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The North
Sea Region
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COOPERATION MANAGEMENT

FINAL REPORT

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Sub-theme 2: Programme structures

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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:

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Introduction

This report addresses programme bodies, project partners and stakeholders of the Interreg IVB North Sea Region Programme (NSR programme). The report is part of the “On-going Evaluation” which presents the main findings and recommendations regarding the topic “Programme Structure”.

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

- How do the Joint Technical Secretariat, the Monitoring and Steering Committees and the Managing and Paying Authorities perform and function?
- How do the committees of the programme complement each other in terms of programme management?
- How can efficiency be maintained and improved in the next programme period?

The report is structured into following chapters:

- Management of the programme
- Monitoring and steering of the programme
- Further programme bodies

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 On-going Evaluation in an easy to read way.

This interim report is based on the main results from desk research and online surveys in which answers were given by 21 out of 25 projects' lead beneficiaries and 21 out of 25 bodies of the programme as well as on 5 additional telephone interviews with bodies of the NSR Programme. The report concentrates 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.

Further information on methodology and the evaluation model of the “On-going Evaluation” is provided in appendix A.

0. The programme structure at a glance

- The basis for the evaluation of the programme structure is provided by the bodies of the programme as well as by their tasks and their functions within the programme. Figure 1 gives an overview of the relevant bodies and the programme's overall structure.

