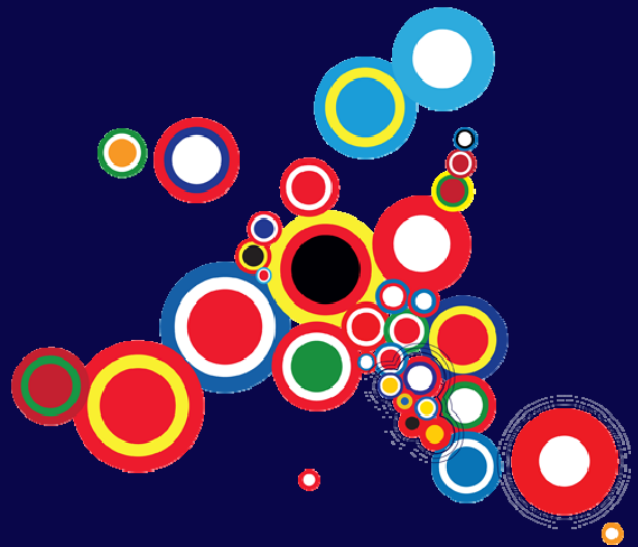




INSTRUMENT FOR PRE-ACCESSION ASSISTANCE (IPA II) 2014-2020

MULTI-COUNTRY

Regional cooperation and networking in the field of agriculture, rural and economic development of cross-border areas



Action summary

The focus of this action is to foster regional cooperation among institutions and stakeholders in the agriculture and food sector, with a view to enabling a more balanced territorial development of the Western Balkans in the perspective of EU integration.

The activities will create opportunities for sustainable development of the economic and social contexts in rural and cross-border areas and improved use of EU funds, especially in the context of IPA Cross-Border Cooperation and IPA Rural Development (IPARD) programmes.

Action Identification	
Action Programme Title	IPA II Annual Multi-Country Action Programme 2016
Action Title	Regional cooperation and networking in the field of agriculture, rural and economic development of cross-border areas
Action ID	IPA 2016/037-900.08/MC/RegCoopAgricRuralDevCBC
Sector Information	
IPA II Sector	9. Regional and territorial cooperation
DAC Sector	43010 – Multisector aid
Budget	
Total cost	EUR 0.5 million
EU contribution	EUR 0.5 million
Budget line(s)	22.020401 – Multi-country programmes, regional integration and territorial cooperation
Management and Implementation	
Management mode	Direct management
European Commission	DG NEAR Unit A4 – Financial assistance: policy and strategy
Implementation responsibilities	DG NEAR Unit A4 – Financial assistance: policy and strategy
Location	
Zone benefiting from the action	Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo*, Montenegro, Serbia)
Specific implementation area(s)	'Drina – Sava' region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia) 'Drina – Tara' region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro) 'Sharra' region (Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo) 'Prespa' region (Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) 'Prokletije' region (Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro) 'Neretva' region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia) 'Pcinja' region (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria)

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Timeline			
Final date for contracting including the conclusion of delegation agreements	31 December 2017		
Final date for operational implementation	31 December 2020		
Policy objectives / Markers (DAC form)			
General policy objective	Not targeted	Significant objective	Main objective
Participation development/good governance	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>
Aid to environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gender equality (including Women In Development)	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trade Development	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reproductive, Maternal, New born and child health	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
RIO Convention markers	Not targeted	Significant objective	Main objective
Biological diversity	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Combat desertification	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Climate change mitigation	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Climate change adaptation	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

1. RATIONALE

PROBLEM AND STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

The 2015 European Commission Progress Reports state that “while there has been important progress toward EU integration over the past year major challenges remain for the Western Balkans”. Most of them face significant challenges in terms of agriculture and rural development, economic governance and competitiveness, etc. Economic development is crucial for job creation and growth and increasing the interest of investors. In this context, the Commission has put particular emphasis on the need to bolster regional cooperation and to boost regional economic development and connectivity.

The need for good neighbourly relations and overcoming bilateral disputes is also stressed. In that sense, regional cooperation specifically related to the agriculture and rural development sectors is highly connected to the political issues and cyclic disputes among the Western Balkans. These disputes frequently influence the export/import of agricultural products and raw materials, and in some cases ban the importation of certain products from particular countries.

None of the Western Balkans has a functioning market economy. Public financial management systems need strengthening and structural reforms need to be prioritised. Competitiveness needs to be enhanced in order to support fiscal consolidation and tackle high unemployment. As regards competitiveness and growth, significant challenges remain in the Western Balkans, in particular with regards to job creation. This includes the agri-food sector, even though the region has the land, labour, location, and climate needed to potentially supply domestic and European markets with high-value products. Small farms make up the bulk of the agricultural sector in the Western Balkans. However, many of these are being abandoned, especially in mountain areas, as people move from rural to urban areas, and also because of population ageing.

Land remains a crucial point of intersection for inter-sectoral policies and investments in the Western Balkan region and particularly for water and agricultural policies and investments. The demand for more arable land and its water resources has risen due to rising food prices, population growth and the prevalence of biofuel policies. Water plays a central role for farmers and investors looking to cultivate land. In the context of the Western Balkans however, a determining factor for agricultural investment is the complex political, economic and cultural interface between land tenure rights and irrigation water rights.

Securing tenure to undertake long term investment cannot be done without engaging at a local level. Although policies recognise and emphasise the need for land redistribution and the reallocation of water rights on an equitable basis, the practices in land (re)distribution in the Western Balkans are influenced by the contested politics of land and agriculture.

