

Improving project quality

Outcomes Paper

04-05 March 2025

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Prague | Czechia

Background

It is well known that all EU funded projects should meet high standards of quality. It is even more important for projects co-financed by Interreg programmes as they mostly concentrate on soft measures and sometimes it is extremely difficult to grasp an immediate outcome of such projects. Due to their nature (innovativeness and pilot character), results of such projects can only be visible long time after project completion. Therefore, Interreg programmes and their projects must demonstrate their relevance and value to local populations as well as decisions makers within their territories and across Europe. Also to recognize that the Interreg concept of cooperation can make a meaningful impact, contributing to solutions for common challenges in the programme areas.

During the workshop organized by Interact on 04-05.03.2025 in Prague, several representatives and practitioners from Interreg programmes exchanged practical implications connected to improving overall quality of projects. During these discussions, programmes agreed on the key characteristics of a high-quality Interreg project and identified reasons why some projects fall short in quality. Additionally, number of practices were presented and discussed that programmes can use throughout the project development and implementation phases to improve project characteristics and enhance overall project quality.

Programmes represented:

- IPA CBC Italy - Albania - Montenegro
- Interreg VI-A Grande Region
- Interreg VI-A Maas-Rhein
- Interreg NEXT Poland - Ukraine 2021-2027
- Interreg VI-A Slovenia - Croatia
- Interreg V-A South Baltic
- Interreg VI-A Germany - Denmark
- Interreg VI-A IPA Hungary - Serbia
- IPA CBC Bulgaria – Turkey
- Interreg TN Danube

The findings gathered during the workshop are presented below.



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SESSION 1 Quality in Interreg projects

What does it mean quality in Interreg projects?

In general, quality is a perceptual, conditional, and somewhat subjective characteristic, which can be interpreted differently by different individuals. In the context of Interreg, it is essential to differentiate between the quality of procedures (i.e., how funds are spent) and the quality of projects (i.e., the impact they have in creating change within the programme area).

Why quality is essential in Interreg projects?

There are several reasons why it is essential for Interreg to support quality projects.

Efficient use of public funds	Interreg projects are funded by public money, so it is crucial to ensure that resources are used effectively and efficiently to achieve the desired outcomes.
Achieving tangible impact	High-quality projects are more likely to create real, lasting change in the programme areas, addressing key challenges and contributing to local and regional development.
Building trust with stakeholders	High-quality projects build trust and credibility among stakeholders, including local communities, authorities, and funding bodies, ensuring continued support for future initiatives.
Demonstrating the value of cooperation	Quality projects highlight the benefits of cross-border (transnational) cooperation, showcasing the positive impact of working together across national borders to tackle shared challenges.
Sustaining Programme success	Maintaining high-quality standards ensures the long-term success and sustainability of Interreg programmes, reinforcing their reputation and increasing the likelihood of future funding.
Meeting Programme objectives	High-quality projects are more likely to align with the specific goals and priorities of Interreg programmes, ensuring that objectives are met, and the overall impact is maximized.
Increasing Programme visibility	Well-executed projects with visible outcomes can attract greater attention and recognition, raising awareness of the Interreg programme and its contributions to European integration and regional development.
Encouraging further collaboration	Successful, high-quality projects serve as examples for future collaborations, encouraging more organizations to engage in Interreg initiatives and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.
Enhancing European identity	High-quality projects contribute to a stronger sense of European identity by demonstrating how cooperation across borders can lead to positive change and shared benefits.



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What are the main project's quality characteristics?

Characteristic	Description
Need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be real (clear demand). • Shall address local or regional challenges.
Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation should be efficient. • Should improve relations between partners. • Should be long-lasting. • There should be a win-win solution through cooperation.
Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should involve relevant and competent partners. • Partners should be able to deliver outputs and achieve agreed results. • Partners should complement each other (e.g. representing different sectors or governance levels).
Innovativeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide new creative approaches to obvious practices. • Provide "out-of-box" innovative solutions. • Ability to acknowledge failures, yet well communicate how to avoid it in the future. • Open to use of new technologies.
Value for money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project budget is used in accordance with the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
Results and outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be clear and measurable. • Must be reliable and achievable. • Outputs should be used by the target group. • Results should have clear impact on the target group.
Sustainability and transferability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should have long-lasting outputs and results. • Maintenance of the outputs after the project finalization is secured and clear. • May spin-off to another project. • Findings and solutions developed/tested could be replicated and/or used by others.
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a clear communication strategy/plan/vision. • Able to communicate to the target groups and other relevant stakeholders. • Both positive and negative outcomes communicated ("failure" can also be a result).

