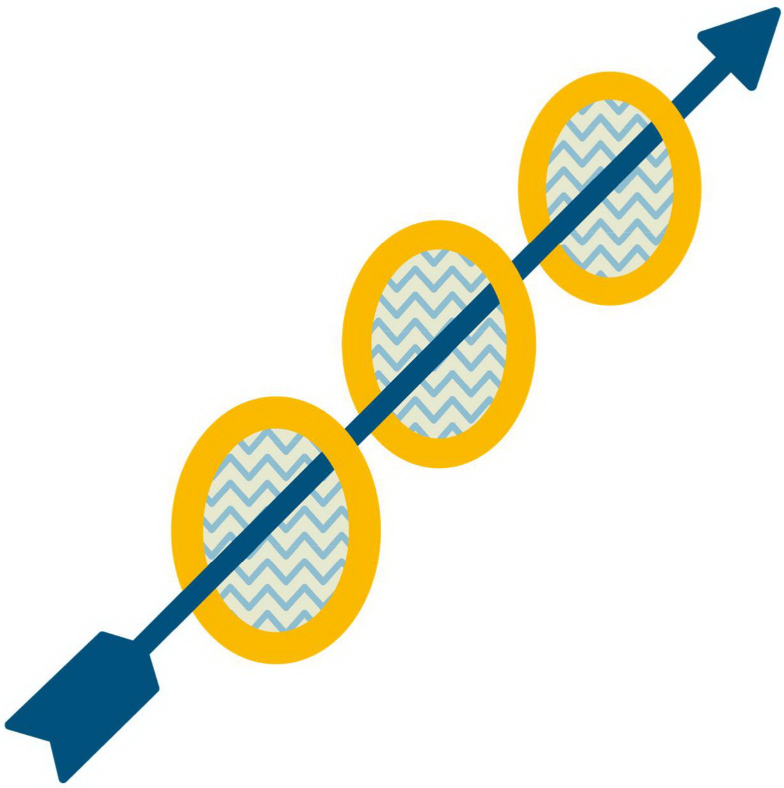
Raising Project Quality

Version 06-2017



European Regional Development Fund

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Interreg programme name
BE-NL	CBC Border Region Flanders - Netherlands
BG-RS	IPA CBC Bulgaria – Serbia
CB	CBC Central Baltic
FCE	CBC France (Manche/Channel) – England
DE-DK	CBC Germany – Denmark
HU-HR	CBC Hungary – Croatia
POCTEFA	CBC Spain – France – Andorra
RO-BG	CBC Romania – Bulgaria
SI-AT	CBC Slovenia – Austria
SI-HR	CBC Slovenia – Croatia
SI-HU	CBC Slovenia – Hungary
SB	CBC South Baltic
OKS	CBC Øresund - Kattegat - Skagerrak
HR-BA-ME	IPA CBC Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina- Montenegro
IE	Interreg Europe
CE	TN Central Europe
NSR	TN North Sea Region
NWE	TN North West Europe

Introduction

All projects should be of good quality, including those co-financed by Interreg programmes. For these programmes it is important to continuously improve the quality of projects because they are supported by public money. It is therefore their moral and professional obligation to spend their programme budget efficiently.

Interreg programmes and their projects need to demonstrate their role and value to the population within their territories, and across Europe. Programmes agree that the Interreg concept of cooperation can make a difference; i.e., contribute to the solutions sought to common challenges in the programme areas. Interreg is a good example where European identity can be created, since it gives the possibility to work beyond national borders and make a change.

For the future of Interreg, more territorial evidence (i.e., stories, facts, figures) is needed to convince decision makers about the added-value of Interreg programmes. It seems that cooperation mechanisms are now well established, but it remains difficult to create real 'stories', in particular when it comes to defining the future of Interreg.

Interreg programmes, together with Interact, have been discussing what a programme can do to increase the quality of Interreg projects selected and implemented. So far, the information in this paper is solely based on the outcomes of what was discussed at the two Raising Project Quality workshops (Oct 2016, Feb 2017). In other words, this is a living document that will be updated after each workshop and with information programmes share with Interact.

Programmes discussed and agreed on the quality characteristics of an Interreg project, and identified reasons why projects of a lower quality exist. We also started identifying practices that programmes can use during the project development, selection and implementation process to improve project characteristics that increase project quality.

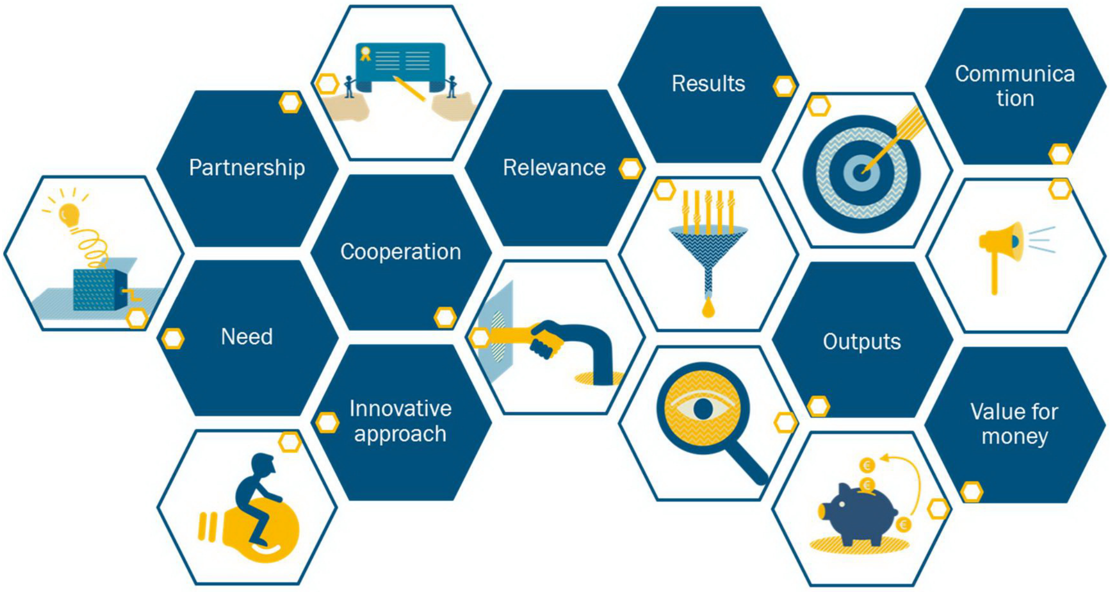
Quality characteristics of Interreg projects

In general terms, quality is a perceptual, conditional and somewhat subjective attribute and may be understood differently by different people. In Interreg it is important to distinguish between quality of procedures ('spending money') and quality of projects (creating a change in the programme area).

