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Case-based Impact Evaluation of the Interact Programme 2014-2020



Final Report

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List of abbreviations

CBC	Cross-border cooperation
CLLD	Community-led local development
EC	European Commission
EGTC	European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation
eMS	Electronic monitoring system
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
EPRC	European Policy Research Centre
FG	Focus group
HIT	Harmonised Implementation Tools
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IRC	Interregional cooperation
ITI	Integrated Territorial Investment
JS	Joint Secretariat
MA	Managing Authority
MRS	Macroregional strategy
MS	Member State
TNC	Transnational cooperation
TO	Thematic objective

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Interact programme has a distinct role in reinforcing the effectiveness of cohesion policy by promoting exchange of experience and best practice in relation to the implementation of cooperation programmes and actions. For the 2014-2020 period Interact's overall objective is broken down into three programme-specific objectives to improve: i) the management and control capacity of Interreg programmes; ii) Interreg capacity in capturing and communicating programme results; and iii) cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches. The Impact Evaluation of the Interact programme assesses the effect of Interact's services on Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders, particularly macro-regional strategy actors. It aims to answer "*How has Interact contributed to supporting Interreg programmes, and in the case of macro-regional strategies other relevant stakeholders, and to improving/changing practices?*" The evaluation is based on case studies of five specific Interact projects:

- 1) Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT);
- 2) Electronic monitoring system (eMS);
- 3) keep.eu;
- 4) Harmonised Interreg branding; and
- 5) Support to the implementation of macro-regional strategies.

Specifically, the evaluation establishes how the products and services of the selected projects are used by target groups and what effect their use has on strengthening management capacities, changing organisational culture and management practices and, related, their efficiency and effectiveness. The methodology for the implementation of the impact evaluation is based on theory-of-change¹ and case-based approaches, as defined in the Interact programme's evaluation plan. The methodological approach builds on a mix of different data gathering, evaluation and visualisation methods tailored to the needs of each of the five main evaluated projects and to the availability of data from Interact sources. Methods used include surveys, in-depth interviews and focus group meetings. By mixing qualitative (focus groups, interviews) and quantitative (survey) methods the constraints of both are mitigated.

The evaluation notes 'conditioning factors' which can influence the level change that is possible, the complex management structures and decision-making in Interreg programmes; the diversity of Interact's target group; the strategic sensitivity of some areas of intervention; the time needed for impacts to develop (the 'seeds' of Interact's work in one programming period are only 'harvested' in the following period); limitations to what can be achieved lined to staff and financial resources, and innovation in involves an element of trial and error.

Despite these challenges and tensions, **this evaluation shows there are positive results and impacts. The evaluation finds sound evidence that the five Interact projects generated immediate results, in terms of changed practices in programme authorities and cultures ('mindsets') and improved systems and tools. Further, the case studies also demonstrate that Interact has an impact on programmes that goes beyond capacity building. There is sound evidence that the selected services have tangible effects on the efficiency and effectiveness of**

¹ DG Regio (2015) *Monitoring of European Cohesion Policy (ERDF, ESF and CF), Guidance Document on Evaluation Plans. Terms of Reference for Impact Evaluations, Guidance on Quality Management of External Evaluations*, CEC, DG Regio, February 2015

programme delivery, on programmes' resilience to change, and also on the programmes' stakeholders, in particular applicants/beneficiaries.

Main outcomes of the case-based impact evaluation

1.) Impact of the Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT) - Around 57 Programmes, i.e. 66 percent of CBC, TNC, IRC and IPA CBC programmes, are using the Harmonised Implementation Tools to at least some extent.² There are differences in the intensity of use between strands: 35 out of 60 (58 percent) cross-border programmes, 12 out of 15 (80 percent) transnational programmes, 2 out of 4 (50 percent)³ interregional programmes, and 8 out of 10 (80 percent) IPA CBC programmes are using HIT to various degrees. HIT also has a reach beyond the programmes which actively participated in its development: out of the 46 programmes that did not participate in the HIT development, 26 (9 of which have signed the eMS licence) are using HIT. Another nine programmes have declared that HIT has served them as inspiration. The use of HIT has produced a number of immediate results.

Result	Observation
Changes to structures and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmonised templates and guidance helped develop and shape programme management provisions and processes. • HIT fosters peer learning and self-reflection in programme bodies, which contributed to a simplification of programme processes and a greater focus on reducing the administrative burden for applicants/beneficiaries. • HIT facilitates a common basis for discussion and exchange on programme management processes beyond HIT and prepared the ground for a number of ensuing harmonisation efforts.
Changes to staff skills and organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIT strengthens the ties between programmes and builds confidence in programmes that harmonisation is feasible and capacities in how to approach it. • HIT affects organisational culture in programmes in terms of capacity to innovate, agility to adapt to change and readiness to compromise. • HIT supports a shift towards greater focus on simplification for applicants/beneficiaries.
Changes to systems and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIT supplies programmes with readily-available harmonised implementation tools and enabled the development of a community monitoring system. • HIT are a useful, complete, and coherent set of programme templates, checklists and auxiliary documents

The evaluation provides evidence that HIT has benefitted programme authorities and applicant/beneficiaries. HIT has helped increase the efficiency and effectiveness of programme management in a substantial number of programmes. It enabled the development of the eMS, and crucially led to a more uniform interpretation of regulatory requirements across programmes, increasing legal assurance. For applicants and beneficiaries, it has positively affected the efficiency and effectiveness of applying for project funding and implementing a project, especially for those working in multiple programmes.

² This figure is based on the replies to the HIT surveys carried out in 2015 and 2018 as well as the statistics on the use of electronic monitoring system (eMS).

³ The two interregional programmes using HIT (at least to some extent) are Interreg Europe and the ESPON Programme.

Impact	Observation
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HIT offers programmes off-the-shelf implementation tools in line with EU regulations and guidance, sparing them from having to develop tools on their own. HIT achieves simplification for actors working in multiple programmes.
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HIT increases legal certainty for programme authorities due to the large number of HIT adopters and the more harmonised interpretation of regulatory requirements. HIT is a building block in the development of a common Interreg brand identity, contributing to the awareness of Interreg and its achievements. HIT fully incorporates the focus on results and support programme performance through results delivery.
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programmes jointly address challenges arising from a changing regulatory environment.

Based on the analysis, a number of recommendations for the future are made:

- *Greater focus on planning:* The development next generation of HITs should draw on the experience from the past HIT development (and other harmonisation initiatives) and be based on a greater degree of planning, including an indicative timeline and interim targets.
- *Greater focus on simplification of tools:* There is room to make the tools more user-friendly and less redundant.
- *Improved guidance and documentation:* More attention should be paid to documenting the process and developing guidance to build institutional memory.
- *Better integration of HIT and eMS development:* In the future, there needs to be a better coordination between HIT and eMS and each project's timeline.
- *Appropriate resource allocation:* Given the high added value of HIT for programmes and importance of a timely delivery for the development of eMS, Interact is advised to allocate appropriate resources to the development of the next HIT package.
- *Agreement on the degree of harmonisation needed:* A meaningful approach to this discussion would be to start with clarifying what the main objective/s of harmonisation is/are and use these as yardstick/s when weighing ambitions for greater harmonisation against programmes' wishes and need for flexibility.
- *Involvement of all strands and IPA CBC on equal footing:* Having separate sets of templates for TNC and CBC reduces the potential benefit of harmonisation for applicants, beneficiaries and controllers and increase the number of optional elements that had to be included in the eMS and should therefore be avoided. Given that IPA CBC programmes have shown a lot of interest in HIT, they should be involved from the start.

2.) Impact of the electronic monitoring system (eMS) - 34 Interreg programmes have signed the eMS license agreement, representing 38 percent of all cross-border, transnational, interregional and IPA CBC programmes.⁴ The adoption level per programme strand is nearly the same across all strands. The license to use the eMS was also signed by three ENI Programmes, despite considerable

⁴ Note that not all programmes having signed the licence agreement are also actively using eMS as programme monitoring system. To Interact's knowledge, around 34 programmes, including ENI, are actively using eMS.

differences in regulatory requirements between Interreg and ENI programmes. The use of eMS has produced a number of immediate results.

Result	Observation
Changes to structures and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS required programmes to rethink and redesign management processes and structures. 39 percent of programmes using eMS say that eMS has led to a simplification of programme processes.
Changes to staff skills and organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS significantly contributed to community building and a culture of mutual support and sharing. eMS has positively influenced the capacity to innovate, organisational flexibility and readiness for accepting and managing change. eMS increases transparency
Changes to systems and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS is a solid system with a well-designed core Procedures based almost fully on electronic data processing and transmission.

Programmes using eMS have a free of charge, high-end software. Evidence from surveys, focus group and interviews shows that eMS has resulted in resource savings and increased efficiency and effectiveness of programme management. For applicants and beneficiaries, it positively affects the efficiency and effectiveness of applying for project funding and implementing a project.

Impact	Observation
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS saves costs as software development was procured and managed by Interact. eMS saves staff resources thanks to increased efficiency in programme management as a result of electronic data management eMS simplifies the application/reporting process
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS facilitates communication between programme authorities and improves transparency. This enhances accountability. eMS promotes legal certainty for programmes. eMS reduces errors eMS has positive effects on programme external communication as it enables the automatic export of data for keep.eu, automatic update of the programme website, and contributes to Interreg being perceived as a family of programmes.
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS was a big change in programmes introducing the system and required them to adopt a proactive approach to change management.

Based on the analysis, a number of recommendations for the future are made:

- Project management structure proved efficient & effective, but communication could be further improved:* The development of eMS by means of a core group and observer group of programmes was efficient. However, the effectiveness of the structure hinges upon the good communication between core group and observer group so that the latter feels sufficiently involved

- *Improve communication with the eMS user group:* There is a need to provide more regular status updates and outlook, give personalised feedback on received comments/suggestions, and provide more advance information before user group meetings.
- *Appropriate resources (incl. for communication):* Resources allocated to the project proved o low given the number of programmes using the system. The high tangible impact of eMS and the high financial risk involved justifies more staff resources.
- *Capitalise on experience gained:* It is anticipated, that time spent on developing eMS for the next programme period will be lower, due to the scope to draw on experience. Thorough feedback on the current system should be gathered before initiating the development of the next eMS.
- *Develop additional functionalities and services, and improve the user-friendliness of the system:* There is the potential for enhancing the user-friendliness of the eMS interface and developing additional functionalities (e.g. linking eMS with the Commission’s single beneficiary passport system).
- *Introduced automatic testing:* eMS suffered from many bugs during the development process. Automatic testing is a major quality assurance measure and should be implemented from the beginning for the new software.
- *Periodic training sessions & DG REGIO information campaign:* Lack of training was described as a major stumbling block to the smooth implementation and use of eMS. Interact could offer periodic (e-)training sessions. For DG REGIO desk officers to more actively promote the use of eMS among their programmes, they need to receive more information on eMS and its benefits.
- *Communicate eMS as good practice:* Better communicating the joint achievement would instil a sense of pride in the eMS user community and boost motivation.

3.) Impact of keep.eu - Use of the keep.eu database has increased significantly in recent years. Between 2012 and 2018, the number of keep.eu users increased almost fourfold (11,530 users – 45,236 users).⁵ Keep.eu has produced a number of immediate results.

Result	Observation
Changes to structures and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to pre-processed information has changed how some implementation tasks are carried out. • Keep.eu allows benchmarking and looking beyond a single programme
Changes to staff skills and organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep.eu helps build institutional/programme memory • Keep.eu builds knowledge and know-how in project promoters who can use the resource to get ideas or find potential project partners.
Changes to systems and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a valuable resource supporting communication and dissemination activities • Keep.eu is the only resource that allows looking beyond single programmes for thematic/territorial analysis.

Keep.eu has a combined impact on the efficiency, effectiveness and resilience of programme. In terms of the wider group of programme stakeholders, there is evidence that keep.eu has contributed to capitalisation efforts and supports (potential) project partners in their search for good practice and inspiration. In particular, keep.eu is increasingly emerging as a tool that is boosting programme and policy effectiveness, supporting effective decision making on project funding, supporting the

⁵ Figures from Google Analytics.

development and pursuit of synergies and territorial collaboration, contributing to evaluation activities and, in particular, promoting communication and dissemination. The resource is also playing an important role in increasing the profile, visibility and understanding of Interreg programmes and the projects they fund.

Impact	Observation
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keep.eu is delivering ways for various stakeholder organisations to save time and resource across a range of activities.
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep.eu supports and informs programme and project decision making. • Keep.eu is a resource for project partners/potential partners to look at good practice, develop project ideas etc. • Keep.eu supports evidence based strategic planning. • Keep.eu provides a comparative perspective for benchmarking and improving performance of programmes. • Keep.eu is a resource to support building synergies and collaboration, with a view to project development or capitalisation. • Keep.eu facilitates the territorial view of participation and engagement • The link between keep.eu and eMS has positive effects on programme external communication
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keep.eu is a means of retaining institutional memory and reinforcing the idea of a 'community'/bigger picture around territorial cooperation.

Based on the analysis, a number of recommendations for the future are made:

- *Continue to improve data coverage:* Despite significant improvements in data quality, the comprehensiveness and completeness of the database remains a key issue.
- *Connections between keep.eu with eMS:* As both keep.eu and eMS develop and evolve, maintaining and continuing to develop mutually beneficial links between the systems will strengthen both.
- *Develop new tools/facilities to support programme management:* Projects and programmes face increasing demands on reporting on results and impact.. Keep.eu could play a key role in this area and should be promoted as capitalisation tool.
- *Refinements to website:* Continue to improve the visibility and usability of the web-site and resources on it.
- *Continue to disseminate and publicise the role/value of keep.eu:* Reinforce clear communication of the vision of what keep.eu is for. Further coordination and collaboration on future developments of other platforms, or better/more visibly connecting keep.eu into the wider 'family' of information resources on territorial cooperation programmes and vice versa.
- *Improve perception issues and lack of awareness:* Developing an even stronger identity with greater visual coherence with Interreg could be valuable.

4.) Impact of harmonised Interreg branding - 78 percent of programmes, cross-border, transnational, interregional strand and IPA programmes, have adopted the harmonised Interreg logo. The adoption rate is highest among IPA programmes, which have all adopted the harmonised branding, and lowest in the interregional cooperation strand where 2 out of the 4 programmes have adopted the harmonised branding. The harmonised Interreg branding has produced a number of immediate results.

Result	Observation
Changes to structures and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change away from dealing with corporate branding in isolation to dealing with it collaboratively • Harmonised Interreg branding expanded cooperation into other communication areas.
Changes to staff skills and organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-building among Interreg communication managers • Process boosted confidence and built capacities for initiating and organising joint communication activities
Changes to systems and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich resource of branding-related material and contribution to innovation in project communication tools

There is sound evidence that the harmonisation of the Interreg branding had a wider positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of programme implementation and the territorial cooperation policy as a whole.

Impact	Observation
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Savings in terms of time, money and staff due to the fact that the branding was centrally procured and paid by Interact. • Resource savings and simplification for projects working in programmes which introduced the use of standard project logo templates and/or centrally hosted project websites.
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-building among Interreg communication managers • Boosted confidence and built capacities in programmes for initiating and organising joint communication activities.
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building capacity for programmes work together as proactive promoters of change. Capacities in programmes on how to initiate and manage joint communication efforts were enhanced as a result.

Based on the analysis, a number of recommendations for the future are made:

- *Provide greater support grass-root level initiatives:* The harmonised branding is essentially a grass-route initiative by Interreg programmes, but Interact played key role in its operationalisation and implementation. This approach can be carried forward in the future.
- *Improve project management:* In the future, a more systematic approach with a clear timeline and planned milestones would be preferable.
- *Find a good balance between flexibility and harmonisation:* It is important to weigh ambitions for greater harmonisation against programmes' wishes and need for flexibility which also enhances the satisfaction with and uptake of the final product, without losing sight of the overall objective of harmonisation, which should be the ultimate yardstick.

- *Communicate the flexibility in using the branding:* Possibilities to adapt the logo need to be better communicated, while at the same time preserving the main look and feel of the harmonised logo.
- *Increase the usability of the logo:* Changes in EU publicity requirements will make adaptations to the logo necessary. Careful modifications to the logo/s should be made to increase its usability following comments from programmes.
- *Put the branding to use in joint communication activities:* There is a wide-spread wish among programmes to focus on the opportunities that a harmonised brand provides for joint communication activities.

5.) Impact of the support to macro-regional strategies (MRS) - The survey targeting MRS stakeholder groups carried out as part of the impact evaluation showed high levels of awareness of Interact's work, with around 70% of respondents stating that they are aware of Interact's support activities, 78% of which have also made use of the resource. The support to MRS has produced a number of immediate results.

Result	Observation
Changes to structures and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuable platforms and networks for exchange and learning, all of which widen and deepen collaboration between MRS, between MRS and Interreg programmes and across Interreg programmes working with the MRS. • Exchange and learning has influenced the development and evolution of MRS systems and processes.
Changes to staff skills and organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to MRS contributes to the development of human resources and institutional capacity regarding MRS in Interreg programmes and vice versa. • Support to MRS fulfils a valuable role in retaining and sharing information, e.g. by providing comparative perspectives across MRS/Interreg programmes working with MRS or disseminating information on legal change.

Evidence shows that Interact support to macro-regional strategies has positively impacted programme authorities and macro-regional stakeholders in that it contributed to increasing efficiency, effectiveness and resilience.

Impact	Observation
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New ideas, contacts and approaches that have resulted from Interact interventions have saved time and resources.
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The support to MRS has increased awareness and understanding of the overall MRS concept, the related issues, and opportunities of macro-regional strategies, which is a key to the success of the approach. • The support to MRS contributes to open exchanges on MRS development and approaches across stakeholder groups, which improves communication and may contribute to a smoother implementation.
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to MRS has led to community building and momentum are a valuable 'by products' of Interact activities in relation to the MRS. It has instilled a more proactive role in MRS and Interreg actors in address common concerns and themes jointly.

Based on the analysis, a number of recommendations for the future are made:

- *Keep developing cross MRS and cross-stakeholder exchanges:* The current work should be continued and developed. For example, more thematic meetings could be undertaken, with a view to developing these as self-sustaining activities led by the MRS themselves.

- *Recognition of Interact's evolving role in relation to MRS:* The mandate for Interact in relation to the MRS support should be clarified to ensure greater transparency and focus, potentially with MRS taking on more 'ownership' of some processes themselves.
- *Perceived need for practical outputs:* The practical/operational focus of Interact's work is appreciated and should be pursued further, particularly as there are numerous studies on the more strategic aspects of MRS.
- *Support for communications:* Communication is identified as a particular challenge for MRS stakeholders because they involve: complex multi-level, multi-sectoral structures and systems; transnational geographies; operations that can be comparatively small/niche; and interventions which cover topics with long term horizons. Interact could provide practical and strategic dialogue and support on communication and dissemination is needed, recognising the specific challenges and audiences for MRS.
- *The scope to refine, clarify and evolve Interact's role post 2020:* The future directions of Interact's engagement and levels of impact must be informed by strategic dialogue and debate on 'big' issues, e.g. link between Interreg and MRS.

Overall Recommendations - In addition to case-specific recommendations, the evaluation sets out recommendations drawn from across the case study projects:

- 1) Keep up the participatory and inclusive approach to developing products and services, with more top-down decisions by Interact taken in a transparent way after a period of extensive consultations with programmes.
- 2) Ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to projects with a high tangible impact; securing sufficient staff resources for facilitating the development and maintenance of the product or service and for the accompanying communication measures.
- 3) Ensure an equitable participation of large and small programmes and that outcomes cater to the needs of different types of programmes.
- 4) Ensure that informal, people-based knowledge is maintained and turned into institutional knowledge; preserve the Interact institutional memory to capitalise on lessons learned.
- 5) Apply project management techniques to facilitate programmes' involvement, with timelines and interim targets as much as possible.
- 6) Avoid re-inventing the wheel by introducing process thinking where appropriate, especially for projects that include repeated steps (e.g. the maintenance of eMS or keep.eu).
- 7) Support creating tangible outputs as they install a sense of achievement in programmes; move cooperation to a more practice-oriented level and help putting ideas into practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Interreg, the Interact programme has a special and distinct role in *“reinforcing the effectiveness of cohesion policy by promoting exchange of experience concerning the identification, transfer and dissemination of good practices and innovative approaches in relation to the implementation of cooperation programmes and actions as well as to the use of EGTCs (Article 2 of the ETC Regulation).”*⁶

This is achieved by providing a large range of free-of-charge products and services to Interreg stakeholders and beyond that aim above all at capacity building through the exchange of experience and coordination. Thus, Interact differs from other Interreg programmes in that its main target group are the territorial cooperation programmes.⁷ Interact aims at enhancing cooperation of territorial cooperation programmes, as the brokers of European regional development, rather than targeting the cooperation capacity of regional development actors. The geographical area targeted by Interact services includes all European Union Member States, Norway and Switzerland. In addition, the programme supports cooperation at the external borders of the European Union (Interreg-IPA CBC and ENI CBC).

Since its inception in 2002, Interact has developed into a widely recognised knowledge hub for all matters related to Interreg programme management. In the 2014-2020 programming period, this role has further solidified and has been expanded to best respond to new and on-going developments. The Interact Programme aims to contribute to thematic objective 11 “Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration”. This overall objective is broken down into three programme-specific objectives to:

- 1) improve the management and control capacity of Interreg programmes;
- 2) improve Interreg capacity in capturing and communicating programme results; and
- 3) improve cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches.

These three specific objectives define the rationale behind Interact services that is; events and tools implemented for the benefit of all strands of Interreg programmes and other target groups of the programme. In analysing Interact’s contribution to these objectives, the evaluation recognises that:

- Interreg programmes face unique management and implementation challenges due to their cross-border and transnational geographies and regulatory complexities;
- engagement and take up of support and tools depends on the wider quality of government, programme management and levels of engagement in Interreg across the EU, and participating non-EU Member States; and
- target groups/beneficiaries are not limited to Interreg programme managers and national authorities involved in Interreg.

⁶ Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal

⁷ Interact has a host of other stakeholders, e.g. , EU-wide strategic players and decision-makers, in particular the European Commission, but also others such as the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, etc., and national and regional actors of territorial cooperation, also beyond Interreg, in particular, actors involved in the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies, actors involved in the implementation of ‘mainstream’ ERDF programmes, national ETC networks,

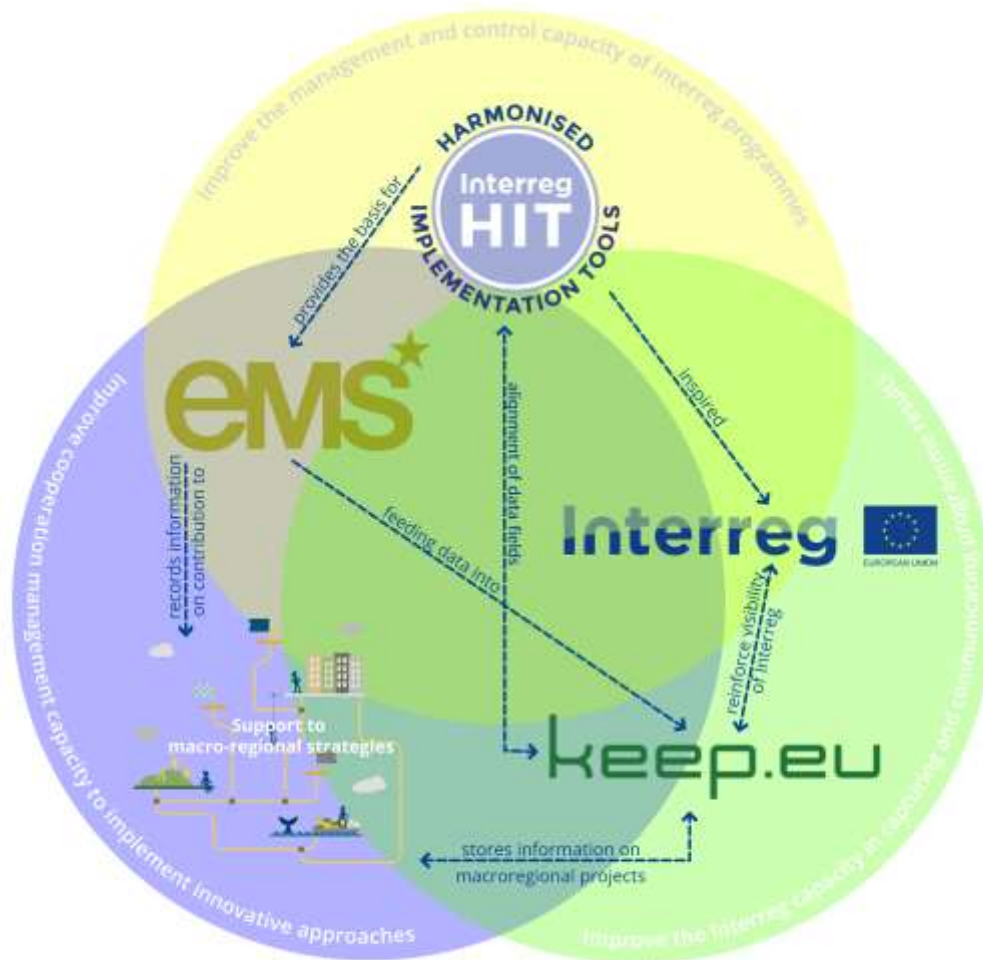
2. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The scope of this evaluation is to conduct a case-based evaluation of the impact of Interact's programme interventions, focusing on five selected projects implemented by the programme:

- 1) Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT)
- 2) Electronic monitoring system (eMS)
- 3) keep.eu
- 4) Harmonised Interreg branding
- 5) Support to the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies (MRS).

It also recognises the number of direct and indirect **interlinkages between the five projects** (see).

Figure 1: Interlinkages between the five Interact projects to be evaluated



Source: Evaluation team

2.1 Understanding impact

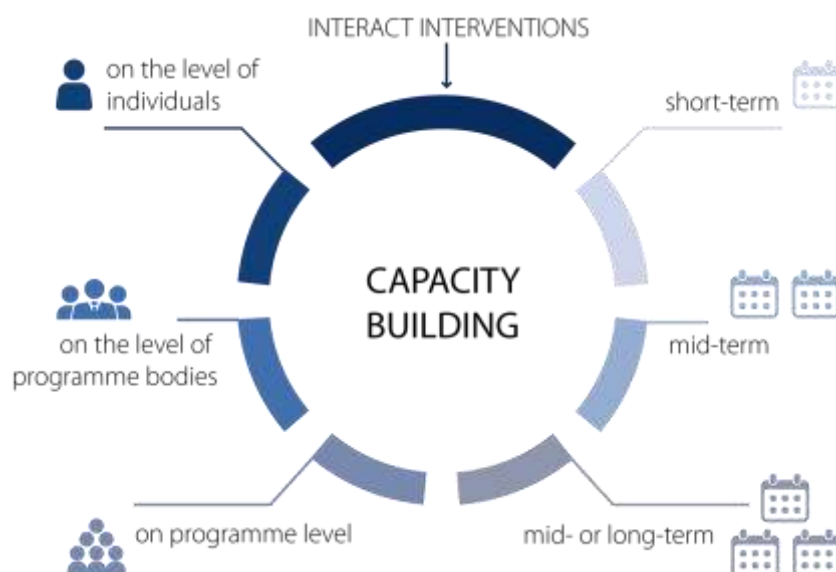
The aim is to **establish how selected Interact products/ services are used by the programme's target groups and what effect their use has on management capacities and (the efficiency and effectiveness of) programme management practices.**

Capacity is an 'elastic' concept understood in different ways. It is generally understood that capacity building is a learning process on the level of individuals or organisations, through increasing knowledge and skills and being able to apply these to problem solving. This results in strengthened organisations that are better run and more efficient, effective, resilient.⁸ Efficiency, effectiveness and resilience in the context of programme management are closely connected:

- **Efficiency** refers to the ratio between input invested and output achieved. The aim is to achieve more with less (staff, time, money, etc.). Higher efficiency, e.g. through a reduction in bureaucracy and paperwork, does not necessarily equal savings in terms of resources needed to implement the programme, but rather frees up resources that can be devoted to tasks other than administration in order to improve the quality of programme implementation (cf. effectiveness). Efficiency gains can accrue from optimising service delivery, e.g. through the use of electronic systems, streamlining and simplification of processes, clearer splitting of tasks and functions, better skilled and motivated staff.
- **Effectiveness** refers to the extent to which an intended result can be achieved, or a targeted problem solved. In contrast to efficiency, which focuses on "doing the thing right", effectiveness means "doing the right thing". Thus, it refers to different dimensions of the quality of programme management such as enhanced user-centricity, the ease of access to programme funding (e.g. availability of support and information, usability of programme tools, possibilities for lodging complaints, etc.), transparency of decision-making, and legal certainty. Effectiveness gains can accrue from re-engineering processes, the introduction of a quality/ risk management system, staff development and training, etc.
- **Resilience** refers to the ability of the organisation to deal with and warrant quality in a changing environment, e.g. in the course of a political or legal change, the restructuring of the organisation.

Capacity building in organisations has to start with building the skills of the individual professionals who make up the organisation. However, the implementation of Interreg programmes requires a number of organisations to work together in a complex system. Therefore, efficient and effective programme implementation is achieved only if these organisations pull together. Capacity building also has a time dimension as, in the short-term, measures can achieve knowledge and skills gains of individuals but the inherent inertia of organisations means that capacities can only be built in the medium-term. In networks of organisations that have to work together, such as those that make up an Interreg programme, capacity building has to bring about a system change, and thus tends to be a longer-term process.

⁸ Better run programmes benefit both the organisations managing the programmes as well as programmes' stakeholders, in particular project applicants and beneficiaries.

Figure 2: Capacity building levels

Source: Evaluation team

2.2 Measuring impact

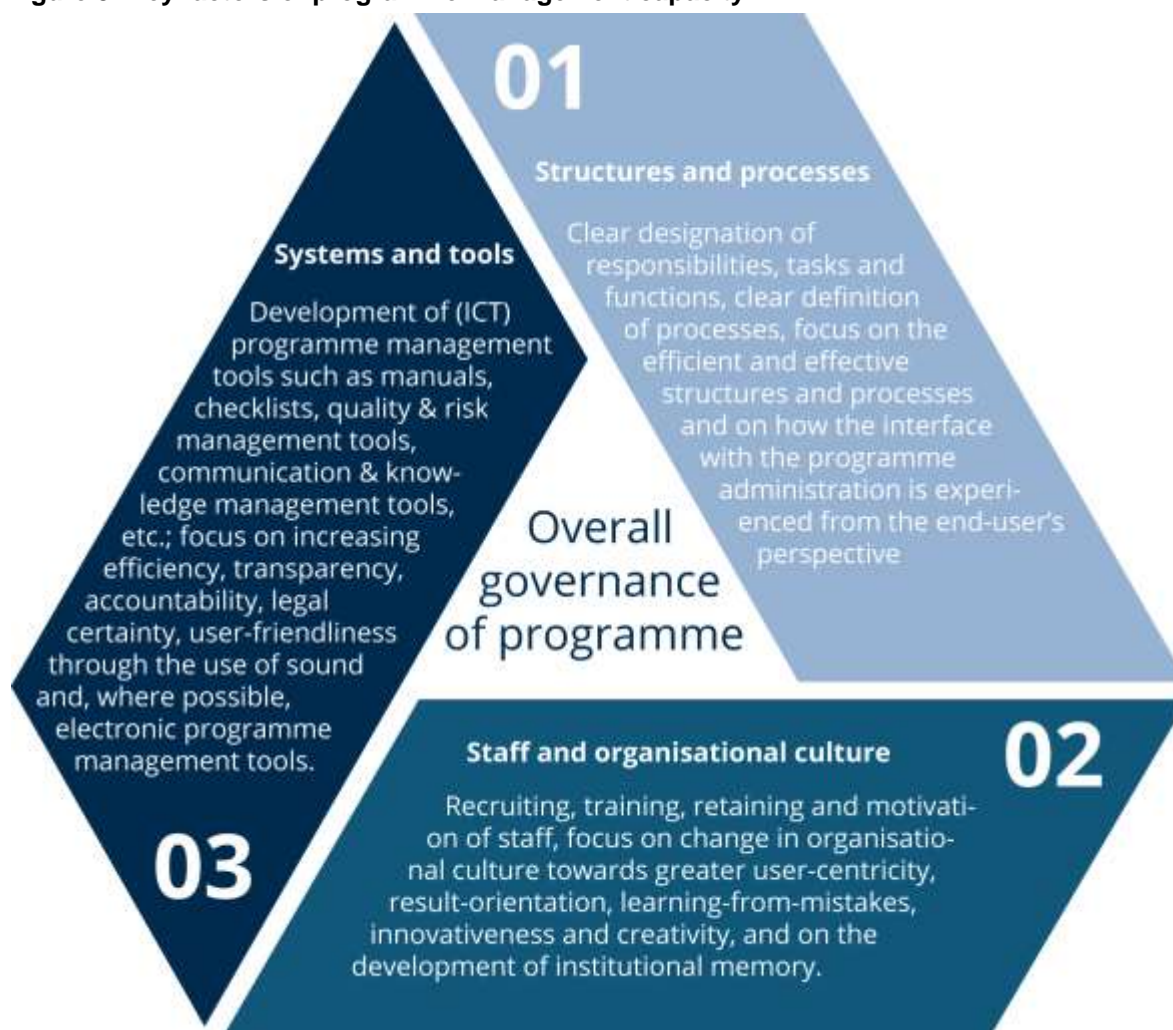
Capacity is not an easy concept to operationalise and increases/improvements in programme management in terms of administrative capacity are not easy to measure. **Interact measures the result of its interventions** in terms of the number of programmes which are using its products and services and the level of satisfaction with them. This focuses on **the level of “enablers” of administrative capacity or performance** and the establishment of what **immediate (“results”) and mid-term effects (“impacts”)** those “enablers” have is left to the evaluation. **Enablers** are understood as key factors that determine what an organisation does and how it approaches its tasks (“practices”). Investing in enablers, thus building up capacity, has expected effects (“impacts”) within programme (but also EU macro-regional strategies) management bodies (e.g. efficiency, effectiveness, resilience) as well as among programmes’ stakeholders (i.e. quality of project applications, result delivery).

In the context of ESI Fund implementation, a number of EU-level tools and guidance are available, from which dimensions of “administrative capacity” can be derived.⁹ **Three key factors, or enablers, can be identified for administrative capacity: (i) structures and processes¹⁰, (ii) human resources; and (iii) systems and tools**, (see). Interact addresses all three types of enablers and thus contributes to improving the overall governance of Interreg programmes.

⁹ See <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8055&type=2&furtherPubs=no>; <https://www.eipa.eu/>, http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/guidance_fiche_thematic_objective_11_en.pdf

¹⁰ It is important to distinguish between processes and practices. Processes are fundamentally an abstraction of how work should be done. Practices is how the process design is interpreted and how work is actually done in under any given circumstances, i.e. how staff responds to the real world of work and accomplish their assigned tasks.

Figure 3: Key factors of programme management capacity



Source: Evaluation team drawing on

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/guidance_fiche_thematic_objective_11_en.pdf

On this basis, it is reasonable to expect that Interact activities deliver on both:

- **immediate results, in terms of changes in management practices and cultures**, and
- **mid-term impacts, in terms of increases in efficiency, effectiveness and resilience of management bodies and programmes, and impacts on programme stakeholders, in terms of access to programme funding as well as project performance** (i.e. results delivery).

Even though impacts may not be either directly measurable, for example in terms of financial savings or delivery on programme results, or directly attributable to Interact interventions, the evaluation is likely to demonstrate anecdotal evidence of Interact's impact.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the impact evaluation is based on a theory-of-change¹¹ and case-based approach, as required by the terms of reference for the project.

3.1 Theory of change

The theory of change approach reflects the unique character of the Interact programme, its impacts, and external factors affecting programme management capacities.

Theory-based evaluation requires programmes to consider four key questions:

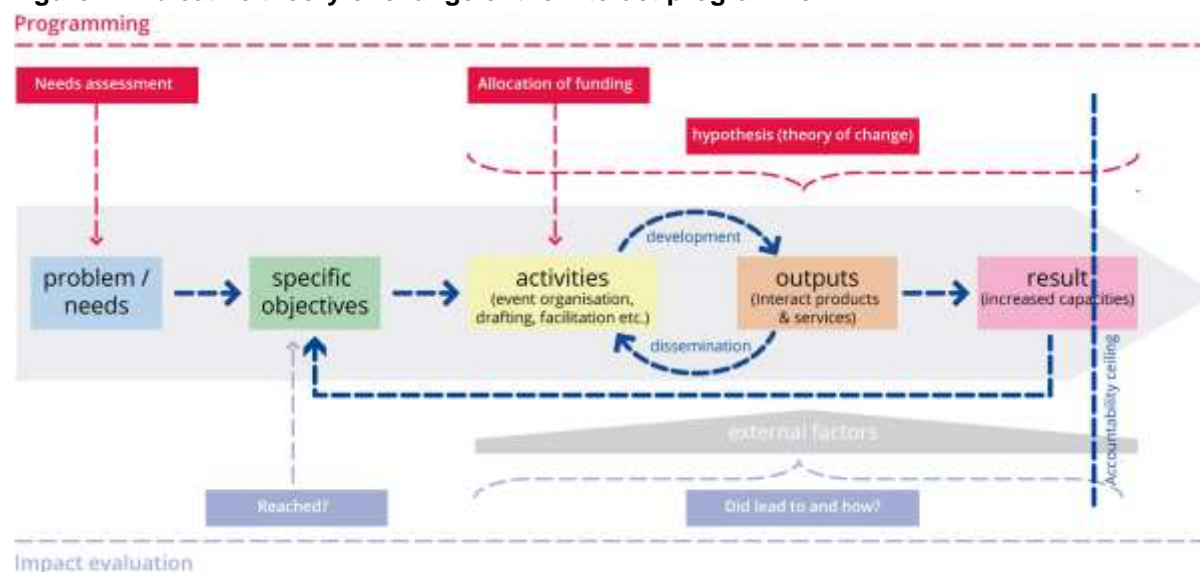
- What does the programme aim to influence/change (objectives expressed as outcomes)?
- How can it be ensured that interventions will contribute to achieving the objectives of the programme?
- How does the programme contribute to intended or observed outcomes?
- How will it be evident whether and when the programme has been successful?

