



TESIM

Technical support to the implementation
and management of ENI CBC programmes

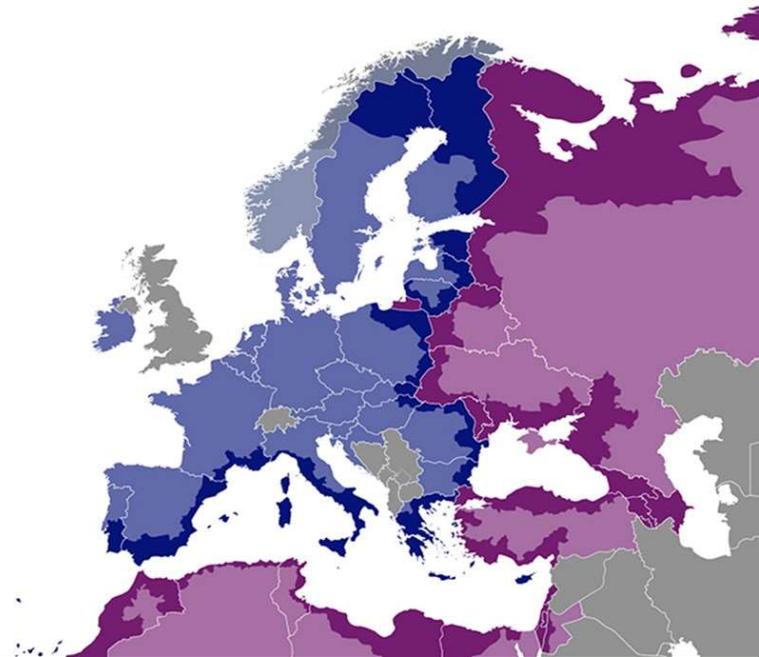
Mid-term evaluations in ENI CBC programmes

Overview of evaluations and recommendations

September 2021

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I. Introduction

So far, evaluations have not been a widely used tool in neighbourhood cross-border cooperation programmes. Carrying them out in the 2007-2013 period was optional, and only five out of thirteen programmes (Kolarctic, Karelia, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, South-East Finland-Russia, Italy-Tunisia) undertook such exercise to have a deeper view into the programme effectiveness and efficiency, its delivered results and impact, as well as to draw conclusions from the programme implementation.

In the current period, the Implementing Rules (897/2014) state in Article 78 that the evaluations are part of the programme implementation toolbox. However, they do not specify the type or the timing of the evaluations, leaving it to the programmes to decide and describe their intentions in the joint operational programmes (JOPs) and in their annual monitoring and evaluation plans.

This paper summarises the experiences from the **mid-term evaluations carried out in ENI CBC programmes so far** and can serve as a source of inspiration to those still planning to undertake them. It also looks into those recommendations provided to the individual programmes that can be of value for the entire ENI CBC community.

Reports of mid-term evaluations of the Estonia-Russia CBC (EE-RU), Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine (HSRU)¹, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine (PBU) and Poland-Russia (PL-RU) Programmes, as well as the terms of reference for the Mediterranean Sea Basin (MSB) Programme were used to prepare this overview.

¹ The evaluation in HSRU was carried out at a very early stage of the programme implementation (in 2018-2019) as a part of the mid-term evaluation exercise of all cooperation programmes managed by Hungary, and at that moment in time evaluators could only cover a limited scope and did not have sufficient information to answer some of the questions put forward in the evaluation.



II. Evaluations in ENI CBC: programme plans versus reality

The planning of evaluations in ENI CBC programmes started with including a chapter in their JOPs, which provided an indicative monitoring and evaluation plan. At that stage, all ENI CBC programmes foresaw evaluations in their JOPs, as either:

- Own **mid-term evaluation** of the programme,
- **Ex-post evaluation** or evaluation at the end of the programme implementation period,
- Programme-specific evaluations linked to the **mid-term review by the European Commission**,
- **Evaluation of the projects** with budgets exceeding 5 MEUR,
- A combination of the above.

Further on, the annual monitoring and evaluation plans specified the programme intentions, and by August 2021 the five mentioned ENI CBC programmes have already started (and in some cases already completed) the mid-term evaluation exercise. Three further programmes (Italy-Tunisia, Latvia-Lithuania-Belarus and South-East Finland-Russia) are in the planning stage.

