

Enhancing Cross-border and Intercultural Competence on the Franco-German Border: Experiences, Reflections, Final results of the Project ACTION Saar Lorraine

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1. Introduction to the Project

Co-financed by the European Fund for Regional Development (EFRD) in the frame of the European cooperation program INTERREG IV A Greater Region, the ACTION Saar Lorraine project aims to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and executives in adapting to the challenges of the cross-border labor market. ACTION stands for “Accroître les Compétences Transfrontalières et Interculturelles des OrganisatioNs en Sarre et en Lorraine”, which means “Enhancing the cross-border and intercultural competence of organizations in the Saarland and in Lorraine”.

Begun in November 2013, this Franco-German project (Saarland – Lorraine) is a cooperation between the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (Cnam) in Lorraine and the Institute of Technology Transfer (FITT gGmbH). Moreover, the University of Applied Sciences of the Saarland (htw saar) and the Chambers of Crafts and Trades (IHK Saarland, HWK Saarland), on the German side, as well as the business incubator Eurodev Center in Forbach and the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) Eurodistrict SaarMoselle, on the French side, were associated as strategic partners of the project.

In order to sensitize managers of SMEs for the benefits of the cross-border region and support them in developing cooperation in markets of the neighboring country, the project partners also involved the “Franco-German Competence Center for Cross-border Higher and Adult Education” (Kompetenzzentrum grenzüberschreitende Weiterbildung / Pôle de formation transfrontalier, KgW / PFT), founded by the Cnam and htw saar. Jointly, they developed and implemented a range of activities, which will be explained in more detail below. It can be considered a success that the project continues despite the end of European funding.

2. Achievements of ACTION Saar Lorraine

The project underlines the importance to provide diverse offers in the region to expand the expertise in the cross-border market for prospective customers and companies and to bring them into contact – from easily accessible (freely available Internet platform) via training offers of businesses and chambers to services at university level. In order to operate successfully in the border region, intercultural competence is required, but this should not be reduced to stereotypes such as "typically German – typically French".

2.1. A website to evaluate and develop one's cross-border skills

Via their "Competence Center for Cross-border Education", the project partners first identified the needs in the field of education in order to then develop educational programs, intercultural events and services. In accordance with its overall aim, the first milestone of the project ACTION Saar Lorraine was to create an informative website with an integrated platform on which entrepreneurs can test their knowledge and skills, train themselves and enter into exchange with other interested parties). Thus, the website would not only make the project itself more visible and give it a corporate identity, but also meet the modern, user-friendly requirements of flexible training, independently e.g. of fixed course hours. In a nutshell, the development of the website pursued two main objectives: 1) enabling employers and SME/SMI employees to develop their cross-border skills (language, country-specific knowledge and intercultural communication) and 2) bringing entrepreneurs of the Saarland and Lorraine into contact and thereby establish cross-border networks. The website and the platform are available in German and French throughout (see <http://www.action-saarlorraine.eu>).

As a measure to identify one's own strengths and weaknesses in the cross-border area, three freely accessible multiple choice online questionnaires adapted to the needs of French and German speaking entrepreneurs were developed: a language test, a test of general knowledge and an intercultural quiz. At the end of the tests, users obtain a general result for free (for more detailed results, they have to register on the platform). By participating in these tests, the user finds useful information relating to the cross-border economy and discovers the objectives of the project ACTION Saar Lorraine. In addition, special tools are offered to develop or expand practice-oriented skills in the above mentioned three areas of 1) language, 2) practical knowledge and 3) intercultural competence by the means of specialized glossaries, practical exercises and models for written communication. More precisely, the platform is structured around four components:

- 1) The "Understanding" section (language) is subdivided into two segments, "Correspondence" (letters, emails, telephone conversations) and "Meetings" (invitations with agenda, minutes). It includes introductory texts, a phonetic table, exercises and examples. The user also finds an economy-related glossary and useful links.
- 2) The "Entrepreneurship" component (country-specific knowledge) consists of informative texts on general or specific topics (types of enterprises, human relations, business matters, tax regime, legal aspects, the social system, logistics) and provides, again, useful links.
- 3) In the intercultural section "Communicating", visitors learn to understand the rules and mechanisms of communication in France and Germany. It offers tools such as a list of "false friends" and information on ways of living and doing, which are obviously differentiating from one country to

another. By using tables, checklists and other documents, users can, in parallel, immerse themselves in project management as well as in planning and holding meetings across borders.

