



**Interreg**   
**SLOVENIA - HUNGARY**  
European Union | European Regional Development Fund

# Evaluation of the COOPERATION PROGRAMME INTERREG V-A SLOVENIA-HUNGARY

Final report, July 2017



Programme: Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovenia-Hungary

Contracting authority: Government office for development and European cohesion policy

Contractor: Nov'na razvoj d.o.o.

Evaluator: Julija Marošek

Place and date: Prevalje, July 2017

## Table of contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction.....  | 5  |
| 1.1. Purpose of evaluation.....   | 5  |
| 1.2. Methodological steps .....   | 5  |
| 2. Collection of data and analysis.....   | 6  |
| 2.1. About the programme and main milestones .....  | 6  |
| 2.2. Implementation of the Open call .....  | 7  |
| 2.2.1. Support to applicants in the application phase .....                                 | 7  |
| 2.2.2. Receipt of applications, assessment and selection procedure .....                    | 11 |
| 2.2.3. Timeline for processing of applications.....   | 15 |
| 2.3. Overview of projects approved in the 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadline..... | 16 |
| 2.3.1. List of approved projects.....   | 16 |
| 2.3.2. Geographical distribution of the approved projects .....                             | 17 |
| 2.4. Selected financial data.....   | 17 |
| 2.6 Communication activities .....  | 19 |
| 3. Evaluation .....   | 22 |
| 4. Conclusions and recommendations.....   | 30 |
| 5. Annexes .....  | 33 |
| 5.1 List of interviews .....  | 33 |

## List of tables

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Table 1:</b> Structure of the Cooperation Programme.....   | 6  |
| Table 2: Submission of applications .....   | 11 |
| <b>Table 3:</b> Received and approved projects under 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadline for submission per Priority Axes..... | 12 |
| <b>Table 4:</b> Quality assessment criteria and their importance in the total score.....  | 13 |
| <b>Table 5:</b> Quality assessment of applications .....  | 14 |
| <b>Table 6:</b> Timeline for processing of applications .....   | 15 |
| <b>Table 7:</b> List of approved projects per PAs and specific objectives .....   | 16 |
| <b>Table 8:</b> Location of project partners by NUTS 3 areas (projects approved under 1 <sup>st</sup> / 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadline) ..... | 17 |
| <b>Table 9:</b> Committed ERDF funds per Priority Axes .....  | 17 |
| <b>Table 10:</b> Project budgets overview (total costs) .....   | 18 |
| <b>Table 11:</b> Main cost categories in approved projects .....  | 18 |
| <b>Table 12:</b> Performance framework and expected contributions of approved projects.....   | 19 |
| <b>Table 13:</b> PA1 - Expected contribution of approved projects to the programme output indicators .....                              | 26 |
| <b>Table 14:</b> PA2 - Expected contribution of approved projects to the programme output indicators .....                              | 27 |
| <b>Table 15:</b> TA – Interim achievement of TA projects to the programme output indicators.....  | 28 |
| <b>Table 16:</b> Achievement of communication strategy targets.....   | 29 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Charts 1-3: Usefulness of the supporting documents for preparation of applications..... | 7  |
| Chart 4: Usefulness of workshops.....   | 8  |
| Chart 5: Assessment of specific elements of the project development .....               | 8  |
| Chart 6: Who was contacted for support.....   | 9  |
| Chart 7: Assessment of provided support.....  | 9  |
| Chart 8: Use of eMS in project application phase.....                                   | 10 |
| Chart 9: Appeal of the eMS graphic interface.....                                       | 10 |
| Chart 10: Division of work in entering data in eMS.....                                 | 10 |
| Chart 11: Use of the eMS in the project application phase.....                          | 11 |
| Chart 12: Assessment of the support provided by the National Authorities.....           | 11 |
| Chart 13: Most common communication channels used by LPs.....                           | 20 |
| Chart 14: Assessment of the programme website.....                                      | 21 |

## Abbreviations

|     |                                 |
|-----|---------------------------------|
| AT  | Austria                         |
| CBC | Cross-border Cooperation        |
| CP  | Cooperation Programme           |
| HIT | Harmonised Implementation Tools |
| HU  | Hungary                         |
| HR  | Croatia                         |
| JS  | Joint Secretariat               |
| LP  | Lead Partner                    |
| MA  | Managing Authority              |
| MC  | Monitoring Committee            |
| NA  | National Authority              |
| OP  | Operational Programme           |
| PA  | Priority Axis                   |
| PP  | Project Partner                 |
| eMS | electronic Monitoring System    |
| SI  | Slovenia                        |
| VAT | Value Added Tax                 |

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Purpose of evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the programme management and implementation focusing on project application and selection procedure and Communication strategy.

### Key evaluation questions:

- How effective and efficient are the programme structures?
- How efficient and effective are the programme procedures?
- What is the progress of the programme towards achieving targets of specific objectives?
- What is the progress in implementation of communication strategy and achievement of the set objectives?

## 1.2. Methodological steps

Methodological steps:

| Step  | Timeline         |
|---|------------------|
| 1. Meetings with JS to clarify the tasks                          | April 2017       |
| 2. Design of the questionnaire for LPs in cooperation with the JS | April 2017       |
| 3. Analysis of secondary sources                                  | April - May 2017 |
| 4. Processing of online survey for LPs                            | May 2017         |
| 5. Interviews with programme bodies                               | June 2017        |
| 6. Observation, judgment, assessment                              | June 2017        |
| 7. Draft report   | July 2017        |

The analysis is based on the monitoring data provided by the Joint Secretariat (JS), data obtained from Application Forms, and data available on the programme website. The overall cut-off date was 30 March 2017, whereas data on achievement of indicators of the Communication strategy refer to 31 December 2017.

Lead Partners of all applied projects in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round were invited to take part in an online survey. The survey was opened from 14 April to 8 May 2017. 73 LPs (some LPs applied with several projects), were invited to participate in the survey. 25 responses (34,2%) were received, of which 12 (48%) from Hungarian and 13 (52%) from Slovenian LP organizations. 15 out of 24 respondents (63%) had experience with cooperation in the 2007-2013 programme. For this reason, the interpretation of findings should be made with some reservation regarding validity for the entire target group.

Qualitative data were collected from interviews with MA, JS/Info Point and National Authorities in Slovenia and Hungary.

Main secondary sources used:

- Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovenia – Hungary
- Application Pack published on the programme Website
- Communication strategy

The approved projects are still in the early phase of implementation. The assessment of the progress towards achievement of the programme specific objectives has been made on the basis of expected contributions of these projects to the programme output indicators.

Due to a smaller scope of the assignment the scale of analysis was limited.

## 2. Collection of data and analysis

### 2.1. About the programme and main milestones

The Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovenia-Hungary (CP) was approved by the European Commission on 18 September 2015.

The programme eligible area covers four NUTS 3 regions: Vas and Zala counties in Hungary and Pomurska and Podravska regions in Slovenia. The programme area is the same as in the previous period, however the available funds of the programme decreased from 29 million to 14.8 million of ERDF funds.

The Cooperation Programme (CP) is focused on two Priority Axes and two Specific Objectives. Technical Assistance is programmed as Priority Axis 3.

Table 1: Structure of the Cooperation Programme

| Priority axis 1: ATTRACTIVE REGION   | Priority axis 2: COOPERATIVE REGION  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Thematic objective: TO6, Priority investment 6c</b></p> <p><b>Specific objective 1.1:</b> To increase attractiveness through the diversification and cross-border integration of the sustainable touristic offer in the programme area, based on the protection of the elements of cultural and natural heritage and development of products and services in the less developed rural areas linking them to touristic magnets.</p> | <p><b>Thematic objective: TO11, Priority investment 11b</b></p> <p><b>Specific objective 2.1:</b> To increase the capacity for cooperation in order to reach a higher level of maturity in cross-border relations.</p>   |
| <p><b>Expected results:</b> A higher level of development of sustainable forms of tourism in the remote, rural regions of the programme area, while building on the experience and attractiveness of the important tourist centres located here.</p> <p><b>Result indicator:</b> Number of overnight stays in the programme area, 5% increase from by 2023 (baseline 2014).</p>  | <p><b>Expected results:</b> Higher level, more stable, as well as more extended legal and administrative cross-border cooperation amongst the institutions and organizations from both sides of the border</p> <p><b>Result indicator:</b> The level of cross-border cooperation at institutional level in the programme area; 20% increase on the scale by 2023 (baseline 3.05 in 2015)</p> |
| Priority axis 3: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE  |  |
| <p><b>Specific objective:</b> Contribution to the efficient implementation of the Cooperation Programme.</p>   |  |

All key programme and project implementation procedures are supported by electronic monitoring system (eMS). It is used by all programme bodies, applicants and beneficiaries, however with different levels of accessibility. The eMS has been made operational in September 2015.

The opening conference was organised on 20 October 2015.

The Monitoring Committee (MC) was set up on its 1<sup>st</sup> meeting on 24 November 2015. At the same meeting the documentation for the open call for proposals, the programme eligibility rules, the technical assistance projects, the Communication strategy and rules on eligibility of expenditures were approved.

The open call for proposals was published on 18 December 2015.

By 30 March 2017, applications received to two deadlines have been processed. In total, 6 projects were approved, 1 project in the 1<sup>st</sup> round with a Subsidy contracts signed in September 2016, and 5 projects in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round with Subsidy contracts for 3 projects signed on 27 March 2017. Two projects were in the phase of fulfilling conditions set by the MC prior to the contract signature. Although still in the process of signing a Subsidy contract, the two projects were included in the analysis (financial, expected contribution to programme indicators, etc.).

## 2.2. Implementation of the Open call

The Open call system enables the applicants to submit project applications continuously after the call is launched until programme funds are available. The JS publishes deadlines agreed by the MC to which applications need to be submitted in order to be included in the project selection procedure at the following MC meeting.

