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Summary Report
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Ongoing Evaluation of the INTERREG V-A Programme Austria Czech Republic

Client

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1 The evaluation of the Interreg V A AT-CZ programme

1.1 The Interreg programme AT-CZ

The aim of the programme Interreg AT-CZ is to strengthen regional performance and cooperation in the four priorities “strengthening research, technological development and innovation”, “environment and resources”, “human resource development” and “sustainable networks and institutional cooperation” (Figure 1).

The total funding of the Operational Programme (OP) is approx. 115 Mio. Euros, where 85% are provided by ERDF (97.8 Mio. Euro). With a total share of around 46% of the available funds, the programme puts an emphasis on priority axis 2 “environment and resources” which includes sustainable tourism, biodiversity and innovative technologies to improve environmental protection and resource efficiency.

Figure 1. Overview of the priority axes and specific objectives

Priority Axis 1: Strengthening research, technological development and innovation
SO 1a: <i>Improved and extended research and innovation capacities</i>
SO 1b: <i>Fostering the involvement of enterprises (primarily SMEs) in the innovation system</i>
Priority Axis 2: Environment and Resources
SO 2a: <i>Valorising the region's cultural and natural heritage in a sustainable way</i>
SO 2b: <i>Increase of ecological stability and improvement of ecosystem services</i>
SO 2c: <i>Fostering the utilisation of eco-innovative potential of the region</i>
Priority Axis 3: Human resources development
SO 3a: <i>Extension of common supply of education and qualification activities in order to utilize human resources potential in cross-border region</i>
Priority Axis 4: Sustainable networks and institutional cooperation
SO 4a: <i>Fostering cross-border cooperation of communities and institutions in joint regions</i>

Source: Metis & convelop

6.5 Mio. people live in the programme area, which is very heterogeneous with respect to the territorial and socio-economic situation: metropolitan regions such as Vienna and urban areas (e.g. Brno, Linz, České Budějovice, St. Poelten) are also part of the eligible area as rural areas located at the borders of the countries. No explicit differentiation in the programme strategy is made between these types of regions.

The programme implementation is on track. 86% of ERDF funding has been committed by the end of 2019. 60 projects¹ with in total 244 project partners² (AT 112, CZ 132) and 169 associated partners have been approved within the priorities³. The commitment

¹ Thereof, 11 projects were approved in MC8 in October 2019. These projects are not included in the evaluation in detail as they were still in their contracting/start-up phase.

² This total number of project partners has not been revised regarding multiple project participations of individual organisations.

³ Additionally, 7 projects have been approved within Technical Assistance.

varies among the priorities: While priorities 1 and 3 are well advanced and priority 2 is on track, efforts are needed in priority 4 to increase the absorption.

In the project selection the authorities have focused on larger projects accompanied by a small project funds⁴. Combined with a delayed programme start, this leads to a rather late provision of actual outputs and results. The project implementation works well and beneficiaries report that expected thematic objectives of the projects are/will be achieved. According to the project forecasts the programme is on track to achieve the target values for the output indicators, which are in parts set rather unambitious

1.2 The evaluation - approach and methodology

The ongoing evaluation was carried out between Q3/2018 and Q1/2020. It was structured in eight work packages (WP0-7) and included:

- A detailed evaluation concept including a mapping of target groups (WP0),
- an assessment of publicity (WP1),
- an assessment of the needs of the area and the intervention logic (WP2),
- an assessment of administrative burden (WP3) and
- an assessment of the specific objectives of the priority axes 1, 2, 3 and 4 (WP4-7).

The results of the ongoing evaluation were presented in the Final Reports for WP 1, WP2, WP3 and WP 4 to 7.

The evaluation approach is theory-based and builds upon a performance-oriented model, that combines a top-down and bottom-up approach.

- At the programme level the intervention logic has been re-constructed to understand the chains of impact. On this basis conditions for the success of the Operational Programme have been defined (or rather: probability of achieving the desired impacts).
- The analysis of projects focuses on the desired impacts and tries to compare the situation before and after the completion.

The approach puts cooperation in the center: Cooperation needs supportive conditions and cooperation creates social capital and thus improves the conditions for further cooperations. The evaluators understand ETC as a means to enhance social capital and sustainable conditions and structures for cooperation as an ongoing process.

The sources used are programme-related documents, an analysis of projects, online surveys and case studies on projects, with interviews and an analysis of the project documentation. The following Figure 2 provides an overview of the evaluation.

⁴ The small project fund was evaluated by a specific evaluation carried out until early 2019, focussing on its implementation in 2017-2018. Therefore, it was not in the focus of this evaluation.

Figure 2. Overview of the work packages of the evaluation and sources used

2018 Set-up-phase	WP 0: Concept and Preparation		
	Kick off (expectations of programme partners) Detailed evaluation concept First mapping of target groups in the regions		
	WP2: Needs of the area & Intervention logic	WP1: Assessment of publicity	WP3: Admin. burden
Imple- men- tation WP 1-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Screening ▪ Cross-Impact-Matrix ▪ Workshops ▪ Assignment of interventions 	Focused Online-survey for specific target groups (part 1) (supported / non-supported)	
		Analysis of instruments and tools	Analysis of documents structure & review of MA
2019 Implemen- tation WP 4-7	WP 4-7: Assessment of fulfillment of specific objectives		
	Analysis of the intervention logic, objectives and result indicators		
	Project proposals and reports		
	Online-survey of supported project proposers and PM		
	Case studies/ Interviews (supported / non-supported)		
	Optional services		
	WP 8: Summary assessment, optional summary assessment – on demand		

Source: Metis & convelop

2 Evaluation results

2.1 Communication strategy (WP1)

The Communication Strategy is the framework for the programme communication for the entire programme period. The objective is to ensure an efficient communication flow for beneficiaries, potential beneficiaries, multipliers, stakeholders as well as the general public. For the implementation of the information and communication activities, an indicative amount of 306,600 Euros (including proportionate staff costs) has been planned for the programming period 2014-2020. A mix of communication tools (events and seminars, website, publicity, publications, social media etc) is used to support programme and project implementation.

