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# Positions of the Metropolis Ruhr on EU Cohesion Policy 2021 – 2027

Requirements for the Configuration of the Future ERDF and ESF+ in  
North Rhine-Westphalia, the Federal Republic of Germany and the EU

# **Positions of the Metropolis Ruhr on EU Cohesion Policy 2021-2027**

**Requirements for the Configuration of the Future ERDF and ESF+ in  
the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Federal Republic of  
Germany and the EU**

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## I. Requests of the Metropolis Ruhr – executive summary

In line with European and regional aspirations, the Metropolis Ruhr is driving forward the **economic and environmental regeneration** of its polycentric urban landscape. In doing so, the Metropolis Ruhr is backing new solutions in an environment which reflects, in a densely populated area, the full range of challenges faced by Europe's regions. These specific features make the Metropolis Ruhr a **unique laboratory and model for Europe**.

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF+) are particularly important for implementing exemplary structural policy projects in the region. Therefore, structural funds should be designed in a manner which enables **expanding local competencies and regional strengths**, precisely in the context of European guiding principles. Since the eligibility of all regions – including those that are more developed – has been assured at the EU level, it is now crucial to facilitate their participation, as well as the opportunity for them to make the most of the funding instruments. The Metropolis Ruhr thus calls for:

- an adequate financial envelope for cohesion policy,  
i.e. no budget cuts compared to the current EU funding period 2014-2020;
- financially feasible own contributions,  
i.e. securing a minimum co-financing rate of 50 % by the EU;
- feasible conditions for local stakeholders,  
i.e. the facilitation of funding rates of 80-90 % for projects at (inter-)municipal level by the State of North Rhine-Westphalia;
- maintaining the mandate to distribute funds at the State of North Rhine-Westphalia,  
i.e. no transfer of competence to the national level;
- the recognition of regional circumstances,  
i.e. the independence of cohesion policy from the European semester;
- dialogical procedures and cooperation with the local level,  
i.e. the involvement of local stakeholders and know-how in all programme stages;
- tailored funding offers,  
i.e. adequate flexibility with funding instruments;
- integrated, multifunctional approaches,  
i.e. enabling cross-thematic projects through integrated funding as well as inter-ministerial agreements;
- compatible EU, national and regional state funding,  
i.e. the connectivity and possible accumulation of funds between EU, national and regional state programmes;
- the prioritised consideration of innovative formats that are geographically effective from a structural policy perspective,  
i.e. including the International Garden Show (in German: Internationale Gartenschau, IGA) 2027 in the new OP ERDF NRW;
- an adequate interim solution,  
i.e. the extension of the current funding period should the new EU funding period be delayed;
- optimised and lean administrative procedures,  
i.e. the implementation of the EU-facilitated simplifications in administrative practice at the national and regional state level.

In terms of content, the Metropolis Ruhr will focus on topics and projects in the upcoming EU funding period 2021-2027 that will strengthen **local potential** in order to achieve structural policy objectives based on European guiding principles. In doing so, the region is once again presenting itself as a European model region for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The Metropolis Ruhr sees the EU Commission's concentration on five policy objectives (PO) as a good basis for an efficient use of funds by expanding local and regional strengths. With its future focal points of activities and projects, the Metropolis Ruhr will make significant **contributions to a smarter, greener, more connected, more social Europe and a Europe that is closer to citizens**. The region calls for its structural policy priorities to be supported and fostered by an appropriate design of the ERDF and ESF+ in North Rhine-Westphalia and at national level. More specifically, the aim is

- to further promote the transfer of innovation at the interface of science and industry through specific measures and to facilitate application-oriented projects in SMEs;
- to pursue smart site development as an integral part of innovation-oriented economic policy;
- to enable the expansion of digital infrastructure and digital solutions;
- to ensure the eligibility of green infrastructure as a future-oriented dimension of integrated urban, economic and landscape development;
- to promote the decarbonisation of road transport, new forms of intermodality and multimodality, of autonomous mobility as well as alternative propulsion systems, and environmentally friendly transport infrastructure;
- to promote urban mining as part of an effective circular economy as a contribution to resource protection and climate change mitigation;
- to bolster lifelong learning through specific training and qualification opportunities for target groups, as well as formal, non-formal and vocational training opportunities;
- to address the fight against (child) poverty by improving access to education, recreation and culture, and by providing easily accessible services that go beyond the standard system of career guidance;
- to combat long-term unemployment;
- to promote integration through language courses and opportunities for school and job-related qualifications;
- to support women in the (re)entry into work life and in establishing new businesses in order to create equal opportunities;
- to make the individual programmes in the ESF+ more flexible so that local conditions are adequately taken into account and integrated projects can be implemented through multi-fund calls;
- to strengthen the mandates of regional agencies (in German: Regionalagenturen);
- to strengthen integrated neighbourhood development with elements of a smarter, greener and more social Europe;
- to achieve security in public spaces through modernisation;

- to recognise industrial culture and nature in the promotion of tourism and to create access to funding for its exploitation and marketing for tourism;
- to ensure analogue and digital accessibility.

## II. Preface

By actively shaping the ongoing structural change and by developing specific solutions, the Metropolis Ruhr is making a significant contribution towards compensating for structural deficits and enabling innovation in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). The knowledge and experience gained from the corresponding development processes are being shared with regions both in Germany and abroad. The Metropolis Ruhr promotes European dialogue through cross-regional exchange, as well as cross-border projects, and creates tangible added value for the European Union (EU).

