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Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer Grenzregionen (AGEG)  
 Asociación de Regiones Fronterizas Europeas (ARFE)  
 Association des régions frontalières européennes (ARFE)  
 Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)  
 Comunità di lavoro delle regioni europee di confine (AGEG)  
 Europæiske grænseregioners Arbejdsfællesskab (AGEG)  
 Werkgemeenschap van Europese grensgebieden (WVEG)  
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 Σύνδεσμος Ευρωπαϊκών Συνοριακών Περιφερειών (ΣΕΣΠ)  
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 Ассоциация Европейских Приграничных Регионов (АЕПР)

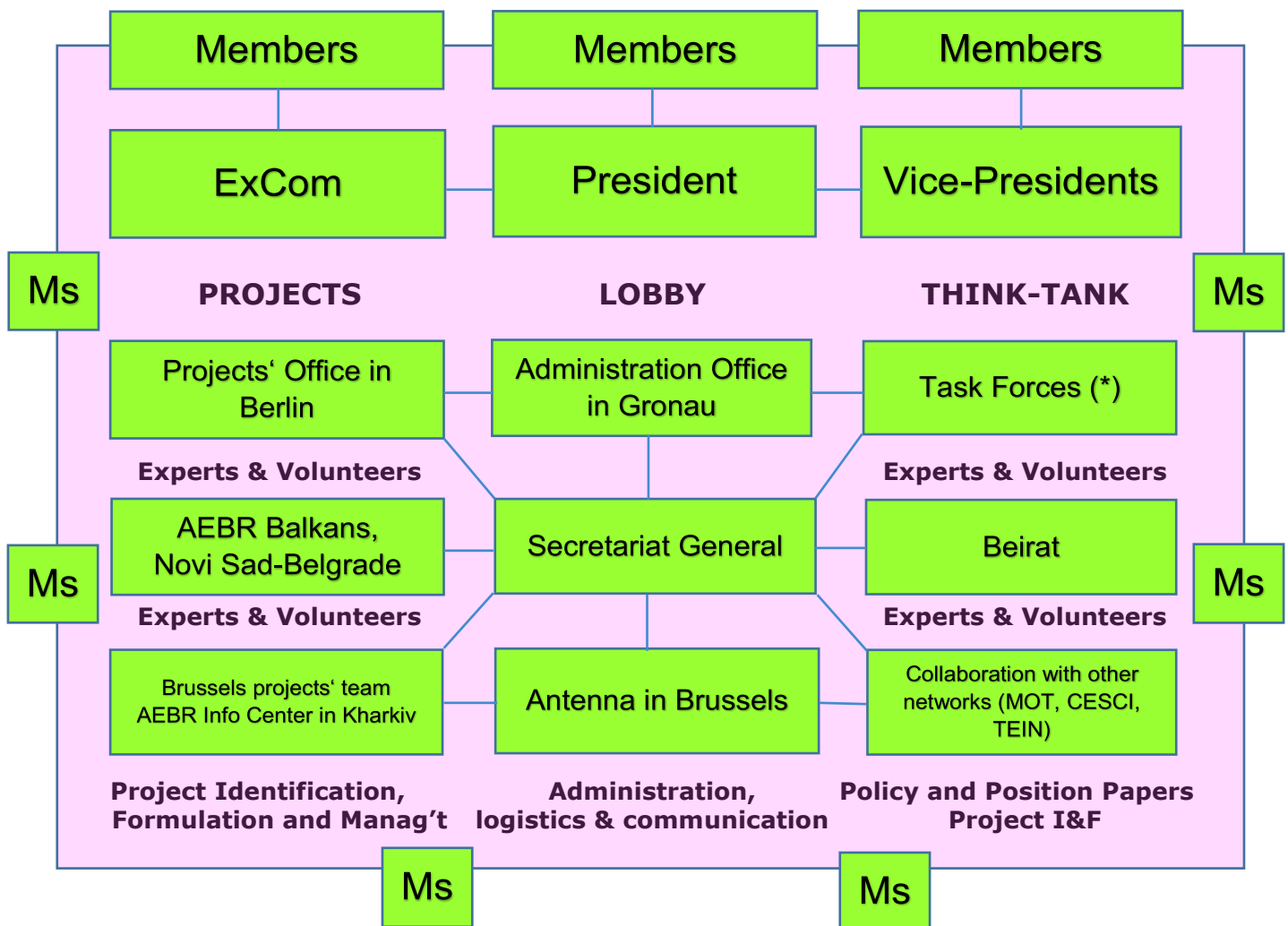


**REVIEWED AEBR STRATEGY**

**Annex 3.1.a** (General Assembly Oulu)

**Overview of current organization of AEBR**

**Political work: decision-making levels  
 (EU, national, regional)**



**\* Task Forces:** External Borders (TFEB), Culture (T4CBC), Interreg, Labour Market, Health, Water Management, Data & Innovation, Schengen, Gender

Source: AEBR Executive Committee meeting, Cottbus, 10th June 2016, Annex 5e (regularly reviewed)

(proposals for future work) ↓

**AEBR Trust Foundation: European Cross-Border Academy (ECBA)**  
 Projects, Research, Quality Management  
 Youth Forum – Peer Group

The first version of this Strategy was approved by AEBR Executive Committee meeting and ratified by the General Assembly on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2015 at the Committee of the Regions, Brussels. A debate to review this Strategy was proposed amongst AEBR members between the General Assemblies 2015 and 2016. The following text was re-validated by the General Assembly of AEBR 2016 in Görlitz (Euroregion Neißة-Nisa-Nysa, DE-CZ-PL) and has been regularly updated according to latest developments. This is a new version for the General Assembly in Oulu.

The departing point was the definition in 2014 and 2015 of a future vision for the Association based on:

- a) concrete and targeted **services** for members, stressing regular information on most important developments in fields of their interest, consultations, calls for projects, etc., dealing especially with the partners' demands;
- b) **reacting** systematically to any initiative affecting CBC or EU border territories at European, national or regional level;
- c) **lobbying** for the interest of ALL border and cross-border regions;
- d) informing regions by organizing **events** with relevant experts, authorities and interested parties on CBC, preparing position papers, checklists, handbooks as well as any other capacity building initiative.
- e) preparing, implementing and monitoring **project** proposals.