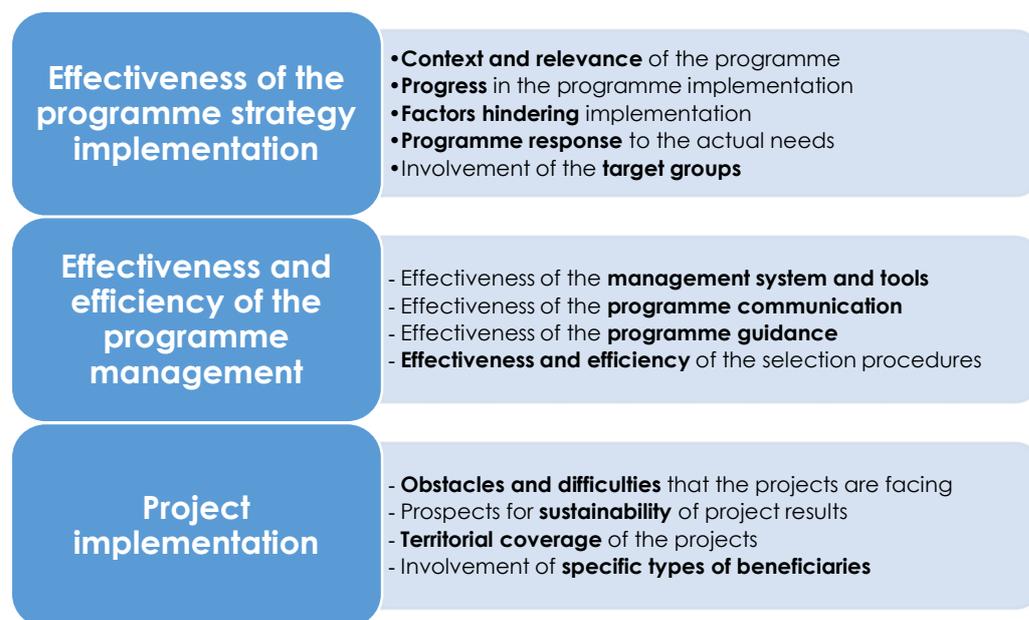
When asked about their view on the role of evaluation in the programme implementation, participants to the Monitoring and evaluation networking event organised by TESIM and held in May 2021 stressed the importance of the evaluations, but at the same time half of the participants also added that this tool has not been used to its full potential.

III. Objectives of the mid-term evaluation

In their mid-term evaluations, ENI CBC programmes have asked the experts to look at the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme implementation and to the progress in the achievement of the programme objectives, as well as to draw lessons to improve the implementation of the current programme, as well as its successor.

In particular, the areas of interest cover three main blocks:

- 1.** the **effectiveness of the programme strategy implementation** is evaluated in terms of indicator achievement and the use of the allocated financing so far, and the prospects of achievement of the programme objectives in full. Also, the relevance of the programme objectives to the actual needs of the programme area is addressed in several evaluations.
- 2.** the **efficiency and effectiveness of the programme management** is looked at in terms of performance of the management system and effectiveness of its tools, including guidance to projects, communication and project selection procedures. In this area, programmes seek for recommendations to improve their functioning and management.
- 3.** the **implementation of projects** is evaluated by looking into their progress, reflecting on the difficulties they face and building on the prospects for sustainability of the results that they intend to deliver. In addition to these, three programmes (HSRU, PBU, PL-RU) asked their evaluators also to look at the **geography** of the partnerships and/or the project activities.



Based on the analysis of these areas, evaluators were asked to provide conclusions and recommendations for the implementation and improvement of the current ENI CBC programmes, as well as for the development of the programmes post-2020.

In addition to the three blocks mentioned above, programmes also posed to the evaluators questions specific to their programmes covering areas of interest for the programme bodies. So, for example, questions in the terms of reference of programmes also addressed:

Estonia-Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - coherence of the programme intervention logic, - efficiency in the use of human resources in the Joint Technical Secretariat, Branch Offices and Managing Authority, - possibilities for further simplification in the programme to optimise the use of the available resources.
Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - effectiveness of communication by the projects, - cross-border character of the projects, - geographic distribution of the project partners.
Mediterranean Sea Basin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - coherence of the calls for proposals with the programme objectives, - consistency of the programme with the macro-regional strategies, - if the decision-making processes in the programme are clear and transparent.
Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Poland-Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - factors strengthening and limiting cross-border cooperation and cross-border integration, - analysis of project partnerships before the application, - duration and quality of cooperation in the partnership.