The main findings of the evaluation show that the **strategy** is fit for purpose, but also leaves some room for improvements:

Some of the **mandatory elements** of the communication strategy still need better coverage and improvements (especially a support for beneficiaries in their communication activities, information on staff resources, and information on the assessment of measures).

With the Interreg logo and common appearance of the communication a corporate identity is ensured. However, the attractiveness of the graphic appearance (corporate design) of the programme (website, programme manuals, etc.) is assessed rather low and could be improved. Here it needs to be mentioned that in the meantime the website has been improved is more attractive now.

The (programme-) **internal communication** has been judged by the interviewees to be very good, as various communication channels ensure good information flows and prove to be also effective for problem solving. The roles between the communication actors are well defined and regular coordination takes place.

External communication to stakeholders, potential and actual applicants and project promoters is according to plan and functional. As in many cooperation programmes, the strategy is based on a classical concept with the organisation of different events and seminars, a website, publicity material like roll-ups or give-aways, press releases and different publications. In addition, some social media presence has been set up.

The analysis has shown that personal contacts play a much bigger role for making the programme visible than the current information and communication tools that are dominated by the "traditional" communication activities targeted at programme stakeholders, beneficiaries and applicants. The potential of social media to provide short and up-to-date information to a wider target group and the potential of media to inform about the benefits of the programme and the added value of European policies are not sufficiently used. Consequently, the programme's interventions are well known to those who are involved (applicants and beneficiaries), but to a much lesser degree to potential (new) beneficiaries and stakeholders and the wider public.

However, **human and financial resources** are very limited and therefore, communication is not given as much attention as it would need. There is certainly a correlation between the capacity of human resources and the outputs and achievements of communication. So far, the limited resources led to a focus on the most important communication tasks, i.e. information of stakeholder on the programme. The budget and resources for communication are too limited in order to reach wider target groups, open the programme to new beneficiaries and inform the wider public about the added-value of the EU-funded programme. So, the programme should devote more time to

communication activities. More human resources would allow for more focus and less multitasking of the programme actors.

2.2 Administrative burden (WP3)

The **programme administration** works well: the internal cooperation and distribution of roles between the different programme actors are functional. Even though resources are scarce, the main tasks can be achieved without significant problems.

Overall, the programme documents and procedures are well prepared, matched to the requirements and rather simple (following the results of the survey). The programme implementation with the checks and assessments of application to the approval is functioning well. However, there is still some room for improvement in the transparency of project selection.

Counselling and support to applicants was rated to be of high quality for regional coordination offices (though with some variations in the assessment), followed by the Joint Secretariat and First Level Control Authorities (FLC). Especially related to the latter, quality gaps exist between the different regions.

Findings also show, that the First Level Control units operate in a dichotomy between the request for better use of available guidance (e.g. provided by Interact) and the need to base their action on legal documents only. The fact that FLC comes in at a very late stage often creates problems that could have been avoided if they came in earlier for consultation. Another findings points to difficulties with FLC when applying simplifications in calculating costs. Also control processes seem to be very long (at least according to the interviewees)

At **project level**, Interreg projects are associated with a rather high administrative effort by both, survey participants without project experience and actual beneficiaries. The efforts regarding formal procedures (submission, implementation and billing) are in general considered much higher than those for activities internal to projects (finding partners, internal coordination and communication). Changes in procedures and overly complex manuals seem to hamper smooth implementation.

According to the survey, 71% of non-project-promotors and 81% of project promoters assume that the expected administrative effort clearly discourages potential applicants from submitting a new project. Nevertheless, 73% of project promoters would recommend the implementation of a project in the Interreg programme AT-CZ to potential applicants.

2.3 The needs of the area and the intervention logic (WP 2)

Both countries have performed well since the beginning of the programming period for most of the analysed indicators. However, (global) developments have significant impacts on the region and on the programme implementation. In several sectors (e.g. climate change, education) the cooperation programme has given important impulses for positive development to improve the competitiveness, etc. for the benefit of the people, organisations, businesses and regions.

Main challenges that can be addressed by Interreg are the following:

In terms of **climate change** cross-border cooperation in this field is already well advanced and can therefore effectively address issues arising from climate change, such as disaster risk assessment and management, or flood protection.

Energy efficiency is a challenge for cooperation, as both countries have a high consumption of energy. Knowledge sharing, joint analysis, studies and practical projects, and support for energy related R&D and the development of joint actions to support energy efficiency are possible areas for cooperation.

Waste treatment is a specific problem in the border region, particularly on the Czech side of the border, where the recycling rate of municipal waste remains below EU average. As Austrian regions show a high standard of waste treatment, joint efforts could tackle this issue, e.g. through an in-depth analysis of cross-border potential in waste treatment, developing cross-border waste treatment plans, sharing capacity.

Digitalisation may help to stimulate positive effects in the border region. The use of online access to services, communication tools and interactions changes all spheres of life. Thus not only infrastructure and equipment, but also digital skills are therefore needed to be able to adapt to the changes. Cross-border cooperation could emphasise the development of models (including the use of hardware and software, organisation and access to digital services) of overcoming barriers (e.g. language tools, access to services across the border, organisation of transport and logistics). Also a joint approach to regulatory instruments (e.g. treatment of personal data) could be on a cross-border agenda.

The heterogeneity of the geographic area of the AT-CZ programme region creates a **difference in needs of urban as well as rural areas**. While urban areas profit from well-functioning cooperation in the fields of research, development and innovation, rural areas are more in need of infrastructure projects, especially innovative mobility.