Theory-based impact evaluation uses the ‘theory’ behind an intervention to evaluate whether the intervention is implemented according to this theory, in order to evaluate the contribution of the intervention to observed effects. It offers a way of looking at how and why a complex change process succeeded under specific circumstances by tracking results chains with the addition of context, explanations & hypotheses (see). In doing so, theory-based approaches address the question ‘why an intervention works’, as well as ‘what is the impact’, both of which are key questions for informing future project and programme development. Theory-based impact evaluation also provides room for learning that the European Commission views as ‘an overarching objective of all evaluations’.¹² Furthermore, it can support the understanding of reasons for underperformance, where this is an issue.¹³

¹¹ DG Regio (2015) *Monitoring of European Cohesion Policy (ERDF, ESF and CF), Guidance Document on Evaluation Plans. Terms of Reference for Impact Evaluations, Guidance on Quality Management of External Evaluations*, CEC, DG Regio, February 2015

¹² European Commission (2014) *The programming period 2014-2020. Guidance document on monitoring and evaluation, European Cohesion Fund, European Regional Development Funds, Concepts and Recommendations*, March 2014

¹³ Polverari L (2015) ‘The monitoring and evaluation of the 2014-20 Cohesion policy programmes’ *IQ-Net Thematic Paper 36(2)*, European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

Figure 4: Indicative theory of change of the Interact programme

Source: Evaluation team

In line with these guidelines, the approach of **this evaluation is based on the assumptions made in the Interact programme's own theory of change** (intervention logic) about how the programme intends to produce the anticipated results. In addition, the evaluation identifies **external factors** that influence the achievement of programme results, but which are beyond the realm of influence of the programme.

The following sections provide an overview of **key elements of the approach and the range of different methods** that were employed including **data gathering, evaluation, and presentation**.

3.2 Case study approach

All five cases are on-going projects or continuous services that were launched under the Interact II programme (2007-2013), or, in the case of keep.eu, even earlier demonstrating that Interact III is able to reap the rewards of efforts that reach far back into the previous programming period. Some Interact services are one-off services based on (sometimes ad hoc) programme requests to meet concrete needs that emerge during the programming period. The five interventions chosen for the evaluation are long-term projects and therefore they represent only a segment of the range of Interact interventions. However, the focus on projects with a long time horizon takes account of the fact that Interact impacts the capacities of Interreg programmes (and key macro-regional stakeholders) which are part of a slow but steady process of change, and that actual impacts can only be established when adopting a longer-term perspective. It also acknowledges the fact that ad hoc requests can sometimes trigger the development of a continuous service that eventually becomes a fixed element in Interact's product and service portfolio. The selection of case studies is further justified by the fact that the five selected projects account for a significant share of Interact's human resources.

Nevertheless, as is widely noted, the scope to generalise from a case study can be questioned and thus a case-study approach for evaluating the programme's impact has some potential drawbacks connected primarily to the limited representativeness of case studies. To overcome possible limitations of a case study approach, and in line with Interact's evaluation plan, methods of data

collection have focused on those which can reach a large target group in an efficient way and comprise surveys and focus groups, complemented with selected interviews.

The general methodological approach builds on a **robust mix of different data gathering, evaluation and visualisation methods** that were tailored to the needs of each of the five main evaluation tasks (as described in the corresponding task descriptions under chapter 3). Each of the case studies has specific elements, which are more/less suited to particular methods, depending on the availability of data from Interact's own sources. By combining different data sources and applying different methods with equal rigour, triangulation of information and opinions becomes possible. This generates different vantage points from which to answer the evaluation questions and enhances the validity of the evaluation conclusions and results. The approach also has the advantage that qualitative (focus groups, interviews) and quantitative (survey) methods can be mixed and complemented in order to avoid the constraints of both: the less objective and resource intensive limitations of qualitative methods and the limited insight into causal relationships and mechanisms of quantitative approaches.

Given the limited budget and time available for the implementation of the evaluation, the **efficiency of the approach is paramount**. As a general principle, the evaluators drew on and made best use of all available sources of information and existing data but additional data collection was also employed selectively to fill data gaps or decide on ambiguous findings. The exact scope of data collection was defined in close coordination with the programme.

According to the terms of reference and programme evaluation plan, the impact evaluation should focus primarily on the effect of Interact interventions on Interreg programmes and, in the case of the EU macro-regional strategies, other relevant stakeholders as the main users of Interact products and services. They are, therefore, the **main target group of the evaluation activities**. However, in order to fully evaluate the impact of Interact services, it is also important to consider the wider group of 'indirect' beneficiaries of Interact products and services, in particular Interreg applicants, beneficiaries, and stakeholders working with multiple programmes and other key programme partners such as the European Commission. Therefore, wherever feasible, these groups were considered in the evaluation, although the main focus remained on the key user groups for each project.

3.3 Methodological approaches

A tailored approach to the research for each of the main research tasks was developed, in consultation with Interact and based on the specific nature of the project.

	Desk research	Focus Group	Survey	Interviews
<i>Task 0: Inception</i>				
<i>Task 1: Evaluation of Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT)</i>	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Task 2: Evaluation of electronic monitoring system (eMS)</i>	✓	✓		✓ (5)
<i>Task 3: Evaluation of keep.eu.eu</i>	✓		✓	✓ (5)
<i>Task 4: Evaluation of Harmonised Interreg Branding</i>	✓			✓ (10)
<i>Task 5: Evaluation of support to the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies</i>	✓		✓	✓ (5)
<i>Task 6: Conclusions</i>				

Source: Evaluation team

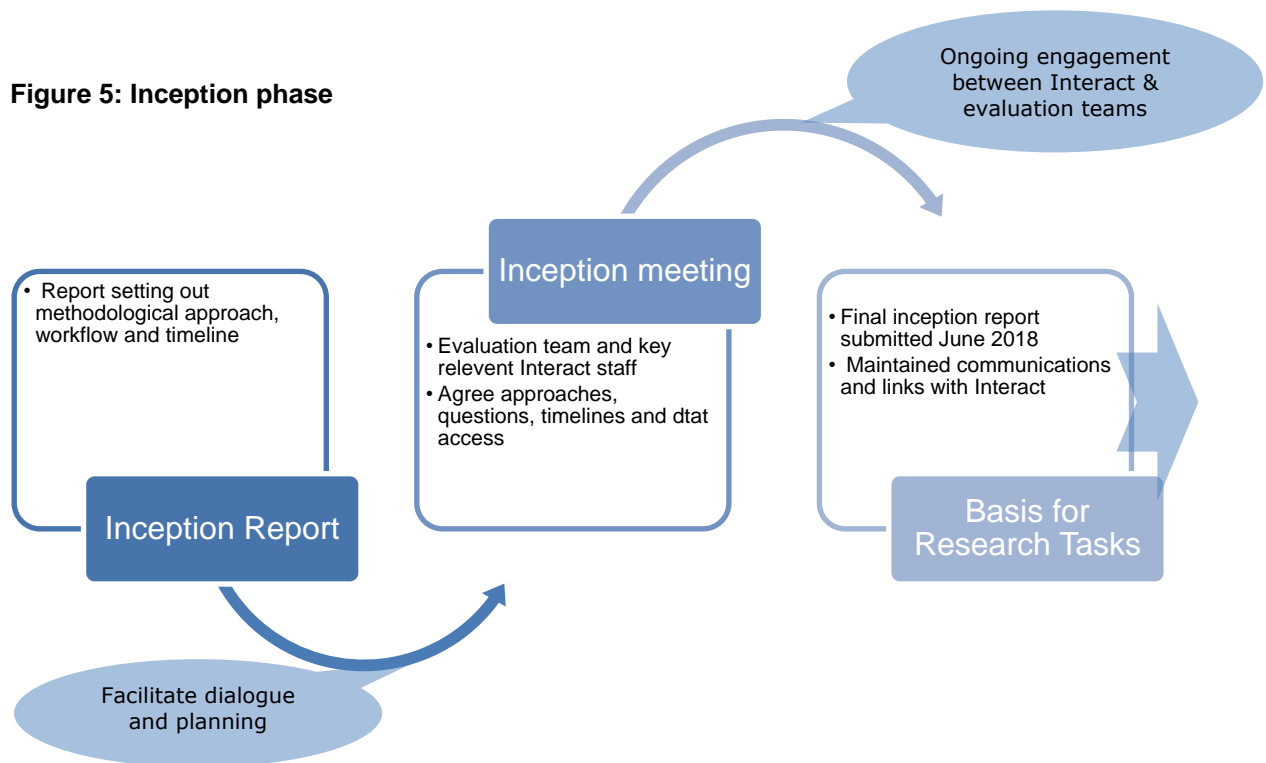
The evaluation team have kept in regular contact with Interact throughout the evaluation process. Access to data and research opportunities have been greatly facilitated and supported by the willingness of the Interact team to engage with the work, help with organising focus groups and meetings, and in obtaining data and reports.

3.4 Evaluation tasks

3.4.1 Task 0: Inception

The inception phase involved a number of stages and liaison with Interact on the key research questions and methodologies.

Figure 5: Inception phase



Source: Evaluation team

3.4.2 Task 1: Evaluation of the Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT)

The evaluation process of HIT involved a number of interrelated stages as illustrated in .

Figure 6: Evaluation steps Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT)

	Method	Steps
Inception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation questions were agreed at the project inception meeting and set out in the inception report. • Initially planned interviews replaced by focus group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewed relevant documentation and reports. Early liaison with HIT project lead to agree on a focus group concept that fits into the overall event concept of the HIT launch event.
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An on line questionnaire was developed in consultation with the Interact project lead for HIT, taking into consideration questions from the 2015 survey on HIT to ensure comparability of results. + Access to a large number of programmes + Quantitative results - Low response rate meant that user figures of HIT had to be estimated - The survey combines questions that are of the evaluators' and of Interact's interest; it therefore got too long, putting off potential respondents - Those in favour of HIT are more likely to respond which may reduce the representativeness of results. • A focus group (FG) concept was developed in close cooperation with INTERACT so as to fit well into the overall event concept of the HIT launch event in December 2018 in Berlin. In preparation of the FG, a facilitation script was developed, shared and discussed with Interact. + Obtain qualitative input from a large number of programmes - For practical reasons and to avoid additional travel costs for FG members, the FG was organised as part of an Interact event, which meant that discussion groups were very large. True discussion was not possible. - The group of programmes not using HIT (or not content with HIT) was not represented in the FG. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The survey was launched on 1st November and personalised survey invitations sent to all Interreg, IPA and ENI Programmes. • Two rounds of reminders sent out, and the survey deadline extended by one month, until 31st of December, to increase the number of replies. • Interim survey results, based on 26 valid responses, were analysed in the beginning of December, in preparation of the focus group, and final results, based on 28 valid responses, in January 2019. • The focus group was attended by 42 participants from 30 Interreg programmes (excluding Interact). It was organised in the form of table discussions in three sessions, which were facilitated by Interact and the two evaluators. Discussions aimed at digging deeper into the results of the survey and focused on the following topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reflections on the collaborative HIT development process; ○ Programme experience with the harmonised tools; ○ The impacts of the use of HIT on programme management bodies, including control bodies, applicants/beneficiaries; • After the focus group, table discussions were summarised and shared with Interact and with participants as part of the minutes of meeting.

Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths and weaknesses of key methods acknowledged and clearly set out • Mixed methods applied, as a means to improve data reliability and validity • Interviews replaced by focus group in order to kick-off the HIT launch event with a reflection on past achievements and shortcomings. The focus group provided a lot of input, but interviews might have been more complementary to the survey by providing rich contextual information (“narratives”) necessary for interpreting the survey results. • Response rate to survey was below expectations (~30 percent of programmes), but survey results are nonetheless representative. • Presentation of initial results for discussion with Interact
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3.4.3 Task 2: Evaluation of the electronic monitoring system (eMS)

The evaluation process of eMS involved a number of interrelated stage as illustrated in .

Figure 7: Evaluation steps electronic monitoring system (eMS)

	Method	Steps
Inception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation questions were agreed at the project inception meeting and set out in the inception report. • Desk research on position papers of EU institutions on eCohesion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewed relevant documentation (e.g. monitoring system survey 2018) and EU-level reports.
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial interviews, based on contacts proposed by INTERACT as having engaged with the keep.eu development process. + Expert well-informed views, providing also a lot of contextual information which enhances evaluators’ understanding - Interviewees ‘close’ to the project - No interviews with programmes not using eMS. • A focus group (FG) concept was developed in close cooperation with INTERACT so as to fit well into the overall event concept of the eMS User Group Meeting in October 2018 in Vienna. In preparation of the FG, a facilitation script was developed, shared and discussed with Interact. + Obtain qualitative input from a large number of programmes - For practical reasons, and to avoid additional travel costs for FG members, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interview questions developed for different potential interview target groups (i.e. European Commission, High-Level Group of Experts on Simplification, European Parliament, European Court of Auditors, European Committee of the Regions, Interreg Programmes participating in the eMS Core or User Group, Interact Monitoring Committee) in consultation with the Interact project lead for eMS. ○ With the help of Interact, suitable interview partners identified and contacted in the early autumn 2018. Eight interviews carried out over the period September 2018-January 2019 and interview summaries and quotes shared with the interviewees for approval. ○ The focus group was attended by 38 participants from 28 programmes (excluding Interact). It was organised in the form of a knowledge café with three rounds of table discussions and six

	<p>the FG was organised as part of an Interact event, which meant that discussion groups were very large. True discussion was not possible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The group of programmes not using eMS was not represented in the FG. 	<p>different discussion topics. Interact helped with facilitation. Discussions aimed at digging deeper into the results of the Monitoring systems survey 2018 and focused on the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ eMS impacts on programme processes and structures; ○ eMS impacts on the organisational culture in programmes; ○ eMS impacts on applicants and beneficiaries; ○ eMS impacts on audit authorities and national control bodies; ○ eMS impacts on programme communication / capitalisation and the positive image of Interact; ● Reflections on the collaborative eMS development process. ● After the focus group, table discussions were summarised and shared with Interact and with participants as part of the minutes of meeting.
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Overview</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengths and weaknesses of key methods acknowledged and clearly set out ● Mixed methods applied, as a means to improve data reliability and validity ● Elite interviews are used, meaning that although the number of interviewees was small, the feedback provided high-level/relevant recommendations, which can form the basis of formal recommendation when used alongside desk research and survey evidence. ● The focus group yielded a lot of input, but a smaller group of people would have allowed more discussion ● Presentation of initial results for discussion with Interact 	

3.4.4 Task 3: Evaluation of keep.eu

The evaluation process of keep.eu involved a number of interrelated stages as illustrated in .

Figure 8: Evaluation steps keep.eu

	Method	Steps
Inception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation questions were agreed at the project inception meeting and set out in the inception report. • Desk Research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewed relevant documentation and reports • Met with project lead Turku and maintained on-going dialogue
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial interviews, based on contacts proposed by INTERACT as having engaged with the keep.eu development process. + Expert well-informed views - keep.eu has a wide range of potential users who are not represented - Interviewees 'close' to the project <p>On line questionnaire was developed in consultation with the Interact project lead for keep.eu</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Access to a broader range of respondents and views + New 'outside the box' suggestions • Low response rates • Those familiar with the resource more likely to respond • For those respondents that are less familiar with the resource, due to lack of familiarity, some suggestions/recommendations may not be feasible • Keep.eu has a wide range of potential user groups, which may not be represented in a balanced way in a survey with a low response rate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key elite interviews with European Commission, Programme Managers, • Survey circulated via anonymous link by Interact using their data bases and in line with GDPR guidelines. The survey was also publicised in relevant communications. • Reminders sent out. • 90 surveys have been completed.
Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths and weaknesses of key methods acknowledged and clearly set out • Mixed methods applied, as a means to improve data reliability and validity • Elite interviews are used, meaning that although the number of interviewees was small the feedback provided high-level/relevant recommendations, which can form the basis of formal recommendation when used alongside desk research and survey evidence. • Presentation of initial results for discussion with Interact • Account was taken of the type of user responding to the survey – in order to ensure that the views of key user groups were given sufficient weight 	

3.4.5 Task 4: Evaluation of the Harmonised Interreg Branding

The evaluation process of the harmonised Interreg branding involved a number of interrelated stages, see .

Figure 9: Evaluation steps Harmonised Interreg Branding

	Method	Steps
Inception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation questions were agreed at the project inception meeting and set out in the inception report. Desk Research Since no suitable date could be found for the envisaged focus group, the decision was taken, in agreement with the Interact lead for the harmonised branding, to carry out additional interviews instead. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of relevant documentation and reports such as position papers of EU institutions on the visibility of Interreg, Eurobarometer studies, and obtain background information on the harmonised branding process (i.e. Interact newsletter, presentations)
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews, based on contacts proposed by INTERACT having engaged with the harmonised branding development process. <p>+ Expert well-informed views</p> <p>- Interviewees 'close' to the project</p> <p>- Few interviews with programmes not using the harmonised branding</p> <p>- Entire evaluation based on only interviews and not complemented by qualitative method.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key elite interviews with European Commission (EC), European Committee of the Regions, Programme Managers, Interview questions were developed for different potential interview target groups (i.e. EC, CoR, Interreg Programmes having / not having adopted the harmonised brand) and in consultation with the Interact project lead for the harmonised branding. Interview partners were identified with the help of Interact and contacted in the late autumn 2018. Eleven interviews were carried out over the period November 2018-January 2019 and interview summaries and quotes shared with the interviewees for approval.
Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengths and weaknesses of key methods acknowledged and clearly set out Elite interviews are used, meaning that the evaluation is based on only qualitative evidence. Presentation of initial results for discussion with Interact 	

3.4.6 Task 5: Evaluation of the support to the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

The evaluation process of support to MRS involved a number of interrelated stages as illustrated in .

Figure 10: Evaluation steps support to EU macro-regional strategies

	Method	Steps
Inception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation questions were agreed at the project inception meeting and set out in the inception report. • Desk Research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewed relevant documentation and reports • Met with project lead Turku and maintained ongoing dialogue
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial interviews, based on contacts proposed by Interact as having engaged with the keep.eu development process. + Expert well-informed views - Interact services have an extremely wide base of users in this field (well beyond the Interreg/ENI community) • On line questionnaire was developed in consultation with the Interact project lead for MRS + access to a broader range of respondents and views + new 'outside the box' suggestions - Low response rates - Those familiar with the resource more likely to respond - Due to lack of familiarity with the resource, some suggestions/recommendations may not be feasible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key elite interviews with European Commission, Programme Managers, Priority Area Coordinators, National Contact Point, Thematic Contact • Survey circulated via anonymous link by EPRC using publically available contact details and data bases. • Reminders sent out January 2019 and survey deadline extended • 57 surveys have been completed
Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths and weaknesses of key methods acknowledged and clearly set out • Mixed methods applied, as a means to improve data reliability and validity • Elite interviews are used, meaning that although the number of interviewees was small the feedback provided high-level/relevant recommendations, which can form the basis of formal recommendation when used alongside desk research and survey evidence. • Presentation of initial results for discussion with Interact 	

Table 1: Macro-regional governance: varying terminology and governance

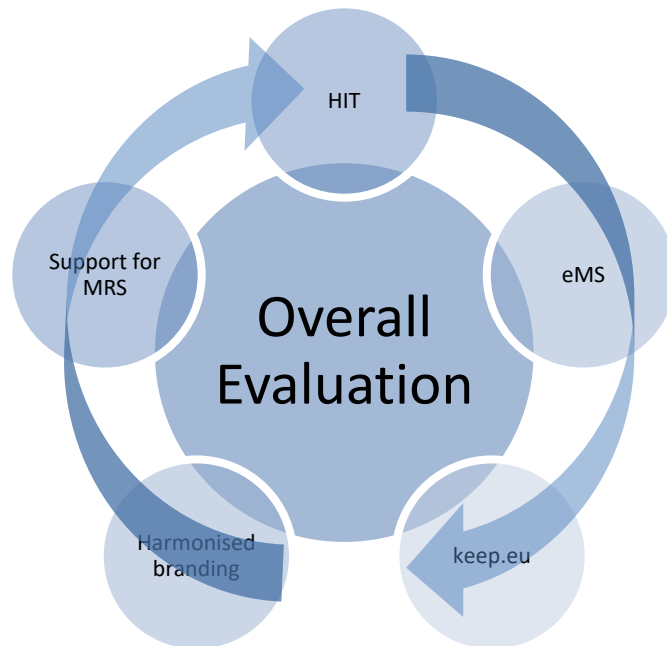
MRS	EUSBSR	EUSDR	EUSAIR	EUSALP
<i>Strategic bodies</i>	National Coordinators Group	National Coordinators Group	Governing Board	General Assembly Executive Board
<i>Implementation support</i>		Danube Strategy Point	Facility Point	
<i>National</i>	National Coordinator	National Coordinator	National Coordinator	National Coordinator
<i>National/Thematic</i>	Policy Area Coordinator	Priority Area Coordinator	Pillar Coordinator	Action Group leader
<i>Thematic/objectives implementation</i>	Policy Area/Horizontal Action Coordinator, Steering group and Policy Area Focal Points	Priority Area Coordinator and Steering group	Pillar Coordinator and Thematic Steering Group	Action Group (steering group) Objective coordinator

Source: Evaluation team

3.4.7 Task 5: Analysis and final reporting

Each of the following sections is structured taking into account the theory-based approach taken by the research and the core analytical pillars outlined in the methodology. Crucially, in the final conclusions the evaluation will look across the five main research tasks and highlight complementarities, cumulative impacts and any possible inconsistencies/challenges.

Figure 11: Overall analysis



Source: Evaluation team

Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT)

How and to what effect have the Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT) been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?



HIT enabled us to finish the designation process in early 2016, due to the ready-to-use templates and procedures. *Survey respondent from Interreg IPA Programme*

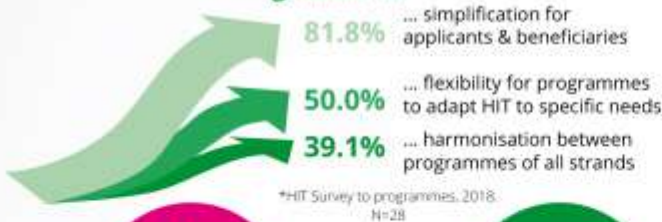
We find that applicants from countries that don't use HIT need a lot more training than those who have seen the forms before in other programmes. *Participant at HIT focus group*

Increased efficiency
 - off-the-shelf implementation tools in line with EU regulations and guidance
 - simplification for actors working in multiple programmes

Increased effectiveness
 - Legal certainty due to 'critical number' using the tools
 - harmonised interpretation of regulatory requirements
 - Contribution to development of a common Interreg brand identity

Improved resilience
 - Programmes jointly address challenges arising from a changing regulatory environment

Future harmonised tools should strive for greater*...



Conditioning factor

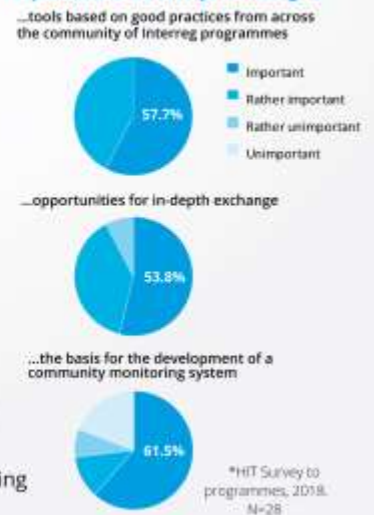
- Pioneering character of HIT
- Willingness of programmes to contribute and compromise to national rules and 'goldplating'

The development of the HIT tools was very democratic and inclusive, it clearly strengthened cooperation between programmes, but it was also a very heavy and slow process at times. The pro's clearly outnumber the con's, but the process wasn't pain free. *Survey respondent from Interreg IPA Programme*

Building programme management capacities by...

- ... changing programme practices**
 - culture of inter-programme cooperation and harmonisation
 - simplification of some programme processes
- ... changing organisational culture**
 - willingness to compromise and change
 - shift towards greater focus on simplification for applicants/beneficiaries
- ... improving systems and tools**
 - harmonised implementation tools based on good programme practices
 - enabled the development of a community monitoring system

Importance of HIT providing*...





4. HARMONISED IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS (HIT)

How and to what effect have the Harmonised Implementation Tools been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?

4.1 Context



Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT) is a collective term for a set of templates and guidance documents developed for a wide range of programme management tasks, and for the interaction with applicants and beneficiaries throughout the project and programme life cycle. HIT encompasses a diverse range of templates and model documents:

- Harmonised tools for project selection (i.e. Application Form, Quality Assessment Criteria, Administrative Eligibility Checklist)
- Harmonised tools for project implementation (i.e. Project Progress Report templates, Progress Report Monitoring Checklist)
- Harmonised tools for financial control and audit (FLC Certificate, FLC Control Report, FLC Checklist)

Other important (auxiliary) tools are the factsheets on eligibility of expenditures under different budget lines, or the model subsidy contract. All tools form one integrated, logically linked package.

HIT has been developed by Interact through a broad participatory process involving a large number of Interreg programmes to ensure wide acceptance and broad application of the tools. 47 percent of cross-border, transnational, interregional and IPA CBC programmes participated actively in either the first, second or both development rounds. The aim of HIT is to harmonise approaches to the implementation of Interreg programmes in order to simplify systems for programme authorities, applicants and beneficiaries, especially those working with multiple programmes, support the communication of Interreg results across programmes through the homogenization of definitions and data, increase legal certainty, and reduce errors and irregularities through the standardisation of approaches.

4.2 Use of HIT in programmes



Best available estimates show that around 57 programmes, i.e. 66 percent of CBC, TNC, IRC and IPA CBC programmes, are using the Harmonised Implementation Tools to at least some extent. This figure is based on the replies to the HIT surveys carried out in 2015 and 2018 as well as the statistics on the use of electronic monitoring system (eMS).

The 2018 HIT survey largely confirms the forecast given by programmes in a survey in 2015 on their intended use of HIT.¹⁴ Out of the programmes that responded to both surveys, only one programme had changed its mind and has decided to use HIT (likely because of the adoption of eMS) despite having stated in 2015 that they would use HIT only as inspiration. Thus in spite of the lack of very

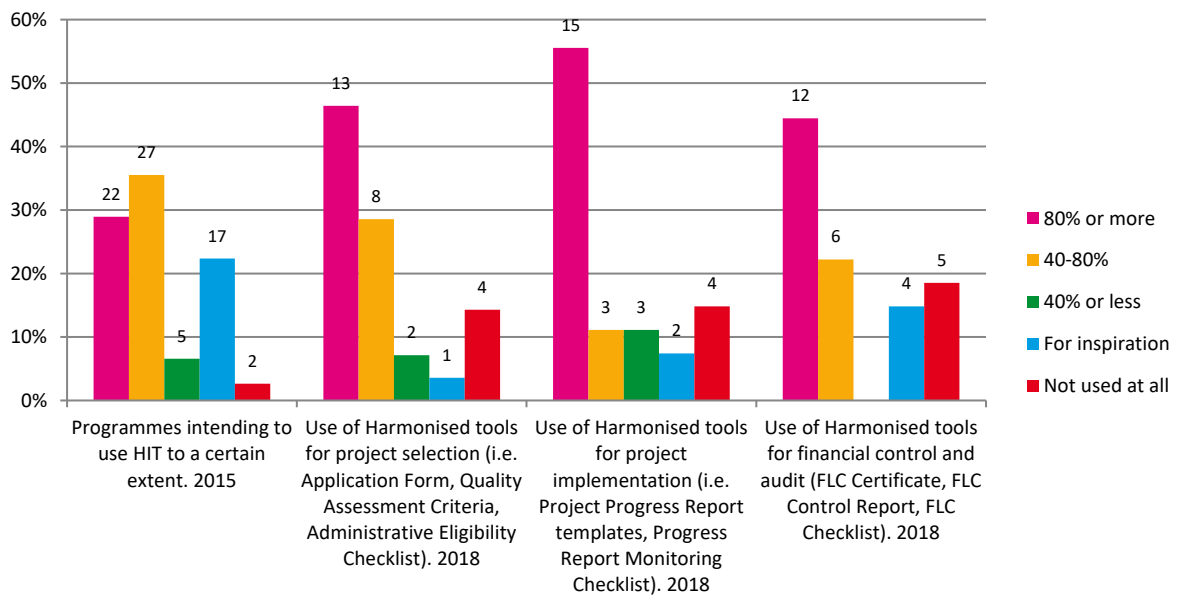
¹⁴ All comparison between the 2015 and 2018 survey has to be treated with caution as the 2015 survey is based on 73 responses, while the 2018 survey is only based on 28 valid responses.

robust data, the comparison identifies that the number of programmes using HIT has probably not changed much between the 2015 forecast and 2018 and it is likely that it has gone up slightly.

As regards **differences between strands**, 35 out of 60 (58 percent) cross-border programmes, 12 out of 15 (80 percent) transnational programmes, 2 out of 4 (50 percent)¹⁵ interregional programmes, and 8 out of 10 (80 percent) IPA CBC programmes are using HIT, at least to some extent.

A robust positive trend can be observed in terms of the **extent to which HIT is used**. The share of programmes using 80 percent or more of the tools has increased for all three groups of tools (see). This is also confirmed by directly comparing the responses of programmes to both surveys.

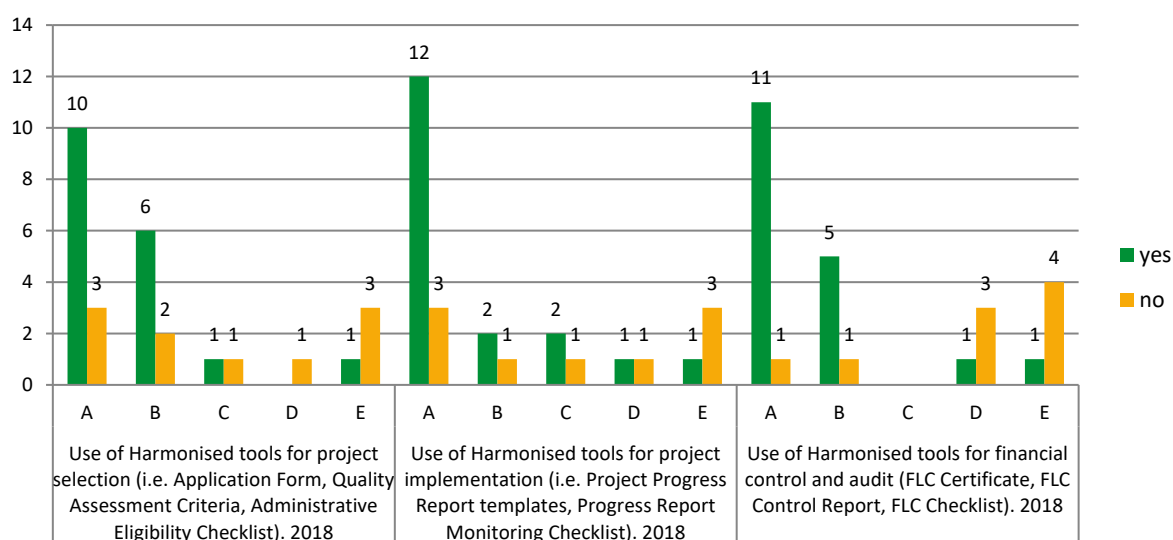
Figure 12: Forecasted adoption of HIT in 2015 (N=73) and actual use of HIT in 2018 (N=28).



Source: HIT survey, 2015 & 2018. Data labels show the absolute numbers.

Figures on participation in the HIT development and adoption of HIT in programmes also show that the commitment to using the tools has increased over time. Out of the 46 programmes that did not participate in the HIT development, 26 (9 of which have signed the eMS licence) are using HIT. Another nine programmes have declared that HIT has served them as inspiration. HIT, therefore, has a reach beyond the programmes which actively participated in its development.

¹⁵ The two interregional programmes using HIT (at least to some extent) are Interreg Europe and the ESPON Programme.

Figure 13: Degree to which HIT is used in programmes using/not using eMS

Source: HIT survey, 2018. A= >80 percent, B= 80 percent-40 percent, C= <40 percent, D= only for inspiration, E= does not use HIT at all, N=28.

There is also a clear correlation between the use of eMS and the extent to which the harmonised tools have been adopted by programmes (see). Programmes which have adopted eMS use the harmonised tools to a larger extent.

Reasons for not using HIT. According to the 2018 HIT survey respondents, the most important reasons for programmes deciding not to use HIT are (in the order of importance):

- Good experience with programme-specific tools from last period;
- Requirement to use a specific (national) monitoring system which couldn't be adapted to the HIT; and
- More flexibility needed to adapt tools to programme needs.

Conversely, reasons that did not play an important role are:

- Tools are too complex for our programme; and
- Use of tools is not supported by our Monitoring Committee.

When weighing the freedom to design programme tools on the basis of what has worked well in the programme context in the past against the benefits of harmonising with other programmes for the sake of applicants/beneficiaries, some programmes legitimately opt for the former. Driving forces behind such decisions seem to be the programme MAs/JSs and not the Monitoring Committee Members. However, national authorities can strongly shape the degree of harmonisation that can be achieved by introducing specific national rules or by giving priority to harmonisation on the national level. In particular the requirement for programme MAs to use a (national) monitoring system, which cannot be adapted to the HIT, is one of the biggest impediments to harmonisation within the Interreg community of programmes. The alleged complexity of the tools, an occasionally expressed criticism, was not a reason for not adopting them and programmes understood that they could change the tools as they liked.

Common modifications to HIT. The survey to programmes on the use of HIT revealed that programmes did indeed customise the tools to quite some extent by:

- Making substantial changes to compulsory questions or tables;
- Omitting (compulsory) questions or tables; and
- Additional questions or tables (other than the optional ones).

It is difficult to draw general conclusions on what modifications were made and why as they are specific to each tool and can only be understood when analysed in the context of each programme. However, the following points identify some main findings per group of tools:

- Harmonised tools for project selection: modifications were made to the Application Form by:
 - simplifying the target group section (e.g. cutting out questions or not asking applicants to specify target group involvement per WP);
 - simplifying section C.2.1 asking projects to link their objectives, expected results and main outputs to the programme's intervention logic (e.g. no compulsory link between a WP main output and a programme output indicator).
 - simplifying budget tables; and
 - Adaptations were made by adding programme-specific questions regarding specific types of projects (e.g. tourism, SME), or specific tables (e.g. regarding the purchase of land).
- Harmonised tools for project implementation: modifications made to Project Progress Report templates were mainly minor changes such as:
 - presenting progress made on target groups or indicators only in the final progress report;
 - eliminating the reporting per WP or adding the reporting per activity;
 - adding fields/tables on progress on communication or results indicators; and
 - collecting additional information needed for the annual implementation reports (e.g. on partnership, spending forecast, actions on social innovation, etc.).

Regarding the Progress Report Monitoring Checklist, a number of programmes decided not to use it or have reworked it completely.

- Harmonised tools for financial control and audit: modifications made to the FLC Certificate, FLC Control Report, FLC Checklist Project Progress Report templates were mainly minor changes such as:
 - Changes to wording;
 - FLC Report and Certificate were merged (note that this is an optional feature); and
 - Additional checks added (e.g. on state aid, national contribution follow up, public procurement).

4.3 Immediate results



The development of HITs was the first major attempt to harmonise Interreg programme management across a large number of programmes of all strands. Evidence shows that both the development process and the resulting harmonised tools have enhanced capacities for programme management by positively affecting the culture of cooperation among Interreg programmes, the organisational culture in programme authorities, as well as programme management processes and tools.

One of the main pioneering achievements of HIT is that it prepared the ground for a number of ensuing **'spin-off'** harmonisation efforts. Other harmonisation initiatives were developed in the 'slipstream' of the successful development of HITs, as programmes started to gain confidence and recognise the benefits of harmonisation, and notably included the electronic monitoring system (eMS) and the creation of a harmonised Interreg branding. In particular, the development of eMS would be hardly thinkable without the prior development of common application and reporting forms as well as checklists and templates for assessment, monitoring and financial control of projects. In return, eMS also enhanced the uptake of HIT as it provided programmes with an additional argument in favour of using the harmonised tools rather than staying with their established templates. The focus group and survey have shown that programmes often consider HIT and eMS as one and see the fact that **HIT enabled the development of a community monitoring system** as the biggest impact of HIT. In other words, eMS has reinforced the impact of HIT. Given the synergies between HIT and eMS many programmes expressed the wish for the two **HIT and eMS development processes to be better integrated in the coming programming period**.

4.3.1 Changes to cooperation and organisational culture

The HIT development has shaken up habits of programme authorities. Programmes which are used to developing programme tools independently, for example, are now compromising and seeking consensus on harmonised tools on a voluntary basis. On the one hand, the consensus-based and voluntary approach meant that all programmes who participated were genuinely committed (and for those that did not participate, the tools were still a useful source of inspiration). On the other hand, the non-binding, flexible nature of the HITs also meant that, ultimately, programmes did not feel compelled to stick to the harmonised templates, but rather saw these as a basis upon which they could develop their programme-specific tools. Nonetheless, HIT clearly enhanced the **culture of inter-programme cooperation**. It further strengthened the ties between programmes, built confidence in programmes that harmonisation was feasible and encouraged capacities in how to approach such a task.

"HIT facilitated a common basis for discussion. Now we understand each other much better." Participant at HIT focus group

HIT has also meant a shift towards **greater user-centricity** by focusing on the reduction of the administrative burden of accessing and managing Interreg funding for applicants and beneficiaries. Even though the principle of simplification for programme applicants and beneficiaries was rather marginalised in the complex HIT development process, simplifying the life of applicants/beneficiaries, especially those involved in multiple programmes, was still the primary motivation of programmes to join the HIT development.

Lastly, the development and adoption of HIT changed **both the mindset of individuals and organisations, i.e. organisational culture**, as it demanded from programme authorities lateral thinking, the agility to adapt to changes and readiness to compromise. All of this ultimately contributes to improved change management and, hence, **the resilience of organisations** or, as is the case with Interreg programmes, the system of organisations that is needed for implementing a programme. Even though programmes reported that they encountered some internal scepticism regarding HIT, the initiative was widely supported. The fact that a large number, or 'critical mass', of programmes was on board as well as the fact that programme could take a 'shopping list' approach to using the tools and pick out what elements they liked, increased acceptance and helped convince Monitoring Committee members.

4.3.2 Changes to structures and processes

The development of HIT has introduced innovation in both programme management practices and tools. Fundamentally, the HIT development achieved a basic clarification of terminological differences between programmes, and therefore facilitated a common basis for discussion and exchange beyond HIT. It also focused programmes on the similarities they share and provided them with insights into how other programmes approach programme management tasks. This exchange on programme management is also an essential part of other Interact activities, but discussions on HIT forced programmes to go much more into depth in order to understand other programmes' arguments and proposals.

Even though the harmonisation of programme procedures was outside the scope of HIT, some programmes reported that the **templates helped develop and shaped programme management provisions and procedures**. HIT development fostered peer learning and provided an opportunity for self-reflection on what it really needs to assess and monitor projects. The focus group and survey provided evidence that, in some programmes¹⁶, this led to a **simplification of programme processes**. The harmonized budget lines were also described as a simplification, even though some interpretations of the eligibility of expenditure are still open for discussion. And finally, simplifications have to be seen in the light of the complexity introduced by the new regulatory requirements for programmes regarding the assessment and monitoring of the results performance of projects. At programme-level, the collaborative development of programme tools introduced an additional layer of discussion and decision-making, which made decision-making considerably more complex. In this context, programmes underlined the importance of having the freedom to adjust the tools to programme needs. Several programmes stated that the adoption of HIT was conditional upon this freedom.

"The harmonized budget lines were a big simplification, but some interpretations of the eligibility of expenditures are still open for discussion." Participant at HIT focus group

¹⁶ E.g. a focus group participant reported that the way travel budgets were calculated in the national system has been adapted to be in line with HIT, which simplified the procedure.