There is a general consensus that **AEBR Core Business** mainly consists of the identification of CB obstacles and possible solutions; lobbying EU institutions and national authorities about CB issues, including solutions to identified obstacles; and informing border and cross-border regions.

### a) **Provision of services**

**AEBR Core Business** is the main one, though it is an indirect service, sometimes with a mid- or long-term view. For instance, already in 2015, AEBR initiated an in-depth analysis on how territorial cooperation programmes should look like after 2020 and, in the summer of 2016, we were already following up the processes to launch the 7<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report, finally adopted on 9 October 2017, and the proposals of budget and regulations for further periods, in order not to lose track for cross-border interests.

**Information** is another challenge. There are many tools and possibilities at EU, national and regional level, but it is not easy to achieve an optimal flow of information despite its amount and the availability of sources. Perhaps there is too much information, and a rationalisation effort is needed. To this end, an App has been conceived in order to offer border and cross-border regions tailor-made information about EU topics, project calls, events, good practices, etc. This App has not been developed yet due to its cost (but possibilities to finance it are being explored, maybe in collaboration with other organizations). There is a general consensus about the need to modernize AEBR website.

It is also very much needed to extend the knowledge and utilisation of EU tools, such as the online web portal *Your Europe* ([www.youreurope.eu](http://www.youreurope.eu)) on EU Rights, including the *Your Europe Advice* service ([www.youreuropeadvice.eu](http://www.youreuropeadvice.eu)) to answer enquiries from citizens (and businesses) on their personal EU rights in all 24 EU languages. This tool is free of charge and guarantees a reply from a specialised lawyer within one week. SOLVIT ([www.solvit.eu](http://www.solvit.eu)) helps citizens and businesses to solve problems with a foreign national administration. We could build up cross-border cases in collaboration with these tools and make early advice to cross-border regions when implementing new activities. The extension of similar services at the external borders of the EU would also be advisable, within the limits of what it is possible. The Commission's Communication on *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in*

*Border Regions* (20 September 2017) introduced several instruments which may help a lot: a *Border Focal Point* in DG Regio and an *online professional network*, which are already operational. The network is operated through the EU *Futurium* platform: <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/border-regions>, and its use for different purposes is highly recommended.

