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# Final evaluation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

Final report, 30th October 2024

# List of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **AA** | Atlantic Area |
| **AAP** | Atlantic Action Plan |
| **CA** | Certifying Authority |
| **CCDR-N** | Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional do Norte, I.P. |
| **CPMR** | Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions |
| **DG MARE** | Directorate-General Maritime Affairs and Fisheries |
| **DG REGIO** | Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy |
| **EC** | European Commission |
| **EEA** | European Economic Area |
| **EEIG** | European Economic Interest Grouping |
| **EGTC** | European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation |
| **EP** | Evaluation Plan |
| **ERDF** | European Regional Development Fund |
| **ETC** | European Territorial Cooperation |
| **EWRC** | European Week of Regions and Cities |
| **FLC** | First Level Controllers |
| **GDPR** | General Data Protection Regulation |
| **GoA** | Group of Auditors |
| **IP** | Interreg Programme |
| **JS** | Joint Secretariat |
| **MA** | Managing Authority |
| **MC** | Monitoring Committee |
| **MS** | Member States |
| **NA** | National Authority |
| **NC** | National Correspondent |

| | |
|---|---|
| **PAF** | Project Application Form |
| **PO** | Project Officer |
| **POCTEFA** | Spain-France-Andorra Interreg Cooperation Programme |
| **SEA** | Strategic Environmental Assessment |
| **SIGI** | Sistema de Informação e Gestão Integrada (Integrated Management Information System) |
| **SME** | Small and Medium Enterprise |
| **SO** | Specific Objective |
| **SUDOE** | Interreg South-West Europe Programme |
| **TA** | Technical Assistance |
| **ToR** | Terms of Reference |
| **WP** | Work Package |

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# Executive Summary

The present report comprises the **Final Evaluation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020**, which aimed at fostering transnational cooperation among regions along the Atlantic Area (AA) to address common challenges, ultimately contributing to the cohesion and prosperity of the Atlantic regions within the European Union.

The Programme funding was channelled into four priorities, which corresponded to the transnational key challenges and opportunities in the region. The main objectives included promoting innovation and competitiveness through the development of new technologies and practices, fostering resource efficiency to support sustainable development, and enhancing resilience to natural and human-induced risks. The Programme also aimed to protect and promote the natural and cultural heritage of the Atlantic Area, improve connectivity through enhanced infrastructures, and support social inclusion and sustainable communities.

The Programme, through the financing of 71 projects, **has produced a wide range of outputs and results**, including the development of new services, transformative solutions, methodologies and tools, as well as the enhancement of capacities and the creation of regional and/or local networks, fostering key sectors within the AA and ultimately **generating a positive impact on the territory**. An extensive sample catalogue of such key identified results illustrating this impact in tangible terms forms part of the evaluation report.

In this way, the evaluation report provides evidence on how the Programme has contributed towards a **positive impact on the territory** within its allocated budget, contributing to the sustainable development of the Atlantic cooperation area through a wide range of outcomes. These included the creation and enhancement of new services, solutions, and tools, as well as contributing to shaping national and sub-national policies. These outcomes have encouraged a positive impact across multiple relevant sectors of the AA. Notably, the **blue economy** has been identified as a key sector across all four priorities. The identified results have significantly boosted key sectors within the blue economy, including aquaculture, seafood, maritime shipping, marine renewable energy, biodiversity protection, and risk prevention and management. Moreover, sectors beyond the blue economy, such as sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, and pollution reduction have also seen advancements due to the Programme's outcomes. The Programme's outcomes underscore its effectiveness in generating significant economic, technological, and social outcomes, strengthening regional cohesion and socio-economic development. This transformative impact reflects the Programme's success in fostering integrated regional cooperation and addressing common challenges within the Atlantic cooperation area. As a result, the Programme stands as a **valuable instrument** for promoting regional economic development in the AA, fostering collaboration among countries and supporting transnational partnerships.

The evaluation team followed a **methodological approach** combining both primary and secondary sources of information as well as qualitative and quantitative information. Particularly, the evaluation team conducted extensive desk research on available documents at the Programme and project level and conducted interviews with key stakeholders, including Programme bodies, National Correspondents and the Audit Authority among others. Additionally, an online survey was conducted targeting all beneficiaries of the Programme with the aim of gathering their insights. Finally, the overall analysis was complemented by the development of eight in-depth case studies of projects among the four Priority Axes.

The main **conclusions** of the final evaluation are provided below.

- Regarding the **Programme performance**, it has successfully executed the available budget funds, 140 million euros, with the global financial execution rate standing at 99.9%. The Programme management structure was thus able to address the two main external shocks that the Programme was subject to: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit**.**

- In relation to the two core **external shocks**, the potential impact of Brexit was effectively mitigated, primarily influencing the timing of the calls for proposals. The Covid-19 pandemic generated an unprecedented challenge. The Programme started to implement measures early to address the challenge; it proved to be flexible with the timelines and gave the projects an automatic extension of 6 months. Furthermore, the Programme provided case-to-case support to address the modification requests and allowed the necessary changes for the adequate implementation of the projects.

- The **Programme software, SIGI**, was one of the main challenges faced by the Programme during its first years of implementation due to technical problems. The Managing Authority of the Programme managed to hire a new company that took over the previous one to develop SIGI V.2. and developed a contingency plan during the transition period between platforms. The new platform effectively supported the project's life cycle stages and allowed the adequate monitoring and measurement of the results and outputs.

- The Programme faced challenges and incorporated important lessons learned from its **calls for proposals**. A significant bottleneck arose from the lengthy first call and the two-stage procedure, which strained the Joint Secretariat's resources. The timing of calls was influenced by Brexit, concentrating funding and calls in the early phase of the Programme. Structurally, the Programme included two regular calls followed by a unique third call focused on the capitalisation of projects' results from the previous supported projects. The early commitment of funds facilitated high financial execution rates and early project impacts. This design aimed to enhance project impact and sustainability but primarily supported the continuation of activities and improved communication. However, not having an exclusive reporting system for the third call limits the assessment of its results.

- Overall, the **system of indicators** has been successful in providing an overview of the accomplishments of projects in relation to the original targets set and the final achievements. This has allowed to quantify the outputs and, consequently, the results of projects, providing a good vision of the Programme's implementation and performance. Some indicators showed very high execution rates, well exceeding the set targets. For these indicators, targets could probably be more ambitious in the future.

- The **partnerships** in the Programme have effectively included all relevant partners, ensuring geographical coverage. Particularly, the Programme has been effective in including partners and fostered the creation of **quadruple-helix** partnerships. Additionally, the Programme has shown great effectiveness in the involvement of the **private sector**, a crucial actor providing key added value to the projects as explicitly indicated by beneficiaries of the Programme.

- The **communication strategy** of the Programme was comprehensive and effective, characterised by the development of essential guiding documents, manuals, and training to ensure stakeholders were well-informed about Programme opportunities, application procedures, and implementation guidelines. The Programme utilised diverse channels such as annual meetings and events to disseminate project outcomes, enhancing transparency and stakeholder engagement. At the project level, the Programme encouraged communication through a mandatory communication Work Package requiring detailed communication plans, identification of target audiences, and appointment of communication managers responsible for implementation and liaison with the Joint Secretariat.

- Regarding the implementation of the three **horizontal principles**, projects generally aligned with environmental principles given their focus on sustainable development, implementing specific measures to enhance environmental impact. Projects also committed to the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination, promoting gender balance and inclusivity in participation and activities. These principles were integrated into the application and selection processes and documented in progress and final reports, allowing projects to track their evolution and achievements periodically. However, there is

potential for future programming periods to provide more specific guidance on enhancing project contributions to these principles through capacity building initiatives.

- The **sustainability of results** within the Programme has been robustly evidenced through comprehensive project analysis and beneficiary feedback. Projects have demonstrated enduring impact and longevity through high continuation rates of outputs and sustained management solutions. Collaborative networks have further bolstered sustainability efforts, ensuring continued relevance and impact beyond the Programme's duration. Many projects have successfully transitioned to subsequent funding sources, such as the current Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027 and other national and EU funds, illustrating proactive measures to extend their reach and maintain momentum.

- The Programme strategically emphasised **amplifying the impact of its results beyond the Interreg "bubble"** through a triple approach. This included a mandatory Work Package on capitalisation across all projects, ensuring concrete measures for leveraging project outcomes. A specific call (Call 3) focused on continuing and capitalising funded projects further enhanced result dissemination, although its scope leaned more towards project continuation rather than broader result capitalisation. Moreover, the Programme significantly expanded collaboration with partners outside the Atlantic Area, increasing from two partners in the 2007-2013 period to 31 partners in 2014-2020. This inclusion facilitated the adoption of developed solutions beyond the AA, enriching partners with new knowledge and methodologies. While scaling results beyond the AA was not the primary objective of these initiatives, they proved instrumental in enhancing dissemination strategies and integrating Programme outcomes into broader local, regional, national, and European policies.

- The outcomes of the projects, and the overall impact of the Programme through the consecution of a solid set of outcomes, has not only contributed to the development of the territories pertaining to the AA but has also helped **advance broader policy objectives.** This strategic focus has significantly enhanced economic performance, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and overall quality of life across the Atlantic region. The Programme's alignment with the Atlantic Strategy is evidenced by the substantial number of blue economy-related projects that have been supported by the Programme and the high level of correspondence with the four pillars defined in the revised Atlantic Action Plan (AAP 2.0). thereby, ultimately fostering cohesive regional development and addressing some of the key challenges identified in its Action Plan.

- Key **best practices** have been identified through in-depth case studies, highlighting successful factors common across projects. Well balanced and relevant partnerships play a crucial role, with broad participation from private, public, research, and third sector organisations proving essential for project implementation and impact. This underscores the importance of building quadruple-helix partnerships. Projects have benefited significantly from partners with expertise in relevant topics and experience in Interreg Atlantic or similar initiatives, along with a demonstrated commitment to project goals. Alignment with broader EU policies and initiatives has also emerged as a critical success factor, enhancing project relevance and ensuring effective implementation and results capitalization.

Finally, the evaluation has elaborated a set of **11 recommendations** to further enhance the implementation of the Programme in future programming periods and its impact. The recommendations include aspects related to the improvement of Programme management, the upgrading of the reporting system and measurement of indicators, strengthening synergies with other EU policies, initiatives and programmes as well as placing greater emphasis on the capitalisation of project results.

# 1. Introduction

This document presents the final report on the evaluation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 served as a key instrument of European Territorial Cooperation, facilitating transnational collaboration across France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. It aimed to strengthen territorial cohesion by addressing shared challenges in innovation, resource efficiency, and environmental protection, with a specific focus on the blue economy and coastal resilience. Funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), with a budget of €185 million, the Programme played a crucial role in aligning regional efforts to promote sustainable development and implement the Atlantic Strategy, showcasing the EU's commitment to fostering cooperation for mutual benefit across its member states.

As indicated under Clause 6 of the Technical Specifications[1], the evaluation team was required to prepare and deliver a final report within 4 months after the start of the contract and 'present the final results and perspectives of the main components of the evaluation'. The final report includes the findings of the different activities carried out as part of the evaluation, which comprises desk research of available documents at the Programme but also project level, as well as interviews with the main Programme bodies and beneficiaries and an online survey for beneficiaries. A more detailed overview of the methodological approach can be found in the next section.

The overarching objectives are to provide a final evaluation of the implementation of the Programme and the results and impact that have been achieved.

## 1.1. Description of the structure and content of this report

This evaluation final report is structured around four main sections. The current Chapter serves as an introduction to the report's content. The second Chapter outlines the methodology employed by the Evaluation Team, hereafter referred to as 'the Team', in executing the assignment and highlights the primary and secondary sources of information used. Chapter three presents the emerging findings, answering all 30 evaluation questions around the five key dimensions of the analysis. Finally, the fourth Chapter contains the main conclusions identified and outlines some key recommendations for the future.

A brief and synthetic Executive Summary also forms part of the report. Similarly, the report includes Annex 1 as a self-standing document that showcases a sample of results obtained from the projects participating in the Programme. Other annexes are also included, containing the information on the bibliography consulted for the report, the topic guides for the interviews that were carried out and the questionnaire of the online survey.

# 2. Methodology

## 2.1. Main objectives of the evaluation

The objectives of the Final Evaluation are to *support the Programme's management and policy decisions based on the results of the evaluation in order to improve the policy tool in future programming periods* and to *provide*

[1] ToR. Call for Tenders for the Final Evaluation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. September 2023.

