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Roadmap: How to capture and highlight the added value of Interreg

Developing, testing and using impact pathways for learning, evaluation, communication and future programming

October 2026

Purpose of this paper

This guidance is designed as a practical roadmap. It helps Interreg programmes explain what cooperation makes possible, why it matters, and how impact pathways can be developed and tested with credible evidence. It builds on the agreed work on Interreg added value and on lessons from online and in-person exchanges with Interreg programmes practitioners.

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1. Purpose and content of this guidance

This paper provides a practical roadmap for Interreg programmes that want to capture, demonstrate and communicate the added value of cooperation through impact pathways. It explains why this matters, how programmes can develop meaningful pathways, how these pathways can be tested, and how the findings can be used for evaluation, communication and future programming.

The guidance was developed through a shared reflection process with Interreg programmes. This process aimed to support the launch of impact evaluations, strengthen the common understanding of Interreg's added value, and encourage exchange on evaluation perspectives, approaches and methods.

What this guidance helps Interreg programmes do

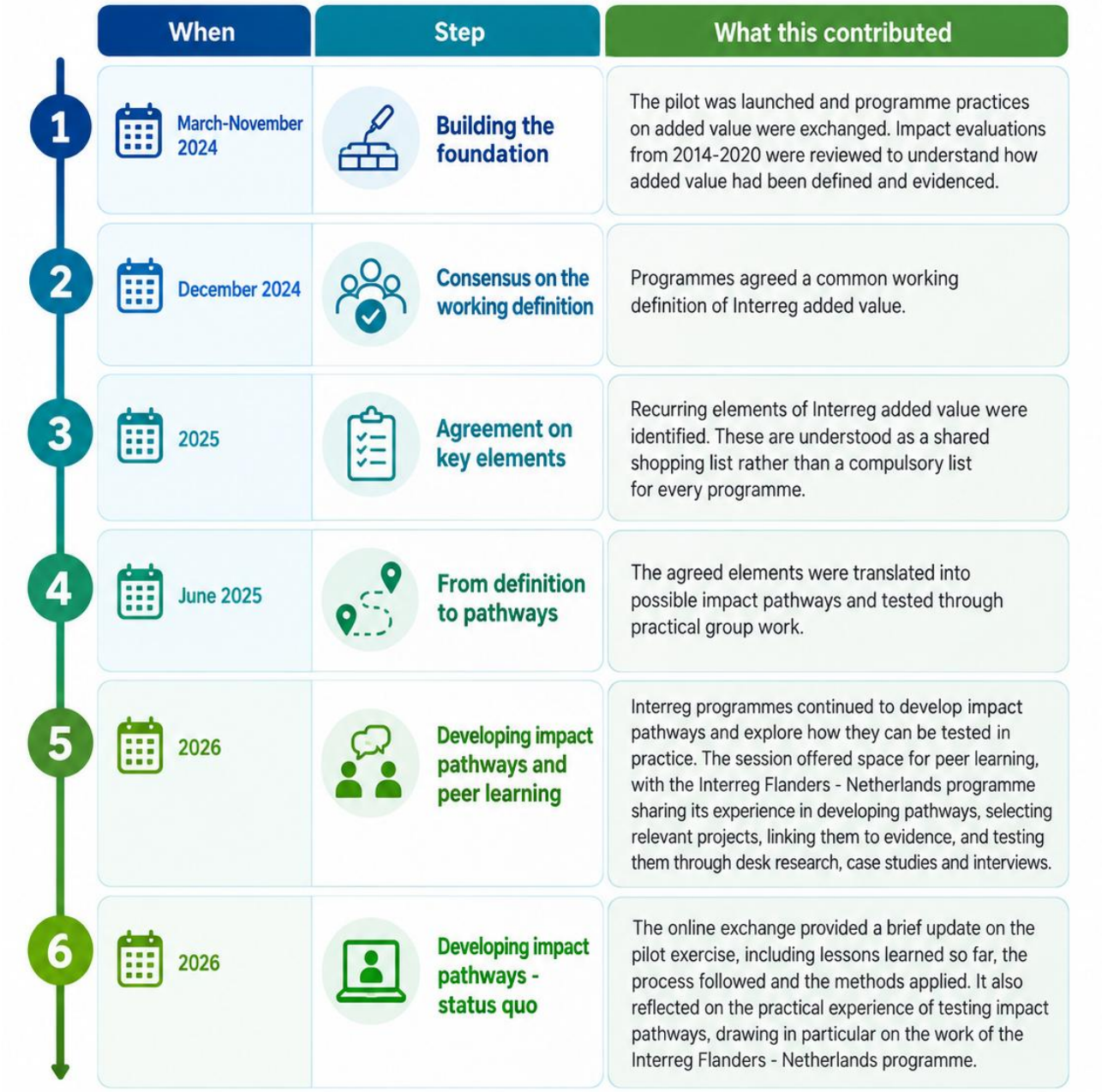
- Use the agreed definition and key elements of Interreg added value as a common starting point.
- Select the added value elements that are most relevant for their own programme context.
- Develop a small number of clear, testable impact pathways.
- Translate intangible cooperation effects, such as trust, cooperation quality and learning, into observable changes.
- Prepare sharper evaluation questions, and communication messages.
- Use learning from 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 to inform the design of 2028-2034 Interreg chapters.

2. How this roadmap was developed

Following a bottom-up approach, Interact and participating programmes jointly identified Interreg added value as an important topic for exchange, reflection and further development, based on programme needs and interests.

This roadmap builds on a step-by-step process carried out with Interreg programmes. The aim was to move from a shared understanding of Interreg's added value towards a practical way of demonstrating it through impact pathways.

Figure 1. The process



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The process also supported the development of a methodology to demonstrate Interreg's added value, starting with impact pathways and gradually moving towards evaluation questions that could be included in programme evaluations. In this way, the exercise can contribute to reflections on the future direction of Interreg post 2027.