### 2.2.1. Support to applicants in the application phase

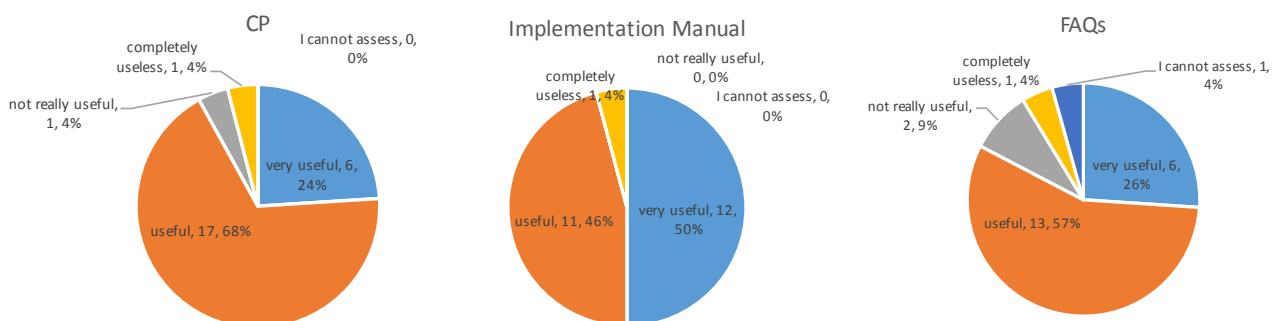
The MA/JS in cooperation with NAs offer support to potential applicants in project development and preparation of applications. The main forms of support comprise:

- Published CP and guidance available at the programme website: open call, application pack, frequently asked questions, other relevant information;
- Informative workshops for applicants organised by MA/JS and in cooperation with NAs. Materials presented at workshops were published on the programme website;
- Information support and advice is provided by JS in Maribor and Info Points at Zalaegerszeg and Szombathely (e-mail, phone, face to face meetings);
- Information support and advice provided by NAs (e-mail, phone, face to face meetings);
- IT support concerning technical questions related to eMS.

### Usefulness of programme documents and guidelines

Programme documents and guidelines needed for preparation of the application are available on the programme website.

The most useful document for the preparation of the application in view of LP-survey respondents was the Implementation manual for beneficiaries, followed by the CP and Frequently asked questions. Though useful for most respondents, the highest share of dissatisfaction was expressed regarding FAQs.



Charts 1-3: Usefulness of the supporting documents for preparation of applications

### Workshops for applicants

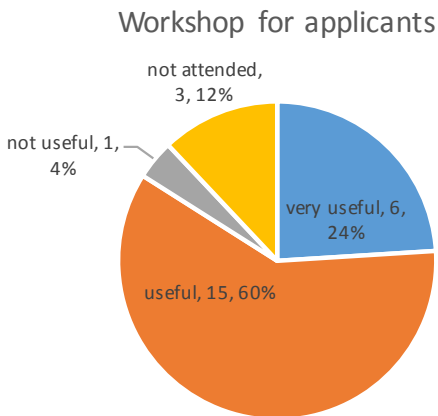
Workshops for applicants were organised after deadlines for submission of applications were announced. In the 1<sup>st</sup> round, one workshop was organised on each side of the border, whereas in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round one workshop was organised jointly for both sides. Both rounds attracted around 300 participants.

Informative workshops were used to convey key messages about the programme, its requirements and guidance regarding the project development. By the observation of the JS/Info Pint participants were not ready to ask specific questions or share project ideas in the plenary. They preferred to use the opportunity during breaks, over e-mail, or scheduled individual meetings.

Possible reasons are seen in a relatively small size of the programme area and similar potentials addressed (e.g. cultural heritage), so the participants were not willing to share the 'how'.

Respondent to LP-surveys proposed to:

- use the workshops for applicants to support partner search
- organise workshops at several locations and increase information activities in announcing of the events.



By experience of the MA/JS the participation in workshops is decreasing since the start of the programme.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> workshop was upgraded with inclusion of lessons learned from processing of applications in the 1<sup>st</sup> round.

It was observed by programme bodies that old and relatively stable partnerships are preparing new projects. For new entrants to the programme it seems to be more difficult to find partners and develop effective partnerships (not many actors identified, 'old partners' prefer to cooperate within already established constellations, language is also perceived a barrier). Trust, previous experience and time play an important role in the forming of partnerships and quality project development.

Chart 4: Usefulness of workshops

### Development of project proposals

60% of the 30 surveyed LPs applied with 1 project and 35% with 2 projects. Only one respondent applied with 3 projects (5% of all respondents). 63% of respondents had experience in cooperation in the 2007-2013 programme.

Respondents assessed different aspects of the project development. These assessments are quite polarised. Most frequently the challenges were associated with ensuring of the co-financing (60%), forming a project partnership (56%) and with aligning of the project with the requirements of the CP (54%). On the other hand, consolidation of interests among project partners was not perceived problematic for 63% of respondents; similarly, the understanding of the State Aid was easy for 58% of respondents.

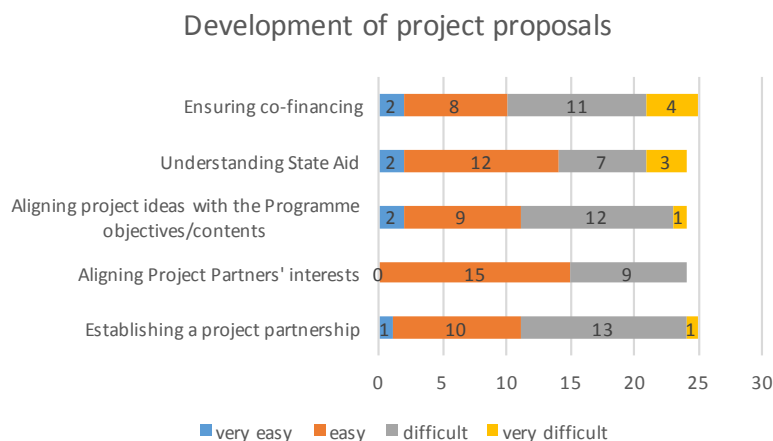


Chart 5: Assessment of specific elements of the project development

Requests for information from the JS under the 1<sup>st</sup> deadline was not so big as in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round, when many applicants rejected for the quality at the MC meeting, came for clarifications.



Most questions posed by applicants to Info Point under 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline still concerned technical issues (annexes, VAT, eligibility of partners, ...). Content related questions came up mainly during the preparation of applications for the 3<sup>rd</sup> deadline. Some applicants expressed surprise about the downsize of the programme funds.

By observation of the programme bodies, the applicants, in particular those having experience with the CBC programme in 2007-2013, underestimated the changes of the programme, which were reflected in increased result orientation, more focused contents and increased attention towards measuring the results.

The applicants have not sufficiently examined the CP and its intervention logic. The project intervention logic has also been slightly changed by introduction of a new term – deliverable. Many applicants failed in understanding the focus of the PA2 (capacity building, institutional cooperation) and applied with projects that tackled other key themes which were relevant for the sectors/thematic areas, however not the priority of the CP.

Similarly, in the view of the MA and the Slovenian NA, too often projects started from local ideas that would like to be expanded to a cross border level, however the real cross border challenges and potentials were not well considered. In such situations it was difficult for the applicants to align the project with programme challenges and intervention logic, indicators and related measuring methods.

Many project ideas were similar. The MA/JS could only after the MC meeting recommend to different applicants to consider the possibility of working together. Nevertheless, the proposals to join the ideas were not accepted by applicants.

In providing support to potential applicants, the Hungarian NA worked closely with the Info points. The role of the NA was concentrated more on content related support, such as contribution of project to the CP objectives. During preparation of projects to be submitted to the 1<sup>st</sup> deadline, more than 10 applicants contacted the NA, while in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round only a few used this opportunity. By experience the interest is much bigger at the programme opening. One of the possible reasons for the lower number of contacts was that project that failed AB check in the 1<sup>st</sup> round, reapplied and did not seek for any additional support. There seem to be less interest for the PA2 by Hungarian partners; among projects asking for information from the NA only one addressed the PA2.

The JS made some effort to collect lists of potential beneficiaries and directly informed the potential institutions on opportunities for taking part in the programme.

According to the LP-survey respondents, the JS and Info Points were the main contact to get advice and information when preparing the application. Satisfaction with the services of the JS/Info Point is assessed very high in all listed aspects, especially good responsiveness of the JS/Info point was noted.

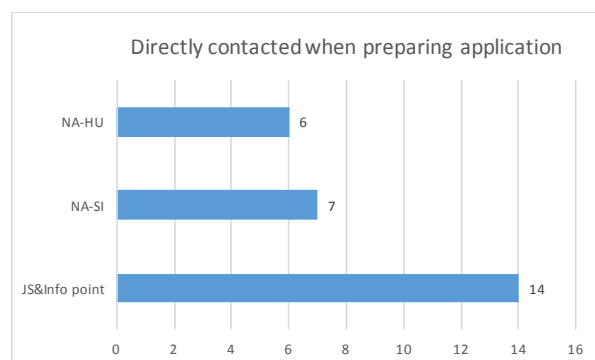


Chart 6: Who was contacted for support

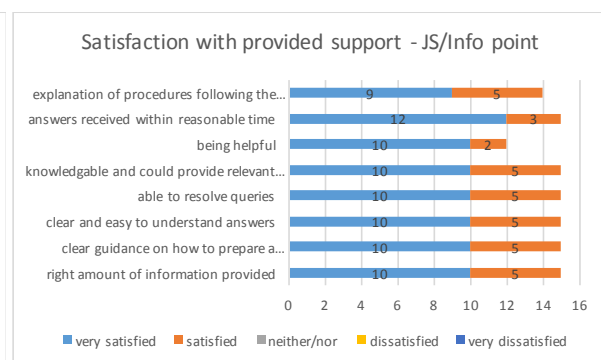


Chart 7: Assessment of provided support

## Preparing applications in eMS

The preparation of applications in the eMS was challenging for more than half of respondents: 32% found the system very difficult, 32% difficult. The system was easy to use for only 16% of respondents, while the rest were neutral in their assessment. Respondent commented that differences between entered data and printed versions existed, and that the entering of data was time consuming due to mistakes in the functioning of the system. As observed by the MA, JS and Info point, difficulties occurred in defining the reporting periods and linking them with the budget. If not the right order was followed, the work done by the applicant was lost.