The starting point for Interreg is that there are issues of common concern in a common area, and that by means of cooperation we can find better solutions and make a bigger change than we would if we worked independently.

Quality Interreg project formula

2+2 ≥ 5



Need

The starting point of a quality Interreg project is a clear need for it.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Need	• There needs to be a clear need/real demand for a project. • The need is on the regional and/or programme area level. • The need is common/joint on both sides of the border.

Cooperation

The core of the quality of an Interreg project is cooperation across borders, because the results achieved in cooperation with others have a bigger impact.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Cooperation	• The project has a common denominator to become a basis for cooperation. • It's a win-win solution through cooperation. • Project results are not achievable without partners across the border, or they are achievable but are not of a sufficient quality without the partners across the border. • Cooperation is a pre-condition and needs to bring added-value to the project. • Cooperation starts at the development stage and continues after the funding from the programme finishes. • There has to be a benefit/positive effects out of cooperation.

Commentary:

- The level of cooperation depends on the maturity of the programme, the historical cooperation tradition, and the length of cooperation in programme priorities. For example, there is a difference if the partners from the programme area cooperate on pollution mitigation for the second programming period or the fifth.
- Cross-border impact and cross-border cooperation are not the same. Cooperation means that partners are 'pushing' themselves to work together and exchange, to have active collaboration leading to mutual understanding. Partners jointly produce outputs and commit to ensuring long-term effects (common vision). The cross-border impact is the effect of the cooperation visible on both sides of the border.
- Networking and mere exchange of experience is not sufficient to qualify as a quality Interreg project.

Challenges:

- Investments: A cross-border or transnational character needs to be well demonstrated and justified. Investments need to be jointly developed; otherwise they have a purely local dimension.
- Pilot actions: Usually locally oriented, thus difficult to prove that other partners will benefit from this investment.
- Does the cooperation need to lead to the joint achievement or is the learning element enough? In most cases this depends on the topic of the project.

Partnership

A quality Interreg project is one in which partners needed to achieve project results are on board.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Partnership	• Partners need to be able to deliver outputs and achieve agreed results. • Partners need to have the right competence and ability to influence the decision makers (if needed, and in case decision makers are not actual project partners). • Preferably, partners need to be from different levels (i.e., different levels of governance, civil society, thematic institutions) to provide different points of view. • Partners should be proportionally active to the planned project results and to the contribution to project indicators.

Commentary:

- What defines the right partnership for the project depends mainly on the topic of the project and its ambitions (what is to be achieved).
- Number of partners involved in the partnership is not important, although some programmes have limitations to the maximum number of partners. In principle, big partnerships are more difficult to manage.
- Sub-partner concept (NWE): for partners with very technical expertise that are not necessarily interested in the overall project. They usually deliver a small, specialized part of the content.

Examples of types of partners

Coordinating beneficiary concept (NSR)
For small organisations (e.g., small municipalities, SMEs) lacking the internal capacity to be involved in the project, and to limit the administrative burden.

Advisory partners (IE)

Partners light concept (BE-NL)
For partners that participate for just a limited period, mostly SMEs.

Sub-partners (NWE)
Programme's general principle is to work with full partners only, but organisations without the financial capacity to participate in a project or which only wish to participate to a limited degree in a project (e.g., in one or two activities) may participate as sub-partners.

In general, sub-partners are small in size, have specific expertise and should work in close cooperation with one particular partner. Sub-partners must be located in the same country as their responsible partner. Their involvement in the project is often limited in time and content. Nevertheless, sub-partners can be regarded as an integral part of a project as they are directly involved in its implementation.

Sub-partners fall under the responsibility of another partner (the 'responsible partner') with which they are required to sign an agreement to ensure good working relations. The full partner acts as guarantor of their financial contribution to the project. The full partner submits the sub-partner expenditure together with his.

Like full partners, sub-partners must keep a complete audit trail of all documents of probative value. (In contrast to external experts or consultants, sub-partners can include staff costs.) The first level controller of the full partner must control the expenditure of the sub-partner. When deemed necessary, he should also include on-the-spot checks.

Sub-partners may only claim costs through their responsible partner and only if they are listed as a sub-partner in the application form. However, it is not necessary for them to sign the partnership agreement. The total budget of all sub-partners cannot exceed 50% of the responsible partner's budget. If this condition is not fulfilled, then the proposed sub-partner(s) must become (an) official partner(s).

For example, a Lead partner with a budget of EUR 500,000 has a sub-partner. The maximum budget of the sub-partner amounts to EUR 250,000. If the lead partner has two (or more) sub-partners, their maximum cumulative budget would be EUR 250,000.

Challenges:

- Involvement and competence of associated partners should be questioned, especially when projects have many of them. Associated partners are project partners participating in the project without financially contributing to it.

Innovative approach (innovativeness)

A quality Interreg project goes beyond existing solutions and the state of play in the sector and/or the region.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Innovative approach	• The project is built on previous results and it avoids overlaps and replications (evolution of ideas). • The project goes beyond existing solutions and the state of play in the sector and/or the region. • New or improved aspect of the project could be the uptake of existing technology (e.g., the application of research). • The activities and the outputs are additional to what is being done now in the partner organisations (no business as usual). • There are clear benefits compared to existing approaches.

Commentary:

- Innovative approach is not necessarily linked to innovation.
- In some cases, applying solutions from other areas in the area of the new project can also be valuable (i.e., innovative in area).

