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**The North
Sea Region
Programme**
2007–2013



FINAL REPORT

Executive Summary



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The preparation of the executive summary was overseen by the Programme's Evaluation Steering Group (ESG), comprising representatives from countries and regions participating in the Interreg IVB North Sea Region Programme and coordinated by the Joint Technical Secretariat.

This executive summary is part of a series about the on-going evaluation process of the Programme. In accordance with the on-going evaluation approach these reports are:

Institutional Capacity and Performance:

- (1) Financial management and control set-up
- (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

Disclaimer:

The content of this paper has been prepared by DSN – Connecting Knowledge and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the North Sea Region Programme or its Evaluation Steering Group (ESG).

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0. Introduction

This executive summary is part of the on-going evaluation of the North Sea Region Programme 2007-2013 which has taken place between mid-2011 and beginning of 2015. This on-going evaluation was not a 'traditional' mid-term evaluation half way through the programme as implemented in past programme periods but an evaluation that is carried out throughout the period of implementation of the North Sea Region Programme.

Within the on-going evaluation the following different thematic themes have been evaluated at different stages of programme implementation:

- Financial management and control set-up
- Programme structures
- Application procedures and project development
- Programme impact and coverage including an in-depth evaluation of
 - Private and public partner integration
 - External and internal project management
- Transnational cooperation
- Legacy
- Programme and project cooperation in communications & programme visibility

Some thematic themes have been evaluated at early stages of the on-going evaluation, e.g. the thematic theme “financial management and control set-up”, so the programme can adopt recommendations of the on-going evaluation to further develop the programme implementation throughout the running programme period. Some thematic themes have been evaluated at the end of the on-going evaluation, e.g. the thematic theme “legacy”, when more projects have been finalised and conclusions can be drawn from these finalised projects.

The whole on-going evaluation of the North Sea Region Programme was based on an evaluation model. This 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.

The main purpose of this executive summary is

- to illustrate the key themes and issues from the perspective of the projects and stakeholders of the North Sea Region programme and
- to recapitulate the key recommendations given in the different thematic evaluation reports of the on-going evaluation.

The executive summary shall draw interest on the different thematic evaluation reports which can be found on the North Sea Region Programme’s website.

1. Financial management and control set-up

Within the on-going evaluation of “financial management and control setup at the programme and project level” different key themes and issues arose. In summary, one key issue was the reporting process based on the finding that the quality of the progress reports varies significantly from project to project. Due to the general complexity of procedures and regulations, the reporting of overhead and staff costs as well as the reporting of indicators and public procurement is considered most difficult from the projects’ point of view. These problems lead to an increased risk of irregularities regarding reported costs and to an increased workload for both the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) and the projects to improve the quality of progress reports. The progress reports function as a basis for reliable monitoring of the projects’ performance. In this respect the accessibility and usability of the online reporting system as well as the reporting of overhead and staff costs, the reporting of indicators and the reporting of public procurement have been evaluated in particular.

As another key issue the First Level Control (FLC) process emerged during the on-going evaluation. Based on observations and experiences by the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) the quality of the FLC varies significantly between projects and first level controllers. A significant number of First Level Controllers do not meet the basic regulatory requirements in terms of completeness and accuracy. Moreover, there is a need to strengthen the role of the JTS in terms of ensuring the quality of FLC in taking more responsibility for the accuracy of FLC.

Recommendations

- ✓ The **online reporting** system should be accessible to all project beneficiaries in order to facilitate the management of the reporting process within the project consortia. This would streamline the reporting at both the beneficiaries’ and the project level.
- ✓ The online reporting system should provide additional **standardised tools for strategic and day-to-day project management** in order to facilitate efficient project steering and reporting (e.g. graphic analysis of project budget, diagrams showing the relation between on-going activities and the attainment of milestones).
- ✓ **Knowledge exchange** between beneficiaries and projects should be supported by social media tools on the NSR Programme’s website to build a community of practice.
- ✓ The NSR Programme should aim to decrease the likelihood of incorrect reports on overhead costs by reducing its methodological complexity. Many beneficiaries strongly support the implementation of **flat rates for overhead costs** in the next programme period 2014-2020.
- ✓ The **reporting of indicators** should focus more on those indicators which allow for the measurement of projects’ performance with regard to their specific objectives and activities. This would enhance their relevance to project steering.