The JS provided support to applicants regarding the use of the system. Often queries did not relate to eMS, but were content related. The Implementation Manual – Part 3, however provides a very detailed guidance on how to prepare the application, including warnings about possible consequences if certain steps are not followed.

After analysing most common mistakes in the 1<sup>st</sup> round of submissions, the JS included more control mechanisms in the application module of the eMS to support the applicants in checking that all parts of applications are filled in. However, if the field contains a sign (e.g. -, x, /,...) in order to save (uncompleted) work, the alert will not be activated. Later on in the work process these fields can easily be overlooked by the applicants.

Preparing the application in eMS was

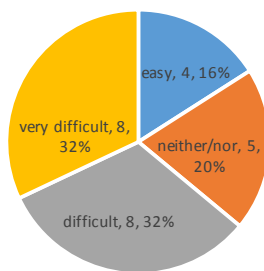


Chart 8: Use of eMS in project application phase

Appeal of the eMS graphic interface

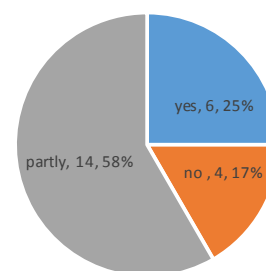


Chart 9: Appeal of the eMS graphic interface

The system was used by several project partners that filled in data simultaneously what could potentially lead to mistakes.

It was not uncommon that work process between the project partners was conducted in English language and parts of applications were not translated. Mistakes could also be done as PPs used own excel files for preparing the budget and changes were not consolidated appropriately in the eMS. According to surveyed LPs, in most cases the work has been done by the LP themselves, though also other combinations were applied.

Who entered data in eMS?

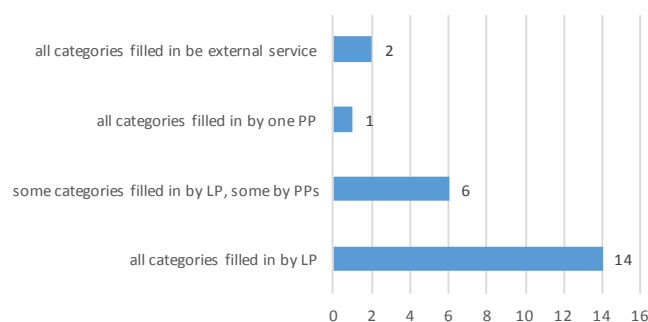


Chart 10: Division of work in entering data in eMS

## Assessment of the support provided by programme bodies compared to 2007-2013

Respondents of the LP-survey who have experience with the 2007-2013 programme, assessed the quality of service provided by the programme bodies compared to the previous period.

In most cases, the improvement (significant or slight) was noted for the Info Points (50%), followed by the JS (47%) and the MA (43%). On the other hand, also worsening of services was noticed mostly for the Info Points (28%), followed by the JS (13%) and the MA (7%). These assessments have to be taken with reserve due to a small number of respondents (14, 15).

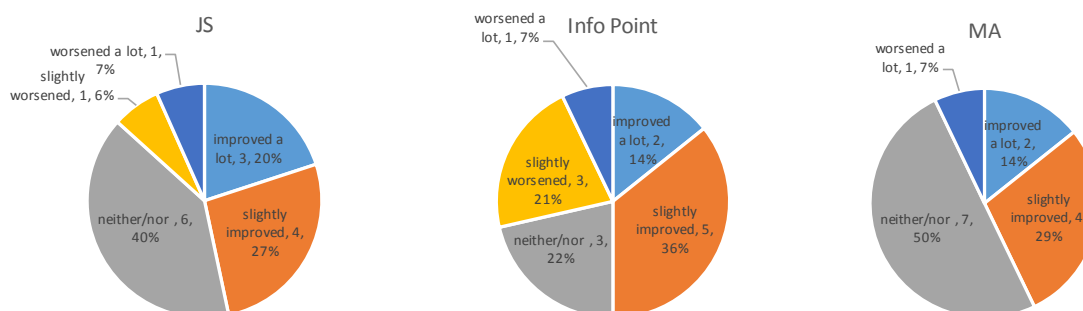


Chart 11: Use of the eMS in the project application phase

The National Authorities were also assessed by a relatively small number of respondents (11, 12). Improvement of the services of the Hungarian NA was recognised by 58% and of the Slovenian NA by 55% of respondents. Relatively high share of neutral assessment was given to the Hungarian NA (42%). 18% of respondents found the services of the Slovenian NA worse than in the previous period.

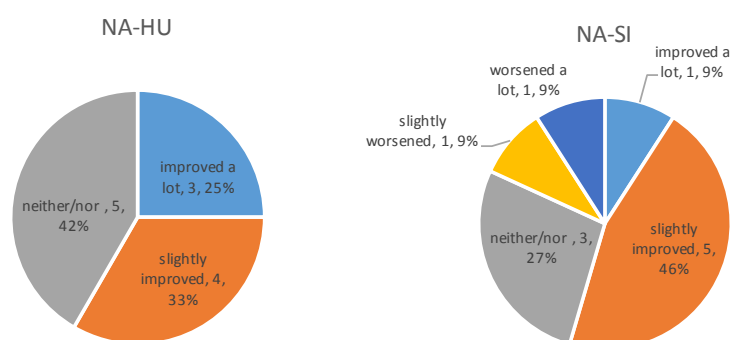


Chart 12: Assessment of the support provided by the National Authorities

### 2.2.2. Receipt of applications, assessment and selection procedure

Although the purpose of the open call is to allow applicants continuous submission of applications, few applications were submitted before the deadline and the majority on the final day for submission.

Table 2: Submission of applications

| Day of submission        | 1 <sup>st</sup> deadline | 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadline |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5 days ahead of deadline |                          | 1 (2%)                   |
| 4 days ahead of deadline |                          | 4 (10%)                  |
| 3 days ahead of deadline |                          | 5 (12%)                  |
| 2 days ahead of deadline | 3 (7%)                   | 5 (12%)                  |

|                         |          |          |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|
| 1 day ahead of deadline | 8 (17%)  | 5 (12%)  |
| Deadline for submission | 35 (76%) | 22 (52%) |

Source: JS

### Overview of received and approved projects

The interest for the programme under both deadlines was quite high. 89 applications were received under both deadlines, 46 in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 43 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> round. 67% of applications addressed PA1 and only a third the PA2. Whereas only 1 application (2% of all received) was approved in the 1<sup>st</sup> round, the share increased in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round with 5 approved applications (12% of the received).

Considering a relatively small size of the programme area and limited pool of potential beneficiaries, the programme attracted high number of applications. For comparison, 125 applications were received under two deadlines in a much bigger Interreg V-A SI-AT programme.

**Table 3:** Received and approved projects under 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline for submission per Priority Axes

| <b>Applications 1st deadline</b>  | <b>PA1 6c</b> | <b>PA2- 11b</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|---|---------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Submitted applications, % of total received applications under 1 <sup>st</sup> deadline | 32 (70%)      | 14 (30%)        | 46 (100%)    |
| Administratively compliant & eligible applications, % of received under IP              | 6 (17%)       | 5 (35%)         | 11 (24%)     |
| Approved & signed contracts   | 1 (3%)        | 0 (0%)          | 1 (2%)       |
| <b>Applications 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline</b>   | <b>PA1 6c</b> | <b>PA2- 11b</b> | <b>Total</b> |
| Submitted applications, % of total received applications under 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadline | 28 (65%)      | 15 (35%)        | 43 (100%)    |
| Administratively compliant & eligible applications, % of received under IP              | 22 (79%)      | 12 (80%)        | 34 (79%)     |
| Approved & signed contracts   | 4 (14%)       | 1 (7%)          | 5 (11.6%)    |

Source: JS/MA, programme website

The 3<sup>rd</sup> deadline was due in April 2017 and the number of submitted applications dropped to 26. Though not analysed in this report, possible reasons in the view of the JS/Info point could be that partnerships decided not to develop further projects failed in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> round, or that limited capacities of partners with engagement in other projects (ETC, national) currently do not allow to engage in projects. NUTS3 regions cooperating in this programme are also eligible in other CBC programmes with Austria and Croatia.

### Administrative and eligibility check (AB check)

The intention of the MA was to increase the efficiency of the assessment and selection procedure and to keep up with the planned dynamics to announce two deadlines per year.

Experience from the previous programme period showed that significant share of applicants had to be asked for clarifications or missing documents during AB check, what prolonged the procedure.

The AB Check is done by the JS in compliance with the check list published in the Implementation manual for beneficiaries. In order to pass, the application has to be 100% compliant at the submission stage. This means that in case of inconsistencies or any missing elements, the application is rejected without prior request for clarifications or supplements.

During the AB check the investment documentation is not examined. PPs declare and confirm compliance with the programme rules and requirements by signing the Project Partner statement. In case statement is at later stages found false, PPs can face prosecution by the penal code.

The JS internally harmonised the approach in checking of the applications (e.g. what is understood by filled in Annex, etc.) and treated all applicants equally. The JS agreed one exemption concerning the

project budget - if data were prepared in one language only, the application was accepted and the bilingual version had to be produced at a later stage provided the project was approved.

The AB check in the 1<sup>st</sup> round resulted in 76% of rejected applications and the JS/Info point received many negative feedbacks by applicants who failed it. Main reasons for rejection of applications were formal mistakes, such as mandatory fields not filled in bilingually or not filled in at all, inconsistencies between different parts of the application, data in annexes not completed, etc.

Applicants in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round were more successful and the rate of applications that passed AB check increased to 79%. According to the JS, the reasons for improvement lie in measures taken to avoid mistakes in preparation of applications (workshops, published FAQs on mistakes on the webpage, eMS has been upgraded, face-to-face meetings with potential applicants). The MC decided to continue with agreed procedure in the 3<sup>rd</sup> round.

### Quality assessment

The assessment procedures and criteria are published in Part 3 of the Implementation manual for beneficiaries. The surveyed LPs self-assessed to what extent they were familiar with those:

- Of 21 respondents, 81% were fully and 10% partly acquainted with the assessment and selection procedure, 10% were not
- Of 25 respondents, 68% checked quality criteria when preparing application, 32% got familiar with.

