Publicity and Communications

Sub-theme 1: Programme and project cooperation in communications

Sub-theme 2: Programme visibility

This report was commissioned by the Interreg IVB North Sea Region Programme as part of its on-going evaluation process.

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The preparation of the report was overseen by the Programme's Evaluation Steering Group, comprising representatives from countries and regions participating in the Interreg IVB North Sea Region Programme and co-ordinated by the Joint Technical Secretariat.

This report is part of a series about the on-going evaluation process of the Programme. In accordance with the on-going approach these reports will be available one by one in the near future:

Institutional Capacity and Performance
       1) Financial management and control setup
       2) Programme structures
       3) Application procedures and project development

Added Value
       1) Programme impact and coverage
       2) Transnational cooperation
       3) Legacy

Publicity and Communications
       1) Programme and project cooperation in communications & Programme visibility
       2) Communications measures on project level

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0. Introduction

This report addresses programme bodies, project partners and stakeholders of the Interreg IVB North Sea Region Programme (NSR Programme). The report is part of the "Ongoing Evaluation" which presents the main findings and recommendations regarding the sub-themes "Programme and Project Cooperation in Communications" and "Programme Visibility". Both sub-themes are dealt with in one report as they are closely linked to one another in terms of content.

This report deals with following evaluation questions as formulated by the programme bodies:

- Do connections exist between what is considered a strong transnational project/cluster in terms of content and what is considered a strong project in terms of communication? Does relevant communication have an impact on the overall output and results of a project?

- What is the strategic value of communication and its relevance as a business development tool (at the transnational level)?

- Which measures are relevant to and have been implemented to increase programme visibility during the programme period? Which measures could potentially have an impact in the future?

- How has the effectiveness and user-friendliness of the programme's website contributed to the programme's visibility?

The report is structured in the following chapters:

- Programme and project cooperation in communications
- Programme visibility

The report focuses on the main findings (!) and recommendations (✔) of the evaluation process which are highlighted with symbols in the margin. In addition, opinions taken from online surveys and interviews give an impression of different perspectives stakeholders and projects have. The report summarises the findings and recommendations of the Ongoing Evaluation in an easy to read way.

The findings and recommendations regarding "programme and project cooperation with regard to communication" are based on the main results from desk research and online surveys in which answers were given by 7 out of 10 projects' lead beneficiaries as well as on 5 additional telephone interviews with projects' lead beneficiaries of the NSR Programme. Based on the findings presented in this report the issue of "programme and project cooperation in communications" will be further investigated in a second round of evaluation.

The findings and recommendations regarding "programme visibility" are based on the main results from desk research and online surveys in which answers were given by 17 out of 25 projects' lead beneficiaries and 18 out of 25 stakeholders (bodies of the programme) as well as on 4 additional telephone interviews with projects' lead beneficiaries and 4 telephone interviews with stakeholders of the NSR Programme.

The report focuses on the general findings and recommendations with strategic relevance to both the improvement of the current programme period as well as to the next programme period 2014-2020.

More information on methodology and the evaluation model of the "Ongoing Evaluation" is provided in appendix A.

1. Recommendations at a glance

Please find below an overview of the recommendations of this report which are explained in detail in the following chapters.

✓ In the next programme period, the role of the National Contact Points (NCP) in supporting the communication of projects should be synchronised and coordinated with the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS). The NCP should act as multipliers which channel project results to relevant stakeholders at the regional level (e.g. via an own newsletter, own website, etc.) and link project communication to specific regional agendas and policies.

✓ The programme should facilitate knowledge transfer and good practice between projects on how to communicate results to stakeholders successfully (e.g. by means of further developing the "project section" on the programme's website, by creating a communicative newsletter or by implementing a knowledge base on communication tools) and to thus foster cross-fertilisation between projects with regard to communication activities.

✓ The communication of success stories and the presentation of project outputs within the North Sea Region Programme should be further developed. The programme should implement a project output database geared towards the various target groups of the specific results. The database would allow the programme to pass on success stories to the relevant target groups, including hands-on material of high practical value.

✓ The programme should continue with the cluster approach in the next programme period. In order to increase the visibility of the clusters and their thematic area, however, they should be presented on the programme's website in a more clear and detailed manner.

3. Programme and project cooperation in communications

The analysis of "programme and project cooperation in communications" focuses on the communication of projects and project results as well as on how the programme can provide projects with support for improving their communication.