AEBR has prepared a draft Communication Strategy, which is aimed at being discussed and commented by AEBR members. We use direct mailing about main news, also our website, and we try a most dynamic newsflash under the formula of a *News Digest*, which tries to achieve a more regular periodicity. We are also increasingly using the social platforms:

- [Facebook](#) was mostly used in a personal basis, though it has improved its dynamic, and the *Task Force External Borders* establishes a closed discussion forum with regular contributions and a growing community. Another initiative in Facebook is the *Informational Center of AEBR at Simon Kuznets KhNEU*, very active in the border regions of Ukraine, and similar initiatives are to be encouraged for other task forces or working groups. Projects like IVY are also very active in FB and other media.
- In [Twitter](#) (@SocialnetAEBR) we inform of main events that we organize or attend, and re-twit as much as possible our members' events and news. We are keeping a growing presence, developing a more systematic approach to this kind of networks. An informal and virtual "think-tank" is under preparation to be activated from the Berlin Office. Participation in active events with popular hashtags helps, as well as connecting AEBR members.
- *Messenger* and *WhatsApp* are also growingly used by some groups of AEBR members or in certain events.
- AEBR videos in *YouTube* have many visits, but they are still underused by most of our members. We have organized all videos from the last years per event in the following set of playing lists:  
[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCITpmv2fWDGXszvuctVkIBA/playlists?view\\_as=subscriber](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCITpmv2fWDGXszvuctVkIBA/playlists?view_as=subscriber).

There is a growing use of these tools by members and friends. However, the huge amount of information available and a quick succession of events make very difficult to keep a dynamic flow of information without the participation of a full-time employee (and/or an App to manage available information). To this end, in most projects implemented by AEBR we have included a chapter on *Communication, Dissemination and Exploitation* (CDE) and, in those where AEBR has been invited to take part, the role of the Association has been proposed "dissemination and exploitation of results". The idea is contracting a part- or full-time "dissemination officer" through those projects' budgets for dissemination activities (of projects in particular and AEBR in general). Since the implementation of IVY project begun on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2017, a strengthened AEBR communication operation has been launched, with a part-time communication officer (the member of the team is full-time employed, but main task is project management). Two additional staff member have joined since then, increasing AEBR communication capacities, but we still need someone dealing exclusively with communication.

We also take part in several expert groups organized by EU institutions and other organizations, think tanks and thematic platforms in social media (*EGTC - European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation*, *CB Review Stakeholders' Grouping*, *TEIN*, *Cross Border Cooperation Network - Expert Group*, *Euroregion Slobozhanshchyna*, *Rede de Educação e Integração Fronteiriça*, *Fronteras Latinoamericanas*, *Fronteras Cooperativas - Ciudades Gemelas Cooperativas*). Many of these groups discuss on general and particular topics of interest for cross-border regions, and they may be a good source to exchange points of view, explore new project ideas, find partners, etc.

The network organized around AEBR, and the information it contains, can be developed through the implementation of joint projects. Nevertheless, most actions in this direction should follow strict regulations through project calls. It is important to stress here that those border and cross-border regions wishing to take part in European projects under general calls, should join the appropriate register(s) to be eligible to apply. Other recommended register is the *Transparency Register* of the EU. In order to better respond to project calls, the task forces are mainly oriented in this direction:

