

INTERACT study towards cross-programme evaluation

Joint summary

Thematic and operational aspects of cross-border cooperation in Central and South-Eastern Europe



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INTERACT is part of Objective 3 European Territorial Cooperation. INTERACT is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). INTERACT is designed to capitalise on the vast pool of experience and expertise accumulated through INTERREG in the areas of regional development, cross-border cooperation, transnational cooperation and interregional cooperation.

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Executive summary - INTERACT study towards cross-programme evaluation

INTERACT Point Vienna conducted two pilot studies to test joint evaluations of cross-border cooperation programmes in Central and South-Eastern Europe. The studies differ in terms of focus and approach: The “operational study” addresses operational and technical aspects involved in implementing programmes and the “thematic study” deals with thematic aspects and the added value of cross-border cooperation. The operational study was led by Richard Hummelbrunner and the thematic study by Kai Böhme.

With these studies, INTERACT Point Vienna aims to contribute to the wider discussion of better and more useful evaluations of cooperation programmes. Cooperation programmes are expected to conduct evaluations before, during and after the programming period. Evaluations are conducted at a specific point in time, for example a “mid-term evaluation”, or they are extended over a longer time span, covering various phases during the life of the programme, as in an “on-going evaluation”. The current regulatory framework, for 2007-2014, is the first to explicitly mention the possibility of conducting joint evaluations involving several programmes:

Article 47(2) of Regulation 1083(2006)

‘Evaluations may be of a strategic nature in order to examine the evolution of a programme or group of programmes in relation to Community and national priorities, or of an operational nature in order to support the monitoring of an operational programme. Evaluations shall be carried out before, during and after the programming period.’

With this framework, Member States are not limited to evaluations at the level of the operational programme. In fact, they are encouraged to undertake evaluations by themes/priority axes/groups of actions/major projects or by policy fields across operational programmes¹.

Joint evaluations offer new opportunities for cooperation programmes, and they have the potential to complement individual programme evaluations in meaningful ways. For instance, joint evaluations can help identify bottlenecks that are specific to one cooperation programme but not to another. They can also be a very useful tool for a mutual learning process, because a joint evaluation can identify practices/solutions that could be transferred from one programme to another. Furthermore, joint evaluations provide inputs for programme-specific evaluations.

INTERACT Point Vienna, together with interested cross-border cooperation programmes, decided to launch the two pilot studies to investigate the use of joint programme evaluations in the context of cooperation programmes. In order to make programme participation in the pilot go as smoothly as possible, INTERACT Point Vienna financed the entire pilot effort and provided external experts to conduct the studies. It would have been very difficult to participate in such an effort without external financing, especially in the case of smaller cross-border cooperation programmes that have a very limited technical assistance budget.

All cooperation programmes in the INTERACT Point Vienna Zone² were invited by INTERACT to join the cross-programme evaluation pilot in November 2009. Of the 28 cross-border programmes invited, 12 programmes (nine European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) and three Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance Cross-Border Cooperation (IPA CBC) programmes) joined both evaluation pilots. Two further programmes (Austria-Bavaria and Saxony-Poland) joined the operational study only:

¹ Indicative guidelines on evaluation methods: evaluation during the programming period. Working document no.5

² INTERACT uses regionally focused approach to serve territorial cooperation programmes. Each INTERACT Point serves regional groups of cross-border and transnational programmes. INTERACT Point Vienna’s zone covers 28 cross-border cooperation programmes from Central and South-Eastern Europe.

Programme participation in the cross-programme evaluation pilot:³

EU 12: Poland-Slovakia (PL-SK), Poland-Czech Republic (PL-CZ), Romania-Bulgaria (RO-BG), Slovenia-Hungary (SI-HU)

EU 15: Italy-Austria (IT-AT), Austria-Germany (Bavaria)* (AT-BY)

EU 12-15: Slovenia-Austria (SI-AT), Austria-Hungary (AT-HU), Austria-Czech Republic (AT-CZ), Austria-Slovakia (AT-SK), Germany (Saxony)-Poland* (SN-PL)

IPA CBC: Hungary-Croatia (HU-HR), Romania-Serbia (RO-RS), Slovenia-Croatia (SI-HR)

