

Report to AER General Assembly 2018 by the Monitoring and Evaluation Group

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Introduction

Per AER Statute, 4.8, the Monitoring and Evaluation Group reports to the General Assembly and is responsible for:

- a) Monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the mission and objectives of AER, in compliance with the provisions of the Statute and the Procedures;
- b) The efficient and sound use of financial and human resources.

Since the General Assembly in May 2017, the Monitoring and Evaluation Group has made a **follow-up of previous recommendations** submitted to the General Assembly and **focused on the performance of the Committees**.

The Monitoring and Evaluation Group has participated in Executive board and Bureau meetings, Committee meetings and other AER events. The group has conducted interviews with AER Vice-presidents, Committee Presidents, member regions and the Secretary General. The information and answers given are summarized in this report.

Previous recommendations

Since the General Assembly 2017, AER has been managed by a new president, Magnus Berntsson, and an Executive Board consisting of the President, the Treasurer, six Vice Presidents (with assignments defined by the Board), three Committee presidents and the adjunct members; the President of the AER Youth Regional Network (YRN), the Eurodyssey President, the President of the AER Summer Academy and a representative of the region hosting the secretariat.

Per AER Statute, 6.2, the Executive Board manages the coordination of all AER activities. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group submitted a report to the General Assembly in St Pölten 2017 with observations and recommendations on how to further develop the organization.

The Monitoring and Evaluation group finds it remarkable that the report and its recommendations have not been on the Executive Board agenda. This makes it difficult to know whether the Executive Board accepts to work on the recommendations presented to the General Assembly 2017.

As the Monitoring and Evaluation Group hasn't been communicated by the Executive Board regarding the previous recommendations submitted to the General Assembly, they are repeated below, expecting the reactions of the Executive Board:

1. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board to **evaluate the Committee's work, its results and to make the reforms necessary.**
2. The Monitoring and Evaluation group recommends the Executive Board, the Committees and the Secretariat to continue to **develop member relations** to increase dialogue and interaction among all members.
3. The Monitoring and Evaluation group recommends the Executive Board and the Secretariat to **remove obstacles for all members taking part in AER meeting.**
4. The Monitoring and Evaluation group recommends the Executive Board and the Secretariat to **define the role of AER in projects** where the members are partners.
5. When AER is partner in projects the Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends transparency about the need for AER to **finance a part of the staff with project money.**
6. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board, the Bureau, the Committees and the Secretariat to continue to explore and **upgrade AER's meeting design**, to increase dialogue and interaction between members.
7. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group encourage AER to **develop storytelling, peer-reviews and best practice** to show what the organization and its members are delivering between meetings.
- 8.. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board and the Secretariat to **define leadership over the goals and design of AER meetings**, to make sure that the meetings are delivering the interest of AER members, rather than the hosting region's interest.
9. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board, the Committees and the Secretariat to establish a **meeting calendar and a workplan one year in advance.** The committee presidents need to coordinate and plan the upcoming year with its sub-committee presidents.
10. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board and the Secretariat to evaluate the use of Slack among AER members. It's important that the use of a new tool, like Slack, is driven by demand.

The Committees

Per AER Statute the Thematic Committees are responsible for exchange and dissemination of best practice and running of programs and projects. They may prepare, decide and implement initiatives in the framework of their assignments. Each Committee is chaired by a President, responsible for the committee's smooth running.

The AER Procedures states that each Committee decides on its own working structure and may appoint leaders to sub-entities, if they respect the principles of the AER Statute and Procedures and follow the budgetary framework and provisions set by the Executive Board.

The Committee Presidium consists of the President and the Vice-Presidents of the committee and will take a joint responsibility for the planning of the committee's activities.

It is of genuine interest for AER members to have a committee organisation that is effective and useful. The Committees are forum for exchange and dissemination of best practice and running of programmes and projects. For many members the Committees represent an added value of their membership in AER.

Observations

In the Monitoring and Evaluation Group report of 2014 the results of a member survey showed that it's vital to engage member regions to be more active in the work of the committees and that lobbying primarily should be carried out in relation to the needs and decisions taken by the committees.

The Secretariat has tried to ensure interaction among members during and between the meetings through the smaller workshop format, and in complementary events with strong networking focus. In general, the Secretariat also provides help to members who are looking for regions with similar interests/challenges, partners for projects etc.

Today, 2018, the Monitoring and Evaluation Group notes that **on the one hand Committee presidents are concerned by the lack of engagement from members in Committee work and on the other hand the members express lack of relevant content and added value of Committee meetings.**

One Committee president stressed that *"it's important that the members are active and suggest topics that they want"*. But how do they do that? When and how are the suggestions absorbed? The Monitoring and Evaluation Group has been informed that depending on the work carried out in the Committees, the Presidents of the Committees may choose to invite speakers themselves or provide advice on expertise they would like to include in the meetings. The Secretariat oversees harmonizing the agendas, identifying and inviting speakers and moderators, conceptualizing the facilitation. But **there are vast differences between committees, regarding how the Presidents coordinates the presidiums and cooperates with the committee working groups and thereby absorbs the interests of AER members.**

Some members express that they see the committee plenaries mostly as a way to meet, to be social and to connect. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group acknowledges that social activities are important but at the same time they will not provide the long-time argument for being a member of AER.

As the committee meetings, work groups and sub-committees are open to all members, the only permanent parts of the organization are the committee presidiums and the work group and sub-committee chairs. And indeed, the participation of members in committee meetings show variations of people, members and tasks.

