



Vado e Torno – Erfahrungen im Ausland sammeln

Action Plan as Part of the Interreg Europe Project 'SME Internationalisation Exchange'

By Project Partner 4 – NBank, Lower-Saxony/ Germany

Part I – General information

		 
Project: SIE – SME Internationalisation Exchange		
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Part II – Policy context

The Action Plan aims to impact:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Investment for Growth and Jobs programme
	<input type="checkbox"/>	European Territorial Cooperation programme
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other regional development policy instrument
Name of the policy instrument addressed: Operational Programme Niedersachsen ERDF/ESF 2014 - 2020 (2014DE16M2OP001)		

Part III – Details of the actions envisaged

ACTION 1

1. The background (please describe the lessons learnt from the project that constitute the basis for the development of the present Action Plan)

The aim to create an initiative that orientates itself at the 'Go and Come Back' (Vado e Torno) initiative developed in the Italian Molise region and that was presented during Phase 1 of the SIE-Project there was the idea that – at least some regions in Lower-Saxony- face similar problems.

There are regions in Lower Saxony that are quite similar to the Molise Region and that are facing challenges like remoteness, poor transport infrastructure (both private as e.g. connection to highways/ international airports but also public transport) and poor connection to the internet which does not foster the internationalisation of enterprises.

In addition to this, there is also a lack of larger cities with both access to higher education/ high schools and also attractive recreational offers for young people. These regions also do face demographic challenges due to the fact that young people often move away and the population is ageing. This is a challenge to enterprises in general that might have problems to find qualified staff, let alone trying to act at an international level.

There are nonetheless some major differences that should be kept in mind when trying to transfer the 'Go and Comeback' approach to Lower-Saxony.

Firstly, Lower-Saxony is by far larger than the Molise region. Lower-Saxony has about eight million inhabitants, covering 47.614,07 square kilometres whereas the Molise region has about 310.000 inhabitants and is covering 4.437,65 square kilometres.

Due to this fact, there are regions in Lower-Saxony that are very different from Molise and Lower-Saxony is home of companies that are working at an international level very successfully like Volkswagen, Continental tyres, Enercon or Big Dutchman. And even in the more, remote regions described above there are international companies like Stiebel Eltron, Symrise or Otto Bock.

Nevertheless, SMEs do make up about 99,5 % of the enterprises in this federal state and offering these a new chance to act at an international level and attracting or keeping young professionals might be worthwhile.

One has also to keep in mind that the NBank does not cover the whole territory of Lower-Saxony, so it is not possible to select certain regions that are the most similar to the Molise region. Thus, SMEs from the whole of Lower-Saxony should be allowed for this initiative, learning from the experiences from the Italian partner region of the SIE-project.

The original model developed in the Molise region can be described as follows:

'Molise has relatively low levels of internationalisation among its SMEs community as well as depopulation processes due to young people leaving the region to find employment. In order to address these issues and encourage the development of new companies, the Molise region developed the innovative "Go & Come Back" project which aims to boost SMEs internationalisation in the region.

The project offers international internships to 40 young graduates from Molise region so they can gain valuable work experience abroad in order to bring back international skills, connections and experience which can be used in the region to create a range of new international start-up companies.

Young people from the region were invited to apply to a public selection in order to participate in the programme.

Opportunities and placements outside the EU were identified through a network of individuals or organisations from Molise who are living and working in companies all over the world. These networks include associations of Italian people abroad and international Chambers of Commerce.

The internships costs are funded by the project and at the end of the period, when young people return back, they are offered a financial incentive of up to €20,000 to establish a new international business in the Molise region. They also have the option to partner with up to 4 other young people involved in the scheme to pool resources in order to have a bigger investment of up to €100,000.'

It is not planned to copy or transfer the initiative 1:1 to the north of Germany but that it might have some valuable input to tackle problems that are faced in Lower-Saxony as well.

The aim of the planned initiative in Lower-Saxony is to raise awareness for the internationalisation of SMEs, especially those in the more remote regions of the federal state.

Selected participants and their companies will profit directly as they have the opportunity to gather hands-on experience abroad; either in an enterprise of their sector that already operates successfully at an international level or in a market, that is of special importance for them.