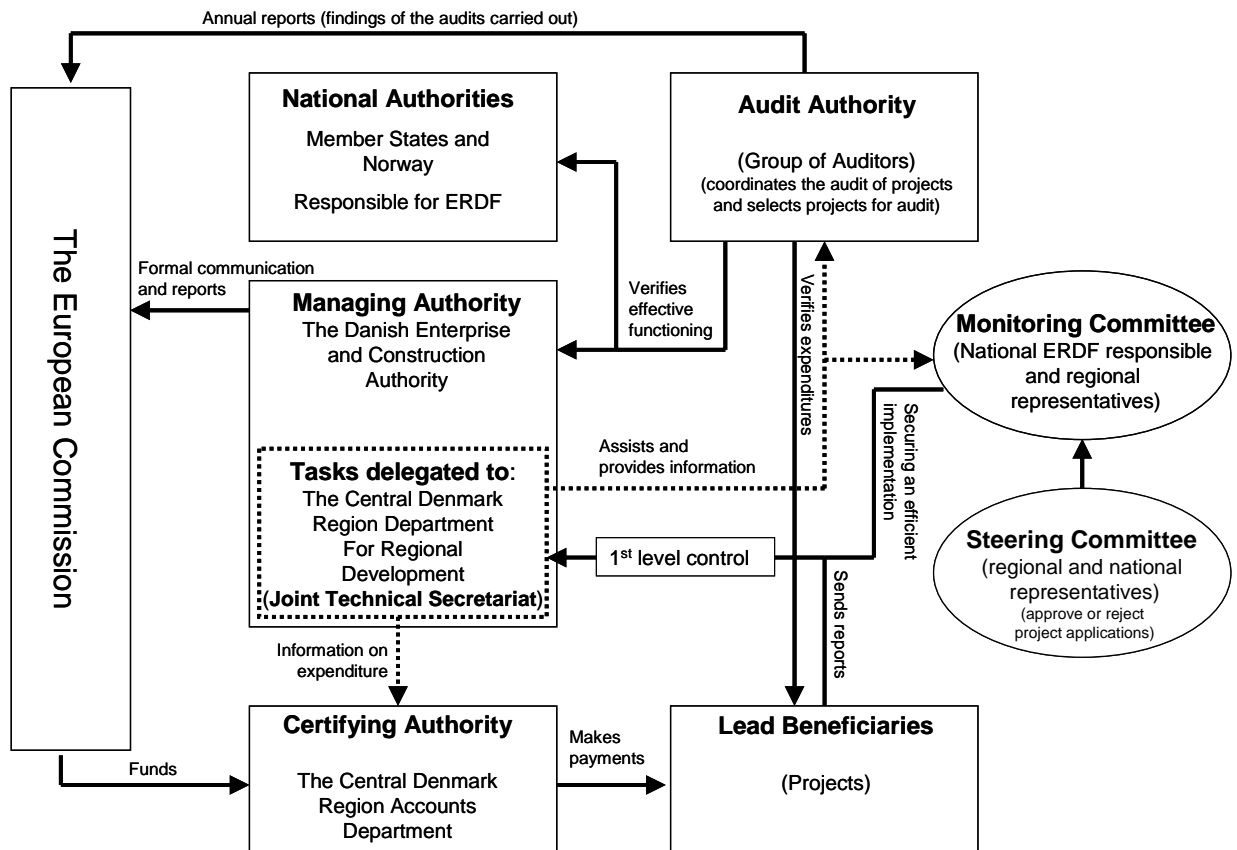


Figure 1: Bodies and Tasks within the North Sea Region Programme

Source: Operational Programme, additions made by dsn

- In general, the participants of the online surveys stated that they are very satisfied with both the programme's structure and the work carried out by the bodies of the programme. In particular, they are very satisfied with the work of the Steering Committee and the JTS.



1. Management of the programme

In terms of programme management, the Managing Authority (MA) and Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) are the main bodies of the programme. In line with article 14(1) of the ERDF regulations 1080/2006 all tasks of the MA, except formal communication with the European Commission (which includes the formal submission of annual reports, the final report and the ongoing evaluation studies), are delegated to the JTS.

Therefore, this chapter concentrates on the assessment of the JTS as the management hub of the whole programme. The JTS is functionally linked to most of the other bodies within the programme and also to the projects themselves. In order to take these functional linkages into account the JTS has been evaluated with the following questions in mind: How do the projects assess the work of and the communication with the JTS? How do other programme bodies assess the work of the JTS?

General findings



- Communication and interaction between the JTS and the projects functions in an almost frictionless manner. The projects state that the JTS is friendly and helpful, provides prompt and comprehensible responses to questions, and is clear in providing reference of whom to contact at the JTS in case of any queries.
- This positive assessment on behalf of the projects demonstrates the emphasis the JTS places on communication and interaction with the projects. Smooth communication between the JTS and the projects provides a basis for good project work. Similarly, the projects also appreciate the quality of communication with the JTS.
- Nevertheless, some beneficiaries express that the JTS should intensify direct communication with the projects. At the same time, however, the limited resources of the JTS are widely recognised.
- Although the official financial and activity reports do not provide enough information for effective project steering, (cf. the report on “Financial Management and Control Setup”) the beneficiaries consider the direct feedback of the JTS on these reports helpful to steering their own activities more efficiently.
- The other bodies of the programme are also very satisfied with the work of the JTS. The detailed assessment of the tasks carried out by the JTS as formulated in article 60 of the general regulations 1083/2006 indicates that there is generally a high level of satisfaction with regard to the realisation of these specific tasks (cf. Figure 2).

