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Model for MRS evaluation
The final report

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This working paper proposes a comprehensive and adaptable model for evaluating change made thanks to the EU macro-regional strategies (MRSs) work. It proposes an impact model with pathways and a corresponding evaluation framework with evaluation questions, judgement criteria and exemplary indicators that can be further explored and adapted by each MRS and for cross-MRS evaluations. This working paper aims to support those proceeding with evaluating MRS.

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Table of contents

1. Introduction 3
1.1. The need to enhance monitoring and evaluation of MRS 3
1.2. Standards for evaluation of MRS 4
1.3. Proposed approach for evaluation of MRS 5
1.4. How to use this model 6
2. Common impact model 8
2.1. Purpose 8
2.2. Outline of the model 8
3. From the impact model to the evaluation framework 12
3.1. Evaluation questions 12
3.2. Judgement criteria 14
3.3. Indicators 14
3.4. Evaluation questions, judgement criteria and exemplary indicators 15
4. Reporting template 25
4.1. Introduction 25
4.2. Key facts about the MRS evaluation 26
4.3. Answering the evaluation questions 26
5. Verification of the evaluation framework 32
5.1. General approaches 32
5.2 World Café, a cost-effective method for evaluation 32
6. Concluding remarks 35
Annex 1: List of abbreviations 36

1. Introduction

1.1. The need to enhance monitoring and evaluation of MRS

EU macro-regional strategies (MRS, Strategies) provide an integrated framework endorsed by the European Council to address common challenges faced by a defined geographical area relating to EU Member States and third countries. They thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation, contributing to the achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion[1].

The shared objective of the MRS is to establish a framework for policy integration, coordination, cooperation, multi-level governance, and partnership to address common challenges. Rather than serving as funding instruments, these strategies aim to align national and regional approaches, pool resources, and create synergies between existing policies, sectors, and initiatives across countries and stakeholders. This coordinated macro-level implementation is expected to yield visible results and, in the long term, enhance economic, social, and territorial cohesion within each transnational region.

Today, four MRS are in place: the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP).

Enhancing monitoring and evaluation in MRS is crucial for ensuring the effective implementation and capturing of the impact of these ambitious transnational frameworks.

Initiatives to develop monitoring systems are ongoing in all MRSs and evaluations have also been conducted. Each MRS defines its own approach to the evaluation process. For example, the EUSDR has developed an evaluation plan, while other MRSs have not yet adopted a formal evaluation framework. However, in all MRSs, there are several mechanisms in place to track the progress of the Strategy and identify areas for improvement.

Currently, there is no publicly available systematic overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the monitoring and evaluation frameworks in the four MRS. Moreover, the state of development is not yet fully aligned since the European Commission (EC) and the Council of the EU are calling for improvements to MRS monitoring and evaluation systems.

The **EC states** that although achievements were recorded in the fields of monitoring and evaluation, activities need to be stepped up. This is crucial to get better and more robust data on the impact of the MRS, including in terms of funding mobilised for implementing the Strategies. Comprehensive monitoring mechanisms would also be helpful in maintaining political support and would help key implementers to better understand each Strategy's weaknesses and strengths[2].

[1] Regulation No 1303/2013, 17 December 2013, Article 2

[2] Report, COM/2022/705 final, p 10.

The **Council conclusions** acknowledge the need for robust data on the impact of the Strategies, including mobilised funding for the implementation of the Strategies, strategic communication on impacts and results, and the appraisal of the added value at the EU and macro-regional level as well as the need to improve the monitoring and evaluation and to increase the visibility of the results of the Strategies. This recognises the shared responsibility between the Strategies participating countries and the Commission for comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms[3].

Interact supports various capacity-building activities for MRS stakeholders and facilitates cross-MRS monitoring and evaluation work. As part of this support for MRS, in 2024, Interact awarded a contract to M&E Factory to build capacity to further enhance monitoring and evaluation systems in MRS, with a focus on capturing macro-regional change. The target group for this service was the MRS support unit/secretariat representatives responsible for MRS monitoring and evaluation systems and D1 representatives of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy of the EC. They all have been actively engaged and contributing throughout the launching and implementation of this service.

The assignment focused on supporting further developments and enhancing the capacity of MRS support units to improve MRS monitoring and evaluation systems. It aimed to jointly explore technical aspects of evaluation frameworks, e.g., types of evaluations, evaluation criteria, evaluation questions, judgement criteria, evaluation methods, and data requirements, and not the evaluation governance.

Besides peer learning and continuous exchange among the stakeholders, the assignment aimed to develop a comprehensive, adaptable model for evaluating MRS. **The model is designed to provide flexibility for individual MRS to tailor it to their specific needs while maintaining a standardised framework** that supports the aggregation of MRS achievements at the EU level. This working paper presents the resulting model.

1.2. Standards for evaluation of MRS

As MRS are policy frameworks for intergovernmental coordination, there are **no strict legal requirements for monitoring and evaluation**. The only legally non-binding recommendations by the EC, the Council, and the Better Regulation guidelines set out the principles the European Commission follows when evaluating policy instruments.

Therefore, the design of the MRS monitoring and evaluation system is determined by the MRS stakeholders.

However, it is important to distinguish between MRS-level evaluation and the monitoring obligations linked to EU funding. Binding requirements apply to the use of funding, for example, for MRS implementation activities supported by Interreg and other EU funding programmes.

[3] Council Conclusions, 11060/23, 27 June 2023

Formal requirements regarding monitoring and evaluation would be set only if it was included in the MRS governance support application. As such, transnational Interreg programmes do not evaluate the success of the MRS but monitor the delivery of the agreed work plan and sound financial management.

To effectively assess the progress and impact of MRS implementation, a well-structured system should **combine internal monitoring with external evaluation**. To develop such systems, sufficient resources should be dedicated to those two clearly differentiated but complementary tasks:

- **Monitoring and reporting** involving data collection on core activities is continuous and implemented as an internal task by the stakeholders of the Strategy itself, while

- **Evaluation** has defined start and end points and is conducted by external, functionally independent experts who provide a fresh perspective.

While internal monitoring of MRS implementation provides an overview of the progress made, it does not generate sufficient data for robust evaluation conclusions. It is an ongoing activity primarily focussing on collecting input, output, and procedural indicators while offering limited insights into results, impacts, and contextual factors. As a periodic task, external evaluations aim to assess successes and are a much better source of stronger impetus for necessary adjustments, ensure neutrality in the process, involve a broader and more diverse range of stakeholders and provide greater visibility.

1.3. Proposed approach for evaluation of MRS

Traditional economic policy evaluation frameworks focus on assessing the cost-benefit of policies. This involves quantifying the costs and benefits of a policy in monetary terms and then comparing these to determine whether the policy is worthwhile. Traditional economic frameworks can be useful for evaluating policies that have a clear economic impact. However, they can be less useful for evaluating policies that have more complex or intangible effects, such as MRS.

Accordingly, alternative policy evaluation frameworks[4] have to be considered relatively new and not yet widely used in practice. These evaluation frameworks have the potential to provide a more comprehensive and balanced assessment of the impacts of policies, and they can help to improve the quality of decision-making at the policy level.

Alternative policy evaluation is guided by several general principles, including:

- Participative: it should involve a range of stakeholders in the process, including policymakers, researchers, and the public.

[4] The term was taken from: Mazzuca et al (2020): Alternative policy evaluation frameworks and tools; Exploratory study; BEIS Research Paper Number 2020/044

- Contextual: it should consider the specific context in which policies are implemented.
- Dynamic: it should be an ongoing process responsive to changing circumstances.
- Learning-oriented: it should be used to learn from the experience of implementing policies and to improve future policy decisions.

To conduct alternative policy evaluation, a combination of methods is proposed, including:

- Outcome mapping along a theory-based impact chain – provides a structured way to assess the long term impacts of policies based on their immediate effects.
- Contribution analysis considering strong links in the impact chain – supports identifying influencing factors and contributions to an expected change.
- Multi-criteria analysis helps to assess the performance of different activities by considering various factors that are often conflicting or difficult to quantify.