Other participants/ enterprises will also profit as in the course of the initiative, they will be in contact with bodies that can give counsel on internationalisation aspects and other opportunities or programs that might be of interest.

The Nbank would also profit as it hosts an attractive initiative on internationalisation that demonstrates, that the Nbank is not just the right point of contact for programs of the federal state of Lower-Saxony but is also a competent body when it comes to national and also international programs and initiatives. The action plan would enable the NBank to link this work to its current portfolio of internationalisation support.

The proposed action directly addresses issues that are named in the policy instrument addressed, the operational program Niedersachsen (https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/atlas/programmes/2014-2020/germany/2014de16m2op001).

The operational program states that SMEs are the backbone of the economy of Lower-Saxony with only 0,3 % - less than 1000 - of the companies have more than 250 employees. They are seen as the driving force of the economy of Lower-Saxony, at the same time, it is stated, that they face more difficulties to get support, e. g. funding.

As regards content, how to support the SMEs, that are seen as so vital, the operational program names several measures to strengthen them.

Overall aim is it, to 'support the ability of SMEs, to profit from the growth of regional, national and international Markets and from the process of innovation

In concrete programs in the Operational program this means to 'Foster sustainable and high-level employment and support for the mobility of the workforce' and 'Adaption of workforce, companies and entrepreneurs to change'.

The operational program and the proposed action plan both address the same target group – SMEs, especially small ones that might have problems to deal with the challenges of internationalisation.

They both also stress certain factors to be crucial for the success of strengthening SMEs: to make them successful at regional, national and international, they need to train their workforce, to support mobility to be able to adapt to change. Change in this case also means internationalisation, especially within the EU as the global setting for free trade is changing, so an hands-on-experience in another member state might be very important to reach this goal.

As said before, the visit of the Molise region and the similarities to regions of Lower-Saxony – especially the south of Lower-Saxony inspired the idea to transfer the 'Go and Come Back' approach from the south of Italy to northern Germany.

This is seen by many actors and stakeholder and as a result, the Suedniedersachsenprogramm (program for the south of Lower-Saxony) was developed. It addresses issues that were also identified by the SIE-project, to tackle them, it stresses the importance of developing regional mobility, the transfer of knowledge and the continuous development of the regional workforce while at the same time enhancing the regional attractiveness.

As mentioned before it is not yet sure, if it is possible to restrict the planned action to a certain region. But the problems identified in the Molise region and parts of Lower-Saxony are very similar and so are the applied measures (Molise 'Go and Come Back') and the proposed measures (action plan for Lower-Saxony). Thus, with the restrictions and adaptations named, the 'Go and Come Back' model should be transferable to Lower-Saxony.

With the experience gathered by the Molise region and the Italian SIE-project partners with their successful project and hopefully the experience gathered by the pilot action, the new approach could be a permanent offer for SMEs to gather experience concerning internationalisation. It is obvious that not all the SMEs interested will be able to take part, but it is a good means to make them aware of the topic in general and they might discover, that the NBank also supports them concerning international measures.

The NBank has the experience to handle to programs derived from the operational program, it should be able to handle an initiative like this pilot action, that is in line with the operational program. As there are means in different program from the current period, the implementation should be possible and an inclusion in the next period as well.

2. Action (please list and describe the actions to be implemented)

One aim of the original 'Go and Come back' initiative was to tackle the high rate of unemployment among young professionals in the Molise region. Thanks to the general employment rates in Germany and in Lower-Saxony as well, this problem is not seen as this urgent. Young professionals facing this should by no means be excluded from the planned initiative but it should be expanded to SMEs that do not act at an international level, but wish to and by doing so, might attract or keep young members of staff.

There are however, grant schemes available in Lower-Saxony or Germany in general like the Gruenderkredit or the Microstarter. In these schemes, the participation in an international exchange would – to my mind – be a positive aspect concerning a positive verdict in any program assisting founding or expansion. In addition to this, the staff of the Nbank does have qualified members of staff to give detailed counsel on these programs, either for the founding of a company or the expansion of an existing enterprise.

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In the following part, the planned implementation of the action in Lower-Saxony is described. As discussed at project meetings, this would be done profit from the experiences made by the Molise colleagues who offered their ongoing assistance.

