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**EVALUATING INTERREG PROGRAMMES. THE
CHALLENGE OF DEMONSTRATING RESULTS AND
VALUE OF EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION**

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BRIEF



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Evaluating Interreg Programmes. The Challenge of Demonstrating Results and Value of European Territorial Cooperation

This Spatial Foresight Brief dives in the muddy waters of the transnational Interreg programme evaluation and nets the challenge of demonstrating results and value of the European Territorial Cooperation. It sheds light on different approaches to measure and evaluate the impact of Interreg, and introduces some suggestions on possible future developments. Through this, it contributes to the debate around the improvement of European Territorial Cooperation, by focusing on possible ways to enhance the evaluability of its Programmes. This brief will draw upon two examples of mid-term evaluations carried out by Spatial Foresight to show how challenging this exercise is and how it can be improved in the future.

The brief's background derives from the work carried out by Spatial Foresight in a wide range of Interreg evaluations across the European Union. The evaluations regard mainly transnational programmes, such as Interreg Alpine Space, Interreg Baltic Sea Region, Interreg Central Europe, Interreg Greater Region and Interreg North West Europe, or interregional programmes, such as the Interreg Europe programme, but also cross-border, such as the Channel programme, and Regional ERDF Programmes.

Evaluating Interreg Programmes

European Territorial Cooperation, more widely known as Interreg, started in 1992 and is running currently under its 5th programming period with a budget of EUR 10.1 billion. European Territorial Cooperation programmes, or Interreg programmes, aim to promote cooperation across regions and Member States in the European Union using mainly sources from the European Regional Development Fund.

The scope of Interreg programmes is diverse, with their focus placed on cooperation, be that cross-border, transnational or interregional cooperation between regions sharing common challenges and opportunities. Cross-border cooperation programmes target border regions concerning member states sharing a border, transnational cooperation involves regions from several countries of the EU forming larger cooperation areas, while interregional cooperation brings together all regions from the whole European territory. Today there are 60 cross-border, 15 transnational and 4 interregional cooperation programmes in place, operating through different projects.

During the 2014-2020 period Interreg is based on eleven thematic objectives, their investment priorities and their specific objectives to deliver the Europe 2020 strategy for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the EU. These thematic objectives cover themes of innovation, SME competitiveness, environment and sustainability, social inclusion and education. The selection of the thematic objectives and investment priorities are decided based on the needs of the region that the programme wishes to address.

Interreg programmes aim to eventually bring a change in their region and contribute to regional growth and development. To do so, Interreg programmes need to have a clear concept of what change they want to contribute to and more specifically how they plan to achieve it. The *theory of change* gives the overall picture of the change the programme wishes to contribute to and why, i.e. the envisaged impact in the region. Clear steps to achieve this change are planned through the programme's *intervention logic*, explaining how the desired change is going to happen in the region through the programme's interventions. This defines the impact: the change that can credibly be attributed to a programme's



intervention (European Commission, 2014). The intervention logic helps programmes to better approach results and plan what they want to achieve through the programming period. It helps programmes in becoming more specific on their aim to change the situation in a region or area for a particular target group (Interact, 2015a).

The cohesion policy framework for the 2014-2020 period was designed with a more result-oriented approach in comparison to the previous programming period. Interreg was reformed to achieve greater impact and a more effective use of the investments. In order to strengthen the result-focus of the policy, the regulations asked to assess the effectiveness and impact of the programmes. This means that the focus of evaluation shifted from fund absorption, to the results produced by interventions. This meant a shift of focus from actions and financial means to results and change. Here is where the programme evaluation came to play a role: to see in how far this change has been achieved.

The monitoring and evaluation of Interreg programmes is a necessary and mandatory step for programmes during the 2014-2020 programming period. According to the ESIF Common Provisions Regulation (1313/2013), Article 56 (3), “during the programming period, the managing authority shall ensure that evaluations, including evaluations to assess effectiveness, efficiency and impact, are carried out for each programme on the basis of the evaluation plan and that each evaluation is subject to appropriate follow-up in accordance with the Fund-specific rules”. Given that the key elements of Interreg for 2014-2020 are concentration, simplification and results orientation, evaluation is gaining more and more importance.