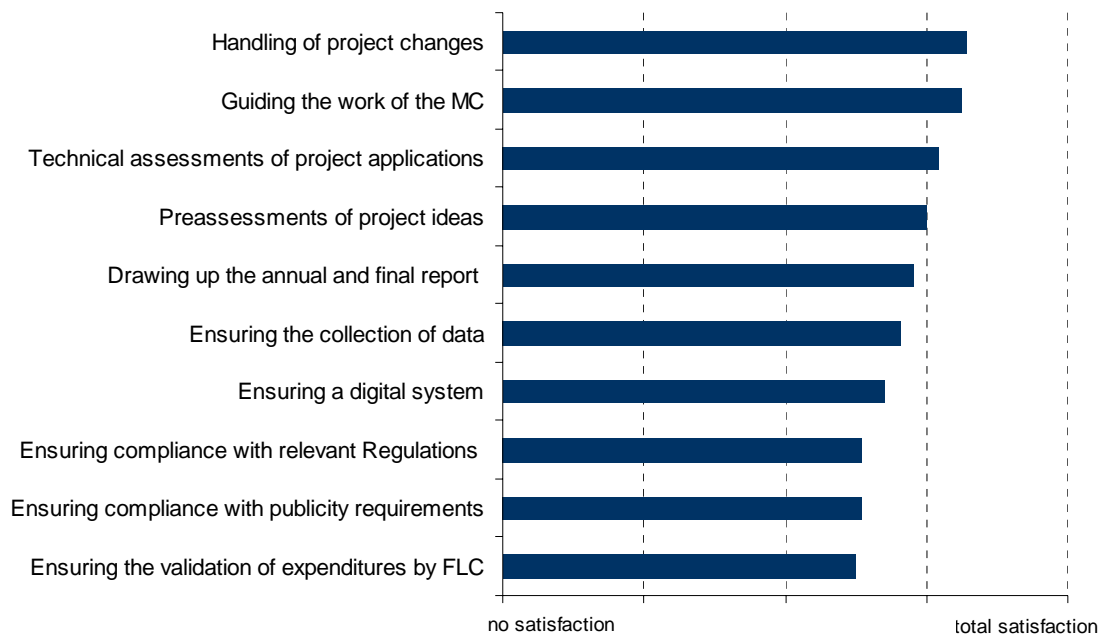


Figure 2: How satisfied are you with the realisation of following tasks of the JTS?

Source: Online survey

- However, Figure 2 indicates that the work of the JTS induces less satisfaction when it comes to tasks regarding the management of the FLC process. Relevant tasks the JTS carries out related to the FLC process such as “ensuring compliance with relevant regulations” or “ensuring the validation of expenditure by FLC” are rated lowest in the online survey. Other tasks which were rated more positively include on-the-spot verifications of the projects’ expenditure and sample checks of the work of the FLC as formulated in article 60 of the general regulations 1083/2006 and article 13 of regulations 1828/2006.
- These findings correspond with the interim report of the programmes’ Ongoing Evaluation on “Financial Management and Control Setup” in which the first level control process is evaluated at the programme and project level. Here, the need to strengthen the role of the JTS as a means of ensuring the quality of FLC in taking more responsibility for the accuracy of FLC is detected. More specifically, these findings refer to the sample checks of the quality of FLC and to on-the-spot verifications of expenditure.
- Findings during the evaluation indicate that the role of the bodies of the programme (e.g. FLC, JTS, NCP, Member States) within the FLC process is not clear to all bodies of the programme.
- The results from the online survey indicate that half of the 20 projects’ lead beneficiaries are not only moderately or slightly satisfied with their role as lead beneficiary, but also with the programme’s support in preparing them for this role. Thus, some lead beneficiaries requested clearer guidance through all relevant information needed to carry out this role effectively. Other projects requested a heightened exchange of knowledge and experience with other lead beneficiaries.



Recommendations



The function of the JTS in the FLC process should be strengthened by means of proactive management of the FLC scope

The findings indicate a high level of satisfaction with the work of the JTS, both among the lead beneficiaries as well as among the other bodies of the programme. When it comes to the tasks related to the FLC, however, this is not the case. In line with the recommendations stated in the interim report on “Financial Management and Control Setup” the JTS should take a proactive role in managing the FLC process by applying statistical methods such as risk analysis to select projects for on-the-spot verifications and to define the content of them (cf. the interim report on Financial Management and Control Setup). The at this point already foreseen sample quality checks of the FLC should also be continued throughout the next programme period 2014-2020.

By means of this proactive management the JTS is able to verify the quality of the FLC and can implement measures geared towards improvement. This will thus strengthen the position of the JTS as a management hub within the whole programme structure.

The JTS should intensify the preparation and training of lead beneficiaries for their challenging role in administering and managing their international consortia

The lead beneficiaries are the main link between the JTS which represents the NSR programme and the project beneficiaries. The tasks lead beneficiaries carry out are challenging both in terms of administration and management of international consortia as they require specific knowledge and competencies. The quality of project management is vital to the effectiveness and impact of project activities.