3. Why demonstrating added value matters for Interreg programmes

In the world of project funding, the term “added value” refers to the value that is achieved by delivering a project through a given fund compared to regular public-sector funding. Looking for “Interreg” added value is therefore a search for what is achieved by funding something through Interreg that couldn’t have been achieved if not funded through Interreg.

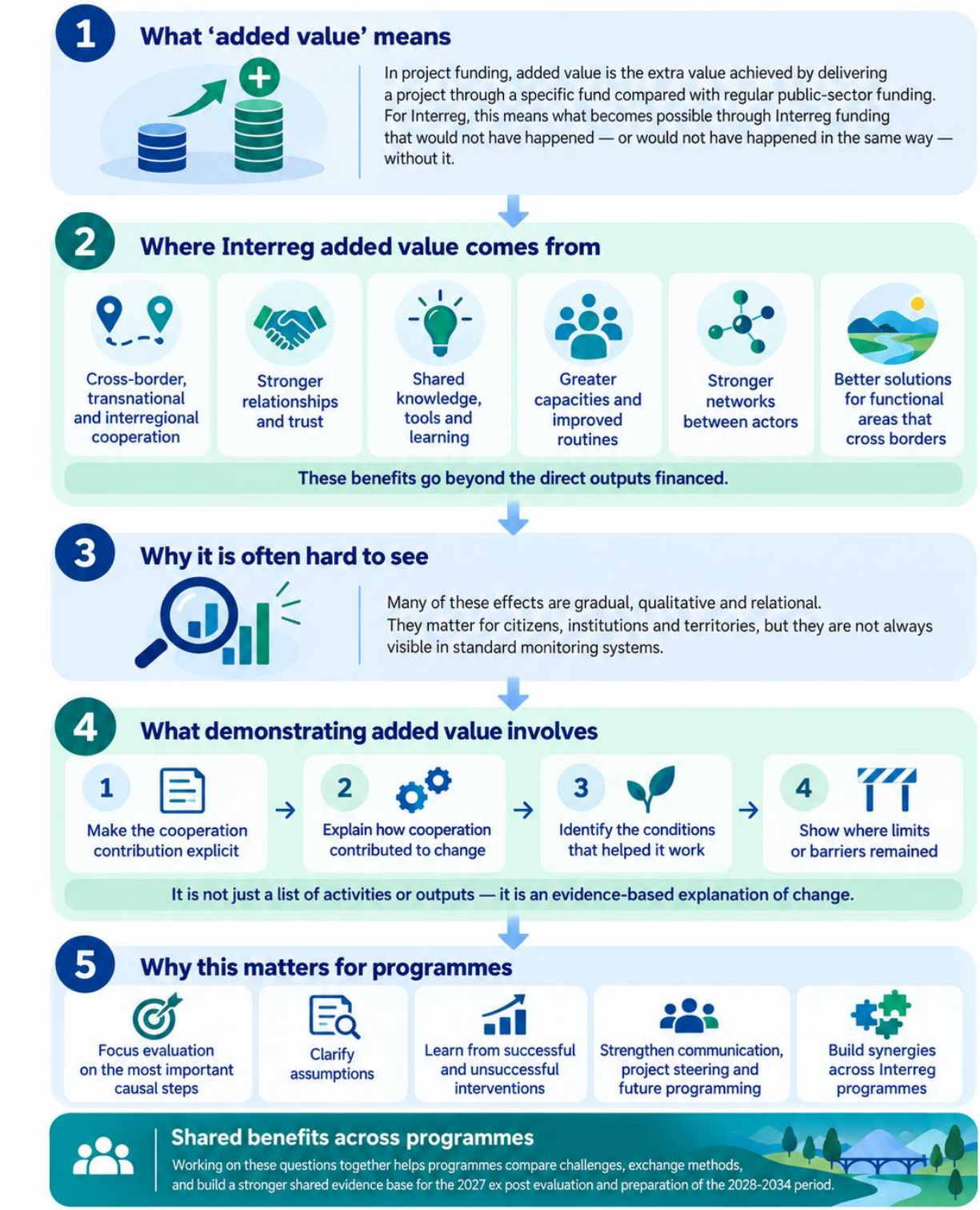
Interreg programmes support cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation. Their added value is not limited to the direct outputs they fund. It also lies in how cooperation changes relationships, capacities, routines, networks and territorial solutions: actors learn to work together, trust is built, knowledge and tools are shared, and solutions become better adapted to functional areas that do not stop at borders. These changes matter for citizens, institutions and territories, but they are often gradual, qualitative and difficult to see in standard monitoring systems.

Demonstrating added value therefore means making the cooperation contribution explicit. It helps programmes answer a simple but important question: what did Interreg cooperation make possible that would not have happened, or would not have happened in the same way, through national, regional or sectoral funding alone? The answer is not only a list of activities or outputs. It is an evidence-based explanation of how cooperation contributed to change, under which conditions it worked, and where limits or barriers remained.

For programmes, demonstrating added value is not only a communication exercise. It is also a practical management and learning tool. By defining added value and testing it programmes can focus evaluation on the most important causal steps, clarify assumptions and learn from both successful and unsuccessful interventions, and turn findings into stronger communication, project steering and future programming.

When several Interreg programmes work on these questions together, the exercise also creates synergies: programmes can compare common challenges, exchange methods and build a stronger shared evidence base for the 2027 ex post evaluation and the preparation of the 2028-2034 period.

Figure 2. Why demonstrating added value matters



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4. Agreed working definition and key elements of Interreg added value

The following definition and key elements (see graphic below) were agreed through a series of online and in-person meetings with Interreg programmes practitioners. These identified key elements should be considered as an indicative list rather than a compulsory checklist: each Interreg programme can select the elements most relevant to its strategy, cooperation context and evidence needs when demonstrating its added value.

How to use this section

Do not try to cover every element in a single evaluation. Instead, start by selecting the elements that are most relevant to the programme strategy, cooperation context and evidence needs.