Also in the proposal for 2021-2027 programming period Common Provisions Regulation (2018/0196), the importance of evaluation is confirmed in article 39, stating that “(1) The managing authority shall carry out evaluations of the programme. Each evaluation shall assess the programme's effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value with the aim to improve the quality of the design and implementation of programmes. (2) In addition, the managing authority shall carry out an evaluation for each programme to assess its impact”.

DG Regio published guidelines on how to monitor and evaluate Interreg programmes for 2014-2020 Programmes. A thorough monitoring process supports a good evaluation exercise, and programmes with a clear identification of needs and changes to achieve, defining well-selected indicators, are well prepared for evaluations. Output and result indicators have been set up and are monitored to measure Programme results. While result indicators can measure change, they cannot capture the amount to which the programme has contributed to that change, i.e. the contribution defined as impact. Each Interreg Programme defined its priorities and objectives and, along with them, a number of indicators allowing for the continuous monitoring and eventually the evaluation of the different actions towards the targets set. To support this, managing authorities had to prepare and submit an evaluation plan, outlining the foreseen evaluations of the programme and aimed at improving the quality of evaluations carried out during the programming period (Interact, 2015b).

Learning, accountability, and the production of useful information for future steering are the end-scopes of the evaluation process. Eventually, the evaluation of the programmes shall allow to assess their progress as well as their impact on territorial cooperation and regional development. It aims to provide evidence about the efficiency and effectiveness of a public policy intervention and advice about how to improve it in the future.

While the respect of regulation, and accountability to national and EU-level funders are the immediate reasons for Programmes to pursue evaluation exercises, the learning achieved from the evaluation



experience is the most valuable outcome of an evaluation, so as to improve practices in the next programming period, or counteract weaknesses in the current one. Through this learning experience, evaluations can demonstrate better the results and value of Interreg programmes.

Challenges when evaluating Interreg programmes

The evaluation of Interreg programmes does not come without challenges. Demonstrating the results and value of Interreg may be an onerous exercise from both the programme's, as well as the evaluators' perspective.

First challenges appear even before the actual evaluation, where a number of steps need to be followed and taken into account beforehand. These concern a good planning and a solid development of an intervention logic, which are necessary for supporting the evaluation. Developing clear definitions and measures is a prerequisite to be taken into account from the beginning of the programming period and the programme drafting. When developing the indicators, clear definitions and measurements need to be in place. This is also linked with the selection criteria for the projects, i.e. the criteria need to reflect what the programme wants to achieve through its projects. The clearer the definitions, indicators and measurements are from the beginning, the more straightforward will be the evaluation work.

Although the evaluation process may seem simple, it requires a continuous effort from the programme bodies to go through its different steps and requirements. Managing authorities' staff need to establish routines in the collection of data and monitoring process early enough and develop a monitoring system. At the same time, this also requires work from the evaluators to identify and coordinate the right methods to best develop an objective assessment of the impacts of the programmes.

Furthermore, the portfolio of projects of each Interreg programme is heterogeneous. Most projects are small-scale and diverse in nature and thematic focus. Given that the main aim of the set of programmes is cooperation on topics that are relevant to the regional context, projects are often not exactly fitting into the scheme of thematic objectives, priority axes and specific objectives, requiring quite an amount of tailoring on the programme's side, which reflects in challenges for the evaluators.

Due to the peculiar characteristics of the programmes, target groups as well as beneficiaries are also diverse in nature and distributed across large territories spanning across different administrative and cultural backgrounds and capacities.

Challenges are also observed when it comes to the methods chosen and used for the evaluation. As mentioned above, evaluations strive to identify the impact of programmes, or in other words the contribution that programmes give on the changes observed. To quantify impact, the most accurate method would be to adopt a counterfactual approach, statistically analysing the differences in indicators between populations targeted by the programme and those not targeted. However, the particularly complex features of the analysis make it challenging to adopt a counterfactual approach to the evaluation: sampling projects that are representative would require sample sizes out of the scope of evaluation exercises for this kind of programmes.