- ✓ The Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) should carry out systematic **sample quality checks**, in particular for the first progress report of all projects. This would have a positive influence on both the quality of beneficiaries' subsequent reports, as well as on first level controls throughout the projects' lifetime.
- ✓ The JTS should proactively steer the scope of **on the spot verifications** which are to be carried out by first level controllers at project beneficiaries. For this purpose the JTS should carry out a risk assessment to identify relevant cost items which need to be controlled on the spot.
- ✓ Positive experience has been made with carrying out **regional seminars for First Level Controllers**. These regional seminars should be implemented regularly in all member states of the NSR Programme with a decentralised FLC system and should be obligatory for all FLC.

Opinions from lead beneficiaries

"The major problem is the online monitoring system itself. You can not add additional changes requests before the previous one has been approved. Sometimes this leads to extreme delays."

"A simplification of the indicator list would be helpful as it is much too complex (overwhelming and difficult to operate with in practice)."

"The indicator tends to be unclear and indistinct. It is sometimes difficult for partners to know which indicator to report results under."

"The FLC process is administratively very heavy. Four documents have to be signed and sent for every partner which seems excessive. Other programmes only require one certificate that is issued, so I don't see the point in sending all those documents to LB. The FLC is a national responsibility, so one certification should be enough. Some LB's make the partners send all other documents to them as well including every single timesheet, invoice and other verification which is not acceptable."

More details on findings and recommendations can be found in the evaluation report "financial management and control set-up" which is available on the North Sea Region programme's website. <http://www.northsearegion.eu/ivb/content/show/&tid=178>

2. Programme structures

Within the report on “programme structures” the work of the programme bodies responsible for the management of the programme (mainly the Managing Authority and the Joint Technical Secretariat) as well as the work of bodies responsible for the monitoring and steering of the programme (Monitoring Committee and Steering Committee) have been evaluated. During the on-going evaluation different key themes and issues arose.

A key issue was the role of the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) within the First Level Control process. In general, the lead beneficiaries as well as the Monitoring Committee (MC) and the Steering Committee (SC) are very satisfied with the work of the JTS, e.g. when it comes to the support of projects, the handling of project changes, the pre-assessments of project ideas or the preparation of MC or SC meetings. But there is potential to strengthen the role of the JTS in the First level Control (FLC) process as the quality of the FLC varies significantly between projects and first level controllers.

Regarding the programme’s support for lead beneficiaries some lead beneficiaries demand more support by the programme in preparing them for the role as Lead Beneficiary as it is a very ambitious and challenging role.

Another key theme became the role and the work of the National Contact Points (NCP). In general the programme bodies are satisfied with the work of the NCP and emphasise their usefulness as they are e.g. an easy access for the projects to the programme as they provide information in the national languages. The NCP in the different member states are organised in different ways and both the range and intensity of services to the potential national beneficiaries vary greatly. The focus of NCP depends on the availability of resources as the contact points are funded at the national level.

Recommendations

- ✓ The function of the JTS in the FLC process should be strengthened by means of **proactive management of the FLC scope**.
- ✓ The JTS should intensify the **preparation and training of lead beneficiaries** for their challenging role in administering and managing their international consortia.
- ✓ In addition to the written approval the MC should discuss parts of the annual report during their meetings. The **achieved project results and programme impacts should be reflected** most intensively in order to raise the awareness for the realisation of the programme strategy and the planned impact.
- ✓ The **National Contact Points (NCP)** should continue their work in the next programme period 2004-2020 as they are considered successful links to the regions. However, the different NCPs should increasingly exchange good practice and streamline the quality and intensity of their services.
- ✓ The **audit system of the NSR programme** should place more emphasis on the assessment and acknowledgement of project results and their impact.

Opinions from lead beneficiaries and stakeholders

“In general, the JTS functions extremely well. The work that they do is not only done well, but they are also very flexible and generally have a natural talent of dealing with issues in an elegant and constructive way.”

“In general, the MC concentrates on the right tasks, but it might want to look in more depth at the results of the projects and evaluate the strategy on a more permanent basis (although that's easily said of course).”

“The decision making process could be improved with regard to what is considered a good project, balancing the role of projects as providers of content for the programme with the processes that a project goes through.”

“The [project selection] criteria is adequate, however, it is noticeable that some project promoters have difficulty bringing across their ideas on paper. It might be helpful to include visualisation tools, so that such project promoters can show what a result of a project might be (using pictures, movies, simulation software).”