Approaches should combine quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of MRS initiatives.

A fundamental prerequisite for applying alternative policy evaluation is a common understanding of an evaluation model that traces the impact pathway of the MRS.

1.4. How to use this model

This working paper proposes and describes a model for capturing evidence of MRS impact (see Chapter 2).

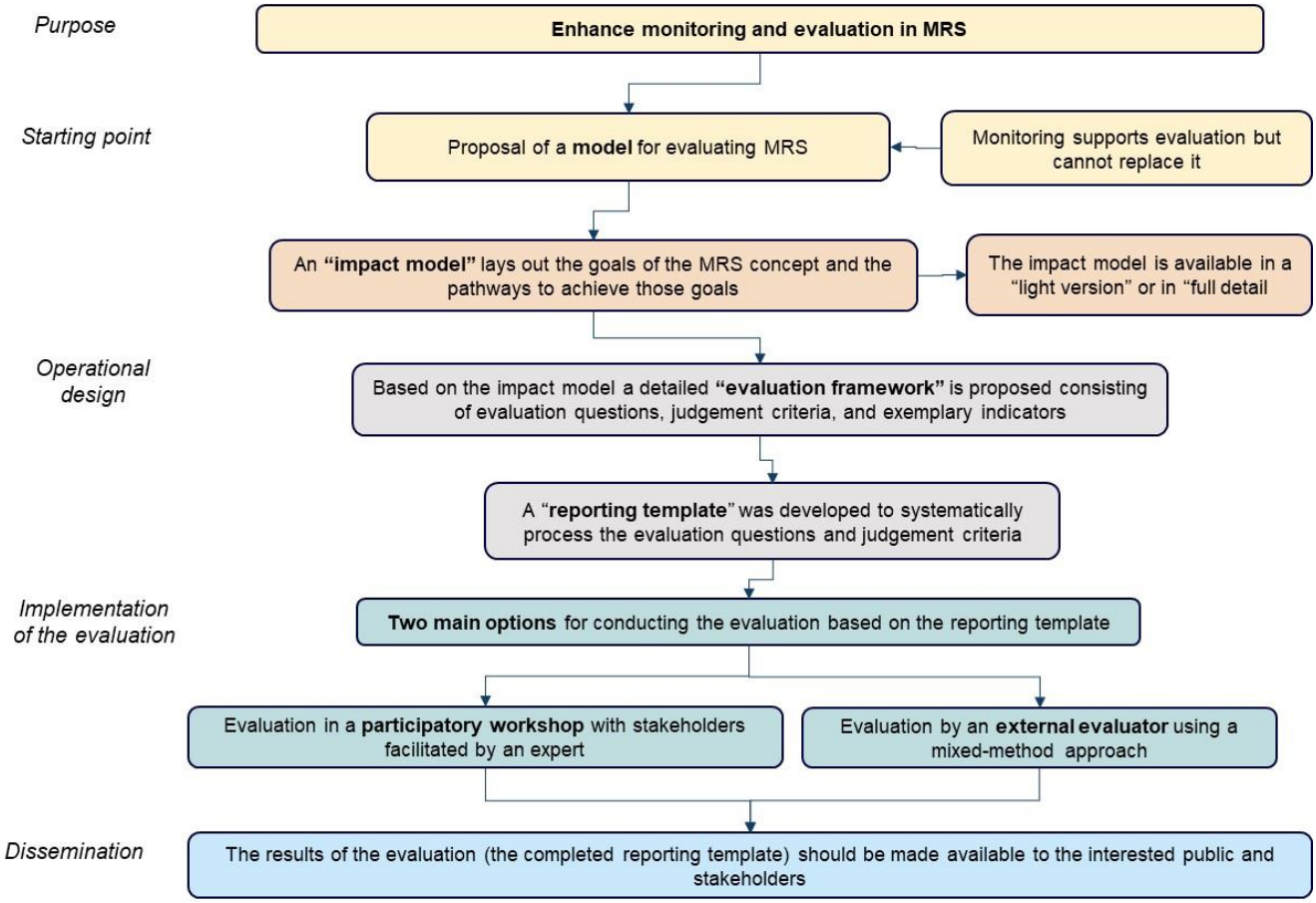
It forms the basis for designing an evaluation framework consisting of evaluation questions and judgement criteria (see Chapter 3). The judgement criteria are further specified by a set of exemplary indicators, and potential data sources are proposed.

Chapter 4 offers a practical reporting template to evaluate the networking and capacity-building processes, policy work and action implementation driven by the MRS stakeholders.

Chapter 5 describes approaches to verifying the evaluation framework (a light and a fully-fledged option) and describes an optional method for a cost-effective participatory evaluation workshop.

The proposed standardised method allows evaluation activities to be rolled out broadly to all four MRS or to individual MRS. The model provides flexibility for individual and cross-MRS evaluations by establishing relevant priorities within defined levels.

Figure 1: The model for conducting MRS evaluation



2. Common impact model

2.1. Purpose

The impact model is developed considering that MRS, as a strategic policy framework, aims for long term impact/change on concrete shared challenges. To achieve this, MRS addresses challenges from a cross-sectoral perspective by engaging all relevant stakeholders, pooling and exploiting all available resources (human, financial, institutional, legislative, etc.), and implementing purposeful actions on the ground.

Starting with a shared understanding of the MRS's expected impacts helps make an evaluation more targeted and informative.

To achieve this, a common impact model for supporting evaluation at the overall MRS level has been developed. It explains how MRS activities are expected to lead to desired outcomes. A well-defined impact model provides clarity on:

- The goals (and/or objectives) of the MRS;
- The steps it uses to achieve those goals (or objectives);
- The expected changes in the macro-region thanks to MRS actions.

This clarity makes it easier to identify which aspects of the MRS to evaluate and what data to collect. It can either be used “off-the-shelf”, or it can be adjusted to the level of thematic area or other macro-regional processes.

A clear impact model fosters better communication between the MRS stakeholders and evaluators. It ensures that all parties share a common understanding of MRS goals, objectives and pathways to achieve them. It also highlights the interdependency of MRS governance stakeholders' performance, roles and responsibilities in the MRS implementation process.

2.2. Outline of the model

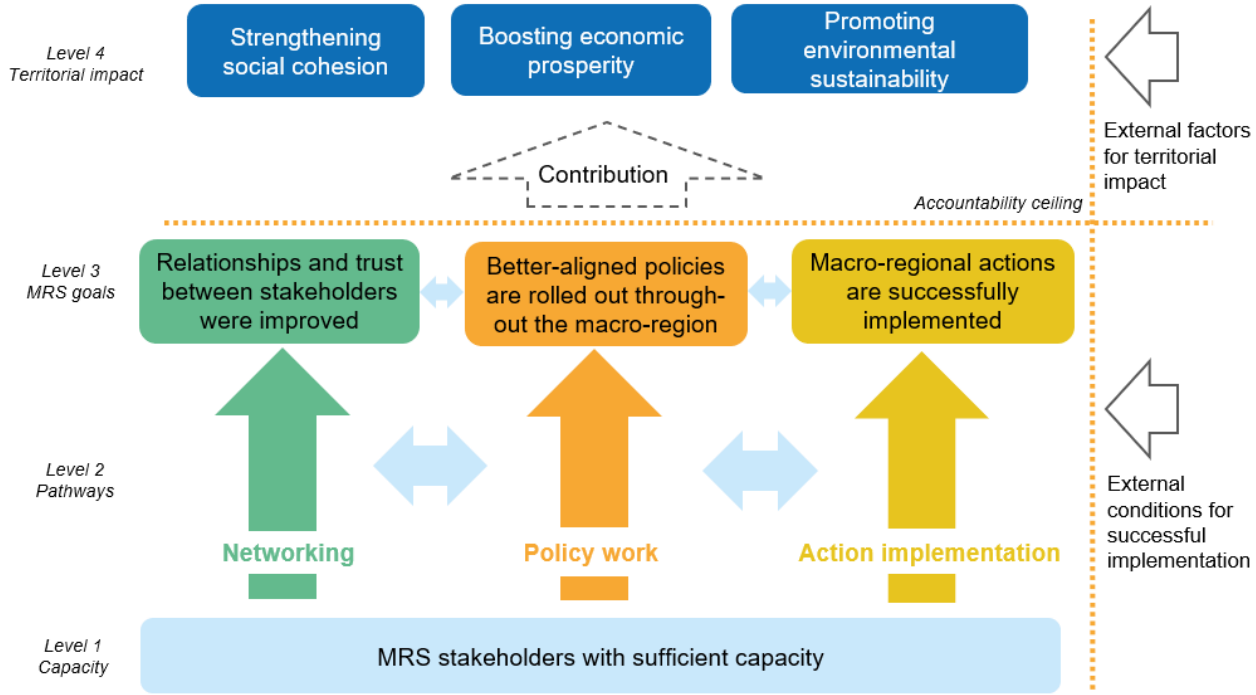
The “light” model presented in Figure 2 outlines a general framework to provide evidence of changes resulting from the MRS work. It is not tailored to reflect the specific context or reality of each MRS.