For Interreg, theory-based impact evaluation approaches are used instead. This entails a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including desk research of relevant programme documents, surveys directed to the different target groups, interviews with the programme bodies and other stakeholders, focus groups, case studies. These methods are tailor-made to each programme's objectives and needs and allow to collect information from different perspectives. Through these



methods, evaluators are able to analyse quantitative aspects of both internal programme operation and changes in indicators in the target territories. The qualitative analysis is then used to draw conclusions on the possible causal relation between the programme’s activities and the observed changes. Specific challenges are related to showing impacts and added value on territorial cooperation, quality of life, economic development or administrative capacity and governance mechanisms.

Keeping these challenges in mind, programmes define their intervention logic based on what they want to achieve in terms of changes, and therefore, of their impact. Programmes have taken different approaches with respect to the selection of indicators that evaluators can use as part of the information for programme evaluation exercises. The different approaches depend on different conceptions and understandings of the theories of change and intervention logics underlining the programmes.

Examples from the Interreg North West Europe programme 2014-2020 and the Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme 2014-2020 are given below. Within the overall requirements of the European Commission to define the impact of ERDF programmes in 2014-2020 in general, and of Interreg programmes in particular, the Programmes use two different approaches to define their overall results and to measure impact on the territory.

Interreg North West Europe Programme

The Interreg North West Europe (NWE) programme is an example of an Interreg programme that defined its impact as a direct contribution to the socio-economic change in the territory.

The programme’s intervention logic

From the beginning, the Interreg NWE programme for 2014-2020 was aware that it would be difficult to define and measure its impact on the north-western European territory. The programme highlights that *“the Programme cannot address all specific transnational development needs as presented in the overall ambition. Firstly, the Programme has limited resource and financial capacity. Secondly, there is an increased need to ensure the generation of results in the strategic fields of choice”* (Interreg North-West Europe, 2015). The programme conceives its contribution as having the potential to support specific outputs in the target fields, as the focus of each investment priority lies on the implementation of actions and not on exchange of knowledge and experience. Since the programme is largely oriented towards innovation, the concept is based on supporting innovation that is close to the market (for instance by supporting pilot projects or “proofs of concept”). Here the impact is implicitly placed on the subsequent spontaneous diffusion of innovation starting from pilot actions. All financed projects must ensure the component of transnational cooperation, however the main aim is not the cooperation itself, but rather the actual outcomes of the projects.

Table 1 Interreg NWE – Specific objectives and result indicators

Specific objectives	Result indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enhance innovation performance of enterprises throughout NWE regions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Degree of SME involvement in collaboration with other institutions (including R&D)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To facilitate the implementation of low-carbon, energy and climate protection strategies to reduce GHG emissions in NWE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectiveness of the NWE public sector organisations in the implementation of low carbon strategies (% of the country urban population with existing low carbon strategies)



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To facilitate the uptake of low carbon technologies, products, processes and services in sectors with high energy saving potential, to reduce GHG emissions in NWE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status of conditions for low carbon technology deployment in NWE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To facilitate the implementation of transnational low-carbon solutions in transport systems to reduce GHG-emissions in NWE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status of competences of the transport sector in the use of low carbon solutions in the transport systems (% of transport companies amongst all EMAS registered enterprises)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To optimise (re)use of material and natural resources in NWE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status of competences in the resource intensive sectors in NWE for eco-innovation diffusion (Eco-innovation activities in the Eco-Innovation Scoreboard)

Source: *Interreg NWE 2014-2020 Cooperation Programme, 2015.*

The result indicators reflect the programme's intervention logic by relating each specific objective to a quantitative result indicator, based on statistical data. It is interesting to note how the result indicators for North West Europe are as much as possible based on countable items relating directly to the desired outcomes, showing the programme's understanding of its theory of change as a relation between programme-supported interventions and the desired effects in the target area.

Approach to measure impact

In the 2014-2020 programming period, a greater focus ensuring result orientation was required to make results measurable and visible and to generate a greater impact (Interreg North-West Europe, 2015), with respect to the previous programming period.