4.3.3 Changes to systems and tools

The set of harmonised tools is built on a thorough analysis of past programme tools and exchange on programme good practice. Feedback shows that most programmes **consider HIT as useful, complete, and coherent**. They also consider some harmonised tools, in particular the application form, as **somewhat fragmented and overly complex**, as they contain too many questions/fields, some of which yield rather redundant input. Programmes acknowledge that the complexity stems from the fact that the HIT package aimed at accommodating as many programme wishes as possible. In the future, redundancies should be eliminated and more attention paid to the user-friendliness of especially the content-related parts.

As regards **applicants/beneficiaries**, most programmes report that they generally **handle the forms well**, but that some found it challenging to establish, in the application form, a link between their project's objectives, expected results and main outputs and the programme's intervention logic. Programme opinions are split on whether the application form helps and guides applicants in following a results-oriented approach or whether results-oriented applications could have been achieved in a simpler way. Evidence from the survey suggests that challenges can be mitigated through clear guidance and training. Thus, there is a potential for exploiting synergies in the next programming period by developing common guidance for applicants/beneficiaries, including real life examples of good project intervention logics.

4.4 Impacts



The survey on the use of and satisfaction with HIT and the focus group provide sound evidence that HIT has benefitted programme authorities and applicant/beneficiaries alike. HIT has helped increase the efficiency and effectiveness of programme management in a substantive number of programmes, not least because it enabled the development of the eMS, but, above all, because it has led to a more uniform interpretation of regulatory requirements across programmes, increasing legal assurance. For applicants and beneficiaries, it has positively affected the efficiency and effectiveness of applying for project funding and implementing a project, especially for those working in multiple programmes.

Table 2: Summary of impacts found

Impact	Definition	Observation
Efficiency	Achieve more with less, e.g. through optimising service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HIT contributes to a more efficient programme implementation as it offers programmes off-the-shelf implementation tools in line with EU regulations and guidance, sparing them from having to develop tools on their own. HIT achieves simplification for actors (applicants/beneficiaries, national controllers, national authorities) working in multiple programmes.
Effectiveness	Doing the right thing to increase quality and performance, e.g. transparent decision-making, staff development, better communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HIT increases legal certainty for programme authorities resulting from the large number of HIT adopters and the more harmonised interpretation of regulatory requirements. HIT is one building block in the development of a common Interreg brand identity, contributing to the awareness of Interreg and its achievements. HIT fully incorporates the focus on results and support programme performance through results delivery.
Resilience	Ability to deal with and manage change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HIT achieved that programmes jointly address challenges arising from a changing regulatory environment.

4.4.1 Increased efficiency

Resource savings in programme authorities. The development of the HIT was a time-consuming and resource-intensive process for the programmes that actively contributed to it. Nonetheless, the survey and focus group have provided plenty of (anecdotal) evidence that programmes were able to reap savings in terms of time and staff resources:

- 80.8 percent of survey respondents agreed or rather agree that **HIT saved staff resources** as programmes do not need to develop their own implementation tools.
- Especially for programmes that either did not exist in the previous programming period or whose start was considerably delayed, HIT meant that there were **tools readily available when they needed them**, which saved them time and helped them catch up.
- Since the ambition was to develop harmonised **tools that are based on minimum requirements** regarding legal compliance and good programme management practices, HIT promoted a debate on what data are really needed for assessing, monitoring and controlling projects. Even though the principle of simplification was not always strictly followed as more

and more optional elements were added over time, programmes still understood HIT as an opportunity to pick up good practices from other programmes for the sake of simplifying their own practices and tools.

- The main efficiency gain of all is probably the fact that **HIT enabled the development of the eMS**. Around 40 percent of Interreg programmes are using the eMS and hence benefit from the fact that it has saved from having to develop a monitoring system on their own (see chapter on the evaluation of eMS).

“HIT enabled us to finish the designation process in early 2016, due to the ready-to-use templates and procedures.” Survey respondent from IPA CBC Programme

The effect of HIT on simplification is sometimes reduced by **gold-plating on Member State level**. Various programmes reported that they had to make changes to the forms to comply with national requirements. One focus group participant, for example, reported that her programme had to add a lot of additional checks to the FLC forms due to the rigorous and detailed national audit procedures.

Simplification for actors working in multiple programmes. In addition to programme authorities, other programme stakeholders also benefitted from the fact that HIT reduced administrative burden. 84.6 percent¹⁷ of respondents to the HIT survey agree that HIT makes life easier for **applicants/beneficiaries** working in multiple programmes. Programmes report that those applicants/beneficiaries that are involved in projects in different programmes find it easier to handle the different programme forms as they are very similar and applicants/beneficiaries can handle them better than before they were harmonised.

The satisfaction of applicants with the application forms was also rated quite highly by programmes (See Figure 14).

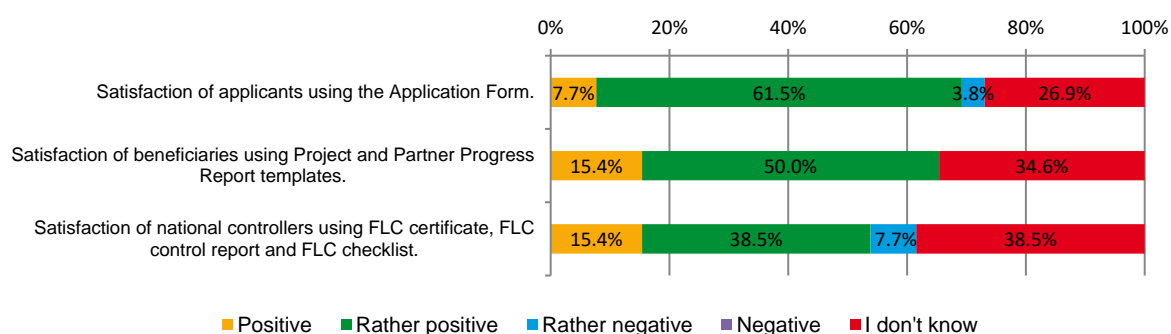
“We find that applicants from countries that don’t use HIT need a lot more training than those who have seen the forms before in other programmes.” Participant at HIT focus group

80.8 percent of respondents to the HIT survey believe that the harmonised tools for financial control and audit support **national controllers** working for multiple programmes. However, they rate the satisfaction of controllers with the tools considerably lower (53.9 percent).¹⁸ One shortcoming of the process in this respect was that members of the working group were usually from the JS (or MA) and often did not have a clear mandate to speak and decide on behalf of national control bodies. In the future, it would be good to collect feedback from end users more systematically in order to develop tools that are user friendly.

Lastly, the harmonised tools led to simplifications for **national authorities** as they receive similar forms and information from all programmes in which they are involved.

¹⁷ These responses are partly based on the perceptions of survey respondents, but some programmes also have carried out surveys to applicants/beneficiaries.

¹⁸ Note that a similar survey on eMS has revealed a high satisfaction of both and national controllers with eMS, which use the harmonised tools. Applicants/beneficiaries and national controllers were not surveyed for this evaluation. Presented figures are mainly based on the perceptions of programme managers and should be treated with caution.

Figure 14: Satisfaction of applicants/beneficiaries and FLC with the tools

Source: HIT survey, 2018. N=28

4.4.2 Increased effectiveness

Impacts on the effectiveness of programme management. Besides the impact on the efficiency of programme management, HIT also positively affected a number of factors associated with the quality of programme management such as increased legal certainty for programme authorities, improved results performance or the positive contribution to the creation of an Interreg brand identity.

There is sound evidence that HIT has **increased legal certainty** for programme authorities. 88.5 percent of survey respondents agree that HIT provided assurance that they are using implementation tools in line with the EU regulations and guidance. Statements from programmes in the survey and focus group also testify that increased legal certainty was an important reason for them to use HIT.

"The Harmonised Implementation Tools make us feel that we are on the safe side." Survey respondent from Interreg CBC Programme

Certainty has increased as a result of:

- the more uniform interpretation of regulatory requirements (reducing "lonely programme solutions");
- the decreased likelihood of missing out on anything as "many eyes are on it"; and
- the fact that a majority ('critical mass') of programmes are using HIT, which makes it hard for auditors to question the regulatory compliance of the tools.¹⁹

The uniform interpretation of regulatory requirements among programmes is a major achievement of the HIT process. The exchange taking place in the scope of the HIT development has very much shaped how programmes have interpreted the newly introduced requirement on results orientation and how they have translated it into their implementation tools. Programmes confirm that the clear and harmonious approach to results-orientation helps them report on outputs and results. One programme even reported that it **led to more clearly focused projects**.

"In our programme, the quality of the project has substantially risen as a result of requesting projects to have a clear intervention logic in the Application Form." Survey respondent from Interreg CBC Programme

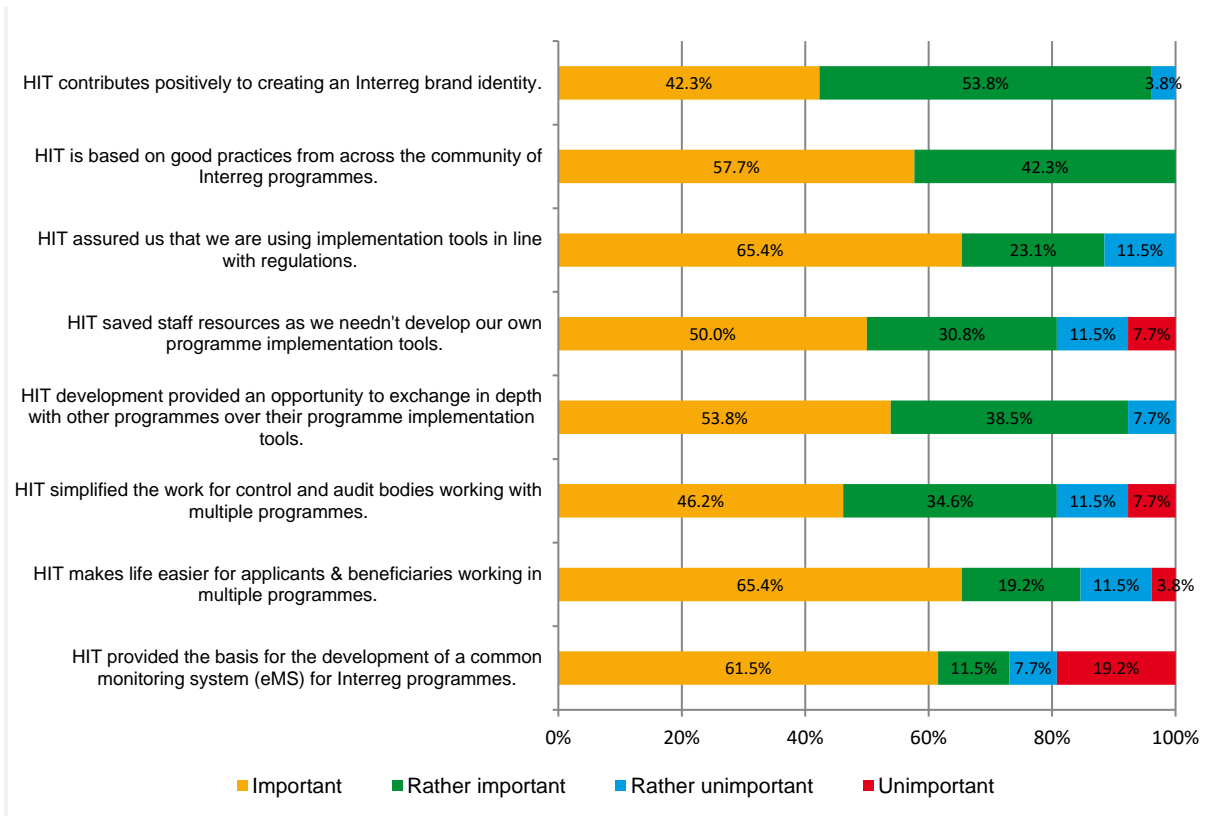
¹⁹ Nonetheless, one programme reported that compliance was questioned by the programme's auditor in spite of the programme using HIT and eMS.

Evidence from one programme shows that the harmonised application forms allow the identification of **potential overlaps with and double funding of projects** from neighbouring programmes.

“Having harmonised application forms helps cross-checking with other programmes the potential existence of overlaps/double funding.” Survey respondent from Interreg TNC Programme

And lastly, HIT has also had an **impact on the visibility of Interreg**. 96.1 percent of respondents agree that HIT has positively contributed to creating an Interreg brand identity. HIT is one building block in the overall endeavour to increase the awareness of Interreg.

Figure 15: Impacts of harmonised implementation tools



Source: HIT survey, 2018. N=28

4.4.3 Increased resilience

The collaborative development of harmonisation implementation tools meant that programmes jointly address challenges arising from a changing regulatory environment. The process enhanced self-reflection, and organisational flexibility, improving change management in programmes, which contributes to more resilient programmes.

4.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The harmonised implementation tools have been adopted, even though to varying degrees, by around 66 percent of Interreg programmes as well as some ENI programmes. Given that HIT was the first major attempt to harmonise Interreg programme management across the three strands, the achieved result is a remarkable success by all standards. It prepared the ground for a number of harmonisation efforts that followed in the 'slipstream' of the successful HIT development, notably the eMS and the harmonised Interreg branding. Furthermore, the debate and exchange that took place in the scope of the HIT development has contributed to a more harmonious interpretation of regulatory requirements across programmes, possibly even in programmes that did not opt for HIT, but use HIT 'for inspiration'.

There is sound evidence that the collaborative development process, as well as the resulting tools have positively contributed to building programme management capacity by:

- Developing a culture of inter-programme cooperation and strengthening the community of Interreg programmes;
- Changing organisational culture in programmes and supporting a shift towards greater focus on simplification for applicants/beneficiaries;
- Simplifying some programme management processes; and
- Providing harmonised implementation tools, which are based on good programme practices and enabled the development of a community monitoring system.

Beyond those immediate results, HIT has had wider impacts on the efficiency and effectiveness of programme implementation.

- HIT has contributed to a more efficient programme implementation as it offered programmes off-the-shelf implementation tools in line with EU regulations and guidance.
- HIT has increased legal certainty for programme authorities resulting from the large number of HIT adopters and the more harmonised interpretation of regulatory requirements.
- HIT has improved the resilience of programmes as it induced a more proactive change management.
- HIT has achieved simplification for actors (applicants/beneficiaries, national controllers, national authorities) working in multiple programmes.
- HIT is one building block in the development of a common Interreg brand identity.

In view of these positive effects, there is potential, also in connection with the high interest in eMS, to increase the number of programmes using HIT in the coming programming period. However, whether HIT will be more widely adopted in the coming period will be conditional upon both Interact addressing the shortcomings of the development process and tools of the current period, but also on a number of external conditioning factors.

Conditioning (success) factors. The success of HIT clearly depended a great deal on the hard work, dedication and perseverance of Interact. Interact's approach to harmonisation based on broad participation and transparency was another key success factor explaining the wide acceptance of and satisfaction with the harmonised tools. Beside these efforts, the evaluation has brought to light a number of factors influencing the impact of HIT, which are outside Interact's control. The most

important factor is the programmes' willingness to participate and commit to using the tools. Programmes have both dedicated time and staff resources to the collaborative HIT development and have also shown a lot of flexibility by compromising on tools rather than sticking with their established tools. At the same time, survey and focus groups have shown that the flexibility of programmes is limited by particular national specifications. Some programmes, for example, reported that they were required to achieve harmonisation within the country so that there was no appetite for harmonizing at the EU level, while other said that they had to follow national rules regarding FLC, which were more stringent than the HIT approach. The achievements of HIT, therefore, must be evaluated in view of these external factors.

"The development of the HIT tools was very democratic and inclusive, it clearly strengthened cooperation between programmes, but it was also a very heavy and slow process at times. The pro's clearly outnumber the con's, but the process wasn't pain free." Survey respondent from Interreg TNC Programme

Since the development of the first HIT package had a 'pilot' character, involving a lot of trial-and-error, there is clearly scope for learning from the aspects that went well/not so well. A number of general lessons can be drawn from the process:

- **Need for project implementation plan with timeline and milestones.** As previously stated, the development of HIT was the first major attempt to harmonise Interreg programme management across a large number of programmes of all strands. Being a pioneering endeavour, the HIT development could not fall back on the experience from similarly complex past harmonisation projects. Some degree of trial-and-error and an *ad hoc* approach to managing and facilitating the development process were therefore unavoidable. This included the lack of a project implementation plan, which would have helped programmes with their own planning. *By contrast, the development of the next generation of HITs can draw on the accumulated experience from the past HIT development (and other harmonisation initiatives) on how to approach the task, what steps are needed, and how much time they require. It should be based on proper planning, including an indicative timeline and interim targets/milestones as well as consideration of the interdependences between the different (interim) outputs in order be able to give early warnings of any risks of a delay occurring. Timeline and interim targets should be coordinated and agreed with programmes and clearly communicated to them.*
- **Transparency and good documentation of the process are key.** In spite of the trial-and-error nature of the HIT development, the 2018 HIT survey confirmed that programmes were satisfied with how the development process was run by Interact. All programmes responding to the survey agreed or rather agreed that the development process was transparent²⁰, (that decisions were taken and communicated in a transparent way), and inclusive²¹, (it allowed all interested programmes to participate in the development and shape the final tools). Programmes positively highlighted the fact that they received draft templates in due time before each meeting and a summary report on the meeting's conclusion. They also appreciated that HIT was presented outside of dedicated HIT meetings to inform programmes that could not participate in its development. *As programmes clearly appreciated these*

²⁰ 55.6 percent of programmes strongly agree and 44.4 percent of programmes rather agree to the statement.

²¹ 55.6 percent of programmes strongly agree and 44.4 percent of programmes rather agree to the statement.

measures aimed at increasing transparency of the process, they ought to be continued in the future for all programmes to feel well informed and involved.

- **There is a trade-off between an inclusive versus efficient development.** Programmes also largely agree that the development process of HIT made efficient use of programmes' time and was result-oriented.²² However, they also admit that the consensus-oriented approach to developing the tools meant that the process was time and resource intense. Programmes see a potential for running this process more efficient in the future. Ideas brought forward include ensuring more consistency of participants in the different working groups or cutting down on the time dedicated to finding consensus among programmes. *There is undeniably a trade-off between the inclusiveness of the process and its efficiency, and comments from some programmes suggest that they are willing to accept more top-down decision-making. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that Interact's participatory approach to harmonisation is a key success factor explaining the wide acceptance of and satisfaction with the resulting outcomes. Programmes are likely to accept more top-down decisions, but only if decisions are taken in a transparent way and after having been consulted.*
- **Find the right balance between greater harmonisation versus 'shopping list approach'.** Programmes reported that they were confused about the degree of harmonisation that the harmonised tools aspire to achieve and thought that the tools could be adapted freely to each programme's needs. As a result, programmes took the liberty to modify the tools to quite some extent, changing or taking out core elements or adding new ones.²³ The discussion about the degree of harmonisation that HIT should aim for is likely to continue in the future. A meaningful approach to this discussion would be to start with clarifying what the main objective/s of harmonisation is/are. In the case of HIT harmonisation, initially it was strongly geared towards achieving simplification for actors involved in multiple programmes. Evidence suggests that both objectives have been largely reached: applicants/beneficiaries and financial controllers appreciate that a common approach is used across programmes. The fact that the tools differ on the details does not appear to have significantly lessened the result. *Later, the objective widened and also included the development of a community monitoring system. It is important to weigh ambitions for greater harmonisation against programmes' wishes and need for flexibility, which also enhances the satisfaction with and uptake of the final product, without losing sight of the overall objective/s of harmonisation, which should be the ultimate yardstick.*
- **Better integration of HIT and eMS development.** When the decision to develop a community monitoring system was made in 2014, the harmonised templates were already at an advanced stage of development, but not yet final. As a result, decisions had to be taken in the eMS core group that affected HIT, outside the much larger HIT development group/s. On the other hand, decisions taken in the HIT development group/s sometimes proved to be impossible to be implemented in the electronic monitoring system. *For the future, a better integration of the development of HIT and eMS is needed and the timelines of the two*

²² 44.4 percent of programmes strongly agree and 55.6 percent of programmes rather agree to the statement.

²³ Only around 50 percent of programmes using HIT state that they have adopted the tools for project selection and implementation (almost) fully. Around 40 percent of programmes using the harmonised tools for financial control and audit use them as they are.

projects have to be better aligned. It would also be useful for the eMS IT manager to take part in HIT working group meetings to ensure that the tools can be technically implemented in eMS or any other programme monitoring system. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that the group of programmes using HIT goes well beyond the user group of eMS and that discussions in the HIT working group should not give the impression that they are only aimed at programmes using eMS.

- **Support from a critical number of forerunners can ‘tip over’ the opinion of the sceptics.** HIT demonstrates that, once a critical number of programmes support an innovative cooperation initiative, many more will follow. Thus, a virtuous cycle is triggered whereby more the programmes that join, the easier the remaining programmes are convinced and the easier programme MAs/JS find it to convince their Monitoring Committees. *To create the same virtuous cycle in similar future endeavours, Interact should look out for potential pioneers and forge alliances with those programmes.*

Areas of further development or engagement. Besides the potential to improve the development process, there is also a potential to correct the shortcomings of the current HIT package as well as extend it with new components:

- **Simplification of the tools.** The HIT survey and reports from programmes that have been collecting feedback on the harmonized tools from applicants/beneficiaries show that, generally, applicants/beneficiaries like the forms. They appreciate the harmonisation across programmes, even though the degree of harmonisation was not as far-reaching as it could have been. Programmes have experienced that applicants find parts of the application form complex, but also say that it guides applicants well through the requirements on results-orientation which didn't exist previously. Programmes also experienced that some parts of the application form lead to redundant input. 95.4 percent of programmes say that the future HIT should be simpler. *The future HIT package would benefit from greater focus on simplification for applicants/beneficiaries. A more systematic collection of feedback from end users should be considered already for the development process. In order to increase the user-friendliness and reduce the complexity of the tools an in depth stock-taking should be carried out to identify redundant elements by drawing on a representative sample of tools used in programmes.*
- **Better integration of CBC and TNC/IRC programme tools.** What began as a development of a joint HIT package for CBC, TNC and interregional cooperation programmes moved at some point into a separate package²⁴ for TNC/IRC and CBC programmes. In doing so, Interact responded both to a request from programmes and to the fact that the size of the working group had become impractical. As a result, CBC programmes were working on the almost finalised TNC HIT package, which they found challenging as they needed to understand the logic of a package that had been developed without their involvement. Having two sets of templates also increased the number of optional elements that had to be included in the eMS. Lastly, the fact that programmes took a ‘pick and mix’ approach to using the set of harmonised tools in order to create their own HIT derivatives, questions the need for separate

²⁴ This concerns only the harmonised tools for project selection and project implementation. No separate CBC/TNC/IRC harmonised tools for financial control and audit were developed.

harmonised packages. *In the future, one integrated development for CBC and TNC/IRC programmes would not only mean greater harmonisation across strands but could also once again strengthen the idea of a reduced core of commonly used elements to which programmes can add freely. A new working method is necessary in order to allow for the involvement of a large number of programmes in the development while, at the same time, ensuring the manageable size of working group. One option²⁵ is to delegate most of the consultations and discussions to existing Interreg networks (i.e. the network on financial management, support to AAs, first level control, communication, etc.) and establish a small HIT steering group consisting of only a handful of Interreg programmes. The task of the steering group would be: (i) to define what needs to be changed in the existing tools; (ii) define specific tasks that are either passed on to an existing Interreg network or on which the community of Interreg programmes is consulted; and (iii) to bring the different elements together and combine them into one consistent set of tools.*

- **Consideration of IPA and ENI programme requirements.** IPA CBC programmes were not involved in the second round of discussions on HIT, but figures on uptake shows that 80 percent of IPA programmes use the tools. ENI programmes were not actively involved in the process as they were too different from the Interreg programmes in the past period, but some of them have adopted the harmonised tools. *There is every reason, therefore, to involve IPA and ENI programmes from the start in the development of the next generation of harmonised tools.*
- **Better documentation and guidance for programme authorities and applicants/beneficiaries.** Even though programmes appreciated the written summary reports they received after each HIT working group meeting, it still proved difficult for programme managers who did not participate in the meetings to understand the logic behind the tools. Consequently, they, sometimes found it difficult to guide applicants/beneficiaries in using application and reporting forms. Furthermore, programme managers sometimes lack an overview of which harmonised tools there are and how they all fit together. *In addition to programme delegates who haven an important role in communicating the results of HIT meetings to their colleagues, there is also scope for Interact to provide better documentation and guidance. Synergies could also be exploited by developing common guidance for applicants / beneficiaries, e.g. real life examples of good project intervention logics.*
- **Scope for additional new harmonised tools.** Participants identified more than 60 new potential elements of programme/project implementation, which could be developed in the frame of the HIT process. These range from State Aid checklist/assessment procedures to guidance on the monitoring of project results. *Given the added value of HIT for programmes and importance of a timely delivery for the development of eMS, Interact is advised to put additional resources into HIT. A possible way to make available additional resources could be to outsource some of the HIT-related discussions to other Interact-managed networks, especially with regard to the development of new tools.*

²⁵ This was already discussed at the HIT kick-off event in Berlin, December 2018.

Figure 16: Programmes' expectations for the future generation of HIT

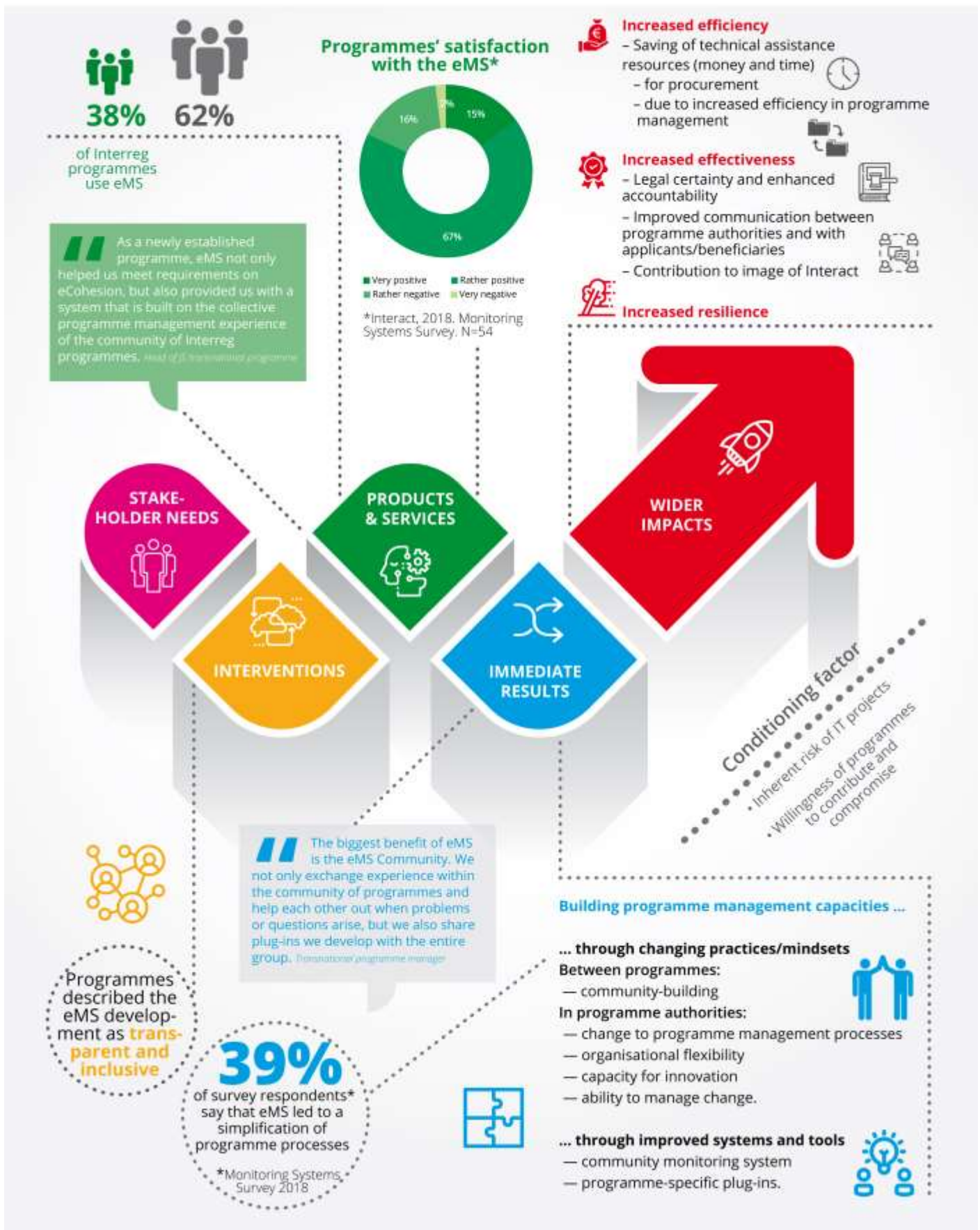


Source: HIT survey, 2018.

Electronic Monitoring System (eMS)



How and to what effect has the electronic monitoring system (eMS) been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?



5. ELECTRONIC MONITORING SYSTEM (eMS)



How and to what effect has the electric monitoring system been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?

5.1 Context



eMS is a free of charge programme monitoring system that enables Interreg programmes to collect and store all necessary project and programme information and communicate with applicants and beneficiaries electronically. eMS has been developed by Interact in close cooperation and coordination with the Interreg community. Programmes interested in using eMS could participate as part of a small core group, consisting of two cross-border and two transnational programmes, or the observers group, which benefitted from the intense exchange on programme practices and monitoring system requirements during the eMS development phase. The initial development phase was finalised in 2015, but development and improvement of the system is ongoing as technical errors are eliminated and new functionalities added to the system. In addition, Interact:

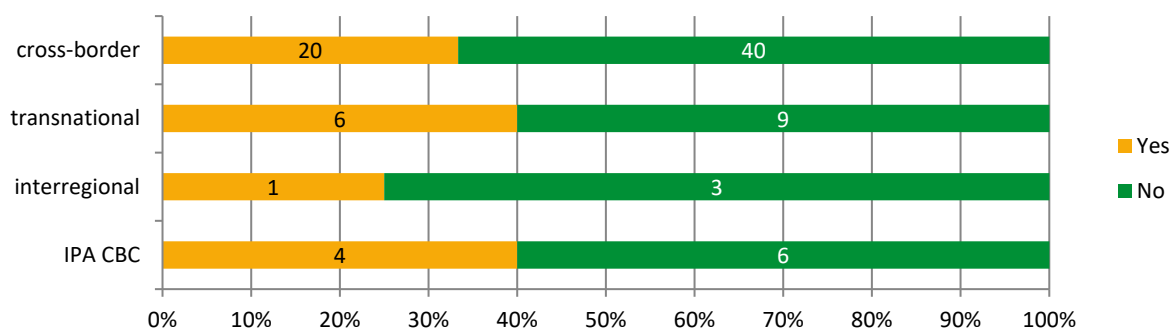
- facilitates continuous exchange in the eMS User Group with the aim of specifying further eMS development needs;
- provides support to programmes using eMS in the form of a helpdesk, a continuously updated eMS manual, eMS User Group meetings, training events, training resources, e.g. videos, pay for technical support for installing and configuring the system, provided by from the company who developed the eMS system;
- manages an existing Monitoring Systems Network, which organises continuous exchange of experience between users of different systems across Interreg programmes; and
- manages a 'wish list' of further developments of eMS.

5.2 Use of eMS in programmes



Thirty-four Interreg programmes have signed the license agreement, representing 38 percent of all cross-border, transnational, interregional and IPA CBC programmes.²⁶ shows the different levels of adoption per programme strand, which are nearly the same across all strands. The license to use the eMS was also signed by three ENI Programmes, despite considerable differences in regulatory requirements between Interreg and ENI programmes.

²⁶ Note that not all programmes having signed the licence agreement are also actively using eMS as programme monitoring system. To Interact's knowledge, around 34 programmes, including ENI, are actively using eMS.

Figure 17: Use of eMS per programme strand

Source: Information provided by Interact.

Common modifications to the eMS. When analysing the use of eMS in programmes it is important to note that usage figures do not distinguish between the different degrees to which the system is used and a signed license agreement does not guarantee that a programme uses eMS actively. The eMS is also structured in modules, meaning it is possible to use just part of the eMS (e.g. the application form).

Interviews and focus group discussions suggest that programmes have not modified the eMS core. Some have opted out of certain functionalities (e.g. the payment feature in the CA module or the export to keep.eu), or do not use specific finance tables. Many programmes were afraid to 'break' the logic of the system, lose compatibility with new releases, and drop out of the users' community. Instead of making changes to the core system, programmes used eMS plug-ins to adapt the eMS to their needs. A major benefit of eMS in this regard is the scope for programmes to share of plug-ins. Additional functionalities that could not be developed by Interact, but which a number of programmes were keen to pursue, were sometimes divided within the user group and the new developments were paid for by the smaller group of interested programmes. Such developments were monitored by Interact, and had to be explicitly allowed by Interact to be included in the eMS core available to all programmes.

A customisation option described as essential by programmes is the possibility to configure eMS to work in multiple languages and use multiple currencies, funding rates as well as funding (ERDF, IPA, ENI and others) sources.

Reasons for using eMS. eMS was an attractive offer to Interreg programmes, especially for those that did not previously have an IT system or were not fully satisfied with it. It offered a fully-fledged monitoring system for free, built on the collective programme management experience of a large number of Interreg programmes. It saved programmes from having to go through complex public procurement processes and/or the intense work required to develop their own system. Given the complexity and burden of developing an IT system that complies with all the requirements on eCohesion, joining the eMS community of users seemed a logical choice, especially for many smaller programmes.

"eMS has a lot of support in both Units in DG REGIO dealing with territorial cooperation. We are currently preparing a position paper for the period post 2020 in which we will explicitly recommend the use of eMS to programmes. Interreg programmes have to fulfil the same requirements on eCohesion as mainstream programmes but with a much smaller budget. It seems a disproportionate burden

for every Interreg programme to develop its own IT system." *Nathalie Verschelde, Deputy Head D2 – Cross Border Cooperation, DG REGIO, European Commission*

Nonetheless, scepticism in the Interreg community about whether Interact would be able to pull off such a complex IT project and the lengthy procurement process for software developers meant a number of programmes went ahead with their own system procurement and development. Once the development was under way, and the first eMS-supported calls were launched, an increasing number of programmes decided to adopt eMS and sign the user license.

Another significant group of programmes that use eMS do so due to necessity. This group includes programmes which started late and did not have time to set up their own electronic monitoring system, and programmes that did not succeed with their own procurement process or faced other challenges in building a system on their own.

"For the Interreg Danube Programme, eMS was a life saver when our programme's own procurement failed. A transnational programme cannot be managed without a proper IT system." *Interreg Danube Programme*

Reasons for not adopting the eMS. In spite of the huge success of eMS, the majority of programmes use another monitoring system. According to an Interact eMS survey, around 50 percent out of these programmes have developed a programme-specific system, 44 percent use a national system and six percent use a system that was developed for several programmes within a region. Reasons cited for not adopting the eMS, include, by order of importance:

- Good experience with an already existing monitoring system from the last programming period;
- Legal requirements which impeded the use of eMS (e.g. requirement for programme MAs to use a national monitoring system);
- The required flexibility to meet programme needs was only offered by a dedicated system; and
- Uncertainty about whether the development of eMS would succeed.

In the latter group (22 percent of survey respondents, corresponding to 12 programmes) could be open to switching to eMS in the coming period and should be the primary target of efforts to further promote the use of eMS.

Other eMS stakeholders. The community monitoring system eMS also clearly delivers on EU policies on the simplification of the management of ESI Funds post-2020 for both programme authorities and beneficiaries and eCohesion. European institutions such as the European Commission (EC)²⁷, European Parliament (EP)²⁸, European Court of Auditors (CoA)²⁹, and Committee

²⁷ A DG REGIO survey on the early adoption of simplification measures in the current period²⁷ revealed a decrease of approximately 1 to 1.7 percent of the total administrative costs on the level of programme authorities (MA/IB, CA/AA) resulting from the introduction of electronic monitoring systems: SWECO, t33, and Spatial Foresight, 'Use of New Provisions on Simplification during the Early Implementation Phase of ESIF', Final Report (European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, 19 July 2017), http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/studies/pdf/new_prov_simplification_esif_en.pdf.

²⁸ European Parliament, Committee on Regional Development, 'European Parliament Resolution of 26 November 2015 on Towards Simplification and Performance Orientation in Cohesion Policy 2014 - 2020 (2015/2772(RSP))', accessed 24 August 2018, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2015-0419+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>.

of the Regions (CoR)³⁰ specifically promote the use of IT systems ('e-Cohesion') as a means to achieve reductions in administrative costs and burdens. Furthermore, the European Parliament³¹ and the High Level Group of Independent Experts on Monitoring Simplification for Beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds (HLG)³², an expert body installed by the EC, also speak in favour of harmonising rules and templates across Interreg programmes as a way of simplification. The HLG³³ also recommends the development of a common IT platform for ESI Funds management, citing eMS as best practice example.

"A shared eCohesion platform for all ESIF programmes would be of great value for all MSs. They would be able to focus on other implementation aspects. However, it must also be recognised that if such a system was to be mandatory it would undermine the fact that many resources went into the development of existing IT systems, many of which are very good and working very well." *Iulia Hertzog, Member of the High Level Group of Independent Experts on Monitoring Simplification for Beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds and Managing Authority Romanian CBC Programmes*

5.3 Immediate results



The collaborative approach to developing, testing, improving and using the community monitoring system eMS introduced a number of changes in Interreg programmes, which are associated with increased capacities for programme management. These include: changes to structures and processes; organisational culture; and systems and tools.

There is good evidence that the system has built capacities in programme authorities who now find it much easier to access data, have a full overview of the state of programme implementation at any time and access the support and knowledge of the eMS community. In the case of the ADRION programme, for example, both IPA and ERDF controllers are using eMS, transferring first level control (FLC) knowledge from ERDF to IPA. This will benefit them in the post 2020 period, as IPA programmes will be more closely aligned with ERDF-funded programmes.

Overall, eMS development led to a common basic standard in programme management that is followed by a large number of programmes. This offers significant potential for further exploitation of synergies and the transfer of knowledge and practice between programmes. eMS means that programmes meet more often than before which provides opportunities, e.g. during coffee breaks, also to discuss other issues. Other **eMS spin-offs** are, for example, the plug-ins developed by programmes and shared with the community.

²⁹ European Court of Auditors, 'Simplification in Post-2020 Delivery of Cohesion Policy', Briefing Paper (Luxembourg, May 2018), https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/BRP_Cohesion_simplification/Briefing_paper_Cohesion_simplification_EN.pdf.

³⁰ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/11/15/council-conclusions-on-synergies-and-simplification-for-cohesion-policy-post-2020/pdf>

³¹ European Parliament, Committee on Regional Development, 'REPORT on European Territorial Cooperation - Best Practices and Innovative Measures (2015/2280(INI))', 9 June 2016, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+REPORT+A8-2016-0202+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>.