The **criteria for quality assessment** were designed on the basis of HIT tools. In accordance with increased result oriented approach, the programme attributed the highest importance to strategic aspects of the project assessment.

Table 4: Quality assessment criteria and their importance in the total score

| Set of criteria                           | Sub-criteria and max. points  | Max. points | % of total score |
|---|---|-------------|------------------|
| <b>Strategic assessment</b>               | Relevance and strategy (C1- C2), max. 9 points<br>Project's contributions to the programme's objectives, expected results and outputs (C3-C8), max. 27 points<br>Horizontal principles (C9), max. 3 points (1 for each principle) | 39          | 36%              |
| <b>Specific leading principles for PA</b> | 6c: 6 guiding principles for each intervention area, (C10-C13-C18), max. 27 points<br>11b: 6 guiding principles for each intervention area, (C19-C23), max. 27 points   | 27          | 25%              |
| <b>Cooperation</b>                        | Cooperation character and cooperation approach (C24-C27), max. 17 points  | 17          | 16%              |
| <b>Operational assessment</b>             | Management (C28-C29), max. 6 points<br>Work plan (C30-C32), max. 12 points<br>Budget (C33), max. 6 points   | 24          | 22%              |
| <b>Total</b>                              |   | <b>107</b>  | <b>100%</b>      |

Source: Implementation manual for beneficiaries, own analysis

Compared to other CBC programmes (and proposed criteria in the HIT tools), the assessment of contribution to wider strategies is not included in chosen criteria, though inputs are requested in the application form.

The 'Specific guiding principles for IP' derived from the CP are to some extent unclear and partially overlap with strategic criteria:

- A distinction of what is assessed in criteria C20 and C22, which concern projects under 11b, is not evident. Both criteria assess capitalisation on the project results implemented in the past. Although assessors harmonised themselves on the approach, this is not shown transparently in the implementation manual. C20/C22 to a certain extent also overlap with the strategic

criterion C2, which observes the use of available knowledge and how the project builds on existing results and practices.

- Identical criteria C15 and C21 (observing principles of environmental sustainability for 6c and 11b) and C18 and C23 (observing inclusion of disadvantaged groups for 6c and 11b) do not function as IP specific in the assessment grid as used for both PAs. They partly overlap with the C9 (horizontal contributions) in the strategic part.
- The overlap also exists between the IP specific principle C14 for 6c (effect on the number of overnight stays, which is also the programme result indicator) and the criteria C4 (clear link to a programme specific result indicator).

**Quality assessment** of applications is done by 3 assessors of the JS, who are not involved in the project development support.

Different approaches to assessment have been tried in previous programmes (external assessors, external assessors in combination with the JS). In the opinion of the MA/JS the use of internal assessors proved to be the best option compared to previous practices. The JS personnel was involved in the programming process and has good knowledge of the programme objectives, contents, expected results. A weakness perceived by some assessors is lack of specific thematic knowledge or knowledge of specific national legislation. The JS has a possibility to engage external expertise.

Assessors attended a training organised by the MA for three CBC programmes (SI-AT, SI-HR, SI-HU). The team was additionally harmonised internally.

Table 5: Quality assessment of applications

| <b>Applications 1st deadline</b>                                  | <b>PA1</b> | <b>PA2</b> | <b>Total, % of all assessments</b> |
|---|------------|------------|------------------------------------|
| Number of applications scored 70% and more (75 points and more)   | 1          | 0          | 1 (9,1%)                           |
| Number of applications scored between (64-74 points)              | 3          | 1          | 4 (36,4%)                          |
| Number of applications scored less than 60% (less than 64 points) | 2          | 4          | 6 (54,5%)                          |
| <b>Applications 2nd deadline</b>                                  | <b>PA1</b> | <b>PA2</b> | <b>Total, % of all assessments</b> |
| Number of applications scored 70% and more (75 points and more)   | 7          | 1          | 8 (23,5%)                          |
| Number of applications scored between (64-74 points)              | 1          | 2          | 3 (8,9%)                           |
| Number of applications scored less than 60% (less than 64 points) | 14         | 9*         | 23 (67,6,0%)                       |

Source: JS, own analysis / \* two projects were found administratively incompliant during the quality check and thus scored with 0 points.

Each application is assessed independently by two assessors. If projects comprise infrastructure and works, the assessors can request from applicants the investment documentation for check.

The final score is calculated as average of two assessments. Assessors' comments are summarised in a Summary Appraisal Grid, which is presented to the MC. In 47% of cases, the difference in given score between the two assessors was between 0 - 5 points (up to 5% of total score), 30% of assessments differed between 6 - 11 points (up to 10% of total score), and 20% differed from 12 to 15 points (11% - to 14%). The scores differed 22 points (21% of total score) in one case. The project was of poor quality and did not reach the threshold by none of the assessors. Higher differences were more frequent in assessment of projects below the threshold.

In both rounds, more than half of assessed projects did not reach a threshold, the share was significant especially in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round (68%). Also, the overall quality of projects above the threshold was not very high in the 1<sup>st</sup> round, approximately one third of assessed projects scored below 70% of total points. The share of applications proposed for approval increased from 9% in the 1<sup>st</sup> round to 23.5% in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round.

### MC decision on projects proposals

The MC discusses projects assessed by the JS. Projects are clustered in 3 groups (recommended for approval, recommended with conditions and recommended for rejection).

The MC procedure on selection of projects brought a new step compared to the previous period - the possibility to postpone a project that has prospects to be approved if certain conditions are met. Support of the JS and NAs regarding improvements is available. The applicants can work on the same application already inserted in the eMS.

In the view of the Hungarian NA it can be sometimes difficult for assessors to be aware of any specific regional or national circumstances and therefore the MC meeting is the place where such situations can be discussed. Different views or positions of the cooperating sides are solved and harmonised at MC meetings and the ranking list is usually followed.

By opinion of the MA, the time devoted for the presentation of each project in a more qualitative manner at the MC meeting is not sufficient.

Divergence in the views of the MC members was noted when projects of the 2<sup>nd</sup> round were discussed so the final decision was taken at the following meeting.

### Face to face meetings with applicants

Face to face meetings between the LPs of approved projects and project managers (assessors) of the JS are organised to clarify any open issues. These meetings are assessed as very positive by the MA. The applicants clarify output indicators, methodologies for monitoring of indicators, activities, number of target groups, adjust the timeline for implementation and similar.

Applicants whose projects were rejected or postponed, have the possibility to clarify the project weaknesses with the head of the JS or the NAs.

### 2.2.3. Timeline for processing of applications

60% of the 20 LP-survey respondents found the duration of the assessment procedure as expected and 49% longer than expected.

Overview of main milestones in processing of applications shows that the process from the receipt of applications to the signature of Subsidy contract for both rounds with similar number of received applications was between 7-8 months. Differences exist in achievements of intermediate milestones.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> round, the AB check was done quicker than in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round, which was partly affected by summer holiday periods. The Quality check in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round was done in shorter time considering the increased number of applications. State aid check is done in app. 1 month and was to some extent done in parallel with quality check. The period from submission of applications to the MC decision was done in 15 weeks under the 1<sup>st</sup> and took 25 weeks in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round, where the decision was postponed at the initial and taken at the following MC meeting.

The period from the MC decision to the signature of contracts vary and is dependent on the conditions to be fulfilled by applicants, the readiness of project partners to start with the implementation, and similar. E.g. two projects approved in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round comprise road/cycle path constructions, and in accordance with the programme rules, there is a possibility to submit investment documentation in 6 months from the MC decision on approval.

Table 6: Timeline for processing of applications

| Steps  | 1 <sup>st</sup> deadline | 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadline |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|  | Start date - end date    | Start date - end date    |
| 0. Publication of the Open call / announcement of the deadline | 18/12/2015 -             | 24/05/2016 (website)     |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Informative workshops for applicants   | 13/01/2016 (Szombately, HU)   | 14/06/2016 (Moravske Toplice,SI)   |
|   | 18/01/2016 (Radenci, SI)  | -  |
| <b>2. Receipt of applications in eMS</b>  | <b>12/02/2016 at 23:59</b>  | <b>25/07/2016 at 12.00</b>   |
| 3. Administrative & eligibility check (AB Check)                                | 15/02/2016 – 29/02/2016<br>(46 applications, 11 workdays)                 | 26/07/2016 – 29/08/2016<br>(43 applications, 24 workdays)  |
| 4. Quality check of applications  | 01/03/2016 – 22/04/2016<br>(11 applications x 2 assessments, 29 workdays) | 08/09/2016 – 27/10/2016<br>(34 applications x 2 assessments, 36 workdays)                          |
| 5. State aid check/opinion for projects   | 08/04/2016 – 09/05/2016   | 10/10/2016 – 10/11/2016  |
| <b>6. MC meeting – decision on projects</b>                                     | <b>25/05/2016 – 26/05/2016</b><br>(15 weeks from submission to decision)  | <b>16/01/2017</b><br>(25 weeks from submission to decision)*                                       |
| 7. Preparation and sending out decision letters                                 | 27/05/2016 – 20/06/2016   | 23/12/2016 – 06/01/2017  |
| 8. Face-to-face meetings with beneficiaries                                     | 24/06/2016  | 06/01/2017 – 20/02/2017  |
| 9. Preparation of ERDF contracts (fulfilling conditions by beneficiaries)       | 27/06/2016 – 01/09/2016<br>(1 contract)                                   | 20/02/2017 – 24/03/2017<br>(3 contracts), 2 projects still in the process of fulfilling conditions |
| <b>10. Signing of ERDF contracts</b>  | <b>21/09/2016</b>   | <b>27/03/2017 (3 contracts)</b>  |
| 11. Duration from submission of application to signing of the Subsidy contracts | 7 months  | 8 months   |

\* decision not taken at the meeting 5-6 December 2016, postponed to 16 January 2017

Average time needed for the processing of applications has shortened significantly compared to 2007-2013 (from 11.3 months<sup>1</sup> to 7.5 months).

