

Harmonized approach to capture & highlight the added value of Interreg

Summary of the impact pathways workshop, Vienna, 16-17 June 2025

I. Purpose and context

This workshop brought together Interreg programme representatives and evaluation experts to explore **how impact pathways can be used to better demonstrate the added value of cooperation within Interreg**. Impact pathways offer a structured approach to understanding how programme activities contribute to broader changes such as trust-building, network development, capacity building, and policy influence - areas that traditional monitoring systems often fail to capture meaningfully.

Over the course of the workshop, participants worked in subgroups to identify and map impact pathways based on real-life examples from their programmes. These exercises helped illustrate how different types of cooperation processes unfold and lead to meaningful outcomes.

The group then explored which pathways were the most relevant for their programmes - those that matter most to their context and goals – and considered how to prioritise which pathways should be the focus of evaluation activities. Discussions further examined how impact pathways can strengthen evaluation design by helping programmes refine evaluation questions, pinpoint critical steps (or "tipping points") where progress may stall, and better align monitoring efforts.

The workshop was supported by the Evaluation Helpdesk expert Thomas Delahais, whose insights and guidance were crucial in helping participants grasp both the conceptual and practical application of impact pathways in Interreg evaluations.

II. Main objectives of the event

- Introduce the concept of impact pathways and clarify how they differ from intervention logic and theory of change.
- Explore how to apply impact pathways in programme evaluation to better capture cooperation-specific added value.
- Practice identifying, mapping, and prioritising impact pathways using real-life Interreg examples.
- Begin shaping relevant evaluation questions to establish methodological approaches for data collection and analysis and testing strategies.
- Discuss the next steps for embedding impact pathways into programme planning and evaluation exercises.

III. Key concepts explained: Intervention Logic vs. Theory of Change vs. Impact Pathways

Before diving into practical application, it's important to clarify how **intervention logic, theory of change, and impact pathways** differ and complement one another.

- **Intervention logic:** predominantly a programming and monitoring tool, that enables programmes to organise their main activities/outputs etc. in terms of how they contribute to the programme's overall objective. Its limitations as a tool for impact evaluation are:
 - They are often not sufficiently granular;
 - They tend to use "official" programme language of specific objectives/indicators etc. which do not reflect the complex array of contributing factors as to whether goals are reached, **how and why**.
- **Theory of change:** overall explanatory model of what happened and why.
- **Impact pathways:** individual causal pathways, which are specific enough to enable qualitative or quantitative testing. Collectively the impact pathways constitute the theory of change. (Think of the Theory of Change as the map and the impact pathway as the route you take to get to a specific destination. In evaluations, we often zoom in on one pathway to investigate in detail how a particular result came about).

IV. Key messages

When developing and applying impact pathways, keep the following key aspects/messages in mind:

- **Move beyond indicator summaries.** Evaluation should explain *why and how* change occurs, not just count outputs.
- **Focus on what matters.** Programmes should prioritise a few key pathways that are meaningful, feasible to assess, and representative of their work.
- **Impact pathways help focus evaluation.** They offer a way to identify "tipping points" where projects succeed or fail, enabling smarter evaluation and programme design.
- **Impact pathways vary by context.** While common pathways exist (e.g. trust-building), how they unfold depends on the cooperation maturity, policy environment, and specific programme clusters.
- **This approach takes time and support.** Most participants were new to using impact pathways and stressed the need for ongoing methodological guidance. Impact pathways represent a relatively recent methodological approach in programme evaluation practices, providing practitioners with an enhanced framework for mapping and evaluating complex interventions.

V. Practical steps to apply impact pathways

Create a detailed theory of change and map distinct impact pathways for each programme: Doing this pays off well beyond the evaluation stage - it sharpens programme design from the start. Because an impact pathway sets out the causal steps and underlying assumptions more precisely than a broad intervention logic, it allows the programmes to anticipate the resources, capacities and partnerships they will need to achieve their goals. To help Interreg programmes begin applying impact pathways, the following step-by-step process was discussed:

1. Mapping impact pathways

- Begin with identifying a major programme goal or observed impact (e.g. improved cross-border services).
- Work backward to define the *preconditions*, *activities*, and *intermediate outcomes* required to reach that goal.
- Break these down into individual impact pathways such as trust and cooperation or capacity building or policy influence or innovation lab or service/tool development or removal of legal/technical barriers

2. Zoom in

- Not all impact pathways can be evaluated in one study. Select those that:
 - Are relevant to your programme
 - Raise unanswered questions
 - Align with available data
 - Can reveal important insights or lessons

3. Define evaluation questions

- Typical questions include:
 - Was the goal achieved? If so, how and why?
 - Where did the pathway break, and for whom?
 - What factors influenced success or failure?
 - What was the programme's degree of influence?

