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The North  
Sea Region  
Programme  
2007–2013



 **dsn**  
ANALYSES & STRATEGIES  
COOPERATION MANAGEMENT

FINAL REPORT

# Institutional Capacity and Performance



**Sub-theme 3:** Application procedures and  
project development

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

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

#### Institutional Capacity and Performance

- 1) Financial management and control setup
- 2) Programme structures
- 3) Application procedures and project development

#### Added Value

- 1) Programme impact and coverage
- 2) Transnational cooperation
- 3) Legacy

#### Publicity and Communications

- 1) Programme and project cooperation in communications
- 2) Programme visibility
- 3) Communications measures on project level

#### Disclaimer:

The content of this paper has been prepared by dsn Analysen & Strategien | Kooperationsmanagement and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the North Sea Region Programme or its Evaluation Steering Group.

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## 0. Introduction

This final report addresses programme bodies, project partners and stakeholders of the Interreg IVB North Sea Region Programme (NSR programme). The report is part of the “Ongoing Evaluation” which presents the main findings and recommendations regarding the topic “Application Procedures and Project Development”.

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

- What have been the relevant measures and activities to develop good transnational projects?
- How can the set-up of the application procedure be maintained?
- Are transparent, competitive and common procedures and criteria for the project selection process being implemented?

The report is structured in the following chapters:

- Project development
- Application procedure and project selection

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

This final report is based on the main results from desk research and online surveys in which answers were given by 17 out of 25 projects’ lead beneficiaries and 18 out of 25 stakeholders (bodies of the programme) as well as on 4 additional telephone interviews with projects’ lead beneficiaries and 4 telephone interviews with stakeholders of the NSR Programme. The report focuses on the general findings and recommendations with strategic relevance to both the improvement of the current programme period as well as to the next programme period 2014-2020.

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



## 1. Recommendations at a glance

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

- ✓ The search for appropriate partners is the most relevant area of support for projects in the phase of project development. The National Contact Points (NCP) are usually the initial point of reference for potential project promoters and applicants. In order to make the search for partners more efficient, the connection between NCP should be strengthened within the North Sea Region by creating sustainable cooperation structures which are supported by a (technical) exchange platform.
- ✓ The role of the National Contact Points varies between the Member States of the North Sea Region programme. The portfolio of services the NCP offer should be made more clearly visible and promoted on the programme website. In this way, project applicants or project partners are better informed and know whom to contact (National Contact Point (NCP) or Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS)) in case specific questions arise or assistance is needed.
- ✓ In order to achieve high quality project development, a substantial volume of resources is necessary. Thus, it is recommended that the programme continues to reimburse projects' preparation costs in the next programme period. The possibilities to receive seed money at the national level should be promoted more strongly by the NCP within the relevant Member States.
- ✓ Both throughout the project application process as well as during project selection and approval, the specific links between the objectives, results and impact of the projects and the SWOT analysis should be described.
- ✓ During the next programme period the "quality of communication" should represent a criterion for project selection and be assessed in relation to a "communication plan" as part of the application. Moreover, the creation of a clear link between application chapters, core selection criteria and priority considerations is recommended.
- ✓ During the assessment of project applications the JTS should continue to involve external experts if required for specific technical details. The JTS should clearly indicate the involvement of external experts in the assessment, as this would make the procedure more transparent for the members of the Steering Committee and the Monitoring Committee.