*inputs for future implementation.* As such, the evaluation comprises two overall methodological objectives, which include:

- Analysis of the **implementation and management** of the Programme. The implementation assessment comprises an evaluation of the budget allocation for the Programme 2014-2020, in addition to the provision of an overview of the Programme management and the communication strategy used.
- Evaluation of the implementation's **impact**. The impact evaluation focuses on the impact of key objectives, analysing changes in cooperation regions, Programme contributions, best practices, and improvements achieved. It also considers external factors like Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, aiming to provide a detailed analysis of the Programme's results.

## 2.2. General framework of the evaluation

As defined by the Terms of Reference (ToR), the final evaluation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 pursues a set of concrete objectives, which are summarised below:

| Objectives of the evaluation |
|---|
| **Evaluation of the Implementation** |
| (1) Support the Programme's management and policy decisions based on the results of evaluations better to run the policy tool in future programming periods. |
| (2) Provide inputs for future implementation by identifying the main challenges and providing lessons learned. |
| **Impact evaluation** |
| (1) Indicate the level of success of the Programme in achieving the objectives of each priority. |
| (2) Identify the contributions of the Programme towards the achievement of EU2020 targets. |

In view of accomplishing the two above-defined types of evaluation as well as to attain the defined objectives, the evaluation team has developed a General Framework of the evaluation in **which all 30 evaluation questions** have been structured around five key areas, defining concrete indicators and sources of information.

The General Framework of the Evaluation is the main instrument and reference for the evaluators' work, and it was agreed and consolidated with the Managing Authority (MA) and the Joint Secretariat (JS) of the Programme at the inception stage. During this phase, it was agreed that the final evaluation would pay particular attention to the results and impact (as a contribution to a positive change) of the projects. As such, the evaluation has responded to all the evaluation questions defined in the General Framework, but the study has focused on questions related to impact and effects (intrinsic to a final evaluation as the one presented in this report).

Table 1: Evaluation Framework

| EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Efficiency and effectiveness of Programme procedures** | | | |
| **Evaluation questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / tools** | **Main indicators/answers** |
| 1. What was the performance of the Programme decision-making process involving the Programme bodies? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and National Correspondents (NCs)<br>**Documents**: Programme Documents (annual implementation reports, Interreg Programme (IP), call for projects packages, other relevant documents and guidelines), Guiding Principles for Partnership Implementation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 | Desk research<br>Interviews | Management bodies' level of perception of the governance of the Programme<br>List of factors and constraints |
| 2. Were the steps from calls for proposals, project generation, evaluation by the JS and selection procedure to contracting and project monitoring efficient? Identify main bottlenecks and lessons learned. | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, Call for Proposals info package, Communication Strategy | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Correlation between Programme objectives and calls specifications<br>Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management/selection process<br>Number and description of the computer tools used<br>Level of satisfaction of managers and beneficiaries<br>List of strengths and weaknesses of the call for proposals set up<br>Recommendations to improve the system |
| 3. Did the structure and timing of calls for proposals support the delivery of the Programme in the most effective way? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, Calls for Proposals info package, Communication Strategy | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Correlation between Programme objectives and calls specifications<br>Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management/selection process<br>Number and description of the computer tools used<br>Level of satisfaction of managers and beneficiaries<br>List of strengths and weaknesses of the call for proposals set up |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4. Was the SIGI ("Sistema de Informação e Gestão Integrada") effective in: Supporting the project's life cycle stages, from applications and selection processes up to the submission of progress reports and payment claims? Managing documented data? Measuring the targeted results and outputs? Managing the several users of the IT platform? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Audit Authority**,** National Auditors Network and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, indicators monitoring system, SIGI | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Number and description of the computer tools used<br>Level of satisfaction of managers and beneficiaries<br>List of strengths and weaknesses of the management information system<br>Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme monitoring |
| 5. What were the conclusions and necessary improvements in the management of the Programme in line with the evaluation results (for example, the reduction of administrative burden, simplification of procedures, etc.)? Could the administrative burden be limited in in future programming periods? In which aspects? What were the costs and benefits of the Programme: what measures might be used to assess the "transnational added value" of the Programme's activities? Did the system of indicators have the capacity to provide a fair and comprehensive picture of the results/outcomes generated by projects in their quantitative and qualitative aspects? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Audit Authority and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, indicators monitoring system, SIGI | Desk research<br>Interviews | Level of satisfaction of managers and beneficiaries<br>List of strengths and weaknesses of the management information system<br>Number and description of the computer tools used<br>Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management |
| 6. Was the Technical Assistance (TA) volume of resources and their distribution between the management bodies sufficient to guarantee efficient management of the Programme? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Audit Authority**,**<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, including the Programme Manual and the Guiding Principles for Partnership Implementation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 | Desk research<br>Interviews | Level of satisfaction of managers<br>Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management<br>Recommendations on resourcing for a smooth implementation of the Programme |
| 7. Were the human resources of the JS, MA, and Members States adequate to fulfil their various tasks regarding number and capabilities? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Audit Authority<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, including the Programme Manual and the Guiding Principles for Partnership Implementation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 | Desk research<br>Interviews | Level of satisfaction of managers<br>Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Recommendations on resourcing (quantify and qualifications) for a smooth implementation of the Programme |
| **Effectiveness of the involvement of stakeholders** | | | |
| **Evaluation questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / tools** | **Main indicators/answers** |
| 1. Did the Programme succeed in involving its stakeholders and, in particular, the policy relevant partners and private partners? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, especially the ones related to the calls for projects and project generation | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Level of outreach of the call for proposals system<br>Level of transparency of the call for proposals system<br>Level of fairness of the call for proposals system<br>Level of efficiency of the call for proposals system<br>Level of transparency of the selection procedure<br>Level of efficiency of the selection procedure<br>Level of correlation between the selection criteria and IP objectives |
| 2. Was the Programme able to attract new, relevant partners? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, especially the ones related to the calls for projects and project generation | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Level of outreach of the call for proposals system<br>Level of transparency of the call for proposals system<br>Level of fairness of the call for proposals system<br>Level of efficiency of the call for proposals system<br>Level of transparency of the selection procedure<br>Level of efficiency of the selection procedure<br>Level of correlation between the selection criteria and IP objectives |
| 3. What were the main features of the partnerships (e.g., location, type of partners, etc.); | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, especially the ones related to the calls for projects and project generation | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Main features/characteristics of existing partnerships<br>Level of correlation between the selection criteria, the IP objectives, and the existing partnerships |
| 4. To what extent were the Programme and the projects sustainable? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects packages, project execution reports, other relevant documents and guidelines (including online project resources) | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online survey<br>Case studies | Identification of projects by priority with strong potentiality of sustainability of results<br>Good practices on sustainability fiches<br>Stakeholders' perception level on capitalization |
| **Evaluation of the Programme communication strategy** | | | |

| Evaluation questions | Sources of information | Techniques / tools | Main indicators/answers |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Was there sufficient awareness and knowledge by the different target groups about the activities and achievements of the Programme? | **Stakeholders** MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Level of match between the information and communication policy and the communication actions undertaken / results<br>Level of coverage of the communication plan<br>Level of relevance |
| 2. Did the management bodies of the Programme ensure an adequate communication flow in the Programme area? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Level of match between the information and communication policy and the communication actions undertaken / results<br>Level of outreach of communication actions |
| 3. Did the Programme communication measures efficiently reach the relevant target groups? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Level of match between the information and communication policy and the communication actions undertaken / results<br>Level of efficiency of communication measures |
| 4. Did the Programme contribute to raising projects' capacity to communicate their accomplishments? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Level of match between the information and communication policy and the communication actions undertaken / results<br>Level of impact in communication strategies of projects |
| 5. What were the necessary improvements in the communication strategy based on the evaluation findings? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey<br>Case studies | Identification of need addressed in relation to communication strategy |
| 6. What were the suggestions and specific forms of capitalisation on projects experience to implement? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy, IP, project implementation reports, other territorial cooperation IPs and Good Practices in capitalization and Programme Documents | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online survey<br>Case studies | Identification of other IPs Good practices in capitalisation<br>Specification of concrete actions for the capitalisation of experience and outcomes: capitalisation strategy<br>Proposal of forms of capitalisation |
| **Compliance with the strategic environmental assessment** | | | |

| Evaluation questions | Sources of information | Techniques / tools | Main indicators/answers |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Were environmental aspects considered sufficiently in the phases of project evaluation and selection? | **Stakeholders:** MA, JS and NsC<br>**Documents**: Programme Documents (annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects packages, project implementation reports, other relevant documents and guidelines Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Level of correlation between the project selection process and the recommendations included in the SEA report<br>Indicators information capacity about environmental aspects |
| 2. Is there a need for other environmental indicators to be included in the monitoring for future programming periods? Which ones? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs<br>**Documents**: Programme Documents (annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects packages, project implementation reports, other relevant documents and guidelines on SEA | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | Strengths and weaknesses of the indicator system |
| 3. Were environmental aspects/ gender taken sufficiently into consideration in the project evaluation and selection phases? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Programme Documents (annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects packages, other relevant documents and guidelines on gender equality) | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey<br>Case studies | Level of correlation between the project selection process and the recommendations included on the horizontal principle on gender equality<br>Stakeholders' perception level on gender equality |

| IMPACT EVALUATION | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / tools** | **Main indicators/answers** |
| 1. What has changed in the cooperation area of the Programme in terms of governance, integration policies, sustainable economic development and other dimensions? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, European Commission (EC)<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews | Potential added value of the Programme – governance and sustainable economic development perspective<br>Correlation between the IP' objectives and the other strategic documents' objectives<br>Identification of good practices contributing towards the EU 2020 strategy and various dimensions of sustainable economic development in the region |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2. How did the Programme contribute to that change and how were the effects of the Programme distributed in the Atlantic Area (AA) (cities, rural areas, tourist zones, etc.)? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews | Potential added value of the Programme – governance and sustainable economic development perspective<br>Mapping of distribution of changes and effects of the Programme in the region |
| 3. Which continued interventions would be needed in this field? More specifically, what are the key areas/themes or sectors able to contribute to the development and cohesion of the AA? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | Potential added value of the Programme – governance and sustainable economic development perspective<br>Strategic recommendations for the Programme implementation and in view of the next programming period |
| 4. How could the Programme amplify valuable results outside the Interreg "bubble", namely through defining common objectives for proper joint dissemination of results targeting, ideally, a transfer of practices and results to other actors and territories for their integration into local, regional, national and European policies and strategies? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | Identification of opportunities for transfer of results<br>Identification of synergies and capitalisation of results |
| 5. How did the priority axes and specific objectives (SOs) contribute to broader policy goals, particularly those of Europe 2020, the territorial agenda, the horizontal principles defined by the Programme and the EC (non-discrimination, sustainable development, etc.) and dimensions such as the quality of citizens' life? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | Potential added value of the Programme – international perspective<br>Correlation between the IP' objectives and the other strategic documents' objectives<br>Identification of good practices contributing towards the EU 2020 strategy, the territorial agenda and the horizontal principles of the Programme |
| 6. Can best practices be identified (if so, which ones) in each of the Programme's priorities for potential replication and dissemination? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, annual reports, projects reports (implementation reports and final reports), SIGI | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | Identification of best practices for potential replication and dissemination |
| 7. What was the type of improvements that can be demonstrated (qualitative and | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs | Desk research<br>Interviews | Main lessons learned |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| quantitative) and necessarily reflected by the indicators? | **Documents**: All Programme Documents, annual reports, projects reports (execution reports and final reports), SIGI | Case studies | Number and description of success factors and weaknesses<br>Level of satisfaction of the managers and beneficiaries<br>Operational recommendations for Programme implementation |
| 8. How relevant was the relationship between the Programme and the Atlantic maritime strategy, and how should this interaction be followed in future programming periods? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS, EC, experts on the strategy<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area, Atlantic Action Plan (AAP), online resources from Atlantic Assistance Mechanism | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | Potential added value of the Programme – international perspective<br>Correlation between the IP' objectives and the Atlantic Strategy objectives<br>Identification of best practices related towards a positive contribution to the Atlantic strategy |
| 9. What was the potential impact of Brexit on the Programme? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Programme beneficiaries<br>**Documents:** All Programme Documents, annual reports, projects reports (implementation reports and final reports) | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online survey | Perception of Programme managers and beneficiaries<br>Operational recommendations for Programme implementation post Brexit |
| 10. What was the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic? | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Programme beneficiaries<br>**Documents:** All Programme Documents, annual reports, projects reports (implementation reports and final reports) | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online survey | Perception of Programme managers and beneficiaries<br>Operational recommendations for Programme implementation post Covid-19 pandemic |

## 2.3. Tasks completed for the evaluation

Following the Key Evaluation Framework above, tasks, methods, and sources of information that have been used for this Programme evaluation are explained below for the purpose of the present final report.