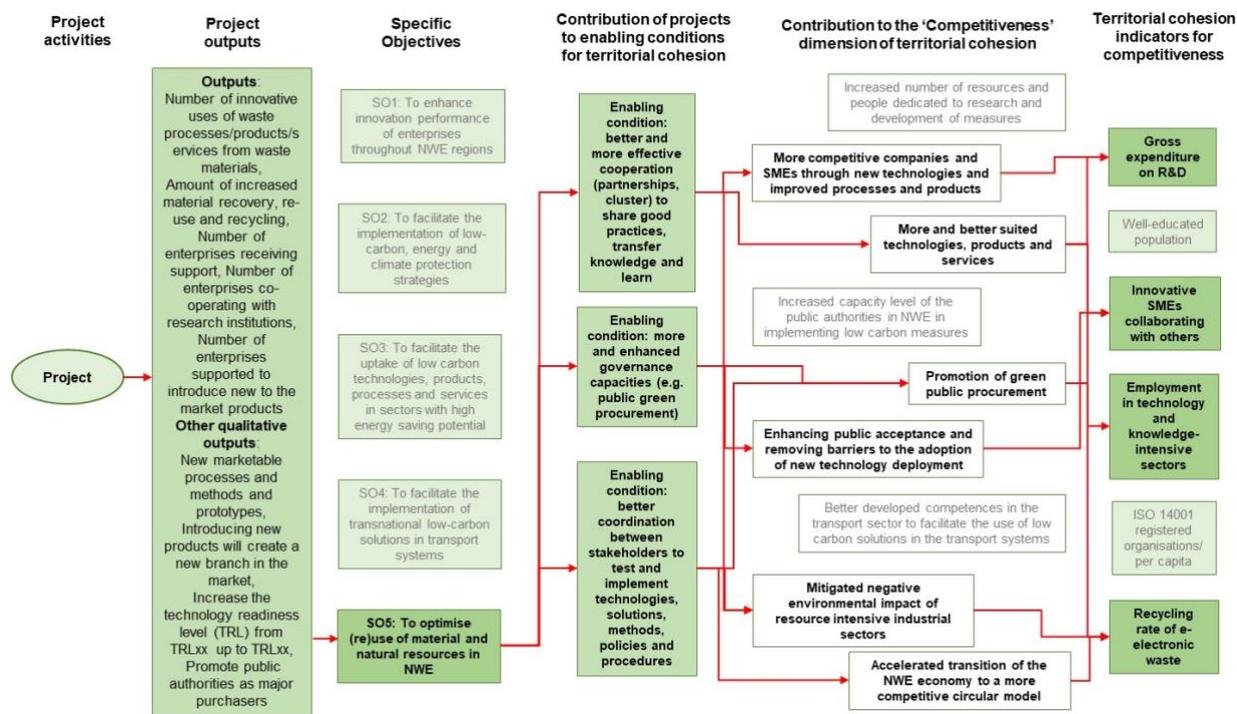
Initially, the programme defined a limited number of result indicators, however being aware that it would be difficult to show the diverse results of the programme with only the selected result indicators. The vision of the programme bodies was to adopt a methodology that would be able to show the overall impact on territorial cohesion in North-West Europe. That is why in 2017 the programme commissioned a study to elaborate a methodological approach and a baseline for several cohesion-related indicators (Interreg North-West Europe, 2017).

Based on a theory-based evaluation approach, this report defined a wider indicator system for the NWE Programme contributing to two dimensions of territorial cohesion, namely 'competitiveness' and 'balanced development', including a) a set of context indicators including baselines and a set of indicators reflecting the expected contribution of North-West Europe to b) the strategic areas of importance/interest for the Programme (ETC variables or cohesion enablers), and c) a framework of expected storylines. In total, 6 indicators reflecting the 'competitiveness' dimension and 12 for 'balanced development' were identified, establishing their baseline value at the beginning of the programme period. As a tool to define the contribution of the Programme to these indicators, a storyline concept was developed, based on an approach by Böhme and Gløersen (Böhme & Gløersen, 2011). To connect the (geographically limited) projects and their results with the general cohesion indicators, the notion of 'enabling conditions' (increased capacities, better cooperation and better coordination) was used.