Challenges:

- For projects it is difficult to describe the gap they plan to fill.
- It can be difficult for applicants to understand what we mean by an innovative approach – try not to use this term.
- There are different understandings of innovation (technology, process, approach) among programmes and people in general. Innovation is not only about new technology.
- How to distinguish what is innovation and what is in general added-value?
- Can the partnership in itself be part of the innovation? For example, having different people around the table to overcome barriers and challenges previously identified.

Relevance

A quality Interreg project should not be an isolated island; instead, it should be one part of the “bigger picture” in a programme area.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Relevance	• The project and its results contribute significantly to the programme strategy and its objectives. • The local solutions are embedded in the long-term strategies.

Commentary:

- It should be the role of the MC members (and national and regional authorities) to verify if the project is relevant for the programme area or not; they should have strategy-oriented thinking.

Challenges:

- Establishing project relevance towards local/national/regional/EU strategies in a world that is changing faster than ever before is challenging for everyone. These strategies do not always follow those changes, thus links to the strategies need to be flexible.
- It is sometimes difficult to judge if the project idea fits or not with the national strategies.

Results

A quality Interreg project has long-lasting achievable joint results.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Results	• Change achieved jointly. • The effects of the project need to be long-term. • Contribute to programme results. • Need to start to be achieved within the project lifetime. • “Failure” can also be a result (i.e., failure to prove starting hypothesis of a project/negative result). • Need to be measurable.

Commentary:

- It is not necessary for projects to have impact on both sides of the border or all countries/regions involved. It depends on the topic of the project.

Outputs

A quality Interreg project delivers sustainable outputs that are used by target groups and other stakeholders.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Outputs	• Outputs are used by target groups which enable achievement of results. • Outputs are "kept alive" after the project end. • Project is sustainable; i.e., outputs are used after the project ends.

Commentary:

- For outputs to be used after the project ends they must be maintained. However, not all outputs need maintenance.
- Some outputs might need a financing source to exist after the programme financing stops.
- Sustainability can also be in administrative structures – future cooperation with partners.

Challenges:

- There is a contradiction in expectations concerning State Aid and revenues.
- How can it be checked if outputs exist and are used after the project ends?
- What are the consequences if the outputs do not exist after the project ends?

Value for money

A quality Interreg project represents reasonable value for money.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Value for money	• The project budget is used in accordance with the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Commentary:

- <u>The principle of economy</u> concerns minimising the costs of resources. The resources used by the project's partnership for its activities should be made available in due time, in appropriate quantity and quality, and at the best price.
- <u>The principle of efficiency</u> concerns getting the most from the available resources. It is concerned with the relationship between resources employed and outputs delivered in terms of quantity, quality and timing.
- <u>The principle of effectiveness</u> concerns meeting the objectives and achieving the intended results.
- In some programmes, value for money is about how much is achieved with the programme funds; i.e., costs per unit/result/indicator. These programmes assess what they get for the money allocated to each project.

- For other programmes, value for money is not about how much each output or result will cost. Interreg projects have other benefits that are often not measured (e.g., contribution to peaceful co-existence, trust and mutual understanding, social integration, EU integration, EU identity, common market, etc.) or can't be measured.

Communication

A quality Interreg project communicates clearly outside the project itself to increase the use of its achievements.

Group	Interreg project quality characteristics
Communication	• Simple and clear communication towards the programme and the external stakeholders. • The project has a story to tell. • There is a clear communication strategy/plan/vision. • The project targets only the relevant/core stakeholders/target groups. • If relevant, the project appeals to the public to show concrete solutions to real problems (show how Interreg can help you).

Commentary:

- Communication is not only about promotion of the programme. It is about achievement and promotion of the outputs/results and their durability.

Optional elements of good project quality

1. Transferability of outputs – if the outputs are of good quality it is more likely that they will be transferred. Not all outputs can be transferred. Transferability is the ability to "sell" the outputs beyond the project itself.
2. Multiplier effect - projects should trigger new projects/cooperation.

Reasons for low(er) quality of projects

Taking into account the agreed project quality characteristics, programmes discussed why some projects don't have them. Several reasons for low(er) quality of Interreg projects were identified. These have been grouped into three main categories: (1) reasons on the projects' side, (2) reason on the programmes' side, and (3) external factors.

Reasons on the projects' side

1. Project partners lack understanding of the purpose of Interreg, and/or are not familiar with the programme and its aim.
2. Applicants have difficulties understanding what the programme is looking for, especially when they don't consult the programme bodies or participate in the workshops, and/or they present the project idea to the programme too late.
3. Project partners don't read guidance provided by programmes, especially partners that have been participating in previous Interreg projects, and are therefore not aware of new/changed conditions in programmes.
4. Applicants don't have enough resources (staff, time, budget) and knowledge to prepare and implement the projects, especially newcomers, small organisations and applicants who are engaged in several projects. Quite often, financial and communication managers are not part of the application process, and they add their input very late in the process. This leads to problems regarding the fulfilment of the communication tasks and the budget in general.
5. Late start of project development and application preparation often leads a projects vision that is not harmonised and not well developed.
6. There is lack of agreement about who does what, when and why in the partnership because they don't develop the project together. Even consultants sometimes work alone without active involvement of the project partners who will implement the project.
7. When an investment is the main interest of partners and the project is built around it (a so called 'shopping list project') the project is not developed based on joint interests/needs.
8. Realistic benefits compared to the needs of target groups are not sufficient.
9. No/not enough involvement of stakeholders/target groups leads to weak communication and lack of knowledge of why the project is needed.
10. Applicants don't understand the importance of logical links within the project (coherence) and don't provide the right/detailed enough information in the application form (often weak work plan, budget, explanation of results and outputs).
11. Some projects only re-invent the wheel without adding value to the new project. Sometimes they don't do proper background research to know what has been done before (in previous projects) and in general what is feasible to do in a given sector and area.