The common impact model (see Figure 3) formulates conditions for success in a logical chain (along pathways) necessary to achieve longer-term objectives and make a change. Pathways are logically and chronologically ordered sets of (interim) outcomes in which some outcomes must occur before the other.

The model is structured around four levels and three primary pathways (networking, policy work and action implementation. Additional levels and pathways may be added, as needed, to suit the specific requirements and relevance of each MRS.

The model also defines the “system boundaries”, where external factors come into play and should be considered in the evaluation.

Figure 2: Common impact model with pathways for MRS (light version)



The common impact model includes four levels:

- Level 1: **Capacity**

Describes fundamental preconditions that form the basis of the impact model, i.e. sufficient organisational and planning capacities of the MRS.

- Level 2: **Pathways**

Sets out three pathways combining networking, policy work, and action implementation.

- Level 3: **Key MRS goals**

At level 3, the interaction of the three pathways is intended to achieve MRS goals:

- Relationships and trust between stakeholders are improved, fostering social capital within the macro-region;
- Better-aligned policies are rolled out throughout the macro-region, supported by administrative and political stakeholders;
- Macro-regional actions are implemented, meeting established targets and positively influencing the region.

Provided that the MRS goals are achieved, it can contribute to a positive change in socio-economic and environmental dynamics in the local areas in terms of increased economic prosperity and environmental sustainability outlined in Level 4: Territorial impact.

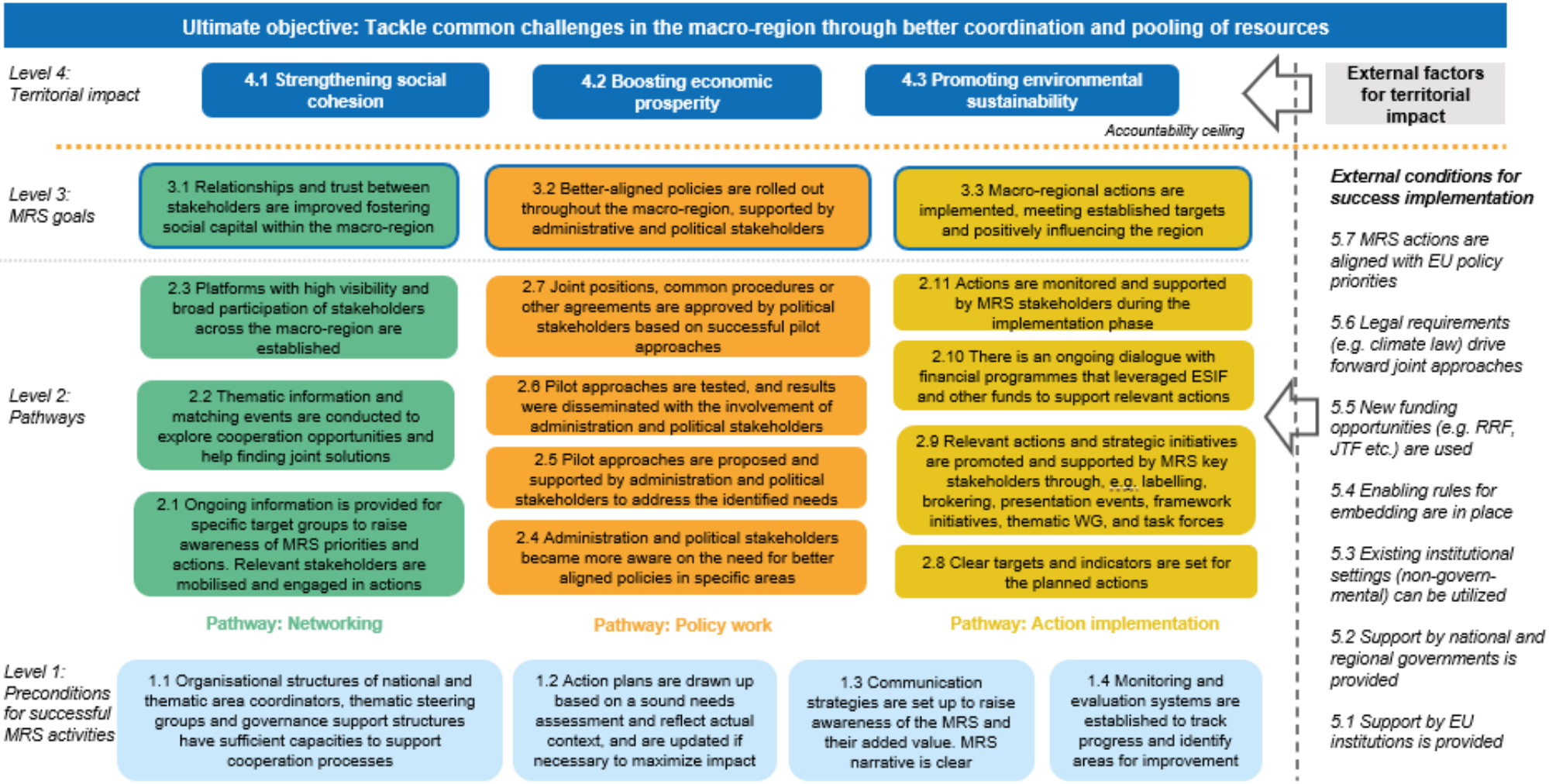
- Level 4: **Territorial impact**

This level is not only determined by the three pathways but also significantly affected by external factors outside the sphere of influence of the MRS stakeholders (e.g., changes in the social and economic conditions, the political context, etc.).

The dashed line in the impact model, referred to as the accountability ceiling, defines the system boundaries. It marks the point where the influence and accountability of the MRS core stakeholders, as described in the governance architecture, ends and where other external factors come into play.

Although assessing territorial impacts is challenging, it is nevertheless an important evaluation topic. The primary purpose of the MRS is not only the achievement of the MRS goals but also their contribution to territorial development and change in that territory. However, even below the accountability ceiling, external conditions for success outside the sphere of influence of the MRS stakeholders must be considered. The external conditions for success (see on the right-hand side, Figure 3) should be met for smooth implementation of the MRS even if they are outside the control of the MRS stakeholders (e.g. support provided by governmental bodies, etc.).

Figure 3: Common impact model with pathways for MRS

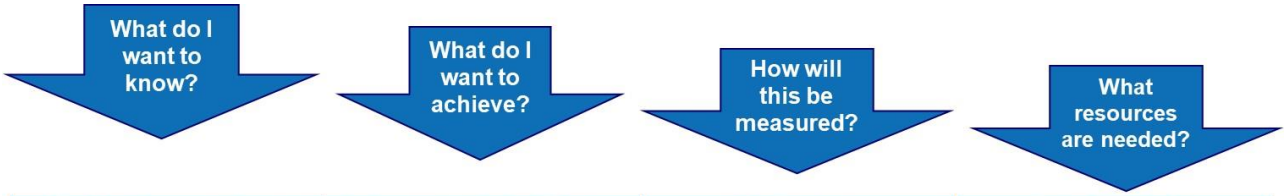


3. From the impact model to the evaluation framework

The common impact model in Figure 3 serves as an input for a more detailed evaluation framework, which consists of six evaluation questions, around 30 judgement criteria, and exemplary indicators. The indicators can provide helpful information to assess the judgement criteria.