It has to be taken into account that this was only an ex-ante exercise to prepare the ground for the final impact assessment of the programme, planned for 2020.



Figure 1 Example of a storyline to show the contribution of a project to 'competitiveness'



Source: Interreg North-West Europe, 2017

This approach to evaluate the impact of the Interreg programme builds on the contribution analysis method (Mayne, 2012). It is thought to open up the black box of impact generation of the Interreg programme and to show how different aspects of territorial cohesion are addressed by different projects.

The challenges for evaluation and updating the situation of the result indicators

In 2018, the programme carried out its operational mid-term evaluation. It included an early test assessment of the Programme’s contribution to territorial cohesion, using the approach presented above.

The approach was deemed useful in showing the ‘logic link’ between projects and different dimensions of territorial cohesion, by avoiding too simplistic views on the most ‘famous’ indicators (e.g. jobs and income). However, also the following shortcomings and challenges were identified:

- This approach shows mainly the ‘change in the territory’ and the ‘potential contribution’ to it, using the logic model and the storyline. However, it will be difficult to determine the ‘real contribution’, even after the programme life, due to a very limited size of the impact on each indicator. Quantification of the impact can only be estimated.
- The analysis identified a deficit in available regional statistical data, in particular in the areas of environmental protection, sustainable mobility, GHG emissions, as well as resource and material efficiency. There is a concrete need for more regionalised data at NUTS2 and NUTS3 level, in order to be able to better analyse and evaluate regional disparities in these fields. The lack of regionalised data drives the Programme to a bias towards the territorial objective of competitiveness, as there are more related indicators available, e.g. on jobs, innovation, R&D.



- With regard to the enabling conditions (cooperation, capacities, knowledge), it is difficult to find objective and measurable indicators to analyse them. Here, additional tools such as surveys or case studies, complementing the statistical data review, are necessary.

To sum up, the approach is a good basis to re-construct a detailed intervention logic. Hopefully, this preparatory work on defining storylines and detailed impact pathways for territorial cohesion will help to look for evidence of causality during the impact assessment. This is expected to go beyond the evaluation of what has happened, and consider why something has occurred.

Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme

The evaluation of the Interreg Baltic Sea Region (BSR) programme is an example of an Interreg programme defining its impact as a contribution to the building of relevant capacities in institutions and all relevant stakeholders. This approach allows for a more realistic and flexible impact measurement, with the risk, though, of being ‘hazy’ and unclear for the implementation.

The programme’s intervention logic

In the Interreg BSR Programme, the starting point is the consideration that the financial resources of the programme are limited, especially compared to national and regional cohesion programmes, and thus have limited possibility to have a direct impact on socioeconomic and territorial objectives. This leads to a different understanding of programme impact, compared to the Interreg NWE programme. The programme document indicates that “*the programme develops a leverage effect on regional development by investing in the institutional capacities of the programme’s target groups*”, by enhancing institutional knowledge, governance structures and organisational set-up, the use of human resources, the ability to attract new financial resources, and the capability to work in a transnational environment. According to the Programme, “*the most significant impact of the Programme in the region is its contribution to the institutional capacity building*” (Interreg Baltic Sea Region, 2014), therefore indicating how the Programme objectives are foreseen to be reached through the activity of institutions in the area, rather than directly.

Such understanding of the programme’s theory of change is reflected in the selection of specific objectives and result indicators, a few of which are presented in the table below.