## 2.3. Overview of projects approved in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline

### 2.3.1. List of approved projects

The outcome of the assessment and selection procedure under two deadlines are six approved projects. Five projects address PA1 and one project PA2. By the cut off date contracts have been signed for four projects.

Table 7: List of approved projects per PAs and specific objectives

| Project acronym       | Main topics addressed & key outputs   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <b>Green Exercise</b> | Linking cultural & natural heritage & healthy life<br>9 Green parks, 5 tourist products, 5 packages, 5 biking routes, guides, accommodation (1 youth hostel), capacity building and promotion   |
| <b>Go in Nature</b>   | Linking nature protected areas and their natural and cultural heritage with local services and products into sustainable tourist products<br>10 programmes, 5 nature experience locations set up, 6 new packages, renovated lookout tower, 30 providers networked and with built capacities |
| <b>ESCAPE</b>         | Linking of tourist offers, building on key attractions, refreshing cultural & natural heritage in rural areas, 81 points to be linked, cycle path, 9 heritage elements preserved, 5 CB-tourist packages   |

<sup>1</sup> Evaluation of the Operational Programme Cross-border cooperation Slovenia-Hungary 2007-2013.



| Project acronym           | Main topics addressed & key outputs   |
|---------------------------|---|
| <b>IronCurtainCycling</b> | Increasing the attractiveness of the Euro Velo 13 – iron curtain cycling path<br><br>340 km of routes linked and promoting natural & cultural values of the area, new cycling path, new accommodation facilities, iron curtain outdoor museum, mobile app, promotion events, capacity building for tourist guides and tourist providers |
| <b>Guide2Visit</b>        | Positioning and promotion of the CB areas' specific cultural & natural heritage<br><br>Visitor management tools, CB-tourist packages (gastronomy, traditions, sports, natural heritage, built heritage), cycling path, capacity building  |
| <b>Right Profession</b>   | Addressing imbalance on the labour market, supporting career decisions of the young, Institutional network linking 201 entities, 2 protocols, equipment, capacity building, awareness activities, promotion of cooperation between students, enterprises, educational institutions  |

Source: website, project applications

### 2.3.2. Geographical distribution of the approved projects

Six approved projects will be implemented by 43 project partners, of which 4 are located outside the programme area. Most project partners are located in Pomurska region (15) and Vas county (11). The programme is to a lesser extent represented in Podravska region (6 PPs) and Zala county (7PPs).

Table 8: Location of project partners by NUTS 3 areas (projects approved under 1<sup>st</sup> / 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline)

| Slovenia                 | 1 <sup>st</sup> / PPs | 2 <sup>nd</sup> / PPs | Total PPs | Hungary         | 1 <sup>st</sup> / PPs | 2 <sup>nd</sup> / PPs | Total PPs |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| Pomurska regija          | 4                     | 11                    | 15        | Vas County      | 4                     | 7                     | 11        |
| Podravska regija         | 0                     | 6                     | 6         | Zala County     | 0                     | 7                     | 7         |
| <i>Osrednjeslovenska</i> |                       | 2                     | 2         | <i>Budapest</i> |                       | 2                     | 2         |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>4</b>              | <b>19</b>             | <b>23</b> |                 | <b>4</b>              | <b>16</b>             | <b>20</b> |

## 2.4. Selected financial data

### Commitment of ERDF Funds

50% of ERDF funds available for the implementation under PA1 and PA2 will be committed to approved projects after two rounds. Committed funds under PA1 reached 63% and only 10% under PA2. Funds for Technical Assistance were committed in full at the start of the programme implementation.

By end of March 2017 no payments from the Programme were made.

Table 9: Committed ERDF funds per Priority Axes

|              | 1 <sup>st</sup> deadline | 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadline | 1 <sup>st</sup> + 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadline | Programme funds      | Share of ERDF funds committed in % |                        |                                   |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|              | ERDF                     | ERDF                     | ERDF                                       | ERDF                 | 1 <sup>st</sup> deadl.             | 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadl. | 1 <sup>st</sup> + 2 <sup>nd</sup> |
| PA1 (6c)     | 882.321,27               | 5.425.400,89             | 6.307.722,16                               | 10.000.000,00        | 9%                                 | 54%                    | 63%                               |
| PA2 (11)     | 0,00                     | 332.722,86               | 332.722,86                                 | 3.295.015,00         | 0%                                 | 10%                    | 10%                               |
| Subtotal     | 882.321,27               | 5.758.123,75             | 6.640.445,02                               | 13.295.015,00        | 7%                                 | 43%                    | 50%                               |
| TA           | 1.500.000,00             |                          | 1.500.000,00                               | 1.500.000,00         |                                    | -                      | 100%                              |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>2.382.321,27</b>      | <b>5.758.123,75</b>      | <b>8.140.445,02</b>                        | <b>14.795.015,00</b> | <b>16%</b>                         | <b>43%</b>             | <b>55%</b>                        |

Source: JS and own calculation

### Average size of project budgets

The open call defined minimum and maximum requested ERDF funds (max. 85% of total project cost) for each PA:

- PA1: min. 50,000 Euro and max. 2,000,000 Euro and
- PA2: min. 20,000 Euro and max. 350,000 Euro.

The average ERDF contribution in projects under PA1 is 1,261,544.44 Euro and thus below the limits set in the open call. The ERDF contribution in PA2 supported project is closer to the upper limits of the open call 332.722,86 Euro (1 project only). Average total project costs and costs per PPs are shown in below table.

Table 10: Project budgets overview (total costs)

| Priority Axis | No. of projects | No. of PPs | Total project costs in Euro | Average budget per project in Euro | Average budget per PP in Euro |
|---------------|-----------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| PA 1 – 6c     | 5               | 36         | 7.420.849,66                | 1.484.169,93                       | 206.134,71                    |
| PA 2 – 11     | 1               | 7          | 391.438,69                  | 391.438,69                         | 55.919,81                     |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>6</b>        | <b>43</b>  | <b>7.812.288,35</b>         | <b>1.302.048,06</b>                | <b>181.681,12</b>             |

Source: JS, own calculation

The programme introduced **simplified cost options** to reduce administrative burden on beneficiaries:

- Lump sum for preparatory costs in the amount of 2,000 Euro per project
- Flat rate of 20 % of direct costs other than staff costs/ 10% for projects including infrastructure and works)
- Office and administrative expenditure shall be reimbursed by the programme according to a flat rate of 15 % of eligible direct staff costs (budget line staff costs), no documenting required.

Costs for Infrastructure and works are the main cost category in 3 approved projects. Staff costs in total project budgets range between 9% - 26%, with only one project exceeding 50%. External costs have significant share in four projects and range between 27% - 34% and one with 74% of total project costs.

Table 11: Main cost categories in approved projects

| Cost category            | No. of projects  |           |
|--------------------------|------------------|-----------|
|                          | Less than 49,99% | 50% - 75% |
| Staff costs              |                  | 1 (54%)   |
| External costs           |                  | 1 (74%)   |
| Equipment                | 1 (33%)          |           |
| Infrastructure and works | 3 (36%-48%)      |           |

Source: application forms

Use of simplified cost options in approved projects:

- 39 of 43 PPs (90%) planned office and administrative costs, which are calculated on a 15% flat rate basis, 4 PPs in 2 different projects did not plan any costs in this category;
- 20% flat rate for staff costs option was used by 14 PPs (32.6%) in 4 different projects.

By observation of the MA, not many projects used the possibility to get a lump sum for preparatory costs.

14 (56%) of the LP-survey respondents used simplified cost options; of which 56% used preparatory cost, 64% staff costs and 86% office and administrative costs options. 54% of respondents find simplified cost options efficient and 15% partly efficient, whereas 35% could not make any judgements.

### Expected achievement of performance indicators

Expected contributions of the approved projects to the 2018 milestones show that projects under PA1 are likely to meet the targets, whereas the only one approved project so far under PA2 will not be sufficient to meet the financial targets and output target 11.2.

Table 12: Performance framework and expected contributions of approved projects

| Indicator type | ID   | Indicator / key implementation step  | Measure. unit | Milestone 2018 | Final target 2023 | Expected contribution from approved projects |              |
|----------------|------|--|---------------|----------------|-------------------|--|--------------|
|                |      |  |               |                |                   | 2018   | 2023         |
| financial      | P1.1 | Payments: certified total amount of eligible expenditure   | EUR           | 600.000.00     | 11.764.705,89     | 4.648.952,11                                 | 7.420.849,66 |
| output         | CO09 | Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural or natural heritage and attractions | Visits/year   | 800            | 10,000            | 10,000                                       | 20,700       |
| financial      | P2.1 | Amount of certified expenditure for PA2  | EUR           | 465,755.10     | 3,876,488.24      | 178,318.40                                   | 391.438,69   |
| output         | 11.1 | Number of institutions/organizations involved in CB-initiatives  | Number        | 12             | 100               | 150  | 201          |
| output         | 11.2 | Number of joint professional agreements and protocols  | Number        | 3              | 20                | 2  | 2            |

Source: JS

## 2.6 Communication activities

The MC adopted the Communication strategy of the programme on its first meeting in November 2015. The Strategy defines communication objectives, key messages and target groups, communication tools and activities:

The purpose of Communication Strategy is:

- Increasing the awareness about the Programme and also the Cohesion policy and EU funds among the general public, stakeholders, the expert public (political public), the media and beneficiaries and highlight the role, achievements and impact of the Cooperation Programme and its projects,
- Informing potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities under the Cooperation Programme.

Specific objectives at programme level:

- Ensure well-functioning internal communication between the programme bodies to make the programme function effectively,
- Provide information on all programme related issues (programme documents, eligible area, available funds, etc.),
- Strongly promote the funding opportunity to activate the potential beneficiaries,
- Support beneficiaries in all phases of project implementation to guarantee the best possible outcome of the projects,
- Actively cooperate with other Interreg programmes to share information and best practices and learn from one another, general public information on co-financed projects,
- Promote the benefits of CBC in the programme area.