The methodology is structured around a set of four interrelated tasks:

- Task 0: Inception phase,
- Task 1: Desk research,
- Task 2: Collection of primary data,
- Task 3: Case studies,
- Task 4: Analysis and recommendations.

### 2.3.1. Task 0: Inception phase

The kick-off meeting took place on March 20th, 2024. The meeting covered the overall strategic approach of the evaluation, aiming to focus on the **impact of the Programme** in the 2014-2020 period to provide reliable and efficient information from the final evaluation to the current 2021-2027 programming period. In this sense, it was agreed that the evaluation will focus on the **impact, insights, and consequences of the projects in regional development, paying particular attention to the results in both the Atlantic region and specific territories**. The ultimate objective of the impact evaluation is to define how the results can be replicated in the whole of the Atlantic region, while providing a showcase impact in the transnational context.

Additionally, the evaluation team and the MA agreed on a revised timeline of the evaluation and the deliverables which needed to be produced.

### 2.3.2. Task 1: Desk research

This task concerned the identification and revision of all relevant information and available documents. In order to ensure that the evaluation team had access to all available information, particularly in relation to projects' documents, the MA and the JS granted access to the evaluation team to SIGI.

As such, the evaluation team has conducted an in-depth analysis of the following information:

- All relevant Programme's related documents (including the approved Programme, the Programme manual, annual implementation reports, Evaluation Plan (EP) of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020, Midterm Evaluation Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020, etc.),
- All projects' related documents: including the progress and final reports, as well as the available information on SIGI,
- EC and pan-European sources.

An exhaustive list of all sources of information and documents consulted as part of the desk research is provided under Annex 2.

## 2.3.3. Task 2: Collection of primary data

### 2.3.3.1. Interviews with key stakeholders and beneficiaries

The evaluation team conducted four interviews with members of the MA and the JS in Porto, Portugal, on 17 and 18 April 2024 to obtain their insights on the Programme's implementation and results, as well as to reflect on key lessons learned, good practices, and areas for future action.

Interviews were held with the Head of the MA, the Director of the JS and three Project Officers (POs). The topic guides used for the interviews can be found in Annex 3.

Additionally, the evaluation team conducted interviews with the five National Authorities (NAs) throughout the second half of May 2024. The topic guide used for the interviews can be found in Annex 4.

To gain further relevant insights from the Programme implementation and impact, the evaluation team conducted additional interviews with key stakeholders. In particular, interviews were held with the Executive Secretary of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) Atlantic Arc Commission, the relevant PO from the Directorate-General Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) and the Audit Authority of the Programme. All interview questionnaires can be found in Annexes 5, 6 and 7.[2]

Finally, the interviews with project beneficiaries from the eight selected case studies specified in Task 3 (Section 2.3.4) were conducted throughout May and June. Interviews were conducted with seven Lead partners and one partner. The topic guide can be found in Annex 8.

### 2.3.3.2. Online survey with beneficiaries

An online survey with tailored questions was designed, prepared, and launched towards all the beneficiaries of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 with the aim of gathering their views and experiences in of the Programme.

The survey questionnaire primarily consisted of closed-ended questions designed to prompt respondents to express their opinions within a ranked scale of responses or a predetermined set of options. This methodology facilitated the quantification of responses and the establishment of relative comparisons during the analytical phase. Additionally, the questionnaire incorporated open-ended questions to allow beneficiaries to elaborate further on their engagement with the Programme.

The survey was elaborated using the EU survey platform and was launched on 16th April 2024. The survey was launched by the JS to all beneficiaries to ensure compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The questionnaire (included under Annex 9) consisted of 47 questions structured around the following seven sections. Additionally, it also incorporated a few questions covering the post-27 period.

1. Calls for proposals,
2. Selection procedure,

[2] In this specific case the interviewee from DG MARE is also representative of DG REGIO.

3. Implementation and key results,
4. Results of your project, lessons learned and suggestions,
5. System of indicators,
6. Reporting system,
7. Communication.

The online survey gathered 90 responses from beneficiaries of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020.

### 2.3.4. Task 3: Case studies

Case study research is a useful tool for gaining a better understanding of a complex issue or subject that can provide more insight into and/or add strength (i.e., in-depth research of a practical example) to what is already known through previous research. The objectives include providing an analysis to measure the progress of the Programme towards its targets, digging into the concrete results achieved and the impact that such results have had in the territory, including the potential replicability of those results at regional (Atlantic) level.

The evaluation team, based on the information collected on the previous tasks, identified a **long list of potential case studies**. Particularly, a set of criteria were used to make the selection:

- **Quality and performance (at results level)**: the selection carefully looked at the outputs and results achieved by each project based on the information included in the progress and final reports to identify those projects that have generated a greater impact in the AA.
- **Innovation level**: projects have been examined against their level of innovation in their implementation and results to identify those with a higher degree of innovation.
- **Geographical balance**: the case study selection ensures coverage of projects with Lead Partners from the five participating Member States (MS).
- **Inclusion of the 4-helix approach and sustainability of the achieved results**: partnerships are a crucial feature of projects, and the inclusion of the different types of actors provides added value to enhance the capitalisation and sustainability of results.
- **Positive contribution towards the horizontal principles**: the case study selection also aimed at further understanding the implementation of the horizontal principles and their effects, selecting projects with proven positive impact.

From the initial long list of potential case studies (26 identified projects), the team narrowed down the selection to a **final list of eight case studies,** ensuring a balanced distribution across the four Priority Axes, a balanced geographical distribution across the five participating countries and selecting the most relevant projects considering the previous criteria. The final selection of case studies is presented in the following table:

Table 2: Final selection of case studies

| Priority 1 | | Priority 2 | | Priority 3 | Priority 4 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SO 1.1** | **SO 1.2** | **SO 2.1** | **SO 2.2** | **SO 3.1** | **SO 4.1** | **SO 4.2** |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAFER | AYCH | SeaFuel | NEPTUNUS | AGEO<br>RISK-AQUASOIL | CleanAtlantic | AtlanticOnBike |

Once the selection of the eight case studies was done, the following activities were conducted:

- Development of a template for the case study report;
- Compilation of key documents on the implementation of the selected projects;
- A comprehensive analysis of the information available from each of the selected projects: project application forms (PAFs), interim progress reports, website and online available resources;
- Interviews with the Lead partners and, subject to availability, with other partners of the project.

### 2.3.5. Task 4: Analysis and conclusions

This task constitutes an integral component of any evaluation exercise, involving the progressive analysis of findings and results derived from desk research, online surveys, interviews, and consultation activities. The evaluation team has employed distinct analytical methodologies for both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the evaluation:

- **Desk research** involves inputting relevant performance data into an Excel spreadsheet.
- **Interviews** entail summarising main points and categorising them into the different dimensions specified in the following section.
- Analysis of the **online survey** results is conducted within a coding framework, with recurring themes from responses being identified and reviewed.

Throughout the assignment, all team members have integrated perspectives, insights, evidence, and reflections.

This collaborative effort has ensured a comprehensive and objective review of key findings and their implications, leading to the development of the evaluation's conclusive report, including a self-standing executive summary for external readers and a mapping exercise of a sample of projects' outcomes showcasing the contribution of the Programme towards the positive change in the AA (this catalogue can be found in Annex 1 of the report).

# 3. Main findings of the key evaluation questions

## 3.1. Introduction

This section contains the main findings derived from the desk research, Programme documents, fieldwork, and analysis carried out by the evaluation team. A response has been provided for each of the 30 evaluation questions contained in the Tender Specifications, grouped around five topics:

- Efficiency and effectiveness of the Programme procedures,
- Effectiveness in the involvement of stakeholders,
- Evaluation of the Programme communication strategy,
- Compliance with strategic environmental assessment,
- Impact evaluation.

## 3.2. Efficiency and effectiveness of the Programme procedures

| TOPIC 1: Efficiency and effectiveness of the Programme | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| **1. What was the performance of the Programme decision-making process involving the Programme bodies?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs<br>**Documents**: Programme Documents (annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects packages, other relevant documents and guidelines), Guiding Principles for Partnership Implementation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 | Desk research<br>Interviews | **Management bodies' level of perception of the governance of the Programme**<br>**List of factors and constraints** |
| **2. Were the steps from calls for proposals, project generation, evaluation by the JS and selection procedure to contracting and project monitoring efficient? Identify main bottlenecks and lessons learned.** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, Call for Proposals info package, Communication Strategy | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Correlation between Programme objectives and calls specifications**<br>**Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management/selection process**<br>**Number and description of the computer tools used**<br>**Level of satisfaction of managers and beneficiaries** |

| TOPIC 1: Efficiency and effectiveness of the Programme | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| | | | **List of strengths and weaknesses of the call for proposals set up**<br>**Recommendations to improve the system** |
| **3. Did the structure and timing of calls for proposals support the delivery of the Programme in the most effective way?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, Calls for Proposals info package, Communication Strategy | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Correlation between Programme objectives and calls specifications**<br>**Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management/selection process**<br>**Number and description of the computer tools used**<br>**Level of satisfaction of managers and beneficiaries**<br>**List of strengths and weaknesses of the call for proposals set up** |
| **4. Was the SIGI (Sistema de Informação e Gestão Integradaeffective in: o Supporting the project's life cycle stages, from applications and selection processes up to the submission of progress reports and payment claims? o Managing documented data? o Measuring the targeted results and outputs? o Managing the several users of the IT platform?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Audit Authority**,** National Auditors Network and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, indicator system, SIGI | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Number and description of the computer tools used**<br>**Level of satisfaction of managers and beneficiaries**<br>**List of strengths and weaknesses of the management information system**<br>**Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme monitoring** |
| **5. What were the conclusions and necessary improvements in the management of the Programme in line with the evaluation results (for example, the reduction of administrative burden, simplification of procedures, etc.)? o Could the administrative burden be limited in in future programming periods? In which aspects? o What were the costs and benefits of the Programme: what measures might be used to assess the "transnational added value" of the Programme's activities? 8 o Did the system of indicators have the capacity to provide a fair and comprehensive picture of the results/outcomes generated by projects in their** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Audit Authority and Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, indicator system, SIGI | Desk research<br>Interviews | **Level of satisfaction of managers and beneficiaries**<br>**List of strengths and weaknesses of the management information system**<br>**Number and description of the computer tools used**<br>**Resources and staff dedicated to the Programme management** |

| TOPIC 1: Efficiency and effectiveness of the Programme | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| **quantitative and qualitative aspects?** | | | |
| **6. Was the Technical Assistance(TA) volume of resources and their distribution between the management bodies sufficient to guarantee efficient management of the Programme?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Audit Authority**,**<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, including the Programme Manual and the Guiding Principles for Partnership Implementation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 | Desk research<br>Interviews | **Level of satisfaction of managers**<br>**Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management**<br>**Recommendations on resourcing for a smooth implementation of the Programme** |
| **7. Were the human resources of the JS, MA, and Members States adequate to fulfil their various tasks regarding number and capabilities?** | **Stakeholders: MA, JS and NCs, Audit Authority**<br>**Documents: All Programme Documents, including the Programme Manual and the Guiding Principles for Partnership Implementation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020** | **Desk research**<br>**Interviews** | **Level of satisfaction of managers**<br>**Resources and personal staff dedicated to the Programme management**<br>**Recommendations on resourcing (quantify and qualifications) for a smooth implementation of the Programme** |

## 1. What was the performance of the Programme decision-making process involving the Programme bodies?

The configuration of the Programme bodies follows the usual structure applied in different IPs of similar magnitude. As specified in Section 1.6 of the Programme Manual[3] the Programme is comprised of a MA, designated by the MS and tasked with the management of the Programme, and a JS set up to assist the MA and the Monitoring Committee (MC) with their respective functions. The management of the Programme is guided by the principles of Good Governance. MS monitor the management of the Programme during these MC, which take place on a regular basis.

Within this Programme management and decision-making framework, the Programme has successfully executed all available Interreg (European Regional Development Fund, ERDF) funds, over 140 million euros, supporting a total of 71 projects. The global financial execution rate stands at 99.9%. There is slight overcommitment under priorities one, two, and three, but this has been compensated with priorities four and five under the flexibility rule allowed by the EC (FAST-CARE Regulation (EU) 2022/2039).

[3] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme Manual for applicants and beneficiaries. Version of May 2021.