Development opportunities lie in the better use of **research, development and innovation** to overcome barriers and stimulate cooperation. Changing working environments (with an increase in distant working, home office) also create opportunities in remote areas to better access jobs. A key to this is **education and training**, which increases employability and access to a wider labour market – taking advantage of the large heterogeneity of the AT-CZ border region. Connecting **tourist** destinations, cross-border cycle paths and hiking trails, were given as good examples of cross-border cooperation, which they would like to see continued in the future. **Sustainable forms of mobility** will increasingly be of relevance as greenhouse gas emissions are rising. Future cross-border cooperation should therefore continue to address environmental aspects of cross-border mobility, coordination and harmonization of public transport and investments in green infrastructure. Additionally, efforts to reduce the dependence on private transport will also be key, particularly for rural areas.

Impulses for the social and health care sector to provide common solutions to the **demographic change** are also needed. More focus should be placed on the common provision of services (e.g. information centres for retirees, pensioner passes etc.) and a better coordination of different specialties of health institutions in the border region, in order to maintain the high quality of services offered. This issue has gained significant importance as the COVID-19 pandemic is challenging the health systems and all other spheres of society.

2.4 Project outputs and results (WP4 to WP7)

2.4.1 Priority Axis 1: Strengthening research, technological development and innovation

The implementation of PA1 is well advanced. In total, 27 projects were submitted, and 17 projects approved (approval rate: 63%). 112% of the planned ERDF-funds for this priority are committed by end-2019 (123% for IP 1a, 97% for IP 1b).

In total, the 17 projects in PA1 involve 52 project partners, and 55 associated partners. Compared to the other PAs, the size of the partnerships in the projects is smaller (on average 3,1 partners). Given the nature of the priority, unsurprisingly research institutions dominate as beneficiaries (40 project partners out of 52). Also, public institutions are reached (9 on local level, 1 on regional level). In 1b also service providers are involved (2).

The majority of projects in this priority have a strong focus on research activities (in some cases combined with the establishment of R&I-infrastructure). In IP 1a, the projects aim for capacity building and advancement in the specific scientific field. Thematically, projects revolve around life sciences, biotechnology and measurement technology. Therefore, a strong potential for cross-border cooperation in these fields can be deducted. In IP1b, most projects have a strong focus on applied research and the thematic fields are more varied (ICT, veterinary medicine, construction sciences, biotechnology).

Based on the assigned intervention category, research projects are the majority (6), followed by projects for technology transfer and university-enterprise cooperation (4). Two projects belong to the intervention category creation of public R&I infrastructure.

An analysis regarding the forecasted outputs to be delivered by 2023 shows that the programme implementation is on a good track to achieve the target values of the output indicators by the end of the period. Especially the forecasted outputs for OP2 and OP4 exceed the target values of the programme.

From the online survey and the case studies the following aspects can be highlighted:

- As for all priorities, project partners in PA1 ascribe to the projects a high relevance for strategic development of the organisation (mean 5.07, modus 6), a finding which was endorsed also in the case studies.
- As motivation to implement the project in Interreg AT-CZ, the possibility to cooperate with partners in the programme area (93%) was stated most frequently by the beneficiaries in PA1, followed by the possibility to expand their competencies (70%). 41% claim the funding possibility was a reason to implement the project.
- The project partners are often already linked via informal ties, especially on personal level (e.g. joint publications of the involved leading researchers). With the Interreg project, first formalized cooperation takes place. Cooperation itself is considered as indispensable in science and facilitates higher efficiency and better quality of research (by combining complementary competences to apply integrative/interdisciplinary approaches, sharing staff, infrastructure and data etc.).

Furthermore, the online survey shows that:

- 78% of the respondents with projects in PA1 claim that in case of rejection they would have resubmitted the project in Interreg.
- 26% state they would have tried alternative international funding programmes (highest share among all priorities), whereas 11.1% would have tried national funding programmes.
- 15% would not have implemented the project at all (lowest share among all priorities).

Summarizing, the programme is effective in the context of PA1 by providing impulses for activities that strengthen research, technological development and the innovation system in the programme area. This is especially the case for interventions supported within IP1a, whereas in IP1b the specific potential of the CBC-approach can be exploited more extensively. Focusing on larger projects with considerable project duration, a success factor to achieve sustainable collaborations and respective structural effects, promotes the efficiency of the programme. This promising approach, however, is counteracted by the extensive administrative requirements for project implementation.

2.4.2 Priority Axis 2: Environment and Resources

In total, 37 projects were submitted in PA2, and 25 projects approved (approval rate: 68%). 86% of the planned ERDF-funds for this priority have been committed by end-2019. However, the implementation of PA 2 has progressed differently in the individual IPs (76% for IP 6c, 119% for IP 6d and 49% for IP 6f).

In total, the 25 projects in PA2 involve 121 project partners and additionally 72 associated partners. Compared to the other PAs, the size of the partnerships in the projects is the largest (in average 4.8 partners).

With regard to the types of partners involved, the composition in PA2 is very heterogeneous. Public institutions on regional and local level dominate as beneficiaries (32 and 29 project partners). Also, advocacy groups incl. NGOs and research institutions play a prominent role (17 partners each). Furthermore, national public institutions (10), cluster organizations and associations (3) as well as infrastructure and other (public) service providers (4) are involved.

The vast majority of projects in this priority deals with tourism and cultural and natural heritage (IP 6c). Other projects include biodiversity, environmental protection, adaptation to climate change and disaster management (IP 6c) or waste management (IP 6f).

An above-average number of projects in PA2 carries out studies and analyses. Also, awareness rising events play a prominent role for most of the projects. Some projects include physical investments and the creation of infrastructure.

