

HARVESTING REPORT ON POST 2027 INTERREG

Results of stakeholder, citizen and programme consultations

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Executive Summary

To inform Cohesion Policy reform debates and the future arrangements post 2027, the European Commission initiated a large-scale consultation process on European Territorial Cooperation during the Interreg Annual Event in 2023. This process went on to involve numerous consultation events, surveys and interviews. For the first time, the consultations were not only limited to programmes and major policy stakeholders but also involved citizens of the Interreg programme areas. Almost all Interreg programmes consulted their citizens, although the consultations were voluntary. Particular effort was made to involve young people. This included around 100 young people from across Europe who met in November 2024 in Brussels to voice their perspectives on the future of territorial cooperation beyond 2027. The culmination of their collaborative efforts is encapsulated in the 'Declaration by Young People on the Future of Territorial Cooperation.' Overall, the consultations resulted in almost 100 'harvesting reports' that draw together inputs from over 10,000 individuals and organisations.

Living in border regions is an advantage and offers opportunities, according to consultation responses. Responses range from 94 percent to 55 percent of respondents agreeing that living in a border region is advantageous. Key perceived benefits include cultural links, travel and tourism, economic opportunities ranging from cheaper shopping to business links and wider market and labour market access, connections to transport and infrastructure links, high environmental quality and quality of life, availability of a wider range of education and training opportunities and access to some key services. However, citizens and stakeholders also recognise development challenges, obstacles, and barriers. Perceived disadvantages cover a wide range of concerns ranging from physical barriers to social aspects of living in border regions. On this basis, belief in the rationale and value of territorial cooperation comes across strongly in the consultation reports, especially in relation to areas such as climate change, the environment, economic competitiveness, public services and quality of life as well as newer areas of activity such as safety and security.

In addressing both new and long-standing development opportunities and challenges, the consultation reports shared a consensus that Interreg specifically adds value and brings about positive change. Key points raised relate to its huge value in knowledge exchange and learning, the durable connections people and communities, capacity to address common and complex challenges, role in building resilience, and territorial relevance and sensitivity to territorial specificities. These points were further reinforced at the Interreg GO! event where a variety of speakers including Raffaele Fitto, Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, underlined the value and importance of territorial cooperation.

Looking to the future, a clear need and demand for territorial cooperation, opportunities to build and carry forward the core elements of Interreg, and scope to keep learning, adapting and improving are all identified in the harvesting reports. Key observations for the future cluster around the themes of continuity and durability, flexibility and innovation, synergies and coordination, community links, delivering impact and support. The consultation exercise included a question on the '*Interreg project of your dreams*'. The volume of ideas which were suggested reflects the wide interest and commitment to pursuing territorial cooperation in the future and as does the range of ideas in terms of themes, scale and approach. The broad areas of interest reflect priorities already discussed in this paper: social, environmental and transport infrastructure; cooperation on public services; security and risk prevention; tourism and cultural heritage; environmental protection; social cohesion and democratic values; and education. More generally, projects aimed at local/territorially relevant solutions, community/citizen engagement, learning and training, longer term perspectives, simple administration, good partners, and results on the ground are all seen as core elements of 'dream projects'.

Overall, the consultations led to the following major conclusions regarding post-2027:

1. Interreg is both a tool and a policy to bring European values and policies close to the people through cooperation governance, trust building, communities and citizens' actions, place-based approaches (customised to local needs) and joint projects.
2. Interreg is appreciated for its role in opening up new opportunities for cooperation, reaching beyond borders, fixing the issues linked to the different legal and administrative systems (hampering the full opportunities of the Single Market) and learning from each other (thereby benefitting from Europe's diversity);
3. Interreg is crucial for candidate countries, outermost regions and neighbouring countries (especially it prepares the accession of candidate countries); and
4. Interreg acts on the territories of several Member States and, in many cases, it also involves non-Member States; therefore, it needs to keep the key elements of its ecosystem built and successfully tested over 35 years (i.e. programmes with common budget, joint preparation and implementation, shared management).

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1. Introduction

Interreg is a key funding instrument to foster cooperation, competitiveness and cohesion in the European Union. Now almost 35 years old, Interreg has increased in size, scope and significance over successive programme periods, with programmes also becoming more collaborative and involved in wider networks. These changes have brought with them higher expectations and pressures, particularly in terms of what Interreg programmes and their projects can deliver. The expectation has been that programmes move on from knowledge and relationship building to the delivery of tangible results. A sharpened focus on results is further amplified by budgetary pressures and the administrative demands of participating in territorial cooperation.

Looking to the future, the European Commission's 9th Cohesion Report states that addressing today's challenges requires better governance in border areas, stronger coordination of services, infrastructure and investments and exchanges of experience.¹ Crises including Covid and the war in Ukraine have amplified and added to the specific development challenges faced by border regions, particularly along Eastern external borders. Linked to wider pressures, just transition and the green economy also require collaborative responses. At the same time, wider debates on the future of Cohesion Policy include questions and issues that also impact the future Interreg.

In this context, the European Commission recently initiated an extensive consultation process that provided input into the post-27 debate from the perspective of territorial cooperation programmes, their stakeholders, and citizens living in areas covered by the Interreg programmes. Consultations were carried out with programmes and key stakeholders on European Territorial Cooperation, covering the Interreg A programmes, including external border programmes with Western Balkans and Türkiye and neighbourhood countries, as well as Interreg B, C and D programmes. This report presents an overview of the combined results of the consultation exercise. The report begins by detailing the consultation process and goes on to set out key findings on borders and territorial cooperation, the added value of Interreg, options to maximise performance and aspirations for the future.

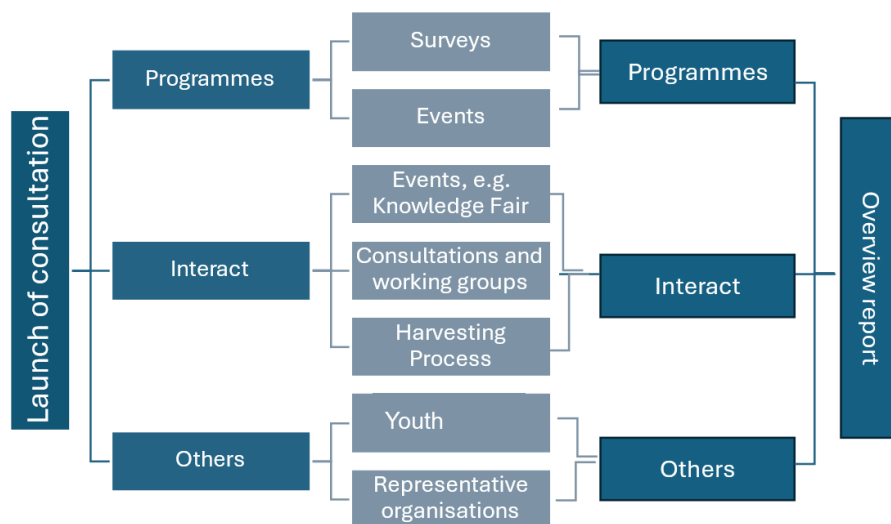
¹ European Commission (2024) Nineth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/reports/cohesion9/9CR_Report_FINAL.pdf

2. Consultation Processes

With a view to informing Cohesion Policy reform debates and the future arrangements post 2027, the European Commission initiated a large-scale consultation process on European Territorial Cooperation during the Interreg Annual Event in 2023.



Figure 1: Consultation processes



Source: Author

The consultation involved three main strands.

1. Stakeholder and citizen consultation

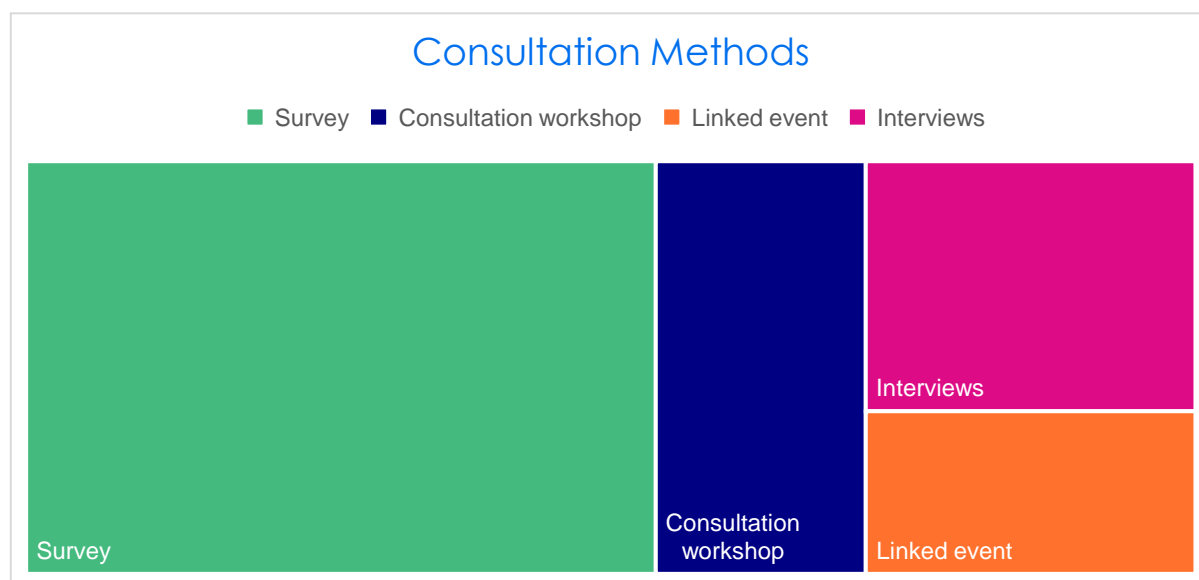
This was led by Interreg Programmes and involved surveys, workshops and consultation events. Programme authorities conducted the consultations and then shared results through 'Harvesting Reports' submitted to the European Commission. The European Commission provided guidance and advice on content and approaches to the consultation on an *ad hoc* basis and through the

provision of a toolkit.² Recognising the diversity of Interreg programmes, programmes were able to adapt both the approach and the included questions to their own specific situation.

An online survey was the most widely used approach to gathering responses and was used by almost all programmes in at least part of their consultation process. In many cases, the survey was also accompanied by additional consultation methods, including consultation workshops, sessions at linked events, and targeted interviews. These included, for example,

- Invitations for citizens which were disseminated through contact points to municipalities, which primarily shared them via municipal websites and social media platforms.
- Questionnaires which were circulated at relevant/related events, e.g. regional festivals.
- Facilitated workshops and targeted engagement with key programme stakeholders.
- The active involvement of Youth Councils in responding to the questionnaire and circulating them within their network.
- A simplified questionnaire was even delivered in 13 schools in the Italy-Slovenia programme area as part of a class on the EU.

Figure 2: Consultation Methods



² DG Regio (2023) Guide for Shaping Together the Future of Interreg, Interreg Post 2027, DG Regio Brussels, < https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/guides/interreg-post-2027/interreg-consultation-post-2027.pdf>

In addition to inputs from programmes, the consultation exercise also attracted participation from key organisations and groups such as associations of border regions, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), cross-border twin cities, and the Interreg Volunteer Youth (IVY) initiative.

The questions posed in the consultations drew heavily on the guidance document provided by the European Commission which encouraged comparability across the programme responses. However, questions were also adapted, reorganised and restructured to suit the specifics of programme areas, the methods used, and the target groups involved.

The consultation reports submitted by programmes detail the very considerable efforts undertaken to gather broad, balanced and representative responses. While not all programmes report detail on the level and types of participation, a broad indication of the scale of the overall exercise can be provided.

- There are 88 consultation reports (see Table 1).
- In relation to the Interreg A programmes analysed, well over 9,785 individuals and organisations were involved (not all of which are reported on participation numbers). At least, 5,371 are reported as having participated in citizen consultations.
- Over 2,500 participants (individuals and/or organisational representatives) were involved in Interreg B programme consultations.
- 1,900 participants (individuals and/or organisational representatives) took part from external border programmes.
- Of particular note are the efforts to engage with young people, for example through work with local youth parliaments.

Table 1: Coverage of consultation reports

Report Type	Number	Percentage of Programmes submitting reports
INTERREG A Strand A Strand in the EU and EFTA Countries	41	84
INTERREG A IPA	9	90
INTERREG A NEXT	6	86
INTERREG B	10	90
INTERREG C	4	100
INTERREG D	3	60
Stakeholder Reports (CMPR, COR, IVY (AEBR), MOT, TERAM ³)	5	-

Consultation responses are generally transparent in setting out the geographic, demographic and institutional balance of their respondents. Stakeholder responses cover a wide range of organisations with public authorities and agencies comprising the biggest number of respondents. Education and research organisations, enterprise and business organisations, interest groups, and NGOs are also covered in stakeholder feedback. Groups and individuals familiar with Interreg represent the largest proportions of consultation respondents. In some cases, response rates were acknowledged to be low, especially from citizen consultations. In other instances, issues around the 'weight' attached to institutional responses, the time available to prepare responses, and the potential for double counting are important to take into consideration. Further points to note in relation to the consultation exercise, and correspondingly the overview presented in this report, are as follows.

- Engagement with the consultation was highest amongst groups familiar with Interreg, which influences responses.
- The consultations were not 'exclusive' to those familiar with Interreg. Therefore, not all the points raised are limited to 'familiar' areas of cooperation. Equally, some respondents may *only* be familiar with what can/can't be done under a specific programme, as opposed to Interreg as a whole, which can also influence responses.
- Respondents had varying levels of awareness and engagement with 'borders', linked to where they were based within the relevant programme area.

³ Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), Committee of the Regions (CoR), Interreg Volunteer Youth (IVY), Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT), Institute TERRAM

- Interreg programmes and programme areas are diverse and vary in their experience. Therefore, not all the ‘widely identified’ themes apply to every case equally.
- Not all the Interreg programmes submitted a report.

2. Programme consultation

Complementing the citizen and stakeholder consultation, a programme-focussed consultation was organised by the Interact Programme. Interact is uniquely well placed to facilitate the programme consultation, having supported Interreg for more than 20 years through events, publications and tools. The consultation process involved several events, working groups on key themes, reports, and a harvesting event (Brussels, November 2024). In line with the approach agreed with the European Commission, inputs particularly focussed on the more technical and innovative elements of programme management and implementation, in particular:

- performance-based approach and future SCOs;
- synergies and cooperation;
- territorial instruments;
- external cooperation;
- flexibility and adaptability of programmes;
- greener Europe;
- future of ISO1; and
- other issues, e.g. indicators, maritime cooperation, communication and JeMS.

The consultation responses underline the diversity across the Interreg programmes in terms of their scope, scale and the borders they cover. Further, differing approaches to gathering and analysing the responses have informed the subsequent Harvesting Reports and this variation does impact the possible approaches to developing an overview. Each consultation report captures specific needs and issues in individual programme areas and programmes and will be a valuable resource for future planning. However, collectively the consultation reports also provide valuable insights into opportunities, obstacles and recommendations for territorial cooperation as a whole. The ten reports prepared by Interact are available at <https://www.interact.eu/library/367>.

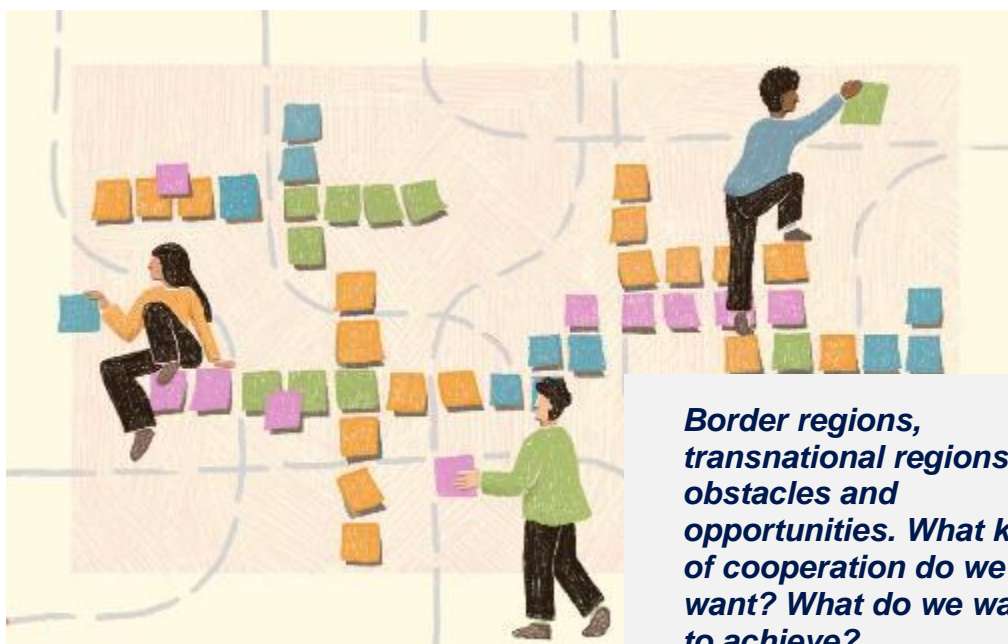
3. Interreg GO! event

The European Commission invited cooperation stakeholders and Interreg programmes to the Interreg GO! event on 27 and 28 March 2025. The conference was organised in partnership with the Interreg Italy-Slovenia programme, the EGTC GO!, the Friuli-Venezia-Giulia region in Italy and the Ministry for Cohesion and Regional Development in Slovenia and Interact. The post-2027 high-level event had political representation, including Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms Fitto, and more than 550 participants. Key messages from the consultation on Interreg post-27 were presented and discussed, taking into account the broader political and policy perspectives. The morning plenary composed of three panel discussions:

- Panel 1: Cooperation: Shared Spaces, Shared Goals: Cooperation with candidate and neighbouring countries, including for outermost regions
- Panel 2: Border regions, transnational regions: obstacles and opportunities: What kind of cooperation do we want? What do we want to achieve?
- Panel 3: Cooperation & Performance: Shifting up a Gear: How to improve the cooperation impact and visibility?

The afternoon programme included the Interreg Slam 2024-2025.

3. Borders and Territorial Cooperation



Border regions, transnational regions: obstacles and opportunities. What kind of cooperation do we want? What do we want to achieve?