Table 2 Interreg BSR – Specific objectives and result indicators

Specific objectives in Priority Axis 1	Result indicators of Priority Axis 1
‘Research and innovation infrastructures’: To enhance market uptake of innovation based on improved capacity of research and innovation infrastructures and their users	Capacity of research and innovation infrastructures to implement measures to increase the market uptake of innovation
‘Smart specialisation’: To enhance growth opportunities based on increased capacity of innovation actors to apply smart specialisation approach	Capacity of innovation actors (innovation intermediaries, authorities, research institutions, enterprises) to implement smart specialisation approaches



Specific objectives in Priority Axis 1	Result indicators of Priority Axis 1
'Non-technological innovation': To advance the Baltic Sea Region performance in non-technological innovation based on increased capacity of innovation actors	Capacity of innovation actors (innovation intermediaries, authorities, research institutions, enterprises) to implement measures to increase uptake of non-technological innovation

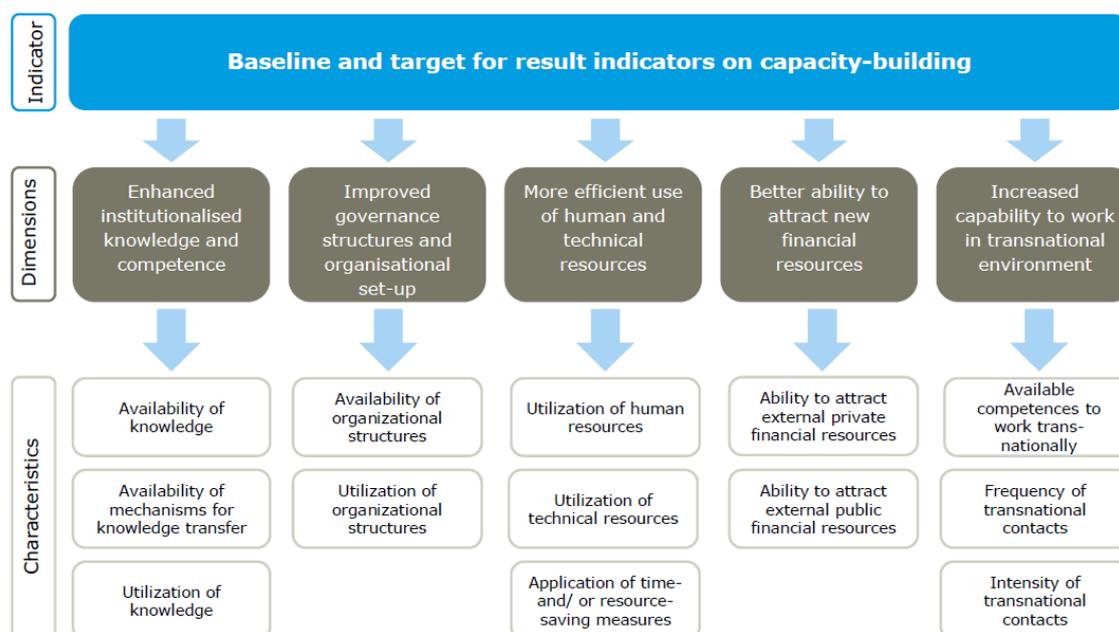
Source: *Interreg Baltic Sea Region, 2018*

The focus, as clearly emerging from the choice of result indicators, is put on the ability of the programme's activities to generate capacity in its target groups. This is reflected also in the name of some priority axes such as "Capacity for innovation", rather than "innovation" as found in the Interreg North West Europe Programme and many others.

Approach to measure impact

For the monitoring of institutional capacity in the region, five dimensions of institutional capacity were defined in the original study that established baseline values for all Specific Objectives of the Programme in 2015. Each of the five dimensions was operationalised further with a different set of characteristics.

Figure 2 Dimensions and characteristics of capacity-related result indicators (Interreg BSR)



Source: *Interreg Baltic Sea Region, 2018*.

In order to use the elaborated indicators as an effective instrument to monitor changes in the programme region, it was decided that the situation on institutional capacity needs to be captured at the beginning, mid-term and at the end of the funding period. In 2014/2015, qualitative baseline and target values for result indicators were set according to a five-point scale developed in an external evaluation in 2014-2015 in order to ensure comparability of results over the course of the funding period. 4 The scale ranges from 'no capacity' (1) to 'full capacity' (5).



In order to define baselines and targets, a wide range of thematic experts of the Baltic Sea region were involved. The experts represented the thematic fields and participating countries in the Programme. They were identified by the MC and were familiar with the target group(s) in their country and their thematic field without being directly involved in funded projects.

