

**Policy tool for assessing** **opportunities for the use of ecosystem services in River Deltas and instruments of regional policies in support of that.**

# **1. Introduction**

This report is prepared as one of the outcomes of the Delta Lady project with the aim to develop a Policy Tool for assessing opportunities for the use of ecosystem services in river deltas.

## **Aim of the Delta Lady project**

The project addresses rivers deltas in Europe and their potential to develop innovative activities aiming at the utilization of local bio-resources for the development of the bio-economy. The project aims at the definition and improvement of policy instruments that enable to foster the capabilities of using deltas' ecosystem services for regional economic development. The project addressed 6 delta regions: Rijn Delta (Netherlands), Danube Delta (Romania), Camargue Delta (France), Albufera Delta (Spain), Po Delta (Italy) and River Blackwater Delta (Ireland).

The overall aim of the Delta Lady project was to improve the implementation of regional development policies and programmes, in particular, Investment for Growth and Jobs[[1]](#footnote-1) and, where relevant, ETC[[2]](#footnote-2) programmes, in the field of the protection and development of natural and cultural heritage.

## **Policy issues and problems addressed**

The delta regions in Europe are rich in biodiversity but economically poor. Nowadays, they are located on the periphery of mainstream economic activities and are low economic performers in Europe. Large rivers in Europe have nature reserves in river deltas. These reserves accommodate wonderful biodiversity but rarely wealth. The capabilities which were needed for agriculture, transport and manufacturing lost their value in the course of changes to the presently dominant knowledge-based economies. Even on the Rhine River, the most industrialized river of Europe, its northern delta arm, which constitutes the Frisian region, is an economic periphery in the Netherlands and a low economic performer in Europe when measured by value per person in this country. Unemployment is high, young people move out to other regions and the knowledge basis is narrowing down.

The policy issue is about how to foster the cultural capabilities available from the past and develop new ones based on the ecosystem services in the river deltas in Europe for sustainable economic development. These capabilities enable modernizing economies toward value-adding products and services in tourism, sports, arts, education and so on.

## **Policy instruments**

The challenge in the Delta Lady project was to define policy instruments that enhance the above-described capabilities through the use of biodiversity for food production, product designs based on local plants, waterways for housing, the landscape for culture and so on. This policy tool report is about the example of the Delta Lady project of how to define these policy instruments[[3]](#footnote-3), which leads to some lessons on how to find opportunities for the use of ecosystem services in Deltas.

Natural and cultural heritage forms an integral part of our natural resources and are being utilized as assets in regional development. The issue of the Delta Lady project fits in with the EU 2020 strategy, focusing on (1) Smart growth: exploring new opportunities for delta regions; (2) Sustainable growth – all the policies addressed have sustainability components; (3) Inclusive growth – the new approach of the Delta Lady project is geared towards the creation of projects, jobs and companies that can contribute to the partner regions.

The issues of the Delta Lady project matched with the Interreg Europe program, particularly with the selected specific objective in terms of creating capabilities for sustainable use and development of the deltas' cultural heritage and biodiversity which can be a key added value to the modern economies based on diversified products and services in delta regions. The Interreg Europe Programme funding was the basis for the funded partners in the regions to cooperate and learn from each other, through the good practices and experiences of delta communities and to be able to develop more comprehensive strategies addressing deltas.

The Delta lady project also matched with EU policies referring to ecosystem services in particular with respect to biodiversity, in the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020, the EU Habitats Directive and in the EU Blueprint to safeguard Europe's Waters. But from the start, the Delta Lady partners realised that the development of ecosystem services requires far more than nature conservation because deltas accommodate important ecological values, concentrations of economic activities and infrastructure which face new pressures caused by climate change. Development of the ecosystem services in the river deltas enables added value in ecological and economic terms, thereby fostering sustainable regional policies.

The Delta Lady project aimed at the definition and improvement of policy instruments that enable to foster of the capabilities in using deltas' ecosystem services for regional economic development. To reach this improvement the project was focused on the exchange of know-how about actions in the past, good practices, capabilities and initiatives, as well as on regional policymaking aiming at the use of ecosystem services for regional economic development.

The project delivered tangible project proposals for the regional implementation of actions that foster the potential of partners to use ecosystem services and strengthen economic development based on the use of local cultural and natural qualities. The project will eventually result in the improved implementation of the regional policy instruments leading to the improved use of deltas' ecosystem services for regional economic development. This is done through policy improvement, improvement of governance, learning sessions, development of action plans, identification of good practices and sharing and active work in chosen deltas with the involvement of regional stakeholder groups. The project also collected and disseminated the knowledge gained in the good practice directory[[4]](#footnote-4) for delta regions. The specific Delta Lady approach is described in more detail below, to give some guidance on how to find opportunities for the use of ecosystem services in Deltas.