“In certain cases, it may also be helpful if the JTS hires external experts to evaluate the (technical) innovation value of certain deliverables.”

“The National Contact Points are ideal “invitations” of the programme which indicate that you are welcome as a project.”

“In my view the focus of the Interreg IVB North Sea Region projects is shifting from content to financial control. At present there are at least five levels of financial assessment, but who looks at or cares about the content?”

More details on findings and recommendations can be found in the evaluation report "programme structures" which is available on the North Sea Region programme's website. <http://www.northsearegion.eu/ivb/content/show/&tid=178>

3. Application procedures and project development

Within the theme “application procedures and project development” different key themes and issues arose during the on-going evaluation. With regard to project development it turned out that the efficient search for partners is the most relevant area of support for projects during the project development phase. In addition, the aspects of realistic project planning and budgeting are also relevant areas in need of support by the programme.

With regard to the National Contact Points (NCP), the lead beneficiaries and stakeholders perceived the aspect of individual consulting to be the most important service. But related to some NCP their services provided during the phase of project development or the application procedure are not transparent enough for the lead beneficiaries.

A key theme regarding application procedures was the consideration of specific links between the objectives, results and impact of the projects and the SWOT (Strength – Weakness – Opportunities – Threats) analysis of the North Sea Region programme in the process of project selection and approval. The SWOT analysis of the North Sea Region is of key relevance to the programme as it entails the basic assumptions of and justifications for the whole programme strategy.

Additionally, within the application procedure the suitability of the project ‘selection criteria’ and the ‘priority considerations’ were evaluated in particular as they are of key relevance for the assessment and the selection of projects within the North Sea Region programme.

Recommendations

- ✓ The **search for appropriate partners** is the most relevant area of support for projects in the phase of project development. The National Contact Points (NCP) are usually the initial point of reference for potential project promoters and applicants. In order to make the search for partners more efficient, the connection between NCP should be strengthened within the North Sea Region by creating sustainable cooperation structures which are supported by a (technical) exchange platform.
- ✓ The role of the **National Contact Points** varies between the Member States of the North Sea Region programme. The portfolio of services the NCP offer should be made more clearly visible and promoted on the programme website. In this way, project applicants or project partners are better informed and know whom to contact (National Contact Point (NCP) or Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS)) in case specific questions arise or assistance is needed.
- ✓ In order to achieve **high quality project development**, a substantial volume of resources is necessary. Thus, it is recommended that the programme continues to reimburse projects’ preparation costs in the next programme period. The possibilities to receive seed money at the national level should be promoted more strongly by the NCP within the relevant Member States.

- ✓ Both throughout the project application process as well as during project selection and approval, the specific **links between the objectives, results and impact of the projects and the SWOT** analysis should be described.
- ✓ During the next programme period the “**quality of communication**” should represent a criterion for project selection and be assessed in relation to a “communication plan” as part of the application. Moreover, the creation of a clear link between application chapters, core selection criteria and priority considerations is recommended.
- ✓ During the assessment of project applications the JTS should continue to involve **external experts** if required for specific technical details. The JTS should clearly indicate the involvement of external experts in the assessment, as this would make the procedure more transparent for the members of the Steering Committee and the Monitoring Committee.

Opinions from lead beneficiaries and stakeholders

“For several projects I have been involved in preparing proposals, the feedback from the Secretariat was quite helpful though especially in the beginning of the programme it was not clear what type of (transnational) activities and indicators were expected. Also, with the extension of an existing project, the feedback was not sufficient to make the application feasible, it was rejected though if the reasons would have been clearer earlier it may have gone through after all. Later at the development of a cluster proposal the support by the programme may certainly be described as “good”, the Secretariat was very helpful and supportive also after a delay in developing the proposal.”

“The staged process with some national review, followed by a proposal by the JTS and a decision by the Steering Committee is quite fair. Also the feedback provided after the decision is adequate.”

“The assessment done by the secretariat is good/excellent, though on some subjects capitalising on specialist knowledge is essential. Some national delegations do this, but not all.”

“Efficiency of decisions is satisfactory, the decision criteria could be strengthened as well as the discussions on the quality of the projects. Projects thematic orientation is well discussed, discussions on whether the projects’ contribution to the programme area provides value for money can be strengthened.”

