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Angelo Salsi from the European Commission is responsible for the LIFE program in the EASME department "LIFE and CIP Eco-Innovation".

Interview with Angelo Salsi, European Commission

The LIFE program, one of the most important funding instruments in the field of environmental and climate protection in the EU, starts in the coming funding period from 2021 to 2027. The funding program was further developed and expanded in view of the European Green Deal and the evaluation of the LIFE program. We wanted to find out more about the innovations from Angelo Salsi.

Angelo Salsi from the European Commission is responsible for the LIFE program in the EASME department "LIFE and CIP Eco-Innovation". The European Commission's Executive Agency for

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME) manages EU programs to keep small businesses competitive, as well as programs in research, the environment, energy and fisheries.

ANL: Mr Salsi, what are your duties at EASME?

Angelo Salsi: I am the manager of the LIFE and Eco-Innovation unit in the executive agency EASME. My team is in the front line helping member states and all concerned parties protecting Europe's natural heritage and our environment as well as supporting the EU efforts in the battle against climate change.

ANL: A study on the impact of the LIFE program to date has recently been published (Bringing Nature back through LIFE). It describes many successes of the LIFE program, but there are also obvious gaps, for example, some species are severely under-represented so far. What does this mean for the future of the LIFE program?

Angelo Salsi: Indeed, the study presents a review on how the LIFE Programme, since 1992, has contributed to the conservation status of EU protected species and habitats as concluded in the latest EU State of Nature report. Some species might indeed seem more present than others, but if one looks more closely the picture gets more diverse. For instance, next to the well-known relevant projects addressing vertebrates (like the lynx, the wolf and the bear), there are many projects targeting restoration of open habitats and forests that actually contributed to the protection of invertebrates too. However, as this information is not

visible by the title or the overall objectives of the projects, such are often not taken into consideration, when analyses, only based on the general project information, are carried out.

Further, in the next LIFE programme priorities will be given to projects addressing species and habitats that are in a greater need i.e. based on extinction risk as well as to such, contributing to several particular priorities of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030, among which is the protection of pollinators.

As you know, LIFE is a bottom up programme and what kind of projects will be financed depends to what kind of proposals will be submitted. We, from the Commission side in the last years did a lot of efforts to promote the need for actions targeting invertebrates, carried out dedicated meetings, explicitly highlighted pollinators in the call for proposals, published dedicated materials etc.

All depends from the understanding of the need, the readiness and the expertise of the candidates to submit such proposals. I really hope that with joint efforts together with the Member States authorities, the scientific community, the NGO, practitioners and of course the media, we will achieve much better results in supporting actions addressing the needs of invertebrates.

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ANL: What are the consequences of the European Green Deal for the LIFE program? Does this shift the funding priorities?

Angelo Salsi: LIFE as it has been designed, fits perfectly with the Green Deal, and we are proud that with LIFE we will contribute 100% to its objectives, such as: restore biodiversity, cut pollution and reach a clean, circular economy. The upcoming LIFE Programme will reflect them even more. We have been listening to what has been happening on the ground across EU Member States regarding the impact of Covid-19 on beneficiaries.

Thus, we have recently made extra effort to contribute further to the Green Deal by launching a Call for Proposals to reinforce the capacity of NGO acting at Member States' level to mobilise and strengthen civil society participation and contribution to the implementation of the European Green Deal. LIFE wants to help NGO in this time of crisis, while putting the European Green Deal high on the agenda.

ANL: LIFE project applications are considered to be complicated, which discourages smaller institutions in particular. Are there any plans to simplify the project application process for the coming funding period? What characterizes a promising LIFE project application from your point of view?

Angelo Salsi: In the current programming period we have already come a long-way with simplification: two-stage approach, increased first pre-financing payment, easier access to

start-ups, increased flexibility... More will come indeed with the coming funding period. The application procedure will be soon much easier as also LIFE will make use of the Funding & tender opportunities Participants Portal, ensuring a common entry point for all applicants to most EU grants.

When it comes to a good application, I always mention the following crucial elements:

- A good baseline with a few key indicators quantified as far as possible
- Target set in terms of impact and linked to the baseline
- Key actions well described and in line with baseline and target to get there.
- A budget that matches the ambition of the project and...
- A solid partnership, if needed to reach the target.

An extra tip: before submitting, ask two more people to read it: Someone who knows nothing about LIFE and about the project, and someone else that knows about LIFE but not about the project. The first will tell you if the way it is presented is clear and to the point. The second will tell you if it contains all key info that should be there, based on the guidelines in the LIFE call. Good luck and see you soon in LIFE!

ANL: Thank you for the interview!

About the Person

Angelo was born in Bolzano, in the very north of Italy. This is a region known as Südtirol where three different linguistic groups live together in a peaceful and successful way. He moved to Bologna to continue his studies. There he majored in agricultural sciences and started his career as agro-meteorologist: the guy who tells the farmers which way the wind will blow. It was a great job that he loved and still misses today, but “things must change”, as Angelo says.

In 1992 he passed a competition and entered the European Commission. Two years after, he joined „the House“ working for the Nature Conservation department of the Directorate General for Environment. It was another love story that lasted almost 10 years. Saving butterflies and birds has a lot to do with the old Native American proverb that says: „We do not inherit the earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children“.

In 2000 he was appointed deputy head of a new department - „The Life Unit“. This unit was responsible for the management of the whole Life financial program, financing projects covering all possible environmental aspects. A great opportunity for him to learn and to stay in contact with the territory, something he greatly appreciates.

In 2005 it was time to move to a management responsibility as head of a new finance unit. It was a wonderful experience helping him shape his skills in the challenging world of management.

After several years dealing with contracts and invoices he went back to his old love: nature conservation and biodiversity. He became responsible for the Life Nature unit. Once more on the front line helping member states and all concerned parties to protect Europe’s natural heritage and the wider biodiversity of which we are part.

In 2015 he moved together with the LIFE programme as Head of the LIFE and Eco-Innovation unit in EASME, the executive agency of the European Commission for Small and Medium enterprises. Despite the business focus of the name, the agency executes various EU funding programmes, such as the Energy and Climate part of Horizon 2020, some grants of the European Maritime and Fishery Fund and, obviously, the LIFE Programme. Very soon, as of Spring 2021, both LIFE and Angelo will find a new “home”, the newly funded “European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency – CINEA”. In this case the name says it all and Angelo’s LIFE love story goes on.

Laufen, February 2021.

The interview was conducted by Paul-Bastian Nagel and Franziska Albrecht, ANL.