# **2. The Delta Lady approach**

We use here the specific Delta Lady approach to address the question of how to find opportunities for the use of ecosystem services in deltas.

The guideline steps in this policy tool are based on the steps in the Delta Lady approach and the experiences and evaluation with these steps in the Delta Lady project. The description of the approach presented taken is based on actual steps undertaken in the project, based on the exchange of experiences as an interregional learning process among the partner organisations and their staff, as well as among the stakeholders in the partner regions and other regional policy actors in Europe.

The first main aspects of the Delta Lady project approach were the **Regional Stakeholder Groups (RSG)** set up in every partner region consisting of relevant actors in the field of the deltas' ecosystem services and their use for economic development. The working arrangements of each group were tailored to the regional context but the main features were the same. The RSGs met at least twice a year to learn about the interregional practices, explore how to apply them in a regional context and work towards so-called regional action plans. In some cases, smaller subgroups worked more intensively on subthemes or tasks.

The second main aspect of the approach is identifying previous **(good) practices**. The question of what went wrong in the economic and regional development of the delta needed to be turned into the policy question about how to generate valuable activities based on the deltas' cultural and natural qualities. Various strategies were already available, but the focus in the process was on the exchange of know-how about actions in the past, capabilities and initiatives, as well as on regional policymaking aiming at the use of ecosystem services for regional economic development.

The third aspect of the Delta Lady approach is the use of **case studies**. In the project implementation, the case studies made by the partners for the project proved to be a useful method for policy learning at both partner and stakeholder levels. On the regional stakeholder level, the case study method helped to analyse a situation and challenges linked to the project issue and propose interventions to improve the region's targeted policy. On the interregional partner level, learning happened through case study presentation sessions, in which each partner presented the regional challenge addressed in their case study. The partners conducted the case studies related to the addressed deltas themselves. But the Delta Lady project offered the possibility for the delta regions to be visited during the interregional learning sessions by the other partners to get in-depth knowledge of the regional situation. Unfortunately due the COVID not all regions were visited physically and part of the meetings were online. Interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders, an analysis was done and policy improvements proposed were discussed with the partners, results were also discussed by the partner staff present with regional stakeholders, responsible policymakers, politicians and regional media.

The fourth aspect of the Delta Lady approach was participation in the **Policy Learning Platform[[5]](#footnote-5)** Seminars and conferences. Interregional Policy Learning Seminars were organized during which partners and stakeholders exchanged and learned about the relevant policies and practices, and shared experiences from case studies and the action planning process. Participation was open to all interested actors. The project also tried to participate in the policy learning platform activities of Interreg Europe Platforms to learn and to contribute.

The fifth aspect of the Delta Lady approach was the **development process of the regional Action Plans**. This was a two-way approach. In one direction each partner worked closely with their RSG throughout the project to integrate the learning from seminars/meetings/workshops and regional interactions into a tailored made regional Action Plan for the implementation of regional policy measures and initiatives for the development and use of the deltas' ecosystem services aimed at fostering the deltas' natural and cultural qualities for economic development. In the other direction, the partners learned from each other and explicitly reported in their action plans the inspiration and ideas they got from the other regions[[6]](#footnote-6).

## **Actors involved**

Besides the stakeholders in the regional stakeholder group, other actors were involved to disseminate knowledge about innovative approaches, to raise awareness for ecosystem services and support and enable future policy-making and action plan implementation:

* policymakers in the process of policy improvement that foster capabilities in the use of ecosystem services for deltas' economic development;
* organizations that provide funding for new developments;
* policy makers & government organizations that support innovations, investments, and manage investments and ERDF and other funding;
* policymakers in other peripheral regions;
* organisations responsible for the management, exploitation of natural areas and/or cultural heritage;
* Regional Development and Environmental agencies.

## **Documentation of the exchange of experience**

After every learning session, a report was developed by the advisory lead partner to summarise the content of the learning session. The advisory lead partner also provided a template for the description of the case studies that the partners reviewed and agreed upon. The case studies on the partner deltas identified the main challenges and issues and formulated strategies and policy recommendations. The partners selected the good practices to be included in the good practice directory after the learning sessions. The outcomes of the learning sessions were presented and discussed with the regional stakeholder groups. The regional stakeholder groups were also involved in gathering opinions in the form of a structured interviews for the case study report. For this regional stakeholder workshops were conducted.