Common working definition of added value of Interreg

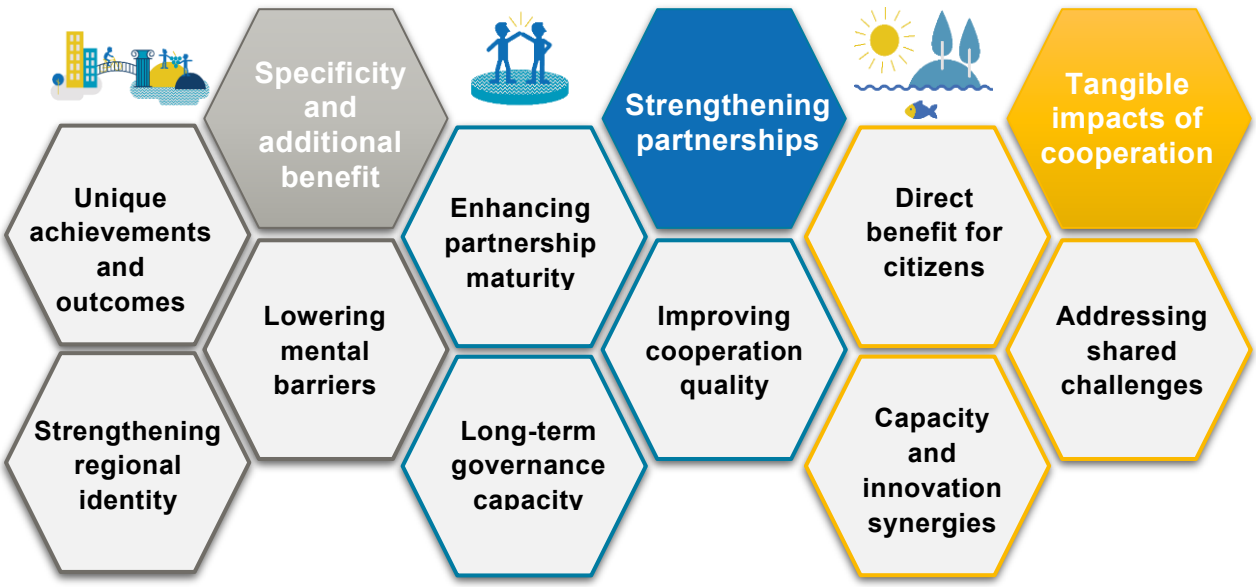
"Added value refers to the unique benefits and impact that cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation brings, which could not be achieved without the Interreg programme's support.

This added value is characterized by for example the formation and strengthening of sustainable cross-border/transnational/interregional partnerships, the testing, developing and/or rolling out of shared solutions to common challenges, and the promotion of knowledge exchange and innovation across borders, building capacity for sustainable development, addressing shared challenges jointly, and generating long-lasting socio-economic and environmental impacts.

Interreg programmes go beyond the scope of individual, local, regional, national or interregional actions and create synergies that generate lasting socio-economic and environmental impacts.

By enabling people and professionals to collaborate across borders, Interreg programmes reduce barriers and disparities, broaden perspectives, and strengthen regional cohesion, ultimately benefiting communities."

Figure 3. Key elements of Interreg – the Interreg added value "shopping list"



5. Core concepts: from intervention logic to impact pathways

As the definition of Interreg added value above shows, the added value of one programme may consist of different elements compared to another Interreg programme. One technique for helping programmes to identify the added value of their programmes, monitor, evaluate and communicate about them, is through impact pathways.

In short, impact pathways are a method for understanding a programme's impact.

Impact pathways help programmes explain how cooperation leads to change. They complement existing programme frameworks and tools such as intervention logic, monitoring systems and theories of change. They do not replace these tools. Instead, they make the steps between activities, outputs, results and wider impacts more concrete, visible and testable.

This is particularly useful for Interreg, where important effects often happen through cooperation processes: partners build trust, develop shared routines, exchange knowledge, improve coordination, create joint solutions or strengthen governance across borders. These effects may not be fully captured by standard indicators, but they are often essential for understanding the added value of cooperation.

5.1. How these concepts relate to each other

Table 1.

Tool	Main role	Why it matters
Intervention logic	The formal programming and monitoring framework (skeleton).	It links needs, objectives, actions, outputs and indicators, but is often too broad for impact evaluation.
Theory of change	The overall explanatory map of how change happens.	It explains the main causal routes, assumptions, actors and context factors behind results.
Impact pathway	A specific, testable route within the theory of change.	It describes how a particular type of cooperation is expected to produce a particular change.

In simple terms, the **intervention logic** shows the formal structure of the programme. The **theory of change** explains the broader story of how change is expected to happen. An **impact pathway** zooms in on one specific part of that story and makes it testable.

For example, a programme may have a broad objective to improve cross-border public services. An impact pathway would describe the concrete steps through which this could

happen: relevant partners meet, build trust, identify a shared service gap, develop a joint solution, test it with users, adapt it, and eventually make the service available across the border.

5.2. Key features of impact pathways

Impact pathways are useful because they break down complex cooperation processes into smaller and more understandable steps. They show not only **what** was delivered, but also **how** and **why** cooperation made a difference.

Impact pathways can:

- run in parallel, complement one another or represent alternative routes to change;
- interact with each other and lead to wider or unexpected effects;
- describe short chains of change, such as improved cooperation routines, or longer chains, such as long-term territorial impacts;
- include both tangible and intangible changes, such as new tools, improved services, stronger trust or better coordination;
- be tested with evidence, including documents, monitoring data, interviews, case studies and stakeholder feedback;
- be updated during the evaluation when new evidence shows that the original assumptions were incomplete or need refinement.

An impact pathway should therefore be detailed enough to test, but not so complex that it becomes difficult to use. Its purpose is to support learning, evaluation and communication, not to describe every possible activity or result.