³² High Level Expert Group on Monitoring Simplification for Beneficiaries of ESI Funds, 'Final Conclusions and Recommendations of the High Level Group on Simplification for Post 2020', 7 November 2017, http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/newsroom/pdf/simplification_proposals.pdf.

³³ Ibid.

5.3.1 Changes to structures and processes

The development and use of the eMS presumed a substantive change to programme management practices as:

- existing programme management procedures and tools needed to be harmonised among programmes;
- programmes procedures that used to be based on paper documents had to be transferred to procedures that are based (almost fully) on electronic data processing and transmission; and
- the electronic data management opened new possibilities to reorganise work.

All of this required the rethinking and redesign of established processes, structures and relations between different programme functions, and provided opportunities to change established working routines. Programmes reported, for example, that new possibilities for teleworking/remote working were emerging because information is readily accessible remotely.

eMS very much defines workflows from the top-down even though programmes have some flexibility in adapting the eMS to their needs and established processes. Benefits from the system, however, are greater when programmes adapt their procedures to the system and not the other way around. In an Interact survey, 39 percent of respondents said that eMS led to a **simplification of programme processes**, but focus group and interviews evidence reveal a more nuanced picture. Many programmes reported that eMS simplified some procedures but it also made others more complicated. Others found that eMS did not simplify internal procedures as such, but rather shifted the focus of work to new areas. However, some programmes confirmed that the process of rethinking administrative procedures did lead to simplified procedures, which had a noticeable impact on reduced administrative costs or reduced application-to-grant time (see section 0 on impacts). The degree to which programmes could harness a positive effect of eMS on programmes processes depended on a number of factors:

- How much programme procedures and roles differed (prior to the adoption of eMS) from how they are defined in eMS. Programmes which had very lean procedures in place sometimes experienced an increase in programme administration with the adoption of eMS.
- The point at which programmes decided to use eMS determines how much time they had to prepare for using it, as well as opportunities to influence its development. Programmes which joined eMS at a late stage, e.g. because of a failed procurement, had considerably more difficulties fitting eMS to their way of working. The Interreg Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme, for example, handled the first two calls outside eMS, which resulted in difficulties as calls then had to be retrospectively entered in the system.
- Programmes, which did not have an electronic monitoring system in place in the previous period were particularly satisfied with eMS, while programmes which did have a well-functioning monitoring system and switched to eMS were sometimes dissatisfied. For newly established programmes (or programmes that changed from being funded through IPA to being ERDF-funded), and hence could define management structures and procedures 'on a blank canvas', the alignment of management practices to those pre-defined in the eMS did not pose a problem. On the contrary, they described the workflows defined in eMS as logical and also appreciated the fact that they could learn from more experienced programmes.

- Programmes with own in-house IT resources found it easier to configure and adapt eMS to programme needs than those without or with little in-house IT expertise.
- Programmes which offered sufficient in house training and guidance found that users were largely satisfied, while those who failed to provide training and guidance were faced with greater dissatisfaction.

"As a newly established programme, eMS not only helped us meet requirements on eCohesion, but also provided us with a system that is built on the collective programme management experience of the community of Interreg programmes."
Barbara Di Piazza, Head of JS, Interreg ADRION Programme

5.3.2 Changes to cooperation and organisational culture

eMS obliges programmes to give up some of their independence and be ready to compromise. At the same time, programmes benefitted from the fact that the eMS development drew on the concentrated experience of Interreg programmes in programme management practices, the interpretation of regulatory requirements, and the development of IT management systems that are both functional and user-friendly. The intense exchange in the eMS community did not stop with the release of the system, but still continues in the form of an Interact managed user group and in self-organised exchange among programmes. Programmes also provide mutual support with (technical) questions, share information and plug-ins, but collectively test new releases and report bugs to Interact.

"The biggest benefit of eMS is the eMS Community. We not only exchange experience within the community of programmes and help each other out when problems or questions arise, but we also share plug-ins we develop with the entire group." *Catalin Florean, IT manager, Interreg North West Europe Programme*

72 percent of all respondents to an Interact eMS survey state that the exchange of practical expertise and support from other programmes using eMS is very important for them. Interviews and the focus group suggest that the process has significantly contributed to **community building among Interreg programmes**. For example, core group members reported that, in the beginning, there were still some tensions in the group as members tried to convince others of their way of approaching different management tasks. However, they soon realised that the only way forward was to be willing to compromise, from which point onwards the development process went very smoothly.

The collaborative development was described by programmes as a valuable learning exercise that made them reflect on and question their own approaches to programme management. Evidence suggests that this had a positive influence on the **capacity for innovation, organisational flexibility and readiness for accepting and managing change** in programme authorities. Nonetheless, many programmes reported that the reorganisation of tasks and processes was sometimes met with resistance. This concerns especially programme managers in the Joint Secretariats and Managing Authorities, while controllers and auditors are generally content with the system and consider it easy to use. Interviews confirmed that negative attitudes were the result of "teething problems" of the system, missing functionalities and lack of user-friendliness and general reservations towards IT systems, but they did not stem from a general unwillingness to change established ways of working. In order to overcome resistance, programme managers representing their programmes in the user group had to invest time and effort into explaining the reasons behind necessary changes and the

overall advantages of adopting eMS as well as actively gather feedback from all sides on new developments in order to ensure that the system is as user-friendly as possible.

The fact that all steps are traceable in the system positively affected the relations between authorities within a programme as it facilitates collaboration between people and institutions. While previously it could take some time to obtain certain information, which often turned out to be unreliable, the same information is now only a 'few mouse-clicks away'. However, programmes also reported that this transparency was perceived as distracting or irritating by some and that programme authorities needed to address the issue of digital competences and etiquette.

5.3.3 Changes to systems and tools

Programmes described eMS as a solid system with a well-designed core based on the thorough examination of programme management practices. It handles a large part of, even though not all, management tasks electronically. The benefit of having such a system at hand is considerable, especially for programmes that did not previously use a similar IT system. Due to the large number of programmes using eMS, it also gets thoroughly tested, which increases its stability and reduces errors, although some errors do nonetheless occur.. The fact that programmes could not, if they did not want to lose access to new system releases, make major changes to the core system, i.e. those affecting the source code, was described as a minor drawback by most programmes. A potential area of further improvement is the user-friendliness of the system. The user experience of practitioners having to work with the system should be more thoroughly discussed and tested.

5.4 Impacts



Programmes using eMS have a free of charge, high-end software at hand. Evidence from surveys, focus group and interviews shows that eMS has resulted in resource savings and increased efficiency and effectiveness of programme management in programmes. For applicants and beneficiaries, it positively affects the efficiency and effectiveness of applying for project funding and implementing a project.

Table 3: Summary of impacts found

Impact	Definition	Observation
Efficiency	Achieve more with less, e.g. through optimising service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS saves costs in programmes as the external software development was procured and managed centrally by Interact. eMS saves staff resources thanks to increased efficiency in programme management as a result of electronic data management. eMS simplifies the application/reporting process as well as controlling and provides synergy effects for applicants/beneficiaries as well as auditors/controllers working in multiple programmes.
Effectiveness	Doing the right thing to increase quality and performance, e.g. transparent decision-making, staff development, better communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS facilitates communication between programme authorities and improves transparency as (the history of) every step is well documented in the system. This also enhances programmes accountability and helps programmes in case of a formal complaint. eMS promotes legal certainty for programmes as the large number of programmes using it and external audit of eMS provide assurances that it complies with regulatory requirements. eMS reduces errors that result from incorrect data entry as the need for the manual input of data is significantly reduced. eMS has positive effects on programme external communication as it enables the automatic export of data for keep.eu, automatic update of the programme website with content coming directly from eMS, and contributes to Interreg being perceived as a family of programmes.
Resilience	Ability to deal with and manage change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eMS was a big change in programmes introducing the system and required them to adopt a proactive approach to change management.

5.4.1 Increased efficiency / resource savings

Resource savings due to the collaborative development of eMS. Currently, over 30 programmes are using eMS, which saved up to €20 million in comparison to each of these programmes developing a system of their own.³⁴ Costs were saved for the external software developers, but also for managing the development (or procurement) of the software, as this task was taken over by Interact on behalf of the programmes³⁵. Nonetheless, eMS did not entirely spare programmes from having to invest staff resources as these were still needed for the adaption of eMS to programme needs, participation in the user group, testing of new releases, but also internal training and the in house collection of feedback

³⁴ Information provided by Interact.

³⁵ In Interact, 2.5 FTE are dedicated to the (further) development of eMS.

on eMS, etc. Some programmes also invested in a backup plan in case eMS was not developed in time by Interact.

Programmes expect that the time and effort needed for developing eMS and introducing and learning how to use it will be significantly lower in the next programming period, as the experience gained will considerably ease the development and adoption of a follow-up community monitoring system. Programmes confirmed that the development of a community eMS did not only save financial resources for software procurement, but also staff resources, even in programmes that were part of the core development group.

"The collaborative development of eMS was a valuable experience, but also very resource-intensive. For a future eMS, the lessons learned, especially as regards the user-friendliness of the system, must be fully taken into account to avoid repeating the same discussions. It would also be good to do an in-depth stock-taking exercise of what could be changed in the current version of eMS to increase its user-friendliness for all user groups even before the next eMS development is launched." *Heike Schütt, Managing Authority, Interreg V-A Germany (Mecklenburg - Vorpommern - Brandenburg) - Poland*

Resource savings thanks to increased efficiency in programme management. Resources were not only saved thanks to the collaborative development of the system and the fact that Interact bore the main burden of it, but also because of the advantages of electronic data management. Programmes described functionalities like automatic messaging, automatic eligibility checks, automatic generation of reports/subsidy contract, simplified communication with applicants and beneficiaries, simplified and immediate information retrieval, etc., as real time-savers. One of the main factors increasing efficiency in programme management is the fact that programme administration became largely paperless and that manual data entry is avoided.

In some programmes, this led to a considerable **reduction in the application-to-grant time**³⁶. Other programmes stated that application-to-grant time remained the same, and one programme³⁷ even stated that it actually increased as a result of the contracting procedure getting more complicated. Since application-to-grant time depends on many different factors, a concluding verdict on the effect of the electronic handling of calls on the time needed for processing applications cannot be made. Nonetheless, it is safe to assume that eMS supports programme authorities in that it takes over the most repetitive and, hence, error-prone working steps and that it facilitates the collaborative processing of applications or project reports.

The full efficiency potential of the electronic monitoring system is likely to be only realized in the next programming period, when it will be possible to manage the programme fully electronically without the need to keep additional tables and when the learning effort will be lower. Besides, there is still potential to further increase efficiency by paying more attention to the user-friendliness of the system.³⁸

³⁶ For example, in the Interreg Austria-Slovenia Programme

³⁷ This was the case in the Interreg Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland (Peace) Programme.

³⁸ For example, programmes criticised that, for the assessment of progress reports programme officers have to jump back and forth between the different parts in the system, the information on the budget is well-presented in the system, but cannot be easily printed out, that checklists are too long and that there is not enough space for writing justifications for rejections, etc.

5.4.2 Increased effectiveness

Besides the impact on the efficiency of programme management, eMS has also positively affected a number of factors that can be associated with the quality of programme management. These include the transparency and traceability of the decisions of individuals as well as increased legal certainty for programme authorities or fewer human-induced errors.

Many programmes mentioned that eMS facilitates communication between programme authorities and improves **transparency** as every modification, but also previous modifications, are well documented in the system. This has not only shaped the relations between programme functions (see 5.3 on changes in organisational culture), but also enhances programme accountability and helps the programme in cases of a formal complaints. The eMS, therefore, has a positive effect on programmes' legal certainty. **Legal certainty** is further promoted by the fact that a large number of programmes are using the system, which assures them of the compliance of eMS with regulatory requirements. Interact also commissioned an external audit of eMS which confirmed that eMS is compliant with the regulations. Lastly, eMS has significantly reduced the need for the manual input of data. Several programmes mentioned that this has **reduced the error rate** due to incorrect data entry.

The eMS has also had several positive **effects on programme communication**. It is an important tool for programmes to communicate with applicants and beneficiaries, and it also supports programmes with fulfilling wider communication tasks. For example, the **automatic export of data for keep.eu**, together with the fact that eMS data fields are aligned with the data requirements of the keep.eu project database, has simplified programmes' task of regularly updating keep.eu with project data. An interviewee from the European Commission, DG REGIO, noted that the data stored in keep.eu has improved as compared to the previous programming period for programmes using eMS. In spite of these advantages, not all programmes use the automatic data export to keep.eu.

Another automation that became possible thanks to eMS is the **automatic update of the programme website with content coming directly from eMS**. Several programmes have developed an interface between eMS and their programme website, which they shared with the eMS community, and report that this has considerably eased the work of programme communication officers. Finally, eMS also enables an automatic export of the list of beneficiaries, and thus supports programmes meeting transparency requirements.

eMS has the potential to facilitate the aggregation of data across Interreg programmes for the purpose of e.g. capitalisation and communication. However, the fact that programmes use, for example, different indicators and different languages puts a practical limit on the potential for data aggregation in spite of the identical data structure.

eMS **contributes to Interreg being perceived as a family of programmes** by Interreg stakeholders and beneficiaries to the point where, as some programmes reported, applicants/controllers mix up programmes and programme rules or even register in the wrong programme's eMS. In an Interact survey to programmes, 86 percent of respondents stated that eMS contributes positively to the image of Interreg. Even though eMS is not intended for marketing Interreg, it has certainly enhanced communication with applicants and beneficiaries, improved the image of cooperation and created a stable community of programmes using eMS. It facilitates communication within a programme and

also supports programme authorities in the fulfilment of communication and transparency requirements.

Impact on controllers and auditors. Audit Authorities and national control bodies often serve more than one programme and therefore have derived specific benefits from eMS as they are experiencing synergetic effects from being able to use the same system and templates in various programmes. Focus group and interviews have shown that eMS has made life easier for Audit Authorities and national control bodies in a number of ways:

- Easy access to the relevant documents and data, e.g. for control and management verifications, for the controlling of project expenditures and online processing of data;
- Simplified and more convenient control thanks to the automatic calculations of SCOs, exchange rates, different funding sources, financial tables that provide a better overview, etc.;
- Simplified sample taking for second level control; and
- Increased legal certainty by using a system that is used by many programmes and has been audited as compliant with regulatory requirements and that ensures an archived audit trail.

As a result, feedback from controllers and auditors on eMS was very positive. 79 percent of programmes estimate the satisfaction of national financial controllers and Audit Authorities with eMS as good or very good in the 2018 survey on eMS conducted by Interact. Controllers and auditors consider the system easy to use and have positively emphasised the good guidance available. Overall, eMS led to increased efficiency in AAs and control bodies, which, as evidence shows, has led to faster designation processes of programme bodies³⁹ and more rapid processing of payment claims.

"I am working with several monitoring systems as Audit Authority. For me, eMS is by far the best system as it best matches established procedures and also has the best guidance documents available." Programme auditor at eMS focus group

Furthermore, there is evidence that eMS has also changed practices in AAs and renewed relations between organisations. FLC bodies streamlined procedures as a result of eMS (e.g. they now use the same checklist) and cooperation and communication between programme bodies (JS, MA, FLC, AA, etc.) has improved. The commitment to work on a common goal has increased.

Impact on Interreg applicants and beneficiaries. More efficient and effective programme management also benefits applicants and beneficiaries through, for example, quicker processing of applications/reports, improved tracking of the status of a submission, and better communication between, e.g. JS and the controller, which might mean a more uniform application of programme rules.

eMS also positively affects the efficiency and effectiveness of applying for / implementing a project in a number of ways:

- eMS allows applicants/beneficiaries to exchange data and messages electronically with programme managers.

³⁹ In the 2018 eMS survey, 84% of programmes said that eMS made the designation procedure easier and 79% that it made it faster.

- With eMS comes a greater responsibility, but also more transparency for lead partners (LP) who now have access to partner reports. This helps them manage the partners' inputs, supports the aggregation of data and gives LPs a better overview of the status quo.
- eMS also facilitates communication within the project partnership as the lead partner has a better overview of what project partners are doing and the system allows project partners to work simultaneously on applications/reports. eMS also allows assigning roles (e.g. communication, accounting, etc.) in the system, which improves cooperation within one partner institution.
- eMS puts pressure on the project team to cooperate and communicate more, which, as one programme notes, increased the quality of reports. It also eliminated common copy-paste errors (e.g. in budget tables), which occurred in the past.
- eMS guides applicants/beneficiaries through the complex Interreg rules on participation, application processes and has also offset difficulties with defining a project intervention logic.
- eMS has significantly simplified processes for applicants/beneficiaries applying/working under multiple programmes using eMS.

In an Interact eMS survey to programmes, 65 percent of respondents rated the satisfaction of applicants and beneficiaries with eMS as rather, or very, positive⁴⁰. Anecdotal evidence from programme managers suggests that applicants/beneficiaries prefer eMS over other monitoring systems, and especially like its reporting functionality. They also appreciate the fully electronic application submission. Applicants/beneficiaries typically state that eMS is complex but that it becomes easier to use once you are familiar with it and ultimately is quite self-explanatory and intuitive. Negative opinions about eMS are mostly down to bugs or the system being down at times. Programmes reported that negative reactions were avoided by providing applicants/beneficiaries with good guidance and training on eMS. Thus, while the overall feedback of applicants/beneficiaries is positive, there is still room for improvement and the keys to increasing user satisfaction are tackling the user-friendliness of eMS and developing good guidance and training.

5.4.3 Increased resilience

The introduction of eMS meant a big change to programmes' processes, systems & tools and organisational culture. It required them to adopt a proactive approach to change management, which ultimately contributes to them being more resilient to change.

⁴⁰ For example, 75% of applicants/beneficiaries of the Interreg Central Baltic, XX% of the Interreg Central Europe, but only 50% of the Peace Programme are or very satisfied with eMS. In the case of the Central Baltic answers show that satisfaction has improved over time as bugs in eMS were removed

5.5 Conclusions and recommendations

In interviews and the focus group meeting, eMS was often cited by programmes as the single most important achievement of Interact. eMS is seen as an epitome of the added value of inter-programme cooperation. The collective experience of a large number of programmes went into eMS development, which took the exchange on programme management practices, the heart of Interact's approach to capacity building, onto a new, deeper level. The outcome is an elaborated programme monitoring system that has digitalised core programme management tasks. There is sound evidence that the collaborative development process, as well as the resulting community monitoring system, have (deeply) affected:

- programme management practices, partly also simplifying programme processes;
- cooperation culture among programmes, building capacities in programmes for self-organised cooperation and enhancing the readiness to expand cooperation into other, new areas; and
- organisational culture in programme authorities, increasing organisational flexibility, the capacity for innovation and the ability to manage change.

eMS not only delivers on Interact's envisaged results in terms of increased programme management capacity, but it also has wider tangible impacts in terms of increased efficiency and effectiveness of programme implementation.

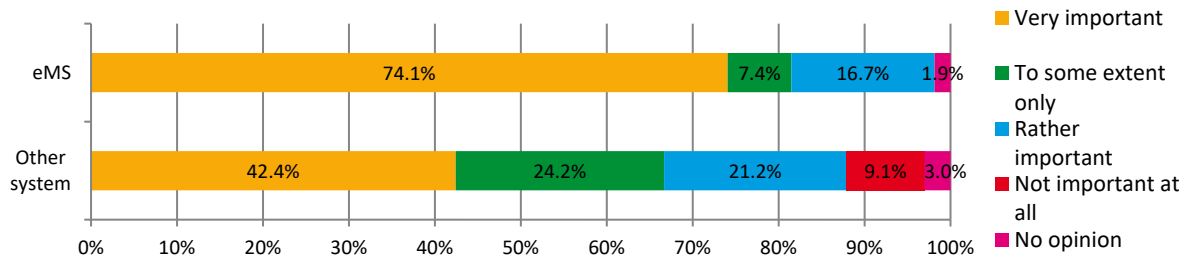
- eMS saves costs in programmes for procuring and managing the external software developers.
- eMS saves staff resources thanks to increased efficiency in programme management as a result of electronic data management.
- eMS facilitates communication between programme authorities and improves transparency as (the history of) every step is well documented in the system. This also enhances programme accountability and helps programmes in cases of a formal complaints.
- eMS promotes legal certainty for programmes because of the large number of programmes using it and external audit of eMS provide assurances that it complies with regulatory requirements.
- eMS reduces errors due wrong data entry as the need for the manual input of data is significantly reduced.
- eMS has positive effects on programme external communication and also enables the automatic export of data for keep.eu, automatic update of the programme website with content coming directly from eMS, and it contributes to Interreg being perceived as a family of programmes.
- eMS provides synergy effects for applicants/beneficiaries as well as auditors/controllers working in multiple programmes.
- These conclusions are supported by the numbers that are using eMS (over 30 programmes, i.e. 38 percent of all cross-border, transnational, interregional and IPA CBC programmes), which is much higher than initially expected. These programmes have saved up to €20 million as a result of not having to develop a system of their own.

In light of these benefits, the large majority of programmes in the eMS user group want a community monitoring system to be developed for the next programming period. There is also potential for the number of programmes adopting the system to increase in the coming period. Some programmes are

still struggling with eCohesion requirements and programmes, and those which were sceptical about the feasibility of developing a community monitoring system, may be open to switching to eMS. These two groups of programmes should be the primary target of efforts to further promote the use of eMS.

The potential for bringing additional programmes on board is also shown by the Interact eMS survey. Asked about the importance of developing a monitoring system for Interreg Programmes for the upcoming Structural Funds period, 42 percent of programmes (corresponding to 14 programmes) not currently using eMS say that it is very important for them.

Figure 18: Graph on the importance of an eMS 2.0 for non-adopters, adopters



Source: Interact, 2018. Monitoring Systems Survey. N=54

Conditioning factors. IT projects are known for their high risk of failure. The success of eMS is largely the merit of Interact, which adopted a very **participatory and inclusive approach to developing the system** despite very limited financial and staff resources. In interviews and the focus group, the development process was described as having been run professionally. Meetings of the core/observer group were described as well-prepared and effective. Overall, the process was considered transparent and democratic, giving programmes many opportunities to comment and make suggestions. Some programmes even expressed the wish for less democracy and more top-down steering and decision-making in the development of a follow-up eMS. Nonetheless, the broad basis on which eMS was built and intense involvement of end users has certainly contributed to the high acceptance and satisfaction with eMS.

In spite of the pivotal role of Interact in the development of eMS, it could not have been achieved without the **strong participation of programmes**, in particular those who were part of the core group. They devoted significant staff resources to eMS for meetings, testing of new releases, and so on. Members of the core group highlighted the professionalism of all group members and the fact everyone came well-prepared to the meetings. Members of the user community also contributed to the overall success of eMS through active testing, reporting of bugs, sharing of plug-ins, and so on.

The main **causes for dissatisfaction with eMS** are software bugs, which seem unavoidable in software development and are not specific to eMS, and shortcomings regarding its user friendliness. However, many issues that negatively affect the satisfaction with eMS, and the degree to which programmes could harness a positive effect of eMS are down to the programmes themselves and beyond the influence of Interact. These include, for example, whether a programme has its own in-house IT resources, whether it offered sufficient training and guidance to users, whether it was willing to adapt their own programme processes to the workflows defined in the system, and whether the decision to use eMS was taken at an early stage and gave the programme time to prepare for using it and the possibility to influence its development.

A number of **lessons can be drawn** for the future development of eMS, some of which can also be transferred to other areas of application:

- **The project management structure is effective, but requires good communication between core and user group.** The project management structure with a small core group steering the project and an extended observer group providing input was effective. It takes account of the fact that not all programmes have enough staff resources, or the specific in house IT expertise, to dedicate to such an intense process. Decisions taken by the core group were generally respected and the support that core group members provided to the eMS user group was appreciated. *For similarly complex future projects it makes sense to consider adopting the same type of management structure. However, the success of such a structure also hinges upon good communication between core group and observer group so that the latter feels sufficiently involved.*
- **Communication can be improved, requiring adequate staffing.** The project demonstrates the importance of continuous communication between Interact and the user group, and need to devote sufficient resource to it. While programmes appreciated that Interact was open to comments and suggestions for further developments of eMS (to improve and add to existing functionalities), they remarked on the fact that these sometimes ended up in a 'black box'. Often programmes only found out that their suggestions had been taken up when a new version of eMS was released. Programmes consider meetings well-organised and useful, but wish to get more information in advance on which concrete proposals will be discussed and decided at the meeting in order to be able consult colleagues at home prior to the meeting. Interact could also consider circulating short questionnaires as part of the preparation for a meeting. Programmes also think that communication between meetings should improve. *Continuous communication in the form of regular status updates and outlook, personalised feedback on received comments/suggestions, and advance information before meetings are time-consuming yet essential parts of project management. It is important that sufficient staff resources are allocated to it.*
- **Resource allocation to eMS should be proportional to the project's impact and financial risk.** Linked to the above, there is a need for a sufficiently large Interact team working on eMS. Programmes remarked positively on the personal commitment and dedication of Interact staff to the project, but thought that there were too few staff resources once the number of programmes using eMS increased to its current level. *Given the importance and added value of eMS for programmes, Interact is advised to put additional resources into eMS development and maintenance and, if necessary, even prioritise eMS over other activities with a lower financial risk and less tangible impact.*
- **The next community monitoring system should make optimal use of the obtained experience.** eMS clearly saves staff resources in programmes, but still puts a strain on programme staff resources. The time and effort needed for developing, adopting and learning how to use eMS could be significantly lower in the future due to the experience gained in the current period. *Kicking off the new development with a thorough stock-taking exercise (e.g. what optional functionalities are used, what changes would the different user groups like to see in a future eMS) and building strongly on the existing system will ensure an optimal use of the experience gathered.*

- **Greater efforts are needed to avoid software bugs.** eMS suffered from many bugs during the development process. While this is not unusual for software development projects, a potential future community monitoring system should aim at avoiding bugs as much as possible. Also, due to a lack of resources for software development, there was no automatic testing for eMS. Testing had to be undertaken manually by Interact and programme staff. *Automatic testing is a major quality assurance measure and should be implemented from the beginning for the new software.*
- **Improve the user friendliness of the system.** eMS was often criticised for the lack of attention to user friendliness. Programmes were typically represented in the core group by programme officers in managerial positions and IT managers. Possibly as a result, the usability and user experience of the system got a bit lost in the discussions. Also with the limited resources on the side of Interact and the programmes, the main attention was put on functional development and user-friendliness was not seen as main priority of the project. This should be changed in the future. *To achieve greater user friendliness in the future, representatives of the user-side, i.e. people who use the system in their day to day work, should be more directly involved in questions concerning, e.g. the design of the programme user interface. It is also recommended to allocate appropriate resources to the project to make sure that all the important aspects of the software can be sufficiently addressed.*
- **Keep the transparent and inclusive decision-making.** Some feedback from programmes suggest that the future development of eMS should be more top-down to increase efficiency. However, this should not deflect from the fact that a central success factor of eMS is the participatory and inclusive approach to involving programmes, as they are the ones ultimately using the system. *Programmes are likely to accept top-down decisions so long as they are taken after a period of consultations and in a transparent way.*

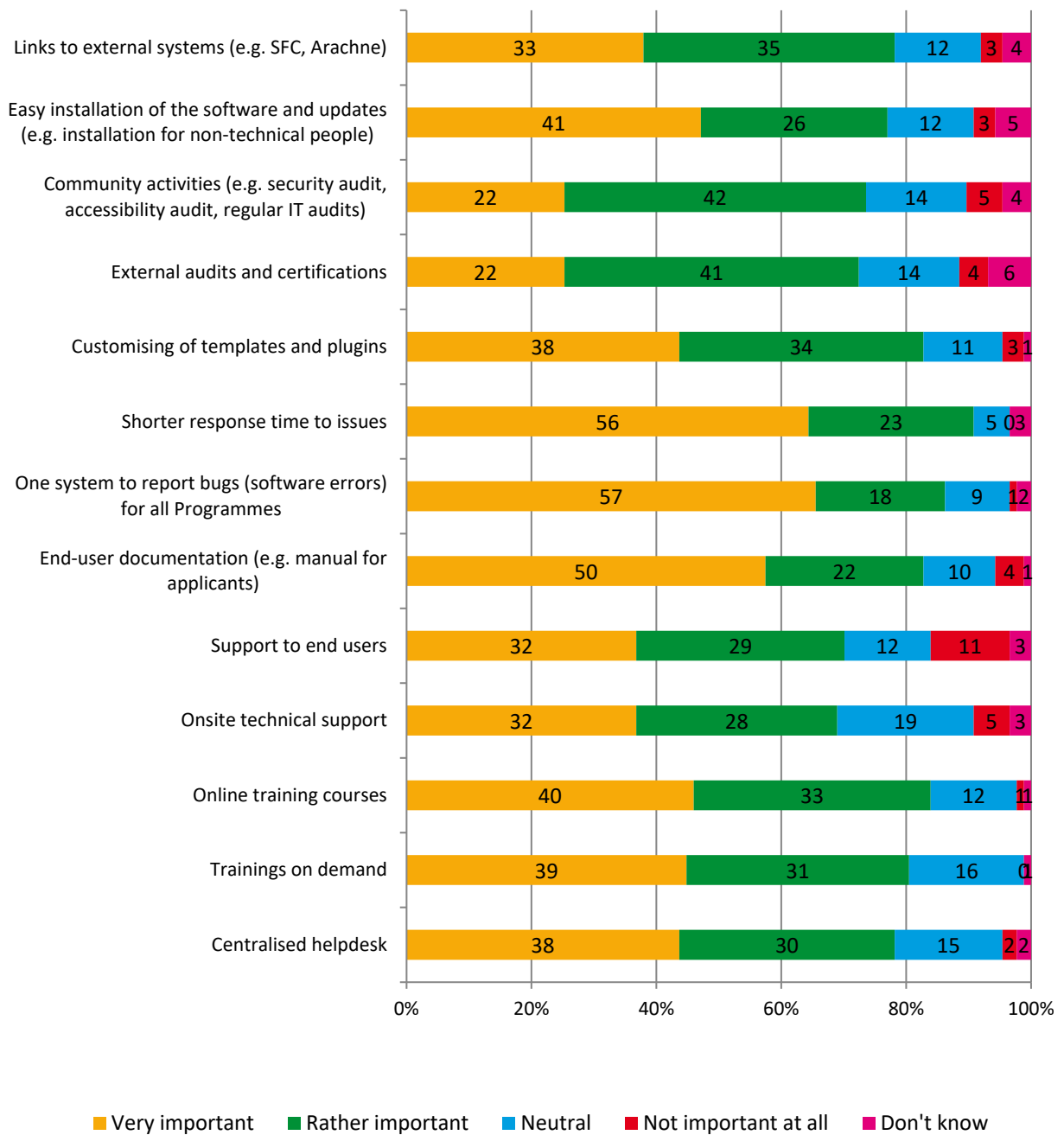
Areas of further development or engagement. There is a clear expectation towards and mandate for Interact from both the European Commission and Interreg programmes to continue developing eMS in the next programming period. There also seems no real alternative to Interact again taking on this task. Interact is both experienced, enjoys the trust of the programme and has the relevant expertise on programme management.

- **Ensure adequate resources:** There is agreement that adequate resources need to be allocated to a new community monitoring system to fully address the high risks and importance of this project. Interact should be able to allocate sufficient staff and financial resources to the project and external software development. Appropriate resources are needed, among others, to provide better training to the community of software users, implement automatic testing, improve quality assurance and user friendliness, and for continuous communication.
- **Scope for further developing joint guidance and trainings (e.g. video tutorials) on eMS.** The lack of training was often cited as a key stumbling block to the smooth implementation and use of eMS. Interact could offer periodic training sessions for programme managers, controllers and auditors that are new to eMS. Training could also be provided in the form of e-learning sessions to allow a large number of users to participate.

- **Information event for Programme Desk Officers at DG REGIO.** Another group of Interact stakeholders that would benefit from general training or an introduction to eMS are programme desk officers at DG REGIO. One DG REGIO interviewee observed that desk officers' opinion on eMS was strongly shaped by their programmes' stance on eMS.⁴¹ An information campaign targeting DG REGIO staff could mean that desk officers would be more directly informed and potentially could more actively promote the use of eMS among their programmes.
- **Better communicate the eMS achievement.** A general remark often made by programmes is the fact that eMS is not sufficiently promoted as an example of good practice, especially outside the Interreg community. eMS is a joint achievement and outcome of programme cooperation. This achievement could be better communicated in the future. Being recognised as an example of good practice would also instil a sense of pride in the user community and would boost motivation to continue along this path. While DG REGIO has not actively promoted eMS as an example of good practice, it plans to become more active in this respect, e.g. by explicitly recommending eMS to Interreg programmes in an Interreg position paper.
- **Develop additional functionalities/services for eMS users and engage in further cooperation/harmonisation.** If eMS was pursued further, there is not only scope for developing additional functionalities and services for eMS users (see) but also for engaging in further cooperation and harmonisation, e.g. with DG RESEARCH's division on Common IT Systems to explore possibilities to link eMS with the Commission single beneficiary passport system. Since eMS has led to a streamlining of programme management, this opens opportunities for exploiting synergies that may result from further harmonisation.

⁴¹ If a programme dismissed eMS as impossible to use in their context than desk officers tend to accept these arguments without really questioning them.

Figure 19: Additional services ideally offered to Programmes using a community eMS in the coming period

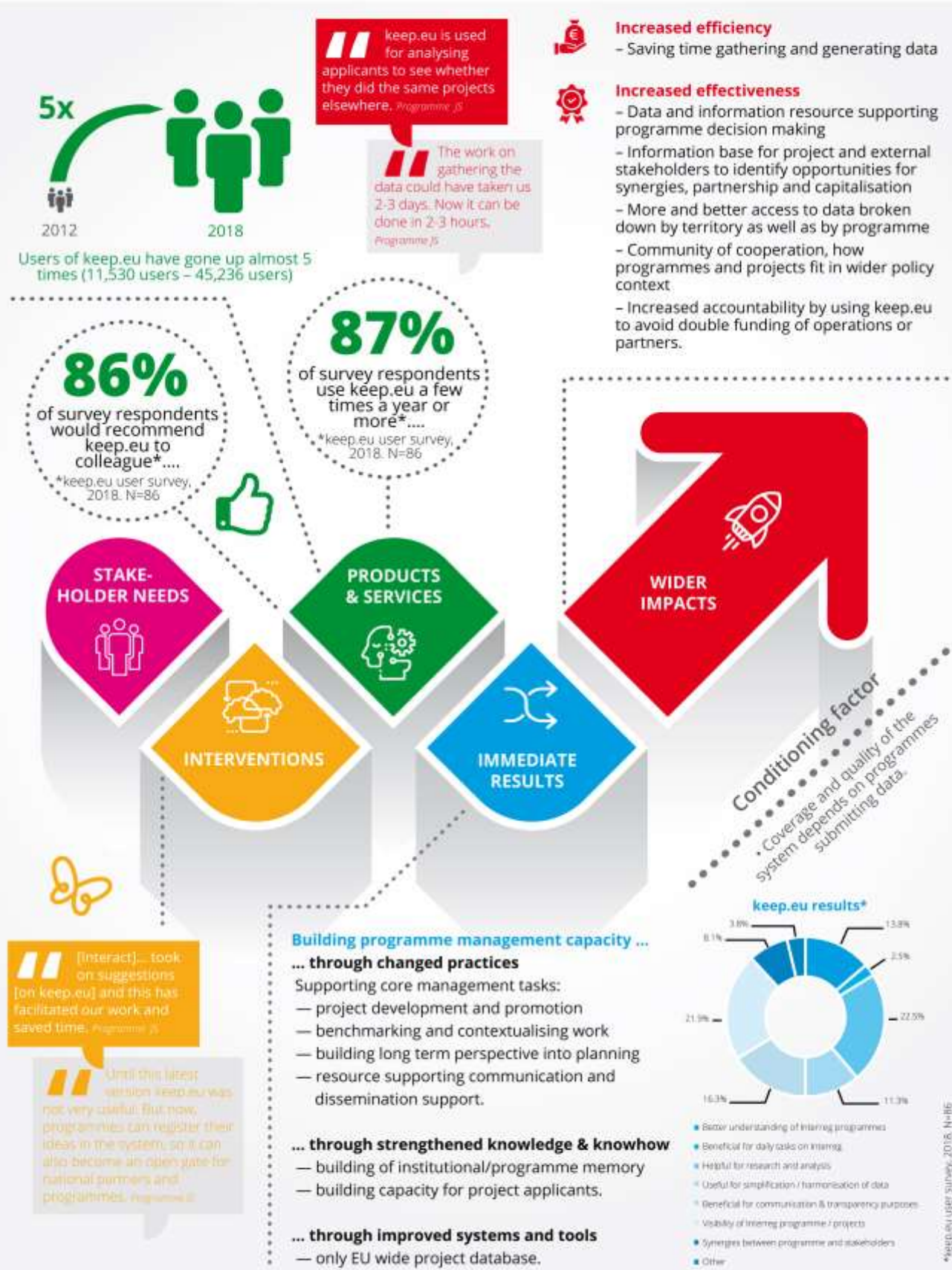


Source: Interact, 2018. Monitoring Systems Survey. N=54

EU projects database – keep.eu



How and to what effect has the EU projects database – keep.eu been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?



6. KEEP.EU



How and to what effect has keep.eu been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?

6.1 Context



Keep.eu is a comprehensive database and web portal that allows users to examine information on programmes, projects and beneficiaries across all Interreg strands, including IPA and ENPI/ENI programmes. Interact's work on keep.eu began in 2008, with the support of the European Commission and the Interreg community who contribute data. Interact's work has been supported by the keep 2.0 group, which is a platform for discussions on the future of keep.eu and is comprised of representatives of keep.eu stakeholders.

Since its inception keep.eu has gradually expanded to include more projects, programmes, thematic information (e.g. on macro-regions, ESPON territorial indicators, etc.) and functionalities, such as the possibility to view project partners on maps, generate statistics or editing rights of data for programmes.

The scale of developing the database, which covers data for the period since 2000, is a huge undertaking. It covers data for numerous programmes,⁴² different programme types, programmes implemented under the differing regulatory and reporting requirements for each programming period, and for programmes with programme/country specific systems for gathering, monitoring and reporting. This all has implications for:

- data availability and accessibility; and
- how to best to make search facilities and categories coherent across each period.

Crucially, keep.eu relies on programmes submitting data. Currently, coverage of the 2007-13 programming period is 94 percent (see) but the total figure for 2014-2020 is 61 per cent, although work is on-going to increase this total.