Closer regional cooperation and coordination of policies among the Western Balkans is therefore crucial in order to enhance trade and foster economic growth and prosperity in rural areas. Regional cooperation among the beneficiaries is an integral part of the overall preparation for integration into European structures. The Western Balkans still need to enhance their networking activities to strengthen regional cooperation through political and policy dialogue, the exchange of information, the sharing of knowledge and best practice as well as the creation of strong and effective partnerships to address common interests and challenges.

Strengthening administrative capacities, facilitating networking and developing partnerships for agriculture, rural and economic development in rural areas is indispensable for the proper implementation of EU policies. This is particularly important when applied at local and regional levels and anticipates the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders including local administration, the private sector and civil society, i.e. using the Area Based Development (ABD) approach.

Rural livelihoods are enhanced through effective participation of rural communities in the management of their own social, economic and environmental objectives by empowering people in rural areas, particularly women and youth and by applying the ABD approach. Close economic

integration of the rural cross-border areas and the creation of rural on and off-farm employment can narrow rural-urban disparities, expand opportunities and encourage the retention of skilled people, including youth, in rural areas.

Since the last decade, the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe (SEE) has served as a regional institutional platform for its members i.e. institutions responsible for agriculture and rural development (Ministries of Agriculture and Rural development) and represents the main regional initiative which supports the EU integration process in the field of agriculture and rural development in the region. On a more local level, in the past six years, the ABD approach has been trialled and tested as the right type of action for enhancing regional cooperation and fostering integrated economic development of the rural cross-border regions in the Western Balkans.

This success comes from the fact that the approach is people-centred, based on understanding the realities of the rural population and on the principle of their participation in determining priorities for intervention. It is also holistic in that it is non-sectoral and it recognises multiple actors, multiple strategies and multiple outcomes. Its activities are devoted to several different dimensions of sustainability such as: environmental, economic and social.

The functional Regional Offices/Project Management Units (PMU) established in the regions of 'Drina-Tara' (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia), 'Drina-Sava' (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia), 'Prespa' (Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and 'Sharra' (Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo) as well as a Regional Office in Belgrade, are continuing the facilitation of the sustainable socio-economic development in the cross-border rural areas of the SEE region. Furthermore, a baseline analysis as well as a strategic plan are being prepared for an additional three regions: 'Neretva' (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro), 'Pcinja' (Serbia, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and 'Prokletije' (Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro).

The different and divergent interests of stakeholders will be one of the key factors determining the success of cross-border cooperation. Stakeholder participation and involvement has been seen as an effective way to guarantee the dynamism and long-term sustainability of this action. Stakeholders can be divided into two categories, primary and secondary stakeholders.

- Primary stakeholders are the constituent groups and individuals who would be positively impacted by the outcome of this action. In the case of cross-border cooperation regarding socio-economic and environmental sustainability, the primary stakeholders are the rural population, citizen groups, local communities and businesses that reside in the cross-border region and use its shared resources.
- Secondary stakeholders are the groups who are significantly influencing the overall process and are most instrumental to meet the strategic objectives. They are the Ministries of agriculture and other responsible institutions for rural development, working groups of professionals and experts, chambers of commerce, and other interested parties.

In each cross-border region, a stakeholders group (SHG) has been established consisting of a local government representative, the business sector (private actors and business organisations, including agriculture holdings and/or cooperatives) and civil society organisations (NGOs) other than business organisations.

However, effective stakeholder involvement in promoting balanced regional development does not happen overnight. It takes time to mobilise stakeholders and to ensure their long-term vision and participation on a common project. Therefore, the rural areas are the ideal spot for bringing together the mosaic of stakeholders and projects that are required for balanced territorial development reflecting the extraordinary diversity of populations, territories, cultures and expertise.

OUTLINE OF IPA II ASSISTANCE

In addition to policy reforms, extended regional cooperation during the EU integration process of the Western Balkans is essential to enhance economic growth, thus enabling a more balanced territorial development of the Western Balkans.

The work and activities of the proposed action in the period 2017-2018 will be focussed on:

- Enhanced cooperation and networking among IPA II beneficiaries in the agriculture and rural development sectors;
- Enhanced opportunities for development of the economic and social contexts in the rural and cross-border areas through the provision of technical support for the development of quality project proposals and information activities.

Regional cooperation continues to be the catalyst for the enlargement process. The Western Balkans face a number of common problems which could be more efficiently addressed through peer review and sharing of good practices. It will strongly contribute to their alignment with the Union *acquis* especially in Chapters 11: Agriculture and rural development and 27: Environment.

Through this action, the SWG will also continue to facilitate regional cooperation so as to create the necessary framework conditions further overall economic development and private sector investments in rural cross-border areas. In addition, the action also aims at improving the conditions for the sustainable use of natural resources and environmental protection in the designated cross-border areas.

RELEVANCE WITH THE IPA II MULTI-COUNTRY STRATEGY PAPER AND OTHER KEY REFERENCES

This action correlates with the Multi-country indicative Strategy Paper 2014-2020 ¹(MCSP) and its key areas and sectors where cross-border and multi-country assistance will be most useful to support the IPA II beneficiaries prepare to meet the accession criteria. It is designed to support regional and territorial cooperation, facilitating the coordination and effective horizontal and vertical implementation mechanisms and complement with the MCSP.

The programming documents for each of the targeted cross-border regions and stated development priorities in the baseline analysis by the stakeholders in the targeted cross-border regions (which were prepared within the first phase of the European Union funded project 'Preparation for implementation of the area based development approach in the Western Balkans') are closely related to the main policy areas of the IPA II Regulation : (i) reforms in preparation for eventual Union membership and related institution-and capacity-building, (ii) socioeconomic and regional development, (iii) employment, social policies, education, promotion of gender equality, and human resources development, (iv) agriculture and rural development, and (v) regional and territorial cooperation.

