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Evaluation of the INTERREG Europe programme-Lot 1

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**Final report for Lot 1**



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## List of Abbreviations

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AA	Audit Authority
AIR	Annual Implementation Report
CA	Certifying Authority
CoR	European Committee of the Regions
CPR	Common Provisions Regulation
EC	European Commission
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
FO	Finance officer
FTE	Full-time equivalent
GoA	Group of Auditors
IE	Interreg Europe
IGJ	Investment for Growth and Jobs (programmes)
IT	Information Technology
JS	Joint Secretariat
LA	Lead Applicant
LP	Lead Partner
MA	Managing Authority
MC	Monitoring Committee
NPC	National Point of Contact
OP	Operational Programme
PA	Priority Axis
PLP	Policy Learning Platform
PO	Programme officer
PS	Partner State representative
RoP	Rules of Procedure
SO	Specific Objective
ToR	Terms of Reference

# 1 Introduction

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As stated in the Terms of Reference, the operational evaluation of Interreg Europe will assess if the programme is being implemented efficiently and effectively in order to achieve the programme objectives. This evaluation covers administrative capacity, the resource allocation, but also the human resources and the structures and procedures.

Specific Objective 5.1, Technical Assistance, of Interreg Europe is to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency in managing and implementing the Interreg Europe programme. To achieve this, the Cooperation Programme identifies a number of fields:

- the establishment of effective and efficient support structures and the development of tools and activities for programme management;
- ensure an effective project generation and selection system leading to a manageable number of good quality and relevant applications;
- adequate support and facilities for stakeholders in the projects and the Policy Learning Platform (PLP), including a monitoring and control system that is as ‘simple’ as possible;
- fully exploit of the possibilities offered by IT tools for efficiency
- develop suitable channels and activities for the communication, dissemination and capitalisation of projects as well as the PLP;
- processes to allow programme management bodies to make informed decisions and give effective steering to the implementation and the strategic course of the programme.

This Lot 1 evaluation reviews whether resources allocated to programme’s technical assistance are adequate and proportionate to the programme’s intended objectives. It also assesses the effectiveness of procedures and structures to administer, implement and manage the programme.

As this evaluation is considered a learning tool, its outcomes will help improve efficiency in the use of resources and effectiveness in delivering the programme. The evaluators are therefore facilitators that help the programme implementing bodies to optimise workflows and practices to achieve the management objectives.

As the programme still has some years of implementation ahead, any process improvements may still be meaningful in the period 2014-20. In addition, some outcomes of this evaluation may be used for further reflection and discussion for the 2021-27 programming period.

All these aspects have been considered when designing this evaluation, which is organised in 3 blocks or tasks:

- programme management and steering;
- support for operations (interregional projects and PLP);
- the programme communication strategy and its contribution to programme’s objectives.

For each task, evaluation questions reflect the areas of interest. This report is structured in subsections, and the evaluation questions have been inserted in them.

A summary of the conclusions for each question are highlighted. This is followed by the detailed analysis.

This evaluation confirms that the programme procedures work as expected, especially support for projects, which is highly appreciated by all programme stakeholders. On the operational side, the evolution of the structure and monitoring of the PLP is a key area to follow-up. On the strategic side, increased visibility for the National Points of Contact (NPC), encouraging the active participation of Monitoring Committee (MC) members at the MC meetings and the re-focusing of the communication strategy are the three main challenges for Interreg Europe in this second phase of programme implementation.

## 2 Context and methodology

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### 2.1 Context of the evaluation

The Interreg Europe operational evaluation is taking place exactly in the middle of the programme implementation. 2018 (time of this evaluation) is the third year of implementation.

These three years of progress enable a good overview of programme operation and the functioning of authorities and bodies as well as the procedures to reach the programme objectives.

As stated in the Terms of Reference, ‘The reinforced focus on results in this programming period needs adequate administrative capacity and human resources for delivering the day-to-day management and control activities, but also efficient structures and procedures to ensure smooth implementation and strategic decision-making process’.

The objective of the operational evaluation is therefore to answer the question: is the programme doing the thing right? In other words, does the programme and implementation structures work efficiently and effectively to achieve the programme objectives?

This Lot 1 evaluation looks to understand whether the resources allocated to programme technical assistance, are adequate and proportionate to the programme’s intended objectives. This includes assessing the effectiveness of existing procedures and structures to administer, implement and manage the programme.

The Terms of Reference also mention the target groups interested in the outcomes of this evaluation. These are primarily the programme authorities, the European Commission, the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee. In addition, the European Council and the European Parliament are mentioned, together with Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies of ESIF programmes, in view of the 2021-27 programming period.



This evaluation is also taking place as the debate on the future programming period is starting. The legislative proposals for Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 were presented in May, when the negotiation procedure was also launched.

Interreg programmes, and especially the pan-European programmes, are usually implicit in the wording of the proposals for the upcoming programming period because of their specific nature. That reference usually allows the programmes to have a perspective into their future and to adapt their strategies accordingly.

Legislative proposals for the period 2021-27 currently question the continuation of Interreg Europe as it is structured in 2014-20. This affects this operational evaluation in two ways:

- outcomes of the evaluation may highlight the positive input of Interreg Europe to Cohesion Policy for the discussions or negotiations;
- programme bodies have raised awareness among programme stakeholders about the future perspective of the programme and the importance of contributing to this evaluation, especially via the surveys and interviews.

## 2.2 Data collection methods

Data for this evaluation were collected through document studies (literature review), surveys and interviews. In the report, the main outcomes of each information source are indicated in the text, and also with three distinctive icons:



document studies  
(literature review)



surveys



interviews

### **Surveys of Monitoring Committee (MC) members and lead partners.**

Two surveys addressed the two target groups for different purposes.

- **The MC member survey** produced qualitative information from as many Partner States as possible. The MC includes over 100 people, some in advisory capacity (for example the European Commission or the European Committee of the Regions representatives). As contained in the list of MC members provided, 37 of the MC members are National Points of Contact as well. Out of these 37 persons, 18 answered the survey covering 17 Partner States.<sup>1</sup>

The large number of recipients and the need to get opinions from as many Partner States as possible made it necessary to use a survey rather than interviewing a sample of members. Therefore, the survey was designed to collect as much qualitative information

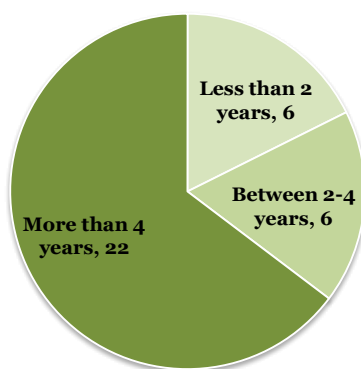
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<sup>1</sup> No specific survey was carried out with the NPCs/ PS representatives on the implementation of the six tasks outlined in the Annex to the Communication strategy 'Points of contact guidelines'. This may have influenced the final recommendations of the report with regard to the NPCs/ PS representatives and their tasks.

as possible, with many open questions. This survey addresses programme steering and management, project application and implementation, aspects regarding the PLP, and programme communication.

In total 42 MC members including MC advisors (European Commission representatives) and MC substitute members replied to the survey, some 38% of the recipients. Respondents are well representative of the MC, from 20 different countries, including EU Member States and Partner States. A few respondents did not indicate their country of origin, so the number of Partner States may be higher. Furthermore, respondents are a mix of experienced and less experienced members, with a clear majority of very experienced members. Of the 34 respondents who indicated their level of experience as an MC Member, six have less than two years of experience, six have two to four years and 22 have more than four years of experience.

Figure 2.1 Respondent years of experience as Interreg Europe MC members



source: survey of MC members

- **The lead partner survey** was addressed to the 184 lead partners from the three first calls for proposals. This survey produced the opinion of the lead partners on those aspects that affect them (project application, project implementation, programme rules, communication and IT tools). The high number of approved projects and partners involved in the 184 projects made it necessary to target lead partners only. In the logic of the lead partner principle, it was assumed that the lead partners would collect the views and opinions of their partners when answering the survey. However, it was mentioned during the Monitoring Committee meeting<sup>2</sup> that the fact of targeting only lead partners may have affected the outcomes of the survey, which would reflect the views of the lead partners only and not of all the partnerships.

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<sup>2</sup> the 19 December in Innsbruck

The survey combines collecting opinions on procedures and documents, as well as detailed qualitative feedback on each item. The survey of projects combined questions relevant for Lot 1 and Lot 2 of this evaluation.

In total 97 lead partners replied to the online survey, 53% of the total projects. The respondents cover projects under each Specific Objective (SO). The distribution of respondents per SO is balanced, with four lead partners from projects under SO 1.1 replied to the survey, 22 under SO 1.2, 23 under SO 2.1, 25 under SO 3.1, 14 under SO 4.1 and 9 under SO4.2.

These two online surveys were launched at the end of June, after discussions between the Joint Secretariat (JS) and the evaluation team to find optimal formulations for questions.

Given the different holiday periods within the European Union and the Programme area, the surveys were open until mid-August to maximise the responses.

### **The literature review**

The literature review gives an overview of the programme's overall structure, the procedures and the state of play. During the review, the focus was on aspects relevant to the evaluation questions. Those contents have served to build the structure and the foundations of this report, to which the input from the rest of the methods was added.

The document review helped identify areas for analysis. The documents are detailed in an Annex and may be summarised as:

- Programme official documents: Cooperation Programme, Rules of Procedure of the MC, Annual Implementation Reports, Description of the Management and Control System,
- MC meeting notes and background documents (including for written procedures),
- Programme reference documents: Programme Manual, Communication Strategy,
- Other documents: internal evaluations by the Joint Secretariat, monitoring data, information on the website.

### **The interviews**

The interviews were an additional angle for this evaluation, helping formulate the assessments, in coordination with the outcomes of the literature review and the surveys. They also highlighted additional areas for attention in this evaluation.

Interview purposes varied with the different target groups:

- Three Partner State representatives (Slovenia, Croatia and Belgium),
- Two people from the Managing Authority (MA),
- 10 from the JS,
- Two consultants working for the PLP,

- 16 lead partners.

The decision to interview three representatives of the Partner States was taken in a meeting of the evaluation team on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2018. These interviews produced qualitative information from Partner States actively involved in the programme implementation which had not responded to the survey or had not identified themselves as respondents to the survey.

For MA, JS and PLP staff, detailed questions were adapted to the working areas of each target group. In addition, questions for JS staff were targeted to each position, in order to optimise the interview time and obtain precise information from each person.

For the lead partners, the interviews produced qualitative information not available from the survey. The specificities of this target group and the fact that they may be less familiar with programme needs made it necessary to find additional ways to obtain their opinion.

Deciding the interview questions, interviewees and some practical aspects were subject to exchanges between the evaluation team and the JS and were included in a methodology document ('Methodology interviews evaluation').

Interview outcomes were analysed and combined with the other inputs for this evaluation. The responses to the interviews were compiled and combined in the cases in which they indicated a trend. These trends were inserted in the report. The analysis of the responses indicates that some opinions or comments are shared by two or three respondents. The evaluator considered these two or three opinions as a trend. In the cases of standalone answers (not following a trend), they were included in the report only if they brought a clear added value to the topic, and these cases are clearly indicated in the report.

### 2.3 Approach on the effectiveness and efficiency checks

As stated in the inception report, the approach for the efficiency and effectiveness checks is based on the following definitions and assumptions:

**Efficiency:** how economically or optimally inputs (financial, human and material resources) are used to produce outputs and results.

This usually compares the input output ratio to an ideal standard. However, as mentioned in our offer, checking efficiency using a unit-cost approach is difficult due to the particular activities of an Interreg programme (JS support for operations, for example) and because the aspects to be examined are often qualitative and not easily quantified.

In this evaluation, inputs and outputs are quantified to some extent, and the efficiency check has been complemented with two efficiency-related questions:

- Could more activities have been realised or obtained with the available financial, human, material and technical resources?
- Were some programme activities not realised or only partly carried out due to a lack of financial, human, technical or material resources?

The main concern of this operational evaluation is to understand whether the resources are adequate and proportionate to the programme's objectives.

**Effectiveness:** performance in terms of the actions taken to yield positive results and/or to achieve pre-defined goals. This evaluation appraises the quality of steering and management activities towards achieving SO 5.1.

This operational evaluation assesses the effectiveness of procedures and structures to implement the programme, rather than programme effectiveness as a whole.

### 3 Evaluation results. Task 1.1: Programme management and steering

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This task involves analysing the organisation and related processes of the programme bodies. This includes MC meetings and the decision-making process, which are fundamental to the core functioning of the programme and also deal with day-to-day programme work.

For operational reasons and to ease the analysis, the following sections have been reorganised starting with an analysis of programme steering and after that with programme management.

The overall finding of the evaluation of the programme management and steering is that the programme has the adequate decision-making procedures in place, with clear and transparent rules, and effective management processes. The details are provided below. Although the programme works well, the below sections provide also some suggestions for possible improvements. These can be taken as starting point for a discussion if the programme wants to further improve its management and steering.

#### 3.1 Programme steering

Programme steering refers to the strategic decision-making, the bodies involved, their interaction and the quality of decision-making processes.

As Interreg Europe involves 30 Partner States, the decision-making processes need to be as streamlined as possible given the many strategic decisions, discussions and project applications.

Two evaluation questions analyse the programme steering:

- Are responsibilities of the programme bodies clear and complementary?
- Are decision-making processes clear and transparent?

Below are the analysis results.

##### 3.1.1 Are responsibilities of the programme bodies clear and complementary?

*All programme bodies understand their role and know about the complementarities especially between the MC and MA/JS. However, the functions, composition and complementarities of the*

*National Points of Contact (NPC) or individual Partner State representatives with the MC and MA/JS could be made more visible.*

**Recommendations:** *In the opinion of the evaluator, the complementarities of the NPC or single Partner States with the rest of the programme bodies could be made more visible, possibly on the website.*

To answer the question, two groups of bodies which fulfil different functions in steering the programme are analysed separately:

- MC and MA/JS,
- NPCs and/or Partner State representatives.



The roles of the **MC and MA/JS** are clearly detailed in the Interreg Europe Cooperation Programme and Interreg Europe Monitoring Committee Rules of Procedure (RoP). These state that the MC performs the main monitoring tasks of the Programme. The list of the tasks, composition and other rules are detailed in the RoP.

Section 5 of the Interreg Europe Cooperation Programme contains extensive details of MA and especially JS tasks for implementing the programme. As the MA and JS assist the MC in preparing decisions they are involved in steering the programme. The Cooperation Programme indicates when the MA/JS prepares decisions to be taken by the MC, and also when the MA/JS have discretionary powers (decisions on some minor changes of projects).

Other MA and JS implementation tasks are also extensively detailed in the Cooperation Programme.



The survey of MC members confirms 100% that the roles of their institution and other programme bodies are clear. During the interviews with programme bodies, it was made clear that MC members understand their role. Only new representatives usually need to be briefed on the programme and MC dynamics.

MC members largely agreed that the roles of the various programme bodies were complementary. In their comments, some MC members wished for more informal communication or interaction (a kind of 'facebook workplace' was mentioned in one comment).

This distribution of responsibilities seems appropriate in a programme which involves 30 Partner States and whose MC may include 90 members with decision-making power, as well as the need to be timely and meet deadlines, as with any other Interreg programme.



However, 4 MC members (at the MCo8 in Sofia, for example) raised questions about unclear distribution of responsibilities for decisions on the specific issue of project partnership changes. The JS reacted to this request and applied additional improvements in the procedure to allow more time for Partner State reactions. In the Programme Manual it is stated that the Partner State will be asked to confirm the eligibility of the new partner, if necessary.

As a conclusion, the roles of the MC members in the programme steering are clear to all programme bodies, and are also clear in the literature review. In the only case in which there was unclarity about the responsibilities, he JS reacted and clarified the procedure in the Programme Manual.

Even though the **NPC or individual Partner State representatives (PS)** have no steering or management roles, their involvement in the programme and assistance to the steering and management bodies make it relevant to review their contributions. The NPC and PS are not always MC members. In this sub-section, we are considering the roles of NPC and PS only, as the roles as MC members are covered in the sections focusing on the Monitoring Committee and its functions in the programme.



Both NPC and PS fulfil tasks that are relevant not only for implementing the programme, but also for decision-making.

The Annex to the Communication Strategy states that the NPC or PS is responsible for:

- checking the eligibility of partner status and
- checking the relevance of support letter signatories.

These are part of the six tasks of NPC or Partner State representatives. The other four tasks relate to communication and are covered in other sections of this report.

The Programme Manual also confirms that partnership changes need to be checked by the Partner States, which is in line with checking the eligibility of partners.



As for their roles, the JS confirmed in the interviews that both have the same functions in the Programme. Some Partner States have chosen to have a representative named 'National Point of Contact', but this does not change any of the functions or responsibilities. In fact, the website section on the NPC does not distinguish between an NPC or a Partner State representative and all Partner States have contacts and information. Therefore, NPCs and PS are considered as having the same role.

Some Partner States benefit from the technical assistance budget covering travel and accommodation costs to attend MC meetings (Article 8 of the MC RoP), but this does not relate to 'NPC' or 'Partner state representative'. All Partner States could obtain some financing from technical assistance to organise national and regional events and cover travel and accommodation costs for programme meetings. Only 14 Partner States chose to this support.

