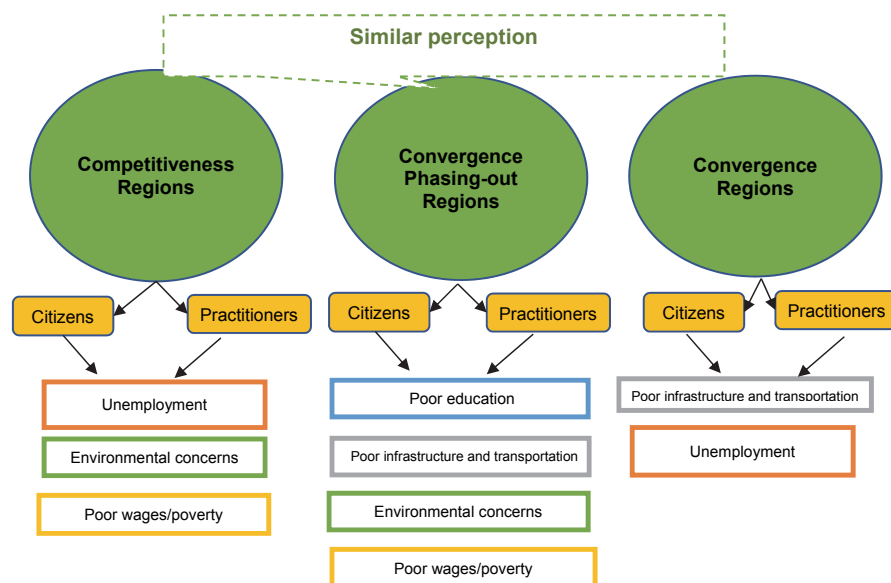


Figure 2. Areas of perceived similarity with regard to the biggest regional problems between citizens and practitioners

Source: Tudor et al. (2017).

Unemployment is the regional issue for which a consensus exists between citizens and experts in most of the case study regions. This regional problem is pointed out by both categories of regional actors, yet it is not always given the same importance in the hierarchy of regional needs.

In the case of problems belonging to the area of partial perceived similarities, the practitioners recognize the existence of the problem at the regional level, yet they refer only to certain aspects of the identified issue. For instance, in the case of the problem defined by the survey as *poor wages/poverty*, practitioners refer to the existence of certain regional problems underpinning these issues (for instance, *social exclusion* – in the region of Calabria, *sectoral problems* – in the region of Extremadura, *Roma integration* – in the case of Sud Est region). The group of partially corroborated perceptions also includes the situations when, although the problem is present both in the practitioners' discourse and in citizens' perception, the former emphasizes only the consequences resulting from non-solving of the problem. For instance, in the case of the problem defined as *poor governance* in the survey, the discourse of experts reveals specific qualitative categories: *small business exclusion*, *regional divisions and grievances* and *urban/rural divide* (Essex)¹, *high in-traregional economic and social diversification* (Dolnośląskie region).

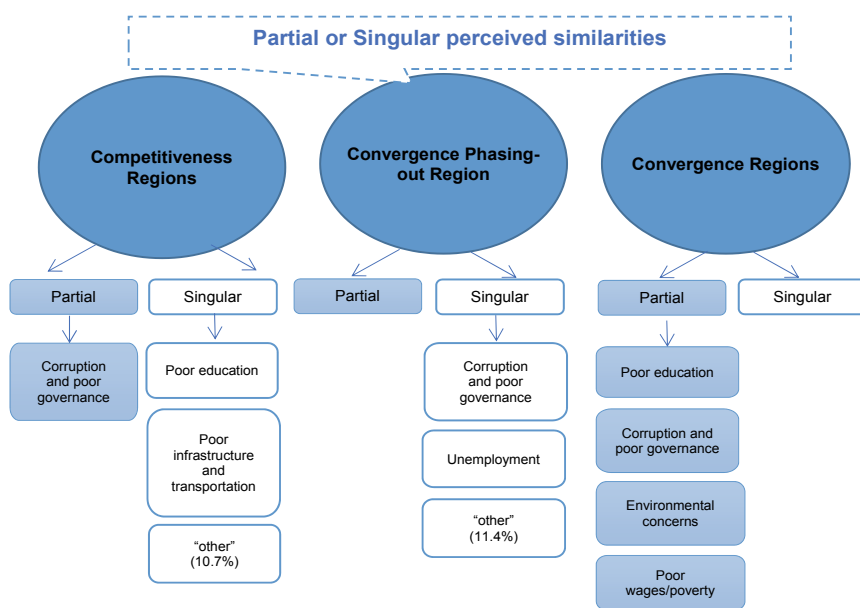


Figure 3. Areas of partially corroborated or singular perception on the most serious regional problems

Source: Tudor et al. (2017).