* involved in the operational study only

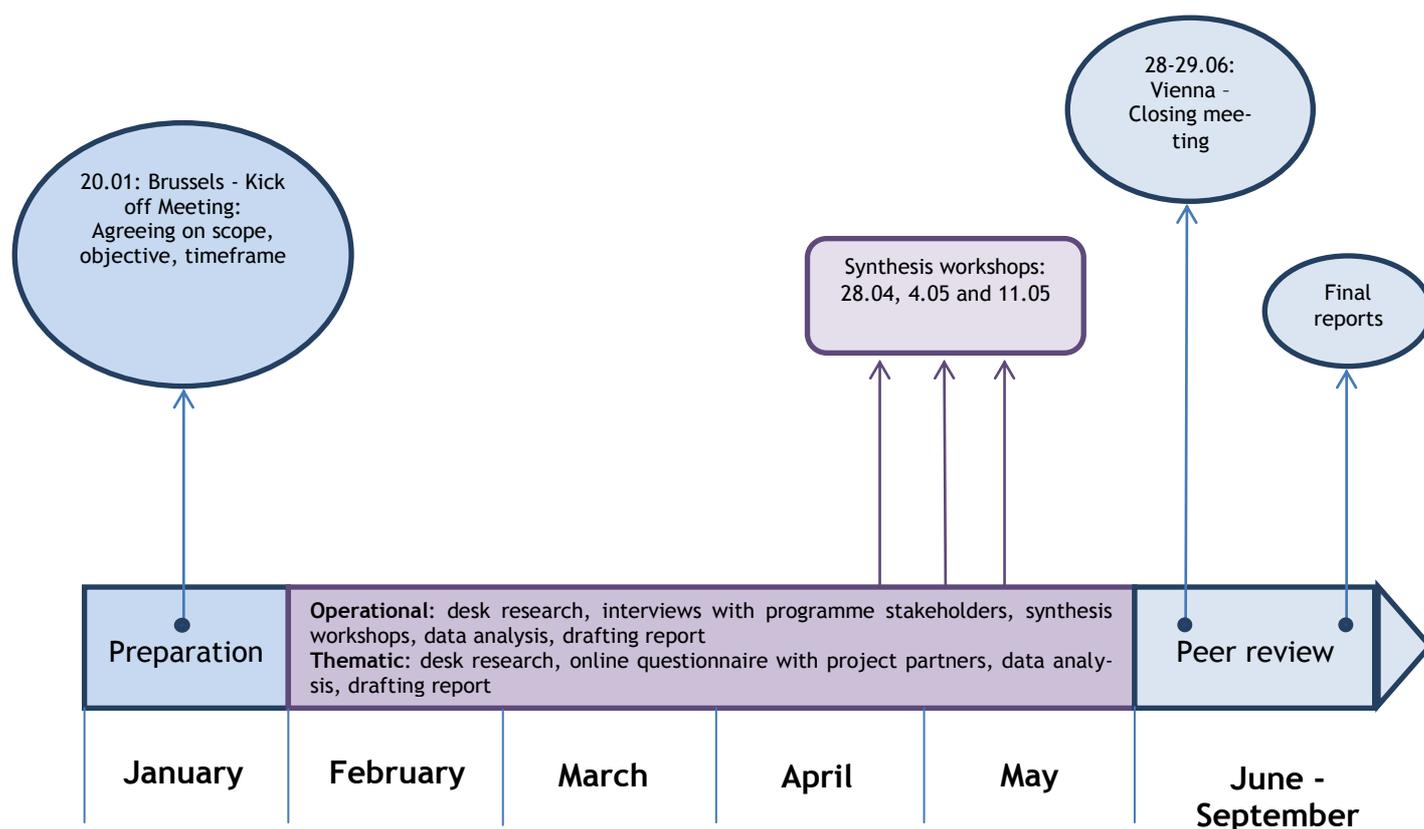
Both pilot studies started with a joint kick-off meeting in Brussels on January 2010, at which time representatives of participating programmes and experts agreed on the objectives, scope and timeframe of the analyses. Those at the meeting decided to focus the operational study on project generation, assessment and selection and the thematic study on the regional knowledge base (eg. human resources development and support to SMEs) and natural heritage utilisation (eg. tourism, national parks, natural sites and heritage, environmental protection risks and cultural heritage).