3.1. Border Regions: Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

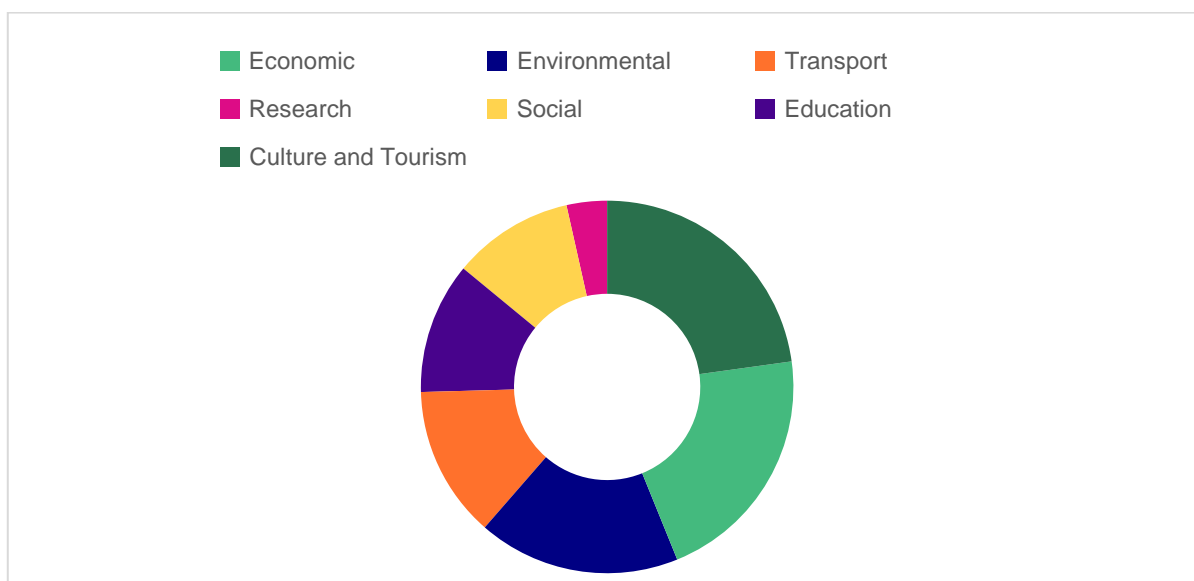
Living in border regions is an advantage and offers opportunities, according to consultation responses. Responses range from 94 percent to 55 percent of respondents agreeing that living in a border region is advantageous. Notably, citizens and stakeholders from EU external border programmes also consider it an ‘opportunity’ to be living on/near a border, e.g. 80 percent of respondents in the Interreg IPA Bulgaria-Serbia programme. In contrast, citizens and stakeholders were slightly less likely to see the border as an opportunity along some of the EU’s most integrated land borders. This is potentially due to the fact that higher levels of more intensive exchange, e.g. cross-border commuting, practical, operational and administrative barriers, are more frequently and widely experienced in day-to-day life.



Living in border regions is an advantage and offers opportunities

A range of ‘advantages’ are attributed to living in border areas (see Figure 4). Analysis of the harvesting reports highlights recurring themes, with culture and tourism, economic, and environmental factors particularly emphasised.

Figure 3: Living in Border Areas: Key areas of ‘advantage’ identified in harvesting reports



The most widely identified ‘advantages’ to life in border areas are associated with **cultural links, travel and tourism**. Across the consultations, respondents identify the value of people-to-people links, opportunities for cultural exchange, for example through linguistic and cultural connections and diversity, and access to leisure and cultural facilities.



“It is enriching to live close to territories where other languages are spoken and with different cultures” Stakeholder Respondent

“The perception is that proximity to the border brings the best of two countries, that proximity brings increased understanding, knowledge and acceptance, that it is enriching to cooperate across the border and enriching to live in one country and work in another.” Stakeholder Respondent

“The border greatly expands the horizons. the border gives an opportunity to study and implement projects. After all, projects are not only activities and infrastructure. They are about building relationships between people” Stakeholder Respondent

Economic opportunities, ranging from cheaper shopping to business links and wider market and labour market access, are widely mentioned in both citizen and stakeholder responses. Access to markets for goods and services is important for households, businesses and service providers. Related to economic development and competitiveness, opportunities are also recognised in access to wider and more diverse labour markets and work in key sectors of shared interest. **Access to wider transport and infrastructure links** are notable benefits along borders where access to a transport hub or road network across the border was nearer/easier than travel to a domestic centre.

Environmental quality and quality of life are further widely perceived advantages of living in border areas. Many border regions are less densely populated than central areas and offer access to high quality natural environments. The opportunities to improve ‘access to nature’ and improve/protect natural environments through working with partners across the border is an important area of perceived benefit. More generally, the scope for joint action on major development challenges like climate change and environmental risk and disaster prevention is widely noted as a positive aspect of living in border areas.

The availability of a **wider range of education and training opportunities and access to some key services** are also widely cited as positive features of life in border areas. Youth respondents in particular highlighted the value of educational and training exchanges. Opportunities around healthcare are also widely appreciated aspects of border area living, as well as related collaboration on innovation and research.



“The proximity of the border is source of innovation through the sharing of knowledge, practices, or experiences” Citizen Respondent

While the advantages identified above are widely shared, **there are also variations.**

Labour market and employment opportunities are more commonly referenced in programme areas with an established pattern of cross-border commuting. In regions where there are economic development disparities between territories in the programme area, the ‘advantages’ in terms of e.g. market access, labour flows and cheap shopping are not necessarily equally shared across the whole programme area and some areas can be negatively affected.

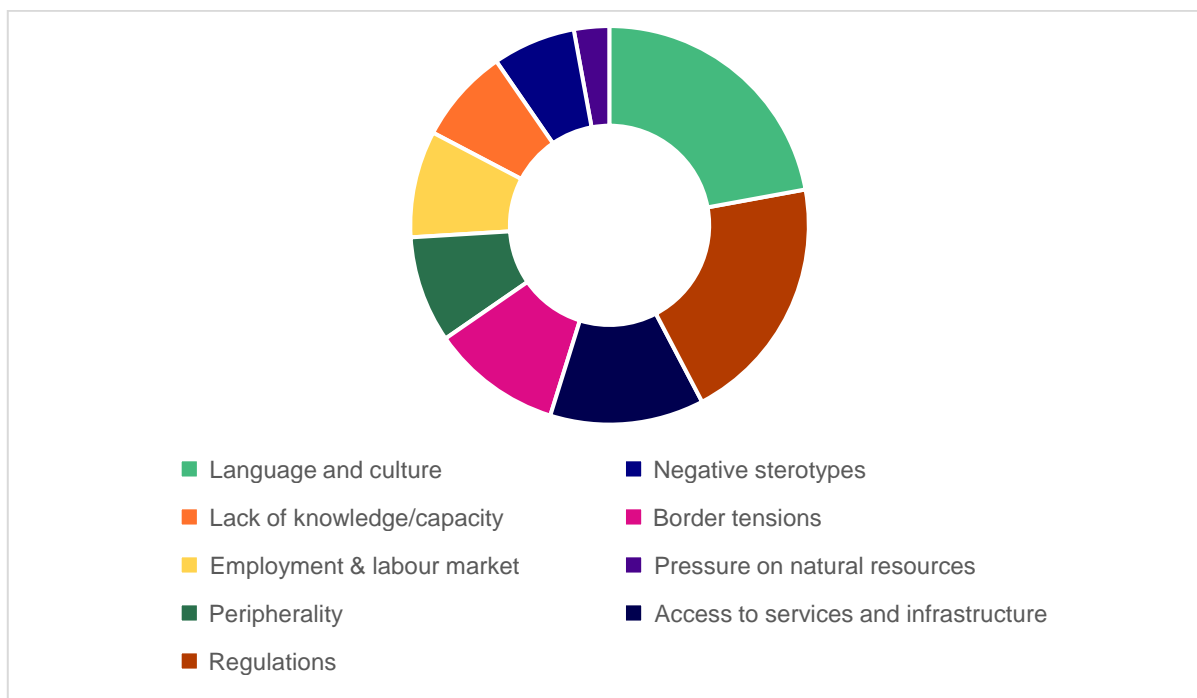
In more peripheral border areas, environmental quality is particularly widely recognised as an advantage. The inherent challenges for maritime borders and borders with major physical barriers are recognised, but the ‘uniting factor’ is also underlined. For example, having maritime borders brings new opportunities and widens the scope of cross-border cooperation with a variety of sea-related joint issues. Along external borders, the perceived advantages and benefits are similar to those in other areas, including economic development opportunities, environmental quality, tourism, cultural exchange, and transport links.

Direct associations and familiarity with ‘the border’ are clearest in the Interreg A programmes. It is acknowledged that border issues and cooperation are not as obvious in places further from the border. Nevertheless, as these regions have similar challenges, responses note that they can still benefit from border links, for example in terms of skills supply, establishment of larger operations,



they are discussed, opportunities for cooperation linked to environmental sustainability, sustainable development and climate change are the most prominent responses, followed by cooperation and exchange around social and cultural actions such as education integration and youth, sustainable transport and entrepreneurship. While there are strong positive associations with life in border areas, citizens and stakeholders also identify development challenges, obstacles, and barriers. Perceived disadvantages cover a wide range of concerns ranging from physical barriers to social aspects of living in border regions. Some of the most frequently mentioned challenges are linguistic and cultural barriers and regulatory barriers (see Figure 4) and many of the challenges are mutually reinforcing which can create blocks to cooperation.

Figure 4: Living in Border Areas: Key disadvantages and barriers identified in harvesting reports



Barriers and challenges linked to **linguistic and cultural differences** are widely referred to in the consultation responses and reflect the diversity of border regions. Cultural barriers are openly recognised, with concerns about

negative stereotyping and prejudice identified. Linguistic barriers and lack of opportunities to study or engage with the language of a neighbouring territory are widely mentioned. Both issues amplify and reinforce **regulatory and bureaucratic barriers**. The challenges of regulatory and bureaucratic barriers are well illustrated in the case of difficulties in labour market flows and working across borders due to variations in tax and employment law and differences across Schengen/non-Schengen borders. Additionally, particular pressures are felt along borders where a neighbouring territory can offer higher levels of pay and more skilled jobs. Linguistic and administrative barriers can increase challenges around **lack of capacity/knowledge of territorial cooperation, weak limited citizen engagement in policymaking**, weak institutional cooperation, and inadequate shared public services. These are all recognised as key barriers, especially along external borders.

Citizens and stakeholders in border areas are aware of challenges linked to their **peripherality from major domestic centres and hubs**. For several programme areas, the challenges of peripherality are increased by the nature of the terrain, or maritime borders. Associated concerns include higher cost of living, depopulation and aging populations in more remote areas, fewer job opportunities, and lack of large cities.

Lack of connectivity and transport links across the border, either due to a lack of provision or congestion around key border crossings, amplifies the impact of 'distance' to and from major development centres. Pressures on, and weak access to, services is a related concern, in particular imbalances in service provision between one side of the border and the other. For young people in particular, barriers to the 'right to stay' and limited professional and educational opportunities in border areas are strongly emphasised with the 'education gap' being identified as one of the biggest difficulties. Challenges around connectivity, mobility and transport exacerbate this concern.

In recent years, the obstacles to cooperation have been intensified and added to by both Covid and security issues. **Border tensions and security** are broad areas of concern and cover issues linked to border aggression and civil security. These concerns are not limited to Eastern EU regions on the borders with Russia and Belarus near areas of active conflict but extend to areas impacted by concerns over cross-border crime, vulnerability to external interference, and exposure to extreme climate events, including wildfires, flooding and drought.

While the points raised above are common across programme areas, there is variation across programme area types and programme types. For example, stronger reference is made to labour market challenges in areas with more integrated land borders. Concerns over illegal migration, security and crime are strong along eastern external borders. Not all territories share the same 'relationship'/awareness of the border or identify as a 'border region', which

impacts the extent to which border issues are viewed as 'important' and worth engaging in.

For the Interreg D programmes involved with Outermost Regions in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, South America and the mid-Atlantic countries and territories close to them, for example, are all third countries or Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) and widely experienced additional challenges including very limited citizen engagement in policymaking, weak institutional/political cooperation, lack of shared and common frameworks to work within, and limited understanding of cross-border impact.

3.2. Need for Territorial Cooperation in the Future



need for cooperation as a means to build on opportunities, address challenges, and progress in the future.

In terms of current awareness of Interreg, citizen surveys reveal a mixed picture ranging from 18 – 80 percent of respondents familiar with the Interreg programme – although this result does reflect overall response rates and approaches to the consultation process. From this group of responses, the most familiar/memorable Interreg projects are clustered around themes including sustainable tourism, walking and bike routes, public transport, health and education projects, environmental action and risk/disaster management and protection.

Looking to the future, Figure 5, Figure 6 and Figure 7 illustrate that **economic development and the environment are the most widely identified areas of territorial cooperation and key priorities for the future**. Both are broad categories and cover a huge range of possible interventions. As will be discussed, tourism and cultural heritage, innovation/R&D, connectivity and issues around public services are also key considerations.

Figure 5: Key areas of territorial cooperation identified by respondents in harvesting reports

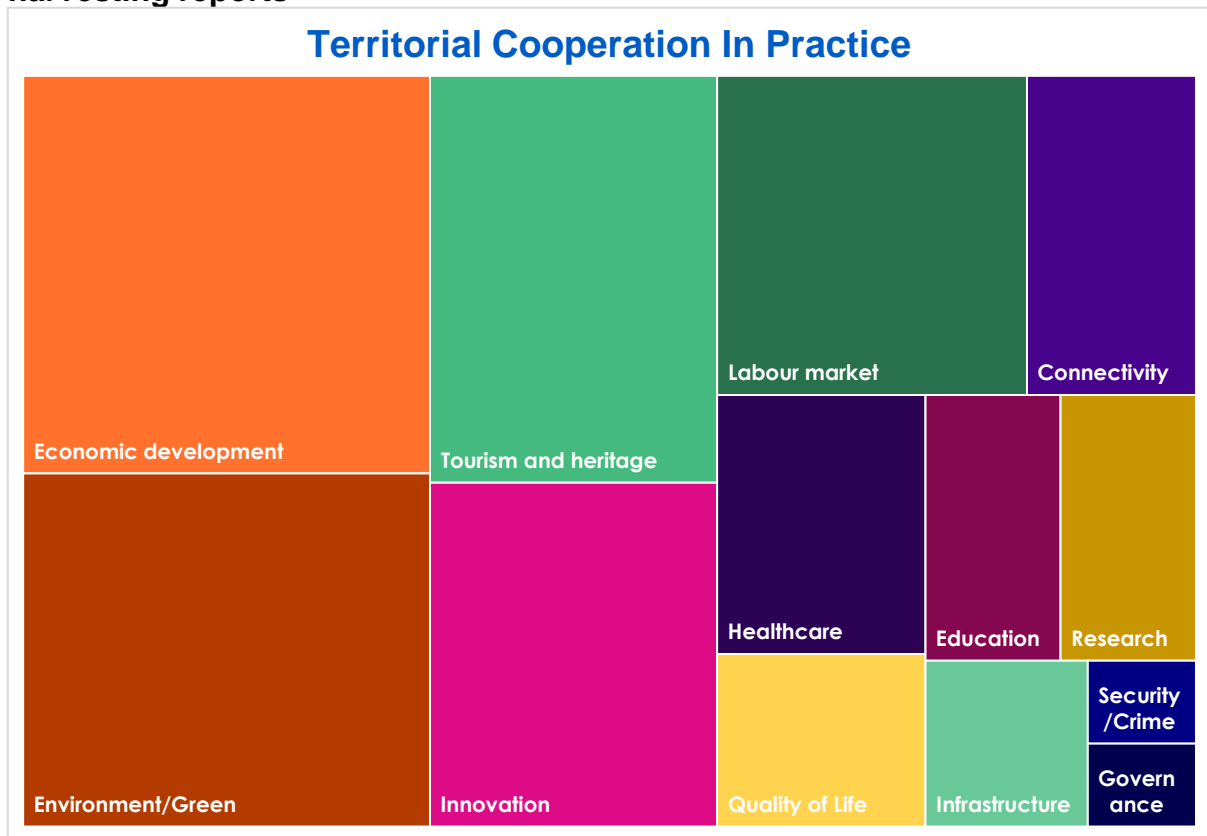


Figure 6: Top three priorities for future territorial cooperation identified in harvesting reports – citizen responses

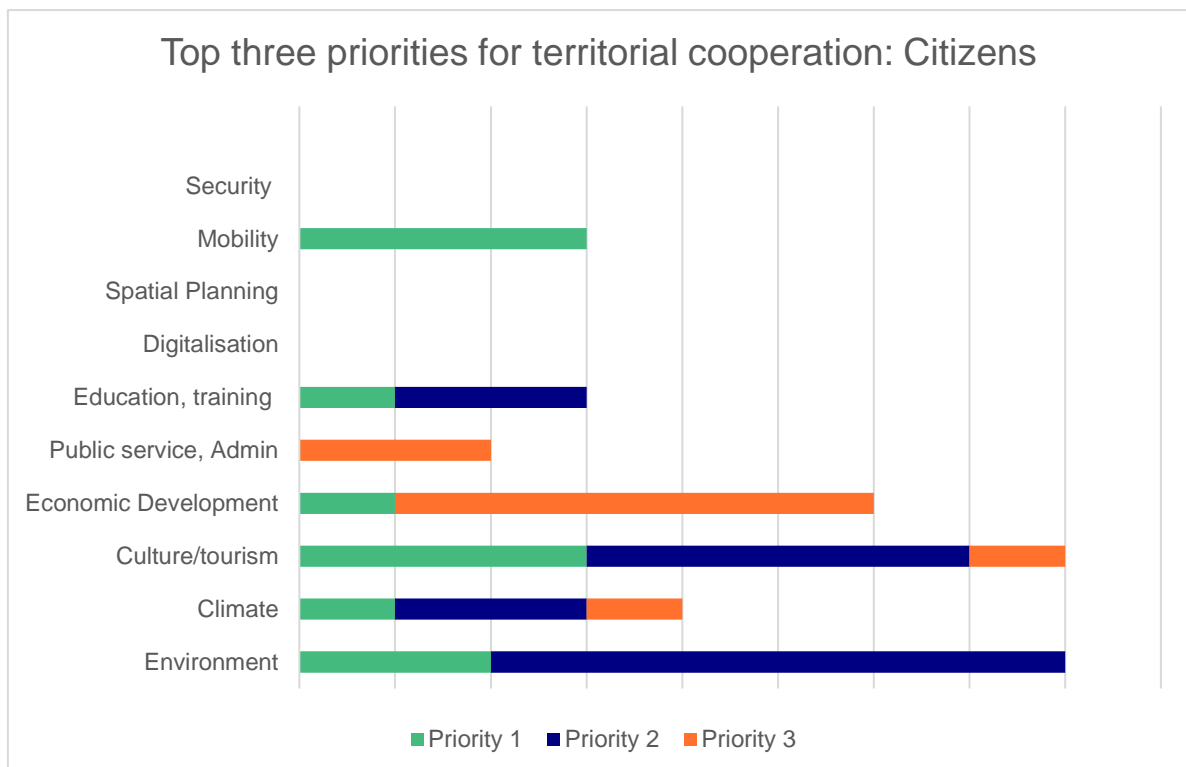
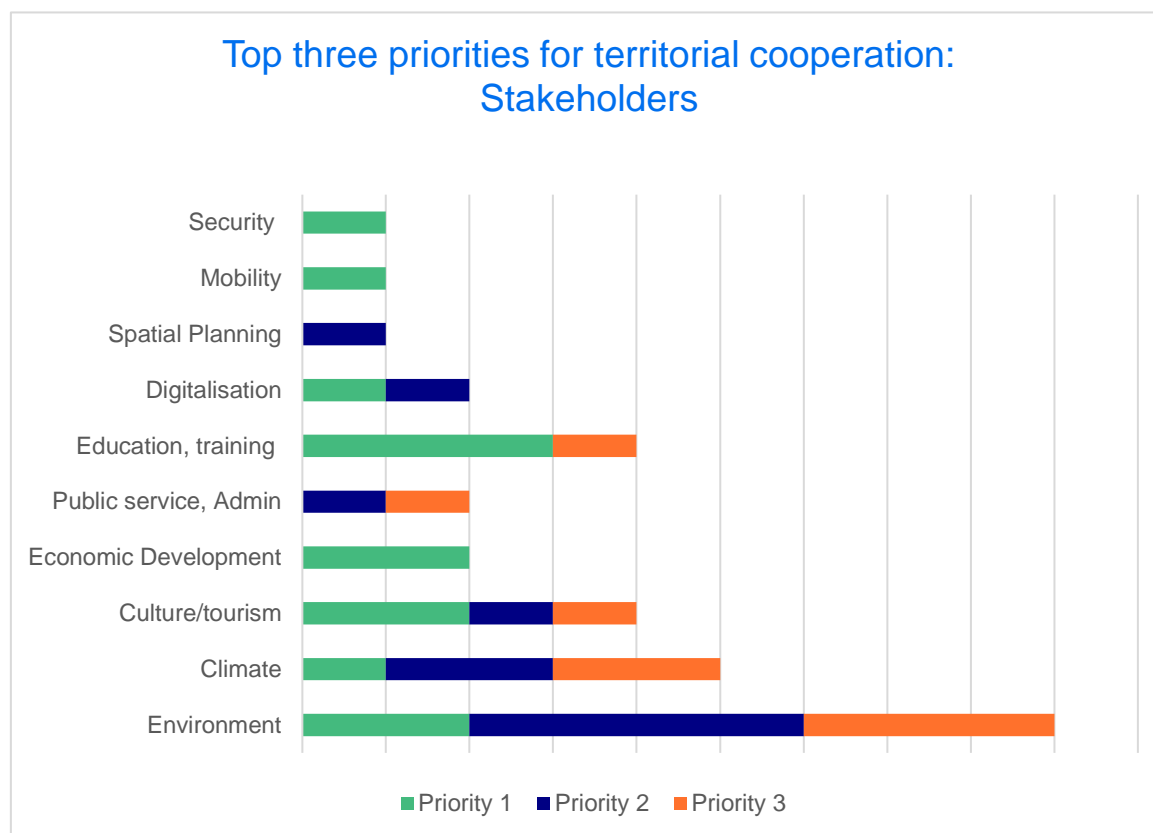