More specifically, this action is in line with two of the four axes of the MCSP: (i) Regional structures and networking and (ii) Territorial cooperation i.e. to assist the promotion of ABD projects in a limited number of marginalised rural border regions and to support projects following the ABD approach to facilitate sustainable growth in defined geographical areas in cross-border regions in the Western Balkans.

In this perspective, the SWG is recognised as part of the regional structures and networks which contribute to the development of the beneficiaries in particular in the sector of Competitiveness and Innovation, including trade that could be promoted by providing assistance to "facilitate the promotion of Area based Development (ABD) projects in a limited number of marginalized rural border regions". Political support for the implementation of ABD in the region was also expressed by the Ministers of Agriculture from South Eastern Europe on their regular annual working meetings.

¹ (2014)4293, 30.06.2014.

In particular the MCSP 2014-2020 states that "regional cooperation and exchanging best practices are an efficient way of promoting rural development in particular in border areas which need to be better interconnected with the neighbouring regions. These challenges would be best tackled following a comprehensive approach based for instance on the concept of Area Based Development" that is promoted by SWG. Moreover the MCSP 2014-2020 foresees that:

1. "projects prepared under the Area Based Development (ABD) approach to facilitate sustainable growth in defined geographical areas in cross-border regions in the Western Balkans, in particular rural areas characterized by specific complex development problems, will be considered for funding under cross-border cooperation programmes".
2. service contracts and/or grant agreements will support specific networks such as SWG.

This action is also in line with the goal of the South East Europe (SEE) 2020 strategy, which is to improve living conditions in the region and to bring competitiveness and development back into focus; it is closely following the vision of the EU strategy Europe 2020. In the context of the SEE 2020 Strategy, the EU aims to help the Western Balkans to better respond to market signals, integrate agriculture in expanding regional and international markets, improve efficiency and provide alternative jobs outside agriculture. As stated in the MCSP "Regional cooperation and exchanging best practices are an efficient way of promoting rural development in particular in border areas which need to be better interconnected with the neighbouring regions. These challenges would be best tackled following a comprehensive approach based for instance on the concept of Area Based Development Approach".

LESSONS LEARNED AND LINK TO PREVIOUS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Given the nature and scope of the EU integration process of the SEE countries, the experience has shown that regional cooperation must be accounted for in a wide sense which includes the implementation of a range of actions that will: facilitate cooperation among academia and policy implementation institutions for access to scientific and technical knowledge in agriculture and rural development sectors; facilitate access to and sharing of accessible and assistive informational support and funding; facilitate and support capacity-building by means of exchange and sharing of information, experiences, workshops and best practices; and the provision of technical and economic assistance.

Experience and the day-to-day discussion with the stakeholders involved in IPA CBC projects in the region show that the development and economic prosperity have been hampered by lack of adequate legal framework in each Beneficiary, limited administrative capacities at national, regional and local level, lack of cooperation and, finally, lack of ownership of the actions/projects (in case of projects prepared by the lead partners and mirror

The Project Management Units (PMUs) set up in each of the targeted regions ('Drina-Tara' PMU in Vishegrad, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 'Drina-Sava' PMU in Brcko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 'Sharra' PMU in Prizren, Kosovo, 'Prespa' PMU in Korca, Albania) under previous projects are well placed to assist and facilitate project generation within the regional strategic framework and programming for economic development of the cross-border regions. This role, indeed, derives from the programming documents as described in the previous section and, in particular, the CBC Programmes between IPA II beneficiaries state that "projects prepared under the Area Based Development (ABD) approach to facilitate sustainable growth in defined geographical areas in cross-border regions in the Western Balkans, in particular rural areas characterized by specific complex development problems, may be considered for funding under this cross-border cooperation programme. Account will be taken of the

preparatory work for the ABD approach already carried out in the cross-border region covering Montenegro and Albania.²”

PMUs, indeed, serve as an information point where members of the stakeholder’s group for each region (SHG) can obtain the necessary information on new calls for proposals and programmes. Indeed PMU staff has provided information and support in the preparation of applications for different calls for proposals (i.e. the 3rd IPA CBC Call for Serbia - Bosnia and Herzegovina and 3rd IPA CBC Call for Serbia – Montenegro and also other national calls and international donor calls opened in each Beneficiary or targeting cross-border region) by using the ABD approach. The latter is specifically focussed on developing capacities of local stakeholders both in regard to the Stakeholder Groups and stakeholders in the ABD areas who may become beneficiaries of actions under the ABD programmes or other regional programmes.

In each region they have contributed to the preparation and submission of quality project proposals under IPA CBC programmes, IPARD, National rural development programmes and other national calls published by different donors operating in the regions. The PMUs are perceived by the local stakeholders as an adequate tool to achieve their goals and to respond to their needs, in particular because PMUs make easier the access to information on open calls and the partners search.

Additionally, the grant scheme implemented within the IPA funded project 'Preparation for implementation of the area-based development approach in the Western Balkans - second phase' in the regions 'Drina-Tara' and 'Drina-Sava' has proven that support to small scale investments aiming at improving short value chains in the agricultural, food and tourism sectors significantly boost the regional economy and contributes to restoring the previously broken cross-border links in the rural regions.

To build on past successes and stimulate economic growth and sustainability, a broader regional perspective is essential, which involves continued support to networks on local (Stakeholders Group) and regional levels (SWG Assembly, Working groups) to facilitate cooperation and dialogue in the agriculture and food sector.