12. When the partnerships become bigger, the joint need becomes less obvious because of activities added to include everybody's interests.
13. Weak partnership (unbalanced, false or ad-hoc partners) put together to impress the programme and not to deliver the changes needed in the programme area.
14. Technical challenges with the application form (space, logic, IT system).
15. Lack of commitment by partners involved in the project. Commitment to the project and the partnership is too low in some organisations. This is often because of lack of support from the management level.
16. Changes in the partnership (partners dropping out, new partners) and within project partner organisations result in people implementing what somebody else planned.
17. Weak cash flow management and rules/administrative challenges.
18. During project development, projects or some partners hide weaknesses and risks (for example, competence, lack of human resources, need for time-consuming process of obtaining permits, missing background analysis, etc.) on purpose. This causes problems and potentially lowers the quality during the implementation.
19. Some organisations wait for the programme to lower expectations towards projects at later calls for proposals, when facing de-commitment.
20. There are organisations that are simply hunting money and don't spend time on the quality of project content.

Reasons on the programmes' side

1. At the beginning of the current period, due to the change of 'philosophy', programmes were not sure who they were – lack of identity. Consequently the messages from programme bodies (lack of common understanding and approach) to potential applicants were not harmonised during the first calls.
2. Late start of the programme forced programmes to open calls before their monitoring systems were in place and the guidance for projects prepared.
3. Programmes don't understand what projects need and what it means to work in an Interreg project.
4. Staff fluctuations and discontinuation in Programme Secretariats.
5. Engagement of the MA/JS staff in closure of the 2007-2013, designation in 2014-2020, anti-fraud measures and other legal administrative requirements at the expense of working with potential applicants (especially in programmes with high numbers of applications).
6. Monitoring Committees are not strict enough with projects of a lower quality because of political reasons and lobbying.
7. Disagreements within the Monitoring Committees about the achievements sought on programme and project levels.
8. Some application forms are too complicated and the IT system not tested enough.
9. Long period from approval of the project to signature of Subsidy Contract causes the loss of project dynamics.

External factors

1. Change of law or rules and of political structures at national/regional level.
2. Force Majeure and economic crisis.
3. State Aid issues can limit the full potential of a cooperation project.
4. Limited Technical Assistance funds for engagement of the highly-skilled staff needed for a more demanding approach in 2014-2020.

The overall impression is that lower quality of Interreg projects is caused on the one hand by lack of understanding of Interreg and its specifics, and on the other hand by weak cooperation and coherence of information.

Programme practices for raising project quality

The result orientation and new/additional rules introduced in the 2014-2020 programming period are challenging for everybody, both programmes and projects. The change is especially challenging for organisations that have been participating in Interreg projects in the previous periods.

Raising quality is a continuous process on all levels. The question is what can programmes do for applicants and beneficiaries to help them increase the quality of their projects?

FORMULA: Personal approach by well trained staff.

1. Project development and selection

What a programme can do depends on resources available (staff and budget) and number of applications coming in.

To be able to determine which practices increase the quality of projects their usefulness needs to be evaluated.

Internal capacity building

Internal trainings are organised for staff in programme bodies that give advice to projects. The main purpose it to make sure the messages delivered to projects from different programme staff are harmonised.

NWE: Workshops in the secretariat are organised every second week to discuss specific cases and learn from each other.

CE: An internal guidance paper on individual consultations has been prepared for Joint Secretariat members. It should help them know what they should comment on and what not when giving feedback to projects during project development phase. In addition, project officers exchange during dedicated unit meetings on their experiences and questions asked by lead applicants.

NSR has prepared an internal assessment criteria guidance matrix to support and harmonise understanding within the Secretariat. Additionally, they held Team Days focused on developing internal capacity for carrying out assessments and weekly update meetings are done throughout the entire assessment process to discuss open issues and common challenges.

Guidance for projects

There are different options for **consultations with projects**; for example, they can be individual or collective (events, webinars). In all cases, a programme should apply equal treatment (all projects offered equal assistance), avoid conflicts of interest (adviser versus assessor role) and the consultation should be coordinated with National/Regional Authority (division of task and roles should be defined in advance).

NWE: In the second step of the call, a workshop (1,5 day) is organised for step 2 applicants (LP and 1 partner) during which the projects have the possibility to network and work together on their intervention logic in smaller groups. After that, each project meets the programme at least twice to help them prepare the project for the second step application. This creates a high work load but is useful because 80 % of projects are successful in the second step. Of course the person who is helping the project is not assessing it at the assessment stage. The practice is useful also because the programme knows what to expect from the project already at the pre-implementation stage.

CE: The programme takes care not to get directly involved during the project development phase, in order to avoid any conflict of interest. Applicants fill in a template where they describe their project idea, which is the basis for an individual consultation (personal, phone or skype). Consultations can have either a content-wise or financial focus. In addition, general guidance is offered by the national contact points. The programme also organises lead applicant trainings, including practical guidance and exercises on how to fill in the application form.

SB: Project applicants are offered a one-hour meeting to discuss their project idea (short project description, not the application form) and get guidance. For example, the project officers provide feedback on the outputs proposed without commenting on all details (e.g., if the proposed target value is OK) – the process could otherwise be considered as a pre-assessment, which is not the case. No guidance is given during the last week of the call. For projects that were rejected with the recommendation to re-apply, longer consultations are allowed, to review the reasons why projects were rejected.

Individual consultations are provided:

- Face-to-face: programme office, project office, programme events, contact points. The benefit of being together in one room is that it contributes to the relationship building and understanding of each other (especially when using a foreign language).
- Online: different online collaboration platforms (e.g., Skype, WebEx), phone. The benefit of using online environments is that meetings can be organised quickly and more often due to the lower costs involved (no venue costs, no travel).

Applicants also appreciate practical **events** where they meet other applicants and project partners from current or already closed projects to learn from them about Interreg project challenges and tips on how to deal with them. Practical exercises and examples are needed for applicants to understand better how the information needed has to be presented.

Ideas for face-to-face events:
- Discussions facilitated by an external moderator.
- Practical exercises (i.e., learning-by-doing approach).
- Combine different methods of presenting information to make events more interactive and interesting (e.g., short presentations, group work, role play, videos, external speakers).
- Offer short trainings on skills every project needs; e.g., plain language tips.
- Pitching session: an applicant explains their project idea to the audience focusing on the results and receiving direct feedback.
- Set up a panel to provide feedback to projects following a questioning system. Members of the panel could be: Joint Secretariat, Monitoring Committee members, representatives from regions, Contact Points, thematic experts and approved projects.
- Invite approved projects to share tips; i.e., their success factors and failures.
- To understand better the value of your events you could add this question to the event evaluation form: What are the main learning points you will take back home from this event?
- Organise a test/quiz/game during the event to make it more interactive. **NSR** practice: jeopardy quiz.