These components are developed step by step, with each stage adding greater technical detail and sophistication, as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 4: Components of an evaluation framework



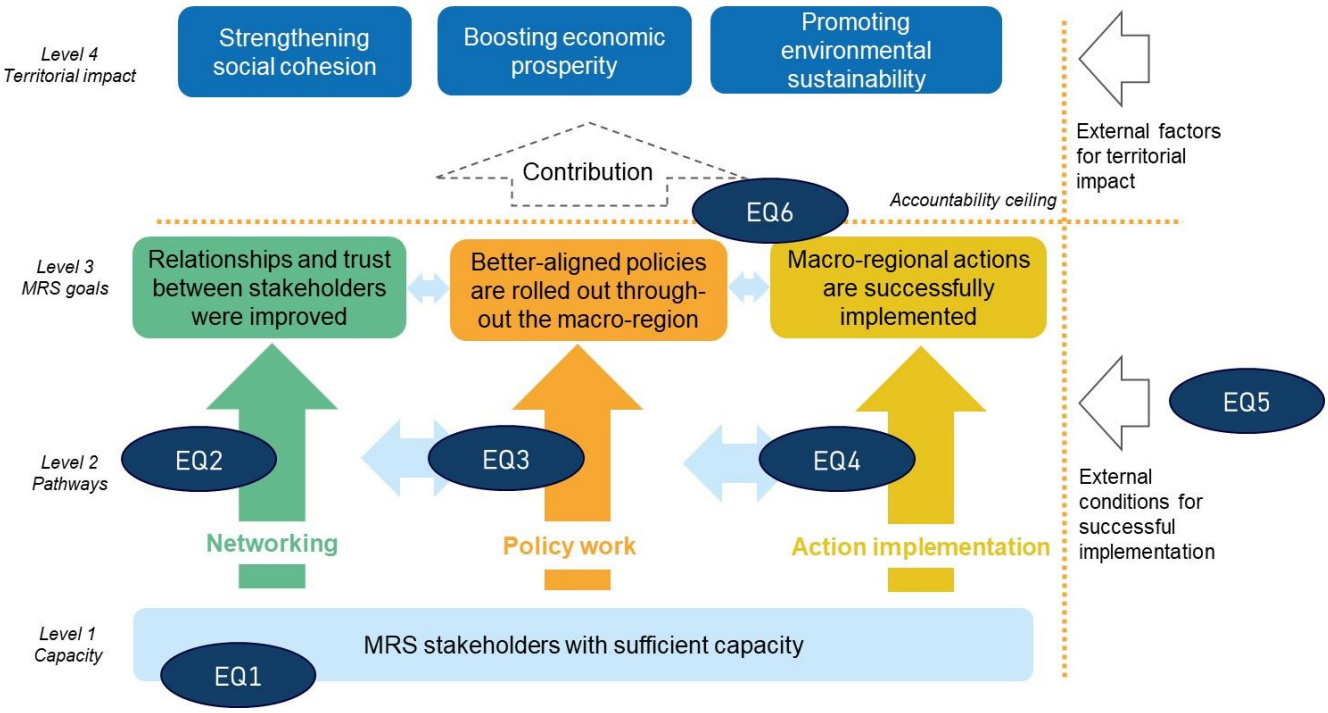
Evaluation questions	Judgment criteria / Factors of success	Indicators	Data / Methods
• **linked** to **objectives of the MRS** • Each address **only one evaluation criteria**	• **operationalizes evaluation question** • helps **identify indicators**	• **linked to judgment criteria** • demonstrate **whether or not objectives were met**	• **MRS monitoring data** • **external sources** (studies, surveys, interviews, focus groups)

3.1. Evaluation questions

Evaluation questions, as the first component, are formulated to concentrate the evaluation on a limited number of points, ensuring that the conclusions are useful and of high quality.

- EQ1: To what extent are the PRECONDITIONS for successful MRS activities in place?
- EQ2: To what extent has NETWORKING built up relationships and trust between stakeholders fostering social capital within the macro-region?
- EQ3: To what extent has POLICY WORK led to better-aligned policies across the macro-region?
- EQ4: To what extent has ACTION IMPLEMENTATION led to the successful implementation of actions that fit the needs of the macro-region well?
- EQ5: To what extent do EXTERNAL CONDITIONS outside the control of the MRS support (or hinder) the implementation of the MRS?
- EQ6: Are the achievements of the three pathways RELEVANT to tackling the challenges in the macro-region? (not impact!)

Figure 5 Common impact model with pathways for MRS and evaluation questions



Timing of the evaluation

Timing is a decisive factor when conducting an MRS evaluation, and it defines the scope. As mentioned above, monitoring is a continuous, internal data collection process; an evaluation's focus depends heavily on the MRS implementation status and progress. Depending on it, the following types of evaluations can be distinguished:

- The **process evaluation** addresses performance related to the MRS capacity and delivery system, stakeholder involvement, communication and enabling factors. It addresses EQ1 and EQ5.

- The **implementation evaluation** is concerned with achieving outputs and direct and immediate results but not capturing the impacts/changes. The implementation evaluation can be performed as part of an interim evaluation and will also address the progress made. It addresses EQ1, EQ2, EQ3, EQ4, EQ5.

- The **impact evaluation** assesses the change beyond immediate effects against a baseline situation. The impact evaluation is only possible if a sufficient level of implementation has been reached. It is usually done from an ex-post perspective. It addresses EQ1, EQ2, EQ3, EQ4, EQ5 & EQ6 (the fully developed impact chain).

Since MRSs are strategic frameworks and the actual change can be expected in the long term, the impact evaluation should focus more on the relevance question than the impact question.

3.2. Judgement criteria

Judgement criteria (also known as assessment criteria or factors of success) specify the evaluation questions.

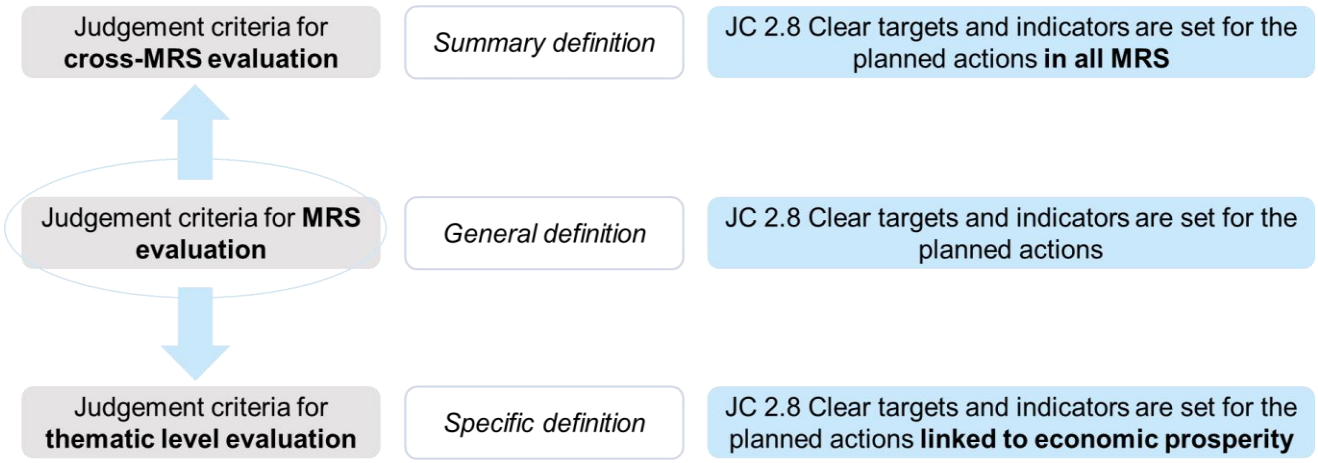
Each judgement criterion is defined before selecting an existing indicator or designing a new indicator. Judgment criteria are essential for determining the focus of the evaluation question. By focusing too soon on indicators, one is likely to get trapped in existing information, even if it is inadequate for answering the question asked. Judgment criteria are formulated as favourable conditions. At a later stage, it is verified to what extent this condition could be fulfilled – what is its progress of achievement.