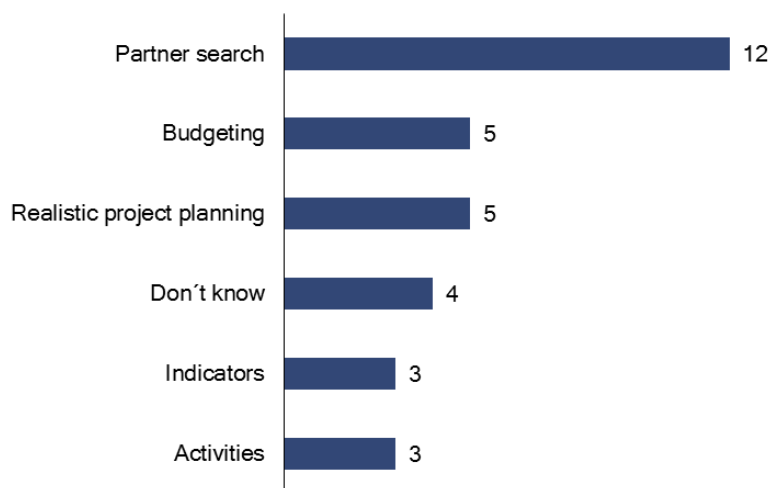
## 2. Project development

This chapter focuses on the project development process from the point of view of both the lead beneficiaries of the projects and the stakeholders (bodies of the programme). It focuses on the performance of the project development process as well as on the role of the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) and the National Contact Points (NCP) throughout this process.

### General findings



- Within the online survey both the lead beneficiaries of the projects as well as the stakeholders were asked to assess the project development process within the North Sea Region Programme (NSRP) in general. The assessment of the process differs slightly between lead beneficiaries and stakeholders. Whereas the majority of the stakeholders described the project development process within the NSRP as “good”, over 50% of the projects merely rated the process as “fair” and just under 50% as “good”. Thus, from the projects’ point of view, there is some potential to improve the project development process, be it for example with regard to refining the search for appropriate partners. Having said this, the projects also pointed out the helpful support of the JTS during the project development phase. Positively rated were, for example, the workshops organised by the NSRP or the direct feedback given by the JTS in the event of urgent questions.
- As the online survey has revealed, the efficient search for partners is the most relevant area of support for projects during the project development phase. In addition, the aspects of realistic project planning and budgeting are also relevant areas in need of support, whereas assistance with regard to indicators and activities seems less relevant for the projects (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Which are the most relevant areas of support for projects in the project development phase? (multiple selection is possible)**

Source: Online survey, number of responses



- The role of the JTS and the NCP in supporting projects during the project development phase are perceived differently by lead beneficiaries and stakeholders. From the lead beneficiaries and stakeholders point of view, the most important support tool or service which should be provided by the JTS in the project development phase is the pre-assessment of project ideas. With regard to the NCP, the lead beneficiaries and stakeholders perceived the aspect of individual consulting to be the most important service.

## Recommendations

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



**The search for appropriate partners is the most relevant area of support for projects in the phase of project development. The National Contact Points are usually the initial point of reference for potential project promoters and applicants. In order to make the search for partners more efficient, the connection between NCP should be strengthened within the North Sea Region by creating sustainable cooperation structures which are supported by a (technical) exchange platform.**

The results of the online survey indicate that the search for appropriate partners is the most relevant area of support for projects in the phase of project development. Due to the smaller significance of cultural or language related barriers, the National Contact Points are usually the initial point of reference for potential project promoters and applicants. In addition, the NCP are well connected to the regional level and can thus facilitate the development of project ideas and the search for appropriate partners across countries within the NSR Programme. Within the online survey and conducted telephone interviews the participants stressed that the main challenge is not necessarily related to finding a sufficient number of partners, but rather to getting in touch with the *right* partners. Thus, in order to support the search for partners, the connection between NCP should be strengthened within the North Sea Region. This could, for example, be done by establishing a technical exchange platform for the NCP which would ultimately unite the supply of and demand for suitable project partners. In this way, NCP would proactively provide relevant partners from their region whilst at the same time keeping mutual track of the feedback given by other NCP. In order to coordinate activities and exchange experiences within this structure, the NCP could come together in regular meetings which could, for example, take place between the meetings of the Steering Committee.