Currently, the JTS offers helpful lead beneficiary seminars before the projects start. However, the evaluation results indicate that continuous training of the lead beneficiaries throughout the projects' entire lifecycle could in fact serve to meet their needs better. Besides administrative issues, such support should also cover training in the field of intercultural project management. Furthermore, the exchange of knowledge and experiences between lead beneficiaries and projects should be actively encouraged by the programme (e.g. through training seminars or virtual platforms). Given the limited resources the JTS has at its disposal such training could be carried out by external experts working in close coordination with the programme bodies.

Opinions from the online surveys

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

“JTS is very friendly and always answers questions via email in a good way.”

“The JTS' communication with all project beneficiaries needs to be improved.”

“The JTS could do with 2-3 additional permanent positions (unfortunately the budget is not sufficient and the extent of possible technical assistance is limited).”



2. Monitoring and steering of the programme

The evaluation of the programme's monitoring and steering is based on the question how well the Monitoring Committee (MC) and the Steering Committee (SC) perform and function. Whilst the SC is responsible for the approval or rejection of project applications for funding under the NSR Programme, the Steering Committee reports to the Monitoring Committee. The MC is responsible for monitoring the NSR Programme in order to secure the effective and high quality implementation of the programme. Both bodies are assisted by the JTS.

The general findings of an online survey are listed below. In this survey 11 participants were either members of the MC or familiar with its work and 11 participants were members of the SC or familiar with its work.

General findings



- The division of labour between the MC and SC as noted above is generally considered positive by the programme bodies and stakeholders.
- With regard to the MC's performance, the main findings of the online survey indicate that both the members of the Monitoring Committee and other bodies of the programme are very satisfied with the MC's work. Similarly, the structure of the MC required for effective decision making is regarded as adequate in terms of both size and composition. Furthermore, the frequency of the meetings is also evaluated positively.
- The members of the MC are "extremely satisfied" with the way the JTS prepares the MC meetings and are also satisfied with the specific tasks carried out by the MC. Both the reflection of the programme's financial situation and the periodic review of the programme's progress perform particularly well.
- The MC approves the annual report of the programme in written form. In the online survey and telephone interviews some interviewees stated that this procedure is not the most suitable way to acquire a deeper understanding of the programme's impact and the project results.
- In general, the members of the SC and the other bodies of the programme are very satisfied with the work of the SC. The main findings of the online survey with stakeholders regarding the performance of the SC show that both the size and composition of the SC is suitable for efficient decision making and that the frequency of the meetings is adequate. The SC considers the current consensus-orientated mode of decision making adequate.
- The information basis such as the technical assessment of project applications for approval is also adequate and the meetings of the SC well prepared. Furthermore, the decision-making criteria of the SC for project approval are considered adequate.



Recommendations



In addition to the written approval the MC should discuss parts of the annual report during their meetings. The achieved project results and programme impacts should be reflected most intensively in order to raise the awareness for the realisation of the programme strategy and the planned impact.

At present, the MC approves the annual report in written form. In addition, however, at least some parts of the annual report should also be presented by the JTS during MC meetings to discuss concrete project results and the achieved impact of the programme. This discussion could heighten the awareness for the benefit and achievements of the project and the realisation of the programme's strategic objectives.

Moreover, the MC could also invite single projects in order to gather direct results and to initiate a dialogue with beneficiaries regarding issues such as programme strategy, project administration or day-to-day management. Such first-hand information from a stakeholder's point of view could foster both the continuous development of the NSR programme and the quality of programme management.

Opinions from the online surveys

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

"There could be more updates on progress between the MC meetings. There could be more discussion on impact and content."

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

"Furthermore, the concept of trans-nationality could be further developed with regard to what the programme expects projects to bring to the table."

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

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

3. Further programme bodies

Besides the JTS, the Managing Authority and the Monitoring and Steering Committee other bodies of the programme such as the National Contact Points and the Audit Authority were subject to the Ongoing Evaluation.