4. Refine pathways and assumptions (this was covered in the event)

- Clarify which steps are critical and under what conditions they may or may not work.
- Identify "tipping points" or weak links in the impact pathway - these are areas for special focus during evaluation.

5. Test the impact pathways

- Use qualitative or quantitative methods to assess whether the pathway holds true across different projects or cases.
- Gather data that allow comparison between successful and unsuccessful examples, with the goal of learning from both what works well and what works less well.

6. Make evaluative judgements

- Interpret findings based on the logic of the pathway:
 - What worked, where, and for whom?
 - What did the programme contribute - and what did it not

VI. Examples of impact pathways identified during the event (for more details see Annex1)

During group work, participants applied this process to real Interreg cases and identified key pathways, including:

- **Trust building** → Better cooperation → Institutionalised joint action
- **Capacity building** → Innovation → Tool development → Service delivery
- **Policy Influence** → Strategy adoption → Long-term impact

These pathways helped participants see how seemingly intangible outcomes (e.g., trust) can be evaluated meaningfully if the right questions are asked and the right data are gathered.

VII. Key reflections and key take-aways from the event

- **Impact pathways provide structure to evaluation** that is often missing when focusing only on indicators or project-level achievements.
- **Added value of cooperation can be shown** using a handful of well-defined impact pathways common to many programmes.
- **Early deployment is critical.** Mapping pathways at the start of programming can improve project design, monitoring, and evaluation.
- **The method is still new.** More time, training, and tailored guidance are needed for widespread use in Interreg evaluations.

VIII. Next steps

- **Repeat the face-to-face workshop**, only if it is requested from programmes and provided that a sufficient number of programmes sign up.
- **Online event, November: “From impact pathways to practice.”**, present the key lessons and example pathways created in the June workshop;

2026:

- **From draft pathways to solid evaluative judgements** (builds on “Practical steps to apply impact pathways,” point 3 and beyond): Refine evaluation questions, Refine the pathway and its assumptions, Test the pathway (formative evidence-gathering, Make evaluative judgements, etc.
- **Thematic pathway labs** focusing on specific policy objectives and specific objectives (ISO 1, PO 5, circular economy, clean energy, environment, etc.). Each lab will: 1) adapt generic pathways to the theme; 2) agree on context-specific assumptions; 3) identify data sources.
- **Terms of Reference (ToR) for impact evaluations (event)**

IX. Annex

Annex 1: Impact pathway developed during the event

1.1. Impact pathway: benefits for citizens and institution (health)

Preconditions

- Institutions and citizens engage in high quality CBC/TN/IR cooperation
- There are existing cooperation frameworks (Interreg programme AT-CZ, cooperation agreement between lower Austria and Czech Republic)
- There is political and administrative commitment in CBC/TN/IR initiatives

Activities

- Structures collaboration and capacity (led by programmes)
- Interreg projects deliver solutions to CBC/TN/IR challenges
- Agreement that issues x--- can only be solved at the CBC/TN/IR level, or that there will be a unique gain to address it at CBC/TN/IR level
- Needs analysis
- Demand from citizens
- Capacity
- Match needs and demand and capacities

Outcome/outputs

- There are mature CBC/TN/IR partnerships
- Improvement of policy making outside of Interreg
- Pilot the activities on a small-scale condition
- Update previous legal agreement
- Roll out and uptake of solutions

Goal

- improve the Healthcare conditions in the programme area (improved or newly accessible services and tools)

Territorial goal

- Interreg projects deliver direct benefits for citizens and institutions
- Positive citizens perception and trust in CBC/TN/IR cooperation