Figure 20: keep.eu data coverage

Projects	2000-06			2007-13			2014-2020		
	in keep.eu	overall	percent	in keep.eu	overall	percent	in keep.eu	overall	percent
Interreg Cross border	6004	8690	69	6737	7229	93	2196	3444	64
Interreg Transnational	1131	1183	96	1148	1148	100	631	871	72
ENPI/ENI Cross-border	363	363	100	333	333	100	184	267	69
Interreg -IPA Cross-border				928	928	100	0	18	0
IPA-IPA Cross-border				633	802	79	184	452	41
Total	7498	10236	73	9779	10440	94	3195	5052	63

⁴² For example, for the 2014-2020 programming period alone there are 79 Interreg programmes and 10 IPA programmes

Programmes	2000-06			2007-13			2014-2020		
	in keep.eu	overall	percent	in keep.eu	overall	percent	in keep.eu	overall	percent
Interreg Cross border	62	64	97	55	55	100	45	60	75
Interreg Transnational	13	13	100	12	13	92	12	15	80
Interreg networking	7	7	100	3	4	75	1	4	25
ENPI/ENI Cross-border				12	12	100	0	15	0
Interreg -IPA Cross-border				8	8	100	5	10	50
IPA-IPA Cross-border				2					
Total	82	84	98	92	92	100	63	104	61

Source: Interact, last update 10/04/2019, <https://www.keep.eu/statistics/representativity>

6.2 Use of keep.eu



Use of the keep.eu database has increased significantly in recent years. Figures from Google Analytics on users and sessions on keep.eu show:

- Between 2012 and 2018, the number of keep.eu users increased almost fourfold (11,530 users – 45,236 users).
- Growth in the numbers of new users is intensifying; the number of users more than doubled between 2016-18, (18,511 - 45,236).⁴³
- The number of sessions on keep.eu increased over fourfold between 2012 and 2018 (16,789 sessions - 70,567 sessions).

Users primarily learn about keep.eu through communications by Interact, but the European Commission and other programme authorities also have a strong role to play in continuing this increase in use and engagement with the resource, (see). In terms of user habits, at present, keep.eu is primarily an instrument used periodically and for specific tasks. 87 percent of survey respondents indicated that they use keep.eu a few times a year, or more, (see).

⁴³ Growth continues to increase, as revealed by the number of keep.eu users in the first two months of 2019, which more than doubled versus the first two months of 2018 - 1 January to 1 February 2019: 12,739 users vs 1 January to 1 February 2018: 6,055.

Figure 21: How users learned about keep.eu

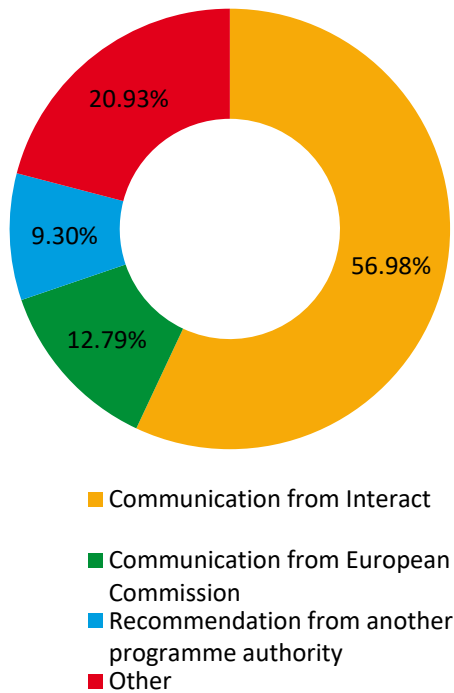
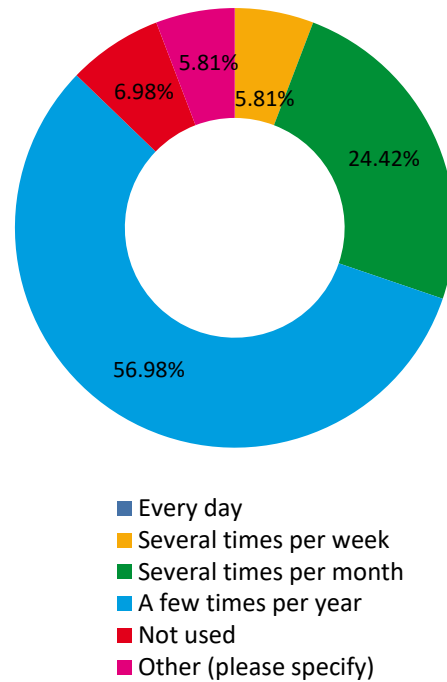


Figure 22: Frequency of keep.eu use



Source: Survey to keep.eu users, 2018. (N=86)

Reasons for not using keep.eu While there is widespread support and usage of keep.eu amongst the key stakeholder groups that responded to interviews and the survey (programme authorities, EC, national authorities covering Interreg, and researchers) a number of perceived limitations and difficulties were noted which affect usage and engagement.

- **Perceived, and actual, challenges in data transfer for some programmes.** In some cases, due to technical incompatibilities between some monitoring systems and keep.eu, data transfers can be challenging at least initially. In others cases, the strategic backing needed to promote active engagement e.g. support from a national authority or Monitoring Committee, is not in place.

"The whole system won't fly without being up to date. People will not have faith in the data and cannot build the bigger picture that is needed. The weak commitment weakens the resource." European Commission official

- **Reputational issues, linked to the earlier stages of keep.eu development under the previous programming period, can still affect views on the utility/usability of the resource.** A number of interview respondents indicated that keep.eu in its initial phase was of limited use due to data quality issues and difficulties with the web site. In terms of specific and general concerns:
 - some stakeholders noted that there were specific errors in the data available, which a small programme could possibly to go through, check and correct but, for larger programmes, the crosschecking of data was seen as a major undertaking.

- more generally, data quality and usability were the key concerns including lack of data, out of date information and, incomplete data sets which meant that the data was not comparable and of limited value.

"The biggest issue is people's reluctance to use the platform. So the problems are not technical, which can be solved easily, but more about the old negative perceptions on Keep.eu. It is tricky to change this mind-set." Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat

- **A 'lack of ownership'/investment from key stakeholders, including programmes and Member States.** The success of the system depends on programme commitment and involvement. However, rightly or wrongly, keep.eu can be perceived as:
 - unwanted, extra work;
 - 'something for someone else to deal with; or
 - additional to established systems when some organisations have worked hard to develop and maintain their own web sites and do not want to invest in supporting another.

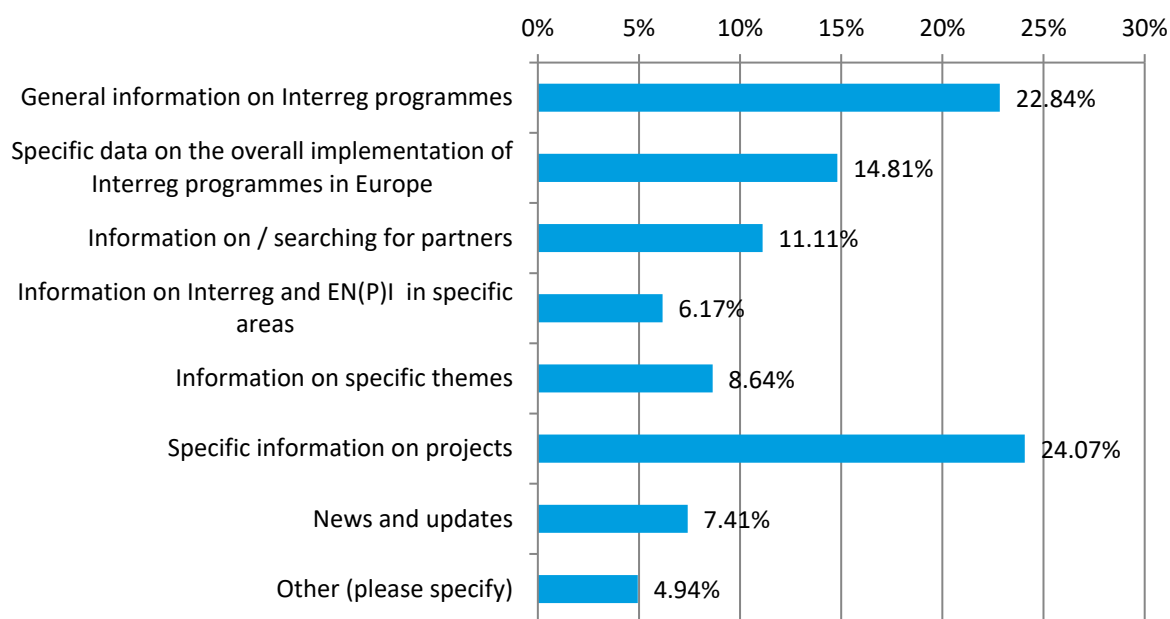
Perceptions such as those noted take time to change and the reluctance of stakeholders to take advantage of keep.eu is persisting in some cases. However, recent work by Interact, the involvement of the keep 2.0 group, dissemination and publication efforts, regular meetings on keep.eu, and the push to gather data supported by the Commission have all improved keep.eu and are contributing to a shift in these opinions.

In particular, with some assistance from the European Commission, programme authorities can be encouraged to update the database more regularly. The link between keep.eu and eMS, which up loads data to keep.eu, facilitates this task and thus improves data quality. Interviewees and survey respondents note that usability of the resource, including the functionality of the web site, has greatly improved in the current version of keep.eu. The scope to develop maps and more easily download data, for example, were noted. In addition, stakeholders value the openness and wiliness of the Interact team to engage and listen to ideas and suggestions. Interviewees are positive about the fact that comments and suggestions were considered while developing the platform, e.g. beta system testing and CSV extraction.

6.3 Immediate results



A live database requires regular data input and keep.eu relies on programme authorities to do this. Initially, this creates additional administrative demands on programme stakeholders, primarily programme secretariats. The burden can be reduced if the programme uses the Interact-developed electronic monitoring system (eMS) tool, but it is perceived as a considerable task, particularly for programmes that do not use eMS and do not use English as their main working language. However, the fact that the uploaded data is then readily available, can be filtered, grouped together, and downloaded by all users means that benefits of the resource is experienced by a range of user groups and in a number of ways, (see).

Figure 23: Reasons for using keep.eu

Source: Survey to keep.eu users, 2018. (N=86)

*"... I had doubts at the beginning about the utility of the platform. But, now it is a very useful tool on Statistics for Interreg authorities and for the Commission."
Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat*

Searches for specific information on projects by a range of stakeholders and for general information on Interreg were cited as the most common reasons for accessing keep.eu. More specifically, the platform is used for tasks such as:

- **programming, evaluation or other strategic purposes**, e.g. generating overviews of programme activities in specific thematic areas, developing territorial breakdowns of Interreg activity, or gaining a longer term perspective on development in a region;
- **communication purposes and capitalisation of programme results**, e.g. using keep.eu data as a basis for publicity materials, identification of similar/related themes/projects, or key project stakeholders, or a reference source for potential project applicants; and
- **project selection/monitoring/reporting**, e.g. cross-referencing for project originality, reporting on programme activity on specific themes that may not be directly/separately monitored under the programmes' own systems.

The use of keep.eu paves the way for a number of results benefitting a range of stakeholders, most notably Interreg programme authorities.

6.3.1 Changes to stakeholder capacity and institutional memory

Stakeholder capacity building. As is highlighted in the preceding discussion, keep.eu is used as a source of reference in programme management tasks. Associated with this is the wider process of supporting learning and capacity building. Having a readily available source of comparable information helps build broader perspectives and insights into specific areas of intervention for programmes, project stakeholders, and policy makers more generally.

Retaining institutional/programme memory. The fact that keep.eu retains data on more than one programming period provides a valuable ‘historical’ perspective on programme/policy development, which without keep.eu would be lost as project’s end and programming periods finish, web sites close, key actors move on, and project details are often lost/out of date. The presence of keep.eu helps to combat the loss of historical information and builds a solid, retained knowledge base. Without keep.eu, accurate, in depth, long-term, comparable perspectives on Interreg are extremely time consuming and hard to develop. However, a longer-term perspective is necessary for robust assessments of impact over time, territorial results, patterns and trends in partner engagement - all of which are central concerns for contemporary policy analyses.

keep.eu is providing a base resource which can be used to boost overall knowhow and capacity. This role is likely to intensify in the future as the longer-term, comparative perspectives that keep.eu provides form a resource for programme planning post 2020. Highlighting the potential value for programmes and policymakers of the resource for forward planning is something that could be actively promoted, particularly as programmes will not be subject to an ex ante evaluation for the next programming period and the ‘external’/‘comparative’ perspective brought by an evaluator will not be available to them.

6.3.2 Changes to systems and tools

Supporting core management tasks: For authorities in charge of the management and implementation of programmes, keep.eu provides access to an information resource that can be used to support programme implementation tasks. In particular, for programme managers, who know the status of their own data in the system, the availability of quick ‘pre-processed’ information⁴⁴ is particularly valued. The result of using keep.eu data include:

- **Operational improvements**, such as better calls for proposals - providing better information and targeting in calls, e.g.
 - by examining past programme activity, thematic concentrations, trends in other programmes;
 - using keep.eu to help build capacity for project applicants. Where programmes are confident in the coverage of their programmes in the database, project promoters can be referred to keep.eu for information on project ideas, what makes a ‘fundable’ project, and improving their applications. It can also be used as a means to find potential project partners who can bring added value to the project and increase its chances of winning support.

“...stakeholders use it. We had around 400 proposals for projects. Many of them said that they found partners through keep.eu.” *Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat*

- **Strategic insights to better inform planning**, e.g. through
 - overviews of the profile of partners and projects, identifying current trends, tracking change over time.

“Keep.eu is used as an inter-programme database that can generate ideas. You can see what others are doing and you can cluster together ideas and patterns of

⁴⁴ For example, data which has been categorised according to specific themes, or territories.

actions that would benefit most programmes." *Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat*

- benchmarking progress
 - looking beyond a single programme experience;
 - new ideas and solutions to specific implementation challenges, e.g. see what projects have been funded on specific themes in other areas;
 - comparing across programmes to identify common themes/interests for possible collaboration and synergies; and
 - identifying distinctive elements in programmes.
- contextualising and understanding the role and position of Interreg/ENI programmes more generally, e.g. gaining overviews of overall activity in specific territories, countries, themes; and
- generating longer-term views
 - capacity to look back, identify what worked well in the past, and help plan post 2020, e.g. targeting thematic areas of strength, partner clusters, potential programme synergies etc.

In survey responses, programme authorities, particularly programme joint secretariats, highlight the way in which the keep.eu resource is currently used, and could increasingly be used, to support programme management and implementation processes. Similar, points apply to the use of keep.eu for national authorities working on Interreg and the European Commission.

"It is used by my colleagues during assessments of programmes and on information regarding partners. It is also used by communication colleagues when they consolidate information that is displayed on our programme website." *Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat*

"Until this latest version it was not very useful. But now, programmes can register their ideas in the system, so it can also become like an open gate for national partners and programmes. Keep.eu acts now as a repository and is the central point where you can access and check all programmes" *Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat*

"Keep.eu can be seen as an "inter-programme database that can generate ideas" and which "can cluster together ideas and patterns of actions that would benefit most programmes" *Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat*

"It is also helpful for my colleagues working in the evaluation and selection of projects. They use it as a benchmark for analysing those applying for funding and to see whether people did the same projects somewhere else. In this way they are making sure that an applicant organisation is not receiving other funding or double financing for the same project." *Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat*

Communication and dissemination support. Keep.eu is a database but is also proving to be a valuable tool supporting communication and dissemination activities, e.g. by the European Commission, programme authorities, project promoters and other stakeholders. For example, programme authorities have indicated that keep.eu helps them get an easy, quick overview of programme achievements. Programmes obviously have access to their own raw project

data.Keep.eu, however, provides easy access to thematically and territorially grouped/categorised data that is 'usable', easier to work with and current, especially as maps and charts can be generated through keep.eu. In addition, individual projects are also covered, all within one platform. The information available is used for communication activities, such as updating the programmes webpage, preparing presentations and infographics for events, such as annual conferences and the week of cities and regions.

The same information is also valuable for the European Commission, whose communication activities also benefit from keep.eu data. Interviewees highlight its value as a tool to provide information and examples quickly to support discussion meetings and at events, e.g. to identify interventions in specific regions/Member states/themes. Given that the programmes rely on public money, the availability of information serves wider communication purposes, such as facilitating accountability of public authorities towards citizens and their representation in regional and national parliaments as well as the European Parliament. Effectively communicating the role, impact and value of Interreg and territorial cooperation is an ongoing challenge. A recognised resource with reliable data is an important tool available to programmes, projects, and policymakers, seeking to highlight and communicate their role and contributions.

"For the Commission it has been a very useful resource. Other DGs have also found it a useful resource, DG Mare, DG Move, DG Env – they go on to it and use it." European Commission Official

"We use it in the group of communication managers from our network on Interreg transnational programmes. At the European week of regions in Brussels there is an exhibition on transnational programmes and for this we have developed infographics with facts and figures - keep.eu has been helpful for this". Interreg Programme Joint Secretariat

6.4 Impact



The combined impacts of the results address the three dimensions of impact identified in the evaluation methodology, efficiency, effectiveness and resilience.

Table 4: Summary of impacts found

Impact	Definition	Observation
Efficiency	Achieve more with less, e.g. through optimising service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of a coherent, usable resource Interreg, Interreg-IPA cross-border, ENI CBC and IPA-IPA CBC. • Helping support authorities in meeting information/communication demands - saving time and resource • Helping to improve programme/project coordination by offering comparative perspective across programmes.
Effectiveness	Doing the right thing to increase quality and performance, e.g. transparent decision-making, staff development, better communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting and informing programme and project decision making • A resource for project partners/potential partners to look at good practice, develop project ideas etc. • Supporting evidence based strategic planning • Comparative perspective for benchmarking and improving performance • Resource to support building synergies and collaboration, with a view to project development or capitalisation • Territorial view of participation and engagement in order to target efforts. • The link between keep.eu and eMS has positive effects on programme external communication as it enables the automatic export of data for keep.eu, automatic update of the programme website with content coming directly from eMS, and contributes to Interreg being perceived as a family of programmes
Resilience	Ability to deal with and manage change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional memory and historical perspective • Reinforces the Interreg community – ‘part of something bigger’

6.4.1 Increased efficiency

An assessment of efficiency has to recognise that, during the initial set up period and data input stages, submitting data to keep.eu is an additional task that already very busy organisations and individuals have had to undertake. This is especially true for programmes not using eMS or other systems that can be adapted to sending data to keep.eu. However, as the demands for synergies, dissemination, and accountability increase, keep.eu is delivering ways for various stakeholders to save time and resources across a range of activities. One example would be reducing time spent gathering and generating data on project coverage for requests by the European Commission and national authorities. As previously mentioned, programmes have raw data but access to the ‘pre-processed’ thematically and territorially categorised data on keep.eu saves time and effort.

By referring project stakeholders to keep.eu, programmes are offering project development support but also saving some time through not necessarily having to identify from their own resources, for example, ‘best practice’ ideas for potential project partners and overviews of current areas of activity. For project stakeholders, keep.eu is a quick way to get an overview of project types and partners of the various programmes that are operating in their area. For research bodies and evaluators, it is a

valuable resource for establishing the relative position of project/programmes/themes, accessing raw data on programmes and gaining a longitudinal perspective over more than one programming period. Keep.eu provides data that other sources do not, for example over more than a single programme period. The aspect of keep.eu that is identified as particularly useful, however, is that the data is quick and easy to use and access.

"The work on gathering the data could have taken us 2-3 days. Now it can be done in 2-3 hours" Interreg Programme JS

"One of the benefits is that you can retrieve and compare information. It saves us a lot of resources because we don't need to do this ourselves." Interreg Programme JS

6.4.2 Increased effectiveness

Programme experiences of the value of the keep.eu resource vary, linked in part to

- whether they use eMS (or other systems that can send data to keep.eu) and can upload data easily;
- the position of their Monitoring Committees on engagement with the development of joint resources, which impacts initial engagement/familiarity with the resource, support for programme authorities to spend time submitting and updating data, and the amount of effort invested by programmes on their own web-sites and search facilities; and
- the position of Member States hosting key programme institutions, e.g. national authorities hosting managing authorities which have differing positions on the use of eMS, their own set ups/requirements for data etc.

Nevertheless, keep.eu is increasingly emerging as a tool that is boosting programme and policy effectiveness, supporting effective decision making on project funding, supporting the development and pursuit of synergies and territorial collaboration, contributing to evaluation activities and, in particular, promoting communication and dissemination.

As has been highlighted, the resource is playing an important role in increasing the profile, visibility and understanding of Interreg programmes and the projects they fund. In terms of the wider group of programme stakeholders, there is evidence to suggest that keep.eu has contributed to capitalisation efforts of Interreg/ENI staff by using data for developing infographics and maps, which can be relayed during events (e.g. European week of regions).

Associated with the communication and dissemination activities is keep.eu's impact in terms of transparency and accountability. More and better access to project information, particularly information across programmes and on a territorial basis, provides stakeholders with an overview of activities not previously available to them from a single source. As such, keep.eu has an important role in showing what is being done with public money. At present, the extent of this role is limited by the coverage of the data held by keep.eu, which is not complete for the current programming period. Coverage and representativeness of the data is something that the keep.eu web site is clear about. For example, on reliability, all the project, partner and call data in keep.eu is described in terms of its

coverage and completeness. Further, future work should ensure clarity on how projects are categorised and counted in thematic categorisations.

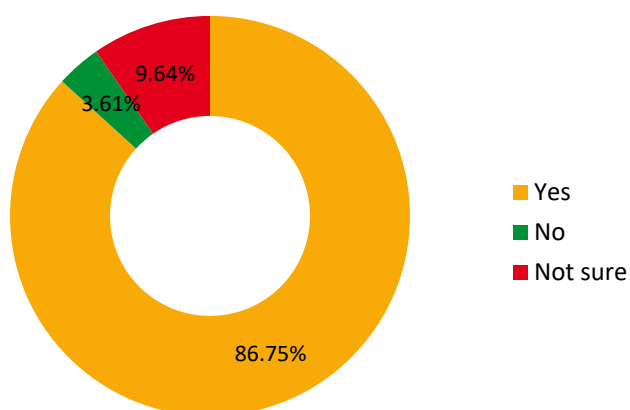
6.4.3 Increased resilience

Resilience is a big topic on which to expect a database to have any impact. However, the contribution of keep.eu as a means of retaining institutional memory and reinforcing the idea of a 'community'/bigger picture around territorial cooperation has a relevance to the ability of programmes to manage and adapt to change. It contributes to building a sense of how individual programmes sit within a wider framework. Looking to the future for programmes and stakeholders planning activities post 2020, keep.eu is a useful source of information on how to manage and direct change and programme evolution, e.g. identifying possible clusters, areas of potential collaboration with neighbouring programmes etc.

6.5 Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, keep.eu is perceived as a useful tool with multiple benefits and impacts. A large majority of survey respondents, covering programme managers and authorities, Commission officials and researchers, indicated that they would recommend keep.eu to a colleague (see).

Figure 24: Would you recommend keep.eu to a colleague?



Source: Survey to keep.eu users, 2018. (N=86)

Keep.eu has a role in contributing to the improved implementation of programmes by making available data in a 'pre-processed' and user-friendly way. As previously discussed, programme authorities using this information have reported efficiency and effectiveness benefits. Keep.eu can be used to contribute to better projects as project promoters use keep.eu as a platform for knowledge exchange and networking. Communication activities by programme authorities and other stakeholders have widely benefitted from keep.eu.

Conditioning (success) factors. Where there are barriers and challenges to the usage/usefulness and impact of keep.eu, many factors remain outside the direct control of Interact.

- **Reliance on programmes supplying data.** While a system for gathering and managing data can be established centrally, the coverage and quality of the system depends on programmes submitting data.

- **Technical and operational challenges.** Technical and operational capacity do not necessarily keep pace with stakeholder expectations and it is not possible/realistic to deliver on all expectations, or changes may take time to be rolled-out.
- **Range of users.** Keep.eu is a resource for Interreg programmes, but it also has a wider relevance, e.g. to domestic policy makers seeking to gain an overview of programmes, policy and academic researchers and so on. Systems, structures and approaches that work for some groups may not be as valued by others.
- **Nature of impact.** Real impact takes time. Keep.eu is a developing resource and more data is being added which is improving the 'usability' and utility, but the results and impacts of more recent changes are still emerging. Current and potential users are still getting to know the resource on an ongoing basis and understanding how it can be used.

Areas of further development or engagement. While there are external conditioning factors shaping impact, **Interact can continue to work to maximise, reinforce and build on the results and impact of keep.eu.**

- **Improve further the coverage of data.** Despite significant improvements in data quality, further efforts are needed and the coverage of data is the crucial challenge for keep.eu.

Gains in this respect could be achieved through further and stronger support from the European Commission, e.g. if technical aspects of regulatory reporting requirements were adapted in a way to achieve synergies with keep.eu, the quality of data would improve as a result. The possibility of making keep.eu mandatory was raised in a number of interviews and survey responses. Making it compulsory to submit data to keep.eu would ensure a more comprehensive and complete database. It could also be a way for the value of keep.eu to be extended, providing further practical services, e.g. for programmes and the European Commission. Lists of programme operations could be hosted in keep.eu, for example, using a standard, harmonised format.⁴⁵ Publishing lists of operations is a requirement for programmes and using keep.eu could be a way to support programmes in meeting this requirement and ensure compatibility and comparability of data, which can itself support and inform programmes and policy. If the requirement to submit data remains voluntary, ongoing, active support from the Commission, as well as Interact's own efforts, would have to be taken forward.

The keep.eu website is clear and open about the current coverage and completeness of data, with a dedicated page on the keep.eu web site.⁴⁶ This extremely important contextual information is available 'if you look for it'. However, as use of the resource increases and a wider range of stakeholders access the resource, *linking a brief note/caveat on data coverage/representativeness to charts and downloads could be worth considering*, because this type of information is easily lost as information is used in different contexts. A similar point can be made in relation to how thematic categorisations are made for complex multi-

⁴⁵ Although, who takes on responsibility for editing data is an important question, as this all could just generate yet more work for programmes and even projects. It is also felt that ensuring consistency is important – thus a centralised system is better.

⁴⁶ <https://www.keep.eu/statistics/representativity>

sectoral projects. This information is summarised on the keep.eu web site.⁴⁷⁴⁸ However, additional information could be valuable, e.g. on the impact of double counting and what criteria are used to categorise projects. This could also reinforce Interact's case for project categorisations being retained as a centralised process, as opposed to something that would be undertaken by programmes who could argue they 'know the projects better'. In addition, the *current improvements to data coverage and reliability*⁴⁹ could be further supported by *training on the resource overall, data exchange, and an ongoing process of simplifying (wherever possible) the data exchange process.*⁵⁰

- **Links and connections between keep.eu with eMS.** In view of facilitating data input, which keep.eu relies on programme authorities to do, the eMS Interact tool offers significant scope for simplification. Currently not all programmes use eMS, mainly because of compatibility issues and requirements to use national systems. If more authorities would systematically use eMS and link it with keep.eu, this would imply significant simplification for them and improve the data quality and comparability in keep.eu. Whether or not Programmes use eMS is not something Interact can control. However, noting the value and compatibility of the two systems is something that can continue to be highlighted by Interact, particularly in the lead up to the next programming period. Also, *as both systems develop and evolve, maintaining and continuing to develop mutually beneficial links between the systems will strengthen both.*
- **Develop new tools/facilities to support programme management.** Looking to the future, keep.eu can be useful as a tool to help programmes report on specific themes and issues that may not be picked up in programmes' own monitoring systems, such as numbers of projects within specific themes. Programmes have been quick to see the potential in this field, e.g. survey responses suggested the inclusion of themes such as low carbon and blue growth.

To improve the relevance and utility of keep.eu, it may be necessary to *review, although not necessarily change, aspects of the thematic coverage to reflect new themes and cooperation efforts.* The introduction of new thematic categories would be extremely challenging. However, the relevance of some existing themes, such as 'coastal management and maritime issues' to contemporary policy themes could be highlighted. Keep.eu is continually evolving and now, for example, also covers IPA-IPA programmes. Looking to the future, the *introduction of further information on macro-regional strategies (MRS)*⁵¹ and *sea-basin strategies could be very valuable for Interreg programmes and MRS stakeholders.* There may

⁴⁷ 42 different thematic keywords were agreed when the Keep database was set up. Each project whose data is published in keep.eu is classified according to this closed system either with one, two or three thematics. This system of project classification applies indistinctively to projects of any programming period, from 2000 to the present days. It is independent from the intervention logic that applies to 2014-2020 only, and fundamentally different in nature: Regarding the latter, thematic objectives (TOs) and investment priorities (IPs) are embodied in the project data itself before its uploading to Keep.

⁴⁸ There is also the question of who is best placed to input data - could the assignment of the thematic in keep.eu database be done by the Programme Officers and not by Keep officers, as they don't have the level of detailed project knowledge? – needs to be consistent allocation so difficult to do with loads of organisations

⁴⁹ The next version of the keep.eu website, scheduled for the end of 2019, is planned to have a much clearer picture of the representativeness and completeness of data.

⁵⁰ A manual which explains the different ways (manual/automatic) to export data to keep.eu, depending on the type of database used would be helpful.

⁵¹ Keep.eu does cover macro-regional strategies, but currently on the EUSBSR and EUSDR

even be scope to reflect specific territorial groupings/interests e.g. Arctic cooperation, which are not covered by a MRS but are the focus of joint actions and cooperation.

For a variety of stakeholders, the capacity to not only access raw data, but also to easily map and chart the data, is highly valued. This is a demand that will intensify as the desire for ever more visually well-presented accounts of activity increase, e.g. through greater use of infographics. In particular, the scope for keep.eu to record outputs, results and impacts is something that respondents highlighted. For example, programme authorities responding to the survey noted that they saw *ways in which keep.eu could be valuable to the project partners who would have better means to communicate project achievements and their involvement*. Two projects under Interact and ESPON on measuring results and impact of territorial cooperation are already exploring this issue.⁵² Providing robust, comparable evidence of programme results and impact would be an invaluable resource. However, a major barrier is the overall challenge faced by projects and programmes in measuring impact which may be intangible, is unevenly experienced across the programme area, can take time to emerge, is often small scale, and is difficult to categorise.⁵³ While it may be challenging to develop a set of indicators that can reliably map impact, it may be possible to capture case studies for specific regions. However, stakeholders also note the benefits of keep.eu as a neutral tool/database.

The partner search facility on the keep.eu web page was less widely referred to in survey and interview responses. However, as has been noted, in a number of cases keep.eu is highlighted as a source of information for potential project partners seeking, in particular, an experienced project lead, partners on new territories/programmes, or to build cross-project/programme synergies and links. Key to taking this aspect of keep.eu forward is not just the technical development of keep.eu itself, but also *building commitment in terms of promoting keep.eu across programme levels, encouraging the potential capitalisation and use of the platform for stakeholders*.

- **Refinements to website.** Some interviewee and survey respondents stressed the need for the website to be more “intuitive” and easy to use by programme authorities and the general public, e.g. improving the visibility and usability of maps, making the site look less ‘technical’ and more up to date in terms of design. *The inclusion of further engaging graphics and ‘featured’ statistics on the main keep.eu home page provides stakeholders with a useful insight not only into the types of data available, but also, crucially, how they can be used.* Developing these elements of the website will highlight the usability and relevance of the resource to stakeholders.

⁵² ESPON TEVI – Territorial Evidence Support of European Territorial Cooperation Programmes. The primary objective of this project is to make ESPON territorial evidence and knowledge base more accessible and useful in practice. Part of the work is to build on the opportunity to deepen and strengthen links between ESPON and keep.eu, through enhancing the range of ESPON territorial evidence available on the KEEP database. In this case the aim is to develop evidence-based baseline assessments and territorial characterisations of each ETC programmes and using specific performance monitoring indicators develop a set of territorial indicators to support the monitoring of programme implementation and progress. <<https://www.espon.eu/TEVI/>>

⁵³ McMaster, I, Wergles, N and Vironen, H. (2019 forthcoming), ‘Results Orientation: What is it doing for Interreg?’ European Structural and Investment Funds Journal.

Such refinements can be addressed by both technical changes, and also at a more strategic level, through a very *clear communication of the vision of what keep.eu is for*. This will help to keep efforts focussed on the core functions of keep.eu and reinforce its role, avoiding the danger of it trying to be too many things to too many people. It is noted that the following actions are already planned:

- Maximising the usability and utility of search criteria and results is an on-going process and is expected to advance further in the next version of keep.eu launched at the end of 2019;
 - Graphics will be easier for the users to apply and utilise in their own reports and communications; and
 - Cooperation with ESPON to access specific data that can be used in programming.
- **Continue to disseminate and publicise the role/value of keep.eu to the programmes.** An obstacle to taking full advantage of keep.eu lies in the uptake level of keep.eu by key stakeholders which is influenced by perception issues and lack of awareness. In this respect, *more information events and training will be helpful; in particular, opportunities to highlight the ways keep.eu can be used/useful*. Work to boost the profile of, and commitment to, keep.eu has already been undertaken by Interact, supported by the Commission. An ongoing support/push from the European Commission would be invaluable.

Efforts to disseminate the role of keep.eu should naturally focus on key stakeholder groups, i.e. programme authorities and the European Commission. However, recognising the wider role of keep.eu is also important. As has been highlighted, keep.eu is increasingly a resource for project partners and, for national authorities, keep.eu provides a unique insight into national and regional participation in territorial cooperation. For researchers and evaluators, access to data that is comparable across programme areas and time periods provides valuable insights into performance and future planning. As such, keep.eu can be promoted to wider audiences. Linked to this, developing an even stronger identity with greater visual coherence with Interreg could be valuable, giving an 'external' user an immediate visual trigger that this is a formally recognised source for reliable data on Interreg.

Figure 25: Example of positive linkages between data and information sources



Work on dissemination could also be supported by *further coordination and collaboration with future developments on other platforms, or better/more visible connection of keep.eu with the wider 'family' of information resources on territorial cooperation programmes and vice versa.* As has been highlighted throughout this evaluation, keep.eu has its own distinct role as a solid base of information and data that links

to, and from, other sources and forms of information. Keep.eu gets information, for example, from programmes and eMS and the Interreg.eu web site refers/links back to keep.eu for programme data, (see). The connectivity and complementarity of the various sources of information is something which can continue to be developed as a means to strengthen each one individually, and to provide an even more coherent resource overall.

Harmonised Interreg Branding



How and to what effect has the harmonised Interreg branding been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?



78%

of Interreg programmes use the harmonised Interreg logo

/// The re-branding is essential for the communication and visibility of Interreg. [...] *European Commission Official*



Increased efficiency

- Saving time, money and staff resources as branding was centrally procured and paid
- introduction of standard project logo templates and/or centrally hosted project websites simplified communication requirements for projects in some programmes



Increased effectiveness

- visibility and awareness of Interreg among programme stakeholders (potential beneficiaries, policy makers on all levels, wider public)



Increased resilience

- programmes became change agents

before...



after...



/// Our projects make ample use of the harmonised Interreg project logos. 42% of projects are using it. It helps them meet their communication requirements, and it helps us increase the visibility of Interreg. [...] *CEC communication manager*

/// The harmonised branding contributes to community-building among our projects and partners. Because their logos are all building on our programme logo, they can now recognise each other at events more easily and collaborate on joint activities [...] *TNC communication manager*



Programmes described the harmonised branding development as **transparent and democratic**

Building programme management capacities ...

... through changed practices

- dealing with corporate branding cooperatively
- expanding cooperation into other communication areas

... through changed mindsets

- community-building among Interreg communication managers
- capacity for initiating & organising joint communication activities
- confidence that Commission decisions can be influenced through collaboration.

... through improved systems and tools

- rich resource of branding-related material, also for projects.



/// The good experience with working collaboratively on a harmonised Interreg brand has whetted our appetite for more cooperation. Since then, collaboration has expanded into other areas and a number of additional collaborative initiatives have sprung from it." *TNC communication manager*



7. HARMONISED INTERREG BRANDING



How and to what effect has the harmonised Interreg branding been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?

7.1 Context



Harmonised Interreg branding stands for the joint endeavour of Interreg programmes to harmonise their visual appearance and brand identity to achieve greater visibility and brand awareness. The branding includes the development of a joint logo, which is free to use for all Interreg programmes, and an effort to re-establish the well-known term ‘Interreg’ when referring to European Territorial Cooperation (ETC). The idea came from the group of transnational programme communication officers, who took it forward and worked hard to convince their technical programme bodies (JS/MA) and programme Member States as well as the European Commission to back it. Together with Interact, transnational programme communication managers also worked on reaching out to cross-border programmes to get them on board at an early stage. Interact supported the initiative from the start by launching a survey on the support of a harmonised branding for Interreg in March 2014, which revealed an overwhelming support by Interreg Programmes, and by producing a promotional video. Furthermore, Interact facilitated delivery of the initiative in a number of crucial ways:

- procurement of a design company for the development of the basic logotypes and brand design manual;
- facilitation of the collaborative decision-making process on the selection of external contractor and brand design; and
- management of the external contractor and the customisation of the basic logotype to programmes’ needs.

The harmonised Interreg branding is, therefore, a joint effort of (transnational) programme communication officers, Interact and, colleagues at the European Commission’s DG REGIO..

7.2 Use of the harmonised Interreg branding in programmes and by other Interreg stakeholders



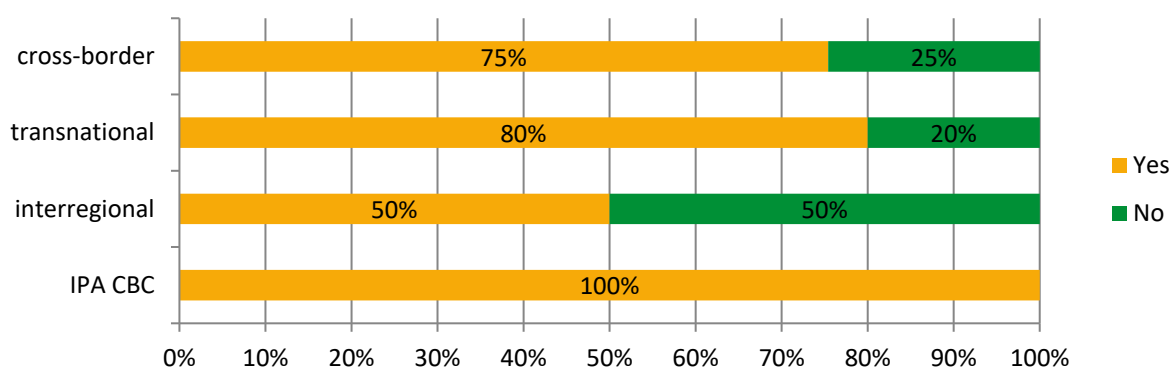
Besides the return to the old brand name “Interreg”, the re-branding of European Territorial Cooperation into Interreg includes a common logotype for Interreg which can be customised for programmes and projects.

Use of Interreg as a brand name. Most programmes incorporated it in some way in either their programme name, URL, website and/or print materials. This re-branding was widely supported by Interreg programmes, many of which had never really abandoned it. Interviews revealed only one critical voice from a cross-border programme, which originally had not been content with the brand name as it could be confused with the interregional strand. However, over time as Interreg is becoming an established brand name, the potential for confusion reduces. The brand name is also used by regional and national authorities, although they still have the tendency to mix ‘Interreg’ with ‘European Territorial Cooperation’ (ETC).