IV. Methods and techniques used to carry out the mid-term evaluations

The experts used different methods to collect the necessary information and data for the evaluation exercise, as well as to cross-check its consistency and validity. In particular, the following methods were employed in the reviewed evaluations:

- **Desk research of documents =>** Review of the relevant EU and programme documents, procedures, reports to gather the necessary background information about the programme and the legal environment in which it operates.
- **In-depth interviews =>** Structured interviews with the representatives of the programme authorities and bodies to gain a deeper knowledge on the programme functioning and its achievements.
- **On-line surveys =>** With the applicants and beneficiaries of both selected and rejected proposals to gather their views and experiences about the application process and the implementation of the projects. In the case of PBU and PL-RU, also surveys with the inhabitants in the programme area were carried out.
- **Collection and analysis of data =>** Information from the programme management information systems related to the calls for proposals, project assessment results, project partnerships, programme and project indicator achievement, etc.
- **Case studies and partnership network analysis =>** The mid-term evaluations of PBU and PL-RU involved not only reviews of selected projects, but also an analysis of the characteristics of the partnerships (e.g., its duration, quality, intensity, communication, as well as the future prospects and plans).
- **Mapping of the data =>** Use of maps to display the collected data (e.g., on partnerships, project activities, number of projects per region).
- **GIS-based analysis =>** In the case of HSRU, the evaluation team gathered and processed statistical data in order to assess the relevance of the programme priorities in terms of the changing territorial needs by benchmarking the starting and the current socio-economic situations of the programming area.



V. Recommendations

Based on the research and analysis carried out during the mid-term evaluation exercise, experts have provided each programme with a set of conclusions and recommendations.

While the conclusions are mainly based on the performance of the individual programme, the recommendations are often of a more general nature and can be of interest and use to the other programmes as well.

This chapter provides an overview of the recommendations addressing both improvements suggested for the implementation of ENI CBC programmes, as well as those related to Interreg NEXT.

A) Recommendations related to implementation of the ENI CBC programmes

The biggest block of recommendations is related to the **capacity building for the project beneficiaries**. These recommendations relate both to the topics that could be covered during the events (e.g., communication and other horizontal issues), as well as the means of delivery of information and knowledge to the project beneficiaries.

Overall, the applicants and beneficiaries see the guidance and capacity building activities as effective. However, there are also several suggestions made to improve them even further. For example, the use of visual aids to feature processes and video clips to provide explanations are suggested, as well as the use of examples based on pre-filled templates. Also, information on the common mistakes, lessons learned, and best practices is seen as a valuable input that can support applicants and beneficiaries.

"The general quality and the cross-border aspects of the projects can be improved by sharing the experiences of best practices. For this purpose, delivery of a regular publication (similar to the professional materials published both on-line and off-print versions by the LEADER programme, e.g., guides, fact sheets, compilation of best practices), with explanations on four languages; more field trips and local presence; and project fairs can be applied".

First phase evaluation of HSRU

"Application process and eMS reporting process are the ones requiring the most efforts by applicants/beneficiaries and can be made more easily understandable with visualisation of the process step by step.

Consider providing examples of pre-filled reporting documents as a learning material.

Create a base of the best practices that will enable program participants to make rational decisions based on historical experience".

Mid-term evaluation of EE-RU

In addition, evaluators have noted that, based on the feedback gathered from the projects, training on use of the programme electronic management system could be useful, as well as gathering their feedback and where possible introducing slight adjustments in the system that would make the reporting process more comfortable and less time consuming for the beneficiaries.

Evaluators also observed differences in the understanding of the notion and meaning of the **horizontal (cross-cutting) principles** among the project beneficiaries. They suggest taking further actions to improve the understanding of the beneficiaries and with this also implementation of the horizontal principles related to the equality between men and women, equal opportunities and non-discrimination and the principles of sustainable development.

“Everyone knows that this principle exists, but no one can fully evaluate and describe it. Sustainable development can cover many areas, and everyone can interpret it in a slightly different way”.

From the interviews carried out by the PL-RU mid-term evaluators

When it comes to the performance of the **programme bodies**, in general it is seen as efficient and effective. However, to improve the outreach to the potential applicants and beneficiaries on the whole territory of the programme, evaluators suggest enhancing the capacity of the branch offices and the allocation of more responsibilities to them. The involvement of senior university students for internship in the joint technical secretariats and their branch offices is suggested to improve the situation concerning the availability of human resources.

Another topic that is covered in all evaluations relates to **communication**, and it is recommended to improve all types of it, including internal communication among the programme bodies, as well as the communication by the programme and its projects. Reaching out to new target groups that span beyond the local and regional level is suggested to promote the delivered results on a wider scale, as well as closer cooperation with the local players to benefit from the use of their media channels.

