

EU STRATEGY FOR THE BALTIC SEA REGION (EUSBSR)

Practical suggestions for the Operational Programmes

The Council of the European Union has now endorsed the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and this has been confirmed by the European Council (Heads of State and Governments), setting out a framework for its governance. In their Declaration at the Stockholm Ministerial Conference, the 8 Baltic Member States further clarified their commitments in practical terms. In addition, the Commission has been given a leading role including a duty to report back regularly to the Council.

A significant source of financing will come from the Structural Funds. Therefore, the Operational Programmes should consider how to finance projects mentioned in, or in line with, the Strategy. The Managing Authority should report regularly on this, and coordinate their work with the coordinators for each priority area.

In anticipation of this, at the conference held in Visby on 11-12 June 2009, several Programme Authorities called for some methodological guidance. As the European Commission has been invited to facilitate this concrete implementation of the EUSBSR, we have prepared this document to help. It should be underlined that the suggested elements are indicative and may be improved in the light of experience.

An important consideration is that time matters. Implementation reports demonstrating significant progress and first achievements will be submitted to the Council in 2010 and 2011. Therefore, it is recommended to have a pragmatic and dynamic approach (rather than a procedures oriented one) which aims at results. The objective of the EUSBSR is to go from 'words to actions'.

Steps to be taken

As the Member States have endorsed the EUSBSR and support its Action Plan implementation, the first steps illustrating this political commitment to act is to make necessary provisions to enable the use of available instruments and funding sources and to identify the existing and upcoming projects that contribute to the EUSBSR implementation.

For the alignment of funds from the Operational Programmes in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) to the implementation of actions / projects in the EUSBSR, the following steps are recommended for the Monitoring Committees.

- Agreeing that the EUSBSR be taken into account in all future decisions on allocation for funding of the Operational Programme. The justification is that the EUSBSR is the policy of the European Commission in the BSR (based on extensive consultation of stakeholders in the region) and that the Member States have endorsed it (including the principle of aligning the funds). In addition the EUSBSR should be seen as a source of good projects to the benefit of the BSR and of the individual regions.
- Adopting and proposing to the Commission the inclusion of a standard clause in the text of the OP at the next modification. The text could be as follows:

"The action plan annexed to the Communication of the Commission on the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (published on 10 June 2009) identifies a set of priority areas. Where it is appropriate, activities with relevance for the Baltic Sea

Region Strategy shall be coordinated or joint activities shall be implemented within the framework of the relevant priority axis of this Operational Programme. Projects which might contribute to the realisation of the action plan should be duly taken into account in the selection process. Each year in its annual report the operational programme shall also describe its contribution to the Baltic Sea Strategy."

- Identifying those priorities and actions / 'measures' of the OP, which are especially relevant from the EUSBSR's point of view and inform the coordinators of the priority area concerned.
- Agreeing that the project applications which demonstrate that they are in line with the EUSBSR and show a sufficient level of quality receive priority, especially the ones indicated as 'fast track' in the Action Plan.
- We suggest the following methods of giving priority: allocation of additional points; different weighting of the existing assessment criteria; possibility to discuss with the Managing Authority / Joint Technical Secretariat to improve the project before application; earmarking of funds for the implementation of the EUSBSR; speeding up calls for projects in relevant fields; publicise more widely the need to support the EUSBSR; providing information on how the EUSBSR and the programme may share common objectives; considering modification of application forms etc. This means that consideration has to be given to the selection criteria being changed.
- Discussing and deciding on the possibility to use article 37(6) of R. 1083/06 to support interregional projects with other regions in the BSR. The Commission could provide some guidance on this possibility. It is important to know that interregional projects can be supported by all the Operational Programmes, even if this is not explicitly foreseen in the Operational Programme document (as this possibility is provided for by R.1083/06).

