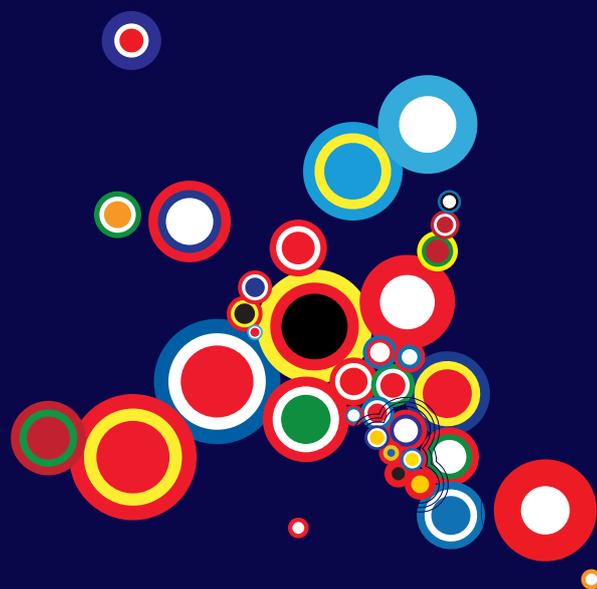




INSTRUMENT FOR PRE-ACCESSION ASSISTANCE (IPA II) 2014-2020

MULTI-COUNTRY

Support to the Regional Rural
Development Standing Working
Group



Action Summary

The action will provide support to the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe. The SWG is an intergovernmental organisation operating in the field of agriculture and rural development. The focus of its activities is related to economic development of rural cross-border areas in the Western Balkans by facilitating regional cooperation between rural stakeholders (local government, civil society and private sector).

The main benefit for the IPA II beneficiaries is socio-economic development of rural cross-border areas resulting in an increased quality of life of citizens living in those areas.

The main benefit for the European Union lies in further reconciliation and good neighbourly relations in the region, thereby ensuring peace and stability in a wider Europe.

Action Identification	
Programme Title	IPA II Multi-country action programme 2014
Action Title	Support to the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group
Action Reference	IPA 2014/031-603.12/MC/rural development SWG
Sector Information	
ELARG Sectors	Agriculture and rural development
DAC Sector	43010 – Multisector aid
Budget	
Total cost (VAT excluded)¹	EUR 1 million
EU contribution	EUR 1 million
Management and Implementation	
Method of implementation	Direct management
<i>Direct management:</i> ELARG unit in charge	ELARG D.3 – Regional Cooperation and Programmes
Location	
Zone benefiting from the action	Western Balkans
Specific implementation area(s)	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia
Timeline	
Deadline for conclusion of the Financing Agreement	N/A
Contracting deadline	31 December 2015
End of operational implementation period	31 December 2018

¹ The total action cost should be net of VAT and/or of other taxes. Should this not be the case, clearly indicate the amount of VAT and the reasons why it is considered eligible.

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

1. RATIONALE

One of the overriding political and economic challenges in the Western Balkans is the EU integration process. This is a highly complex process which involves the formulation and implementation of reforms in a wide range of areas.

The South East Europe (SEE) Strategy 2020 entitled “Jobs and Prosperity in a European Perspective” reflects the determination of all the governments in SEE to embrace the bold policy approaches required to attain the levels of socioeconomic growth necessary to improve the prosperity of all its citizens and to facilitate eventual integration with the European Union.

Although all of the Western Balkan (WB) IPA II beneficiaries are at different stages of development, they face similar challenges in modernising the agricultural sector and economic development of rural areas. Difficulties in dealing with policy reform and harmonisation, lack of information systems and sluggish economic development coupled with limited institutional capacity continue to obstruct the reform processes in the Western Balkans.

In addition to policy reforms, extended regional cooperation during the EU integration process of the WB countries is essential for enhancing economic growth.

In the pursuit of the EU integration objectives, the WB beneficiaries have created a regional body in the field of agriculture and rural development under the authority of the governments from the region (Ministries of Agriculture). The Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe is a regional organisation, financially backed up by its member institutions. Its decision making body is the SWG Assembly, presided on an annual rotation basis and its Secretariat as the operational, administrative, coordinative and organisational body of SWG is based in Skopje.

