

Embracing Sustainability in Interreg: Programme and project management

Interreg Knowledge Fair session report | March 2024

Overview

Interreg is a driver of positive change. But could we do more to also be a driver of sustainability? Is Interreg doing all it should to reduce our impact on our shared environment? This session explored experiences and practices which are aimed at turning Interreg programmes more sustainable.

Session Agenda

Introduction

Glimpse into context

Interreg's sustainability regulations – DNSH Principle and SEA Directive

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) responsibilities and opportunities

Project management triple constraint and the sustainability 3 Ps

Project Triple Bottom Line

Sustainable project management approach

Testimonials

A personal perspective - Merike Niitepold – Interreg Central Baltic Programme

Measuring project cycle greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) - Sophie Scarvelis - Interreg Euro-Med

SDGs as a tool and requirement for sustainability in Interreg projects - Interreg Aurora Programme

Group Discussion

- Do we do enough for sustainability?
- If not, what hinders it?
- Sustainability approaches in the programmes.
- Prioritizing.
- What else can be done?
- Should Interreg have joint sustainability related targets?
- Is there a need for cooperation/Interact support?

Session Summary

This session discussed how Interreg can be a driving force in addressing sustainability beyond its usual legal obligations. The session aimed to take a pragmatic approach, by mapping our current sustainability practices, attitudes, challenges within programmes and exploring interest in further cooperation.

The considerations for the session's work were as follows:

- programmes/project assert compliance with legal sustainability obligations but struggle to translate this into tangible behavioral change. Often, sustainability efforts remain confined to merely checking off boxes without driving substantial change in practice.
- Interreg has the potential to drive the sustainability change, with the capacity to make significant EU wide impact through programme and project level practices
- Sustainability encompasses various aspects such as: durability/sustainability of project results, relevance of the solutions, involvement of the local actors in the design/implementation and ownership of solutions, quality of the project, etc. However, environmental sustainability was the main focus and a starting point for the first such type practical event on sustainability.
- A positive shift in approach was observed during session preparation. Programmes started to provide guidance or at least advice for an enhanced project sustainability. This shall raise awareness amongst programme and project partners.

Several introductory questions were asked from participants:

- Do you have a responsible person assigned in your programme for the sustainability?
- Do you promote sustainability approaches beyond simply mentioning the necessity to meet requirements during programme events?
- Do you monitor (plan to) or assess sustainability aspect of project activities.

Reflections from the participants:

- While sustainability is carefully assessed, sometimes also monitored during the implementation, there is often no specific person assigned or planned specific measures to deeper explore the topic or facilitate change. Instead, it is typically a team effort. Some support from Interact in raising capacity and awareness could be beneficial.
- Sustainability can be embedded in the programme strategy. For example, the sea is a vital part of the region's identity in the South Baltic programme. And maintaining, improving water quality in one of the priorities in the programme.
- The sustainability of the project-based intervention may be questioned.
- It is important to implement actions which can be clearly measured in terms of results and impact, avoiding practices which may be regarded as "greenwashing".
- In next period, the monitoring of sustainability could become more structured.

Testimonials

Merike Niitepold, Central Baltic programme

The speaker shared inspiring ideas for personal reflection on our responsibilities and opportunities for action. A notable example highlighted the speaker's commitment to being flight-free for five years, serving as a truly inspiring demonstration of personal dedication.

Aurora programme

The integration of the SDGs into its programme delivery were also promoted during the session. Actions such as making SDGs integration workshops mandatory for projects were mentioned.

Sophie Scarvelis, Euro-MED programme

The speaker shortly presented the sustainability journey of the Euro-MED programme. It started in 2014-2020 period with eligibility of costs for carbon emissions compensation, guidelines for sustainable events included in the Programme Manual and assessment of horizontal principles. Efforts led to tangible changes in regional institutions, including the adoption of more sustainable public procurement practices initiated by the JS.

It is important to be mindful of and reduce carbon emissions, such as by minimizing unnecessary travel and organizing greener events. However, it is important to communicate about these efforts and raise awareness.

The carbon footprint measurement tool developed by the Interreg Euro-Med programme was also demonstrated. This initiative has established a method to quantify the emissions generated by a project throughout its lifecycle. Integrated with JEMS, the tool is now mandatory for all reporting projects, with several reports provided using this tool. Its effectiveness and potential for replication in other programs have been recognized, leading to its upcoming presentation at the JEMS user groups meeting in the spring. Further use and development is to be considered.

Conclusions and plans for follow-up

- Interact will coordinate follow-up actions to foster collaboration amongst programmes based on session discussions.
- An online event similar to this session will be organized to broaden the reach of the programmes. After two events, Interact will analyse the situation, interest and needs of programmes and determine next steps.
- Exchanges between programmes on tools such as Euro-MED's carbon footprint calculator to be fostered aiming at its replicability.

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