“There is room for improvements when it comes to partner search. How can this be done both at physical arenas and online? The key to a good project is a strong and relevant partnership in relation to theme. Can we find ways to facilitate this? The thematic workshops worked very well.”

“A better help with partner search, especially transnationally might be possible. Maybe by better cooperation of NCPs.”

More details on findings and recommendations can be found in the evaluation report “application procedures and project development” which is available on the North Sea Region programme’s website.

<http://www.northsearegion.eu/ivb/content/show/&tid=178>

4. Programme impact and coverage

Within the report on “programme impact and coverage” the effect of the programme’s priorities and projects on the implementation of the programme’s SWOT analysis as well as the integration of private partners have been evaluated. During the on-going evaluation different specific key themes and issues arose.

One of these key issues was the allocation of beneficiaries and budget in the participating regions throughout the programme area as the analysis of the involvement of beneficiaries reveals that some countries have a different level of involvement within the NSR programme.

Another key issue arose from the question, if the SWOT analysis -which is a strategic basis for the North Sea Region programme- has changed during the programme implementation or if the SWOT analysis is still relevant. From the projects point of view the socio-economic framework within the North Sea Region has not changed in a way that has influenced the successful implementation of the projects results and the SWOT analysis of the North Sea Region programme is still relevant. Anyhow, some of the projects have been influenced by the current financial crisis by difficulties in finding project partners capable of sufficient co-financing or by financial difficulties. Some project partners had to withdraw from projects due to the financial crisis.

Also the involvement of private partners within the North Sea Region programme became a key theme as it turned out during the on-going evaluation that projects and private partners benefit from each other. On the one hand, projects clearly benefit from the involvement of private partners - e.g. private partners contribute additional expertise and experiences or private partners facilitate access to specific industry networks and stakeholders. On the other hand, private partners can benefit from their participation in the North Sea Region Programme, too - e.g. private partners acquire new contacts with the public and academic sector in the North Sea Region and access to networks at the European level or private partners can test new concepts or methodologies developed in the North Sea Region.

In the North Sea Region Programme some projects are working with an external project management, some projects are running their project management by themselves (internal project management). Within the evaluation of “programme impact and coverage” it has also been evaluated why projects have chosen one of these models and how satisfied they are with it. Beside different reasons for choosing one of these models it can be stated, that a lack of experience and competences regarding INTERREG as well as limited capacity within the own organisation are main reasons for lead beneficiaries to work with an external project management.

Recommendations

- ✓ The JTS should initiate discussion with the National Contact Points in order to find out whether there are **country-specific barriers** or drivers which hamper or encourage participation in the NSR Programme.
- ✓ The projects should assess their **individual impact in the context of both the programme strategy and SWOT**. In doing so they are encouraged to also reflect aspects such as relevance, dimension, cost-benefit-relation and level of innovation of the achieved solutions.
- ✓ The NSR Programme should continue with the **successful integration of private partners** in the next programme period 2014-2020.
- ✓ Clear **identification of the implementation of project management** (internal or external) within the projects of the NSR Programme.
- ✓ The **knowledge exchange** between project managers from NSR projects should be strengthened.

Opinions from lead beneficiaries

“Socioeconomic framework: Constrained economic activity as a result of the financial crisis and sovereign debt crisis and the impacts these things have had on employment and growth opportunities.”

“We experienced more instability and partner changes due to the financial crisis.”

“The private partners are the ones that develop and use the knowledge to develop products and services that enable the implementation of the policies we strive for.”

“We have two private partners in our consortium who participate, for the purpose of the project, as public entities. Meeting with them and discussing the Interreg requirements at the project-idea stage was crucial to securing their participation and ensuring they were fully informed as early as possible.”

“[External project management]... reduces the amount of administrative work within the company of the lead partner. We had the possibility to concentrate on the partners and the content / activities. As it was our first project as Lead Partner, we wanted to have support regarding the regulations in reporting and also assistance for all partners as most of them were involved in an EU project for the first time.”

“[The benefit of working with an external service provider is the]...possibility to give good support to partners also during high peaks of work. The project management are sometimes a lot of work and sometimes less, with a subcontractor as help this can be balanced out.”