The knowledge and results gained from the transformation process in the Metropolis Ruhr are in demand worldwide. The following aspects are particularly considered to be exemplary for other polycentric metropolitan regions in Europe:

- the process quality with new forms of inter-municipal cooperation and multi-level governance models,
- the project quality in complex regional and interregional formats, as well as
- the innovative character of solutions for the future of the industrial landscape.

The Metropolis Ruhr is currently facing the task of safeguarding what has already been achieved, of further reducing remaining competitive disadvantages and of bolstering new strengths through smart specialisation as a European model region. Structural instruments from the EU, as well as funding programmes from the German government and the State of North Rhine-Westphalia have provided significant support to the region in shaping the structural change. Also for the next development phase, the cities and county authorities of the Metropolis Ruhr are counting on being able to use structural funds from the regional state, the German government and the EU on reasonable terms, in order to achieve ambitious goals.

Therefore, it is crucial that the operational programmes (OPs) – particularly the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF+) – are designed in such a manner as to take into account the specific local conditions in the future EU funding period 2021-2027, and that they can be utilised under fair conditions. In this way, regional challenges and opportunities with regard to climate change mitigation and adaptation, innovation, integrated urban development and the fight against poverty can be linked to European objectives and implemented in an integrated manner.

With a [first position paper](#) in 2017 and a [second position paper](#) in 2018, the Municipal Council of the Metropolis Ruhr – the regional body of all Mayors and all Heads of the county authorities, as well as the Regional Director of the Ruhr Regional Association (in German: Regionalverband Ruhr, RVR) – is long advocating for a strong cohesion policy as part of the future EU funding period 2021-2027. This position paper adds regional requirements and expectations with regard to the configuration of the ERDF and ESF+ 2021-2027 in Europe, in Germany and in the State of North Rhine-Westphalia.

### **III. EU Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 in North Rhine-Westphalia – prerequisites for successful structural policy**

In the Metropolis Ruhr, it is common practice to operationalise structural policy in accordance with the specific strengths, potential and challenges of the region. In the future, the region will both continue contributing to a more efficient use of resources at the local level and continue creating added value for the EU. This will be achieved through strong formats of inter-municipal cooperation – such as a new type of integrated planning of green infrastructure at the International Garden Show "IGA 2027" – and programmes that are geographically effective from a structural policy perspective and that address several content-related objectives. This presupposes that the upcoming framework enables the Metropolis Ruhr to participate in the funding instruments and to make optimal use of them.

#### **1. Ensuring an adequate financial envelope for EU cohesion policy – precluding budget cuts**

The ERDF and ESF+ are particularly important for achieving the structural policy goals of the Metropolis Ruhr. Both funds enable measures with trans-regional significance with regard to climate adaptation and climate change mitigation, innovation with new forms of economic activity and new ways of working, and preventing poverty. Therefore, the cities and county authorities of the Metropolis Ruhr call for EU cohesion policy funds not to be reduced in comparison to the current EU funding period 2014-2020. Financial resources for new instruments such as the "Just Transition Fund" are to be provided in addition to cohesion policy and as grants. They must not be redeployed at the expense of the ERDF and ESF+.

#### **2. Enabling regional development – ensuring 50 % co-financing**

The effective use of cohesion policy funds requires own contributions to be affordable and financially feasible, which is why the Metropolis Ruhr is calling for an EU co-financing share of at least 50 %. The proposed reduction of the EU co-financing rate to 40 % would result in local authorities and other potential project leaders hardly being able to meet the conditions. In that case, the region would rely on the German government or the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to compensate for the missing 10 %. In addition, the Metropolis Ruhr is calling on the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to support (inter-)municipal projects with funding rates of 80-90 % in the new funding period..

#### **3. Consistently implementing regional funds management – tailoring funding**

The EU is characterised by the diversity of its regions with their specific strengths, potential and challenges. Funding instruments must be designed in such a way as to enable the expansion of local competencies and regional strengths in line with European guiding principles. The decentralised, regional management approach must be maintained so that each region – also within a single Member State – can independently decide on the exact distribution of the structural funds allocated to it. This means the authority to select funding priorities and areas of focus is to be located at the regional level (in Germany: the Bundesländer), thereby creating important access to funding. Currently, eligibility for measures in one of the EU's specific goals (policy objective 3: a more connected Europe through increased mobility and ICT connectivity) is excluded, since this goal is not to be applied in Germany. For the Metropolis Ruhr, this decision is

neither understandable nor acceptable. The non-application of policy objective 3 in the Federal Republic of Germany blocks funding for urgently needed investments in the construction and expansion of digital infrastructure. Therefore, the cities and county authorities of the Metropolis Ruhr are calling on the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to campaign for strengthening the decentralised fund management and for (sub)regional needs at EU and national level.

#### **4. Looking out for specific regional features – conducting differentiated assessments of pan-German developments**

The Metropolis Ruhr is extremely critical of the proposed link between cohesion policy funds and the country-specific recommendations within the framework of the European Semester. The country-specific recommendations evaluate pan-German developments, thus referring to the national average. In contrast, the ERDF and the ESF+ are regionally designed programmes that take (sub)regional specifics and challenges into account. These do not automatically equate to the nationwide situation. In fact, there are considerable disparities between the individual Bundesländer (i.e. the European regions) within the Federal Republic of Germany. As long as the country-specific recommendations have no precise regional reference, they should not influence the programming of region-specific programmes. In the ESF+, for example, it is incomprehensible that combating long-term unemployment should no longer be worthy of support in Germany as per the recommendation of the European Commission, since there is a considerable need for action for precisely this in the Metropolis Ruhr.