In addition, the interviewees emphasised that a clear description of the NCP's role in relation to project development is necessary within the next programme period. This corresponds with the recommendation given in the final report on "Institutional Capacity and Performance" of Sub-theme 2: Programme structures on page 10 where a common definition of tasks is recommended.



**The role of the National Contact Points varies between the Member States of the North Sea Region programme. The portfolio of services the NCP offer should be made more clearly visible and promoted on the programme website. In this way, project applicants or project partners are better informed and know whom to contact (NCP or JTS) in case specific questions arise or assistance is needed.**

The Member States of the North Sea Region programme are responsible for the National Contact Points. The role of the NCP varies between the Member States, as the level of service and assistance offered by the NCP depends on their resources and capacity. The services provided by the different NCP, for example during the phase of project development or the application procedure, are not made clearly visible and promoted sufficiently on the programme website. When making these services more clearly visible, the varying capacity and resources of the NCP could be mentioned.

Having said this, the promotion of NCP services should not result in “competition” between the NCP, as these rely on the resources available in each specific country. Thus, a kind of “core service portfolio” could be agreed upon by the NCP and jointly promoted on the programme website. As a result, applicants or project partners will ideally be provided with a better overview of the responsibilities of the NCP and the JTS. This, in turn, would also help to identify whom to contact - the NCP or the JTS - in case specific questions arise or assistance is needed.



**In order to achieve high quality project development, a substantial volume of resources is necessary. Thus, it is recommended that the programme continues to reimburse projects' preparation costs in the next programme period. The possibilities to receive seed money at the national level should be promoted more strongly by the NCP within the relevant Member States.**

This recommendation is based on comments given in the online survey and telephone interviews with regard to whether there is a need for seed money in the North Sea Region programme. Participants in the online survey and telephone interviews were asked about their preferences regarding seed money or the reimbursement of preparation costs for approved projects. The discussion revealed different views on this issue. Some interviewees prefer a seed money approach at the programme level. They argue that seed money would be helpful for the preparation of a good application, be it in particular for the setup of project partners and the definition of targets and tasks. It facilitates face to face contacts and meetings which are not only very useful, but often also necessary for the successful completion of the application. They also point out that the eligibility process for receiving seed money should be simple and that a strict quality selection process should be implemented.

Other interviewees have a more differentiated opinion on seed money. Whereas, in principal, they agree with seed money, they argue that it should only be granted to SMEs or newcomers of the programme. As newcomers often have little experience with transnational cooperation they commonly have to invest additional time and effort to develop an application. Similarly, many SMEs often lack the sufficient capacity to invest the necessary time into completing a successful project application. For this reason, financial support and compensation would be helpful and provide a motivating incentive for newcomers and SMEs to participate more actively in a transnational programme.





Finally, the majority of interviewees welcome the continued reimbursement of preparation costs for approved projects in the next programme period. Projects eligible for reimbursement are subject to a strict quality assessment procedure which they have to pass in order to receive the full sum of preparation costs. Thus, in line with the opinions noted above, it is recommended that the reimbursement of preparation costs is continued in the next programme period. In addition, the possibilities to receive seed money at the national level should be promoted more strongly by the NCP within the relevant Member States.

### Opinions from lead beneficiaries and stakeholders

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

- *“The workshops and NSR events are a good occasion to meet potential partners and to exchange with the JTS. We experienced good exchange - although the pre-assessment came to another result than the final proposal evaluation.”*
- *“For several projects I have been involved in preparing proposals, the feedback from the Secretariat was quite helpful though especially in the beginning of the programme it was not clear what type of (transnational) activities and indicators were expected. Also, with the extension of an existing project, the feedback was not sufficient to make the application feasible, it was rejected though if the reasons would have been clearer earlier it may have gone through after all. Later at the development of a cluster proposal the support by the programme may certainly be described as “good”, the Secretariat was very helpful and supportive also after a delay in developing the proposal.”*
- *“There is room for improvements when it comes to partner search, how can this be done both at physical arenas and online. The key to a good project is a strong and relevant partnership in relation to theme. Can we find ways to facilitate this? The thematic workshops worked very well.”*
- *“A better help with partner search, especially transnationally might be possible. Maybe by better cooperation of NCPs.”*

## 3. Application procedures

This chapter focuses on the application procedure from lead beneficiaries’ and stakeholders’ point of view. It focuses on both the application assessment process and the project approval process, as well as on the effectiveness of the core selection criteria and priority considerations.