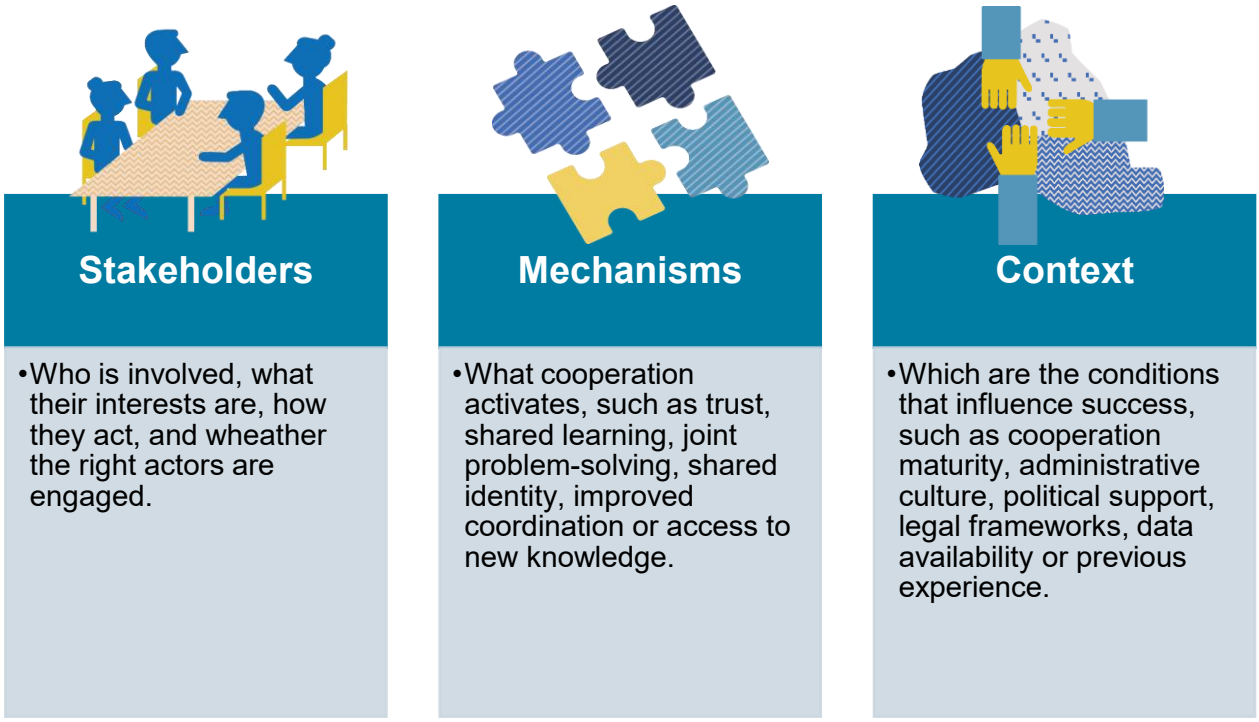
5.3. Unpacking the “mystery box”: why things work, or do not work

Impact pathways help programmes move beyond counting outputs. They open the “mystery box” between what the programme funds and what eventually changes.

Instead of only asking whether a project delivered its outputs, through impact pathways a programme can zoom in and ask:

- How did change happen?
- Why did it happen?
- Under which conditions did cooperation work?
- Where did the process slow down or fail?
- What role did Interreg cooperation play?

Figure 4. Unpacking the process: three especially important elements



This helps programmes understand not only whether results were achieved, but also why some pathways worked in some contexts and not in others.

5.4. Key practical terms

Table 2.

Term	Practical meaning
Tipping points	Critical steps where it is uncertain whether one change will lead to the next. These are the best places to focus evaluation questions and evidence gathering
Preconditions	Conditions that need to be in place for the pathway to work, such as trust, administrative commitment, relevant stakeholders or existing cooperation frameworks.
Cooperation capacity	The baseline level of cooperation in the programme area. It influences how ambitious the pathway can be.
Accountability ceiling	The point beyond which, even if the programme can plausibly contribute to change, they cannot be held fully responsible for the change occurring or not.

5.5. Tipping points: the key to a focused, resource efficient evaluation?

Programmes have limited resources for their evaluations. This is why it makes sense to focus on what they don't know but which would like to know.

As explained above, tipping points are where it is uncertain whether one change will lead to the next. That's why, when programmes have limited resources, it is recommended to focus on these tipping points. The evaluation can be used to ask: did the causal link hold strong or did they break down? What factors influenced either the break down or continuation of the pathway?