The Managing Authority/Joint Technical Secretariat should consider:

- Publishing the EUSBSR documents on its website and promoting the EUSBSR in its publicity material and communication events.
- Examining the new and existing projects, to see which of these are in line with the EUSBSR, and provide an overview of this to the coordinators of the priority areas. These projects should be flagged in the monitoring and IT system.
- Ensuring that the next calls to be launched in relevant fields of the OP (and associated publicity events) indicate that the applications in line with the EUSBSR will receive specific attention and will be identified as contributing to the implementation of the EUSBSR. Hence, the EUSBSR action plan should be made available to the potential project holders (e.g. by publication on the MA/JTS website). Applicants will also need to receive advice on how their project will be assessed as contributing to the EUSBSR. In addition, the application forms could be modified to include a section where the applicant can demonstrate how the project fits with the EUSBSR.

- Including a section in the Annual Implementation Report to the European Commission on how the programme and the projects supported have contributed to the implementation of the EUSBSR. This section should contain a summary of the activities of the MA/JTS carried out in support of the EUSBSR, including a summary of activities in the relevant priority areas of the EUSBSR. The first report is due in 2010 (Annual Report on 2009).
- Appointing a person responsible for dealing with issues related to EUSBSR
- Facilitating the cooperation with regions, authorities and beneficiaries in other MS outside the eligible programme area.

For these concrete steps, Programme Authorities may find it useful to benefit from an exchange of experiences which could be organised by INTERACT.

Questions and answers

- *What are the criteria for an action / project to be in line with the EUSBSR?*

Essentially either (i) They are mentioned in the Action Plan of the EUSBSR or (ii) contribute to its objectives (so, an action / project not mentioned in the Action Plan can still be identified as being in line with the EUSBSR);

- *Is there a need to significantly change the Operational Programme (reprogramming)?*

No (or at least probably not). The current Operational Programmes are based on a similar process (priorities based on a strategy established after consultation of stakeholders) and are based on the Lisbon and Gothenburg objectives. Therefore, they might already be largely in line with the EUSBSR. In particular, they would usually cover issues such as environment, innovation / RTD, SMEs, transport and energy infrastructures, education, tourism, ... Regarding the other actions / projects of the EUSBSR (single market, health, safety and security,...) that the Operational Programmes are less likely to cover, it is worth noting that they usually require actions other than investments (e.g. regulatory actions, alignment of procedures, technical expertise, etc.). If the Operational Programmes are changed (for any reason), it could mention explicitly in the text that it supports the implementation of the EUSBSR, as suggested above.

- *Is it possible to add actions/projects to the EUSBSR?*

Yes. The Action Plan only presents the flagship projects (i.e. there are also other projects) and is a rolling one that can be adapted either formally when it is re-assessed by the European Commission or informally after agreement of the Coordinating Member State/organisation (which has the responsibility for the priority area).

- *Are the projects in the Action Plan finalised?*

No. They are rather examples of ideas of projects. They may hence be reviewed by project holders. Some could be complemented by additional elements, some may be improved in their goals and some may be broken down into several smaller projects which will then be coordinated (e.g. one in each region).

- *Is there a specific monitoring / reporting system to be set up?*

No. Once the existing and new projects are identified, they are monitored in the same way as other ones. No specific reporting system has to be put in place. The reporting on the identified projects is done through the normal Annual Report of the Operational Programme (in a dedicated section). Specific reporting on flagship projects may also go via a separate channel to priority area EUSBSR coordinators, but this is not a programme concern

- *How much does the EUSBSR rely on the ERDF / ESF / Cohesion Fund programmes?*

Cohesion Policy funding is important, but by no means exclusive. Many actions/projects of the EUSBSR essentially require cooperative or administrative actions (e.g. streamlining or coordinating market requirements). Out of those which do require funding, a significant part will be financed by national / regional funding (especially in those Member States where Community funding is less important), by other EU funding (e.g. Research Framework Programme, Competitiveness and Innovation Programme, LIFE+, TEN-T and TEN-E, Education programmes, Culture programmes,...) or by the international financing institutions or the private sector (European Investment Bank, Nordic Investment Bank, NEFCO, Nordea,...). Nevertheless much can be financed by the ERDF / ESF / Cohesion Fund, although EUSBSR does not rely only on the ERDF / ESF / Cohesion Fund.

- *Can projects which are purely regional be in line with the EUSBSR?*

Yes. Many projects can be designed and implemented by a single region. For example, the establishment of wetlands or promotion of tourism can be done by a single region but they nevertheless contribute to the objectives of the EUSBSR.