Despite the specificity of this action - aiming at supporting the concept of ABD to facilitate sustainable growth in rural areas in decline in Western Balkans- there is a need for increased coordination with the national authorities and other bodies implementing CBC programmes at intra – Western Balkans borders and, particularly, with the experts team implementing the Cross-border Institution Building plus (CBIB+) Phase 2 service contract. A better coordination is especially envisaged for the activities that must be implemented at the local level to contribute to the capacity building of local stakeholders. It is important to underline that even though CBIB+ actions are similar, they focus on different target groups. Indeed the CBIB + phase 2 is more dedicated on the support of the managing and implementing structures of the CBC programmes, the ABD approach is specifically focussed on developing capacities of local stakeholders both in regard to the Stakeholder Groups and stakeholders in the ABD areas who may become beneficiaries of actions under the ABD programmes or other regional programmes. Anyhow a well structured cooperation and synergy with CBIB+ team will certainly contribute to increase regional cooperation at all levels.

Furthermore, together with the ABD Stakeholder Groups, the SWG has identified many actions which would be complementary to CBC action, such as private investments in short value chains aiming at improving the quality of food products and local tourist services and at enhancing the integration of small operators in the value chains. The identified business development possibilities could be supported through the coordination and joint cooperation between the SWG ABDA structures and JTS structures and could result in preparation of quality project proposals to be submitted under CBC calls for applications as stipulated in the Multi Country Indicative Strategy Paper, section 4. Territorial

² Section 3: PROGRAMME STRATEGY, part 3.3 Horizontal and cross-cutting issues of the IPA II CBC Programmes at intra-Western Balkan borders

cooperation, article 4.2 Objectives, results, actions and indicators – “Projects prepared under the Area Based Development (ABD) approach to facilitate sustainable growth in defined geographical areas in cross-border regions in the Western Balkans, in particular rural areas characterized by specific complex development problems, will be considered for funding under cross-border cooperation programmes.”

2. INTERVENTION LOGIC

LOGICAL FRAMEWORK MATRIX

OVERALL OBJECTIVE	OBJECTIVELY VERIFIABLE INDICATORS (*)	SOURCES OF VERIFICATION	
To contribute to fostering regional cooperation among institutions and stakeholders in the agriculture and food sector, with a view to enabling more balanced territorial development of the Western Balkans in the perspective of EU integration.	Level of progress in political reforms of the Western Balkans towards EU integration related to agriculture and rural development	The SWG Head Office / Secretariat will monitor on an annual basis the progress of the Western Balkans through the IPA II beneficiary Annual Progress Reports related to their EU approximation	
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE	OBJECTIVELY VERIFIABLE INDICATORS	SOURCES OF VERIFICATION	ASSUMPTIONS
To strengthen the networking and cooperation among public institutions and stakeholders as well as with other relevant regional bodies in order to accelerate the EU accession process of the Western Balkans in the agriculture and rural development sectors	<p>Number of political measures/ statements for future joint cooperation in the field of agriculture and rural development among the Western Balkans</p> <p>Number of agriculture and rural development common policies directions set in line with EU acquis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IPA II beneficiary Annual Progress Reports related to their EU approximation • SWG Annual Report • Reports from different meetings • Press releases 	<p>Positive opinion of the EU on the progress made related to the EU approximation process</p> <p>Intensified negotiation process between the Western Balkans and the EU</p>
RESULTS	OBJECTIVELY VERIFIABLE INDICATORS	SOURCES OF VERIFICATION	ASSUMPTIONS
<p>Result 1:</p> <p>Enhanced cooperation and networking among IPA II beneficiaries in the agriculture and rural development sectors through the development of joint statements, positions, declarations and the promotion of a continuous political and policy dialogue;</p>	<p>Number of Ministries of Agriculture's joint political statements and policy documents prepared and disseminated by the SWG.</p> <p>Number of high level meetings involving line Ministries, local</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SWG Annual Report • Reports from different meetings • Political statements/declarations 	The networking and cooperation among Ministries of Agriculture and other stakeholders in the Western Balkans are functional

<p>Result 2:</p> <p>Enhanced opportunities for development of the economic and social context in the rural and cross-border areas through continuous dialogue among the stakeholders and provision of technical support for the development of quality project proposals and information activities</p>	<p>organisations/institutions and other regional/international donors organised per year.</p> <p>Number of project proposals developed and submitted for funding under various grant schemes (e.g. IPA CBC, regional development grant schemes, IPARD, etc.) with the TA support of SWG.</p> <p>Number of technical meetings involving Stakeholders on local/regional level such as local authorities, NGO's and business sector organised per year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports from JMC • Reports from PMU's • Reports from EU delegation to Western Balkans 	<p>Stakeholder Groups and Project Management Units are actively cooperating in the process of preparation of projects of high quality</p> <p>Stakeholder Groups and Project Management Units are actively cooperating in the strategic planning process</p>
--	--	---	---

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

Result 1: *Enhanced cooperation and networking among IPA II beneficiaries in the agriculture and rural development sectors through the development of joint statements, positions, declarations and the promotion of a continuous political and policy dialogue.* This will be achieved through the following set of activities:

1.1. Organisation of Annual Working Meetings of the Ministers for Agriculture:

The meeting of the Ministers for Agriculture from South East Europe is essential to address and set the common challenges and goals for the future wellbeing of agriculture and rural development in respect to EU integration and regional cooperation in South Eastern Europe.

The main output of the meeting is a policy document entitled: 'Conclusions of the Annual Working Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture from SEE', conveying the common interest in the framework for future cooperation in the field of agriculture and rural development and aligning the agricultural and rural development policies with new developments under the EU CAP.

Among many issues, the Ministers from SEE countries are discussing and jointly working on their commitments to the EU integration process of the Western Balkans for coherent implementation of enlargement criteria and conditionality in becoming EU members. During the implementation of this action, (one) Ministerial meeting is planned.