General findings

- Within the online survey lead beneficiaries were asked to name the instruments most important to their communication. According to the results gathered, the most important communication instruments are events and personal talks – which involve face to face contact – followed by project websites and brochures. Instruments belonging to the "new social media" such as facebook, youtube etc. are of lesser importance to the participating projects in the current programme period.
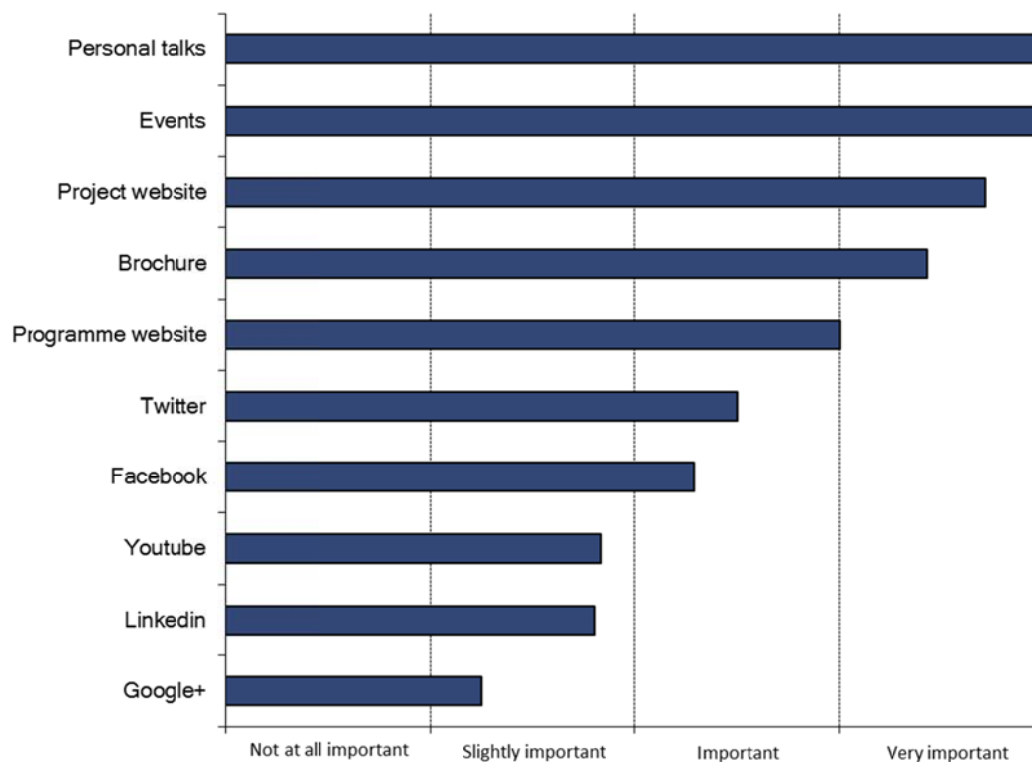
Figure 1: **How important are the following communication instruments?**
Source: Online survey, mean value

- Furthermore, the results of the online survey indicate that the main focus of communication throughout the duration of the project is on informing stakeholder groups and establishing a continuous dialog with them as well as on obtaining regular feedback on project results.

- Some projects tend to focus their communication on information rather than on participation and involvement. Projects implementing a participatory approach indicate that the dialog with relevant target groups influences the projects' output to a large extent.

- With regard to the programme's support for successful project communication, the satisfaction among lead beneficiaries varies. Generally speaking, the majority of participating lead beneficiaries rate the communication plan guidance, the project section user guidance and the plaque templates as helpful documents for their own project communication. In addition, some lead beneficiaries stated that both the National Contact Points as well as the regular communication seminars provide ideal support for communication.

Recommendations

The following recommendations take up the findings above. They intend to solve the addressed issues based on the feedback given by projects as well as on the desk research carried out by the evaluators.

✓ **In the next programme period, the role of the National Contact Points in supporting the communication of projects should be synchronised and coordinated with the Joint Technical Secretariat. The NCP should act as multipliers which channel project results to relevant stakeholders at the regional level (e.g. via an own newsletter, own website, etc.) and link project communication to specific regional agendas and policies.**

For the current programme period, the results of the online survey indicate that the National Contact Points support projects' communication activities in various ways. The main reason for this resides in the fact that the NCP and their infrastructure are the responsibility of the Member States and thus each have access to a different set of resources. In general, the NCP are closer to regional stakeholders which ultimately benefits the programme because relevant stakeholders can be identified and involved more efficiently.

