



Interview

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programme

Interview with Celia Alberto Pérez, General Director of European Affairs of the Government of the Canary Islands and Managing Authority of the Interreg MAC programme, to find out more about the programme. More specifically, the challenges overcome, the real impact it generates in the territories and the future perspectives.

How would you describe the Interreg MAC programme to someone who has never heard of it? Why is this programme so important?

Interreg programmes are the instrument through which the European Union promotes cooperation between regions belonging to different Member States and with regions in non-European countries located close to the external borders.

The Interreg MAC programme is specifically aimed at supporting with European funds cooperation projects involving partners from the Canary Islands, Madeira, Azores and partners from seven African countries - Cape Verde, Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Sao Tome and Principe. All MAC projects must include at least one partner from the Canary Islands, Madeira or Azores and one partner from one of these African countries.

The current MAC programme has a duration of seven years - from 2021 to 2027 -; a total budget of 200 million euros; and focuses on four areas of cooperation: R&D&I, green transition, governance and mobility, and migration management. The MAC, as you have seen, is a key instrument.

It is a programme that continues to grow in terms of the number of countries and, consequently, the number of projects. How is this achieved?

The MAC has been growing both in terms of budget and number of participating countries. The rules governing its operation and management have also evolved. This has been achieved mainly thanks to two things: good negotiation and awareness-raising among European institutions of the need to work together with neighbouring countries for the economic growth of all; and good implementation of the programme and projects.

Mobility and migration are global issues (nowadays in territories such as the Canary Islands they are the order of the day). What role does the programme play in managing these challenges? How can it help?

Mobility and migration were included for the first time in Interreg in the current period 2021-2027. The role of Interreg is to accompany and complement the specific instruments that the EU has for these issues, such as the Migration and Asylum Fund. The budget that Interreg allocates to this area is relatively small, but it covers an essential part, which is cooperation between entities on both sides of the border to identify problems and jointly define the best solutions.

What have been the biggest challenges faced by the programme since its inception? How have you overcome them?

The Interreg programmes were not initially adapted to the particularities of the Outermost Regions. They were set up to promote cooperation between regions located within the European continent that had land borders - for example, border regions in Spain and Portugal - and between regions located on the external borders of the continent and neighbouring countries, which initially were only those of the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. It has taken a long way for Interreg to properly integrate the cooperation of the Outermost Regions. Because of their remoteness, the ORs cannot cooperate with other European regions - with the exception of the cooperation between the Canaries, Azores and Madeira - and the countries surrounding them are also far away from the European continent, in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, South America or the mid-Atlantic.

Probably the most difficult thing has been to obtain and combine funding from both sides of the border, and in fact we are still working on this because it is essential for the cooperation to be balanced and for all partners to feel truly involved.

Of all the things you mentioned in the previous question, what would you say has been the biggest/main lesson learned from this beautiful process?

The main lesson is that working together generates mutual knowledge, understanding and trust. This is essential for the success of an Interreg project because the European rules are very strict, but we have seen that these contacts and trust last after the projects are finished. Today, there are stable links and collaboration networks between entities that met when working together on Interreg projects, such as universities, research centres, public administrations and associations.

Looking to the future, what is your vision for the Interreg MAC Programme, and do you have any goals?

The MAC has been fundamental in consolidating a common cooperation space in this Atlantic area. Before, there were only bilateral contacts, derived from historical relations such as that of the Portuguese regions with Cape Verde or that of the Canary Islands with Mauritania and Cape Verde. Now that this area is consolidated, the great challenge is to identify the main priorities and focus the programme on them. To do this, we are working on capitalising on results, i.e. identifying the best initiatives achieved thanks to the programme and working on them in order to transfer and scale them up.

What message would you like to send to the readers so that they understand the relevance of this programme and the role they can play in it?

The multiplier effect of Interreg is enormous. The projects generate economic activity in the territory through actions promoted by public entities that benefit many small and medium-sized enterprises. Meetings, studies, exchanges, travel, all of this is carried out in the different territories participating in the programme through service contracts that benefit the local economic fabric. Beyond its strategic importance as an instrument of cooperation and external action, it is undoubtedly an instrument of economic development that moves the local economy.