Table 3: Level of financial execution

| Priority | Executed RDF support |
|---|---|
| 1 | 100.2% |
| 2 | 103.5% |
| 3 | 101.7% |
| 4 | 98.5% |
| 5 | 89.0% |
| **Total** | **99.9%** |

Source: MA of Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

From the above, the performance of the Programme bodies complies with the Guiding Principles, and the decision-making process of the Atlantic Programme bodies follows a similar structure to that of other Interreg Programmes and has led to a complete financial execution of the available funds by the Programme.

Furthermore, the Programme management structure was able to address two external shocks: the impact of the **Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit**. To minimise the external challenges that took place throughout the Programme period, the Programme bodies carried out different measures to tackle the effects of Brexit in 2018, which implied a lack of information on the continuation of UK partners, and the financial and administrative instability provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The main responses from the Programme management included: (1) granting further **flexibility** and (2) **extensions** for projects. The MA, MC, and JS rapidly granted an automatic 6-month extension for projects affected by Covid-19. Additionally, this extension was combined with greater flexibility in terms of modification of activities, targets, indicators, and budget when properly and duly justified.

The SIGI platform emerged as another significant factor impacting the Programme, particularly its management. This new system was developed for the 2014-2020 period in response to feedback from users and authorities of the 2007-2013 Programme. However, its implementation faced certain difficulties due to the bankruptcy of the IT provider, resulting in performance below the required standards at the beginning of the programming period. The negative impact and delays induced by the platform led the MA to develop a strategy to mitigate the adverse impacts on the Programme's implementation by establishing a contingency plan for the submission of project progress reports and payment claims while the new IT company improved the existing tool.

The **contingency** plan and the **co-existence of two platforms** increased the work and burden on the JS and MA, which was already exceptionally high considering Covid-19 and the number of modifications requested by projects. Additionally, these Programme bodies provided case-by-case assistance throughout the period.

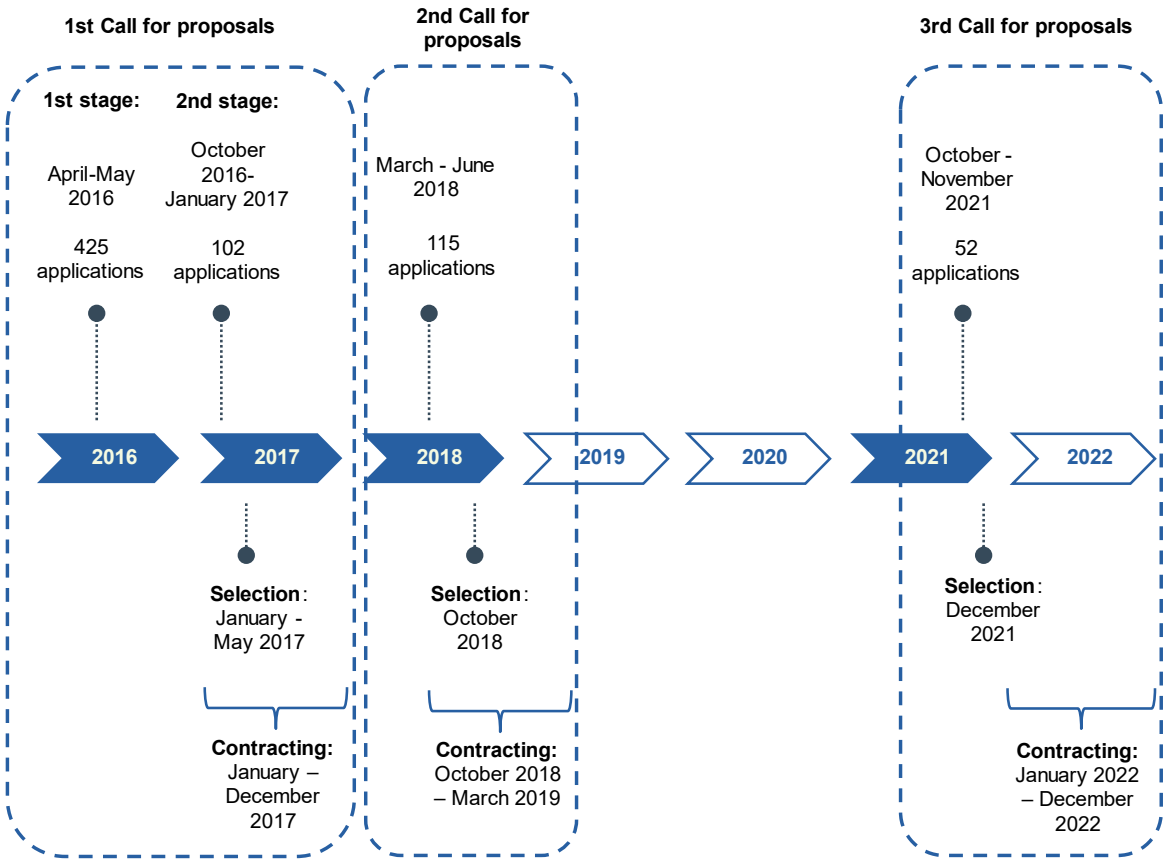
The preceding argumentation is confirmed by the fact that most of the consulted beneficiaries in the online survey show **overall satisfaction with the support received from the Programme's authorities** during the project implementation. More concretely, 77.53% reported being satisfied or mostly satisfied with the support received.

From all of the above, the evaluation can conclude that the performance of the Programme decision-making process involving the Programme bodies has been adequate, since it has correctly executed all the funds and has helped developed 71 relevant projects. Moreover, it has been able to face and address the multiple challenges that have arisen during the Programming period, both external (Brexit and Covid-19) and internal (a non-functioning SIGI at the beginning of the implementation).

## 2. Were the steps from calls for proposals, project generation, evaluation by the JS, and selection procedure to contracting and project monitoring efficient? Identify main bottlenecks and lessons learned.

The Interreg Atlantic Programme 2014-2020 comprised three different calls launched in 2016, 2018 and 2021, as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 1: Overview of calls for proposals timeline




The first call implemented **a two-stage evaluation** process. In the first stage, 425 applications were reviewed as manifestations of interest, and 102 projects were selected to proceed to the second stage. From these, 44 projects were ultimately chosen for financing. Due to the two-stage procedure, the selection process took over a year. To avoid such lengthy procedures and a large number of applications, the MC opted for a one-stage call to reduce the administrative burden on the JS in the second and third calls. As a result, 115 applications were received in the second call, of which 27 projects were funded. In the third call, restricted to projects previously financed under the first and second calls, 52 applications were received, with 33 projects securing funding. The aim of this call relied in enhancing follow-up activities and/or capitalisation of results. This novelty enabled projects to increase the potential impact of the achieved results.

The funding concentrated on the first and second call of proposals. Additionally, the financial concentration was coupled with a timeline concentration, being the first and second calls launched between mid-2016 and mid-2018, and the third call at the end of 2021. The **concentration** served as a mitigation measure to overcome and minimise

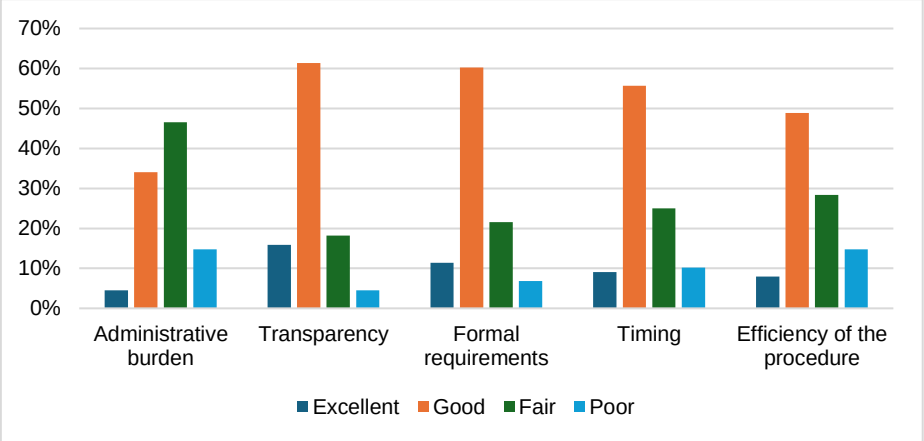
any potential problems and uncertainties arising from **Brexit**. This approach ensured a high level of commitment of the ERDF budget and ultimately facilitated the full implementation of the Programme in the following years.[4]

The previous figure also illustrates the **selection process** for each call, revealing a lengthier procedure for the first call. The JS played a crucial role in the selection procedure by evaluating and scoring all received project applications and, subsequently, presenting these proposals to the MS during the Project MC Despite their extensive involvement in the scoring and ranking of projects, the final decision rested with the MS, who could create their own rankings and make the ultimate decisions on project approvals. Consequently, for some MS, the role of the JS could be perceived as primarily advisory, with the ultimate authority over project selection remaining with the MS.

The calls for proposals within this operational period encountered very lengthy processes, thus prolonging the procedures timeline. Notably, the two-stage process of the first call spanned over a year, contributing significantly to the lengthy duration. Furthermore, the delays were also accentuated due to the technical complications associated with the digital platform SIGI. Consequently, the procedural efficiency was significantly compromised. This diminished efficiency has also been underscored by beneficiaries.

From the figure below, beneficiaries generally viewed the application process favourably, with most categories receiving the highest ratings in the *Good* category. *Transparency* and *Formal Requirements* stood out, with nearly 60% and 55% of respondents, respectively, giving a *Good* rating. This suggests that the application process was generally perceived as clear and well-defined. However, the *Administrative Burden* category revealed a more varied response, with a significant portion of beneficiaries rating it as *Fair*, indicating that while some aspects of the application process were efficient, others might be perceived as cumbersome.

Graph 1: Beneficiaries' rating of the application process



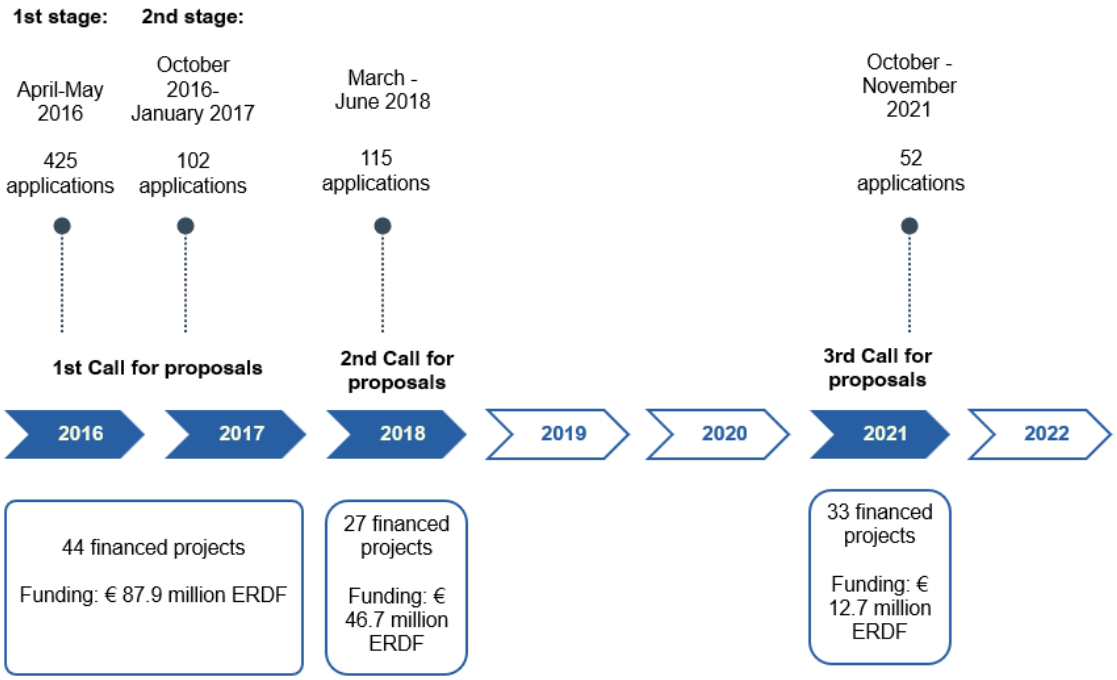

Overall, the calls for proposals encountered one significant bottleneck due to the **extensive length of the first call**. The two-stage procedure extended the timeline, placing an additional burden on the JS. As illustrated in Figure 1, it took one year from the start of the application process to the final selection of projects, and nearly an additional year for the contracting period. Additionally, technical issues with the SIGI platform hindered the effective implementation of the calls for proposals process, resulting in not only delays but also increased strain on the Programme bodies and beneficiaries.