Both evaluations involved detailed analyses of programme documents, websites and available statistics as well as surveys and meetings with programme representatives. While the thematic study drew key information from beneficiaries, the operational study had a clear focus on programme stakeholders - including the relevant representatives of managing authority (MA), national authority (NA), Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS), regional body (RB), monitoring committee (MC), etc. The heart of the thematic study was an online survey of project partners concerning the thematic focus and the added value of their projects. The operational study was mainly based on interviews of programme stakeholders and three interactive synthesis workshops, during which programme representatives discussed details of their operational practice and had extensive opportunities to exchange experience and opinions. The results of both pilots were presented and discussed with participating programmes at a joint closing meeting in June 2010.

For the operational study, a team of seven national experts - from Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia - supported the responsible expert. Experts carried out interviews with programme stakeholders, assembled the programme synthesis reports and contributed to the synthesis workshops and the final report. Involvement of several experts from different countries made it possible to conduct a greater number of direct interviews with different stakeholders in their national languages. The experts also have special knowledge of national requirements and specificities, which means they have a better understanding of the differences between programmes.

³ Programme names according to Inforegio website:

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/country/prordn/search.cfm?gv_pay=ALL&gv_reg=ALL&gv_obj=11&gv_the=ALL&lan=EN&gv_per=2.



Although the operational and the thematic studies were implemented separately, the links between these pilot programmes go beyond the joint kick-off and closure meetings: Most importantly, some aspects were addressed in both studies, in order to shed light on these issues from two different methodological approaches while incorporating the views of beneficiaries and the views of programme stakeholders.⁴ The issues addressed included the opinion of programme actors and project owners on project development, assessment and selection procedure, as well as future macro-regional strategies.

Two reports are available on the INTERACT website, one for each study, summarising data, analyses and findings. In addition, programme-specific information collected in the course of the operational study was aggregated in synthesis reports for each participating programme. Synthesis reports were provided to each programme for their benefit and use, and these will not be published or distributed by INTERACT.

Limitations

The studies are by no means comprehensive evaluations of participating cooperation programmes and projects. There are a number of important limitations that should be kept in mind, including:

- At the time of the study, participating programmes were in quite different stages of programme implementation, ranging from rather advanced programmes, with more than 60% of total funds committed, to programmes in rather early stages of the allocation cycle, with less than 25% of the total funds committed. In one IPA CBC programme, no projects had been approved at all at the time of the study. With regards to this programme, the thematic study thus had to be limited to general observations on a programme level.
- The level of involvement of programmes and projects in the study was also quite varied. For instance response rates of beneficiaries to the online questionnaire of the thematic study ranged from a stunning 98% of projects contacted to 43% for less responsive programme areas. Obviously statistics based on these data can be biased in cases where project responses are not representative for the whole programme area,

⁴ The interview grid for the operational study contained several questions relevant to the thematic study and vice versa. The results were exchanged between the experts.

whether this is due to low response rates or because few projects were contacted. Likewise, for cases in which two project partners gave answers about the same project, double counting cannot be excluded. The same situation applies to the operational study, where the number of interviews and range of actors involved varied considerably from one programme to another.

- It is also important to keep in mind that cross-programme evaluations cannot and should not weight achievements of one programme against the achievements of another. Programmes are indeed very different and need to be seen in a wider context, one that takes into account geographic specificities and regional priorities. It is neither useful nor necessary to propose universal solutions or recommendations that must apply to all cooperation programmes. For this reason, the studies do not include universal best practices or any kind of ranking of the participating programmes. The cross-programme evaluation was focused on providing programmes the opportunity to learn from each other. Indeed, even without explicit recommendations, these cross-programme analyses, including practices and data from different programmes, can lead to substantial improvements in the way a single programme functions or pursues thematic areas and content generation. For programmes interested in learning from others, the operational study contains about 30 good/interesting practices that were identified and outlines more than 50 ideas for improvements in various areas.
- There was some debate among stakeholders on whether or not the studies could still be called “evaluations”, because the evaluators did not make qualitative judgements on single programmes. There are different approaches to evaluation, and in this case it was agreed with participating programmes not to focus on a comparison of programmes in terms of efficiency, effectiveness or impact. Indeed, one major achievement of the studies is a comprehensive description of the variety of approaches of cooperation programmes with regards to both operational and thematic aspects. Another major achievement was to provide programmes an opportunity to exchange experience, learn from each other and identify useful practices. Some of these practices are transferable to other areas, some less so. There are many ways to improve programme implementation, and one of the most effective ones is learning from experience gained by other programmes. This exercise has shown that comparative studies that are *not* focused on judging programmes or giving them recommendations can be informative and useful. As a next step, individual programmes can employ this information to draw their own conclusions regarding their specific situation, achievements and limitations in comparison to others. Results of the studies can lead to programme-specific recommendations, and thus improvements, to be elaborated by programme stakeholders and/or to feed into further evaluations on the level of individual programmes.