Figure 7: Top three priorities for future territorial cooperation identified in harvesting reports –stakeholder responses



“The border always means problems. Problems require the projects to solve them, the projects mean we [Interreg projects] are needed” Stakeholder Respondent - Ukraine)

“Our geographical location and the distance between us and Europe make it essential for us to cooperate with our neighbouring countries.” Stakeholder consultation Interreg D)

“This feedback underscores the recognition of Interreg as a vital instrument for fostering cooperation, highlighting that there is a pressing need to expand and improve the opportunities for exchange and collaboration among stakeholders” Harvesting report



Environment

In terms of the broader themes where territorial cooperation is seen as valuable, ‘green’ and environmental interventions are highlighted as areas where Interreg has a long-standing positive role. Environmental protection, conservation projects and shared environmental management are amongst the most widely referenced

project ‘types’ by citizen respondents who were familiar with an Interreg project, and particularly amongst youth respondents.

Climate change and environmental protection are also the most widely prioritised areas of intervention for future cooperation, including joint environmental protection, joint handling of natural disasters, environmental sustainability – pollution reduction, biodiversity protection, green energy, and digitalised waste management monitoring.



“Respondents appear to view cross-border cooperation not just as a tool for economic growth, but also as a means to create a more cohesive, environmentally responsible, and prosperous region” Citizen Respondent

“Joint projects in environmental protection are essential – our rivers and forests don’t recognise borders, so neither should our conservation efforts” Harvesting Report

This finding from stakeholder and citizen consultations is reinforced by Interact consultations on Priority Objective 2, which stands out as a ‘top priority’ for Interreg. For example, Interreg’s capacity to support integrated responses to specific territorial needs in relation to environment and climate change is noted. These interventions range from support for innovation and research on new/advanced technologies, e.g. clean tech and Greentech, to actions to promote ‘green solutions’ at a local/community level and environmental protection measures for shared ecosystems.

The specific actions envisaged vary depending on the nature of the borders involved, e.g. whether marine, remote, densely populated, shared waterways and so on. Despite this, there are common themes including, in particular, the potential to boost work on local initiatives and actions, improve ecological awareness and engagement through projects.



Economy

Economic opportunities, including business development and economic competitiveness, are some of the most widely identified areas of activity by stakeholders and citizens. Specific examples include opportunities around business collaboration in key sectors of

territorial relevance/impact, entrepreneurship, SME support linked to green development, green transition and digitalisation. Innovation, both in terms of supporting and delivering innovation, is also a key recurring theme, including opportunities to enhance, boost or apply innovation in territorially relevant sectors, support for innovation capacity and take up in core stakeholder groups, e.g. SMEs.

Various aspects of economic development are also identified as core priorities for the future. This includes a wide range of activities such as business collaboration, sustainable value chains, SME support, territorial competitiveness, and innovation, clusters, innovation hubs, business incubators. Connection to other development priorities, notably climate action and the environment, are the basis for important synergies going forward, e.g. in relation to green and blue growth opportunities. Also linked to economic development opportunities, labour market actions, such as supporting and enabling cross-border working and exchange, are identified as important issues in the future. This is particularly due to the current regulatory and administrative challenges still faced by workers living and working in different countries.



“Facilitating small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) cooperation addresses economic development goals by strengthening the regional economy, encouraging innovation, and creating business networks that enhance competitiveness. These tangible, visible results not only support local economies but also demonstrate the Programme’s impact on small businesses, which are vital to both countries’ economies.” Harvesting report



Tourism and
cultural
heritage

Opportunities linked to tourism and cultural heritage are areas where Interreg has been very active in the past and they are especially widely referred to in consultations, e.g. cooperation on joint tourist products and services. Citizen consultation

responses on the awareness of Interreg show that projects linked to tourism and heritage are amongst the most visible and ‘recognisable’ e.g. hiking and tourist trails. Innovative and sustainable approaches to joint marketing, shared facilities, connecting trails and tourist routes, and development around shared heritage are all seen as opportunities for future cooperation.



“Cultural cooperation and tourism initiatives have been identified as another cornerstone of success. The creation of common tourist destinations and cross-border touristic routes has enhanced the region’s appeal to visitors. Efforts to promote local products and cultural heritage have also fostered stronger community ties and boosted local economies.” Harvesting Report

Support for **cultural exchange and, in particular, projects linked to tourism** have particularly strong support especially in citizens consultations. This includes, for example, activities linked to language, sport and community

engagement, joint participation in creative industries (music, performance arts, acting, crafts) and joint tourism products and services.



Labour
markets and
education

Actions around labour markets, training and employment are noted in citizen and stakeholder consultations, e.g. youth entrepreneurship and training, and labour mobility. The topics of digitalisation and

communication technologies are also widely mentioned in relation to this area. Educational/training opportunities, in particular skills development and engaging with youth supporting cross-border mobility and exchange, are identified as opportunities for the future. This includes, for example, training, networking between stakeholders, citizen campaigns, career development and job shadowing opportunities.



“Reconsideration of existing educational programmes to better align them with the needs and aspirations of current younger generations”. Stakeholder Respondent

This area of intervention is particularly valued by younger respondents in the consultation. For example, when asked “what actions in favour of young people do you think should be implemented in the cross-border territory?”, young people in the France-Italy programme area prioritised easier access to employment and the opportunity to gain cross-border professional experience.



Public
services and
quality of life

The importance of public service provision more generally and access to services is clearly expressed in the consultation responses. Stakeholder and citizen respondents identify opportunities for cooperation in health, education and emergency service provision and the

opportunity to collaborate on new technologies as a means to improve and extend service access and even cross-border health services. Complex **institutional and regulatory frameworks** can make territorial cooperation on public services challenging. However, future cooperation could build on work to implement models of shared governance in public services, creating pilot projects, possibly in health and education, which reflect joint responsibility. Even in areas where regulatory and institutional differences are noted barriers, consultations highlight areas of productive cooperation.



“One of the most successful areas of cooperation has been in healthcare. Joint actions, including the development of common medical protocols, the implementation of telemedicine services, and the exchange of medical knowledge and best practices, have significantly improved healthcare access and quality in the border region. These initiatives demonstrate how shared challenges in public health can be effectively addressed through collaborative efforts.” Harvesting Report

Respondents pointed to limited citizen engagement in policymaking, a lack of joint policy visions for programme area development, and insufficient shared public services as areas needing improvement, pointing to opportunities for cooperation in the future. Also mentioned are actions **around quality of life and in particular issues around access to leisure resources**, the improvement of public spaces, social engagement and the integration of marginalised communities.

Work with younger populations to support democratic development and participation is another area of interest. Great potential is recognised in projects to promote civic engagement and social cohesion, creating activities aimed at entrepreneurial youth and stimulating youth creativity and empowerment, and involvement in projects and cooperation with European organizations involving youth from different European countries. All of these activities are important for fostering the next generation of leaders.



Connectivity
and
transport

Cooperation on **connectivity and transport**, particularly linked to testing and trialing new green technologies and enabling more integrated planning, are cited as important areas for collaborative activity. Although the capacity to invest in physical infrastructure is limited, smaller-scale activities such

as bike paths and local green transport initiatives are amongst the more widely ‘recognised/known’ Interreg activities in citizen consultations. Looking to the future, **mobility and support/improvement of transport and connectivity** are strong priorities for citizens. Interventions related to improvements in public transport provision and connectivity are particularly highlighted. These include, for example, enhancing physical connectivity, more integrated planning of transport services, and links to other EU and national programmes and policies in order to incorporate a cross-border dimension. Innovation and pilots to test new approaches, the application of new, especially green technologies and small-scale infrastructure investments to improve regional connectivity and sustainability are also of interest. Systems to apply cross-border ticketing and/or reduced fares for cross-border populations and the development of integrated planning and information systems, e.g. on schedules and timetables are further activities mentioned in this regard and cooperation on the maintenance of key

cross-border routes and systems is highlighted as important. Looking beyond transports connections, **digital connectivity** is increasingly considered as important as physical infrastructure, particularly for fostering innovation and supporting start-ups, and represents therefore a key area of cooperation in the future.



“More infrastructure projects (environmental, sustainability, healthcare, green energy) “Broader eligibility for such projects would help regions address critical issues and boost long-term resilience” Stakeholder Respondent



Safety and security

Security and civic

protection/preparedness are emerging themes across for range of border areas. Opportunities are identified linked to community preparedness in response to existing and new crises and cooperation on local security and

safety concerns. The impacts of war in Ukraine and tensions with Russia and Belarus are clearly primary concerns. Cooperation is sought along eastern borders on, for example, local responses and adaptation to the direct and associated impacts of conflict. More generally, ‘safety’ and ‘security’ are also associated with combatting crime, social divisions and environmental disasters and so have a wider relevance across a variety of border types.

Across these themes, soft qualitative capacity building-type investments have ongoing support. The scope to work across stakeholder types and involve communities and citizens are also emphasised. However, investment in, e.g., hard infrastructure is also supported, such as transport infrastructure, public buildings and spaces, and environmental and waste management infrastructure. Programmes generally lack the financial resources for significant infrastructure investments. However, enabling larger investments would address core cross-border challenges and enhance project sustainability. The need to balance tangible (e.g. infrastructure) and intangible (e.g. service improvements) outcomes is emphasised.



Specifics

Similar cooperation themes are raised across programme types and territories, but with an area/programme specific focus reflecting, for example, specific conditions along maritime borders, areas with multiple languages, and

major physical barriers. It is possible to identify additional variations/specificities associated with the type of cooperation area.

External borders

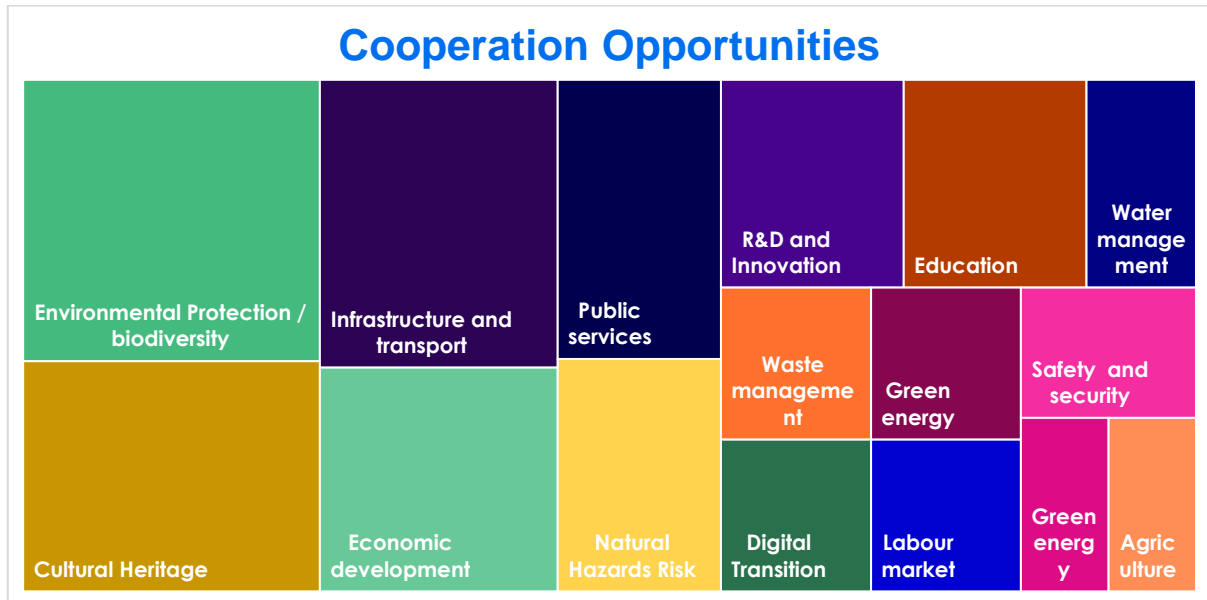
Interreg programmes operate along numerous external EU borders. This includes cooperation with the Western Balkans and Türkiye; ‘neighbourhood’ countries; and EU outermost regions and their neighbourhoods. For these programmes, a focus on external EU borders and work with a combination of EU funding (ERDF and IPA and NDICI) are distinctive features. Additionally, the impacts of political instability and tensions are much more prominent issues, also impacting the complexity of development challenges, concerns over safety and security, and the barriers at border crossings with external partner countries. Other concerns include: the lack of common/shared initiatives and frameworks; cultural, perception and linguistic barriers; lack of common/shared infrastructures; substantial development disparities; limited awareness of shared development issues; limited of citizen engagement; peripheral location; and environmental obstacles.

In this context, territorial cooperation is seen as bringing opportunities to collaborate on a wide range of issues. Of note is the particular attention given to **environmental and climate related themes** e.g. including joint approaches to protection of biodiversity and climate resilience as well as the prominence given to responses relating to climate disasters and waste/water management. In particular, the respondent feedback reflects a sense of needing to tackle big common challenges with joint action and the value of links to EU strengths in the field. **Cultural links and tourism** are also a widely shared thematic focus from both stakeholders and citizens. **Infrastructure and transport** links get support, particularly along land borders with accession countries e.g. improved transport infrastructure, border crossings, and transport networks equally accessible from both sides of the border as well as joint investments to improve mobility of people, goods and services. However, it is also noted that these investments can take up a large proportion of programme budgets. **Economic development** opportunities linked to innovation and research are noted, especially around areas of shared concern such as blue and green growth, new tech solutions, entrepreneurship and SME cooperation. Sustainable food/agri food production value chains and innovations in the context of climate change were also noted.

Public sector development and cooperation in aspects of healthcare and education are a further common focus, particularly for citizens, and related to concerns over the impact of demographic change and disparities between territories in levels of public service provision. Opportunities around digital transition is identified as an emerging theme, with emphasis on infrastructure and training, digital literacy and digital inclusion. Further, emerging priorities

include **resilience, safety and security, civil protection and refugee support** and food security.

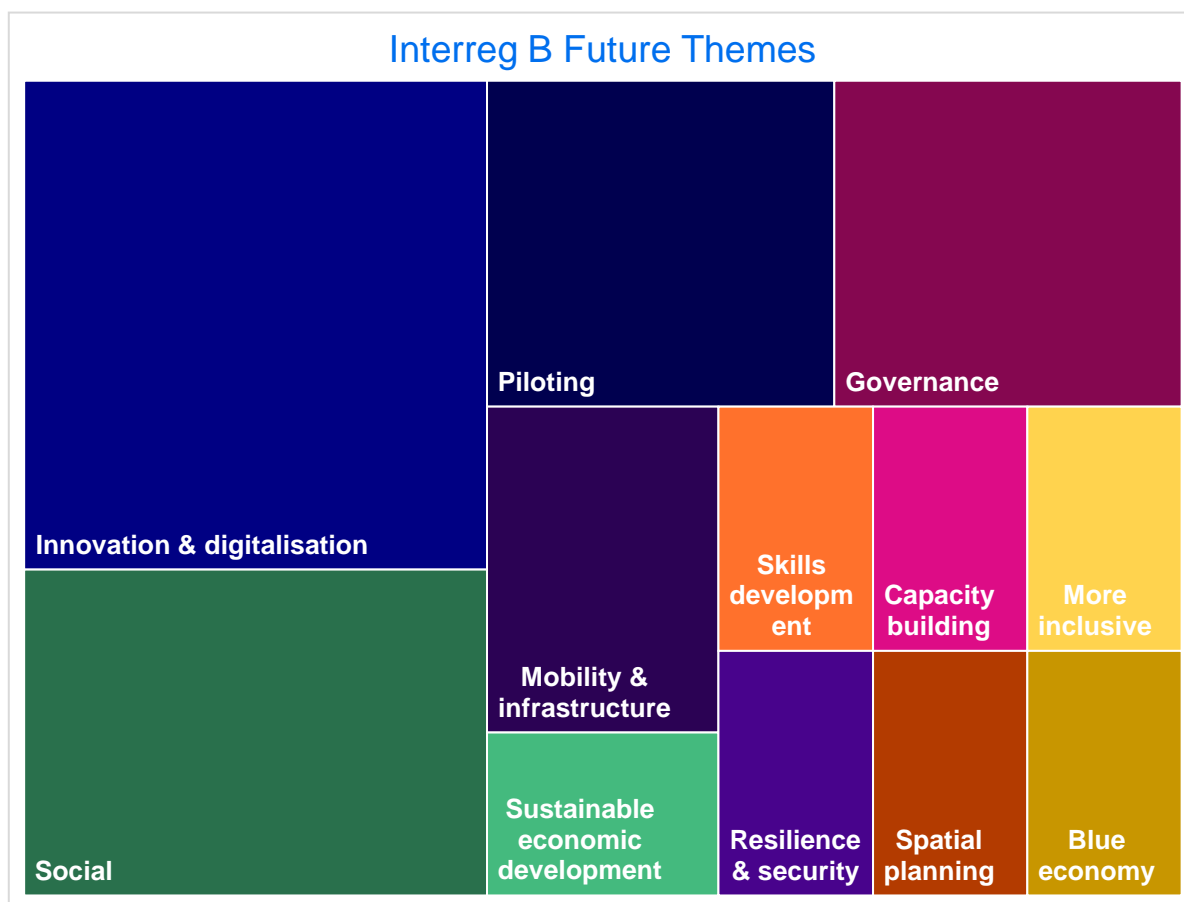
Figure 8: External Border Programmes Key Areas of Interest for Cooperation Identified in Consultation Reports



Interreg B

Many of the core themes identified for **Interreg B programmes** are similar to those for Interreg as a whole. However, notable variations are a greater emphasis on innovation, governance and capacity and in particular opportunities linked to digitalisation, which reflects the greater distances involved. Opportunities around blue growth is also a notable addition.

