



CLUSTERING BACKGROUND PAPER

Joint Annual Conference & General Assembly 2010

16-18 June 2010 – Stavanger, Norway

Aim of clustering

The aim of project clustering in the North Sea Region Programme is to assist projects within and across priorities in identifying common issues considered valuable for the projects as well as the Programme.

Background

Strategic project initiatives are in high demand from Programme stakeholders as well as from the European Commission. The concept has been identified by different names over time, but the overarching idea remains the same. In the case of the NSRP, strategic projects have been anticipated since well before implementation of the 2007-2013 Programme and examples are mentioned in the Operational Programme.

In the NSRP the work to discuss different methods in relation to strategic projects initiatives started formally with a stakeholder workshop on the topic. One of the main discussion points was if there should be an emphasis on individual strategic projects (i.e. flagship projects) or if it should rather be clusters of such projects – to draw on the potential multiplication effect which might come from shared strategic input.

Approach to clustering

At the stakeholder workshop on strategic projects it was recommended that the Programme opt for the clustering approach. This approach has been approved by the Monitoring Committee of the Programme. A working group has subsequently been setup to facilitate the process to implement the concept.

The project clustering concept builds on the idea that projects, which share a common theme or address similar issues, form a cluster of excellence and deliver a shared strategic input for the Programme. An underlying idea is that this might give leverage to their strategic added value.

Spontaneous clustering

Project clustering happens spontaneously when projects meet and often by chance. This type of clustering is already taking place in the North Sea Region Programme and the Secretariat has been approached by a handful of projects, wishing to discuss how to implement clustering in their specific context.

The Programme encourages spontaneous clustering, but has found that this kind of clustering involves a risk of sub-optimisation. Previous experiences indicate that there is a tendency in spontaneous clustering to focus on individual needs of projects rather than the wider strategic potential in the cluster. The bottom-up approach exemplified by spontaneous clustering should therefore be combined with a top-down approach.

Facilitated clustering

Project clustering should facilitate a greater impact of Interreg/ETC by way of a close and coordinated delivery of the projects, bringing added value at strategic level to the projects and the Programme. This will have the potential to strengthen the North Sea Region identity, and make projects more visible to experts on national and international level as well as to the general public.

To secure that the potential in clustering is maximised it has been decided to introduce a Cluster Driver.

The Cluster Driver

The Cluster Driver will maintain the overall focus of the clusters and to ensure that the cluster activities are in line with and contribute towards the overall Programme strategy.

The role of the Cluster Driver is to facilitate the dialogue between related projects and ensure and emphasise the strategic inputs from the process. The role of the Cluster Driver **does not** include managing the clusters. This is entirely up to the individual clusters and their partnership. The Cluster Driver would, in other words, first and foremost be a coordinator for the projects within a cluster.

The Cluster Driver will be based in the Secretariat Office in Viborg, Denmark.

Clustering in practice

A clustering initiative in the context of the North Sea Region Programme could be initiated by a group of projects sharing a common theme but with different approaches for addressing the challenges associated with this theme. The projects would jointly identify strategic elements where there seems to be a real and interesting potential for the projects to work together in order to take advantage of each other's results.

By supporting each other in delivery and drawing on the latest information available from a wide range of partners, individual projects will gain access to a much greater range of resources and knowledge, allowing them to take work on the strategic elements much further than would be possible in single projects.

In effect, the clustering idea takes the value of working together in project partnerships and aims to apply the same methods and draw the same benefits from cooperation between projects.

The practical implementation

Implementation of project clustering in the Programme could be executed as two step process.

In step one, the themes for a specific cluster identified could be subject to a facilitated discussion e.g. in connection with a Lead Beneficiary seminar or a similar already existing arena. The purpose of such a facilitated discussion would be to "test the waters" and establish whether it is possible to identify a common field of interest between the needs of the projects and the needs of the programme. It may turn out that the themes already identified would need adjustment or that completely new themes are identified. This is what the meeting during the Annual Conference will be about.

If step one proves successful, it would be possible to initiate step two. Step two would involve launching a call for mini-projects based on the findings of phase one. Based on the conclusions about step one it will be the programme's Monitoring Committee to finally decide about the set-up and next steps.

Themes

A number of themes, structured as over-arching themes and sub-themes, have been identified as starting point for clustering discussions among projects.

The actual projects clusters may or may not make use of the themes listed below, but the themes listed below constitute a framework within which the clusters are supposed to operate. Themes which are completely different from the ones listed are not ruled out but are, on the other hand, anticipated to be the exception rather than the rule.

The over-arching themes are as follows:

- Climate
- Sustainable Communities
- Innovation
- Managing Marine Resources

Criteria for clustering initiatives

Clusters should contribute to the overall Programme aim and objectives, but have a strong focus on added value at strategic level. The clusters should also bring something in delivery which would not have been achieved by the individual projects by themselves.

Exact details on criteria will be presented well in advance of any Calls for Applications for Clustering Initiatives.

Financing the clusters

Project clustering is an additional activity for the projects involved and as such an activity, which has not been taken into account in the project budget.

The overall idea is to organise the clusters as small projects following the same structure as a “normal” project but with a limited number of beneficiaries, in effect the Lead Beneficiaries of the participating projects.

Decisions on the precise structure should be left for the project beneficiaries. Taking into account that the idea of project clustering involves a time limit, it is proposed that project cluster mini-projects will be operational for a period not exceeding 18 months and have a budget not exceeding € 250,000 in total.