



INTERACT 2014-2020 IMPACT EVALUATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Interact Programme holds a special place among Interreg programmes. Its purpose is to *“reinforce the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy by promoting exchange of experience concerning the identification, transfer and dissemination of good practices and innovative approaches in relation to the implementation of cooperation programmes and actions as well as to the use of EGTCs.”* (Article 2 of the ETC Regulation¹).

The impact evaluation takes stock of the effects of Interact’s work in relation to its engagement with target groups and programme specific objectives to improve i) the management and control capacity of Interreg programmes; ii) Interreg capacity in capturing and communicating programme results; and iii) cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches.

The methodology of the impact evaluation is based on theory-of-change as defined in the Interact programme’s evaluation plan. The methodological approach builds on a mix of data gathering, evaluation and visualisation methods including data and documentary analysis, interviews and a survey. By mixing methods the constraints of both are mitigated.

The evaluation notes ‘conditioning factors’ which can influence the level change that is possible, the complex management structures and decision-making in Interreg

programmes; the diversity of Interact’s target group; the strategic sensitivity of some areas of intervention; the time needed for impacts to develop (the ‘seeds’ of Interact’s work, limitations to what can be achieved linked to staff and financial resources, and innovation involves an element of trial and error. The research uses examples and quotes to highlight key points, but which are based on broader analysis and findings, as outlined in the methodology.

The analysis starts by highlighting the range and diversity of interact activities, services and tools, which is important to consider when considering impact. Resources can be mutually reinforcing, work across levels of intervention, have niche, but high-level target groups etc.

In terms of target group engagement, the research found engagement with target groups and take-up/usage of resources is key to the programme delivering beneficial impact. Interact’s main target group are the Interreg programmes, but beneficiaries also include, e.g. actors involved in the implementation of macro-regional strategies, national ETC networks, and European Union institutions. Overall levels of engagement with Interact services and tools are high amongst key target groups. Now entering its fourth phase, Interact has not only built-up extensive links, but connections to target groups are increasingly long-standing and durable.



Based on analysis of impact on Interact's three Specific Objectives, Interact is shown to impact on: improving the overall governance of cooperation programmes by building institutional capacities, delivering immediate results, in terms of changes in (programme management) practices and cultures; increasing administrative capacities and impacts on increases in efficiency, effectiveness and resilience of programme management bodies and programmes; and delivers benefit to programme stakeholders, e.g. in results delivery.

The increased, informed and intensified role of Interact over the 2014-2020 is clear. Further as Interreg continues to evolve, the need for Interact services remains. While continuity of service and progression is important, in order to amplify and elevate Interact's role a number of factors can be considered in the future, e.g. working to retain responsive and agile delivery, with online and in person provision, effective and efficient development of existing work, e.g. through synergies and 'routinisation' of some elements, clarifying and communicating offering in some areas, continuing productive collaboration with the European Commission, but retaining 'programme focus', considering the territorial dimensions to elements of work and building on capitalisation and communication work to support programmes.

For the upcoming 2021-2027 programme period, evolution and developing existing lines of work, maximising beneficial synergies across areas of work and capitalising on the huge range of skills and resources with Interact is a key message. At the same time, Interact's capacity to adapt and respond quickly to new issues and needs remains vital. Interact has potential to continue to improve, address challenges, build and capitalise on their existing body of work, and further amplify their role and impact, as well as contribute in new ways.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The overall aim of the evaluation is to **'assess the intended and unintended effects of the services delivered by the programme in 2014-20'**. Furthermore, as specified in the Terms of Reference², the purpose is to *'evaluate the impact of the breadth of services on relevant target groups by looking at how Interact's services are used by the programme's target groups and what effect their use has had on the capacities of Interreg programmes and other stakeholders in managing Interreg programmes'*.

Building on earlier evaluations (Interact case-based impact and Operational Evaluation), the evaluation widens the evaluation scope to include the range of services delivered by Interact III and, as the programme approaches the end of the 2014-2020 programme period, offers insight into how Interact products and services are used by target groups, what effect their use has on strengthening programme management capacities and offers lessons for the future.

The overarching question addressed by the methodology is "How has Interact contributed to Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders in terms of being better off and in improving/changing their work practices?" The evaluation results and recommendations inform Interact programme bodies (i.e., Monitoring Committee, Managing Authority/Secretariat, Interact Offices and their Hosting Institutions) in fulfilling their management, monitoring, steering and programming role/s; and are relevant for Interact's stakeholders.

Section 2 sets out the context for the evaluation, in particular the specificities of the Interact programme. Section 3 outlines the evaluation approach and methodology, which are also described in detail in the evaluation inception report.³ Section 4 focuses on programme implementation and delivery, noting the extent, range and diversity of Interact's outputs. Section 5 discusses how target groups use Interact resources. Sections 6, 7, and 8 analyse Programme impact in line with Interact's three programme Specific Objectives (SO). Section 9 sets out overall conclusions and recommendations.

2 CONTEXT

2.1 Interact

The Interact Programme holds a special place among the Interreg family of programmes. Its purpose is to “reinforce the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy by promoting exchange of experience concerning the identification, transfer and dissemination of good practices and innovative approaches in relation to the implementation of cooperation programmes and actions as well as to the use of EGTCs.” (Article 2 of the ETC Regulation⁴).

Unlike the majority of Interreg programmes, which contribute to social, economic and environmental development in their respective programme areas by targeting the cooperation capacity of regional development actors, **the Interact Programme targets the cooperation capacity of the Interreg programmes** themselves. Interact's main **target group** are the Interreg programmes. However, over time, Interact's target group has broadened to include, e.g., macro-regional strategies, national ETC networks, and European Union institutions.

Interact provides a **large range of free-of-charge products and services** for its stakeholders. The products and services are designed to build and enhance stakeholders' capacities in implementing and managing territorial cooperation programmes and strategies (e.g., Interreg programmes, ERDF programmes, macro-regional strategies and others). The rationale is that enhanced capacities will lead to greater effectiveness and efficiency in the way the programmes and strategies are implemented and, hence, contribute to the effectiveness of EU Cohesion Policy.

Looking to the future, Interact aims to build on this contribution. The new 2021-2027 Interact IV Cooperation programme is being finalised. Within the Interreg-specific Objective in the Interreg Regulation of 'Better Governance', three programme-specific objectives (SOs) have been identified, focusing on:

- *Increasing efficiency: Strengthening the management capacity of Interreg programmes and other cooperation actors.*
- *Enabling individuals: Strengthening the capacity to work in cooperation programmes and context.*
- *Interreg visibility: Strengthening the capacity to capture and communicate programme and project results and to increase visibility.*⁵

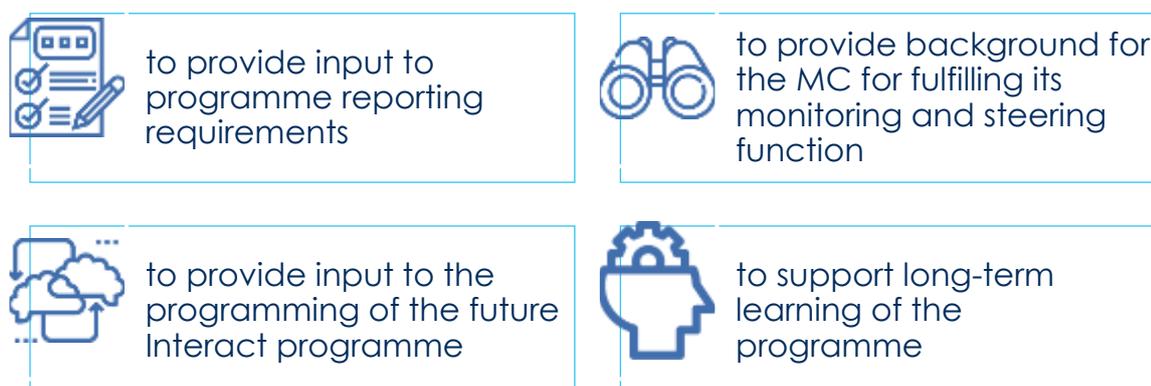
The draft Programme notes key areas where lessons are drawn from 2014-20. Of particular relevance for the 2021-27 period is Interact's resilience and adaptability, e.g., flexibility and responsiveness during Covid). The new programme also shows strong continuity and commitment to build on Interact's successes. Both the **continuity and capacity for change and learning make the findings of this evaluation particularly valuable as the 2021-27 programme is operationalised in what is still a complex and uncertain policy environment.**

3 APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Objective and Scope of the Evaluation

The overarching question addressed by the methodology is “**How has Interact contributed to Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders in terms of being better off and to improving/changing their work practices?**” The objective of the evaluation is to complement the other evaluations carried out during Interact III and, as the programme approaches the end of 2014-20 period, offer insight into how Interact products and services are used by target groups and what effect their use has on strengthening programme management capacities with a view to meeting the objectives set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Purpose of the evaluation



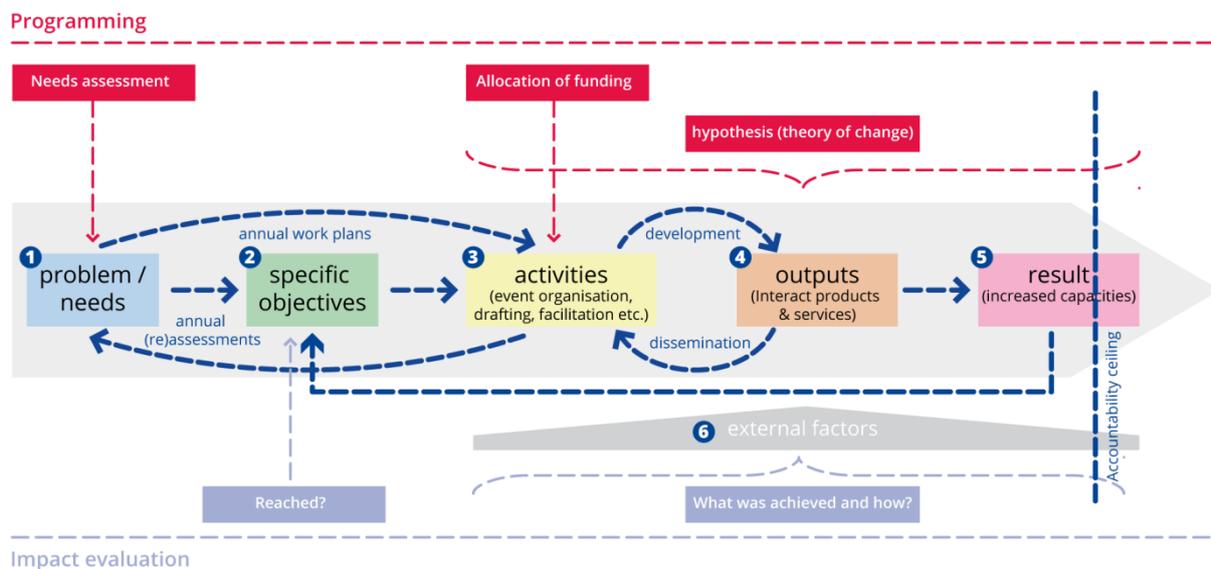
Source: EPRC

The evaluation takes stock of the effects generated directly and indirectly, short and long-term, through Interact's events, tools and publications. It also considers Interact's diverse stakeholders. The evaluation takes into account that the 'impact' of Interact takes a very different form to the impact produced by cross-border and transnational Interreg programmes it supports. Theories of territorial development do not apply and conventional approaches to evaluating programme impact cannot be used. A customised theory-based evaluation design and different theoretical foundation are needed, inspired by theories of organizational change.

3.2 Evaluation framework

The Interact evaluation plan⁶ specifies the use of a **'theory of change' approach** to the Programme impact evaluation. Theory-based impact evaluation uses the 'theory' behind the programme intervention logic to evaluate whether the interventions are implemented according to the theory and evaluates the contribution of the intervention to observed effects. Figure 2 sets out a schematic view of the intervention logic of the Interact Programme. It offers a way of looking at how and why a complex change process succeed under specific circumstances by tracking results chains, with context, explanations & hypotheses added. In doing so, theory-based approaches address the question 'why an intervention works', as well as 'what is the impact', both of which are a key questions for informing future project and programme development.

Figure 2: Interact intervention logic



Source: McMaster, I. Wergles, N. and Vironen H. (2020) Case-based impact and operational evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020, EPRC

As shown in Figure 2, Interact's result chain consists of five main building blocks, which are described in further detail below.



promotion and dissemination of outputs plays an important role in maximising potential results.

Results

Delivery of (expected) results

Interact aims to enhance institutional capacity and an efficient public administration⁷. More specifically, it aims for increased capacities for management and control, capture and communication of programme results, and the implementation of innovative cooperation approaches in Interreg programme management bodies. Results, however, are not measured in terms of management capacities but in terms of the use of the Interact products and services and the satisfaction with them. There is, hence, an important logical gap between Interact's main objective and the results indicators selected in order to reconstruct the Programme's results chain, and which the impact evaluation is bound to fill with additional evidence.

External factors

External factors influencing results delivery

Situational factors, which are beyond the direct influence of the Programme, can significantly condition Interact's results performance. The evaluation has to take into account that the acceptance and take-up of Interact products and services depends not only on the effort made by Interact to deliver useful outputs and to reach out to relevant actors, but also on a number of conditioning factors, many of which have already been identified as part of the case-based and operational evaluation and are shown in Figure 3.

Considering the influence of 'external factors' is an important part of the intervention logic. Figure 3 expands on the types of conditioning factors affecting Interact's performance and draws on wider analyses set out in the Case-Based and Operational Impact Evaluations. Recognition of these barriers and the 'limits' to Interact's role are key to contextualising the scope and scale of Interact's impacts and are taken into account throughout.

Figure 3: Factors conditioning Interact's results and impacts

Institutional complexity	<i>Institutional complexity of the Interact programme governance structure resulting from a decentralised implementation model with the MA and Secretariat and the four Interact Offices, as the single beneficiaries of the programme, all located in different parts of Europe and having different hosting institutions. This increases the Programme's coordination and administration burden.</i>
Complex management	<i>Complex and multi layered management structures and decision-making in Interreg programmes mean that many stakeholders have to be convinced of the utility of making changes to well-established management practices before they are introduced.</i>
Diverse target groups	<i>Large and diverse target groups mean that Interact has to carefully navigate around different interests. Interact also increasingly engages with actors beyond its core target groups, which means that it needs to earn recognition among actors which are not yet used to regularly working with Interreg.</i>
Resource limitations	<i>Interreg programmes have limited (staff & financial) resources and may find it difficult to actively engage in Interact activities.</i>
Political nature of some activities	<i>Some of the areas in which Interact engages, e.g., its support to the Macro-regional Strategies or the rebranding of Interreg, are strategically, even politically, sensitive. As a result, Interact is sometimes faced with concerns, attitudes or frustrations that don't fall within the remit of Interact, but which impinge on Interact's work by adding complexity and uncertainties.</i>
Adverse events	<i>Adverse events have disrupted the support provided by Interact. The impact of Covid have been long lasting and far reaching - prolonged lockdowns, barriers to travel and associated planning and programming issues has been critical to retaining progress towards Interact's own targets. Additionally, the temporary closure of the Interact Office Valencia posed challenges.</i>

Source: McMaster, I. Wergles, N. and Vironen H. (2020) Case-based impact and operational evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020, EPRC

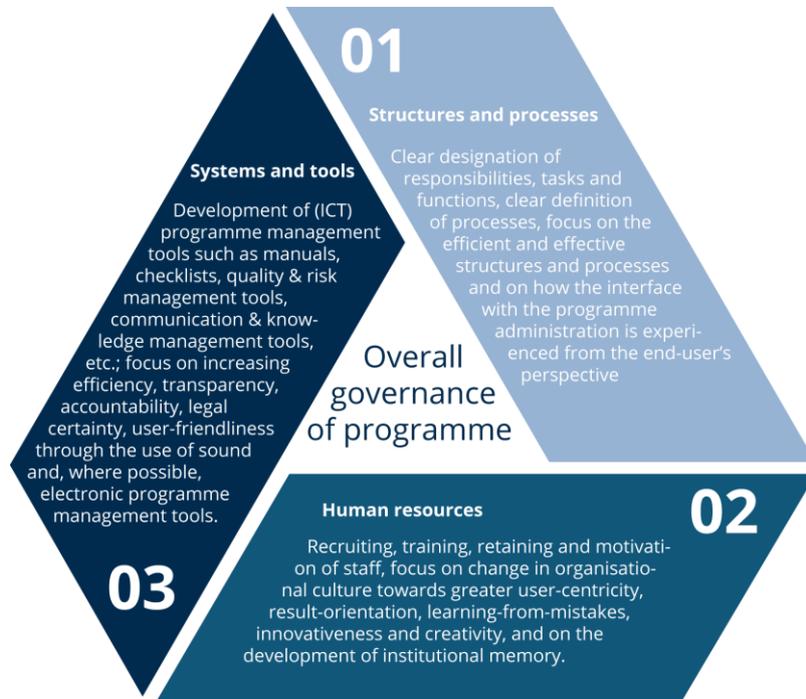
3.3 Capturing Interact Impact

Interact's main objective is to build institutional capacities in the public authorities targeted by Interact's services. "**Capacities**" is a somewhat 'elastic' concept and not easy to operationalise or measure, which makes counterfactual or highly quantitative analyses less useful in this instance. This evaluation replicates the approach used in Interact's case-based impact evaluation. A theoretical framework is applied which approaches 'capacities' from the point of view of 'enablers' of institutional capacities to manage/administer cooperation programmes.

Enablers are understood as key factors that determine what an organisation does and how it approaches its tasks ("**practices**"). Investing in enablers, thus building up capacity, has **expected short-term results** (i.e., changes to practices and mindsets) and **longer-term positive impact**, as it leads to strengthened programme management bodies that are more efficient, effective, resilient and, hence, better run. Better run programmes benefit both the bodies managing the programmes as well as programmes' stakeholders, in particular project applicants and beneficiaries.

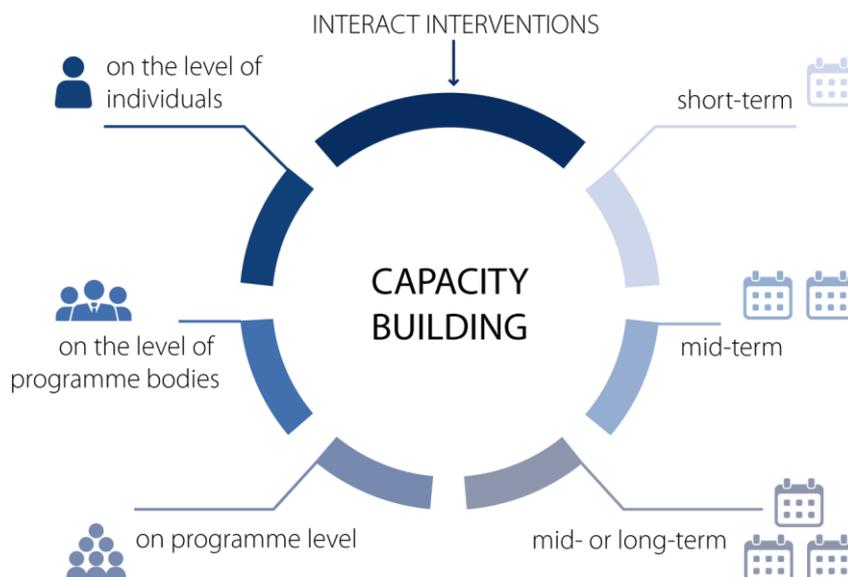
Commission guidance on TO11⁸ distinguishes between three enablers of administrative capacity, which ensure accountability for performance (including communication of and capitalisation on results); transparency in decision-making; and inclusion of relevant stakeholders in all phases of the programme cycle (see Figure 4):

Figure 4: Enablers of programme management capacity



Source: McMaster, I., Wergles, N., Vironen, H. (2019). *Case-based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020. Inception Report.*

Figure 5: Dimensions of capacity building

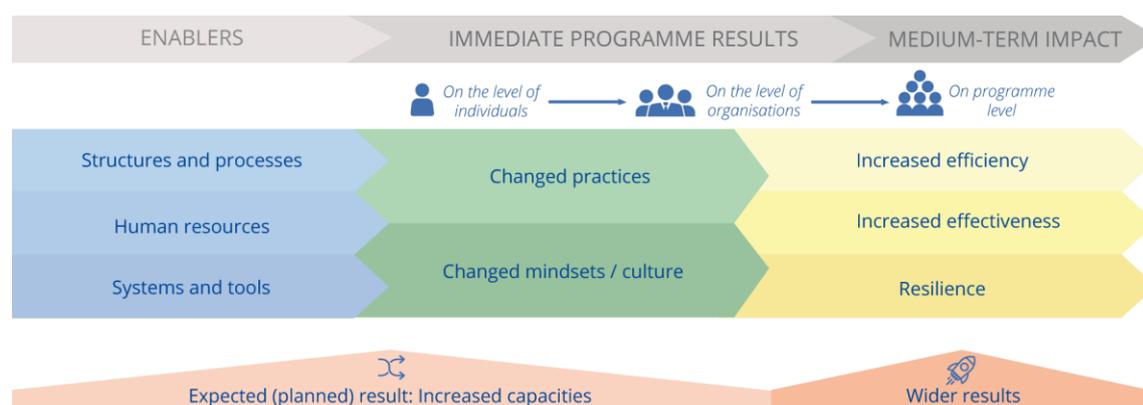


Source: McMaster, I., Wergles, N., Vironen, H. (2019). *Case-based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020. Inception Report.*

Capacity building is generally understood as a **learning process on the level of individuals or organisations, by increasing knowledge and skills and the ability to apply these to problem solving**. Therefore, capacity building in organisations must start with building the skills of the individual professionals who make up the organisation.

Capacity building also has a time dimension: in the short-term, measures can achieve knowledge and skills gains for individuals. The inherent inertia of organisations means that capacities can only be built in the medium-term. In networks of organisations that must work together, such as those that constitute an Interreg programme, capacity building has to bring about a system change, and is thus a longer-term process (see Figure 5). Figure 6 shows how enablers contribute to changing (programme management) practice and mindsets (first in individuals and then trickling down to the organisation and programme level), contributing to increased efficiency and effectiveness in programme management and to organisations/programmes that are more resilient to change.

Figure 6: Results chain



Source: McMaster, I., Wergles, N., Vironen, H. (2019). *Case-based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020. Inception Report.*

Efficiency, effectiveness, and resilience in the context of programme management are closely connected:

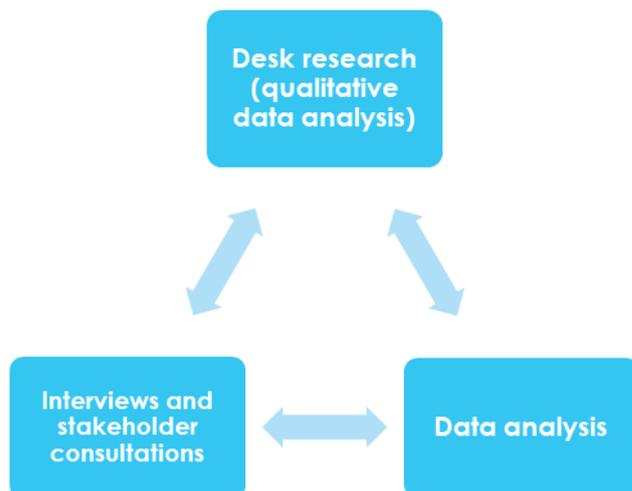
- **Efficiency** refers to the ratio between input invested and output achieved. The aim is to achieve more with less (staff, time, money, etc.).
- **Effectiveness** refers to the extent to which an intended result can be achieved, or a targeted problem solved. In contrast to efficiency, which focuses on “doing the thing right”, effectiveness means “doing the right thing”.
- **Resilience** refers to the ability of the organisation to deal with and warrant quality in a changing environment, e.g., in the course of a political or legal change, the restructuring of the organisation, etc.

3.4 Methodology

The research methodology has four core components: desk research, interviews, quantitative data analysis and the evaluation of Interact trainings.

	<p>Desk Research: In depth review of available documentation, including programme documents, evaluations, Interact studies and publications, programme monitoring tools and data, and external studies</p>
	<p>Data analysis: Survey data on the use of Interact products and services, data on events, web-statistics, monitoring data</p>
	<p>Interviews: 36 semi structured interviews using a stratified random sample (allowing for random selection at the same time as balanced geographic, programme and stakeholder coverage)⁹ The interviews included a balance of programme types, geographies and stakeholder types. Open ended questions ensured interviewees were free to express positive and critical views</p>
	<p>Training assessment: review of training evaluation forms, online questionnaire, and case-based learning assessment with 63 responses (recent course selected for a case study using case-based learning assessment to assess the course participants' longer-term knowledge gained in the training)¹⁰</p>

Figure 7: Triangulation of evaluation methods



By combining a range of data sources and applying different methods, triangulation of information and opinions becomes possible, see Figure 7. This generates different vantage points from which to answer the evaluation questions and enhances the validity of the evaluation conclusions and results.

Aspects of the evaluation rely on gathering opinions on subjective issues that cannot be quantitatively measured. Where this is the case, particular care is taken to ensure that interviewees were selected at random and reported opinions were not based solely on a single source, but to clearly illustrate and elaborate on a point. It should also be noted that, as section 4 illustrates, Interact output is extensive. A case-based evaluation of Interact projects was carried out in 2018-19¹¹ and



highlights the very specific ways in which specialist outputs have delivered results and impact. In contrast, the programme impact evaluation takes a broader perspective, looking across projects and noting aspects of work highlighted by stakeholders.

4 IMPLEMENTATION AND DELIVERY

Previous programme evaluations carried out for the 2014-2020 programming period have provided sound evidence for the robustness and validity of Interact's intervention logic and approach, and the impact of key services and tools.

- The case-based impact evaluation¹² demonstrated that, for the five selected long-term Interact projects covered, Interact services changed organisational culture ('mindsets') and management practices in programme authorities and improved systems and tools. Further, the case studies also demonstrated that Interact has an impact on programmes that goes beyond capacity building. The evaluation found clear evidence that the selected services have tangible (longer term) effects on the efficiency and effectiveness of programme delivery, on programmes' resilience and capacity to manage change, and also on the programmes' stakeholders, in particular applicants and beneficiaries.
- The case-based impact and operational evaluation also noted 'conditioning factors' which influence the level of change that can be achieved by Interact. Among these are the complex management structures and decision-making in Interreg programmes; the diversity of Interact's target group and challenge of providing all-encompassing services to all of them; the strategic sensitivity of some areas of intervention; the time needed for impacts to develop; limitations to what can be achieved linked to staff and financial resources, or the fact that developing innovative services involve an element of trial and error.
- As part of the Interact operational evaluation¹³, the appraisal of programme progress found that Interact is meeting, and often exceeding, its targets and fulfilling its objectives (expressed in terms of results indicators), that satisfaction levels with Interact services are generally high, and that the Programme has been successful in mitigating challenges and barriers (e.g. the temporary closure of the Interact Office Valencia or the Covid-19 pandemic).
- The operational evaluation also concludes that the governance system is resilient and effective in delivering results due to its flexibility and responsiveness to dealing with upcoming challenges, the vast experience and high level of engagement of staff and the commitment of all programme partners to accommodate the needs of the Programme, given its complex implementation structure.
- The operational evaluation established, that, in many respects, Interact functions as a quasi-organisation which exhibits a high degree of customer-centricity and continuity in its provision of products and services (e.g., across funding periods) and in staffing. The Programme has found a flexible implementation model that is compatible with its project-type of work and need to deliver flexible responses to *ad hoc* stakeholder demands.