- 4) The networking part “Forum” encourages an exchange between entrepreneurs having a user profile. It offers sections such as "Questions and Answers", "Bulletin board" and "Documentation" (of events).

The users thus find themselves well equipped with information relevant to the Franco-German border territory. The platform was officially launched during the symposium on 24 September 2013. The website of ACTION Saar Lorraine was completely revised in 2014, in the course of which many contents were made freely accessible (i.e. without registration). Moreover, an interactive map with some 900 organizations and institutions of the so-called Greater Region (Saarland, Lorraine, Luxembourg, Wallonia, Rhineland Palatinate) was created in 2014. This map makes it possible to capture visually the cross-border competence or know-how existing in the Greater Region.



Figure 1: French homepage of the platform (<http://www.action-saarlorraine.eu/fr>)

2.2. Events to create a habit of cross-border meetings

In parallel, networking activities between enterprises in the Saarland and in Lorraine were promoted in the events organized by the project team of ACTION Saar Lorraine. In the course of the year 2014, four Franco-German after-work meetings took place in the evening. Organized in close cooperation with the strategic partners of the project ACTION Saar Lorraine and other selective partners, these after-works constituted privileged moments of cross-border networking for different audiences in both a friendly and professional setting. They dealt with issues relevant to SMEs/SMIs of the Saarland-Lorraine cross-border region in very different, unusual formats every time: a film-and-discussion evening, a theater-and-discussion evening, a football tournament followed by a panel discussion in cooperation with the Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK) Saarland and the Franco-German Grammar School in Saarbrücken and a “BarCamp” (or “non-conference”) in cooperation with the Chamber of Crafts (HWK) Saarland.

In the first half of 2015, two Franco-German “Manager Cafés” were organized as breakfast meetings, one in Saarbrücken, one in Forbach. The morning format came along with another novelty: The events focused on highly specific thematic issues and involved specialists of different backgrounds for a rich debate and an ambitious kind of networking. The interest of these manager cafés was at least double: gaining new audiences and making connections between the worlds of education and business in a Franco-German context. Thematically, two concrete job descriptions served as a headline: sales managers and engineers. Involving representatives of important companies such as Hydac and Smart France, both meetings focused on “How to select, educate and manage” Franco-German candidates with these two job profiles.

Throughout all the events, new target groups such as universities and students of Franco-German programs were successfully integrated, as were pupils of selected schools (the Franco-German Grammar School, D-Saarbrücken and the Lycée Condorcet, F-Schoeneck). Numerous contacts were established, with participants still exchanging their business cards a long time after the end of the events.



Figure 2: Impression of the first after-work (image materials of the Competence Center)

2.3. Business Days for an institutional and entrepreneurial mobilization

The project period of ACTION Saar Lorraine was flanked by two large-scaled Franco-German conferences at the beginning (September 2013) and towards the end of the project (June 2015). As already mentioned, the symposium of September 2013 marked the official launch of the Internet platform and allowed to give the project a corporate identity. In terms of content, the day was devoted to economic exchanges in border regions. It provided institutions and enterprises the opportunity to benefit from reports of cross-border institutions in other regions. Moreover, intercultural and other important aspects of working in border regions were illuminated in a roundtable discussion with enterprises operating across borders.

The final conference of June 2015 was organized in the spirit of an institutional and entrepreneurial mobilization and focused on the subject “Doing business successfully in border regions”. 100 politicians, actors of economic development and the labor market, entrepreneurs, employees, consultants and representatives of business clubs and business networks came together to discuss the four major themes of the day, 1) Politics – Public policies to serve the cross-border economy,

2) Economy – Promoting businesses and entrepreneurs in the border region, 3) Education and training – Cross-border competencies for future entrepreneurs, 4) Europe – EU funding as a way to do cross-border business. In the latter, possibilities and limitations (EU rules of direct financing of companies, low interest of enterprises in INTERREG generally, etc.) of EU funding for the establishment of cross-border businesses were likewise discussed.

Although both conferences bore the same name (“Journée professionnelle” or “Business Day” in French, “Fachtagung” or “specialist conference” in German), their formats and contents were very different. They were thus adapted to the ongoing development of the project. The second conference also served as a measure of communication to secure the sustainability of the project in the future.