Specific objectives at project level:

- Inform beneficiaries of the duties attached to the funding,

- Support and encourage beneficiaries in communication activities,
- Underline the benefits of CBC for the general public in the programme area.

The Communication Strategy also defined main communication phases and main focus of communication:

- Promoting the results, benefits and best practices of the OP SI-HU 2007-2013
- Promoting funding opportunities in the frame of the CP Interreg SI-HU 2014-2020
- Promoting the results, benefits and best practices of the CP Interreg SI-HU 2014-2020
- Provision of information and support to (potential) beneficiaries and programme partners.

The focus of recent activities related to the current programme was on promoting funding opportunities and information for potential applicants to prepare project proposals.

The programme website is the main communication channel used to find out about funding opportunities for 64% of LP-survey respondents. An important significance is also contributed to potential project partners who are the source of information for 36% of LP-survey respondents. Other communication channels were used to a lesser extent.

Finding out about the Call for proposals

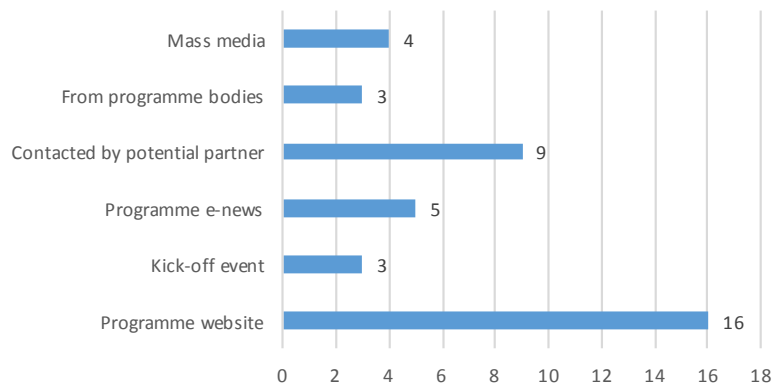


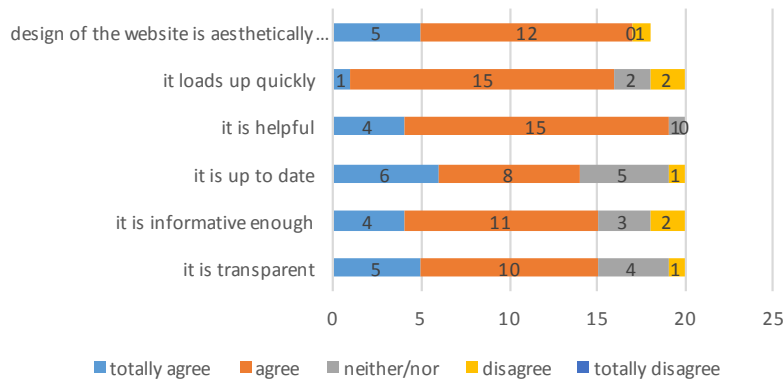
Chart 13: Most common communication channels used by LPs

According to the communication strategy, the programme website is also the main communication tool for communicating with the (potential) beneficiaries, general public, programme partners/expert public and the media. It operates in 3 languages (English, Hungarian, and Slovenian).

The website provides information about the programme structures (including contacts), programme documents and open call documentation necessary for applicants, decisions taken by the Monitoring Committee, guidelines and information for project beneficiaries. News related to the programme implementation, events, workshops and project news are published on the website. For the work of the JS and programme partners, the intranet was also set up.

In 2016, 70,974 visits to the website were made by 8,965 single users. 56% of sessions were made by Slovenian and 29% by Hungarian users. The webpage is to a minor extent visited also by users from other countries.

### Programme website



LP-survey showed that for the majority of respondents the website is found appropriate in all listed aspects, whereby the highest level of agreement (75%) was on its helpfulness. Room for improvement in the view of respondents exists in regular updating, provision of more informative contents and increased transparency.

Chart 14: Assessment of the programme website

64% of respondents is subscribed to the e-newsletter; of those 63% read each issue and 38% most of issues.

Facebook was open in October 2016. It is followed by half of respondents; one third follows it regularly.

### 3. Evaluation

- **Evaluation question: How effective and efficient are the programme structures?**

The assessment is focused on the programme structures linked to the implementation of the open call and was made on the following judgement criteria:

- The HR capacities of the programme bodies are sufficient;
- Procedures and working processes are established and respected;
- Coordination and cooperation between programme bodies is established.

**The programme structures related to implementation of the open call have been effectively set up and operate in professional manner.**

The MA, JS and Info points, National Authorities and the Monitoring Committee were effectively set up. Teams supported from the Technical Assistance are deployed and no significant shortages were identified.

The personnel of the MA, JS, Info points and NAs has to a large extent been engaged in the previous programme and involved in the current programming phase. The level of institutional memory is high. The competence and experience of the personnel in programme implementation and management seem sound. The staff of the MA, JS, Info Points and NAs are well accessible for support and committed to include lessons learned from implementation of previous procedures into provision of the support.

The procedures related to the implementation of the open call are established and followed by the involved programme bodies. Separation of functions between the project support and project assessment within the staff of the JS and Info point is secured and respected. The assessment and selection procedures as well as related criteria were published and potential applicants are informed on these during workshops.

The work of the Monitoring Committee was not analysed. However, the MC meetings are organised regularly and open issues have so far been resolved. Both countries organise preparatory meetings at national level, which is considered a good practice. Programme bodies have established Bilateral Working Group where regular coordination is taking place and open issues are addressed. In this respect the cooperation between the bodies seems effective.

Overall efficiency and effectiveness of programmes structures is however closely linked with procedures and processes in place, which are assessed in the next evaluation question.

- **Evaluation question: How efficient and effective are the programme procedures and processes?**

Based on experience with the previous programme period, the programme bodies put considerable attention to ensuring conditions for increasing the efficiency and simplification of the programme delivery mechanisms related to the processing of the open call and implementation of the projects.

The assessment was made on the following judgement criteria:

- The programme bodies provide quality support to project applicants;
- The programme procedures are user friendly to applicants/beneficiaries;
- The procedures allow for selection of programme-relevant and feasible cross border projects;
- The programme procedures are implemented efficiently.

The procedures related to processing of two rounds of applications submitted to the open call were carried out in a fairly efficient and effective manner. The overall effects of procedures on the programme level are still early to assess.

The support to potential applicants is well accessible and the overall quality of provided support assessed very well by the users. Experience in the processing of the two rounds of applications however revealed further needs for support.

Introduced changes of the programme procedures and processes compared to the 2007-2013 period have to some extent lessened the user-friendliness of the programme towards applicants; in particular, because of the stricter AB check procedure and greater complexity of the application forms coupled with deficiencies in the performance of the eMS.

The criteria for assessment of the quality of projects are relevant and allow selection of quality projects whereas there is some space for further fine-tuning in terms of clarity and distribution of points.

The efficiency of the project assessment and selection process in terms of time needed until the MC decision is relatively good, although some negative effects on the increase of the overall workload in the following deadlines are possible because of repeated assessment procedures for the same projects.

More detailed assessment of specific elements and procedures is presented below:

#### **Application pack for development of project proposals**

The MA, JS / Info point and National Authorities supported the applicants with a wide range of tools, which were to a great extent harmonised between the three CBC programmes managed by Slovenia (SI-HU, SI-AT and SI-HR). The provided tools were found useful/very useful by the great majority of surveyed LPs (between 83% (FAQs), 92% (CP) to 96% (Implementation manual).

The project application pack published on the programme website comprises relevant information needed to develop a project proposal and to submit an application. The Implementation manual for beneficiaries is well structured into key contents/phases and offers appropriate guidance to applicants and beneficiaries. Considering the challenges applicants faced with the establishment of project intervention logic, these parts may not have been sufficiently addressed in the manual (Part 2 – contains one general chart, Part 3 descriptions of specific elements).

The Application Form (AF), which is based on HIT tools and available in eMS, is quite detailed in some parts. Especially the preparation of the project budget requires time as it needs to be broken down in much detail. There is considerable difference in the max. ERDF contribution between the PA1 and PA2, whereas the requirements with regard to the level of details to be provided in the AF are the same. Detailed planning in the application phase, however can later effectively support the implementation and allows for effective monitoring of project achievements.

The amount of information, rules and requirements that has to be observed in a project design, show that cross-border cooperation has developed to a rather high level of complexity. This limits the pool of potential applicants and beneficiaries in the programme area that have sufficient organisational, human and financial capacities to enter the CBC programme, which has also been indicated by the respondents to LP-survey.

#### **Support in project development and application process**

The information support provided by programme bodies was well accessible (phone, e-mail, individual meetings and workshops) and according to respondents, also effective. The attendance to the workshops for applicants was very good and the interest for the programme was high, however the applicants seem not to have recognised the benefits of discussing content related aspects of applications in the early stage of implementation of the open call with the programme bodies.

Experience from first two rounds revealed further needs of support: improving capacities of applicants to establish appropriate intervention logic compliant with the CP, improving the overall quality of project proposals, and support in partner search for new potential applicants.

### Application process in eMS

The eMS system is expected to be an effective and efficient solution for the overall programme management and implementation. The performance of the system has not yet been optimal and not found user friendly especially in the 1<sup>st</sup> application round. The JS has already made certain steps in eliminating deficiencies in the module for preparation of the applications.

Besides the improvements of the eMS it can be assumed that competences of applicants for the use of the system also strengthened and that greater attention was given to preparing the application without formal mistakes, what contributed to increase of effectiveness of the AB-check in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round.

### Administrative and eligibility check - AB check procedure

The **AB check** procedure was simplified compared to 2007-2013 and its duration made shorter. More responsibility was put to project partners with regard to ensuring sufficient financial and operational capacity as well as with regard to management of investments.

The exclusion of the clarification step made this procedure least user friendly for those applicants who were rejected for minor formal mistakes that could have been resolved relatively quickly within the same procedure. Feedback on the project quality is thus also postponed to the next deadline (provided the applicant decides to re-apply and the AB check is successful in the next round). In this respect, the procedure is not user-friendly for the applicants.