In the next programme period, the role of the National Contact Points in supporting the communication of projects should be synchronised and coordinated with the JTS. The NCP should act as multipliers which channel project results to relevant stakeholders at the regional level (e.g. via an own newsletter, own website, etc.), hereby linking the specific project communication to regional agendas and policies.

The existing role of the NCP coordinator at the JTS should be further strengthened as so to efficiently organise the cooperation between the NCP and JTS with regard to project communication. As recommended in the interim report on "Transnational Cooperation - Added Value at the Project / Cluster Level" (p.7), the cooperation between the JTS and NCP should also benefit from the project specific input given by the Portfolio Managers. Thus, the role of the NCP coordinators and Portfolio Managers at the NCP and the JTS should be clearly defined for the next programme period. For more information on the organisation of the cooperation between the NCP and JTS see also the recommendation in the final report on "Application Procedures and Project Development" (p.6).

✓ **The programme should facilitate knowledge transfer and good practice between projects on how to communicate results to stakeholders successfully (e.g. by means of further developing the "project section" on the programme's website, by creating a communicative newsletter or by implementing a knowledge base on communication tools) and to thus foster cross-fertilisation between projects with regard to communication activities.**

Due to the complexity of thematic scopes, target groups and regional contexts, the communication of transnational cooperation projects is generally a major challenge. Nevertheless, some projects have been successful in developing good practice on how to communicate a transnational cooperation project and its results throughout the whole project lifecycle. The programme and project cooperation with regard to communication should be facilitated by good practice and knowledge transfer between projects. Moreover, the JTS should create a newsletter on communication with updated information on the latest communication measures which projects have implemented. In this way, projects are inspired by other projects when it comes to addressing specific target groups effectively. Good practice of this kind could then, in turn, flow into a knowledge base in which good practices on communication are documented and made easily accessible to other projects. Ultimately, this process could not only lead to the cross-fertilisation of projects regarding communication activities, but could also contribute to strengthening ideas and fostering a community of "project implementing bodies". Finally, the recommended function of a Portfolio Manager (cf. recommendation in the interim report on "Transnational Cooperation - Added Value at the Project / Cluster Level", p. 7) could support both the knowledge transfer between different projects of a similar or comparable thematic scope as well as encourage the effective communication of their results.

Opinions from lead beneficiaries

Below you will find some opinions of lead beneficiaries taken from the online survey regarding the issue of programme and project cooperation with regard to communication:

The distribution of good communication examples and ideas from the programme to projects has taken place, but it might be possible (and useful) to do this even more.

Without the templates it would be much more difficult to find a starting point for further development and discussion with the partners. The guidelines are very helpful to understand needs and responsibilities and to have a common way of understanding overall objectives.

It is highly challenging to reach the right target groups and to convey the message in a strong enough way. We received some help from resources in partner organisations, but it cannot be stressed enough that professional input is worth considering using more than projects on average have been doing. To have fewer, well carried out communication measures is more fruitful than a large number of not-thought-through attempts.

4. Programme visibility

This chapter focuses on the visibility of the programme in terms of communication at the programme level. It focuses on the visibility of project results and outputs as well as on the visibility of cluster projects within the North Sea Region Programme.

General findings

- Within the online survey both lead beneficiaries and stakeholders were asked to assess the general visibility of the North Sea Region Programme at the European, national and local level. Whereas, according to the results gathered, the visibility of the programme was rated highest at the European level (half of the participants assessed the programme's visibility as "good", the other half as "fairly good") it's visibility at the local level was rated lowest (the majority of participants assessed it as being "fairly good"). Generally speaking, these results indicate that there is potential to improve the visibility of the North Sea Region Programme at the national and local level as well as, to some extent, also at the European level.

- In general, both the lead beneficiaries and stakeholders are satisfied with the role the National Contact Points play in communicating the programme. The lead beneficiaries acknowledge that the NCP are often present at regional, national and programme events and also facilitate a good exchange of the NSR projects with interested organisations.

- It is agreed upon by both the lead beneficiaries and stakeholders that the most important communication measures geared towards increasing the visibility of the programme are the presentation of project results and success stories as well as the communication of the programme's impact. Moreover, both agree that the implementation of these measures could be improved within the NSRP, especially when it comes to the presentation and communication of success stories.

- In the online survey lead beneficiaries and stakeholders were asked to assess the effect of the cluster approach on the visibility of the different topics within a specific cluster. Whilst both agree that an effect is undoubtedly observable, stakeholders view the effect to be greater than the lead beneficiaries. Moreover, the majority of stakeholders and lead beneficiaries also agree that the cluster approach has strengthened the dialog with and between relevant stakeholders.