3. Challenges in ACTION Saar Lorraine

In order to provide useful best-practice models for operators who will run a similar project in another border region in the future, it seems appropriate to recall at this point that experiences are not always entirely positive and that, there will always be room for improvement. Along with the successes, difficulties are an integral part of every national, cross-border or European project.

3.1. The limits of autodidactic online training

The project ACTION Saar Lorraine led to the development of free online tools of quality which are available to employers, employees and more generally to all persons wishing to enhance their cross-border skills. However, even if a positive dynamic was stimulated by the project (illustrated by the large number of tests with requests of detailed results – nearly 300 – by Saarland and Lorraine entrepreneurs wishing to assess their mastery of cross-border competences), the border territory proved less open to autodidactic online training than we initially believed. Beyond the interest and enthusiasm shown by users in the evaluation of their cross-border skills, their desire to train themselves remained limited.

The problem lies neither in the cost (because the use is free), nor in the playful nature of the training materials, nor in an interface that is not enticing enough (the evaluations confirm that it is appreciated). Our investigations rather suggest that users simply do not have the motivation for self-training at the end of their workday, or maybe they actually prefer traditional forms of learning (classroom training). A second explanatory factor is that to access the self-training tools, users must register online. Apparently, a certain reluctance exists among the entrepreneurs to leave their email address. The fact that we gradually opened all content however did not change anything.

The impact of the contents developed will be undeniably better seized from the moment they will be integrated into a training offer of a more traditional format. If the new training materials (Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Serious Games, etc.) certainly require the training operators to go forward, it is important to keep in mind that beyond a passing fad, a real difficulty to mobilize learners sustainably is inherent to the nature of autodidactic training. The discussions initiated

recently about transforming part of the MOOCs into Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs) illustrates the attempt to make a synthesis between the traditional presential learning formats nowadays outdated and the new digital learning formats which do not have an answer to everything. The project ACTION Saar Lorraine seems to embody this slow movement forward in the world of education.

3.2. The weak governance of border areas

Apart from these project-immanent limits, there are others related to the reality of cross-border territories. Thereby, we certainly do not mean the management of cross-border projects in general. It is true that the existence of different organizational structures in two institutions such as the CNAM and FITT/htw saar, frustrations related to language despite the bilingualism of staff, cultural misunderstandings despite a Franco-German team, incompatibilities related to payment habits (sometimes 3 months after delivery in France, sometimes ahead in Germany or at maximum 2 weeks after the delivery) are real difficulties. However, they are not insurmountable for operators that will always find solutions as long as good humor and pleasure to work together prevail – which has consistently been the case in the ACTION Saar Lorraine project.

By difficulties related to the border territory, we rather mean the difficulties of implementing a project in borders that, as many official documents testify, remain areas in demographic, economic, environmental and territory-related tension, facing various shortcomings (institutional, legal, fiscal and social) as well as strong economic competition from neighboring countries. Despite the mobilization of many local actors on these issues, a strategic vision for the development of border areas is still missing, and instances of arbitration and decision-making are, where they exist, unable to compensate weak governance due to a lack of continuous governmental action, both on the French and on the German side in this area.

In the concrete case of the ACTION Saar Lorraine project, this reality has led to a serious difficulty to sensitize businesses to the cross-border idea and to mobilize them, for example, in the frame of economic events. The fact that many of these run in parallel was also problematic because these events are all competing for the same audience although clubs, networks and Chambers of Crafts et Trades (such as DCF, Marketing Club Saar, ITC, CCFA, IHK, HWK, AGEME, etc.) intend to be complement each other.

3.3. For a simplified management of European funds

Due to their experience in the matter, the two operators of the ACTION Saar Lorraine project did not have any particular problems related to the administration of the ERDF amount allocated within the INTERREG IV A GR program or to the implementation of project measures and their justification in front of the various controllers. However, the administrative and financial management of European projects is objectively speaking of such a high complexity that it scares many interested stakeholders and so damages the dynamism of existing tools of cooperation in border areas. Everyone knows the long genesis needed for most cross-border projects and the complexity of implementing and managing such cooperation. This is also a humble appeal to simplify procedures.