1.2. Impact pathway: Trust and capacity building/capacity building

Preconditions

- Institutions and citizens engage in high quality CBC/TN/IR cooperation
- Agreement on problems, framing policy goal, instruments to achieve them
- Increased range and ambition of cooperation
- Lack of social support: services actually tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups
- Public authorities in charge of social support services: open/motivated/willing to improve service design and provision
- Citizens from vulnerable groups willing to engage with public authorities

Activities

- Joint project design and implementation
- Needs assessment /problem diagnostics (vulnerable groups, ...): Problems they are facing what is not working
- Identification of the best practices already existing successful stories
- Workshops with authorities and citizens + consultation with vulnerable target group

Outcome/outputs

- Joint solutions to shared challenges
- Design training for public authorities (capacity building programme) + co-creation methods
- Organisations have access to the skills, knowledge and tools that allow them to innovate
- Pilot training with the public authorities + pilots with vulnerable people
- Strategy on institutionalising co-creation methods of social support (pilot level)
- Trust and community actions
- Tangible mechanisms that formalise and facilitate long-term collaboration

Goal

- Ownership of cooperation / of policy goals by different actors
- Improved or newly accessible services and tools
- Joint development and delivery of citizens focused solutions
- Improved social support services
- There is trust and capacity among stakeholders

Territorial goal

- Interreg projects deliver direct benefits for citizens and institutions
- Rollout and uptake of solutions
- Concrete benefits that enhance services access, innovation and integration

Annex 2: Impact pathway developed during the event including possible questions

2.1. Impact pathway: development of joint services (including questions)

Preconditions

- Joint project design and implementation (projects to build on)
- Organisations have access to the skills, knowledge and tools that allow them to innovate (basic level of trust)

Questions

- Legal permission
- Lack of stakeholders (buy -in)
- Was there a lack of trust? Reasons for blockage?

Activities

- Joint project design and implementation
- Improved capacities
- Pilots/analysis
- Expanding and deepening networks

Outcome/outputs

- Resolution of legal and administrative issue

Questions

- Was blockage caused by capacity?
- Deepened /expanded network
- Quality of partnership?

Goal

- Development of joint services

Questions:

- To what extent is there an increase in CBC/TN/IR access to services?
- Is it operating effectively, responding to needs? Why /why not /in which circumstances was goal achieved?
- Did x happen (why/why not/in which circumstances)

Territorial goal

2.2. Impact pathway: Interest for networking/need to cooperate (including questions)

Match-making

- Incentives to cooperate
- Tools to cooperate
- Channels to cooperate

Questions:

- Are stakeholders joining or not?
- Which are the expectations?
- Which tools were most beneficial/useful?

Engagement

- Successful cooperation

Questions:

- Which stakeholders are more committed?
- To what extent are they committed/engaged?
- What are barriers?

Formalised network

- Agreement

Questions:

- Is the network stable?
- Is the network dense?
- Is the network larger?
- Is the network more intense?
- Is the network varied?
- Is the self-sustaining?
- Are these networks making its members better off (SMS more competitive, innovative)?

Preconditions

- Capacities to network and cooperate

Q: big question on the wished change

2.3. Impact pathways: Partnership (including questions)

Deepened cooperation

- formal process of cooperation
- habits of cooperation
- institutional process

Questions

- Do we have a stable partnership?
- Who is cooperating?

Institution

- Sense of success: want to do it again
- More people
- Use methods
- Learn to cooperate
- Learn from projects

Stakeholders

- Bias space & method to cooperate
- Motivation due to topic

Projects

Questions

- What activities do better support cooperation?
- What is needed

Preconditions

- Motivation
- Agreement on problem
- Some skills
- No resistance to change

Annex 3: Impact pathway developed by Interact: (to be adapted to different programmes' situations)

3.1. Unique achievements and outcomes through cross-border/transnational/interregional cooperation

Precondition

- **Existing cooperation frameworks** Institutional, legal, or informal cooperation mechanisms are in place to enable collaboration across borders or regions.)
- **Political and administrative commitment:** Without political will and administrative support, cooperation cannot be sustained.
- **Trust and capacity among stakeholders:** Mutual trust and organisational ability are key to effective cooperation.

Activities

- **Joint project design and implementation** (Projects must be designed and implemented collaboratively to reflect real cross-border/transnational/interregional cooperation.)

