



EVALUATION PLAN

Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

August 2018



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1. Introduction: background and legal requirements

The evaluation of public policies and associated programmes is not only a legal imperative, but also a condition for improvement and an accountability exercise.

In the context of the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds, the impact of programmes shall be assessed in relation to the targets under the European Union Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, taking into consideration the size of the programme.

The present evaluation plan is elaborated by the Managing Authority (MA) to comply with:

- The provisions of Regulation (EU) No. 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 (Common Provisions Regulation (CPR), articles 50, 54, 56 and 114);
- Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal (article 14);
- The European Commission (EC) guidance documents on monitoring and evaluation¹ and on evaluation plans².

The evaluation plan defines the evaluation strategy for the entire programmatic period. It is an important support instrument for several dimensions of the programme, namely decision making, implementation and result-orientation. Hence, it contributes positively to improve the programme's effectiveness and impact, and it is an important component of the programme's life cycle.

The document establishes the evaluation strategy for the entire period of 2014-2020, taking into account the experience from evaluations made in the previous programming period. Results of the evaluation activities (when available) will be reported in the Annual Implementation Report (AIR) for the years 2017, 2019 and 2022 (covering the previous year of implementation).

The present document aims at setting the planned assessments, with an indicative description. During the programme lifetime new evaluation has to take place, which means that the monitoring committee may review the evaluation plan in line with the programme needs.

Being based on the DG REGIO monitoring and evaluation guidance, this evaluation plan encompasses the following elements:

- Subject and rationale (sections 2, 3 and 5)
- Methods and data requirements (section 3.1)
- Estimated budget (section 3.8)
- Duration and a tentative date (section 4)

¹ Guidance Document on Monitoring and Evaluation - European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund - Concepts and recommendations (March 2014):

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2014/working/wd_2014_en.pdf

² Guidance Document of Evaluation Plans (February 2015):

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2014/working/evaluation_plan_guidance_en.pdf

- Evaluation questions (section 5)

2. Evaluation activities

2.1. Objectives of the evaluation plan

The Interreg Atlantic Area programme aims at fostering cooperation in the western part of Europe bordering the Atlantic Ocean, hence contributing to a more cohesive Atlantic Region, enhancing its natural and cultural heritage and increasing its comparative advantage related to its maritime perspective.

To support these objectives and their result orientations, an evaluation plan will be implemented, pointing towards the improvement of effectiveness and impact of the programme, reinforcing the involvement of stakeholders, guaranteeing a fruitful communication and ensuring the programme's capacity to have real impact in the cooperation area.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the Introduction, the evaluation plan will not only support appropriate input and decision making in programme's management, but also implementation and result orientation.

2.2 Coverage of the evaluation plan

The present evaluation plan refers to the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme, co-financed by ERDF under the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) goal. The programme covers 5 Member States: France, Ireland, Spain, Portugal and the United Kingdom. As mentioned in the Introduction, this plan establishes an evaluation strategy for the entire implementation period of the programme.

2.3. Types of evaluations

The Atlantic Area evaluation plan is proportional to the financial allocation of the programme and takes into consideration its expected evolution and the elements reported, containing those associated with the performance framework.

According to the objectives previously defined, the specific needs of the programme and article 56(3)³ of Common Provisions Regulation, two main types of evaluations are foreseen for 2014-2020:

³ "During the programming period, the managing authority shall ensure that evaluations, including evaluations to assess effectiveness, efficiency and impact, are carried out for each programme on the basis of the evaluation plan and that each evaluation is subject to appropriate follow-up in accordance with the Fund-specific rules. At least once during the programming period, an evaluation shall assess how support from the European Structural & Investment (ESI) Funds has contributed to the objectives for each priority. All evaluations shall be examined by the monitoring committee and sent to the Commission."

- **Implementation evaluation:** on the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme, where it is also included the evaluation of the communication strategy;
- **Impact evaluation:** on each priority axis and specific objective of the programme, also encompassing the follow-up of result indicators.

By covering these two types of evaluations, the Interreg Atlantic Area evaluation plan encompasses implementation and impact assessments, pursuing two objectives: (i) analysing how the programme is being implemented and managed; (ii) evaluating the effects of the intervention.

The general objectives of this evaluation plan are the following:

- Offer a framework to plan impact and implementation evaluations;
- Expand the quality of evaluations applied during the programming period;
- Further support programme management and policy decisions based on the results of evaluations;
- Provide inputs for the relevant AIR and other reporting and monitoring exercises.

In what regards impact evaluation, the specific objectives are examining if the programme:

- Has succeeded in achieving the objectives of each priority;
- Has contributed to achieving the EU2020 objectives.