- Furthermore, the results of the online survey indicate that, besides the implementation of (thematic) events at the programme and project level, the programme website is one of the most important communication instruments when it comes to increasing the programme's visibility. Thus, in line with the results of the online survey, a clear presentation of the programme's political objectives on the NSRP website is of great importance. Although lead beneficiaries and stakeholders are also satisfied with the user friendliness and maintenance of the programme website, they also see potential for improvement; be it for example with regard to the menu structure and ease of navigation. With regard to the "project section" on the programme website, some participants stated that it is well struc-

tured and well implemented in comparison to other programmes (e.g. it is easier to search for and filter relevant information). Having said this, they at the same time also see potential for improvement, mentioning for example the need to keep the information in the "project section" up to date. Whereas for half of the participating lead beneficiaries in the online survey the presentation of the projects on the programme website provides added value (i.e. it provides helpful information and links to other projects) for the other half it does not.

Recommendations

The following recommendations take up the findings above. They intend to solve the addressed issues based on the feedback given by lead beneficiaries and stakeholders as well as on the desk research carried out by the evaluators.

! **The communication of success stories and the presentation of project outputs within the North Sea Region Programme should be further developed. The programme should implement a project output database geared towards the various target groups of the specific results. The database would allow the programme to pass on success stories to the relevant target groups, including hands-on material of high practical value.**

The communication of success stories and the presentation of project outputs within the NSRP should be further improved. The visibility of the programme among stakeholders is based on tangible project results which are of high relevance within the thematic scope of the project. The results should be communicated at both the project and cluster level. The programme should implement a project output database geared towards the specific target group (e.g. scientific disciplines, policy areas, economic sectors) and contain selected output generated by the projects. The Portfolio Manager of the JTS should support the projects by selecting the relevant outputs which are to be uploaded to the database. The database should supplement the communication of success stories by providing hands-on material of high practical value for the relevant target groups. For more information on the Portfolio Manager see also the recommendation on p.7 of the interim report on "Transnational Cooperation - Added Value at the Project / Cluster Level".

! **The programme should continue with the cluster approach in the next programme period. In order to increase the visibility of the clusters and their thematic area, however, they should be presented on the programme's website in a more clear and detailed manner.**

By implementing the cluster approach the programme has developed a new strategic approach to communicating project results. The positive comments and feedback given by participants in the online survey and telephone interviews encourages the programme to continue with the cluster approach in the next programme period. According to interviewed stakeholders, cluster projects hold the potential to transfer different topics of the North Sea Region to a higher policy level by combining the topics and strategic approaches from different projects and thus achieving a sufficient critical

mass. In order to increase the visibility of the clusters and their thematic area in the future period, however, they should be presented on the programme's website in a more clear and detailed manner.

The programme's stakeholders rate the implemented cluster facilitator as crucial to the success of the cluster approach in the current programme. Thus, it is recommended that the cluster facilitator be also implemented in the next programme period.

Besides joining forces to communicate already finalised outputs of cluster projects, beneficial synergies can be created as early on as the conception and production phase of project outputs. For more information on this issue see also the recommendation on p.12 of the report on "Transnational Cooperation – Added Value at the Project / Cluster Level". According to some lead beneficiaries and stakeholders it would also be beneficial for cluster projects within the NSRP to communicate with other INTERREG or EU-funding programmes. Again, for more information on this issue see also the recommendation on p.11 of the report on "Transnational Cooperation – Added Value at the Project / Cluster Level".

**Opinions from lead beneficiaries and stakeholders**

Below you will find some opinions of lead beneficiaries and stakeholders taken from the online survey regarding the issue of project development:

▪ *Please note that the annual report could move from 'slightly' to 'very important' if it moved away from being a tick box exercise (for the European Commission) to a more easily accessible publication, including i.e. 'wow' results.*

▪ *The Answers Magazine is a way of putting forward a NSRP important theme and moves away from simple project info towards cluster info. That's a way forward.*

▪ *More attention could be given to project outcomes and their impact at the programme level in events and at the programme annual conference. More inter-project communication should be encouraged through additional measures such as specific events. More encouragement for clustering of projects at earlier stages.*

▪ *As the cluster projects represent a more thematic approach, more relevant stakeholders can be addressed and included in the overall outcomes than through individual projects. Also, the cluster allows some additional partners to be included which allows the inclusion of stakeholders that were not yet identified when writing the proposals.*