The judgement criteria proposed in Chapter 3.4 cover all four levels of the common impact model and allow a holistic evaluation of an MRS.

As an option, the judgement criteria can be specified in relation to overarching thematic territorial objectives (social cohesion, economic prosperity, environmental sustainability), or the judgement criteria can be used for the cross-MRS evaluation.

To do this, the generally formulated judgement criteria must be modified accordingly, as shown in the following Figure 6. This specification makes it possible to evaluate the contribution of the three pathways to a single thematic objective (e.g. economic prosperity), or in the second case; the judgement criteria are used to aggregate the results of the four MRS.

Figure 1: Application of judgement criteria for thematic level or cross-MRS-level evaluation, an example



3.3. Indicators

Indicators, which refer to numerical or qualitative information, are used to verify the judgement criteria. Evaluation, however, does not consist of purely listing indicator values but of drawing conclusions from them.

The evaluation framework proposes a set of indicators for each judgement criterion, organised by evaluation questions.

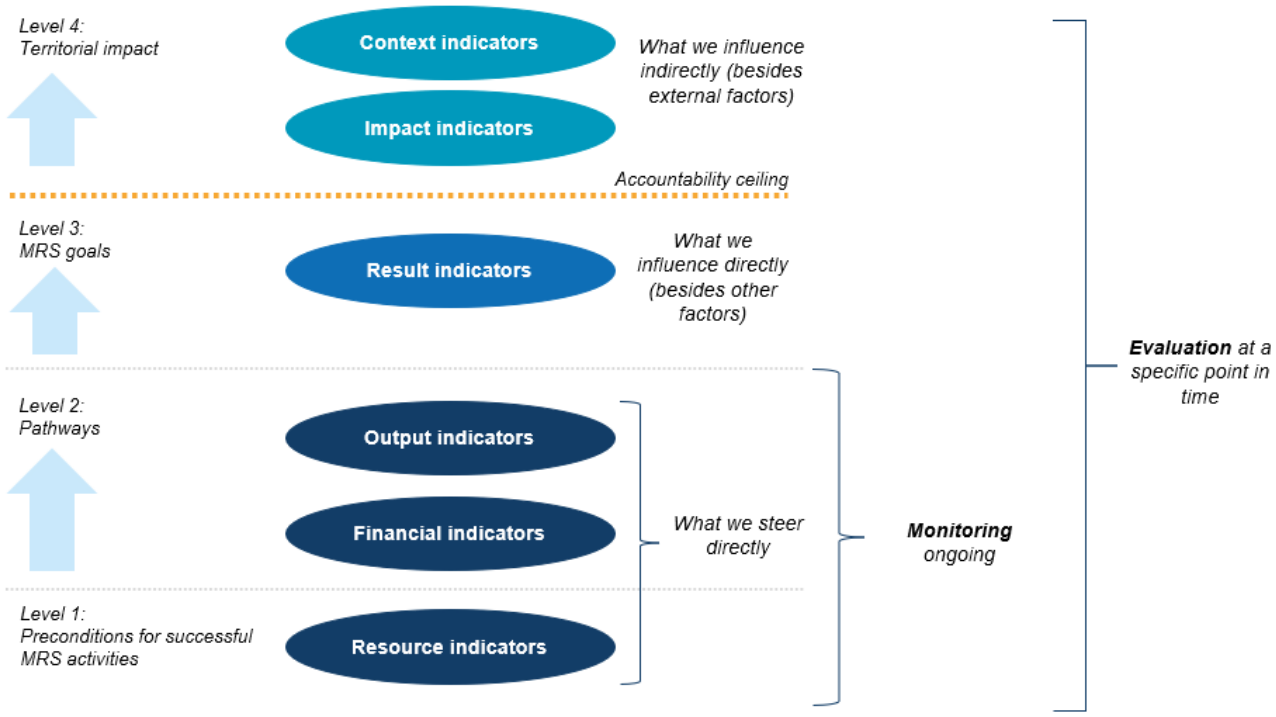
Since the three pathways are interlinked and interdependent, some result indicators might cover all three pathways – for example, mindsets of stakeholders and decision-makers have changed.

If “increased, reduced, improved” is specified as the target, a baseline study comparing the existing situation before the MRS and after the implementation is useful.

Please note that “definitions” of indicators are not provided in this working paper respecting differences across MRS. Therefore, it is up to MRS support units/secretariats, MRS stakeholders or experts to elaborate on these to ensure that everyone shares the understanding of the used terms.

The following figure shows the different types of indicators proposed in Chapter 3.4. These indicators are described along the impact chain. The indicators that capture resources, inputs and outputs are usually collected during monitoring; the other indicators must be collected during the evaluation.

Figure 7: Different types of indicators along the impact chain within and outside the sphere of influence of an MRS



3.4. Evaluation questions, judgement criteria and exemplary indicators

The detailed evaluation framework is described in the following tables. It consists of six evaluation questions, around 30 judgement criteria (JC used in the tables), and exemplary indicators.

The judgement criteria are grouped according to short-term, intermediate and longer-term outcomes (the JC numbering follows Figure 3 above). The indicators can provide helpful information to assess the judgement criteria.

EQ1: To what extent are the PRECONDITIONS for successful MRS activities in place?

Outcomes to be achieved, thanks to the MRS	Exemplary indicators
Short-term to intermediate outcomes	
JC 1.1 Organisational structures of national and thematic coordinators, thematic steering groups and governance support structures have sufficient capacities to support cooperation processes within MRS	Resources: • Staff (FTE) dedicated within each MRS' bodies and staff turnovers/ fluctuations Output: • Type of tools developed outlining the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved in the MRS • Number, frequency and type of capacity-building events and participation to improve the skills, capabilities, and processes of the individuals and institutions involved in all MRS implementation • Type of tools/mechanisms established to facilitate coordination and information sharing among MRS stakeholders (ranging from annual fora to specific meetings) Result: • Perception of MRS stakeholders on the workflow and processes • Perception of the quality of stakeholder meetings/workshops • Level of interaction between MRS stakeholders • Understanding of MRS stakeholders on the adequacy of organisational systems, interdependencies, their roles and responsibilities • Perception of MRS stakeholders into their capacity to achieve results
JC 1.2 Action Plans are drawn up based on a sound needs assessment, reflect actual context, and are updated if necessary to maximise impact	Resources: • Number and type of stakeholders involved in identifying the policy needs and actions proposed in the Action Plan Output: • Developed strong intervention logics / pathways • MRS actions are aligned with EU policy priorities • Documented processes developed to review and update the Action Plan Result: • Perception of MRS stakeholders of the Action Plan • Use of the Action Plan to guide MRS stakeholder work
JC 1.3 Communication strategies are set up to raise	Resources: • Staff (FTE) dedicated to communication

awareness of the MRS and their added value. MRS's narrative is clear	Output: • Quality of developed communication strategies and number of changes and evaluations • Type of communication activities (e.g. website, newsletter, app.) Result: • Decision makers´ awareness of MRS • Relevant stakeholders' understanding of MRS • Perception of stakeholders on the quality of communication and responsiveness to their inquiries and feedback • Perceived added value of MRS in providing a framework for policy alignment in the regions
JC 1.4 Monitoring and evaluation systems are established to track progress and identify areas for improvement	Resources: • Staff (FTE) dedicated to MRS monitoring Output: • Type of monitoring tools/ mechanisms in place to track progress per MRS • Reporting frequency • Quality of the evaluation plan • Planned external evaluations • Appointment of an evaluation steering group Result: • Conducted evaluations • Perception of MRS stakeholders on the monitoring and evaluation system • Evaluation reports disseminated to MRS stakeholders

EQ2: To what extent has NETWORKING built up relationships and trust between stakeholders fostering social capital within the macro-region?