- *Task Force **External Borders*** (TFEB) already tried a project application for Interreg Europe: the FIRE project, but the competition was huge; and currently explores other possibilities within ENI & IPA, as well as outside the EU: United Nations, private foundations, etc. The Info Centres in Kharkiv and Novi Sad/Belgrade (Balkans Office) have explored a variety of project possibilities, particularly our Balkans Office within Erasmus+ and other calls, such as those within the Danube Strategy. Kharkiv is still a challenging issue to gain projects, though there are several initiatives on table dealing with CB Health and, especially, with the constitution of an Association of Ukrainian Border Regions (expected in 2018).
- *Task Force **CB Culture*** (T4CBC) also explores several fields, particularly Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, while consolidating a strong network of cultural platforms and creators. It has also proposed the CoR an initiative to promote CB mobility of artist and cultural entrepreneurs.
- *Task Force **Interreg*** began to work in June 2016. It initiated its activities with a practical case posed by a group of Euroregions in Central Europe related to the management of small project funds (SPF) addressed to people-to-people (P2P) actions. Several lobby actions have been implemented, including a CoR Own Opinion on P2P projects, as well as a survey on the management of these funds and an AEBR position paper. This TF has also followed the implementation of Interreg V programmes and the debates on future regulations for Interreg VI.
- *Task Force **Labour Market*** was constituted to follow up the work initiated some years ago in this field and explore new possibilities for many border regions, especially when dealing with youth unemployment. It follows the project *ComUnYouth*, developed by several AEBR members and other partners in the Baltic Region with the support of the *Nordic Council of Ministers*, and aims at developing project concepts in other cross-border regions, particularly in Southern and South-East Europe. It also follows other related projects implemented by AEBR members.
- *Task Force **CB Health*** tried to revive the Triple ICE project for Interreg Europe, in cooperation with the patients' organization EPECS; and should explore further possibilities. We also received an offer by ECORYS (NL) to take part in a Study for DG Sanco (EU Commission) on *Capitalising on Existing Initiatives for Cooperation in Healthcare in Border Regions*, but this proposal did not succeed. Anyhow, the final contractor has invited AEBR to take part in the study, which has been finalized in March 2018.
- *Task Force **Water Management*** has designed several project proposals in Europe and in other continents, while following up main related EU calls. It particularly concentrates in Latin America, in the framework of *AEBR Global Initiative*.
- A working group was also developed to work on **Data&Innovation**. It began to be created during a workshop in Lisbon around the *Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) Toolkit* developed by Prof. Eduardo Medeiros and presented in an Seminar organized at the University of Lisbon on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2015, under the support of *Hedmark County Council*; as well as other members' and partners' initiatives, looking at the strong need of data, indicators, results and impact assessment. DG Regio is progressing in this field, and the TF has succeeded in an ESPON project to deal with CB TIA.

- Task Force **Schengen** was launched in June 2016 and it is still expected to receive some concrete tasks.
- Task Force **Gender** was proposed in an AEBR Seminar in Jerusalem on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2017. It was launched by AEBR Executive Committee in Ghent on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2017, and has started its activities within TFEB.

Many of these actions are possible thanks to the work developed by AEBR members within these groups, but other services should also be provided from inside AEBR's structure. The internal structure was very weak, but we have got used to this situation. While our finances depend growingly from projects and decreasingly from fees, we have adapted our structure to the flow of funds from projects. This is not very comfortable, but it is the only possible scenario with the current level of income. An increase in membership (in the particular amounts and/or the number of paying members) may solve this in a most appropriate way, and the additional structure needed for projects management could be better designed and implemented.

### **b) Reacting to any initiative affecting CBC or border territories at EU, national or regional level**

We keep our regular activity despite of financial and structural constraints. Our regular relationship with European institutions and our contacts' network keep us well aware of any important initiative affecting our interests, giving us the opportunity to react in early discussion stages. AEBR's or its members' contacts at national and regional level also keep us updated of any progress or damage in the participation of border and cross-border regions in decision-making processes, definition or implementation of programmes, and in any other relevant issue affecting border territories and cross-border structures. This has been the case with our participation in the Commission's Cross-Border Review and related activities since 2015.