3. Evaluation framework: methodology, coordination and implementation

3.1 Methodology and data

Methodology

Evaluation shall be based on proper and rigorous methods in order to ensure credibility, and on full transparency throughout the entire process, from the design of the terms of reference up to the publication of reports.

As stated in EU (2014),⁴ impact evaluation is the adequate instrument to “disentangle the effects of the intervention from the contribution of other factors and to understand the functioning of a programme”.

Two central methodologies are used for impact evaluations:

- the theory based;
- the counterfactual based.

The first methodology, the theory-based impact evaluation, aims at answering the question “why and how it works?” Hence, this methodology is based on defining the theory supporting

⁴ Guidance Document on Monitoring and Evaluation - European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund - Concepts and recommendations (March 2014):

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2014/working/wd_2014_en.pdf .

the intervention and evaluating whether the implementation has been done in line with this theory.

For the second methodology, the counterfactual impact evaluation, the aim is answering the following question: “How much of the change is due to the intervention and for whom?” Hence, the goal is not to explain why a certain intervention works, but to use control or comparison groups to measure how much of the change is due to the intervention.

Despite the fact that both the above methodologies are relevant and - ideally - complementary, the theory based methodology seems more adequate for the Interreg Atlantic Area. In fact, since the means and resources of the programme are limited in relation to the eligible area and associated challenges, this type of methodology, by encompassing both quantitative and qualitative analyses, is foreseen to offer a more complete understanding in comparison with counterfactual methods, which are mainly quantitatively based. Moreover, this last methodology requires a credible control or comparison group, a considerable number of participants and entities in order to guarantee statistical significance and data both on supported and non-supported participants. Hence, the associated financial and technical requirements exclude this approach.

Data

Regardless of the selected methodology, an assessment of impacts of priorities demands micro data on supported entities and individual participants. The information gathered under article 125(2) (d) of CPR - data on each operation, including data on individual participants and operations – will be used to complete impact evaluations of interventions focused on individuals. Hence, the database used for monitoring projects (through their regular reporting – status/progress reports) will be the core source of data, providing the outline of outputs and results produced by projects.

Data to be gathered for the assessment will depend on the specific evaluation questions and therefore data coming from other sources rather than the monitoring system may also be needed. It may be required to collect new data through several tools, for example: interviews (with beneficiaries, programme bodies, other relevant target groups); desk-based research (in-depth analysis of programme documents such as projects’ application form and progress report; projects’ websites, etc.); benchmarking; literature review; surveys; case studies; statistical analysis.

The terms of reference for the selection of the external evaluators responsible for implementing the work will provide further details, but the bidders shall propose the most adequate evaluation method and data requests.⁵

3.2 Coordination and implementation

The Programme Monitoring Committee (PMC), by representing the programme partners, has a steering and decisive role in the development and implementation of the evaluation plan.

⁵ When planning the impact evaluation, the MA ensures the compliance to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which entered into force on 25 May 2018.

The PMC shall analyse and approve the evaluation plan and any of its amendments (article 110 (2) of CPR). It also examines the progress made in the implementation of the plan and the follow up given to the findings of the evaluations (article 110 (1) (b) CPR).

The Monitoring Committee has an essential role in monitoring and advising on the implementation of the evaluation plan and will examine the evaluation plan annually. Moreover, it will be actively involved in the definition of the Terms of Reference for the tendering process associated to the contractualisation of the external experts and will approve this document.

The evaluation plan is developed by the MA and must be presented to the PMC for approval. Furthermore, the MA will also monitor the evaluations, analyse its main conclusions and recommendations and elaborate the corresponding action plan with the measures to be taken to respond to each of these recommendations.

The MA will guarantee the progress and implementation of the evaluation plan by carrying out, with the support of the Joint Secretariat (JS), all the activities associated with the set up and implementation of this plan, namely: organising PMC meetings, contracting, coordinating and guaranteeing quality control of external experts; coordinating with EC, INTERACT, Interreg programmes and others.

In line with the Rules of Procedure of the PMC, the EC has an observer role and can advise the PMC at all stages of the evaluation process.

After the PMC approval of each version of the evaluation plan, the MA shall submit the document to the EC for information through the SFC system. Information on the evaluation plan, as well as the evaluation reports, will be published on the programme website, www.atlanticarea.eu.

The MA is responsible for the tendering of external evaluators. It will prepare the Terms of Reference (ToR), with the support of the JS, to be proposed to the Monitoring Committee for Approval. For the ToR, previous MA experience on public procurements and evaluations, and the EC guidance shall be used.