¹ During the regional programs implementation large contracts and bids were actually delivering in a very localized area. These tended to be centered on the urban areas that were in many cases already performing relatively well. It was deemed easier to deliver to the urban than the rural areas, despite the need being greater in the latter.

Areas of singular perceptions mostly include the situations when citizens considered that the respective problems are present at regional level, yet they are not found, not even partially or through their consequences, in the declarations of practitioners, who participated in the focus groups. This category of perceived non-similarity is found in the case of competitiveness and convergence phasing-out regions from our case study. This difference in the perception of regional problems could be explained by the fact that, at practitioners' level, they represent outdated problems, their pragmatic interest shifting to other EU programme objectives. At the level of citizens, there is a perception that these problems (such as *poor education, regional disparities in infrastructure development*, etc.) still persist in their regions and they want these problems to be addressed in the next programming period as well, until they are completely eradicated.

What should be noted, in this context, is the significant percentage of citizens who ticked the variant "other" as the most pressing problem their region is facing. Thus, 10.7% of respondents from competitiveness regions and 11.4% from phasing-out regions considered that there is another problem more important for their region than those that are the object of the EU interventions through the Cohesion Policy (and which were listed in the pre-defined answers of the questionnaire).

Hierarchy of regional issues – perceived divergences between citizens and practitioners

As regards the hierarchy of regional needs, there are significant perceived divergences between citizens and practitioners related to the hierarchization of regional needs. The figure below shows the priority order of regional needs for citizens and practitioners for three of the nine case study regions. In order to illustrate the above-mentioned divergences the study considered, one specific region for each category of regions defined after the CP objective: Emilia Romagna for competitiveness regions, Burgenland for convergence phasing-out regions and Warmińsko-Mazurskie for convergence regions.

Comparing the hierarchies of regional issues in the view of the two categories of actors for the three regions, a series of similarities and divergences can be noticed. Thus, for all the three regions, *unemployment* is the primary problem in citizens' opinion, yet in practitioners' opinion in two out of the three selected regions, this regional issue is not considered the primary order priority (Burgenland) or it signals a series of potential causes of the low job supply in the regions, like *low attractiveness for large business or low entrepreneurship of population* (Warmińsko-Mazurskie). In the case of this last region, the business environment development level can also partially explain the regional *poor wages and poverty*, which is signalled as a major regional problem for 33.3% of citizens. It is worth noting that practitioners in Warmińsko-Mazurskie have not mentioned poverty or poor wages as a regional problem, although this is considered as a primary issue by 1/3 of the region's population.

Hierarchy of regional needs	Emilia-Romagna (IT)		Burgenland (AT)		Warmińsko-Mazurskie (PL)		
	citizens	practitioners	citizens	practitioners	citizens	practitioners	
Primary order	Unemployment (50.4%)	Unemployment	Unemployment (38.7%)	North-south disparities: infrastructure	Unemployment (37.0%)	Low attractiveness for large business	
		Innovation system		Research (RandD)	Poor wages / poverty (33.3%)	Weak transport infrastructure	
		Post-earthquake recovery					
Secondary order	Environmental concerns (17.4%)	Youth unemployment	Poor infrastructure and transportation (14.5%)	Education/qualification	Poor infrastructure and transportation (13.8%)	Low entrepreneurship of population	
	Corruption and poor governance (10.8%)		Poor wages / poverty (12.0%)	Tourism		Weak social infrastructure	
			“other” (11.4%)				Need for urban areas revitalization
Tertiary order	Poor infrastructure and transportation (8.4%)	Regional disparities	Corruption and poor governance (10.1%)	Wage/social dumping	Corruption and poor governance (9.3%)	Insufficient environmental protection	
	Poor wages / poverty (6.4%)	Social exclusion	Poor education (7.0%)		Poor education (3.2%)	Low innovativeness, including food processing sector	
	Poor education (5.0%)		Environmental concerns (6.4)	Renewable energy	Environmental concerns (2.4)		
	“other” (1.5%)				“other” (1.1%)		

Figure 4. Hierarchy of regional issues – citizens' vs. practitioners' perceptions

Source: Tudor et al. (2017).