▪ *To cluster the knowledge and results connects the programme efforts to national and EU goals. This makes it possible to lift the program from individual projects to the policy level.*

Appendix A - Evaluation Model

The evaluation model adopts the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) model approach as a starting point and applies it to the context of the programme evaluation. The key message of the evaluation approach is that any impact which occurs at the programme level is generated via the quality and effectiveness of the funded projects. This new paradigm focuses not only on stakeholders such as the Commission or regional administration, but also on the projects themselves as core customers of the programme management. Consequently, the programme should support the projects' work as strongly as possible, as so to enable them to manage their activities effectively.
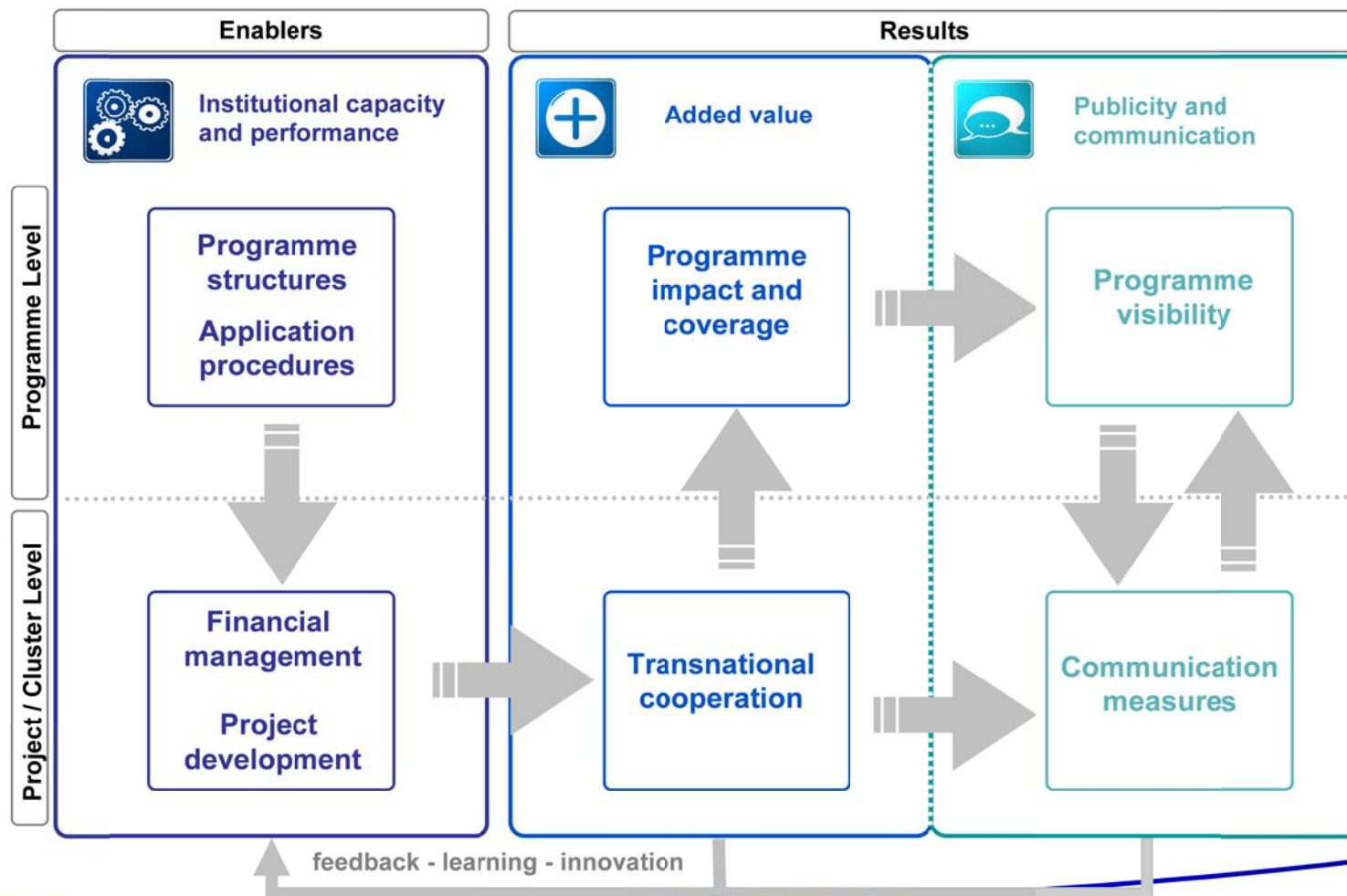
Source: dsn

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