As a conclusion, the two functions mentioned above (checking the eligibility of partners and the relevance of support letters) are not optional for NPC and PS (the functions cannot be waived), as they are needed for decisions about projects. Therefore, it can be concluded that the NPC and PS have a clear role in supporting the decision-making.

These functions are mentioned in the Annex to the Communication Strategy, but in the opinion of the evaluator, additional visibility could be given to the complementarities of the functions of

NPC-PS as related to the MC and MA/JS functions. This applies not only to the two functions mentioned above, but to all the six functions of the NPC-PS. The website could be the place to visualise these complementarities.

### 3.1.2 Are decision-making processes clear and transparent?

*Decision-making processes are relevant, clear and transparent for most MC members and other programme bodies. However, some MC members wished to have more time to discuss the assessment of projects and to have more influence in the process.*

**Recommendation:** *to continue building ownership among MC members towards decisions and the trust towards the technical work of the JS, active participation of MC members in the MC meetings could be encouraged. For example, key strategic topics (PLP progress, for instance) could be tackled in workshops. This would also allow to reserve time to strategic discussion (and not only take technical decisions) at the MC meetings, as the discussion on project assessments will be over in the upcoming months.*

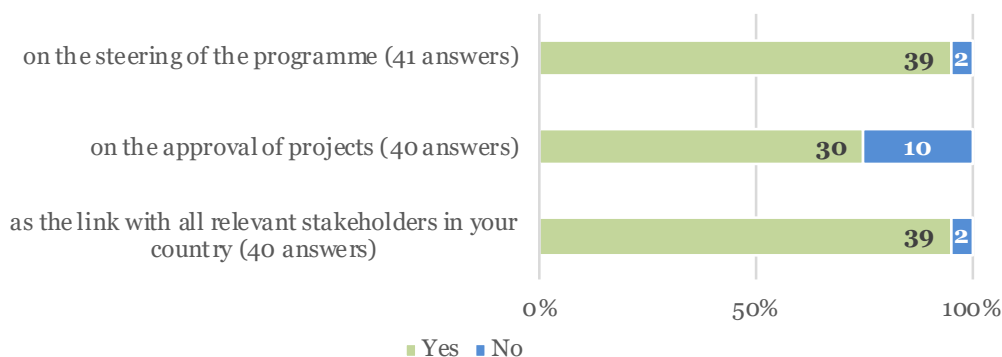
To answer question whether the decision making processes are clear and transparent, several elements need to be analysed:

- First of all, the quality of access to information and documents which is key to sound decision-making.
- As a second aspect, the specific programme decision-making system and the decision-making models need to be considered, as programmes may design their decision system in the most suitable way for their context.
- Among the topics that need MC decisions, procedures for deciding on project applications and modifications stand out as core for the MC and the programme.

#### Access to information

Figure 3.1 Assessment of capacity to perform MC tasks

Do you think that you are in capacity (access to information, to contact persons, etc.) to work effectively ...



Source: online survey of MC Members





The survey outcomes give a clear picture of the quality of access to information, as this aspect is raised by several comments. For the majority of respondents, access to information works effectively to enable the steering functions of the programme. In general, respondents welcome the quality of information and clarifications provided by the JS for decision-making.

Only with the approval of projects did around 25% of respondents think they lack access to information to fully enable their steering functions. In these cases, the comments do not refer to the access to information, but rather to the difficulty for MC members to assess proposals, or the impossibility of more effectively influencing the approval of projects.

#### The Interreg Europe decision-making system



Steering of Interreg Europe involves a series of decision-making processes that take place during MC meetings or by written procedure.

The MC RoP and the Programme Manual detail that certain decisions such as eligibility assessment will be taken by written procedure.

There have been eight MC meetings (and two informal ones) since June 2015, so two meetings per year (even three in one year).

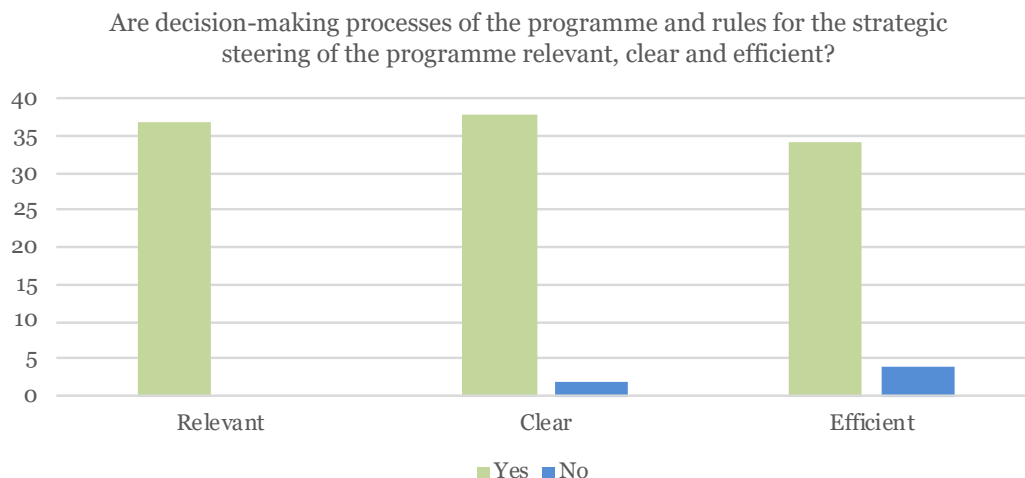
The minutes of the eight MC meetings highlight that they focus on discussing and monitoring programme progress and decisions usually refer to strategic aspects, in the sense of topics that imply a choice which may influence the programme progress. For example, the evaluation plan was approved in the MC meeting of Tallinn, whereas the evaluators were approved via written procedure.

The number of decisions are not high compared to the agenda points for each MC meeting. As reflected in the minutes, there are extensive discussions on technical aspects at MC meetings, which allow the JS to obtain further strategic feedback to improve documents or processes. In some cases, the final decision may take place by written procedure.

In addition, 21 written procedures have been launched and finalised in these three years of implementation. They all deal with key aspects of programme implementation such as eligibility and strategic assessment of projects, annual implementation reports, etc. The JS provides the MC representatives at each MC meeting with an overview of written procedures launched between MC meetings, for transparency.

In addition, the MC decision notes (with general information and the final decision) are published on the website.

Figure 3.2 MC member opinions on the decision-making processes



Source: survey of MC members



For most MC respondents, the decision-making processes are relevant, clear and efficient. In their comments, several respondents acknowledge the high number of MC members and the need for an efficient voting system. However, 7 comments in the survey point to allowing for more discussions at MC meetings, especially on project assessments.



In the interviews the MA stressed that the MC meetings are very well structured as all of them involve two days of discussion, and the agenda contains 12 items with five sub-items. That means 60 subjects to discuss at every meeting.

As a conclusion, decision-making at MC meetings is kept to aspects strategic for programme implementation. The limited time for the MC meeting requires identification of the number of topics that can be covered, and some pre-agreed aspects are subject to written procedure. This decision-making system seems efficient, as time available is optimised bearing in mind the large number of MC members and the number of topics for discussion (including the high number of applications).

However, following the suggestions of the 7 survey respondents, more time for strategic discussion could be allowed. Even though there will probably be no more project assessments in this period, it is important to continue engaging the MC members in the strategic decisions of the programme so that the ownership of the programme steering is kept at the MC.

Therefore, the evaluator recommends more time for strategic discussions in future MC meetings.

#### Decision-making models



The Rules of Procedure (RoP), approved by the MC, foresees consensus as the basic principle for decisions at the MC. If consensus is not possible, two voting models are included for decisions on:

- programme management and implementation: 5/6 majority of the votes (abstentions not relevant) are needed,

- projects: 2/3 of the votes are needed.

Table 3.1 Overview of the decision-making models

Overview of the decisions at MC meetings			
MC meeting	Decision by consensus	Decisions by vote	Votes leading to approval of the proposal
Riga, June 2015	4	1	0
Luxembourg, September 2015	6	0	0
Utrecht, February 2016	6	6	0
Winterthur, October 2016	4	0	0
Bratislava, December 2016	4	2	1
Valletta, March 2017	2	0	0
Tallinn, December 2017	5	0	0
Sofia, March 2018	7	0	0

Source: own elaboration based on the MC notes

The MCO3 in Utrecht saw voting used six times, probably because the programme was still settling its basis so some fundamental aspects were deeply discussed and defended by Partner States.

Majority voting raises the question of its proportionality and/or usability. Only once did majority voting led to approval of the proposal (i.e. the majority required was reached). Here the consensus could have been used, as there was unanimous agreement<sup>3</sup>. In the other cases, majority voting always led to rejection of the proposal.



In the survey, 3 responses highlighted the need to be able to use the voting system in a programme like Interreg Europe. However, 2 comments considered that the majorities required make it difficult to implement changes. They block discussion and take a lot of the meeting time.



As the interviews with programme bodies reveal, the RoP and decision-making model result from over 10 years of experience, especially with the previous programme Interreg IVC. The aim of this system is to allow for smooth decision-making and avoid blocking at MC meetings, which would have a clear impact on programme implementation.

The interviews confirm that the JS thoroughly prepares the background documents for each MC meeting, including documents related to selecting projects, to ensure quick decision-making.

Consensus has been the general rule when making decisions, and the voting model has been used in only a few cases (see table 3.1)

<sup>3</sup> The decision to be taken referred to devolving power to the MC for decisions on budget cuts and changes following the mid-term review, all MC members voted for this.

In parallel with these majorities, another aspect at MC meetings is the behaviour of MC members. As indicated in the interviews, some MC members are very proactive during the meetings and in implementing the programme (for example in lobbying for post-2020 programming). This pro-activeness gives those MC members a feeling of ownership of the programme and its decisions. Such pro-activeness is frequent in Interreg programmes and is linked to consensus-based systems. However, not all MC members are so active, and there is a risk of apathy among less active members.

As a conclusion of all the above, having recourse to voting with these majority levels has the advantage of making sure a new proposal is very widely supported by Partner States and avoids decisions that are difficult to implement later on. However, these levels of majorities seem to block decisions and may create a feeling that it is impossible to change any type of proposal submitted to the MC. Having recourse to majority voting also blocks the possibility of continuing discussions until a consensus is reached.

In the opinion of the evaluator, to counter-balance the strict majority rules and the feeling that it is difficult to influence the programme through voting, the combination of pro-activeness on the side of the MC members and trust in JS preparation work is the key to maintain the ownership level among the MC members.

Therefore, promoting the active participation of all MC members would help continue building ownership of the decisions and trust in the JS preparatory work, especially now that the discussions on project assessments will be over in the upcoming months. At the same time, it would avoid modifying voting rules at this stage of the 2014-2020 programme.

One concrete recommendation to promote active MC member participation is the organisation of workshops for items discussed at MC meetings. Post-2020 programming may be one of them, but also strategic topics such as the progress and the direction of PLP in the near future.

#### Project related decision-making



One aspect discussed in at least two MC meetings (Utrecht and Bratislava) was the clarity of MC member roles in assessing projects. In both MC meetings, proposals to change the assessment and selection procedures were voted on and rejected.

Desk research reveals that the system is designed to be as efficient as possible and to speed up implementation of the programme rather than opening the processes to allow for active participation of MC members during the assessment phase.



Most MC respondents to the survey consider the decision-making processes for projects as relevant, clear and efficient, as shown in figure 3.2. However, they also feel that more decision-making power should be kept for the MC. 7 responses to the MC survey indicate the wish to be more involved in the assessment process. In this view, the wish to reserve more time to discuss assessments at MC meetings (possibly in workshops), as suggested by MC members, could be a good compromise between the number of assessments to deal with and

stronger involvement of MC members in the process. However, the last chance to discuss the assessment process in an MC meeting will be in December 2018.



The JS took the initiative to invite MC members to two assessment meetings during 2018, where technical aspects were discussed. Participation was voluntary and attendees appreciated the discussion. This kind of initiative builds trust and ownership, but participation was low, perhaps because not all MC members were available for an additional meeting.

As a conclusion of the above, MC members recognise the good quality of preparation by the JS, but they also wish to have more influence in the process, as in other Interreg programmes. As mentioned in the previous section, ensuring active participation of MC members during meetings would bring additional ownership of decisions and trust in JS preparatory work. Therefore, it is recommended that MC meetings reserve time to discuss the assessment of projects. This recommendation may be too late for the 2014-2020 programme, as the last call is being assessed and will be finalised as this evaluation is taking place, but could be included in any future programme.

### 3.2 Management of the programme

Programme management refers to the processes of bodies involved in day-to-day implementation of the programme. The evaluation assesses if the organisation for programme implementation is appropriate to reaching programme objectives, if it maximises use of the resources, and if the capacities of MA and JS staff are adequate.

The management bodies considered in this section are:

- NPC and Partner State representatives, whose implementation role is analysed, and
- the JS, as it implements all management procedures in the programme, assisting the MA.

#### 3.2.1 Is the programme management effective -assigning the right inputs to generate the right outputs?

*Programme management is a responsibility of the MA and JS, and globally the **effectiveness** of their work is confirmed by all programme stakeholders. However, NPCs and single Partner States play a supporting role that could be clarified and which could also be enlarged to better contribute to programme objectives.*

**Recommendations:** *The evaluator recommends that the role of the NPC-PS and complementarities with other management functions of the MA and JS is made more visible on the programme website.*

*In addition, the role of the NPC as a link to national knowledge networks for communication purposes could be reinforced by creating guidance (including a thematic approach) to promote the programme in their countries. An MC decision could decide if this activity needs to be implemented by every NPC-PS.*

*In addition, an interactive IT tool could update NPC and Partner States with programme news and enable informal exchange among themselves. It would also be useful for Partner States to identify situations where their intervention is needed and to anticipate further problems.*

Progress towards the output and result indicators are useful in assessing if the programme management is making adequate progress. However, it is not the only tool to assess efficiency and effectiveness.

*Table 3.2 Indicative progress of the output indicators for Specific Objective 5.1*

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Target value (2023)</b>	<b>Achieved by October 2018</b>	<b>Source</b>
No. of interregional cooperation projects approved	Number	200	184	Monitoring data
No. of project visits and participations in project events by the JS	Number	200	33	Monitoring data
Average no. of visits to programme website	Number/month	15,000	43,984	AIR 2017
No. of MC meetings	Number	14	8	Monitoring data
No of employees (FTEs) whose salaries are cofinanced by TA	Number	--	27	Monitoring data

Source: own elaboration



As shown in table 3.2, the progress made by the programme indicates that output indicator targets will be achieved by the end of the programme. In the specific case of the number of project visits, the fact that the JS usually attends the closure event of every project leads to assume that the participation of JS in project events will be higher in the upcoming months and that the target value will be reached.

These data need to be understood along with additional qualitative data and the opinions of programme stakeholders to get a complete picture of the effectiveness and efficiency of programme management.

The literature review and the survey reveal that the role of the **NPC or Partner State representatives (PS) in the management of the programme** needs to be clarified and analysed.



Section 5.3 of the Cooperation Programme states that the MA, assisted by the JS, is responsible for managing the programme. A detailed list of provisions defines their roles and tasks.

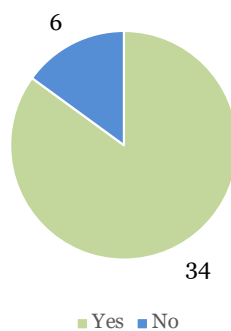
As in the previous section on steering the programme, the NPC or PS also assist in managing the programme. As in the Annex to the Communication Strategy, Partner States support the JS on a number of tasks. For programme management the tasks are:

- Providing national specific information, including on potential beneficiaries, especially Goal 1 & 2 players;
- Point of contact for potential applicants;
- Wide dissemination of programme information;
- Organising national/regional events (for information, dissemination, project partners, first level controllers, and so on).

These tasks are considered as instrumental to reaching programme communication objectives, which indicates that NPCs or PS have defined programme implementation tasks.

Figure 3.3 Perception of MC members on their NPC role

Do you think that you are in capacity to work effectively as the link with all relevant stakeholders in your country?



Source: Survey of MC members



In the survey of MC members, the role of NPCs and Partner State representatives as links to stakeholders in their country was covered. Most respondents agreed on the effectiveness of NPC related processes. Where this was reported as challenging, the difficulty was seen to be the national settings and arrangements.

However, when asked about the efficiency of programme management bodies, 4 MC members mentioned that the NPC could further support the MA and JS, especially in linking the programme with national knowledge networks for communication purposes.

In addition, 2 lead partner respondents argued that the NPC did not always give accurate information about the programme, local details in the application phase, or policy categorisation. In some cases, the projects claim that NPC functions are not clear for them, for example on the

guidance NPCs can provide. This is probably due to a misunderstanding by projects or applicants, who may think NPC roles are the same in all Interreg programmes.

As an overall conclusion, the NPCs-PS are well supported by the programme. They have assigned tasks, the possibility to benefit from programme technical assistance, annual briefings organised by the JS, and overall support provided by the JS. Any pitfalls seem to come from national settings.

MC members are satisfied with these tasks, but some would like to support the programme management more, especially with links to national and regional networks<sup>4</sup>.

However, NPC roles are not always clear for some project partners.