Similarly, while *poor infrastructure* is considered a secondary issue by the citizens from Burgenland and Warmińsko-Mazurskie regions, the practitioners from these regions consider that this problem is a primary issue, which must be treated and solved as a priority, before the *unemployment* problem.

In the case of *corruption and poor governance*, one out of ten citizens who participated in the survey in the selected regions considered that this issue is the most serious regional problem. This issue is signalled by the regional experts from the selected regions under the form of potential effects of poor governance, namely: regional disparities (Emilia-Romagna), *need for urban areas revitalisation*, *low attractiveness for large business* (Warmińsko-Mazurskie).

The above data reveal that, in many cases, the priority order of regional needs is different in citizens' and practitioners' views. In general, regional experts are those who decide, according to evidence-based data and perceptions, which are the regional priorities that will be approached through the CP regional programmes. Thus, regional CP programmes will address as a priority needs that are not perceived as the primary need by citizens. This will in turn result in citizens' perception of the Cohesion Policy as ineffective at regional level.

Citizens' perceptions on the effectiveness of the EU in addressing the regional issues and solving them

We shall next analyse the perception of citizens from the case study regions on the effectiveness of the European institutions in dealing with the most serious problem in their region in correlation with the problem that they have perceived as the most relevant. This analysis can provide a picture of the European citizens' perception on the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy instruments, as the main means of intervention of the Union at regional level meant to provide solutions for solving the most serious regional problems.

In order to evaluate the citizens' perception on the effectiveness of the EU in addressing regional issues, the authors considered the answer to the following question (from the quantitative survey): *How effective do you think the following institutions will be at dealing with the biggest problem in your region?* The three pre-defined answers used in the survey were: *very effective*, *somewhat effective*, *not so effective*), with special reference to the EU, as promoter of the Cohesion Policy. In the decision to take into consideration this variable from the survey, it was considered that citizens' perception on the effectiveness of the EU institutions is generally based on their previous (direct or indirect) experiences with the EU programmes and policies on which their point of view on the EU effectiveness was based.

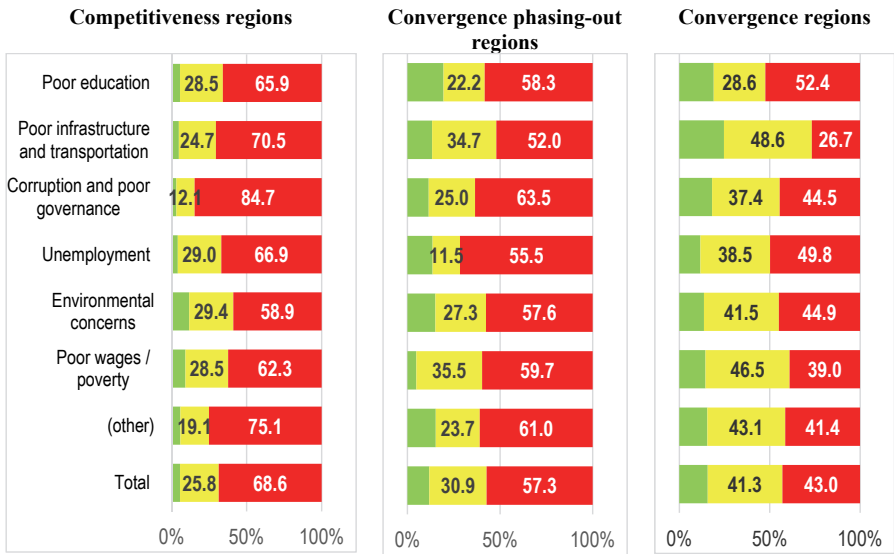


Figure 5. Citizens' perception on the EU institutions' effectiveness in dealing with the most serious problem that they consider affecting their region

Legend: very effective – green; somewhat effective – yellow; not so effective – red

Note: regions' weighted averages reported.

Source: Tudor et al. (2017).

In the opinion of the citizens from the *competitiveness regions* covered by our case study, the EU enjoys a rather modest confidence in the capacity of its institutions and implicitly of its programmes to solve the major regional problems. Out of all the respondents from these regions 68.6% declared that the EU is “not so effective” in dealing with the region’s biggest problem. The EU is invested with moderate confidence only as regards the effectiveness of its interventions in problems related to environmental protection and social protection of disadvantaged people (with low wages or poverty), followed by unemployment (Fig. 5).