“[Internal project management gives the opportunity]... to build up project management competence within the organisation. This competence secures that the organisation and region can take part in transnational projects in the long term. This ensures: 1) that PM competence and knowledge about the needs of the organisation and region are not separated. 2) people working within the project develop (The people who develop the region develop)”

More details on findings and recommendations can be found in the evaluation report "programme impact and coverage".

More details about the integration of private and public partners within the North Sea Region programme can be found in the report on "programme impact and coverage – partner integration report".

More details regarding external project management in projects can be found on the report "programme impact and coverage – external project management"

All reports are available on the North Sea Region programme's website. <http://www.northsearegion.eu/ivb/content/show/&tid=178>

5. Transnational cooperation

Within the evaluation report on “transnational cooperation” the relevant measures and activities which were carried out by the projects and cluster projects for creating a strong environment for transnational cooperation were evaluated. During the on-going evaluation different specific key themes and issues arose.

One of these key themes was the role of the programme and, in particular, the role of the project officers of the Joint Technical Secretariat in strengthening transnational cooperation and the transnational character of projects. Project officers have knowledge about the projects as well as knowledge and an overview about the programme strategy. Thus, they have potential to link concrete project strategies and results to both the specific aims of the NSR Programme strategy and to the level of achievement at the programme level.

In line with this, the possibilities of the programme to support projects in actively promoting their results and to strengthen the transnational nature of the North Sea Region projects became another key theme.

In the field of transnational cooperation cluster projects had been a key theme within the on-going evaluation. The programme’s strategic project approach on so called “cluster projects” is based on the clustering of projects on related topics. The main purpose of cluster projects is to improve the communication of project results in order to increase the visibility in specific thematic areas. Projects participating in a cluster project stated that the cluster approach has strengthened the transnationality of their project. From the projects’ point of view, a key advantage of participating in a cluster project relates to the resulting increase in visibility of the projects and their results at a higher level which, in turn, also raises the awareness of politicians at the EU level.

Recommendations

- ✓ In the next programme period, the tasks of project officers in the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) should be broadened so that they each function as **“Portfolio Managers”** for specific programme priorities. The function of Portfolio Managers extends beyond technical project administration to not only include the facilitation of cooperation between projects within the NSR Programme, but also to encourage the communication of results to stakeholders from both the regional and European level. Moreover, Portfolio Managers should link concrete project results and their (anticipated) impact to the achievements of the NSR Programme strategy.
- ✓ The JTS should intensify the support for projects geared towards **further developing skills for intercultural management**. Accordingly, the JTS should strive to facilitate knowledge transfer between projects, provide resources such as learning material and training sessions, as well as develop a comprehensive overview of providers or a knowledge base accessible on the website.
- ✓ The **JTS should act as a “door opener”** which supports projects in actively promoting their results vis-à-vis the European Commission and other European organisations. Such a “strong voice from the North Sea Region” could help individual projects join forces and thus exert a stronger impact on policy development.

- The Portfolio Managers could play an active role in selecting and linking relevant projects and their results to ongoing policy discussions.
- ✓ The programme should promote and support the sustainability of projects embedded in transnational networks by **sharing good practice** on how to organise and ensure the transnational nature of the North Sea Region.
 - ✓ The programme should **continue with the established cluster projects** in the next programme period by building on the successful implementation of a cluster facilitator.
 - ✓ The JTS should also encourage the **clustering of projects beyond the North Sea Region programme** which are engaging in similar activities as part of other INTERREG and funding programmes.
 - ✓ The programme should **increase the opportunities for projects to learn from each other**, transfer knowledge and to benefit from synergies both during the conception and production of outputs throughout their implementation phase. The Portfolio Manager could actively support the process of cross-project integration and knowledge exchange.

Opinions from lead beneficiaries

“It is challenging to manage so many partners from different countries speaking different languages and originating from a different background. Sometimes it is not so easy to streamline the different thinking and to get to a common understanding/solution. But this also provides many different views and ideas!”

“Within the project partnership intercultural management plays an important role. It helps to understand opinions/arguments of partners in foreign countries and to manage the project according to the different cultures involved.”

“Participation in a cluster project helped to lift selected project results to a higher level (e.g. the best practice guide) which will be distributed at high level EU events.”

“[Added value of cluster]: To create more awareness among politicians (EU) about the cruise sector itself as well as its added value to accessibility, job opportunities and economical potential in the EU. More visibility of the project and its results, new stakeholders addressed and new contacts made.”