All programmes provide **written guidance** about the programme and the information that must be provided in the application form.

Tips for improvement of written guidance:
- Make documents shorter to make it easier to read them.
- Update guidance regularly and highlight the changes made in the documents.
- Archive outdated versions of guidance-related documents to avoid confusion.
- Minimise (if possible avoid) copy/paste from previous periods in cases where the rules have changed.
- Avoid long, complicated descriptions.
- Use images, infographics, diagrams, etc., where appropriate.
- Make sure the material is adapted to the audience and relevant to the topic - involve communication officers.
- Use plain language and explain EU specific terms (i.e., avoid jargon).
- Send emails to applicants letting them know where to find useful information (e.g., newsflash format)
- Allow an option to subscribe to changes/updates only.

More and more programmes are present in the online environment to interact with potential applicants and beneficiaries.

Programmes practices for online guidance:

- recorded presentation of Interreg project concepts (**NSR**),
- animation videos (**DE-DK**),
- "home-made" animated videos using free online tools like Biteable or Moovly (**NSR, Interact**)
- recorded sessions from events (**CE**),
- webinars on different topics every two weeks (planned in **CE**), live stream thematic seminars, which are recorded and published on the website (**ÖKS**),
- short videos with experience and recommendations from project officers and projects (**ÖKS**),
- chat/live sessions on a regular basis to answer questions (tested in **SB**),
- guidance videos and screencasts (**RO-BG, NSR**),
- animated templates and explanation of the intervention logic (to be tested for the next call in **HR-BA-ME**),
- brochure with abstract examples to clarify the difference between results, outputs and deliverables to project applicants (**SB**).

When uploading information on the programme website try to use easy to understand titles for sections and documents. Develop core messages to introduce each section of the website so applicants clearly understand what can be found where. Use graphics and reading charts for more visible, structured access to guidance documents.

Project quality self-check

Before submitting the application form and even before applicants start drafting the project proposal the programme could offer them some additional tools to check if the project could be successful with the application.

Proposals for project quality self-check:

- A quiz with 5 short questions[1]. For example: a pop-up window would appear on the website saying: "Is Interreg XY the right programme for me? Start the quiz!" If the right answers are chosen the applicants are encouraged to apply.
- Mind map (yes/no process) to determine the weak links in the project.
- Family check: the applicants should ask somebody external to their project to read the concept note/application to check whether it's understandable
- Self-assessment tool: simplified assessment checklist to be used by applicants to assess their project before submission. It would include assessment questions and links to application form sections. It could be more of a qualitative assessment rather than a scoring system; i.e., people should be able to explain why they should get the high scores.
- Role play method could be used in partnerships when developing the project idea. Some partners take over the role of the secretariat and challenge the other partners to discover weak points and address them.
- Project cross-check with common mistakes published by programmes after each call (learn from mistakes).

[1] Example in ÖKS programme (in Danish): http://interreg-oks.eu/ansoka/vemkanansokaochforvad/testdigselv.4.1945eb0b148e579efa6dbca.html

Tools testing

Programmes need to test their implementation tools before applicants start using them. Test on two levels: technical and content.

Calls for proposals

Seed money projects (pre-project)

SB, OKS: Support for activities connected to preparing a project, such as preparatory studies and analyses, or developing the partnership. No support given for writing the application itself.

2-step calls for proposals

The purpose of the 2-step calls for proposals is that the projects are informed about their relevance for the programme, and about their weaknesses. Fewer applications at the second step gives the programme more time to work closely with potential quality projects. Many programmes offer individual support for projects when working on the details of their projects after a first-step approval. The consultation is more successful if the whole partnership is involved.

CB: After a first-step approval, the project has one month to prepare the work plan which is then checked by the secretariat. The project then has one more month to apply changes after receiving comments from the secretariat.

Ongoing calls

Ongoing calls are calls which don't have any deadline for submission. Projects can submit their proposal at any time.

SI-AT, SI-HR, SI-HU: Ongoing calls with two assessment rounds per year. They noticed that projects are able to focus more on the quality of the project when there is no deadline pressure. Projects have more time to prepare and submit their projects when they are really ready.

Limitations

To avoid a project re-applying with the same partnership and the same project proposal, the programme should limit the possibility to re-apply for projects with no potential.

SI-HR, SI-HU, SI-AT:
- Re-submission limitations: The projects that are not approved by MC may not apply for programme funds again with the same project idea and the same partnership. There is, however, no mechanism that would stop partnerships coming back with the same project.
- Postponed application: When the project idea is relevant but the application

form needs revision or further development in one or more aspects, the partnership has the possibility to re-submit it. The revised application may be re-submitted only within the timeframe of the next submission deadline of the open call, and is subject to a new assessment and decision by the MC.

Evaluations of the call for proposals

According to some programmes, there is no clear evidence that if a project got a lot of support then it would be successful. Some applicants are so convinced that they are right that it is difficult to change their mind, and they don't take into account the advice received from the programme.

However, there are many applicants who are grateful for the advice they receive from programmes. They often give feedback on the programme services they used so programmes can improve their efficiency. For future applicants it is also useful when programmes share the most common mistakes or shortcomings from projects in previous calls.

CE: After each call for proposals a survey is sent to applicants, asking them how they rate the applicant support and related tools and documents.

To receive feedback on the usefulness of programme materials (documents, videos etc) an online rating system can be used (**Interact** practice).

Information asked at the application stage

It is assumed that the project will perform better if they think through the whole project already at the application stage. According to programmes, some parts of the application form are more challenging than others; e.g., work plan (not detailed enough), budget (not properly planned), and sustainability (no thinking beyond the project lifetime).