In view of the above, recommendations to improving programme management could include:

- Visualisation of complementarities between the NPC-PS and other management bodies, perhaps on the Interreg Europe website, by means of diagrams or a visual tool (recommendation by the evaluator),
- better definition of the guidance an NPC-PS can provide, rather than giving guidance on policy aspects, they should give specific national information,
- enhancing ways of using NPC-PS potential and their links to national knowledge for communication and other management purposes. This could be done through guidance for the NPC-PS. The evaluator recommends that such guidance contains the basic elements to perform the communication from the programme to national networks. A thematic approach in the packages could also be included. The NPC-PS would adapt the basic package to the national context and language. The action would be supported by an MC decision, which would ensure implementation for as many NPCs-PS as possible. Alternatively, the MC could also discuss and decide if this activity would be included in the task ‘wide dissemination of programme information’ and make it compulsory for NPCs to implement.
- Exploration of enhanced ways of broadening NPC-PS connections as a network, and ensuring an on-going flow of information, activities and updates in addition to the annual briefings, possibly via an interactive IT tool. This would ensure that NPCs-PS are updated on programme news and can have informal exchanges among themselves. It would also be useful for Partner States to identify situations when their intervention is needed and anticipate further problems.

### 3.2.2 Is the programme management efficient-timely, without mistakes, well used inputs for the desired number and quality of outputs?

*The efficiency of JS human resources is confirmed as JS deliveries are high quality and on time. There is anticipation and management of peaks in workload, and adaptation to new*

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<sup>4</sup> To be read with the communication section of this report.



*circumstances. This has all taken place at the cost of additional workload for JS staff, which is currently working at the limits of capacity.*

**Recommendation** : *to mitigate the situation of the JS working at the limits of capacity, and the risk of affecting the quality of delivery, the evaluator suggests that additional JS members could be considered for recruitment;*

*Teleworking, smart working or similar systems could introduce flexibility in the JS work.*

This section reviews human resource allocation at the JS. Other programme processes and their efficiency are tackled in the respective sections (project assessment, support for projects, support for PLP, etc.).

Human resources are the cornerstone of managing an Interreg programme. Their organisation is key to the correct functioning of all programme-related processes. Aspects that need to be checked to analyse the efficiency include the number of staff working on programme implementation, internal organisation of work processes and management of staff turnover.



In the Interreg programmes, the main body involved in day-to-day management is the JS. For Interreg Europe, 27 full-time equivalent staff members of the JS deal with project management including project assistance, assessment and monitoring, financial monitoring and communication. In addition to these, the JS is also in charge of monitoring the PLP.

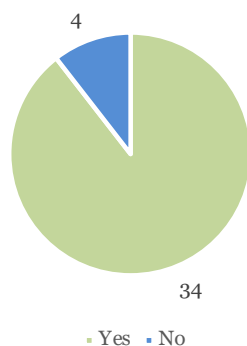
JS internal processes are documented in detail to ensure common understanding of the tasks by JS members, and as a basis for new staff members. Examples include the internal guidance on validating a good practice or dealing with the mid-term review of projects. These internal processes, as well as the programme and project management processes are labour-intensive as the level of details increase the quality of delivery.



In general, MC members responding to the survey feel programme management is efficient. They consider the resources at MC, MA and JS level sufficient to ensure smooth implementation of the programme.

Figure 3.4 Title: Level of resources at the MC/MA/JS

Do you think the available resources at MC/MA/JS level are sufficient to generate high quality interregional projects, and to ensure that the entire programme runs smoothly?



Source: Survey of MC members

The survey of project lead partners confirms that the JS assistance is quick and precise. The high quality of support and close contact with officers in charge are appreciated by most survey and interview respondents.



However, the internal perception is that JS staff are currently working at the limit of capacity. As discussed during the interviews with the JS, the figure of 27 FTE members of staff was decided by the MC based on the assumption that 200 projects would be approved. In the first three calls, 184 projects were approved, and the target of 200 projects may be reached (and probably exceeded) following the fourth call, whose assessment is expected to be finished in March 2019.

Precise preparation of the work is especially important in assessing projects. Each project proposal is assessed twice. A full-time experienced officer is expected to assess an average ratio of 2.5 to 3 projects per week. Additionally, newcomers to the JS get internal training to ensure the assessment process runs as expected. When the calls for proposals are closed, assessing projects is declared internally as the top priority for all project-related tasks. This involves reorganising the human resources to deliver the assessment in time for preparing the MC decision.

Besides, temporary support (one finance officer and one project officer) has been recruited to reinforce the teams. A full-time project officer monitors on average 22 projects in addition to assessing project applications (focus on quality assessment criteria 1 to 4) and monitoring PLP activities. After the third call, a full-time finance officer already monitors on average 30 projects each, while also being involved in assessing project applications (focus on quality assessment criteria 5 and 6) and reporting. In the communications unit, the ratio is about 50 projects per officer for assistance to project communication, as they are not involved in the project monitoring. This is when all projects of the first three calls are active and monitored at the same time.

This situation happens in a context in which the fourth call applications will be approved in the upcoming months and the first call projects have not finished their activities.

In addition, the JS had to adapt to more projects being approved than expected at the beginning of the period. And the workload related to the mid-term review and the pilot action requests was underestimated. Besides, resources had to be allocated to cope with the PLP workload, as well as reporting to the EC, control and audit.

The EC requirements on reporting, control and audit at programme level take three full time positions, which diminishes the time available to monitor projects. More time than expected has been needed to fulfil new requirements and thus to comply with the EC regulations. In some cases, the added value of the requirements to the management and control system is not evident (designation of the MA and Certifying Authority, annual summary in the context of the annual closure of accounts). In other cases, the scope of the requirements seemed disproportionate to the risks at stake (fraud prevention with the help of the EC fraud risk scoring tool Arachne).

Overall, the opinion of most JS and MA members is that the workload so far has been heavy but manageable thanks to efficient internal processes (including procedures to ease the integration of newcomers to the JS), to anticipation, the positive working environment, and to the skilled staff working at the JS. Procedures to simplify reporting have also already been implemented (increased use of simplified cost options, decreased reporting frequency during phase 2).

The JS also thinks there could be flexibility about new ways of working like teleworking or smart working, to motivate staff further.

As a conclusion, the efficiency of the JS work is confirmed. Not only because the JS delivers with high quality on time, but also because of anticipation and management of peaks in the workload, and adaptation to new circumstances (staff turnover or more approved projects than expected). This has happened by bringing additional workload for JS members. So far, the quality of the work done by the JS has not been affected (except once when the assessment of the third call took longer than expected), but both timing and quality could be affected in the long-term if the workload continues to be at the limits of capacity, and if the estimated number of 200 projects to be monitored is bypassed.

Therefore, two recommendations derive from the above conclusions:

- the workload at the JS cannot stay at the limits of capacity in the long-term, as it could compromise the quality of delivery; additional JS members could be considered for recruitment (recommendation by the evaluator);
- new ways of working like teleworking could be used to introduce flexibility at the JS work.

### 3.2.3 Have the MA and JS adequate capacities to fulfil their tasks?

*The staff profiles are adequate to perform the work of the JS. The quality of the delivery is confirmed by all programme stakeholders.*

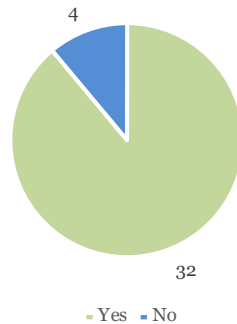
This question is closely related to the previous one. This section reviews the professional profiles and performance of JS members.



As a general rule, the MC survey confirms the capacities of the MA and JS to fulfil their tasks. It also confirms that almost all MC members consider that resource allocation is appropriate.

Figure 3.5 Adequacy of capacities and profiles at MA/JS

Do you think the MA and JS have adequate resources (staff capacities and profiles) to fulfill their tasks?



Source: Survey of MC members

In all cases, the programme bodies and lead partners (please see section 4 of this report for details) confirm the high quality of the work by the JS. MC members appreciate in particular the extensive preparation of MC documents, which facilitates and increases the effectiveness of steering work and also brings transparency to MC-related processes.



However, as confirmed by the Annual Implementation Report (AIR) 2017, minutes of the Tallinn MC meeting and some comments in the MC survey and interviews, JS capacities have been under pressure during the assessment phase, especially in the third call, which took longer than expected because of the:

- high number of applications and added complexity of the third call assessment due to the resubmissions
- JS monitoring workload for the first and second call projects
- Underestimated workload related to the mid-term review and pilot action requests
- heavy financial management of the programme and the need to allocate more staff in these processes rather than to supporting projects
- increased workload required by the PLP
- staff changes at the JS, especially of experienced people.

Up to October 2018, the human resources and their performance seem stable, despite the pressure caused by assessment of the fourth call for projects.

As a conclusion, the staff profiles are adequate and the quality of outcomes is confirmed by all programme stakeholders. At the same time, staff turnover seems to be back to normal levels.

The only aspect to be followed up is the workload for JS staff. So far, the heavy workload has caused some delays, but the quality of deliverables has remained high.

## 4 Evaluation results. Task 1.2 The programme support to operations

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A primary aspect of Interreg programme management is support for operations. The projects are the heart of a programme, so the majority of programme resources and processes are dedicated to supporting the elaboration of applications, selection and monitoring once projects are approved.

The evaluation questions covered project generation, assessment and implementation, as well as programme rules and IT support. For the assessment, the perceptions of programme bodies and projects on support efficiency and effectiveness are key.

The overall finding of the evaluation of the programme support to operations is that the programme processes to support projects work as expected, effectively and efficiently. The projects highly appreciate the support and the number of applications has exceeded the expectations. The support to PLP is effective, and still evolving towards enhanced efficiency. The details are provided below. Although the programme works well, the below sections provide also some suggestions for possible improvements. These can be taken as starting point for a discussion if the programme wants to further improve its implementation.

### 4.1 Programme support to project generation

Programme support to project generation refers to all processes designed and implemented by the programme to attract potential applicants and to support the development of relevant project ideas.

#### 4.1.1 How efficient and effective is the programme support for beneficiaries during project generation?

*The support for project generation has been effective. Lead partners appreciate the tools, as the single tools are satisfactory for a majority of users. 100% of the respondents are satisfied with the JS assistance and with the clarity of the application pack. In addition, the number of applications have exceeded programme expectations.*

*The efficiency of the entire system is shown by the extensive detail of the Manual, anticipating applicant questions, and the use of online tools.*

This question refers to overall support from the programme, especially the JS, during the application phase. The following questions give more specific answers for individual tools and processes, and a summary of all the specific answers is provided in the box above.

4.1.2 Are the supporting tools (e.g. webinars, online self-assessment tool, partner search tool, project idea feedback) sufficient and appropriate to generate good quality applications?

Lead partners of approved projects and MC members consider all the tools supporting project generation to be very useful. JS assistance is found useful by almost 100% of the survey respondents, information events are appreciated by almost 90% and webinars also by almost 90% of the respondents.

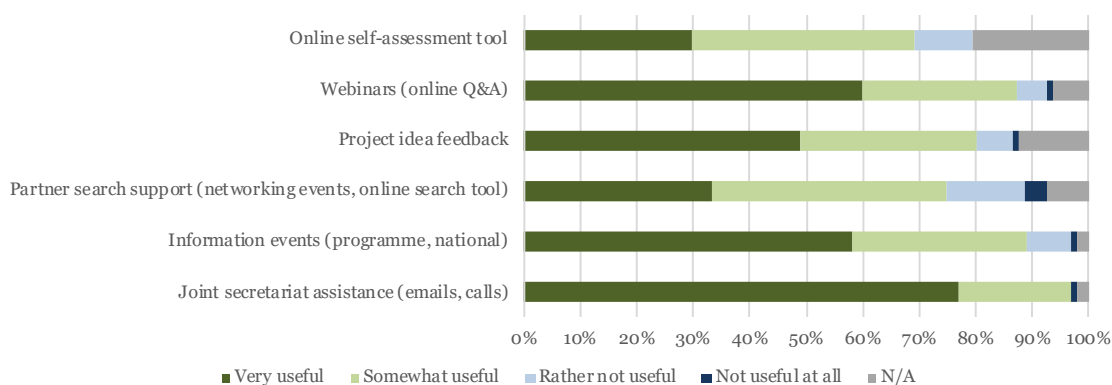
In the case there would be a new call for proposals open, some recommendations could be proposed:

- more oral feedback on project ideas would be appreciated, as it gives more details, as suggested by the interview respondents;
- a balanced coverage of all Partner States with national information events or online activities, as suggested by the evaluator;
- clearer messages on the partner search tool about the profile of relevant applicants, to avoid numerous irrelevant partnership requests, as suggested by the interview respondents.

To support the elaboration of project applications, Interreg Europe has developed tools and processes which are addressed in the following paragraphs.

Figure 4.1 Overall satisfaction with programme support tools for project applicants

How useful do you assess the following supporting tools for the preparation of project application?



Source: Online survey of project lead partners

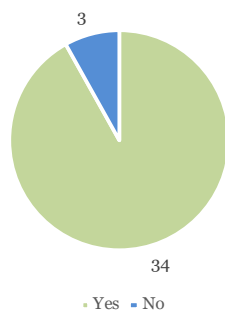


Overall the project lead partners assess programme support during project generation to be very useful or useful. In particular direct contact with the JS via email or phone is appreciated, as illustrated in Figure 4.1 and confirmed by the interviews with lead partners.

The online-self assessment tool is considered the least useful of the tools, and still 70% of the survey respondents found it useful. However, no specific comments have been received in the survey or interviews.

Figure 4.2 Overall satisfaction level of MC members for tools assisting the generation of projects

Do you think the tools for assisting applicants allow for the generation of good quality applications?



Source: Survey of MC members

In line with the opinion of lead partners, MC members largely agree that the tools assisting project generation are adequate (see figure 4.2). Tools are accessible and adapted to various levels of knowledge. In their comments, 4 respondents to the survey wished to highlight that NPCs have a role in the application phase as well.

Despite the overall positive assessment, there are still many project proposals that can be improved. Some MC members wonder if this is related to the quality of the tools or to applicants not using them properly. 2 responses also point out that an active national contact network would improve the quality of projects, and that thematic support is also needed in the application phase.

The following sections give details of individual tools and their contribution to the effectiveness and efficiency of support for project generation.

#### The application pack



The application pack consists of the Programme Manual, the terms of reference for each call (published on the website together with the call), the application form on iOLF and templates for partner declarations and letters of support. Some videos on the website also go through aspects of project applications.

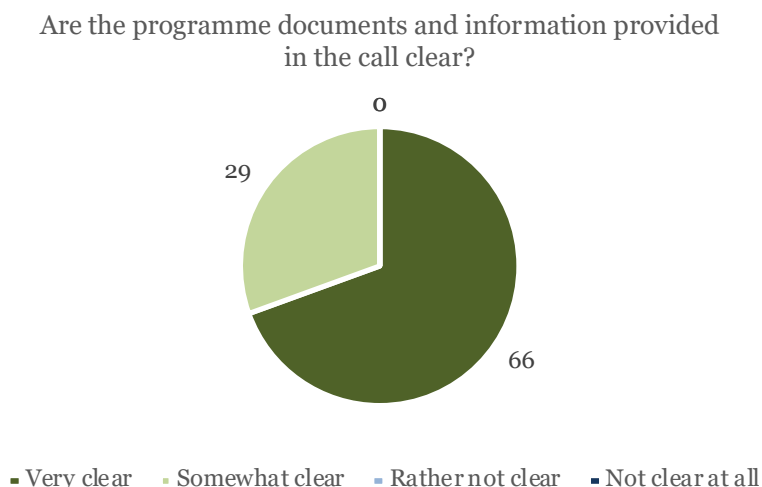
The Programme Manual is a complete compilation of all steps and details in project application, implementation and closure. In addition to descriptions of the procedures and rules (with examples), are thematic aspects key to developing a good Interreg Europe project. There is a clear explanation of specific objectives and the respective target groups for each, as well as examples of projects under each SO.

The Manual also includes details of each type of improvement for policy instruments or programmes and provides examples from Interreg IVC projects, for inspiration. It also gives details of output and result indicators.

In addition, the Programme Manual provides points of attention ('don'ts'), which is a useful way of using the programme's experience as a learning tool to benefit future projects.

This comprehensiveness aids efficiency, as it anticipates many potential queries and mistakes in future applications and implementation.

Figure 4.3 Perception of the clarity of the application pack



Source: Survey of lead partners



The survey respondents confirmed that documents and information in the call were clear. 70% of the respondents indicated that the documentation and information were very clear, whereas the remaining 30% indicated that it was somewhat clear. However, 2 project lead partners pointed out that information on MAs and Intermediate Bodies was not always updated, which created some uncertainties when drafting the project and establishing links to regional programmes.



During the interviews, some lead partners added that many doubts during the application phase could be easily solved by reading the Programme Manual.

All of the above leads to conclude that the application pack has been an effective and efficient tool for project generation. A detailed Programme Manual that evolves and answers almost any question from applicants confirms the efficiency. In addition, lead partners see the extensive coverage of items and examples as very useful.

#### JS assistance



JS assistance for preparing applications is the best rated of all the tools. As shown in Figure 4.1, almost 100% of respondents considered this assistance as very useful or useful.