1.2. Organisation of Agriculture Policy Fora:

The Agricultural Policy Forum (APF) promotes and stimulates debate and discussion on policy issues among policy makers, governmental and non-governmental organisations from the agriculture and rural development, water and forestry sectors in SEE, relevant international policy and development institutions, national, regional and international experts and academics in order to provide technical background on the regional aspects of the European integration process.

The Agriculture Policy Forum is the place where the SWG member can discuss various issues related to agriculture and rural development policy, mainly but not always the ones deriving from the EU acquis. The topics are also suggested/requested by the SWG member institutions according to their needs. In this way SWG is given a mandate to work on the requested specific topics and to facilitate the process. Therefore, the APF range from IPARD related process to topics and sectors such as the Area Based Development Approach, Water and Forestry management, Biodiversity, Areas with Natural Constraints (previously LFA), etc. These Working Groups frequently meet and the Forum represents the annual gathering where the issues are additionally discussed and presented in front of a larger number of interested and relevant participants. In this regard, it can be brought as an example of priority issue the theme of land tenure, ownership and land consolidation as outlined in the streamlining agriculture policy dialogue group. As stated in the following section 2.5. "Cooperation with other regional structures" cooperation and interlinkages with different initiatives such as the LANDNET regional platform will be initiated to add value and to successfully implement this action.

The APF affords the opportunity to review the accomplishments achieved, considering the challenges and opportunities for the development of agriculture and rural areas in SEE over the period up to 2020. The main output of the APF is the agenda which summarises the outputs from the discussions in the plenary and working group sessions on policy topics relevant to the SEE countries, focusing on aligning their agricultural and rural development policies with EU policies. During implementation of this action, one Agriculture Policy Forum is planned.

1.3 Organisation of meetings of different Working Groups within the SWG for discussion of issues related to the economic development of rural cross-border areas:

The SWG as a regional platform supporting the EU integration process has established different Working Groups comprised of experts assigned by the Member Institutions and representatives of other partners and/or stakeholders' institutions. Their role is to support the SWG in the development and/or implementation of specific activities, such as: provide a discussion platform for EU related issues; provide networking possibilities for Ministry representatives and other stakeholders in different agriculture sectors and rural

development and prepare progress reports submitted to the SWG Secretariat and integrated into the SWG Annual Report.

Depending on the needs during the implementation of the action, different Working Groups will discuss and provide inputs on issues related to the economic development of rural cross-border areas.

Result 2: Enhanced opportunities for development of the economic and social context in the rural and cross-border areas through continuous dialogue among the stakeholders and provision of technical support for the development of quality project proposals and information activities. This will be achieved through the following set of activities:

2.1. Organisation of regular meetings of the stakeholder groups:

Activities will be implemented to continue cooperation among stakeholders in the target cross-border areas through the organisation of regular meetings of the stakeholder groups. These activities will also facilitate the achievement of the strategic development goals defined in the strategic frameworks and programmes for economic development of the regions. As part of this action, three stakeholder group meetings will be organised in each cross-border region; twelve in total for the four cross-border regions.

2.2. Implementation of capacity building measures for preparation of relevant projects with adequate quality:

The capacity-building activities defined by the stakeholders in the previous phase of the project will continue to be implemented by the PMUs. Their focus will be on the preparation of quality project proposals focusing on EU funds, capacity building on partnership and networking and other specific measures defined during the project implementation. Also, the SWG will continue to identify additional possibilities to support capacity building measures within the targeted cross-border regions which will be specifically tailor-made according to the stakeholder needs. It is planned to be a process where both PMUs and stakeholders will improve their administrative capacities for better use of EU and other funds.

2.3. Provision of support to stakeholders for preparation of project proposals for different calls for proposals:

This will be done through the provision of support to the stakeholders from the regions during the preparation of projects under different Calls for Proposals by the PMU staff. It will contribute to the increased use of funds in the cross-border regions, focusing on different available Programmes, as well as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II), such as IPA Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) Programmes and IPA Rural Development (IPARD). It is expected that at least eight quality project proposals will be prepared and submitted on different open calls in the targeted cross-border regions.

In accordance with the MCSP and the programming documents, assistance will also be provided for facilitating the process of regional cooperation through the ABD approach in the marginalized rural cross-border regions. The main role of the ABD structures is to inform and facilitate cross-border cooperation initiatives and support the access to different funding schemes of the ABD stakeholders in order to contribute to the implementation of the ABD programmes.

As stated in the MCSP and in the CBC Programmes, there will be a special consideration for the preparatory work for the ABD approach already carried out in the cross-border regions. Therefore the attention of the ABD structures is set on IPA CBC programmes but also all on other available funding opportunities that could contribute to the development of the marginalized cross-border regions in need.

As previously stated, this action will be carried out by taking into consideration the specificity of ABD approach and the objective of enabling ABD type projects to be funded through the CBC programmes between IPA II Beneficiaries.

Additionally, as far as the coordination with IPARD funds is concerned, the ABD structures have been cooperating with the IPARD structures. In particular ABD structures started supporting them to increase the visibility of their open calls for proposals by providing information to potential IPARD beneficiaries among ABD stakeholders.

Furthermore the SWG is in constant dialogue with the services responsible for IPARD in DG AGRI to facilitate the access to IPARD funds for stakeholders in the ABD regions. An example of this is that most IPARD programmes make reference to the ABD activities.

2.4. Publicity and information activities related to funding opportunities in the cross-border areas:

The current communication and visibility channels established through the SWG website (www.seerural.org) and the websites of the targeted regions (prespa.seerural.org; drina-sava.seerural.org; drina-tara.seerural.org; sharra.seerural.org) will be used as a platform to share relevant information about the project activities and other relevant information related to funding opportunities. Other channels, such as social media, will be used for dissemination of all relevant information. Day-to-day communication among the PMUs and stakeholders will additionally contribute to this process.