An analysis regarding the forecasted outputs to be delivered by 2023 shows that the programme implementation is on a good track to achieve the target values of the output indicators by the end of the period. For most of the indicators, the forecasted outputs exceed the target values of the programme (except CO14⁵ and CO10⁶). However, no project within PA2 has delivered actual outputs by October 2019. As the first projects just have been completed, actual outputs can be expected before the end of 2019.

⁵ CO14: Total length of reconstructed or upgraded roads

⁶ CO 10: Number of eco-innovations introduced in the cross-border area

From the online survey the following aspects can be highlighted:

- As for all priorities, project partners in PA2 ascribe a high relevance for strategic development of the organisation to the projects (mean 5.09, modus 6).
- As motivation to implement the project in Interreg AT-CZ, the possibility to cooperate with partners in the programme area (89%) was stated most frequently by the beneficiaries in PA2, followed by the possibility to contribute to the development of the programme area Austria – Czech Republic (66%) and to their region (51%).

Summarizing, the programme is effective in the context of PA2 by providing impulses for activities that contribute to the protection of the environment and the promotion of resource efficiency in the programme area. This is especially the case for interventions supported within IP6c and IP6d where projects address specific potentials of the cross-border region. The effectiveness of the programme regarding directly facilitating eco-innovation (IP6f) is to be questioned. The efficiency of the programme can be increased by pursuing a more strategic approach in the context of sustainable tourism to increase the synergies between the individual projects.

2.4.3 Priority Axis 3: Human resources development

By end-2019 the implementation in PA3 is well advanced. In total 10 projects were submitted, and 9 of them approved (approval rate: 90%). 99% of the planned ERDF-funds for this priority are committed.

In total, the 9 projects in PA3 involve 40 project partners, and additionally 30 associated partners. The size of the partnerships is on average 4.4 partners, which is higher than in PA1 and PA4.

Given the nature of the priority, unsurprisingly education and social institutions dominate as beneficiaries (14 project partners out of 40). Also, regional public institutions (14) are prevalent project partners. Furthermore, local public authorities (8), research institutions (2) and NGOs (2) are involved in the projects.

All projects in PA3 are to a very high extent target group oriented and typically involve training, exchange and networking activities as well as development of studies, handbooks and guidance and information material. Improving language education in the programme area is a common theme of the projects (3 out of 6). Establishing and strengthening cross-border partnerships of education institutions is also addressed by some of the projects (3). Furthermore, some projects are also strongly motivated by cross-border transfer of know-how (3).

An analysis regarding the forecasted outputs to be delivered by 2023 shows that even though only 59% of the ERDF-funds for the priority are committed by mid-2019, the target values for the output indicators will be met. With more than 1300 participants reached by training activities implemented in the projects, the actual outputs by October 2019 exceed the target value by far.

From the online survey and the case studies the following aspects can be highlighted:

- Project partners in PA3 ascribe to the projects a high relevance for strategic development of the organisation (mean 5.42, modus 6). The case studies revealed that even though the projects predominately fit to the profile of the beneficiaries, the projects and the cooperation with the partners are not always strategically pushed.

- As a motivation to implement the project in Interreg AT-CZ, the possibility to cooperate with partners in the programme area was stated most frequently by the beneficiaries in PA3 (84%), but comparatively less frequently than in the other priorities.
- Another important motivation was the possibility to expand their competencies (68%). The projects support competence development by (i) transfer of know-how among the partners and (ii) joint know-how development. The relevance of these two means vary among the projects.
- Compared to the other priorities, in PA3, the aspect of having a funding possibility for the organization was claimed most frequently as a reason to implement the project (53%). The case study analysis confirmed the importance of Interreg as a funding possibility for the institutions. In some cases, the constellation of the partnerships was chosen in order to fit into the programme.

The implementation of the programme within PA3 supports the expansion of offers of education and qualification activities: However, the projects predominately address the education sector (education institutions, pedagogues and students/children in early childhood education, primary and secondary education). Projects that address qualification services (e.g. aiming at higher qualification/mobilisation of workforce, cooperation of job centres) are currently missing. So far, the need for these interventions was little due to the positive economic situation. Furthermore, projects implement only partly joint services that accompany regular educational activities.

2.4.4 Priority Axis 4: Sustainable networks and institutional cooperation

Compared to the other priorities, the implementation of PA4 is not well advanced by end-2019. In total, 14 projects were submitted, and 9 projects approved (approval rate: 64%). 63% of the planned ERDF-funds for this priority are committed.

In total, the 9 projects in PA4 involve 31 project partners and additionally 12 associated partners. Compared to the other PAs (except PA1), the size of the partnerships in the projects is relatively small (in average 3.4 partners).

Given the nature of the priority, unsurprisingly public institutions dominate as beneficiaries (17 on regional and 6 on local level). Also, advocacy groups incl. NGOs (2), research institutions (4) as well as one educational institution and one cluster organisation are involved.

Projects in PA4 cover a wide range of topics, from regional development to health care, labour market or animation technology. Most projects focus on awareness rising and networking activities.

An analysis regarding the output indicator shows that projects in PA4 are on a good track. The target value for 2023 has already been achieved in October 2019. The forecasted outputs (by beneficiaries) to be delivered by 2023 exceed the target values of the programme by far.

From the online survey the following aspects can be highlighted:

- As for all priorities, project partners in PA4 ascribe a high relevance for strategic development of the organisation to the projects. However, a mean of 4.38 (out of 6) is clearly below the overall average (5.06).

- As motivation to implement the project in Interreg AT-CZ, the possibility to cooperate with partners in the programme area (92%) was stated most frequently by the beneficiaries in PA4, followed by the contribution to the development of the programme area (69%). 46% claim the possibility to expand their competencies, services and products was a reason to implement the project.

All three case study projects were developed by long-standing cooperation partners. In all three cases, the project capitalises on previous Interreg projects.