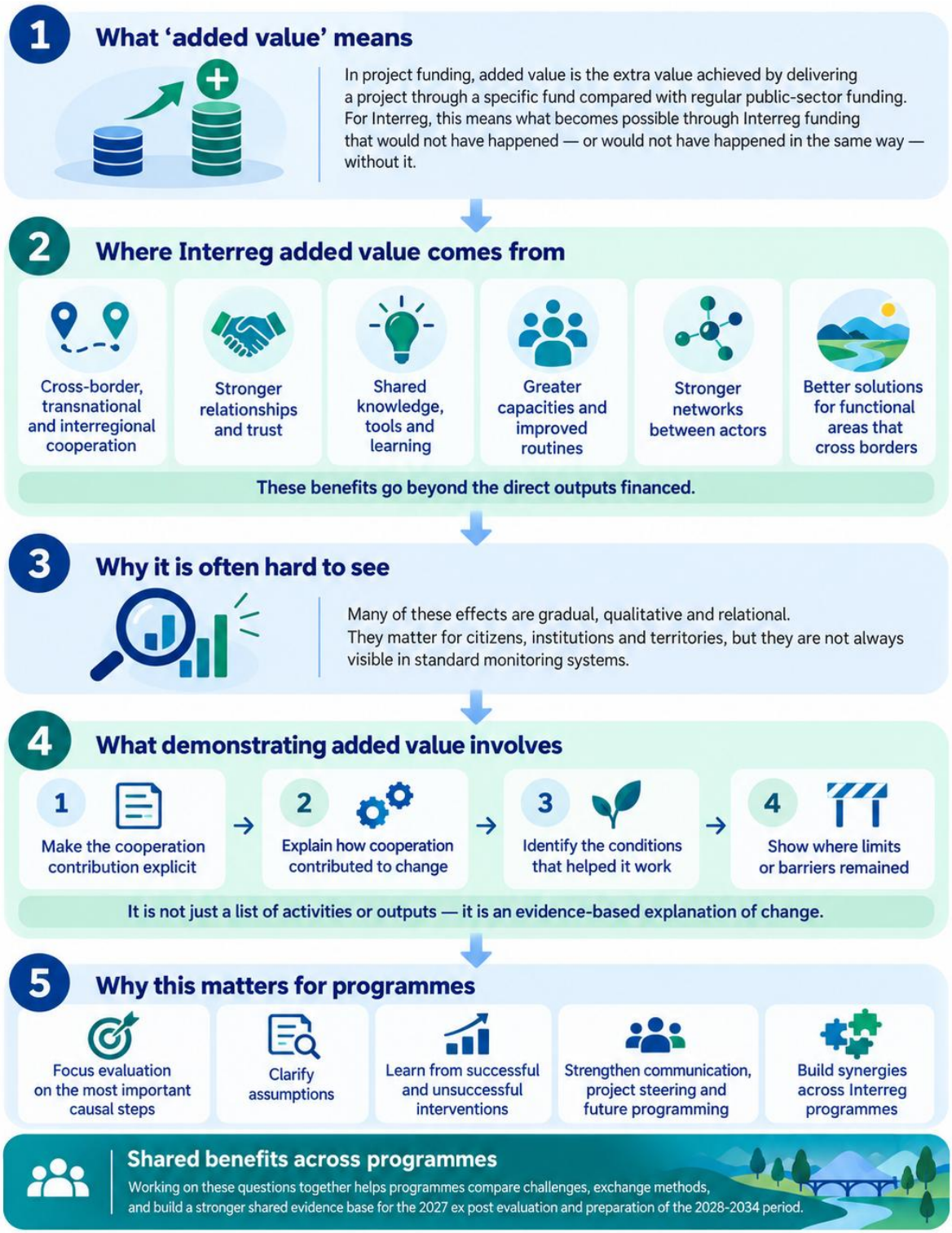
Remember, the purpose of focusing on tipping points is to help you concentrate your resources on critical areas. Therefore, avoid identifying all causal links as tipping points. Focus only on those that represent critical areas where targeted interventions could make a significant difference.

For example:

- where the pathway is most likely to break down;
- where the link between one step and the next is uncertain;
- where evidence is currently weak;
- where assumptions are important but untested;
- where the programme needs to understand why cooperation did or did not make a difference.

6. A practical six-steps roadmap

Figure 5. The roadmap



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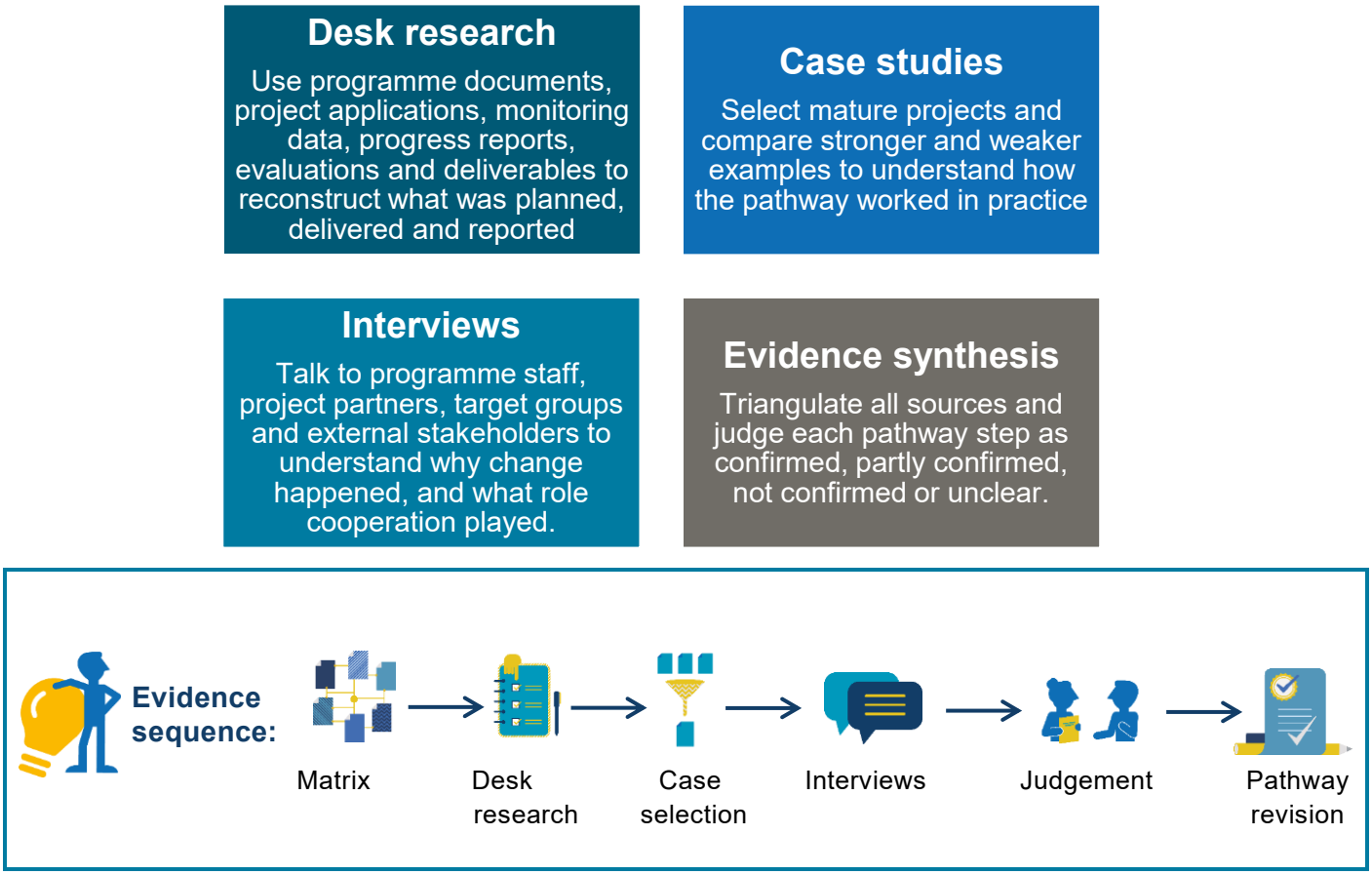
7. Testing impact pathways in practice