Figure 9: Interreg B Key Areas of Interest for Cooperation Identified in Consultation Reports



Interreg C

Interreg C programmes have a distinct role, working at an interregional level across the EU. Each of the Interreg C programmes have their own roles and characteristics which inform aspirations for future projects. While also reflecting many of the key themes identified above, particular responses from this programme type included:

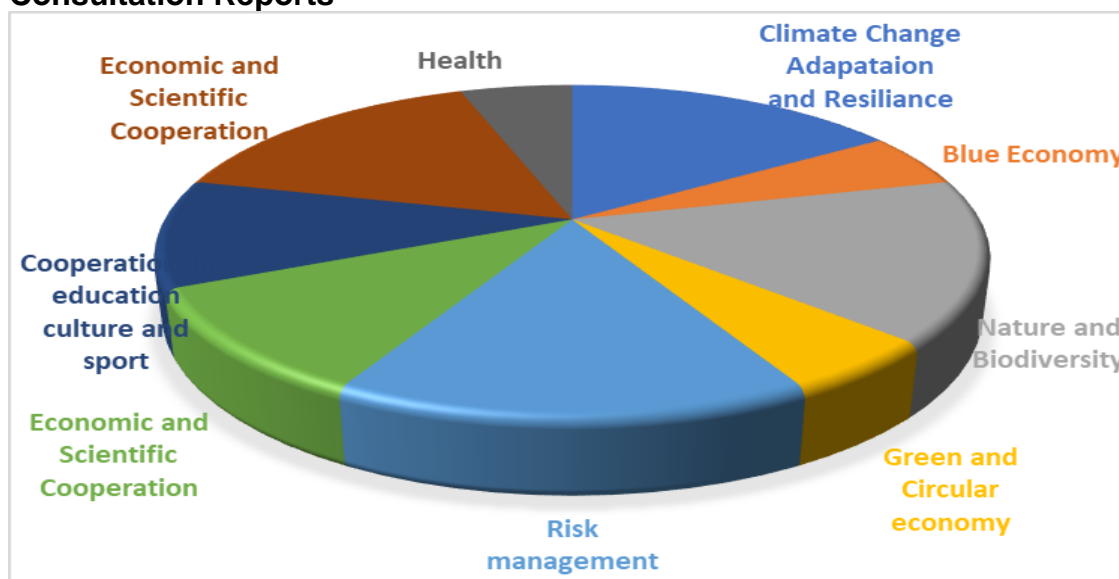
- Urbact respondents particularly identified sustainable urban development, knowledge transfer and capacity building, community engagement and citizen participation as well as digital innovation and smart city development and holistic and comprehensive initiatives.
- Interreg Europe respondents shared ideas for cooperation on climate change, biodiversity, disaster preparedness, SME support, citizens' involvement, and digitalization. More general views on what constitutes a dream project included aspects such as mutual learning, results for participating regions, low/no administration, good partners and need based projects.

- ESPON responses reflect a commitment to, for example, prioritising shared challenges (focusing collaborative efforts on pressing transnational issues like climate change adaptation, urbanization, and environmental sustainability) and promoting experimental cross-border projects addressing specific regional challenges such as integrated infrastructure or shared resource management.
- Interact respondents aim at expanding the role of Interact as a ‘think-tank’ on territorial cooperation, with wider roles in developing capacity, skills and knowhow. New opportunities in new/emerging technologies are envisaged and strengthened support for a wider range of topics and reaching more stakeholders.

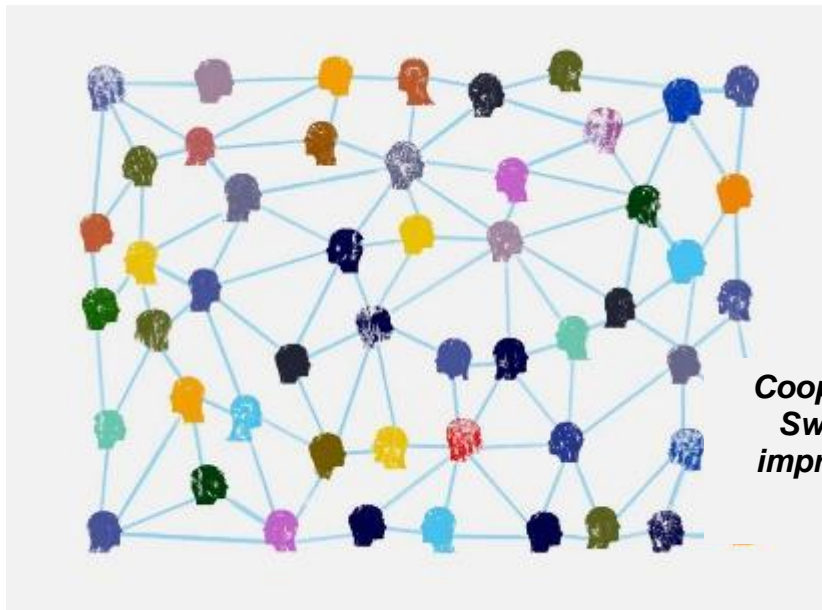
Interreg D

Interreg D programmes cover EU outermost regions and their neighbourhoods. The objective of Strand D for the outermost regions is to allow them to cooperate with neighbouring countries and territories. Under this strand calls for proposals can be launched for combined funding under the ERDF and the (NDICI). Programme responses emphasise the importance of climate change adaptation and resilience, blue, green and circular economies, environmental protection, safety and risk management as well as sustainable tourism and sport and culture, (see Figure 10). In particular, exchange based around training and exchanges of scientists, teachers and students, as well as cooperation with wider neighbourhood area, are highlighted. Linked to the distance from the EU, lack of wider familiarity with EU funding approaches, and importance of links to neighbouring non-EU Member states additional concerns include building common/shared initiatives and frameworks; awareness of shared development issues; and citizen engagement.

Figure 10: Interreg D Key Areas of Interest for Cooperation Identified in Consultation Reports



4. Interreg Adding Value



***Cooperation & Performance:
Switching a Gear. How to
improve cooperation impact
and visibility?***

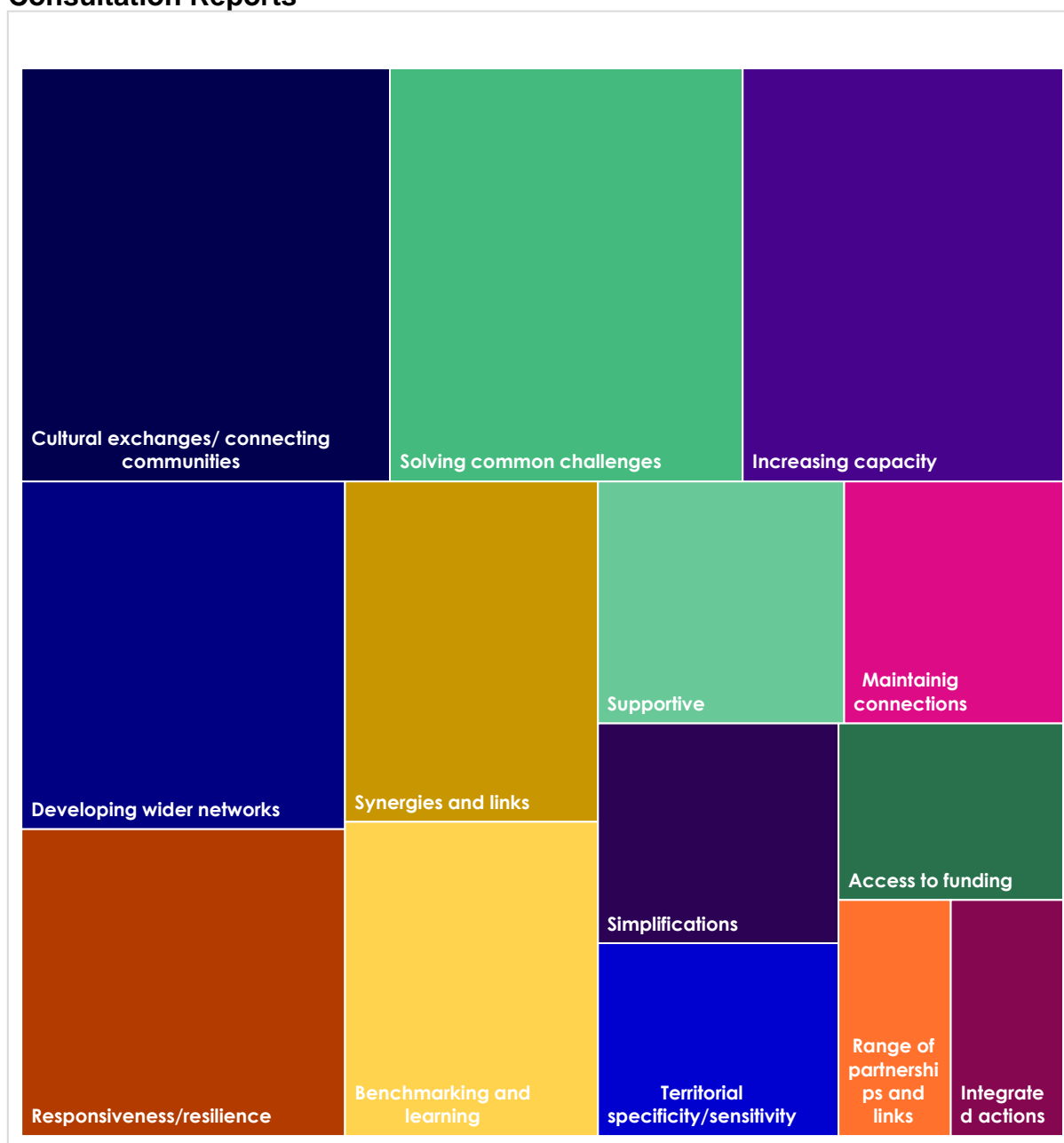
4.1. Interreg Adds Value



The added value of territorial cooperation, specifically Interreg, is widely discussed in the consultations. Clear conclusions are that Interreg does add value and does so in a number of ways. Figure 11 is an overview of broad areas of added value identified in the harvesting

reports and provides an indication of how widely they are mentioned. Key points raised relate to value in exchange and connecting communities, scope to address common challenges, capacity building and resilience.

Figure 11: Territorial Cooperation Areas of Added Value Identified in Consultation Reports



Across all of these categories, **the connections between people matter the most**. Consultation responses stress the importance of interpersonal links, networks and the range of partnerships that would not have happened without involvement in Interreg. At a fundamental level Interreg delivers value just by enabling and facilitating an understanding and appreciation of the cultural richness and diversity of neighbouring territories, and trust between stakeholders. The framework, focus and resource that Interreg provides not only initiates and enables links between citizens and stakeholders, but also helps to maintain lasting productive networks and partnerships, bringing together diverse partners that would not otherwise have worked together and linked regions. As well as links between territories, the value of multi-level and cross sectoral cooperation within territories and across levels of governance are

also important. For example, trust building, visits and exchange of experience mean Interreg is proving a valuable tool for engaging with communities, local and regional authorities and at the strategic level, by working across levels of governance.



"Programme helps to overcome any feelings of being distant from one's overseas neighbours. It was still identified that working across maritime borders naturally have different dynamics compared to land borders". Stakeholder Respondent

"Often thanks to Interreg projects, the political border is not a defining boundary. This opportunity for collaboration is extremely important, both because it systematizes expertise and because it gives us visibility of what is happening across the border, in a constructive way." Stakeholder Respondent

Networks and exchanges are built around the opportunity to collaborate on **addressing common challenges for the territory** and act in an integrated way both on long standing issues, e.g. physical obstacles, development disparities and cultural divisions, and also on new challenges including migration, conflict in neighbouring territories, and environmental damage linked to climate change. Territorial cooperation is widely associated with administrative complexity, as will be discussed later in the report. However, as a framework for cooperation, it enables and simplifies connections, encourage positive action and delivers outputs and results that can themselves simplify and streamline solutions. The territorial 'roots' of Interreg, the foundations in shared development issues, and also the 'relatable' scale of interventions also means the programmes are viewed as **territorially relevant and sensitive to territorial specificities**, which may not be reflected in the same way in domestic strategies, e.g. the needs of peripheral areas.



"There is some cooperation that I know of in nature conservation, which could not be done without the cross-border cooperation and here the Interreg funding is a critical incentive for cooperation." Stakeholder respondent

"Programmes tap into a willingness and interest of companies and organisations to work together to address common issues or attack common problems" Stakeholder respondent

Particularly for external border areas, the role of Interreg as a **framework** within which to pursue synergies, links and dialogue and address joint challenges and actions is particularly valued. Notably, the wider **strategic role** of Interreg in relation to external borders is highlighted, e.g. as a link to wider territories with geopolitical significance and in supporting the process of alignment for pre-

accession countries by enhancing institutional capacities, harmonizing standards, and building trust and connections across borders.



“Tackling cross-border challenges such as environmental issues, public health, or infrastructure needs become more effective when countries collaborate, as solutions can be implemented on a larger scale. Another key advantage is the pooling resources, which allows for more efficient use of funding, expertise, and infrastructure in the region” Harvesting report

Learning and capacity building are emphasised as core areas of strength and added value. Keys are knowledge exchange and capacity building activities that improve the skills and knowledge of participants and end beneficiaries. Associated benefits are the capacity to innovate and be more ambitious, particularly supported through joint action.



“... funding allows my organisation to take bigger steps.” Stakeholder Respondent

” ...funding allows us to undertake innovative and replicable pilot projects that we would otherwise be unable to consider.” Citizen Respondent

These are contributions which are valued across all the programmes, but particularly so in the IPA regions and smaller territories. Key points are value in terms of trust building and as a tool for engaging with local and municipal partners within and between territories. Interreg delivers value in **learning, knowledge exchange** and reinforces these opportunities. This dimension is particularly emphasised where large distances make more direct action challenging, e.g. respondents in Interreg D programmes emphasise advantages in sharing the “resources and skills of each country” and enabling the circulation of knowledge and skills.

Responsiveness and resilience are especially valued elements of the programmes during a period dominated by major crises. At its most extreme, Interreg cooperation along the EU eastern borders have been very directly and negatively impacted by the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Where cooperation is maintained, it has required flexibility as some funding needed redirected from, e.g., from tourism to health and other areas impacted by war. It also greatly raised security concerns, and practical issues linked to access to partners, opportunities to meet and capacity to meet deadlines.

Capitalising on established networks and relationships has enabled stakeholders to adapt and respond to major challenges. **The territorial specificity and sensitivity** are other valued aspects of Interreg programmes,

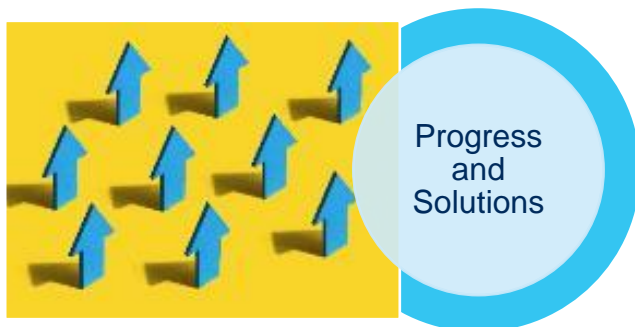
even those covering large geographic areas. For example, funding allows cooperation on niche, but valuable topics overlooked by other funding streams.



“Interreg NPA funding allowed cooperation on niche, but valuable topics overlooked by other funding streams, including building the creative economy in peripheral regions, and testing plant breeding in northern climatic conditions.” Harvesting Report

4.2. Delivering Interreg and Performance

Maximising the added value, impact and visibility of Interreg is an ongoing process and links closely to the efficiency and effectiveness of Interreg programmes. Targeting relevant issues is crucial but these efforts must be accompanied by mechanisms to turn objectives and priorities into impactful projects and visible results. As will be discussed, in the lead up to a reform period, the focus of debate is on what needs to be changed and improved in terms of management and implementation. Nevertheless, the consultation responses also identify important advances and improvements in Interreg management and implementation which can be taken forward in the future.



Progress made in establishing, managing and implementing Interreg programmes is reflected in the consultation responses. The value of having Interreg as an **established framework around which to build cooperation** has already been mentioned. The stability of the ‘Interreg framework’ over successive programme periods

means cooperation efforts have been able to mature, with many becoming more ambitious, widening and deepening cooperation and delivering tangible results. Interreg offers financial resources, but it also provides **advanced institutional resources, expertise and support crucial to mobilising and delivering projects**. While the inherent complexities of territorial cooperation are clear, progress in **delivering simpler systems** and support to navigate challenges are highlighted by stakeholders. For example, the introduction of **Simplified Cost Options (SCO)** is described as a ‘great relief’, significantly reducing administrative burdens for partners especially for SMEs and smaller organisations and allowing more time for project activities. The application of

small project funds is identified as another useful measure which has proved less demanding for smaller and new partners and key to ‘kick-starting’ cooperation. The development of **shared services and tools**, particularly through the work of Interact, is appreciated and linked to saving time, staff and financial resources. Collaborative work on programme websites to make information and support greater accessibility is another example. In particular, Interact’s work on the joint monitoring system (JeMS) is highlighted.



“JeMS system is excellent and could be proposed also for Programmes other than Interreg” Stakeholder Respondent

In responding to changing project and programme conditions, a number of programmes are **complimented for their flexibility and capacity to adapt**, which is important for projects working in innovative, challenging and changing conditions.