AEBR initiated and in-depth analysis on how territorial cooperation programmes should look like after 2020 by producing, distributing and discussing with AEBR members and key stakeholders a set of papers on main Cohesion, Territorial Cooperation and CBC issues: the report of the REGI Committee at the European Parliament *European Territorial Cooperation – Best Practice and Innovative Measures* (2016), *Towards the Review of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report* (2016), *Importance of Cohesion Policy for the future of the EU and CBC* (2016), *Simplification of management and administration in CBC programmes* (2017), the European Committee of the Regions (CdR)' Opinion *The future of Cohesion Policy beyond 2020 "For a strong and effective European cohesion policy beyond 2020"* (2017), on *Decentralisation of future Interreg programmes: operational programmes with sub-programmes* (2017), *Europe thrives with a strong Interreg programme* (2017), *EU Cohesion, Regional Policy and CBC* (2018), and a position paper on the proposed MFF and Regulations for 2021-2027 (2018). In the meantime, the Cohesion Alliance promoted by the CoR and main regional associations is a very suitable platform to further promote Cohesion Policy. Territorial Cooperation seems to have consolidated its position as a basic building block for European integration.

### **c) Lobbying for the interest of border and cross-border regions**

The same can be said about this: with healthier finances and a larger structure, this lobbying can be more systematic and productive. Many efforts have been made during AEBR Presidency of Karl-Heinz Lambertz by himself, the Secretariat, the Advisory Committee and many of our members, either individually or through the task forces, to keep a high level of communication with EU institutions. There are many results achieved in terms of influence of border and cross-border regions in legislative proposals, financial

chapters, policies, initiatives and programmes, institutional reports, etc. In fact, in the last years cross-border cooperation has entered more and more deeply in EU and national agendas.

Of course, this is not only the result of AEBR's work, at least it is not only the result of our work developed in the last ten years. Actually, it is the result of almost fifty years working together, border by border all over Europe, overcoming many difficulties and obstacles. In these years other associations of regions, generalists and thematic, have been created including several platforms to promote cross-border cooperation. This has undoubtedly provoked a strengthening of the relevance of local and regional authorities in all levels, including the EU, showing today a tight network covering all fields of activity. And this is clearly the case of border and cross-border regions, despite of a growing re-nationalisation of policies and the subsequent erosion of the European integration process. In this situation of instability and uncertainty, a necessary synergy amongst all elements of this regional network has been pursued, but there are many situations of **competition** due to overlapping functions and spheres of influence. This competition makes the access to grants very difficult, especially when our competitors have wider structures and stronger finances, unless these grants are particularly targeted to borders areas.

On the other hand, many cross-border structures have been built in these years, euroregions, similar structures and, more recently, many EGTCs. Some of the many structures created in the nineties do not exist today, but many have grown, and their territories have grown with them. Others wait with a minimum structure to have the chance to participate more actively in the whole cycle of CBC, including decision-making. There are plenty of successful stories in European borders which have not been told yet, or they have not been told properly. Probably the lack of a widely accepted European narrative on borders and CBC has also something to do with the lack of knowledge about those little stories happening every day in every border.

And this is another working field we are developing toward European institutions: **border regions show a "positive European agenda"**, as well as an "agenda of challenges" for the next decades. EU institutions are paying a closer look to these issues, and AEBR **task forces** also focus on major topics for the EU which affect cross-border territories:

- *External Borders* (TFEB) follows the relationship between neighbours and promotes exchanges of views across the external borders of the EU and beyond, particularly between public authorities, civil society organisations and, especially, amongst youth.
- *CB Culture (T4CBC)* plays a crucial role in the development of trust, first brick in the wall of cross-border integration.
- *TF Interreg* provides an insight on practical issues faced daily by cross-border regions when implementing cross-border projects and programmes.
- *CB Labour Market* shows the work yet to be done in harmonising national regulations and in achieving an authentic Single Market for daily issues affecting citizens.
- *CB Health* focuses on patients' rights and efficient health care and social services across borders.
- *CB Water Management* deals with another major European and global issue, the management of natural resources across national boundaries, while establishing bridges with other continents through *AEBR Global Initiative*.
- *Data&Innovation* focuses Cross-Border Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) through an ESPON project.
- *TF Schengen* will analyse how to stimulate the feeling of cross-border citizenship with an "inclusive" and not an "exclusive" approach.