Testing is the step that turns a plausible pathway into an evidence-based explanation. It should confirm whether the pathway was achieved, explain the reasons behind it - why or why not it was achieved, and identify what role Interreg cooperation played.

Figure 6: Four complementary evidence sources to test the impact pathways:



Practical testing sequence

- Create a pathway evidence matrix with one row per step of the pathway.
- Mark the tipping points and formulate 1 to 3 questions for each.
- Collect existing evidence through desk research.
- Select case studies that allow comparison between strong, partial and weak pathway achievement.
- Interview programme and project stakeholders to confirm the pathway and ask why or why not the expected change was achieved.
- Revise the pathway and document the judgement.

8. From draft impact pathways to practical evaluation: Lessons from Interreg Flanders - Netherlands

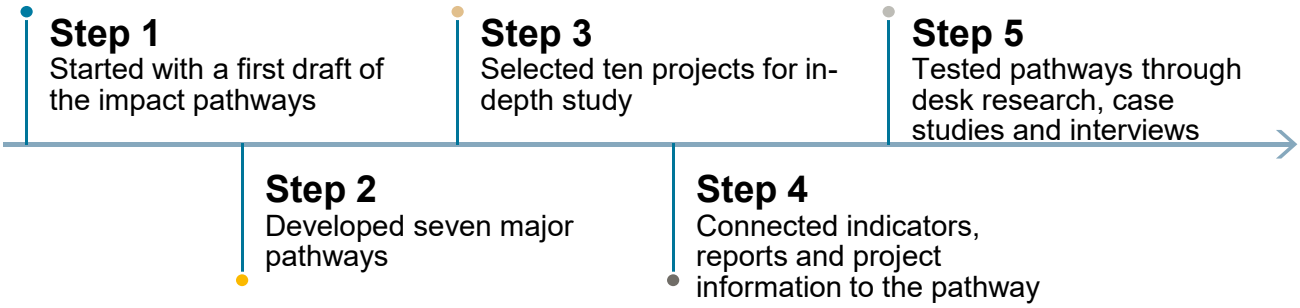
8.1. A programme case study

The Flanders-Netherlands programme provides a practical example of how draft impact pathways can be converted into testable claims and used in an ongoing impact evaluation. The approach was presented at the Ljubljana peer-learning event on 27 May 2026 and at the online event on 3 June 2026. Its main value lies in creating a structured process for selecting pathways, assembling evidence, testing mechanisms and refining the programme's understanding of how cooperation contributes to change.

Key message: Impact pathways are most useful when they are treated as working hypotheses. They should be tested against evidence, discussed with stakeholders and revised as learning develops.

The programme developed seven major pathways, selected ten projects for in-depth study, connected existing indicators, reports and project information to the relevant pathway steps, and tested the causal claims through desk research, case studies and interviews.
This shifted the evaluation from a narrow question of whether activities and outputs had been delivered towards a more useful one: what did cooperation itself contribute? The analysis therefore looked for mechanisms such as coordination, mutual learning, joint problem-solving, access to complementary expertise and stronger institutional networks. It then examined whether these mechanisms led to observable changes in practice, behaviour or governance.

Figure 7. Interreg Flanders – Netherlands case study



Lessons learned:

- Start with a draft and refine it;
- Select projects carefully;
- Clarify programme versus project preconditions;
- Plan for workload;
- Use interviews to understand mechanisms.

8.2. Why this approach is useful

- **It is proportionate.** The programme first used information that already existed - monitoring data, project reports, applications and previous analysis - before deciding where new interviews or case-study evidence were needed.
- **It creates traceability.** Each important pathway claim can be linked to an evaluation question, one or more evidence sources and an explicit judgement. This makes the reasoning behind conclusions easier to follow and challenge.
- **It supports learning and adaptation.** Evidence is not used only to confirm a pathway. It can also show that a mechanism is weaker than expected, that a precondition is missing or that the pathway should be simplified or reformulated.
- **It links evaluation and management.** Findings can inform project support, data collection, communication and future project selection while implementation is still under way, rather than only at the end of the programme period.

8.3. General lessons for developing and using impact pathways

The Interreg Flanders-Netherlands programme example confirms a wider lesson: impact pathways should be selective, explicit and iterative. The following lesson-learned can help programmes make them clearer, more evaluable and more useful for day-to-day programme work.

Table 3.

Lesson learned	What it means in practice
Be clear about the added value focus.	Distinguish EU added value from Interreg added value. EU added value explains contribution to wider EU objectives; Interreg added value explains what cooperation itself made possible.
Use the agreed elements as a shopping list.	The common key elements give programmes a shared language, but each programme should select the elements that best match its strategy and context.
Make preconditions explicit.	Impact pathways only work if certain conditions are in place. Programmes should check whether trust, relevant stakeholders, cooperation frameworks and data actually exist.
Focus on contribution, not only activity.	It is not enough to say that cooperation took place. The evaluation should explain what cooperation brought: coordination, learning, joint problem-solving, access to expertise, stronger networks or more coherent solutions.
Ask smart, realistic questions.	Evaluation questions should be answerable and placed at tipping points, not spread across every possible step.