#### **5. Guaranteeing participation at the local level – using local expertise**

The Metropolis Ruhr recommends that the State of North Rhine-Westphalia involves the local level more actively in all stages of programme planning. Cities and county authorities should participate more consistently, especially in the preparation, design, implementation and evaluation of regional calls. With the region's expertise, calls can be utilised more effectively and more user-friendly in terms of successful structural policy.

The EU Commission's proposals provide a good basis for the active participation of the local level in programme design, monitoring and evaluation. The Metropolis Ruhr sees this as a targeted call for a formal partnership between the national and local level, in line with multi-level governance. This is an approach that needs to be brought to life, particularly with the ERDF. The partnership must be activated and utilised to ensure a high degree of result orientation, efficiency and European added value when implementing the EU programmes at the local level. Attention should be paid to the balanced participation of both large and small municipalities.

In this context, the Metropolis Ruhr also calls for the Ruhr conference to be continued in a dialogical process and for the financing of coordinated project priorities through inter-ministerial approaches.

#### **6. Strengthening multifunctional approaches – enabling integrated solutions**

In the densely populated urban area, cross-thematic considerations and integrated solutions are crucial prerequisites for the success of structural policy. They fulfil multiple functions and holistically aim towards improving the quality of life at the local level. It is important to continue pursuing the basic approach of integrated solutions. To this end, also the possibility of integrated

funding approaches must be strengthened, i.e. the possibility of calls for projects and calls for funds across funds. This, in turn, requires strategic coordination between the regional state and national ministries.

### **7. Making use of restructuring – ensuring synchronisation of EU, national and local state funding**

In addition to EU funding policies, the German funding framework is also about to be restructured. The Metropolis Ruhr considers this an opportunity to harmonise individual funding strands. Legal inconsistencies in the funding programmes of the individual levels (EU, Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia) must be avoided in the interest of all involved.

A project-related, modular combination of funding across all levels is desirable. The eligibility of projects should be measured according to their content, qualities and goals and should not depend solely on the compatibility of the guidelines of individual funding programmes. Therefore, the Metropolis Ruhr is demanding compatibility where missing, e.g. with regard to the ERDF and the joint scheme for improving regional economic structures (in German: Gemeinschaftsaufgabe Regionale Wirtschaftsförderung, GRW). Where programmes are not yet sufficiently compatible, and where there are doubts about the connectivity in specific individual cases, rules should be interpreted positively in terms of a project's output (positive interpretation requirement).

National funding is currently very relevant in North Rhine-Westphalia in the context of the structural strengthening act (in German: Strukturstärkungsgesetz), i.a. also for the hard coal power plant locations in the Metropolis Ruhr. There is a special requirement here to coordinate the use of funds and to provide connectivity, as well as the possibility of accumulating funds in the future. The European initiative for decarbonisation in the context of the EU's Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism provides funds for a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. In the Metropolis Ruhr, this is needed for the exit from coal-based electricity generation in connection with successful development plans for the power plant locations. It is important that these funds are provided in the form of grants (and not loans).

### **8. Setting funding priorities – anchoring the International Garden Show (IGA) 2027 in the OP ERDF NRW 2021-2027**

With new inter-municipal cooperation projects and innovative formats, the Metropolis Ruhr is pioneering in creating greater efficiency in the use of funds at the local level and in creating added value for the EU. It does so by means of structural policy programmes that address cross-thematic goals and that have an effect at the local level. Inter-municipal partnerships work with continuity and intensity to further develop such approaches as well as new solutions to the most pressing questions for the future.

The International Garden Show (IGA) 2027 currently represents the launch of a large “green and innovative” building block, entailing new approaches in the field of integrated urban development, climate adaptation, the smart use of space and social participation. By means of the IGA 2027 and new inter-municipal project formats, the Metropolis Ruhr aims at growing into the most modern, greenest urban landscape in the world. Given its importance for structural policy in the Metropolis Ruhr, and as an integrated contribution to the EU's policy objectives, the IGA 2027 must be firmly anchored as a funding priority in the OP ERDF NRW, analogous to the REGIONALE NRW.

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## **9. Bridging delays – ensuring applicability when the OPs start**

Due to the ongoing negotiations on the Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, which is the basic framework for equipping and shaping the European Structural Funds, a delay in the start of the new EU funding period seems inevitable. In order to bridge the funding gap between the two funding periods, the Metropolis Ruhr suggests extending the current funding period under current conditions. Moreover, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and the EU Commission should press ahead with preparing the OPs as expediently as possible so that the OPs can be used immediately after approval. This means, for example, opening calls for funding directly with the approval of the OPs, as well as providing the administrative guidelines for processing funding applications at the same time. This will avoid further delays in implementing structural policy.

## **10. Achieving administrative simplification – following local-level recommendations**

The Metropolis Ruhr welcomes the overarching approaches to administrative simplification at the European level - e.g. reducing the number of sectoral EU programmes, as well as the simplified cost options (lump sums). These approaches must also be adopted in administrative practice at national and regional state levels. The simplifications, which the proposed EU regulations allow for, must be applied consistently when programming, implementing and evaluating the national and regional state programmes.