In the interviews, lead partners expressed their satisfaction with the JS assistance. In 2 cases, lead partners mentioned that they would have appreciated to receive more oral feedback during the application phase. In one case, oral feedback was preferred to written feedback, as it provides for more detail.

As a conclusion, users confirm the effectiveness of the assistance. Oral answers could improve the efficiency partially, however the need to harmonise information given to applicants to save time during the assessment justifies the choice of written answers.



## Information events



A number of events have been organised both by the JS (Annual Events, Lead Applicant seminars) and the Partner States (national events) since 2015 (please see tables 4.1 and 4.2). They raise awareness of the programme and any upcoming call, but also facilitate networking and partner searches.

As the programme was approved in June 2015, and the objective was to open the first call for proposals as soon as possible, it was decided to finance some events and the use of the website with the Technical Assistance of the Interreg IVC programme.

Table 4.1 General information events organised by the JS

<b>Information events organised by the JS</b>		
Date	Event	Number of participants
December 2014	Europe let's cooperate, Bologna	825
June 2015	Lead Applicant seminar, Prague	71
June 2015	Lead Applicant seminar, Brussels	136
March 2016	Europe let's cooperate, Rotterdam	511
March 2017	Europe let's cooperate, Valletta	355
March 2018	Europe let's cooperate, Brussels	413 registered
April 2018	Experience fair, Sofia	293

Source: own elaboration based on monitoring data

Table 4.1 illustrates the information events organised by the JS for public authorities and other stakeholders which had about 2400 participants. Other more specialised events included two lead applicant seminars in 2015, reaching out to over 200 potential applicants.



As shown in Figure 4.4, lead partners appreciate the information events and 90% of them considered the events as very useful or useful. Networking opportunities at these events were highlighted by the respondents and one even recommended creating the opportunity to learn directly from experienced applicants or lead partners, as in the Exchange of Experience Seminar in Sofia (April 2018).

Table 4.2 Events organised by the Partner States

<b>Number of information events organised by the Partner States</b>		
Year	Number of events	Number of Partner States
2015	35*	24
2016	37	21
2017	37	24

2018	18	16
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Source: own elaboration based on monitoring data; \* 30 national information events organised as part of the information campaign for the first call for proposals



Between 2015 and 2017, most national events were in April/May 2015, March/April 2016 and January/March 2017, when the calls for projects were open. The events gave details of the requirements in each country for an Interreg Europe application, as well as during implementation. The distribution of events per country varies, as they depend on the Partner State. Countries like Poland have organised 20 events since 2015 whereas other countries have not organised any.



Lead partners did not raise the question of having few or no national information days during the application phase. Since there may not be any further calls, it is late to recommend any action. However, a balanced coverage with national events in all Partner States may help. These events could take place physically or online but would ensure that basic information on national issues are communicated to applicants. This recommendation may be considered for any future programme.

Table 4.3 Online information activities organised by Interreg Europe

<b>Online information activities</b>		
Date	Information activity	Number of participants
December 2014	Europe let's cooperate, webstreaming	1000
March 2016	Europe let's cooperate, webstreaming	1043
March 2017	Europe let's cooperate, webstreaming	(no data)
April 2018	Europe, let's cooperate, webstreaming	775
April 2016	Lead Applicant (LA) webinar on designing project methodology	256
April 2016	LA webinar on building a relevant partnership	212
April 2016	LA webinar on managing project budget and finances	255
April 2016	LA webinar on project communication strategy	260
April 2017	LA webinar on designing project methodology	104
April 2017	LA webinar on building a relevant partnership	115
April 2017	LA webinar on managing project budget and finances	104
April 2017	LA webinar on project communication strategy	82
March 2017	Third call launch webinar	208
May 2018	LA webinar on designing project methodology	72
May 2018	LA webinar on building a relevant partnership	92
May 2018	LA webinar on managing project budget and finances	72
May 2018	LA webinar on project communication strategy	63

Source: own elaboration based on monitoring data



In addition, online tools such as webinars for lead applicants and the online third call launch webinar were offered to potential applicants to give precise information about preparing an application. Please see table 4.3. There were 12 lead applicant webinars from 2016 to 2018, in four blocks that had 1 687 online participants. Adding participants in the third launch call webinar bring the total to 2 089.

The webstreaming of ‘Europe let’s cooperate’ events saw online participation of about 2800 people (in addition to the 2 400 physical participants at the events).

As a conclusion of all the above, the effectiveness of all these tools is proved by the applications submitted, which average 219 per call. This figure doubles MC expectations of about 100 applications per call.

In addition, the systematic use of online tools to provide information, along with the number of participants confirm the efficiency of the system. If the tools would have resulted in even more applications, the programme would have capacity problems in processing them.

Moreover, a simple comparison of the number of physical and online participants is not enough to check efficiency. The focus on online tools (61 events versus 16 physical events) needs to be balanced with the need to hold physical events for communication and networking.

#### Project idea feedback

The project idea feedback is a service consisting of written or oral feedback from the JS about a project idea form. It can be requested online once a project idea has been submitted.

Table 4.4 The project idea feedback in figures

<b>Project idea feedback</b>		
Call	Number of project ideas checked	Number of applications
1 <sup>st</sup> call	349	261
2 <sup>nd</sup> call	94	211
3 <sup>rd</sup> call	115	234

Source: own elaboration based on literature review



As illustrated in table 4.4, the number of project ideas has varied in the three past calls. The fact that the number of project ideas is higher than the number of applications submitted in the first call is probably due to the novelty of the programme, the new programming period and because not all interested persons or bodies were fully aware of all Interreg Europe requirements. In addition, the JS confirmed that some rules were added for the second and third calls to manage the high number of feedback requests.



The survey and interviews with project leaders confirm the usefulness of project idea feedback. Almost 90% of the respondents agree to the usefulness. As mentioned by one interviewee, the very specific focus of the programme makes project idea feedback a fundamental tool to save time and efforts for applicants.

The above considerations confirm the effectiveness of project idea feedback.

On the other hand, it is assumed that the programme spent less time giving advice than assessing a proposal that is not correctly formulated. This assumption goes in parallel to the perception of the lead partner about saving time. So, this tool efficiently deals with interest in the programme and identifies good project ideas and partnerships.

#### Partner search tool



75% of the survey respondents found the partner search tool useful, as shown in figure 4.1. Two comments highlighted problems related to the tool, but were not specific enough. They referred to the need to have a 'better search engine for partner search' and 'lack of control in online search tool'.



In the interviews, one lead partner mentioned that they received about 50 expressions of interest when they posted their project idea, but the majority of them were not relevant partners (regional governments). This lead partner thinks that it could be made clearer what kind of partners are relevant for the programme.

As a conclusion, the partner search tool is effective in the perception of the majority of lead partners. In the unlikely case that a new call for proposals was open in the future, the tool would need to emphasize which kind of applicants are relevant to the programme and probably allow the lead applicant to indicate which type of partners are searched.

## 4.2 Assessment

The assessment phase is one of the most sensitive in the programme life cycle. The process leading to selecting quality projects needs to combine accuracy, transparency and timely delivery, in the context of a heavy workload due to many applications. The following paragraphs analyse the assessment process in Interreg Europe.

### 4.2.1 How efficient and effective is the assessment of applications? Is the assessment process leading to selecting good quality projects?

*Overall, the process is efficient, as producing high quality assessments needs the resources, internal organisation and time taken. MC members also feel the process and especially the clear criteria are effective for selecting high quality projects.*



As stated in the AIR 2014-15, a major concern of MC members with implementation of the new programme was to minimise non-eligible applications, to avoid frustration among potential applicants.

In addition to this, discussions in several MC meetings focused on the application assessment process (see section 3.1 above) and the need to balance transparency with efficiency.

Since 2015, 876 projects have gone through the eligibility check, in four calls. This gives an idea of the workload for the programme structures during the process. The assessment of applications to the 4<sup>th</sup> call for proposals is being carried out in the autumn of 2018, when this report is being drafted.

Application assessment includes eligibility and quality assessments. The quality assessment is also divided into strategic and operational assessments. The Programme Manual details each phase, the criteria and the processes (including the complaints procedure). Programme bodies feel this structure makes assessment and decision-making easier and concentrates on projects that understand the programme logic.

#### Eligibility assessment



Outcomes of the 876 projects that applied to the Interreg Europe Programme are shown in the below table.

A higher proportion of projects passed the eligibility check phase in the second and third calls and a further increase was observed in the fourth call. As the programme was already running from the second call on, JS communication efforts possibly had an influence in the increase.

Table 4.5 Overview of the eligibility check

<b>Eligibility check Interreg Europe</b>			
	Number of eligible projects	Number of applications	Eligibility rate
1 <sup>st</sup> call	175	261	67%
2 <sup>nd</sup> call	158	211	75%
3 <sup>rd</sup> call	171	234	73%
4 <sup>th</sup> call	139	170	82%

Source: own elaboration based on the literature review

As stated in the Programme Manual, the eligibility criteria tackle both formal and content-related aspects, and failing any eligibility criterion makes the entire application ineligible. However, in practice, the assessment forms and background documents for the MC reveal that most ineligible projects fail to fulfil several criteria.

The eligibility criteria were discussed several times at MC meetings (including Utrecht and Tallinn), especially the need to find a more flexible way to deal with mistakes in the applications, for example by allowing one mistake, or rectification of mistakes. These flexibility options were submitted to a vote and rejected. However, the JS introduced flexibility options in the fourth call, allowing for one mistake per application under ‘correctness of the letters of support’.

To check if the process is effective and whether dismissing applications that do not comply with the minimum Interreg Europe requirements is justified, data on eligibility criteria not respected in the past three calls is detailed below.

Documents supporting MC decisions on eligibility assessments in the first call show that 23% of ineligible projects failed more than one criterion. 45% of these were due to an incomplete application form and 31% related to the correctness of the support letter.

In the second call, 26% of the ineligible projects failed more than one criterion. Almost 39% had an incomplete application form, and almost 35% had incorrect partner declarations.

For the third call for proposals, 32% of ineligible applications did not fulfil more than one criterion, 29% had an incorrect partner declaration and 28% an incorrect letter of support. In addition, ineligible applications were screened by the JS for quality and 83% had a very poor geographical coverage so they would have most probably failed the strategic assessment.

This additional screening in the third call shows that the eligibility assessment anticipates potential shortcomings of applications and dismisses those with fundamental difficulties, in most cases (83% in the third call).

In the fourth call, the eligibility rate has increased to 82%. The new flexibility measure has affected eight applications, or 5% of applications. So this measure has not increased the eligibility rate substantially.



Two lead partners confirmed that rejecting a proposal based on ‘technicalities’ is too strict, and it should be possible to amend mistakes. Another lead partner argued that overly detailed eligibility criteria may lead to less clarity for the whole process.

As a conclusion of all the above, the eligibility process deals with a high number of applications and the programme has implemented a system of strict application of eligibility criteria in order to deal with this high number. Some lead partners think the process is too strict and may reject good quality proposals due to technicalities. However, the additional screening in the 3<sup>rd</sup> call and the new flexibility measure in the 4<sup>th</sup> call show that the majority of ineligible proposals have also fundamental problems that would not allow them to succeed in the quality assessment. Therefore, the process is effective.

#### The quality assessment



The quality assessment has two phases, strategic and operational assessments. This is an efficient way to select projects and verify the core quality of the project first, before assessing the operational aspects. Only projects passing the strategic assessment go through the operational assessment.

Both the strategic and the operational assessments are finalised by an MC decision.

Checking effectiveness of the assessment procedure involves the question ‘is the assessment process leading to selecting good quality projects?’. To answer this, the perception of stakeholders

is key, but data may give a first insight on the quality of projects finally selected in Interreg Europe.

The minimum score for a project application to be recommended for approval is 3.00. Therefore, a score of 3.67 or above corresponds to the highest quality projects.

The following table illustrates that the third call saw a decrease in both projects recommended for approval and in highest quality projects.

Table 4.6 Overview of eligibility and strategic assessment

<b>Eligibility and strategic assessment</b>						
	Projects over 3.00	Projects over 3.67	Number of eligible projects	Number of applications	Projects over 3.00 as compared to applications	Projects over 3.67 as compared to applications
1 <sup>st</sup> call	67	39	175	261	26%	15%
2 <sup>nd</sup> call	68	32	158	211	32%	15%
3 <sup>rd</sup> call	57	23	171	234	24%	10%

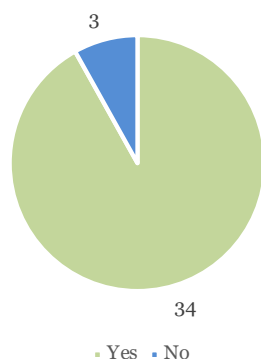
Source: own elaboration based on the literature review

The reasons for the decrease in projects scoring 3 or over may be varied but may include the resubmission of previously unapproved applications in the third call.

A comparison with the approval rate of other Interreg programmes (transnational, for example) should carefully consider the many differences in the application processes (two step procedures, expressions of interest etc.) and that could affect the final figure. However, approval rates in some transnational programmes can range from 16 to 25%. Therefore, the approval rates of Interreg Europe could be at the highest levels which could indicate that the quality of applications was already high, considering the context of the Interreg programmes.

Figure 4.4 Perception of MC members on the selection of high-quality projects

Do you think the selection procedure leads to the approval of the best projects?



Source: survey of MC members



Most MC members think the selection procedure identifies and approves high-quality projects. The clarity of criteria is mentioned as a key to success. One comment explains the process in the JS-Partner State meeting to assess proposals, and considers it ‘shared, objective, impartial and transparent’.

However, one MC member also thinks the eligibility criteria are sometimes too strict and good quality projects may be rejected due to clerical errors. Another aspect that is mentioned by one MC member is the lack of knowledge of national or local policies by staff in charge of the assessment, and the effect it could have in appraising the project<sup>5</sup>.



As discussed during the interviews with programme bodies, the average duration of the assessment (including eligibility and quality assessments) is about 6 months for the 200 projects. In the opinion of all programme bodies, this is reasonable and also the outcome of a very efficient organisation of assessment work. Some comments point out that this duration is shorter than in other Interreg programmes, or even in Horizon 2020.

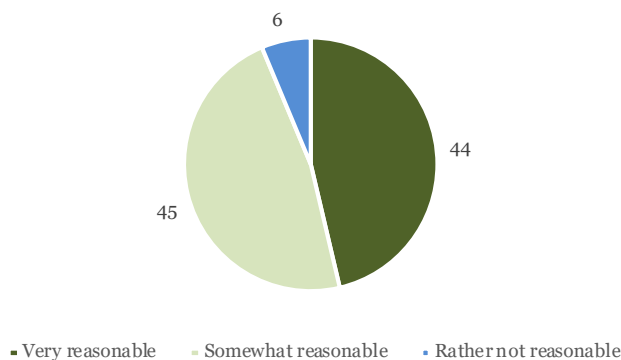


Project lead partners generally understand the reasons behind the time needed to assess the application and inform the project lead partner of the decision (see Figure 4.5). As the survey targeted lead partners of approved projects, there are few comments on the duration of the assessment process. Of these three respondents that indicated “not reasonable” specified that *eight months* for the procedure is too long and that the delay challenged implementation. For instance, the applicants (waiting for the decision) may estimate a starting date for a project, and any delay implies rescheduling activities which takes resources.

Other respondents mentioned that six months is reasonable, in particular given the many applications and in comparison to other programmes. These answers concern the complete assessment procedure, covering the eligibility and the quality phases.

Figure 4.5 Perception on the timeframe for approval

To what degree did you perceive the timeframe within which you received the approval notification as reasonable?



Source: Survey of lead partners

<sup>5</sup> This comment does not imply that the JS should know about all national or regional policies; it rather seems to signal that the assessment is not considering in depth the national or regional policies



In conclusion, effectiveness of the quality assessment process is confirmed by the views of stakeholders and the number of approved projects which is in line with similar programmes.

The efficiency of the assessment process should be judged on the time for assessment, the number of applications, human resources and the efficient tools implemented by the JS to deliver high quality, on time. The perceptions of programme stakeholders confirm the efficiency of the process, as the time and human resources are justified by the quality of the work.

#### 4.2.2 *Is the project assessment and selection process sound, transparent and fair?*

*All programme stakeholders confirm the clarity and transparency of the assessment process. The accurate work done by the JS in applying the criteria and preparing the background documents is key to a transparent process.*

Transparency of the assessment process is determined by accessibility to information about the process phases and outcomes.

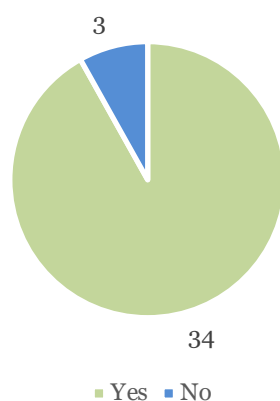


The Programme Manual contains extensive details on the criteria and the technical process to assess applications, including the score of 3.00 needed to pass the strategic assessment check. As stated in the Programme Manual, the MC decides the projects to be assessed based on operational aspects that could include asking the full assessment of any application.

Participation of some Partner States in the quality assessment briefing of the third call and fourth calls (meeting of 5 September 2018) ensured transparency. This new process is not yet included in the procedural rules but is highly appreciated by MC members who participate.

Figure 4.6 *MC member perception of the transparency of the process*

Do you think the whole selection process is transparent?



