

Art of Cooperation – Assessment and Selection Procedures panel discussion summary

Interreg programmes have been constantly developing during the last 30+ years, and new innovative solutions are needed not only on project implementation level but also concerning project selection processes. The panel aimed at identifying some of the best practice examples that certain programmes have to offer and which can act as a basis for eventual improvements in the future.

When it comes to **setting up project assessment procedures**, the presented Interreg programmes (Hungary-Slovakia CBC Programme, Austria-Hungary CBC Programme and Hungary-Croatia CBC Programme) agreed that the aim is always ‘the simpler, the better’, meaning optimally a one-step open call for proposals. Nevertheless, all of them use other, specialised methods as well, such as targeted, non-competitive calls for Small Project Fund management (Hungary-Slovakia CBC Programme), a continuous, ongoing call (Austria-Hungary CBC Programme) or an SME development scheme that acts as an umbrella project (Hungary-Croatia CBC Programme). There can be room for two-step project selection as well, if the complexity of the future projects makes it necessary, e.g. in case of large infrastructure projects, or as regulated by the Hungary-Slovakia CBC Programme in connection to their system of Territorial Action Plans. A novel approach is to open a given programme priority only once during a programming period, giving both potential applicants and JS/MA proper time to prepare, assess and later implement in parallel projects which are similar. In any case, the speakers concluded that the chosen setup of calls has to mirror the length of the border, the number of potential applicants and the expected number of project proposals in the given border region.

Circumstances are different for the three programmes, but they do **involve external assessors** at some point and to a certain degree. The ‘classic’ approach of two external experts assessing a given project proposal on a 100 point scale has been replaced by managing quality assessment entirely with internal staff and contacting experts via the system of the regional coordinators or via the line ministries represented in the MC, if necessary (Austria-Hungary CBC Programme), or by having each project proposal checked for quality by one internal assessor (JS) and one external expert (Hungary-Croatia CBC Programme). In both cases the JS gains detailed knowledge about the project already well before the contracting phase.

Interreg is special as compared to the sectoral (national level) programmes meaning that the diversity between project proposals is much bigger – it can happen that e.g. biosphere reserves are in the same programme priority as bicycle roads. Therefore the professional background of external experts assessing the same set of projects should be as similar as possible, in order to allow for a harmonised level of scoring. It is a useful recommendation to subdivide larger priorities into smaller components and measures, ones which only receive an amount of project proposals that can be assessed by the same pair of assessors. The Hungary-Slovakia CBC Programme is even involving the selected external experts in the preparation of the sectoral assessment part of the future assessment grid, and the entire call for proposals in general; this way the external assessors are not just presented later on with a scoring system which they do not support from a professional point of view.

For solutions to involve the MC and its members into the quality assessment the speakers again presented slightly different approaches. The Hungary-Croatia CBC Programme has seen a somewhat ‘conservative’ role of the MC, receiving the proposed ranking list and following it, down along the score in each priority until the available funding, while the Hungary-Slovakia Programme has started to place more responsibility on the MC members, involving them to nominate territorial experts and providing them with their own

part of the quality assessment grid where they can score the alignment of the project proposals with the development strategies of the border area's counties.

A new and strong tool in the hands of the Austria-Hungary Programme is the 'postponed decision' option of the MC for the cases when it is not possible to set conditions to project proposals which could simply be answered 'fulfilled' or 'not fulfilled'; here the MC can send the back the project proposals for revision and the LB-s can re-submit them in a next round, helping the creation of good quality projects from previously not well prepared ones. Last but not least a new innovation by the Hungary-Slovakia Programme is the so-called group assessment where all quality assessors of the same programme priority sit together and discuss the project proposals, listen to each other's arguments, eventually even fine-tune their own scores, and thus jointly place the project proposals onto the ranking list.

The last topic touched upon by the panellists was **the use of thresholds in the quality assessment** and on the ranking lists. They agreed that e.g. receiving only 59 points instead of the minimum 60 is never the actual reason for a project proposal not to be selected, since most likely it has several problems which resulted in lower scores along the different criteria in the first place. Due to the fact that many project proposals will be submitted within a next call, LB-s have to be explained in detail how to improve and have to see the bigger picture, not just the weak overall score.

Nevertheless, thresholds are useful if applied reasonably, as they are a tool to filter out irrelevant applications, while at the same time providing a chance to establish a line under which the quality of the project proposals should not fall. To give an example, the Hungary-Slovakia Programme presented the approach of setting a threshold connected to the overall score coming from the strategic assessment and the territorial assessment – the reason being that if a project proposal is not in line with the call and at the same time is not of importance to the border region then the cross-border programme should not finance it.

The panel discussion ended with the speakers agreeing that **the line of development in assessment and selection procedures has been straight and continuous, but there is always room for trying new approaches**, especially if they have been successfully applied by other Interreg programmes of the Central- and Eastern European region, where possibilities and challenges are often very similar, also in the area of project assessment.