Pragmatic structures are to be developed with help from the local level, since cities and county authorities, as programme beneficiaries, can identify obstacles and any need for reform. The specific steps for simplifying administration that the Metropolis Ruhr is proposing to the State of North Rhine-Westphalia in the context of future EU structural support are given in Chapter V.

#### **IV. Using regional potential – creating added value for Europe**

In line with European and regional aspirations, the Metropolis Ruhr is driving forward the economic and environmental regeneration of its polycentric urban landscape. In doing so, the Metropolis Ruhr is backing new solutions in an environment which reflects, in a densely populated area, the full range of challenges faced by Europe's regions. These specific features make the Metropolis Ruhr a unique laboratory and model for Europe. By means of intermunicipal cooperation, solutions and projects are developed and applied under "real conditions". In various actor constellations, innovative forms of cooperation and decision-making are tested and expanded across existing systems. The Metropolis Ruhr will continue to consistently profile and network as a **European model region** by implementing specific projects and innovative instruments.

The **ERDF** (see sections a, b and d below) is particularly important for the region when it comes to implementing exemplary structural support projects. Therefore, the OP ERDF NRW shall be designed in a manner which enables expanding local competencies and regional strengths, precisely in the context of European guiding principles. In the upcoming funding period, this particularly applies to new innovation and transfer projects at the interface of industry and science, to smart site development in the context of the coal phase-out, to measures intended to promote the energy transition and climate adaptation, and to integrated urban development and mobility concepts with increasing citizen involvement.

In this context, the **ESF+** (see section c below) comes into focus since the digital transformation, the energy transition and climate adaptation measures must all continue without any major social and economic disruption. This implies that activities geared towards poverty reduction, education and training can be carried out in a way that prevents people from falling behind. Hence, measures are crucial that help to strengthen the quality of life and social harmony in urban neighbourhoods.

## **a. Innovation-oriented economic development Ruhr – contributions to a smarter Europe (PO1)**

A bolstered scientific landscape and a highly dynamic innovation landscape with transfer-oriented actors testify to the fact that development in the Metropolis Ruhr is making enormous strides in catching up. This development has given new impulses for technology transfer to the medium-sized economy, for the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), for the establishment of start-ups and for innovation.

Projects over the next few years will focus on further expanding research and innovation capacity, providing space for new economic activities and jobs, better interlinking universities and companies, and accelerating the transition to a climate-neutral economy by promoting new technologies. With this focus, the Metropolis Ruhr is clearly promoting the objective of a smarter Europe.

### **1. Promoting innovation – pushing technology transfer at interfaces and in SMEs**

One focal point of innovation promotion is on expanding entrepreneurship in connection with technology transfer and the application of new technologies, especially by SMEs. With the growing science and start-up landscape, there are good prerequisites for promoting innovation. The important thing now is to further promote the transfer of innovation at the interface of science and industry through specific means and, consequently, to also support application projects in SMEs. Technology and start-up centres, as well as transfer points, hubs and innovation laboratories at universities, are important catalysts and facilitators in the innovation process. Therefore, their work should be supported by ERDF funding.

Consistently using the advantages of digitalisation can result in significant effects for innovation in SMEs. Direct funding for implementation projects in companies should also be provided. These measures are particularly important for the large number of medium-sized companies in the Metropolis Ruhr.

### **2. Smart site development – enabling preparation, exploitation and integrated use**

In the field of site development, the Metropolis Ruhr's mining area agreement (in German: Bergbauflächen-Vereinbarung) has already led to the implementation of exemplary solutions that are demanded throughout Europe for the post-coal era. As part of a coordinated intermunicipal process, the hard coal-fired power plant locations, with a total area of around 900 ha, are being considered as potential new centres of development. Successful site development requires compatibility of various sources of funding and preparing the re-use at the interface of industry and science. The European initiative for decarbonisation in the context of the EU's Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism provides funding for a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. In the Metropolis Ruhr, this is needed for the exit from coal-based electricity generation in connection with successful development plans for the power plant locations. It is important that these funds are provided in the form of grants (and not loans).

As an essential part of innovation-oriented economic policy, smart site development is being pursued beyond the power plant areas. New settlement projects, as well as business start-ups and expansions, need space as much as new forms of business activities and working do. The

revitalisation of brownfield sites with the necessary disposal of contaminated sites, treatment and exploitation measures must have priority over the further usage of unspoiled nature. It is expected that funding from the ERDF and other programmes will facilitate this essential task for ecological and economic regeneration.

Within the framework of Regio.NRW, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia has set an example in the expiring funding period with the call on economic areas (in German: Regio.NRW Wirtschaftsflächen). An extension of this funding programme in the new funding period could give new impetus to the development of economic areas in the Metropolis Ruhr. It would be crucial to enable cities to submit applications over the entire funding period (without submission deadlines) and to ensure adequate funding for development and infrastructure measures.

