

Empowering Associated Regions through Cascade Funding

Recommendations from EU Missions Ocean and Waters innovation actions A-AAGORA and CLIMAREST

The EU Mission “Restore our Ocean and Waters” Cascade funding

With a 2030 target, the EU Mission “Restore Our Ocean and Waters” (Mission Ocean) aims to protect and restore marine and freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity; prevent and eliminate ocean, sea, and water pollution; and make the sustainable blue economy carbon-neutral and circular, through innovative, basin-scale solutions. To this end, the Cascade funding is a mechanism designed to enhance the feasibility, replicability, and scalability of innovative solutions created and validated under the Mission Ocean, through engagements with areas with similar challenges, designated as Associated Regions. This funding thus builds capacities for implementing Mission Ocean developed solutions and empowers local communities.

Measures to scale uptake from the A-AAGORA and CLIMAREST innovation actions

A-AAGORA and CLIMAREST are the two first Mission Ocean innovation actions, with a mandate to *carry out demonstration activities in the Atlantic and Arctic basin and identify areas and locations where the solutions are replicable to draw up an action plan and roadmap to replicate and scale up the ecosystem and biodiversity restoration solutions and actions*. Having gone through the entire cascade funding for Associated Regions mechanism, this brief draws on A-AAGORA and CLIMAREST experience, to illustrate how the mechanism was implemented, and what the innovation actions’ teams and the Associated Regions learned from the process.

The implementation of Cascade Funding mechanism in a nutshell

To align with the Mission Ocean's impact-driven approach, A-AAGORA and CLIMAREST should engage at least five Associated Regions led by local and/or regional public authorities, to demonstrate the feasibility, replicability, and scalability of their innovative solutions. The experience from each innovation action, from the release of the announcement of the call for Associated Regions to the signing of the contracts is summarized in the following table.





Call for Associated Regions

Following the Mission Ocean criteria, there was an attempt to harmonise the calls text for Associated Regions (AR). These were independently announced and separate dedicated platforms were available for submission.

Targeting 7 AR, all lead by municipalities and covering different Ocean basins, 3 calls were opened:

1st 1 Danube and 2 Mediterranean; 2nd 1 Atlantic and 1 Mediterranean; 3rd 1 Arctic and 1 Atlantic. In between calls, the need to improve communication became clear, especially by using visuals, establishing direct contacts, participating in Ocean Mission matchmaking events, and by having an informal support system.

Time frame: June 2023 – July 2024

Targeting 5 AR, all with similar ecological challenges and habitats as the demonstration sites, 3 calls were opened:

In the 1st, 3 AR were awarded (Rocky bottom, Softbed and Seagrass). However, the call had to be reopened twice to find AR for the Arctic Fjords and Oyster Reefs habitats. The calls were announced via social media, the website, and networks including the call host's newsletter. Clarifications were provided through email or online meetings.

Time frame: June 2023– August 2024

Cascade funding process

As no template for the contract with the ARs was available, SINTEF developed a first version that was subsequently revised in collaboration with UAveiro. This template has also been shared with other Mission projects.

During the interaction process with the consortium partners for the approval of the contract template, special attention was given to intellectual property rights. After the approval of the document by the 30 consortium partners, the process was initiated with the ARs. All AR consortia were led by Municipalities, that in most cases have specific regulatory rules, bringing an extra layer of complexity to the process. As well, the need for partners in AR to have their own consortium agreement was not initially foreseen.

The contract template went through several iterations before being approved by all consortium partners. The most serious issues arose from including local/regional authorities. Initially, consortia led by research institutions were accepted, but contracts had to be directed with the authorities. This led to the inclusion of authorities in the negotiation process, making it more complex. However, some of the authorities faced financial and legal obstacles, causing unexpected delays and one needing to be replaced.

Engaging process

Dedicated AR welcome events, with EU representatives of Mission Ocean, were organised, and the AR were invited to join monthly online meetings together with the consortium. These meetings covered both the innovative solutions, the cascade funding process and joint initiatives. A dedicated communication channel was established on teams to foster communication and exchange of information, as well as a dedicated area on the innovation action website.

An online kick-off meeting was held to introduce AR to the consortium, and AR were invited to participate in monthly online CLIMAREST meetings. A dedicated work plan was developed to enhance coordination and communication among work packages and AR. The ARs have been invited to several in person meetings and events, and an annual meeting is planned at an AR location to boost engagement and facilitate information exchange. A social media campaign was launched to highlight the partners in AR.