SESSION 2 Improving quality at development stage

What can programmes do for applicants and beneficiaries to help them secure and increase the quality of their projects?

Generating projects of good quality requires a certain amount of time, preparation, effort as well as resources from a programme, especially when there is a high number of applications on the table. Relevant support to applicants, continuous evaluation of project assessment and selection procedures need to happen, as all this can have an impact on the quality of the projects developed and submitted.



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The following practices have been mentioned by the programmes as potential ideas:

About project support and assistance:

- Ongoing exchange among programme staff is necessary to increase the level of knowledge and internal training is key to increase the capacity of programme bodies to provide assistance to applicants as well as harmonised messages. There must be a common understanding of the call when launched, the project assessment grid and criteria used to be able to provide relevant and similar advice to potential beneficiaries. Internal written guidance can help too.
- Meeting applicants as much as possible increase the chances to get the messages through and therefore impact the relevance/quality of projects being developed. Informative sessions, call-related networking events work well. JTS on tour to visit each territory belonging to a programme could be tested.
- Sketch application: project ideas are assessed, with a possibility of a consultation with JS, offered 3 weeks before the call for proposals closes. This is however not compulsory.
- Individual consultations are common practice and do contribute to increase the level of project proposals before they are submitted. Written feedback on project ideas is also provided by certain programmes.
- Some participants however mentioned the difficulty to convince applicants getting feedback from the program staff. Consultations are offered to comment project ideas, but a high number of applicants do not use that service, which is a pity as such consultation often results in a better quality in the final project proposal. Active, wide and friendly communication on the staff and services offered to the applicants could be a way of reaching them (e.g. posting videos on social media, creating stronger communication campaigns when a call is open). Pro activity is key. Certain programme antennas (regional or national contact points) contact the applicants to offer such consultations.

About project assessment:

- In certain programmes, extra points are given during the assessment stage where there is active engagement from civil society demonstrated in shaping the idea.
- Certain programmes contact external thematic experts to look at application forms in order to get an opinion (service provided by the Ministry) and to confirm the relevance of a project idea thematic-wise.
- The knock-out criterion is sometimes used and enables not to spend too much time on a certain application which is clearly out of scope.
- Internal training is very important during project assessment as well as ongoing exchanges and meetings. Assessing projects is a difficult task, especially when it comes to projects located in the “grey area” (i.e. projects on the edge of being recommended). A “four-eye” principle is often used to make sure projects are correctly assessed.
- Exchanging with other Interreg programmes on scoring systems and criteria grids can be very inspiring.

About project selection:

- Some programmes organise a preparation meeting with their MC/SC members prior to the MC/SC to discuss the outcome of the project assessment exercise. This enables to already pass on certain messages to all programme bodies before the final selection of the projects.
- MS/SC representatives should also be trained. It is important that those members understand the possible negative consequences when a project proposal is supported from a political level but hasn't reached a certain level of quality. The implementation of such projects could represent a certain risk for the programme afterwards.