“It’s an agile and flexible program which is a huge plus compared to other funding sources where you more or less sign contracts on your objectives and if they are not reached, you get a cut in your funding.” Stakeholder Respondent

“The Programme is flexible in terms of the activities to be implemented and allows project partners to come up with their own initiatives, which is a huge plus.” Stakeholder Respondent

More generally, **active, informed and engaged support from programme authorities** is praised. In this context, the particular role played by Interact is also highlighted. Interact plays a unique and highly valued role in bringing Interreg programmes together and facilitating the exchange of information and the ‘cooperation’ mindset that it brings to Interreg is essential to its success. Interact saves programmes time and money by streamlining processes and preventing duplication of efforts. This allows programmes to focus on high-impact activities rather than reinventing existing solutions, maximising efficiency and value.



There remain barriers to delivering effective and efficient cooperation

All the consultations show that **excessive administrative controls and overly complex rules** are identified as barriers to participation and aspects of delivery, e.g. delaying initiatives and discouraging participation by key groups. Respondents stress

that programmes and project teams are often burdened with paperwork and compliance checks instead of focusing on achieving meaningful project outcomes. Specific areas of concern relate, for example, to complex audit and

control processes, complicated and prolonged project application and payment systems, lack of clarity in some terminology and systems, lack of flexibility to respond to changed conditions, and complex reporting systems. The difficulties faced are particularly challenging for smaller organisations, NGOs, SMEs and territories with weaker institutional capacities and resources. These challenges are further increased when the systems 'keep changing' with each programme period. Categories of 'barrier' are illustrated in Figure 12 and

Figure 13 and include issues linked to administrative and regulatory issues, capacity and know how on ETC and territorial capacities.

Figure 12: Key barriers and challenges in cooperation and indication of most frequently emphasised concerns

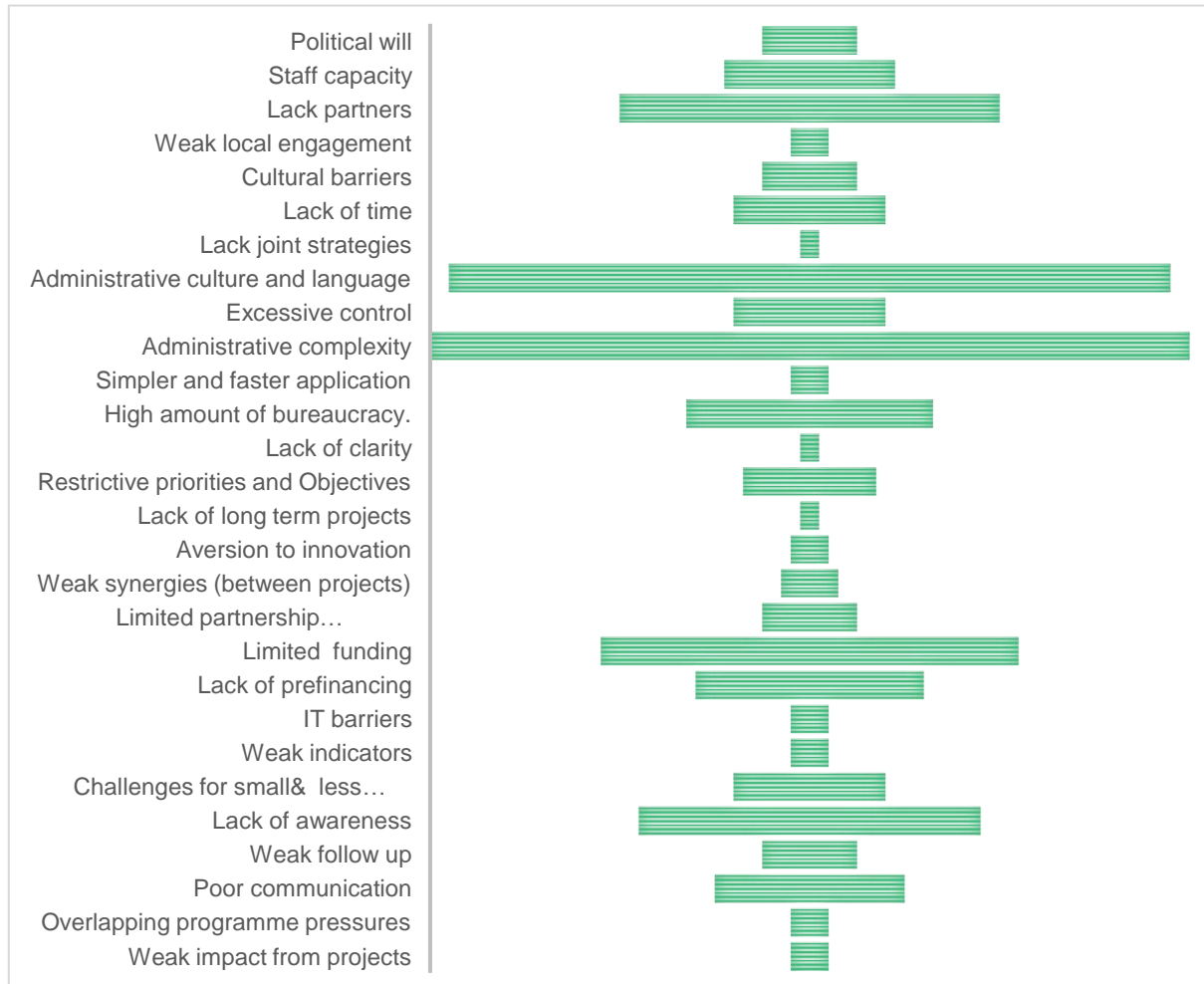
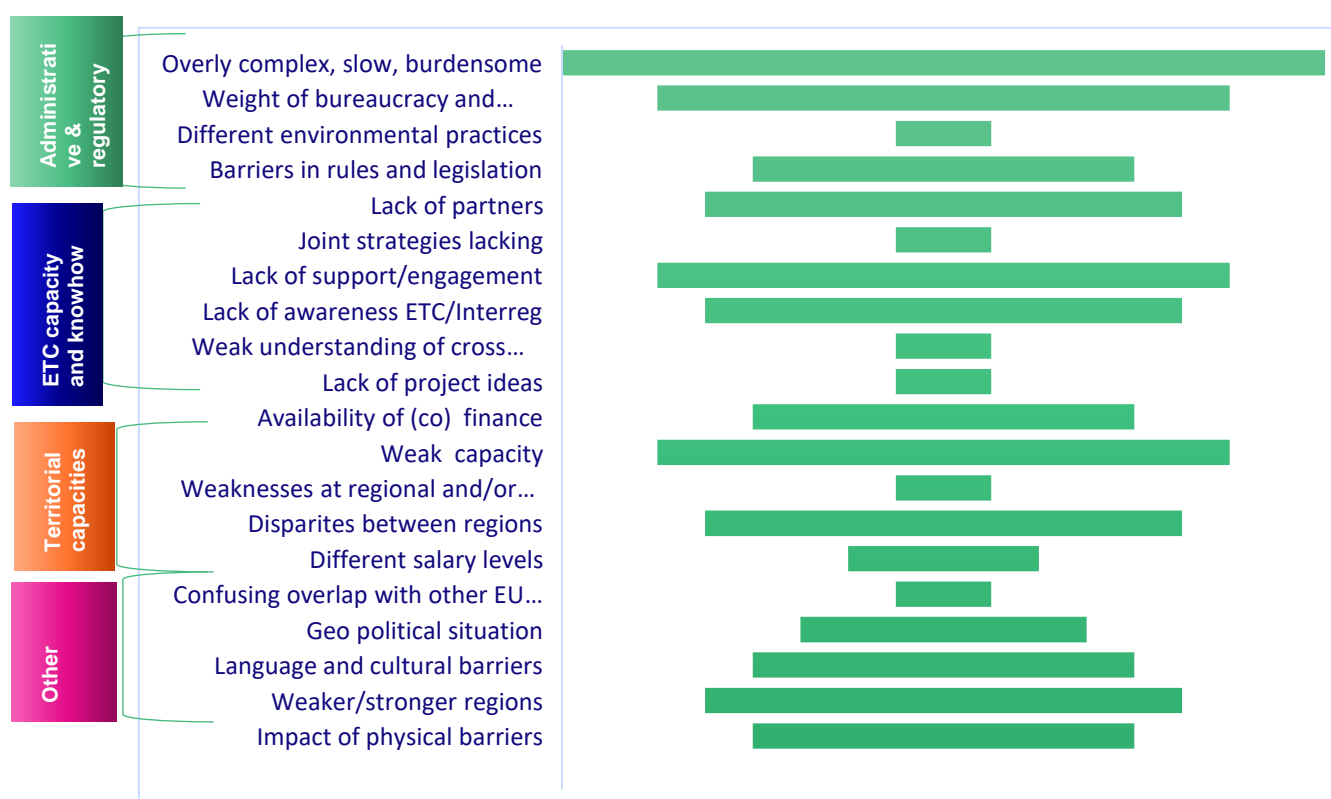


Figure 13: Key barriers in external border programmes

Within these categories key issues identified in the reports include the following.

Cultural and linguistic barriers are amongst the most widely identified barriers to cooperation although with a broad range of experiences within this category. In some cases, significant differences in administrative approaches and cultures prove challenging. In others, linguistic barriers add an additional challenge to already complex administrative procedures. At the same time, lack of 'difference' can also be a barrier to cooperation, with stakeholders reluctant to pursue exchanges with the partners areas that are not sufficiently 'different'. While cultural barriers in terms of different working methods and approaches are mentioned, negative stereotypes were not identified to the same extent. Similarly, competition between territories and stakeholders is not widely mentioned. This suggests there is no direct opposition to cooperation in theory, but additional factors constrain cooperation in practice.



"Organisational culture is different in both countries. It also means that sometimes you must take a little more time to understand where these differences lie" Stakeholder Respondent

"The other country is not considered 'exotic' enough precisely because of its geographical proximity" Stakeholder Respondent

"Language is a major obstacle, but it is very important for mutual understanding and appreciation." Stakeholder Respondent

Lack of knowledge/understanding of the institutional, economic and social roles and responsibilities on ‘the other side of the border’ is an identified challenge. More generally, a lack of awareness of Interreg and territorial cooperation opportunities is a difficulty. These are widely experienced concerns but are particularly keenly felt along the external borders where issues like limited understanding of cross-border impact and a general lack of awareness about programme benefits are highlighted. Lack of awareness in key ‘target’ groups is another challenge, and a recurring theme is the lack of awareness among the youth about European Territorial Cooperation opportunities. Many respondents believe that young people, especially those outside specific sectors or academic fields, are unaware of the opportunities within Interreg that are available to them.



“Municipalities are busy with national EU support schemes and prioritize investment projects. Not all municipal leaders understand why soft projects are needed.”
Stakeholder Respondent

Weak support from domestic political leaders is viewed as a barrier to territorial cooperation. Political support is key to delivering successful projects and mobilising activity, but political dynamics and tensions can also disrupt the continuity and success of cooperative efforts, particularly along external borders. There are concerns that these issues could be more of a challenge in the future and are amplified by a weak understanding of cross-border impact, resource-intensive access to the programme, and a general lack of awareness about potential benefits.

It remains **challenging for stakeholders to agree on joint areas of action**. Respondents indicate that partners have different levels of knowledge, ambition, and interests, making it more difficult to establish common goals and effectively collaborate. There can be a lack of joint frameworks or strategies, which can ease/facilitate engagement, as well as differing needs of partners on both sides of the border. This challenge can be especially acute in programmes covering large numbers of territories. Under Urbact, for example, the diversity of partners, in terms of administration, context and stage of development, can complicate the transfer of ideas and the implementation of good practices.

Capacity issues are major barriers according to respondents, particularly as Interreg programmes and projects are acknowledged to be relatively complex to administer. Capacity issues cover a broad spectrum of concerns from

operational concerns within organisation to wider development issues in the participating territories. Key issues are grouped as follows:

- **Differing institutional capacities and competencies on either side of the border.** For one cross-border programme, 60 percent of stakeholders found that the main obstacle to better cooperation could be traced back to different levels of regional and/or local competence on either side of the border. Another programme noted that less developed areas often struggle to meet the demands of complex projects, which can result in missed opportunities for meaningful collaboration. For example, lack of staff and time pressures are major concerns, especially for small organisations. In the current period, additional pressures are posed by overlapping of programming periods and the late adoption of EU Cohesion regulation.
- **Varying financial capacity/resources** impacts on the ability to participate in Interreg, particularly for smaller organisations, and can create imbalances in the cooperation between weaker and 'stronger' regions and territories with different levels of co-financing. Exacerbating the problem is the long time periods it can take to get payment for claims.
- **Distances from key development and infrastructure networks** in many border regions are also challenges. For example, remote or rural areas can lack adequate transport links, infrastructure or access to resources necessary for active participation. **Variations in digital connectivity and digitalisation** are also identified as barriers, and differences in key areas of **public service provision**, such as health, education and training, can make cooperation challenging.

Another key area of concern is the **lack of partners and imbalances in partnerships**. These include identifying new partners; reluctance of potential partners to participate in smaller projects; and having to complete work on behalf of partners, particularly those with lower funding. **This is not just an issue for lagging regions**. In territories with higher salary and operating costs, for example, the comparatively small amounts of funding available from Interreg, combined with high administrative demands, may not be attractive enough to encourage participation. One respondent, for example, stated that partners withdrew from a proposed cooperation, among other things because the financial resources are of no interest to them as not even the salary costs would have been covered. Widening access is also impacted by issues around narrowly defined specific objectives, calls and weaknesses in indicator systems. The adequate capturing of results has also proved to be frustrating and can contribute to a low visibility and profile of the projects and programmes.

The difficulties in identifying suitable partners across borders can limit opportunities to broaden partnerships and build capacity. This is a particular challenge for areas with low absorption capacity, e.g. where there is a small pool of stakeholders and/or areas facing challenges like outmigration and

declining populations. Expanding cooperation beyond a close group of partners with dedicated capacity and specialist knowhow can be challenging, with programmes risking being perceived as having the same partners ‘all the time’ and limited in terms innovation. Challenges are amplified by budget pressures and limitations, in particular lack of access to pre-financing for projects and lack of flexibility.



“Local communities often lack the infrastructure, financial resources and human capital required to take full advantage of cooperation opportunities. As a result, cooperation can be skewed toward more developed ones, leaving behind those with greater needs but fewer resources” Stakeholder Respondent

“Hermetic, inaccessible and not very transparent, not easy or available for many municipalities, institutions and entities planning partnerships in projects” Stakeholder Respondent

“Knowledge transfer across regions is sometimes limited to persons/organisations that have previously been involved in common initiatives, and it is difficult for new organisations to find and join new networks” Stakeholder Respondent

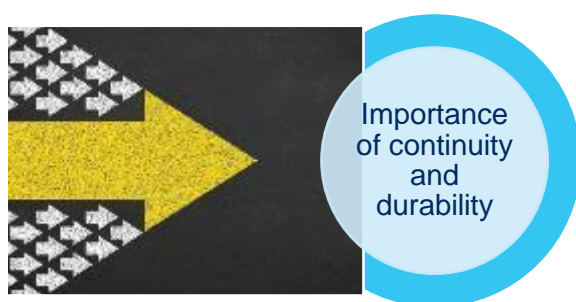
5. Maximising Performance



Ideas and observations for the future

Looking to the future, a clear need and demand for territorial cooperation, opportunities to build and carry forward the core elements of Interreg, and scope to keep learning, adapting and improving are all identified in the harvesting reports. Key observations for the future cluster around the themes of continuity and durability, flexibility and innovation, synergies and coordination, community links, delivering impact and support. The following sections describe key issues identified and proposed potential responses.

5.1. Continuity and durability



Change and crises have been a dominant feature of the 2021-27 period. In this context, although there is emphasis on reform and adaptation to change, the importance of continuity and progression is also underlined across the consultation responses.



“The Covid-19 pandemic has drastically affected the current state of cooperation. Against this background, there are calls for “maintaining and strengthening of the mutual relations “. (Stakeholder Respondent)

Consistency in programmes allows for consolidation, evolution, learning and improvement, all of which would be supported by:

- **Continuity in geography.** It takes time to build the relationships, trust and even friendships which are at the heart of cooperation. It is important to continue in the cooperation effort and it is only possible to do so if the continuity of the geography of the Programme is ensured.
- **Thematic continuity.** A clear thematic structure is required and should be maintained. Constantly changing priorities and funding constraints can mean that projects remain isolated or short term due to the lack of financial or institutional incentives for sustained collaboration. In contrast, consistency would help to ensure the stability of major project outcomes, e.g. through networking older projects. It is important to use and not overlook what already exists and support longer term projects.
- **Continuity in core elements of implementation.** As previously noted, consultation responses identify important areas of progress in the management and implementation of Interreg. Related to this are concerns that substantial changes could lead to retrograde steps in terms of the development of joint systems and collaborative approaches and the argument that core tools and approaches should be retained and refined.



“Through Interact and programmes’ own efforts proven IT tools have been developed. In the future, the most efficient approach would be to develop them and not change them with every new perspective”. Harvesting Report

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- For example, though Interact and programmes’ own efforts proven IT tools have been developed. In the future, the most efficient approach would be to develop them and not change them with every new perspective.
 - **Retain focus on governance** and allow flexibility in ISO1 to take into account the diverse governance and institutional arrangements in participating territories.

Continuity is also a theme in feedback on future project partnerships. With a view to optimising results, innovation, synergies and networks, the possibility of reinforcing key partner networks is suggested. A related point is **extending sustainable projects**. While consultation respondents note the importance of innovation and ability to move from what has been done in the past, there is recognition that good projects with high added value for the territory could be carried forward, for example, through additional capitalisation funding and the expansion of already successful models. This could reduce the pressure to constantly innovate and a focus on scaling successful models can enhance stability and cooperation among stakeholders. Capitalisation on previous projects could contribute to a stronger and more complete integration, e.g. network existing projects, initiatives and infrastructure created in previous programmes.