Source: Survey of MC members

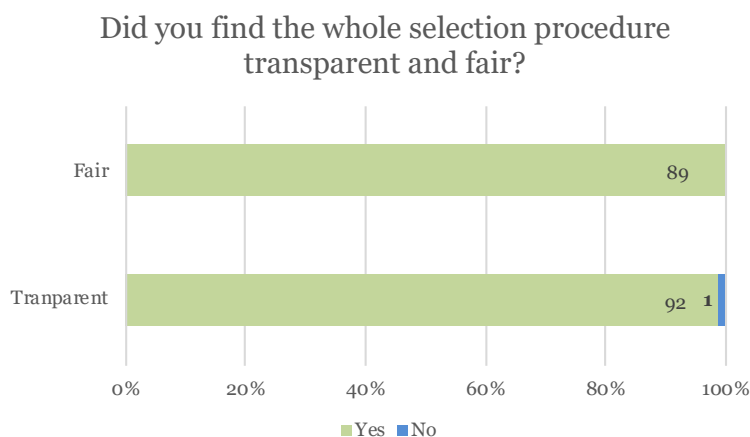


A clear majority of MC members consider that the selection process is transparent (See figure 4.6). The clear description of the process in the Manual, detailed criteria and notification of rejection reasons to applicants are highlighted by MC member comments.

Most MC members appreciate the quality work done of the JS to prepare the background documents and how the detailed criteria make the entire assessment process more transparent.

However, some MC members also point out that the limited time for discussing project assessments at MC meetings, as highlighted in section 3.1 of this report, and that MC members should be involved from the beginning of the process.

Figure 4.7 Perception of the selection procedure



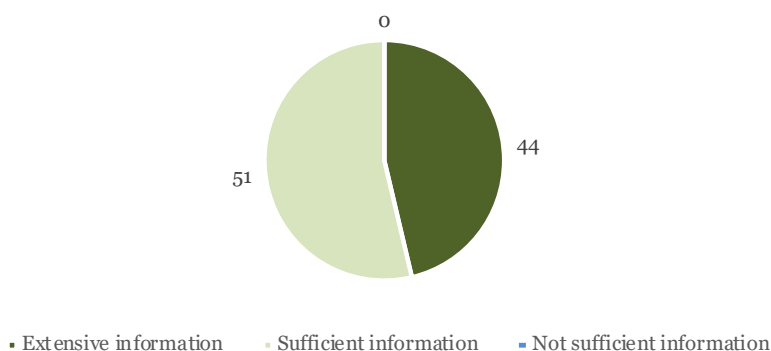
Source: Survey of lead partners



The lead partners believe the assessment procedure is fair and transparent, as shown in figure 4.7. Information on the process is extensive or sufficient for the majority of the 95 lead partners who responded to this question, as shown in figure 4.8.

Figure 4.8 Completeness of information in the selection process

To what degree did the programme documents contain all information related to the selection process (eligibility and quality assessment)?



Source: Survey of lead partners



Both MC members and applicants can ask for clarifications on the eligibility, following two different procedures. Notes of the MC meeting in Sofia show an increase in the number of clarifications on eligibility received from lead applicants (of ineligible projects), from two in the first call to 16 in the third call. However, this was 7% of third call applications, which does not immediately suggest the eligibility criteria are unclear.



MC members can ask for clarifications in the assessment process. As confirmed by the JS, MC members asked for clarifications especially during the first call, but this has reduced to no requests in the third call. This, together with the possibility of participating in some assessment meetings has further improved the perception of transparency in the process.

The complaint procedure for applicants is divided into a clarification phase (when 99% of cases are solved) and the formal complaint.

As indicated during the interviews to the JS, only two complaint procedures have been launched since the beginning of Interreg Europe. The applicants contested the eligibility check, but the troika met and did not accept the arguments that related to sending via electronic signature and to preparation costs. In any case, the complaints have served to improve the programme manual.

As a conclusion of all the above, data confirm the fairness and transparency of the assessment and selection process. The existence of the clarification processes and the possibility to make use of them add more transparency to the selection process.

### 4.3 The implementation phase

This section details and analyses JS procedures to support the implementation of projects.

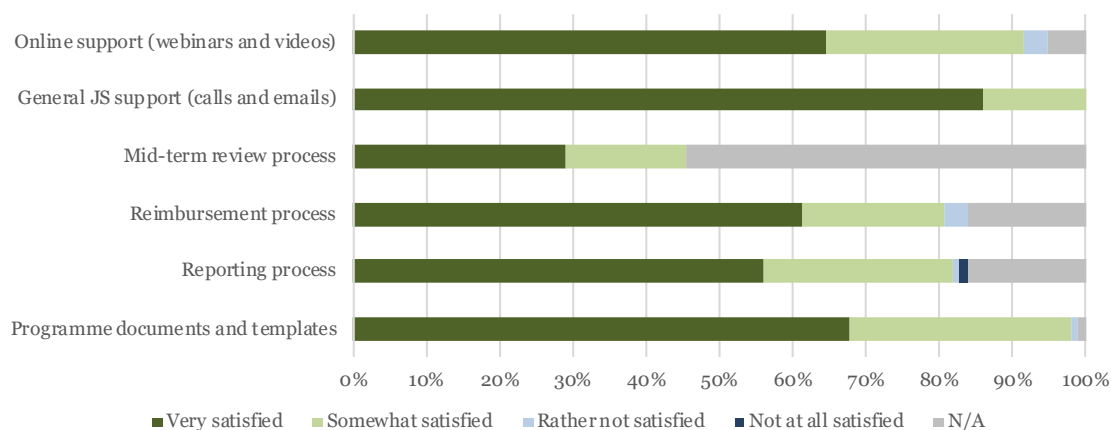
#### 4.3.1 *How efficient and effective is the programme support to beneficiaries during the project implementation?*

*Overall, the various processes implemented are effective, as they allow the programme to run as expected and are appreciated by the users. The following questions give details on the specific processes.*

This overall question about programme support for implementing projects is further split into four questions about reporting and monitoring, reimbursement to beneficiaries and financial management, the mid-term review and funding for pilot actions.

Figure 4.9 Overall satisfaction with the programme support during project implementation

Are you satisfied with the support from the programme to the implementation of your project? Please rate the following support tools and processes



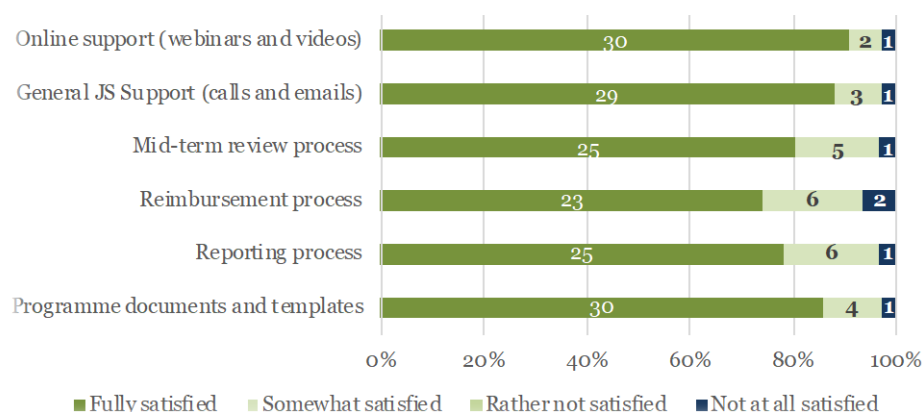
Source: survey of lead partners



Figure 4.9 complies visually the perception of lead partners on the programme support to implementation. The overall perception of the lead partners is positive, in particular for general JS support, which is considered useful for project implementation by 100% of the respondents. Of the survey responses sent, the following illustrates the overall perception of lead partners: ‘Generally the support from the JS is excellent. Emails are answered quickly and reasonably. My best experience of Interreg support in 20 years’.

Figure 4.10 Perception of MC members on support for project implementation

Are you satisfied with the support from the programme to the project implementation?



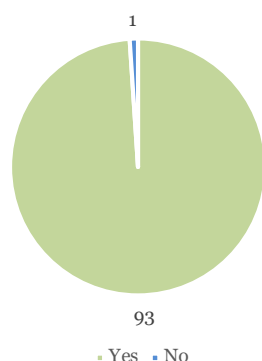
Source: Survey of MC members

As shown in figure 4.10, the majority of the MC members are also satisfied with programme support for implementing projects. Online support and the mid-term review are especially appreciated by MC members.

Almost unanimously, lead partners very positively rate the quick responses from the JS (see figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11 Satisfaction with the time for JS responses to the projects

Do you get useful responses by the JS in a short time frame?



Source: survey of lead partners



In addition, interviews with lead partners confirm the good quality of JS support. One lead partners suggested attending the kick-off meeting for projects instead of the final conference would be more helpful for the projects (the final conference is only for communication purposes).

**4.3.2** *Is the reporting and monitoring procedure (and related tools including indicators) of project implementation well set-up and efficient? Does it allow effective verification of project outputs? Does it allow effective verification of project results?*

*The monitoring processes are efficient, as they cannot be reduced without compromising the reliability of data. However, some improvements could make the process more effective.*

**Recommendations:** *add information and examples about policy improvement, impact and side effects. Additional output indicators could include social media appearances or followers and the thematic achievements of projects are better captured by means of good practice compilation.*

*When the combination of the compilation of result indicators from monitoring progress reports and from the survey of Investment for Growth and Jobs programmes will take place, the evaluator recommends to*

*-indicate the source of the data rather than summing the figures from both sources (as the monitoring processes behind are too different)*

*-make sure a representative number of IGJ programmes answer the survey*

The reporting and monitoring procedures are essential to the programme development, as they follow-up on progress made by projects, both financially and in terms of activities. In particular, they highlight the contribution of project activities to achievements at programme level.

In the Interreg programmes, the monitoring procedures refer to the variety of tasks usually implemented by the JS to check (and also support) the progress of projects. One monitoring task is reporting, which refers to regularly sending structured information to the JS.



For Interreg Europe, progress reporting is on-line (iOLF) every six months (for phase 1 of the projects). On the basis of these reports, the JS reviews the output and result indicators.

The following paragraphs refer mainly to monitoring output indicators. Result indicators are more frequently reported by projects later in the programme lifecycle. To September 2018, only 8 of 130 projects have reported result indicators and monitoring follows the same procedure as the output indicators.

In parallel, to collect relevant information for the result indicator at programme level, the JS launched a series of surveys of all Investment for Growth and Jobs programme MAs and intermediate bodies in the EU. One survey was launched in 2018 and two more will follow, in 2020 and 2023.



As confirmed during the interviews to the JS, the monitoring of progress reports tries to ensure there is sufficient evidence for the indicator figure declared by the project. This may take some time and several clarification rounds between the JS and the lead partner. At the end of this process, only indicators validated by the JS are officially considered by the programme.

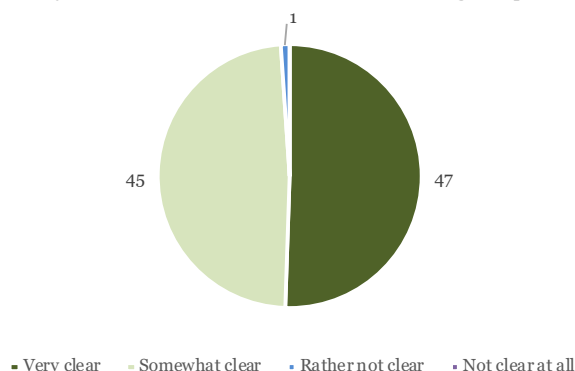
The checks for each indicator depend on the indicator and the progress made by the project. For example, for the ‘number of good practices identified’, general information is requested in every progress report, but the last report of phase 1 requires more information on. The information on good practice is checked against information on the website. And practices with enough quality are included in the good practice database, published on the programme website. Communication indicators are partially followed by online tools, which is efficient way.

In general terms the last phase 1 report is more demanding in terms of monitoring, as indicators need to be even more closely checked. Some are compared to external sources of information and links to funds mobilised and changes need to be established. In addition, the action plans are checked and redrafting is sometimes requested.

The time for these revisions is considered necessary by the JS to ensure the data and indicators are reliable. Verification of all information and reimbursement to the lead partner needs to take less than 90 days, as required by CPR Regulation 1303/2013, Article 132. On average, the progress reports are ready for reimbursement in 69 days, according to background documents for the MC meeting in Sofia.

Figure 4.12 Perception of how project activities contribute to the indicators at programme level

Is it clear to you how the project activities contribute to the programme objectives and how the indicators work in Interreg Europe?



Source: survey of lead partners



In the opinion of project lead partners, it is clear or very clear how project activities contribute to programme indicators. The comments received, also in the interviews, confirm this clarity and point out that the link is clearer now the projects are more advanced.



In the interviews, 2 lead partners indicated misunderstandings regarding indicators during the application phase and which do not seem relevant any longer.

The positive evolution on the understanding of indicators also applies to the policy improvement indicators, which are clearer now for lead partners, but more awareness and more on-line information is needed. Some projects find it difficult to know, describe and quantify the impacts and side effects of their project.

In the interviews, 4 lead partners highlighted that programme indicators are too open and do not capture all the activity and potential effects of the projects, including:

- communication indicators that relate to traditional approaches and not social media outputs and results
- the official programme indicators are too open and should be focused in view of phase 2 of the projects.

All of the above leads to conclude that monitoring processes are efficient, as they cannot be reduced without compromising the reliability of data and take less time than the regulatory requirements.

However, in view of the comments in the interviews to lead partners, the programme could provide more examples (including finalised projects) of policy improvement, impact and side effects.

In view of the comments in the interviews and in the opinion of the evaluator, it would be useful for the programme (to comply with all its objectives) to capture and demonstrate other achievements of the projects. Some are easier to compile with additional output indicators, such

as social media posts or followers<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, thematic achievements could be captured via the good practice record and other communication or capitalisation methods, rather than via indicators.

In addition, in the opinion of the evaluator, the result indicator survey launched at programme level could be combined with the indicators provided by the projects, as suggested in the analysis of the result indicators survey. However, there are two aspects that need following up:

- the two sources of information have different monitoring procedures (strict monitoring of project result indicators vs. no monitoring of survey outcomes) making it necessary to indicate the source of the data rather than summing figures from the two sources;
- the survey needs to cover a representative number of IGJ programmes in the EU.

#### *4.3.3 Does it allow payment of beneficiaries in adequate time, reducing financial errors and decommitment risks?*

*In general, the reimbursement process works as expected and on time. Lead partners seized the opportunity to raise their wishes on the eligibility of costs and ask for more flexibility when an event takes place outside a partner's territory or if an additional trip takes place.*



As illustrated in Figures 4.9 and 4.10, more than 80% of lead partners and 99% of MC members are satisfied with the reimbursement process. The system works as reimbursements take place as anticipated and the process is adequate to the programme.

In the survey of MC members, two comments highlighted that reimbursement to partners takes too long, including the transfer from the lead partner to partners (even though this is not a programme task). Advance payments were suggested, which would help public bodies and especially small municipalities to manage the financial flows.



In the interviews with lead partners, no major comments related to the reimbursement of lead partners. The only comments regarded flexibility for the eligibility of certain costs, such as the organisation of events outside of partner territories, or if an additional trip takes place.

#### *4.3.4 How efficient is the mid-term review of projects?*

*The mid-term review is needed as it helps projects better focus phase 2 and reorganise their spending progress. The process efficiency is evolving as the JS is preparing additional guidance on the Manual and is also refocusing towards a more qualitative approach.*

**Recommendation:** *The JS could make clearer the purpose of preparing for the future phase 2, rather than reviewing phase 1, as suggested by 2 lead partners.*

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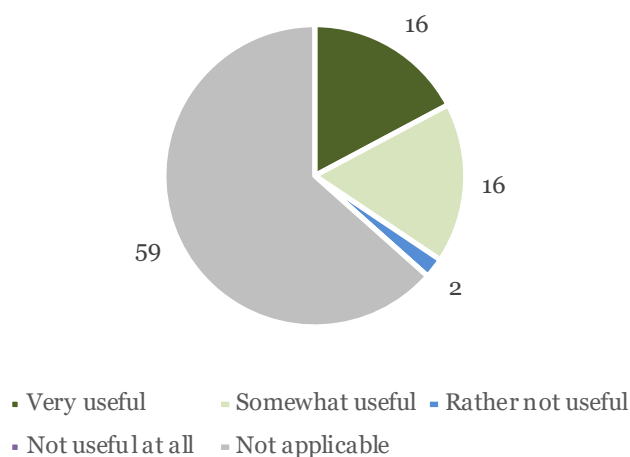
<sup>6</sup> Please see also lot 2 recommendations for additional indicators.



As indicated during the interviews, 19+12 mid-term reviews have taken place so far. They usually happen some months before the closure of phase 1.

Figure 4.13 The mid-term review

How useful did you find the mid-term review in helping you better focus phase 2 of your project?



Source: survey of lead partners



The fact that not all projects have gone through the mid-term review yet explains the number of N/As in figure 4.13. Among the projects concerned, the majority consider that the mid-term review helps better focus phase 2 of the project. One respondent clarified that the mid-term review helps understand if the project is reaching the objectives and avoiding ‘surprises when the activities are completed’.