General findings



- The participants of the online survey and interviews are satisfied with the work of the National Contact Points (NCP) and emphasise their usefulness. The NCP



provide easy access for the projects to the programme as they provide information in the national languages. There is no language barrier when talking to the NCP which is of particular importance when it comes to the clarification of highly complex regulatory issues. The NCP have been established in the programme period from 2007-2013 and have been approved as useful supporting structures for the programme at the regional level.

- As the telephone interviews show, the National Contact Points in the different member states are organised in different ways and both the range and intensity of services to the potential national beneficiaries vary greatly. Whilst the services of some NCP cover a broad range of aspects such as programme dissemination, support in finding suitable partners, information regarding project application procedures, translation of core documents, or support of the smooth implementation of current projects, other NCP function on a more administrative level. The focus of NCP also depends on the availability of resources as the contact points are funded at the national level. Some interviewees stated that the tasks carried out by the NCP in the different member states should in fact be made more transparent.
- The participants also provided feedback on their experiences with the second level control run by the Audit Authority and on the third level control run by the European Commission. The feedback from the Audit Authority to the auditees was described as moderately helpful to the projects in the online survey. Some projects even mentioned that the audit carried out by the Audit Authority was more helpful to the projects than the third level control carried out by the EU Commission.
- Feedback given from the projects' point of view stated that the control system of the NSR programme focuses more on financial issues than on content and project results. The effectiveness of projects and their contribution to the NSR programme impact is not considered the main focus of the control system.

Recommendations



The National Contact Points (NCP) should continue their work in the next programme period 2004-2020 as they are considered successful links to the regions. However, the different NCPs should increasingly exchange good practice and streamline the quality and intensity of their services.

The National Contact Points are considered very helpful as they disseminate the NSR programme at the regional level and consult potential partners and current project beneficiaries with a shared focus on the own regional context. They are a useful complementation of the JTS at the regional level and provide an ideal point of entrance for the projects to the programme. In order to strengthen the NCP it would be helpful if the NCP developed a common definition of tasks for all NCP in the member states by, for example, providing basic information regarding the programme, project development, partner search and application, programme dissemination, websites in national language or on seminars for first level controllers at the regional level. Furthermore, consistency and complementarity with the information and services provided by the JTS needs to be ensured.



The key advantage of the NCP is their ability to address relevant topics from both a regional and national perspective. This is a valuable asset when it comes to the interpretation of national law in the context of EU regulations which are applied during official reporting and first level control.

In addition, the network of the NCP should be strengthened in the next programme period to encourage the sharing of experiences amongst NCP and to increase the internal transparency of NCP's tasks and achievements. For this purpose, tools such as social media or regular telephone conferences could be implemented. Furthermore, the JTS should also be part of the network to ensure strong and effective communication with the NCP.

The audit system of the NSR programme should place more emphasis on the assessment and acknowledgement of project results and their impact

The main objective of the audit system is to ensure that projects are carried out in compliance with all relevant regulations. However, projects often observe that the audit focuses more strongly on financial issues than on content.

A stronger focus on the assessment and acknowledgement of project results in relation to budget expenditure could motivate project beneficiaries in their practical work and strengthen their perception and acceptance of the audit trials. Key project results could for example be reviewed by the JTS or external experts as part of the audit.

Opinions from the online surveys

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

"The National Contact Points are very useful and a good supporting system"

"The projects can talk to the National Contact Points in their own language, so barriers to the initiation of contact are much lower than is the case with the JTS."

"The audit needs to be much more flexible and needs to be updated/involved in the content of the project. At present the audit is taking away the fun and the creativity that Interreg generates."