Outcomes to be achieved, thanks to the MRS	Exemplary indicators
Short-term outcomes	
JC 2.1 Ongoing information is provided for specific target groups to raise awareness of MRS priorities and actions. Relevant stakeholders are mobilised and engaged in actions	Output: • Communication tools used to target groups • Number of meetings/events attended by the MRS stakeholders • Press releases /newsletters issued Result: • Level of interaction between MRS stakeholders

JC 2.2 Thematic information and matching events are conducted to explore cooperation opportunities and helping to find joint solutions	Output: • Number of meetings/events attended by the relevant stakeholders • Type and diversity of stakeholders involved in MRS events (sectoral/geographic) • Type of support provided by coordinating bodies Result: • Perception of stakeholders on their involvement
Intermediate outcomes	
JC 2.3 Platforms with high visibility and broad participation of stakeholders across the macro-region are established	Output: • Number and type of platforms and initiatives established • Improvement/development of platforms Result: • Perception of MRS stakeholders on the benefits of the platforms • Level of change in a certain timeframe • Sustainability aspect of the platforms – how long do they exist, how self-sustainable are they developed, are they likely to continue
Longer-term outcomes	
JC 3.1 Relationships and trust between stakeholders are improved, fostering social capital within the macro-region	Result: • Perception of stakeholders on their relationships with other stakeholders • Interaction level in the baseline year per stakeholder category compared to status in year x • Perception and examples of how the MRS activities increased trust and shared values among stakeholders • Examples of successful collaborations stemming from improved trust and relationships • Link of the achievements to the needs defined in the action plan

EQ3: To what extent has POLICY WORK led to better-aligned policies across the macro-region?

Outcomes to be achieved, thanks to the MRS	Exemplary indicators
Short-term outcomes	
JC 2.4 Administration and political stakeholders became more aware of the need for better aligned policies in specific areas	Output: • Type, number and frequency of formats conducted with political actors in the reference period (e.g. high-level meetings) • Type of participants in the political formats

	Result: • Level of involvement and commitment at the political level per MRS • Perception of MRS stakeholders on the political level commitment • Type of obstacles or drivers influencing the political commitment to MRS (e.g. politically sensitive issues) • Perception of MRS stakeholders on the effectiveness of high-level meetings
JC 2.5 Pilot approaches are proposed and supported by administration and political stakeholders to address the identified needs	Output: • Number and type of plans/roadmaps developed, translating strategic discussions in high-level meetings into concrete actions
Intermediate outcomes	
JC 2.6 Pilot approaches are tested, and results were disseminated with the involvement of administration and political stakeholders	Result: • Number, type and examples of pilot approaches tested • The level of support from political and administrative stakeholders for proposed pilot approaches (e.g., through endorsements or allocated resources) • Feedback loop established to refine policy alignment based on pilot outcomes
JC 2.7 Joint positions, common procedures or other agreements are approved by political stakeholders based on successful pilot approaches	Result: • Number, type and examples of agreements made • Geographical coverage (it is not necessary that all actions cover the whole area, but it needs to be taken into consideration) • Number, type and examples of working groups, committees, or joint task forces established to work on the implementation of joint agreements
Longer-term outcomes	
JC 3.2 Better-aligned policies are rolled out throughout the macro-region, supported by administrative and political stakeholders	Result: • Number of aligned or better coordinated policies, legislation or regulatory standards adopted across the macro-region. • Number of regional/national governments that have officially integrated the policies, legislation or regulatory standards • Geographical coverage of aligned or better coordinated policies • Alignment index: Degree of consistency between local, regional, and national policies • Public funding directed toward the aligned or better coordinated policies

	• More stakeholders (against a baseline) are engaged who promote and act to implement the policies/actions independently • Link of the achievements to the needs defined in the action plan

EQ4: To what extent has ACTION IMPLEMENTATION led to the successful implementation of actions that fit to the needs of the macro-region well?

Outcomes to be achieved, thanks to the MRS	Exemplary indicators
Short-term outcomes	
JC 2.8 Clear targets and indicators are set for the planned actions	Output: • Developed measurable targets and indicators in the action plan (quantitative and qualitative) Result: • MRS stakeholders' awareness of targets and indicators set
Intermediate outcomes	
JC 2.9 Relevant actions and strategic initiatives are promoted and supported by MRS stakeholders through, e.g. labelling, brokering, presentation events, framework initiatives, thematic WG, and task forces	Output: • Number and type of activities to promote relevant actions and strategic initiatives • Examples of strategic initiatives and collaborations formed or strengthened through MRS work Result: • Satisfaction rate of stakeholders with relevant actions and strategic initiatives
JC 2.10 There is an ongoing dialogue with financial programmes to support MRS's relevant actions	Output: • Number and type of activities to promote the dialogue with financial programmes (e.g. financial dialogue networks) • Examples of MRS actions and transnational cooperation implemented with the support of ESIF and other funds • Number and type of Cohesion programmes explicitly mentioning the MRS in their programme documents/ project/action descriptions Result: • Programme stakeholder awareness and satisfaction with the MRS activities/embedding tools and their contribution to MRS funding • More national and EU support programmes are aligned to MRS objectives and made eligible to implement MRS initiatives

	• MRS actions are better embedded into funding programmes, and more funding is available for MRS actions • Challenges in embedding actions into funding programmes are identified and addressed, leading to improved funding of initiatives of macro-regional importance
JC 2.11 Actions are monitored and supported by MRS stakeholders during the implementation phase	Output: • Type of monitoring tools/mechanisms in place to track the progress of MRS initiatives Result: • Increased capacity among stakeholders to monitor and support the implementation of MRS initiatives
Longer-term outcomes	
JC 3.3 Macro-regional actions are implemented, meeting established targets and positively influencing the macro-region	Result: • Progress of target achievement • Number and type of actions implemented • Perception of stakeholders on positive effects of changes in the respective policy fields • Durability of actions implemented (e.g., use of results, sustainability). • Spillover effects influencing adjacent regions or policy fields • Link of the achievements to the needs defined in the action plan

EQ5: To what extent do EXTERNAL CONDITIONS outside the control of the MRS support or hinder the implementation of the MRS?

Note: EQ5 addressed the assessment of external conditions that are not within the MRS's sphere of influence but can facilitate or hinder the MRS work and implementation.

External conditions	Exemplary aspects to be considered
JC 5.1 Support by EU institutions is provided	• Influence of EU support/non-support on the functionality of the MRS and the implementation of its strategy • Influence of EU support/non-support on the visibility of MRS priorities in EU-level decision-making processes.
JC 5.2 Support by national and regional governments is provided	• Influence of national and regional governmental support/non-support on the functionality of the MRS and the implementation of its strategy • Political will and alignment of national/regional policies with MRS goals • Allocation of sufficient resources to MRS work

JC 5.3 Existing institutional settings (non-governmental) can be utilised	• Perception of stakeholders about the extent to which existing institutional settings are involved in the MRS implementation (e.g. use of existing dialogue formats) • Stakeholder diversity in institutional involvement
JC 5.4 Enabling rules for embedding are in place	• Common Provision Regulation reference to embedding principles and requirements • Cohesion programmes include specific measures to embed MRS priorities • Procedures are in place to follow up on the progress in implementing embedding measures
JC 5.5 New funding opportunities (e.g. RRF, JTF, etc.) are used	• Stakeholder perception of the accessibility and relevance of new funding opportunities like the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the Just Transition Fund (JTF) for implementing MRS priorities • Stakeholder perceptions of how effectively new funding opportunities like the RRF and JTF are leveraged by actors within the macro-region to support actions aligned with MRS priorities
JC 5.6 Legal requirements (e.g. climate law) and EU thematic priorities drive forward joint approaches	• Perception of stakeholders about the extent to which legal requirements on the global or EU-level such as the EU climate law, have influenced cooperation and the specific actions taken as a result in the macro-region

EQ6: Are the achievements of the three pathways relevant to tackling the challenges in the macro-region?

Note: It is nearly impossible to establish causal relationships between the MRS outputs and results and the change in the overarching socio-economic and environmental conditions in the sense of an “impact” in the MRS territory. Therefore, instead of the “impact question”, the “relevance question” should be asked.