The methodology to obtain the experts' assessment and opinion on the situation of capacity indicators, both for the baseline study¹ and for the up-date measurement in 2018², was based on online surveys, supplemented by interviews to reflect on the results of the survey and fill remaining gaps. Certain methodological coherence was necessary to achieve comparability and a certain level of scientific robustness.

The challenges for evaluation and updating the situation of the result indicators

The approach to assess institutional capacities with the help of thematic experts and the aggregation of their estimation of capacities in their field has proved to be useful and produces meaningful results.

However, the methodology still presents some limitations and challenges that can be partially solved through methodological adjustments (e.g. working with a larger database of thematic experts, planning pre-survey interviews to test the questionnaire and to identify relevant external influence factors, adding questions on the possible contribution from the BSR programme).

One major drawback remains even after quantification and aggregation of capacity values – the qualitative character of the approach and the results, limiting the comparability with other programmes or with larger national or EU-wide benchmarks. At least, unless the same methodology is used to evaluate all programmes.

Overall, the methodology is an interesting approach to establish a meaningful measurement tool characterizing situation in the BSR, in addition to other indicators or variables. The tool seems to have an important potential that has not been fully exploited yet. However, it still remains to be seen how far it will be able to demonstrate the contribution from the programme to the observed changes. Possibly, complementary methods, such as contribution analysis, might be required.

Pros and Cons of the two approaches

The two examples show how the definition of impact varies and how the result indicators reflect the different conception of impact that the programmes choose. The different notions of impact reflect different “theories of change” of the programmes, and these have to be kept into account for the design of the evaluation approaches.

Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, if we consider not only the design but also the practical applicability during evaluations (see Figure 3).

Both approaches are able to open the black box and generate important information on the causal links between Interreg projects, programmes and expected results in the territory.

In general, it remains difficult to measure the territorial effects of transnational cooperation. Main methodological challenges for both approaches are: 1) the time lag between the programme and any

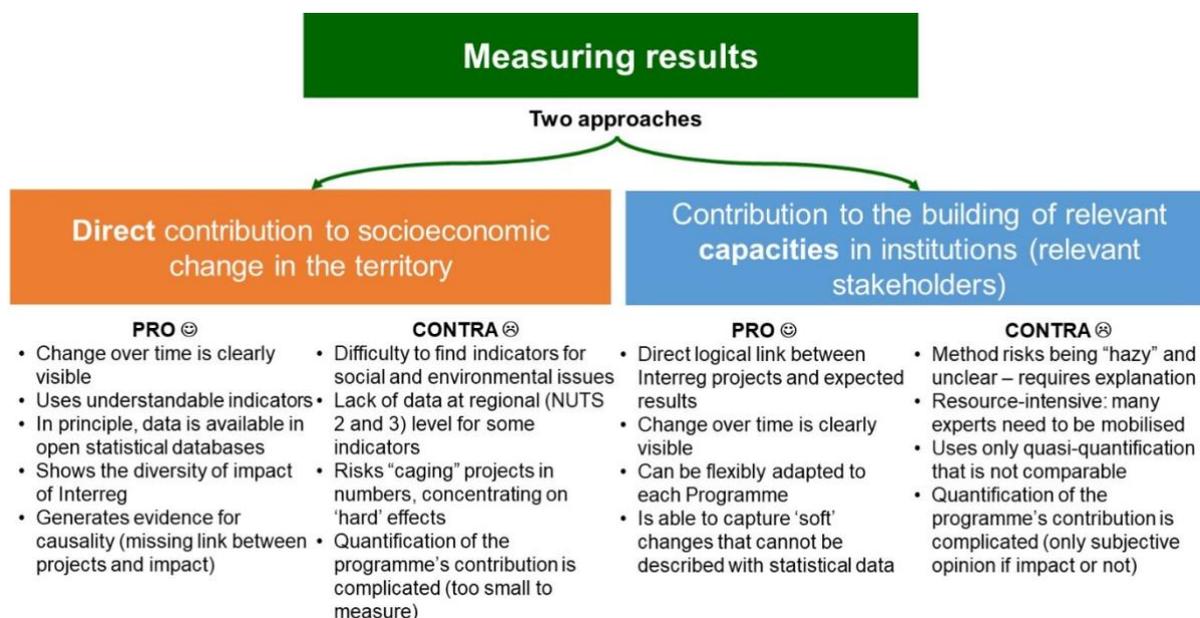
¹ The baseline study was based on 72 responses to the survey and on 11 additional interviews.