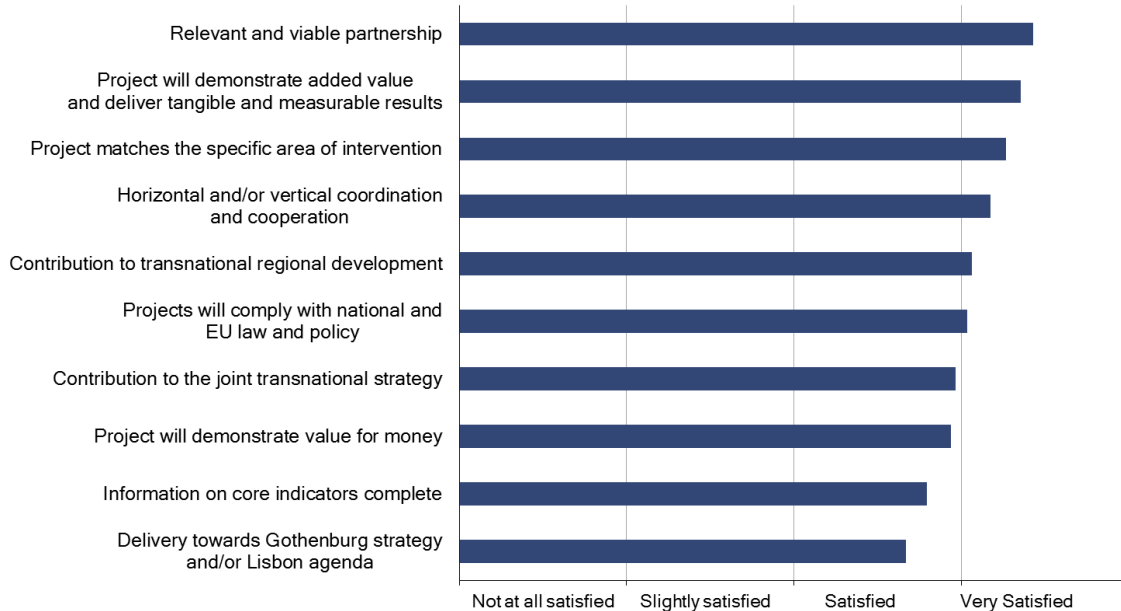
### General findings



- Within the online survey both lead beneficiaries and stakeholders were asked for their overall opinion on the decision making process during project application and its efficiency. In general, both groups rate the decision making process during project applications and its efficiency as “good”.