Territorial impacts expected	Exemplary aspects to be considered
JC 4.1 Strengthening social cohesion	• Relevance of achievements of networking, policy work and action implementation compared to the needs identified during the preparation of the action plan (evaluated using a relevance matrix) • Influence of external shocks and changing macro-economic context on the achievement or non-achievements of MRS goals
JC 4.2 Boosting economic prosperity	
JC 4.3 Promoting environmental sustainability	

Use of a relevance matrix

A “relevance matrix” addresses the relevance question. It is a tool for systematically assessing the relevance of the achievements of the three pathways – networking, policy work, and action implementation – to the needs identified in the MRS. The relevance assessment represents a further analytical step.

The achievements in the three pathways have already been assessed in the evaluation questions EQ2, EQ3 and EQ4. These achievements are now set in relation to the needs.

The relevance assessment can only be carried out at an advanced stage of MRS implementation when achievements are already visible.

For each need in the matrix, one must evaluate the degree to which the corresponding achievements contribute to that corresponding need. You can use a scoring system (e.g., 0-4 scale).

An exemplary matrix is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Exemplary relevance matrix

Longer-term achievements		Main needs identified in the Action Plan (summarised)					
JC from pathways 1, 2, 3	Level of achievement	1 Main social needs		2 Main economic needs		3 Main environmental needs	
		Need 1.1	Need 1.2	Need 2.1	Need 2.2	Need 3.1	Need 3.2
JC 3.1	Low (1)	0	0	Low (1)	0	0	Low (1)
JC 3.2	Good (3)	0	Good (3)	0	0	0	Good (3)
JC 3.3	Moderate (2)	0	0	0	Mod. (2)	0	0
Average Relevance		**0**	**1,0**	**0,3**	**0,7**	**0**	**1,3**
		0,5		**0,5**		**0,7**	

The relevance matrix is structured as follows:

- The longer-term achievements from the three pathways are listed in the left-hand column. The achievements are represented by judgement criteria (JC) 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3. The level of achievements has already been assessed on an ordinal scale (moderate, good, etc.) when answering the evaluation questions (EQ) 2, 3 and 4.

- The needs are shown in the top row of the table. To do this, the main needs (social, economic, environmental) must first be extracted from the action plan and summarised.

- In the relevance matrix, the longer-term achievements identified in the three pathways (networking, policy work, action implementation) are linked to the main needs (defined in the action plan).

- In Chapter 3.4, indicators were recommended for judgement criteria (JC) 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 to help identify which achievement is relevant for which need.

- The average total value at the end of the calculation (e.g. 0.5 for social needs) is transferred to the reporting template.

Overall, the relevance matrix is a tool for linking achievements in the three pathways of networking, policy work, and action implementation with the MRS needs. The achievements of all three pathways are considered together, which provides a holistic picture.

4. Reporting template

4.1. Introduction

In the proposed reporting template, each evaluation question's judgement criteria are evaluated semi-quantitatively using a common ordinal scale[5] (see explanation below).

The template is structured so that evaluation profiles can be created. Due to their visual nature, evaluation profiles are very suitable for working in participatory workshops.

Table 2: Ordinal scale to assess the level of achievement

Scale	Explanation
na: Not applicable or no data available to verify progress made	It is currently not possible to assess the progress made in assessing the judgement criteria because the relevant information and data are lacking or too contradictory.
0: No progress achieved	Based on the available sources of information, there is no recognisable progress in achieving the outcome, as no relevant measures are known.
1: Low progress achieved	The expected outcomes were only achieved to a limited extent. Less than 25% of the measures required to achieve the outcome were implemented. The planned measures were not implemented, and there were considerable difficulties and setbacks. There was a significant deviation from the operational targets.
2: Moderate progress achieved	The implementation of the planned measures is satisfactory. Between 25% and 50% of the set targets were achieved. Some difficulties and setbacks exist, and there is a partial deviation from the targets.
3: Good progress achieved	The achievement of the expected outcomes is above average. Between 50% and 75% of the set targets were achieved. The planned measures are well implemented, with a slight deviation from the targets. There are only a few difficulties and setbacks.
4: Excellent progress achieved	In this category, target achievement is well above average. Between 75% and 100% of the set targets were achieved. The implementation of the planned measures is going very well, and there are hardly any difficulties or setbacks. As a result, there are hardly any deviations from the targets.

[5] A semi-quantitative rating was also recommended in an evaluation tool for an MRS: OECD (2019): National EUSAIR Multi-Level Governance Self-Assessment Tool

4.2. Key facts about the MRS evaluation

Name of the MRS: Text

Timing of the evaluation and implementation status:

- Very early date => assess only EQ1 and EQ6
- Moderate implementation status => assess EQ1, EQ2, EQ3, EQ4, and EQ6
- Well advanced implementation status => assess all EQ1, EQ2, EQ3, EQ4, EQ5, and EQ6

Text - Provide details on the timing of the evaluation

Evaluation approach

- Internal evaluation
- Light external evaluation
- Fully fledged external evaluation

Text - Provide details on the evaluation approach (see chapter 5 of this working paper)

4.3. Answering the evaluation questions

EQ1: To what extent are the PRECONDITIONS for successful MRS activities in place?

Outcomes to be achieved, thanks to the MRS	Achievement at a specific point in time (insert date)						Justification
	na	0	1	2	3	4	
Short-term to intermediate outcomes							
JC 1.1 Organisational structures of national and thematic area coordinators, thematic steering groups and governance support structures have sufficient capacities to support cooperation processes							
JC 1.2 Action plans are drawn up based on a sound needs assessment and reflect actual context, and are updated if necessary to maximize impact							
JC 1.3 Communication strategies are set up to raise awareness of the MRS and their added value. MRS's narrative is clear							

JC 1.4 Monitoring and evaluation systems are established to track progress and identify areas for improvement							

Concluding answer to EQ1 and subsequent recommendations

Text

EQ2: To what extent has NETWORKING built up relationships and trust between stakeholders fostering social capital within the macro-region?

Outcomes to be achieved, thanks to the MRS	Achievement at a specific point in time (insert date)						Justification
	na	0	1	2	3	4	
Short-term outcomes							
JC 2.1 Ongoing information is provided for specific target groups to raise awareness of MRS priorities and actions. Relevant stakeholders are mobilised and engaged in actions							
JC 2.2 Thematic information and matching events are conducted to explore cooperation opportunities and helping to find joint solutions							
Intermediate outcomes							
JC 2.3 Platforms with high visibility and broad participation of stakeholders across the macro-region are established							
Longer-term outcomes							
JC 3.1 Relationships and trust between stakeholders are improved, fostering social capital within the macro-region							

Concluding answer to EQ2 and subsequent recommendations

Text

EQ3: To what extent has POLICY WORK led to better-aligned policies across the macro-region?

Outcomes to be achieved, thanks to the MRS	Achievement at a specific point in time (insert date)						Justification
	na	0	1	2	3	4	
Short-term outcomes							
JC 2.4 Administration and political stakeholders became more aware of the need for better aligned policies in specific areas							
JC 2.5 Pilot approaches are proposed and supported by administration and political stakeholders to address the identified needs							
Intermediate outcomes							
JC 2.6 Pilot approaches are tested, and results were disseminated with the involvement of administration and political stakeholders							
JC 2.7 Joint positions, common procedures or other agreements are approved by political stakeholders based on successful pilot approaches							
Longer-term outcomes							
JC 3.2 Better-aligned policies are rolled out throughout the macro-region, supported by administrative and political stakeholders							

Concluding answer to EQ3 and subsequent recommendations

Text

EQ4: To what extent has ACTION IMPLEMENTATION led to the successful implementation of actions that fit the needs of the macro-region well?