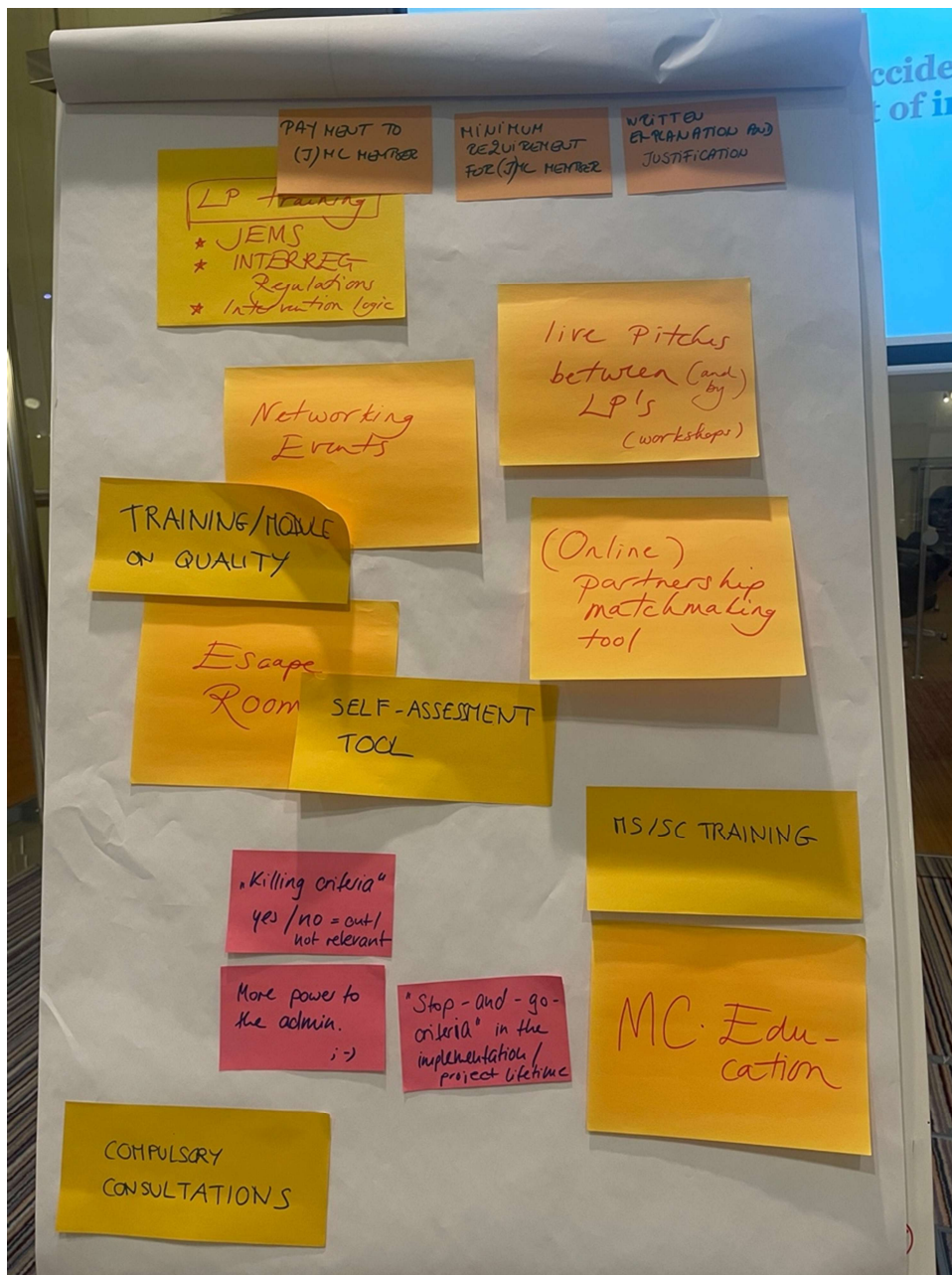
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- MC/SC members are in a good position to let JS know when a partner involved in an Interreg project can create difficulties. They could carefully look at the partners involved in project applications and point out potential risky partners whenever possible.
- The voting system is anonymous in certain MC/SC to avoid pressure and political push.
- A newsletter is sent to MC/SC members on a regular basis to inform about the state of play of programmes and open calls when funding is to be allocated, and projects selected.

In addition to the discussion and exchange of practices to increase quality during the development stage, an “out of the box thinking” session has been organized. Participants were asked to reflect upon further possible ideas to increase the quality of the projects developed by applicants. The following picture includes the result of the different groups’ discussions.