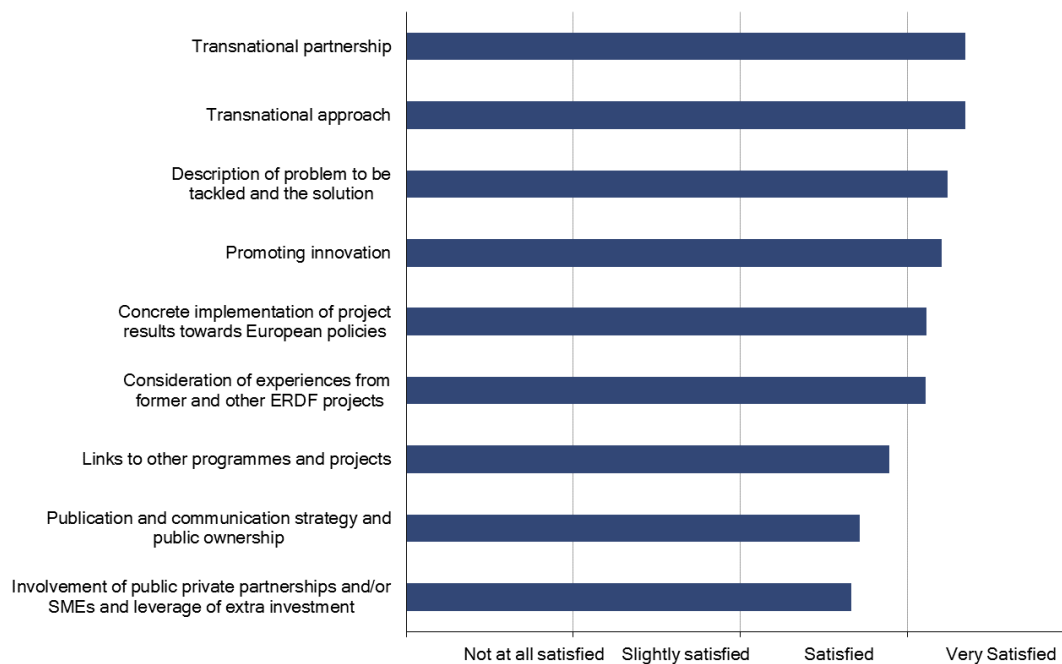
- Similarly, the core selection criteria and priority considerations were also generally rated as “good” and “appropriate” by both lead beneficiaries and stakeholders. From their point of view, the core selection criteria and priority considerations allow for the selection of projects with the highest potential impact.
- In detail, the core selection criteria were assessed as follows:



**Figure 2: From your point of view, how satisfied are you with the core selection criteria for selecting projects within the NSR?**

Source: Online survey, mean value

- In detail, the priority considerations were assessed as follows:



**Figure 3: From your point of view, how satisfied are you with the priority considerations for selecting projects within the NSR Programme?**

Source: Online survey, mean value



- Both the lead beneficiaries and stakeholders agree that the project selection process is efficient and that it leads to fair decisions. However, whereas the majority of stakeholders assess the process as “transparent”, most of the lead beneficiaries participating in the online survey rate it as „not transparent”.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations take up the findings above. They intend to solve the addressed issues based on both the feedback given by the lead beneficiaries of the projects, the stakeholders (bodies of the programme) and the desk research carried out by the evaluators.



**Both throughout the project application process as well as during project selection and approval, the specific links between the objectives, results and impact of the projects and the SWOT analysis should be described.**

The SWOT analysis of the North Sea Region is of key relevance to the programme as it entails the basic assumptions of and justifications for the whole programme strategy. For this reason, the project selection and approval process should describe the specific connection between their envisaged objectives, results and impact and the SWOT themes for the North Sea Region. In this way, the consistency between the projects’ specific scope and their contribution to the programme strategy and the opportunities and threats at the level of the North Sea Region can be improved. Moreover, the programme could verify the SWOT themes and their relevance throughout the whole programme lifecycle. This would allow for a continuous update of the SWOT throughout the seven year lifecycle of the programme (see also the recommendation in the interim report on “Sub-theme 1: Programme impact and coverage” of the Ongoing Evaluation, page 11).



**During the next programme period the “quality of communication” should represent a criterion for project selection and be assessed in relation to a “communication plan” as part of the application. Moreover, the creation of a clear link between application chapters, core selection criteria and priority considerations is recommended.**

Within the online survey the core selection criteria and priority considerations - as laid down in the programme document “Assessment Procedure and Project Selection” – were assessed by both lead beneficiaries and stakeholders as to whether they are appropriate for selecting the projects with the greatest potential impact. For both the lead beneficiaries and stakeholders, the selection criteria and priority considerations are generally considered appropriate. In the next programme period, however, both groups agreed that the “quality of communication” should represent an additional criterion for project selection and be assessed in relation to a “communication plan” as part of the application. This not only highlights the importance of communication for the impact and visibility of the projects, but also for the programme as a whole.