### **3. Digitalisation as a crosscutting issue – ensuring the eligibility of digital infrastructure**

Digitalisation is a crosscutting issue and a prerequisite for modernising the economy and society. There is still a need to invest in the expansion of digital infrastructure in order to facilitate new work environments and new forms of working for people, to maintain the competitiveness of SMEs and to support local authorities on their way to become “Smart Cities”. Solutions for data protection, accessibility and other social aspects should be developed by involving citizens. Digital solutions for developing and marketing the unique industrial landscape (industrial culture, industrial nature etc.) also open up further income-generating and employment opportunities in the growth field of tourism. The polycentric Metropolis Ruhr has a typical mix of urban and rural structures. Particularly in the rural areas, digital groundwork still needs to be done. The cities and county authorities of the Metropolis Ruhr are calling on the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to promote the eligibility of digital infrastructure measures within the ERDF and to create opportunities for implementing essential investments in broadband expansion respectively. This is all the more important in view of the proposal to not implement PO3 (a more connected Europe with strategic transport and digital networks) in Germany.

## **b. Connected urban landscape Ruhr – contributions to a greener, low-carbon Europe (PO2)**

With regard to future environmental and climate policy in Europe, in Germany and in North Rhine-Westphalia, the decision-making levels agree: To achieve the common climate change mitigation targets, there is a short-term and specific need for action by all stakeholders. The local level plays a crucial role in this process. Over 70 % of climate change mitigation measures and up to 90 % of adaptation measures will need to be implemented at regional and local level. The Metropolis Ruhr accepts this responsibility.

At the same time, the region faces particular challenges in terms of climate change mitigation and adaptation, environmental quality, energy transition and regional mobility. These challenges are a result of, inter alia, the history of heavy industry, the polycentric settlement structure, the continued existence of some challenging urban neighbourhoods and the inadequate mobility structures and services both in the urban conurbations and the rural regions of the metropolitan area.

The cities and county authorities of the Metropolis Ruhr aim to take on more responsibility here and invest in the connected urban landscape, climate change mitigation and public infrastructure – as is expected by the EU, the national government and the regional state. For this, they need special support. Special funding instruments and access are required at all decision-making levels – in the future (OP) ERDF NRW 2021-2027, as well as in the context of the new European Green Deal.

### **1. Location factor “green infrastructure” – ensuring direct access to funding in OP ERDF NRW 2021-2027**

With the concept of green infrastructure, the EU has opened up a new dimension of integrated urban, economic and landscape development, which the Metropolis Ruhr is bringing to life. The foundation for this has been laid by many years of experience in designing structural change. The IBA “Emscher Park” started the dismantling of a highly industrial landscape, which continued within the scope of the Emscher Landscape Park and the ecological reconstruction of the entire Emscher system.

Building on this, the Metropolis Ruhr is striving for further stages of integration, coordination and connecting of urban landscape development, sustainable water management, green urban development, climate-neutral mobility and applied climate change mitigation, as well as climate adaptation. In an innovative combination with other infrastructure, green infrastructure is intended to guarantee sustainable development prospects, better quality of life and greater appeal of the Ruhr as a location. Attractive green infrastructure is also a relevant location factor for the economy. Consideration of both the ecological and economic dimension of green infrastructure can therefore be seen in close connection with the smart site development in PO1.

In order to achieve the bundle of integrated objectives, measures and projects of green infrastructure, suitable access to funding in the OP ERDF NRW 2021-2027 is required. For that reason, the EU’s specific objectives iv (“*promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and disaster resilience*”) and vii (“*enhancing biodiversity, green infrastructure in the urban*”)

*environment, and reducing pollution*”) of PO2 need to be implemented appropriately in the OP ERDF in North Rhine-Westphalia. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to include the specific objective vii of PO2 in the ERDF NRW 2021-2027 funding catalogue. This means ensuring that the “Green Infrastructure.NRW” funding programme is maintained.

When designing appropriate programme, development and project funding for green infrastructure, it must be ensured that the funding models of the OP ERDF are open and compatible with the intended integration of various fields of action. To be more precise, it must be possible to combine local and regional investment with regional state funds, national funds and EU funds.

## **2. Enabling regional contributions to a greener, low-carbon Europe – supporting urban mobility**

The European model region Ruhr is pursuing the aim of creating sustainable solutions for urban mobility in the polycentric area through new forms of intermodality and multimodality, through alternative propulsion systems (such as e-mobility and hydrogen), through autonomous mobility and environmentally friendly transport infrastructure (such as cycle highways, railways and waterways). Innovation and pilot projects in the field of smart traffic management and the efficient connection of different traffic modes are intended to support these processes. In doing so, the holistic view of the interactions between urban and rural areas provides a special opportunity. Improving urban transport systems as a whole will reduce dependency on motor vehicles and promote the decarbonisation of road traffic. Therefore, the specific objective iv of PO3 (*“promoting sustainable, multimodal urban mobility”*) should be moved to PO2 or taken into consideration in PO2 respectively.

## **3. Urban mining as a strategic solution – driving forward further development of the Ruhr circular economy**

With its diverse building structures and existing logistical cycles, the Metropolis Ruhr has an extensive stock of materials. For a circular economy to be effective, on the one hand, new buildings and products must be designed in such a way that material separation and reuse are taken into consideration from the outset (in the sense of full recyclability). On the other hand, the built-in stock has to be organised logistically and systematically beyond life cycles and sometimes over longer periods, and materials are to be made available again. For example, in addition to the development of sustainable building materials, the recyclability of traditional building materials (especially gravel and sand) should be consistently pursued. In perspective, a research and testing centre for urban mining can save raw materials, avoid long transport routes and thus contribute towards environmental protection and climate change mitigation. Further developing the regional circular economy in accordance with the guiding principle “from waste management to security of supply” is part of the European model region. Because of the need for smart and digital solutions, there is a direct connection to PO1 here.