3.3 Synergy with other programmes and initiatives

Aiming at widening the evaluation perspective, enriching results of evaluation actions and avoiding duplication, the Interreg Atlantic Area promotes, whenever possible, synergies with other Interreg programmes, with INTERACT, with the EC, with other national and regional operational programmes, as well as with other entities involved in evaluation activities.

These collaborations occur at several levels: participation in organized joint events by INTERACT, EC or other programmes, and sharing methodologies, results of evaluations and good practices. Aiming at improving the performance and efficiency of the Atlantic Area programme, benchmarking actions with comparable Interreg Transnational programmes will be implemented

3.4 Involvement of stakeholders

The European Code of Conduct on Partnership strengthened the partnership principle in the context of the ESI Funds for the 2014-2020 programming period. In line with this principle, the Interreg Atlantic Area promotes the engagement of its stakeholders in the design and implementation of the evaluation plan whenever possible.

Relevant partners shall be involved in the evaluation of programmes within the framework of PMC meetings, examining the progress made in the implementation of the evaluation plan and the follow up of evaluations (in line with article 5 of CPR).

3.5 Evaluation expertise

According to article 54 (3) of the CPR, “evaluations are to be carried out by experts (internal or external) that are functionally independent from the authorities responsible for programme implementation.” Since the structure of the MA and JS does not conceive separate departments or units working with evaluation matters, such independency cannot be guaranteed. Hence, evaluation will be carried out by external experts that will be selected through an open and transparent tendering procedure.

Nevertheless, since the programme aims at ensuring an efficient use of human and financial resources assigned to evaluation activities, and also intends to guarantee the ownership of these activities, a mixed approach of internal and external expertise will be in place.

In summary, evaluations will be carried out by external evaluators. The MA and JS will provide them with information and input from the monitoring of approved projects, programme developments and all other information needed for the assessment. Further data collection will also be completed by external evaluators through questionnaires, interviews, and so on.

The results and conclusions of the final evaluation may be presented either by external evaluators or by the management bodies of the programme in its communication activities.

3.6 Communication of evaluation results

As already mentioned, the MA and JS will analyse and discuss the main results of the evaluations and elaborate an action plan for the monitoring and implementation of the main conclusions and recommendations drawn by the external evaluators.

Evaluation reports will be published on the programme website. The final evaluation reports will be transmitted to the EC through the SFC system. Moreover, the programme will actively promote the findings of evaluations through several communication and dissemination activities (for example, thematic workshops for beneficiaries, policy makers and other stakeholders; social media and community development, press releases, presentations at external events, *etc.*) as foreseen in the communication strategy.

Evaluation results will also be used by the Interreg Atlantic Area to improve the implementation of the programme and to sustain the development of the next programme post 2020.

3.7 Quality management strategy

In order to ensure the quality of the programme evaluations, adequate time must be foreseen to plan and procure evaluations. Specific criteria will be defined in the terms of reference for the selection of independent external evaluators. These criteria will be mainly focused on the capabilities and expertise in evaluation, specifically related to Cohesion policy and ETC programmes. Evaluators will be required to use a rigorous methodology to sustain the performance of their tasks. They should also prepare initial, intermediate and final reports on the implemented evaluations. The MA and JS will be responsible for quality control of the subcontracted evaluation tasks.

Regular information on findings and results and evaluation reports will be provided to the PMC.

3.8 Human and financial resources

The Head of the MA is engaged in the preparation of the action plan, which will be implemented with the support of the JS.

MA and JS will be involved in the evaluations on demand. To ensure good expertise of evaluation methodologies and rigorous planning and managing of evaluations, MA and JS will participate in **trainings** mainly offered by INTERACT, carry out self-studies and exchange with other ETC programmes.

In what concerns financial resources, an indicative amount of € 140 000 from the technical assistance (TA) budget was approved by the PMC for contracting external expertise on programme evaluation for the whole programming period 2014-2020 (€ 60 000 in 2018 and € 80 000 in 2023).

The TA budget is updated and approved by the PMC on an annual basis.

4. Planned evaluations and timing

Impact evaluations shall be planned in order to balance their timing. As a general rule, they should be scheduled as late as possible to allow for the availability of results, but also as early as possible to enable the findings to contribute to the policy process. In particular, the timing for evaluations shall be shaped according to the distinct phases of programme implementation. Hence, evaluations aiming at assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme may be carried out at an earlier stage than impact evaluations. For the latter, a critical mass of approved projects with initial results must exist.