These activities will reinforce the visibility actions of the CBC structures as their objective is to further disseminate the information on all available funds (IPA CBC, IPARD, National and International donors, etc) for the benefit of the stakeholders in the marginalized rural cross-border areas by using the already well established communication channels between ABD structures and them.

2.5. Cooperation with other regional structures:

The SWG will continue to promote regional cooperation as a platform thereby ensuring coordination between the regional structures in the targeted cross-border areas through dissemination of knowledge and information on key economic developmental issues and available funding of other active donors as well. It will continue the good cooperation established with other regional structures such as: Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN), Global Water Partnership (GWP), Regional Environmental Centre (REC), Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM), Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Also, many other initiatives will be considered in order to add value and successfully implement this action such as the LANDNET (informal international network on experts on land issues) whose aim is to stimulate proper and timely responses to (changing) needs of society regarding land use and land tenure in rural and peri-urban areas.

Regional cooperation is a way to widen local views and bring new knowledge to the area in order to improve local strategies. It can boost the innovative character of local development actions and contribute to increased competitiveness of the area through: capacity building and bringing in new business partners; and diffusion of innovation, know-how and new skills.

All activities aim to support the overall economic development and private sector investments in rural cross-border areas, attracting national and foreign public and private investments of cross-border relevance to enhance cooperation and to improve the living conditions of large segments of the population concerned. It will require the participation of policymakers in the dialogue process, together with the main stakeholders including representatives of local government, civil society and representatives from the business community as well as academics and experts and will stimulate a culture of dialogue on various important policies and economic development issues of rural cross-border areas.

In addition, the cooperation in the four targeted rural areas of the Western Balkans ('Drina- Sava', 'Drina-Tara', 'Prespa' and 'Sharra') will be strengthened with the implementation of cross-border projects and the establishment of operational stakeholder groups in the remaining three targeted regions ('Pcinja', 'Neretva', and 'Prokletije'). Proper preparations are made for the implementation of cross-border projects within these three regions as well.

RISKS

Experience has shown that the timeframe of proposed Calls for Proposals under IPA CBC programmes can often be postponed and even in some cases not published at all. This could seriously affect the assumed results and ultimately influence negatively the established partnership links among the stakeholders in the rural cross-border areas.

The potential for regional and/or local disputes can have a negative effect on the implementation of the action. Although this potential for conflict is minimal, there are still open political issues in the region which can be or become a destabilising factor.

Regular meetings with the Stakeholder Groups, IPA CBC structures within the targeted IPA II beneficiaries, as well as regular monitoring of the action implementation by the SWG Head Office/Secretariat will be some of the mitigation measures to prevent negative effects on the implementation of the action.

CONDITIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

An appropriate institutional framework, both at a national and international level and at local and regional level ensure a satisfactory synergy between top-down development strategies and bottom-up participatory processes that will contribute to effective and timely implementation of the action.

The Western Balkans are still developing more efficient management processes in order to utilise their national authorities' limited resources effectively and to build their capacities to fulfil the EU's stringent requirements in the adaptation process.

Successful implementation is only possible through coordinated, collaborative and comprehensive efforts of all stakeholders working together towards a shared vision of integrated economic development of the cross-border regions. The Stakeholder Groups (SHGs) which are established and operational in each of the targeted cross-border regions include participation of representatives of local public administration, the private sector and civil society sector covering all aspects of the rural societies.

Constant communication and exchange of information, acknowledgment and cooperation among the responsible ministries, involved stakeholders and other relevant structures will establish proper conditions for successful implementation of the action.

All Western Balkans need to improve the integration of environment and climate change concerns into other policy areas (such as agriculture and rural development). The strengthening of the administrative capacity and inter-institutional cooperation should remain a priority.

3. IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The action will be implemented by the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe on behalf of its member institutions³. It is guided by the SWG Assembly which is made up of two delegated representatives of each member party. The SWG Assembly will have at least two sessions during the project implementation. Each SWG Assembly session produces a report on the SWG activities.

The member institutions represented by the Ministers of Agriculture and Rural Development have their regular annual meetings where discussions are held on future regional cooperation and reforms in the sector of agriculture and rural development. Conclusions or declarations are produced following the Ministerial Meetings.

A Project Steering Group (PSG), consisting of representatives of: SWG (SWG Head Office / Secretariat, current and future SWG Presidency), DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, DG Agriculture

³ Ministry of Agriculture Rural Development and Water Administration - Republic of Albania
Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations - Bosnia and Herzegovina
Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management - Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry - Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Ministry of Agriculture and Food – Republic of Bulgaria
Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development – Montenegro
Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection – Republic of Serbia
Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development – Kosovo

and Rural Development, JRC IPTS Agri-Life Unit, FAO and contracted international and regional consultants will oversee the timely and proper implementation of the action. The PSG will meet at least twice during the project implementation.

Working Groups within the SWG for discussion of issues related to the economic development of rural cross-border areas will be held at least twice during the implementation of the project.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD(S) AND TYPE(S) OF FINANCING

The action will be implemented by means of a direct grant awarded to the SWG with a duration of one calendar year on the basis of Article 190(1)(f) of the rules of application of Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, since the RRD SWG is a particular type of body with relevant technical competence.

4. PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

METHODOLOGY FOR MONITORING (AND EVALUATION)

The European Commission may carry out a mid-term, a final or an ex-post evaluation for this action or its components via independent consultants, through a joint mission or via an implementing partner. In case a mid-term or final evaluation is not foreseen, the European Commission may, during implementation, decide to undertake such an evaluation for duly justified reasons either on its own decision or on the initiative of the partner. The evaluations will be carried out as prescribed by the DG NEAR guidelines for evaluations. In addition, the action might be subject to external monitoring in line with the European Commission.