Right in the middle of the programming period and despite the fact that the Regulations refer to ETC, the European Commission has re-introduced the brand name 'Interreg' on their website, on social media and other Commission publications, in their organisation chart, and in official speeches. Currently, Interreg still co-exists with ETC, but the switch will be completed in the coming period. The new Interreg Regulation will use Interreg throughout the document and the Commission will require programmes to use the term Interreg exclusively.

Use of the harmonised Interreg logo in programmes. 78 percent of programmes, including cross-border, transnational, interregional strand and IPA programmes, have adopted the logo. The adoption rate is highest among IPA programmes, which have all adopted the harmonised branding.

Figure 26: Use of the harmonised Interreg logo in programmes



Source: Interreg.eu

Common modifications of the logo. The brand design manual offers some alternatives for the adjustment of the logotype to programmes' requirements. Programmes made very creative use of the possibility for customisation. In particular, the option to add the old programme logo as an additional graphic element was used widely by almost half of all programmes that are also using the harmonised logo. Some have 'stretched' this flexibility, making modifications which are no longer in line with the brand design manual including:

- changes to the colour scheme such as using different blue hues, using a different colour for the programme name;
- changes to the harmonised programme name format, using a different font for the programme name, the programme CCI code instead of the name, capitalising the name, or not aligning the programme name with the Interreg lettering; and
- other modifications including detaching the programme logo from the EU flag, changing the size of the EU flag⁵⁴ and so on.

Even though the overall satisfaction with the harmonised logo is high, an issue that has come up repeatedly in interviews is the dimension of the EU flag, as defined in the manual, in relation to the other logo elements. Since regulatory requirements⁵⁵ state that the EU flag, when combined with

⁵⁴ In some cases, programmes have changed the size of the EU flag vis-à-vis the programme icon to the extent that it contradicts Article 4.5 of the COMMISSION IMPLEMENTING REGULATION (EU) No 821/2014, which specifies that "If other logos are displayed in addition to the Union emblem, the Union emblem shall have at least the same size, measured in height or width, as the biggest of the other logos."

⁵⁵ Ibid

other logos, may not be smaller than the other logos, the logo cannot be easily combined with other logos without appearing very wide or with the EU flag appearing bigger than other logos, even when this is not the case. The logo is also very wide, especially for programmes with a long programme name, which makes it unfit for certain applications which require a square/ish logo (e.g. as icon on social media, etc.). Many programmes have therefore revised the size of the flag in their logos. The rigid colour scheme, which often does not match with the colour scheme of a publication, was described as a problem and a reason for beneficiaries sometimes dislike the mandatory use of the logo.

Reasons for not adopting the harmonised Interreg logo. Programmes, which have decided not to adopt the logo did have explicit and reasonable grounds. Reasons cited for not adopting the harmonised logo include:

- fear that changing a well-established programme brand would lead to reduced visibility and recognition in the programme area;
- costs associated with having to re-print information and merchandising materials bearing the old programme logo and the money that had gone into the development of the existing programme branding;
- the fact that the harmonised branding wasn't ready by the time some programmes launched their first calls; and
- the fact that the harmonised logo is difficult to combine with other logos, e.g. of programme partners from non-EU countries whose emblems need to be displayed as co-funding source on equal terms with the EU emblem.

"As a programme that includes non-EU partner countries, we have to display all co-funding sources on equal terms. The harmonised Interreg logo with its integrated EU emblem was therefore not usable. For future harmonisation initiatives it would be good if more consideration was given to the needs and limitations of small cross-border programmes, such as ours, in particular by ensuring enough flexibility in the approach." *Andreas Weiss, Managing Authority, Interreg Alpenrhein-Bodensee-Hochrhein*

"There is a trade-off between visibility on the EU-level and visibility and recognition in the programme area, which is our programme's main concern. We had put a lot of effort into making the programme and its logo known in the area, so changing to a new logo would have been disruptive and would have incurred additional costs for new promotional material. Also the timing was an issue as our programme was launched before the harmonised brand had been finalised." *Peter Paul Knol, Head of JS, Interreg Germany-Netherlands*

Use of the harmonised Interreg logo by beneficiaries and other Interreg stakeholders. While programmes, from both the adopters and the non-adopters group, acknowledge the benefit of having a harmonised brand, many also believe that the benefit of enhanced visibility of Interreg programmes is greater for the European Commission and other EU-level stakeholders than for individual programmes. While the programme's main concern is the visibility and recognition in the programme area, for EU-level Interreg stakeholders such as the European Commission or the Committee of the Regions, and also regional and national stakeholders, a main concern is the recognition of Interreg as an effective funding instrument. Hence, these institutions strongly welcome the initiative, and have confirmed its effectiveness for increasing Interreg's visibility within the EU institutions (see impacts).

The **European Commission, DG REGIO**, makes extensive use of the logo, e.g. on social media or for the ‘25 years of Interreg’ celebration in 2018, in spite of DG COMM’s rules for communication for all Commission services which require the exclusive use of the Commission’s visual identity. DG REGIO managed to be granted an exceptional permission to use the logo, arguing that Interreg is established a brand such as, for example, Erasmus, and plans to continue doing so for coming Interreg celebrations. The Commission has also actively promoted the use of the Interreg brand towards the Interreg Community, e.g. at the Annual Commission event for Interreg programmes in 2014.

As regards **beneficiaries**, the initiative has expanded into project communication in a number of programmes as they introduced the harmonised logo template for projects, which is part of the harmonised branding package. Where use is optional for projects, the high share of projects using the logo is of satisfaction with the resource. The flexibility of being able to use the harmonised logo next to an (existing) project logo also accounts for the high acceptance.

“Our projects make ample use of the harmonised Interreg project logos. 42 percent of POCTEFA projects are using it. It helps them meet their communication requirements, and it helps us increase the visibility of Interreg.” *Cristina Igoa Garcandía, Communication manager, Interreg POCTEFA*

7.3 Immediate results



Cooperating on the development of a harmonised Interreg brand has impacted both programme practices in terms of how brand/visual identity is developed and decided upon in programmes and the programmes’ organisational culture in the majority of programmes. In the past, programmes were dealing with corporate branding on their own, they are now doing so cooperatively and are likely to continue doing so in the future. The good experience with cooperating on the Interreg brand has built a desire for more cooperation, which has had a number of **knock-on effects** in different areas including: (i) changes to cooperation and organisational culture; and (ii) changes to systems and tools.

7.3.1 Changes to cooperation and organisational culture

Interreg programmes not just visually appear more ‘as one’/coherent, but also work more closely together on communication-related initiatives. There is a genuine interest in greater collaboration and making more use of the possibilities that a harmonised brand provides for joint communication activities. Interact partly facilitates this cooperation through its own communication networks, but programmes’ communication managers also organise themselves and implement initiatives with little or no help from Interact, especially for initiatives that don’t involve the entire community of Interreg programmes. The positive experience with the harmonised branding process boosts confidence and builds capacities in programmes for initiating and organising joint communication activities. The success of harmonised branding has also earned programme communication managers greater recognition and interest from the European Commission. Overall, it has helped all programmes improve communication. Examples of collaborations that are **direct or indirect spin-offs** of the harmonised branding are:

- the network of communication officers contributed to the sections on communication in the Harmonised Implementation Tools and to keep.eu;

- transnational communication managers have teamed up with the Heads of JS for joint advocacy work in order to promote transnational cooperation, which had been threatened by budget cuts and a possible reductions in the number of programmes in the coming period. They developed a brochure on ten key messages of TN programmes, and communication officers organised a joint exhibition at the 2018 European Week of Cities and Regions in Brussels; and
- Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak, Interreg Denmark-Germany and Interreg Sweden-Norway have joined forces on marketing, which has become easier as they share the same logo and colour scheme thanks to the harmonised branding.

*"The good experience with working collaboratively on a harmonised Interreg brand within the group of programme communication managers has whetted our appetite for more cooperation. Since then, collaboration has expanded into other areas and a number of additional collaborative initiatives have sprung from it."
Julia Chenut, Communication manager, Interreg Alpine Space*

There is also evidence from the Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak Programme that the branding process fostered **identity-building within the programme**. The programmes understood the re-branding as an opportunity to improve and build a shared identity among the different programme offices in Copenhagen, Malmö and Gothenburg by involving the entire team in the re-branding exercise. Previously, communication was handled in the Copenhagen office and the Gothenburg office didn't feel sufficiently involved.

7.3.2 Changes to systems and tools

In a number of programmes, and as a result of the harmonisation process, **innovative approaches to project communication (tools)** were introduced by making the use of harmonised logo templates for projects mandatory and/or hosting project websites. Generally, beneficiaries were very satisfied with these options, which save both time and money, as long as they had the option to continue using an established project logo next to the new logo.

7.4 Impact



There is sound evidence that the harmonisation of the Interreg branding had a wider positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of programme implementation and the territorial cooperation policy as a whole.

Table 5: Summary of impacts found

Impact	Definition	Observation
Efficiency	Achieve more with less, e.g. through optimising service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The harmonised Interreg branding achieved savings in terms of time, money and staff resources for programme authorities due to the fact that the branding was centrally procured and paid by Interact. The harmonised Interreg branding led to resource savings and simplification in projects working in programmes which introduced the use of standard project logo templates and/or centrally hosted project websites. The time saved means that projects can focus on their core work right from the start, which might contribute to quicker project results.
Effectiveness	Doing the right thing to increase quality and performance, e.g. transparent decision-making, staff development, better communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The harmonised Interreg branding is clearly geared towards increasing the visibility and awareness of Interreg and its achievements among programme stakeholders: potential beneficiaries, regional, national and EU-level decision-makers, but also the wider public.
Resilience	Ability to deal with and manage change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The harmonised Interreg branding initiative is an example of a proactive approach by programmes to become change agents by working together in order to influence EC decisions. Capacities in programmes on how to initiate and manage joint communication efforts were enhanced as a result.

7.4.1 Increased efficiency / resource savings

Efficiency gains or resource savings in programme authorities adopting the harmonised branding. Harmonised branding resulted in savings in terms of time, money and staff resources for programme authorities due to the fact that it was centrally procured and paid for by Interact. It also avoided costs associated with the brand development as, e.g. time was saved during programme preparation to work on and consulting all programme partners on different design options. The actual amount of savings is, however, very case-dependent. Some programmes had not planned to do a re-branding between the two programming periods, so actively contributing to the development of harmonised branding resulted in some extra work for them. Also the fact that, e.g. in the case of the Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak Programme, the harmonised branding had not been finalised when the first call was launched meant that a provisional version was adopted and had to be changed again once the logo was finalised, resulting in extra costs for, e.g., the re-printing of materials.

Resource savings and simplification in projects. Several programmes have introduced the use of standard project logo templates and/or centrally hosted project websites, which has substantially

reduced costs for setting up project communication tools. It also saved projects time and effort that previously had to go into developing an individual logo and meant a real simplification of communication requirements. The time saved means that projects can focus on their core work right from the start, which might contribute to quicker project results.

7.4.2 Increased effectiveness

Visibility and awareness of Interreg: The harmonised branding is clearly geared towards increasing the visibility and awareness of Interreg among programme stakeholders which include potential beneficiaries, regional, national and EU-level decision-makers, but also the wider public.

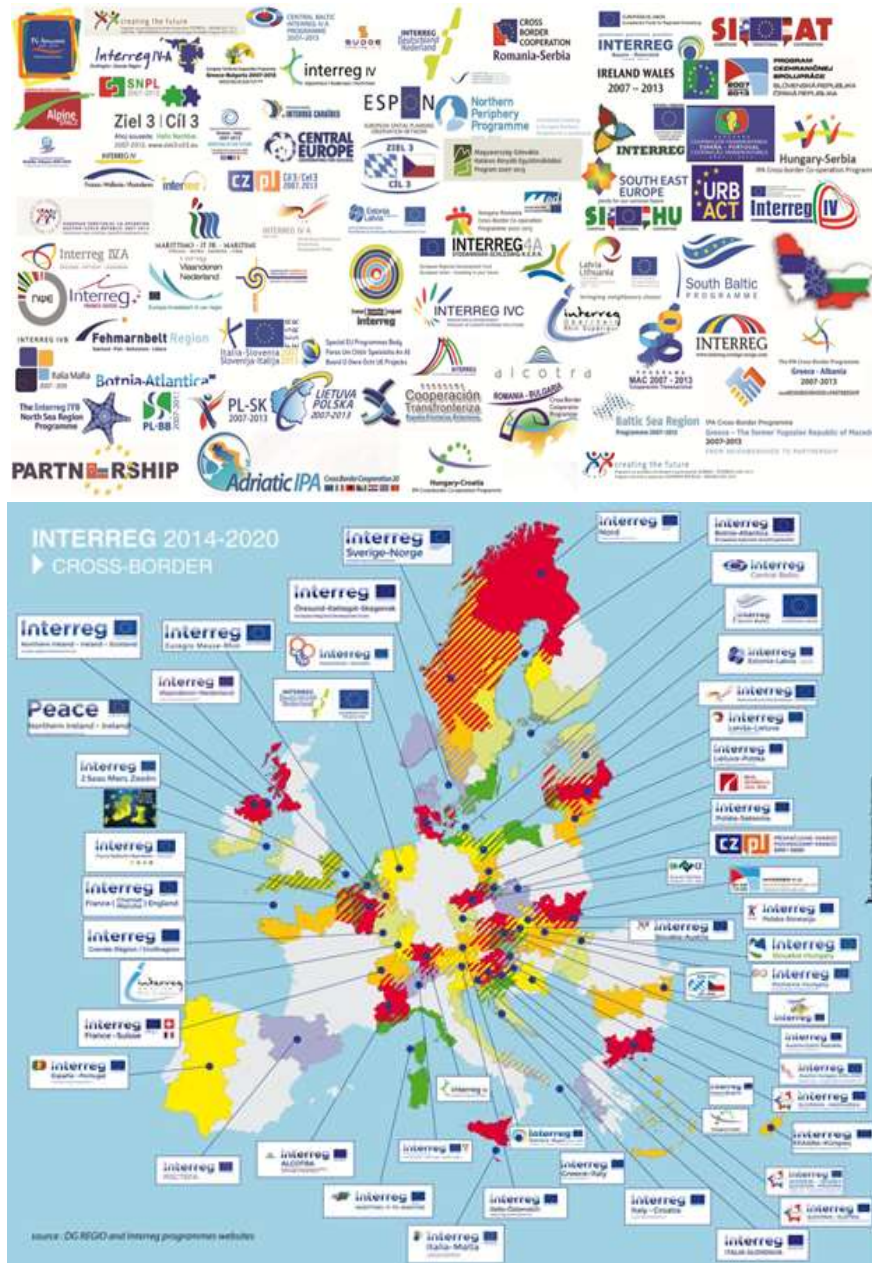
Flash Eurobarometer surveys⁵⁶ show that the majority of people living in EU border regions are not aware of EU-funded cross-border cooperation activities in their regions. Whether the Interreg brand has had any significant effect on the visibility of EU-funded territorial cooperation in the **wider population** is difficult to tell and can also not be easily disentangled from other programme, regional/national and EU-level communication efforts. Given that programme communication budgets are modest in relation to the population that is served by Interreg programmes, it seems, in general, questionable whether programme communication activities, including the harmonised branding, are able to make a measureable impact to subsequent Eurobarometer surveys.

Also, transnational and interregional cooperation usually does not aim directly at the wider public but rather targets institutional actors, thus the B2B level. However, as the awareness of Interreg on the B2B level improves over time, and as projects are having first results, this will ultimately also affect the B2C level. The full effect of the harmonised brand on visibility will only be seen in the coming years when Interreg will become more visible in the regions thanks to the achieved project results.

"The re-branding is essential for the communication and visibility of Interreg. The European Territorial Cooperation brand was too intellectual and also abbreviated differently in different languages, and therefore not suitable as a brand name. Interreg, on the other hand, speaks to people's emotions, is closer to the citizens and used uniformly across languages." Agnès Monfret, Head of Unit A2 – Communication, DG Regio, European Commission

⁵⁶ European Commission, 'Flash Eurobarometer 422. Cross-Border Cooperation in the EU', September 2015, http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S1565_422_ENG; European Commission, 'Flash Eurobarometer 423. Citizens' Awareness and Perception of EU Regional Policy', September 2015, http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2055_423_ENG.

Figure 27: Interreg programme logos before and after



Source: Interreg Central Europe / Interact

Awareness of Interreg among **(EU, national, regional) policy-makers** is also an important concern for Interreg programmes as they are the ones making strategic decisions which affect EU (regional) policy, e.g. regarding the future regulations or the next EU multi-annual financial framework. Since Interreg accounts for only three percent of the overall ERDF budget, it often receives less attention than mainstream programmes, especially from regional and national policy makers. The harmonised branding is likely to increase the visibility of Interreg among policy-makers in the future as more and more projects produce ‘branded’ results and make concrete and visible investments in their regions. On EU level, interviewees from the EC’s territorial cooperation units confirmed that the harmonised branding helps them position Interreg within DG REGIO.

There is also evidence that the understanding of the fact that Interreg is a family of programmes has risen among **applicants and beneficiaries**. As most programme logos now have the same look and

feel, it has become more tangible to see what Interreg stands for. There is anecdotal evidence that projects (from the same or different programmes) recognise each other more easily and are more likely to engage with one another when they find out about shared commonalities. Hence, the branding contributes to community-building among projects, possibly leading to synergies. Lastly, the use of harmonised project logos further increases the visibility of Interreg.

"The harmonised branding contributes to community-building among our projects and partners. Because their logos are all building on our programme logo, they can now recognise each other at events more easily and better collaborate on joint activities. Some of our project partners even discovered, thanks to the harmonised branding, that there are other Interreg projects implemented in their organisations, something they were not aware of before." *Frank Schneider, Interreg Central Europe Programme*

7.4.3 Increased resilience

The harmonised Interreg branding initiative is an example of programmes becoming change agents by working together in order to influence EC decisions. Capacities in programmes on how to initiate and manage joint communication efforts were enhanced as a result. The proactive approach to dealing with change contributes to more resilient programmes.

7.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The re-branding of European Territorial Cooperation into Interreg has been a resounding success. This overall conclusion is substantiated by the large number of programmes that have adopted the harmonised branding as well as the strong strategic support that the initiative receives from the European Commission's DG REGIO. Consequently, the European Commission proposed to completely abandon the term ETC in favour of Interreg in the coming period and will push programmes towards the use of the brand name Interreg, although the use of the logo will remain voluntary. In terms of visibility, Interreg is certainly more of a brand than ETC ever was, and the evaluation revealed sound evidence that awareness has increased in the more immediate Interreg stakeholder groups (i.e. applicants/beneficiaries, policy makers), even though the effect of the re-branding on the awareness level of Interreg cannot easily be isolated from other communication efforts with the same aim. On the contrary, the Interreg brand is a communication tool which can only be fully effective if used in a large number of communication activities and as part of a larger Interreg communication strategy. The degree to which the harmonised branding has increased the awareness of Interreg in the wider EU population is much more uncertain. One might even question the need for EU citizens to know anything at all about different EU funding instruments. As one interviewee argued, the focus of communication should be on what the EU does for its citizens without bothering them with the complexities of EU funding instruments.

"The Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak Programme has always been a strong promoter of a harmonised branding to facilitate the difficult task of communicating to the wider public what EU funding does for them. We would even be ready to go for a much more radical harmonisation and focus only on communicating the EU emblem rather than establishing an Interreg sub-brand. Why bother the public with the complexities of EU funding instruments?" *Lise Riis Molteved, Communication manager, Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak*

Conditioning (success) factors. The success of the harmonised branding is linked to a number of factors that worked together favourably. The process was highly political, and its outcome therefore uncertain and hinging upon the good collaboration of organisations and the personal efforts of dedicated individuals. Interact made an important contribution to the success, but the overall achievement comes down to a number of actors, including programme communication managers who convinced programme partners, and officers in the territorial cooperation units who backed the initiative and lobbied for it within the EC.

In spite of the particular circumstances of the project, a number of **lessons can be drawn** that can be transferred to other areas of application:

- The harmonised branding is essentially a grass-root initiative of Interreg programmes. This, together with the fact that the development process was very transparent, democratic and inclusive, accounts in part for the high acceptance that the (re-)branding has received among programmes and the fact that a majority of them endorsed it. The ultimate success of the initiative boosted confidence in programmes that, together, they can influence EC decisions, and it enhanced capacities in programmes on how to initiate and manage joint communication efforts. *Interact has a key support role in providing facilitation and coordination as well as expertise on how to put ideas into practice in order to avoid grass-root level initiatives coming to nothing because of a lack of resources or clear leadership.*
- While programmes praised the open and participatory nature of the brand development some also remarked on the fact that it sometimes lacked structure and planning and, hence, efficiency. Undoubtedly, this was a result of the fact that the initiative was highly political and unpredictable, and both transnational programme communication managers and Interact had no clear mandate in the beginning to go ahead with the rebranding. Also the brand development aspired to securing the broadest possible support, and a lot of effort was put into consensus building and persuasion. *For future similar endeavours, a more systematic approach with a clear timeline and planned milestones would be preferable to increase efficiency and effectiveness.*
- It is often not easy to pinpoint what direct, tangible results Interact seminars and network meetings produce as their effects may only show with time. The harmonised Interreg branding, however, provides an example for how an idea that was brought up first at a communication network meeting of the transnational communication officers in 2011/12 subsequently developed into something concrete and tangible. The tangible results that cooperation on developing a harmonised Interreg brand has delivered made the benefit of collaboration very palpable for programmes. This positive experience has created the mood for more cooperation and consequently led to a number of follow-up activities in the area of communication, many of which are organised bottom-up. *It appears that creating these tangible cooperation outcomes give a renewed momentum to the cooperation between Interreg programmes as a whole and also benefitting 'softer' and less output-oriented forms of cooperation.*
- The harmonised branding shows the importance of securing the support of a critical number of pioneering programmes for any innovative cooperation. Pioneers take the first step, which in turn makes it easier for other programmes to convince their MCs to follow. *To create the same virtuous circle in similar future endeavours, Interact should look out for potential pioneers and forge alliances with those programmes.*

- The harmonised branding also demonstrates the importance of keeping in view the main objective of a joint harmonisation effort when discussing harmonisation. The primary objective of the harmonised Interreg brand was to enable communication and capitalisation across programmes and projects for the benefit of the visibility of Interreg. Evidence gathered during this evaluation suggests that this objective has been reached and that harmonised programme logos are now instantaneously associated with Interreg in spite of the fact that some have been customised to quite some extent and not always in line with the brand design manual. *It is important to weigh ambitions for greater harmonisation against programmes' wishes and need for flexibility. This enhances the satisfaction with and uptake of the final product, without losing sight of the overall objective of harmonisation, which should be the ultimate yardstick.*

Areas for further engagement / development of the harmonised Interreg brand. In view of these observations, there are a number of concrete recommendations that can be made for the future as regards both the further development of the harmonised logo but also the collaborative approach that was taken for developing a harmonised branding for Interreg. If Interact was to aim for a higher number of adopters in the coming programming period, there are a number of measures it could take:

- **Make adaptations to the logo to increase its versatility of use.** Changes in EU publicity requirements (e.g. no more reference to the ERDF necessary) will make adaptations to the logo unavoidable. Furthermore, interviewed officers at DG REGIO stated that they are considering the development of additional 'fresh' visuals beyond the logo for the 30th anniversary celebrations of Interreg in 2020, using the bridge as leitmotif. These opportunities should be utilised to also work on improving the proportions of the logo in relation to the EU flag. Many programmes have complained that the logo is very wide and cannot be easily combined with other logos, and many changed the size of the EU flag on their own. The wish for a square-ish version of the logo to be used as icon on, e.g., social media, as well as for a monochrome version was expressed several times. However, programmes had no appetite for the development of a completely new logotype as it would be counterproductive to the establishment of an Interreg brand. Another important issue for increasing the adoption level would be to have the revised logo ready in time for programmes, including the early starters, to use it when they need it.
- **Communicate better the flexibility that exists for adapting the logo.** Interviews with programmes who decided not to adopt the harmonised branding show that they were, in principle, supportive of the idea. Some, however, concluded that they needed flexibility beyond what they thought was possible with the harmonised logo. Possibilities to adapt the logo need to be better communicated, possibly by showing examples of how programmes have appropriated the logo and made it theirs, while at the same time preserving the main look and feel of the harmonised logo.⁵⁷ The fact that programmes may add their programme icon could, in particular, be better highlighted. The message to programmes involving partners from non-EU countries could be that the logo can be used separately from the EU flag as done, for example, by the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme. The aim is not to encourage programmes to deviate from the design manual, but to work towards the goal of achieving higher visibility of Interreg through a common visual appearance.

⁵⁷ e.g. the Peace Programme that uses the logo lettering Peace instead of Interreg, but has preserved the font and colours.

- **Better exploit the potential of the harmonised Interreg branding.** There is a wide-spread wish among programmes not to repeat the discussions surrounding the logo but rather to focus on the possibilities that a harmonised brand provides for joint communication activities. This includes concrete communication activities (e.g. joint activities in the scope of the EC day, Europe Day or at the European Week of Regions and Cities) as well as strategic activities. The latter could include a proper discussion of what the Interreg brand stands for and what values it represents, as part of the brand development. Another possibility is the development of an integrated Interreg communication strategy that involves Interreg programmes, including Interact, but possibly also the European Commission and other EU-level stakeholders, with the aim of maximising the effect of the dispersed funds in communicating the benefits of Interreg.

"A harmonised branding for Interreg makes a lot of sense, especially when part of a wider communication strategy that should ideally include the Interreg programmes, Interact and the European Commission. Since the financial means of Interreg programmes for communication are very limited, economies of scale should be sought to achieve the best possible impact." *Wolfgang Petzold, Deputy Director of Directorate Communication, European Committee of the Regions*

Support to macro-regional strategies

How and to what effect has Interact's support to the macro-regional strategies been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?



~90%
aware of Interact work in support of macro-regional strategies*



*Survey on Interact support to macro-regional strategies to Interreg programmes bodies and macro-regional actors, 2018. N=47



~80%
of respondents say Interact helped with developing new ideas and approaches*....
*Survey on support to macro-regional strategies, 2018. N=47



Increased effectiveness

- New ideas and approaches - strategic foresight and engagement across stakeholder types, Interreg/national authorities/European Commission.
- Awareness and understanding - of the macro-regional strategies in general, comparative perspectives and on technical issues, involved in governance.
- Transparency and communication - more effective communication and exchange across the strategies, and within a strategy.



Increased resilience

- Community building and momentum - regularity of events and outputs builds momentum.

//
Interact support has acted as catalyst for new initiatives.

Respondent to survey on Interact support to macro-regional strategies



STAKEHOLDER NEEDS



PRODUCTS & SERVICES



WIDER IMPACTS



INTERVENTIONS



IMMEDIATE RESULTS



Conditioning factor

- Some strategies in place longer than others
- Profile and weight behind strategies can vary
- Challenges in the management and implementation of strategies.

// The network of programmes has been very well organised and well-structured and much appreciated.
National Coordinator

// ...good to exchange and get a look a bit beyond what one is doing and get to share experiences.
Priority Area Coordinator

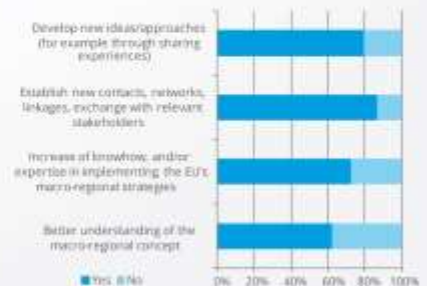
// Interact workshops and meetings [...] Very valuable in providing knowhow.
European Commission Official

Building management capacity ...

... by widening and deepening collaboration

- Establish new consultative/collaborative processes, e.g. thematic events
- Improve awareness, understanding and action on opportunities and challenges
 - Comparative perspectives
 - Regulations
 - Governance
- Help inform thinking on how to improve systems and processes
- Build and retain built competence and capacity.

Benefits of Interact support to macro-regional strategies*



*Survey on Interact support to macro-regional strategies to Interreg programmes bodies and macro-regional actors, 2018. N=47

8. INTERACT SUPPORT FOR THE MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES

How and to what effect has the support for macro-regional strategies been used by Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders?



8.1 Context



There are currently four EU macro-regional strategies (MRS), each at different stage of implementation. Interact is tasked to support the development of new ways of cooperation involving the macro-regional framework. Interact works towards increasing awareness of the MRS, clarifying their concept, developing pilot models for coordination and cooperation and strengthening dialogue across funding programmes that contribute to engaging in macro-regional cooperation, creating synergies and supporting thematic exchanges. In doing so, Interact aims to support macro-regional strengths, address weaknesses, and meet Interreg programmes needs, in particular those dedicated to support specific macro-regional strategy (four Interreg transnational programmes are meant here in particular). The European Council conclusions on the implementation of the MRS also request that Interact supports exchanges across the MRS. It also has to respond to changing needs, new demands and recommendations, for example the findings of a Commission study on MRS and their links with Cohesion policy.

Interact's work, therefore, covers a range of activities. Interact organised meetings of the MRS thematic coordinators (policy area coordinators/ priority area coordinators/ pillar coordinators/ action group leaders); developed publications, including input papers and reports from the events; initiated and supported cross-MRS discussions during e.g. European Week of Regions and Cities in 2018; lead on the network of Interreg transnational programmes dedicated to support MRS; participated in events and contributed to the discussion on coordination and cooperation across programmes sharing MRS experiences.

The work is:

- horizontal across MRS⁵⁸, which are diverse, with differing institutional set ups, at different stages in their development, and with differing weights and profiles.
- across a diverse range of stakeholder groups. It aims to be beneficial for Interreg programme managers, as well as other relevant stakeholders, national and thematic coordinators of the strategies, and support structures to the MRS such as strategy and facility points, macro-regional experts, European Commission services and other EU institutions.

⁵⁸ Interact support is horizontal for all macro-regional strategies and provide exchange of experience and dissemination of best practices. Facilitating dialogue and knowledge sharing between ETC programmes and macro-regional stakeholders is beneficial for ETC programme managers, in order for them to understand how they could concretely contribute to macro-regional strategies, but also how they can benefit from these. INTERACT III activities for macro-regions will enhance cooperation between ETC programmes and programmes implementing activities for the Investment for Growth and Jobs Goal (objective 1), other sectoral programmes and stakeholders and coordinators of macro-regional strategies. The support to macro-regions, e.g. with networking, exchange of experience and communication activities across existing strategies, will necessarily complement the work of transnational programmes, Interact (2014) Interact OP, p. 3. <http://www.interact-eu.net/#about>

- broad, strategic, and heavily based on foresight activities and forward planning. Over the period, Interact's involvement in MRS spans a wide range of activities.

Work has been primarily undertaken by 1-2 members of Interact staff, with varying levels of support over the period.

8.2 Use of support for macro-regional strategies



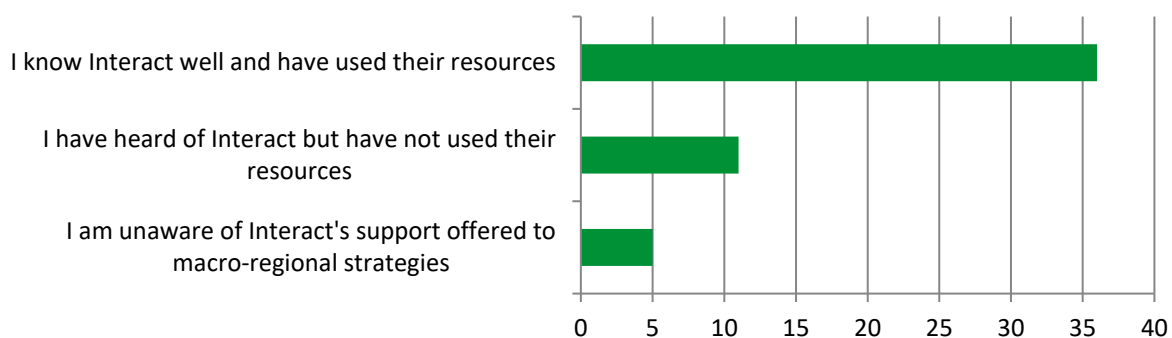
High-level of awareness of Interact activities amongst key stakeholder groups. Interact carries out its own regular user surveys and, in 2018, found that thirty percent of respondents reported they had used Interact products and services in support of the implementation of macro-regional strategies. This result is low in comparison to some of the other areas of Interact work, but not all Interreg programmes cover areas with MRS. Responses to the question, 'We have used (will be able to use) the knowledge and skills acquired through Interact products and services in our daily work', suggest those who did engage found it beneficial.

The survey and interview research carried out for this evaluation supports and elaborates on these findings. Based on the impact evaluation's more targeted survey of MRS stakeholder groups, responses show high levels of awareness of Interact's work (see) which is encouraging given:

- the high levels of staff turnover in national and thematic MRS-related posts⁵⁹ noted by interviewees and respondents, and
- differences in the 'exposure' to Interact's work, e.g. the EUSBSR has a longer and more established connection with Interact than e.g. EUSAIR.

Where there is less awareness of Interact's role, this is most notable amongst stakeholders based in national authorities and not directly involved in Interreg, e.g. national coordinator, steering committee member, national ministries, and head of unit responsible for national planning.⁶⁰ This variation is not unexpected as Interreg programmes are Interact's main user group.

Figure 28: Awareness of Interact support in relation to MRS



Source: Survey to keep.eu users, 2018. N=47

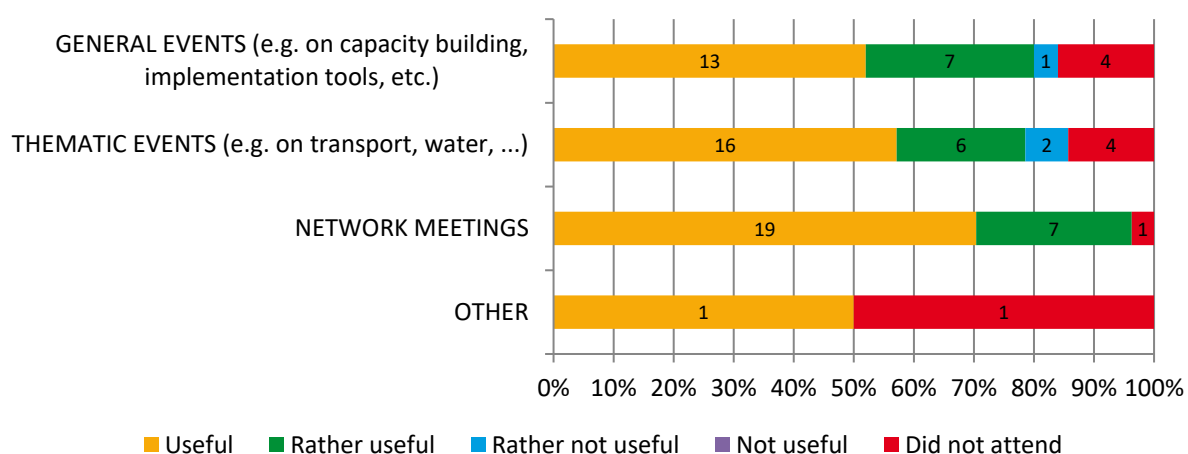
Both survey respondents and interviewees identify meetings and events organised and facilitated by Interact on MRS as being of particular value. The majority of respondents indicated that they, or their organisation, had participated in Interact events. Attendees at Interact events generally found them

⁵⁹ MRS posts, not within Interact

⁶⁰ This could be an indication of a wider trend as non-respondents are less likely to be aware of Interact's work in this area, see also description of methodology

'useful' or 'rather useful', in particular the thematic events addressing topics relevant for the MRS, and network meetings across transnational programmes involved in MRS.

Figure 29: Perceptions of meetings and events



Source: Survey on MRS users, 2018. N=47. Numbers in the bars show the number of responses.

In relation to Interact MRS events, particular points noted in interviews and recurring in survey evidence are:

- The broad recognition of Interact's **unique position to fulfil the facilitation/events** roles and draw stakeholders together from across geographic and thematic areas. The prevailing view is that without Interact meetings across the MRS this would not have happened.
- Stakeholders place significant **value on the opportunity to meet**, despite resource and time pressures on participants. In particular, the introduction of thematically based meetings is highlighted as especially useful, and something that would not have happened without Interact's initiative.
- The **high quality of events**, resources and participation by Interact:
 - Despite pressures and time constraints, Interact staff are generally perceived as available to participate in meetings and seminars, and make good quality presentations and interventions;
 - Accompanying meeting papers and reports are well informed, informative and balanced, which is particularly valued as many of the topics are controversial, and it can be difficult to cover the issues 'diplomatically';
 - Interact's moderation and facilitation of meetings is proactive, engaging and useful;
 - **Overviews across the MRS** provided in meetings and background papers are valuable for giving perspective and new ideas;
 - Meeting findings and **results are pulled together and followed up**, rather than just all talk and then nothing happening; and
 - The **work and time involved** in organising, preparing for, facilitating, and reporting on meetings are appreciated.

"Direct exchanges [on MRS] are ...very valuable. I have collected many business cards during coffee breaks, lunch breaks etc....It is very valuable to have these contacts ... for future work" National Government Official working with MRS and Interreg

Looking beyond events and meetings, survey results showed that Interact support, provided through their website (most notably the library section), studies, guidance notes and ad hoc advice, is perceived as either 'useful' or 'rather useful' by almost all respondents. In addition, the value to be derived from Interact's more operational/practical focus is noted in the context of the sheer volume of research on MRS from other sources, e.g. European Commission and academia.

Factors affecting lack of take up. For those who did not use/take up the resources available, a range of factors is identified in the surveys and interviews.

- **Lack of awareness and weak information flows** are cited by some respondents as reasons for not using Interact resources:
 - lack of direct information flow from Interact towards some thematic coordinators, an issue which could possibly be amplified by staff turnover and the 'newness' of the MRS etc and the limited resources that Interact has available.;
 - some seminars and events seemed to be 'not open' to relevant actors, and could be more actively communicated (even just to clarify who should be attending and how that was decided).
- **Lack of time/resources** to engage was a factor for 30 per cent of respondents. This is a particular concern in a field that commonly involves a lot of travel and meetings, and may only form part of some stakeholders' remit.
- **Timing of support** is an issue, particularly in relation to ad hoc advice. When a concrete issue arises, while Interact does respond to the issue, this can be too late, as events have moved on (especially in relation to MRS where so many other stakeholders and processes are involved).
- **Stakeholder willingness to engage** is another significant factor for various reasons. Interact work on MRS is relevant to a wide range of stakeholders, not just Interreg/ENI programmes. For stakeholder groups not involved in Interreg cooperation, collaborative working and engagement may not be such a well-established practice/approach. In addition, levels of engagement can also vary depending on levels of domestic political commitment to MRS, meaning stakeholders receive more/less encouragement and resources to participate.

8.3 Immediate results



Survey and interview responses identify a number of ways in which Interact activities, and stakeholder engagement, deliver in relation to those 'enablers' identified in this evaluation as key to building capacity, structures and processes; knowhow; and systems and tools.

8.3.1 Changes to structures and processes

Interact's work is both establishing new consultative/collaborative processes, e.g. thematic events, and helping to inform thinking on how to improve other systems and processes.