SWG's vision is to promote innovative and sustainable agriculture and rural development through regional cooperation so as to improve rural livelihoods in the SEE countries.

SWG's mission is to increase horizontal cooperation among respective countries and territories of South Eastern Europe by coordinating regional initiatives related to agriculture and rural development and supporting the process of social and economic development of rural areas.

The rural cross-border areas in the Western Balkans are characterised by a complex mix of interdependent socio-economic problems including poverty, social exclusion and administrative burdens. Many current borders in the region did not exist before 1990 i.e. before the break-up of Yugoslavia and were just 25 years ago part of an open and active economic space. Following the establishment of independent states, the regions were confronted with substantial obstacles. On the one hand the regions became distant from the capitals and on the other hand became separated from neighbouring regions which belong to another country with which there used to be normal relations. On average depopulation trends are stronger in these rural cross-border areas than in other parts of the countries. In addition, these new border areas have suffered more than other regions from various conflicts in the region in terms of movement of population (including refugees) and destruction of infrastructure. As a consequence the economies of these regions strongly suffered during the last 25 years. However, many of them are rich in natural assets and still have human capital potential.

The main SWG work in the period 2015-2017 will be focussed on:

- networking and capacity enhancement of SWG Member Institutions;
- facilitating regional cooperation between rural stakeholders (local government, civil society and private sector) in the SEE region;
- implementing the Area Based Development Approach (ABDA) as a tool to foster sustainable growth in the SEE region.

For this particular action, the focus will be put on facilitation of ABDA which is considered to be an innovative approach enabling breakthrough in sustainable growth of rural cross-border regions in the

Western Balkans. It is perceived as suitable for targeting defined geographical areas in cross-border regions characterised by specific complex development problems. The approach is based on a methodology which is inclusive, participatory and flexible and ensures integration and coherence. It is suitable in particular for areas where one or a combination of the following development situations exists: poverty gaps, post-natural or human disasters, post-conflict environment and exclusion issues.

Political support for the implementation of ABDA in the region was expressed by the Ministers of Agriculture from South Eastern Europe on their regular annual working meetings. The most recent one took place in Serbia at the end of 2013 which resulted in the Kopaonik Declaration 2013: *"We confirm our political support to the initiatives and activities taken to facilitate a sustainable socio-economic development in the cross-border rural areas of the SEE region. In this regard we welcome the actions undertaken by the SWG together with the European Commission (EC) to foster rural development in the SEE region through the application of the Area Based Development approach and we confirm our commitment to provide political, financial and technical support to the development and implementation of a multi-annual area based development program during the 2014-2020 period. In addition, we are ready to enlarge our cooperation in all other horizontal issues under the authority of our institutions"*.

SWG, with financial support from the European Commission, has since 2010 been paving the ground for the implementation of ABD activities through the establishment of functional Regional Offices/Project Management Units (PMU) in the cross-border regions of "Drina- Tara"(cross-border region between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia), "Drina- Sava" (cross-border region between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia), "Prespa" (cross-border region between Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and "Sharra" (cross-border region between Albania, Kosovo and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) as well as a Regional Office in Belgrade.

The PMUs will act as a Secretariat for the established Stakeholder Groups (SHG) in each of the regions and facilitate the latter's work including the strategic planning discussions, the elaboration of programming documents and project proposals. The PMUs shall develop knowledge and will be able to inform stakeholders about existing financial support instruments and opportunities. In addition, the PMUs will provide support for project development and assist in better utilisation of existing, and advise on potential new, financial support instruments available in the region.

The programmes for economic development of the four defined cross-border regions using the ABD approach were developed in close cooperation with stakeholders and have a multi-annual planning perspective. These programming documents, as well as the plans have been delivered, to the European Commission's Directorate-General for Enlargement. Projects prepared under the 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 inter alia cross-border cooperation programmes.

PROBLEM AND STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

The Western Balkans still face a number of pressing structural problems in the institutional, political and economic spheres in the EU approximation process. A general lack of capacity and cooperation between national, regional and local authorities and structures which are in charge of implementing reform policies and adopt good governance standards have a negative impact on the EU approximation process.