The action will be monitored at different levels:

- Review of progress by the Project Steering Group (once every 6 months);
- Reporting on progress to the Contracting Authority (once every 6 months);
- From the Contracting Authority's side, generally, contract execution is monitored through regular meetings with the grant beneficiary by the task manager and participation in Project Steering Group meetings;
- For payments, the Contracting Authority has established checklists to identify key factors to ensure that contract and/or project deliverables are adequately verified for the purpose of the visa 'certified correct'. The invoices for interim and final payments are scrutinised by an independent external auditor who carries out an expenditure verification to ensure that costs have been incurred for the purposes of the action and are substantiated by supporting documents before the invoices are presented to the Contracting Authority;
- This action may be subject to result-oriented monitoring (ROM) to be carried out by an external service provider.

INDICATOR MEASUREMENT

Indicator	Baseline 2015	Final Target 2018	Target 2020	Source of information
<i>Action (outcome) indicator 1 (linked to Specific Objective):</i> Number of political measures/statements for future cooperation in the field of agriculture and rural development among the WB counties	0	1	/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · SWG Annual Reports · Meeting reports • IPA II beneficiary Annual Progress Reports related to their EU approximation
<i>Action (outcome) indicator 2 (linked to Specific Objective):</i> Number of agriculture and rural development common policies directions set in line with EU acquis	0	1	/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · SWG Annual Reports · Reports from meetings • IPA II beneficiary Annual Progress Reports related to their EU approximation
<i>Action (output) indicator 3 (linked to Result 1)</i> Number of Ministries of Agriculture's joint political statements and policy documents prepared and disseminated by the SWG.	0	2	/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · SWG Annual Reports · Meeting reports · Political statements
<i>Action (output) indicator 4 (linked to Result 1)</i> Number of high level meetings involving line Ministries, local organisations/institutions and other regional/international donors organised per year.	0	2	/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · SWG Annual Reports · Reports from meetings
<i>Action (output) indicator 5 (linked to Result 2)</i> Number of project proposals developed and submitted for funding under various grant schemes (e.g. IPA CBC, regional development grant schemes, IPARD, etc.) with the TA support of SWG.	0	8	/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · SWG Annual Reports · Meeting reports · Internal SWG monitoring documents · Official journals from EU delegations to the Western Balkans · Official journals from different donor organisations in the Western Balkans
<i>Action (output) indicator 6 (linked to Result 2)</i> Number of technical meetings involving Stakeholders on local/regional level such as local authorities, NGO's and business sector organised per year.	0	12	/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · SWG Annual Reports · Reports from meetings

5. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Subsidiarity is a fundamental principle of the ABD approach, which should be implemented as close to the rural population as possible, i.e. the local level in villages and rural municipalities. In the planning and implementing phases of projects, but also in the project monitoring process, the inclusion of the local community, in particular women are considered. Greater attention will be paid to support the active participation of civil society, in particular women in socio-economic processes.

The stakeholder groups in the target regions provide equal opportunities for the participation of men and women by their involvement in consultation and in the decision making process, ensuring that policy and decision-making takes account of cultural barriers, challenges, and male and female interests and needs.

This action will strive to promote gender equality as well to take measures to achieve equal opportunities for male and female in all aspects of rural development. Successful implementation of the action will mean that more and more projects in the cross-border regions promote a business development environment that contributes to gender equality.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

This ABD approach will involve integrating the principle of equal opportunities into all arrangements, procedures, and policies drawn up in the cross-border regions. The concerns regarding equal opportunities in terms of gender, age, nationality, religion, disabilities and minorities will be reflected in stakeholder consultations, capacity building measures and regional/institutional structures. In each cross-border region, equal participation by men and women in steering bodies is a priority. This is a good example especially in rural areas where women's contributions and roles are not fully recognised. Successful rural development depends on harnessing the skills and resources of all citizens and on delivering benefits which meet their different needs.

Therefore, the focus of ABD interventions, as stated in the strategic framework of each cross-border region is gender equality and the social inclusion of vulnerable groups and marginalised populations, in particular persons with disabilities. This will also be reflected in all activities implemented by the SWG or the PMUs.

MINORITIES AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

Differences of opinion and different visions of the future perspective provide richness to debates during the stakeholder meetings on how local development can be achieved in these rural areas. Such conflicts should not be hidden, but deserve to be fully and openly discussed. It is important that all the voices are included in the debate, not least those who are representing less-organised or marginalised groups, including young people, the elderly and people experiencing poverty. It is important that these meetings are able to end up with clear, explicit and shared choices.

Due to construction barriers, infrastructure and insufficient health services and lack of education and employment opportunities, persons with disabilities are often suffering from extreme poverty. Particularly in rural areas, persons with disabilities continue to suffer from discrimination and social exclusion.

The ABD approach addresses the development situation of minorities and vulnerable groups on a holistic and sustainable way that recognises their rights as individuals and distinct minority communities. It is based on understanding of the impact of discrimination on minority groups and effective methods to achieve equality. It also recognises that the human development of every sector of society benefits all and promotes prosperity and stability of the cross-border regions. The continuous cooperation and communication among a rural population, sharing the same resources and thriving to attain an improved future, but with different ethnic and religious awareness and linguistic barriers, contributes to bridging and restoring once broken links.

ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY (AND IF RELEVANT OTHER NON-STATE STAKEHOLDERS)

All ABD activities in the cross-border areas will be executed to complement the cooperation in the defined priority sectors and at the same time to comply with the EU standards and requirements. Thus, empowerment and involvement of civil society is an essential condition for the planning, implementation and monitoring of ABD projects.