² For the 2018 study 115 experts were invited to take part with a 47% response rate. 13 in-depth Interviews to 13 experts were carried out in order to gain background knowledge on the situation of capacities in the different thematic fields.



possibly induced changes, 2) the attribution/contribution problem that might be solved with adequate methods to show also small and 'soft'/intangible impacts.

Figure 3 Two approaches to evaluate results of Interreg programmes



Source: Own elaboration based on (Salvatori, 2018).

With an eye to Interreg evaluations post 2020: The tricks of the trade

Lessons learnt from the current programmes are particularly interesting and can be helpful, facing the new Cohesion Policy programming period 2021-2027.

Specific features of transnational cooperation programmes require specific approaches to evaluation, including intervention logics with relevant indicators, for this kind of Interreg programmes. Ideally, in the next programming period these approaches and the relevant elements such as the indicator system will be harmonised as far as possible and common for all transnational Interreg programmes. This would avoid to re-invent the wheel several times and facilitate more comparability and aggregation between all transnational Interreg programmes.

To facilitate measurement and evaluation of transnational cooperation programmes, several conditions need to be met:

- **Multi-dimensional objectives:** The programmes have thematic objectives, but within these themes – due to their limited size – the added value compared to other public interventions is on cooperation, governance capacities and innovative public policy approaches. Result frameworks need to consider both indirect and direct dimensions of objectives.
- **Add a multi-level perspective:** There are two action levels: project and programme. While projects usually rely on a multi-actor governance system (local, regional, national and/or transnational, triple helix etc.), programme level partnerships tend to be more limited in kind. At project and at programme level, there will be different outputs and results. The intervention logic has to consider both levels and should not mix them.



- **Measure the impact of projects to learn more about the impact of programmes:** Even if project might also have ‘hard results’, most outcomes and effects will be soft or anecdotal, e.g. tools, services, strategies, manuals, solutions, pilot actions. To measure final results, it will be necessary to monitor and evaluate the (expected) use of these ‘soft results’ by relevant target groups and their impact in relevant policy-making areas. This would require an adequate methodological framework and baseline.
- **Open up to environmental and social effects:** transnational programmes are historically bound to their economic impact. However, they have an important pioneering role in environmental and social areas that should be monitored through adequate indicators.
- **Use non-linear impact systems:** In real life, impact does not occur in a linear way. It instead unfolds in complex and systemic impact systems. To better measure their impacts, Interreg programmes should develop impact systems for their different priority areas.
- **Learn from experience:** A meta-evaluation of evaluations of 2014-2020 Interreg programmes would help to systematically identify good practices in monitoring and evaluation and to structure lessons learnt.

With an eye to the future, some actions combining suggestions from both programme approaches discussed in this paper could be taken on board at a European Union -wide level. In short, these regard:

- ⇒ **Defining common result indicators for Interreg.** The development of common result indicators for Interreg would allow for a greater harmonisation of findings and a smoother collection of available information and sources. At the same time, having common result indicators for the Interreg programmes across the European Union would facilitate the comparison among programmes, giving the possibility of evaluating eventually the impact of Interreg in the regional development of the whole European Union.
- ⇒ **Developing a common methodology for baseline setting, or establishing common baseline values.** Such an approach would allow the European Commission of a somewhat “light” counterfactual approach which collects more information on the status quo, although not using advanced statistical methods that would be too burdensome.
- ⇒ **Role of a European Union programme as methodology support.** Evaluations are a synthesised and complex processes. Having support from an existing European Union programme, new approaches, or trainings would only be of benefit for streamlining evaluation activities across European Union.



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