The case-based impact evaluation and operational evaluations present valuable insights and evidence. However, as has been noted, the Programme Impact Evaluation takes a broader perspective and the full range of Interact activities. At the outset, therefore, an overview of the main types of deliverables and how they are regarded is important to better understand the overall role and impact of Interact's work. As will be discussed, Interact delivers through a wide range of processes, tools and actions, which are both complementary and make their own contributions to the Programme's results and impact.

Interact distinguishes between events and tools. In terms of delivering against targets Interact remains on track.

- Number of events: the total for the first 5 years is 604, i.e., approximately two thirds (68%) of the target (890).
- Number of participants to Interact events: the total number of participants at Interact events to 15,569, already exceeding the target (13,240) by nearly 18%.
- Number of tools: cumulative achievement to 267.80, again slightly exceeding the target (250).¹⁴

Events are the main delivery mechanism of the Interact Programme (100 percent of interview respondents highlighted their active participation in events). Event satisfaction is measured through a standard evaluation form. Participants are asked to evaluate on a scale 1 (disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) the usefulness of the event and whether it met participants' expectations, event materials, presenters and facilitators, content, and method, and whether the content will change current practices of my organisation. Open-ended questions allow participants to make qualitative comments and suggestions. Since 2017, the programme has replaced the paper form with an online evaluation questionnaire, which participants receive via email within a few days of the event. The shift online has facilitated the analysis of the event evaluations but has also led to a drop in the return rates (~50% of participants return the evaluation form), which has negatively affected the representativeness of the data.

Overall event ratings are calculated by the programme by taking the mean of several, but not all questions in the evaluation questionnaire. Table 1 shows the average scores of events per Specific Objective and broken down by the Programmes mid-term objectives. Interact events obtain very high ratings; with very few exceptions, they score above "4". Differences between specific objectives and mid-term objectives are minor and not statistically significant. Nonetheless, some patterns can be observed.

- SO 1 "Improve programme management and control capacities" events are rated slightly higher than SO 2 and SO3 events. SO 1 events target primarily the Interreg programmes, which have historically been Interact's core target group.
- Events with a rather "technical" content tend to receive high ratings. Examples are state aid or finance-related events. However, there are also many thematic, and communication-related events that are evaluated very well.
- In March 2020, due to the COVID pandemic, Interact switched from physical to online events only. This has not had any adverse impact on event evaluations. In fact, online



events have been rated on average slightly higher (4.42) than physical events (4.38). However, in terms of numbers of participants, some online events had over 100 participants, which is around 2-3 times more than the most attended physical events.

- Regarding comments received, recurring themes were
 - Participants express the wish for more practical examples,
 - Participants ask for event materials (presentations, handouts, etc.) and for them to be distributed before the event,
 - The participation of the Commission in events is valued.
 - Time for exchange and discussion is particularly valued, and it is often suggested that more time dedicated to it.

Table 1: Event evaluations 2016-2021

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Average
Specific Objective 1: To improve management and control capacity of Interreg programmes	4,51	4,44	4,46	4,32	4,36	4,50	4,44
ER 1.1.1 A more widespread application of simplified and harmonized approaches							
A-ER 1.1.1 – Simplifying approaches for Programme and Communication Management	4,40	4,56	4,51	4,29	4,25	4,51	4,42
B-ER 1.1.1 - Eligibility and simplified cost options	4,74	4,43	4,52	4,21	4,44	4,55	4,48
C-ER 1.1.1 – Monitoring Systems, including eMS	4,41	4,41	4,45	4,17	4,27	4,50	4,37
D-ER 1.1.1 – Specialised legal issues	4,82		4,45	4,54	4,37	4,52	4,54
ER 1.1.2 A more widespread use of identified good practice and quality standards							
E-ER 1.1.2 - Evaluation as a learning process for programme management and programme communication	4,48	4,38	4,27	4,30	4,37	4,51	4,38
F-ER 1.1.2 - Programmes' Financial Management, including closure	4,44	4,53	4,48	4,43	4,58	4,46	4,49
G-ER 1.1.2 - Management and control systems, control and audit	4,36	4,46	4,51	4,41	4,34	4,57	4,44
ER 1.1.3 Improved communication between Interreg programme management bodies and the Member States representatives							
H-ER 1.1.3 - Roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes	4,45	4,32	4,50	4,24	4,28	4,38	4,36
Specific Objective 2: To improve Interreg capacity in capturing and communicating the programme results	4,19	4,31	4,43	4,37	4,36	4,51	4,36
ER 1.2.1. Increased thematic expertise / competence within the Interreg programmes							
I-ER 1.2.1 - Capitalization & Thematic Knowledge development and communication	4,31	4,40	4,42	4,43	4,34	4,51	4,40
ER 1.2.2. Establishing and promoting repository of Interreg results							
J-ER 1.2.2 - Capturing and giving visibility to Interreg results: KEEP and Communication	4,23	4,32	4,45	4,29	4,29	4,52	4,35
ER 1.2.3 Leadership of integrated Interreg communication strategy established							
K-ER 1.2.3 - Strengthening the visibility of Interreg results	4,02	4,21	4,41	4,40	4,45	4,52	4,33
Specific Objective 3: To improve the cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches	4,39	4,49	4,58	4,04	4,33	4,42	4,37
ER 1.3.1. Increased knowledge about new and existing tools							
L-ER 1.3.1 - Building and communicating knowledge management base for new and existing tools			4,48	4,12	4,42		4,34
ER 1.3.2 Develop workable models adjusted to Interreg context							
M-ER 1.3.2 - Innovative tools and workable models	4,46	4,46	4,71	3,74	4,29	4,49	4,36
ER 1.3.3 Increased awareness in the Interreg programmes about complementarities with other EU funds							
N-ER 1.3.3 - Scaling up inter-programme capacity & competence	4,33	4,60					4,46
ER 1.3.4 Increased awareness of the mainstream programmes about advantages of cooperation as an implementation tool							
O-ER 1.3.4 - Awareness raising on cooperation approaches across funding sources and actors		4,40	4,56	4,25	4,29	4,34	4,37
Annual average	4,42	4,42	4,48	4,27	4,36	4,49	4,41

Source: Interact event evaluations 2016 to 2021

For a more detailed analysis of the intervention mechanisms of Interact, in the following sections and for the purposes of the evaluation, a further distinction is made between 'events', 'advisories', 'training courses', 'networks', 'tools', and 'publications'. As the following sections will highlight, even within the categories there are notable variations in the type of deliverable, e.g., between online training, and in person events, specialist papers and publications for wider stakeholder groups. The deliverables are also interconnected and interrelate, with one activity drawing on or leading to another. For example, an event or training programmes can result in related publications. Interact tools have associated development networks and events.

4.1 Tools

Interact offers a range of **practical tools to facilitate various aspects of programme management and implementation**, e.g., see Table 2. For the purposes of this evaluation 'tools' are understood as deliverable resources for programmes to adopt/apply. Although sometimes listed as Interact 'tools', Interact's work in relation to, e.g., publications, training, and networks are covered in separate sections.

Table 2: Selected Interact Tools

Tool	Description
	Free of charge electronic monitoring system provided by Interact to all interested programmes who sign the license agreement
	Integrated package of tools for programme implementation, including tools for programme implementation, project selection, financial control and audit and eligibility of expenditure
	Translation Glossary brings together the terms most frequently used in everyday management of Interreg programmes, defines what they mean in Interreg context and provides translations into a variety of European languages.
	Through collaboration programmes, supported by Interact developed shared visual identity, e.g., Interreg Brand Design Manual.
	Source of aggregated information in territorial cooperation projects and beneficiaries
	Portal offering up to date information on Interreg across Europe

Source: EPRC and <https://www.interact-eu.net/>

The Interact Case Based Evaluation has examined the use and impact of most of these tools in detail, finding them well used and with **positive results and impacts, in terms of changed practices in programme authorities and cultures ('mindsets') and improved systems and tools**. Further, the case studies also demonstrate that Interact has an impact on programmes that goes beyond capacity building. There is sound evidence that the selected services have tangible effects on the efficiency and effectiveness of programme delivery, on programmes'

resilience to change, and on the programmes' stakeholders, in particular applicants/beneficiaries.¹⁵

4.2 Publications and information resources

Interact's publications have become an authoritative, useful and usable source of information and have developed over the years. The format, scope, scale, and approach of the publications differs substantially, e.g., some

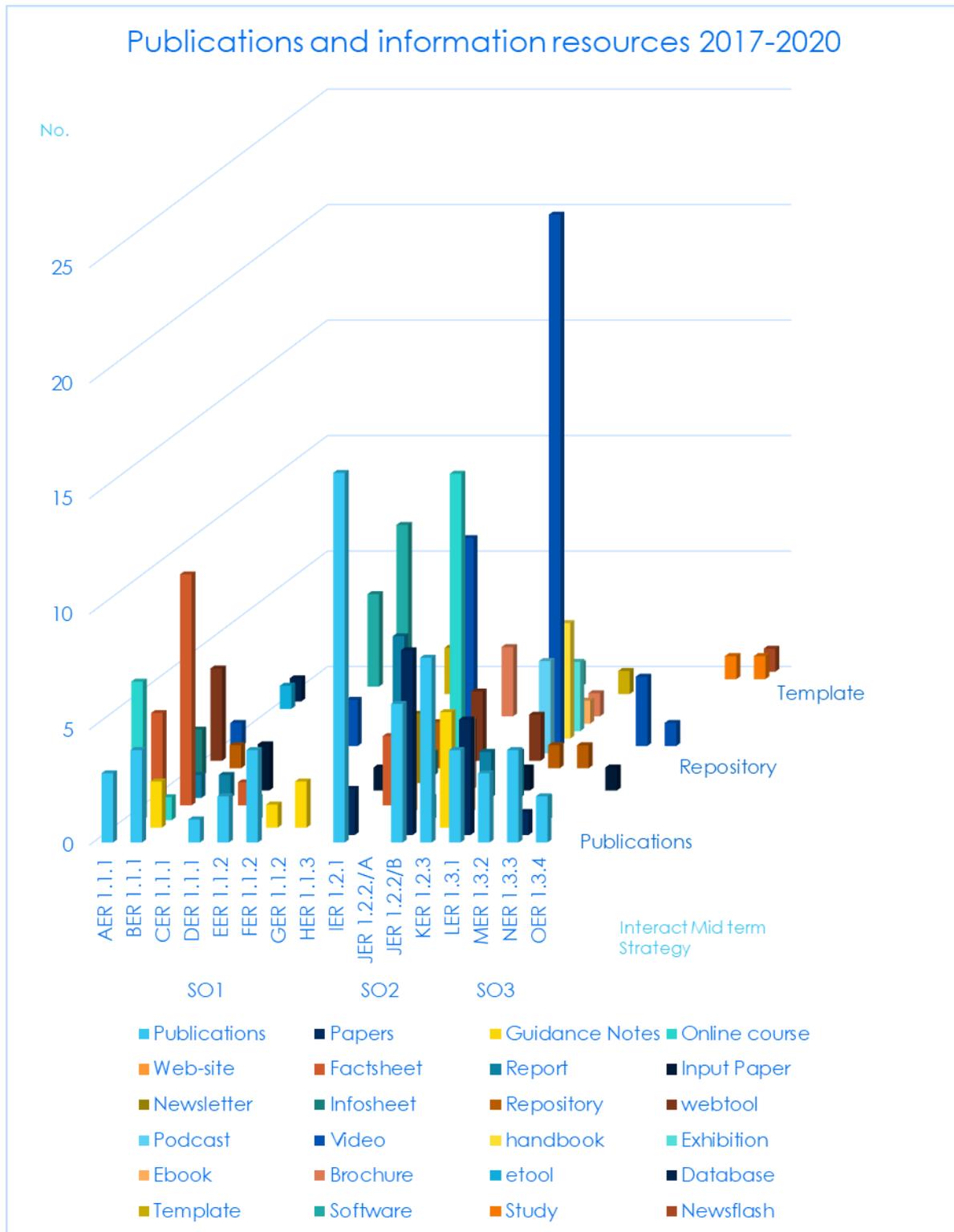
- aim to summarise - others aim to provide depth and analysis;
- aim to clarify and act as a reference - others aim to open discussion and promote dialogue;
- present and interpret existing material/regulations - others seek to inform the development of future approaches and approaches; and
- have very specific target audiences – others have a broader application.

See also Figure 8.

Linked to these variations, impacts will differ, e.g., a specialist input paper delivered in the lead up to regulatory reform can have a major impact on programme and policy delivery. A more general publication with a wider circulation may have a less demonstrable impact but contribute to longer-term awareness raising.



Figure 8: Interact Publications



Source: Interact Data, EPRC illustration

Overall, publications are generally widely accessible through the publications page of the Interact website and are widely used, although some publications are circulated to narrower

specialist groups/audiences, e.g., through networks or linked to events. The shift from lengthy reports to more concise material targeted at practitioners is of particular note and value.

As previously mentioned, accessibility of materials through the library pages on Interact's website mean they are readily available and link to further, related materials (e.g., events and presentations). Continuity in the presentation and style of the publications has built recognition of Interact's roles and also add 'weight' to the publications (i.e., they come from a well-recognised, respected source).¹⁶

Interact has also a presence in external publications, such as in the Panorama Magazine of the European Commission. For example, the joint Panorama edition on transnational cooperation was highlighted in interviews as valuable for disseminating and sharing information and for reinforcing links and connections between the Interreg programmes. The

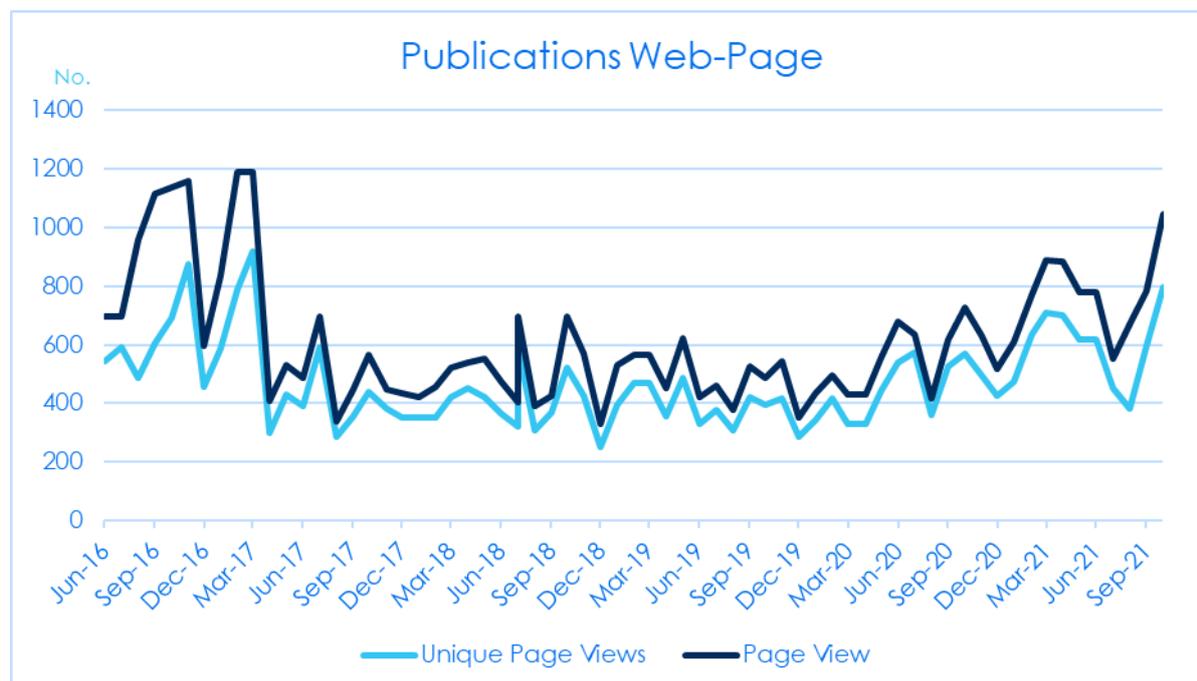


role Interact has played in supporting other joint communications, e.g., the '10 Things to Know about Transnational Cooperation' publication,¹⁷ and promoting ideas and case studies to inform databases are similarly credited with significantly increasing the profile of the Interreg Transnational Programmes at a key point in the lead up to the preparations of the new Cohesion policy regulations and programmes.

Overall, **publications are recognised as resources for reference, or as a starting point for more in-depth work.** For example, a respondent noted the value of factsheets on technical and legal issues as a resource to 'double check' issues and reply to external questions e.g., clarifications on questions from auditors. Publications have been used by programmes to develop their own tailored library of resources to better share and filter through the most relevant publications on key management and implementation issues. The fact that the Interact library of publications was improved and made more accessible/user friendly is highlighted in interviews. Publications may not always be extensively used on a regular basis, 'knowing the resource is there' as a reference resource is seen as important.

Figure 9 illustrates cyclical variations in the publications' web-usage, i.e., with dips around holiday periods. Increases in usage around end/beginning of programme periods are also apparent. Covid has also had an impact on how these resources are used. Covid limited opportunities to attend events, making 'static' resources that could be used at any time more important. However, for other respondents particularly those for those already working closely with Interact services and tools, the publications 'add less direct value' and were less widely used.

Figure 9: Web Access to Interact publications page



Source: Interact Data, EPRC illustration

Looking to the future, there may be ways to make publications even more accessible, e.g.

- blog post as a new publication is launched.
- shorter 'easily digestible' headlines, charts or data could make reports more accessible to a wider group of stakeholders, particularly for stakeholders whose first language is not English. While programmes do not expect publications to be translated, to circulate resources more widely, e.g., to beneficiaries, translation into national languages can be useful. With this in mind, shorter/translatable versions of publications, e.g., summaries, data and graphics, help to make the resource easier to share.

4.3 Training

Interact has undertaken a wide range of training through a variety of means. **In the period 2017-2021, Interact has organised ~60 training courses on a large range of topics** (see Figure



Online learning platform

10). Interact runs in person training events for small and large groups on specialist areas and issues of broader application. Content may be developed and delivered by Interact staff, consultants or experienced practitioners; training sessions may be one-off or part of a series, and sometimes extend over several days (e.g., the programme management, finance management or communication camps). Interact staff also feed into training events run by

other organisations, e.g., programmes and the European Commission. Increasingly, training is also delivered online, most notably through Interact's Online Learning Platform. The Platform already has 1139 students enrolled.¹⁸ Initial courses on the online learning platform covered facilitation and presentation skills as well as substantive courses on evaluation and IPCC.

Box 1: Examples of short courses provided by Interact on digital communication

12 short courses provided by Interact on digital communication

- Common mistakes in digital communication
- Audience and goals
- Decision-making in online environments
- Facebook for Interreg
- Twitter
- Programme websites
- LinkedIn
- Emails and e-newsletter
- Instagram
- Internet trolls
- Analytics and insights
- Digital storytelling



Source: Interact (2020) *What's up in 2020, Interreg communication network meeting, 25 February 2020, Vilnius, Lithuania* <http://www.interact-eu.net/download/file/fid/18820>

Figure 10: Proportion of training events by theme



Source: Interact <https://learning.interact-eu.net/courses>, EPRC illustration

As has been noted, the form and format of the training provided are diverse. However, feedback suggests that the courses are well received, and address identified needs. Training courses are on average evaluated slightly higher (4,51) than other Interact events (4,40). Interact event participants often express in event evaluations a preference for “practice-oriented” and “interactive” events, which may explain the high satisfaction with training courses.



As an increasingly important aspect of Interact's work, and one not covered in detail in the case-based impact evaluation, the Impact Evaluation looked more closely into Interact training courses. First, a survey was shared with former training participants of a sample of 25 face-to-face as well as online training courses from 2017-2021. It yielded 63 valid responses.

The survey confirmed the findings of the event evaluations in that the **assessment of Interact training courses was overwhelmingly positive**. In particular, the practical component of trainings and the method of learning based on practical examples and cases, was praised. Participants also highlighted the value of training courses as a networking opportunity and, in this context, many participants regretted the fact that in trainings had to be online during the COVID pandemic. Participants at beginners' camps (e.g., the finance management or programme communication camp), which are designed for Interreg staff new to the job, highlighted the fact that they were able to connect with people who were in a similar situation (i.e., starting a new job in the Interreg world) and create their own international networks. According to participants, the 'interactiveness' of the training also helped create a strong sense of community.

Interact staff was described as **highly professional trainers** able to create a pleasant learning atmosphere in which participants feel safe to speak out and participate in (group) tasks. Also highlighted as positive was the involvement of external trainers in areas in which Interact did not have (enough) inhouse expertise. Participants also appreciated receiving individual feedback from trainers on their performance in tasks, which they said was always respectful, non-judgemental and encouraging. As a suggestion for the future, several mentioned that they would like some follow-up feedback after having had some time to apply the new knowledge or skills on the job. By the same token, they thought that it might be interesting for Interact to follow up on their development after the training.



Thanks to this training I became able to professionally and effectively plan an event, coordinate with my team and develop attractive, interesting and full of useful information.

Participant at Facilitation training for Romanian colleagues, Bucharest/Romania, 27.02.2018-01.03.2018

The survey shows that participants at Interact training courses had learned new technical knowledge (e.g., on capitalisation in Interreg, on finance management, etc.) and concrete new skills (e.g., facilitation skills, graphic design skills, drafting in plain English skills or skills on how to use keep.eu). With very few exceptions, survey respondents stated that, and gave

examples of how, they are **using the new knowledge or skills in their daily work**. They provided ample evidence that trainings had **changed their way of working** ("practices"). Course materials (e.g., presentations, templates for facilitation scripts, etc.) were used regularly by participants after the meeting and are also handed down to programme staff who have not participated in the meeting. Multiple responses provide testimony of the fact that training

participants act as multipliers of the teaching content in that they pass on the information and materials to colleagues, but also to applicants and beneficiaries. It can be said that the impact of trainings on changing programme practices transcended the people who participate in the course. Often, they become new institutional practices.

“

I prepared a repository of templates for official letters in plain English that we use in our everyday work to make work process more effective.

Participant at an introduction to using Plain Language, online, 16.12.2021

Some respondents reported that, as a consequence, their **daily work or their interaction with applicants, beneficiaries, auditors, etc. had become more efficient and effective**. Course feedback notes that training events have not only delivered in relation to the specific themes, but also can support skills development in associated areas, such as effective, clear communication.¹⁹ Several survey respondents noted an improved communication with beneficiaries thanks to the fact that the training had led to an enhanced understanding of a particular topic.

“

[The training] stimulated my curiosity and made me want to look further and learn more about the platforms and the tools [for decision-making in online events] available on the market.

Participant at Decision-making in an online environment - dedicated training for the EUSDR PACS, online, 12.10.2020

In the case of the project generation training, which also included project representatives, some report that the training had prepared them for managing a project which otherwise would have been overwhelming. Respondents also reported that the trainings had motivated them for additional autodidactic learning.

4.4 Events

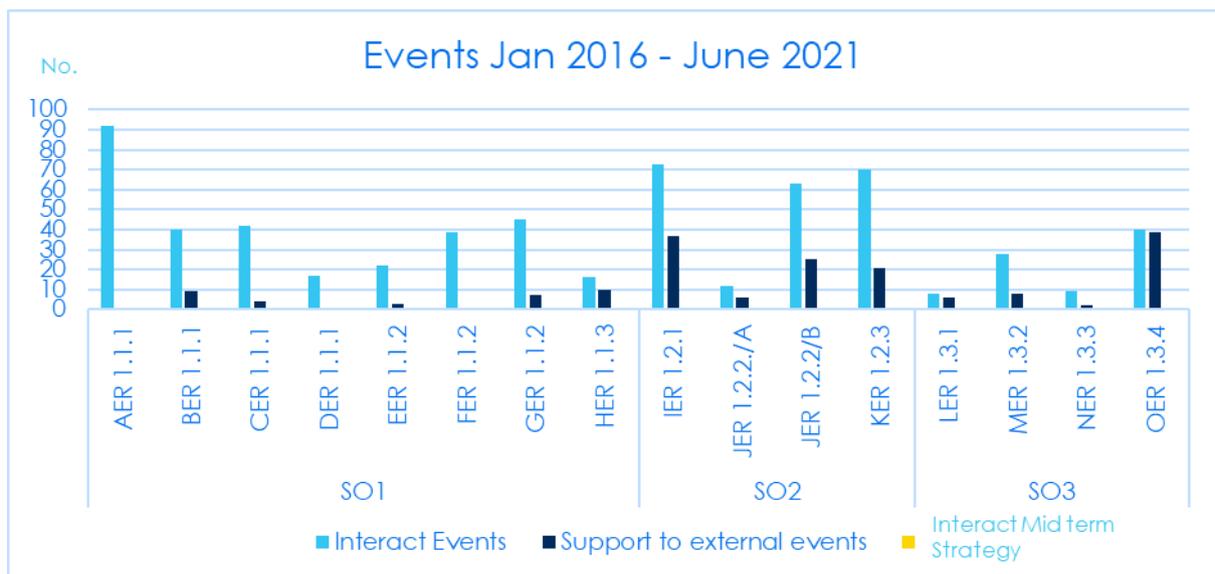
Interact organises, facilitates, and participates in numerous events that vary in size and theme. Interact's own events focus on specific themes and are based on the needs of, and relevance to, the Interreg programmes. For example, recent events have focussed on SCOs, anti-fraud, and issues related to the post-2020 period. Interact also organises regular larger scale events in the Interreg calendar, most notably the European Cooperation Day and Interreg Project Slam. Accompanying on-line resources and materials are associated with both events.

Figure 11: Major Interact Events

Joint Interreg events		
	<p>Aims at promoting territorial cooperation and project results to local communities through the organisation of events. It happens every year on 21 September and surrounding days in Europe and neighbouring countries.</p>	<p>Interact coordinates the event, working alongside ETC programmes, the European Parliament, European Commission and European Committee of the Regions</p>
 <p>Interreg Project Slam</p>	<p>As part of the European Week of Cities and Regions Interact organises a 'project slam' using storytelling techniques to share the benefits of their work with a European audience. Interact facilitates and supports the projects, providing guidance and training to support effective communication.</p>	<p>Held in conjunction with key events, such as European week of Cities and Regions and Interreg Annual event</p>
<p>Ad hoc</p>	<p>Interact can host or participate in ad hoc events on specific topics</p>	<p>Programmes/ stakeholders request/invite input directly</p>

Source: EPRC illustration

Figure 12: Number of events by Medium Term Strategy Goals



Source: Interact data, EPRC Illustration

Feedback from stakeholders on this element of the work is favourable. Joint Interreg events are noted as beneficial as they connect stakeholders across the Interreg community. In addition, many small and well-thought through points of detail from Interact are highlighted, e.g., getting well-timed reminders about participation/information requests.