## **c. Education and cohesion – contributions to a more social Europe (PO4)**

With the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU institutions have prominently placed social issues on the agenda. Social problems are particularly concentrated in the Metropolis Ruhr. Specific to the region are, for example, an increased (child) poverty rate, a high number of households not reached by education, and increased long-term unemployment. However, condensed social problems also serve as a test bed. They offer the opportunity to use the ESF+ to develop innovative solutions and to transfer successful approaches to other regions. As a model region for just structural change, the Metropolis Ruhr directly and indirectly contributes to effectively achieving European targets in the area of poverty reduction, education and further training.

### **1. Fostering lifelong learning – shaping structural change**

Lifelong learning is a key instrument in shaping structural change and dealing with demographic change. It helps to overcome the problem of poverty and is a key component in ensuring a skilled regional work force. The national and regional ESF+ programmes should aim to enable the further development of local education landscapes. This includes bolstering training and qualification measures, which are targeted towards specific groups, as well as formal, non-formal and vocational training. The qualification of specialists in small and medium-sized companies, as well as tailor-made measures for people without formal qualifications should be a priority. Thematically, the following topics are particularly important to the region: qualifications for digital change, creating awareness for environmental and climate change mitigation, and intercultural programmes to strengthen social cohesion.

### **2. Creating opportunities – supporting children and young people at risk of poverty**

Providing support to children and young people at risk of poverty is a priority in the Metropolis Ruhr. This requires target group specific measures that go beyond the standard social services and the general education system. Measures should encompass innovative approaches that provide children and young people with access to education and extra-curricular care, as well as cultural and leisure activities. Easily accessible services that go beyond the standard system of career guidance are also necessary for young people to get a foothold in the labour market. These services should be linked to the programme “Kein Abschluss ohne Anschluss” (meaning: no dead-end qualifications), which is currently supported by the ESF North Rhine-Westphalia. The national and regional ESF+ programmes should be in line with these priorities.

### **3. Continuing fighting long-term unemployment – promoting reintegration**

Fighting long-term unemployment is a key area of activity for the Metropolis Ruhr. Many local authorities have put strategies in place and these strategies need effective tools. Therefore, measures to reintegrate the long-term unemployed into the labour market must remain eligible for funding under the ESF+ NRW. This particularly applies to measures that are designed to ensure a close-knit range of coaching and advisory services, and includes easily accessible advisory services such as those currently provided by the advice- and info points for the long-term unemployed.

#### **4. Empowering immigrants – promoting school and job-related integration**

As a metropolitan area, the Metropolis Ruhr has an above-average proportion of people with an immigration background. A feature that is specific to the region is a local concentration of people who have immigrated from South-East Europe. Immigrants from South-East Europe compete on the labour market for casual employment with the local unemployed and displaced persons, while permanently claiming social security benefits as "top-ups" and "supplements". Local authorities also bear the main burden when it comes to integrating displaced people. Successfully integrating displaced people and people with an immigration background strengthens local cohesion and relieves municipal budgets. Therefore, national and regional ESF+ programmes are to provide access to funding, especially for language courses and measures for school and job-related integration.

#### **5. Promoting equality – expanding the employment of women**

Gender equality is a crosscutting objective of regional development. In relation to the labour market, it is particularly important for integration, as well as the fight against child poverty. The national and regional ESF+ programmes must especially promote measures to support women (in care situations) in their (re)entry into working life as well as entrepreneurship among women. All projects need to reflect the specific circumstances of women. For example, it must be possible to participate in educational projects on a part-time basis and all measures need to include childcare options. Measures to introduce women to STEM professions should also be promoted.

#### **6. Facilitating tailored opportunities – creating more flexibility**

In order to reflect local conditions, the Metropolis Ruhr calls on the national and regional governments to ensure a high degree of flexibility in individual ESF+ programmes. This applies, for example, to the flexible handling of age thresholds when addressing young people. In addition, integrated approaches to urban and district development should be possible. In doing so, the regional government – in continuation of the "Starke Quartiere – Starke Menschen" programme (meaning: strong quarters – strong people) – shall define clear responsibilities. It shall ensure the administration of joint calls from the ESF+ NRW and the ERDF NRW at *one* ministry and an adequate budget for these calls.

#### **7. Strengthening advisory services and networks – expanding regional advisory structures**

Effective implementation of the ESF+ needs a regional structure of advisory services and networking. The "Regionalagenturen NRW" have proven themselves as a structure for creating local networks and regional platforms. They need sufficient leeway so that they can provide advice on a case-by-case basis and fine-tune the implementation of the programmes to their specific local contexts.

#### **d. Liveable Metropolis Ruhr - contributions to a Europe closer to citizens (PO5)**

The local level plays a key role as a place to live, stay and identify with. Therefore, expectations are high for a conceptual and constructional qualification of city and district areas, as well as city and district landscapes. This applies even more to the Metropolis Ruhr since regional challenges are clearly reflected in the public sphere. These, in particular, include a lack of attractive commercial space, vacant spaces in city centres, social ghettoisation in certain neighbourhoods and visible demographic changes that require the adaptation of infrastructure and services within walking distance.