On the other hand, rejections due to formal mistakes increased the overall workload of the applicants and the JS at the overall programme level. Applicants who reapply with the same project to the following deadline have to insert the project once more in the eMS and the JS has to perform the checks once again in full. From this point of view, a single AB check was more efficient in terms of processing a batch of received applications quicker, whereas for the entire programme the effect is not the same. Thus, only high level of administrative quality of submitted applications can positively affect overall efficiency at the programme level. Promising developments were shown in 2<sup>nd</sup> round where 79% of applicants passed the AB check compared to only 24% in the 1<sup>st</sup> round.

### Assessment of project quality

Quality checks were done by a small number of assessors and resulted in a well harmonised approach to assessment, what was reflected in relatively small differences in majority of assessments. Results of assessments show that the quality of proposed projects in general is quite low. In this respect, the postponement of projects by the MC, which gives an opportunity for the applicants to improve projects and enter data in the existing application and apply once more, is considered appropriate, although the project has to enter the whole assessment and selection cycle again.

The **sets of criteria for quality assessment** cover relevant aspects of a good cross-border project. IP specific criteria for 11b are not fully transparent for a potential applicant. Certain overlaps of IP specific and strategic criteria make the assessment less clear in terms of weight given to a specific element of assessment.

The division of scores in the assessment grid strongly supports the strategic and result orientation of the programme, however implementation capacity and feasibility play an important role in actual achievements of strategic objectives. Although all relevant operational aspects are checked, their relative importance in the overall score seems suppressed with 22% compared to 61% of total points given to strategic and IP specific criteria.

**Timeline from the project submission to signing of the subsidy contract** was similar in both deadlines, however implemented more efficiently in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round when the number of applications processed in



quality assessment increased by almost 4 times. Within the existing delivery framework, where resources for AB check and quality assessment are fixed and limited, the overall timeline until the MC decision mainly depends on the number of received and processed applications. In addition, that JS personnel has limited possibilities to devote full time to the assessment procedures because of assigned other tasks and responsibilities. Therefore, the room for shortening of procedures and maintaining the quality of service is small. However, so far the programme was effective in ensuring two deadlines per year in order to allow frequent inflow of applications and that postponed or projects rejected at AB check have a possibility to apply in a relative short period again.

The possibility to submit investment documentation for construction of road and cycle trails prolongs the time between the MC decision and actual start of the project. Although this option is favourable for the applicants (and at the same time exception to other types of infrastructural investments), it prolongs the project start. If conditions are not met and subsidy contract not signed, this may lead to a slow down of the progress towards achievement of programme objectives.

### **Harmonisation and simplification**

The programme uses several mechanisms, which support the harmonisation between the programmes (HIT tool, eMS, simplified cost options, acceleration of application and reporting procedures through eMS). CBC programmes managed by Slovenia are already harmonised to a great extent.

The extent of simplification achieved is still early to assess. Use of simplified cost options for the office and administrative costs is offered by the programme as the only possible way of claiming this type expenditure and will thus contribute to simplification for both the beneficiaries and FLC controllers.

Based on approaches of the PPs in approved projects, the use of flat rate for staff costs show more potential in projects under PA1 (6c), which are of higher value and often include infrastructure and works, purchase of equipment, ... This option has so far been used by a relatively high share of PPs (33%).

The nature of projects under PA2 (11b), which are linked to institutional cooperation and capacity building, assumes a greater involvement of project partners' staff. Considering also the smaller size of projects, flat rate options for staff costs will be more difficult to apply in this PA.

### **Performance 2018**

The programme is characterised by a relatively long programming period and subsequently late start of implementation. Although milestones were set relatively low, the achievement of targets seems more problematic for the PA2, where only one project is in implementation since March 2017.

- **Evaluation question: What is the progress of the programme towards achieving targets of specific objectives?**

The approved projects are in the early start of implementation (for 2 approved projects the subsidy contracts have not yet been signed). Therefore, the likely progress towards achievements of the targets of specific objectives was assessed on the basis of expected contributions of projects to targets set for the programme output indicators and their links to result indicators.

With 50% of the programme ERDF funds being committed to the approved projects, these are likely to contribute effectively towards the achievement of targets the output indicators. The progress is in particular promising under PA1. The progress towards achievement of the specific objectives of PA2 is moderate in terms of the number of approved projects and sectors addressed so far.

In terms of geographical coverage, the programme achievements are likely to be more visible in the Pomurska region and Vas county.

## PA1: ATTRACTIVE REGION

**PA 1 - Specific objective 1.1:** To increase attractiveness through the diversification and cross-border integration of the sustainable touristic offer in the programme area, based on the protection of the elements of cultural and natural heritage and development of products and services in the less developed rural areas linking them to touristic magnets.

63% of ERDF allocated to PA1 was committed to five projects which aim at linking natural and cultural heritage of the area into different tourist offers, products and services that should (through creation of packages) attract more visitors to the programme area.

Table 13: PA1 - Expected contribution of approved projects to the programme output indicators

| ID   | PA 2 - Output Indicator  | Measurement unit | Target value (2023) | Expected contribution from approved projects |             |                 |             |                                   |             |
|------|--|------------------|---------------------|--|-------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|
|      |  |                  |                     | 1 <sup>st</sup>                              | % of target | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | % of target | 1 <sup>st</sup> + 2 <sup>nd</sup> | % of target |
| 6c.1 | Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural or natural heritage and attractions (EU)            | visits/year      | 10.000              | 3.000  | 30%         | 17.700          | 177%        | 20.300                            | 203%        |
| 6c.2 | Number of people participating in interpretation and educational events related to the cultural and natural heritage (P) | Number           | 2.000               | 0  | 0%          | 3.675           | 184%        | 3.675                             | 184%        |
| 6c.3 | Number of joint CB-touristic products / services newly developed (P)   | Number           | 12                  | 8  | 67%         | 48              | 400%        | 56                                | 467%        |
| CO42 | Length of cycle tracks and footpaths   | km               | 8                   | 0  | 0%          | 4,14            | 52%         | 4,14                              | 52%         |

Source: JS and own calculation

Expected contributions of these projects to the achievement of targets of programme output indicators show that the programme has potential to progress very well (see table 13). The question is whether some targets were not underestimated during programming.

The biggest increase is to be expected with regard to the number of joint CB-tourist products. 56 joint CB-products and services are planned to be developed by five projects currently in implementation. If realised effectively, the target would be exceeded by 467%. The CP or the Implementation manual for beneficiaries however do not provide any common definition of a joint CB-product, which gives space to beneficiaries for different interpretations of what a CB-tourist product is.

Relatively ambitious are also beneficiaries' predictions about the expected annual increase in the visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions. The beneficiaries proposed own methodologies, how these visits will be measured or assessed.

The outputs indicator CO42 (length of cycle tracks and footpaths) has potential to progress well as 52% of targets are expected to be realised, however two projects are still in the process of obtaining the relevant investment documentation.

Actual achievements and contributions to programme specific objectives will be possible to assess at later stages when project outcomes become visible.

**Expected result** is higher level of development of sustainable forms of tourism in the remote, rural regions of the programme area, while building on the experience and attractiveness of the important tourist centres located here.

The CP foresees to measure one Programme specific result indicator – 'number of overnight stays'. Gross value for the result indicator are easy to get from official statistics, whereas determining the net effects of the programme will be more challenging. Two projects plan investments in accommodation capacities. As projects in general focus on attracting visitors to the programme area, a methodology for

assessing the contributions to generation of overnight stays needs to be developed and contributions assessed.

Considering the funds available in the programme for the PA1, the target for this result indicator (5% increase or 263,460 overnight stays by 2023) seem overambitious.

Results to be achieved within this PA are expected to be wider. They could e.g. comprise increased awareness of people included in interpretation events, increased income of tourist providers, new job opportunities in less developed areas, improved visibility of destinations and its cultural and natural heritage, increased cooperation between tourism magnets and rural hinterland, etc. These cannot be captured by one proposed indicator only.

## PA2: COOPERATIVE REGION

**PA 2 - Specific objective 2.1:** To increase the capacity for cooperation in order to reach a higher level of maturity in cross-border relations.

One approved project, to which 10% of ERDF funds available for this PA, is expected to double the targets set for the output indicator measuring the number of institutions and organisations involved in CB initiatives (11.1), which could indicate that targets have been set low in the programming phase.

Table 14: PA2 - Expected contribution of approved projects to the programme output indicators

| ID   | PA 3 - Output Indicator   | Measurement unit | Target value (2023) | Expected contribution from approved projects |             |                 |             |                                   |             |
|------|---|------------------|---------------------|--|-------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|
|      |   |                  |                     | 1 <sup>st</sup>                              | % of target | 2 <sup>nd</sup> | % of target | 1 <sup>st</sup> + 2 <sup>nd</sup> | % of target |
| 11.1 | Number of institutions/organizations involved in CB-initiatives | number           | 100                 | 0  | 0%          | 201             | 201%        | 201                               | 201%        |
| 11.2 | Number of joint professional agreements and protocols           | number           | 20                  | 0  | 0%          | 2               | 10%         | 2                                 | 10%         |

Source: JS and own calculation

An important factor to be observed in assessing the actual outcomes of the projects, is the intensity and quality of involvement and interactions between these institutions.

Slow progress in the implementation of this priority affects mainly the output indicator 11.2, which measures the number of joint professional agreements and protocols.

The priority considers a relatively wide spectrum of different sectors, where the institutional cooperation is supposed to increase (environment, social services, employment, spatial planning, public transports, civil protection and risk, cultural cooperation). That some potential for cooperation exists, was reflected in received applications, however the quality of proposed projects was relatively low and the PA2 has therefore not been properly addressed yet.

**Result indicator:** The level of cross-border cooperation at institutional level in the programme area; 20% increase on the scale by 2023 (survey, baseline 3.05 in 2015)

It is expected that projects will beside the increase in CB-cooperation at institutional level achieve other results (e.g. increase in the competences of people within cooperating institutions, improvement in the quality of services for the users, new CB services or models of cooperation, ...) that may not be captured by the survey alone.