Programme practices addressing this challenge:

- **NWE**: Separate work package for the "long-term effect" of the project. A strategy must be in place for how the project is going to achieve its results after the project lifetime. It covers the activities undertaken to sustain the main project outputs and activities, aiming at rolling them out to additional territories.
- **FCE**: Testimonials from target groups are expected at the application stage to show their involvement.
- **CE**: Within the Communication work package, applicants have to describe how they will roll out the results to target groups outside the partnership, and emphasis is put on the information regarding ownership and sustainability of results. Targets have to be set for additional indicators (e.g. leverage of funds, jobs to be created) for a time span of 5 years after the end of the project.

Assessment of projects

How to improve assessment procedures to make sure the best quality projects are recommended for funding?

2-step assessment

During the first step, the projects are only assessed against a limited amount of criteria. If they don't score high enough in those they are rejected already at this stage of the assessment. Programmes use different criteria for the first step, and all quality criteria for the second step.

CE: The programme has introduced a relevance filter; i.e., in the first instance only the relevance to the programme objectives, the clarity of project objectives and the transnational cooperation approach are assessed. The JS assessment is based on a four-eyes principle.

Assessment procedure

NSR: Peer review in the teams and then 1 person carries out quality assurance on all projects; i.e., usually the manager.

SB: Each application is assessed by two assessors (internal and external). A third person reviews a bigger number of projects for a better overview and additional input.

ÖKS: Assessment team for each project consists of 1st opinion, 2nd opinion and financial officer. After the team has made the scoring, the scores are discussed with the rest of the secretariat at a joint assessment meeting.

CE: The assessment is performed both by the JS and an external expert with dedicated expertise in the relevant topic. The JS performs the consolidation of scores and comments of both assessors. In case of divergent opinions, discussions with experts are initiated in order to come to a joint opinion.

Scoring

Most programmes use scoring systems. One exception is the **NSR** programme, where descriptive assessment is used (no numerical scoring: insufficient, weak, sufficient, strong). Similarly, **SB** uses a mixed system, in which scores are applied but not summarised.

In some programmes there are difficulties with scores 0-1-3-5 because the score is mostly between 3 and 5. The knock-out criterion (i.e., zero) is hardly used. Having using the 1-2-3-4-5 scale doesn't make enough difference between final scores to be able to point out the difference in quality of projects. It might be better to develop a descriptive scale; e.g., criterion fulfilled, to some extent satisfactory, not sufficiently described, criterion not fulfilled, etc.

Threshold for recommendation is often around 60 %, and some programmes also have different weights on some criteria and thresholds per criteria.

RO-BG: As an encouragement measure they give extra points to: (1) projects proposing partnerships that involve at least one beneficiary that implemented projects financed from EU funds, (2) to partnerships that involve (more/all) beneficiaries with proven experience in the field addressed by the project, and (3) to partnerships that involve beneficiary(ies) that implemented contracts for the previous Programme with a good execution rate (above 50%).

RO-BG: If there is a difference between two assessors of more than 5 points (out of 35) for Expressions of Interest - Step 1, or more than 10 points (out of 100) for full Application Form – Step 2, then a mediation is performed by the Chairperson and a third person (different team of two assessors can get involved).

NWE: The project is assessed as a whole and then an overall conclusion according to the programme's objectives and rules is drawn in a panel.

CE: The threshold for recommendation is 70 points (out of 100) and thresholds for each criterion are also defined. If a proposal fails for a criteria threshold, this is considered as a knock out. If the difference in scores between the JS assessment and the external expert is more than 10 points, a discussion takes place in order to achieve consensus.

Ranking of projects

BE-NL: On first list of projects prepared after the assessment, projects have points and are ranked. Later on, the scores are removed and a JS-panel discusses the project quality in general and looks at the needs of the programme. The MC receives only the overall advice with observations from assessors.

SI-AT, SI-HR, SI-HU: If the final average scores from two JS assessors differ a lot then the two assessors discuss the project quality and differences in points of view, and agree on the project status.

CE: The average of the scores given by internal and external assessors is calculated. The average score is considered for setting up the ranking list. External and internal assessments are both presented without saying who is who. Ranking of proposals is presented also per Priority Axis.

SB: The scores are not summed up because the sum would not determine whether the project is recommended for funding or not. The argumentation is decisive for the final recommendation. There is no ranking system as long as the funding is available.

Consultation during assessment

DE-DK: It is possible for the programme to contact the project during the assessment period to ask for clarifications or missing information (deadline 10 days). To ensure equal treatment, all projects are approached. This does not mean that the applicants can submit incomplete applications - the whole application and budget form, as well as the firm-specific documents, have to be handed in by the application deadline.

SB: Clarifications during the assessment are allowed when information is contradictory or is missing (e.g., if a study is mentioned the programme asks which one). However the clarifications should not lead to improvements in the application.

Assessors

Most programmes will try to ensure that the person offering advice to projects during the application stage is not the person who assesses the application during the assessment procedure.

- The project assessment is of a better quality when a programme has internal assessors because they are committed to the success of the programme.
- External assessors are often used in cases where the internal assessors (JS) are not sure about an application - for example, whether the project is innovative or whether the project is realistic or not.
- If the programme has external assessors they need to be well trained, or else they should be only one part of the assessment team.

CE: 20 thematic experts are used in project assessment. A lot of effort is dedicated to training the experts in order to have common understanding and coherence. There are always two people assessing projects (internal + external), and in general an average score is calculated.

SI-AT, SI-HR, SI-HU, NSR: Assessors are only members of the JS (best acquainted with the programme, high commitment to the success of the programme, impartial and low risk of conflict of interest).

SB: The projects are assessed by two assessors (one internal and one external) and an internal reviewer. The recommendation for the Monitoring Committee is based on all three opinions.

POCTEFA: As well as the technical points, the Monitoring Committee will also give points to projects regarding territorial aspects (this is a new practice). Points will have to be justified by them as well.

Selection

One of the main challenges with project selection is still about how to develop a more selective approach; i.e., how to detect a good quality project. Sometimes very well written projects are not the best ones.

Approval decisions are made at the Monitoring/Steering Committee meeting where each project is examined and discussed. Although the Monitoring/Steering Committee decision-making often concurs with Joint Secretariat recommendations, this is not always the case.

Identified decision-making challenges:

- Political issues.
- Country envelopes; accountability of MC members to project beneficiaries.
- Conflict of interest often occurs, and Joint Secretariat has no influence on that.
- There are different opinions on what is and/or makes a good project.
- Lack of knowledge of MC members on the topic of the project.
- Different opinions of assessors make final decisions difficult to make.