##### **1. Promoting integrated neighbourhood development – combining climate resilience, local supply and leisure**

For the Metropolis Ruhr, as a heterogeneous conurbation, integrated, sustainable and smart neighbourhood development will become even more important in the coming years. Therefore, the ERDF in NRW should generally support quality-oriented solutions which consider several strategic goals. These include, for instance, the climate-resilient design of neighbourhoods, the improvement of existing infrastructure and expansion of local supply (keyword: integrated supply concepts), the improvement of connections to open and green spaces and the promotion of educational opportunities and creative work on site. Opportunities to support housing for lower income groups should also be created (“social housing”). By designing urban districts attractively, disadvantaged (residential) areas can be upgraded and mixed socially. In doing so, the involvement of the local population, by using easily accessible forms of (digital) participation processes, can effectively advance neighbourhood development.

##### **2. Gaining security and visibility – investing in the modernisation of public spaces**

In the context of making public spaces more attractive, the (re)modelling of public spaces into welcoming places and meeting venues is an important task for the cities and county authorities of the Ruhr Metropolis. On the one hand, this refers to the city centres with their shopping streets, marketplaces and catering areas, where there is a considerable need for renovation and modernisation. On the other hand, it is important to take a look at the central points of public transport. Improving the security and visibility of train stations, as well as bus and tram stops, not only contributes to PO5, but also to PO2 by creating a positive interaction between urban development and the use of public transport.

##### **3. Strengthening the promotion of tourism – recognising the value of industrial culture and industrial nature**

Tourism can sustainably pursue the social, ecological and economic safeguarding of the cultural and identity-creating heritage. Industrial culture and industrial nature have become known as authentic and unique places of experience far beyond the region. These locations and their international value also help people identify with their region. Furthermore, they generate income-generating and employment opportunities. Recognising industrial culture and industrial nature equally as cultural heritage in tourism promotion, in addition to castles, palaces and traditional cultural landscapes, is long overdue. The future OP ERDF NRW should thus create or rather maintain funding opportunities for extensive tourism-related exploitation and marketing.

#### **4. Ensuring access and transfer of knowledge – promoting analogue and digital accessibility**

Promoting accessibility for all groups of society is a crosscutting issue that plays an important role in neighbourhoods, as well as in city centres, leisure and relaxation areas. In addition to constructional access, this also means promoting the transfer of information and knowledge. This is not only a question of developing analogue solutions, but also one of testing digital applications. In the OP ERDF NRW 2021-2027, funds are to be provided specifically for this crosscutting issue.

## **V. Design and implementation of programmes – proposals for administrative simplification**

The application and implementation of projects funded by the ERDF NRW and the ESF NRW is complex and often presents funding recipients with challenges. Based on the experiences gained in coping with funding, the Metropolis Ruhr is submitting specific proposals to the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to simplify administration. These proposals are intended to contribute to an increased efficiency in the use of resources at the local level and to the successful implementation of funding projects.

### **1. Ensuring uniform requirements with regard to programmes and managing authorities – bringing about changes for the efficient application of European structural programmes**

An efficient, targeted and straightforward use of the ERDF and ESF+ requires uniform conditions, for instance for personnel cost presentation, data acquisition and accounting. Aligning the administrative guidelines for processing funding applications would make life a lot easier for cities and county authorities. The State of North Rhine-Westphalia should harmonise conditions and requirements in such a way that they are adopted by the executive district authorities (in German: Bezirksregierungen; of which there are three in the Metropolis Ruhr: Düsseldorf, Münster and Arnsberg). To ensure consistent alignment, standardised application and verification forms should also be introduced.

### **2. Strengthening digitalisation in programme management – avoiding bureaucracy**

The administrative tasks associated with the handling of EU-funded projects tie up enormous human and financial resources and generate a high bureaucratic burden (e.g. receipts lists, analogue file management and the sending of original documents etc.). Such requirements do not exist in other funding programmes of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia (e.g. the directive on financial support for city traffic). To use resources efficiently, bureaucracy-based regulations should be dismantled and digital procedures introduced. Digital solutions as a crosscutting issue and task must be particularly used in the management of funding programmes. For example, the approval of electronic invoices (PDF or e-bills) can make things considerably simpler for project partners when calling up funds.

### **3. Reducing the number of audits – building on the capacity to act at local level**

In ERDF-funded projects, calls for funds are checked and audited by the audit offices (in German: Rechnungsprüfungsamt, RPA). This procedure has not been introduced by the EU, but by the State of North Rhine-Westphalia as part of the administration and control system (specification of “audit trails”). This preliminary check is not provided for in the current ESF. As a result, the current practice with the procedures laid down by the regional state leads to confusion, additional burden on personnel and long delays when calling up funds. Eliminating the additional checking and auditing of funds calls by RPAs or external auditing firms would make the process easier and save costs.

#### **4. Recognising relevant personnel and material costs of the cities and county authorities – strengthening the capacity to act at local level**

It is imperative for cities and county authorities to have personnel for managing and implementing funding projects. Accordingly, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia should provide in its funding guidelines for the recognition of personnel and material costs as part of the total eligible expenditure of a project. Moreover, lump sums could be used to make settlements easier.

#### **5. Recognising earmarked donations and other grants as cities' own contribution – strengthening the capacity to act at local level**

At present, regional state budgetary law allows earmarked donations from third parties in the context of a funding project to be offset against the local authority's own contribution. However, the city or county authority is obliged to pay at least 10 % of the total eligible expenditure on its own. This requirement has not proven itself, especially in the case of cooperation projects in which each partner is to contribute its own share, thus falling below 10 %. Therefore, it should be possible to use earmarked donations, sponsorship funds and contributions from partners in order to finance the entire local authority's own contribution. The State of North Rhine-Westphalia's drafted finance act 2020 provides for this. This rule should definitely be implemented and find its way into the regional state's budgetary rules and funding guidelines.