The implementation of the programme within PA4 supports and strengthens cross-border cooperation of communities and institutions. Project partners are mostly provinces/regions or provincial/regional state agencies. The projects typically focus on networking and awareness-raising activities. The projects have a clear territorial component and contribute to better cross-border cooperation. There are two outstanding and awarded projects that achieve significant improvements in cross-border coordination in the health sector. The small project fund that is included in this IP is an appropriate instrument to also reach small beneficiaries and actors in the programme area and to support small cross-border projects, pilot activities and innovative approaches. Interreg AT-CZ has an USP as funding scheme to support projects that aim to strengthen cross-border cooperation and coordination specifically in thematic fields of public interest.

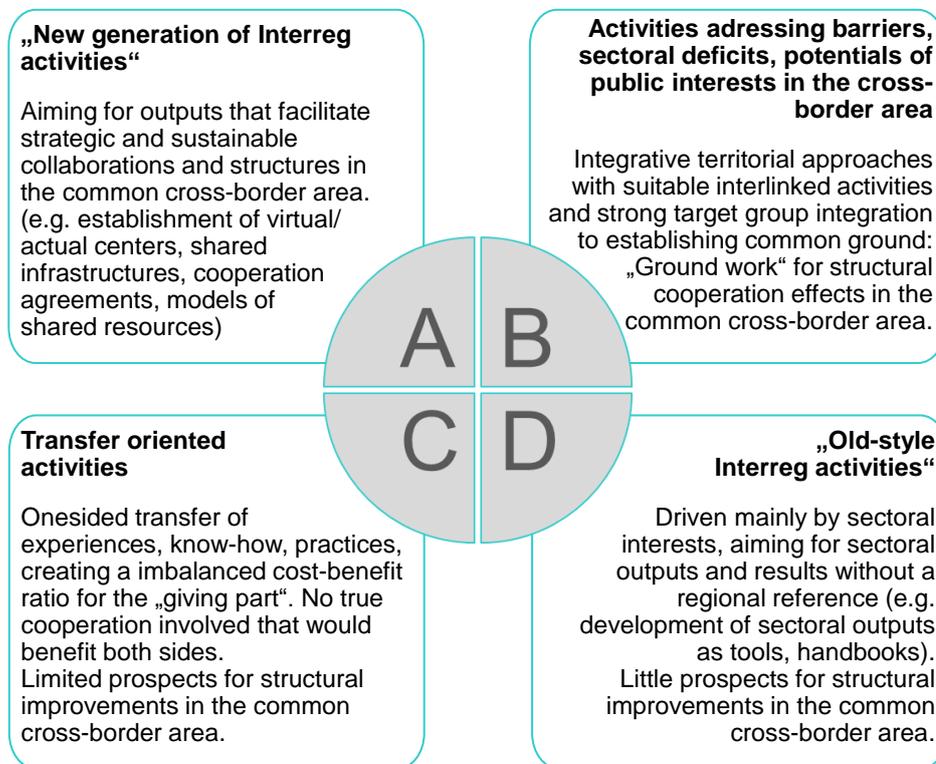
2.5 Types of activities

One of the most important outcomes of the evaluation is a classification of the types of activities with the projects. Typically, supported projects are characterized by a mixture of activities. Based on 14 in-depth case studies, four “archetypes” of activities can be deduced by considering the nature and expected outputs and results of activities. They differ regarding their potential to exploit the added value of Interreg AT-CZ and to lead to structural cooperation effects (Figure 3).

Within the scope of Interreg, activities of type A and B address topics in the right way. Projects that focus on these two activity types exploit the added value of Interreg, lead to higher interconnectedness and structural and tangible effects of the cross-border cooperation. They deal with thematic issues in which the “region does matter”. Sectoral activities support structural improvements in the programme area. Contrarily, projects that are rather driven by type C and D activities, do not sufficiently embrace the potential of the cross-border funding scheme in facilitating structural improvements in the programme area as a result of cooperation.

This generic typology of activities should be used as a guideline for project mobilisation and selection to support an Interreg AT-CZ project portfolio that creates higher territorial impact. In future programme implementation, mainly projects of type A and B should be supported. Projects of type C and D only should be funded, if cooperation practices need to be built, but not in areas with a track record of successful cooperation. If a shift in the mobilisation and selection of the projects can be achieved, this will also lead to more tangible outputs and results of the CBC-programme.

Figure 3. Types of activities

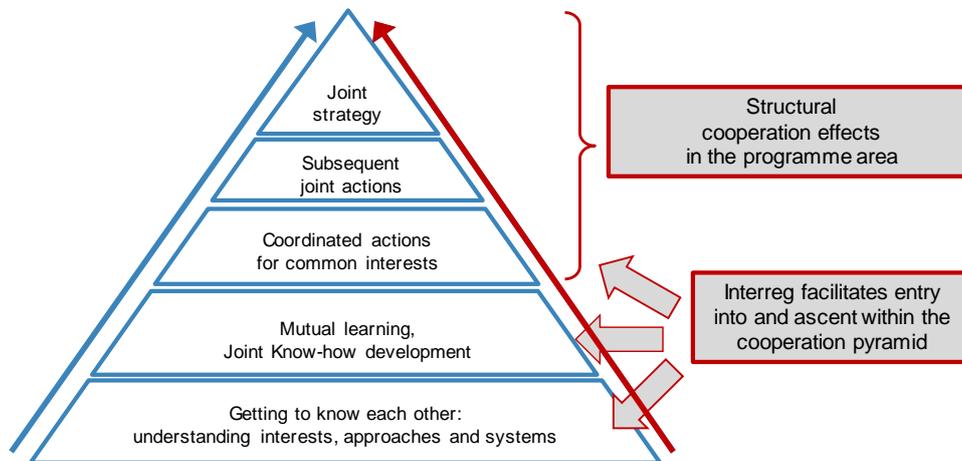


2.6 Cooperation aspects

Interreg AT-CZ offers a USP in the cooperative approach with a territorial dimension that creates a real unique added value. It serves a niche and sets impulses for cooperative projects with specific profiles and potentials: The case studies showed that Interreg AT-CZ brings together partners with complementary and/or comparable capacities from both sides of the border. Their cooperation within a certain thematic scope facilitates the exploitation of synergies and creates emergent effects that lead to structural improvements in the common cross-border area. Such effects unfold gradually by successively ascending to stronger (and more formalised) forms of cooperation (→ ascent within the “cooperation pyramid”, Figure 4).