Some say that AER needs to offer its members a broad pallet of interesting things and there are many different regions with very different interests. But is there sufficient continuity so that members can be involved in building collaborations and concrete exchanges of best practice? Today AER has fewer working groups doing work between meetings. Why is that and how do we encourage more members to participate?

Others say that permanent work groups and sub-committees makes it difficult to effectively reflect the rapid changes in today's Europe and would prefer task forces with temporary assignments

instead. Some say that the way to organize AER in three Committees might be too rigid. Many of the currently most interesting topics, digitalisation, for instance, affect two or three of the committee's portfolios. Committee 2 for Social policy and Public health deals for instance with two topics where the responsibility varies greatly in the European countries.

It is of paramount interest to the members that the Committee work provides high quality content. More frequent participation of high representatives of the European Commission is often requested.

The Monitoring and Evaluation Group questions whether the committee plenaries today are interesting enough to all members. Judging by the number of participants at many of AER meetings they seem primarily to be of interest to the Nordic regions.

There have been new initiatives in the committees for finding ways of activating the members in professional discussions. The perfect match is a mixture of group debates/work and presentations from members or guests from outside AER. The time issue is often discussed between the members – mostly stating 'too short time' for the topics and for informal discussions with other members. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group finds the current committee organization hampering this. The committee plenaries deal mostly with internal issues, which in practice means that the time for discussions between the participants becomes even shorter.

The role and organization of the Committees, regulated in statutes and procedures, were set at a time when AER had significantly more members. The journey from separate committee plenaries to the joint meetings in autumn and spring, reflect the diminishing number of participants and is also a consequence of the changing role of the committees.

The members' needs must be key for the how the work is organized and how the strategies are formulated as well as their implementation by the Executive Board. The outcome of the Bureau can use more power from Executive Board to strengthen the work on advocacy and lobbying. Today the strategies of the General Assembly and the Bureau are not easily visible in the in the work of the Executive Board.

There is a lack of Executive Board ownership, implementing the changes of AER - both the number of members as well as the number of active members are decreasing. Member relations cannot be upheld through group emailing only. The members are represented by individuals, and member contacts need to be on an individual basis, which require knowledge of the needs and expectations of every individual member. The Executive Board must live up to its executive responsibilities and guide the Secretariat's work on member relations.

The Vice Presidents have different areas of responsibility; Interregional cooperation, Mediterranean affairs, Democracy, Institutional affairs etc. It is appreciated by the members that so many committed politicians want to have a role in AER. But do they connect enough with the Committee work? At the same time there are many vacant positions within the Committees, and the Election Committee reports difficulties in getting enough nominations to fill the vacancies

The Vice Presidents of the Executive Board should be able to pursue issues until they are completed – issues that are important for the development of the organization. It can both be professional and structural issues and depends on the members needs and expectations.

Closing remarks

During the last couple of years AER has reformed its statutes and procedures, with new responsibilities for the different bodies and the Secretariat. It has been a necessary change, with great efforts within the organization and among members. Still, the Monitoring and Evaluation group acknowledges the need for further development of the organization's performance and how the work is organized.

AER is no longer an organization with 240 active members and topics are overlapping the committee structure. On the one hand Committee presidents are concerned by the lack of engagement from members in Committee work and on the other hand the members express lack of relevant, high quality, content and questions the added value of the Committee meetings. From the look of it, the expectations on the performance of the Committees and its President and Vice Presidents differ. Members, Presidents and the Executive Board have different views on what the Committees should deliver. It is time to re-evaluate the committee organization to make the work in AER more flexible and engaging. Instead of the current joint committee plenaries, one general AER meeting in autumn and one in spring could offer a more flexible arena for high-level EU representatives discussing current topics, members propagating project ideas and partner search, exchange and dissemination of best practice by members and experts, seminars about work groups or task forces reports, debates on rapporteur findings and so on.

And, most important: It is evident to the Monitoring and Evaluation Group that the Executive Board needs to take charge and manage the organization of AER. It is the politically elected Executive Board that is responsible for and ensures the results that AER is expected to deliver to its members. The Executive Board needs to take a step forward, conduct strategic development discussions (for example, based on the recommendations and questions of the Monitoring and Evaluation Group or the Executive Board Advisor) and to decide on the way forward. A stronger executive leadership from the Executive Board is also necessary for governing the Secretariat. As an example, the Monitoring and Evaluation Group expects the Executive Board to address the report at a forthcoming meeting.

Recommendations

1. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board to strengthen its strategic capacity and decision-making to improve the management and performance of AER.
2. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board to re-evaluate the committee organization based on the findings in this report.
3. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board to consider a flexible organization built on Work Groups, Task Forces and Rapporteurs rather than the current committee structure.
4. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board to consider replacing the current joint committee plenaries with AER Autumn and Spring General Meetings.

5. Should the Executive Board, contrary to the recommendation above, decide to continue the work in the Committee format, the Monitoring and Evaluation group recommends the Executive Board to implement common goals and agreements on what the committees should deliver and how.

6. The Monitoring and Evaluation group recommends the Executive Board to strengthen the format of rapporteurs.

7. The Monitoring and Evaluation group recommends the Executive Board to discuss how to strengthen the Vice-Presidents and associate them closer to the work among the members.

8. The Monitoring and Evaluation group recommends the Executive Board to increase the participation of high representatives (European Commission, etc) to AER events, following the EU agenda of issues, and enable members to influence.

9. The Monitoring and Evaluation group recommends the Executive Board to re-evaluate the decision about having two offices, one in Brussels and one in Strasbourg.

10. The Monitoring and Evaluation Group recommends the Executive Board to address this report at a forthcoming meeting.