To maximise resources and progress on the joint learning process, especially for enhancing critical mass on the replicability and scalability of the innovative solutions, a joint in person meeting with the different ARs in both projects was organised. The joint meeting got very positive feedback, and a follow-up joint meeting is foreseen.

Experience from A-AAGORA/CLIMAREST Associated Regions

Feedback from AR regarding their overall impression of the funding process was collected and Figure 1 is representing the overview of the results. Largely positive responses can be seen, followed by a sentiment analysis of the responses to the open questions which indicates that the overall sentiment is mixed between positive and negative experiences, highlighting the need for changes in the funding process.

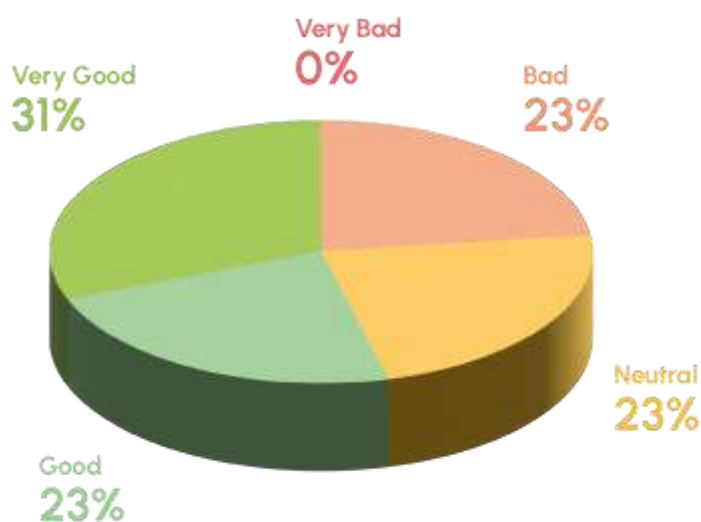


Figure 1- Associated Regions impression about A-AAGORA/CLIMAREST cascade funding process.

The respondents gave different examples of the benefits of participation such as, knowledge exchange, networking and support for restoration actions. However, the process also had several challenges. Some of these challenges were encountered in proposal preparations, particularly in relation to the inclusion of municipalities, which was challenging. The main challenge there is the bureaucratic burden and the increased time it takes to reach a stage where contracts can be signed. Besides the challenges related to inclusion of the municipalities, the process was described as well as designed.

Three recommendations are suggested by the engaged Associated Regions: **Faster payment process, clearer involvement of municipalities, and better management of expectations.**

Recommendations



Engagement of Associated Regions

- Offer tailored support to increase awareness and accessibility
- Host workshops or webinars to explain funding opportunities and application requirements.
- Partner Associated Regions with experienced institutions to guide them through the process.
- Establish a responsive helpdesk to resolve queries quickly.



Cascade funding process

- Simplify the call for funding procedures to streamline the administrative process
- Provide simplified application templates specifically designed for the call for Associated Regions in Mission Ocean.
- Offer digital tools for application submission
- Contract templates and guidance for the contracting process.



Empowering Associated Regions

TAILOR-MADE COMMUNICATION

- Enhance outreach to Associated Regions.
- Develop targeted communication campaigns and partnerships to raise awareness of innovation actions and cascade funding opportunities.
- Highlight successful collaborations with Associated Regions.

FOCUS ON MUTUAL BENEFITS

- Align the innovative solutions with the Associated Regions priorities.
- Provide evidence on how participation will contribute to both regional and EU objectives.
- Engage the associated regions in co-design processes throughout the project where possible

FOSTER KNOWLEDGE-SHARING.

- Establish forums/community of practice for sharing best practices and success stories, especially with sister projects.
- Provide training and technical support to Associated Regions to strengthen their ability to replicate the innovative solutions.
- Implement a combination of online events for wider reach and cost-effectiveness, alongside a few key in-person events that are essential for building personal connections, facilitating follow-up activities, and fostering direct collaborations between existing Horizon consortia and newly engaged Associated Regions.

AUTHORS (alphabetic order)

Gorjanc, Sašo	Lundheim, Sigurd
Hausner, Vera	Øverjordet, Ida Beathe
Lillebø, Ana	Pinho, Mariana
Lito, Patrícia	Pujol, Marta

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