[4] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual implementation report 2018

## 3. Did the structure and timing of calls for proposals support the delivery of the Programme in the most effective way?

In terms of **structure**, the Programme included two regular calls followed by a third call focused on capitalisation. This last call was a novelty, as it was open only to projects from the previous calls to finance follow-up activities and/or capitalisation of results. As a result, the structure design allowed to **increase the impact of projects** funded in the first two calls, with a focus on the capitalisation of results and, hence, sustainability of results.

Figure 2: Overview of calls for proposals design




A detailed analysis on the actual performance of the third call can be found under question 6 (section 3.4 of the evaluation report).

This structural design facilitated the commitment of a substantial portion of the available funding during the initial phase of the Programme, as the third call had a significantly low financial allocation, ensuring **high financial execution rates**.

The **timing of calls** for proposals during the 2014-2020 programming period was, as previously indicated, significantly influenced by Brexit, resulting in a concentration of calls and available funding in the first half of the programming period. The Brexit negotiations precipitated uncertainty regarding the participation of UK partners and the eligibility of costs. In response to these considerations, the Programme proactively opted to advance the timing of the second call to ensure that a substantial portion of the ERDF budget was already committed, thus anticipating potential future problems and uncertainties. This approach has been efficient in ensuring that the impact of Brexit remains at the Programme level, with minor implications for partners and project implementation.

Additionally, beneficiaries, overall, consider the timing of the calls to have been adequate. As illustrated in the previous graph (Graph 1), over half of respondents to the online survey considered it *Good* and 9.09% considered it *Excellent*.

## 4. Was the SIGI (''Sistema de Informação e Gestão Integrada'') effective in:

- *Supporting the project's life cycle stages, from applications and selection processes up to the submission of progress reports and payment claims?*
- *Managing documented data?*
- *Measuring the targeted results and outputs?*
- *Managing the several users of the IT platform?*

During the early stages of the Programme, there was an active involvement in developing an electronic platform to ensure a smooth management of the Programme and solid support for the beneficiaries.[5] For this purpose, one of the main objectives set for the 2014-2020 programming period was to develop an integrated system where partners could report their progress. This led to the development of the SIGI, a platform based on the one used in the prior programming period but with important improvements compared to the previous system.[6] To bring partners close to this new tool, the JS and the MA conducted a training session for Lead Partners to facilitate their adaptation to the platform. The new platform worked efficiently for some time, but by 2018, its overall performance started to fail because of some problems related to the workflow of progress reports and payment claims. This resulted in delays and other difficulties, which led to a negative impact on the overall implementation of the Programme.[7]

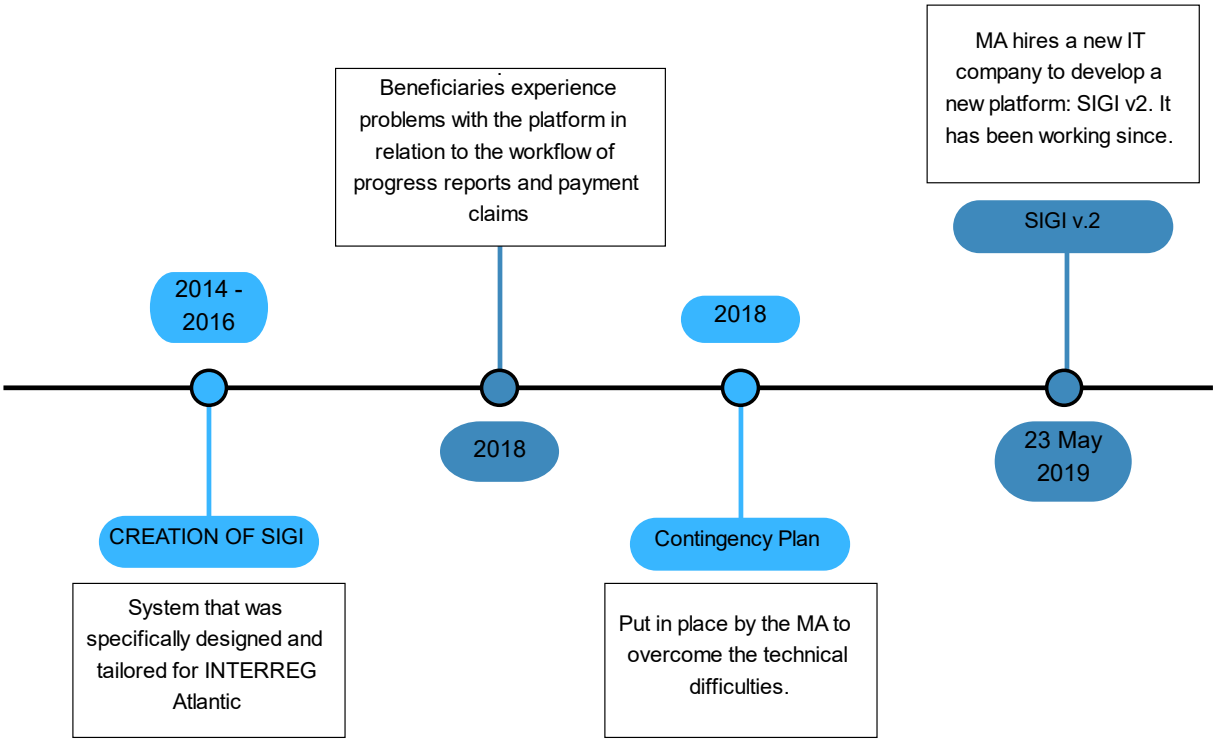
In 2018, the IT company responsible for the management of the platform went into bankruptcy. At this point, a contingency plan was put in place by the MA to overcome the technical difficulties. The contingency allowed the contractualisation of projects approved under the second call and the submission and/or receipt of the first progress reports in due time. During this period of change, there was a need for very dedicated IT support, and the Lead Partners were given a higher degree of flexibility when uploading their reports. A key measure taken by the MA to ease the impact of SIGI working poorly was to hire two additional staff members during the data migration phase to manually transfer a substantial bulk of information and control data automatically migrated.[8]

However, as reflected in the midterm evaluation of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 carried out in 2019, several difficulties arose related to SIGI. A significant problem was the temporal inability to claim reimbursement for expenses incurred during project implementation by project beneficiaries, with some beneficiaries reporting having experienced temporary cashflow problems.

The MA, in light of the challenges related to SIGI that arose in 2018, prepared and launched a public procurement dedicated to the IT and, in May 2019, hired a new IT company, with extensive experience in European Union funds management, to adapt and improve the existing IT tool and provide a new version of the SIGI. The updated IT tool was presented in September 2019 following an intense work period to offer the new platform as soon as possible.[9] The updated platform has been live since the end of February 2020. The MA offered a session to explain the functioning of SIGI v2., as well as explanatory videos for the NCs, beneficiaries and controllers, among others. The new platform changed the methodology for reporting the progress of the projects. The new SIGI was more efficient because all the information was compiled in the same place for all the projects, so the system included a summary on indicators, progress and final reports, as well as financial information.

[5] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2016.
[6] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2017.
[7] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2018.
[8] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2019 and information reported by the Managing Authority.
[9] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2019.

Figure 3: Timeline of the SIGI developments




The situation with the platform meant that the beneficiaries had to adapt to three different systems during the duration of the Programme, so they had diverse perceptions of the platform throughout it. The intermediate evaluation already showed that the platform was not working at the expected level. At that time, the opinions regarding the functioning of the platform were mostly poor (60%), with only 19% of respondents rating it as either good or excellent. For the current period, 2014-2020, the online survey provided interesting insights in relation to the development of the SIGI v2. Out of the 90 respondents, almost 45% indicated that the platform was good, closely followed by almost 35% of respondents who agreed that the functioning was fair. This shows a significant improvement in relation to the opinions reported in the previous evaluation. In relation to the extremes,6.34% of respondents believed that the platform worked in an excellent way, while 13.48% showed discontent with the platform as they thought its functionality was poor.

Similarly, the online survey also assesses the perceptions of the users regarding the five main features of SIGI. Graph 2 shows the results for these characteristics, which are interface and accessibility, operability and user experience, management of documented data, support throughout the process and measurement of the results. Overall, the responses obtained were mostly positive for all five areas when taking into consideration both the 'excellent' and 'good' options. In particular, the feature with the highest rating was interface and accessibility with a 49% of both excellent and good feedback. The feature that is regarded as 'excellent' by almost 15% of the respondents was the support received during the project. In general, all areas display positive feedback form respondents, with all of them being rated as either "excellent" or "good" by more than 50% of respondents and as either "excellent", "good" or "fair" by over 80% in all features. On the contrary, only a low percentage (9% to 16% of respondents) listed as "poor" any of the features of SIGI V.2, particularly the interface and accessibility, operability and user experience, and the management of documented data.

Graph 2: Features of SIGI v.2

Overall, with the changes introduced in SIGI v2. the system now supports the project's life cycle stages, from applications and selection processes to the submission of progress reports and payment claims. The system allows to satisfactorily measure the results and outputs, measuring them against the objective and the established targets. The IT platform has different functionalities depending on the type of user.

Despite the positive opinions towards SIGI v2, beneficiaries also indicated several areas of improvement in the survey. They highlighted that there were several recurring problems with the platform, so they proposed several upgrades:

- The most recurring problem highlighted is the **complexity** of the platform. The respondents commented that SIGI was not very **user-friendly**, with complex navigation and numerous nested sections that made it hard to use. To enhance a more user-friendly experience, the respondents suggested redesigning the interface to make it more intuitive, operational and interactive. Others also indicated the idea of developing an app to make the process faster and more accessible on a daily basis. Overall, they asked for solutions to reduce the **general length of the process**.

- Another concern that was expressed was the **repetitive processes.** Certain users found it to be very time consuming primarily due to the need to enter the same information multiple times across different sections. Many highlighted the need to consolidate the documentation to avoid repetitive entries.

- Regarding the **support** received, some users stressed the importance of having direct and continued support with all partners. To do this, some respondents proposed the idea of having a virtual assistant that would help with any questions that could arise during the reporting process. Nonetheless, the evaluation team acknowledges the limited funds available and scope of the Programme to implement such recommendations.

- There were also frequent mentions for the need for better **organisation and management of documentation** within the platform. To solve this, respondents highlighted the importance of including features like categorisation into folders or the use of Artificial Intelligence tools to assist with report generation. At the same time, it was noted that the platform sometimes did not save the data, which could be solved by adding features like the **autosave**.

- Regarding the **indicators,** the respondents called for a more intuitive registration of them. Also, they showed that it would be very helpful to be able to link the documents with the indicators.

- Lastly, some minor changes that the respondents highlighted that would be interesting to implement were the possibility to **transfer results,** being able to **download information** like financial details for instance and being able to see the reports of other partners. However, on this last topic, it is essential to bear in mind that any functionality needs to comply with GDPR requirements on data protection.

## 5. What were the conclusions and necessary improvements in the management of the Programme in line with the evaluation results (for example, the reduction of administrative burden, simplification of procedures, etc.)?

### *a) Could the administrative burden be limited in future programming periods? In which aspects?*

The mid-term evaluation identified three key areas for improvement:

1. The online platform was the main issue identified by all relevant actors, affecting first level controllers (FLC), as well as payment claims by beneficiaries, and the communication and support they receive from the POs, since the JS was overloaded working under the Contingency Plan. A detailed analysis of the online platform SIGI V.2 can be found under question four above.

2. A more integrated approach towards Programme management in terms of, for example, creating tutorials on specific themes that could bring beneficiaries clarity on what the Programme is looking for, on how to fill in reports, etc. given the workload faced by the Secretariat, having a more integrated approach when communicating to beneficiaries. Throughout the life of the Programme, a multitude of seminars have been organised for beneficiaries. Some examples (non-exhaustive list) are presented below:

- February 2018, Porto, *Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional do Norte* (CCDR-N), dedicated session to beneficiaries on Call 1.
- During March and April 2018, in all MS participating in the Programme: A JS member went for local seminars, jointly organised with NCs.

In line with this, the Programme took on board this recommendation and organised several webinars and workshops to support beneficiaries, some of which are listed below:

- Webinar about the Call 3, October 2021;
- AA online workshop, "Making the most of natural and marine resources for the benefit of the Atlantic regions, October 2021;
- AA online workshop at the European Week of Regions and Cities (EWRC), October 2022;
- Webinar to support projects on financial reporting, November 2022;
- Information day on IPs, May 2022.