It is much easier now that events are online. This is a real advantage because of time and cost savings.

Head of JS of Interreg cross-border programme

While it has posed challenges, the shift to online events has also allowed greater flexibility, opportunities for events to engage across wider groups, and increased participation levels, due to the reduced time and cost implications for participants.

Retaining a strong virtual/online dimension to Interact's work is strongly supported for the organisation of future events. Respondents understand it is difficult to replicate certain elements of a physical event, such as the informal nature of exchanges and networking and active participation and engagement. However, the scope for having some form of informality included in virtual events was appreciated. Many of Interact's virtual events already include various team-building work etc. Building on this approach and looking to the future, there are potentially additional ways to incorporate more informal networking time (e.g., additional time at the end of a virtual event for those who are able and interested in continuing discussions).

Interact is also active in participating in and facilitating specific Interreg events and other wider EU events. Through its high profile, Interact can:

- attract and support participation; and



- help promote programmes and projects at events and to wider audiences. In particular, working with programmes to specify and communicate what they deliver 'on the ground' has been valuable.

Interact has also been praised for their willingness to act as a facilitator at events. These types of inputs and support are appreciated, (especially by programmes with smaller secretariats and that may not always have in-house capacity) and can be particularly fruitful in terms of connecting with stakeholders outside of Interreg. Looking to the future, for some events, particularly specialist events, a suggestion is to involve a wider range of experts and move on from a heavy reliance on programme inputs. To date, Interact has drawn heavily on programmes to present and share their experiences. However, if the topic is new, the programmes do not have the experience. In these cases, the programmes need to hear information from the experts (e.g., from Interact themselves, the European Commission, academia etc.).

4.1 Advisory

Interact also provides ad hoc tailored advisory services. As the programme period has progressed, advisories remain an important element of the work, e.g., as a means to address specific and more complex issues.²⁰ Advisory work is, therefore, a vital element of Interact's capacity to be responsive to programme needs. The work is diverse, can be challenging to precisely plan for, and often involves 'experimental', dynamic and changeable aspects. Some examples of the range of issues covered include project selection, inter-cultural communication, and eligibility rules.²¹

Towards the end of the programme period, programmes have engaged on issues in relation to the new regulations e.g., on Small Project Funds. For example, a programme representative noted the opportunity to participate in dialogues with Interact and the associated benefit of facilitated exchanges of experience with relevant programmes.

The 'use' of this service by Programmes is variable. Interview evidence showed that lack of engagement from some programmes is not due to a lack of awareness or unwillingness, but can be linked to:

- Time constraints - direct work with Interact not only places demands on Interact time, but it also takes time for the Programmes to elaborate on their specific issues, engage with Interact and work with the outputs and results.
- Level of Interact service overall – As one respondent noted – “We have used individualised support to a lesser extent because individual requests are sufficiently taken into account within collective activities. The fact that meetings are now primarily online have allowed further flexibility, wider participation and allowed reacting to individual request much faster.” (Head of Interreg CBC Secretariat)

An issue to consider for the future is how to balance this work alongside intensifying and extending work elsewhere. It is core to Interact's capacity to 'respond' directly to programme

needs. It can be valuable to work with programmes directly and can inform Interact's wider work. However, it is also time consuming and may 'favour' some programmes with additional resource. Considering how best to balance this work is an issue to consider in the future, i.e., to make sure the value of the work is shared widely across target groups where possible, and it is the best use of Interact's resources and input.

4.2 Networks

Interact manages knowledge exchange through a range of networks (digital and physical) which are largely is largely topic/theme driven, see Table 3.

Table 3: Interact Networks

Network theme	Network	Note	
Finance	1	Audit Authorities	Annual meeting, online platform, complementary to Comm meetings and opportunity for open exchange auditors and Group of Auditors members
	2	Certifying Authorities	Annual meetings, online platform Certifying Authorities
	3	Eligibility of Expenditure	Online discussion forum Open to all
	4	Financial management	Exchange platform Interreg managing authorities, programme and finance officers from joint secretariats and others involved in the financial management of the programmes.
	5	Finance Officers of Transnational and International Programmes	Exchange platform finance officers of Transnational and Interregional programmes (restricted network.)
	6	National Control	Discussion forum National controllers
	7	Regional networks of financial officers in Northwest Europe	Network meetings finance officers in Northwest Europe (restricted network)
	8	Simplified Cost Options	Exchange platform Interreg programmes
	9	State aid	Exchange platform and consultation inputs Interreg experts and State aid experts
	10	Support to Audit Authorities	Annual meeting online community MA/JS staff
Monitoring and Evaluation	11	Evaluation	
	12	Informal working group on indicators	Informal working group Interreg programme (restricted)
	13	Monitoring systems	Annual meeting Monitoring system practitioners
Communication	14	Interreg communication officers	Community and exchange Interreg Communication experts
	15	Transnational and Interregional communication	Regular meetings and network Communication officers of transnational programmes and Interreg Europe
Capitalisation	16	Better Governance	Exchange Practitioners Interreg and wider
	17	Culture and creative industries in Interreg	Exchange Interreg programmes
	18	Climate change	Exchange Practitioners Interreg and wider
	19	Inclusive growth network	Exchange Practitioners Interreg and wider
	20	Knowledge of the Seas	Thematic learning events Practitioners Maritime Interreg and wider

	21	Migration	Exchange	Practitioners Interreg and wider
	22	Sustainable transport	Exchange and synergies	Practitioners Interreg and wider
	23	Capitalisation practices and communication of results	Exchange	Interreg
Harmonised Tools	24	Hit Core Group	Regular meetings and development	Core group
	25	eMS User Group	Regular meetings and development	eMS users
	26	European Cooperation Day	Networked events	All
	27	Keep 2.0	Regular meetings and development	Practitioners Interreg and wider
Innovation Cooperation	28	Cooperation in mainstream programmes (Art 96.3.d)	Exchange	Practitioners Interreg and wider
	29	Transnational programmes supporting macro-regional strategies	Exchange	Transnational MA.JS and DG regio
Networks of Programmes	30	Regional network in Central and Southeast Europe		
	31	Interreg IPA-CBC	Exchange	IPA-CBC practitioners
	32	Small Project Funds	Exchange	Interreg experts in SPF
	33	Transnational and Interregional projects officers	Annual/biannual meeting and exchange	Transnational and intrerregional programmes
	34	Interregional programmes	Annual/biannual meeting and exchange	Heads and MA intrerregional programmes
	35	MedLab Group	Exchange	Southern Europe and Mediterranean cooperation programmes and stakeholders
	36	National Contact Point (NCP) Network	Exchange	national/regional contact/info points (NCP)
	37	Outermost Regions Interreg Programmes	Exchange	EU institutions, Member States and Interreg programme practitioners

Source: <https://www.interact-eu.net/networks>

In 2018, there were 25 networks of different sizes and activities.²² Some networks provide an active forum for information exchange on the Communities platform, while others organise (regular, annual) meetings to foster discussions on specific relevant topics.²³ As noted in the 2018 Annual Report, the largest network has over 180 members (Interreg Communication Network), while others are intentionally smaller to facilitate a targeted approach. One example of the latter is the 27 members of the informal working group on indicators, a targeted group collaborating on a specific project.²⁴

Interact's leadership within the networks has been noted as building strong communities of practitioners where issues of common concern can be discussed e.g., Interreg branding and the transnational strand in the Communication Network.²⁵ Materials accompanying network

events are considered to be easy to access and share. Interview respondents also highlight the value of the resulting networks for addressing specific questions and issues and pooling ideas. For example, in the lead up to the new programme period, specialist/up-to-



the network has made it easier to ask around on this very important but pretty technical issue [Developing a new website].

Head of JS Interreg transnational programme

date knowhow on technical issues such as website redesigns and management is very valuable, given their central importance for communications work. This highlights the role that the networks can have as a 'jumping off point' for wider or more specific dialogues/networking. Furthermore, it is noted that Interact is effective in being clear about their limits and not trying to control/deliver it all, but rather being able to 'help make it happen'.

Simplifying and clarifying the networks could be considered in the future. The networks and working groups are valued as a means of knowledge exchange and developing new thinking/solutions. However, the Interact networks are very different in their formality, role and approach which can confuse stakeholders in terms of, for example, how 'open' the group is, how best to engage, understanding its role etc. With this in mind, networks could be more clearly defined and organised, while also recognising the need for tailored solutions. Some networks may naturally 'run their course', with solutions found, links established, and needs addressed. Some networks may have enough momentum and interest to become self-sustaining. A review of the future role/expectations of the various networks could be useful and consider the added value of the networks, bearing in mind the issues around progression /evolution highlighted.

5 TARGET GROUPS REACHED



Interact's main target group are the Interreg programmes. Thus, the main users of Interact services are staff working for public authorities involved in Interreg programme and project management, control/audit and communication, as well as the intermediate bodies or beneficiaries of innovative territorial development instruments, such as ITIs or CLLDs. However, over time, **Interact's target group has broadened** to include diverse groups of stakeholders such as actors involved in the implementation of macro-regional strategies, national ETC networks, and European Union institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, etc and actors involved in the implementation of mainstream ERDF programmes linked to delivering greater thematic and strategic coherence and synergies.

5.1 Target group engagement and experiences

The 2021 Operational Evaluation Interact has already identified Interact's robust and extensive engagement with its target groups, e.g., with Interact exceeding its targets in terms of participation in events.²⁶ These findings are reinforced by the following findings of the Interact Impact Evaluation.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that, as the preceding analysis highlights, not every resource is comprehensively used and not all programmes engage consistently – all of which have implications for impact. However, it is equally important that programmes are not 'forced' to use resources, tailored inputs (which may not immediately apply to all) can be made available where relevant, information can be provided 'in advance', and Interact are mindful of where best to place their efforts.

- **Ongoing commitment to facilitating and enabling engagement**

Adding to the operational evaluation analysis of engagement, interview responses reflect the **overall high levels of engagement with Interact services and tools amongst key target groups**, in particular stakeholders directly involved in programme management and implementation, managing authorities, secretariat representatives and specialists, e.g., in financial control, audit, and also the European Commission specialists. A balance of programme types and geographies are engaged with Interact, e.g., 25 programmes from all strands are participating in the HIT Core group for the development of HIT Tools for 2021-27.²⁷

The long-standing durable links that programmes maintain with Interact are highlighted by stakeholders, ~ a quarter of interview respondents. Many noted the development of excellent personal working relationships and links to

Interact staff, and their experience of the growing role of Interact over the years. Links are also carried forward within programmes efforts are made to promote, disseminate and engage with Interact's work, e.g. "I make a point of encouraging all staff to engage with Interact" (Head of Interreg/IPA Joint Secretariat).

Interact works hard and on an on-going basis to pursue **'active and direct engagement' with target groups**. Physical events and chances to meet in person are at the heart of Interact's work. Reflecting on the advantages of physical events, respondents note the added value of the informal networking and the lack of distractions that can come attending an event. However, since 2020, online events have proved a new way to widen and deepen participation (reducing barriers to participation most notably cost and travel). This type of flexibility and on-going commitment is appreciated by stakeholder groups. Interview respondents highlight:

- Interact's capacity, commitment and willingness to rapidly adapt to on-line provision in light of the Covid crisis,
- The knowledgeable, engaged and 'approachable' staff;
- Interact have valuable soft skills as well as technical knowhow; and
- Beneficial changes to key 'engagement tools' and access points are noted, e.g., improvements to the website.

“

We have a very long-standing link with Interact (since 2008) and use/appreciate a wide range of their services, from eMS though to networks

IPA Programme Manager

“

The Interact point is geographically close and has been very helpful – we can easily approach them with questions.

Interreg MA/JS

“

The culture of Interact is such that, if I did have a suggestion for doing something differently, I feel I would be heard and could contact them directly. There is a willingness to listen and learn.”

Head of Unit, National Interreg Authority

When considering target group engagement, **a level of variation over time is important to recognise**. For example,

- a notable change resulted from the move of events and training online in response to the Covid pandemic. For example,



- a number of respondents commented on their selective engagement in the past, due to travel, time and cost issues, but increased involvement since events moved online;
- others found capacity issues, exacerbated by Covid combined with programming, meant they had limited in the time they could devote to events, and relied more on written documents or presentations;
- levels of stakeholder engagement and participation are more/less intensive as work progresses on tools and services
 - early consultation on a resource, e.g., eMS is important but then can become more routinised into the future; and
- another change links to stages in the programme cycle, with intensive periods in the run up to the adoption of new regulations and a new programme period
- for some programmes, and on some themes, events come 'too late', and a resolution has already reached by the programmes themselves. Although, as will be noted in subsequent sections of this report, exchange of experience through Interact events and exchange can still be a useful 'reassurance' / 'confirmation' for programmes, and some of the 'solutions' developed draw on knowhow and networks linked to Interact activity.

It remains the case that some programmes are more/less engaged than others. This issue is explored in detail in the Interact Operational Evaluation, ²⁸ which found:

- Reasons for more limited/or less visible use of Interact products services include:
 - lack of staff time/resource,
 - distance to travel for meetings/participation,
 - some uncertainty about exactly what Interact does and who to talk to;
 - resistance to change language issues;
 - use of 'other' resources, e.g., Commission, programme or national support.
- Programmes are 'indirectly' engaged with Interact, which may not be picked up by Interact overviews of participation, e.g. they get information from events/meetings passed on/shared from other sources, or may not respond to feedback questionnaires.

The Operational Evaluation concluded it was unsurprising that not all programmes participate to the same extent. It is always going to be difficult to engage with 'everyone all the time'. Complementing these findings, interviewees for the Impact Evaluation see the opportunity to

'pick and choose' where and when to engage as allowing programmes flexibility and adaptability.

- **Stakeholder flexibility and engagement with specific services and tools**

Across the three Interact Specific Objectives, target groups differ and expectations as to the extent, level and impact of their engagement should reflect this. Recognising the variations and specificities linked to each SO, activity and tool, a broad review of engagement based on interview responses is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Overview of Target Group Engagement by Interact SO

	Engagement	Key target groups
SO 1	<p>Direct engagement with programme management and implantation specialists on key themes and tools</p> <p>Information resources for programmes on technical issues</p> <p>Direct work with European Commission on key themes and tools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interreg programme management and implementation specialists • European Commission thematic and area specialists
SO 2	<p>Strong engagement and role of programme communications experts, through communication networks and targeted events, tools and training.</p> <p>Wider engagement and established cooperation with, e.g., European Commission on large scale communication, dissemination and publicity events</p> <p>Work with projects as part of Project Slam</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interreg programme management and implementation specialists • Interreg programme communication managers • European Commission thematic and area specialists • Selected projects (Project Slam and Capitalisation networks) • Wider policy/programme networks for communication and capitalisation (indirectly)
SO 3	<p>As noted in the Interact 2019 Annual Implementation report, success in this area of activity requires intensive and close cooperation with Interreg programmes and with the other stakeholders engaged with the implementation of the macro regional strategies, EGTC, other ESIF programmes and Member States.</p> <p>Links to national policy environments through macro regional work and areas-based programme collaboration networks</p> <p>Close cooperation with European Commission noted in key specialist areas.</p> <p>Only a very limited number of Interreg programmes took up some innovative ITIs, CLLD and JAP, which is an issue beyond the control of Interact and limits their impact they can expect to have across programmes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IPA ENI Interreg programmes • Programmes and networks working with macroregional strategies • Interreg programme management and implementation specialists (linked to work in innovative tools) • European Commission thematic and area specialists

Source: EPRC



Interview respondents are aware of the breadth of Interact's work but also go on to note specific aspects they are particularly familiar with. Frequently mentioned examples (i.e. specifically mentioned by more than one third of respondents) are, e.g.

- Tools, e.g. HIT and eMS/JeMS, keep.eu;
- 'Technical work', e.g. covering financial management, eligibility, simplified costs options, state aid and indicators and, reporting;
- Networks;
- Capitalisation work; and
- Work on the 2021-2027 regulations and new programme period, e.g. events on functional areas, PO5, ISO1, 2.

This is a limited 'snapshot' of target group awareness of key areas of Interact's work but does provide an indication of where areas of work 'stand out'. Interact's **work covers areas of general and specific interest, which has related implications for engagement with target groups.** For example, work on communication can involve engagement across programmes,

wider stakeholder groups and direct engagement with projects and communication specialists. In contrast, some training and networking events are seen as 'for more junior members of staff'; others target specialists in a field, e.g. working on audit or State Aid issues. The variations in engagement and the range of Interact services means the character/role of Interact can be experienced differently, e.g. as a trainer, advisor, partner, service provider, network lead, technical specialist. Interact manages these various 'characters' to its work and different relationships that these entail with their target groups. However, it is worth recognising that these different dimensions to the work exist and can impact on how Interact is perceived.

This scope to be **selective in their participation and use of Interact services and tools means stakeholders have important flexibility and control in how they decide to use and share resources.**



We are quite targeted in selecting what we take part in. We look through the Interact newsletter which shows what events are coming up and note events of interest and who might want to attend. We then share knowledge or experience gained from the events around other colleagues within the Secretariat and Managing Authority.

Interreg CBC Programme Manager

- **Responsive to and engaged with target groups in work planning and development**

Interviewees generally recognise and appreciate the way Interact prepares their work and services and the way in which Interact try to involve all the different programmes in their activities. It is very positive that programmes are asked 'what they need' and that the programmes can respond with requests. More generally, the 'culture of cooperation and communication' supported by Interact is highlighted by respondents. Programmes are listened to and can reflect their own needs, with the emphasis not always on a 'single means of operating' or a single 'right answer'.



There are benefits which come from the Interact/Interreg culture of cooperation which promotes the understanding of differences, and that different regions or parts of Europe may approach challenges and development in different ways. It is important not to argue about who is closer to the truth but work on understanding each other. There is also a culture of communication which emphasises understanding the needs of the recipient and ensuring that those needs are reflected in any communication”.

Head of Unit, National Interreg Authority

Interact's geographically dispersed offices and 'proximity' to programmes is an aspect of engagement that respondents noted. The links to the 'local' Interact office and familiarity with specific programme contexts are assets. Not all programmes/stakeholders benefit from the same close links as others, but the geographic dimension and sensitivity to territorial specificities were widely referred to in relation to a number of issues such as promoting work on cross programme synergies, macroregional links, and physical presence in the newer Member States (albeit the MA is in Slovakia). At the same time, it should also be stressed that the pan-European coverage that Interact offers is fundamental and fragmentation of effort and 'spreading resources too thinly' is important to avoid.

To inform decisions on how to best use Interact resources, it is important that stakeholders are aware of what they all are and what work is planned. An issue to consider for the future is some lack of clarity on what activities Interact is developing, possibly because of information overload and challenges in managing the volume of output. A number of respondents noted that in the past, Interact was much smaller, the number of activities were fewer and they felt 'familiar' with all the elements of Interact's work. As Interact's portfolio has increased and extended, awareness of all the activities and resources has been harder for stakeholders to keep up.

- **Engagement is optional and can grow**

Maximising impact and engagement with target groups is still a key objective for Interact. Looking to the future, Interact's key focus clearly remains programme stakeholders. Interact was created by and for the Interreg community and the primary focus remains on programmes. Within that core group, additional efforts are made to target thematic specialists, different programme types and various programme actors, e.g., auditors as well as

secretariat staff etc). Nevertheless, within the programme 'group' there are still opportunities to explore and deepen links to some stakeholders, e.g., programme contact points are the focus of an emerging area of work.²⁹ Another opportunity could be to link to programme beneficiaries in some elements of work. For example, linked to capitalisation efforts it could be interesting to link to key beneficiaries and stakeholders to highlight strategic opportunities or best practice, possibly linked to the Interreg Learning Platforms. Although it is not Interact's main role, programmes have engaged with Interact in relation to training or events for beneficiaries to provide specialist input. However, care would need to be taken that Interact is not forced to take on what should be programme communication and capitalisation efforts or work overlaps with other interventions.

More generally, wider groups do benefit from Interact work, e.g., the European Commission, European Parliament, national government officials, policy makers and academics. The European Commission, for example, is not a 'main recipient' or target group. Nevertheless, as will be highlighted there are important synergies and a high level of engagement between Interact and the European Commission, involving regular meetings, consultation on Interact's annual work plans, European Commission input into Interact guidance, and participation in events. According to European Commission officials, the 'coinciding' interests of the programmes and the European Commission mean that Interact events on, e.g., how to interpret regulations, can allow the Commission to gauge the opinions of programmes and act as a bridge to the programmes.

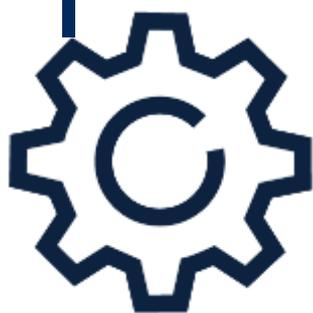
Building on areas of coinciding interests could also be of potential interest for the future. For example, as work on programme complementarities, synergies and coordination is pursued and work on territorial cohesion and functional areas develops, Interact and the wider Interreg community could have a lot to offer in terms of knowledge exchange and expertise.

	Conclusion	Recommendation
	<p>Interact is effectively engaging with core target groups</p> <p>Interact is extending its reach and engagement with wider programme and stakeholder types</p>	<p>Retain 'programme-first' focus, but ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope to widen/deepen links within programme groups • A clear focus on programmes will allow Interact a robust, clear basis for extending and developing its links to wider stakeholder groups • As work on coordination and synergies grows, Interact has a lot to offer wider stakeholder communities.

	<p>There are variations and difference in in how, when and why stakeholders engage</p> <p>Stakeholders value the flexible way they can engage with Interact</p> <p>Online service provision and engagement hugely important</p> <p>Further work can be done to ensure stakeholder are aware of the resources and wat work is planned.</p>	<p>Maintain responsive and adaptive approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pick up on new trends based on own experience and programme/wider stakeholder consultation • Outputs and plans will need to respond to rapidly changing external environments; allow for adaptation and change • Retain strong online provision to extend reach/engagement
	<p>Tools and services are complementary</p> <p>Stakeholder generally engage with a wide range of services and tools</p> <p>Some resources may not be used as 'heavily' or 'visibly' as others, but are valued within narrower user groups and/or at specific points</p>	<p>Some services and tools are well established and can be 'routinised'</p> <p>Some events could be standardised and delivered online, involving self-assessment</p> <p>Some activities and resources will evolve. Support can and should 'move on', e.g. not all networks are as active as others.</p> <p>The use and usability of published reports and resources could be amplified, e.g., with blog summaries of outputs and accompanying infographic summaries and ongoing work on web-site accessibility.</p>
	<p>The value of links to 'local offices' noted</p> <p>Potential for deepening programme area links on some issues</p> <p>However, the pan-European coverage is still the core added value of Interact</p>	<p>Geographic links are valued</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The territorial focus of Interact's work has value and could be extended in relation to some aspects of work(particularly in light of the emphasis on coordination, complementarities and the territorial agenda) • Geographic focus aspects should complement and support, the pan-EU perspective and coverage.

6 EVALUATION OF SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 1: TO IMPROVE THE MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL CAPACITY OF TERRITORIAL COOPERATION PROGRAMMES

6.1 Context



Specific Objective 1 aims to improve the management and control capacity of territorial cooperation programmes. Particular emphasis is placed on simplification and harmonisation, application of best practice, and improved communications between ETC management and implementation bodies. Under Specific Objective 1 Interact undertook a wide range of strategies to deliver results, including actions around simplifying approaches for programme and communication management, work on eligibility and simplified cost options, advice and development of monitoring system, addressing legal issues, support on financial management and programme closure and support on management and control and audit.

Figure 13: Specific Objective 1

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 1	EXPECTED RESULTS			
TO IMPROVE MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL CAPACITY OF ETC/INTERREG PROGRAMMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A more widespread application of simplified and harmonised approaches with the aim of reducing the administrative burden, attracting new types of beneficiaries (e.g., private) and mitigating the risk of errors. A more widespread use of identified good practice and quality standards, which could serve as a benchmark for evaluating performance of the programmes across ETC/Interreg. Improved communication between the ETC/Interreg programme management bodies and the Member States representatives. 			
INTERREG CHALLENGE	Specific Objective	Expected Results		Medium Term Strategy
Management and Control Need to shift the focus and resources from administration and the rules to the content of the programmes/projects -Need to improve information flow between the programmes and the Member States in areas of 'shared responsibilities'. -Diversity of rules and interpretations. -Increased risk of errors. Need to develop common quality standards and recognised good practice. -Need to increase the inflow of new beneficiaries	1.1 To improve management and control capacity of ETC programmes The aim is to contribute to an efficient and effective implementation of ETC/Interreg programmes, addressing also the shift towards more simplified and standardised programme management. Management is to be understood in a broad sense and covers all aspects of the life cycle of ETC/Interreg programmes: from the programming phase to the closure, including all programme and project management issues as well as finance, control and communication	1.1.1	A more widespread application of simplified and harmonised approaches with the aim of reducing the administrative burden, attracting new types of beneficiary and mitigating the risk of errors.	A-ER 1.1.1 Simplifying approaches for programme and communication management B-ER 1.1.1. Eligibility and simplified cost options C-ER Monitoring systems including eMS D-ER Specialised legal systems
		1.1.2	A more widespread use of identified good practice and quality standards, which could serve as a benchmark for evaluating performance of the programmes across ETC/Interreg	E-ER 1.1.2 Evaluation as a Learning Process for Programme Management and Communication F-ER 1.1.2 Programmes Financial Management, including closure G-ER 1.1.2 Management and control systems, control and audit
		1.1.3	Improved communications between ETC/Interreg programme management bodies and the Member States representatives	H-ER 1.1.3 Roles, Responsibilities and Decision-Making Processes

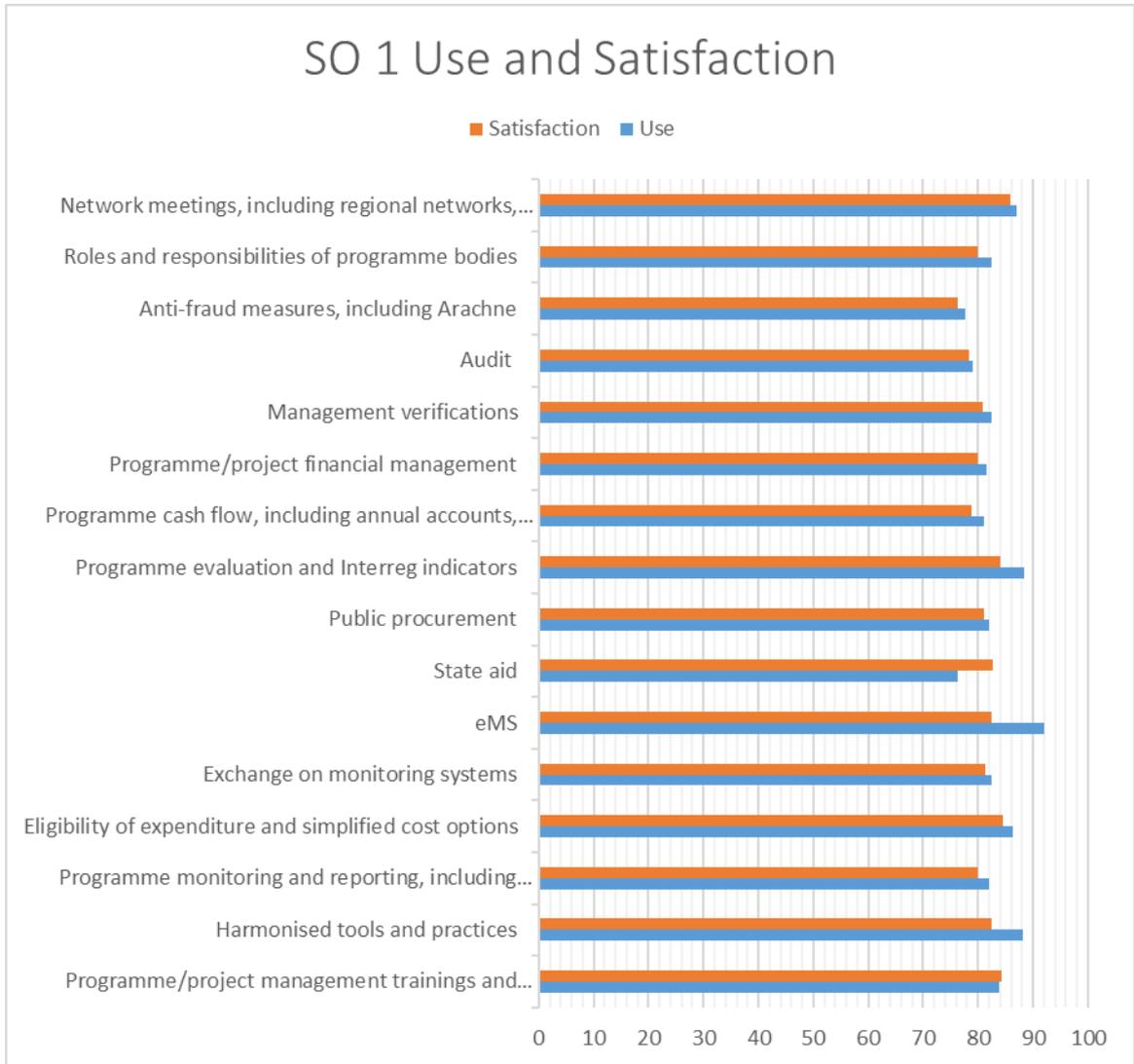
Source: MAWP



Examples of the types of services and tools delivered under this SO range from delivery of the electronic monitoring system eMS to tailored training events. It should be noted that these systems should not be viewed in isolation, e.g., tools such as eMS and HIT have events, networks, training and tools around them,

networks have events and publications. However, 'stand-alone' training, events and publications also take place. Figure 14 gives an indication of the levels of use/engagement with services and tools in relation to Interact Specific Objective 1. Overall levels are high.