## PA3: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

**Specific objective:** Contribution to the efficient implementation of the Cooperation Programme

The overall programme implementation started with a considerable delay and most projects have only started. The team financed by the TA funds is fully assigned to the programme and operated with relatively high level on intensity in 2016. The project events seem to be progressing well in accordance with the needs.

The range of programme output indicators for the TA is quite limited and does not sufficiently observe any qualitative aspects of the implementation.

Table 15: TA – Interim achievement of TA projects to the programme output indicators

| ID  | TA – Output indicator   | Measurement unit | Target value (2023) | Achieved in period 2014 - 2016 |      |      |       |             |
|-----|---|------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|------|------|-------|-------------|
|     |   |                  |                     | 2014                           | 2015 | 2016 | total | % of target |
| 3.1 | Number of successfully implemented projects   | number           | 36                  | 0                              | 0    | 0    | 0     | 0%          |
| 3.2 | Number of programme events  | number           | 14                  | 0                              | 1    | 4    | 5     | 35,7 %      |
| 3.3 | Full time equivalent positions financed by the Technical Assistance for the implementation of the Cooperation Programme | number           | 9                   | 0                              | 3,5  | 9,14 | 9,14  | 101,5 %     |

Source: JS and own calculation

- **What is the progress in implementation of Communication strategy and achievement of the set objectives?**

The progress towards the achievement of the communication strategy objectives is progressing well according to the achievement of the target values of the communication strategy indicators. The programme effectively established communication tools for both internal and external communication. The access to the programme information and funding opportunities and results of the assessment and selection processes are made available to public. At present the general public was addressed to a lesser extent.

The programme website as the main communication tool is structured in a meaningful way and regularly updated with news. At present, the published contents mainly target potential applicants and beneficiaries, what is in line with the implementation phase foreseen in the Communication Strategy – promoting funding opportunities.

The website succeeded in reaching its target audience, what is evident from the website statistics and LP-survey, however the website seems to be more recognisable and used by Slovenian than Hungarian users. Comparison of the achievement with the targets set in the Communication strategy, the visits to website exceeded the targets for 2023 by 7-times only in 1year. Targets for other indicators in the communication strategy were set more realistically and are progressing well.

Communication activities focusing specifically the general public have so far have been less intense and concentrated mainly on 1 event. Facebook account has room for attracting the followers and to increase the interactions between the programme and target audiences.

**Table 16:** Achievement of communication strategy targets

| Indicator  | Measurement unit | Baseline value | Target value 2023 | Achieved by end of 2016 | % achieved |
|--|------------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Awareness about EU funded CB projects                    | percentage       | 45%            | 48%               | Survey 2020             | -          |
| Recognisability of the CP Interreg SI-HU                 | percentage       | 56%            | 60%               | Survey 2018             | -          |
| Knowledge of the Programme website                       | percentage       | 0%             | 80%               | Survey 2018             | -          |
| Number of visits to the website                          | visits           | 0              | 10000             | 70974                   | 710%       |
| Number of submitted e-messages with informative contents | messages         | 0              | 40                | 27                      | 68%        |
| Number of workshops performed                            | workshops        | 0              | 8                 | 3                       | 38%        |
| Number of participants at workshops                      | participants     | 0              | 400               | 300                     | 75%        |
| Number of mailing list members                           | addressee        | 0              | 500               | 212                     | 42%        |
| Number of created Information materials                  | issues           | 0              | 1000              | -                       | -          |
| Number of events performed                               | events           | 0              | 8                 | 2                       | 25%        |
| Number of participants at events                         | participants     | 0              | 600               | 300                     | 50%        |

Source: JS

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

The programme bodies have compared to the previous programme period introduced some changes in the delivery mechanisms with a view to increase the efficiency, simplification and harmonisation of programme procedures and processes and to increase the programme result orientation and programme effectiveness. Effects of these changes are still early to assess as they are very much interlinked and dependent on a number of factors, of which the quality of project development and the application phase play an important role.

### Programme structures and procedures

Considering that the 3<sup>rd</sup> round of applications is being processed under open call following the same procedures and that half of the ERDF funds have already been committed, major changes in the project assessment procedures and steps are not expected. Certain findings presented in the assessment can thus be considered in the design of the future delivery mechanism.

| Conclusions   | Recommendations  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Conclusion 1:</b> The Implementation manual for beneficiaries has some room for improvement in order to support applicants in project development.</p>  | <p><b>Recommendation 1:</b></p> <p>The JS should complement the description of the criteria C20 and C22 in the Part 3 of the Implementation manual for beneficiaries to clarify different aspects that are assessed in each of them.</p>   |
| <p><b>Conclusion 2:</b> Potential for the use of simplified cost options exists in particular under PA1, which can contribute to simplified project management and financial controls.</p>  | <p>Part 2 of the Implementation manual should be complemented with practical cases of establishing the intervention logic and its links to the programme intervention logic.</p>   |
| <p><b>Conclusion 3:</b> The eMS was found difficult to use for many applicants, although significant improvement noted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round.</p>   | <p><b>Recommendation 2:</b> The JS/Info point should further promote the use of all simplified costs options envisaged by the programme in the workshops for applicants or through individual consultations.</p>   |
| <p><b>Conclusion 3:</b> The eMS was found difficult to use for many applicants, although significant improvement noted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round.</p>   | <p><b>Recommendation 3:</b> The MA/JS should continue working on the improvement of the eMS and building capacities of applicants and beneficiaries for its use in both the application and reporting process. The layout for Pdf formats generated from eMS should be improved and the accuracy of displayed information compared to eMS ensured.</p> |
| <p><b>Conclusion 4:</b> Speeding up of the AB check made the programme less user friendly for applicants who failed due to minor formal mistakes. Repetitive submission of applications increased the workload for the applicants and the JS and prolonged the time to receive feedback on the project quality (provided that AB check was successful in the next round).</p> | <p><b>Recommendation 4:</b> The MC, MA and the JS should further monitor the outcomes of AB checks. If share of administratively non-compliant applications increases significantly, the possibility to correct minor formal mistakes during the same procedure should be considered by the MC.</p>  |
|   | <p>If the number of received applications to a deadline is small, what was already the case in</p>   |

3<sup>rd</sup> round, an additional step – asking for clarifications/correction of formal mistakes would not significantly influence the time needed for the overall assessment procedure. However, it would allow for a greater inflow of projects to be discussed at the MC meeting and consequently more dynamic programme implementation if such projects are eventually approved (or even postponed).

**Conclusion 5:** In general, the quality of received applications so far has been relatively low and by observation of the JS the proposed ideas were often similar. Preparation of applications has become complex and requires significant time and resources of the CB partners regardless of the project size.

**Recommendation 5:** The programme bodies should further monitor the quality of projects. If appropriate, the option to introduce a two-step application procedure (concept, full applications) in the next programming period should be considered. Also, simplified applications especially for the projects of smaller size should be envisaged.

## Effectiveness – progress in achievement of programme objectives

The programme is characterised by late start of the implementation, which was further prolonged due to high share of administratively incompliant projects in the 1<sup>st</sup> round, and postponements due to low quality. Despite that, the likely effectiveness of the programme is still promising in particular under PA1, whereas PA2 has not been properly addressed yet.

| Conclusions  | Recommendations  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Conclusion 6:</b> Strengthening of the capacities of applicants for the development of appropriate project intervention logic and overall quality of projects, consistent with the challenges, objectives and results of the programme is necessary.</p> | <p><b>Recommendation 6:</b> The JS/Info points in cooperation with NAs should pro-actively support the project generation and development with a view to raise the quality of projects. Special attention should be put to areas, which have so far not been sufficiently covered under PA2.</p> <p>The current system and range of support services for applicants could be complemented with additional capacity building actions (e.g. practical trainings focusing on the development of project intervention logic and its alignment with the CP). The most suitable format should be discussed with potential applicants and could also serve for partner search purposes. Such actions should be scheduled prior to the announcement of the deadline for submission to allow sufficient time for the quality preparation of projects.</p> |
| <p><b>Conclusion 7:</b> The system of programme level indicators is not sufficient to capture a wider range of expected programme results.</p>   | <p><b>Recommendation 7:</b> The MA/JS should review the programme intervention logic and (in cooperation with the evaluator) develop additional result/output indicators to improve</p>  |

the monitoring of project outcomes and to better capture the programme outcomes.

## Communication

The Communication strategy targets are progressing well. The implementation of the programme has revealed some additional needs where actions should be strengthened.

| Conclusions   | Recommendations  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Conclusion 8:</b> The awareness about the opportunities for cooperation seem to be less recognised by potential applicants operating in sectors addressed by PA2. Based on the feedback of LPs and observation of programme bodies, the forming of new partnerships is still challenging.</p> | <p><b>Recommendation 8:</b> The JS in cooperation with NAs should consider options how to promote the programme within institutions and other targets groups operating in sectors targeted in PA2.</p> <p>E.g. thematic round tables, focus groups or similar events can be organised to allow discussion on cooperation potentials and forming of partnerships. The programme can also be presented at thematic events organised by other stakeholders.</p> |
| <p><b>Conclusion 9:</b> The general public so far was addressed to a lesser extent.</p>   | <p><b>Recommendation 9:</b> The JS could extend the information and publicity activities from yearly events to organisation of small communication campaigns in cooperation with the project partners and local media. Knowledge about the programme and its achievements should be presented in a user friendly and interactive/engaging ways (e.g. quizzes, videos, interviews with end beneficiaries,...).</p>  |



## 5. Annexes

### 5.1 List of interviews

| <b>Date</b>                | <b>Name</b>     | <b>Programme body</b>       |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 26 May 2017                | Aleš Mrkela     | Managing Authority          |
| 26 May 2017                | Eva Sever       | Joint secretariat           |
| 6 June 2017                | Urška Trojar    | National Authority Slovenia |
| 12 June 2017               | Miklós Bodonczí | Info point                  |
| 12 June 2017               | Ágnes Gombás    | Info point                  |
| 14 June 2017, 29 June 2017 | Jasmina Litrop  | Joint Secretariat           |
| 14 June 2017               | Dóra Horváth    | National Authority Hungary  |
| 28 June 2017               | Anita Plevník   | Joint Secretariat           |