Furthermore, regional co-operation 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 for strengthening regional co-operation through political and policy dialogue, exchange of information and sharing of knowledge and best practice and the creation of strong and effective partnerships in order to address common interests and challenges.

The Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in SEE serves as a regional institutional platform and is the main regional initiative which supports the EU integration process in the field of agriculture and rural development in the region.

Strengthening capacities, networking and partnership development for agriculture, rural and economic development of rural areas is indispensable for the proper implementation of EU policies. This is particularly important when applied at local/regional level and anticipates the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders including local administration, the private sector and civil society. Bringing different actors closer together on exploring opportunities for joint social and economic development actions aims at improving the competitiveness and attractiveness of the border areas.

The target groups of the action are the respective local administrations, the business community and civil society dealing with agriculture and economic development of rural areas.

Intermediaries are the SWG members i.e. institutions responsible for agriculture and rural development (Ministries of Agriculture and Rural development).

The final beneficiary is the entire population of the WB and in particular those living in rural cross-border areas.

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

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

Assistance under the Multi-Country Strategy Paper (MCSP) 2014-2020² is delivered along four axes of which one is support to regional structures and networks. Actions at regional level will concentrate on supporting the functioning of existing regional organisations, bodies and platforms through a contribution to their administrative and operational costs and on supporting specialised networks through contribution agreements, grants and technical assistance.

Assistance will also be provided to facilitate the promotion of Area Based Development (ABD) projects in a limited number of marginalised rural border regions.

SWG is expected to make a major contribution to the development of the IPA II beneficiaries of the Western Balkans in particular in the sector "Competitiveness and Innovation including trade".

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.

The EU Enlargement Strategy states that competitiveness needs to be enhanced to tackle inter alia high unemployment and that considerable efforts lie ahead to address substantial regional differences within the countries with higher levels of poverty in rural areas.

² C(2014) 4293, 30.06.2014

LESSONS LEARNED AND LINK TO PREVIOUS FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Even though regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries has intensified over the last several years at various levels (political, social, trade and industrial), the application of the existing political commitment has not yet provided tangible and visible results at the local level. Several reasons have been identified including a diverging or lack of relevant legal framework on either side of the border, cumbersome provisions ruling the bilateral and multilateral context (migration, customs, etc.), lack of a joint development methodology and strategy, a marginalised and inactive economy suffering in general from stronger depopulation than non-border areas and an insufficient provision of services and lack of institutional capacities at national, regional and local level which can provide support to the cross-border cooperation.

In order to keep the momentum alive and develop a genuine joint vision of the future concrete and tangible actions need to be undertaken both from a top-down perspective as well as at local level enabling local initiatives to identify available resources. A permanent and strong involvement of all key stakeholders (local government, civil society and the private business sector) is essential for developing and implementing integrated cooperation actions based on the ABD approach. This includes a firm commitment to enter into partnerships, both public/private and among private business partners and NGOs.

The cross-border area concerned should be carefully delineated and sufficient flexibility should be left to adapt the area concerned to the concrete development issues which need to be addressed.

It has been demonstrated that an appropriate legal framework is needed, both at national/international level and at local/regional level ensuring a satisfactory synergy between top-down development strategies and bottom-up participatory process of typical local development approaches. This is particularly important in a cross border setting in order to allow joint and participatory preparation and elaboration of programme strategies as well as decision-making processes. It may have to take the form of binding and permanent cross-border partnerships to ensure long-term sustainability as, in the absence of these, cooperation might be only of a social-cultural nature, rather than achieving socio-economic added value.

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

The technical meetings organised within the SWG Working Groups have highly contributed to the networking, exchange of know-how and information for achieving sustainable agriculture and rural development and therefore having greater possibilities to deal with the competitive demands of the EU integration.

The experience of the Western Balkans from implementing agriculture and rural development policies under IPA I (2007-2013) has shown that the level of participation in the respective programmes, in particular those in the area of agriculture and rural development (IPARD), varies according to the regional and local capacity to prepare projects. In general, the most deprived or marginalised areas are also those with the lowest capacity to generate projects and hence the lowest level of participation in the instruments.