Figure 14: Levels of Use and Satisfaction with Service Delivery (%)



Source: Interact Use and Satisfaction Survey 2018

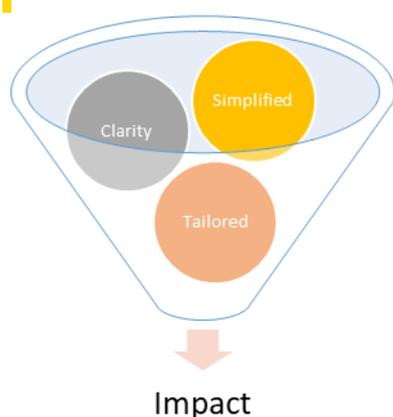
6.2 Enablers

Work to improve the management and control capacity of territorial cooperation programmes has involved major efforts in terms of harmonising the Interreg programme management across large number of programmes. The processes of developing and maintaining tools like HIT and eMS are highlighted in the case-based impact evaluation as having enhanced capacities for programme management by, e.g., positively affecting the culture of cooperation among Interreg programmes, the organisational culture in programme authorities, as well as programme management processes and tools. Wider analysis reveals similar findings in relation to actions under SO1 overall. These results are in line with Interact's expected results. However, the following analysis is also able to show a wider range of results linked to Interact's core objectives:

- More widespread application of simplified and harmonised approaches,
- More widespread use of good practice and quality standards, and
- Improved communication between Interreg programmes and Member State Representatives.

As well as identifying results, the following analysis also identifies specific challenges and lessons for the future.

6.2.1 Structures and Processes



Interact services and tools have delivered positive results in relation to a number of aspects of improved structures and processes.



Simplified & harmonised processes

Interact's work under SO 1 contributes to **informing and simplifying programme management and implementation processes.**

Interview evidence reinforces the case-based impact evaluation's findings that the adoption of Interact tools such as HIT, and eMS have contributed to simplified and more harmonised practices across the programmes that apply them. For example, harmonised templates and guidance helped develop and shape programme management provisions and processes.

“

Thanks to INTERACT programmes increasingly adopt similar implementation practices, which is beneficial to applicants/beneficiaries, who no longer have to adapt to programmes specifics when applying to several programme

Director Transnational Interreg Programme

Associated learning throughout the adoption and implementation phases of shared systems have contributed to simpler programme processes and a greater focus on reducing the administrative burden for applicants/beneficiaries. eMS, and more recently JeMS, have required programmes to rethink and redesign management processes and structures, with simplification and

increased transparency being noted benefits. Harmonised branding has provided access to pre-processed information, which has changed how some implementation tasks are carried out.

Broader advice, identification of best practice and benchmarking on specific technical issues has helped programmes to plan structures and processes for new elements.

For example, Interact's work on Simplified Cost Options (SCOs), is widely also referred to by interview respondents (~30 percent of interviewees). As well as informing arrangements for the 2014-20 programme period, Interact training, advice, and support on working with SCOs has been valuable in planning processes the 2021-27 period in terms of tasks and definitions of processes and is expected to deliver results in terms of simplification and harmonisation in programme structures and processes in the future.

“

Interact is definitely a contributory factor to changes in approach.... One example is simplified cost options. The ... programme has made a lot of progress in this area and the information from Interact certainly contributed to this.

Head Of Unit Interreg CBC Programmes



Clarity, definition and communication

Interact outputs are highly valued for their contributions in helping define and clarify programme structures and processes. The 'close to life' and practical focus Interact offers is appreciated. In this respect, events and training are particularly highly regarded, with publications also important. Direct advice is also valuable. For example, a programme made changes to its management and control system based on clarifications from Interact on the establishment of certifying authorities – “changes were made, and the system had worked well ever since” (Head of Interreg Programme Unit).

Support to establish robust clear structures and processes around programmes also benefit the



links between programme authorities, with wider stakeholder community, and **facilitate communication and operations with Member State systems and structures.** Connecting different programme structures, e.g., Managing Authorities and Audit Authorities, can be challenging and Interact advice/support in aiding this process is noted by respondents. For example,

input from Interact into dialogues on technical, Interreg-specific issues has helped to inform and clarify State Aid regulations as they apply to Interreg programmes.

Respondents recognise that working on new and technically demanding issues can mean that there is a risk of inaccuracies and differing interpretations. The rapid changes underway in the operational environment, delays in the adoption of regulations and accompanying guidance make delivering up to date accurate output is all the more challenging. Interact's efforts quality check output and avoid confusion are noted and valued and should be continued in the future.



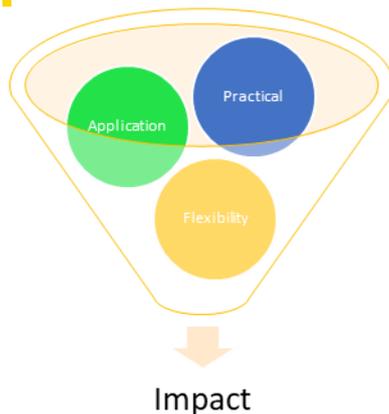
Tailored structures and processes

Interreg programmes are distinct and can be at different stages with differing needs, meaning not all content is taken up directly. Even where content is not directly applicable evidence from interviewees reveals that output from Interact is used as **background material to inform programmes' own tailored/adapted structures and processes.** Some programmes make adaptations on a more 'line by line' basis. Others may opt not take up a shared or joint approach. At its most extreme, external border programmes had separate rules. However, programme respondents still felt they benefitted in terms of shared ideas.

Interact's work situates a programme in the wider context and broadens understandings. It can support a move to work out the programme's own tailored procedures and practice. For example, the decision not to use HIT and eMS tools led some programmes to a more critical assessment, knowledge and assessment of the systems they do use and opportunities to refine and improve them.³⁰ Dialogue on joint tools facilitated a basis for discussion and exchange on wider programme management processes and provided an opportunity for programmes to test new ideas. Another respondent noted that working together with other Interreg programmes in the same area can come to practical, territorially adapted solutions for common challenges. This can materialise in the form of giving input, explaining the specific situation of a programme, discussing with other people in similar situations and finding a beneficial solution (Head of Interreg CBC Joint Secretariat).

Interact can even act as a facilitator and mediator in discussions where programmes are having difficulties in planning their approach. Respondents noted occasions where programmes faced difficulties with different views on specific issues. Interact was able to act as a neutral body and facilitate discussions and help solve problems (Head of National Interreg Unit).

6.2.2 Systems and Tools



Interact outputs have delivered positive results in relation to several aspects of systems and tools, building and delivering practical tools, supporting application and adoption, and adaptable to specific contexts.



Practical resources

Interview respondents highlight the value of having 'off the shelf', **practical**

resources to use and which can be complementary and compatible with other programmes. For example, work on harmonised branding has led to changes away from dealing with corporate branding in isolation to dealing with it collaboratively and expanded cooperation into other communication areas.

In addition to resources like the HIT tools, **'smaller scale' inputs are also valued. Specific Interact outputs are in daily use as 'Interreg Life Hacks', which ease, smooth and simplify key management and implementation processes and procedures.** For example, an interviewee noted the use of a TA calculator. Another example is a respondent's use of a matrix for developing eligible expenditure provided to participants at an Interact Finance Camp event. The resource is now used in the daily work of the programme financial control and audit officer.

“

the templates that Interact provides and the tools that they offer work very well and we use them. These make the programme management easier. This is also good for our project partners as they will appreciate if they have similar requirements (across the different programmes)...if programme would develop their own system, then the project actors would get confused!"

Head of Unit Interreg CBC Programme

As with establishing structures and processes, working across diverse programmes and stakeholders does involve challenges and it can be difficult to develop tools that work for all. For example, some data exchange templates may meet European Commission needs for data provision but may not reflect programme needs to the same extent. For some respondents, the time and effort involved in establishing joint resources was challenging.

However, continuing to work on common technical platforms such as JeMS remains important for the post 2020 period. Programme tools to convey and communicate is another area where respondents noted potential for future development, e.g., looking at the HIT tools and considering ways to have a standardised project final report on results, which could then help and promote synergies and working across programmes and capitalisation efforts.



Application and adoption

As well as the tools themselves, **Interact resources come with on-going support such as manuals, checklists etc.** Interact publications and training are available to support programmes working with the tools or on management and implementation issues. Use of publications and training is variable.

However, interview evidence shows how programmes have used these resources to build a sustainable, tailored resource for programmes and others have found them a useful resource particularly during lock-down.

On-going interaction between Interact and its stakeholders mean tools and services are not static resources. Many are continually improved and updated, e.g., respondents note the improvements to eMS through the programme period. The support available also adapts through the programme period, reflecting changing needs and demands. For instance, at the start of the programme period, there may be more emphasis on general support and take up. Later, a stronger emphasis can be placed on more fine-tuning issues.



Flexibility

While consistency and coherence are valuable characteristics so too is adaptability. As with the structures and processes, not all programmes work with every aspect of the available tools in the same way. Related, the challenges of delivering 'generalised' tools, training or exchange events to the benefit of all programmes are widely recognised.



The programme] got inspiration from Interact application forms, reporting models, etc. for the monitoring system they tried to use in this period. Their manual of implementation was inspired by Interact documentations, as well as the certainty about some rules and the clarity of explaining some concepts that were more difficult for beneficiaries"

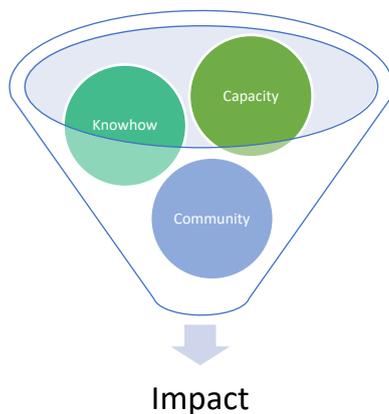
Interreg CBC Programme Representatives

Programmes slightly adapt the resources to reflect their specificities, with Interact **helping programmes understand differences better and leading them to better adapted solutions** and working better with wider systems and tools. For example, a checklist provided by Interact on SCOs helped update a programme's own checklist. Another respondent notes that Interact events/services and tools provide a 'good starting point', a framework for mutual learning and better understanding,

which allowed programmes to develop tailored solutions more efficiently (Interreg CBC Programme Coordinator).

The flexible and adaptive approach taken is noted. However, there remain some occasions when communications from Interact can appear to suggest a specific way of doing things and continuing care needs to be taken to allow for programmes have a tailored approach, as they do have unique features related to the geographical area, the administration, etc.

6.2.3 Human Resources



Capacity and Confidence

Interact services and tools **boost confidence and capacity within Programmes**

in various ways. As a source of information, events and publications on specific issues offer a robust base of information for programmes. For example, interview respondents noted events on new programme requirements help

to gather information on legal expectations linked to new regulations, increasing confidence and legal certainty for the programme. Interact are found to have been very helpful in providing training and meetings to show how new tools and facilities can be used, e.g., SCOs and working with Small Project Funds.

Stakeholder confidence in the resources is amplified by Interact's partnership and cooperation with the European Commission. Interact is seen as an important channel/route/bridge to/from the Commission, based on their networks and relationships and their unique position in the Interreg community, (~80 percent of respondents specifically mention the value of this role). Direct links to the Commission to get clarifications on technical issues on the programmes' behalf are helpful – both for the Commission and programmes.

One respondent found “despite EC guidance open questions frequently remain. Thanks to Interact support we find the answers faster”. (Head of National Audit Unit). Noting the importance of this role in relation to the specific case of State Aid, several respondents found Interreg representatives acting alone can be seen as 'less important' in comparison to national and regional programmes and therefore have a lesser voice within delegation. In this context, “it's important to have one organisation which can collect and transmit joint concerns to the European Commission” (Head of Unit, National Authority for Interreg). The role of Interact as intermediary between programmes and the European Commission is also beneficial to the Commission for whom Interact is a central contact for several issues regarding Interreg, for example SCOs or State Aid. For example, a Commission official notes that Interact can very

quickly set up an event of Q&A on an issue when the need arises, which benefits the Commission's understanding of programme issues/concerns.

Shared development, close stakeholder consultation and dialogue during the development of shared tools also provides confidence for users. For example, HIT strengthens the ties between programmes and builds confidence in programmes that harmonisation is feasible and capacities in how to approach it.



The benefits come in an indirect way through an awareness of how things are done in other organisations and other countries. This has often helped us to find a solution and made us more comfortable in our own decisions."

Interreg CBC Programme



Embedding and extending knowhow

As well as overall capacity building, **knowledge exchange and learning is highly valued.** Targeted training in is boosting capacity in key areas for programmes, particularly in relation to specialist themes, e.g., audit. For example, targeted trainings, such as the Finance Camp and Annual Audit Seminar training on State Aid and Small Project Funds, are noted as providing valuable, tailored and intensive knowledge and understanding of key specialist themes. Further notable examples are set out in Box 2. Additionally, tailored support to programmes is highlighted as valuable, e.g., support the take up on eMS, support on developing a Small Project Fund. Amplifying the results of this area of work is the fact that **more events and training sessions were available online.** Retaining this dimension to Interact's work is valuable for the future.



Q&A: Audits of operations
2021-2027



Knowhow in specific areas of work is enhanced through seminars and training events. At key stages in the programme cycle activities on, e.g., new resources, new regulations or evaluation and annual evaluation reports have particular resonance and applicability. For example, Interact-organised training events on the new regulatory period involving representatives from DG Regio were extremely helpful in gaining a real understanding of changes and how regulations could/should be implemented. Even for programmes that are experienced and well established, there is recognised value in the confirmation of ways of working, exchange on approaches to issues from the wider context and future planning and innovation.

Crucially, **work on complex issues does not fall to programmes to address alone**

but is 'shared' through exchange of experience, facilitated by Interact, or supported directly through Interact publications and presentations. The established networks of experts and practitioners that Interact draws on can deliver 'trusted' output on what can be highly technical issues from, e.g., 'pioneer' programmes taking on new

approaches, representatives from the European Commission and National Governments, resources which "would not be available to programmes working alone." (Interreg CBC Programme Manager). Results to the benefit of the programmes are clear. However, direct benefits to programme staff are also highlighted. For example, one respondent highlighted progress in their **general professional skills, e.g., public speaking, as well as specialist knowledge as a result of engagement in Interact events.**



*One of the main advantages of **INTERACT** is that it allows [us] to test/discuss new ideas with experts from other Programmes before implementation. In this respect, we do not only take advantage of **INTERACT**, but we also contribute actively."*

Head of Unit Interreg CBC Programme



Box 2: Developing Technical Knowhow

Risk-based Sampling

Work of Interact in relation to delivering overviews of programme approaches, e.g., on risk-based sampling, provide valuable points of comparisons and lessons. Respondents were sensitive to the challenges in this work, e.g., with different type/volumes of information available across the various programmes posing challenges to providing a coherent overview (Programme Finance and Audit Officer)

SCO

Interact organised an SCO practitioner workshop for 60 practitioners to exchange knowledge and experience on specific aspects of SCOs, which can be carried forward to the 2021-27 programme period where they are expected to be even more widely applied.

Audit

Events valued and “We also use INTERACT publications and documents which provide a summary of discussions and thus provide combined knowledge from the discussions. They are a good addition to the events. We have also participated in their development. The document “Q&A audits if operations 2014-20” is one of the main documents for auditors and it was particularly useful to us as it serves as a real glossary for all important issues” (Representative of National Interreg Authority)

State Aid

INTERACT activities on state aid were noted as particularly useful by a number of respondents: noted as ‘very much to the point and professional’. What distinguished Interact’s work on this field was the tailoring and sensitivity to the specific needs of Interreg and the ‘voice’ it could Interreg practitioners, where in the past they have felt ‘less important in comparison to national and regional programmes and with a lesser voice within delegations. (Representative of National Interreg Authority)

N.B. The following examples are based on cases highlighted by multiple respondents, and using illustrative quotes

On technical issues, for some programmes, some themes/issues are covered too late considering the state-of-play with their programming cycle. In order for the programmes to include thematic advice, there may be scope to introduce specific themes earlier (especially complex themes such as State Aid). While this is not regarded to be a big issue (as Interact is seen to address any challenges and problems as they arise), it is noted that earlier support is helpful especially with more complex topics.



Enabling community building and support networks

Training and direct learning inputs are important. However, Interact's role in **facilitating shared and joint learning and building communities and networks is also key**. The collaborative and participatory approach to work is widely identified as one of the most important elements of INTERACT's support. For example, respondents note Interact is 'helping to help programmes help themselves', building a sense of "community where programmes can reach out to each other when facing specific challenges" (Financial Control and Audit Officer). For example,

- "regular meetings of auditors and the opportunity to get to know other programmes, share/discuss and discuss with the European Commission are valuable and events are complementary to Commission Audit events" (Head of Audit Authority).
- "the opportunity to work with a community of peers through regular events, e.g., the Annual Audit Seminar, is beneficial for sharing experience and best practice and as a way to seek clarifications on Commission decisions" (Financial Control and Audit Officer).

As well as drawing from Interact's resources and inputs, programme and stakeholders note their engagement as contributors to events and training, with the associated benefits of increased visibility, profile and confidence, and sense of altruism and expertise.

As well as links between programmes, as has been mentioned direct connections to the European Commission, either through Interact or via Commission participation in events, is highlighted as a valuable resource. A number of programmes and Commission representatives, note that the support works well alongside links to/from programme desk officers.



By cooperating [through Interact], I am able to generate contacts with other CBC and transnational programmes. We grow together and learn from each other."

Interreg Cross Border Programme

Exchange of experience and networking are at the heart of what is beneficial to programmes.

Individual participants, particularly those working in specialist fields, note the benefits of working with Interact services and tools for their personal professional development. However, the wider benefits to programmes in terms of organisational changes/adaptations are less immediately apparent for some. Limiting learning only to direct participants in events etc can be the result of various factors, the culture of the organisation, personnel involved, and pressures of work.

Evidence from training participants, however, suggests that individual participants often act as multipliers in that they pass on training content and materials to colleagues and/or use training content to change programme documents and procedures. The value of wider dissemination of knowhow, tools, learning within programmes boosts institutional knowhow, capacity and memory. This could be something Interact can work to highlight further, particularly as so many resources are available online, events and meeting are recorded and easily shared.



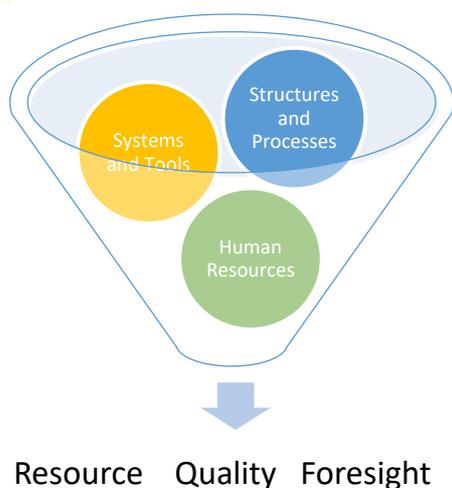
After the training, I have modified our procedures and documents concerning the SCOs.”

Participant at the Management verifications training, Thessaloniki/Greece, 21-22.2.2018

6.3 Impacts

SO1 has delivered impact by addressing key issues linked to programme efficiency and effectiveness and resilience by, e.g., helping Programmes deliver better and more impactful projects, saving programme time and resource through provision of tools/ advice/knowledge and better systems and flows of information. As is noted at the outset of the evaluation, take up of the various resources vary and there are substantial constraints beyond Interact's control that influence the extent to which large scale impacts can be quantitatively measured. However, this in-depth evaluation shows how outputs under SO 1 deliver beneficial impacts for programmes. Looking to the future, Interact has an invaluable resource with wider applications/relevance and scope to develop its role and impact further.

6.3.1 Efficiency, effectiveness and resilience



- Resource saved**

The scope to use off-the-shelf tools has saved programmes the time and effort in developing their own systems. This contribution is particularly valuable for newer and smaller programmes. Interact materials (e.g., presentations, guidance, templates) are also used by programmes for their own events and trainings for applicants and beneficiaries, saving

preparation time and effort. Concrete examples of the benefits of these resources are as follows:

- “the eMS system has had a positive impact because we could launch our call at the end of 2015, contract our first projects in spring 2016 and consequently we had no problems with N+3. We were able to start early because of the monitoring system. Had we chosen to wait for the ... national system, we would have been delayed by 2 years. We are therefore very grateful to use the eMS.” (JS/MA Interreg Cross Border Programme)
- “even when Interact resources are not adopted fully, the availability of ‘starting points’ ‘something to work with/from’ saves time and effort, e.g., “participation in INTERACT has certainly led to efficiency and effectiveness gains” (Interreg Cross Border Programme)
- Interact work can be used to build a case for how to address change through providing clear information and illustrations of how issues have been dealt with in practice, which can smooth and rationalise necessary change. (Interreg Cross Border Programme Secretariat)
- For the training of programme beneficiaries, I took the materials from the Interreg project management camp and prepared the presentation with a support of the materials. (ENI CBC Programme participant at Interreg project management camp, Wroclaw/Poland, 3-6.7.2018)

Through Interact’s work on the regulations and technical aspects of programme implementation, regulatory requirements are analysed and presented in a concise manner, which respondents find saves significant time as they do not have to go through lengthy regulations themselves.

Work led by Interact, both for and with Programmes, has helped raise awareness and understanding of the relevance and applicability of new approaches, e.g., SCOs, again saving programmes time in addressing these issues alone. Additionally, through maintaining references resources like the library etc, programmes who may not use specific tools for can monitor progress and look at how they could be used in the future.

As a result, some of key impacts of Interact’s work are for programmes moving into the 2021-27 programme period. With established tools, systems and knowhow in place and an understanding of how these are developed, programmes are spared the time and resource of developing these from scratch and go in with more knowledge to work with. For example, the first package of HIT tools was available well in advance of programmes starting.³¹ JeMS will be at an advanced stage for programmes starting. The financial savings for programmes using eMS are considerable the programme, as they did not have to develop their own monitoring system. It has been estimated to be in the order of ~20 million Euro.³² In the coming period, savings may be even higher given that Interact and the Interreg programmes can capitalise



There are benefits from the interpretation of regulations and legislation, as well as clarity which comes from training, all of which impact the operation of the organisation”.

National Interreg Authority

on the experience with the development of eMS for developing the new community monitoring system.

- **Quality**



Noted contributions to building skills, awareness and understanding have knock on effects on informing better systems and solutions for more effective programme management and even a positive knock-on effect for beneficiaries. For example,

- “The work on simplified cost options, which Interact contributed to, was done mainly for the benefit of small projects. We have succeeded in setting up unit costs for small projects where the budget can be calculated and paid out on unit costs. This will be a huge simplification for many beneficiaries. We are currently in a test phase with a number of pilot calls so we will be able to see how it works and what the benefits are for beneficiaries. This came from an awareness of the high administrative burden faced by small projects where only a small amount of money was being applied for and wanted to find a way to simplify things. Interact definitely contributed to this process, mainly through our participation in related events.” (Interreg CBC Managing Authority)
- “The training that we are able to pass on, based on the input from Interact, allows our stakeholders to be more prepared to respond to opportunities and implement projects well. The training helps to ensure the prevention of problems in the projects rather than the need to correct them afterwards.” (Interreg National Authority Representative)
- Another notable contribution is through Interact's engagement with the European Commission, e.g., in the preparation of the Interreg Regulation, in which Interact played an important role in improving the draft as it identified and communicated to the Council weaknesses in the legal texts. The Commission could not have played that role since their influence in council negotiations is limited to technical support. (European Commission Official)

Work on shared systems, approaches and understandings are, therefore, credited with offering direct benefits to both programmes and programme beneficiaries. Greater standardisation, clarity and structure also links to better transparency and accountability within structures and processes. However, as has been noted adaptability and flexibility in the tools and services also contributes. Looking to the future, major steps have been introduced to develop harmonised tools and approaches, but it should be recognised that standardisation can only go so far. Care needs to be taken not to go 'beyond what is needed for simplification' potentially cutting out the scope for programmes to adapt tools to their own conditions. Simplification should not be confused with standardisation.

- **Responsive, foresight and planning**



The specialist and network-based approach to much of Interact's work has helped Programmes deal with the inherent complexities of working with Interreg. For example, established fora, such as the working groups and networks, have given programmes scope to come together to work on

responses, such as developing methodologies for identifying risky operations (Finance and Audit Officer).