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SESSION 3 Improving quality at implementation stage

Shifting perception of project quality

Traditionally, project success was measured by **time, budget, and scope (iron triangle)**. However, modern project management emphasizes **long-term impact** and **stakeholder alignment** as key indicators of success. *According to the report Maximizing Project Success:* "It's not enough to direct our energy toward completing a project on time, on budget and within scope. While the iron triangle remains important..., practitioners have expanded their focus to include an understanding of the holistic value a project can deliver (...). During this session, we aimed to keep the focus on value created by project and project quality features, though at times, it was challenging to avoid delving into **operational aspects** such as **public procurement, reporting, and state aid**."

THREE FOCUS AREAS IN IMPLEMENTATION

Three aspects were chosen to focus on quality during implementation:

Cooperation & partnership

- Balanced partner involvement across borders
- Ensuring joint implementation (clear division of responsibilities according to the expertise) and long-term durability

Communication

- Visibility of project results
- Transparency
- Clear internal communication rules (language, channels, frequency) and joint understanding

Results & impact

- Continuous monitoring of activities to ensure they lead to measurable and lasting results and preventing scope creep
- Ensuring shared understanding of objectives
- Realistic planning to achieve planned results

PROGRAMME'S ROLE IN FACILITATING AND MONITORING PROJECT QUALITY

Participants expressed divided opinions on the role of programme in ensuring project quality after the project approval, highlighting both limitations and opportunities. Discussions proved that although there are limitations and challenges but they can be turned into opportunities.

Limitations turned into opportunities:

1. Restrictions to influence project after the approval
 - Once a project is approved and agreements signed, programme staff have limited influence over implementation.
 - ➔ However, project applications don't have detailed implementation plans which means that quality can still be shaped through more detailed planning, stakeholder engagement communication strategies, etc.
2. Delayed awareness of project challenges
 - We get to know about the challenges quite late, making early intervention difficult.
 - ➔ Start communication and monitoring from the start of implementation is key to detecting and addressing risks at early stage.
3. Responsibility lies primarily with project partnership
 - Mainly projects are accountable for planning and implementation of the projects.
 - ➔ Programmes can provide clear timely, relevant guidance and support and in such way facilitate the quality of the project outcomes.
 - ➔ Rapid environmental changes introduce both risks and opportunities – change management and communication help maintain project relevance and quality and it requires close cooperation between the project and programme.



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Opportunities for programme involvement:

1. Active communication and involvement from early stage
 - Ensuring projects start without delays and establishing early communication with lead partners.
2. Encouraging knowledge sharing
 - Projects can build on existing knowledge by using platforms like Keep.eu and internal programme databases, programmes can support networking of the finished and new projects, of projects in certain field.
3. Proactive communication & support to quality
 - Clearly defining quality expectations from the beginning (presentation on this topic during kick off meeting, etc.)
 - Providing feedback on progress, not just monitoring deliverables.

MEASURES TO IMPROVE PROJECT QUALITY DURING IMPLEMENTATION

Effective & continuous communication

Strong early and ongoing communication builds trust, ensures alignment, and provides clarity on programme expectations. Programmes use:

- Kick-off meetings & initial monitoring meetings
- Mid-term reviews & site visits, attending project events
- Social media & project website observations
- Emails & online meetings

Key Question: *Does the programme provide an early-stage guidance on project quality expectations (for example, during the project kick off meeting?)*

Since it may not be possible or feasible to meet every project early on, prioritizing projects with higher risk and establishing proactive communication with them is helpful.

Streamlining and simplifying programme procedures

One way to support project in quality is regularly review, simplify and streamline project implementation (reporting, project changes, etc.) procedures to allow more focus on project quality and results.

Capacity building & guidance

An important aspect of support is providing timely, concise, and relevant guidance, along with well-structured capacity-building opportunities that align with project needs and the effectiveness of support measures. Effective capacity-building strategies include:

- Guidance documents
- Online & in-person training (tailored by experience level)
- Videos & interactive learning
- Networking events on specific topics

Innovative Approaches: AI-driven support, project competitions, and even escape rooms for training.

Project quality is a critical but often non-urgent task for project officers, requiring conscious effort from the entire JS/MA team to develop effective support measures. Even with strong support systems in place, regular updates are necessary due to changing environments, regional priorities, and evolving work methods.