The complexity of European projects can not be better illustrated than by the obligations of justification. While it may seem trivial, the case of pastries is in this respect emblematic of how cumbersome some procedures are. The project operators planning to order pastries for 50 EUR have to make a call for competition between at least three bakers. They must send a requirement specification which, by experience, frightens the providers consulted. They then will encourage them on the phone to provide a quote. Finally, they will select one on the price on an unverifiable quality, unless they go to each provider to test the product, which means a trip that they will also have to justify to their first level controllers. Although it is legitimate that a strict control is exercised whenever public money is involved, the extreme justification obligations can, honestly speaking, sometimes be very counterproductive.

This entirely true, but somehow cartoonish description should however not make us forget that there are competent local services, such as in Lorraine the SGAR (General Secretary for Regional Affairs) and above all the GIP Interreg, which gave excellent advice throughout the project period and proposed real solutions to the difficulties of the operators. The obligation of justification is therefore not so much a problem by itself, but it could potentially become one in the wake of the ongoing debates in some border cooperation zones on abolishing the local branches. In this context, we appeal to the managing authorities of future INTERREG programs to keep these local branches since it is those in the front office who give advice to the operators. Removing the organs doing this patient daily pedagogical work could jeopardize the emerging of cross-border cooperation by discouraging operators baffled by what sometimes looks like a bureaucratic outbidding.

4. Summary and Outlook

The very objective and unique feature of ACTION Saar Lorraine was to develop and accompany the cross-border competence of employers and employees in the Saarland-Lorraine border region. We dare say that the project actually contributed actively to a better mutual knowledge of the structures and culture on both sides of the border by providing free online tools teaching this knowledge on its platform and by organizing events that brought entrepreneurs as well as citizens together. If a positive dynamic was instilled indeed, the border area nonetheless proved less open to these offers than initially expected. Despite all efforts taken by various initiatives, this part of Lorraine remains less dynamic economically than for example the “Sillon Lorrain” (“Lorraine rift valley”). A series of reports on ACTION events and interviews with the French and German managing directors were published in local newspapers (such as the Républicain Lorrain, the Luxemburger Wort, the Saarbruecker Zeitung and others) or broadcast on local TV channels (such as TV 8 Moselle Est).

The ACTION Saar Lorraine project brought closer together two institutions, Cnam and FITT / htw saar, wishing to develop in the Greater Region and encouraged a more efficient mode of operation between the partners. Today, FITT / htw saar is the natural partner of the CNAM in Saarland, just as the CNAM is a vital partner to FITT / htw saar in Lorraine. The trust that has developed between them, also in view of procedures would not have been possible without ACTION, i.e. on a purely national level. At present, the CNAM and htw saar organize joint events, publish a common newsletter and offer joint binational training. Co-diploma are being introduced. In the Greater Region, CNAM and htw saar develop strategic positions that are the result of prior consultation.

Finally, they often have a common delegation rather than two separate ones in many fairs of the region (such as the “Interregionale Jobmesse” or the “Greater Region Business Days”). As an emanation of the ACTION Saar Lorraine project, the Competence Center for Cross-border Education provides a common office for Cnam and FITT / htw saar members of staff. Today, all relationships and project proposals between the Cnam and htw saar pass via the Competence Center that serves as a facilitator between the two institutions.

Through the Competence Center for Cross-border Education, the sustainability of ACTION Saar Lorraine is ensured. The sustainability of the project will be put into practice in two ways: First, the organization of breakfasts, manager cafés and after-works will continue, all the more since, obviously, the aim is not to make profit, but to create visibility and encourage networking. Second, the developed training content can be integrated into a paid training offer so that it will be regularly updated and enriched. Around the Competence Center, the cross-border collaboration between all partners will continue and become even more intense in the frame of a sustainable development strategy as well as in that of complementary and concerted action. The website of the project is intended to be developed, constantly updated and upgraded. In such a favorable environment, the project – become network – ACTION Saar Lorraine can only continue to exist, even if many shortcomings remain. The integration of the materials developed for use in autodidactic training into a more traditional course offer will be possible without any problems because it is the CNAM’s and htw saar’s mission to respond to these developments in the world of education. By contrast, the limits of cross-border governance will continue to arise and can only be responded to politically. To remind this is also one of the concerns of a project such as ACTION Saar Lorraine.