Willingness and confidence to innovate and evolve is facilitated, either through having a shared resource which can inspire change, free up capacity to innovate or via the development process and gaining familiarity and expertise in the field. For example, the Interact case-based impact evaluation noted that eMS and HIT have positively influenced the capacity to innovate, organisational flexibility and readiness for accepting and managing change. Reassurance can come through engagement on specific challenging themes/issues, such as setting monitoring indicators where Interreg programmes faced particular challenges, which were not well reflected in the overall approach applied to Cohesion policy programmes.

The rapid response, adaptation and support linked to Covid was important to help programmes maintain effective operations in changed conditions and boosted their resilience. For example,

- “the sharing of experiences and support that Interact offers through the networks has helped. For example, during the Covid crisis, this has been helpful to understand how different programmes deal with issues e.g., on the spot checks.” (Head of Interreg CBC Programme Unit) This has had knock on benefits: opened up consultation with other programmes, built trust, increased flexibility (avoid being too strict and bureaucratic) and try to come up with case-by-case solutions (rather than punish project partners). (Head Interreg CBC Programme Unit)

As has been noted, some particularly significant impacts of Interact's work are for programmes moving into the 2021-27 programme period. With established tools, systems and knowhow in place and an understanding of how these are developed, programmes are spared the time and resource of developing these from scratch and go in with more knowledge to work with. For example, tools are already in place, training and events to support the take up of new tools have been undertaken. Work in advance has allowed programmes to progress even though there have been delays in the regulations (Head of Interreg CBC Managing Authority). It was also mentioned that programme authorities have been able to liaise with Interact regarding specific issues and topics and prepare a coordinated opinion on the regulations to the European Commission. In the other direction, it was useful to have topics being discussed at the Council fed back so that there could be Member State level discussion on them.

Due to the variety of Interreg programmes, it can be difficult for Interact to act as a 'single voice' and have the capacity to address legislative issues for a wide variety of programmes. In some cases, respondents also mentioned that the links to the European Commission were already covered by the national representations, which understand the specific needs and conditions of the programmes in the country in question. Nonetheless, Interact was still noted as a useful 'additional/ channel/method of communication with the European Commission, especially concerning specific areas (e.g., implications of PO4) for both programmes and the European Commission. It has also been noted that in particular small Interreg programmes benefit from the fact that they are represented by Interact in discussions with the Commission

or as observer in expert groups (comitology) on such technical issues such as State Aid rather than having to have a dedicated (State Aid) expert inhouse.

	Conclusion	Recommendation
	<p>Time & Resource saving: Interact contributes to efficient programme implementation, by offering off-the-shelf implementation tools and resources in line with EU regulations and guidance</p> <p>As well as 'large-scale' tools, smaller-scale resources like checklists are helpful for programmes, boosting efficiency and effectiveness in key tasks.</p> <p>The tools are complementary and link, meeting other objectives, e.g., results focus and programme performance</p> <p>Simplification: Interact work is delivering and informing simplified and harmonised solutions, which are widely used. For example: Interact achieves simplification for actors (applicants/beneficiaries, national controllers, national authorities) working in multiple programmes</p> <p>For some programmes the scope to adapt tools and apply lessons, as opposed to fully harmonised approaches have proved simpler and useful</p> <p>Adaptable: Scope to work flexibility and adapt/learn from tools valuable to programmes.</p> <p>Transparency and clarity: Legal certainty and transparency is improved for programmes and beneficiaries. Better informed decisions enabled by services and tools (even when the tools themselves are not adopted)</p>	<p>There continues to be value in seeking joint, simplified and harmonised approaches where appropriate. However,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The effort to develop the resources needs to be considered – harmonisation does not always lead to simplification and can be resource intensive. • The conflicting pressures that programmes face should be taken into account, e.g., to pursue harmonisation at national level can reduce appetite to pursue greater harmonisation at EU level <p>It is worth noting and extending the impact/value/use of 'small tools'</p> <p>As significant strides have been made to harmonise key systems, looking to the future it will be important to consider how much impact can be achieved and where it is most beneficial to target efforts.</p> <p>Retain and recognise the value of flexibility and adaptability in how some tools are used.</p> <p>Interact tools (e.g., publications, templates, presentations, guidance documents, etc.) have shown to be an important (and maybe underestimated) resources for programmes. Programmes are using them in their day-to-day as reference, as starting point for developing their own tools, in their exchanges with applicants and beneficiaries, etc.</p> <p>Trainings are very effective interventions and cater to the needs of Interreg programmes for "practice-oriented" and "interactive" events. This line of activity (in particular online trainings) could be developed further.</p>

	<p>Expert input and know how: Input on highly specialist fields such as State Aid is of particular value in informing effective and efficiency systems and responding to change</p> <p>Decision making and communication capacity: Interact built up extensive information and knowhow on take up and adoption of tools and services to inform effective and efficient decision making</p> <p>Implementation/adaption support are an important part of the tools provided. The provision of technical knowhow and advice on new and technical administration and implementation issues are highly regarded</p> <p>Communication capacity: Communication resources and information ease communication between stakeholders and contribute to effectiveness</p> <p>Strategic Links and engagement: Interact informs and feeds into Programme, Commission and policy decision making, e.g., on the application of State Aid in Interreg</p>	<p>Knowhow/institutional memory of why/how decisions were taken could be valuable to retain/distil to inform future iterations/developments</p> <p>Some more embedded elements of the work could be more routinised/delivered through online training.</p> <p>Work with/ encourage programmes to extend engagement with resources within own communities and extend simplification efforts to beneficiaries</p>
	<p>Resilience and community building: Tools, know how capacity and skills have boosted stakeholder adaptive capacity and resilience, e.g., delivery of 'timely' resources is key, as already noted with the availability of JeMS in advance of programmes starting</p> <p>Interact support helps programmes to help themselves through networks and links gained</p> <p>Responsive Programmes feel able to ask for help and be 'listened' to</p> <p>Advisory support to individual programme has been important and can pick up on programme specificities. However, it also ties up Interact resources which otherwise could benefit more programmes.</p>	<p>The complex nature of Interreg programmes means one size fits all is not always possible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback, monitoring and evaluation efforts could pick up on the 'associated' benefits of Interact services and tools, e.g., informing decision making, adapted solutions, clear communication with/between programme stakeholders. <p>Where relevant, there could be ways to 'capitalise' on advisory work extend and share elements of advisory work with wider relevance, e.g., short blog posts on key learning points (with the agreement of participating programme/s), in order to get the most from the time and resource that the work involves</p> <p>When undertaking advisories critically consider the resources involved and whether a more widely targeted intervention may be more impactful or another provider may be better placed to</p>

		<p>address the issues, e.g. direct contact with the Commission.</p> <p>Take up opportunities and avenues for more widely promoting the findings of advisory work to maximise added value (with agreement of the participating programme). The in-depth work with programmes is valuable, but there may be scope to disseminate experiences widely to the benefit of all programmes.</p>
	<p>Strategic links and connection: Engagement with the European Commission, specifically on technical implementation issues, such as the application of State Aid regulations in Interreg, Simplified Cost Options and Small Projects Fund is valuable from Programme and Commission perspectives. Overall, the role is very valuable and productive.</p> <p>The intermediary role Interact plays can be challenging and challenged on some issues.</p>	<p>Maintaining strong links with the European Commission benefits programmes, beneficiaries and the European Commission.</p> <p>Keeping these links visible, transparent and 'accessible' is important for programmes, particularly on some more challenging topics.</p>

7 EVALUATION OF SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 2: TO IMPROVE THE TERRITORIAL COOPERATION CAPACITY IN CAPTURING AND COMMUNICATING THE PROGRAMME RESULTS.

7.1 Context



Specific Objective 2 aims to improve territorial cooperation capacity in capturing and communicating programme results. The results-orientation and effective communication of results with a view to capitalisation and maximising impact are key concerns for the 2014-20 Interreg programmes. The aim of Interact's work is to increase thematic expertise and competence within programmes, build a repository for results and lead on the development of an integrated ETC/Interreg communication strategy. Under Specific Objective 2, the Interact programme has

planned a wide range of interventions to deliver these results, including work on capitalisation, communication, thematic knowledge development, capturing, conveying and highlighting Interreg results, and development of keep.eu database, see Figure 15.

Figure 15: Specific Objective 2

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 2 ³³	EXPECTED RESULTS
TO IMPROVE THE ETC/INTERREG CAPACITY IN CAPTURING AND COMMUNICATING THE PROGRAMME RESULTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased thematic expertise/competence within the ETC/Interreg programmes thanks to Interact support • A repository of ETC/Interreg results is established • Leadership of integrated ETC/Interreg communication strategy established

INTERREG CHALLENGE	1.2	Specific Objective		Expected Results	Medium Term Strategy
RESULTS AND COMMUNICATION -Need to improve thematic expertise. •Need to identify substantial evidence of Interreg results. •Need to establish strategic coordinated communication, which would ensure the visibility of Interreg against other Interreg programmes		To improve the ETC/Interreg capacity in capturing and communicating the programme results Smooth implementation of ETC/Interreg programmes in regards to the thematic concentration and the focus on results. In addition, the effects of ETC/Interreg on Cohesion Policy should be more clearly identified. Increased visibility of ETC/Interreg as a whole, on the basis of the results achieved. Increased networking, also at a strategic level.	1.2.1	Increased thematic expertise / competence within the ETC/Interreg programmes thanks to Interact support.	I-ER Capitalisation and Thematic Knowledge, Knowledge Development and Communication
			1.2.2	A repository of ETC/Interreg results is established	J-ER Capturing and giving visibility to Interreg Results: Keep and Communication
			1.2.3	Leadership of integrated ETC/Interreg communication strategy established.	K-ER Strengthening the visibility of Interreg Results

Source: *Interact Multi Annual Work Programme*

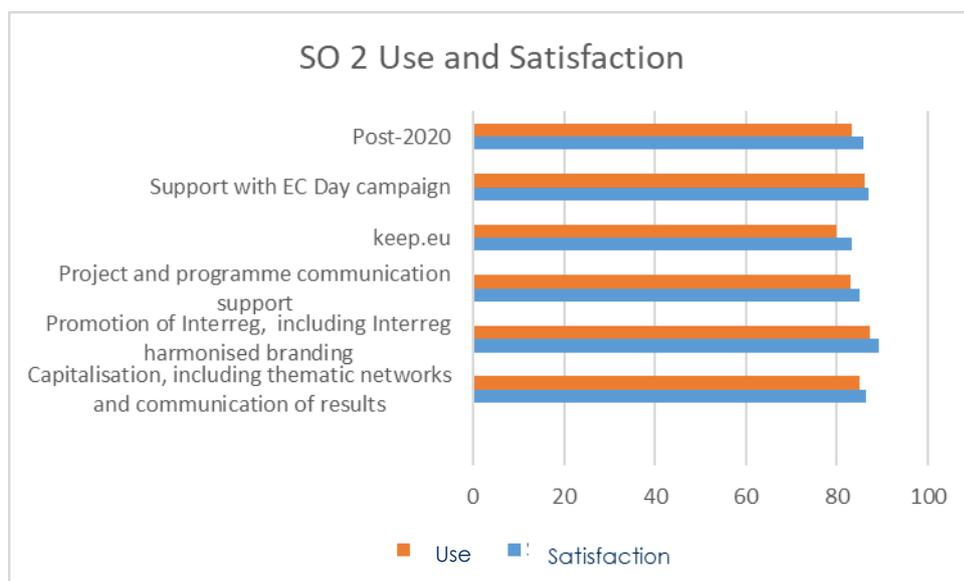


In practice, this translates to work on numerous products and services, including the development of keep.eu and interreg.eu, regular events, thematic networks, publications and newsflashes – various Interact publications, contributions to external publications (e.g. Panorama magazine of the European Commission) and online newsflashes (mass emails which are sent approx. 10 times a year)

and podcasts; and strategic dialogue - through events (physical and online), Interact website (e.g. provides access to networks, online learning platform), social media. As well as considering activities and outputs separately, there are points of cross-over, complementarity and mutually reinforcing activities which support the other SOs, e.g., between the European Cooperation Day, Project Slam, Interreg.eu and communication support (network, publications and training).

Figure 16 give an indication of the usage of Interact services and tools in relation to Interact's SO2.

Figure 16: Use and Satisfaction SO2



Source: *Interact Use and Satisfaction Survey 2018*

7.2 Enablers

Work to improve territorial cooperation capacity in capturing and communicating programme results has evolved. This has involved large scale pan-programme initiatives such as keep.eu and tailored solutions and training. Respondents to this evaluation note the value and challenges of various structures and processes (Section 7.2.1), systems and tools (Section 7.2.2) and human resources (Section 7.2.3) facilitated by Interact. Contributions to the results set out by Interact are noted to include:

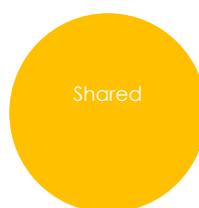
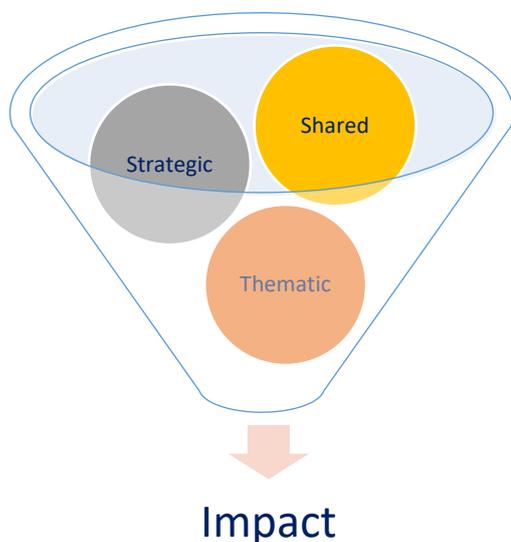
- Thematic expertise and competence;
- Repository of Interreg results;
- Leadership of integrated communication strategy.

However, the analysis is also able to show a wider range of results linked to the core objectives:

- More widespread application of simplified and harmonised approaches;
- More widespread use of good practice and quality standards, and;
- Improved communication between Interreg programmes and Member State Representatives.

As well as identifying results, the following analysis also identifies specific challenges and lessons for the future.

7.2.1 Structures and Processes



Shared structures and processes

The increased demands and expectations, as well as the variety of audiences for Interreg communications can place a substantial burden on the individual programmes. This in mind, Interact has played an important role in facilitating **access to shared and collaborative communication structures and processes for programmes.**



Interact provides an opportunity to engage in regular **EU-wide collaborative communication activities**, such as the European Week of Cities and Regions, Project Slam and European Cooperation Day, which **can help extend the reach and visibility of the programmes**. By engaging in such events, the programmes and projects gain visibility beyond their own programme area and add weight to their own communication efforts, through involvement with pan-European initiatives and with involvement from the European institutions. As noted by one interview respondent *“joint promotion activities (have) contributed a lot to more visibility of all programmes”*. At the same time, a balance must be struck between the diversity of programmes and presenting a strong joint profile.

Interact’s work has led to initiatives and joint communication activities, which can be embedded in the programme’s own communication structures and processes. These



We use Interact services and products a lot. This includes training, capitalisation, communication, European Cooperation Day, podcasts. We also used a lot of material that was made available on communication activities.

Representative of Joint Technical Secretariat of a cross-border Interreg programme

approaches have been inspired by the Interact ‘culture/approach’. For example, an interviewee noted the influence of the Interact culture on *“the organisation of national information days and their methods of communication”*.

Looking beyond communication, **Interact’s work**

on capitalisation has helped to inform Programme approaches to what was a new area for them in the 2014-20 period. One programme notes that Interact helped them to break the concept into more workable ‘chunks’, look at how to embed the progress more fully in the programme from project applications to evaluation, and also set up processes to support beneficiaries. More generally, the collaborative structures have helped programmes and the Interreg community as a whole to **identify key shared interests, areas of strength and impactful contributions**, e.g. through the work of Interact networks. Joint work on communication tools, resources and approaches have been noted to simplify some tasks and been helpful in terms of ‘sharing the load’.

Strategic input/role



Regular joint events and activities with the European Commission, Interact, programmes and the wider policy community have become a more established part of the programme processes. These are particularly important for managing communication and engagement for the Interreg programmes.

Interact has a particularly strategic input and role concerning these joint activities. One notable example concerns its position working with and ‘between’ Interreg programmes and

the European Commission, which has become an increasingly embedded and acknowledged part of Interact's tasks. This **'intermediary' role is particularly noted in relation to capturing and communicating Interreg results**, e.g., through **facilitating and supporting joint communication events and resources** (European Week of Cities and Regions, European Cooperation Day and Interreg Project Slam) and developing information resources like keep.eu.

Much of Interact's role is supporting programme communications. However, as more strategic coordinated communications are pursued there is a challenge of presenting a wide variety of programmes and different geographies through with a coherent voice, especially on strategic issues. With this in mind, and despite the recognised value of Interact products and services for programmes as a whole, there is often a level of adaptation needed to tailor these to the national and regional contexts, e.g. Interact as a common voice may be more valuable for certain geographical areas (i.e., areas where experience and linkages are more established).

Another area of work with strategic impact is Interact's work on capitalisation. **Interact is credited with helping programmes to 'think through the concept of capitalisation' and work with them to embed the concept in the programmes.**



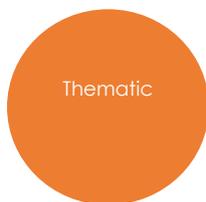
We have drawn up a call for capitalization for programming 21-27 using the information from the training by adopting specific objectives and criteria."

Participant at the training "The concept of "Capitalisation" in Interreg 2020+, online, 3.12.2020"

in the programmes. For example, one programme noted the 'very useful', well received' support from Interact (Head of Secretariat, IPA/Interreg Programme). Following both general and advisory input from Interact, the Programme made

positive changes to the 2014-20 programme and the 2021-27 programmes. Interact helped to identify areas of need and planning and informed projects call contents - the first around testing and pilots and the other around validation of results and application. Based on these successes, strategic and practical impacts, capitalisation remains an area of ongoing interest for stakeholders.

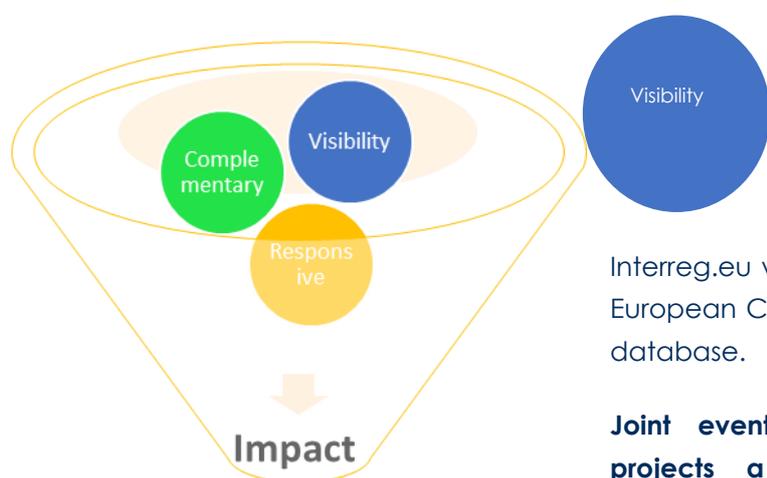
Thematic engagement



Interact's thematic engagement provides a foundation for wider capitalisation and dissemination activities. For example, **through Interact's thematic networks, the participating Interreg programmes have gained engagement and profile.** The Interact networks are noted as useful platforms for exchanging views and experiences amongst the members and disseminating key results. The benefits of the working groups are generally recognised, however for some this message could be more widely shared. For example, a respondent felt that in the case of some working groups, the options of joining had not been widely communicated (e.g., working group on the development of indicators). The respondent recognises that working groups need to have specific criteria for joining and are limited in terms of the participants but suggests that the

opportunity to join needs to be widely and clearly communicated to the programmes (i.e., more than just a mention at a specific Interact event).

7.2.2 Systems and Tools



Visibility

Interact has several communication tools which aim to make Interreg results and activities more visible, including Interreg.eu website, Interreg Project Slam, the European Cooperation Day, and the keep.eu database.

Joint events give programmes and key projects a core resource in terms of dissemination and opportunity to link to wider

European events, most notably the European Week of Cities and Regions. Communication efforts on this scale promote **visibility within the wider regional/Cohesion Policy community**.³⁴ For example, 75 percent of participants in the European Cooperation Day events felt they had improved the visibility of European Cooperation.³⁵ However, these efforts are subject to challenges. Notable barriers to wider engagement through the European Cooperation Day include Covid, time and resource limitations, as well as lack of media attention.³⁶

In 2021, 44 programmes participated in the European Cooperation Day, which is a fall from the initial high of 70 in 2012.³⁷ Although programme engagement in the European Cooperation Day events has fallen online events have led to a large increase in participants 103,207 in 2021, compared to 42,826 in 2019. The number of public institutions and local organisations that participated in European Cooperation Day events increased from 12 in 2018 to 20 in 2020.³⁸ When

considering this data, it is important to acknowledge the impacts of Covid and the natural fluctuations in public engagement activities through programme life cycle. As attendance at physical events has proved challenging, engagement through social media has become an increasingly important channel for reaching target groups. For example, the European Cooperation Day Campaign reached 5,338,517 people via key Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts.³⁹

“

Interact makes our [programmes] message unified across Europe.

Representative of ENI cross-border programme

Interact also has an important role in supporting the work of specific programmes and more tailored responses. For example, Interact organised a small event for Interreg projects as part

of the climate summit that was held in Poland. Participating programmes felt the event offered good publicity for the programmes as well as for Interact.

Work to maintain visibility and engagement during the height of the Covid pandemic is highlighted as particularly valuable, not only to boost the visibility of projects and programmes but also by showing programmes what is possible to achieve through online events and communications and leading by example (as mentioned, Interact was quick to adapt to online and remote events and illustrated the opportunities to maintain and even increase engagement and visibility).



Complementarity

dimension.

The European perspective is a particularly valued aspect. For example, an interview respondent highlighted the importance of having *“knowledge of the wider European context, improved understanding of legislation and how that can trickle down to the national, regional and local settings.”* Representative of Interreg cross-border programme.

Besides the European perspective, the involvement of external experts and specialists at Interact events is also viewed to be beneficial (e.g., specialists from specific fields, or representatives from the European Commission or national governments). For example, Interact had involved a journalist sharing experiences at a communications event, which addressed issues such as communication graphics and design issues, as well as storytelling approaches.

Additionally, Interact’s work provides valuable complementary resources of systems and pan-European tools which support the communication and dissemination activities. For example, keep.eu is the only resource that allows looking beyond a single programme for thematic/territorial analysis. As noted by a respondent *‘we advertise it and recommend it to potential beneficiaries so that they can check what is already being funded in their region—it’s a good source of information’*. (Head of National Interreg Authority). Systems and tools such as keep.eu and Interreg.eu are also particularly valuable for Interact stakeholders whose work depends on having a good a pan-European perspective, most notably, the European Commission and other EU bodies, but also other European Territorial Cooperation Associations (e.g., AEBR, MOT, CESCO, etc.), research institutions, etc.

Data bases and resources like Interreg.eu and keep.eu are important sources of information and are building up their coverage of programme and project results. A shared resource of

Interact events are valued especially for **thematic/specialist engagement and for the opportunity for programmes to gain a wider European**



Given that we are working in a European funded programme, it supports my credibility when talking to applicants and beneficiaries to have direct knowledge of other programmes and the European context.

Representative of Interreg cross-border programme

comparable information on results is challenging to develop and respondents noted the scope to continue to work in this area to maximise the value of these resources. As the demands for information increase the importance of striking a balance between usability and clarity and coverage is highlighted by respondents. For example, time pressures demand that for an additional system to be used and usable it needs to offer clear added value and be quick and straightforward to engage with.

Related, work on suitable result and impact indicators for Interreg programmes is a long-standing challenge and source of long-standing debate. Interact's work, along with programmes, on the issue has helped to inform dialogues and proposed solutions to capturing and conveying results more clearly. As understandings of the opportunities and challenges of working with practical, informative indicators are improved, opportunities to develop cross programme resources to disseminate resource will continue to progress.



Responsive

Interact has been quick to pick up on new areas of work and address the evolving programme needs, which in turn has been helpful for programmes to respond and adapt to changes/new demands. Examples include:

- **Addressing complex issues** – The development of collaborative approaches to complex issues such as new regulations and planning for the new programmes has been beneficial. Respondents note, for example, Interact's work and input over the last two to three years in the run up to 2021-27 programme period as very good and helpful in terms of understanding the changes and providing implementation options.
- **Work on capitalisation** - Interact's work has contributed to tools and resources for working with and operationalising this concept. For example the Capitalisation Management Guide was developed and published by Interact in August 2020 to provide a step-by-step guide from concept to practice, including sharing of experiences and practices from a seven year period,⁴⁰ has been circulated to desk officers at the European Commission.
- **Responses to Covid** –The fact that events were organised online meant that, at a particularly busy time in the programme lifecycle, stakeholders could attend more events. Some of the SO2 online events had a very high number of participants (e.g., Bringing Territoriality into Interreg - Functional areas on 22.04.2020, Q&A Session | ISO 1 'A better Interreg governance' on 16.06.2020) exceeding 2 or 3-fold the average number of participants at a face-to-face Interact event. While respondents recognise



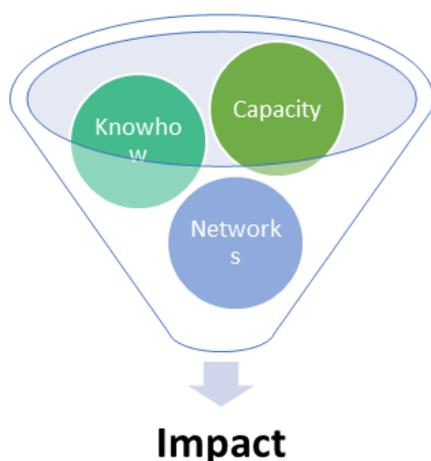
The capitalization training was crucial for the Interreg Italy-Slovenia programme. Interact provided for on demand assistance, but also tools to correctly plan capitalization from the very beginning of the implementation of the Programme. I started using those tools to guide the programme towards 2021-2027 capitalisation approach.

Participant at the training "The concept of "Capitalisation" in Interreg 2020+", online, 3.12.2020

the value of face-to-face contact, especially for specific types of themes, a continuation of online events, particularly on topics of common interest to all programmes are noted to be useful.

- **Preparatory work for 2021-27 programme period** - A focus on developing solutions is an aspect of Interact's work. Interact's work on the 2021-27 programme period is credited with not just contributing to a better understanding of changes (in this case on specific issues linked to communications but also providing 'genuine implementation options. Related, many respondents note the usefulness of input from DG Regio, as well as experiences from other programmes facing the same challenges.
- **Tailored support to programmes** – Interact has also been responsive to addressing programme-specific issues, for example in terms of providing technical advice and supporting the development of promotional videos and material.