By contrast, the citizens from the *convergence regions* perceive to a greater extent the fact that the EU has the ability to intervene for solving their regional problems. The percentage of those who declare that the EU is “not so effective” in these actions is 43%, the remaining respondents considered that the European institutions are “very” or “somewhat effective” in this matter (Fig. 5). The regional problems for which the citizens from the convergence regions consider that interventions of the EU are mostly effective are related to poor infrastructure and transportation. Maybe this perception is generated by the awareness of the fact that the development of regional infrastructure needs major investments, difficult to be financially supported by own funds of less-developed regions. Social exclusion is the second problem for which the citizens of these regions consider that the EU could be effective in their corrective interventions through programmes dedicated to combating poverty and stimulating wage growth.

The perception of citizens from the *convergence phasing-out regions* on the effectiveness of the EU institutions in dealing with their regional problems is, somehow, in between convergence and competitiveness citizens’ point of view. The general percentage of those who consider that the EU is “not so effective” is close to 60%, and the problem on which citizens think that the EU can intervene more successfully is linked to regional infrastructure development (Fig. 5).

It is worth noting that regardless of the region, for the specific regional problem considered by most of the citizens to be the most important, the percentage of those who declare that the EU would be “very effective” in solving it, is rather low, compared to the same perception expressed in relation to the other regional problems of less relevance.

Concluding remarks

The comparative study regarding the regional needs that require interventions through the Cohesion Policy, confirmed the initial hypothesis that there are perceived differences between citizens (beneficiaries of regional corrective interventions through Operational Programmes) and practitioners (those responsible for the design and implementation of operational programmes related to the Cohesion Policy). These can be found both in relation to defining the regional needs and in hierarchising them. Thus:

- Citizens *define the regional needs* based on their everyday experience. On the other hand, practitioners regard the regional needs by reference to the EU Cohesion Policy programme objectives established for seven years' period.
- In citizens' perception, the *hierarchy of regional issues* is variable, depending on regional and personal contexts. From the practitioners' views, the hierarchy of regional needs can be changed by major shocks but is mostly tributary to multiannual programme.

These differences between citizens' and practitioners' views lead to *partial corroborated perceptions on regional issues*. Thus:

- There is an overlap between the two categories of regional actors' perceptions regarding the existence of *some regional issues*;
- *A different order of priority regarding regional issues* is found between the categories of regional actors, mainly for those regional issues that are considered relevant by both categories;
- The significant percentage of citizens who chose the variant *other* as being the biggest problem for their region requires a more detailed investigation with regard to the nature of these other regional problems in order to better target these issues through the CP and improve citizens' perceptions on the effectiveness of the EU interventions.
- From the practitioner's perspective, the malfunction in Operational Programmes management, especially attracting funds in those areas and by those beneficiaries that have previous relevant experience in implementing European programmes, thus deepening intra-regional divergences as the disadvantaged areas do not have the capacity to develop projects like the more developed areas have.

The case studies also confirmed that the perceived divergences between the two categories of regional actors, as regards the problems their regions are facing and which require corrective interventions, are correlated with a negative perception on the effectiveness of the EU institutions to address these regional issues. Thus, for those regional issues that are found on the agenda of both categories of regional actors, there is a higher percentage of citizens that positively appreciate the effectiveness of the EU institutions in dealing with these specific regional problems. In other words, when citizens and experts are on the same page in identifying the specific regional needs, there is a higher probability that the regional programmes designed and implemented at regional level by experts (practitioners) correspond to citizens' expectations. Consequently, the perception of the latter (citizens) on the CP effectiveness tends to be more positive.

This study on comparative analysis of citizens' and the Cohesion Policy practitioners' perceptions represents a starting point for improving the process of construction and implementation of Operational Programmes, as well as their communication mechanisms.

The public communication of the Cohesion Policy can be targeted to highlight the efforts made in solving the problems considered as the most pressing by citizens, so that their perception of the effectiveness of public interventions should increase.

At the same time, citizens' consultation and greater involvement in the decision-making process regarding the EU intervention directions is necessary, in order to reach the desired convergence between the programmatic objectives of the Cohesion Policy and citizens' real needs.

Acknowledgement

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