Widening and deepening of collaboration between MRS, between MRS and Interreg programmes and across Interreg programmes working with the MRS. Survey responses highlight the role of Interact in increasing contact linkages and exchange. These provide valuable platforms and networks for exchange and learning beyond those available through other sources such as links between MRS, direct linkages between thematic coordinators from different MRS, and across

programmes working with the MRS. These all widen and deepen cooperation and collaborative working. Of particular note is that:

- Interact has **built ‘proper exchange’**. There is a balanced approach and broad representation in meetings. Participants are not ‘told what to do’ and ‘always looking to the more established MRS to see what to do’. There is a real opportunity for ‘everyone to learn from everyone’;
- **Awareness and understanding of specific challenging issues**, e.g. the implementation of the MRS in different areas, is developed as exchanges help to contextualise and add the perspective of stakeholder experiences;
- The comparative perspective that Interact provides helps build **clarity and communication on debates** amongst stakeholders and supports their role in subsequent communications and dialogues with their own stakeholders including managing authorities or programme monitoring committees. An event which was useful for the information discussion of policy positions with colleagues, for example, can then subsequently be linked with the more formal negotiations.
- Initial support provided by Interact for exchange of experience has formed a basis for **continued dialogue and links** beyond/after formal events, e.g. between programmes.

“The idea how we could cooperate more across the MRSs and work more with our counterparts was a really important outcome of the... meeting with all four MRS.... We are still elaborating how we can use this cooperation possibility more, and we will during the upcoming year explore more concrete options.” MRS Priority Area Coordinator

In the short-term, this type of networking and dialogue provides soft, intangible results. However, especially around a new form of territorial cooperation, these exchanges are invaluable in taking the approach forward and refining MRS structures and processes. Looking to the future, there remains a benefit in having a single, broad based organisation that can facilitate this process and ‘pull things’ together.

Operational change and ‘new ways of doing things’. Interact has had a role in the development and evolution of MRS systems and processes. In the current programming period, as the MRS are becoming more established, results can stem from discussions facilitated by Interact. Almost 80 percent of survey respondents noted that Interact had helped them in their thinking about developing new ideas and approaches including in:

- building implementation chains;
- identifying ways to build flagships/macro-regional projects, as a result of facilitated exchanges;
- managing the exchanges and relationships between Interreg transnational programmes supporting MRS and drawing on lessons already applied by other programmes;
- informing revisions in MRS Action plans;
- finding approaches to managing the interface between relevant transnational programme administrations and the MRS, and developing relations between CBC Interreg programmes and MRS; and

- identifying possible links to new forms of funding, e.g. one respondent noted MRS specific events co-financed by the CEI Cooperation Fund.⁶¹

As previously noted, where changes are introduced or planned, the scope to work with Interact and draw on past and wider experience is valuable. In other cases, in particular the more newly established macro-regions, the opportunity to learn and exchange has helped establish systems that are more efficient and avoid some of the pitfalls involved.

"It [Interacts role/impact] has been more about creating a way to exchange experiences, share problems, and solutions." Interreg Programme Manager

8.3.2 Changes to stakeholder capacity and institutional knowledge

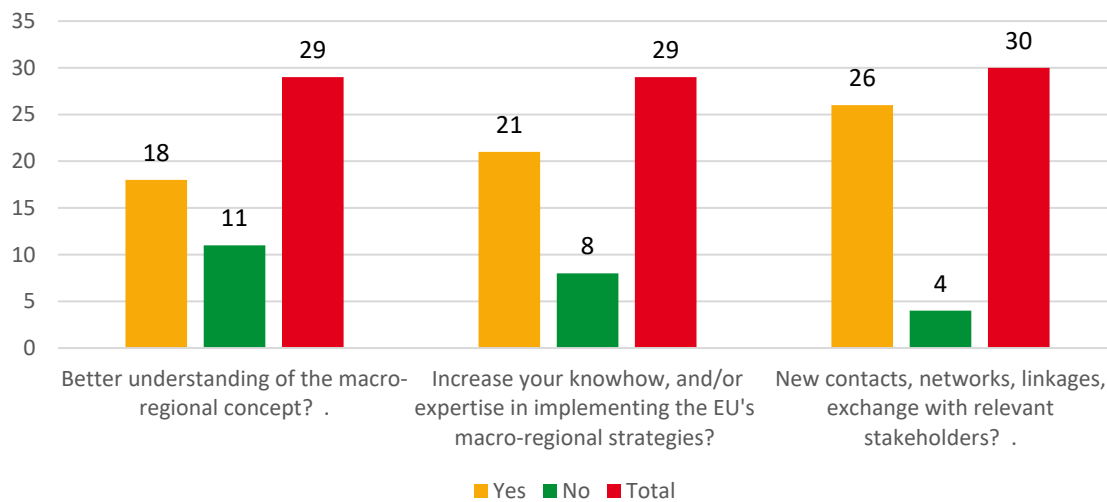
Interact's contributions to the development of knowhow, human resources and institutional capacity, within Interreg programmes about MRS and within MRS about Interreg, are frequently highlighted in interviews and surveys. Comments include the contribution to supporting and reinforcing positive change, encouraging innovation, and building institutional memory. Given that disparities in institutional and administrative capacity are one of the key implementation challenges faced by MRS⁶², this contribution is especially important.

Survey responses highlight the role of Interact in increasing knowhow and expertise (72.41 percent). Thirty-eight percent of respondents stated that Interact has not helped in their understanding of the MRS concept but this is qualified by respondents noting that they already have robust overall knowledge and expertise in MRS.⁶³ Nevertheless, in a field that can be subject to high levels of staff turnover, and associated loss of knowhow and expertise, Interact activities were **valued as a way to retain, build and competence, knowledge and skills**. For staff coming into what can be a complex role, Interact has been able to make a valuable contribution in supporting, retaining and sharing information.

⁶¹ Central European Initiative - <https://www.cei.int/news/4397/workshop-on-research-and-innovation-in-adriatic-ionian-macroregion-in-trieste>

⁶² COWI study and European Commission Report on the implementation of MRS notes the negative impact of amongst other things: institutional and staff fluctuations; disparities in economic, institutional and administrative capacity; and weak implementation chains between decision makers and key implementers. COWI (2017) Study on Macro-regional Strategies and their Links with Cohesion Policy: Final Report, CEC DG Regio and CEC (2019) Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of the Regions, on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, COM (2019) 21 Final

⁶³ It is also worth noting that Interact doesn't offer a specific service targeting overall awareness raising, but it is an important by-product of the work.

Figure 30: Results of support/events

Source: Survey to keep.eu users, 2018. N=47

"I attended meetings moderated and organised by Interact and involving all the thematic coordinators. They were good..., providing a good platform and ideas of ways of working. It was good to exchange and get a look a bit beyond what one is doing and get to share experiences." *MRS Priority Area Coordinator*

"They clarify many things and as such play an important role (especially important for newcomers such as myself)." *European Commission official*

"The networks and the contacts have been a real eye opener." *Interreg Programme Manager*

"The network of programmes has been very well organised and well-structured and much appreciated." *MRS National Coordinator*

The capacity of Interact to retain in depth knowledge of the complexities and variations of the MRS is especially valuable in relation to:

- **Comparative perspectives:** the four MRS, although implemented in different geographies, develop through recognised phases⁶⁴ and share similar objectives. It is helpful that 'someone' can explain both how the different systems work and point out similarities. This also links the on-going work to cover MRS in the keep.eu database, which is a key source of comparable information and data.
- **New regulations:** during a period of regulatory change, a point of contact/bridge between the European Commission and strategy/Interreg programme stakeholders can help facilitate communication and change. For example, a European Commission official noted that working with Interact was "very helpful, particularly in terms of explaining the new regulations. Meetings were organised side by side with the Commission. We worked together with Interact trying to explain the regulations to the stakeholders."

⁶⁴ COWI (2017) Study on Macro-regional Strategies and their Links with Cohesion Policy: Final Report, CEC DG Regio.

- **Governance:** for stakeholders, Interact events and support have been beneficial in refining their ideas on the complex and evolving governance aspects of the MRS. This has been positive, first, simply as a forum within which to discuss practical challenges and solutions, second, to support the development of a longer-term, strategic perspective⁶⁵ and third, to help 'cover the basics' and retain knowledge.

"The problem with macro-regional strategies is not the awareness, but the high turnover of expertise (i.e. people at governing boards and steering groups are changing all the time). People have to start from scratch every time, and do not know how it all works. Therefore Interact workshops / meetings can be very valuable providing the knowhow." *European Commission Official*

8.4 Impact



The core of Interact's mission is to build capacities in public bodies involved in the implementation of ETC/Interreg Programmes. As this section will describe, the combined impacts of the results address the three dimensions of impact identified in the evaluation methodology: efficiency, effectiveness and resilience.

Table 6: Summary of impacts found

Impact	Definition	Observation
Efficiency	Achieve more with less, e.g. through optimising service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New ideas, contacts and approaches that have resulted from Interact interventions have saved time and resources.
Effectiveness	Doing the right thing to increase quality and performance, e.g. transparent decision-making, staff development, better communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The support to MRS has increased awareness and understanding of the overall MRS concept, the related issues, and opportunities of MRS, which is a key to the success of the approach. • The support to MRS contributes to open exchanges on MRS development and approaches across stakeholder groups, which improves communication and may contribute to a smoother implementation.
Resilience	Ability to deal with and manage change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community building and momentum

8.4.1 Increased efficiency

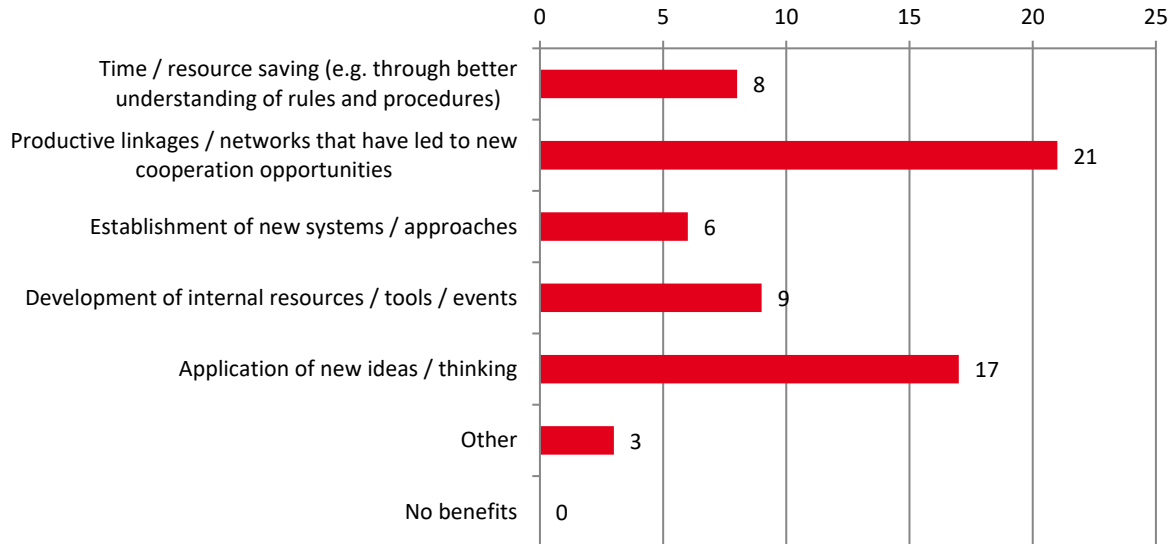
The **foresight and initiation** role that Interact plays is highlighted as valuable in helping to address challenges and improve efficiency, particularly in relation to governance issues. The reliance on Interreg programme budgets for funding key elements of MRS implementation, based on a three-year funding availability, means the long-term perspective can be lacking and operations can become fragmented. Having a forum for more **strategic engagement** is valuable and bridges gaps linking MRS, programmes and the European Commission.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ For example, MRS governance support is provided by Interreg transnational cooperation programmes according to Interreg funding rules and through projects on a three-year basis, what leads to additional workload for the MRS key stakeholders and is lacking the long term perspective. Having an opportunity for more strategic thinking is valuable for longer-term planning

⁶⁶ To an extent this has led to Interact itself fulfilling a very strategic role at various points.

In a way, Interact activities helped us determine the sub-themes to be focused on during our presidency of the Danube strategy. It is a reflection of the discussions we had during Interact events. Government *Ministry official working with MRS and Interreg*

Figure 31: Engaging with Interact has led to the following benefits



Source: Survey for MRS users, 2018. N=47; multiple answers possible.

8.4.2 Increased effectiveness

Awareness and understanding of the overall concept, the related issues, and opportunities of MRS is key to the success of the approach. Interact's work has had a positive impact on awareness of the various issues involved in the management and implementation of the MRS, across the national and thematic coordinators of the MRS, Interreg programmes, and the Commission. However, survey and interview responses suggest that this impact is mostly concentrated within the MRS stakeholders themselves and fulfils more of a clarifying role. Communication within the key MRS stakeholder groups is nevertheless highly valuable and supports wider dissemination activities.

Transparency and communication. Improved understanding, greater awareness, and more effective communication and exchange are all important in improving transparency. In many respects Interact's work contributes to open exchanges on MRS development and approaches, e.g. hosting open events, supporting exchanges across stakeholder groups, hosting resources on-line, and engaging in dissemination and discussion. However, in other respects, the issue of transparency could be given greater consideration in certain areas e.g. in establishing more clearly who attends events that are 'invitation only', and the role of Interact in more strategic debates about MRS governance and implementation.

8.4.3 Increased resilience

More generally, **community building and momentum** are valuable 'by products' of Interact activities in relation to the MRS. The fact that MRS stakeholders can meet on a regular basis, work on related

themes and address common concerns all builds a sense of being part of something bigger. The initiation of activities by Interact such as the thematic cross-MRS meetings, the push of regular events, and the presence of reports and inputs has helped contribute to keep the MRS processing and evolving, especially at times when political and institutional backing and resources for the MRS can vary.

8.5 Conclusions and recommendations

Based on interview and survey responses, the overall view on Interact's activities in relation to the MRS is positive. An important point to come from the research was 'thanks for the work that has been carried out' and to 'keep up' the good work. Overall, the results and impact of Interact's work play a valuable role in initiating new action and reinforcing advancing thinking on MRS, building in depth knowledge and 'supporting the foundations' of the MRS. All of this impacts on efficiency, effectiveness and resilience.

"Interact fulfils a highly valued role." National Government Official working with MRS and Interreg

"As far as Interact's role is concerned, we appreciate everything that they are doing" Interreg Programme Manager

Conditioning factors. It is important to recognise that respondents were generally mindful of the context in which Interact is working. In relation to MRS, Interact has limited resources with which to fulfil an extensive role, covering a wide range of activities and involving a range of stakeholder groups and types, including national government officials. To date, for example, Interact has held a small number of thematic events which were well received and useful. However, the EUSDR alone has eleven thematic priorities and the EUSBSR covers 13 policy areas and, while the 3-4 Interact thematic meetings held to date demonstrate potential, there is scope to develop the process much further.

Unlike other Interact projects, which deliver a specific tool or output, the support provided is more commonly in the form of meetings, events, and stakeholder engagement. As such, results and impact can be less immediately apparent, more intangible, and may take time to emerge, but are no less valued. Additionally, while MRS and the stakeholders involved share many interests and concerns, there are also variations and divergences in their views, approaches and needs including:

- Some macro-regions have been in place longer than others;
- Specific forms of support can be more/less relevant or have more/less impact on stakeholders. A study on MRS links to Cohesion policy, for example, identifies three phases of development: (i) set up of a MRS governance system, individual capacity building of MRS key implementers; (ii) MRS understood by external stakeholders and starts to operate, institutional capacity building up; (iii) maturity of the strategy delivering tangible measures and results.
 - in some geographic areas e.g. in the Baltic, there is more familiarity with Interact as there has been a longer term and more direct engagement;

- each of the four MRS have their own dynamics and trajectories, and therefore might require context-sensitive approaches.⁶⁷
- The profile and weight behind the MRS can vary, linked to political change, and differ across themes, which can impact levels of commitment, attendance at events etc.;
- The types of stakeholder, territorial relations, and the numbers of partners involved differ across, and within, the MRS; and
- Significant challenges remain in relation to the management and implementation of the MRS. These concerns fall out with the remit of Interact, but the uncertainties and frustrations involved can shape Interact's role and impact. On the one hand, issues can impinge on Interact's work, adding complexity and uncertainties, but, on the other hand, the challenges provide an even greater need/role for Interact as means to discuss and address the issues.

Areas of further development or engagement. Where there are perceived limitations on Interact's results and impact, many relate to this wider context. Recommendations for the future are developed with these points in mind. Some general lessons include:

- even within the current scope of work, there is great potential for Interact to do more on the MRS framework if proportionate resources are allocated;
- there is a need for a clear strategy on Interact IV Programmes services to the MRS;
- there is scope for the improvement of the existing service or an expansion/extension of the service, if decided and desired by Interact Monitoring Committee;
- the mandate for Interact in relation to the MRS support should be clarified; and
- there is scope to develop MRS support towards capacity building for key MRS stakeholders, funding, communication and strategic planning.

A number of more specific lessons for the future can also be drawn out.

- **Keep developing cross MRS and cross-stakeholder exchanges.** Acknowledging that there is still much to learn in the management and implementation of MRS, a strong point from the interviews and survey is that the **current work should be continued and developed**, covering activities such as:
 - MRS/ Interreg programme engagement and cross MRS exchanges;
 - surveys/overviews about the development of the MRS in thematic areas,
 - increasing awareness among MRS actors about their tasks and goals,
 - helping to maintain and build strategic 'attention' on the issues through regular meetings;
 - supporting Interreg programmes in defining good governance and cooperation structures; and
 - having small teams meetings across the four MRS.

Although each of the MRS are distinct and it is important to recognise the particular contexts and needs of each⁶⁸, the value of sharing and exchanging knowhow remains. As has been noted, previous studies identify different stages in the development of MRS, which could suggest differentiated forms of support are necessary. However, common challenges remain,

⁶⁷ ibid

⁶⁸ ibid

the scope to learn from each other should not be lost, and the variation within the individual MRS means that, for example, cooperation may be well advanced within one theme but less so in another, thus emphasising the scope for shared learning and support.

For Interact, *this means continuing to focus particularly on facilitating and supporting meetings*, which can be a considerable undertaking. *Where to focus efforts, therefore, must be carefully planned*. A single MRS, for example, can have 11 themes, putting into context a more general call for more thematic meetings. It would not currently be feasible for Interact to host events on each individual theme and so efforts have to be somewhat selective but could demonstrate wider relevance through, for example

- a model/approach to be used for other areas, e.g. even just a simple meeting template for thematic meetings; or
- summary/dissemination of common/transferable themes.

If a larger role were anticipated, then careful consideration would have to be given to the numbers of staff working on this area.

- **Build and extend links, especially with newer MRS and their stakeholders.** *Interact's own links and networks with, in particular, the newer MRS and stakeholders could continue to be developed*, e.g. to include regional fora such as the Central European Initiative, and ensure that relevant stakeholders feel directly involved/contacted. There could be scope to build further links to the cross-border cooperation programmes in the future, particularly as the Commission reinforces its expectation that they will take MRS into account post 2020. This would allow, in addition to other support, Interact to return to its more natural/clearer cut focus on Interreg programme needs.

Many meetings benefit from being open, informal discussions that are not formally documented. However, in order to carry out productive, meaningful events, some are necessarily 'by invitation only' but there is a risk that those not involved can interpret this as exclusionary. *Ways to offer at least some 'engagement/link with the wider stakeholder community could be considered*, e.g.:

- for each meeting, where possible, appoint an informal contact person for each MRS, to facilitate relaying information;
 - a brief record of the general topics covered at meeting;⁶⁹
 - dissemination of 'points of general interest'.
- **Recognition of Interact's evolving role in relation to MRS.** Unlike Interact's involvement in the development of specific tools, where it has a clearly specified role, the relationship between Interact and the MRS has to be dynamic and evolving. In some areas, the role played by Interact may just be one of 'initiation' and then allowing stakeholders to take forward the initiative. It may be more efficient, for example, for Interact to pass responsibilities in some areas back to the MRS for them to apply/adapt approaches. With the thematic meetings, discussions may arrive at a stage where it would be more effective for other experts to take the work forward, as the meetings become more technically focussed. This

⁶⁹ It is recognised that a note on the meeting is generally put on the Interact programme web-site

should not be viewed as a shortcoming by Interact, but a success in initiating a durable network/process. With this in mind, *working with stakeholders to try to ensure a self-sustaining dimension to activities could be an important element of future work.*

- **Perceived need for practical outputs.** The practical/operational focus of Interact's work is emphasised, particularly as numerous studies already exist on the more strategic aspects of MRS, e.g. by the European Commission and external researchers. This has even led to the impression that 'more money may have been spent on researching the MRS than has actually been committed though the MRS.' *Interact could build on developing and supporting further practical outputs from events, meetings and exchanges.* Various suggestions were put forward by respondents, including:
 - events to address issues in greater depth and provide more practical services and products. When stakeholders are taking time out to travel, with the cost and time implications involved, it would be valuable to have a high-level expert involved in the issue/topic that can really add extra value;
 - dialogue on specific challenges, e.g. balancing a perceived contradiction in the regulations requiring synergies and increased focus the results focus;
 - develop 'basic' resources, e.g. a 'toolkit' for beginners in the strategies, "EU MRSs for dummies", or a guide/recommendations on how to achieve policy impact; and
 - look at ways to boost the coverage of the MRS in keep.eu, communication and knowledge management tools in the MRS.

In relation to outputs and recommendations, *a further point to note is that there would need to be consistency and 'weight' behind guidance.* Interviewees noted a concern that the guidance notes may merely represent the opinion of Interact.

"We do not always know whether the guidance as put forward by Interact will also be accepted / seen the same way by the COM." Interreg Programme Managing Authority

- **Support for communications.** Related to the preceding point on the need for very practical support, one area of specific need is support for various forms of communication activity. Communication is identified as a particular challenge for MRS stakeholders because they involve: complex multi-level, multi-sectoral structures and systems; transnational geographies; operations can be comparatively small/niche; and target interventions in areas which have long term horizons. There is an identified need for support with:
 - External communication:
 - help with 'selling' the wider role and impact; translating activities into policy relevant messages and content; linking and building political support, and showing that results have real impact.
 - facilitation of dialogues on overall improvement of communication – exploring the extent to which a more unified systematised communication will help improve understanding at all levels.
 - news about MRS to those countries which are not yet part of the MRS.
 - Cross MRS/Interreg Communication:
 - communicate better the best practice from the different approaches;

- communication and web-pages with some degree of centralised contact to improve communication and avoid overlap of systems and approaches.
- Internal communications:
 - knowhow and exchange on how to work best with specific stakeholders, e.g. steering committees.

Interact has worked on communication, dissemination and capitalisation in the past, which is potentially work that could be drawn on/linked to.

The preceding recommendations cover both practical points that could be acted on, but also touch upon wider debates about Interact's overall role in MRS. Taking a forward looking perspective and reflecting on the 'big' issues is beyond the scope of this evaluation. Nevertheless, how these issues are resolved shape the longer-term impacts of Interact's work. In this context, therefore, it is important to recognise a number of factors.

Debates around the future links between MRS and Interreg transnational programmes.

Linked to views that transnational Interreg programmes should be allowed to concentrate on fulfilling their own role, and MRS should become less reliant on them, Interact's role could revert to a clearer focus on the needs of Interreg programmes specifically and supporting cooperation. This could include, for example, links between CBC programmes, and even mainstream Cohesion policy programmes, and MRS.

The scope to refine, clarify and evolve Interact's role post 2020. At present Interact is doing what is asked of it, that is engaging and supporting a wide range of stakeholders, as well as participating in strategic and policy discussions and debates on the MRS. As the role of MRS has evolved, it has been valuable to have broad engagement. Further, the more Interact has done, the more it has been asked to do, which is another indicator of success. However, this process also pulls Interact's work in numerous directions and away from its core focus on Interreg, leading to questions about transparency, accountability and representativeness.

- Need transparency and accountability
 - Interact is a programme itself, not an institution – should it continue to have such a big role in MRS?
 - Interact is feeding into very strategic discussions; need to be sure this is appropriate/properly mandated ;
 - need to ensure transparency in communications and dialogue; and
 - need clear lines of responsibility.
- Greater ownership and responsibility by MRS
 - Interact is not responsible for driving, and managing the MRS. It is useful to share experiences, but increasingly MRS operation and impact depends on the management of specific internal systems, and not all the issues can be addressed by common/joint solutions.

The potential for a 'super' MRS support secretariat? The European Commission has strengthened the focus on MRS post 2020. This may require capacity to support long-term strategic coordination for each MRS, e.g. a dedicated secretariat for the MRS, but also a form of strategic central resource to allow for better longer term planning and support. There could be central support on key areas, rather

than each MRS trying to do things, such as skills development for communication for example, separately and by themselves. On the one hand, some stakeholders suggested that Interact, as the point with most expertise on the operation, development and implementation of all the MRS, could fulfil this type of role. Such a change would have to involve a major change in staffing, resources and remit but, on this basis they could:

- plan and initiate joint meetings, e.g. support the presidency of strategies with organising events;
- transfer knowledge;
- help flagships deliver results;
- improve implementation chains between decision makers and key implementers;
- help with improving communications;
- support thematic coordinators;
- monitor implementation of strategies;
- evaluate strategies;
- hold a single annual MRS event;
- support pre-accession countries with capacity-building; and
- more visibly serve as one-stop-shop for all MRS.

On the other hand, however, others feel that such a strategic role would be better covered by a dedicated institution with a clear focus and mandate which is formally part of the governance of the MRS and has clear lines of accountability, responsibility, monitoring and maintenance of quality.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The Impact Evaluation of the Interact programme set out to identify the impact Interact has on Interreg programmes and other relevant stakeholders through its services. The evaluation conducted case studies on five specific services: (1) Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT); (2) electronic monitoring system (eMS); (3) keep.eu; (4) harmonised Interreg branding; and (5) Interact's support to the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies.

The overarching evaluation question is:

How has Interact contributed to supporting Interreg programmes, and in the case of macro-regional strategies other relevant stakeholders, and to improving/changing practices?

The evaluation establishes how selected Interact products/services are used by the programme's target groups, and what effect their use has on (the efficiency and effectiveness of) programme management practices. In particular, the focus is on changed management practices and, related, their efficiency and effectiveness.

"Changed programme management practices" are understood to be the result of strengthening the 'enablers' of programme management capacities, i.e. the key factors that determine what an organisation does and how it does it:

- a. Structures and processes,
- b. Staff skills and organisational culture,
- c. Systems and tools.

Investing in enablers, thus building capacity, is expected to impact on programme management bodies in terms of increased efficiency and effectiveness in implementation, and the resilience of programme bodies to deal with external change and pressure. Ultimately, improved programme management will benefit programmes' stakeholders, in particular applicants and beneficiaries.

Generalisation and scalability of findings. Before setting out the conclusions, it is important to note that the five case studies covered represent only a segment of the range of Interact products and services, and are not fully representative. As such, the scope to generalise about the impact of other Interact services can be questioned as the:

- the case studies are on-going projects or continuous services dating back to previous programming periods. Interact III is therefore able to reap the rewards of efforts that reach far back into the previous programming period;
- the case studies are long-term projects unlike many other Interact services that are one-off services based on (sometimes ad hoc) programme requests to meet concrete needs that emerge during the programming period; and
- the case studies, with the exception of the support to MRS, have culminated in very tangible outcomes (i.e. products), while a large share of Interact's services are soft interventions such as learning events, network meetings for facilitated knowledge exchange or (thematic) studies. Demonstrating the tangible results of soft interventions is much more difficult and only possible if the measure is evaluated over a longer period of time.

In the future, any follow-up impact evaluation should **pay greater attention to representativeness and randomisation**. However, in spite of these important reservations, the selection of case studies is justified by:

- the fact that the five selected projects account for a significant share of Interact’s human resources;
- the focus on projects with long time horizons takes account of the fact that Interact impacts on the capacities available in Interreg programmes as part of a slow, but steady process of change, and that actual impacts can only be established when adopting a longer-term perspective; and
- the variety of intervention types, such as the example of the support to MRS, shows that ‘soft’ type of measures can also have tangible effects in the longer term if there is sufficient continuity and consistency in the commitment. The case study on the harmonised branding provides an example for how soft interventions, such as meetings, can become the birthplace for innovative ideas that then develop into a concrete and tangible output. Providing occasions and space for encounters and exchange is a prerequisite for more tangible cooperation outcomes to emerge. Tangible cooperation outcomes give a renewed momentum to the cooperation between Interreg programmes as a whole and also benefit ‘softer’ and less output-oriented forms of cooperation. Thus, there is a positive feedback loop between harder and softer interventions.

The following discussion focuses on: overall conclusions, across all five case studies; results and impact in terms of Interact’s specific objectives; cross-cutting recommendations; and recommendations per case study. In doing so, the evaluation reflects the distinctive nature of each of the case studies, but also the importance of their inter connections, interdependencies and overall role.

9.1 Overall conclusions

The evaluation found sound evidence that the five analysed Interact services have generated immediate results, in terms of changed practices in programme authorities and cultures (‘mind-sets’), which contribute to the achievement of wider impacts on the efficiency and effectiveness of programme implementation. and Table 8 summarise the observed results and impacts.

Table 7: Overview of changed mind-sets and practices

Enablers	Observed change in programmes
<p>Changes to structures and processes – Focus on clear, efficient and effective structures and processes and on how the interface with the programme administration is experienced from the end-user’s perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIT consists of a set of harmonised templates and guidance that helped develop and shape programme management provisions and processes. • HIT fosters peer learning and self-reflection in programme bodies on what they really need to assess and monitor projects, which contributes to a simplification of programme processes in some programmes, and a greater focus on reducing the administrative burden for applicants/beneficiaries. • HIT facilitates a common basis for discussion and exchange on programme management processes beyond HIT and prepared the ground for a number of ensuing harmonisation efforts affecting programmes structures and processes. • eMS required programmes to rethink and redesign established programme



management processes and structures, but also provided opportunities to introduced new ways of working (e.g. remote working). 39 percent of programmes using eMS say that eMS has led to a simplification of programme processes.

- **Keep.eu** provides fast and easy access to pre-processed information. This has changed how some implementation tasks are executed. Keep.eu, for example, facilitates the development of targeted calls for proposals by examining past programme activity, thematic concentrations, or trends in other programmes.
- **Keep.eu** also allows benchmarking and looking beyond a single programme, which improves understanding of the role and position of Interreg/ENI programmes more generally or in specific territories.
- The **harmonised Interreg branding** triggered a change in programmes away from dealing with corporate branding in isolation to dealing with it collaboratively.
- The **harmonised Interreg branding** has also expanded cooperation into other communication areas.
- **Support to MRS** provides valuable platforms and networks for exchange and learning beyond those available through other sources, all of which widen and deepen collaboration between MRS, between MRS and Interreg programmes and across Interreg programmes working with the MRS. This exchange and learning has influenced the development and evolution of MRS systems and processes.

Changes to staff skills and organisational culture –

change in organisational culture towards greater user-centricity, result-orientation, learning-from-mistakes, innovativeness and creativity, and on the development of institutional memory.



- **HIT** strengthens the ties between programmes and builds confidence in programmes that harmonisation is feasible and capacities in how to approach it.
- **HIT** affects organisational culture in programmes in terms of capacity to innovate, agility to adapt to change and readiness to compromise.
- **HIT** supports a shift towards greater focus on simplification for applicants/beneficiaries.
- **eMS** significantly contributed to community building among Interreg programmes and to a culture of mutual support and sharing.
- **eMS** has positively influenced the capacity to innovate, organisational flexibility and readiness for accepting and managing change in programme authorities.
- **eMS** increases transparency, which affects the relations and facilitates collaboration between people and institutions.
- **Keep.eu** helps build institutional/programme memory.
- **Keep.eu** builds knowledge and know-how in project promoters who can use the resource to get ideas or find potential project partners.
- **Harmonised Interreg branding** led to community-building among Interreg communication managers who work closely together on different communication-related initiatives.




	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmonised Interreg branding affects organisational culture in a majority of programmes as the process boosted confidence and built capacities in programmes for initiating and organising joint communication activities. • Support to MRS contributes to the development of human resources and institutional capacity regarding MRS in Interreg programmes and vice versa. • Support to MRS fulfils a valuable role in retaining and sharing information, e.g. by providing comparative perspectives across MRS/Interreg programmes working with MRS or disseminating information on legal change.
<p>Changes to systems and tools –</p> <p>Focus on increasing efficiency, transparency, accountability, legal certainty, user-friendliness through the use of sound and, where possible, electronic programme management tools (manuals, checklists, databases, etc.).</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIT supplies programmes with readily-available harmonised implementation tools, based on good programme practices and enabled the development of a community monitoring system. • HIT are a useful, complete, and coherent set of programme templates, checklists and auxiliary documents (e.g. guidance, factsheets, etc.), even though some elements are too complex and yield redundant input. • eMS is a solid system with a well-designed core whose user friendliness can still be improved. It handles a large part of management tasks electronically. • eMS transfers programmes procedures that used to be based on paper documents to procedures that are based (almost fully) on electronic data processing and transmission. • Keep.eu is a valuable resource supporting communication and dissemination activities, e.g. by the European Commission, programme authorities, project promoters and other stakeholders. It also supports programmes with fulfilling EU publicity requirements. • Keep.eu is the only resource that allows looking beyond single programmes for thematic/territorial analysis. • Harmonised Interreg branding includes a rich resource of branding-related material (harmonised logo, design manual, icons for the 11 TOs, etc.). In a number of programmes, innovations to project communication (tools) were introduced, e.g. harmonised logo template for projects and/or the hosting of project websites.

Table 8: Overview of impacts

Type of impacts	Observed impact on programmes (and other stakeholders)
<p>Efficiency gains and resource saving –Achieve more with less, e.g. through optimising service delivery</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIT contributes to a more efficient programme implementation as it offers programmes off-the-shelf implementation tools in line with EU regulations and guidance, sparing them from having to develop tools on their own. • HIT achieves simplification for actors (applicants/beneficiaries, national controllers, national authorities) working in multiple programmes. • eMS saves costs in programmes as the external software development was procured and managed centrally by Interact. • eMS saves staff resources thanks to increased efficiency in programme management as a result of electronic data management. • eMS simplifies the application/reporting process as well as controlling and provides synergy effects for applicants/beneficiaries as well as auditors/controllers working in multiple programmes. • Keep.eu requires a substantial effort upfront for collecting and submitting data to keep.eu. But as the demands for synergies, dissemination, and accountability increase, keep.eu is delivering ways for various stakeholder organisations to save time and resource across a range of activities. • Harmonised Interreg branding achieved savings in terms of time, money and staff resources for programme authorities due to the fact that the branding was centrally procured and paid by Interact. • Harmonised Interreg branding led to resource savings and simplification in projects working in programmes which introduced the use of standard project logo templates and/or centrally hosted project websites. The time saved means that projects can focus on their core work right from the start, which might contribute to quicker project results.
<p>Effectiveness – Doing the right thing to increase quality and performance, e.g. transparent decision-making, increased legal certainty, staff development, better communication</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIT increases legal certainty for programme authorities resulting from the large number of HIT adopters and the more harmonised interpretation of regulatory requirements. • HIT is one building block in the development of a common Interreg brand identity, contributing to the awareness of Interreg and its achievements. • HIT fully incorporates the focus on results and support programme performance through results delivery. • eMS facilitates communication between programme authorities and improves transparency as (the history of) every step is well documented in the system. This also enhances programmes accountability and helps programmes in case of a formal complaint. • eMS promotes legal certainty for programmes as the large number of programmes using it and external audit of eMS provide assurances that it complies with regulatory requirements.

- **eMS** reduces errors that result from wrong data entry as the need for the manual input of data is significantly reduced.
- **eMS** has positive effects on programme external communication as it enables the automatic export of data for keep.eu, automatic update of the programme website with content coming directly from eMS, and contributes to Interreg being perceived as a family of programmes.
- The **harmonised Interreg branding** is clearly geared towards increasing the visibility and awareness of Interreg and its achievements among programme stakeholders: potential beneficiaries, regional, national and EU-level decision-makers, but also the wider public.
- **Keep.eu** supports and informs programme and project decision making.
- **Keep.eu** is a resource for project partners/potential partners to look at good practice, develop project ideas etc.
- **Keep.eu** supports evidence based strategic planning.
- **Keep.eu** provides a comparative perspective for benchmarking and improving performance of programmes.
- **Keep.eu** is a resource to support building synergies and collaboration, with a view to project development or capitalisation.
- **Keep.eu** facilitates a territorial view of participation and engagement in order to target efforts.
- The link between **keep.eu** and eMS has positive effects on programme external communication as it enables the automatic export of data for keep.eu, automatic update of the programme website with content coming directly from eMS, and contributes to Interreg being perceived as a family of programmes.
- The **support to MRS** has increased awareness and understanding of the overall MRS concept, the related issues, and opportunities of macro-regional strategies, which is a key to the success of the approach.
- The **support to MRS** contributes to open exchanges on MRS development and approaches across stakeholder groups, which improves communication and may contribute to a smoother implementation.

Resilience –

Ability to deal with and manage change



- **HIT** achieved that programmes jointly address challenges arising from a changing regulatory environment.
- **eMS** was a big change in programmes introducing the system and required them to adopt a proactive approach to change management.
- **keep.eu** is a means of retaining institutional memory and reinforcing the idea of a 'community'/bigger picture around territorial cooperation.
- The **harmonised Interreg branding** initiative is an example of a proactive approach by programmes to become change agents by

working together in order to influence EC decisions. Capacities in programmes on how to initiate and manage joint communication efforts were enhanced as a result.

- **Support to MRS** has led to community building and momentum which are a valuable 'by products' of Interact activities in relation to the MRS. It has instilled a more proactive role in MRS and Interreg actors in addressing common concerns and themes jointly.

Conditioning factors. The results and impacts set out in and Table 8 are notable, especially when taking into account the wide range of factors that 'condition'/influence change in these areas. When discussing results and impacts it is very important to consider the conditioning factors that shape and influence whether targets are met, but which are beyond the direct influence of the Interact programme.

- **Complex management structures and decision-making in Interreg programmes.** Management and decision-making in Interreg is complex and multi layered. Many stakeholders have to be convinced of the utility of making changes to well-established management practices before they are introduced. Thus, the acceptance and take-up of Interact products and services depends not only on the effort made by Interact to reach out to relevant actors, but also on the willingness (and resources) of these actors to get involved.
- **Broad community of Interreg programmes** (or other stakeholders). The fact that Interact caters to a large target group means that Interact has to carefully navigate around different interests. Since Interact depends on the voluntary, "soft" cooperation and contribution of target groups, there is a need to seek consensus at all times.
- **Political dimension.** Some of the areas in which Interact engages, e.g. its support to the MRS or the rebranding of Interreg, are strategically, even politically, sensitive. As a result, Interact is sometimes faced with concerns, attitudes or frustrations that don't fall within the remit of Interact, but which impinge on Interact's work by adding complexity and uncertainties.
- **Engagement beyond core target groups.** In the current programming period, Interact is increasingly active in areas that involve a large and diverse range of actors, many of which do not regularly work with Interreg. Reaching out to stakeholders beyond Interact's core target groups is challenging. It will take considerable time to gain recognition and trust.
- **Time dimension.** The five evaluated Interact services show that impact needs time to develop and, often, the 'seeds' of Interact's work in one programming period are only 'harvested' in the following period.
- **Resource dimension.** What Interact can do is not only conditional upon its own limited (staff & financial) resources, but also on the resources of programmes. Especially smaller programmes find it increasingly difficult to actively engage in Interact activities.
- **Uncertainty related to the innovative character of Interact's interventions.** Most of Interact's initiatives have a pioneering character and, therefore, always entail the risk of failure. This risk can be mitigated through a number of measures, including proper planning, appropriate resource allocation, clearly defined and realistic objectives, etc. However, a residual risk of non- or under-achievement will always remain.