1.1. Preparation Phase (core three months)

In the first phase of the implementation, mostly preparative tasks would be on the agenda. Concrete tasks in this phase would be:

- compilation of a list of companies that would be willing to offer and host a placement of a young person for a planned period of three months, offer training and ideally would also assist with the accommodation. In the original initiative in the Molise region, the selected hosts do have bonds to the region.

As it was discussed at project meeting, the bonds that developed between the project partners could also help to find suitable placements.

Other sources to find such placements would be existing contacts to companies from Lower-Saxony, that do work at an international level and that do have either have branches abroad or that cooperate with companies abroad e. g. through contacts mediated by the EEN members of staff within the Nbank

- clarification of financial details, insurance issues and housing abroad
- development of a promotional strategy; how could the initiative be promoted best, which means and channels should be used, how to reach out to the target groups efficiently. This would be done in cooperation with stakeholders and multipliers so that they are informed beforehand – before the initiative is made public – so that they can prepare their communication department once the initiative is made public
- development of training strategy for participants of the initiative
- definition of the application process, the selection jury and the process of selection of participants
- the actions described above would be coordinated by the NBank but would involve others as well, e. g. chambers or other stakeholders, that might offer seminars concerning internationalisation for a certain sector or with a focus on a certain country.
- Part of the training and preparation of the participants and companies should always be the internationalisation audit of the NBank and also an exchange with the partners and contacts in the region that the participants picks: contacts from the SIE-Project, foreign chambers on the spot and the regional EEN partner before the actual placement as part of the preparation

1.2. Promotional Phase (core three months)

- finalisation of application documents and routine
- promotion of the initiative in Lower-Saxony by the NBank (not only working for Interreg projects and EEN, that have a focus on internationalisation) but also by members of staff in the Nbanks offices that will be able to assist with the promotional material/ strategy developed in phase 1.1.
- promotion of the initiative in Lower-Saxony by stakeholders that are equipped with the materials prepared in the first phase
- selection of the four participants according to the process developed together with the above mentioned stakeholders and partners
- preparation and local training of the participants would also start in this phase. As this would also include attending e. g. workshops offered by others like chambers or sectoral associations, the exact timing would also depend on their plans. We will work with our local stakeholder group and other relevant organisations to facilitate access to appropriate and complementary activities to help with internationalisation.

1.3. Training and Placement Phase (core five months)

- finalisation of e. g. issues concerning insurances and accommodation

- finalisation of the training where necessary
- actual placement of four participants for the currently planned three months
- the participants should be in contact with the institutions in Lower-Saxony on a regular basis, this could also be done via a monthly feedback/ questionnaire.

1.4. Feedback Phase (three months + following phase)

- collection of detailed feedback, both of the participant and the host. This feedback should be asked for after some time again, also involving the original company, if the participant was employed before.
- evaluation of these, the general response to this first edition of the initiative and the feedback of stakeholders and partners should help in deciding if this model from the Molise region could also work in Lower-Saxony and should be repeated; offering more actors the chance to act at an international level.

The proposed schedule is more than a proposal, nevertheless it will have to take into consideration individual aspects like individual need and availability of trainings and of course the requirements both of the company sending and the company hosting the internship. If and where possible, individual actions should be done as early as possible.

The feedback, especially of the original company and the participant should be ongoing for the next months to evaluate the effects of the development of the participant as well as on the degree of internationalisation and innovation within the original company.

The side-effect of a competition like this would be that also participants to are not selected can be informed about issues concerning internationalisation. This could be services provided by the Enterprise Europe Network, of which the Nbank has been a member for ten years or assistance offered by the special relationship developed with certain European regions, e. g. by taking part in EU projects. It could also involve identification of programs that might be of interest for companies; in this context most of all the EU but also national mobility programs.

All these actions would take into account the experiences made in the Molise region and in the actual preparations, there surely would be additional questions coming up in the process that the SIE-partners would assist with.

1.5. Roll-out in the context of the policy instrument

Building on the experiences that are made in the pilot action and this action plan, it is planned to pursue the go-and-come back approach further. As the NBank is offering programs and initiatives for trainings and further education, this initiative should be part of the offers made in this range of activities.