Lately, programmes have been organising workshops for MC members where they discuss their understanding of the programme and try to harmonise their understanding of a quality project in their programme area. It is useful for the MC members to be reminded before the meeting about the agreed expectations, especially when MC setup is not stable.

SI-AT, SI-HR, SI-HU programmes present at the site visit the best quality projects to MC members.

Understanding of programme ambitions between different programme bodies (JS, MA, MC, NA, CP) should be harmonised. More specifically, you could try the following:

- Awareness-raising within MC on quality, programme, accountability and cooperation.
- Try to agree on a common definition of a quality project.
- Organise workshops for MC members to discuss and agree on quality standards and ways of working together.
- Make a short presentation on selection procedure before recommended projects are presented.
- Discuss the consequences of taking the wrong selection decisions – MC with MA and, if necessary, EC.
- In case of disagreements remind MC members what they agreed before.

2. Project implementation

Interreg projects often have a late and slow start of implementation in comparison to other programmes. Beneficiaries take time to organise themselves and start to work together. In Interreg, new partners join partnerships because of great ideas but are not prepared for this type of cooperation. Research institutes and SMEs are more reactive since the activities foreseen are their normal activities, whereas for public institutions (e.g., municipalities, ministries) Interreg activities sometimes come in addition to their core activities.

Contracting phase

To focus more on the implementation and not the procedures, the contracting process should be as quick as possible.

How to speed up the process of the project partnership agreement signature:

- Some programmes use a pre-defined project partnership agreement (**SB**); others propose a project partnership agreement template (**SI-HR, SI-AT, SI-HU, NWE**) but it is not compulsory to use it. Often the agreement is a mandatory annex to the application or it has to be submitted within a certain deadline after the project is approved (in the case of **NWE,** within 2 months after Monitoring Committee meeting).
- **HR-BA-ME** asks for the pre-agreement in the application phase. In the contracting phase the agreement with amendments related to implementation is signed.
- **POCTEFA:** They asked for the project partnership agreement with all pages initialed by partners (MC request) at the application stage. This created extra workload during the eligibility check. From now on, during the eligibility check, the project partnership agreement must be signed by all partners on the last page. A scanned copy is accepted to speed up the process and get all signatures.
- **CE:** a pre-defined partnership agreement has to be used as a minimum requirement where additional clauses can be added, if the partnership so wishes. It has to be signed before the first payment can be made.

To some extent, the quality of the project can be improved if the recommendations made by the programme after the approval are taken into account.

HU-HR, SI-HR, SI-AT, SI-HU: Personal consultations in the contracting phase for ‘fine-tuning’ the project proposal: checking and, if necessary, revising interconnections in the application form (activities, budget items, unit measures, number of units, indicators, communication requirements).

NSR, SI-HR, SB: Projects are not always rejected for not having written clearly about their results. When necessary or possible, projects are asked to rewrite the results as a condition for approval – the procedure varies between programmes.

Quite often programmes ask projects to cut some parts of the budget, but how can they then ensure that the quality of the project will not be affected?

CE: Approved projects have to fulfil a number of conditions (content-wise, financial, administrative, state aid) before the contract is offered to them. Content-related conditions refer mostly to amendments of the work plan in order to avoid problems during implementation and reporting/monitoring. Projects have about 1 month to fulfil the conditions.

LV-LT: If the project can't justify some costs they are cut during the contracting process.

POCTEFA: Decisions about budget reductions come from the Monitoring Committee in case the secretariat recommends a project budget reduction. Projects have to follow the recommendation if they want to have the project approved.

BG-RS: They organise pre-contracting visits, then negotiation visits, and afterwards the contracting phase for each project starts. MA and JS decide on the budget cut.

HR-BA-ME: The following is communicated to potential applicants already before the call is published: "MA reserves the right to refuse to sign the contract if there is a risk of not being able to implement the project (investment projects)".

Guidance for projects & capacity building

Most programmes organise events for at least project lead partners to inform/train them about project implementation in Interreg. However, there is no real capacity and possibility to develop common standards.

Examples of capacity-building efforts:

- Workshop for all partners (lead partners and partners) of approved projects (**NWE, DE-DK**), attached to a specific workshop on communication (**NWE**).
- Site visits by JS staff to all projects approved (**SI-AT, SI-HR, SI-HU, SB**)
- Exclusively on finance: FLC seminars (in Member State countries) are organised for project partners (**NEW, NSR**).
- Network of on-going projects cooperating on social media; e.g., LinkedIn (**OKS**) So far, they have also arranged a face-to-face network meeting which was much appreciated. The network members are project leaders, project financial officers and project communication officers. The projects are first introduced to the networks at a voluntary dinner in connection with programme start-up event for approved projects held after each call. The programme is now evaluating the value of these networks and in which form they should continue.
- “Projects help projects” events with additional input from the programme and external experts; e.g., communication experts or accountants.
- **CE**: organises project implementation trainings for the project management teams (content, financial and communication) enabling cross-fertilisation between projects dealing with similar topics.

- Provide specific trainings to private partners (different thinking).

Withdrawal of a partner affects the quality of a project. It is a time-consuming procedure and difficult to find an appropriate substitute partner. Therefore programmes try to help the partnership to overcome their challenges, where possible, ensuring that the appropriate professional distance is maintained.

CE: NCPs are the ones that contact beneficiaries.

POCTEFA: JS gets involved to solve a problem with a project when it occurs together with the institutional partners of the programme.

LV-LT: Problematic partners are brought together and develop an action plan that can be easily monitored, thus helping the project to go in the right direction again.

Delivery assurance

During project implementation the programmes are more or less monitoring projects and they cannot influence the quality of the project. However, a good relationship between the project and the programme might result in earlier identification of problems and timely management of challenges.

What can be done to help project partners maintain the project quality during implementation?