Interreg AT-CZ shows a number of project examples that facilitate a gradual ascent within the “cooperation pyramid” (e.g. in RTI, management of shared resources, health, education). The programme enables the entry of relevant actors in the lower stages (project partners, target groups). When reaching higher stages, structural cooperation effects can occur that increase the interconnectedness in the long term and benefit joint regional development in the programme area (continuous exploitation of synergies, proactive coordination, resource pooling, joint infrastructure, joint capacity building, common strategies etc.).

Figure 4. Stages of the “cooperation pyramid”



Interreg-experienced organisations dominate the project consortia. Completely new cross-border partnerships are rather the exception; the influx of new beneficiaries is usually facilitated by established partnerships. The number of potential beneficiaries in certain policy fields is limited in the programme area since Interreg AT-CZ requires certain capacities to be able to implement projects with a considerable size and to fulfil the extensive administrative requirements of the programme (e.g. pre-financing, extensive reporting, and challenging accounting). Thus, the programme community is growing slowly, and predominately in an endogenous way.

3 Conclusions and recommendations

3.1 Updating the communication strategy

The core recommendation is to update the communication strategy for making the added value of the cooperation programme more visible. In order to further strengthen the effectiveness of communication and in order to fully comply with the minimum requirements, a set of recommendations has been developed. First, the mandatory elements for information and communication should be completed (especially better support for beneficiaries in their communication activities, information on staff resources and on the assessment of measures). Second, more human resources and time devoted to communication activities are necessary. Third, modern communication tools and better targeted communication for potential applicants, stakeholders and the general public shall be used. Fourth, communication and PR at project level shall be supported. Finally, a consistent and comprehensive monitoring system of measurable indicators for the communication strategy shall be established.

3.2 Reduction of administrative burden

The administrative requirements and bureaucracy of the programme pose a frequently mentioned problem for the beneficiaries, causing frustration and insecurities that also affect the progress in the projects (e.g. uncertainties about accounting, delayed payments). Especially Interreg-newcomers are discouraged to consider Interreg as a funding possibility in the future. To increase the attractiveness of the programme and to also mobilize new beneficiaries, efforts should be reinforced to reduce the administrative burden.

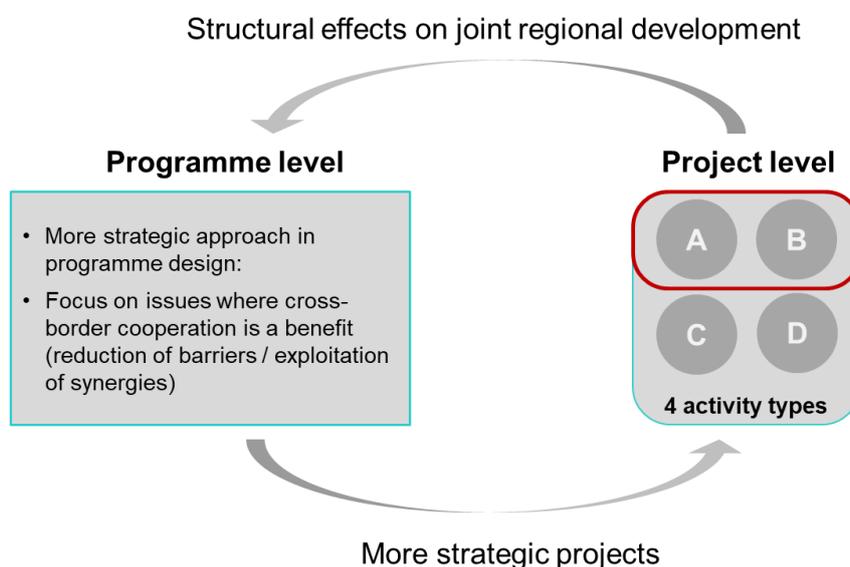
- Increase the coordination among programme bodies and invest in developing common understanding and clearly defined common standards. Centralizing the First Level Control (one in AT, one in CZ) would reduce the number of relevant actors and the coordination effort and hence, the risk of different interpretations.
- The use of Simplified Cost Options should be further exploited: This includes extending the use of “off the self”-solutions/flat rates, adopting and coordinating with other programmes (e.g. examination of models of other Interreg/national programmes as ESF, ERDF), taking part in exchange initiatives as INTERACT.
- Support for applicants and beneficiaries should be increased (project consulting). This can be facilitated by taking up negative and positive experiences of beneficiaries in dealing with recurring challenges, e.g. public procurement rules or accounting problems.
- The language barrier is often mentioned as a serious challenge, however, one that cannot be eliminated entirely. The option to submit and report in English should be introduced, which would, at least in some areas, reduce the necessary project resources for translation.

3.3 More strategic programme approach

In the next period, the USP of Interreg AT-CZ should be reinforced by pursuing a more strategic programme approach. This can be realised in two ways, and both ways are intertwined (Figure 5):

- On the one hand, in programme design, a focus is to be set on issues where cross-border cooperation is beneficial for the reduction of barriers and the exploitation of synergies to facilitate joint regional development. The integrated territorial approach should be considered in the programme design, and reflected in the specific objectives, indicators and selection criteria. Consequently, this focus will be mirrored on project level, and will lead to more strategic interventions.
- On the other hand, a more strategic programme approach can also be supported by mobilising and selecting projects with high prospects to meet the Interreg-intentions and to achieve structural cooperation effects on joint regional development (projects with a strong focus on activity type A and B). This will, in turn, entail that the programme implementation shows the desired strategic effects on joint regional development.