“Establishing ongoing partnership structures that do not rely only on one-off projects and could encourage the creation of networks of local, business and social actors working together to develop new projects and solve common problems, creating a network of cooperation that transcends funding cycles.” Stakeholder Respondent

“Stronger systems and systemic approaches could create more moments of innovation and be less reliant on individual ideas or sparks within Interreg.” Stakeholder Respondent

“It is important that the results of projects being implemented have an impact on the sustainability of partnerships and are not one-time, short-term measures” Stakeholder Respondent

“I think a lot of great projects are already running, all you need to do is keep working, streamline and involve other willing collaborators.” Stakeholder Respondent⁴

“It would be desirable if successful but essentially identical projects could be repeated with a new group of participants. This applies to youth projects, where otherwise only one year group can benefit from an INTERREG project” Stakeholder Respondent

5.2. Flexibility and innovation

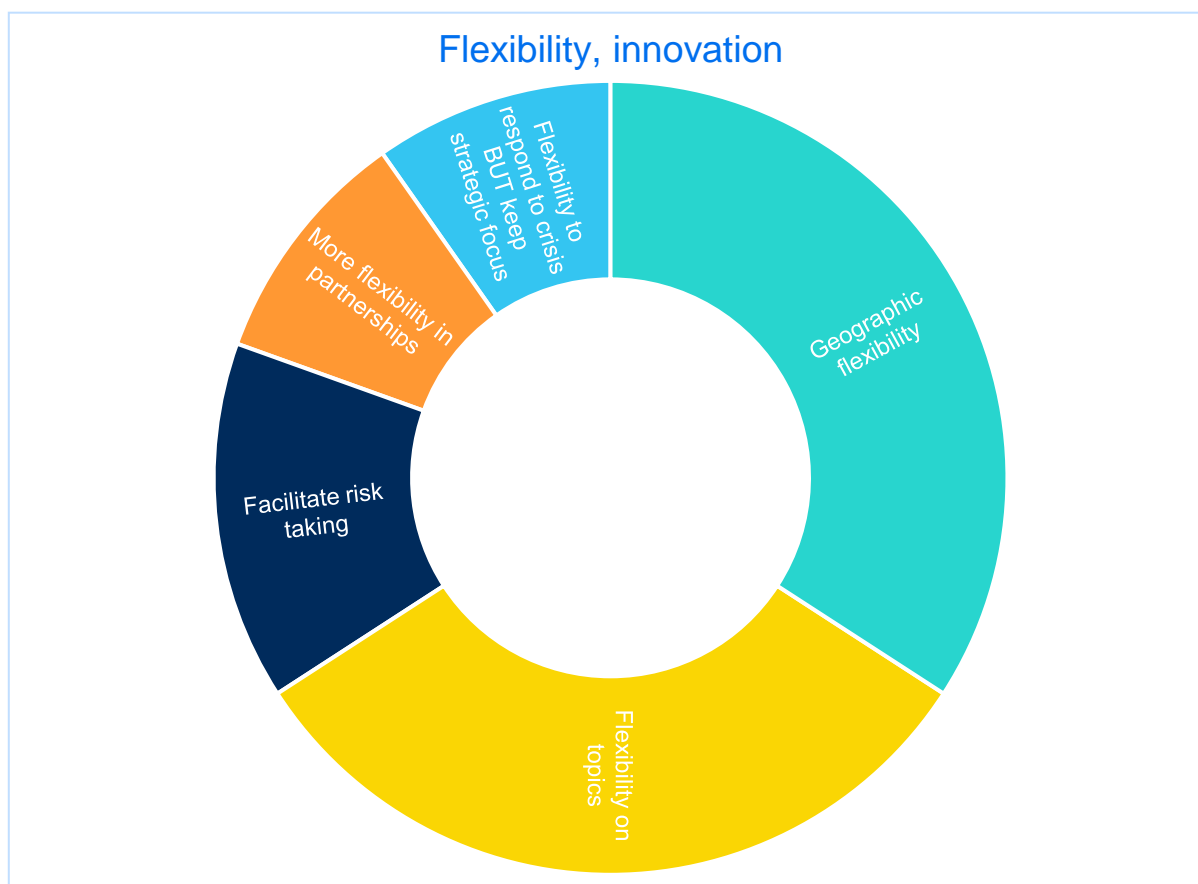


Flexibility and innovation are major ambitions for the future. Current programme arrangements are taken as an anchor point from which to build capacity for flexibility and innovation. As Figure 14 illustrates, particular reference is made to opportunities around

geographic flexibility and flexibility on the topics programmes can support.

⁴ E.g. the Urbact consultation found that across all city sizes, there is a clear consensus on the need for follow-up funding and funding for implementation of the Integrated Action Plans. This is particularly emphasized for bridging the gap between planning and implementing actions.

Figure 14: Report references to aspects of ‘flexibility and innovation’ for the future



Key recommendations include an interest in **greater geographic flexibility**. As connections have deepened within cooperation areas and new areas of cooperation arise, attention has turned to opportunities to extend such opportunities. For example, in some key areas there is value in wider geographic flexibility, particularly in sectors like tourism, to encourage broader collaboration. Having partners and spending some funding outside the programme area can enhance project outcomes. Smaller regions can benefit from connections with larger innovation hubs. Geographic flexibility was also noted as a point of interest for the future for external border areas, e.g. as a means to establishing cooperation with areas facing similar challenges along the eastern borders with Russia and Belarus or increasing the eligible area of programmes (and pool of partners) allowing more balanced participation in some countries. However, responses also stress that the participation of regions other than Programme core area should always prove the added value of their presence.

While continuity in broad themes is valued, **thematic/topic flexibility** during the programme period is also seen as important. The scope to work within broad themes, as opposed to very tightly defined objectives, facilitates adaptation and responsiveness to highly diverse territorial needs and complex/external policy environments. Looking forward and in connection with the current reform

debate, the distinct role of Interreg is underlined as well as the specific operational needs of the programme, e.g. the operation of Interreg across national borders. The position of Interreg outside the European semester must be maintained in order to provide the necessary flexibility to set up and manage programmes implemented in more than one country.

Flexibility is also a key issue for external border programmes. For example, an element of flexibility could allow Interreg IPA programmes to work with partners on topics relevant to the accession processes at relevant stages. Flexibility to allow external border programmes to take into account major shifts in the policy environment and practical obstacles was emphasised. One proposed option would be to have built-in crises provisions to ensure programme resilience and adaptability and allow for a swift and effective response to unforeseen disruptions.

More generally, contemporary events demonstrate the value of flexibility and adaptability in responding to the pace of change and crises, e.g. to better respond to increasing recurrence of climate risks and changing conditions such as heatwaves, wildfires, flooding. The responses include debate about the use/or not of Cohesion Policy as a crisis response mechanism versus the importance of meeting long-term objectives and goals. Nevertheless, even without a specific remit to address crises, the impacts of extreme events are wide ranging and have knock-on effects on projects and programmes. Responses therefore underline the need to adapt and respond to crises as they arise, e.g. through provisions for the transfer of project budget funds in response to unexpected situations.

Another area where greater flexibility is seen as beneficial is to enable **an element of risk taking and innovation**. This could include the adoption of digital technologies, green solutions, and research collaborations to address modern challenges in the region and allowing programmes more flexibility in how funds are used locally, enabling them to adapt to emerging needs and opportunities during the programming period. Linked to the concept of innovation and flexibility, greater willingness to take risks is a focus in some responses, recognising that in ‘new/experimental projects’ outcomes may not be as planned, setbacks and failures do occur, but can nevertheless provide useful lessons and outputs.



“Innovation is sometimes limited by strict adherence to the Programme priorities, even when new ideas may address emerging needs that are not fully aligned with the original Programme.” Stakeholder Respondent

“The Programme shows hesitation to support genuinely new or riskier ideas, which limits the Programme’s adaptability and creative potential” Harvesting Report (“...what we think in the beginning and write in the project application is seldom where we end up at the end of the project. I think this is very good – it’s... agile and flexible...” Stakeholder Respondent

“Particularly when working on innovative/new areas, allow setbacks and failures but allow flexibility to still gain something from them” Harvesting Report

Flexibility in project scales/financing is also mentioned. The responses highlight the perceived value in boosting engagement through more small-scale funding opportunities, while still recognising the value of large-scale coordinated action, e.g. with resources for addressing interventions on pollution control, environmental protection, infrastructure and security. Along external borders, reflecting realities on the ground and capacity constraints, some necessary **flexibility in forming partnerships** is suggested, as strict application of these principles may hinder the creation of effective structures particularly in multi-country programmes. In particular, the specific needs of non-EU countries must also be recognised and attention given to building and retaining commitment in national (as well as regional and local) authorities of non-EU countries. Areas of potential include increasing coordination with national governments to ensure better coordinated and faster decision making, bilateral links with non-EU countries and with intergovernmental organisations (CARICOM, Indian Ocean Commission), and a potential role for EU Delegations in supporting the awareness and alignment of the EU's external action.

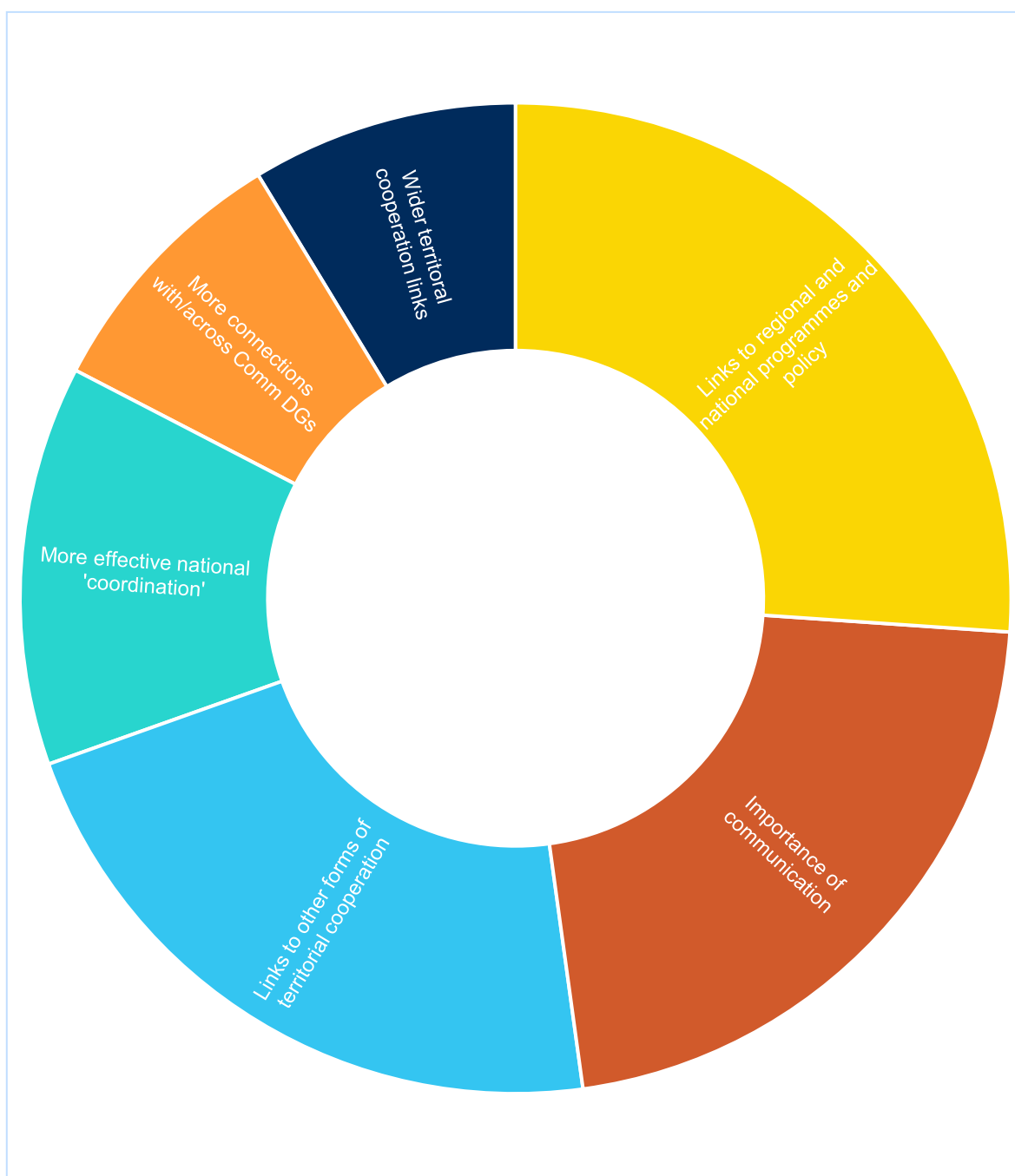
5.3. Coordination and Synergies



Coordination and synergies lie at the heart of Interreg programmes. The Interreg programmes are uniquely well placed to address territorial interdependencies and 'border effects' through collaboration. Consultation responses point to

the numerous examples of cooperation across programmes and the synergies that are in place. However, looking to the future, synergies and coordination are also identified as areas where more innovation and improvement would be beneficial. Given the variety of operational contexts, it is stressed that there is **no one-size fits all solution and retaining flexibility is important.**

Nevertheless, as Figure 15 illustrates, common themes are identified around core themes including alignment and links with wider strategies, programmes and initiatives, the importance of domestic and European Commission engagement, and the scope to widen and deepen synergies and links.

Figure 15: Harvesting Report References to Synergies and Coordination

The scope for Interreg programmes to have strong **alignment with wider EU and domestic strategic goals is highlighted**, whilst still ensuring accessibility and relevance to the territory, smaller organisations and stakeholders. For example, addressing complementarities in key areas such as climate adaptation are particularly important given the range of initiatives in place. In terms of the external border programmes, there are also identified opportunities around links to EU accession and strategic external territorial links which are important and should be visible in relevant programmes.

In terms of where synergies could be developed further, **options to improve coordination and cooperation with national and regional governments** are

foci in consultation responses. As well as efforts on the part of Interreg stakeholders, greater involvement and support from central and regional governments is encouraged to maximise beneficial alignments between territorial cooperation initiatives and national policies, and to ensure adequate resources are allocated. While Monitoring Committee members from domestic administrations are crucial to running programmes, stakeholders argued that national coordinators could also offer additional leadership and expertise to bridge gaps in cooperation and links to, e.g. IJG, Horizon Europe and Just Transition programmes. National authorities can also play a pivotal role in addressing administrative bottlenecks, harmonising regulations, and providing strategic guidance, thus enhancing effectiveness and efficiency.

Collaboration between government institutions could also help to ensure legal and financial continuity of the results. On specific themes this connection is seen as particularly important, e.g. the participation of Ministries and Departments of the State in more proposals related to infrastructure, as local communities do not have the opportunity. Equally, programmes can transfer knowledge from Interreg to the national level, e.g. through integration of project outcomes into local, regional, or national strategic documents and plans. Related, work to enhance the visibility of Interreg activities at national levels is important and coordination at DG level in the European Commission could help to facilitate the transfer of results coming from Interreg and extend impacts and benefits.

‘Other forms’ of territorial cooperation, e.g. Euroregions and EGTC, are widely identified as key partners for programmes to work with to deliver beneficial synergies and links. This covers an increasingly wide range of different types of initiatives, programmes and platforms, which has its challenges but also offers potential, for example through work in different forms of cooperation that facilitate links at different scales and with a variety of stakeholders and beneficiaries. Examples include:

- **Macroregional and sea basin strategies** already have strong links with Interreg programmes, in particular Interreg B programmes with shared territories. Suggestions for ways to improve, extend and intensify links include: a dedicated platform for dialogue and exchange among the macroregional strategies; a strengthened flow of information to and from programmes in and around macroregional and sea basin strategy areas; new ways to develop joint schemes to ensure sustainability; and capitalisation of results.
- **Partnerships and collaboration between programmes** are already in place, e.g. in the Mediterranean and Arctic. Cooperation with other forms of territorial cooperation in the border area also exist e.g. work with EGTC and Euroregions. This type of cooperation with other forms of territorial cooperation in the border region is seen as important in order to strengthen the region and promote a common identity. Work

with EGTC, for example, could be facilitated through regular exchange meetings at shorter intervals and extending the scope of the funding area to align with other cooperation areas. Another proposal is to enhance Interact's role in connecting Interreg with mainstream and other EU funds and initiatives (e.g., Horizon, Erasmus), fostering stronger collaboration and knowledge sharing.

- **Place-based and more local level connections** were also noted in consultation responses. For example, Interreg's role in supporting and engaging with territorial instruments and place-based interventions can be recognised and boosted, e.g. Urbact's work with ITI, and programme participation in CLLD. Looking to the future, ongoing developments in cross-border integration is something that Interreg will have to adapt to. Ensuring engagement with initiatives such as b-solutions, is a way to achieve this.

Looking to the future, as Interreg programmes and other forms of territorial cooperation have matured and established their position, the opportunities for looking beyond individual programmes to develop synergies are clearly reflected in the responses. For example, wider, more structured exchanges are recommended for developing synergies and connection with a range of programmes and initiatives. Crucially, this **alignment should 'lead to something', which implies a commitment to operationalising synergies and actively pursuing connections**. Suggestions to enhance this in the future include the following points.

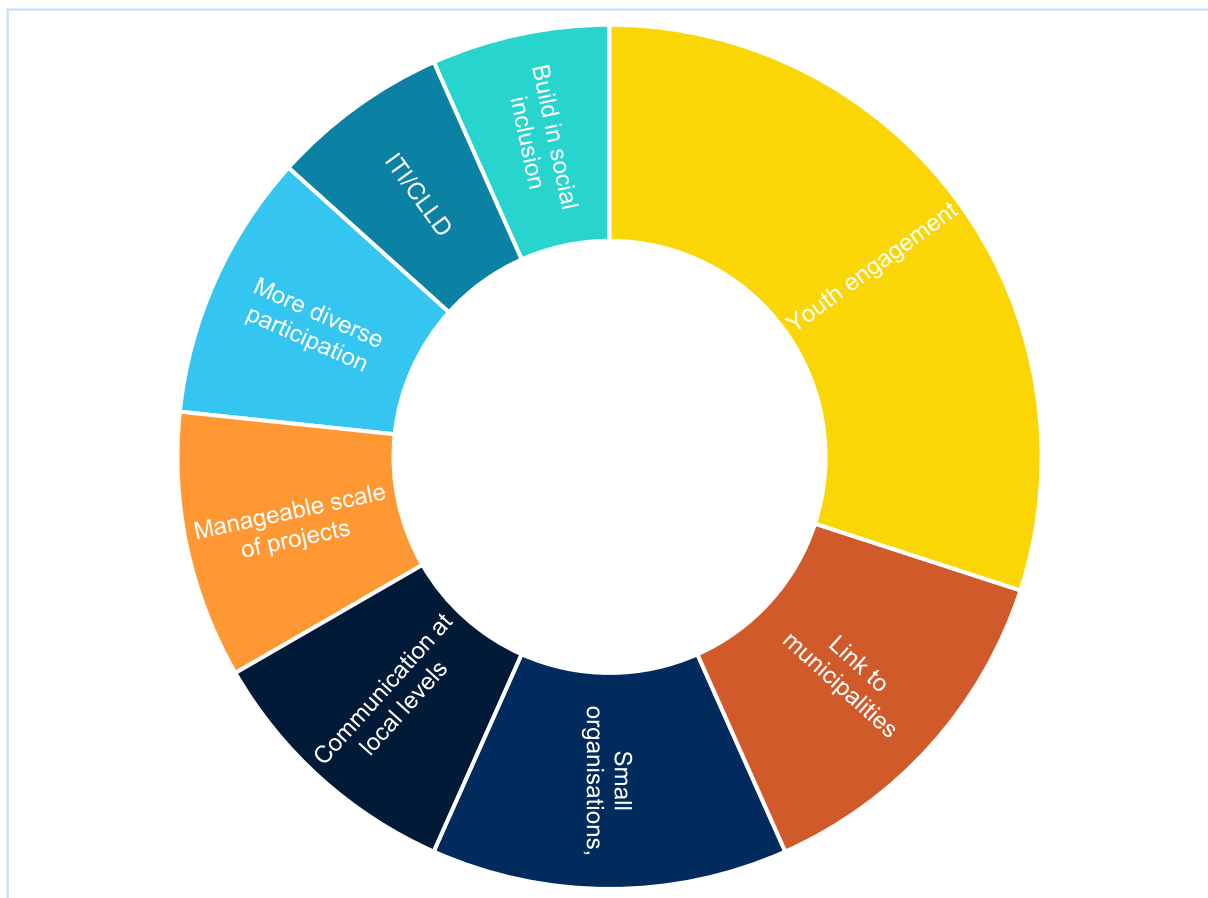
- A **more defined role** within programme administrations to support synergies could be helpful, particularly as the policy environments in which programmes are operating are diverse and can change rapidly.
- Potential partner programmes, initiatives and networks need **clear leadership** and capacity for engagement with Interreg programmes and vice versa.
- Knowledge transfer and capacity building on synergies at local, regional and national levels to improve stakeholder knowledge and engagement and benefits for territories.
- **Synergies and links in management and implementation** can be explored to smooth the operational elements of cooperation, maximise efficiency and improve performance. Programmes can build on work to develop and operationalise systems and tools to support and enable synergies and links and benefit from Interact expertise on the issue.