Outcomes to be achieved, thanks to the MRS	Achievement at a specific point in time (insert date)						Justification
	na	0	1	2	3	4	
Short-term outcomes							
JC 2.8 Clear targets and indicators are set for the planned actions							
Intermediate outcomes							
JC 2.9 Relevant actions and strategic initiatives are promoted and supported by MRS stakeholders through, e.g. labelling, brokering, presentation events, framework initiatives, thematic WG, and task forces							
JC 2.10 There is an ongoing dialogue with financial programmes that leveraged ESIF and other funds to support relevant actions							
JC 2.11 Actions are monitored and supported by MRS stakeholders during the implementation phase							
Longer-term outcomes							
JC 3.3 Macro-regional actions are implemented, meeting established targets and positively influencing the region							

Concluding answer to EQ4 and subsequent recommendations

Text

EQ5: To what extent do EXTERNAL CONDITIONS outside the control of the MRS support (or hinder) the implementation of the MRS?

EQ5 deals with the assessment of external conditions that are not within the MRS's sphere of influence but can facilitate or hinder the MRS work and the implementation of its strategy.

The scale is slightly different from the others.

na: not applicable
0: No support
1: Low support
2: Moderate support
3: Good support
4: Excellent support

External conditions	Level of support						Justification
	na	0	1	2	3	4	
JC 5.1 Support by EU institutions is provided							
JC 5.2 Support by national and regional governments is provided							
JC 5.3 Existing institutional settings (non-governmental) can be utilized							
JC 5.4 Enabling rules for embedding are in place							
JC 5.5 New funding opportunities (e.g. RRF, JTF etc.) are used							
JC 5.6 Legal requirements (e.g. climate law) and EU thematic priorities drive forward joint approaches							

Concluding answer to EQ5 and subsequent recommendations

Text

EQ6: Are the achievements of the three pathways relevant to tackling the challenges in the macro-region?

It is nearly impossible to establish causal relationships between the MRS outputs and results and the change in the overarching socio-economic and environmental conditions in the sense of an “impact”. Therefore, instead of the “impact question”, the “relevance question” should be asked.

The scale for the relevance assessment is slightly different from the others.

na: not applicable; no data available to make a statement
0: achievements are not at all relevant compared to needs
1: achievements are low relevant compared to needs
2: achievements are moderate relevant compared to needs
3: achievements are highly relevant compared to needs

4: achievements are very high relevant compared to needs

As a tool to answering the relevance question, a **"relevance matrix"** should be used as described in the chapter 3.4.

Territorial impacts expected	Level of Relevance						Justification
	na	0	1	2	3	4	
JC 4.1 Strengthening social cohesion							
JC 4.2 Boosting economic prosperity							
JC 4.3 Promoting environmental sustainability							

Concluding answer to EQ6 and subsequent recommendations

Text

5. Verification of the evaluation framework

5.1. General approaches

The evaluation systematically step by step, verifies the proposed conditions outlined in the impact model (e.g. ongoing information is provided), determining whether they are met while also considering external factors. A high degree of fulfilment of conditions along the pathways indicates a high degree of MRS goal achievements.

The evaluation should combine different methods, using both qualitative (descriptive) and quantitative (numerical) data. This approach creates a strong, well-rounded foundation of evidence, helping the evaluation team confirm the conditions and accurately answer the evaluation questions (EQ).

There are several options for verification:

- **Internal evaluation** – it is ensured by the MRS support unit/secretariat using the MRS monitoring and reporting system (under the precondition that an evaluation expert is available in the MRS support unit/secretariat).
- **"Light" external evaluation** – participatory evaluation in facilitated workshops with a representative selection of relevant stakeholders (e.g. World Café as a method is described below).
- "**Fully fledged" external evaluation** – is an evaluation process, including surveys and case studies, conducted by external experts.
- **Context studies** evaluate specific topics, e.g. changing needs in the macro-region, which may support the evaluation task.

5.2 World Café, a cost-effective method for evaluation

A World Café is an interactive dialogue method that can be effectively used to evaluate MRS lightly. It encourages collaborative dialogue, exploring shared knowledge and learning, generating new ideas or reflecting on predefined questions, thus building on collective intelligence in the room. Below is a brief presentation of the method, its structure and design for a session.

Theme: **Evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of the MRS**

Purpose: The discussions focus on assessing the achievements, challenges, and overall performance of the MRS, guided by evaluation questions designed to address key aspects of the Strategy.

Selection of participants: a diverse group of stakeholders is invited, including policymakers, civil society representatives, business leaders, academics – and any other relevant stakeholder who can contribute to the evaluation purpose. Stakeholder mapping is suggested in preparation for the workshop/World Café.

Facilitator: Facilitator(s) are well-trained in the World Café method and can guide the discussions effectively. The number of facilitators could be considered proportional to the number of participants. Clear guidance in group discussions may reduce the number of needed facilitators.

Setting up the room: By definition, the method invites a café-like setting. Participants may sit in small groups around tables, typically 4–6 people per table, or group around stands. The stations (tables/stands) shall provide paper, post-it papers, or flipchart sheets for participants to note their ideas.

A welcoming, informal atmosphere encourages open dialogue.

Structure: The facilitator is free to design his agenda for the session. However, the following is important.

Step 1: Introduction The session begins with an introductory presentation / background information to ensure that all participants have shared understanding of the session's purpose, context, agenda, method that will be applied during the session, expected outcome and use of the session results. If needed, further background information can be provided on e.g., the MRS, its achievements. The evaluation questions are introduced, setting the stage for the table discussions.

Step 2: Table/station discussions on predefined questions. Each table/station is assigned a specific evaluation question related to the MRS effectiveness and efficiency.

The process involves several rounds of discussion, each focusing on a specific question or topic. After each round, participants switch tables/stations and join new groups to cross-pollinate ideas. One person (group facilitator) remains at each table as the "host" to summarise the previous discussion for newcomers, ensuring continuity of the discussion.

Questions are designed to guide conversations toward the session's purpose and expected outcome. They can also become progressively deeper or more focused across rounds. Please consider the time allocated for each round of the discussions.

The questions discussed are based on the evaluation questions and judgement criteria proposed in Chapter 3 of this working paper.

If all six proposed evaluation questions (with 30 judgement criteria) are to be addressed, for example from an ex-post perspective, two workshops should be offered in order not to overload the participants. EQs 1 to 4 could be addressed in the first workshop and EQs 5 and 6 in the second workshop.

It is important to carefully consider the questions, making them concise and clear to the participants. However, this does not mean oversimplifying them.

All participants are encouraged to provide their input and record their thoughts, insights, and ratings related to the evaluation question. Their qualitative feedback and quantitative ratings foster a holistic assessment.

It would be suggested that each table/station host three rounds of discussions on the same evaluation question.

Step 3: Harvesting ideas - summarising group discussions. After the table discussion rounds, the results and ratings are collected and an overall summary is provided to all session participants, allowing for:

- Joint reflection.
- Open discussion and validation of the results.
- Additional insights or clarifications from participants.

Step 4: Closing the session and a follow up. At the end of the session, it is valuable to remind participants about how their input will be used. After the workshop, the insights and data collected during the World Café are synthesised into a comprehensive evaluation report. The report should:

- Summarise the findings for each evaluation question.
- Highlight key themes, challenges, and recommendations identified during the discussions.
- Be shared with all participants and relevant stakeholders, and, if appropriate, published to ensure transparency and accountability.

Any other methods could be used for collecting evidence and views on MRS achievements.

6. Concluding remarks

This working paper proposes a standardised impact model, a method and approach for evaluating MRS. If a standardised approach would be used by all MRSs, it would allow evaluation activities to be rolled out to all four MRSs.

The MRSs are invited and encouraged to adopt the proposed model ‘off-the-shelf’. The model can be used for the evaluation of a single MRS as well as for a cross-MRS evaluation.

We hope MRS relevant stakeholders, MRS support units/secretariats would explore and apply this model that provides flexibility for individual MRS to tailor it to their specific needs while maintaining a standardised framework that supports the aggregation of MRS achievements at the EU level.

Annex 1: List of abbreviations

CPR	Common Provision Regulation
EQ	Evaluation question
JC	Judgment criteria
EUSBSR	European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	European Union Strategy for the Danube Region
EUSAIR	European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region
EUSALP	European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region
MRS	Macro-regional strategy