More details on findings and recommendations can be found in the evaluation report "transnational cooperation" which is available on the North Sea Region programme's website. <http://www.northsearegion.eu/ivb/content/show/&tid=178>

6. Legacy

Within the report on “legacy” the projects experiences in continuation of project results after project closure had been evaluated. During the on-going evaluation different specific key themes and issues arose.

One key theme was based on the finding that the relevance and connectivity of project results for stakeholders and actors is crucial to safeguard legacy. In this context, an early involvement of stakeholders and actors is helpful. Within the on-going evaluation it came clear that those projects, which started to implement a legacy strategy at an early stage, received more sophisticated actions and activities to safeguard legacy.

Other key themes that arose during the on-going evaluation had been the demand of lead beneficiaries and project partners on good practice within the field of legacy to see how other projects have managed the continuation of their project results after project closure successfully. Also to have in mind that resource limitations are a main issue for projects to safeguard legacy.

Again, cluster projects became a key theme also within the field of legacy. The main purpose of cluster projects is to improve the communication of project results in order to increase the visibility in specific thematic areas. The results of the on-going evaluation indicate that, also from a legacy standpoint, the cluster approach is an efficient way to ensure the project results.

Recommendations

- ✓ The programme should implement a **knowledge platform** of good examples for legacy. This should demonstrate how projects managed their legacy and why they were successful.
- ✓ The programme should ensure that projects proactively plan the legacy of their project results at an early stage. A relevant tool would be a market analysis resulting in a **legacy strategy**. The legacy strategy also needs to be integrated into the risk management of the projects.
- ✓ The “**Portfolio Managers**” from the Joint Technical Secretariat (see recommendations in chapter 5: “transnational cooperation”) **could support the development of projects legacy strategies** by linking to stakeholders and institutions at an European and national level.
- ✓ Resource limitations are a main issue for projects to safeguard legacy. The **financing of the continuation of project results** should be considered within the projects` legacy strategies.
- ✓ The activities of **cluster projects should be directly linked to the legacy strategies** of the singles projects.

Opinions from lead beneficiaries

“Validate your results by involving research and academic partners and let them spread the word.”

“Liasse with mainstreaming partners (central government, European Commission, network groups) from day one of the project and involve them in key decision moments of the project. They not only will provide valuable input but also will take your own good work into their networks.”

“Link your project with (changing) EU und national policies, also after the end of the project.”

“Valorise opportunities, like participating in cluster projects and link your project to other projects (outside NSR), European networks etc. to spread the message.”

“Engage in social media. During the project a LinkedIn group was created, which proved to initiate a plenty of debate, without any of the original partners putting any effort in it.”

“It might be helpful to identify case studies on how the legacy of different projects is carried out, and whether there are lessons to be learnt from projects [...]. The lessons learnt aspect would be particularly helpful in ensuring that the same mistakes are not made or how an approach can be improved based on previous experience. However, it is acknowledge that different projects would have different requirements which would make this task somewhat harder to translate to other projects.”

More details on findings and recommendations can be found in the evaluation report "legacy" which is available on the North Sea Region programme's website. <http://www.northsearegion.eu/ivb/content/show/&tid=178>

7. Programme and project cooperation in communications & programme visibility

Within the on-going evaluation of “programme and project cooperation in communications & programme visibility” different key themes and issues arose. One of these key themes was the role of National Contact Points (NCP) and the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) in supporting projects in their communication activities as the results from the evaluation indicate that the activities of the National Contact Points vary in this respect.

Generally the communication of transnational cooperation projects is a big challenge due to complexity of the thematic scope, the target groups and regional contexts. Some projects developed good practice on how to communicate a transnational cooperation project and its results throughout the whole project lifecycle.

The communication of success stories and the presentation of project outputs within the North Sea Region Programme became another key issue during the on-going evaluation. It turned out the the presentation of project results and success stories as well as the communication of the programme impact are the most important themes within the programmes communication measures for the visibility of the programme.

By implementing the cluster approach the programme has developed a new strategic approach to communicating project results in different thematic areas. In this respect, the cluster approach of the North Sea Region programme and its benefit for the programme’s visibility has been evaluated as cluster projects have the potential to raise different themes of the NSR to a higher policy level through reaching a critical mass of topics and strategic approaches from different projects.

Recommendations

- ✓ 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.

Opinions from lead beneficiaries and stakeholders

"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."