According to respondents from projects already in phase 2, the mid-term review complements the Programme Manual, which contains only limited information on the mid-term review and implementation of an action plan per partner.



In the interviews, the limited guidance in the Manual was mentioned as well, and the JS is already working on guidance for the action plans. In addition, the focus of the JS has evolved from an output-related process at the beginning to a more qualitative focus related to policy learning in the recent mid-term reviews.

In the opinion of the JS, the mid-term review also helps check project spending and minimise underspending.

The lead partners that have gone through the mid-term review are satisfied. However, 2 lead partners pointed out that the mid-term review helps close phase 1 rather than prepare for phase 2. They consider it retrospective, rather than looking to the second phase of the project. One of them also argued that it took place too late in the process to improve some aspects of the project.

In conclusion, the mid-term review process is needed as it helps projects better focus phase 2 and if needed to reorganise their spending progress. There is internal guidance and externally the JS

is preparing additional guidance on the Manual, and is refocusing towards a more qualitative approach. The JS is still enhancing efficiency of the process and will need to insist on the purpose, which is preparing for phase 2, rather than reviewing phase 1.

The perception by those lead partners that the mid-term review is retrospective, is probably due to the review of project performance and spending check. These aspects probably take longer to discuss than the prospects for phase 2. So, the comments could serve for the JS to ensure the mid-term review focus is to prepare the next steps in the project.

#### *4.3.5 Is the procedure for deciding on supporting possible pilot actions clear and efficient?*

*The procedure for financing pilot actions is clear for the lead partners and flexible as it can be launched towards the end of phase 1. The JS appointed one person in charge of the pilot actions for efficiency reasons and created a system to assist the projects with State aid compliance, as required by the regulatory framework.*

If a project decides to apply for funding for a pilot action, it needs to submit a request to the JS before the end of phase 1. This needs to be approved by the MC, usually by written procedure. The financing takes place either by reallocating existing budget (with underspending) or through additional funds.

A discussion between the JS and the lead partner on pilot actions also takes place during the mid-term review.

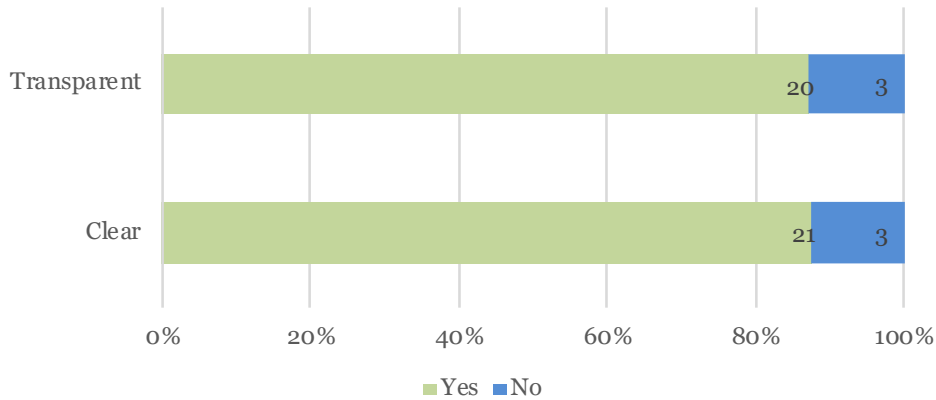


As mentioned in the interview with the JS, the JS allocates human resources to monitor pilot action requests (one staff member is in charge to monitor the overview) as well as to assist projects comply with State aid requirements, even though the risk of non-compliance is low.

On the side of the projects, one respondent to the interview mentioned that the option to apply for a pilot action was considered a means to avoid losing funds underspent during phase 1.

Figure 4.14 Clarity and transparency of the process to request funding for pilot actions

If you have requested funding for pilot actions, was the process clear and transparent to you?



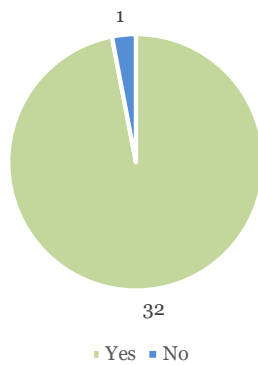
Source: survey of lead partners



Only a limited number of survey recipients applied for funding for the pilot actions, and all of them confirmed the clarity and transparency of the process. The three negative responses were not yet in the process of applying for pilot action funding and possibly confused ‘not applicable’ with ‘no’.

Figure 4.15 Perception of MC members on the time needed for the pilot action request procedure

Do you think the pilot action request procedure takes reasonable time for the amount of funding concerned and purposes of the pilot actions?



Source: survey of MC members

The majority of MC members think that the timeframe for the pilot action request procedure is reasonable and the comments highlight the good quality of the ‘Request for Pilot Action’ form.

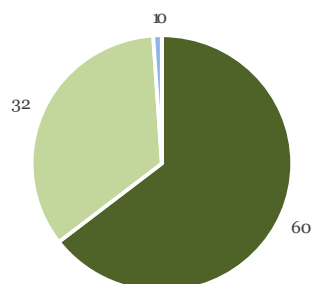
In conclusion, the process is clear for lead partners. The JS appointed one person in charge of the pilot actions for efficiency reasons and created a system to assist the projects to comply with State aid legislation.

#### 4.3.6 How clear and simple are the rules and procedures for programme beneficiaries, taking into account the regulatory framework?

Programme stakeholders think the rules are presented as clearly as possible, but some improvements are needed to clarify budget shifts.

Figure 4.16 Clarity of programme rules and procedures

Do you think the programme documents describing rules and procedures are clear?



Very clear Somewhat clear Rather not clear Not clear at all

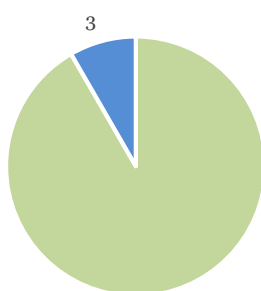
Source: survey of lead partners



As illustrated in figure 4.16, the Interreg Europe lead partners consider that the programme rules and procedures are clearly explained. Only some comments indicate that the level of coverage for phase 2 is still low, while details on phase 1 are extensive.

Figure 4.17 Presentation of programme documents and procedures

Do you think the programme documents and procedures are presented in a simple and clear way for projects?



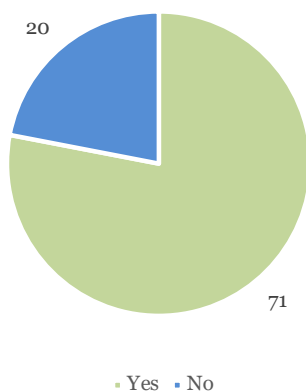
Yes No

Source: survey of MC members

MC members share the positive opinion that programme documents and procedures are presented in a simple and clear way for projects. However, one comment indicated that the need to prove a link to the policy (as requested by the programme indicators) is problematic for applicants. Other comments recognise the effort of the programme in presenting procedures in a clear way, despite the complexity of the rules and the regulatory framework.

Figure 4.18 Simplicity of rules and procedures

Do you think rules and procedures are as simple as they can be?



Source: survey of lead partners

The simplicity of the rules and procedures themselves was covered in the survey and the outcomes are illustrated in figure 4.14. Most lead partners consider that the rules are as simple as they can be, and several comments highlight the need to allow for more lump sums.

Almost one fourth of respondents think there is room for improvement, in particular clarifying budget shifts (2 comments in the survey) and reporting procedures. However, the reporting procedures were assessed differently by respondents, half think they are too complex or time-consuming (including the online tool), and the other half think they are simpler than other Interreg programmes. Particular requests from lead partners were to have more clarity on the end of phase 1 and on project closure, action plans and phase 2 (each request expressed by one lead partner).

There were also comments on the complexity and non-transparency of national rules, but these are not under the responsibility of the JS..



The interviews with programme bodies highlighted that the Programme Manual was written from a programme perspective, not from an applicant or project perspective. In this regard, it was recommended by one lead partner to involve 1 or 2 projects to review modifications of the Manual to check if they are understandable.

As a conclusion, programme stakeholders think the rules are presented as clearly as possible. Some improvements are needed on the clarity of budget shifts.

#### 4.3.7 How efficient and effective are the electronic system tools (iDB and iOLF) developed by the programme?

*The IT tools are appreciated by users, and they make their work easy. Some technical improvements are suggested to make them more efficient.*

**Recommendations:** Some technical aspects could be improved, as suggested by the lead partners and MC members:

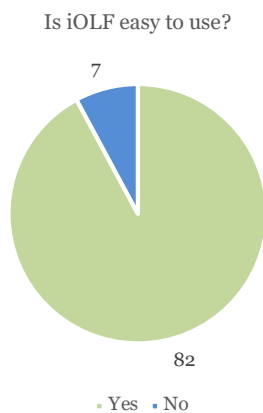
- warning systems could be set up to inform about iOLF updates
- the possibility to download and print sections from iOLF
- information on reports per partner, applications per partner and reimbursements made to partners on iDB

The evaluator also recommends to discuss again internally about the free access of lead partners to partners' spending information, as this is requested by some lead partners.

Interreg Europe provides two IT tools to support programme stakeholders. iDB is the internal tool used for monitoring by the JS, and is also available for MC members to carry out their tasks.

iOLF is used by project applicants to submit their applications and related documents and is used by the lead partners and partners for reporting to the JS.

Figure 4.19 User-friendliness of iOLF



Source: survey of lead partners



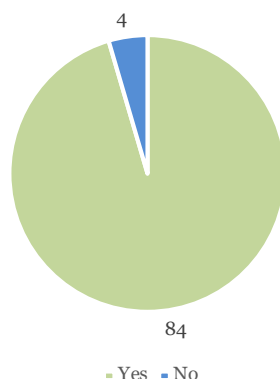
Lead partners in general appreciate iOLF, and especially the improvement over the tools used in the previous period. Some respondents indicated that it was not easy to get used to at the beginning, but now they feel comfortable and appreciate its functionalities.

There are some suggestions for improvement. For example, the possibility to have a version of the progress report narrative with track changes (downloading the report in Word).

For some respondents, the system is still not easy to use, and, as commented, the fact that the various Interreg programmes use different systems is confusing as well. One lead partner suggested to have a warning system on iOLF updates.

Figure 4.20 Helpfulness of iOLF in the monitoring and reporting processes

Is iOLF helpful to monitor your project and report to the programme?



Source: survey of lead partners

As shown in figure 4.20, lead partners extensively appreciate the monitoring and reporting functionalities of iOLF. Some comments contain suggestions for improvement such as:

- additional functions for better monitoring: the possibility to import expenditure at partner level, by budget line and by phase (1 or 2);
- 3 lead partners wished to see the reports by partner before submission or approval by the controller, in order to monitor progress
- the possibility to download and print sections of iOlf in a flexible way.



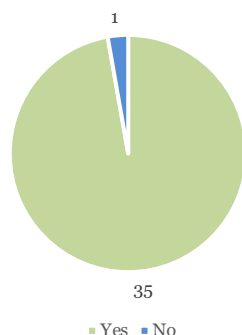
As indicated by the JS, the lead partner has no free access to the expenditure of the partners until they have gone through first level control, unless the partner wishes to send the information or agrees to it. That internal agreement took into account the confidentiality of partners' information.

In the interviews to lead partners, it was indicated that some projects have their own tool to monitor project indicators and the budget, as iOLF is too complicated.

As a conclusion of the above, iOLF is appreciated by around 95% of the users. The suggestions for improvement are details that would help improve the system. The only suggestion that would need further reflection is the wish by some lead partners to access the spending information from the partners without their consent. The programme made a clear choice on this aspect to protect the confidentiality of the partners' information. The evaluator recommends to further discuss the pros and cons of this suggestion, as this system is possible in other Interreg programmes.

Figure 4.21 Perception of iDB by the MC members

Is iDB a useful tool for the steering and management of the programme?



Source: survey of MC members



For iDB, the positive perception is almost unanimous among MC members. Two comments include the wish to have more information such as reports per partner, applications per partner and reimbursements made to partners.

As a conclusion, iDB is appreciated by users and make their work easy. However, it is recommended to include additional functionalities to obtain information such as reports per partner, applications per partner and reimbursements made to partners. That would facilitate work further and make the system more efficient.

#### 4.3.8 Are the resources allocated to projects adequate to allow projects produce the outputs planned in the application forms (including capacity building)?

The resources allocated per project are adequate to produce the outputs so far, as projects at the end of phase 1 have progressed as planned and most faced underspending.



As stated in the Programme Manual, the average ERDF budget per project is between EUR 1 and 2 million. None of the programme stakeholders consulted noted that financing is not adequate for the projects. 13 out of the 19 projects in the first batch of mid-term reviews, faced 'significant' underspending, as stated in the background documents for the MC in Sofia (March 2018). In addition, all 7 pilot actions financed up to May 2018 are using underspent funds from phase 1.

Background documents for the MC in Sofia stated that activities implemented by the 19 projects under the mid-term review were progressing according to the original workplans.

Based on the above data extracted from the literature review, it is concluded that resources allocated per project are adequate to produce the outputs, at least up to spring 2018.

#### Are there any recurring challenges in project implementation that could be better addressed by project support?

The previous sections contain recommendations to improve the programme support to implementation. These recommendations are details to improve services that work efficiently and have not indicated any recurrent challenge that is not covered so far.



#### 4.4 Programme support for PLP

The PLP is the second pillar of Interreg Europe, supporting the programme objective of facilitating ongoing EU-wide policy learning. The PLP provides a service to project partners and any organisation involved in regional policy around Europe promoting continuous policy learning and capitalising on good regional policy practices.

The regulatory threshold for the technical assistance budget made it necessary to sub-contract the service instead of implementing it with JS staff. This was done through a public procurement procedure, so a company or a consortium of companies would run PLP activities under programme supervision.

PLP implementation is subject to an annual work plan with annual objectives, main activities and expected results. The annual work plan is approved by the MC.

This overall structure implies specific support from the programme and the JS, which is different from support to Interreg Europe projects. The programme envisaged a 'mirror structure' between the consortium and the JS to ensure the delivery of PLP activities.

The following paragraphs will assess JS support to the PLP, as well as implementation and monitoring.



According to the Cooperation Programme, JS tasks regarding the PLP are:

- *Ex ante* - developing the PLP terms of reference and guidance documents ;
- During implementation - liaising with the four thematic PLP sections and monitoring their work, ensuring coherence and consistency as well as the quality of services and activities provided by the Platform as a whole.

The PLP started being implemented in June 2016 and the AIR of that year already highlighted difficulties in the start-up phase. One year later, the AIR 2017 stated that development of the PLP was the major issue faced by the programme in 2017, due to underperformance of PLP production and quality. The team was reorganised and part of it was moved to the JS premises in Lille, in 2018.

Background documents for the MC in Valletta (March 2017) highlight reasons for the underperformance, which seem to be confirmed by communications between the programme and the consortium, that the cause was internal to the consortium of nine companies. The novelty of the action and misunderstanding by the contractors of the challenges also contributed to underperformance.

Discussions at the MC meeting in Valletta confirmed the extra monitoring time required by the JS which contributed to delays in assessing the third call applications.

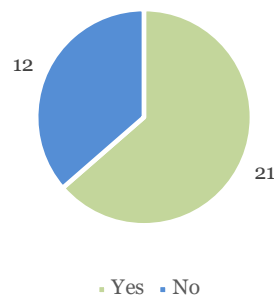
In addition to the organisational aspects, overall progress of the PLP needs to be considered in this analysis as well.



During the interviews, as confirmed by both the JS and the consortium staff, it is only in the second year of implementation (2018) that PLP activities started running. In addition to the organisational difficulties in 2017, the basic contents for the PLP (Interreg Europe project outputs) were only ready in 2018. The JS can confirm that in the second phase of PLP implementation (from 2018) it will move to full-speed. This means switching from passive capitalisation to active capitalisation, involving external stakeholders and engaging users with a bottom-up approach.

Figure 4.22 Perception of MC members on PLP progress

Are the PLP activities and outcomes progressing in line with the initial targets?



Source: Survey of MC members



When asked about PLP performance, most MC members think it is in line with the initial targets, especially thanks to JS guidance and monitoring. However, many do not think the PLP is performing well. However, both the survey and interviews with MC members reveal that many are not aware of the progress made by the PLP. Some MC members suggest having:

- summaries of policy advice and requests for peer review sent to MC members,
- non-confidential thematic meetings,
- more visibility of the PLP aims and activities,
- a mid-term review of the PLP results.

These outcomes and comments reveal a crucial need for the PLP to communicate its activities, internally to programme bodies, as well as externally to users and potential users. This enhanced communication requires the lead or strong involvement of the JS, as it will not only concern communication of the PLP, but communication of the entire programme.

#### 4.4.1 How efficient and effective is JS support for the PLP team?

*JS support is effective as it has improved PLP performance and management. However, the JS support had to change its approach from strategic coordination and content supervision to strict monitoring of all deliverables and internal documents. This shift is not efficient per se, but was needed to ensure PLP performance.*

**Recommendation:** *the evaluator recommends to follow-up the evolution of JS monitoring to see if it reduces the strict monitoring on the internal documents.*

JS support for the PLP needs to be understood in its context and evolution.



As confirmed during the interviews to the JS, when the terms of reference were launched in late 2015, it was envisaged that the contractor would be the driving force of the PLP. For that, a mirror structure PLP-JS was planned with a lead manager at the consortium working directly with the JS coordinator and a number of thematic experts working with eight policy officers at the JS (two per thematic area).