7.2.3 Human Resources



Institutional memory and capacity building

Interact contributes to building institutional memory and capacity in the programmes. For example, keep.eu and Interreg.eu help project promoters who can use the resources to get ideas or find potential project partners. It also contributes to **reinforcing the idea of a 'community'/bigger picture around territorial cooperation.** Similarly, Interact's

guidance documents and publications are noted to be helpful in terms of benchmarking programmes in the wider Interreg context (i.e., understanding of procedures and practices of other programmes in order to develop own approach).

However, as mentioned, the delivery of these resources requires effort and input, and this can place demands on programmes, which in turn can colour views on overall benefits. For example, the engagement with keep.eu is not straightforward for all Interreg programmes. For example, one interview respondent noted that while they upload information to keep.eu, they do not engage beyond this. Another issue concerns the perceived overlaps of keep.eu and the Interreg.eu platforms.



We feel that keep is not being used to its full potential as there is too much information available which reduces accessibility. Automatic uploads would facilitate engagement with keep.

Representative of Interreg cross-border programme



- **Knowhow**

Interact events, networks and training provide a collaborative approach to learning, sharing of programme approaches and challenges, and disseminating this information to wider audiences. The perceived value of these outputs varies depending on the theme, the coverage of programmes (i.e., all Interreg programmes vs. events targeted at sub-group of programmes), and the timing of the events in relation to the programme cycle (i.e., if the event is organised too late, it may provide more limited value).

However, more **generally, Interact events, publications and guidance documents are valued communication tools**, especially for the issues they cover (e.g., they are quick to focus on new issues) and also the way they have been worded and presented. Interact's approach to events and communications are credited with informing programme approaches to events and information days. A respondent noted the example of an ENI communications handbook developed by Interact. The design of the handbook (the use of colours and illustrations), its readability and usability has made it easy to adapt and translate to suit the needs of the programme in question.

Respondents also note issues on possible future developments in relation to thematic advice and support:

- The work of Interact **Thematic Networks** and wider events on thematic issues covers a wide range of issues and events, with some more active than others. Drawing



The knowledge that we gain through Interact services makes us more knowledgeable and experienced in what we can pass on to applicants and beneficiaries.

Representative of Interreg transnational programme

- on experience of the current networks, respondents note value in the activities and scope to develop further in the future. A good example is the work of the Migration Network, see Box 3.
- **Involvement of external experts** This could involve organisation of events and trainings where other external experts are invited to bring new perspectives on key issues like Green or Blue Growth, innovation and entrepreneurship. The possible inspiration from the 'outside' can be difficult when programmes are working on their own, but possible in a larger network.
- **Organise activities based on demand and being agile in a changing world.** Trying to appreciate what is new and where knowledge input will continue to be useful. However, for those programmes that are 'behind' in the programme implementation cycle, there may be value of organising/repeating earlier events

at a later stage (e.g., ENI programmes), with many events recorded this is another option.

- As previously noted, **some Thematic Networks may 'run their course', or evolve to be taken on by other stakeholders**, e.g. led by an interested group programmes, this freeing Interact to take on new/emerging themes or focus on other areas of core work.

Box 3: Migration Network

Migration Network

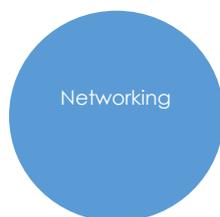
The work of the Migration Network is a good example to illustrate results an impact. Linked to Interact's work on capitalisation and responding to calls for programme to respond to the migration crisis, the migration network is dedicated to Interreg, Interreg-IPA CBC and ENI CBC programmes working on migration-related challenges. This platform is used for: making available relevant data; spreading knowledge about the current experiences and/or practices of programmes; facilitating exchange and peer learning about programmes' migration-related measures and projects, aiming to support the adoption of possible Interreg response and actions in this respect.⁴¹ The network involves regular meetings and is linked to publications and presentations available on the Interact web-site. Commenting on the work of the network respondents note:

- The value of the network as a clear **response to help programmes with the call to help address the 2015 migrant crisis**.
- Helped programmes find **practical ways to engage based** on their existing strengths and areas of activity and build a robust base of knowledge to disseminate to colleague on the issue.
- Helped develop **new perspectives**, though invited speakers and specialists at events from beyond Interreg community, e.g., NGOs speaking about the role of social entrepreneurship schemes in supporting migrants into work, or academics locating activities in wider academic and policy debates.
- Networks events and communications have helped **build programme confidence in what they are doing**. Also, direct engagement with not just DG Regio, but also DG Home has been useful in terms of gathering information, but also the profile of the programmes.
- **Programme and project profile** has been an associated benefit. Participating programmes have been involved to take part in wider events and projects have been featured in presentations and publications.

The events went on to inspire concrete actions, e.g., helped the programme to engage without complex reprogramming of resources, informed the content of calls and approach to the issue, ongoing engagement with the network of programmes. Longer term it is hoped that there will be a 'trickle-down effect', providing foundations for further links synergy and learning. Looking to the future, the narrowing focus of some programmes could pose challenges to address this issue adequately in the future. There is also pressured to work towards more concrete synergies and links, which would require a different more structured approach to the network.



Source: Interviews with Transnational Interreg Programme Representative and <https://www.interact-eu.net/networks#2584-Migration>



- **Community building and networking**

Interact's work in relation to various events, networks and activities has a role in reinforcing wider community building and networking between programmes (including peer-to-peer support the programmes can provide to each other and Interact acting as a bridge between different types of programmes), and between programmes and the wider policy and local communities.

Community building and networking are also a very important result of Interact's work with Interreg communication managers, facilitated by their combined



I am very proud to be part of this (Interact) community. By cooperating in this community, I am able to generate contacts with other cross border and transnational programmes. We grow together and learn from each other.

Representative of Interreg cross-border programme

efforts and inputs into events, shared tools and the communications network. A good example of how the role and value of networks could be highlighted is the video produced of the work done by the Migration network, which provides an accessible and engaging overview of the work, see Box 3. Other areas of work could benefit from something similar.

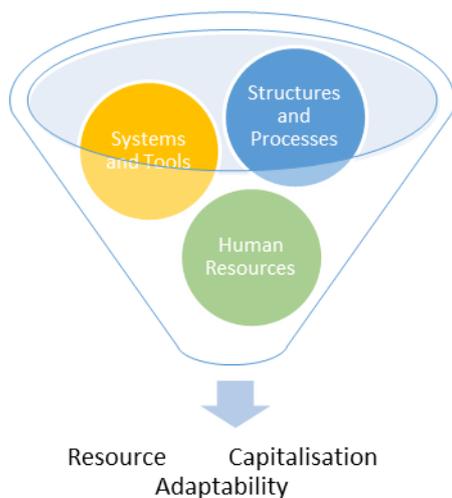
More generally, the value of community building and networking can depend on the format and coverage of programmes. One issue concerns the coverage of Interreg programmes. There is significant variation in Interreg programmes across Europe in terms of their size, geographies and cultural settings. For some programmes it is more valuable to take part in events and activities which bring together sub-groups of programmes of a similar nature, not least to maximise the mutual learning. One respondent suggested that *"the 'family group' should be the starting point"* and *"wider geographical perspectives can develop from there."* Where Interact events cover all Interreg programmes across the whole of Europe, some programmes may choose not to attend, due to the fact that these tend to focus on more general topics. Another issue concerns the format of the activities. For example, during the Covid period, the value from community building and networking has been more limited due to the online format of activities.

7.3 Impacts

As is noted at the outset of the evaluation take up of the various resources vary and there are substantial constraints beyond Interact's control that influence the extent to which large scale impacts can be quantitatively measured. However, this in depth evaluation shows how outputs under SO2 do deliver impact by saving programmes time and resources through providing tools/services and support. Interact's Case-based Impact Evaluation already shows how the development, dissemination, and adoption of Interact's keep.eu data base has already delivered results and impact. The Impact Evaluation focussed not just on the tool itself, but also the resources and processes around the tools. Therefore, in addition, this work contributes to overall assessments of the role of training and publications, as well as the full range of activities under SO2.

7.3.1 Efficiency, effectiveness, and resilience

- **Time and Resources**



SO2 has the potential to deliver considerable impact by saving programmes time and resources through providing tools/services and support.

In terms of communication, Interact's work across SO2 has established a collective effort to capture and communicate programme results, as opposed to simply supporting the individual efforts of the programmes. By providing clear channels of joint, regular events, complemented by

tailored activities, facilitates simplification and 'pulling of resources' for programmes to present and engage with wider networks and across broader stakeholder groups.

Interact's Case-based

Impact Evaluation has already shown how the development, dissemination and adoption of Interact's keep.eu data base and harmonised branding have delivered results and impact. Keep.eu delivers tools for various stakeholder organisations to save time and resources across



If this service was not provided by Interact, the programmes would have to do this themselves. This saves a lot of time and effort.

Representative of ENI cross-border programme

a range of activities. Beyond that, also Guides, Q&A documents, Interact slideshows, etc. are valuable tools which are used and reused by programmes, saving programmes time and resources.

Interact's role in clarifying and summarising new/complex information and promoting collaboration on relevant issues has also saved programmes time and resources. The programmes save time by attending an event where Interact has summarised and presented the information (with more time saving if the event is organised online and enables the participation of larger number of participants). As with other areas of Interact's work, the link to the European Commission is highlighted by the respondents as a valuable means of more quickly clarifying points and informing viable solutions. Respondents also value the fact that information from Interact is presented in a comprehensible and readable 'human language', which is also important in terms of saving time and effort.

Interact's efforts in the development and support of networks between programmes and between stakeholders means that the programmes do not have to work to develop these

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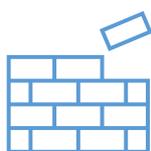
Based on the training information we receive from Interact, we organise training sessions for beneficiaries to ensure that they are fully informed and have as good a basis of information as possible. This increases the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes and helps to avoid problems in advance.

Interact National Contact Point

connections in isolation. As noted by one respondent, the fact that the programmes can meet colleagues from other countries who they do not work normally with facilitates reaching out to colleagues. This broadens the number of available sources of information and allows to

access information faster. It also highlights the core/fundamental value of Interact's 'broad coverage', as well as the more territorially based links that some programmes can value.

Together this work has already proved valuable for programmes in disseminating collective efforts, highlighting wider roles and relevance and, in the future, could support wider Interreg communication on strategic roles and relevance. However, as this role progresses it is important to consider the role Interact plays and be clear on where roles and responsibilities lie and address the question is it for Interact to serve as a communication channel for programmes, or should it be there more as a means to provide technical support.



Capitalisation

Capitalisation is a concept that has carried increasing weight though the 2014-20 period, linked to the emphasis on delivering results and impact, and maximising synergies and links. Interact's role on this issue has built and evolved through the 2014-20 period and into the 2021-27 period. Complementing the individual programme efforts, Interact's work makes a valuable contribution through work on

operationalising and working with the concept, supporting processes that gather programme and project results within specific fields and enabling, identifying and sharing knowledge and awareness among stakeholders about the achievements of Interreg.

Interview respondents have noted the role of various EU-wide events in contributing to the capitalisation of project results. These types of events allow projects to benefit from a much higher profile and exposure. As noted by one interview respondent, this is particularly helpful for specific themes, such as the maritime dimension. For example, the European Maritime Day, in which Interact has participated, e.g., through the Interact's Knowledge of the Seas Network in 2021, is noted as a good example of how this can work. The Maritime Day, which is organised annually, includes exhibitions, seminars, networking and participation of high-level representatives from national governments and the European Commission. According to the respondent, this event provides a good opportunity to mingle, gain experiences and showcase the programmes. The day brings together all the maritime Interreg programmes across Europe and allows them access to European Commission DGs and contacts which would not be possible if they were operating alone. The higher visibility for the projects is notable and there are examples of other programmes picking up ideas and pursuing these. In some cases, the project publicity starts on smaller geographical networks (e.g., Baltic Sea and North Sea Region) and then progresses to the wider EU-level Interact events.

The role of Interact in capitalisation is not only limited to events and can also apply to programme implementation and project support. For example, work on the concept developed **through Interact can also broaden the scope of advice that programme give to applicants**. For example, when advice is given to a potential application, they are interested in hearing that something similar may have happened elsewhere, that they could read a report about it or be put in touch with a project leader in another programme who could share experience.

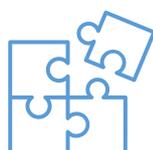
Informed actions



Interact resources like keep.eu and training support and inform programme and project decision-making. For example, project partners benefit from examples of good practice and gain ideas for future development of projects etc. Thus, **sharing information and passing on know-how and training from Interact** is a notable impact. Programme representatives have used knowledge gained from Interact and disseminated this on within their respective organisations and/or adapted the information for wider dissemination (e.g., beneficiaries).

- Based on the training information received from Interact, Programme authorities have gone on to organise training sessions for beneficiaries to ensure that they are fully informed and have as good a basis of information as possible. This was found to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes and helps to avoid problems in advance.

- Projects can be given examples of best practice on communication, capitalisation and dissemination; and
- Programmes can more easily share information with potential applicants.



Foresight and innovation

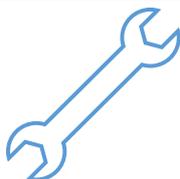
Interact has provided a platform for programmes to be informed, to respond and to work collaboratively with various issues (in place of programmes addressing these in isolation). Interact's activities have a strong element of foresight and future planning (e.g.,

planning for 2021-27 programmes) and aim to ensure that that the programmes work together as proactive promoters for change. As noted by one respondent "networking with other Interact National Contact Points and branch offices has helped (us) to see scenarios that are being faced in other Members States so that we can also be prepared should similar situations emerge." This type of work has also included the building of programme capacities to initiate and manage joint communication efforts.



They are useful in providing information on new areas, e.g., capitalisation of projects, where programmes have to work out a response.

Representative of Interreg cross-border programme

	Conclusion	Recommendation
	<p>Resources saved: Combined efforts achieved savings in terms of time, money and staff resources for programme authorities</p> <p>Interact provides standardised, comparable and insightful information on a range of Interreg programmes and their projects</p> <p>Programmes can use tools to support and inform beneficiaries, thus aiding their work.</p> <p>Communication capacity: Interact's training and tools support the development of effective and clear communications</p> <p>Interact work and expertise inform programme and Commission thinking, e.g., on online events etc.</p>	<p>Highlight ways in which the 'effort' to contribute to joint communication resources can contribute to programmes own resources, as well as continue to benefit other stakeholders such as the Commission.</p> <p>Continue to be mindful of the time it takes to put information into systems and tools, and continue to ease this process as far as possible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is particularly the case in the future where programmes will face additional requirements for their own communication efforts • Continue to highlight ways in which joint resources can help programmes in their own efforts. <p>While joint communications and a unified Interreg voice is a useful tool, Interact must continue to be vigilant and mindful of its position, allow for divergences in</p>

	<p>'Joint'/combined communications can be a useful tool to amplify and extend messages.</p> <p>In key areas, thematic networks have proved a useful way to highlight Interreg's role in new and emerging areas of action, e.g., migration and maritime network.</p>	<p>approach to suit local needs, and be clear where opinions/perspectives differ</p> <p>The development of mutually approved, shared solutions take time to develop and agree, and demands effort to collaborate – which should be reflected in plans/ambitions.</p> <p>It will be important to strike a balance between usability, clarity and coverage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example, joint information resources should not try and be too extensive at the expense of usability <p>Online communications and engagement will remain important in the future and Interact should capitalise on its work and expertise. Joint events and opportunities to disseminate to wider audiences are important.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Covid pandemic has shifted how stakeholders participate and what they expect from large-scale events (expectations are high if people travel to events) • Some authorities/staff may limit travel (linked to reducing emissions, which could make online fora and communications even more important) • Some online SO2 events have reached a number of participants 2-3 times higher than a typical face-to-face event. Online events have proven to be impactful and widely approved (event evaluations match those of physical events).
	<p>Collaborative capacity: Interact plays an important role in facilitating access to shared and collaborative communication structures and processes. Joint communication and events contribute to reinforcing the 'community'/bigger picture around territorial cooperation.</p> <p>Specialist knowhow and community building: The work of the communications network is particularly noted as valuable as a means for communications officers and specialists to exchange knowhow and share ideas</p>	<p>Reinforcing the community/Interreg family concept is important, but work can also build links to wider community and look beyond Interreg communities, e.g., there are opportunities to engage more with external experts.</p> <p>The 'joint' communications approach could be applied in some area and at different territorial levels/ within different territorial groups to reflect territorial specificities/priorities</p>

	<p>Institutional memory: Information institutional memory is invaluable to see progression over time and cumulative information on participation and engagement: keep.eu and Interreg.eu are therefore useful resources to capitalise on</p> <p>Programmes value the efforts on communicating and collecting results, but are sensitive to the challenges involved</p>	<p>Information resources, most notably keep.eu. and Interreg.eu are extremely valuable for retaining knowledge and information across programme periods, which is essential for illustrating progression and link to capitalisation efforts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The relationship between keep.eu and Interreg.eu remains unclear for some stakeholders • Keep.eu, in particular, is a specialist resource and highly ambitious, particular efforts should be made to maximise the usability of the resource <p>Data bases and gathering results is important, but work should also aim to convey the strategic/softer aspects of added value that programmes deliver</p> <p>Consider how collaborative communication efforts could inform EU-level and national level messaging on the role and value of Interreg</p>
	<p>Responsive: Interact's work in the development and support of networks can inform future actions, build resilience and provide platforms for the next programme period</p> <p>Information and exchanges shared in network groups are valuable means to knowledge sharing and support on, thematic and technical issues</p> <p>Through networks and links programme stakeholders gain means to help themselves, build resilience and adapt</p> <p>Responsive: Interact's work on capitalisation picked up rapidly on an identified programme need</p> <p>Interact's work has helped programmes operationalise and apply new concepts</p>	<p>Keep listening to programme needs, pick up on changes and maintain flexibility - these have proved invaluable resources</p> <p>Unless programmes participate in networks the gains from this work may not be very visible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at ways to disseminate network conclusions/key messages. know how <p>Make sure potential members of networks know they can be involved if they wish.</p> <p>Interact's role will evolve. There may be some areas where Interact's role will weaken due to self-sustaining networks on a specific theme.</p> <p>Interact's work on capitalisation has the potential to grow</p>

	<p>Interact's work to deliver high quality resources and tools to support online events and communications have been of particular value in promoting programme resilience and adaptability during the Covid pandemic</p>	<p>Interact's role in relation to capitalisation should be clear, i.e., facilitation as opposed to driving capitalisation activities of programmes, e.g., through work on how to operationalise and technical support</p> <p>Work on capitalisation links also to other areas of work, e.g., synergies and collaboration and communications work, coordinating efforts and sharig knowledge and knowhow within Interact will therefore be important.</p> <p>Beneficiaries are not Interact's main target group, but in relation to some capitalisation activities Interact could work directly with beneficiaries (potentially via the Interreg Europe Policy learning platforms) and programmes to build 'demonstration cases', support policy impact projects etc</p>
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8 EVALUATION OF SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 3: TO IMPROVE THE COOPERATION MANAGEMENT CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT INNOVATIVE APPROACHES.

8.1 Overview



Specific Objective 3 aims to improve the cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches. Coming into the 2014-20 programme period the European Commission launched a number of innovative approaches with the aim of enabling wider and deeper cooperation and simplification where possible, and also reinforced its commitment to supporting collaboration and synergies between programmes and funding. Interact had a role in enhancing these opportunities though increasing knowledge about new and existing tools, identifying and sharing innovative practices for ETC programmes, awareness raising on links and complementarity with other EU funding and programmes, and highlighting the wider role and relevance of cooperation in programmes.

we support cooperation in all its forms

Interreg-IPA CBC

European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI CBC)

Cooperation actions (Art 96.3d)

European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC)

Territorial development tools (ITI, CLLD, JAP)

Inter-programme capacity and competence

Under Specific Objective 3 the programme has undertaken a wide range of interventions to deliver results, particularly around building and communicating a knowledge management base for new and existing tools; innovative and workable models; scaling up inter programme capacity and competence, awareness raising on cooperation approaches across funding sources and actors, see Figure 17.

Figure 17: Specific Objective 3

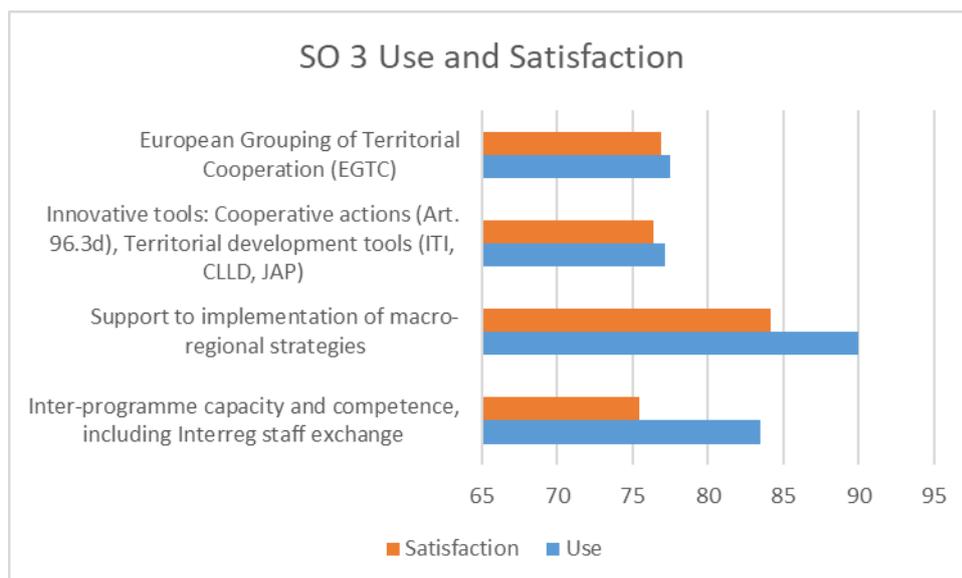
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 3	EXPECTED RESULTS
TO IMPROVE THE COOPERATION MANAGEMENT CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT INNOVATIVE APPROACHES (EGTC, REVOLVING FUNDS, MACROREGIONAL STRATEGIES, ARTICLE 96, ITI, ETC.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased knowledge about new and existing tools. Workable models developed, Increased awareness in the ETC/Interreg programmes about other EU funding schemes and their complementarities with their strategies. Increased awareness of the mainstream programmes about the advantages of cooperation as an implementation tool.

INTERREG CHALLENGE	Specific Objective		Expected Results	Medium Term Strategy
Innovation and cooperation outside ETC/Interreg -Perception of innovation approaches being too complex for Interreg environment -Need to build expertise in these new fields -Need to increase awareness of wider Cohesion Policy context and programmes and synergies with Interreg -Need to establish recognition of cooperation as effective implementation tool	To improve the cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches	1.3.1	Increasing knowledge about new and existing tools	L-ER Building and communicating knowledge management base for new and existing tools
		1.3.2	Workable models developed	M-ER 1.3.2 Innovative tools and workable models
		1.3.3	Increased awareness in the ETC/Interreg programmes about other EU funding schemes and the complementarities with other strategies	N-ER 1.3.3. Scaling up inter-programme capacity and competence
		1.3.4	Increased awareness of the mainstream programmes about the advantages of cooperation as an implementation tool	O-ER 1.3.4. Awareness raising of cooperation approaches across funding sources and actions

Source: Interact MAWP

Figure 18 illustrates levels of engagements with elements of supported offered under Interact's SO3.

Figure 18: Use and Satisfaction So3



Source: User use and satisfaction survey

8.2 Enablers

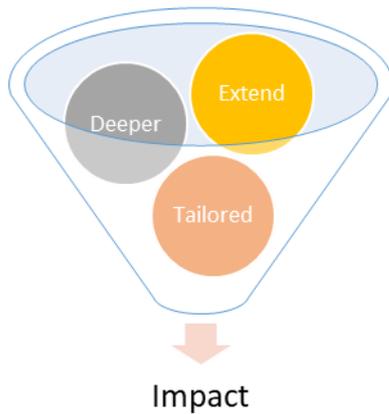
Work to improve the cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches has led to the establishment of active thematic and territorial networks, intensified cooperation across programmes and types of funding and resources on innovative tools, with wider applicability across Cohesion policy programmes, and delivered high-level specialist inputs of technical management and implementation. Contributions to the results set out by Interact are noted:

- Building and communicating knowledge base on tools;
- Sharing innovative tools and models;
- Increasing inter programme capacity; and
- Awareness raising on cooperation.

However, the analysis is also able to show a wider range of results linked to the core objectives: including:

- Improved management and implementation capacity, e.g., through use of new tools; and
- Opportunities to capture, convey and capitalise on Interreg results, e.g., through cross programme cooperation.

As well as identifying results, the following analysis also identifies specific challenges and lessons for the future.



8.2.1 Structures and Processes



Extending engagement with new structures and processes

Interact has done a huge amount to **support the development of new collaboration structures and processes**, most notably in relation to Interreg engagement with Macro-regional

Strategies (MRS), e.g. organised meetings of the MRS thematic coordinators (policy area coordinators/ priority area coordinators/ pillar coordinators/ action group leaders); developed publications, including input papers and reports from the events; initiated and supported cross-MRS discussion; lead on the network of Interreg transnational programmes dedicated to support MRS; participated in events and contributed to the discussion on coordination and cooperation across programmes sharing MRS experiences. Interact also facilitates work in relation to IPA and ENI programmes (in cooperation with TESIM - Technical Support to the Implementation and Management of ENI CBC programmes) and new cooperation arrangements, including European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) and Integrated Territorial Initiatives (ITI) and Community Led Local Development (CLLD). All of this work contributes to the extension of collaboration, operational changes, new ways of doing things and new structures.

Not all of Interact's work in relation to SO 3 is as 'prominent' and established as the work on Macroregional Strategies. Interact cannot force take up of innovative tools or collaboration. In practice, take up of some tools have been much more limited (an issue which is beyond Interact's control). However, Interact has **supported and informed the efforts of programmes that do chose to work with innovative tools**. Where they were adopted, Interact provided support to programmes working with ITI and CLLD tools. Additionally, drawing on this work, other programmes are in a better position to take more informed decisions on whether to adopt the tools in the future.

The specialist knowledge required on innovative tools is a strength that Interact can offer. However, the narrower relevance (at least initially) can mean that expertise within Interact is limited to one or a small number of individuals, which raises challenges when staff move on. For example, work was undertaken with the European Commission on EGTC over a number of years, including a yearly 2-day seminar on how to set up an EGTC. However, due to a staff change in Interact this work did not maintain the same level of momentum. Looking to the future, integrated territorial approaches and cross-programme collaboration are a significant area of interest for the European Commission and will be an issue of growing interest for programmes, so retaining knowhow on these issues is key.



Deeper

Widening and deepening collaboration across programmes and interventions

Interact is uniquely well placed to work on inter-programme collaboration. As previously noted, respondents note the valuable platforms and networks for exchange and learning. These exchanges all widen and deepen processes of collaboration between programmes, across wider initiatives and Interreg programmes, and between Interreg programmes working with innovative tools and MRS. For example, Interact activities offer additional fora through which to feed into/support the work of programmes engaging in specific forms of cooperation, e.g. IPA, ENI, which both recognises their specifics and can also draw them into the wider Interreg family.⁴² There are notable successes in facilitating links, see Box 4, but this experience is not uniform, e.g. with joint platforms for programmes proving challenging to establish in some cases. A positive example is the MedLab Group.