Moreover, Stakeholder Groups established in the cross-border regions consist of representatives of local public administration, the private sector and civil society. In each region, there is tendency to have equal numbers of participants by each sector. In any case, experience has shown that civil society representatives are the main driving force of the Stakeholder Groups. Their input has significantly contributed to the creation of the programming documents and additional project identification. The civil society sector was most active during the implemented 'People to People' actions in the four cross-border areas, organising more than 75% of events.

During the implementation of the grant scheme in 'Drina – Tara' and 'Drina – Sava' cross-border regions, a particular focus was made on the small entrepreneurs operating in rural cross-border regions. Experience shows that private businesses are even more interested in developing business partnerships and quality oriented short value chains.

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE (AND IF RELEVANT DISASTER RESILIENCE)

Environmental pollution recognises no borders and therefore segmented solutions defined by national and/or political borders would yield limited results and impact. Countering this limitation of a purely national focus, cross-border alliance offers the possibility of pooling resources, competencies and existing infrastructures through an inter-organisational (governmental) arrangement. In light of the above, such an alliance could also provide greater legitimacy, as well as political space, in dealing with complex socio-economic and institutional issues regarding environmental sustainability in a longer term.

An increased engagement of civil society, trade unions, employers' organisations and the private sector of the economy, as well as a transparent policy at the national, regional and local level can raise the general awareness on the importance of environment protection and climate change (climate protection/mitigation and climate change-adaptation) in support of the sustainable development of the cross-border regions, in particular its potentials in the tourism and agriculture sector.

Considerable headway has also been made in integrating environmental objectives with other policies and activities. In that sense, alignment of the agriculture and rural development policies of the Western Balkans with EU CAP is crucially important, such as in linking direct payments to requirements that farmers maintain land in good agricultural and environmental condition and comply with relevant environment legislation.

In addition, the strategic framework and related programmes developed by the stakeholders for each target cross-border region are focusing on the joint protection and management of natural resources (e.g. mountain resources, water resources and biodiversity). Their commitment and cooperation is of crucial importance to the preservation of the environment and climate change mitigation in the rural cross-border regions.

The SWG will continue to facilitate the process of sustainable protection and management of shared natural resources, as well as the establishment of adequate institutional structures. It will also support the regions in the process of development of natural disaster resilience and risk prevention plans especially in flood management.

Although the SWG's political mandate does not cover all policy areas of importance to solve common problems in the selected cross-border areas, it will continue to facilitate actions to solve such issues in particular in relation to environment and transport infrastructure. Ministers of Agriculture as members of SWG will facilitate close cooperation with other line Ministries.

Climate action relevant budget allocation: EUR 0
--

6. SUSTAINABILITY

The main beneficiaries of this action - i.e. the members of the stakeholders groups - have been closely working and cooperating together over the past four years. It can already be noticed that the stakeholders have already developed an identity as 'one group', 'one region' and created ownership of the action. The continuous support by the PMU and the implemented grant scheme (signed partnership statements) are likely to guarantee that regional cooperation is pursued. In future the implementation of additional cross-border projects- potentially supported under IPA CBC Programmes- will ensure the long-lasting sustainability of the partnerships and implemented activities. It will only create multiplicity effect where additional actions will just upgrade on the previously implemented.

SWG as an organisation was created by the Ministries of Agriculture from the Western Balkans and acts on their behalf as the implementing development agency. Political support will therefore be ensured through Ministers' statements and conclusions of the Annual Ministerial Meetings. As is the case for all other actions implemented by the SWG, this action also encourages regional ownership.

The signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between the local authorities (municipalities) in the target cross border regions additionally confirms their willingness and commitment to a sustainable economic development of the rural cross-border areas implementing the ABD approach.

Also, the implemented capacity building measures and active participation of the stakeholders are creating knowledge which is further disseminated to the rural population and significantly adding value to the economic, social and environment development of the cross border rural areas.

7. COMMUNICATION AND VISIBILITY

Visibility and communication actions shall demonstrate how the intervention contributes to the agreed programme objectives and the accession process. Actions shall be aimed at strengthening general public awareness and support the interventions financed and the objectives pursued. The actions shall aim to highlight to the relevant target audiences the added value and the impact of the EU's interventions and will promote transparency and accountability on the use of funds.

Communication and visibility activities shall be funded from the amounts allocated to the action. The Commission shall be fully informed of the planning and implementation of the specific visibility and communication activities.

All promotional material and also presentations, reports and other documents related to the action for and during the Stakeholder Group meetings and other events will clearly state that the action is financed by the European Union in line with the Communication and Visibility Manual for EU External Actions. Additional Visibility Guidelines developed by the European Commission (DG NEAR) will also be followed.

More specifically, proper communication and visibility will be ensured by the SWG Communication, Publicity and Visibility Action Plan in relation to the implementation of economic development actions in the targeted cross-border regions. This action plan was prepared in the second phase of the project 'Preparation for implementation of the area based development approach (ABDA) in the Western Balkans' which was successfully realised and exceedingly contributed to the visibility of the actions during project implementation.

It is planned to prepare informative leaflets for the actions, which will be distributed to the stakeholders, SWG partners and the wider public.

The SWG website (www.seerural.org) and the websites of the targeted regions (prespa.seerural.org; drina-sava.seerural.org; drina-tara.seerural.org; sharra.seerural.org) will be used as a platform to share relevant information about the project activities and other relevant information. All available social media and other visibility and communication tools will also be used. The current good communication established between the PMUs and the members of the Stakeholder Group will also be used for dissemination on information on local level related to the action and increase visibility of EU funding.