#### **6. Facilitating more successful applications – introducing central support services and accelerating approvals**

Especially in two-stage competition procedures, a lack of information among applicants often leads to applications being delayed in the second stage or not being made at all. Therefore, it is essential to provide extensive advice right from the first stage of application, i.e. both regarding the content of the funding project and the funding objectives, as well as the legal aspects that become relevant at a later stage. This is why the Metropolis Ruhr proposes that central project and funding advice is provided by the regional state. This advice could provide (potential) applicants from the start with all the information relevant for the application (e.g. via FAQ lists) and could provide advice on an individual basis (also by telephone). This should make it possible to issue grants in the second stage much more quickly.

#### **7. Supplementing the leading market strategy – allowing open-theme funding calls**

The promotion of innovation is a cornerstone of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia's economic policy. Open innovation processes across industries and leading markets make important contributions to this goal. The Metropolis Ruhr thus proposes to stimulate risk-taking for new developments and open innovation processes via appropriate funding incentives. In this context, it would be desirable to launch open-theme and open-industry calls for funding which do not yet define the applicants in terms of sectors and/or subjects, thus constituting a valuable addition to calls for competition in specific leading markets. Companies and lead partners could benefit from such calls when, for instance, implementing springboard innovations.

## **8. Ensuring effective synergies and interfaces in administrative practice – ensuring compatibility of funding programmes**

European guidelines present ERDF and ESF+ as compatible. Moreover, they allow for synergies with other EU programmes in order to promote integrated approaches. However, experiences of the Metropolis Ruhr show that, in practice, it is often difficult to combine different funds or programmes. In fact, this involves a great deal of administrative work. Therefore, the OP ERDF and OP ESF+ NRW must map the interfaces between the programmes even better. Furthermore, integrated projects with multiple sources of funding require *one* central ministry as the managing authority.

## **9. Ensuring recognition of existing concepts – building on existing ideas**

In their description of the matter (the situation on site, the planned instruments, etc.), integrated action plans do not take into account pre-defined funding periods. Instead, they are created in terms of basic validity. If a fund or the funding period is realigned, then an action plan may need to be adjusted and/or updated. However, there is no need for a renewed overall audit. Hence, integrated action plans of cities and county authorities that have already been recognised in the current funding period should continue to be recognised in the subsequent funding period. It is important to build on what already exists. Also when justifying additional or continuing measures, existing action plans need to be recognised.

## **10. Making budgetary resources more flexible – simplifying the financial management of projects**

In case of project delays, there are regular problems with transferring funds between financial years. As there are time delays and financial delays in many ERDF-funded projects – especially with construction projects – it is generally recommended that the regional state's contribution towards funding measures be provided beyond the year. This helps to mitigate or reduce the difficulties associated with the formation of expenditure remnants (§§ 19 in conjunction with 45 LHO NRW and VV) and the associated transfers of funds to subsequent financial years. Therefore, the Metropolis Ruhr calls for the fiscal annuality principle (§ 11 (1) LHO NRW and VV) to be abolished for all funding programmes in the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, including the areas that receive co-financing from the EU. This budget flexibility could be supported by setting up project accounts, into which the funds are paid and which are available over a period that goes beyond the year. These project accounts could be linked to the grant-paying authorities through separate budget management. Alternatively, a similar degree of flexibility could be achieved by adding or increasing the percentage of self-farming funds (§ 15(2) LHO NRW and VV) in the respective budget titles or groups of titles from which all funding programmes are financed.

## **11. Disbursing money from the ESF+ faster – avoiding interim financing**

Particularly in the ESF(+), projects are implemented by non-governmental organisations. Once the project has started, they are often unable to guarantee interim financing over a long period of time. Therefore, it must be possible to make the first request for funding immediately after the project starts and a rapid payment of approved funds in the ESF+ must be guaranteed.

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## **12. Allowing flexible project timelines – responding to project conditions**

Coordination, procedural and participation processes, compliance with laws and guidelines, as well as the sometimes difficult market situation when contracting companies and hiring personnel, can lead to delays in implementing a funding project. Thus, rigid funding periods that are not geared to the specific requirements of projects are a hindrance. Flexibility in determining the duration of the implementation and/or funding period according to the complexity of the project in question, as well as its individual measures, would be in the interest of all project partners. This particularly applies to projects that should not start until the end of the funding period. For example, a cycle path project that requires the construction of several bridges cannot be implemented in 36 months. Further flexibility is needed here.

## **13. Making earmarking periods more flexible – taking into account the nature of the project**

The minimum earmarking period for ERDF-funded projects is 5 years. However, in North Rhine-Westphalia, earmarking periods of up to 25 years are common. The setting of a deadline should not depend on the decision-making level, but rather on the character of a project. In research laboratories, for instance, there are additional costs for renting equipment that can no longer be used, but still needs to be kept due to the earmarking. Also when changing building contractors, (too) long earmarking periods are a hindrance. That was the case, for example, when upgrading the Rheinische Bahn railway to the RS1 cycle highway, which meant a takeover by Straßen.NRW. Accordingly, long earmarking periods should be avoided if the “durability” of a project appears to be significantly shorter than the duration until deadline (e.g. in case of playgrounds and planting).

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