Figure 5. How to get to a more strategic programme approach?



Pursuing a more strategic approach would imply:

- **Focus on reducing barriers, exploiting potentials and achieving structural cooperation effects (e.g. thematic focus in RTI, focus on services of public interest in border regions, cross-border tourism strategy):**
Attention should be paid to thematic issues in which cooperation is beneficial to create structural effects and the dismantling of barriers in the cross-border region.
- **Territorial differentiation in the programme area: rural vs. urban:**
In rural areas Interreg AT-CZ should focus on cooperative interventions to increase the quality of life in the border area and to dismantle barriers.
In urban areas Interreg AT-CZ can be used for joint structural capacity building in niche fields and the exploitation of synergies. This specifically concerns thematic specialisations in research and innovation, where relevant actors are predominately located in regional centres.
- **Project mobilisation and selection: continuation of mobilising larger projects with territorial focus and suitable project profiles**
In future programmes more projects with critical size should be mobilised that

exploit the added value of Interreg AT-CZ. This can be facilitated by focusing on projects that implement type A and B-activities. Activities that do not include true cooperation (type C activities) or are mainly driven by sectoral interests (type D activities) should be reduced and avoided. In addition, it is recommended to continue the small project fund, because it enables scope for new interventions and to reach small beneficiaries.

- **Portfolio of beneficiaries: balance of continuity for experienced beneficiaries and acquisition of new beneficiaries**

A balance between continuity to support sustainability and capitalization of results and new and innovative approaches is to be sought. This approach will also manifest in the portfolio of beneficiaries, which will then consist of experienced partners and mobilised new beneficiaries.

3.4 Feasible intervention logic

It is recommended to pay attention to what can be actually influenced by the programme and to reduce the aspirations. Too ambitious statements should be withdrawn (e.g. better integration of SMEs in the innovation system). It should also be avoided to set the objectives and expected results too narrow. The programme should signal sufficient openness that relevant issues can be better integrated (e.g. the intervention logic of IP 6f of the current programme focuses on eco-innovations in waste management and energy efficiency; however the supported projects focus on different topics).

3.5 Adaptation of indicators

Ultimately, the effects of cross-border cooperation should manifest themselves in improving the links between the partner regions. Therefore, programme indicators should reflect shifts in intensities of relationships (e.g. flow variables, number of long-term cross-border networks and mechanisms also outside of Interreg), changes in the level of information about the cross-border region, and mutual perception in the cross-border area. First promising efforts in this regard are visible (establishing a database regarding cross-border perception and cooperation by means of surveys) and should be reinforced and systematically applied on the level of the different thematic fields addressed by the programme. However, the programme will have to use the common Interreg indicators (for outputs and results) according to the draft regulation. Continuous monitoring of such data over the successive periods allows to detect changes in the long term and specifies contributions of the programme.

Concerning the output indicators, respective target values should reflect an actual influence of the programme, and not be set too low. However, this should not lead to project selection driven by the indicators. As the current approach of rather large projects is supported, also the timing of the occurrence of actual achievement needs to be taken into account. It should be discussed whether interim results can be recognized in the milestones. Otherwise, reported numbers of outputs will be rather low in the early programme implementation phase.

3.6 Priority Axis 1: Strengthening research, technological development and innovation

Maintain a priority for RTI-development, but simplify the intervention logic

It is recommended to pursue the priority to strengthen research, technological development and innovation also in the future. In the next programming period, attention should be paid to the specific added value (structural effects) in combination with scientific fields of high relevance in the cross-border area (e.g. based on common foci in the regional smart specialisation strategies, like utilizing the high potential of the programme in life sciences, biotechnologies).

The intervention logic should be simplified and better focused on the specific added value of the programme and the cooperation aspects, i.e. achieving structural effects by joint capacity building, initiating and strengthening cross-border cooperation of RTI-institutions with complementary competences. Too demanding elements of the intervention logic should be avoided. It is also recommended to merge the two investment priorities, as for SO1b the positive effects regarding the programme objectives mainly result from increased competences of the RTI-institutions for knowledge transfer.

Priority 1 is currently the smallest priority in the programme. Due to the positive effects achieved and the high potential for absorption in the programme area more resources should be allocated for this priority in future programmes.

Focus on projects with structural effects

Projects to be supported should have a clear profile and implement activities with strong emphasis on joint capacity building and sustainable cooperation. This can be achieved by strengthening links among research institutions with complementary competences and establishing enabling structures that facilitate continuous cooperation (e.g. joint infrastructures, cooperation agreements, virtual umbrella associations). Projects aiming at general support activities (especially for enterprises) can only be legitimized if they show the specific added value of a cross-border approach (e.g. support of targeted cross-border networks/value chains). The development of tools without application should not be funded in future.

3.7 Priority Axis 2: Environment and Resources

Maintain the thematic focus in the next funding period

Especially the projects targeting cross-border ecological systems have high added value. It is highly recommended to keep the thematic focus in the next funding period.

Withdrawal of a separate specific objective for eco-innovations

The thematic focus of SO2c is formulated in a way, which is too narrow to attract enough projects (waste management and energy efficiency). For the next programming period, it is recommended to not pursue the thematic focus of eco-innovations as an individual IP. Relevant projects could also be promoted under another thematic focus, e.g. research projects for eco-innovations could be funded by a priority for RTI. High potential for cross-border cooperation exists in the context of public utility services (e.g. water, energy, waste). Respective projects could be integrated in other priorities, too (e.g. PA4). Alternatively, the thematic focus of the IP should be widened to include all eco-innovations, not only waste management and energy efficiency. In all cases, cross-

border mechanisms in relevant fields of public interest (public utility services) should be addressed.