Evaluators also note that due to circumstances external to the programmes it will not be possible to reach **target values set in the programme for the output and result indicators** related to tourism (e.g., number of visitors, number of organised events) as well as in indicators related to the throughput capacity of the border crossing points. The pandemic has also had its impact on the intensity of cooperation, and the evaluators expect that the cross-border effect of the grassroots level activities will be lower compared to what was planned by the programmes and the projects.

“All project activities will be done now online, however, the actual cross-border cooperation effect will be lower than expected. Cross border people-to-people communication is a core aim of CBC projects, and it does not have the same impact as providing people-to-people contacts online”.

Mid-term evaluation of EE-RU

B) Recommendations related to post 2020

Evaluators strongly stress the importance of **a timely programming process and a quick start of the programme implementation** to avoid delays, as was the case with the ENI CBC programmes. This will help to minimize the gap between the current programming period and the new one, as well as prevent delays in the programme implementation compared to the internal cooperation programmes, as was also the case with the ENI CBC programmes.

There are also several recommendations related to **concentration and focus** of the programmes, namely keeping the focus of the programme on the border areas, at the same time also ensuring balanced geographical coverage. Also, concentration on a limited number of priorities is seen as an important precondition for effective and impactful use of the programme financial resources.

When it comes to the tools for programme implementation, a **combination of the regular projects with larger infrastructure investments and people-to-people actions** is seen as optimal, allowing both to satisfy the demand for investments in the border areas, as well as to support local initiatives promoting mutual trust and cooperation.

"In the opinion of the persons participating in the survey, among the projects implemented, the greatest contribution to the achievement of the Programme objectives was made by large infrastructural projects, whose impact is much greater and often multifaceted".

Mid-term evaluation of PBU

As to the arrangements for project implementation, **beneficiaries have also expressed their suggestions for improvement of the practices and procedures**. They specifically stress the need of shortening the duration of the assessment procedures, and for a simplification of reporting.

"The Programme is expected to be simpler (mainly shorter project application assessment process, more flexibility in interpretation of Programme rules and simplified reporting in eMS). Projects should have much more focus on expected results – projects should be evaluated towards their activities and expected results as these indicate potential impact.

Reporting workload has to be minimised – the aim is to implement the project and get results and not convince JTS too frequently what has been done in the project".

Mid-term evaluation of EE-RU

Annex 1

What to take into account when planning programme evaluations?

- **Find the proper time for the evaluation =>** When deciding on timing, consider what management and decision-making processes will the evaluation inform and when this information needs to be available. If deemed relevant, the evaluation can be also carried out in stages where the first stage covers the aspect that can be evaluated earlier and leaving the rest of the questions to be answered at a later stage.
- **Have a clear objective =>** A limited number of objectives will allow evaluators to properly address them. You may envisage also additional tasks within the assignment, on top of the evaluation itself as, for example, undertaking an update of the indicator values or carrying out a consultation. Take into account the progress of the programme (i.e. "what can be measured at this moment in time?"), as well as the possible use of the outcomes of the exercise.
- **Ask the right evaluation questions =>** Avoid asking too many questions and questions to which you already know the answer. Use the evaluation to find out what is essential for you to know and where the expertise of the evaluators can be of help. Ask questions in such a way that the experts have to provide answers that are specific to your programme and its situation.
- **Ensure availability of data and sources of information =>** Carefully consider what information is available to evaluate the specific aspects (i.e., in the programme documents, other evaluations, surveys and reviews, programme electronic management system, etc). Also, count on the involvement of your organisation in the process, as well as that of other programme authorities and bodies, and secure the necessary resources for that.
- **Do not limit the evaluation tools and methods =>** In the terms of reference, you rather suggest the tools and methods that you deem proper for the evaluation, but do not limit the evaluators as to how exactly they should combine them. The best result can be expected if you ask the evaluators to come up with the mix of methods and tools that allows to arrive at the desired outcomes.
- **Look for planned and unplanned achievements =>** In case of cross-border cooperation programmes and projects often there are not only planned results and impacts, but also initially unintended ones. An evaluation could be a good tool to gather evidence on them.
- **Consider the scope to be covered by the evaluation =>** If the programme has supported similar objectives over several programming periods, the evaluators can be asked to cover more than one period of time than the 2014-2020 programme implementation period. Also, depending on the focus of the programme, the evaluation can look in a deeper way into one or several thematic objectives (for example, the ones that the programme plans to continue) or into the involvement of specific types of applicants.
- **List the expected deliverables =>** On top of the evaluation itself, the evaluation team can be also entrusted with a task to produce additional documents, for example, non-technical summary, materials for dissemination or presentations for stakeholders.