The fact that there are then already people that took part would make it easier to promote the initiative, as the promotion could be more vivid with real-life examples.

In addition, the experiences gathered will ensure that the money spent will be spent in an efficient way so that a growth of the budget might more easily be seen more benevolently. Also the experience and the positive effects the placements will have might attract additional partners and sponsors, especially hopefully the stakeholders involved in the early stages of the project and the pilot action that have an idea of the development of the 'go-and-come-back' approach.

3. Players involved (please indicate the organisations in the region who are involved in the development and implementation of the action and explain their role)

- the members of staff of the Nbank would be involved. As Lower-Saxony is a rather large territorial state, the Nbank has five offices in the federal state to cover the whole area. This would secure, that information is available throughout the federal state. The members of staff would be equipped with the promotional material and get feedback information again on the project as such and the initiative planned. The members of the Nbank staff that inform on the NBanks programs do have regular days in every county of the federal state, so that the whole of Lower-Saxony would be covered, also the rural regions that are perhaps the most similar to the Molise region. This will involve mostly phase 1.2.

- the Nbank has a long-standing cooperation with both the chambers of commerce and the chambers of craft in Lower-Saxony; these will be involved as well. On the one hand to promote the initiative, on the other hand also to develop a selection process and after that also with the selection of the companies and participants. This will mostly involve phase 1.2. and 1.3.

- here is also a long-lived bonds with other associations like sectoral associations or regional alliances that would be used to promote this initiative. This will mostly involve phase 1.2. and 1.3.

- to find suitable placements abroad, first of all, the companies with a bond to Lower-Saxony should be employed; in addition to this, the partners in the Enterprise Europe Network might also assist with the more practical issues. This will mostly involve phase 1.1. and 1.3.

- project partners will also assist with finding placements as it was discussed at project meetings. This will mostly involve phase 1.1. and 1.3.

4. Timeframe

The four steps described above should be taken in twelve moths of phase two of the SIE-project, startin when the action is approved: Details on the actions can be found in part "2 – Action"

Months	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.1. Preparation Phase												
1.2. Promotional Phase												
1.3 Training and Placement												
1.4 Feedback Phase												

The whole cycle of an initial action, implementing the adopted 'Go and come back model thus would last twelve months.

5. Costs (if relevant)

1.1. Preparation Phase

Costs in this phase would include meetings with stakeholders and preparation of promotional material, an estimated amount of 500 Euro.

1.2. Promotional Phase

Costs in this phase would include events/ workshops in different regions in Lower-Saxony to cover the federal state. It is planned to have four, each estimated to cost up to 500 Euro; depending if function rooms are available in NBank branches.

1.3 Training and Placement

Costs in this phase would include the costs for four placements for three months which would amount to 24000 Euro (four placements * three months * 2000 Euro per participant).

Costs would also participation in trainings as preparation for the placements; fees are expected to cost 1000 Euro at most.

As the placements – unlike those done by the Molise partners – will only be within the EU, there should not be problems/ large additional costs concerning money transfer or insurances.

Altogether, the cost are expected to be 28000 Euros.

1.4 Feedback Phase

Costs in this phase would include travel expenses to have company visits at the sending companies after the return of the participants, at most 500 Euro.

In addition to this, there would be already calculated staff time for phase two of the SIE project.

6. Funding sources (if relevant):

Pilot action funding is being sought from the Interreg Europe SIE-Project. It would be needed to implement this action to hopefully demonstrate that this approach can assist staff as well as SMEs to think at a European level and to internationalise.

In addition to this NBank will contribute by staff time of members of staff that are actually not working on Interreg projects.

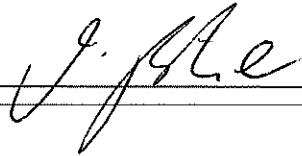
In many parts of the operational program it is stressed that there is a need to support SMEs concerning internationalisation, especially in part 3d of the program The adaption of the Go and Come Back approach would introduce this approach tested in Italy in Lower-Saxony to do exactly this, to support SMEs to internationalise.

Official Signature

Town, Date: Hannover, 16. 10. 2019

Name: Martin BARTÖLKE, Head of the Counselling Department of the NBank

Signature: _____

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Bartölke', written over a horizontal line.