Outputs/outcomes

- **Shared strategies, services, tools, and infrastructures** (Collaboration generates tangible results that individual regions could not produce alone.)
- **Joint solutions to shared challenges** (Interreg enables regions to tackle issues that transcend borders.)
- **Results unattainable by single regions** (Through cooperation, Interreg achieves outcomes no region could accomplish independently.)

Goal – Interreg programme level

- **Unique achievements and outcomes:** The only way how Interreg projects, outputs, and accomplishments are possible is jointly through cooperation and collaboration. Interreg delivers unique results by enabling cross-border/transnational/interregional cooperation to deliver results that cannot be achieved through other mechanisms.

Territorial impact (above the accountability ceiling)

- **Stronger functional areas** (Interreg helps regions evolve into cohesive functional areas, even across national borders.)

External Factors

- **Reduced fragmentation along EU internal borders:** By easing practical, legal, and institutional barriers, Interreg strengthens territorial cohesion.

3.2. Enhancing partnership maturity

Precondition

- **Existing cooperation frameworks** Institutional, legal, or informal cooperation mechanisms are in place to enable collaboration across borders or regions.)
- **Political and administrative commitment:** Without political will and administrative support, cooperation cannot be sustained.
- **Trust and capacity among stakeholders:** Mutual trust and organisational ability are key to effective cooperation.

Activities

- **Structured collaboration and capacity building** (Partners jointly engage in activities that foster strategic alignment, institutional development, and learning)

Outputs/Outcomes

- **Institutionalised cooperation practices and tools** (Tangible mechanisms that formalise and facilitate long-term collaboration.
- **Expanding and deepening networks (roll-out and uptake of networks):** Growing partnership structures that include new actors and deepen thematic or geographic focus.
- **Durable, resilient cooperation structures:** Partnerships that remain active and productive beyond specific projects, contributing to sustained regional development.

Goal

- **Enhancing partnership maturity:** Interreg fosters the development of long-term, cross-border/transnational/interregional partnerships that go beyond individual projects, creating lasting collaborations that would not have formed without Interreg support.

Territorial Goal

- **Sustained cross-border, transnational and interregional governance capacity:** Strong, institutionalised, and self-sustaining networks and governance models that manage shared development over time. These matured partnerships institutionalise into governance structures that shape regional development (territorial)

External Factors

- **Stability and continuity in political and policy environments:** A supportive political and administrative environment that allows partnerships to develop over time.

3.3. Direct benefits for citizens/institutions (Tangible impacts of cooperation)

Precondition

- **Existing cooperation frameworks** Institutional, legal, or informal cooperation mechanisms are in place to enable collaboration across borders or regions.)
- **Political and administrative commitment:** Without political will and administrative support, cooperation cannot be sustained.
- **Trust and capacity among stakeholders:** Mutual trust and organisational ability are key to effective cooperation.
- **Identifiable and shared citizen/institutional needs:** There must be clearly recognised problems or needs that affect people or institutions on both sides of a border. Needs must be identified jointly with citizens and institutions to ensure relevance, ownership, and impact.

Activities

- **Joint development and delivery of citizen-focused solutions:** CBC/TN/IR partners co-create and implement services or tools that address real-life problems.

Outputs/ Outcomes

- **Improved or newly accessible services and tools:** Tangible, user-facing results that increase access, efficiency, or quality of public services.
- **Participation in joint projects:** Citizens improve cooperation quality by providing organisations with the experience to cooperate in new ways
- **Trust- and community-building actions:** Initiatives that strengthen social cohesion, reduce perceived divisions, and connect citizens.
- **Measurable improvement in well-being and institutional performance:** Citizens and institutions experience better service delivery, stronger cooperation, and greater trust.

Goal

- **Direct benefits for citizens/institutions (Tangible impacts of cooperation):** Interreg brings concrete benefits to citizens and institutions on both sides of borders, from building mutual trust to improving the quality of life across borders.

Territorial goal

- **Improved quality of life in border areas:** Improved quality of life leads to long-term territorial resilience, competitiveness, and alignment with EU cohesion objectives: border regions become more attractive, liveable, and functionally integrated for citizens and institutions.

External factor

- **Citizen perception and trust in cross-border cooperation.** Positive experiences with cooperation increase public support, engagement, and legitimacy.