Lessons learned - conducting a cross-programme evaluation

A major incentive for conducting the cross-programme evaluation pilots was to explore the applicability of this approach, its added value and also its limitations in the context of territorial cooperation. The findings are summarised below:

- **Cross-programme evaluations can provide very useful information on the current situation of cooperation programmes in general:** Despite the variety of situations, the high number of programmes participating in the studies allow us to draw some general conclusions that are highly relevant to the ongoing discussions about the general effectiveness of current administrative solutions, as well as the strategic importance of the Territorial Cooperation programmes. Major conclusions are summarised in the executive summaries of the studies.
- **Cross-programme evaluations create an economy of scale:** Seen from the larger perspective of territorial cooperation, evaluating many programmes at the same time is an effective way to save resources, because it lets evaluators combine such work as preparing surveys, study of background materials, baselines, etc. This economy of scale requires one organisation, such as INTERACT, to take over the role of the overall coordinator, to provide the framework for the effort, external experts, organisation of meetings and summary

reports. For individual programmes, it is rather difficult to organise evaluations across programmes and countries due - for the most part - to a serious lack of financial and human resources and regulatory challenges posed by a joint public procurement for external experts.

- **Cross-programme evaluations create a sense of community:** Intensive work of programme stakeholders on joint evaluations also creates new professional contacts and a sense of community. It allows programmes to speak with one voice and raises the awareness of decision makers about Territorial Cooperation as an important strategic tool in a larger macro-regional or European context. It also enables programmes to place subsequent programme-specific evaluations in a larger context, allowing, for example, in-depth analyses of programme approaches, achievements and limitations in comparison to other programmes.
- **Cross-programme evaluations facilitate change:** Knowing about solutions and approaches of other programmes can greatly facilitate change in programme management. For instance, it can help programme stakeholders convince decision makers or policy makers to support necessary changes based on an example of success in another programme.
- **The timing of the cross-programme evaluation determines its potential coverage:** At the time of the study, programmes were in different stages of implementation with the majority of programmes in rather early stages. This approach always raises valid questions about the comparability of data and analyses, but it also ensures that there is still time to actually improve or adjust approaches in the current programming period. A balance needs to be sought between the two objectives of obtaining representative information and leaving room for change.
- **The timing also determines its relevance to the future of ETC as a whole:** The cross-programme analyses are undertaken at the time when the development and implementation of macro-regional strategies - specifically the EU Strategy for the Danube Region - as well as the future design and focus of ETC are at the centre of attention. Findings of the studies thus can potentially contribute to these debates. Outcomes could be compared with the results of the recently published ex-post evaluation of INTERREG III and can be useful for the implementation of ex-post recommendations.⁵
- **The number of participating programmes determines its scope and impact as well:** Our cross-programme evaluation covered a total of 14 cooperation programmes. This large number of programmes allowed the evaluation to spotlight many different practices, and provided a critical mass for the identification of general tendencies. The downside of this broad reach is that joining so many programmes in one effort makes it impossible to work intensively with programmes on an individual basis - to elaborate programme-specific recommendations. Again, a balance needs to be sought between the two objectives of obtaining representative information and drawing effective conclusions on a single programme level.

One more important lesson learned is that cross-programme evaluations are time consuming and require clear commitment on the side of programme stakeholders. The studies would not have been possible without the dedication of participating programme stakeholders to the effort and the numerous working hours, insights and ideas of programme stakeholders that went into the joint effort.

Many stakeholders expressed the wish to continue joint cross-programme analyses and evaluation efforts in the future. The synthesis workshops were also greeted with appreciation, and similar meetings should be planned in the future, to provide a framework for programmes to hold intensive discussions on a limited number of implementation aspects. Programmes also signalled the need to standardise documents, and it might be worth considering a study focused on this issue.

