



Programme agreements – risks and challenges

Synthesis report

Key facts

Since 2008 and in accordance with the Subsidies Act, financial aid and subsidies for the cantons should generally be granted on the basis of programme agreements. This report consolidates the results of several SFAO audits within the scope of application of programme agreements. The objective of the consolidation is to obtain an assessment so as to determine focal points for future optimisation when using this new instrument.

Key findings

- The use of programme agreements presupposes experience in the task area concerned, i.e. knowledge of cause and effect, standard values, etc. Performance and impact-oriented controlling should be based on a comprehensible impact model. The implementation of the instrument thus constitutes a learning process which can extend over several programme periods. This is to be taken into account in audits.
- A progressive approach pays off when programme agreements are introduced. Performance and impact-oriented controlling requires a culture change and the development of links between cause and effect. With the changes which have occurred up to now, administrative units made more progress with easily assimilated intermediate steps than did offices which wanted too much all at once.
- If programme agreements are used, it should be possible for at least some of the tasks they govern to be processed using genuine lump sums or global contributions. The programme agreements should not be the old charges dressed up to look like something new. Otherwise, conventional subsidy forms are the more efficient route.
- Programme agreements require the Confederation to have a clear strategy in the corresponding task area. The Confederation must want to set objectives. This generally requires a minimum of written guidelines. If the Confederation merely wants to support cantonal projects within the scope of the law, no programme agreements are needed.
- Programme agreements require more trust than the previous contributions to cover costs. Whereas costs are easy to control, programme agreements consciously allow room for manoeuvre which must be respected by all the players involved (including control bodies). However, in order for controls to make any sense at all with the programme agreements regime, there have to be meaningful targets, indicators and yardsticks. The SFAO believes that the development of appropriate targets and indicators by the federal offices poses the biggest challenge for the future controllability of programme subsidies.

- The distribution of federal funds should occur on competitive terms (whoever submits the best programme receives the most money), but clear, strategic specifications, objective criteria and a transparent fund allocation process are required on the part of the Confederation.
- Up to now, programme agreements have mainly been concluded with individual cantons. In the future, a greater supra-cantonal impact is to be sought. This is why an attempt is to be made to conclude agreements with several cantons as partners or with supra-cantonal organisations.

The first part of the report describes the introduction of programme agreements in connection with the new system of fiscal equalization and division of tasks between the Confederation and the cantons (NFE). In the second part, the SFAO's audit approach is outlined based on three audits already carried out and two audits which are pending. The third part shows the SFAO's findings up to now grouped according to topic, and finally the fourth part summarises the risks and challenges for the further development of programme agreements.

Original text in German