- A Gender Working Group focuses in the situation in conflict and post-conflict areas, building trust among local organizations through the participation of women's organizations. This WG is still under supervision by TFEB.

We have a stake as European border and cross-border regions in strengthening the European ideal, particularly in these difficult times, as CBC is considered the *Cement of the European House* (see AEBR's paper on "Added Value of CBC"). It is therefore very important to **guarantee the sustainability of cross-border structures and organizations**, and strengthen their role in demanding the closing of cross-border infrastructural gaps (including local needs, and also for tourism), the identification of obstacles (and possible solutions) for the development of dynamic cross-border labour markets, the mutual acknowledgement of qualifications, cross-border health, social and emergency services, taxation, pensions, etc.; and the implementation of new working fields in the cross-border promotion of ecological agribusinesses, renewable energies, ICTs, e-commerce, "silver", "green", "blue" or "orange" economies, etc.

Another challenge for our Association, as we very often lobby for all border and cross-border regions in Europe, proposing general provisions in various regulatory frameworks, reports, analyses and perspectives, is the fact that there are many regions and structures which benefit from our job without any contribution to the network, while we have faced serious difficulties due to the lack of resources during the strong crisis affecting most of Europe in the last ten years. It is important to increase these colleagues' awareness about the benefits of joining the Association and the need to have a stronger group of members to back our activities, for many reasons. We should be aware that there are interested parties spreading the word on "the end of Cohesion Policy", especially Territorial Cohesion and CBC. This happens every EU funding period and we should react well on time. Meanwhile, others have concentrated on "how difficult AEBR's financial situation is" (was), trying to undermine our prestige and capacities. Fortunately, we have been able to keep on working, lobbying, assisting regions, preparing project proposals, etc., and we can go on provided that we have a minimum guaranteed income. Then we could also increase our visibility through the systematic communication of our work.

#### d) **Information** to border regions

..., in particular through the exchange of views and the debate on main issues of interest, among other capacity building initiatives, one of the fields where we have increased our activity in the last years is the **organization of events with relevant experts, authorities and interested parties** on CBC. In average, we are organizing or co-organizing between 5-10 events per year, and the number grows steadily. This has an impact on communication and visibility, but also on operational capacity and expenditure, and we are gaining some progress in communicating it in a more systematic way.

We produce regularly position papers and other documents systematizing existing knowledge, demanding specific handling for cross-border regions and including new proposals.

Another issue that has been growingly stressed in the last years is the extension of our activities into the field of systematic **capacity building**. To this end a diagram was proposed for discussion in order to create a **European Cross-Border Academy** (ECBA). This *CB Academia* could be the basis of an AEBR-related Trust Foundation, building on the knowledge and partnership developed under projects like the following on-going initiatives, if they are combined with a single strategic "training" approach:

- CESCOI has developed a strategic partnership to identify training needs (which skills for future CBC managers) and develop a curriculum to train cross-border experts at university level. A wide partnership has been organized: ISIG, Edutus College,

Universities of Liberec and Gorizia (maybe others like Radboud and Santiago), the MOT, TEIN and other partners. This was submitted to the Erasmus+ call on *Strategic partnership* in 2017 without success, but there are other possibilities, and the network created is exploring them.

- *Euroregion Rhine-Waal* and the *Radboud University Nijmegen*, together with the Province of Gelderland (NL) and AEBR designed a “CB School”, an initiative to gather experts from AEBR members in order to organize training sessions every year before the General Assembly (a pilot event took place in Cáceres on 24 October 2017, and the second edition is planned in Oulu on 19 September 2018).
- With the support of several projects, we have developed a web-based *Online Platform of Knowledge on CBC*, operational since November 2017 in Spanish and soon in English. Additional languages may be included afterwards if finances allow.