⁵ INTERREG III Community Initiative (2000-2006) Ex-Post Evaluation (No. 2008.CE.16.0.AT.016) Final Report available at: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/expost2006/interreg_en.htm

Future thematic evaluation efforts could cover the same programmes and the same aspects, but focus on a more in-depth analysis. Future thematic studies could also focus on the delivery of results related to the Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies.

Future operational evaluation efforts could cover the same programmes but look at aspects of programme administration other than project generation, assessment and selection, which were analysed in the current evaluation. Possible focus areas of future operational studies could be n+3/n+2 and de-commitment (ie. identifying some good practices on how programmes are dealing with avoiding de-commitment) or administration versus results (ie. efficiency and control vs. satisfaction rate, level of irregularities).

Lessons learned - general conclusions from both studies

The operational and the thematic studies had different focus areas and different approaches as summarised below:

	Operational study	Thematic study
Main Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administration of cooperation programmes, with a specific focus on project generation, assessment and selection. ETC and wider context: macro-regional strategies, communication and exchange of information between ETC and other programmes, replication of ideas, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thematic orientation of programmes and added value of cooperation. Specific focus on regional knowledge base (human resources development and support to SMEs) and natural heritage exploitation (tourism, national parks, natural sites and heritage, environmental protection risks and cultural heritage).
Data and information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal interviews of programme stakeholders - MA, NA, JTS, RB, MC, etc. Surveys of MC members and beneficiaries. Analysis of programme documents - including assessment/selection criteria, descriptions of tasks, application packages and manuals for applicants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based mostly on a survey and phone interviews of beneficiaries. Analysis of programme documents and websites with special focus on programme priorities. Fields of Intervention of Territorial Cooperation programmes, overlapping Objective 1 and 2 programmes. Analysis of information available on the Inforegio website.
Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kick-off and closure meetings. Workshops with sub-groups of programmes to discuss findings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kick-off and closure meetings.
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary report (available on the INTERACT website). Synthesis reports (one for each programme, available only to programme stakeholders). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary report (available on the INTERACT website).

While detailed reports and executive summaries are available for each of the two studies, a number of important conclusions can be drawn from both:

- **There are considerable differences between Territorial Cooperation programmes:** Not only did operational solutions differ considerably among programmes, so did thematic orientations and types of added value generated. These differences are mainly due to the need to adapt to the various geographic and administrative settings of the programmes. Although there is ample opportunity for programmes to learn from each other, they need to translate the findings of the studies into their own context. What could work for one programme may be a very bad solution for another. It is thus not possible to single out best practices or provide benchmarks that would generally be accepted or applicable for all programmes.
- **There are differences between EU 12 and EU 12-15 programmes:** The largest differences between programmes can be observed between EU 12 programmes and EU 12-15 programmes. EU 12 programmes involve only newer member states that joined the EU during the last two rounds of accession, in 2004 and 2007. EU 12-15 programmes involve also older (EU 15) member states. These two types of programmes differ with regards to both operational aspects and themes/added value generated. For instance, most EU 12 programmes tend to use open calls for proposals while the EU 12-15 programmes analysed tend to favour on-going submissions of proposals. When it comes to project assessment, it was observed that EU 12-15 programmes tend to involve regional bodies in the process much more than EU 12 programmes. In terms of the thematic study, many project partners in EU12 programmes knew each other beforehand, while fewer partners previously knew each other in EU 12-15 programmes and IPA CBC programmes. Accordingly, it can be assumed that projects involving only EU 12 members can reach more substantial project achievements compared to projects involving both EU 12 and EU 15 countries, where more energy may be needed to establish cooperation routines and networks, especially since these partnerships tend to include a higher diversity of project partners compared to the projects of EU12 regions.
- **Partnership is the key to good cooperation and value added:** The success of cooperation programmes and projects depends to a large extent on the players involved. Mutual understanding and trust of the programme and project partners are preconditions for a fruitful cooperation. Understanding and trust should not be taken for granted, and time and efforts are needed to establish a supportive and positive cooperation atmosphere. Programme and project partnerships can be the key to success or the main reason for failure.
- **Defining added value is of key importance:** For focused programme management and targeted decisions about projects, it is necessary to know what added value a programme wants to achieve. This includes the type of added value, the recipient of the added value and the geographical level that will be impacted. Regular reflections about the basic ambitions of a programme with regard to the different facets of added value help programmes deliver results.
- **There is a need to remain attractive and involve new actors:** Cross-border cooperation beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries have become very aware of the high administrative burden associated with managing cooperation projects. It is becoming increasingly difficult for partners with little experience to join cooperation projects, and cooperation programmes have difficulties in attracting new and suitable partners. There is a risk of crowding out certain types of actors, due to a bias for experienced partners. This issue became evident in both studies and was quantified in the thematic study, where it is shown that more than 50% of the project partners have previously cooperated with most or all of their current project partners. Certainly, some continuation of cooperation over an extended period of time is needed, to maximise benefits of cooperation and to build upon prior common work. At project level, mature partnerships are also often perceived as successful and more result-oriented, while young partnerships often need a substantial amount of time to establish mutual trust between the cooperation partners. However, if the demands towards the projects are too high, and the programmes do not allow and support young and inexperienced partnerships to test and learn cooperation, there is a risk that cross-border cooperation will develop into a closed shop.