"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."

"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."

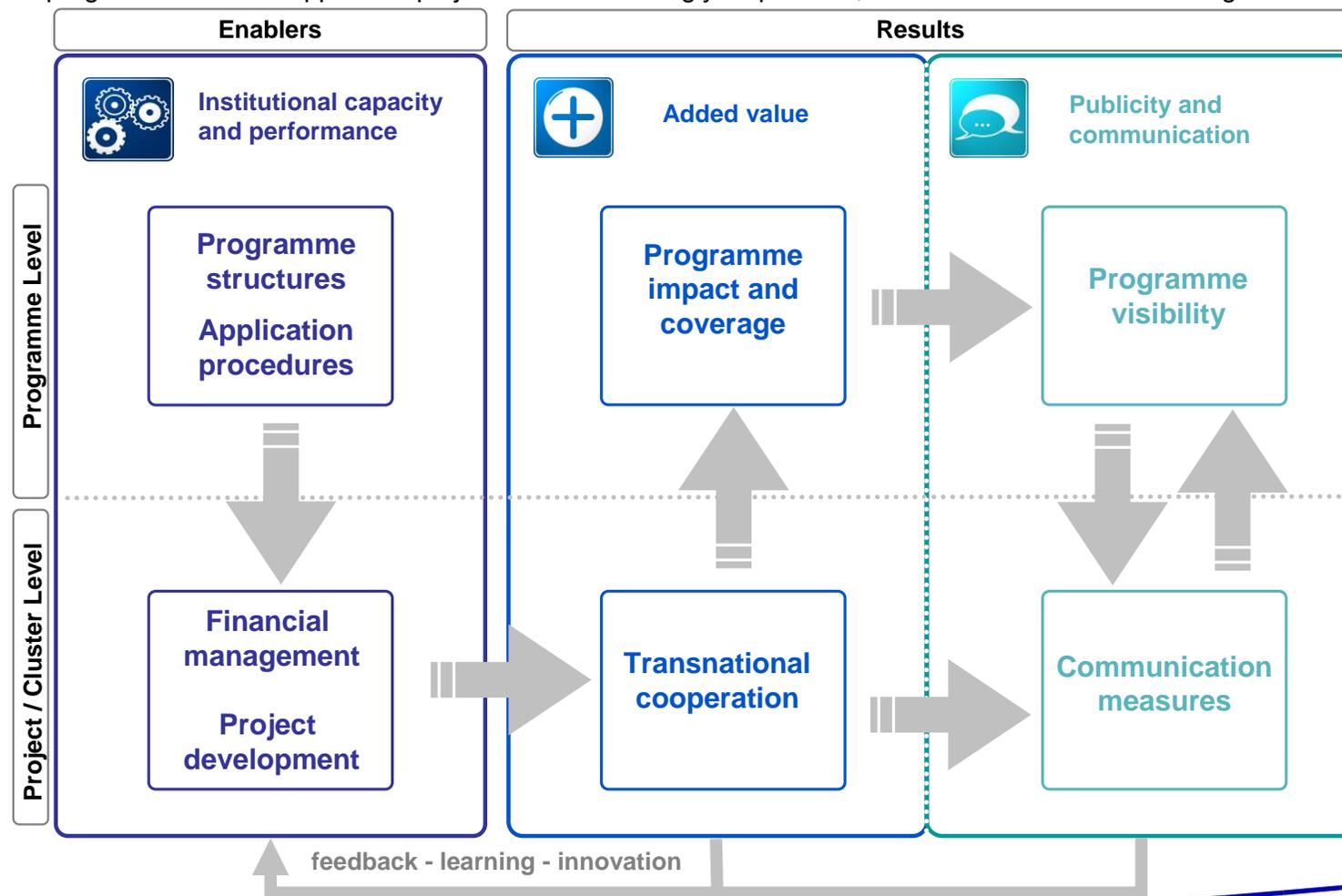
"As the cluster projects represent a more thematic approach, more relevant stakeholders can be addressed and included in the overall outcomes than through individual projects. Also, the cluster allows some additional partners to be included which allows the inclusion of stakeholders that were not yet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

More details on findings and recommendations can be found in the evaluation report "Programme and project cooperation in communications & programme visibility" which is available on the North Sea Region programme's website. <http://www.northsearegion.eu/ivb/content/show/&tid=178>

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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