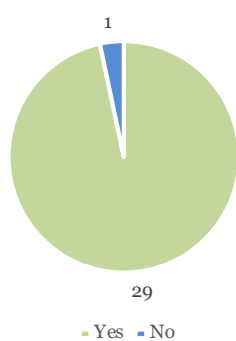
JS support was limited to overall coordination of the four thematic areas, supervision of content in each thematic area, monitoring implementation of the yearly workplan, facilitating links between projects and the platform, and facilitating links between the PLP and the programme Communications Unit.

However, underperformance from the beginning led the JS to strict monitoring of all activities and deliverables (including internal ones), which increased the time spent on monitoring at the cost of time spent on content.

The terms of reference for annual revision of the contract modified the PLP structure, as well as the workflows. Those terms of reference clearly stated that the JS will monitor work progress and validate the relevant internal documents.

Figure 4.23 Perception of MC members on the contribution of JS support to PLP effectiveness

Do you think the day-to-day JS support so far is adequate for the PLP to achieve its targets?



Source: Survey of MC members



The majority of MC members think that support from the JS contributes adequately to PLP effectiveness. They think that JS guidance and monitoring improve PLP management.

As a conclusion of the above, JS support had to change its approach from strategic coordination and supervising contents to strict monitoring of all deliverables and internal documents. This shift is not efficient *per se*, as it is resource-intensive, but was needed to ensure performance of the PLP. Since PLP performance improved after those changes (as detailed in the following sections) the measures taken and new approach to support by the JS were effective.

However, the evaluator recommends to follow up the monitoring in the third year of implementation, in particular to check if the strict monitoring of all deliverables reduces in the coming months, in parallel to improvement in the service.

#### *4.4.2 Are the implementation provisions developed by the programme for selecting and monitoring the PLP efficient? Is the PLP set up efficient and effective?*

*The PLP selection experienced some inefficiencies due to the novelty of the action and the procurement provisions. Programme and PLP monitoring are still being adjusted to find an efficient balance between the checks and PLP performance.*

*The initial PLP structure proved to be ineffective and had to be modified. In 2018, the modified setting contributed to improving delivery quality. In parallel to the monitoring provisions, the structure is also becoming more efficient.*

**Recommendations:** *the evaluator recommends to follow-up the PLP during the third year of implementation and check if the performance is still improving, verify if strict JS monitoring of internal deliverables and intermediate steps has reduced, and the focus stays on the key content-related and strategic aspects.*

*To follow-up on PLP performance and check if new adjustments to the structure are needed.*

*Structured and regular information on the policy advice and requests for peer review needs to be sent to MC members. In addition, it would be necessary to send reinforced communication to external stakeholders about PLP activities.*

Two sets of questions are included in this section:

- if the selection and monitoring provisions are efficient,
- if the PLP structure is efficient and effective.

To follow a logical order of analysis, the PLP structure will be tackled first.

#### **The efficiency and effectiveness of the PLP structure.**



The interviews with programme bodies indicate that a major challenge was the PLP structure. It was a new type of activity for Interreg Europe, and the JS thinks that running the activities under the JS structure would have resulted in easier implementation and management of the PLP. However, the technical advisory budget did not allow for this and the service had to be outsourced.

Outsourcing entailed several difficulties including differing expectations of programme and external staff, the need to reinforce guidance and monitoring and the need to allocate more JS resources. At the time of this evaluation report, programme bodies consider the performance to be on track, but it has taken more time and resources than expected.

At the beginning, a mirror structure PLP-JS was envisaged by the terms of reference with a lead manager at the consortium working directly with the JS coordinator and thematic experts working together with eight policy officers at the JS (two per thematic area).

The contract terms anticipated an annual revision of the contract. In this procedure, the challenges identified during implementation are included and corrective measures defined.

The revision during the first year of implementation and interviews with the programme bodies reveal that during the first year of functioning (2017), the consortium lacked coordination internally among the various companies and experts involved as well as externally in terms of strategic vision. In addition, deadlines and commitments were not always respected, and the quality of the deliverables was considered insufficient by the JS. In fact, the JS coordinator had to coordinate all the work, including for the consortium.

Revision during the first year involved:

- Relocating the lead management to the JS premises, and creating a PLP management team with three managers (project manager, thematic manager and communications manager),
- Concentrating staff: from 29 part-time experts to 10 full-time people,
- A focus on capacity building to ensure PLP staff understand the programme and objectives and provide high quality deliverables

This situation improved in the second year (2018). JS members feel that the quality of deliverables has increased (even though this depends on the specific expert, and the situation varies in the four thematic areas). This has created more trust with the consortium and enabled more efficient use of JS resources (less control on the quality of each document and more focus on the contents).

The consortium staff recognise the learning process in these two years of implementation. Based on the first year difficulties, things have improved in the second year also thanks to better communication channels, more regular coordination meetings, reinforced quality control on the side of the PLP and enhanced trust between the PLP and the JS.

A common opinion of the JS and the consortium is that PLP activities are starting to be more substantial in terms of content, so it is time to involve beneficiaries further, adapting the services to their needs.

In conclusion, both the JS and the PLP staff identified the ineffectiveness of the PLP structure during the first year of implementation. Limited but adequate changes were identified and implemented during the second year, which improved the quality of PLP deliverables and created more trust between the JS and the consortium. This has led to less control on details and more efficient use of the JS coordinator and project officers' time. This process has not ended, but the path to more efficiency is in place. In parallel, the new structure seems to deliver more effectively. A check after the third year of implementation could verify this evolution with less strict

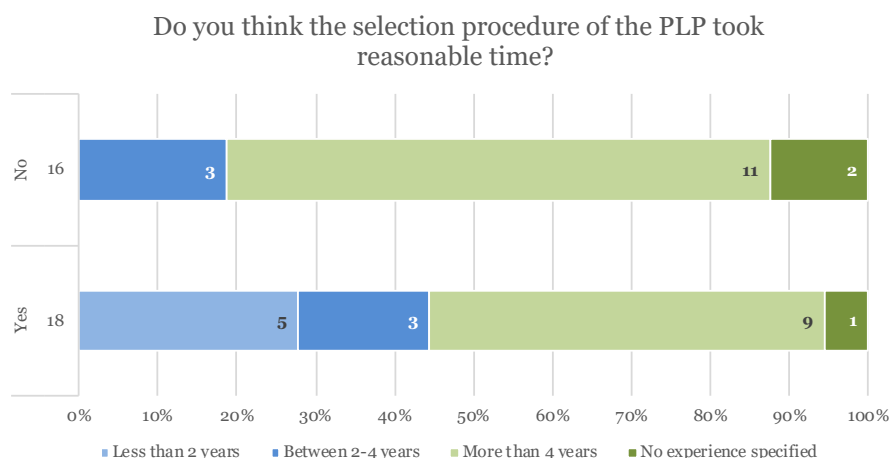
monitoring of internal deliverables and improved efficiency of the PLP. At the same time, the progress of PLP activities will need to be checked to confirm if the changes resulted in an effective structure, delivering as expected.

### The efficiency of selection and monitoring



The majority of programme bodies agree that the PLP **selection procedure** took too long. Even though the survey of MC members shows a balance between those who think the time was long and those who think it was reasonable, the comments and most interviews agree that the selection procedure took too long.

Figure 4.24 Perception of MC members on the time taken to select the PLP



Source: survey of MC members

Figure 4.24 illustrates the perception of MC members on the time taken to select the PLP. Responses have been matched with the experience of MC members in the Interreg Europe programme. The perception is even, with 18 respondents thinking the process took a reasonable time against 16 thinking it was too long. Experienced MC members are more critical (see Figure 4.24) and think the process took too long.

The comments offer various reasons for the time and inefficiency in the selection process:

- the novelty of the PLP in Interreg,
- underestimating the complexity and innovative features of the PLP,
- slow design of the public procurement procedure.

This late start for PLP implementation negatively affected its performance and its contribution to the programme objective of engaging institutions from the Investment for Growth and Jobs IGJ programmes.



PLP **monitoring** evolved during implementation. The interviews with programme bodies confirm that, at the beginning, the aim was to have two thematically specialised JS members working closely with PLP experts in the four areas. These eight JS members

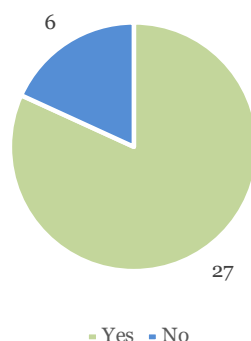
would spend 50% of their time on PLP-related tasks. The expectations were that PLP experts would be the driving force and that project JS officers would be involved as peers in the thematic work.

However, these expectations were not met. There was a lack of coordination at the PLP and unequal quality performance per expert during the first year of implementation. This situation required two JS members to monitor the quality of the work from the PLP experts (checking the details and formats of all documents), which did not require thematic specialisation. In addition, the content-related tasks of the JS staff were reduced to 20 or 30% of their time.

During the second year of implementation, the JS reduced strict monitoring of each document. A monitoring tool was developed, consisting of a spreadsheet with all deliverables and data, which also indicates when the JS needs to approve a deliverable. This tool shows that the number of deliverables needing JS monitoring has decreased and in the second year some deliverables were sent to the JS only for information. However, most still need approval and PLP staff think these processes are still very demanding and take time from thematic work.

Figure 4.25 Perception of MC members on PLP support and monitoring

Do you think the monitoring process of the PLP works smoothly?



Source: Survey of MC members



When asked about JS monitoring of the PLP, MC members generally think it works smoothly. Comments in the survey indicate that the first annual PLP workplan drafted by the consortium was not considered efficient and it generated reinforced monitoring by the JS.

As a conclusion of all the above, the PLP is being adjusted towards a more efficient way of working. It started as a system requiring the supervision and approval of all deliverables. Now it delivers better quality and does not need approval for all deliverables.

The evaluator thinks that to confirm a more efficient monitoring process, a third year of implementation is needed. It is recommended that during that third year (2019) it is checked that only key strategic issues require approval from the JS. For this, the monitoring spread sheet used by the JS would show the reduction of PLP items are subject to approval.

Another indication of enhanced efficiency would be if some deliverables are co-created by the JS team and the PLP, and do not need official ‘approval’ later. That would enable deliverables under the same approach, saving revision and approval time.



The **reporting process** involves submitting monitoring reports every six months, to check how the system is working and if adjustments are needed. The reports and any corrective measures are sent to MC members.



In the opinion of the JS, the process should have been clearer from the beginning, with a reasonable list of indicators.

In the opinion of the evaluator, this reporting process is aligned with usual Interreg reporting, and for the PLP it highlighted performance weaknesses and how to address them. The delay in identifying indicators is probably due to the novelty of the PLP structure.

Therefore, as stated in previous sections, the third year of implementation will indicate if the reporting processes are stable and resources allocated to them are proportionate and efficient.

As a conclusion, the structure and procedures are still being adjusted. The JS modified the initial structure and implemented more intensive monitoring of the PLP, to ensure performance. Then the PLP changed its structure as well, appointing a coordinator, having some staff work part time at the JS premises and introducing additional procedures to ensure quality of the deliverables. If the quality standards are maintained, the JS could concentrate on monitoring the main deliverables rather than background documents or intermediate steps.

The second aspect to be improved is the content information sent to MC members and to programme stakeholders in general. MC members have expressed their wish to be further informed about the activities and outcomes of the PLP, and this information needs to be sent regularly.

Finally, visibility of the PLP and outcomes of the PLP thematic activities could be enhanced.

## 5 Evaluation results. Task 1.3 The evaluation of the programme communication strategy and its contribution to reaching the programme objectives

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In this second phase of the programme, communication will focus on project results, and that creates the opportunity to also reach new target groups.

The overall finding of the evaluation of the programme communication strategy and its contribution to reaching the programme objectives is that the contribution is effective. The details are provided below. Although the programme works well, the below sections provide also some suggestions for possible improvements. These can be taken as starting point for a discussion if the programme wants to further improve communication.



Task 1.3 involves analysing the contributions to objectives of the programme's communication strategy and activities, namely:

- facilitating EU-wide policy learning and capitalising on good practices,
- support for exchange of experience and good practices for regional actors.

To reach those objectives, the Communication Strategy set five objectives:

- increase the awareness of a defined list of actors of 'regional relevance' of the PLP's existence to 50% by 2020,
- inform 90% of target groups of potential funding opportunities by 2018,
- assist successful implementation of 200 projects,
- increase access of good practices by establishing Interreg Europe as the programme of reference for policy issues,
- demonstrate the positive impact of interregional cooperation to European institutions and partner states.

Those communication objectives are external and internal.

Communicating the programme to new external stakeholders aims to attract them to the programme leading to:

- (increased) awareness of the programme and its positive impacts,
- interest in participating in potential applications,
- awareness and use of the PLP,
- increased access to good practices.

This evaluation assesses if these aims are attained and if they contribute to the programme objectives. To do so, the analysis is based on the perception of programme stakeholders, mainly MC members the MA and the JS.

The second level of the communication strategy and the programme goal is internal and operational, consisting of support to Interreg Europe projects in their communication activities. Recent tools implemented by the programme are reviewed to verify their adequacy to reach the programme objectives. The key indicator in this task is the perception of programme bodies and lead partners, as communication from projects will also contribute to programme objectives. The evaluation questions relate to the strategic level (formulation of communication strategy objectives) and to the effectiveness of communication activities. To tackle both aspects, the following sections will deal with:

- formulation of communication strategy objectives,
- effectiveness of communication activities

## 5.1 Communication strategy objectives

The evaluation of the objectives of the communication strategy centred mainly around one question.

### 5.1.1 Are the objectives of the communication strategy set in a way to contribute to the programme's overall objectives?

*The communication strategy contributes to Interreg Europe objectives. However, to be more effective and to adapt to the second phase of the programme (as the strategy itself foresees), the strategy could be refocused. It could pay special attention to certain target groups and focus on the last two of the five Strategy objectives; to increase access of good practices by establishing Interreg Europe as the programme to turn to for policy issues and to demonstrate the positive impact of interregional cooperation.*

**Recommendations:** *The communication strategy could:*

- target its activities especially at national and regional level, mainly on the two last objectives, to do so, NPCs could complement and support the JS.
- consider the importance of reaching new sectorial (thematic) target groups,
- emphasise and reinforce the communication of outcomes, results and potential impacts of the interregional projects, as well as the added value of interregional cooperation.



The five communication strategy objectives were developed in 2015 and updated at the beginning of 2016. They are based on the programme's operational objectives and should contribute to them.

The communication strategy indicates how to measure achievement of these two operational objectives, namely:

- to facilitate on-going EU-wide policy learning and capitalisation of good practices among actors of regional relevance to strengthen regional policies, especially the implementation of programmes for Investment for Growth and Jobs and, when relevant, ETC
  - measurement: 25% of EU regions (NUTS 2) registered on the PLP,
- to support exchange of experience and good practices among actors of regional relevance to integrate learning from the cooperation into regional policies, in particular through their programmes for Investment for Growth and Jobs IGJ) and, where relevant, ETC
  - measurement: support 200 interregional cooperation projects between 'actors of regional relevance' with an influence on EUR 768 million of structural funds.

Lot 2 of the Interreg Europe programme evaluation confirms that the two measurements will be reached by 2023. By July 2018, 59% of EU NUTS II regions were registered on the PLP. In addition, 200 interregional cooperation projects will probably be reached with the fourth call for projects. Finally, projects approved under phase one have an influence on EUR 264 million of

structural funds, which means the target of EUR 768 million will be reached by 2023. So, all targets should be reached by their deadlines.

These targets are also mentioned in section 12. ‘Evaluation’ of the strategy.

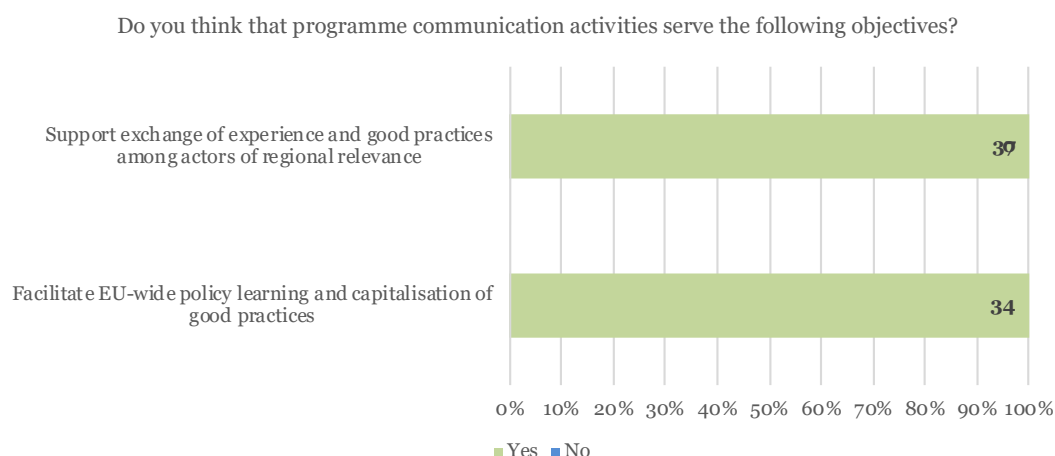
This assessment does not analyse if the targets are being reached, but the objectives already aim to widen the recipients of programme communication. This includes increasing awareness of the list of actors of regional relevance, providing information to target groups of potential funding opportunities, increasing access to good practice and demonstrating the positive impact of interregional cooperation. Therefore, the aim to widen outreach of the programme message is an essential element of programme communication.