Box 4: MedLab

An example highlighted by interviewees is the Medlab group. The MedLab group extends and deepens cooperation and collaboration between Interreg programmes in the Mediterranean and also builds links to IPA and ENI programmes in the area. While it is recognised that programmes need the will and resources to engage, Interact has eased, smoothed and facilitated this engagement, both strategically and operationally. Participants note:

- The utility of the geographic grounding to collaboration.
- The involvement of a range of programme and national representatives and European Commission representatives.
- The identified relevance and scope of cross programme working, as highlighted by Interact's programme mapping exercise and analysis of programme priorities and specific objectives, which has gone on to facilitate targeted work on specific themes highlighting links in relation to, e.g., tourism, climate change.
- Support in linking across programme types (transnational and CBC and external borders). As the work has progressed programmes and partners covering, for example, Tunisia and Egypt have become increasingly involved and are involved in a 'level-playing field' along with the other partners as part of the territorial cooperation 'family'. Interact also works alongside colleagues at TESIM as these external border programmes have their own processes and procedures and to ensure work is complementary.
- Addresses a need where programmes are strong in delivering their own programmes but can face challenges in acting together.
- Linking Interreg initiatives and relevant macro-regional strategy areas.



Tailored

Tailored adaptable structures and processes

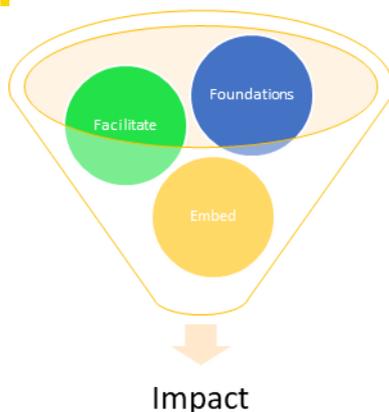
As previous sections have highlighted, an important dimension of Interact's work in this field is its sensitivity to the diverse contexts and circumstance of programmes. As well as providing 'widely applicable' outputs and working to

common denominators, Interact has worked to tailor its outputs, worked in a way that is sensitive to individual needs and interests of the programmes, and is aware of the challenges in promoting coordination. Thus, as well as working collaboratively at joint meetings, care is also taken to engage on a bilateral basis and ensure careful communication.

These efforts are putting in place **processes, practices, and understandings of how programmes work in complementary and distinctive ways**, which respondents note can be built upon and help in a number of ways:

- working towards a project chain across programmes working in related areas as a means to facilitate cross programme collaboration;
- looking to work in smaller groups to operationalise cooperation across programmes in key areas of shared thematic interest; and
- scope to link in and reinforce the work of other Interact teams, e.g., drawing lessons and knowhow from work on macroregional strategies and link to keep.eu as a source of information on projects across the area and work on capitalisation.

8.2.2 Systems and Tools



Foundations



Interact's work across this diverse field has delivered a wide range of systems and tools, which have supported the 2014-20 Interreg programmes and are informing the 2021-27 period.

Reflecting the relative newness of many of the tools and instruments covered, **work to gather**

initial information and experiences is valuable to inform the development of tools and approaches, particularly for the European Commission and national policy makers. For example, respondents note the value of workshops and events showcasing practical cases, which make it easier for people attending to understand situations and find common solutions. The value of lessons drawn from the current round of programmes for up-coming programmes is also highlighted.

As an example of cross-programme working, Interact's own systems work well. IPA and ENI programme representatives noted for example, the positive, complementary way in which Interact has worked with TESIM, e.g in the MedLab group. Interact's efforts to engage with outer most area programmes, IPA and ENI, programmes in a way that recognises specificities, e.g., through providing tailored tools and resources, and also draws them into the wider 'Interreg family' are also important to stakeholders.

In terms of practical resources, the inclusion of macroregions into the keep.eu data base is a practical tool. Substantial work has also gone to providing resources to support links with Investment for Jobs and Growth Programmes, e.g., an Interactive map, and guidelines on Cooperation under IJG goal 2020+ Using "Cooperation" in 2021-2027 Investment for jobs and growth programmes: setting up interregional and transnational actions with beneficiaries located in at least one other Member State. The main results of

this work are expected to apply in the 2021-27 period. To date, building this type of understanding across programme types has proved challenging to operationalise, and this should be considered when considering Interact's 'impact' in the future. In some areas of work, small steps and progress can be significant.



the ENI communications guide. We have to follow certain guidelines when it comes to communication (specific for programmes involving external countries). I do not believe that every single beneficiary should read through the guidelines. Interact came up with this handbook, which is colourful and has illustrations, is easy to read and use. We have adapted this and published it on our website. I believe that people are using it. The more reader-friendly it is, the more it will be used.

ENI Programme Communication Manager

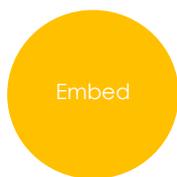
Facilitat
ion

Facilitation and informing new approaches

As experience grows and appetite for wider collaboration increases, more analytical, **comparative resources play a greater role. Interact has developed resources and information to support and 'locate' programmes within their wider cooperation, with a view to supporting inter programme collaboration.** For example, for the MedLab group map of programme geographies and priorities is noted as a useful tool in identifying potential areas of cooperation between programmes. As collaboration efforts mature, Interact's role in facilitating meetings may have to be more closely examined. Cross-programme collaboration can be highly complex, challenging and can require 'leadership' Taking on a stronger role, extending beyond facilitation, could be challenging for Interact reconcile with its remit. Related, expectations of what Interact can achieve in this field should reflect that. Ultimately, it will be programmes and national authorities that mobilise these initiatives.

Nevertheless, **interact can continue to play an important role in informing and supporting stakeholders.** A recent publication 'Cross-border or Transnational – Does it Matter?', published in December 2021 focuses on the issue of operationalising more integrated approaches and responses to the European Commission's call for stronger cooperation between transnational and cross border programmes. The publication has been circulated to programmes via the Interact website and communications and also been sent to all relevant desk offers at the European Commission. In doing so it has opened up discussion and dialogue on the contributions of programme types and cross programme collaboration. At the same time, the European Commission feeds into Interact's work, e.g., inputting into Q&A published by Interact, and helping to ensure new information is accurate and in line with Commission interpretation/thinking.

As has been noted, Interact's work on links to/with the IGJ programmes is an emerging theme. The European Commission highlights the value of on-going collaboration with Interact on work embedding cooperation in mainstream programmes, involving joint publications and exchanges. For example, Interact background analyses and documentation facilitated internal policy setting on embedding cooperation in mainstream programmes. Interact publications are referred to in detail in the European Commission's (June 2021) Thematic Paper: Embedding Cooperation in Mainstream Programmes (horizontal objective). This 'soft influence' is particularly important for the forthcoming period, where the regulations will change substantially. There is potential for the links to be mutually reinforcing, as reference to Interact documentation and awareness of Interact publications also means they are highlighted and identified as resources for the programmes. For example, the Interact Guidelines have been included in a Commission internal policy paper for Desk Officers. The Commissions' paper notes the ongoing relevance of Interact handbooks and publications noting in particular: 'New tools for territorial development and cooperation (Interact 2018) and Added value and efficiency through the use of article 37.6 (b) and EGTC (Interact 2011).

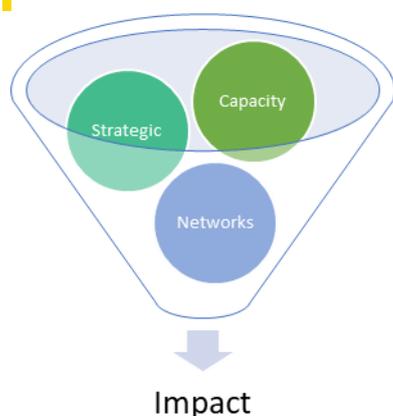


Embed innovative approaches

Interact's contributions at the launch of new initiatives is emphasised. Interact also has a **valuable role in embedding innovative approaches and new systems and tools.** Interact's work on supporting the Macroregional strategies (MRS) is an important example. In this field, the results and impact of Interact's work play a valuable role in initiating new action and reinforcing advancing thinking on MRS, building in depth knowledge and 'supporting the foundations' of the MRS.

Increasingly, Interact's **work on innovative actions has a longer-term perspective.** For example, Interact has linked to Macro-regional Strategies over a number of years and significant expertise and experience has been built up. A key challenge is maintaining and retaining knowhow, particularly as take up of some new instruments can be slow. For example, work on EGTC could continue, as well as wider work on embedding cooperation in IGJ goal programmes as there is a continued need. This work is ongoing since 2006 and, still, many mainstream programmes are finding embedding the concept challenging.

8.2.3 Human Resources



Capacity building



Working on innovative actions and cross programme collaboration is an inherently complex, novel and in some respects higher

risk area of work in that approaches are not yet tested, outputs and impacts are less certain. As such, Interact fulfils important roles in **offering programme and stakeholders 'backup,**

supporting programmes and stakeholders in their own efforts, drawing on wider expertise and networks. For example, MRS work contributes to the development of human resources and institutional capacity regarding MRS in Interreg programmes and vice versa. Support to MRS fulfils a valuable role in retaining and sharing information, e.g., by providing comparative perspectives across MRS/Interreg programmes⁴³ working with MRS or disseminating information on legal change. Counties and regions participating in more than one MRS, e.g., Slovenia, particularly value this type of role.

Similar benefits are noted across the broader spectrum of innovative actions and collaborations. For example, for newer areas of work, e.g., ITIs and CLLD, Interact inputs can help boost capacity and knowhow. Further, where stakeholders are applying innovative tools, linking up what could be potentially isolated actors in the field is helpful.



Strategic links

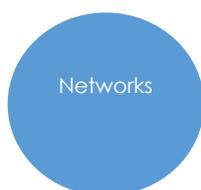
The strategic nature of the links and networks that Interact has worked to develop brings an important dimension to work in this field. Cooperation across programmes on adoption of innovative tools required buy-in and action by various stakeholders across administrative levels and types.

Interact's expertise in working across programmes and stakeholder types is helpful and enables them to play a valuable role **in bridging gaps or communicating new concepts.** Related to this, the work also has a strategic role to play from a planning and preparation perspective and in terms of valuable links to and from the European Commission. For example, as with other areas of activity in this SO, work on the more innovative actions may not have a considerable direct impact in the 2014-2020 programme but will go on to influence development in the next.

Box 5: Territorial Agenda 2030

On the longer-term perspectives on Interact's work, a good example is work in relation to the Territorial Agenda 2030. The TA 2030 was launched in December 2020 as an action-oriented framework addressing the complex interrelated and territorially variable challenges across the European Territory. **The TA 2030 has the scope to contribute to and learn from Interreg experience, particularly in relation to key TA priorities such as integration across borders.** Interact responded to this opportunity and was quick to establish a programme of work in relation to supporting Interreg programmes in their engagement with the Territorial Agenda. Work has included events, development of fiche and a working group. Interact's work has complemented and worked alongside TA 2030 initiatives, most notably the 6 TA 2030 pilot actions. For example, the 'Small Places Matter' pilot action has presented its work at Interact events and Interreg projects are gaining profile and exposure through their involvement with the pilot action. This work comes as the 2014-2020 programmes end but new programmes are being planned. Interact's work provided information and support to programmes in their consideration of the TA 2030 and has the potential to influence and inform programme thinking on the issue as programmes for 2021-2027 are approved and implemented.

Looking to the future, the territorial dimension is an area of work where Interreg (and by association Interact) can add significant value. However, it is also an opportunity to reemphasise the strategic territorial focus of programmes as their raison d'être.



Building networks

Interact inputs have led to **new fora for consultation and cooperation**. For example, respondents noted the value of coordination meetings among the MA in Southeastern Europe. The cooperation established builds a momentum of its own and builds communities around it. For example, through efforts to improve the synergies between Mediterranean Member States, a respondent noted opportunities have grown to cooperate with other Mediterranean programme contact points encountering similar issues and build on the positive benefits of wider cooperation at the start of a new programming period.



Expanding networks has been particularly important in relation to the IPA and ENI programmes. Respondents note the fact that Interact has helped reinforce the message that these programmes are very much part of the 'Interreg family'. However, at the same time, sensitivity to the specific issues and differences of these programme and complementary and cooperative work with TESIM is noted.

Although more closely aligned to SO2, Interact's work on thematic networks is a resource credited with helping to 'locate' programmes' contribution on key themes such as migration, transport and marine/maritime development. In doing so the work offers a platform for better informed cross programme collaboration. Collaboration and synergies with mainstream programmes and other instruments are facilitated by clarity on the added value and



contributions of Interreg, e.g., the migration network has helped to highlight and reinforce the work done by Programmes and links to overall responses to the migration crisis.

The extension and tailoring of networks are valued. However, it is still important to reinforce their place in the 'wider Interreg family'. As Interact's activities and work in 'innovative'/less familiar areas have grown, elements of the work feel less familiar and more remote/separated for some programmes. Thus, working to retain the connection, relevance and relationship with programmes remains an ongoing task.

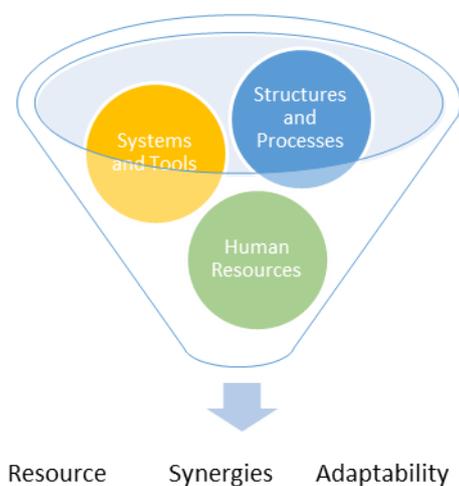
8.3 Impacts

As is noted at the outset of the evaluation, take up of the various resources vary and there are substantial constraints beyond Interact's control that influence the extent to which large scale impacts can be quantitatively measured. Additionally, as well as the previously recorded external factors which can limit impact, SO3 faces some distinct challenges:

- Risk of low take up/interest in new approaches;
- Demand for information may outpace information available;
- Challenge of 'positioning' Interact in debates about the value of new approaches;
- Wide range of potential stakeholders make 'direct messaging' and targeting more challenging and could dilute impact;
- New instruments more likely to change/evolve and adapt posing a challenge in keeping information up dated;
- Work may inform programme decisions not to apply new instruments; and
- Increasing awareness and information are less visible and can take longer to deliver clear impacts compared to, e.g., the adoption of a new IT tool.

Nevertheless, Interact's work in relation to SO3 has positively impacted on efficiency, effectiveness, and resilience directly in a number of respects. As will be discussed, some aspects of SO3 deliver considerable impact, e.g., work in new fields where there is demand for information and resource; wider reach in terms of target groups; and engagement at strategic and operational levels. As the preceding analysis has highlighted, the overall objectives for SO 3 are also connected to other areas of Interact activity. For example, programme capacity building, joint branding, shared systems/approaches can all ease collaboration, support synergies and build capacity to adopt new and innovative approaches.

8.3.1 Efficiency effectiveness and resilience



- **Resources saved**

Interact's work exploring new options and approaches saved programmes time and resource in gathering information and familiarising themselves with, e.g., innovative investments or related programmes. The work has delivered durable outputs and references which can be used at different stages and can have longer-term impact.

The networks and connections resulting from Interact events, networks and resources allow programmes to more quickly resolve questions, develop ideas or launch activities. Particularly notable is Interact work on promoting synergies and links across programmes. Key to the effectiveness of new collaboration approaches is the knowledge and understanding that Interact has helped stakeholders build.

- **Linkages and synergies**



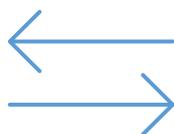
The networks links and synergies resulting from Interact's work have helped programmes deliver opportunities to use joint efforts and collaboration to deliver more effectively. For example, support to MRS has increased awareness and understanding of the overall MRS concept, the related issues, and opportunities of macro-regional strategies. Support to MRS has led to community building and momentum which are a valuable 'by products' of Interact activities. It has instilled a more proactive role in MRS and Interreg actors in addressing common concerns and themes jointly.

Respondents note the opportunities and future value of effective coordination across Interact and TESIM, which provides technical support to the ENI CBC programmes and can be particularly demanding due to the complexities of working in third countries. Interact has helped to build a coherence and dynamic to complex undertakings, such as the MRS or territorially based cross programme collaboration (MedLab). Working across a wider range of territorial cooperation initiatives opens Interact's work to a wider range of stakeholders and provides valuable insights from a broader range of actions to the benefit for programmes.

Interreg programmes have a recognised strength in working across stakeholder types and sectors, as well as territories. In the emerging policy context with an emphasis on territorial cohesion and capitalising on complementarities and synergies, Interact's extensive work on

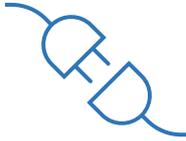
the strategic and practical dimensions of collaboration has much to offer in the 2021-27 programme period.

- **Resilience**



In the current context of rapid change and sudden pressures on programmes and the increasing emphasis on synergies across funding and programmes, Interact's work puts programmes in a good position to maximise their own role, results and impacts and also to adapt and respond to change. Capacity

to work flexibly with new tools and with a wide range of partners is key to the resilience and a necessity in an increasingly complex, rapidly changing economic and policy environment.

	Conclusion	Recommendation
	<p>Time and resource saving: Interact provides a valuable information resource on innovative tools and collaboration across programmes</p> <p>Awareness and knowhow: Interact' work has increased awareness of newer/ others forms of cooperation</p> <p>Engaging with the innovative actions and working on collaboration heightens the profile of programmes and Interreg overall</p> <p>Support is sensitive to programme differences (IPA/ENI) and efforts to build links and engagement with these programmes is appreciated</p>	<p>Communication and dissemination are a key area for work for programmes in the 2021-27 programme period.</p> <p>Look at ways to maintain resources on innovative tools and engage with wider networks, e.g., JRC working on ITI handbook</p> <p>There could be value in engaging more with mainstream programmes to disseminate and engage further beyond the Interreg community</p> <p>Up take of innovative tools and even programme collaboration is slow and Interact cannot force programmes to act, but showcasing good examples, e.g., on an information page on the website could be engaging.</p> <p>Interact continues to have an important position in terms of capturing, communicating and conveying benefits/challenges/applicability of innovative tools to Interreg</p>
	<p>Community building: Interact's work on Macroregions sets the bar for other forms of cooperation, but can also offer valuable lessons on challenges</p> <p>Collaborative capacity: Interact works well alongside TESIM</p>	<p>Scope to build on this work, looking at new ways to operationalise collaboration - e.g., implementation chains, flagship projects cross programme clusters etc, helping to map exchanges and links</p> <p>Continue effective cooperation and coordination of activities with TESIM and NEXT programmes, bearing in mind the challenges facing many of the external border programmes this collaboration will have to be flexible and adapt to changing conditions.</p>



Responsive: Interact has an important role in building sensitivity and awareness of what can be the distinctive issues for different types of cooperation programme/initiative.

Some practical challenges and opportunities of different forms of cooperation/instrument/programme addressed by Interact working either with programmes or the European Commission

Foresight and perspectives: Work carried out on innovative tools may not have immediate impact but can inform planning and up take for forthcoming periods,

Work can inform decisions not to apply new methods, which is still a support to work of the programmes

Work to support cross programme working and synergies is challenging and can be slow to progress. Interact's role is valued in supporting this work, but it can only work in a facilitation role

Examine how to retain and capitalise on smaller more niche areas of expertise, particularly with a view to capitalising on them in the future

Be clear on the benefits of cross programme collaboration, but also where Interact is/isn't able to drive interventions/initiatives

Highlight effective and efficient ways to monitor and engage with the wider programme environment and build links.

9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Impact Evaluation of Interact examines the effects of Interact 2014-2020 services and tools. The report looks at how Interact's services are used by the programme's target groups and their effect on the capacities of Interreg programmes and other stakeholders in managing Interreg programmes.

The Interact programme provides a huge range of high-valued services and tools. At the outset of the evaluation, it was important to present the type, range and character of these outputs in order contextualise and understand their impact. As Chapter 4 illustrates, the resources provided by Interact are extensive and range from IT resources and software, through training and ad hoc advice, to publications and events. Each of these resources has their own role, can complement each other, and are valued by stakeholders. Also, Interact enjoys high levels of 'use and satisfaction' with Interact services and tools, which is confirmed by periodic surveys and event evaluations.

Engagement with target groups and take-up/usage of resources is key to the programme delivering beneficial impact. Now entering its fourth phase, Interact has not only built-up extensive links, but connections to all target groups are increasingly long-standing and durable.

Interact's main target group are the Interreg programmes. Thus, the main users of Interact services are staff working for public authorities involved in Interreg programme and project management. However, particularly over the 2014-2020 period, Interact's target group has broadened to include, e.g. actors involved in the implementation of macro-regional strategies, national ETC networks, and European Union institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions etc, and actors involved in the implementation of mainstream ERDF programmes. For example, for the European Commission there are important synergies and high levels of engagement, involving regular meetings, consultation and participation in events.

Overall levels of engagement with Interact services and tools are high amongst key target groups, in particular for stakeholders directly involved in programme management and implementation, managing authorities, secretariat representatives and specialists and also European Commission specialists. Within that core group additional efforts are made to target thematic specialists, different programme types and various programme actors, e.g., auditors as well as secretariat staff.

Specific target groups differ across the three Interact Specific Objectives:

- SO1 interventions offer support on the main programme management and control tasks. They target almost exclusively the Interreg programmes as Interact's core target group. Around 44% of Interact events fall under SO1 and the share of programmes using SO1 tools and services is highest.



- SO 2 interventions focus on capitalisation and communication of programme results. They primarily aim at the Interreg programmes, but also occasionally include EU Member State representatives, representatives of MRS, other European Structural Funds actors, European institutions, etc. With comparison to SO1, a high number of SO2 interventions consist of support to events organised by external actors. Around 38% of Interact events fall under SO2, and both use of and satisfaction with the events and tools developed under SO2 are high.
- SO 3 interventions focus on innovative cooperation approaches, which include, for example, macro-regional strategies, Cooperation under IGJ Programmes, ITIs and CLLDs, or inter-programme capacity & competence initiatives. They do not only aim at the Interreg programmes. Many events and tools are targeted at MRS actors, IGJ programmes and others, thus not the traditional Interact target groups. Around 18% of Interact events fall under SO3. Given its narrower focus and target group compared to SO1 and 2, the share of Interreg programmes using SO3 events and tools is rather low.

Thus, Interact's work covers areas of general and specific interest, with related implications for engagement with target groups. For example, some interventions under SO 3 have narrower direct target groups, e.g., neighbourhood and IPA programmes or programmes with a link to a macro-regional strategy. The flexibility of stakeholders to engage with Interact outputs in a way and at a time that suits them is appreciated. Interact's commitment to facilitating and enabling engagement and responding to/anticipating partners needs is also highly valued.

- *Seek to retain positive aspects of shift to online as a means to make engagement more accessible, flexible and sustainable.*
- *Recognise that some programmes may be less visibly engaged than others, but keep monitoring programme participation, and maintain aim to have broad participation.*
- *Maintaining the 'programme first' focus keeps Interact's role/engagement clear and clarifies its contributions to/for wider stakeholder groups.*
- *Retain and build links to European Commission, which add value for Programmes, Interact and the Commission*

There are structural, institutional, and situational constraints and challenges that affect Interact results and impact. These issues are considered in detail in the case-based impact evaluation and operational evaluations. They are also taken into account as key contextualising factors in this analysis. For example, low take up of ITI and CLLD is beyond the control of Interact, regulatory and domestic conditions place limits on the scope for simplification and harmonisation. Open ended questions allowed respondents to comment on perceived challenges, difficulties and limitations. These points were considered on a comparative basis across the responses received. Key points in relation to improvements and developments of output results and impact (the focus of this report) are included throughout the report text and

are discussed above. However, it is important to recognise that the evidence highlights the overall positive role and impact of Interact.

Interact products and services support the three enablers of institutional capacity “structures and processes”, “systems and tools” and “human resources”.

- **Structure and processes:** Interact develops a range of management tools which help make programme workflows more efficient and raise transparency, accountability, legal certainty and user-friendliness of programme management. Examples are the electronic monitoring system, the templates and checklists developed under the umbrella of the Harmonised Implementation Tools, and many more.
- **Systems and tools:** Programmes benefit from the exchange of experience facilitated by Interact to learn from exchanges and discussions of good practices and workable models. Examples are the numerous networking and peer learning events organised by Interact.
- **Human resources:** Programme staff benefits from Interact seminars and trainings, which provide opportunities to develop professionally. Examples are the Interreg Programme Management Camps for the “onboarding” of new staff in Interreg programmes.

Enhanced institutional capacity has wider positive impacts on programme performance and programme stakeholders.

Interact is shown to impact on (see Table 5):

- improving the overall governance of cooperation programmes by building institutional capacities, delivering immediate results, in terms of changes in (programme management) practices and cultures;
- increasing administrative capacities and mid-term impacts on increases in efficiency, effectiveness and resilience of programme management bodies and programmes; and
- impacts on programme stakeholders, in terms of access to programme funding as well as project performance (i.e., results delivery).

Table 5: Overview

SO1:	<p>Interact contributes to efficient programme implementation, by offering off-the-shelf implementation tools and resources in line with EU regulations and guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many tools are complementary and mutually reinforcing, e.g., supporting results focus and programme performance - As well as ‘large-scale’ tools, smaller-scale resources like checklists are helpful for programmes, boosting efficiency and effectiveness in key tasks. <p>Interact work is delivering and informing simplified and harmonised solutions, which are benefitting programmes, e.g., legal certainty and transparency is improved for</p>
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	<p>programmes and beneficiaries, simplification for actors (applicants/beneficiaries, national controllers, national authorities) working in multiple programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementation/adaption support is an important part of the tools provided - Provision of technical knowhow and advice on new and technical administration and implementation issues highly regarded and informs programme and Commission approaches/thinking - Resources boost stakeholder confidence and knowhow for decision making and programme management and implementation <p>Scope to work flexibility and adapt/learn from tools valuable to programmes</p>
<p>SO2:</p>	<p>Combined efforts achieved savings in terms of time, money and staff resources for programme authorities</p> <p>Interact's training and tools support the development of effective and clear communications have supported programme effectiveness</p> <p>Interact's work to deliver high quality resources and tools to support online events and communications have been of particular value in promoting programme resilience and adaptability during the Covid pandemic</p> <p>Information institutional memory is invaluable to see progression over time and cumulative information on participation and engagement: keep.eu and Interreg.eu are therefore useful resources to capitalise on</p> <p>Programmes value the efforts on communicating and collecting results, but are sensitive to the challenges involved</p> <p>Interact's work on capitalisation picked up rapidly on an identified programme need</p> <p>In key areas, thematic networks have proved a useful way to highlight Interreg's role in new and emerging areas of action, e.g., migration network</p> <p>The opportunity to connect and work with other programmes through networks and events helps programmes help themselves</p> <p>Interact's work on can inform future actions, build resilience, and provide thematic platforms for the next programme period</p>
<p>SO3:</p>	<p>Interact' work has increased awareness of newer/ others forms of cooperation</p> <p>Engaging with the innovative actions and working on collaboration heightens the profile of programmes and Interreg overall</p> <p>Support is sensitive to programme differences (IPA/ENI) and efforts to build links and engagement with these programmes is appreciated</p> <p>Interact works well alongside TESIM</p> <p>Some practical challenges and opportunities of different forms of cooperation/instrument/programme addressed by Interact working either with programmes or the European Commission</p> <p>Work carried out on innovative tools may not have immediate impact but can inform planning and up take for forthcoming periods,</p>

Work to support cross programme working and synergies is challenging and can be slow to progress. Interact's role is valued in supporting this work.