- **There is also a need to ensure continuity:** Cross-border cooperation is not a one-off exercise. It should be established with a long-term perspective and should be allowed time to grow. Cross-border programmes are an important stepping stone in the evolution of cross-border partnerships and should regard themselves as such. For this reason, programmes should also emphasise the sustainability of partnerships and results after project closure.
- **How to do the right thing?** Territorial Cooperation programmes established more complex administration compared not only to Objective 1 and 2 programmes but also to national programmes and other EU cooperation programmes, such as the Research Framework Programme. Programmes invest considerable resources on complying with administrative and legal requirements, many of which were not designed for programmes involving more than one country. There is limited time and resources for supporting projects in the generation of added value and very limited opportunity to try new and innovative approaches to programme and project management. Obviously this situation is far from ideal, and many programmes, stakeholders and beneficiaries are concerned about it. Especially when it comes to operational aspects, simplification and proportionality are key words to be kept in mind. It is important to do the right things, not just to do things right. Therefore, the focus on administrative requirements should not replace the real objectives of the programme. Concern should be placed on reducing the administrative workload of programme actors as well as applicants, through such steps as simplifying procedures and reducing and harmonising administrative requirements. Regarding content generation, very high levels of complexity can be difficult to handle. There must be more regular reflection on what is needed in the programming areas and what is the specific role of territorial cooperation programmes in general, as well as in relation to other EU or national programmes.
- **Need for cross-programme exchanges and learning:** Territorial Cooperation Programmes are willing to take a broader territorial perspective and are interested in cross-programme transfer and learning, but they also signal their limited resources in this respect. A range of transfer mechanisms is already in use, including informal exchange with adjacent programmes, periodic meetings of actors involved in programmes in trilateral border areas or coordination and exchange between Territorial Cooperation programmes at the national level. Many stakeholders welcome the role of INTERACT in supporting liaison and exchanges among Territorial Cooperation programmes.
- **Attitude towards macro-regional strategies:** Both studies analysed the opinion of programmes and projects on the future macro-regional strategies. The operational study showed that many programmes are concerned about the timing for implementation of upcoming macro-regional strategies - too late for the current programming period and still too early for the next one. There is also some resistance against tendencies to use cross-border cooperation programmes for co-financing macro-regional strategies, as their financial resources are rather small and they have a different mission or focus. On the other hand, there are also many constructive views on macro-regional strategies: they are seen to offer new opportunities and perspectives for successful ideas on a larger scale, as well as providing the impetus for know-how transfer beyond the respective programme areas. Macro-regional strategies can be seen as an additional framework that needs to be taken into account, much like National Strategic Reference Frameworks. Like pieces in a puzzle, cross-border cooperation programmes, and their projects, can be seen as synergetic parts of a bigger picture - contributing to broader topics or strategies. From the point of view of project partners, the main contribution of cross-border programmes is their knowledge of regional needs and people-to-people integration on the ground. Furthermore, cross-border programmes address a broad range of topics involving different sectors that can be viewed as stimulating factors for an integrative strategy.