### e) **Prepare, submit, implement and evaluate project concepts**

In the meantime, we have to find the time, personnel and other resources to do these. In this sense, we rely very often on volunteer work from some of our experts (within and outside our members) who devote their time to help us working out projects at different levels. We also use the knowledge developed by our members and other European border and cross-border regions, and we have received a growing number of direct contracts in the last years, particularly supporting **cross-border cooperation outside Europe**. These projects have taken some of our time, but they have also refreshed our management and financial capacities in times of decreasing income through fees. We have worked hard to improve this situation by trying more projects in Europe, despite a very high and demanding competition in our continent, while in other parts of the world we are the leading organization, as local stakeholders need a wider overview about cross-border cooperation over time in very diverse territories and circumstances. Currently this has been balanced with more EU projects (IVY and b-Solutions), which play a major role in our organization and finances. Hopefully this trend will follow but most probably we will face ups and downs along time, and it is not good to put all eggs in the same basket. So, some working lines outside Europe should not be abandoned (and underestimated).

How to solve these dilemmas? On the one hand we have a highly demanding field of extension of CBC to other continents, with a lot of opportunities of grants and contracts. On the other hand, the need to face growing demands by our European members with little resources. During the last years, most of the work on Latin American projects has been done on a volunteer basis by our network of experts, plus additional working time by the Secretary General and other members of our staff. Very few contracts for experts have been made, meaning in general short compensations for a wider volunteer work made by every expert. In any case, grant agreements with the Commission to implement the IVY initiative and b-Solutions in the EU, and a new generation of grants and agreements at the external borders of the EU and in other continents seem to be a shift in this trend.

We also face additional contracts and projects building upon our previous work in the American continent, relying their implementation in the network of experts around these projects, and **keeping for AEBR just a coordination role**. This role can be accompanied by dissemination and exploitation tasks, if additional staff is contracted to do this job. AEBR still needs to keep its control on the identification and design phases of these projects; otherwise there is a risk of losing the logic behind them and damaging their sustainability. It is expected a development of these initiatives in South, Central and North America, and in Africa, in particular West Africa. There is a growing (and highly challenging) field in the Mediterranean, including Near East. In this sense, refugees and migrants are also drawing our attention, and several proposals have already been defined in this direction. They have



been very important for AEBR finances, but also for our visibility. To sum up all these achievements and expectations, on 23 October 2017 a Conference took place in Cáceres.

At the same time, as previously explained, several groups within AEBR are exploring projects in Europe, mostly through Interreg, though there are additional opportunities in other programmes. “There is life outside Interreg!”, we said in one of our Annual Conferences some years ago: Horizon 2020, Erasmus+, other structural funding or territorial tools (ESF, rural development, Integrated Territorial Investment, Community-led Local Development), international, national and regional funds, private investment, charities, crowdfunding, etc. There are many possibilities that can be explored, and we have project concepts for most of them. In some cases, the union of forces between distant border regions could also be promoted, as it is the case with interregional projects, and even across continents. There are several European Commission’s initiatives that could lead to the establishment of twinning borders. Unfortunately, most of this idea has been concentrated solely in “Twinning Cities”, but we are stressing a wider perspective when proposing twinning in border areas. A renewed focus on the participation of citizens, developed after the celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Interreg in 2015 in Luxembourg led to a strong review of territorial policy and some proactive proposals to increase visibility and “closeness” of territorial cooperation to the citizens and the broad public (e.g. the IVY initiative) after the CB Review and the implementation of new initiatives such as the *European Solidarity Corps*. Other initiatives go directly to protect Cohesion (such as the current *Cohesion Alliance*), where AEBR also tries to be active.

Nevertheless, we should concentrate on our “core business”, which is also in the heart of the European project. We have to keep on exploring (and defending) the Single Market, stressing border regions’ priorities in CBC and national mainstream programmes, highlighting the role of CBC structures in issues like cross-border provision of services and advice, the activation of cross-border economies, the joint/common use and management of shares resources, the permanent observation of cross-border performance and the successful implementation of people-to-people projects.

(Updated on 15 August 2018)