The evaluation is implemented as follows:

1. Midterm evaluation – end 2018 / beginning of 2019

- **Implementation evaluation**
 - Use of TA budget
 - Programme management
 - Communication strategy

- **Impact evaluation**

- A first and preliminary analysis of projects will be carried out since there will be enough information for an initial evaluation of their inputs to the objectives of the programme
 - Projects of the first call will have enough results for appraisal

The timing for evaluations will also take into consideration the EC monitoring requests. Hence, the results of this first evaluation will feed in the AIR 2019 (article 50, CPR). The report will also emphasize the first lessons learnt during the programming period 2014-2020.

2. Final evaluation – end 2021/beginning of 2022

- **Implementation evaluation**

- Use of TA budget
- Programme management
- Communication strategy

- **Impact evaluation**

- All calls will have been launched
- Most projects will have reported their final activities
- A solid set of data and information will be available to evaluate the programme's impact

The results of this evaluation will feed into the Final Implementation Report to be sent to the EC until 31 December 2022. In addition, this report must summarise the findings of all evaluations carried out during the programming period 2014-2020. It will also highlight the lessons learnt for the post 2020.

Additionally, the programme must report progress in the implementation of the plan and the findings of the evaluation activities (when available) in the AIR submitted in 2017, 2019 and 2022 (covering the previous year of implementation).

Moreover, the programme is required to monitor its result indicators for 2019, 2021 and 2023 against the baseline values included in the Approved Cooperation Programme, as indicated in the document “Atlantic Area 2020 Transnational Cooperation Programme 2014-2020. Output and results indicators. Conceptual framework”.

Thus, the programme shall carry out continuous monitoring and evaluation of result indicators up to 2023, taking as reference the baseline values gathered either from official statistical sources or from surveys. In order to obtain comparable data, the surveys will be used, as far as possible, to the same interviewees in the questionnaires carried out to compute these values. The updated data will be included in the annual implementation reports.

To ensure their effectiveness, impact assessments on the programme's specific objectives will also include result indicators.

The planned evaluations and the relevant timing are listed in the table below.

EC report	Evaluations	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
		S1	S2										
	AIR												
Efficiency of the programme (effectiveness, partnership, baseline and target values for result indicators, stakeholders involvement, communication strategy)													
Impact of Specific Objectives (including the follow up of result indicators)													

5. Possible evaluation questions

The programme evaluation activities shall reply to questions such as those anticipated below. The questions are merely indicative. They will be further specified in the terms of reference for the selection of the evaluation experts.

1. Implementation evaluation

- **Efficiency and effectiveness of programme procedures**
 - Are the steps from project generation to contracting as well as project monitoring efficient? What can be improved (identify bottlenecks and lessons learned)?
 - Is the SIGI (“*Sistema de Informação e Gestão Integrada*”) effective in:
 - Supporting the several stages of projects’ life cycle from applications and selection processes up to the submission of progress reports and payment claims;
 - Managing documented data?
 - Measuring the targeted results and outputs?
 - Managing the several users of the IT platform?
 - What are the necessary improvements in the management of the programme in line with the results of the evaluation (for example, the reduction of administrative burden, simplification of procedures, etc.)?

- Is the Technical Assistance (TA) volume of resources sufficient to guarantee an efficient management of the programme?
- Are the human resources of the JS adequate to fulfil its various tasks in terms of number and capabilities?
- **Effectiveness of partnership and the involvement of stakeholders**
 - Has the programme succeeded in involving its stakeholders and in particular the policy relevant partners and private partners?
 - Has the programme been able to attract new, relevant partners?
 - What are the main features of the partnerships (*eg.*, location, type of partners, *etc.*)
 - To what extent are the programme and the projects sustainable?
- **Evaluation of the programme communication strategy**
 - Is there sufficient awareness and knowledge about the activities and achievements of the programme?
 - Have the management bodies of the programme ensured an effective communication flow in the programme area?
 - Have the programme communication measures reached the relevant target groups in an efficient way?
 - Has the programme contributed to raise the capacity of projects to communicate their own accomplishments?
 - What are the necessary improvements in the communication strategy based on the evaluation findings?
- **Compliance with the strategic environmental assessment**
 - Are environmental aspects taken sufficiently into consideration in the phases of project evaluation and selection?
 - Is there the need for other environmental indicators to be included in the monitoring? Which?

2. Impact evaluation of each specific objective

- What has changed in the cooperation area of the programme in terms of governance, integration policies, sustainable economic development and other dimensions?
- How has the programme contributed to that change and how are the effects of the programme distributed in the Atlantic Area (cities, rural areas, tourist zones, *etc.*)?
- Which continued interventions would be needed in this field?
- How has the priority axis and specific objective contributed to wider policy goals, in particular those of Europe2020, the territorial agenda, the horizontal principles defined by the programme and the EC (non-discrimination, sustainable development, *etc.*) and to dimensions such as the quality of citizens' life?