- Promote JS role as advisory rather than controlling body.
- The same programme officer assigned to the project during the whole project lifetime. This person would not only provide technical assistance but also follow project activities closely.
- Establish close relationship with projects through phone calls, visits, Skype meetings, even on-the-spot visit, if this is possible. JS needs to gain projects' trust but this is difficult to do via emails only.
- Workshop on communication (including communication plan and internal communication) could be organised by the programme.
- Team-building activities could be encouraged to overcome cultural differences / learn to work in a multi-cultural environment.

CE: Projects have to invite the JS to project steering committee and kick-off meetings. The programme asks for the minutes of the meetings and checks them. This practice helps them notice/detect any potential problem.

SB: Project officer participates in kick-off, or at least one partner meeting in the early stage of project implementation. Also, a mid-term review will be organised in the form of a meeting between the project and the JS and will cover content-related analysis and financial progress of the project, joint reflection on management issues, recommendations for the remaining project period, and identification of deviations and delays, as well as necessary project changes.

POCTEFA: Projects are obliged to inform JS when a meeting is organised (as stated in the subsidy contract).

HR-BA-ME: The programme defines clear tasks and responsibilities together with the partners: who is in charge of what? Everyone needs to understand what is expected from each partner. JS can act as a moderator to solve problems between partners.

NWE: Takes an active monitoring approach going beyond the provision of formal feedback for reporting. The responsible project officer regularly tracks the global project progress based on complementary monitoring activities and uses information from project visits, meetings or other direct contact with the partnership (formal or informal). The idea behind this is to prevent rather than simply react to issues.

When beneficiaries apply to different programmes from the same area and get different sets of rules, the quality of projects submitted can be affected. According to programmes, Interreg secretariats should work together more often to continue harmonising and to capitalise project results.

SB, OKS: Joint sessions at different programme events to present examples of good projects in both programmes.

POCTEFA: Working with South West Programme. So far, they have organised joint trainings on State Aid and training on the monitoring system since they have the same provider.

CE: Projects are encouraged to organise events jointly with projects from other programmes and to make use of synergies for developing joint actions. JS exchanges with other TN Interreg Programmes in order to identify potential overlaps and identify where possible synergies could be developed.

RO-BG: Representatives from other programmes relevant for the fields addressed by RO-BG (e.g. MA for environment programmes) are designated as MC observers and are invited to take part in the MC meeting.

Quality check

To check the project quality during the implementation is challenging because the quality is often subjective. However, there are some project elements that could be checked to ensure the quality:

- Deliverables and outputs (value for money)
- Active involvement of stakeholders, especially target groups
- Knowledge available
- Indicators being met/fulfilled
- Delivery of results on time
- Having sustainability in mind since the beginning

- Being open about risks and challenges
- Keeping the eyes on the ball (i.e., the objectives)

- **DE-DK**: During the project lifetime, external evaluation of the project (mid-term and final evaluation) will take place to check if the project delivered what it initially promised. The project should secure resources for this (0,5% of the total costs, at least 5.000 € and max. 15.000 €). The reports are of value for the projects as well, as they are fully available to them and include advice for the projects; e.g., regarding project management. Furthermore, projects have to report about the output indicators and their status quo in the yearly reports.
- **SB**: Results are measured by impact on the target group. Testimonials from target groups are expected from all projects: how outputs were used by the target group, if they were useful and widely used, etc. This will also enable the programme to showcase the project stories.
- **FCE**: Testimonials from the target groups are expected already at the application stage.
- **NWE**: Annual appraisal using a simple template: the officer gives individual feedback to the project on how it is going, any critical points, etc.
- **CE**: Mid-term reviews are foreseen which will be conducted by the JS in the frame of a management meeting with the partnership. Only afterwards are project modifications allowed. Also, **OKS** will organize mid-term review meetings to discuss how the project is progressing and which support it needs. These will be also used for collecting results for communication of programme results.
- Experts could be involved when trying to assess the real value for money of deliverables (e.g., Was the study worth its cost?).

Underperformance

Underperformance is no longer only about financial issues such as underspending. It is also related to results and outputs, for instance.

RO-BG: Penalties are foreseen in the subsidy contract in case targets are not reached (e.g., 10%/25% budgetary reduction for the partners that request for FLC less than 75%/50% of the target initially set by themselves at the beginning of the project for the middle of the implementation period); then JS & MA, together with the beneficiaries, proceed to a budget cut.
For their third call, there will be a condition/penalty about underperformance in case outputs are not delivered (new rule): 10%/25% budgetary reduction for less than 75%/50% accomplishment of the initial project indicators targets (average at project level considering all indicators).

CE: In case of low performance of projects following the mid-term review, funds might be de-committed, which is however treated on a case-by-case. JS tries to understand what the reasons behind underperformance are, and then reviews the budget together with the project in order to see which amounts are realistically to be spent during project lifetime.

SB: If the project reaches at least 70% of target values of the main output indicators and spends at least 80% of their budget, then there are no consequences. However, if the programme faces de-commitment the first projects that will bear the consequence are the ones that are spending less than 80% of what they have promised in a given reporting period. This will, however, be treated case-by-case.

SI-HR, SI-AT, SI-HU: The assessment of project spending will be based on the Project Progress Report from the 2nd reporting period onwards. The project is allowed to underspend up to 15% of its budget foreseen for previous periods. If the project has underspent more than the allowed amount, the amount exceeding the set limit might be deducted from the project budget.

NSR: If one or more of the expected outputs as set out in the approved application are not successfully reached, the Managing Authority may request corrective measures are put in place to ensure project performance against the agreed implementation plan, and to minimise the impact of any such failure on programme level.
Failure to report for a period of one year will lead to termination of the project, and procedures will be initiated to reclaim all funding already paid out.

Follow-up activities

So far, there seem to be no follow-up activities after project closure except the regulatory requirements. However, the programmes identified possible activities of programme bodies and Member States to check the long-term outcomes of the project:

- Programme evaluation
- Visits to check on investments and revenues
- Monitoring the use of the outputs
- Try to find out what came out of the cooperation after the project ends
- Make a survey 5 years after the project ends including questions such as: "Is anyone using your outputs?", "Has the ownership of the project changed?", etc.
- Unofficial phone calls a year after the project ends to find out if there are any challenges. Knowing what happens after project closure could be useful for the following programming period (i.e., learning points for improvement).