3.4. Impact Pathway: Improving cooperation quality

Precondition

- **Existing cooperation frameworks** Institutional, legal, or informal cooperation mechanisms are in place to enable collaboration across borders or regions.)
- **Political and administrative commitment:** Without political will and administrative support, cooperation cannot be sustained.
- **Trust and capacity among stakeholders:** Mutual trust and organisational ability are key to effective cooperation.

Activities

- **Structured collaboration and capacity building (Interreg programmes)**
Interreg programmes improve cooperation quality by pre-application activities that aim to ensure high quality cooperation during project implementation

Outputs/ Outcomes

- **Solutions for promoting improved cooperation:** Some projects improve cooperation quality by developing solutions to enable more intense and effective cooperation; project partners create solutions to enable more intense and effective cooperation.
- **Participation in joint projects** Other projects improve cooperation quality by providing organisations with the experience to cooperate in new ways
- **Roll-out and uptake of solutions:** Projects partners and wider stakeholders take-up and utilise the solutions to improve quality of cooperation.
- **Embedding of CB/TN/IR ways of working:** Projects partners and wider stakeholders incorporate CB/TN/IR ways of working into procedures, attitudes and day-to-day activity.

Goal

- **Improving cooperation quality:** Organisations cooperate across borders more intensively and effectively.

Territorial impact (above the accountability ceiling)

- **Increase the range and ambition of cooperation:** Organisations cooperate across borders in new fields and using innovative cooperation structures and practices
- **Organisations cooperate outside the scope of formal funding mechanisms:** The benefits of cooperation are so compelling that organisations do not require external public funding for cooperation to exist

3.5. Impact Pathway: Lowering mental barriers

Precondition

- **Existing cooperation frameworks** Institutional, legal, or informal cooperation mechanisms are in place to enable collaboration across borders or regions.)
- **Political and administrative commitment:** Without political will and administrative support, cooperation cannot be sustained.
- **Trust and capacity among stakeholders:** Mutual trust and organisational ability are key to effective cooperation.

Activities

- **Joint projects design and implementation:** Mental barriers are removed through jointly designed and implemented projects that expand the horizons

Outputs/Outcomes:

- **Solutions for removing mental barriers:** Some projects expand horizons by developing solutions to take down mental barriers
- **Participation in joint projects:** Other projects expand horizons through the experience o
- **Roll-out and uptake of solutions:** Projects partners and wider stakeholders take-up and utilise the solutions to remove mental barriers.
- **Embedding of CB/TN/IR ways of working:** Projects partners/wider stakeholders/end-users incorporate CB/TN/IR ways of working into procedures, attitudes and day-to-day activity.

Goal

- **Lowering mental barriers:** Individuals and organisations broaden their mental scope, permitting them to have more possibilities (as consumers, service-users, jobseekers etc. as well as employers, service deliverers, policymakers etc.)

Territorial goal

- **"Border blindness":** Individuals and organisations take advantage of opportunities without feeling limited by national borders.
- **Integration of Europe's peripheral regions:** Individuals and organisations are more connected leading to economic growth and improved services.

3.6. Impact Pathway: Addressing cross-border/transnational/interregional challenges

Precondition

- **Existing cooperation frameworks** Institutional, legal, or informal cooperation mechanisms are in place to enable collaboration across borders or regions.)
- **Political and administrative commitment:** Without political will and administrative support, cooperation cannot be sustained.
- **Trust and capacity among stakeholders:** Mutual trust and organisational ability are key to effective cooperation.
- **CBC/TN/IR challenges identified:** There is agreement on the issues to be addressed.

Activities

- **Joint projects design and implementation:** Challenges are removed through jointly designed and implemented projects

Outputs/ Outcomes

- **Joint solutions to shared challenges:** Projects create solutions to challenges that could not be addressed individually
- **Roll-out and uptake of solutions:** These solutions are rolled out and taken up within and outside the project partnerships

Goal: Interreg programme level

- **Addressing CB/TN/IR challenges:** Projects resolve or ameliorate territorial challenges that transcend national borders

Territorial goal

- **Stronger functional areas:** Interreg helps regions evolve into cohesive functional areas, even across national borders.
- **Reduced fragmentation along EU internal borders:** By easing practical, legal, and institutional barriers, Interreg strengthens territorial cohesion.