Avoid isolated tourism projects without cross-border strategic approaches

According to the draft EU legal framework (General Regulation, Article 23), the development of tourism and the promotion of cultural heritage in Thematic Objective 5 need to be implemented through integrated territorial strategies with the involvement of the relevant implementation partners (and no longer merely on a project-by-project basis as before). This requires a focus of the programme resources on existing cross-border tourism actions, which are strategically developed.

The lack of cross-border public transport connections has been criticised by several interviewees. It is proposed to have issues of transport connections as an obligatory element of tourism projects.

3.8 Priority Axis 3: Human resources development

Maintain a priority to support the human resource development, but simplify the intervention logic

The intervention logic should be simplified and more focused on the CBC-approach and on the main effects triggered by the interventions, i.e. improving the education system by strengthening cross-border links, contributing to a higher mobility of human resources in the programme area, improving exchange and coordinated actions between education institutions and the economic sector. Too demanding aspirations in the intervention logic should be omitted (e.g. increased integration of SMEs in the qualification system).

Focus on integrative projects with sustainable effects

It is recommended to pursue a priority to support human resource development also in the future, focusing on the specific added value of the CBC-approach in dismantling barriers (e.g. language) and increasing cross-border linkages of the education/qualification systems. By having a strong focus on target group involvement (e.g. schools, students in the cross-border area), such projects contribute also to awareness raising for a common region among the population. Promising project profiles can be identified by activities that draw on cooperation of actors from both sides of the border (e.g. partnerships), embeddedness in regional policies, synergies with other initiatives, project partners with respective scope of work, partners with well-established position in the education system and good access to the target groups, a mixture of (especially cross-border) activities addressing and involving different actors in the education systems.

Because of restrained forecasts for economic development, it can be expected that demand for qualification services will increase in the cross-border area. Addressing this need would also require the acquisition of suitable cross-border projects (e.g. qualification networks) and new beneficiaries and target groups (e.g. job centres, vocational/qualification services providers).

More ambitious target values

Target values of the output indicator CO46 "Number of participants in joint education and training schemes to support youth employment, educational opportunities and higher and vocational education across borders" should be set more ambitiously.

3.9 Priority Axis 4: Sustainable networks and institutional cooperation

Identify key cooperation areas for the next programming period

Health sector projects have strong impact and clearly generate added value. They also have high policy relevance, given rising cost of the health systems and the effects of an aging population. However, they do not fit well into the thematic focus of PA4. Since the number of potential applicants in health is quite limited, the open approach under PA4 is sound and pragmatic in order to provide room for cooperation approaches in specific intervention areas. A stock-taking of key cooperation areas, which are yet untapped, but would deserve particular attention in the forthcoming programming period, might be useful.

Avoid projects without benefits for both sides of the border

During the project selection phase, scope and distribution of the benefits and results generated need to be assessed more thoroughly, while taking a pragmatic approach. Projects without tangible results and significant and measurable impact on the institutional setting in the border region, that simply stress cooperation effects within the (usually well-established) project partnership, should be avoided.

4 Resumé

The evaluation has shown that the programme has been set up very well and is operating smoothly and efficiently. There is still room for adaptation and improvements to enhance effectiveness and efficiency and the added value of the programme.

In general, the selected projects proved to be aligned with the specific objectives. Outputs and results of the projects are mostly of soft nature. Across all priorities, outputs show a strong focus on awareness raising and networking activities. Typical are also outputs that relate to new knowledge in the respective thematic fields of the projects (e.g. via studies, manuals and guidelines and scientific publications). Physical investments and the creation of infrastructure play a minor role (predominately in PA2). Consequently, the most important results are soft-oriented and comprise advancement in the thematic fields, networking effects and awareness raising among target groups.

The integrated territorial approach is not yet consistently and systematically applied in the programme design. Projects often focus more on the thematic objectives than on territorial or cooperative dimensions. On the one hand, this is beneficial, because the application of the projects results in the future (and thus, their sustainability) is in the interest of the project partners themselves and does not depend on a “regional interest”, that might not be attractive to project applicants. On the other hand, “structural effects” that draw on cooperation across borders and support joint regional development are less common. There are some good examples of such projects, e.g. in the contexts of health services, RTI, management of shared resources, but it is not a consistent programme pattern yet. Digitisation as a cross-cutting issue and important topic will be even more crucial, especially with respect to the current events. In the future, the potential of Interreg AT-CZ for real structural effects should be further and more intensively exploited.

Improvements can be achieved by putting more emphasis on the nature of activities within projects that are selected for funding. The focus should be on projects that strongly contribute to Interreg-objectives by addressing barriers, potentials and facilitating structural improvements in the cross-border area and that enhance the social capital in cooperation. The number of projects that are driven by transfer oriented activities or lack any true cross-border aspect should be reduced and only be considered if they show clear prospects to sustainably increase the interconnectedness in the cross-border region.

Improvements are also recommended in expanding the communication strategy to reach a wider audience – and in modernising tools, especially related to the use of social media and audio-visual material. However, this also demands to increase the budget foreseen for communication.

There are new challenges that emerge through the COVID-19 pandemic, which affects nearly all spheres of society. The health sector is a starting point, where cooperation across the border in prevention and treatment of diseases is of more importance than ever. But the challenges go much further, in re-establishing economic activities, ensuring social services, developing common rules for public life in the regions etc. Also, digitalisation is an indispensable cross-cutting topic in all areas and poses new opportunities and solutions to master challenges. CBC-Interreg-programmes can be seen as laboratories for European integration and can provide innovative approaches and answers to open questions. Flexibility, creativity and a common spirit to master the upcoming challenges are needed to overcome new – but also old - obstacles.