Despite these challenges and tensions, this evaluation, based around five of Interact services, shows there to be positive results. Further, the case studies also demonstrate that **Interact has an impact on programmes that goes beyond capacity building**. There is sound evidence that the selected services have tangible effects on the efficiency and effectiveness of programme delivery, on programmes' resilience to change, and also on the programmes' stakeholders, in particular applicants/beneficiaries.

9.2 Contribution to Interact's specific objectives.

In the 2014-2020 funding period, the Interact programme focuses on three programme-specific objectives:

- 1) to improve the management and control capacity of Interreg programmes;
- 2) to improve the Interreg capacity in capturing and communicating programme results; and
- 3) to improve cooperation management capacity to implement innovative approaches.

The evaluation finds that all five of the projects evaluated contribute, at least to some extent, to the three specific objectives, as shown in .

Table 9: Contribution of the five projects to programme-specific objectives

To improve the management and control capacity of Interreg programmes	<p>Contribution to programme objective 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>• Harmonised Implementation Tools (HIT) provide templates and blueprints for a large number of programme management and control tasks, aiming for lean procedures based on recognised good practice in Interreg programme management. HITs are the result of extensive exchange on existing management practices between programmes. Thus, programmes have benefit not only from the resulting tools, but also from this facilitated exchange for building up and enhancing their management capacities.</p> <p>Evaluation finds that HIT has built capacities for programme management by positively affecting the culture of cooperation among Interreg programmes, the organisational culture in programme authorities, as well as programme management processes and tools, not least, by enabling the development of a community monitoring system.</p> <p>Most importantly, HIT was the first major initiative to harmonise Interreg programme management across the three strands based on the voluntary commitment of programmes. It demanded from programme authorities lateral thinking, the agility to adapt to changes and readiness to compromise. All of this ultimately contributes to improved change management and, hence, the resilience of programme authorities.</p> <p>• The electronic monitoring system (eMS) has translated a set of HIT templates into an electronic database portal for the collection of data needed for an efficient and effective programme management, and for an efficient communication with applicants and beneficiaries. In addition to the use of harmonised templates, the development of the eMS required a substantive streamlining of management procedures. Programmes involved in the development of eMS thus benefitted from the exchange of practices on how regulatory requirements are best implemented, while programmes using eMS have high-end technology at hand that has increased efficiency and effectiveness of programme management, freeing resources in programme authorities for other tasks.</p> <p>Evaluation finds that the collective experience of a large number of programmes that went into its development took the exchange on programme management practices onto a new level in terms of depth of the exchange. The collaborative development process and the resulting community monitoring system have (deeply) affected:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • programme management practices, partly also simplifying programme processes; • cooperation culture among programmes, building capacities in programmes for self-organised cooperation and enhancing the readiness to expand cooperation also into other, new areas; and • organisational culture in programme authorities, increasing organisational flexibility, the capacity for innovation and the ability to manage change. <p>Programme authorities who are part of the eMS user community have easier to access data and a better overview of the state of programme implementation at any time, as well as access to the support and knowledge of the eMS community.</p> <p>• The harmonised Interreg brand supports programmes in a number of tasks related to communication and capitalisation, as an integral part of programme management.</p> <p>Evaluation finds that the harmonisation of the Interreg branding had a wider positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of programme implementation and the territorial cooperation policy as a whole. As a grass-route initiative of Interreg programmes, the successful rebranding of Interreg has also boosted confidence in programmes that, together, they can influence EC decisions, and it enhanced capacities in programmes on how to initiate and manage joint communication efforts. As a result, programmes initiated a number of communication-related collaborations that are direct or indirect spin-offs of the harmonised branding.</p> <p>• keep.eu provides programme, project and beneficiary (partner) data and clustering functions that are key for programmes (and their beneficiaries), and other organisations at European, national and regional level to better, and more easily, understand their European Territorial Cooperation environment. It has potential benefits to functions as diverse as programme, project and financial management, as well as capitalisation and communication.</p> <p>Interact's support for the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies (MRS) benefits primarily programmes with a direct link and alignment of objectives to those of a MRS (Interreg transnational programmes, especially those dedicated to support the MRS), but also all other programmes as contribution to the EU macro-regional strategies. Given that the close entanglement between Interreg and MRS is a relatively recent development, Interact increases programme capacities by facilitating dialogue and knowledge sharing among Interreg programmes and between Interreg and macro-regional stakeholders on how to concretely contribute to MRS and harness synergetic effects between both policies.</p>
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Contribution to programme objective 2

- **HIT** and **eMS** have fully immersed in their logic the strategic shift to result orientation and thematic concentration. Through the standardisation of the collection of data on project and programme results across programmes and strands, they have largely contributed to providing the foundation for thematic and evaluation studies that are able to paint the larger picture of Interreg achievements.

Evaluation finds that the exchange taking place in the scope of the **HIT** development has very much shaped how programmes have interpreted the newly introduced requirement on results orientation and how they have translated it into their implementation tools, leading to a more uniform interpretation of regulatory requirements. Programmes confirm that the clear and harmonious approach to results-orientation helps them report on outputs and results, and ultimately also led to more clearly focused projects.

As regards **eMS**, the monitoring system enables the automatic export of data for keep.eu as well as the automatic update of the programme website with content coming directly from eMS. Both functionalities are used by a number of programmes to increase efficiency in programme communication.

- **keep.eu** is the main knowledge management tool for Interreg-generated knowledge. It has supported the structured and consolidated way of collecting Interreg project results as the prerequisite for the (re)use of project outcomes and capitalisation and analysis of results across programmes and strands. Simplifying the access to data on Interreg projects, beneficiaries and results, it contributes largely to Interreg's visibility and supports the communication of the added value of cooperation and paves the way for future thematic studies and other types of reports and evaluations, even across programmes and strands. Given the increased sectoral focus of Cohesion policy, keep.eu has a key role to play in the thematic work of Interact.
- The **harmonisation and establishment of an Interreg branding** primarily aims on achieving greater visibility and wider recognition of territorial cooperation, This indirectly also supports the communication of (aggregated) Interreg results and demonstration of Interreg's added value for Europe.
Evaluation finds that the harmonised branding has led to a number of follow-up inter-programme activities directed towards communicating the added value of territorial cooperation and capitalising on programme results. Programmes express their intention to gear up for more such joint endeavours in the future, shifting the focus from discussing branding to using it in concrete initiatives.
- The **support** provided by Interact to **macro-regions** and to Interreg programmes aligned to MRS covers the capture and communication of MRS/Interreg related results, including networking, exchange of experience and communication activities across existing strategies, the development of (thematic) studies, but also the above-mentioned collaboration between EUSBSR/EUSDR and keep.eu.

Contribution to programme objective 3

- **The EU macro-regional strategies** are innovative and relatively new approaches to territorial cooperation. Interreg funding is a popular source for financing macro-regional projects in territories covered by a MRS. Interact supports MRS as well as Interreg programmes structures and stakeholders in capitalising on their link with macro-regional strategic objectives and governance. Building connections between the territorial cooperation programmes and MRS brings more value to Interreg investments into the EU policies. Furthermore, where the four Interreg transnational programmes dedicated to support the MRS are concerned, Interact supports exchanges of practices and experiences as well as supports these programmes in improving services to the MRS.

Besides, a number of Interreg collaborative initiatives are themselves innovative approaches to programme management:

- **Keep.eu** for the first time gathers information on Interreg projects across programmes in a systematic way. Furthermore, it has a link to MRS as it stores MRS-specific information from macro-regional projects supported by Interreg, ENI CBC, but also other instruments and sources.
- **HIT** and **eMS** as well as the **harmonisation of Interreg branding** are collaborative initiatives aimed at innovating programme management. At the same time, they are also pointers of the cooperation capacity already existing in Interreg programmes. eMS and the harmonised branding can also be seen as spin-offs of HIT as their development has been inspired by the successful cooperation on standardising programme templates. Set up by the strong network of (transnational) programme communication managers, it is a vivid example of the existing cooperation capacity among Interreg programmes. The number of largely self-managed cooperation activities that sprung from the harmonised branding are also indicators for the increased capacity in programmes to innovate and implement innovative approaches to programme management.

Source: Evaluation team

9.3 Cross-cutting recommendations

Due to the interrelated nature of the case studies, a number of lessons can be drawn from the five evaluated Interact products and services that have validity beyond those cases.

- **Keep up the participatory and inclusive approach to developing products & services.** Interact takes, in all three analysed initiatives, a very democratic and participatory approach. The evaluation has shown that this increases programmes' ownership and commitment. It can be said to be one of the key factors explaining the high satisfaction with and high use of Interact's products and services which are developed together with, rather than for, programmes. On the downside, this approach also places a high demand on Interact's and programmes' staff resources. Therefore, some programme managers voiced, in interviews, surveys and focus group meeting, a preference for more top-down decision making by Interact to cut down on the time and effort spent on long development processes, while at the same time still requesting to be consulted on decisions concerning Interact products & services for programmes. *This shows that there are conflicting pressures and requirements and a trade-off has been found between the need for broad consultation of programmes (e.g. in a more exploratory phase of an issue) and top-down decision making (e.g. on issues where no consensus can be found). In particular, interviews suggest that programmes will accept top-down decisions, so long as they are taken in a transparent way and after a period of extensive consultations with programmes.*
- **Ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to projects with a high tangible impact.** Developing Interact's products and services in a participatory and transparent way requires a lot of Interact staff resources. Staff resources are not only needed for facilitating the development

and maintenance of the product or service, but also for the accompanying communication measures. Continuous communication with programmes is important to ensure transparency and the involvement of programmes that may not be able to come to meetings. *Ultimately, this may lead to some challenging decisions about resources for projects/activities with a low financial risk and less tangible impact and those with a higher risk and tangible benefit for programmes.*

- **Ensure an equitable participation of large and small programmes.** While programme participation is central to the success of Interact's product and services, programmes report that they find it increasingly challenging to make available the time and resources to get involved, even though they are genuinely interested and see the value of cooperation. This poses a serious risk to Interact's inclusive approach, as it is especially programmes with a small TA, low staff resources and a lack of specialised staff (e.g. for communication) that often cannot actively contribute. Since Interact depends very much on the voluntary participation of programmes, there is a risk that activities are dominated by programmes with a larger management team and that the outcomes of such processes are biased towards the needs of large programmes. *It is important for Interact to pay attention to the equitable participation of large and small programmes and to ensure that outcomes cater to the needs of different types of programmes (i.e. small-large, Interreg-IPA-ENI, etc).*
- **Preserve institutional memory to capitalise on lessons learned.** There is the expectation among programmes that Interact products and services, such as eMS, HIT or harmonised branding, will be updated to meet the requirements of the next programming period and that this will require less time and effort from programmes than in the past. Programmes have no appetite for repeating the same discussions with every new funding period. *To meet programmes' expectations, Interact has to fully capitalise on lessons learned. This requires investing in preserving institutional memory, so that knowledge on 'what works well/not so well' and 'what did we do and why' does not get lost as time passes and new staff members take over. To ensure that informal, people-based knowledge is maintained and turned into institutional knowledge a number of measures can be taken: provide room for reflection on 'lessons learned' in the entire team, keep detailed records of ongoing projects, and build a structured knowledge base around them (e.g. in the form of checklists, factsheets, tables, etc.).*
- **Facilitate programmes' involvement through project management routines.** One way of facilitating programmes' involvement in Interact projects is through a greater focus on project management routines. Harmonisation efforts like HIT and harmonised Interreg branding were implemented without a full implementation plan, as the large number of unknowns made forward-looking planning difficult. These projects, therefore, relied a lot on trial-and-error and ad hoc approaches. *Follow up to these projects (as well as others) can draw on experience and should involve more detailed planning, including an indicative timeline and interim targets/milestones. Interdependences between the different (interim) steps should be defined to be able to give early warnings of risks of a delay occurring. Timeline and interim targets could be coordinated and agreed with programmes and clearly communicated to them.*
- **Avoid re-inventing the wheel through process thinking.** Another way of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of Interact projects is by introducing process thinking where appropriate. Taking a process perspective on Interact's work means looking out for working steps

that are carried out repeatedly and trying to improve them from a client's point of view, e.g. by standardising them⁷⁰ and, possibly, even automating them. Most of Interact's work is creative knowledge work, which is difficult to structure in terms of processes, but *ongoing Interact services like the maintenance of eMS or keep.eu include a lot of repeated steps, which could benefit from being more routinized, and even automated. Examples are the automatic testing of new releases of eMS to reduce the number of software bugs. Even creative work could benefit from process thinking by positioning individual work activities in the larger context of the other activities with which it combines to create results. Those options could be further explored.*

- **Creating tangible cooperation outcomes benefits programme cooperation as a whole.** The evaluation has shown that the tangible cooperation outputs such as HIT, eMS, keep.eu or harmonised branding give renewed momentum to the cooperation between Interreg programmes as a whole. They instil a sense of achievement in programmes, which increases confidence and creates the mood for more cooperation, benefitting also 'softer' and less output-oriented forms of cooperation. Some programmes have expressed the wish to move cooperation to an even more strategic as well as practice-oriented level by, e.g. formulating joint opinions regarding Commission legislative proposals or increasing joint communication activities. The positive spirit of cooperation also led to a number of bottom-up organised activities. *Interact has a key support role in providing facilitation and coordination as well as expertise on how to put ideas into practice and helping to support grass-root initiatives. A wish was expressed by respondents for Interact to be more flexible, and take ownership of initiatives brought up by programmes.*

- **Strengthen the links and synergies between the five evaluated Interact projects.** The evaluation shows that there are a number of links between the five evaluated Interact projects that could be further strengthened in the future:
 - (1) HIT and eMS are in a symbiotic relationship; on the one hand, eMS was developed on the basis of HIT templates, on the other hand, eMS has clearly increased the uptake of HIT. However, the coordination between the two projects has not been optimal in the past. In the future, the HIT and eMS development should be better integrated.
 - (2) The harmonised Interreg branding has contributed to a wider visibility of Interreg and its achievements. The common Interreg brand could be used to an even greater extent and more coherently in Interact, e.g. through better alignment of the branding of keep.eu with the Interreg brand rather than trying to develop a self-standing keep.eu brand. Mutually beneficial links between keep.eu and the Interreg online portal could be reinforced and developed further. The different resources should reinforce rather than compete with each other.
 - (3) The harmonised Interreg branding could be part of and contribution of the network on programme communication officers involved in the HIT process from the beginning.
 - (4) Keep.eu already cooperates with macro-regional stakeholders for the collection of data on projects related to MRS, so far considering only the EUSBSR and EUSDR. There is potential to further develop this service in the future and for keep.eu to become a known knowledge hub for information on projects contributing to MRS.

⁷⁰ Process design aims at identifying its beginning, end, and intermediate steps, to clarify who the customer is for it, to measure it, to take stock of how well it is currently being performed, and ultimately to improve it. The specification of what tasks are to be performed, by whom, when, in what locations, under what circumstances, to what degree of precision, with what information, and the like.

9.4 Specific recommendations per case study

Specific recommendations for each case study project are set out in the following tables.

Recommendations on HIT		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
Process-related recommendations		
1	<p>The development of HIT was the first major attempt to harmonise Interreg programme management across a large number of programmes of all strands. Being a pioneering endeavour, the HIT development could not fall back on the experience from similarly complex past harmonisation projects. Therefore some degree of trial-and-error and an <i>ad hoc</i> approach to managing and facilitating the development process were unavoidable. That also includes the lack of a project implementation plan, which would have helped programmes with their own planning.</p>	<p><i>The development of the next generation of HITs should draw on the accumulated experience from the past HIT development (and other harmonisation initiatives) on how to approach the task, what steps are needed, and how much time they require. It should be based on proper planning, including an indicative timeline and interim targets/milestones as well as consideration of the interdependences between the different (interim) outputs in order to be able to give early warnings of any risks of a delay occurring. Timeline and interim targets should be coordinated and agreed with and clearly communicated to programmes.</i></p>
2	<p>In spite of the trial-and-error nature of the HIT development, programmes were satisfied with how the development process was run by Interact. Programmes positively highlighted the fact that they received draft templates in due time before and a summary report after each meeting. They also appreciated that HIT was presented outside of dedicated HIT meetings to inform programmes that could not participate in its development.</p>	<p><i>As programmes clearly appreciated these measures to increasing transparency of the process, they ought to be continued in the future for all programmes to feel well informed and involved.</i></p>
3	<p>The development process of HIT was result-oriented and Interact made efficient use of programmes' time at meetings. At the same time, it required high staff resources. Programmes brought forward ideas for running it more efficiently in the future. Ideas include ensuring more consistency of participants in the different working groups or cutting down on the time dedicated to finding consensus among programmes.</p>	<p><i>Comments from some programmes suggest that they are willing to accept more top-down decision-making to increase efficiency. However, it is important to bear in mind that Interact's participatory approach to harmonisation is a key success factor explaining the wide acceptance of and satisfaction with the resulting outcomes. There is no avoiding of an extensive consultation process before taking any decision (top-down).</i></p>
4	<p>Programmes reported that they were confused about the degree of harmonisation that the harmonised tools aspire to achieve and the freedom they had to adopt them to their needs. The discussion about the degree of harmonisation that HIT should aim for is likely to continue in the future.</p>	<p><i>A meaningful approach to this discussion would be to start with clarifying what the main objective/s of harmonisation is/are and use these as yardstick/s when weighing ambitions for greater harmonisation against programmes' wishes and need for flexibility (e.g. the objective to use the tools for the development of a community monitoring system, which requires a higher degree of harmonisation, vs the ambition to achieve simplification for applicants/beneficiaries by using a common approach across programmes).</i></p>

Recommendations on HIT		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
5	In the past, due to sequencing issues, decisions were taken in the eMS core group that affected HIT, without the consent of the HIT development group/s. At the same time, decisions taken in the HIT development group/s sometimes proved to be impossible to be implemented in the electronic monitoring system.	<i>For the future, a better integration of the development of HIT and eMS is needed and the timelines of the two projects have to be better aligned. It would also be useful for the eMS IT manager to take part in HIT working group meetings to ensure that the tools can be technically implemented in eMS or any other programme monitoring system. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that the group of programmes using HIT goes well beyond the user group of eMS and that discussions in the HIT working group should not give the impression that they are only aimed at programmes using eMS.</i>
6	HIT demonstrates that, once a critical number of programmes support an innovative cooperation initiative, many more will follow. Thus, a virtuous cycle is triggered which means that the more programmes join, the easier the remaining programmes are convinced and the easier programme MAs/JS find it convinced their Monitoring Committees.	<i>To create the same virtuous cycle in similar future endeavours, Interact should look out for potential pioneers and forge alliances with those programmes.</i>
Product-related recommendations		
7	Feedback on the harmonized tools from end users is generally positive. Programmes reported that applicants find some parts of the application form complex, but that the form also guides them well through the requirements on results-orientation, which didn't exist previously. They also reported that some parts of the application form lead to redundant input. Most programmes say that the future HIT should be simpler.	<i>The future HIT package would benefit from greater focus on simplification for applicants/beneficiaries. To increase the user-friendliness and reduce the complexity of the tools, an in depth stock-taking should be carried out to identify redundant elements by drawing on a representative sample of tools used in programmes. Feedback from end users should be collected more systematically.</i>
8	What began as a development of a joint HIT package for CBC, TNC and interregional cooperation programmes forked at some point into a separate set of tools for project selection and project implementation for TNC/IRC and CBC programmes. Having two sets of templates increased the number of optional elements that had to be included in the eMS. Since programmes took a 'pick and mix' approach to using the set of	<i>In the future, one integrated development for CBC and TNC/IRC programmes would not only mean greater harmonisation across strands, but could also once again strengthen the idea of a reduced core of commonly used elements to which programmes can add freely. To allow for the involvement of a large number of programmes in the development while, at the same time, ensure a workable size of the working group, a new working method has to be found. One option⁷¹ is to delegate most of the</i>

⁷¹ This was already discussed at the HIT kick-off event in Berlin, December 2018.

Recommendations on HIT		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
	harmonised tools, thus creating their own HIT derivatives, the need for separate harmonised packages can be questioned.	<i>consultations and discussions to existing Interreg networks (i.e. the network on financial management, support to AAs, first level control, communication, etc.) and establish a small HIT steering group consisting of only a handful of Interreg programmes. The task of the steering group would be 1.) to define what needs to be changed in the existing tools, 2.) define specific tasks that are either passed on to an existing Interreg network or on which the community of Interreg programmes is consulted and 3.) to bring the different elements together and combine them into one consistent set of tools.</i>
10	IPA CBC programmes were not involved in the second round of discussions on HIT, but figures on uptake shows that 80 percent of IPA programmes use the tools. ENI programmes were not actively involved in the process for being too different from the Interreg programmes in the past period, but some of them have adopted the harmonised tools.	<i>There is every reason to involve IPA and ENI programmes from the start in the development of the next generation of harmonised tools.</i>
11	Programme managers who did not participate in HIT meetings sometimes found it difficult to understand the logic behind the tools and, hence, to guide applicants/beneficiaries in using application and reporting form. Furthermore, programme managers sometimes lack an overview of which harmonised tools there are and how they all fit together.	<i>Besides programme delegates who haven an important role in communicating the results of HIT meetings to their colleagues, there is also scope for Interact to provide better documentation and guidance. Synergies could also be exploited by developing common guidance for applicants / beneficiaries, including, e.g. real life examples of good project intervention logics.</i>
12	Participants at the HIT launch event identified more than 60 new potential elements of programme/project implementation, which could be developed in the frame of the HIT process. These range from State Aid checklist/assessment procedures to guidance on the monitoring of project results.	<i>Given the added value of HIT for programmes and importance of a timely delivery for the development of eMS, Interact is advised to put additional resources into HIT. A possible way to make available additional resources could be to outsource some of the HIT-related discussions to other Interact-managed networks, especially as regards new-to-develop tools.</i>

Recommendations on eMS		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
Process-related recommendations		
1	The eMS project management structure with a small core group steering the project and an extended observer group providing input turned out to be effective. It takes account of the fact that not all programmes have enough staff resources or the specific in house IT expertise, which they can dedicate to such an intense process. Decisions taken by the core group were generally respected and the support that core group members provided to the eMS user group was appreciated.	<i>For similarly complex future projects it makes sense to consider adopting the same type of management structure. However, the success of such a structure also hinges upon the good communication between core group and observer group so that the latter feels sufficiently involved.</i>
2	The eMS development demonstrates the importance of continuous communication between Interact and the user group, and need to devote sufficient resource to it. While programmes appreciated that Interact was open to comments and suggestions for further developments of eMS (to improve existing but also add new functionalities), they remarked on the fact that these sometimes ended up in a 'black box'. Often programmes only found out that their suggestions had been taken up when a new version of eMS was released. Programmes consider meetings well-organised and useful, but wish to get more information in advance on which concrete proposals will be discussed and decided at the meeting to be able to consult colleagues at home prior to the meeting. Interact could also consider circulating short questionnaires in preparation of a meeting. Programmes also think that communication between meetings should improve.	<i>Continuous communication in the form of regular status updates and outlook, personalised feedback on received comments/suggestions, and advance information before meetings are time-consuming yet essential parts of project management. It is important that sufficient staff resources are allocated to it.</i>
3	Linked to the above is the need for a sufficiently large Interact team working on eMS. Programmes positively remarked on the personal commitment and dedication of Interact staff to the project, but thought that there were too few staff resources once the number of programmes using eMS increased to its current level.	<i>Given the importance and added value of eMS for programmes, Interact is advised to put additional resources into its development and maintenance and, if necessary, prioritise eMS over other activities with a lower financial risk and less tangible impact.</i>
4	eMS clearly saves staff resources in programmes, but still puts a strain on programme staff resources. The time and effort needed for developing, adopting and learning how to use eMS could be significantly lower in the future due to the	<i>Kicking off the new development with a thorough stock-taking exercise (e.g. what optional functionalities are used, what changes the different user groups would like to see in a future eMS) and build strongly on the existing system will ensure an</i>

Recommendations on eMS		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
	experience gained in the current period.	<i>optimal use of the experience gathered.</i>
5	eMS was often criticised for the lack of attention to user friendliness. Programmes were typically represented in the core group by programme officers in managerial positions and IT managers. Possibly as a result, the usability and user experience of the system got a bit lost in the discussions. Also with the limited resources on Interact and programmes' side the main attention was put on functional development and the user-friendliness was not seen as main priority of the project. This should be changed for the future.	<i>To achieve greater user friendliness in the future representatives of the user-side, i.e. people who use the system in their day to day work, should be more directly involved in questions concerning, e.g. the design of the programme user interface. It is also recommended to allocate appropriate resources to the project to make sure that all the important aspects of the software can be sufficiently addressed.</i>
6	Some voices in programmes suggest that the future development of eMS should be more top-down to increase efficiency. However, this should not deflect from the fact that a central success factor of eMS is the participatory and inclusive approach to involving programmes, as they are the ones ultimately using the system.	<i>Programmes are likely to accept top-down decisions so long as they are taken after a period of consultations and in a transparent way.</i>
Product-related recommendations		
7	eMS suffered from many bugs during the development process. While this is not unusual for software development projects, a potential future community monitoring system should aim at avoiding bugs as much as possible. Also, due to a lack of resources for software development, there was no automatic testing for the eMS. Testing had to be undertaken manually by Interact and programme staff.	<i>Automatic testing is a major quality assurance measure and should be implemented from the beginning for the new software.</i>
8	There is agreement that adequate resources need to be allocated to a new community monitoring system to adequately address the high risks and importance of this project.	<i>Interact should be able to allocate sufficient staff and financial resources to the project and external software development. Appropriate resources are needed, among others, to provide better training to the community of software users, implement automatic testing, improve quality assurance and user friendliness, and for continuous communication.</i>
9	The lack of training was often cited as a main stumbling block to the smooth implementation and use of eMS.	<i>Interact could offer periodical training sessions for programme managers, controllers and auditors that are new to eMS. Trainings could also be provide in the form of e-learning sessions to allow a large number of users to participate.</i>
10	Programme desk officers at DG REGIO would	<i>An information campaign targeting DG REGIO staff</i>

Recommendations on eMS		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
	benefit from a general training or introduction to eMS. One DG REGIO interviewee observed that desk officers' opinion on eMS was strongly shaped by their programmes' stance on eMS.	<i>could mean that desk officers more actively promote the use of eMS among their programmes.</i>
11	eMS is not sufficiently promoted as a good practice example, especially outside the Interreg community.	<i>eMS is a joint achievement and outcome of programme cooperation and this achievement could be better communicated in the future. Being recognised as good practice would also instil a sense of pride in the user community and would boost motivation to continue along this path.</i>
12	Since eMS has led to a streamlining of programme management, this opens opportunities for exploiting synergies that may result from further harmonisation.	<i>Developing additional functionalities and services for eMS users but also for engaging in further cooperation and harmonisation, e.g. with DG RESEARCH's division on Common IT Systems to explore possibilities to link eMS with the Commission single beneficiary passport system.</i>

Recommendations on keep.eu		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
1	Improve the coverage of data - despite significant improvements in data quality, further efforts are needed.	<p><i>Gains could be achieved through further and stronger support from the European Commission. Making it compulsory to submit data to keep.eu would ensure a more comprehensive and complete database.</i></p> <p><i>If the requirement to submit data remains voluntary, ongoing, active support from the Commission, as well as Interact's own efforts, would need to be taken forward.</i></p>
2	The keep.eu web site provides information on the current coverage and completeness of data. This important contextual information is available 'if you look for it'. As use and users increase, it is important to continue to communicate on the coverage of data.	<p><i>Linking a brief note/caveat on data coverage/representativeness to charts and downloads could be worth considering.</i></p> <p><i>Provision of additional information on the process of allocating projects to specific thematic categorisations, impact of double counting etc</i></p> <p><i>Improvements to data could be further supported by training on the resource overall, data exchange, and an ongoing process of simplifying (wherever possible) the data exchange process.</i></p>
3	To facilitate and increase data input, promoting use of eMS could benefit keep.eu	<p><i>If more authorities would systematically use eMS and link it with keep.eu this would imply significant simplification for them, and improve the data quality and comparability in keep.eu.</i></p> <p><i>Noting the value and compatibility of the eMS and keep.eu is something that can continue to be highlighted by Interact, particularly in the lead up to the next programming period.</i></p> <p><i>As both keep.eu and eMS develop and evolve, maintaining and continuing to develop mutually beneficial links between the systems will strengthen both.</i></p>
3	keep.eu can be useful as a tool to help programmes report on specific themes and issues that may not be picked up in programmes' own monitoring systems, e.g. numbers of projects working on specific themes. Programmes have been quick to see the potential in this field, e.g. survey responses suggested the inclusion of themes such as low carbon and blue growth.	<p><i>Reflect on, although not necessarily change, aspects of the thematic coverage to reflect new themes and cooperation efforts. The introduction of new thematic categories would be challenging. However, the relevance of some existing themes, such as 'coastal management and maritime issues' to contemporary policy themes could be highlighted.</i></p> <p><i>The introduction of further information on macro-regional strategies (MRS) and sea-basin strategies could be very valuable for Interreg programmes and MRS stakeholders.</i></p>

Recommendations on keep.eu		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
		<i>Potential to reflect specific territorial groupings/interests e.g. Arctic cooperation, which are not covered by a MRS but are the focus of joint actions and cooperation.</i>
4	Projects and programmes face increasing demands on reporting on results and impact, perspectives on mid-long term results and impact are lacking and could benefit from a central resource capturing and recording data.	<i>While it is challenging to develop a set of indicators that can reliably map impact, it may be possible to capture case studies for specific regions etc. Build commitment in terms of promoting keep.eu across programme levels, promoting the potential capitalisation and use of the platform for stakeholders.</i>
5	Continue to improve the visibility and usability of the web-site and resources on it, e.g. maps, making the site look less 'technical' and more up to date in terms of design.	<i>The inclusion of more engaging graphics and 'featured' statistics on the main keep.eu home page would provide stakeholders with a useful insight into not only the types of data available, but also, how it can be used. Links to ESPON are being explored and could provide useful contextual data and information for mapping etc.</i>
6	In order to be clear on where and how to target efforts in the future the purpose/identity of keep.eu must be clear and its position and links in relation to other information and communication tools clearly recognised	<i>Reinforce clear communication of the vision of what keep.eu is for. This will help to keep efforts focussed on keep.eu's core functions, reinforce its role, avoiding it trying to be too many things to too many people. Further coordination and collaboration on future developments of other platforms, or better/more visibly connecting keep.eu into the wider 'family' of information resources on territorial cooperation programmes and vice versa.</i>
7	An obstacle to taking full advantage of keep.eu lies in the uptake of keep.eu by key stakeholders due to perception issues and lack of awareness	<i>More information events and training will be helpful; in particular, opportunities to highlight the ways keep.eu can be used/useful. Work to boost the profile of and commitment to keep.eu has already been undertaken by Interact, and been supported by the Commission. An ongoing support/push from the European Commission would be invaluable. Developing an even stronger identity with greater visual coherence with Interreg could be valuable, giving an 'external' user an instant visual trigger and recognition of this as a formally recognised source for reliable data on Interreg.</i>

Recommendations on Harmonised Interreg Branding		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
Process-related recommendations		
1	The harmonised branding is essentially a grass-route initiative of Interreg programmes. This, together with the fact that the development process was very transparent, democratic and inclusive, accounts in part for the high acceptance that the (re-)branding has received among programmes and the fact that a majority of them endorsed it.	<i>Interact has a key support role in providing facilitation and coordination as well as expertise on how to put ideas into practice in order to avoid that grass-root level initiatives come to nothing because of a lack of resources or clear leadership.</i>
2	Programmes praised the open and participatory nature of the brand development, but also remarked on the fact that it sometimes lacked structure and planning and, hence, efficiency. Undoubtedly, this was a result of the fact that the initiative was highly political and unpredictable, and both transnational programme communication managers and Interact had no clear mandate in the beginning to go ahead with the rebranding. Also the brand development aspired to securing the broadest possible support, wherefore a lot of effort was put into consensus building and persuasion.	<i>For future similar endeavours, a more systematic approach with a clear timeline and planned milestones would be preferable to increase efficiency and effectiveness.</i>
3	The tangible results that cooperation on developing a harmonised Interreg brand has delivered made the benefit of collaboration very palpable for programmes. This positive experience has created the mood for more cooperation and consequently led to a number of follow-up activities in the area of communication, many of which are organised bottom-up.	<i>It appears that creating these tangible cooperation outcomes give a renewed momentum to the cooperation between Interreg programmes as a whole and benefitting also 'softer' and less output-oriented forms of cooperation.</i>
4	The harmonised branding shows the importance of securing the support of a critical number of pioneering programmes for any innovative cooperation. Pioneers take the first step, which in turn makes it easier for other programmes to convince their MCs to follow.	<i>To create the same virtuous circle in similar future endeavours, Interact should look out for potential pioneers and forge alliances with those programmes.</i>
5	The harmonised branding demonstrates the importance of keeping in view the main objective of a joint harmonisation effort when discussing harmonisation. The primary objective of the harmonised Interreg brand was to enable communication and capitalisation across programmes and projects for the benefit of the visibility of Interreg. Evidence gathered during this evaluation suggests that this objective has been	<i>It is important to weigh ambitions for greater harmonisation against programmes' wishes and need for flexibility, which also enhances the satisfaction with and uptake of the final product, without losing sight of the overall objective of harmonisation, which should be the ultimate yardstick.</i>

Recommendations on Harmonised Interreg Branding		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
	reached and that harmonised programme logos are now instantaneously associated with Interreg in spite of the fact that some have been customised to quite some extent and not always in line with the brand design manual.	
Product-related recommendations		
6	Changes in EU publicity requirements (e.g. no more reference to the ERDF necessary) will make adaptations to the logo necessary. Furthermore, programmes remarked that the current logo is very wide and cannot be easily combined with other logos. There is also a wish for a square-ish version of the logo to be used as icon on, e.g., social media, as well as for a monochrome version.	<i>While the development of a completely new logotype as it would be counteractive to the establishment of an Interreg brand, Interact should pick up these remarks and make careful modifications to the logo/s. Another important issue to increase adoption is to have the revised logo ready in time for programmes, including the early starters, to use it when they need it.</i>
7	Interviews with programmes who decided not to adopt the harmonised branding show that they are, in principle, supportive of the idea. Some, however, concluded that they needed flexibility beyond what they thought was possible with the harmonised logo.	<i>Possibilities to adapt the logo need to be better communicated, possibly by showing examples of how programmes have appropriated the logo and made it theirs, while at the same time preserving the main look and feel of the harmonised logo. In particular the fact that programmes may add their programme icon could be better highlighted. The message to programmes involving partners from non-EU countries could be that the logo can be use separate from the EU flag. The aim should not be to encourage programmes to deviate from the design manual, but to work towards the goal of achieving higher visibility of Interreg through a common visual appearance.</i>
8	There is a wide-spread wish among programmes to focus more on the possibilities that a harmonised brand provides for joint communication activities.	<i>Joint communication activities could include both practical (e.g. joint activities in the scope of the EC day, Europe Day or at the European Week of Regions and Cities) as well as strategic activities. The latter could include a proper discussion of what the Interreg brand stands for and what values it represents, as part of the brand development, or the development of an integrated Interreg communication strategy that involves Interreg programmes, including Interact, but possibly also the European Commission and other EU-level stakeholders with the aim to maximise the effect of the dispersed funds for communicating the benefits of Interreg.</i>

Recommendations on support for macro-regional strategies		
	Conclusion	Recommendation
1	Acknowledging that there is still much to learn in the management and implementation of MRS, a strong point from the interviews and survey is that the current work should be continued and developed	<i>The current range of events should be continued/ Interact has the potential to do more, if proportionate resources are allocated; There is scope for improvement of existing service or expansion/extension of the service, if decided and desired by Interact Monitoring Committee. For example, more thematic meetings could be undertaken, with a view to developing these as self-sustaining activities led by the MRS themselves.</i>
2	Numerous policy and academic reports and studies are published on MRS, which make up a solid base of analysis. Interact publications and work should not re-do or overlap.	<i>The more practical focus of Interact publication on MRS is noted and should be the strand that is taken forward. Guidance and papers on very practical/operational issues are of most use. Care must be taken to ensure the guidance is consistent with the approach that will be taken forward by the Commission</i>
3	Build and extend links, especially with newer MRS and their stakeholders. Interact's own links and networks with, in particular, the newer MRS and stakeholders could continue to be developed,	<i>Links to relevant stakeholders in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014) and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (2015) should be actively developed Target links with relevant CBC programmes, cross territorial cooperation arrangements, e.g. CEI</i>
4	Recognition of Interact's evolving role in relation to MRS. Interact's work and role is pulled in numerous directions and, at times, away from its core focus on Interreg. This is leading to questions about transparency, accountability and representativeness.	<i>The mandate for Interact in relation to the MRS support should be clarified to ensure greater transparency and focus, potentially with MRS taking on more 'ownership' of processes themselves.</i>
5	The practical/operational focus of Interact's work is emphasised, particularly as there are numerous studies on the more strategic aspects of MRS	<i>There is scope to develop MRS support towards: capacity building for key MRS stakeholders; funding; communication; strategic planning Interact could build on developing further practical outputs from events, meetings and exchanges could be developed.</i>
6	Communication is identified as a particular challenge for MRS stakeholders because they involve: complex multi-level, multi-sectoral structures and systems; transnational geographies; operations that can be comparatively small/niche; and interventions which cover topics with long term horizons.	<i>Practical and strategic dialogue and support on communication and dissemination, recognising the specific challenges and audiences for MRS</i>
7	Future directions and levels of impact will be informed by strategic dialogue and debate on 'big'	<i>Support provided with external/strategic communication - help with 'selling' the wider role and</i>

	<p>issues, e.g. link between Interreg and MRS, the need for an MRS secretariat?</p>	<p><i>impact; translating activities into policy relevant messages and content; how to link, build political support, and show that results have real impact.</i></p> <p><i>Cross MRS/Interreg Communication:</i> <i>How can best practises from the different approaches be communicated;</i></p> <p><i>Internal communications: knowhow and exchange on how to work best with specific stakeholders, e.g. steering committees.</i></p> <p><i>Interact has worked on communication, dissemination and capitalisation in the past, which could be a basis for future development.</i></p>
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