Additionally, “The Applicant’s User Guide” provides full explanations to beneficiaries on how to fill in a progress report and claim payments for applicants. In addition, there is the Programme Manual directed at projects, which includes and factsheets on several topics, namely progress reports and payment claims. Moreover, there is the “User’s guide to complete the progress report”[10], as well as different videos in SIGI on how to fill in the online reporting directed at beneficiaries and controllers[11], as well as manuals for external users as well.

[10] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. ‘User’s Guide to complete the progress report’. April 2018.
[11] https://sigi.atlanticarea.eu/SIGI.UI/Administration/Videos?clear=True

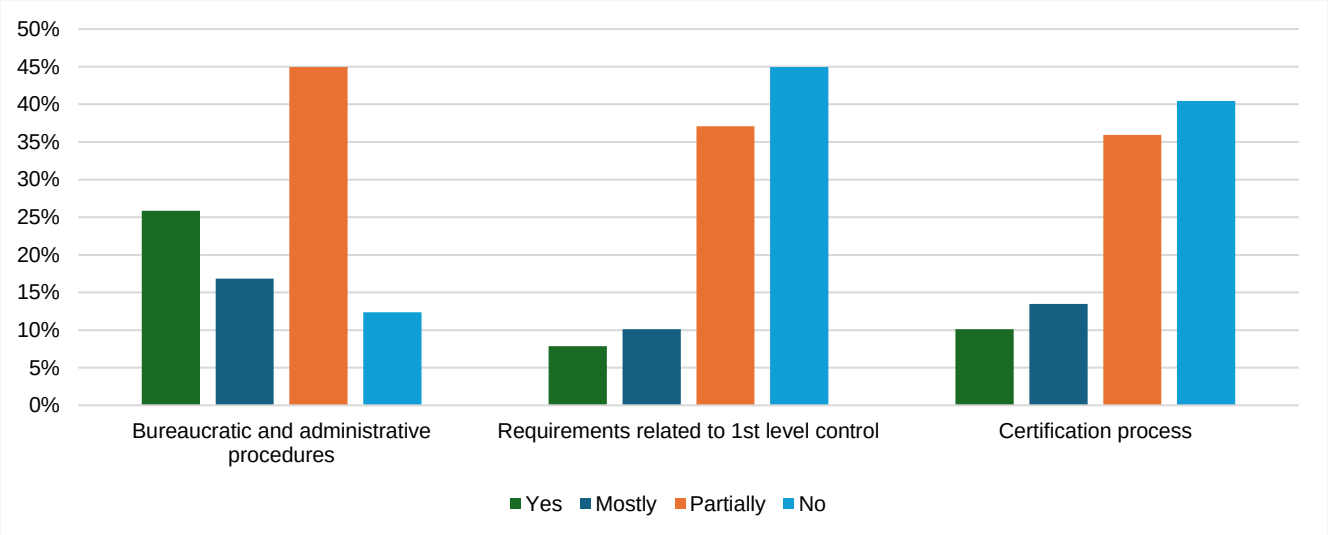
3. Good management practices from other successful IPs could be brought into this Programme, such as organisational tools, webinars for beneficiaries, etc.

The EU regulations regarding the IPs, including the Common Provisions included in Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013[12] and the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013,[13] contain key provisions regulating the administrative procedures of IPs. Therefore, the **general regulatory framework limits the potential areas for improvement**. Overall, the whole certification process and audit procedures are deemed as correct and efficient, placing particular emphasis on the important role carried by first level controllers and the national authorities, whose effective role allows to identify issues at the very beginning and correct them before they reach the final stages of the audit process, thereby increasing the efficiency of the procedure.

However, from the **beneficiaries' side,** it becomes clear that there is a claim towards less administrative burden and simplification of procedures. The following graph contains the three key areas identified by beneficiaries participating in the online survey as having hindered the successful implementation of projects. As it can be observed, 25% of beneficiaries report that bureaucratic and administrative procedures have hindered the implementation of their projects, while 16.85% and 44.94% considered that it has mostly or partially affected the project implementation, respectively. Requirements related to the first level control and certification process were also highlighted by beneficiaries as hindering the successful implementation of the projects, although to a lower extent than bureaucracy and administrative procedures.

Overall, the online survey brings to light the need of beneficiaries for less bureaucracy and administrative procedures, as well as certification processes.

Graph 3: Areas that have hindered the successful implementation of projects




*b) What were the costs and benefits of the Programme: what measures might be used to assess the "transnational added value" of the Programme's activities?*

[12] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 on the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Agricultural Fund. https://eurlex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2013/1303/oj

[13] Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European Territorial Cooperation goal. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:347:0259:0280:En:PDF

The present evaluation report provides a comprehensive analysis on this point under the section dealing with 'Impact Evaluation', and in more concrete terms, under the question related to 'change in the cooperation area in terms of governance, sustainable economic development or integration policies'.

The report does so by providing a documented review of the results of the Programme, including a sample of concrete effects of the projects that have contributed to a positive change in the Atlantic cooperation area and thus demonstrating the transnational added value of the Programme's activities.

In this respect, more than 200 results have been mapped and structured around 10 typologies, as described under the first question of *Section 3.6* below.

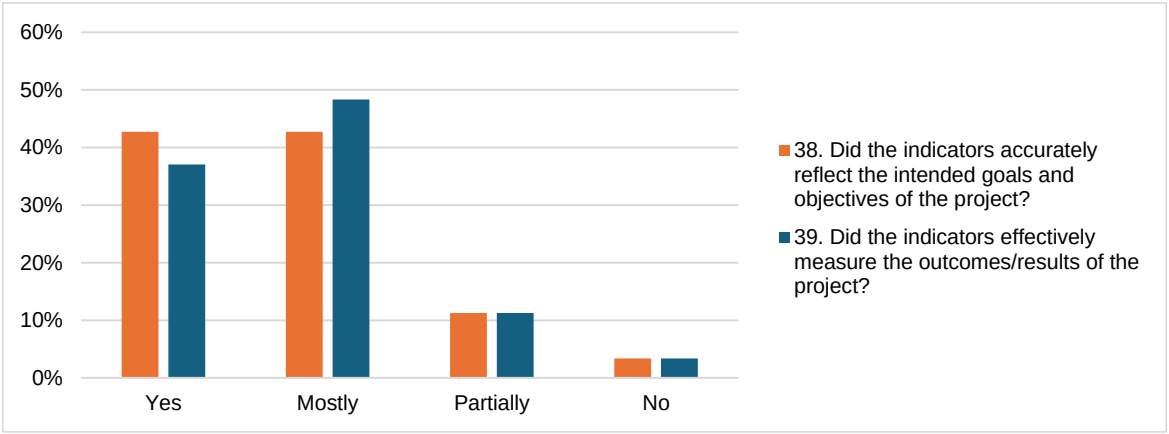
*c) Did the system of indicators have the capacity to provide a fair and comprehensive picture of the results/outcomes generated by projects in their quantitative and qualitative aspects?*

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 defined a set of indicators with the aim of providing an effective instrument to measure the results of the projects and evaluate their impact. These indicators were tailored to each SO and, hence, the thematic of each project. This has allowed to better reflect the results of projects across the different SOs, thus demonstrating the 'transnational added value of the Programme's activities', as described above.

Overall, the system of indicators has been successful in providing an overview of the accomplishments of projects through the original targets and the final achievements. This has allowed us to quantify the outputs and, consequently, the results of projects. Therefore, they have provided a good vision of the Programme implementation.

As can be seen in the graph below, around 85.39% of the beneficiaries who participated in the survey agreed that the indicators succeeded on reflecting the objective of the projects. Similarly, the majority considered that the indicators defined by the Programme were a good measurement of the outcomes and results. Just 3% disagreed with these statements and considered that the indicators did not reflect these aspects.

Graph 4: Overview of beneficiaries' opinion on the indicators




However, there are specific cases in which the reported values of certain projects under concrete indicators have been extremely high, providing an overestimation of certain outputs achieved. These large values are not incorrect, but rather respond to the fact that some indicators might allow certain degree of interpretation by beneficiaries.

Particularly, this has been the case of the indicator the *Number of participants in actions for the dissemination and capitalisation of results (PI05)* in which some projects have reached over 2,400% of the initial target. For example, for this indicator, certain beneficiaries counted the number of visitors to the webpage, which considerably increases the value of the indicator.

The indicators covered by the Programme are detailed in the evaluation question five under section 3.2. Therefore, please refer to that section for further insights regarding the indicators.

Overall, the output indicators have been achieved and, in most cases, exceeded the defined targets. The output indicators showing a greater level of achievement, over 300%, correspond to:

- Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions (C009),
- Population benefiting from flood protection measures (C020),
- Number of participants in actions for the dissemination and capitalisation of results (PI05).

All these indicators focused on the benefits provided to individuals or groups, whether through increased engagement, improved safety, or enhanced knowledge. Therefore, as further detailed in evaluation question five under section 3.2, these indicators allowed for a certain degree of interpretation by beneficiaries resulting in large values of indicators. Indeed, the quantification of indicators in some cases is complicated, since there is certain room for interpretation when it comes to the exact number of people attending a certain activity or the number of beneficiaries reached.

## 6. Was the Technical Assistance (TA) volume of resources and their distribution between the management bodies sufficient to guarantee efficient management of the Programme?

The SO of the TA in the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 was to ensure efficient and effective management and to guarantee effective support to applicants and beneficiaries, while enhancing the visibility and capitalisation of results. In order to do this, the Programme allocated 6% of the total ERDF funding to this task.[14] Such value is very similar to the percentage allocated in other Programmes under the 2014-2020 Interreg programming period as the Interreg South-West Europe Programme (SUDOE)[15] or the Spain-France-Andorra Cooperation Programme (POCTEFA).[16] According to Regulation (EU) 1299/2013, Article 17 states that the amount of ERDF allocated to TA had to be limited to 6% of the total amount allocated to a cooperation Programme.[17]

Under the AA, the funds have been distributed throughout the years covering the costs associated to the JS, the IT platform, the communication strategy, as well as the Audit and Certifying Authorities (CA).[18] These actions have been reflected in the annual implementation reports of the Programme, in which TA represents the last priority axis (Priority Axis 5).

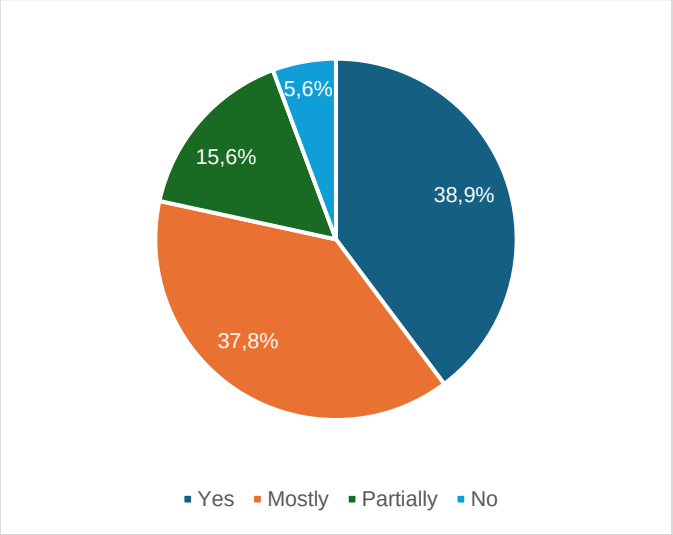
Overall, beneficiaries of the Programme consulted in the context evaluation are satisfied with the support received. After the interviews with beneficiaries and NAs, interviewees had no objections to the volume of resources and

[14] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020: Approved Cooperation Programme.
[15] Cooperación territorial Europea. (2017) Programa de Cooperación Interreg V-B Europa Suroccidental. https://5.interreg-sudoe.eu/contenidoDinamico/LibreriaFicheros/D29F5A47-F2E7-8FC4-F4B3-27B3CF843069.pdf
[16] POCTEFA 2014-2020. Ejes estratégicos. https://2014-2020.poctefa.eu/programa/eje-prioridades/
[17] Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European Territorial Cooperation goal. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:347:0259:0280:En:PDF
[18] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2020.

their distribution between the management bodies, except for some cases of the JS, which is subject to the next evaluation question.

In line with this, from the online survey conducted, 77% of respondents are satisfied or mostly satisfied with the support received from the Programme's authorities during the implementation of their projects.