The learning sessions also offered the opportunity for external experts to be involved. Partner staff of the other regions are of course also a type of expert that during their study visits had the chance to observe the good policies and practices hands-on in the visited region. Particularly in the case of the introduction of the different innovative uses of ecosystem services in deltas based on the natural and cultural heritage the participation of both the partner staff as experts as well as the participation of external experts was sought for a better coverage of the subject. Of course, these experts’ ideas became after the learning session part of the report summarizing the content, and describing the ideas developed during the workshop. And the experts’ role of the partner staff, and partner representatives along with the lead advisory partner contributed to the activities of the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform.

The learning sessions and the exchange of experiences between delta regions in terms of defining which policy instruments were also used to generalise knowledge, comparing the different regions and cases, for instance about how to generate sustainable development for the future, and with what topics of entrepreneurship and environment for innovation in deltas; and how to make an attractive delta environment for young entrepreneurs and establish a learning and probing environment for innovation. An international final hybrid closing conference was dedicated to providing practical examples of how ecosystem services can be used to combine the need to preserve ecosystems with the need to ensure growth and jobs. The Delta Lady project shows that this needs the introduction of new business models and new products and services in deltas, especially community-based business models.

In every region, the discussion and assessment of the opportunities lead to action plan proposals, and the concretization of the proposals by the regional stakeholder groups towards such a regional action plan. The proposals of the partners and their regional stakeholder groups were also assessed and elaborated by the advisory lead partner and shared to the partners for adaptation and adoption, to aid in the establishment of the policy action plans.

# **3. Steps to assess opportunities**

## **Boundaries**

This policy tool gives some guiding steps for assessing opportunities for the use of ecosystem services in relation to regional policies. This means that regional policy actors need instruments of regional policies to support the circumstances for using the ecosystem services in deltas. So opportunities that need a change of EU regulations are not within the scope of assessment. A further boundary is that the Delta Lady project took place in river deltas. Ecosystem services based on a completely different ecosystems like a forest, give also other opportunities.

## **Assessing opportunities**

Assessing opportunities for the use of ecosystem services in relation to regional policies is not a straightforward academic process of analysing the regional economy and ecosystems for opportunities. This analytical process might be part of creating a short list of potential opportunities. This analytical process might also take inspiration from other regional ecosystem cases from elsewhere. In this policy tool, we propose that the shortlist needs to be assessed in a regional process to really value the worth of the opportunities. The cases will have a different function in the assessment. Apart from that the cases form an inspiration of what would be possible; they also function as a source of raising awareness about the possibilities of ecosystem services and practical problems for regional actors. Development of interregional networks are instrumental for generating and shortlisting of opportunities, as well as assessing and resolving possible barriers.

## **Regional process**

The Delta Lady project shows the importance of the involvement of regional actors. They are a source of ideas and support for policy actions. The regional process increases the efficiency of the implementation of the new policy measures and actions. However, an explicit regional process needs to be organised to use the regional actors. To develop specific ideas, the first focus in the process should be on stakeholders relevant to the ecosystem services themselves. Policy actors as listed before, might be part of the regional working group but this depends if they really have a stake in the ecosystem service or just bear the general responsibility for regional economic development or the ecosystem. The Delta Lady project showed the importance of a physical exchange between regional actors which was not always possible in COVID time. The project also showed the value of the physical exchange of partners during interregional meetings.

## **Action plans**

The assessed opportunities for the use of ecosystem services in relation to regional policies are a process where ideas are pitched for policy action. In the Delta Lady project this process is both in the regional stakeholder groups as well as in interregional partner groups. Even if this process would only take place in the delta region itself, it is still key that the process of looking for opportunities for ecosystem services is seen in the light of the development of the action plans. The action plans contribute to the concretization of the proposals through the introduction of new business models and new products and services in deltas, especially community-based business models. The action plans are important in terms of documentation of the challenge and the chosen solution in the region.

1. https://ec.europa.eu/regional\_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2014-2020/se/2014se16rfop009\_en [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. European Territorial Cooperation [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Policy Instruments addressed in Delta Lady: https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/deltalady/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/deltalady/good-practices/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Initiative of Interreg Europe programme to promote continuous EU-wide policy learning of good practices related to regional development policies: https://www.interregeurope.eu/policy-learning-platform [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All Action Plans of partners can be found on the project website in the Library link: https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/deltalady/library/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)