The SWG methodology combined with the existing structures are perceived by local stakeholders as an adequate response to the needs, in particular because it has access to international institutions and can advise the national administrations with regards to improving the legal framework for local development or taking into account bottom-up expressed needs on the design of top-down strategies. It can also act as an institutional umbrella for facilitation of the implementation of initiatives in the selected cross-border regions.

The SWG has been involved since the beginning in the development of ABD programmes and has been and continues to be an informed and active participant in the entire evolution of this process. In this regard, the PMUs established 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 region. In addition, the publicity for other relevant policy instruments and available support will be enhanced by the PMU

2. INTERVENTION LOGIC

LOGICAL FRAMEWORK MATRIX

OVERALL OBJECTIVE	OBJECTIVELY VERIFIABLE INDICATORS (OVI)	SOURCES OF VERIFICATION	
To foster regional cooperation and balanced territorial development in the process towards EU integration.	Overall progress in political reforms towards EU integration	The SWG Head Office / Secretariat will monitor on an annual basis the progress of the Western Balkan countries through the Country Annual Progress Reports related to their EU approximation	
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE	OBJECTIVELY VERIFIABLE INDICATORS (OVI)	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 Balkan countries	Number of Ministerial meetings, Agricultural Policy forums and meetings of the Stakeholder Groups organised	Country Annual Progress Reports related to their EU approximation SWG Annual Report Reports from different meetings Reports of the PMUs	Positive opinion of the EU on the progress made related to the EU approximation process Intensified negotiation process between the Western Balkan countries and the EU
RESULTS	OBJECTIVELY VERIFIABLE INDICATORS (OVI)	SOURCES OF VERIFICATION	ASSUMPTIONS
<p>Result 1:</p> <p>Joint documents (statements, positions, declarations) of the participating Western Balkan countries are prepared based on the political and policy discussions organized under the auspices of SWG</p> <p>Result 2:</p> <p>Project proposals for economic development of rural cross-border areas are prepared and submitted for financing</p> <p>Result 3:</p> <p>Baseline analysis and strategic planning has been performed in at least two additional cross-border areas</p>	<p>Number of political statements and policy documents prepared and disseminated</p> <p>Number of project proposals developed with SWG support funded under various grant schemes (e.g. CBC, regional development grant schemes)</p> <p>Number of additional cross-border areas covered</p>	<p>SWG Annual Report</p> <p>Reports from different meetings</p> <p>Political statements/declarations</p> <p>Reports from the municipalities</p>	<p>The networking and cooperation among Ministries of Agriculture and other stakeholders in the WB are functional</p> <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</p>

			process
ACTIVITIES	MEANS	OVERALL COST	ASSUMPTIONS
<p>Activities to achieve Result 1:</p> <p>Facilitation of the economic development of the cross-border regions through intensive political and policy discussions</p> <p>Organisation of Annual Working Meetings of the Ministers for Agriculture</p> <p>Organisation of Agriculture Policy Forums</p> <p>Organisation of meetings of different Working Groups within the SWG for discussion of issues related to the economic development of rural cross-border areas</p> <p>Activities to achieve Result 2:</p> <p>Facilitation of the process of economic development of rural cross-border areas</p> <p>Organisation of regular meetings of the Stakeholder groups</p> <p>Implementation of capacity building measures for preparation of relevant projects with adequate quality</p> <p>Provision of consultancy support to stakeholders for preparation of project proposals for different Calls for Proposals with special emphasis on calls within IPA II</p> <p>Performance of publicity and awareness raising activities related to available funding</p> <p>Participation in meetings with other regional structures</p> <p>Activities to achieve Result 3</p> <p>Situation analysis, development potential and strategic planning of the economic development of two additional cross border areas</p> <p>Performance of baseline analysis and strategic planning, as well as preparation of programmes for economic development for two additional areas</p>	<p>Contract between Commission and SWG</p>	<p>EUR 1 million</p>	<p>Active participation of relevant representatives of the institutions concerned in the process</p> <p>Active participation and cooperation with and between the stakeholders from the target regions</p>

ADDITIONAL DESCRIPTION

The action aims at creating the necessary framework conditions for 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 and enhancing cooperation for improving the living conditions of large segments of the population concerned.