Graph 5: Satisfaction with the support received from the Programme's authorities during the implementation of projects

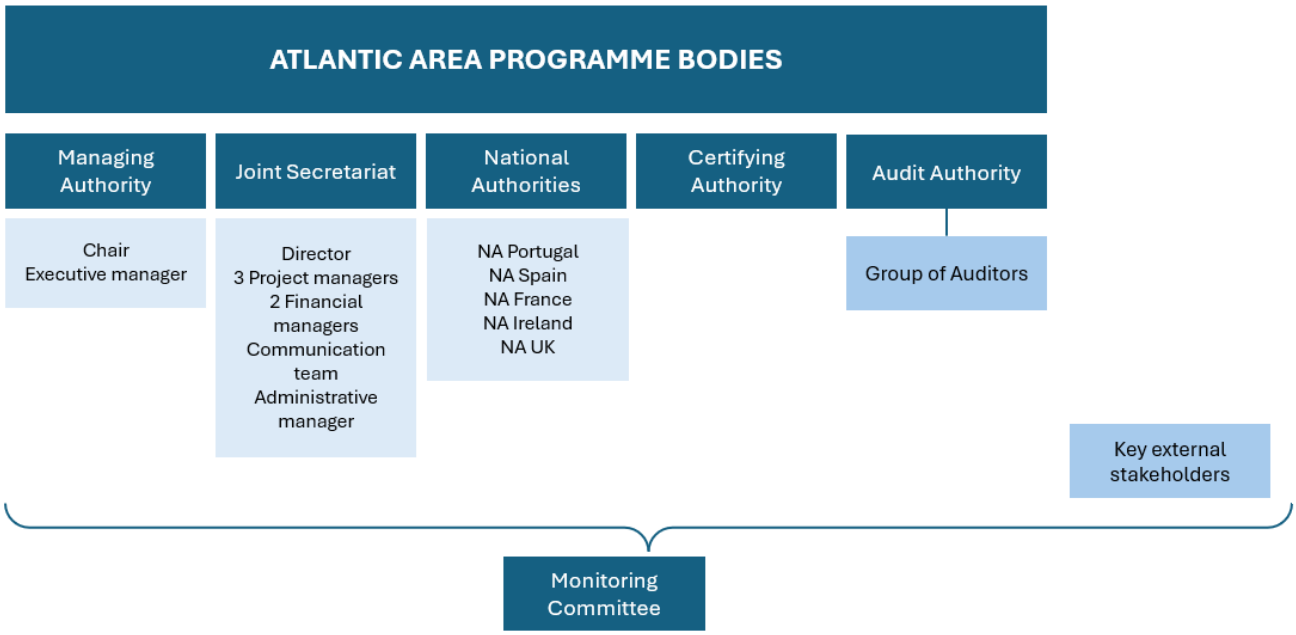



All the above is fully compliant with the above-mentioned Regulation (EU) 1299/2013 and common practice with the rest of the Interreg funded Programmes.

## 7. Were the human resources of the JS, MA, and Member States adequate to fulfil their various tasks regarding number and capabilities?

The Programme bodies are responsible for the overall implementation and management of the Programme, involving both the reliable and effective development of the Atlantic Programme and the monitorisation of the projects. The structure, which can be seen in the figure below, is similar to the one followed by other IPs.

Figure 4: Overview of Interreg Atlantic Area 2014-2020 Programme bodies[19]




Each of the Programme bodies had specific roles to enhance the Programme and guarantee its correct implementation.[20] The **MA** was responsible for the overall management and implementation of the Programme on behalf of the participating countries, ensuring institutional compliance throughout the programming period. It has been supported by the **JS,** which was the main body in contact with the project partners and focused on the daily implementation of the Programme. It was composed of different members that assisted the projects development and monitorisation throughout the projects' lifetime. As the main representation of the countries conforming to the AA, the **NAs** appointed a NC responsible for the implementation, dissemination, and promotion of the Programme at a national level. They assisted the MA and the JS on the territory and with information on national regulations, key for the implementation of the Programme in their countries.

The **CA** managed the expenditure certifications, monitored the payments to project partners and gathered the necessary information to assist the ERDF payments procedure. Moreover, the **Audit Authority** coordinated the implementation of sampling audits on the management and control resources of the Programme. Throughout the Programme, it was supported by a **Group of Auditors (GoA)** comprising representation of the member countries.

Although all the aforementioned bodies had their own management and responsibilities, they were also part of the **MC.** The MC is the main decision-making body and, therefore, a key actor, responsible for the management of the strategic scope of the Programme. It agreed on the definition of the calls for proposals and carried out the selection process of the projects. The MC involved the MS, the MA, the JS, the CA and Audit authorities, and **external key stakeholders as advisory members.** These include the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG-REGIO) desk officer, and organisations such as CPMR[21] and DG-MARE that acted as observers of the strategic decision-making process of the Programme.

Overall, the internal structure was successful in the management and implementation of the Programme during the 2014-2020 programming period. However, the evidence has shown that the available human resources might have been scarce in certain moments of the programming period, particularly in relation to the large number of

[19] The United Kingdom during the programming period 2014-2020 still participated as a member of Interreg Atlantic Area, even after Brexit. For Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027 the United Kingdom no longer forms part.
[20] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. (2021) Programme Manual for applicants and beneficiaries.
[21] Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions. https://cpmr.org/

applications that the Programme received in the first call, deriving from the two-stage process. Despite having hired an additional financial manager in response to the needs identified by the programme bodies, there is also a common understanding from the national coordinators' interviews on the convenience of reinforcing the JS by the MA and MC based on the requirements of the Programme and the available TA budget.

The need to work under a contingency plan with SIGI and then to transfer to an **electronic platform** towards SIGI v.2 posed increased tension in human resources, given the additional workload to be undertaken. Moreover, POs increased their interaction with beneficiaries and supported them to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the Programme management. [22] After 2019, the new system allowed better reporting and a more efficient use of the platform, encouraged by training sessions on SIGI that continued throughout time[23] and covered other areas, such as the third call for capitalisation. In relation to this, the TA has been responsible for **supporting the projects** once they were approved to participate in the AA. In 2017 and after the 1st call, the TA focused on the support of the first approved projects[24] that in 2019 sum up to the projects that passed the 2nd call.[25] Lastly, the monitorisation of the projects that engaged on the third call on capitalisation was developed in 2021.[26]

In terms of human resources, during the data migration from the old SIGI to the new SIGI, the MA hired two temporary staff members to help with the additional workload imposed by the contingency plan. Moreover, the JS was reinforced with a second financial officer (until then the Programme only had one).

Under the scope of the TA, the JS provided guidance and organised sessions to help the projects comply with the European, national, and Programme-level regulations. Moreover, the development of the website and the use of social networks have been key for promoting the **visibility and capitalisation** of results.[27] To enhance these communication activities, **events** organised in coordination with other European Transnational Cooperation Programmes allowed the exchange of lessons learned and good practices, encouraging not only cooperation but also enhancing the resources of the Atlantic Programme.

The **challenges** that the Programme faced throughout the period demanded a stronger engagement of the JS and the MA in the management of the projects. Moreover, as specified in the Annual Implementation Report 2020, Covid-19 required the transition to virtual and online events, demonstrating the Programme and the projects' ability to adapt rather than cancel the planned activities by providing extensions and readjusting the budget.[28]

[22] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2016.
[23] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2019.
[24] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2017.
[25] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2019.
[26] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2021
[27] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2016.
[28] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2021.

## 3.3. Effectiveness in the involvement of stakeholders

| TOPIC 2: Effectiveness in the involvement of stakeholders | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| **1. Did the Programme succeed in involving its stakeholders and, in particular, the policy relevant partners and private partners?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, especially the ones related to the calls for projects and project generation | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Level of outreach of the call for proposals system**<br>**Level of transparency of the call for proposals system**<br>**Level of fairness of the call for proposals system**<br>**Level of efficiency of the call for proposals system**<br>**Level of transparency of the selection procedure**<br>**Level of efficiency of the selection procedure**<br>**Level of correlation between the selection criteria and IP objectives** |
| **2. Was the Programme able to attract new, relevant partners?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, especially the ones related to the calls for projects and project generation | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Level of outreach of the call for proposals system**<br>**Level of transparency of the call for proposals system**<br>**Level of fairness of the call for proposals system**<br>**Level of efficiency of the call for proposals system**<br>**Level of transparency of the selection procedure**<br>**Level of efficiency of the selection procedure**<br>**Level of correlation between the selection criteria and IP objectives** |
| **3. What were the main features of the partnerships (e.g., location, type of partners, etc.)?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, especially the ones related to the calls for projects and project generation | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Main features/characteristics of existing partnerships**<br>**Level of correlation between the selection criteria, the IP objectives, and the existing partnerships** |
| **4. To what extent were the Programme and the projects sustainable?** | **Stakeholders: MA, JS and NCs and Lead partners/Beneficiaries**<br>**Documents: annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects' packages, project** implementation **reports, other relevant documents and guidelines (including online project resources)** | **Desk research**<br>**Interviews**<br>**Online survey**<br>**Case studies** | **Identification of projects by priority with strong potentiality of sustainability of results**<br>**Good practices on sustainability fiches**<br>**Stakeholders' perception level on capitalisation** |

When responding to Topic 2: effectiveness in the involvement of stakeholders, to ensure a better flow of the narrative, the replies to the relevant questions have been structured in the following order: question three on the main features of the partnership, followed by question one on the involvement of partners, question two on attracting new partners and finally question four on the sustainability of the projects' results.

## 1. What were the main features of the partnerships (e.g., location, type of partners, etc.)?

Understanding the main features of partnerships is crucial for evaluating their structure and effectiveness. Therefore, this question is addressed first, as it aims to explore the defining characteristics of the partnerships in question, including their geographical location or typology of partners involved in the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020.

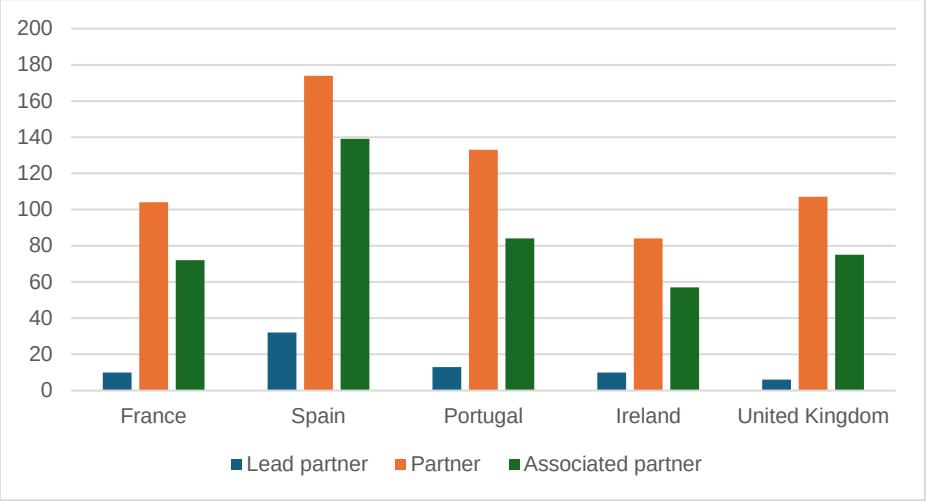
The **average size** of the partnerships stood at around 9 beneficiaries[29] per project (9.62). Nonetheless, the values ranged from five, such as in the ATLANTICFOODEXPORT project, to 16 beneficiaries in the PORTOS project. Additionally, the size also varied across the different objectives of the Programme. Objectives 1.1 and 1.2 have the lowest average number of beneficiaries, while objectives 2.1 and 2.2 feature partnerships with an average size of 10.4 and 11.6, respectively. Including the Associated partners, the average number of partnerships stood at around 16 partners, with a maximum of 38 partners in the project NEPTUNUS, which includes 25 Associated partners.

Compared to the 2007-2013 Programme, the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 defined that "*the partnership must involve at least three partners who must be located within three different Atlantic Area Programme regions of three different MS*".[30] As a result, there was overall geographical coverage in terms of partnerships across the 5 eligible countries, as illustrated in the following graph.

However, in relation to a balanced distribution, there is a predominance of Spanish Lead partners and partners across the projects. In fact, out of the 71 projects, 32 are managed by organisations based in Spain, which represents 45% of projects.

[29] Only Lead partners and partners, not Associated partners.
[30] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme Manual 2014-2020.