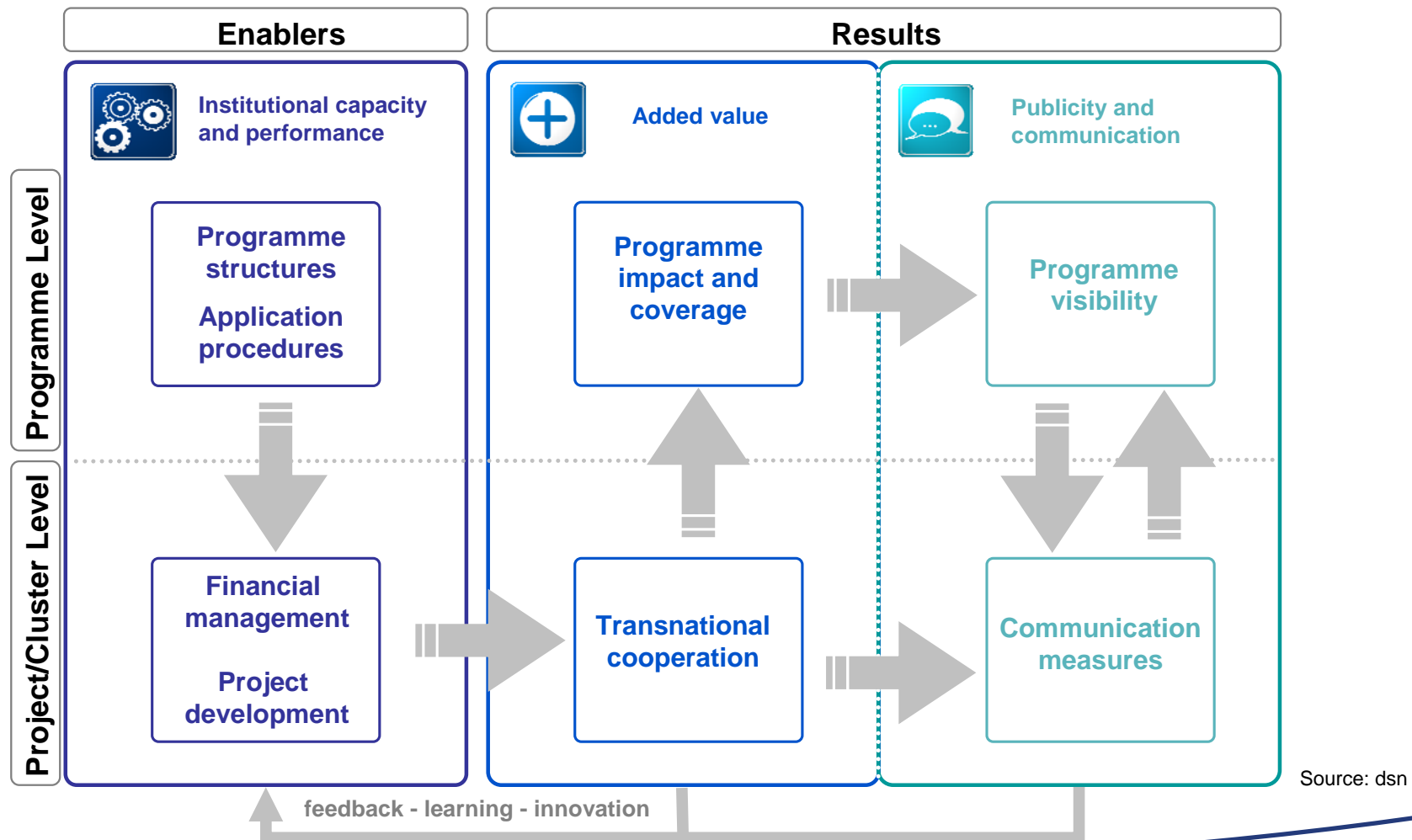
"In my view the focus of the Interreg IVB North Sea Region projects is shifting from content to financial control. At present there are at least five levels of financial assessment, but who looks at or cares about the content?"

"The first level controller - as well as the project controller - has to assess the appropriateness of expenditure in relation to the activities at the project partner and project levels. How can this be accomplished in a reliable way? Content results should dominate and not financial assessment."



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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