Use indicators as part of the evidence.	Indicators should be connected to pathway steps and combined with qualitative evidence, case studies and interviews and other sources.
Measurable change is not necessarily quantitative.	Observable qualitative change, such as a shift from informal contacts to institutionalised cooperation, can also support an evaluative judgement.
Use pathways for adaptive management.	Impact pathways can support steering during implementation, not only accountability at the end of the period.
Learn from non-achievement.	Cases where the pathway did not work can reveal missing preconditions, weak mechanisms or contextual barriers.
Connect past, present and future.	Impact pathways can help explain what worked in previous periods, improve the current programme, and inform 2028-2034 programming.

9. Link to 2028-2034 programming exercise

Impact pathways are not only retrospective evaluation tools.

They can support preparation of the 2028-2034 programming period by helping programmes design focused strategies and explain the measurable contribution of cooperation to tangible territorial change.

This is particularly useful where programmes need to show how cooperation contributes to concrete change while recognising that many Interreg effects are intangible, gradual and context dependent.

Table 4.

Programming need	How impact pathways help	Practical output
Focused programmes	Identify where lack of cooperation is a real bottleneck and where Interreg can add distinct value.	Sharper specific objectives and project selection logic.
Measurable change	Translate cooperation effects into observable steps and evidence points, rather than relying only on quantitative indicators.	Evidence points and indicators linked to pathway steps.
Robust intervention logic	Test whether assumptions between activities, outputs and outcomes are plausible.	Improved intervention logic and evaluation questions.
Synergies with other instruments	Identify where Interreg creates conditions for other policy instruments to work better.	Clearer complementarity narrative.
Communication of added value	Develop messages showing what cooperation enabled and why it mattered.	Evidence-based key messages for decisionmakers and citizens.

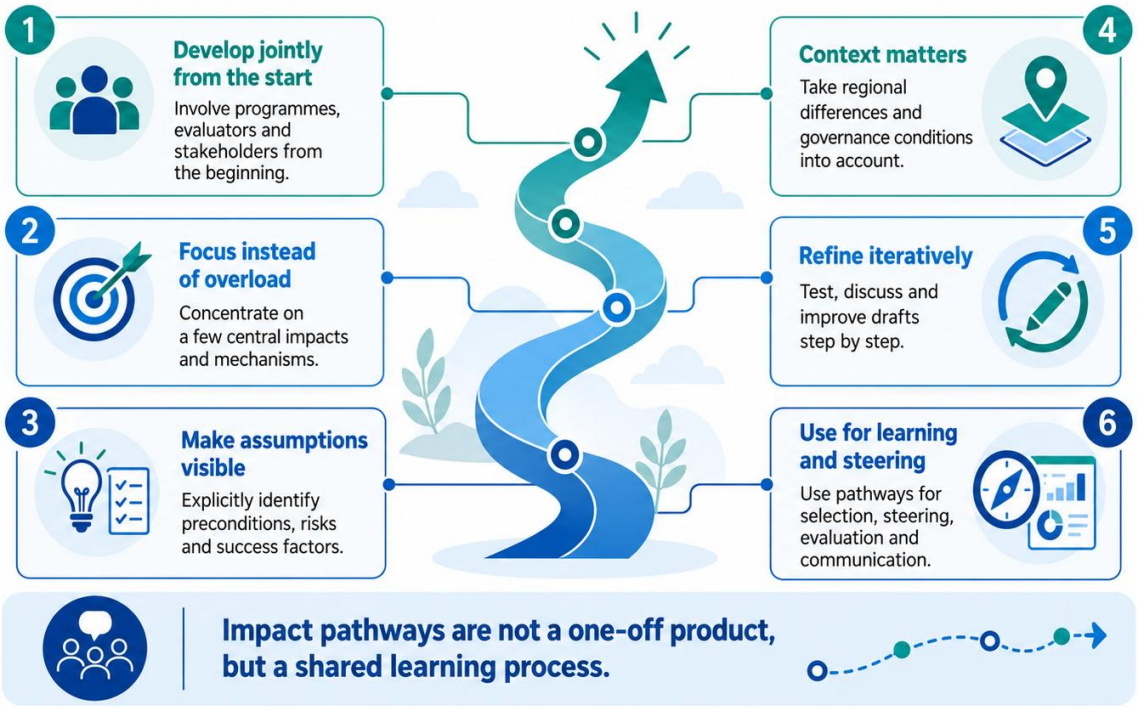
10. Main findings and further reflections

The value of impact pathways lies less in producing a complete diagram than in the discipline they bring to programme work. They require programmes to state clearly what cooperation is expected to change, make assumptions and preconditions visible, identify the points where progress may stagnate, and test these claims with proportionate evidence.

A practical starting point is deliberately modest: select one to three priority pathways, identify two to four tipping points in each, use existing evidence first, and collect new evidence only where important gaps remain.

Used in this way, impact pathways are not a one-off evaluation product but a shared framework for learning and decision-making.

Figure 8. Lessons learned so far



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The main benefit is practical. A tested pathway can sharpen evaluation questions, improve project selection and steering, strengthen communication through evidence-based messages, and clarify how the programme contributes to wider territorial change without claiming responsibility beyond its accountability ceiling.

When programmes develop and test pathways together, they can also compare common mechanisms and context factors, exchange methods and build a stronger shared evidence base for the 2027 ex post evaluation and the preparation of the 2028-2034 programming period.

The next step is therefore not to map everything, but to select the few cooperation claims that matter most, test them well and use the findings to improve programme decisions.

Annex A: Key elements of Interreg added value

Specificity and additional benefit of the programme

- 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 cooperation to deliver results that cannot be achieved through other mechanisms.
- Lowering mental barriers: Interreg reduces the negative impact of borders in terms of the spread of ideas and the use of services. It broadens the mental scope of people involved in the implementation of the projects and their target groups. In border areas this results in people having more actual possibilities (as consumer, jobseeker etc.)
- Identity: Interreg contributes significantly to the development of regional identities by promoting cross-border/transnational cooperation and supporting joint projects that foster the exchange of cultures, ideas and values, strengthen awareness of shared regional characteristics, and reinforce cohesion as part of a common European future.