The overall objective is to continue to work on building and consolidating capacities and structures within the SWG and selected regions established within previous projects.

The action will require the participation of policymakers in the dialogue process, together with 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.

SWG will promote regional cooperation as a platform thereby ensuring coordination between the regional structures in the four target cross-border areas through dissemination of knowledge and information on key economic developmental issues and available funding, start performing the baseline analysis and strategic planning in two additional cross-border regions by influencing the policy making process in the region through various policy dialogue and networking events.

Activities will be directed to facilitation of cooperation among stakeholders in the target cross-border areas through the organisation of regular meetings of the Stakeholder Groups. The activities will also focus on the facilitation of the achievement process of the strategic development goals defined in the strategic frameworks and programmes for economic development of the regions. This will be done through the provision of support to the stakeholders from the regions with the preparation of different Calls for Proposals especially those within the IPA instruments.

In case of available funding, the activities would also focus on baseline analysis, strategic planning and programming of the economic development of at least two additional cross-border areas.

In addition, the cooperation in at least four cross-border rural areas of the Western Balkan (“Drina-Sava”, “Drina-Tara”, “Prespa” and “Sharra”) is strengthened with implementation of cross-border projects.

The SWG, in line with its mandate, will facilitate and support the implementation of the South East Europe Strategy 2020 and contribute to the achievement of the overall targets.

The SWG will also facilitate the trade of agriculture and food products within the provisions of CEFTA and will contribute to overcoming the border problems related to trade issues.

Risks:

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

The aftermath of the financial crisis could impact on the financial stability of the regional set up, including SWG and can contribute to the destabilisation of the regional initiatives.

Regular communication and monitoring of the situation in the Western Balkans as well as regular monitoring of the action implementation by the SWG Head Office / Secretariat will be a method to develop in a timely manner mitigation measures to be undertaken in order to prevent negative effects on the action implementation.

3. IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The action will be implemented by the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe.

A Project Steering Group (PSG), consisting of representatives of SWG (SWG Head Office / Secretariat, current and future SWG Presidency), DG Enlargement, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, JRC IPTS Agri-Life Unit and contracted international and regional consultants will oversee the timely and proper implementation of the action.

The PSG will meet at least two times per year.

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 two calendar years on the basis of Article 190(l)(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 action will be monitored and evaluated 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 reports (interim, yearly and final narrative and financial reports), 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/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.
- The action may also become subject to result-oriented monitoring (ROM) and/or evaluation carried out by an external service provider.

INDICATOR MEASUREMENT

Indicator	Description	Baseline (2014)	Last (2013)	Milestone 2017	Target 2020	Source of information
<i>Action outcome indicator 1 (linked to Overall Objective)</i>	<i>Overall progress in political reforms towards EU integration</i>	<i>tba</i>	<i>Candidate countries meet some accession criteria. Potential candidates are not sufficiently advanced to be granted candidate status.</i>	<i>Further progress made by candidate countries and potential candidates towards meeting the criteria for membership</i>	<i>Candidate countries closer to meeting all accession criteria/ Potential candidates are further advanced in steps towards meeting criteria for candidate status.</i>	<i>Commission Progress Reports SWG Annual Reports Political statements</i>
<i>Action outcome indicator 2 (linked to Specific Objective)</i>	<i>Number of Ministerial meetings, Agricultural Policy Forums and meetings of the Stakeholder groups organised</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>SWG Annual Reports Meeting reports Reports from the Programme Management Units (PMU)</i>
		<i>N/A</i>				
<i>Action output indicator 1 (linked to Result 1)</i>	<i>Number of political statements and v policy documents prepared and disseminated</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>SWG Annual Reports Meeting reports Political statements</i>
<i>Action output indicator 2 (linked to Result 2)</i>	<i>Number of project proposals developed with SWG support submitted under various grant schemes (e.g.</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>SWG Annual Reports Meeting reports Reports from the Programme Management Units (PMU)</i>