- To enhance alignment and coordination, projects should be considered and combined with **different sources of funding**, e.g. linking national and Cohesion funds, cooperation across Interreg programmes and increasingly with Investment for Jobs and Growth, Horizon Europe and Just Transition programmes. A source of funding could be made available to support strategic links and synergies.
- Build and maintain networks of cooperation that **extend beyond programme and project deadlines**. For example, wider and more structured exchanges are recommended for developing synergies and connections.
- Steps to develop plans, e.g. for territorial instruments or cooperation networks, ahead of programming would enable easier integration/synergies.
- Interreg B and C programmes can deliver valuable roles in boosting links and synergies between programmes and more widely, with key existing strengths being developed further and shared.
- It is important to note that pursuing synergies and work in this field places demands on human and financial resources. The specific administrative burden/complexities for stakeholders involved should be recognised and **building capacity and a robust basis for synergies could be enhanced**, e.g. through greater conceptual clarity, shared platforms and tools and harmonisation and simplification.
- **Communication** to promote and develop links, e.g. enhancing programme communication in the territories and more widely through maintenance of continuous dissemination of programme information and more generally improving Interreg's visibility on the impact and relevance to contributing to EU policies. Further development on communicating achieved results where applicable should be considered. Actions such as Index.eu pilots could help with facilitating easier exchanges on technical information while joint events like the European Cooperation Day are highlighted as examples of good practice.

5.4. Community Connections

A widely supported recommendation in the consultation is to build even more citizen participation, engagement and awareness of territorial cooperation. As illustrated in Figure 16, suggestions include diversifying participation, social inclusion and in particular engaging with youth, working at local levels and facilitating engagement through small projects and smaller organisations.

Figure 16: Harvesting Report References to Community Connections



“It is necessary to bring the population of neighbouring countries closer together on a long-term basis around democracy and citizen participation”, Stakeholder Respondent



Encouraging youth engagement is widely mentioned in the consultations. A range of proposals are made to boost participation in the future including: small, community-based initiatives with funding and capacity-building programmes to foster bottom-up

participation; project calls and topics aimed at 'real people'; allowing extra points in project evaluation if a project consortium also includes a youth association; and work with youth councils. Engagement with younger populations, particularly around issues such as the 'right to stay', demographic change and social inclusion are particularly highlighted in more rural and peripheral areas.

More generally **diversifying participation and building wider community engagement** in projects and programmes is a priority and can be addressed throughout the life of programmes and projects.

At the outset, responses stress the importance of citizen and community engagement in the design of the programmes to enable more bottom-up development of programme priorities. More generally, cross-border citizen forums and increased involvement of civil society have a role in communicating what it means to live in a cross-border region to relevant authorities.

Community engagement can be aided by focussing to a greater extent on strengthening local links along the border through community projects that promote cultural, economic and social interaction, fostering collaborative networks that contribute to connecting the territory from a local perspective. In the future, if ITI and CLLD are more widely adopted, **building synergies and place-based policy through territorial instruments** could be developed further and could boost engagement and impact at local levels.

Widening end-user and citizen-involvement and engagement throughout the programmes is also highlighted, as citizen engagement has been limited, in some cases, to activities in a single priority objective. In this context it is important to encourage partnerships that include, for example, private enterprises, NGOs, and municipalities, fostering an inclusive approach that brings together a range of expertise and funding sources.

Practical links and actions are proposed to support **wider engagement and stronger community participation**. These include public information tools to present partner institutions from neighbouring territories (as a lack of knowledge and understanding of the role and responsibilities of counterparts is an obstacle to cooperation); cross-border study-visits to gain better understanding of working environments and needs in different parts of the territory; informal

networking sessions; and opportunities to participate in language courses. Increasing citizen/local participation could also be facilitated by introducing flexible funding for local initiatives to implement small scale projects with less bureaucratic burden, or by strategies for involving NGOs and entrepreneurs in cross-border projects, promoting cross-sectoral cooperation, e.g. through award criteria in project assessment, drawing on the experience of other programmes.

Wider communication and promoting programmes at local and community levels, e.g. through a cross-border identity strategy, communication campaigns and cultural collaborations, applying modern communication strategies leveraging social media and interactive platforms. Use simple language and tailored outreach campaigns to inform local communities and marginalised groups about the benefits of Interreg in their regions.

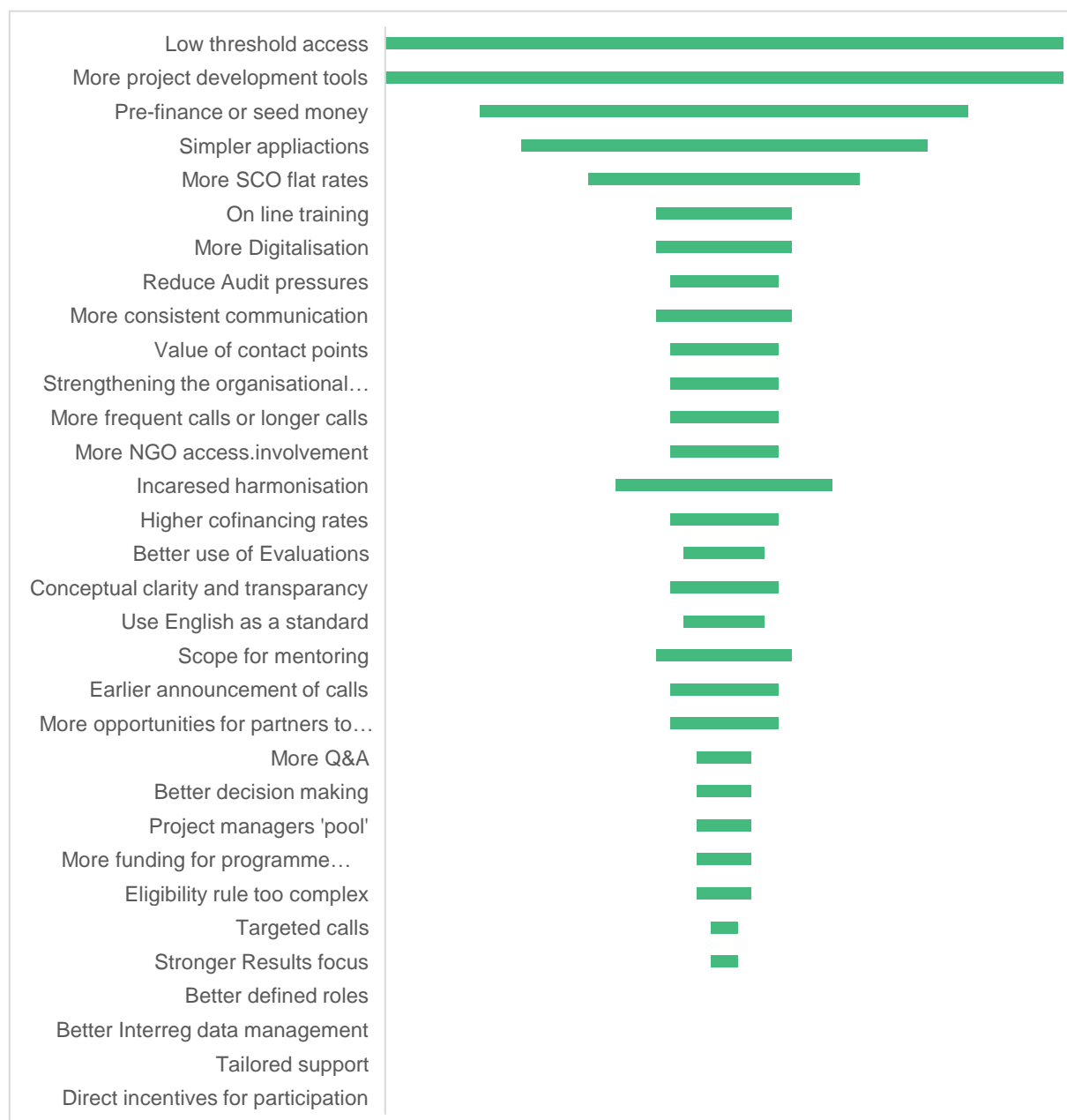
5.5. Operationalising programmes and projects



Delivering territorial cooperation is demanding and requires support. The demands on support systems are extensive and expectations are high. As illustrated in Figure 17, numerous proposals are made to build on existing expertise and respond to new

opportunities. **Points raised cover a wide range of issues but are all framed within a desire for simpler and easier ways to use systems and structures.**

Figure 17: Most widely referred to points to support simplification and encourage engagement



Easier access to 'low threshold' funding is widely supported. Responses refer to positive experiences of the introduction of small projects funds. This funding offers a low-threshold approach which a number of programmes found to be successful in the current funding period. It could therefore serve as a model of good practice for the development of other funding mechanisms with similar levels of accessibility, efficiency, and low bureaucracy. In particular, this type of funding could also be used to help facilitate experimentation and innovation. Related, faster payments would make programmes more accessible, particularly to smaller organizations, and encourage efficient project execution. Similarly, access to seed funding and pre financing are viewed as

essential elements to attracting and enabling smaller organisations, NGOs and new partners more generally.

More generally, **higher co-financing rates and/or more comparable co-financing rates for both sides of the border** are identified by some partners as important to encourage wider engagement in the programmes. Some programme areas have higher/guaranteed national co-funding than others and would like to see the approach extended. A single source of funding for projects and/or higher funding percentage from Interreg are some solutions presented in this regard. Change in financial rules and funding are also seen a crucial to encouraging more private investment and making it feasible for smaller non-governmental organisations (NGO) to participate. Offering variable co-financing rates, for example, is suggested as a means to encourage projects with key target groups, or marginalised groups, as well as reviewing pre-financing rules, allowing advance payments or allowing direct awards.

Simpler applications and approval processes are advocated and the reduction of bureaucracy in the application and project implementation processes in general is proposed. Stakeholders strongly advocated for quicker and better coordinated decision-making processes, as delays in decision-making can hinder project implementation, reduce efficiency and frustrate stakeholders. A single common application portal for all Interreg programmes in the area is one proposal as well as the use of more standardised forms for applications and other elements of administration. One option subject to differing opinions is the use of single language applications in English which would simplify processes. The counter argument is that, to reduce language barriers, allowing applications to be submitted in native languages was more important.



“When writing applications, we feel like we are participating in an essay competition rather than an idea competition — it's about who writes the best application text, not who has the best or most relevant idea.” Stakeholder Respondent

“We propose reducing the length of descriptions in applications creation of a pool of cross-border experts, creation of a network of experts, creation of a one-stop shop for financing small projects, etc.” Harvesting Report

Opportunities to reinforce the quality and transparency of project selection procedures are noted. This could be facilitated by further digitalization of application and reporting tools to make them more efficient. Modernizing these tools can also reduce administrative burdens and improve the overall user experience. Further advances could be made by application of new technologies and systems, e.g. Interact could explore the use of emerging technologies, such as AI, with the aim of enhancing programme effectiveness through tailored guidance and support to user-specific needs (e.g., an AI chatbot for programme management to streamline processes and improve user experience). Further modifications include clearer and less complex processes,

shorter timelines for approvals, rejections, or modifications, and continuous processing amendments.

As projects move to the implementation phase, support from programme authorities on an ongoing basis is highly valued. Proposed measures include further steps to simplification and more support to work with the systems in place. For example, the extension of simpler systems is widely supported, e.g. more extensive use of Simplified Cost Options and Lump-sums, providing flexible budget options for NGOs, allowing them to choose between the traditional system and flat-rate budgeting. It was considered important to retain and continue to develop the JeMS monitoring system. In the future, the focus should be on making JeMs even more user – friendly (and not on developing another system) to enable real time updates, reduce administrative delays and enhance transparency. Further areas of simplification include: addressing audit and control pressures, e.g. through streamlining audit and control systems; more centralisation of audit and control bodies; more training for First Level Control streamlining and standardising auditing and reporting; greater use of electronic reporting; pre-validation of eligible expenditure to prevent later objections; and simplification and improved harmonisation in the recognition of staff costs.

Knowledge exchange and capacity building activities that improve the skills and knowledge of programme participants are valued by respondents and in the future should be maintained and expanded. In particular, **facilitating networking, exchange and communication between partners** with a view to enhancing innovation and impact are underlined as valuable elements of work. Cross-border collaboration is acknowledged to offer opportunities, ideas, and knowledge, but it takes a lot of time and energy to engage. Therefore, more support is needed for building partnerships, especially for small organisations, e.g. more in-person meetings and events, and meetings to build and strengthen partnerships.



“The process of developing a project application, and subsequently implementing the project, provides a wealth of experience in communication and collaborative problem-solving. Joint capacity-building activities and experience exchange trips, especially those to countries that are not partners in the project, foster a strong team, enhance trust, and serve to validate the partnership.” Harvesting Report

Suggested operationalisation measures include:

- Setting up a good practice guide based on strong partnership.
- Providing early-stage training for beneficiaries in project management and specific programme- related requirements.

- Establishing peer support networks to support even stronger projects and gain benefit from partners who know each other, are used to working together and trust each other.
- Initiating a mentor scheme or 'programme champions' who are experienced project partners and can support newer partners as a way to lower barriers to access for new organisations. A pool of experienced external project managers could be identified by the Programme and help especially smaller, less experienced project partners.
- Providing a programme liaison officer to support partnership development and communication.
- Developing match-making tools for partners, e.g. an online meeting platform that would help in exchanging views and finding common goals, with live meetings following if necessary to refine and consult on joint projects. Related, a dedicated networking platform could be used for exchanging experiences, best practices, and questions, ensuring continuous learning and cooperation improvement.
- Listings of potential partners, consultants in an area and project ideas (including those from other Interreg programmes) with partner search tools. Other project idea development tools include a directory of project ideas, a pre-assessment of project ideas, and testimonials for previously successful project in a local language.

Networks and systems can be programme wide or targeted to boost participation in a specific area or theme. Approaches could include: creating entities to assist with partner searches; establishing joint working groups to address specific local challenges, such as border region security, tourism, and business promotion; creating cross-border regional councils; and developing a dedicated platform for small projects to collaboratively generate ideas for addressing challenges through cooperation.

How calls are managed is also linked to partner engagement and support. A number of proposals suggest longer timescales for calls to allow more time for planning, partner search and building a strong partnership. The content and timing of the calls for project applications could be more uniform and predictable and funding possibilities could be communicated to potential applicants more directly. These suggestions would help to avoid situations where partnerships are formed under pressure, lack genuine engagement, and are driven primarily by the need to secure EU funding as such partnerships frequently fail to develop meaningful cooperation during project implementation.

The provision of services and support places demands on programme authorities. Linked to this, stakeholders also recommended offering **more tailored support for programmes themselves**. Boosting the role of contact points is a related proposal. Also more generally, more work to further reduce the administrative workload for Managing Authorities and Joint Secretariats is

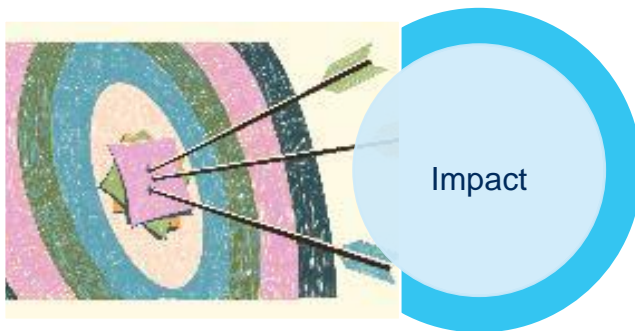
always appreciated and frees capacity to provide more project support and engagement. Another proposal to boost capacity within programmes is the introduction of exchange programmes for professionals. Short-term cross-border exchange programmes for professionals within the programme area comes up in several sections in survey answers, as well as in interviews and workshops.

The importance of support for programmes and simplification is particularly noted for external border programmes due to challenges in capacity, availability of partners and regulatory mismatch. Recognising the unique nature of external border programmes and the complexities involved in implementation was emphasised, e.g. in terms of costs, regulatory barriers and distance/physical barriers, all of which impact on budgets, outputs and results.

- The challenges faced are made even more acute by the pressures that conflict, political instability and geopolitical tensions place on territories already facing challenges in terms of peripherality and global environmental and economic pressures. In this context efforts to avoid overloading systems and easing participation are invaluable. Specific points include, for example, the practical integration of ERDF and NDICI funds for the outermost regions to simplify management. Changes would be beneficial to the different rules for Member States and IPA countries, which currently require adaptations in management systems, FLC units and on the part of project partners. More use of simplified cost options and lump-sum payments, avoiding launch delays, and better-quality audits were suggested. At the same time, improvements made to current systems were emphasised, as a completely new system risks loss of progress and the introduction of further uncertainties.
- Other suggestions are to increase funding for external border cooperation, in particular to reflect its strategic importance and to consider funding mechanisms for third country partners to allow more balanced participation. This could include smaller grants to encourage people-to-people connections and participation of smaller organisations, e.g. the use of small-scale funds to promote community-driven initiatives is an example, higher pre financing and higher levels of cofinancing.

Crucially and throughout, **effective communication is seen as a cornerstone for building trust, preventing misunderstandings and facilitating smoother collaboration between partners**. Stakeholders highlighted the need for clearer, more transparent and frequent exchanges of information between all parties involved to ensure better understanding and alignment of objectives. More opportunity to meet was a widely supported recommendation. For example, opportunities for greater integration of applicants and beneficiaries (e.g. networking meetings, study visits, workshops) is suggested to enhance learning and knowledge exchange. To foster diverse partnerships, creating a permanent network of cross-border collaboration between public, private and civil society actors was encouraged to identify needs and coordinate projects.

5.6. Maximising Impact



Delivering results and impact is central to the success of Interreg projects and programmes. Delivering impact is an area where significant progress has been made to date but also an area where improvements can continue. Suggestions for the future cover a range of issues. A

fundamental point is that limitations around funding and the scale of projects must be recognised. Scope for more substantial and tangible impacts would naturally greatly increase with larger budgets and scope to deliver larger-scale projects, e.g. infrastructure investments. Overall, **more funding is widely called** for to support more impactful, ambitious projects and address pressing border development challenges and capitalise on cooperation opportunities.