In addition, section 11 of the strategy (‘Timeline’) foresees that the later programme stages will be more focused on dissemination of results and capitalisation.



In general, MC members consider that programme communications (and therefore the strategy and its goals) contribute to the programme objectives, as shown in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 Perception of MC members on the contribution of communication to the programme objectives



Source: Survey of MC members

Widening the recipients of programme communication has been tackled by some comments in the surveys and the interviews, which highlight two specific improvements for the strategy:

- to further adapt programme messages to national and regional contexts, in order to reach and mobilise more stakeholders,
- to refocus communication strategy objectives in the current context (autumn 2018) especially for challenges related to the uncertain future of the programme.

In general terms, 2 members of the MC highlight the **need to reach more IGJ stakeholders**, and to facilitate more EU awareness raising leading to capitalisation of good practice and policy learning. To reach this reinforced communication, 2 MC members indicate the need to adapt programme messages to national and regional contexts. That would mean more intensive use of

NPCs and Partner States to benefit from national knowledge, and the improvement of national and regional communication, including communication to policy makers.



This conclusion is also shared by 3 lead partners, who also think programme communication could target more recipients. 2 comments in the lead partner survey indicate that programme communication only reaches known target groups and is not going beyond them. This primarily affects communication of projects but has an aggregated effect on communication at programme level.

Even though similar ideas have been expressed by other programme bodies, one interviewed MC member very clearly stated the **need to re-focus the communication strategy**, bearing in mind the current context for the programme.

In the autumn of 2018 there were two main challenges. One is that the programme is in the second phase of implementation, so the need to attract potential lead partners has come to an end and it is time to communicate the results of projects that have already closed (phase 1) and the impacts or potential impacts of those projects.

The other is the uncertain future of the programme in 2021-2027, which implies that additional efforts in communicating the programme are needed. As suggested by this MC member, communications could focus more on understanding the added value brought by Interreg Europe. It is the only programme enabling exchange of know-how across the entire EU, using the differences between regions as a strength. As mentioned by the MC representative, ‘differences make regions stronger’, and this improves cohesion among regions. Multi-level and multi-sector regional stakeholder involvement could also be made visible. In addition, the added value of Interreg Europe compared to transnational programmes and compared to the Objective Investment for Growth and Jobs could also be made more visible. Reshaping the communication strategy could also target policy makers and project partners who ‘are about to lose their programme’.

The relevance of this position and the potential contribution to improving the communication strategy makes it worth including in this evaluation.

All of the above leads to conclude that the communication strategy contributes to programme objectives. The strategy already considers focusing more on the communication of results in the second phase of the programme, and this is confirmed by the specific comments received by MC members on how to approach this second phase of the programme. These suggestions lead to the following recommendations for the communication strategy:

- Target outreach of its activities *especially* at national and regional level, mainly for the two last objectives (to increase access to good practices by establishing Interreg Europe as the programme of reference for policy issues; to demonstrate the positive impact of interregional cooperation), to do so, NPCs could complement and support the JS,
- Consider the importance of reaching new sectoral target groups,

- Focus communication actions and resources on the two last objectives of the strategy, bearing in mind the second phase of implementing the programme,
- Emphasise and reinforce the communication of outcomes, results and potential impacts of interregional projects, as well as the added value of interregional cooperation.

### 5.1.2 Do the communication activities and tools serve the objectives of the programme?

*Communication activities serve programme objectives, but refocusing the strategy will imply refocusing these activities as well.*

**Recommendations:** Additional communication activities could for example:

- increase in sector networks and the press with published reports on results, highlighting the added value of interregional cooperation,
- organise joint communications with other Funds active in the country or region,
- collect information at national level on good practice transferred to other regions,
- improve PLP cooperation with national representatives or NPCs to mobilise stakeholders in the regions.

*This would require defining specific roles for the NPC network and allocating adequate resources.*

Analysis of communication contributions to programme objectives or if any improvement is needed, is based on the perception of programme bodies and projects.

Figure 5.2 Perception of MC members on the performance of communication activities

Do you think that programme communication activities serve the following objectives?



Source: Survey of MC members

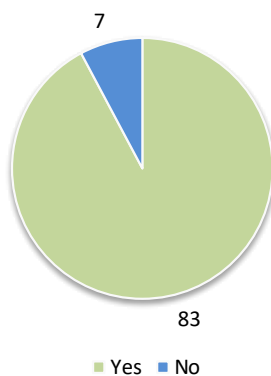


MC members think that the communication activities serve the objectives. MC members agree on the efficiency of communications, proven by the number of applications received, as well as the professionalism of JS staff.

As shown in figure 5.2, dissemination to actors of regional relevance is the less served objective, in the opinion of the MC members. This links directly to the assessment in the previous section and the need to reach more IGJ stakeholders.

Figure 5.3 Perception of lead partners on the contribution of programme tools to communication of Interreg Europe

Do you think the programme communication tools (online tools, hosting project websites) are helping to raise further awareness on the programme?



Source: Survey of lead partners

As illustrated in figure 5.3, most lead partners consider that the existing communication tools help raise awareness of the programme. However, 2 comments from the survey indicate that communication activities only reach known target groups and do not go beyond them.

All of the above, including the analysis under section 5.1.1 leads to conclude that communication activities are effective in helping achieve existing strategy objectives. However, if the communication strategy focuses on reaching new stakeholders, the activities and messages will need to be adapted to it.

As suggested by MC members and the MA in the survey and interview, additional actions for a refocused communications strategy could be:

- enhancing the visibility of best practices and policies, more use of social networks and the press with the publication of reports on results, highlighting the added value of interregional cooperation,
- joint communication actions with other Funds in the country or region,
- collecting information (by the NPC) on good practice at national level that are transferred and taken over from other EU regions,
- improving the cooperation of PLP with national representatives or NPCs to mobilise stakeholders in the regions.

To implement these new actions and to adapt the messages to national and regional levels, the programme could define specific roles for NCPs to support communication activities. Adequate resources would need to be allocated as well.

As recommended by the evaluator in section 3.2 of this report, a specific way to tackle this refocused communication approach could be done by providing guidance for the NPC. Such guidance could contain the basic elements to start communicating the programme to national networks. A thematic approach in the packages could also be included. The NPC would adapt the basic package to the national context and language. The action needs to be supported by an MC decision, which would ensure implementation for as many NPCs as possible. Alternatively, the MC could also discuss and decide if this activity would be included in the task 'wide dissemination of programme information' and make it compulsory for NPCs to implement.

**5.2 Are the different communication activities and tools of the programme, in particular those newly developed (e.g. on-line tools, hosting projects website), implemented in an effective and efficient way?**

*The programme communication tools are implemented effectively and efficiently. However, to reach new target groups and implement a refocused strategy, some measures are needed.*

**Recommendations:**

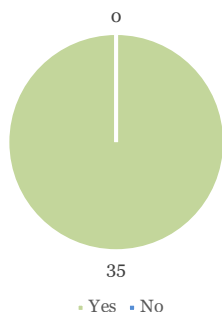
- introduce flexibility for projects to adapt their websites to better reach their territorial or sector target groups,*
- prioritise communicating good practice, concrete results and outcomes of projects, rather than the programme in general terms,*
- provide examples to lead partners (by theme) of how good practice or results could be communicated more effectively to external stakeholders,*
- reinforce the existing storytelling approach, which helps communicate to the general public and policy makers who are not familiar with Interreg. Graphic design, visual information and infographics could be reinforced as well,*
- concentrate on thematically focused communication events, if possible in connection with other funds or thematic initiatives.*

This question analysed how stakeholders perceive the operational support for project communication.

In general, all programme stakeholders agree on the effectiveness of the communication activities and tools. The centralised approach with templates for almost every communication action is efficient for the majority of stakeholders. Comments in both interviews and surveys confirm the high quality of the activities, tools and support.

Figure 5.4 Perception of MC members on the added value of newly developed communication tools

Do you think the newly developed communication tools (on-line tools, hosting projects website) are of added value in raising further awareness of the programme?



Source: survey of MC members



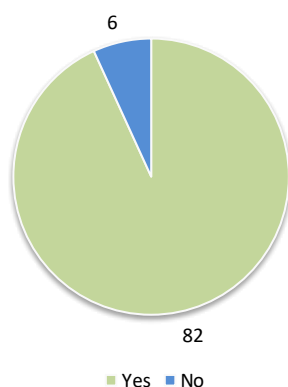
All MC members consider that the communication tools add value in raising awareness of the programme.

In the surveys and interviews, all programme stakeholders commented particularly on the project website hosted by the programme, confirming the importance of the tool. They all agree on the efficiency, but opinions differ on the effectiveness.

All programme bodies think the tool is efficient as it saves resources for projects, and enables centralised control on the contents of project websites. This also allows for a clearer, streamlined and coherent communication strategy.

Figure 5.5 Perception of lead partners on the support provided by the programme communication tools

Do the communication tools support your project effectively?



Source: Survey of lead partners

As shown in the above figure, lead partners consider that Interreg Europe communication tools support projects effectively. 3 comments in the survey, and 5 in the interviews with lead partners, claim that centralised communication tools (especially the central website for projects) restrict projects from innovating or managing content, or adapting the messages to their own target groups. This may limit the target groups that receive information on Interreg Europe projects and does not help reach other stakeholders or the 'industry'.



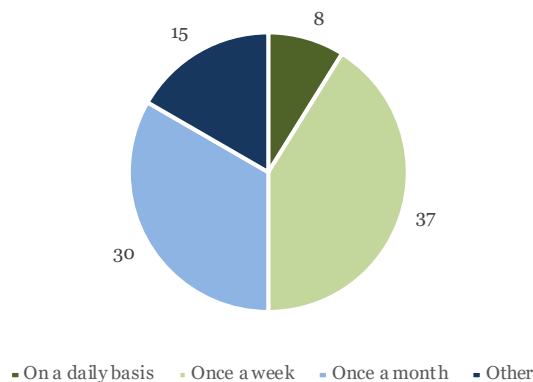


In the interviews, 2 comments by lead partners also mentioned that politicians and external stakeholders do not check websites, so communication takes place mostly in other media. For communication to succeed with politicians, the press and external stakeholders, the message needs to highlight the benefit of projects for them with examples of good results. Mostly this in local and national languages.

In the interviews to programme bodies, one suggestion referred to reinforce the existing story telling approach, which helps communicate to the general public and policy makers who are not familiar with Interreg. The graphic design, visual information and infographics could be reinforced as well.

Figure 5.6 Frequency of use of the communication tools

How often do you use the communication tools as a support to your project?



Source: Survey of lead partners



As shown in figure 5.6, half of respondents use communication tools at least once a week. More than 40% use them only once a month.

This outcome is probably due to the fact that the person answering the survey may not be in charge of communications, but there are no related comments to verify this.

Another hypothesis may be that project communication is very much driven by the website, and when each project is not responsible then less efforts are invested in this activity. So, centralised management may discourage project communication.

The majority of respondents corresponding to 'other' indicated that the project had just started.

All of the above leads to conclude that communication tools are effectively and efficiently implemented. However, some suggestions indicated by the lead partners and programme bodies could be introduced to improve the effectiveness further, and reach new target groups:

- introduce some flexibility for projects to adapt their websites (and other tools) partially to better reach their territorial or sector target groups,

- prioritise communicating good practice, concrete results and outcomes of projects, rather than the programme in general terms,
- examples (by theme) of how good practice or results could be communicated more effectively by the projects to external stakeholders,
- reinforce the existing story telling approach, which helps communicate to the general public and policy makers who are not familiar with Interreg. The graphic design, visual information and infographics could be reinforced as well,
- concentrate on thematically focused communication events, if possible in connection with other funds or thematic initiatives.

## 6 Key conclusions

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The analysis of the programme structures and procedures accomplished in this evaluation leads to three main conclusions.

### **1. Interreg Europe structures work efficiently and effectively.**

The outcomes of the surveys and interviews are illustrative of the efficient procedures put in place to steer and also to manage the programme. The quality work developed by the JS both for the preparation of the MC meetings and also as support for projects is appreciated by all programme stakeholders. Proof of this are for example the figures resulting from the survey. For example, when asked about the usefulness of the tools for project generation or implementation, the JS assistance is almost 100% rated.

An outcome of the quality work is the number of applications, that have doubled the expectations, and resulted into additional workload for the JS.

The Interreg Europe projects and also MC members are satisfied with the service and the overall organisation of the programme, and recommendations included in this report are technical and refer to details to improve procedures already in place.

### **2. Interreg Europe faces two main challenges in the second phase of the programme implementation.**

The first strategic challenge refers to the communication of the programme to certain target groups, especially the national and regional levels.

The evaluation highlights the need to adapt the messages to national and regional contexts in order to reach and mobilise new stakeholders, mainly those in charge of the Investment for Growth and Jobs programmes, and also sectorial target groups.

In line with the provisions of the strategy, that objective will be reached by focusing the content of the communication actions on the outcomes or results of projects and the outcomes of the PLP,

with a focus on understanding the added value of Interreg Europe, using the differences among the regions as a strength.

Following that perspective, the type of the actions would be innovative and go beyond the usual communication actions of a programme (dissemination of the programme, presence at EU institutions and fora, etc).

The second challenge of the programme refers to the PLP, in two ways. On the one hand, the basic challenge is to ensure a smooth functioning of the PLP. The structure and organisation are still adapting after having identified some inefficiencies and quality weaknesses, and it is on the way to find the balance.

On the other hand, the PLP needs to prove the production of continuous quality deliverables. These deliverables are needed both to feed the PLP, but also to provide the basis for the enhanced communication proposed in the previous paragraph.

### **3. This implementation phase offers the opportunity to involve further the NPC and possibly the interactivity at the MC meetings.**

The challenge on communication requires a reflection of all programme bodies on the strategy to follow in this second phase of the implementation of the programme. Refocusing the communication strategy and the identification of the key communication activities are an opportunity to:

- launch a strategic discussion at the MC meetings on how to approach the challenge, and
- to involve the NPC with key concrete activities to make sure the programme is communicated at national levels and at sectorial levels.

These two actions link to two recommendations in this evaluation: the encouragement of active participation of MC members in the MC meetings, tackling strategic themes; and the recommendation to enlarge the role of the NPC in the management and implementation of the programme.

Therefore, the already envisaged refocusing of the communication strategy and actions represent a unique opportunity to deal with the programme challenges and recommendations of this evaluation. Now that the programme will have probably approved all projects to be funded by the end of 2018, it is time to exploit the outcomes of the projects and the PLP and to deal with the challenge of reaching out to the national, regional and sectorial levels.

As an overall conclusion, Interreg Europe works effectively and efficiently, with well structured procedures that are reflected in the satisfaction levels of all programme stakeholders. It faces some strategic challenges that may be discussed and processed by the programme bodies and where possible changes can easily be made thanks to the efficient processes in place.

## 7 Quotes from the surveys and interviews

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‘Interreg Europe is among the 3 best managed and best programmes’ (MC member)

‘The best toolkit for applicants in the whole cohesion policy!’ (MC member responding to the survey)

‘My office is in charge of other ETC Programmes in which my region is eligible, and I can state that both in the application and implementation phases documents and ITC tools, along with the JS support (in any form) are much more simple, clear, accessible and exhaustive for IR-E than the others’ (MC member responding to the survey)

‘Generally the support from the JS is excellent. Emails are answered quickly and reasonably. My best experience of Interreg support in 20 years’ (project lead partner, who was quite critical in some survey questions)

‘They (the officers in charge) always provide all possible help in a very short time, usually within the same day. All the issues are smoothly solved. Also for the progress reports all the comments are justified and relevant and the last report was checked in less than a week. Really an excellent performance. Also the reimbursement process is excellent (within a month)’ (project lead partner)

‘The JS team has been incredibly supportive, informative, helpful in guiding us and finding solutions as well as giving us clear direction where required. They are fully engaged with our project and therefore very specific in their response. Their response time is amazing’ (project lead partner)

‘I wish I could find something to improve (in Interreg Europe), but I would suggest to continue the programme, this is the thing to improve’ (project lead partner)

‘For an Interreg programme, IE have done a good job in simplifying rules and procedures as much as possible’ (project lead partner)

‘My office is in charge of other ETC Programmes in which my region is eligible, and I can state that both in the application and implementation phases documents and ITC tools, along with the JS support (in any form) are much more simple, clear, accessible and exhaustive for IR-E than the others’ (MC member responding to the survey)

‘iOLF is an ABSOLUTELY GREAT tool, we have supported from the very beginning (Interreg IV C times)’ (project lead partner)

## 8 Annexes

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Annex A. List of programme documents reviewed

Annex B. Survey templates<sup>7</sup>

Annex C. Interview templates

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<sup>7</sup> The second survey template refers to project partners even though the operational evaluation (Lot 1) was addressed to the lead partners only. However, both evaluation teams (Lot 1 on operational evaluation and Lot 2 on impact evaluation) used the same survey for their work and a limited number of project partners received the questions related to Lot 2.