The participants of the Ongoing Evaluation were also asked if the number of criteria should be reduced. Whilst most of the interviewees agreed that all criteria are important for the decision making process, some stated that the relevance of specific criteria often varies between individual project themes.

Discussions with stakeholders revealed that chapters in the application should be clearly linked to the core selection criteria and priority considerations. In this way, the direct contribution of projects to these criteria can be identified explicitly.

Another discussion during the telephone interviews related to whether the selection criteria and priority considerations should be ranked in the next programme period. Currently, all criteria and considerations are ranked equally and the results of the discussion do not suggest a recommendation to change this. Indeed, according to a number of interviewees, it would prove very difficult to rank the criteria as they are all important in one way or another and their relevance often varies between specific project themes. Having said this, some interviewees also stated that a ranking would increase the transparency of the decision making process during the approval of project applications



**During the assessment of project applications the JTS should continue to involve external experts if required for specific technical details. The JTS should clearly indicate the involvement of external experts in the assessment, as this would make the procedure more transparent for the members of the Steering Committee and the Monitoring Committee.**

The results of the online survey and telephone interviews with the programme stakeholders, mainly bodies of the Steering Committee (SC) and the Monitoring Committee (MC), indicate that programme stakeholders are satisfied with the assessment of applications as carried out by the JTS. In addition, they stated that it is sometimes hard to assess the impact and level of innovation of the projects applying for funding. This is especially true for projects that are of a highly technical nature. To carry out the assessment of project applications for such projects, the JTS has contacted external experts to provide additional expertise and support in the current programme period which should also be continued in the future. However, the JTS should strive to increase the transparency of the involvement of external experts for the members of the SC and the MC in the next programme period. In order to provide a supporting infrastructure a pool of experts at the Area of Intervention level should be set up, as so to provide specific feedback on the projects' level of innovation and an input for the application assessment procedure. Some interviewees pointed out that the expertise of national governments could also be utilised in the assessment process, be it that of experts from different policy domains of the national governments in the Member States.