Capacity building is particularly sought after, e.g. to strengthen capabilities of local/regional stakeholders to better align priorities with citizen needs, to address key areas of institutional and administrative capacity and as a means to reinforce and capitalise on results. Supporting capacity building through exchange and learning is seen as vital. There is a need for knowledge sharing, and the dissemination of best practices, which could be more structured or accessible. This was considered to improve the quality and impact of projects.

In particular, the value of extending capacity building beyond core groups of practitioners and partners is stressed. The role of **regional and local administrative participation and capacity building** to facilitate more direct contacts between border administrations and more joint working groups are also stressed as areas for future cooperation. Linked to ideas on building domestic engagement and capacity, one proposal is to have a distinct priority or specific objective within Interreg IPA programmes to facilitate the direct transfer of expertise from the Managing Authority to the national authority across various topics, tailored to meet the specific needs of the national authorities. Further, to support the capacity building dimension of external cooperation programmes, enabling all policy objectives to include education training and skills development actions should be considered.

Impact should be considered from the outset. Proposals in this regard include developing even better selection criteria to identify truly sustainable and impactful projects and providing support for more pilot/preparatory projects to test and trial options. Related, clarifying expectations will allow programmes to better guide beneficiaries and boost relevance.

Outputs, results and impacts should be built upon and maximised (capitalisation).

Consultation responses highlight the importance of 'capitalisation' efforts to maximise the value of projects and programmes. Suggestions for how to intensify efforts and improve in the future include:

- robust supportive monitoring throughout the life of project and on-going feedback from stakeholders;
- more results-oriented approach in programme and project management rather than overly focussed on procedures;
- have a dedicated member of staff in programme bodies to support/advise capitalisation efforts;
- creation of a technical assistance mechanism to ensure the sustainability of project results;
- organisation of regular meetings or conferences to discuss the continuity and outcomes of completed projects, e.g. opportunities for project partners and beneficiaries to meet and develop capitalisation efforts, encouragement of long-term initiatives to sustain activities after project funding end; and
- scope to work across programmes on core themes in order to maximise impact/capitalisation efforts, including over the medium-longer terms, e.g. through capitalisation calls, funding and commitments from key stakeholders to take up results.

Capture and communicate results and impact. Effectively and efficiently collecting and communicating meaningful data on project and programme results is recognised as an on-going challenge with opportunities for development in a number of areas, as discussed below.

Ensure clarity and commitment to 'soft'/qualitative impact. Interreg programmes deliver tangible results, but consultation responses also underline the value attached to 'soft' impacts and longer-term outcomes. For example, consultation responses reflect on 'results' in terms of capacity building, personal exchange and networking and knowledge sharing and suggest an opportunity for projects to be explicit about qualitative targets and for monitoring and evaluation to capture the 'true' value of territorial cooperation, as opposed to 'forcing' quantitative targets. The main focus should be the best solutions and building capacity, not just 'neat', easy to measure cross-border outputs for Interreg.

Longer-term perspectives should be integrated into monitoring and evaluation. Cross-border impact can be hard to realise with the activities of a single project and so monitoring and evaluating longer term impact are also proposed. This could be through innovative evaluations and approaches that can identify longer-term 'soft impact'.

Indicators need to ‘fit’ Interreg. Consultation responses note that the use of common indicators is a ‘step forward’ from the previous programme period, where numerous programme specific indicators were used. Continuing a more streamlined and simplified system of indicators is seen as important, but it must include well-defined Interreg specific indicators with a greater recognition and sensitivity to the qualitative results and impacts of Interreg.

- Issues around appropriate indicators and measurement take on additional weight in debates around the application of **performance budgeting**. This is an issue explored in depth by programmes in consultations led by Interact. More generally in the consultations, the need for transparency, accountability and results focus is widely supported. However, responses show a range of opinions on performance budgeting. Several practitioners express concerns regarding the application of the PBA mechanism and call for cost-based interventions to be retained especially at project level. Others see it as an opportunity to simplify programme management especially on the level between the European Commission and the programmes.

The opportunities offered by digitalisation and technology should be exploited. The pace of technological change and range of new opportunities to more efficiently collect and monitor results are noted in the consultations. Applications in the future could be more automated and coordinated data transmissions and greater harmonisation of systems and data. Work is already on going through initiatives in keep.eu and index.eu to provide more integrated overviews and data to inform policy, support reporting, and aid communication.

Communication is key to building results and impact. Proposals include wide publicity of achieved results to raise awareness and increase interest in the expansion and further development of achieved results where applicable. Funding should be increased for the dissemination of project results and search tools for project and programme outputs and results valued. The continuation of a shared Interreg brand is supported.

6. Interreg Dreams and Ideas for the Future



A first point to note on the responses to the consultation questions on dreams and aspirations for future cooperation projects is that there are a lot of them!

The volume of ideas reflects the wider interest and commitment to pursuing territorial cooperation in the future.

Second, the range of ideas in terms of themes, scale and approach is huge. Figure 18 and Figure 19 illustrate word clouds based on responses from citizens and stakeholders on topics for cooperation in the future and indicate the frequency of references. Figure 18 covers Interreg programmes overall and Figure 19 the external borders.

Figure 18: Interreg programmes - key 'dream' themes



"We should get to know each other through language courses in the families, schools and businesses concerned"

"Create dedicated projects that support SMEs, NGOs, and local communities in preserving cultural assets, promoting tourism, and enhancing local living conditions"

"Promote initiatives that connect creative businesses across borders, reduce risks for peripheral areas, and encourage cultural and tourism networking"

"Joint mechanisms to provide support to vulnerable groups to deepen connections between citizens and communities fostering mutual understanding, solidarity and joint social solutions"

"Initiatives to promote cultural understanding and democratic values are desired, including increased support for cultural events, educational exchanges, and joint art projects. These initiatives could strengthen social cohesion and build a stronger shared community across borders."

"Ambitious initiatives to combine the excellence of both countries in key areas such as research (shared research labs in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, renewable energy) and innovation (joint startup incubators and accelerators)."

"To enlarge the main target group from SMEs to SMEs and larger companies up to 3.000 employees, because smaller companies (less than 100 employees) are lacking time and strategic interest to participate in Interreg projects during piloting, etc."

"We need to go beyond borders and view the [...] Programme as a bridge to create European alliances, integrating it with other funding programmes to maximise impact."

"Dedicated youth fund coordinated by consortium in cross-border area"

"Spaces where young people can come together for free to generate ideas, art, and science should be created. These spaces should be equipped with the necessary equipment. Cross-border networks should be established for communication between these spaces and young people. Young people should be directly supported with small grants."

"...like to see more activities to connect schools. They miss better coordination between school facilities and more transfer of know how."

"Any support to education by the programme will help to shape the future of the CBC region"

"Activities aimed at improving psychological and emotional health. Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and discrimination. Senior day camps or community centre activities. Support for individuals with disabilities and special needs, as well as refugees."

"Projects using health and sport as instruments to foster communication and community engagement. "Family leisure and recreational sport park implement recreational sports projects - it is important for the population, their physical wellbeing and mental health"

"Social and health care services including a joint cross-border hospital. Or agreements to make these services accessible across borders."

"Shared Public Services Project - Collaboration in health, education and other public services is crucial to improve the quality of life in the border region. Interreg could explore models of joint financing and shared governance for these services, which would strengthen social cohesion and offer an innovative solution for border areas lacking basic services"

"Social innovation in the broader sense: promoting democratic coexistence focused on inclusion and joint growth, so that we do not drift further apart (think of exclusion, radicalization, right wing extremism, etc.). Europe has ensured peace in our time. This is now under pressure. More collaboration on coexistence is urgently needed."

"Provide a structure for temporary exchanges of officials between the partner authorities. This would enable the officials benefiting from the exchange and the hosting teams to exchange and learn about ways of working between institutions. Such a project would make it possible to facilitate, supervise and streamline the procedures to be followed for these temporary exchanges of officials".

"We need a programme that can support the capacity building for organisations from within the programme area."

"Continue joint management of environmental and natural resources, such as water, forest ecosystems and marine resources. Key actors underline the importance of coordinating efforts on environmental issues, which would include initiatives to combat climate change, protect biodiversity and develop green infrastructure"

"Defence and preparedness issues, for example energy preparedness."

"Intensive research on the topic of housing construction of the future, on their quality and affordability"

"Improved transport infrastructure (roads, bridge, border crossings) "Infrastructure is important and necessary in cross-border cooperation, therefore more focus should be given to the opportunity to build and develop with a focus on growing economic capacities"

"In an ideal world, my cross-border dream project would be a comprehensive and integrated transport and communications network, including Improved transport links: A high-frequency, reliable and environmentally friendly train and bus network, a citizen respondent"

"Supporting accessibility and transport – Cross-border residency cards and ticketing to enable access to services"

"The biggest potential for cooperation lies in tourism, cultural exchange, and start-up development. Enhancing connections at the grassroots level can drive significant progress."

"Joint marketing campaigns to attract international tourists, highlighting the natural and cultural wonders .."

"Joint waste management, waste separation/collection points and subsequent use by businesses"

"Environmental projects supporting civil participation, civil society organisations and youth and disadvantaged groups"

"Coastal risk management and protection in the context of climate change. Coordinated cross-border cooperation on maritime issues."

"Agriculture and food – create a cross-border self-sufficiency project"

"First cross-border centre for energy, climate and nature protection"

"Security Natural disaster monitoring and response, Common procedures to ensure safety from natural disaster"

"Resilience issues. The security situation in the region has been dramatically changed. ... We need to be better to work together in building resilience in the region. It's a broad definition and includes crisis preparedness work, supply security, food security etc."

"Establishing a cross-border security initiative across the entire region to address disinformation and misinformation campaigns."

"Everchanging operational environment calls for new tools to enhance foresight skills and resilience. Creating future scenarios in wider cooperation would benefit the quality and durability of results."

"Project continuity "A project that builds on the results achieved by us in the project already implemented by us"

"Good ideas must be preserved. Provide assistance: Advise the project managers to make their project sustainable. Part of the project should be about creating the means to make the initiative sustainable".

"Projects that actually create a lasting connection to strengthen each other; projects that stimulate something that then continues to have an impact on the entire programme area."

"There are still so many dream projects to be realised in such diverse domains and with such diverse target groups and partnerships that listing them all is an impossible task. Interreg [...] is prepared to put in the work to make all these dream projects come true!"

7. Interreg GO! Event



The findings of the Interreg citizen and stakeholder consultation process were the starting point for the Interreg GO! event held on 27-28 March 2025 in Gorizia-Nova Gorica and organised by the European Commission. Building on the consultations, the event generated wider political and stakeholder engagement and views on Interreg. The key messages from the conference complement the valuable citizen and stakeholder feedback from programme harvesting reports.

Interreg has EU strategic value - Interreg is an essential tool to break down barriers, promote integration, bring together neighbouring regions, and reconcile people. There is a need to continue this in the future, according to **Massimiliano Fedriga, President of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Autonomous region** speaking at the opening of the conference.

Interreg's long-standing role in building 'solid bridges between communities' was highlighted by keynote speakers, most notably **Raffaele Fitto, Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms**. On modernising Cohesion policy, he reminded delegates that the 'Status quo is not an option – the best way to defend and relaunch the policy is to modernise it. For Interreg, this means we must keep what is most important: cooperation governance. The solid partnerships which have built trust and solidarity, adapting European priorities to local circumstances. But to this, we must add a stronger focus on performance and results.'

Executive Vice-President Fitto has acknowledged the results of the consultation as the sign of strong local engagement in Interreg. He called for 'more people-to-people projects, building personal links. More common visions, where local communities work with their neighbours on the other side of the border.'

Interreg's 'transformational power' and role in breaking down mental and well as physical borders was also underlined by **Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos**. It plays a key role in EU enlargement and through programme links across external EU borders, both all the more important in the current geopolitical context. Interreg's value also lies in supporting EU influence in

parts of the world that are strategically important, e.g. through the Outermost Regions Programmes.

The value of Interreg's shared, multi-level management and partnership was emphasised by **Aleksander Jevšek, Minister of Cohesion and Regional Development, Slovenia**. Core strengths like cooperation governance, solid partnership, capacity building, adapting EU priorities to local circumstances were noted as vital for the future, along with people-to-people links and youth engagement. In particular, youth engagement can bridge linguistic and technological/digital divides and there is a need to keep investing in trust building and bottom-up initiatives. The essential role of programme authorities to operationalise territorial cooperation and deliver impact was also underlined.

Panel discussions noted that territorial cooperation is in the DNA of EU (**Juraj Droba, Chairman of the Bratislava Self-governing Region**) and European values are clearly expressed through territorial cooperation. **Younous Omarjee, Vice-President of the European Parliament** stated that 'Interreg is a cornerstone of the European project. We must strengthen it in the future multi-annual EU budget. Celebrating its 35th anniversary this year, I can only highlight its lasting success and reaffirm that cross-border cooperation remains a core objective of the European Union. The European Parliament's long-standing support for Interreg will keep going and become even stronger'. In line with these observations, panellist contributions emphasised the following points.

Interreg has positive impact - Interreg creates the 'right environment for integrating economic cultural and other exchanges' and is a 'win-win' relationship as based on 'mutual benefits'. (**Celia Alberto Pérez, Director-General for European Affairs, Government of Canary Islands**). For example, Interreg transnational programmes, create wider innovation ecosystems to connect regions, research and policy makers, e.g. in areas like health and greentech. Cooperation is not just delivering 'a start' but up scaling projects, e.g. through synergies with mainstream funding programmes (**Anne Wetzel, Director, Hauts-de-France region**).

Ukrainian State Secretary Ihor Yaremenko underlined the wider value of cooperation in building integration, prosperity and security. Interreg was also described as delivering 'real Cohesion' and a key for strengthening the single market, competitiveness, and reform (**Pavel Branda, Member of the European Committee of the Regions**). Territorial cooperation programme areas are like 'living labs' for integration, said **Sandro Gozi, Member of the European Parliament**. He also stressed the potential for more cooperation and reducing border obstacles in the future linked to the BRIDGEforEU regulation. Cooperation connections and engagement deliver valuable associated benefits including the revitalisation of local democracy. Interreg not only builds trust but also 'gives trust' and empowers local communities, according to **Martha Gärber, Head of Interreg cross-border cooperation programme Italy-Austria**.

Interreg connects places and people - A 'unique tool', Interreg enables both practical action and, importantly 'listening', e.g. 'listening to neighbours, listening to needs and trying to understand what is needed' (**Aldo Puleo, Managing Authority, Interreg NEXT MED programme**). Interreg is a tool that takes big ideas to communities and deliver actions on the ground on key issues like health, energy environment, emergency response and security threats (**Emilia Cebotari, Head of External Assistance and European Funds Coordination Department, State Chancellery, Republic of Moldova**). It builds and reinforces people-to-people connections and enables territories to build capacity for long term strategic planning and place-based, territorially rooted approaches (**Arola Urdangarin, EGTC Euroregion Nouvelle Aquitaine – Euskadi – Navarra**). For example, the territorial approach and access to, e.g. small project funds, have helped to develop potential in marginalised communities (**Christina Bala – Interreg Project 'Chess for Change' Hungary-Romania**).

The value and impact of Interreg practice was also clearly demonstrated by projects participating in Interreg's Project Slam. Projects included

PaNaNet+ (Interreg Austria-Hungary): Focused on uncovering and promoting lesser-known heritage sites, this project bridges the Austria-Hungary border to highlight the region's hidden cultural and natural treasures.

Pallium (Interreg Italy-Switzerland): This initiative is dedicated to improving the quality of life for terminally ill patients in remote areas, by enhancing access to palliative care and providing crucial support to families.

Justice without Borders (Interreg France-Germany-Switzerland): This project offers crucial legal support to residents of the German-French border region, helping them navigate legal systems in areas such as consumer and family law, with a bilingual team providing accessible guidance.

Prosper BSR (Interreg Baltic Sea Region): This project helps integrate refugees and immigrants into the labour markets of Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Germany, strengthening local economies and offering valuable job placement support.

SMALL (Interreg North Sea): By aiming to make shared mobility solutions like bikes and scooters accessible to all, including children, families, and the elderly, this project promotes inclusivity in urban transportation.

SpeEd-2-Labour Market (ENI CBC Romania-Ukraine): By modernizing special education and improving teacher training, this project facilitates the transition of children with disabilities into the workforce in the Suceava-Chernivtsi area.

Interreg is needed in the future - new challenges and tensions mean that Interreg has to be stronger. Territorial cooperation was described as a necessity for meeting challenges, e.g. around innovation, mobility and youth. The particular engagement of youth was emphasised in the presentation of the 'Declaration by Young People on the Future of Territorial Cooperation'⁵ and in panel discussions with **Ana Sabanovic, Representative of Youth Council of**

⁵ Youth for Future Cooperation: Declaration by Young People on the Future of Territorial Cooperation

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/newsroom/Declaration_by_young_people_on_the_future_of_territorial_cooperation.pdf

Danube Macro-regional Strategy and Vincent De Keer, Director of EGTC Linieland.

Future strengths will come from both aligning with new priorities, modernising, and focus on performance/results, and building on existing strengths, e.g. around the 'right to stay', competitiveness, strategic links with external borders, and contributions to preparations for enlargement. Crucially, the return of investment is high in Interreg. It offers wide areas, access to best available knowledge, and solutions that are practical widely applicable and durable. It has the capacity to deal with the next big challenges – whatever they are (**David Grzegorzewski, Programme Director, Interreg North-West Europe Programme**).

Interreg is responsive and up to new challenges - Interreg has already proven to be a responsive tool that can adapt to change and drive positive change. For example, effective programme responses to new challenges, including the war in Ukraine, security, disaster and risk management was highlighted. Interreg also has strength though its capacity to connect strategic objectives like 'competitiveness' to action that 'means something' to people on the ground and attracts businesses to establish and grow (**Jan Szyszko, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy of Poland**). Interreg, therefore, was described as a 'good investment answer'. Cohesion and competitiveness are complementary and interdependent and Interreg can play a role in making Europe more cohesive in the face of global pressures and tensions.

In concluding remarks, **Executive Vice-President Fitto** observed that cooperation is the founding value of the EU, and a key theme in future reform. It continues to offer a bridge for the EU, delivers practical cooperation, and links with modernisation, competitiveness, cohesion and reform. There is potential for more cooperation, with initiatives like the BridgeforEU Regulation providing a step forward for practical cooperation and links. **Executive Vice-President Fitto** also emphasised the opportunity under the Mid-term review exercise to respond to the EU's most pressing challenges.⁶ There are challenging negotiations ahead, but the conference speakers highlight support for a strong Interreg.

⁶ Inforegio (2025) - A modernised Cohesion policy: The mid-term review, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/publications/communications/2025/a-modernised-cohesion-policy-the-mid-term-review_en

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