'OPENCOESIONE' - Here it comes the Wiki-Regional Policy

Submitted on 16 Sep 2012 by Luigi Reggi

Last July Italy witnessed a massive release of open data as the national government launched 'OpenCoesione', or 'Open Cohesion', an initiative that has gathered data on more than 450,000 development projects mainly funded by EU Regional Policy and is managed by more than 50 different national and regional (sub-national) institutions. The projects are worth € 33.4 billion in resources for development and, in the lagging regions, they represent the main source of new investment in times of financial downturn.

The projects are now open to public scrutiny on OpenCoesioneOpenCoesione.gov.it and, as raw data, on a section of the Department for Cohesion website. Information on costs, payments, private co-funding, schedules, names of the public and private institutions involved, locations, etc. are available on the web in order to enhance the debate on the destination and use of the funding.

Italy's Minister for Territorial Cohesion and renowned EU Policy expert Fabrizio Barca believes that the lack of transparency on how public money is spent is one of the main reasons for the slow pace characterizing current Structural Fund absorption in Italy. This initiative is therefore unprecedented, especially if the context of Southern Italy is taken into consideration. Southern Italy is where most of the financial resources for development converge and it is often depicted as highly corrupted and (long before the crisis) economically paralyzed. After decades of subsidies, the extent to which European Regional Policy and its Structural Funds are actually effective remains controversial.

So the main purpose of OpenCoesione is to disinfect EU and Italian cohesion policies with the aid of a little sunshine. And while doing so, to improve policy effectiveness through extended public participation and collaboration.

The rise of the Wiki-Regional Policy: from transparency to control to crowdsourcing

Opening the "black box" of Structural Funds is for sure a big step towards greater transparency. Efficiency and effectiveness of regional policy would benefit greatly from improved transparency regarding how, where and when public money is spent. However, in order to have real impact it is essential to enable bi-directional flows of information between government and civil societyby promoting participation and collaboration from all kinds of stakeholders.

The citizen and civil society in general can act as a powerful source both in terms of control of the spending and suggestions for further improvements in policy design and implementation. In particular, public, dispersed control should focus on the results of the policy by comparing targeted and achieved outputs with final outcomes, as represented in the figure above. This is expected to influence the decisions of policy makers with a positive effect on levels of fund absorption, the quality of public investments and citizens' participation in public choices.

Firstly, OpenCoesione needs the citizens because the description of the projects is sometimes incomplete or not fully comprehensible. As highlighted by the Italian blogger Guido Scorza, current descriptions lack key information of projects' rationales, objectives and genesis. Also, it is difficult to understand the broader policy objective behind it or what strategy was followed by the regional authority to justify this action. Information on regional strategies and objectives, as well as on the types of interventions involving one or more specific projects, is already in possess of the administrations. Here a more efficient coordination and better integration between the national and the regional information systems is needed.

However, detailed information about each project is sometimes simply not available. So, on the OpenCoesione portal, each of the 450,000 pages describing the projects includes a form that can be used to provide additional information about the project itself. A mechanism similar to that of Wikipedia. As Beth Noveck points out in her book Wiki Government, "when a policy problem is divided into smaller parts, so that it can be distributed and worked on by collaborative teams, the drive toward openness and innovation begin".

Secondly, the citizen can provide feedback on project implementation, as well as information on perceived results. Examples of the questions included in the form are: "What did the project achieve?", "What are the main results?", "What is the impact on your city or region?", "How can the project be improved?". Within each thematic area of the website (research, energy, etc.), information on the projects funded can be compared with relevant statistics at the regional level, in order to highlight current levels of performance and related trends.

All the information gathered from the users (common citizens living nearby, experts, project managers, civil servants or researchers, etc.) on the projects' achievements is going to be used to enrich current datasets, even if it is too early to determine exactly what this integration will look like. The intention here is to transfer the feedback on both data quality and the project results from central government to the responsible regional institutions in order to enable quick action. A permanent "technical group" has also been established with representatives of both national and regional institutions to strengthen the links between the two tiers of government and exchange additional information about the projects. For example, the Ministry of Research is ready to offer its data on research and innovation projects already published as open data on the website of the Programme "Research and Competitiveness".

In a follow-up posting I will go into the 2 design principles, 2 data issues, many challenges that concern OpenCoesione.