There are still caveats in terms of how Interact outputs translate to impact. First as has been discussed, not all programmes use Interact resources to the same extent. However, even where programmes do not directly engage, they like 'knowing the resource is there if they need it' - a point which was raised on various occasions in relation to publications for example.

Second, the variation in Interact's work, in terms of outputs, target groups, scale, scope and resources. Major projects like HIT and eMS have 'hard' impacts in terms of changes to working practices and resources saved. For other areas of work, the impacts are 'softer', felt over the longer-term and less immediately apparent. Nevertheless, the evaluation shows that less prominent Interact tools, such as guidance documents, templates, Q&A documents, and slideshows, are used by programmes in their daily work and in interactions with applicants and beneficiaries. In particular, training participants report an immediate impact of the training:

- [As a direct consequence of the training] I modified our procedures and documents concerning the SCOs. *Participant at the Management verifications training, Thessaloniki/Greece, 21-22.2.2018*
- The training was very useful and provided more neutral information for me, as my colleagues have been working for the Interreg programme for a long time and they have their strong opinion, and they are not always neutral. Sometimes their understanding is also wrong. *Participant at the Interreg programme management camp for beginners - training camp, The Hague/Netherlands, 29-30.10.2019*
- The training prepared me to discuss financial rules with our programming committee because a.) I had gained a solid understanding of what are the pros and cons of the different options, b.) it provided me the relevant arguments to defend the fixed % real cost option to the committee, c.) it had given me a good overview of approaches adopted by other programmes, which is important as we share the same partner countries, d.) it had deepened my awareness of what issues remain and what are the consequences of a multitude of different approaches in different programmes means for the beneficiaries and controllers. *Training participant at SCOs & Staff costs in Interreg, Lille/France, 5.12.2018*
- Thanks to the knowledge learnt in the training, I am able to help our programme beneficiaries to communicate better their project results. In 2021, our support was requested 120 times, and this year we already provided 26 answers to our projects, in order to help them to improve their communication tools/actions. *Participant at ICON training on graphic design, online, 09.12.2021*
- The greatest benefit from the training was that I got acquainted with Interact's book on capitalization (that I use in my every work) and with repository of capitalization approaches used. *Participant at training "The concept of "Capitalisation" in Interreg 2020+, online, 3.12.2020"*

Third, it is not always possible for changes to be attributed solely to Interact. However, in depth analysis reveals an appreciation that although changes may not be solely due to Interact, it is an important factor and support:

- “many adaptations have taken place and participation in INTERACT has significantly contributed to them; ... “efficiency and effectiveness gains are difficult to measure as they are part of an interactive process. However, without doubt it is very important for us to have INTERACT” Transnational Programme Director
- “the Interact services contribute to new perspectives on topics or thinking about whether something could be done differently or whether new innovations or changes could be introduced. But [we] don’t come straight from an Interact event and immediately implement changes”. (Head of Interreg CBC Joint Secretariat)
- “happy to use Interact services and are always interested in very practical solutions for their challenges. Digging more deeply into these processes, the ‘hand’ of Interact in driving both major change and ‘daily’ benefits to individuals is clear (Head of Interreg CBC Secretariat)
- “We are greatly satisfied with the products and services INTERACT provides. We would like to see continuity. (RL)” We know INTERACT’s work and their staff well and we enjoy cooperating with INTERACT. It is very supportive, and we do not expect any additional support in future”. (Head of Unit, Interreg Audit Authority)
- “find that there is always added value [from Interact]. Even at events where Interact is not there to bring specialist knowledge, but just to facilitate there is added value.” JS Interreg/IPA Programme.” (Head of Interreg/IPA Joint Secretariat)
- Interact’s spirit of cooperation is very important – particularly within programmes like Interact and Interreg Europe which cover all EU countries. This is very helpful stimulates the sense of cooperation underpinning the working method. (Head of Interreg National Authority)

9.1 Recommendations

The preceding analysis highlights areas of positive impact and identifies lessons, and areas where, looking to the future, Interact has potential to continue to improve, address challenges, build and capitalise on their existing body of work, and further amplify their role and impact, as well as contribute in new ways. As the evaluation suggests areas for further or more intense engagement, it is important to also discuss and consider aspects and areas of Interact’s work that can be scaled back or “rationalised” in return so that the overall workload remains the same. The following recommendations suggest both areas where Interact’s engagement could be increased and decreased.

- **Do more of the same and progress...**



The increased, informed and intensified role of Interact over the 2014-2020 is clear. Stakeholders are aware that “Interact’s services have improved a lot over the 2014-20 period and so a continuation/progression of what is being offered is positive” (representative of Interreg CBC programme Secretariat).

The continued value of specific aspects of Interact’s work have already been noted. As Interreg evolves, the need for Interact services remains linked to, e.g., pursuing simplification efforts, maximising programme impacts and support to take up changing technical requirements, such as single audit sample, new SCO opportunities, and risk-based management. More generally, retaining the collaborative and participatory approach to

Interact's work remains the most important aspect of Interact support. Related to this, interview respondents took time to mention the quality of the staff and the importance of retaining the current high quality of staff and expertise in the future, as they are key to the Interact achieving the impacts it has. While continuity of service and progression is important, in order to amplify and elevate Interact's role a number of factors should be considered in the future.



- **Responsive and agile delivery**

A big part of the continuity that stakeholders seek is Interact's capacity and responsiveness to change. Rapid and unexpected change was a dominant feature of the 2014-20 programme period and continues into the 2021-2027 period. Interact's capacity to adapt to huge change, in particular Covid, and to respond quickly to technical issues is hugely important. For example, the value of the on-line events and resources is recognised. At the same time, the return to some physical meetings and hybrid events is also eagerly anticipated.

Future impact will be maximised by continuing a mixed approach with online and in person provision.

- Digital events (particularly short, targeted events) and resources will continue to broaden the stakeholder base, allow more participation and get wider discussion going.
- Carefully planned and selected physical events will maximise partner participation and value.

Interact is very good at picking up and responding to Programme concerns. Stakeholders feel 'consulted and listened to'. As has been noted, Interact takes a democratic and participatory approach, which increases programmes' ownership and commitment, and is a key factor explaining the high satisfaction/use of Interact's products and services. However, it is not always possible to do everything, and stakeholders appreciate that.

- As means of maximising impact, Interact will continue to benefit from its close links to programmes and key stakeholders informing future activities and areas of action.



- **Intermediary role**

Interact is a bridge between the Commission and the Interreg Programmes and a central contact for the Commission on several issues. This role falls logically into the remit of the Interact programme which is in close contact with programmes and has specialist staff on certain topics.

- There are clear advantages and gains in the close links that Interact has developed with the Commission.

Respondents note:



- the intermediary role is exactly the role Interact should have, “filtering and analysing relevant information to provide it to programmes is how we get most out of Interact”. (Interact CBC Programme Manager).
- Interact's role as a voice for the Interreg programmes and a means to connect with the European Commission, e.g., linking theory/guidance and practice.
- From the European Commission perspective, Interact can help to address ‘gaps’ in the flow of information that can occur between Member State officials, programmes and national experts, e.g., on issues like State Aid. Interact also raises important questions, drawing on practical programme experience and views which inform the European Commission.
- Interact's role in **understanding and interpreting legislation and regulations from the European Commission and presenting to programmes is very useful**. Programmes can find that on some issues different people in the European Commission can sometimes provide different answers – so Interact's intermediary function is very useful (Head of National Interreg Authority).
- The Commission is complex and Interact can work in ways the Commission cannot. For example, Interact is ‘handier’ and it can also take on roles (e.g. in Council negotiations as was the case with the 2021-2027 Regulation when Interact brought to the attention of the Council weaknesses of the legal texts) – it is appreciated that Interact is closer to the programmes and more together with the programmes (European Commission Official)

The momentum generated can build for both strategic cooperation and bottom-up initiatives has been a core element of Interact's operations during the 2014-2020 period. Looking to the future there is scope to develop this work to both facilitate programme initiatives and also undertake cross programme strategic outputs, e.g., on selected European Commission proposals. In addition, framing the contribution within the wider role of Interreg was also reflected upon by stakeholders. For example, the partnership, trust and confidence building element of the programmes and connections between people, in particular linked to civil society and youth could be important and something to reflect upon (European Commission Official).

Interact's role in clarifications on technical issues is widely recognised as valuable. However, it is important to note that Interact's role is not to function as a ‘lobbyist’ and should not be assumed to communicate on behalf of all programmes, particularly on strategic policy issues of debate. The Interreg programmes are so varied that is challenging to put forward a single option or view. Equally, Interact do not speak for the Commission and have to take care when ‘interpreting’ or translating content in the regulations etc. Interact are careful of making these

distinctions, e.g., with publications offering 'reflections' as opposed to conclusions. However, the distinction is worth reemphasising and keeping roles and responsibilities clear and distinct.

Further, it needs to be clear where, e.g., the European Commission, could be better in its own communications or aware of information gaps and not leave Interact trying to explain 'grey areas' or 'solve problems. Which leads some to suggest due to a lack of formal role and resources, DG Regio should strengthen its role in relation to programmes, with Interact focussing strongly on its technical contribution and establish a more formal relation with programmes.



- **Reinforcing quality, accuracy and relevance**

A key to Interact's quality relevance and accuracy lies in its links and engagement with its key stakeholders. However,

- Interact has its own lengthy experience and expertise to draw on and has a useful role in picking up new topics of relevance to programmes.

Thus, Interact can in some areas take a lead in driving the provision of information, training and forums for sharing between programmes. This type of active role is apparent in relation to work on capitalisation.

Efforts to ensure accuracy and clarity on the relevance and applicability of shared examples are important. Interreg is regularly working in complex and changing environments. Working on new and technically demanding issues is associated with risk of inaccuracies and differing interpretations. Further, what works in one context may not be appropriate 'best practice' for all. With this in mind,

- Every effort should continue to be made to check the quality, accuracy and applicability of Interact's output and to avoid confusion.

However, the rapid changes underway in the operational environment, delays in the adoption of regulations and accompanying guidance mean the challenges of delivering up to date, accurate output are all the more complex.



- **The role of geography and programme type**

Interact's work has a key role in breaking down barriers between programmes and building territorial links and networks. This is of great value to stakeholders. However, for some elements of work smaller groups are beneficial. Stakeholders also emphasised the value of their links to their 'local' Interact point. Geographically based work and expertise could allow groups of programmes to work on some shared territorial thematic issues, or work with programmes with similar types and levels of experiences. Such work could be to the wider benefit of stakeholder allowing some programmes to move forward, share ideas on specific issues and themes, or address challenges which can then be shared more widely.

- A broad service and accessibility to all programmes is key, as is keeping Interact's work manageable. However, allowing for geographic/territorial basis of the work in selected relevant themes/areas can be of value and complement the wider work of Interact, e.g. Medlab.

There are pros and cons to both standardisation and a more differentiated geographical approach. Speaking for/to programmes with one voice can be useful, e.g., in relation to technical areas or issues of simplification of relevance to all programmes. However, a unified approach may be more/less applicable in some areas/programme types than others and again highlights the need for some differentiation, e.g., Interact accessibility and representation in the southeast of Europe was also noted.

Another dimension to geography/territorial focus is how it extends into programmes themselves. Interact has already been leading work on linking the Territorial Agenda 2030 and Interreg, which has strong links to the TA 2030's emphasis on the need for place-based approaches, cross border cooperation, cross sectoral approaches and working across levels of governance. Through the continuation of this work, as well as related work on capitalisation, Interact help programmes to engage with wider strategic frameworks and agendas.



- **Communication and capitalisation**

An important element of Interact's work and area of positive impact is communication. Interact has provided training, resources, tools and events/opportunities for dissemination and exchange. Major progress has been made, but more is being asked of programmes and Interreg as a whole in the 2021-27 period. Interreg still has a comparatively low profile compared to other sources of EU funding, despite its broad sectoral, geographic, and strategic relevance. Effectively communicating the value of projects and programmes has proved challenging, in part linked to the scale of budgets and indicators used. With these challenges and demands in mind, Interact can continue to support programmes in their focus on impacts, results and communicating and capitalising on their efforts. However, it will remain important to be mindful of the challenges involved representing a wide variety of programmes and different geographies, especially on strategic issues. On this basis, despite the recognised value of Interact products and services for the programmes as a whole, there is often a level of sensitivity and adaptation needed to tailor these to the national and regional contexts where programmes and national authorities have a role. Additionally, it should be clear where Interact's role lies and where the limits are.

- Interact has/can offer a lot in relation to communication and capitalisation, but in terms of technical support of Programmes own efforts.

- **Explore synergies and complementarities**



Expectations of what Interact can deliver are high and informed by current successes and efforts. However, Interact's time and resources are not infinite. Thus, effective and efficient use of the information and tools already generated by Interact is important.

- As opposed to adding layers, a key focus for the future should be using resources to the greatest effect.

Interact has built up a huge volume of work to draw from which can be used to and develop synergies, link to new audiences. For example, the huge effort put into developing keep.eu can be reflected in even wider use and usability of the resource. Simplifying and clarifying the networks is another example of how an area/mode of work could be refined. In terms of events, particularly physical events, the emphasis should be firmly on quality and impact, as opposed to number of events. Existing knowledge and expertise on collaboration can be used to support and inform initiatives building cross-programme synergies and links.

Another way to take better advantage of existing work and increase outreach is to digitalise content. For example, parts of video-recorded events could be edited and put online as short videos (e.g. presentations, Q&A sessions, etc.). Popular events that are held several times could be turned into online MOOCs that also include practical exercises as well as tests (e.g. multiple-choice or case-based exercises) for users to self-assess their learning.

Keeping up the participatory and inclusive approach to developing products & services is vital. However, the approach is demanding and places a high demand on staff resources. There are conflicting pressures and requirements - trade-offs have to be found/made. For example,

- Some areas of work could become more 'routinised as they are now more embedded.

The work to get HIT, eMS, keep.eu and harmonised branding systems 'off the ground' has been considerable and involved extensive consultation. Whilst acknowledging the need for these tools to be to be actively managed and updated in the future, there are elements that can be 'routinised' in the future. Similarly, some elements of work, which are well established or repeated regularly could be delivered online, participants could self-assess - e.g., online training package for new staff (see above).

Further actions to facilitate effectiveness and efficiency in this respect include:



Clarifying offering: Recognising the expansion of Interact activities, clarifying Interact's role and offering remains an ongoing consideration. A difficulty identified for some stakeholders is a lack of clarity of what activities Interact is developing, possibly because of information overload and challenges in managing the volume of output.



Synergies: In terms of Interact's approach, all efforts towards maximising effectiveness and effectiveness will be enhanced by ensuring coordination within and across Interact services, e.g., across the networks and projects, HIT tools, capturing results and capitalisation efforts.



Accessibility and simplification: The work of Interact to support simplification efforts, streamline its own systems, and improve the accessibility and usability has been highlighted throughout this evaluation. The importance of maintaining and advancing these efforts where appropriate remains, especially as programmes face operating in rapidly changing and complex scenarios. Suggestions include continued use of simplified language and clear presentations; making publications even more accessible e.g., blog post for a new publication, shorter 'easily digestible' headlines, charts or data could make reports more accessible to a wider group of stakeholders; use of short, easy to find videos/visuals on key topics; and easier navigation in the Interact website. Interact should lead by example, e.g. regarding the use of plain language or regarding effective communication principles.



Perceptions of target groups: Programmes have matured, are well established, and have built up their own institutional memory and expertise and networks (albeit often building on the work of Interact). An associated challenge is how to remain relevant and working to continue to engage across stakeholder groups is something to consider. Some programme respondents noted an emerging perception that Interact is now something for more junior or 'new' member of staff to engage with to build up skills and training or that it is mainly the 'newer' programmes who benefit from the exchange of experience with the "old" programme who are running since the onset of Interreg. While engaging with the more junior staff and programmes is an important role, Interact may not want to be seen as limited in this way. Thus, the on-going engagement of senior staff in Interact services is an area which remains important and can be emphasised. It could be useful to offer events that are designed specifically for junior (such as the programme/financial/communication camps) and also promoted as such, and others that rather target senior programme staff.

- **Considering Impact**



Interact has been at the forefront of valuable work supporting harmonisation and simplification, which is widely recognised. As Interreg reaches beyond its 30th year and Interact enters a successive programme period, questions can be raised about, for example how much impact Interact can expect to have in the future and how much more 'harmonised' programme can be and still adequately reflect territorial specificities.

- Be realistic about the limits to simplification and harmonisation.

A 'big question' can be raised about how to view Interact's impact, given that Interreg budgets were cut coming into the new programme period, variable levels of commitment to European Territorial Cooperation. However, the budget cuts have to be seen against the wider context of budgetary pressures linked to Brexit and the impacts of Covid. European territorial cooperation programmes have always received a fraction of the funding of mainstream programmes, their 'ownership is shared' and not necessarily defended by national government authorities during negotiations. As such budgets for territorial cooperation suffer at the expense of larger budgets and programmes of funding in budget negotiations. These are all issues which are beyond Interact's control.

Nevertheless, despite simplification efforts and reform cooperation programmes are still complex, involve new demands, tools and resources are available and policy contexts are subject to rapid and extreme change, which highlights the value of Interact's ongoing role. Evidence from the wider Structural Funds environment suggests that mainstream programmes 'want what Interreg has' through Interact. Recent OECD events on Cohesion policy and capacity building highlighted the huge value of cooperation and collaboration in supporting better management and implementation programmes, speakers and the European Commission both cited Interact as an example of the benefits of joint approaches.

- Recognise and capitalise on the wider relevance and appeal of Interact and Interreg activities and do not underestimate the depth and value of expertise and experience - other programmes and initiatives are interested!

- **Concentrating efforts**



Interact's portfolio has increased over time. For example, Interact is now also catering to the ENI CBC and IPA CBC programmes and will, in the future, also support the mainstream programmes. At the same time, Interact carefully manages overlaps with the work of other programmes and initiatives such as with Interreg Europe and the TESIM project.

Uptake of Interact events and tools by its core target group, the Interreg programmes, is very high (over 80%) as is the satisfaction (4,4 of 5 according to event evaluations and according to the latest Interact use and satisfaction survey). It is understandable that programme countries would like to see these numbers go up even more. Experience (as well the pareto principle), however, suggest that a very high extra effort would be needed to significantly increase use and satisfaction even further, at least among the Interreg programmes.

- The evaluation suggests areas for further or more intense engagement. However, evaluators are also mindful of the fact that, when many new responsibilities are added, there should also be a discussion about which aspects of Interact's work could be scaled back or "rationalised" in return.

Some suggestions for how to free up time and resources and in which areas of intervention the effort could be concentrated in the future:

- **Trainings** cater to the needs of Interreg programmes for 'practice-oriented' and "interactive" events. They have shown to be effective in generating impact. This line of activity could be developed further. As part of the trainings there could be the option for participants to (self-)assess their learning progress (e.g. through multiple-choice tests, solving case studies, or individual feedback from the trainer/s, etc.). In particular, some popular and often repeated trainings and events could be turned into off-the-shelf online courses, such as MOOCs.
- Regardless of how the situation regarding COVID develops, **online events** have proven to be effective substitutes of face-to-face events. For each planned event and meeting, Interact should critically evaluate whether online or onsite formats are more effective to achieving the event's objectives and attracting participants.
- An often-voiced concern from Programmes is the fact that they cannot participate in Interact events as much as they would like, as their host organisation's rules restrict travelling, or that they find an event interesting, but that it comes too early/late in their programme cycle. These factors are beyond Interact's control. Creating more **online content**, which people can access when they need it, could be part of the solution. For example, Interact could prepare short video clips of presentations, Q&A sessions, or similar.
- The enormous value of **Interact tools** such as the electronic monitoring system, the harmonised implementation tools and harmonised branding, keep.eu and interreg.eu online databases has been shown in the case-based impact evaluation. Beyond these tools, there are many others (e.g., publications, templates, presentations, guidance documents, etc.) that are important resources for programmes. Programmes use them in their day-to-day work as reference, as a starting point for developing their own tools and documents, in their exchanges with applicants and beneficiaries, etc. In the past, Interact had a strong focus on events. For the next period, greater emphasis could be placed on developing "tools" while reducing the number of events that are organised.
- **Targeted advisories** to individual programmes and Member States and **support for external events** are highly appreciated services of Interact. These activities tie up



resources and could, by some, be considered giving a preferential treatment to those programmes and countries that request it. Requests for individual support could be assessed more critically (i.e. is it more effective to offer pan-European or individual support), could information and knowledge generated be shared (with the agreements of the target Programme), and, if necessary, also turn down/redirect some requests.

- Related to the above, there are also demands form Interact programmes for more **geographically targeted events and work**. This could be considered where there is a recognised need (e.g. shared thematic issues) or where the level of engagement with Interact would otherwise be low. Moving away from the pan-European event format to a more geographically targeted events could means spreading Interact resources thinner. A good balance has to be found between the two.



Notes

¹ Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal

² Interact (2021) Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020, Call for tenders, Terms of Reference (ToR)

³ McMaster, Wergles, N and Vironen, H, (2021) Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme: Inception Report.

⁴ Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal

⁵ Interact (2021) Interact IV Draft Programme 2022 v

⁶ Interact III Evaluation Plan, Version 1.0, Approved on 19 May 2016

⁷ Interact III Cooperation Programme, Version 2.0 (amended in December 2019), p. 1

⁸ CEC, DRAFT THEMATIC GUIDANCE FICHE FOR DESK OFFICERS INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING (THEMATIC OBJECTIVE 11) VERSION 2 - , 22/01/2014, http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/guidance_fiche_thematic_objective_11_en.pdf

⁹ Additional note on methods: For some aspects of Interact's work additional contacts were pursued to identify areas of impact. As has been highlighted, Interact is active in a wide range of fields with varying levels of resource attached to these activities. For some areas of work, a comparatively small number of events or tools are produced, however inputs may be at a high level, work may be in a very narrow specialist field, or alternatively the work covers a wide and disparate range of stakeholders. For aspects of Interact work on SO 3, this was identified as particularly the case. The evaluation team, therefore, contacted Interact staff working in these areas to gain a detailed overview of the work..

¹⁰ Ultimately, the findings of the -based learning assessment were not included in the in the report, as they were not sufficiently robust or representative. Only a very limited number of participants volunteered, and adequate, comparative pre-training resources were not available. However, higher than average response rates to the wider questionnaire on training compensated and added sufficient detail on this element of Interact's work.

¹¹ McMaster, I., Wergles, N., Vironen, H. (2019). Case-based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020. Final Report.

¹² McMaster, I., Wergles, N., Vironen, H. (2019). Case-based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020. Final Report.

¹³ MacMaster, I., Wergles, N., Vironen, H. (2021). Operational Evaluation of the Interact Programme. Final Report.

¹⁴ Interact (2021) Annual Implementation Report, Interact

¹⁵ McMaster, I., Wergles, N., Vironen, H. (2019). Case-based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020. Final Report.

¹⁶ McMaster, I. Wergles, N. and Vironen, H (2021) Interact Operational Evaluation, Final Report, EPRC

¹⁷ Interreg (2018) 10 Things to Know About Transnational Cooperation'
https://northsearegion.eu/media/4115/10-things-to-know-12feb18_web.pdf

¹⁸ <https://learning.interact-eu.net/>

¹⁹ <https://learning.interact-eu.net/course/inter-programme-capacity-and-competence/>

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- ²⁰ Interact (2021) Annual Implementation Report 2020, Interact
- ²¹ Interact (2019) Annual Implementation Report 2018, Interact p. 48
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ <http://www.interact-eu.net/networks>
- ²⁴ Interact (2019) Annual Implementation Report 2018, Interact
- ²⁵ Interact (2018) Reflection on progress towards medium-term strategies, 6th Interact III Monitoring Committee meeting, 15-16 May 2018, Tallinn, Estonia
- ²⁶ McMaster, I, Wergles, N. and Vironen, H (2021) Operational Evaluation of Interact, Final Report, EPRC
- ²⁷ Interact (2020) Interact Annual Implementation Report 2019 Annex 5, p. 1
- ²⁸ McMaster, I, Wergles, N. and Vironen H (2019) Case based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme, EPRC
- ²⁹ McMaster, I, Wergles, N. and Vironen, H. (2021) The Role of National and Regional Contact Points in Interreg, Report for Interact by EPRC.
- ³⁰ McMaster, I, Wergles, N. and Vironen H (2019) Case based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme, EPRC
- ³¹ Interact (2019) Interact Annual Implementation Report 2019, Annex 5 p. 1
- ³² <https://www.interact-eu.net/#o=news/introducing-interregs-joint-electronic-monitoring-system-jems>
- ³³ **Note:** The shorter section on SO 2 merely reflects the number of indicators set by Interact, not a lack of activity in this area of intervention
- ³⁴ European Cooperation Day (2021) Evaluation Report; European Cooperation Day (2020) Evaluation Report, <https://ecday.eu/materials-documents/>
- ³⁵ Ibid
- ³⁶ Ibid
- ³⁷ Ibid
- ³⁸ Ibid
- ³⁹ Ibid
- ⁴⁰ Interact (2020) Capitalisation Management Guide, Interact, available at [Interact | cooperation works | Library \(interact-eu.net\)](https://www.interact-eu.net/library) and referred to at https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2020/08/27-08-2020-capitalisation-management-guide-join-the-community-exchange-and-learn-with-interreg
- ⁴¹ Interact Migration Network, <https://www.interact-eu.net/networks#2584-Migration>
- ⁴² Regulations and circumstances differ for IPA but nevertheless there are important connections to be made and establishing the programmes as part of the wider Interreg community has been valuable. Initial work has focussed on trust building and developing networks. Links to all the programmes and many are very actively engaged, e.g., Romanian-Serbia and Italy, Albania Montenegro Programmes. The network approach has proved to be responsive to programme needs, e.g., working on issues such as public procurement, and accommodating the various stages of the programme cycle.
- ⁴³ "Interact has been supporting and boosting cooperation spirit within the framework of the EU macro-regional strategies but not only addressing services to the macro-regional actors. Interact has ensured horizontal approach in the service delivery across macro-regions whereas experiences and good practices of the individual macro regional strategies have been collected and shared with the other macro-regions." 2019 Annual Report Annex 5 Interact III annual implementation report 2019 7 / 7