Strengthening partnerships

- 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.
- Improving cooperation quality: Interreg programmes raise the quality and effectiveness of cross-border/transnational/interregional cooperation by establishing structures and practices for productive partnerships.
- Strengthening long-term cooperation and governance: By building institutional and governance capacities, Interreg programmes create a sustainable foundation for ongoing collaboration between regions, promoting forward-looking cross-border governance and strengthening cohesion across Europe.

Tangible impacts of cooperation

- Direct benefits for citizens/institutions: 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.
- Addressing cross border/transnational/interregional challenges: It enables solutions to common cross-border and transnational (CBC/TN) challenges that can be effectively tackled only in cooperation between countries facilitating collective approaches to shared issues.
- Building capacity and innovation: Interreg strengthens local and regional capacity by providing access to new skills, knowledge, and tools, while fostering innovation and knowledge exchange across borders.
- Economic and regional synergies: Interreg programmes drive economic growth, regional synergies, and sustainable development through joint efforts, resulting in broader regional benefits and enhanced competitiveness

Annex B: Example impact pathways and questions

Example 1: development of joint services

Preconditions: basic trust, legal permission, stakeholder buy-in, relevant capacities.

- Did legal or administrative barriers prevent progress?
- Was there sufficient trust and commitment among the relevant actors?
- Did the service operate effectively and respond to user needs?
- To what extent did Interreg cooperation improve cross-border, transnational or interregional access to services?

Example 2: partnership maturity

Preconditions: motivation, agreement on the problem, basic cooperation skills and limited resistance to change.

- Who is cooperating, and has the partnership become more stable?
- Which activities most strongly supported deeper cooperation?
- Are cooperation routines becoming institutionalised?
- Are partners willing and able to cooperate again beyond the project?

Example 3: direct benefits for citizens and institutions

Preconditions: shared needs, citizen or institutional demand, political and administrative commitment.

- Were citizens or institutions involved in defining needs?
- Were services, tools or solutions improved or made newly accessible?
- Did the solution create observable benefits for users?
- What role did cooperation play in making the benefit possible?

Example 4: addressing cross-border, transnational or interregional challenges

Preconditions: agreement on the shared challenge, suitable cooperation framework, trust and capacity.

- Was the challenge clearly one that transcended borders or regions?
- Were joint solutions developed and taken up?
- Did cooperation reduce fragmentation or improve functional area development?
- Which external factors supported or limited the result?

Example 5: lowering mental barriers

Preconditions: trust and capacity among stakeholders, opportunities for joint action, citizen or institutional exposure to cross-border activities.

- Did the project broaden perspectives or reduce perceived barriers?
- Were solutions or experiences taken up beyond the partnership?
- Did end users or institutions change routines, attitudes or behaviour?
- What evidence shows that borders became less limiting in practice?

Annex C: Detailed six-step roadmap

Before you start: prepare the process

Agree why the pathway is being developed: evaluation, learning, communication, programming or a combination of these. Decide who should be involved, including programme management, JS/MA, project officers, evaluators, communication colleagues and selected project representatives. Agree the level of ambition and document decisions in a simple pathway log.

Step 1 -> Map impact pathways

- Begin with a major programme goal or observed impact, for example improved cross-border services, stronger partnership maturity, improved cooperation quality or direct benefits for citizens.
- Work backwards to identify the preconditions, activities, outputs and intermediate outcomes required to reach that goal.
- Break the logic down into individual impact pathways such as trust and cooperation, capacity building, policy influence, innovation, service or tool development, removal of legal/technical barriers, or addressing cross-border challenges.
- Keep the wording practical and understandable for programme staff, project partners and decisionmakers.

Output: Draft impact pathway map.

Step 2 -> Zoom in

- Not all impact pathways can be evaluated in one study.
- Select pathways that are relevant to the programme, raise unanswered questions, align with available data and can reveal important lessons.
- Prioritise pathways that matter for programme strategy and communication, not only those that are easy to prove.
- As a practical rule, select 3 to 7 major pathways for a programme-level exercise and 1 to 3 pathways for a focused evaluation.

Output: Priority pathways and selection rationale.

Step 3 -> Define evaluation and learning questions

- Place questions at the tipping points, where the pathway is uncertain or strategically important.
- Ask whether the goal was achieved, how and why it was achieved, where the pathway broke down, for whom it worked, what factors influenced success or failure, and what degree of influence the programme had.
- Include questions about non-achievement. Understanding why a pathway did not materialise is as useful as confirming success.
- Make sure each question can be answered with available or collectable evidence.

Output: Evaluation question matrix.

Step 4 -> Refine pathways and assumptions

- Clarify which steps are critical and under what conditions they may or may not work.
- Identify tipping points or weak links in the pathway. These are the areas for special focus during evaluation.
- Make preconditions explicit: trust, cooperation capacity, administrative commitment, political support, relevant stakeholders, data availability or legal frameworks.
- Distinguish what the programme can influence from wider territorial impacts above the accountability ceiling.

Output: Refined pathway with assumptions, preconditions and tipping points.

Step 5 -> Test the impact pathways

- Use qualitative and quantitative methods to assess whether the pathway holds true across different projects or cases.
- Combine desk research, case studies and interviews.
- Gather data that allow comparison between successful, partially successful and unsuccessful examples.
- Ask directly whether the pathway was achieved, why or why not, and what role Interreg cooperation played.

Output: Validated, partly confirmed, revised or rejected pathway.

Step 6 -> Make evaluative judgements and use the findings

- Interpret findings based on the logic of the pathway: what worked, where, for whom and why?
- Assess what the programme contributed and what it did not contribute.
- Translate findings into programme learning, evaluation conclusions and communication messages.
- Use the learning to improve steering, project selection, monitoring, future evaluation and preparation for 2028-2034.

Output: Evaluation findings, learning points and evidence-based added value messages.