### Opinions from lead beneficiaries and stakeholders

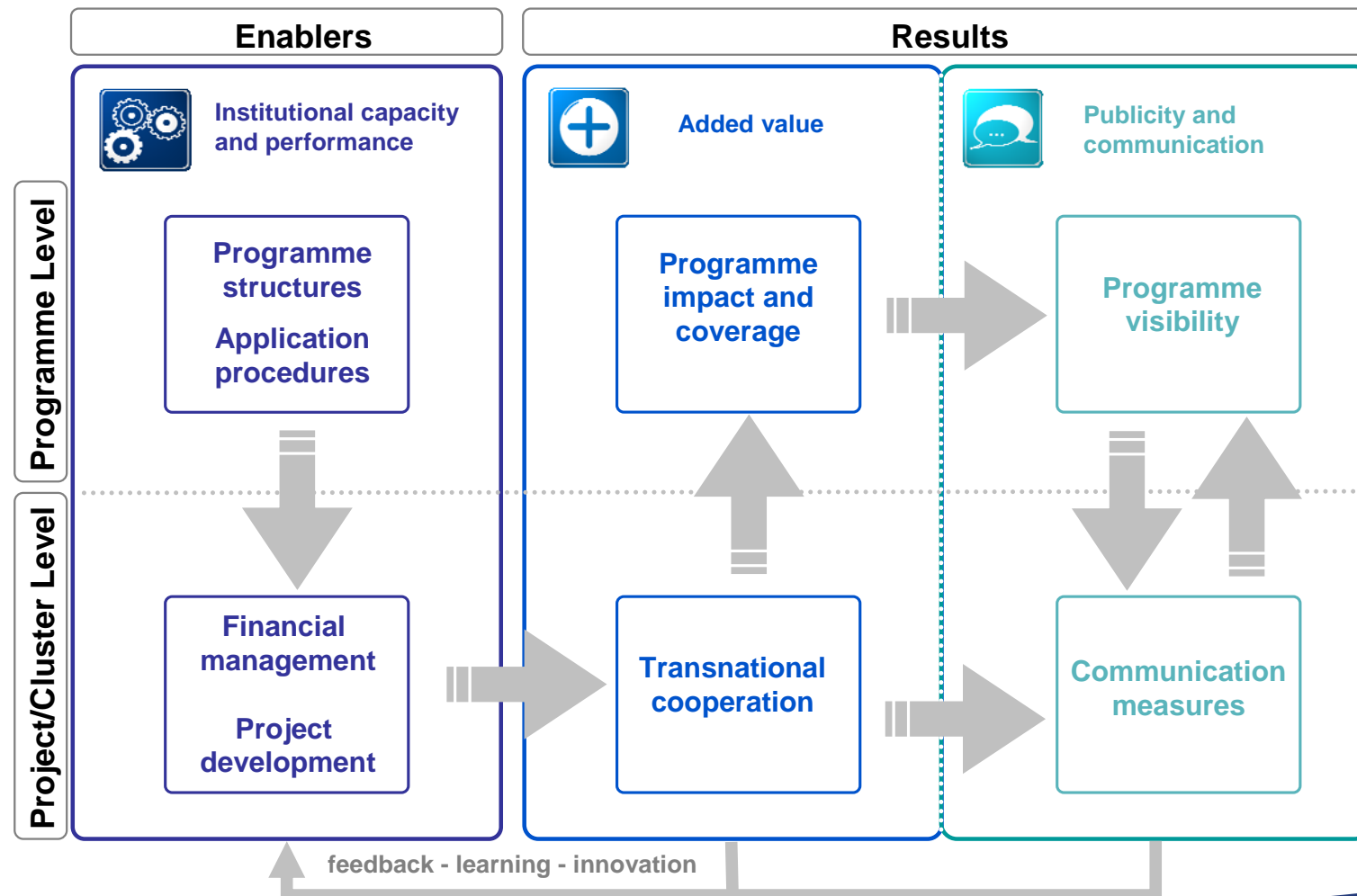
Below you will find some opinions of lead beneficiaries and stakeholders taken from the online survey and interviews regarding the issue of the application procedure:

- *The staged process with some national review, followed by a proposal by the JTS and a decision by the Steering Committee is quite fair. Also the feedback provided after the decision is adequate.*
- *In my personal opinion there was a lack of transparency related to the motivations of selection.*
- *Especially the core indicators and "value for money" are not always clear, or sometimes too rigid and detailed to allow for a more complex project to bring an application through.*
- *The assessment done by the secretariat is good/excellent, though on some subjects capitalising on specialist knowledge is essential. Some national delegations do this, but not all.*
- *I think there should be more scope for specialised evaluation of some projects. Projects are often evaluated by generalists and it would be useful with an overall opinion from a relevant specialist to identify how innovative and viable the ideas are.*
- *Efficiency of decisions is satisfactory, the decision criteria could be strengthened as well as the discussions on the quality of the projects. Projects thematic orientation is well discussed, discussions on whether the projects' contribution to the programme area provides value for money can be strengthened.*
- *All of the priority considerations are valid and some projects describe this better than others. I often feel the communication plans are often an afterthought. I would like to see more specific actions on which partner is going to do what activity/output in this section.*
- *The application form only allows for a very vague WP outline, which causes problems once the project goes live and partners don't know what is expected of them because the application form is a useless tool for referring back to for guidance. It is unhelpful to restrict the application form to a number of characters - it is impossible to explain the investments and WPS to sound interesting, exciting and innovative.*
- *The EXCEL form and the questions were not really helpful to describe the project philosophy.*



## Appendix A - Evaluation Model

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



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