Indicator	Description	Baseline (2014)	Last (2013)	Milestone 2017	Target 2020	Source of information
	<i>CBC, regional development grant schemes)</i>					
<i>Action output indicator 3 (linked to Result 3)</i>	<i>Number of cross-border areas covered</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>SWG Annual Reports Meeting reports Reports from the Programme Management Units (PMU) Political statements</i>

5. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE (AND IF RELEVANT DISASTER RESILIENCE)

Most rural cross border areas are characterised by a wide variety of natural resources shared between different countries with different legal frameworks. The Strategic Development Framework and related Programme developed for each target region focuses inter alia on the joint protection and management of natural resources (e.g. mountain resources, water resources and biodiversity). In addition, one of the components focuses on the institutional set-up for joint management of natural resources in the border areas. SWG will facilitate the process of sustainable protection and management of shared natural resources, as well as the establishment of adequate institutional structures.

The activities of the SWG within the action will facilitate the economic empowerment of the target regions of which some have been recently hit by severe floods and landslides.

SWG within its mandate will also support the regions in the process of development of natural disaster resilience and risk prevention plans.

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

One of the key results of previous projects has been the establishment and consolidation of the Stakeholder Groups (SHGs) in each of the four target regions. These SHGs include representatives of local public administration, the private sector and civil society who contribute to the capacity building process as well as to the programming and project identification process.

The action will continue to target the above-mentioned structures as project partners and main beneficiaries.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING

SWG provides equal opportunities for participation and employment and considers gender balance as one of its guiding principles. This principle applies also to SWG's partners and target beneficiaries and is communicated in the calls for proposals.

The Stakeholder Groups in the cross-border target regions also provide equal opportunities for participation of men and women.

The needs and concerns of both women and men will be reflected in stakeholder consultations, capacity building measures and regional/institutional structures.

MINORITIES AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

One of the critical problems of the cross-border areas of the Western Balkan countries is how to reach remote rural areas in decline where poverty and lack of sufficient economic activities lead younger generations to leave the areas. The complex interdependence between poverty, social exclusion and ethnic tensions are an omnipresent characteristic. ABDA is an inclusive, participatory and flexible approach which ensures integration and coherence and will provide opportunities for participation for all ethnic minorities.

The concerns of minority and vulnerable groups will be reflected in stakeholder consultations, capacity building measures and regional/institutional structures.

6. SUSTAINABILITY

SWG, as an organisation created by the Ministries of Agriculture from the Western Balkan countries and acting on their behalf as the implementing development agency for measures related to agriculture and rural development, focuses on regional ownership. The political support and commitment from the national authorities is assured by their statements and conclusions of the Annual Ministerial Meetings.

The local authorities (municipalities) in the target regions have signed a Memorandum of Understanding thereby confirming their willingness and commitment to economic development of the rural cross-border areas implementing the ABD approach. In this respect institutional commitment is ensured.

It is anticipated that the relevant authorities at national and local level will cooperate and participate in the action by supporting the stakeholders to take part in relevant activities.

7. COMMUNICATION AND VISIBILITY

Communication and visibility will be given high importance during the implementation of the Action. All necessary measures will be taken to make public the fact that the Action has received funding from the EU in line with the Communication and Visibility Manual for EU External Actions.

The implementation of the communication activities shall be the responsibility of the contractors and shall be funded from the amounts allocated to the Action.

Visibility and communication actions shall demonstrate how the intervention contributes to the agreed programme objectives and the accession process. Actions shall be undertaken to strengthen general public awareness and promote transparency and accountability on the use of funds.

The Commission shall be fully informed of the planning and implementation of the specific visibility and communication activities.

The SWG is currently preparing a Communication, Publicity and Visibility Action Plan in relation to the implementation of economic development actions in the target regions. It is planned to prepare informative leaflets for the actions which will be distributed to the stakeholders, SWG partners and the wider public. The promotion leaflets will clearly state that the action is financed by the European Union. In addition, all the presentations, reports produced for and during the Stakeholder Groups meetings and other events will clearly state that the action is financed by the European Union.

The SWG web-site (www.seerural.org) will be used as a platform to share relevant information about the activities.