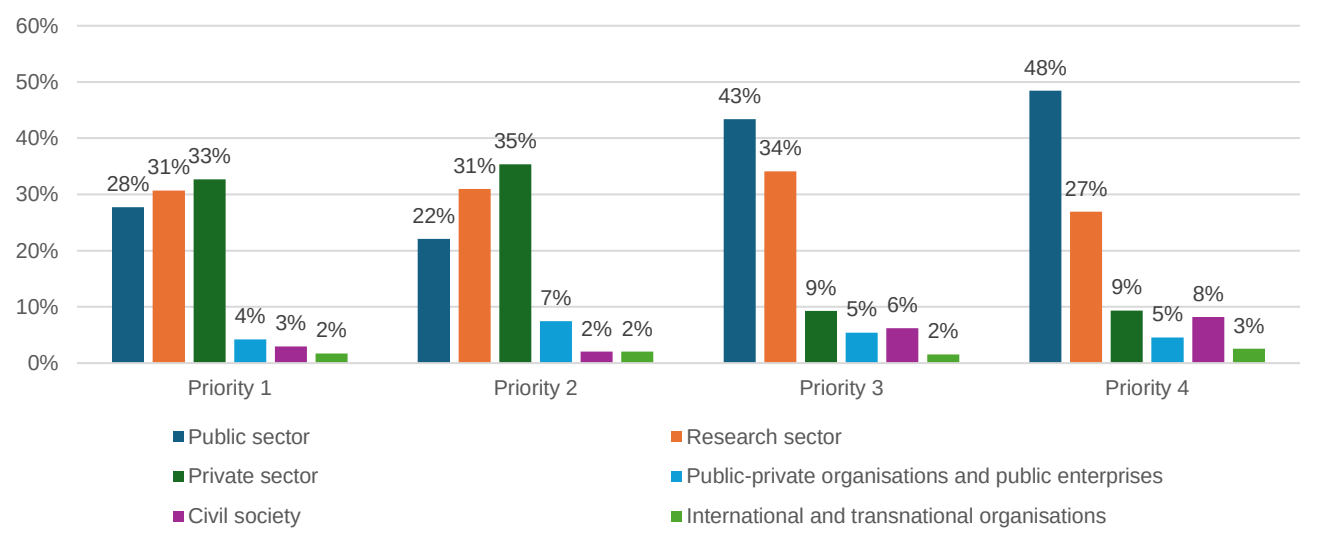
Graph 6: Geographical distribution of beneficiaries




Additionally, the partnerships expanded over the AA territory and included partners and Associated partners from other countries including EU MS such as Belgium or Italy, but also European Economic Area (EEA) countries as well as third countries, such as Morocco. The inclusion of countries outside the AA becomes a useful tool to expand the results outside the Interreg bubble and foster cooperation and synergies with other regions.

Regarding the inclusion of all pertinent stakeholders in the partnerships across the various priorities, the following graph illustrates this distribution. As can be seen, the research sector showed a balanced distribution across the four priorities. However, the public and private sectors exhibited divergence across the different priority axes. The public sector was more present in Priority Axes three and four, while the private sector was more represented in Priority Axes one and two. Similarly to public sector distribution, civil society was also present to a greater y extent in Priority Axes three and four. This is likely due to the nature and thematic focus of each priority. The first two priorities were more closely linked to research and market outputs, while the third and fourth were more associated with social challenges.

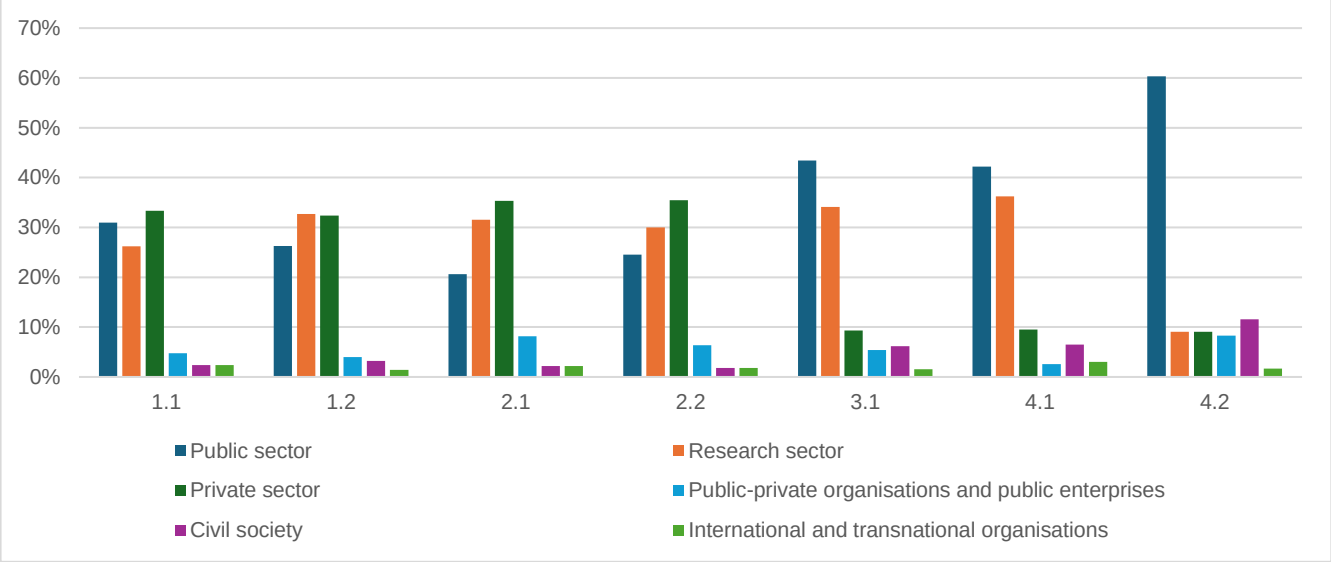
Graph 7: Distribution of type of partners across the four Priority Axes



Building on this analysis and emerging findings, the following graph illustrates partnerships distribution across the different SOs of the four defined Priority Axes. Although the distribution presented in the graph is aligned with the findings above-presented, additional insights emerge.

The public sector was the predominant stakeholder within projects under the SO 4.2, representing 60.33% of partners. Additionally, within this SO, civil society emerged as the second most prevalent actor within the partnerships. Nonetheless, overall, there are similarities in terms of the partners involved across objectives within the same priorities.

Graph 8: Distribution of type of partners across the Specific Objectives

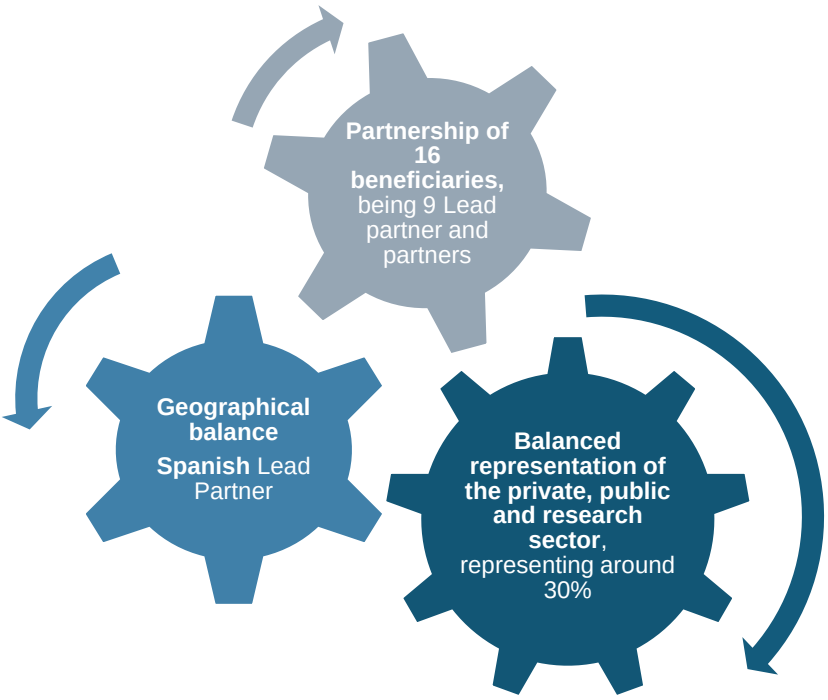



Based on the analysis conducted, a definition of the project prototype of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 is illustrated in the figure below.

The project prototype encompassed a partnership of **16 beneficiaries**, including the Lead partner, eight partners, and seven Associated partners. Geographically, the project boasts a diverse representation from five countries, with the Lead partner coming from Spain, ensuring a broad international collaboration.

The typology of partners is carefully structured to align with the first priority, which has historically funded the largest number of projects. As such, the project prototype features a balanced representation of the private, public, and research sectors, with each representing around 30%. This balanced composition ensures a comprehensive approach, integrating diverse perspectives and expertise. Additionally, there is a minor representation from civil society and public-private and public enterprises, contributing to the project's multifaceted nature and broad stakeholder engagement.

Figure 5: Overview of project prototype partnership




Overall, partnerships in the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 have effectively included all relevant partners, ensuring geographical coverage. As such, beneficiaries have reported, through the online survey, overall satisfaction with their projects' partnerships in terms of geographical coverage, typology of partners, as well as the number of partners, with over 80% of beneficiaries agreeing or mostly agreeing across all three categories.

Despite the overall satisfaction, beneficiaries also provided suggestions on **areas for improvement** within partnerships. Particularly, the most frequently mentioned area for improvement was the need for greater **involvement of the private sector and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)**. Many respondents felt these partners could bring practical insights and innovation, which were sometimes lacking due to an overrepresentation of academic institutions. Additionally, there was a call for the inclusion of **more diverse partners**, such as additional developer partners, environmental economists, and third sector entities, to enrich the partnership and enhance project outcomes. Ultimately, this serves as evidence for the promotion of **quadruple-helix partnerships**.

## 2. Did the Programme succeed in involving its stakeholders and, in particular, the policy relevant partners and private partners?

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 aimed at fostering transnational cooperation among regions along the Atlantic coast of Europe, focusing on innovation, resource efficiency, environmental protection, and strengthening the region's resilience to risks. A crucial component of its success relied on effectively involving a diverse range of stakeholders, including policy-relevant partners and representatives from the private sector, allowing the necessary connection with the market/s. After studying the main features of partnerships in the previous question, evaluating the Programme's ability to engage these key players is essential for understanding its overall impact and effectiveness in achieving its strategic objectives.

Before analysing the Programme's ability to engage key relevant partners, it is crucial to understand its level of outreach. In the first call, the Programme received 425 applications, of which 102 advanced to the second phase, and ultimately 44 were financed. This means that for each financed project, over nine applications were received. In the second call, this ratio decreased to 4.26, potentially due to the first call's two-stage procedure, which had a less demanding initial application process. Notably, 73.24% of projects financed in the first and second calls applied to the third call. Compared to the 2007-2013 programming period, where the ratios remained below three, the **2014-2020 Programme has successfully reached and involved a higher number of partners.**

Additionally, during the 2014-2020 programming period, a **wide range of actors were involved** in the Programme, including: (a) the public sector, (b) the research sector, (c) the private sector, (d) public-private organisations and public enterprises, (e) the civil society, and (f) international and transnational organisations. A more detailed overview is included below:

Table 4: Typology of partners

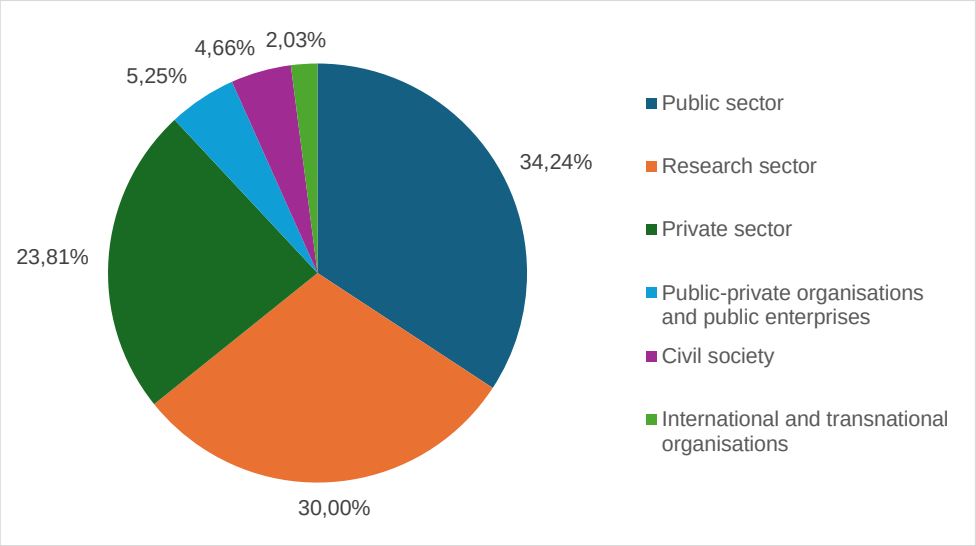
| Categories as described in the Programme manual[31] | Sector | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| National, regional or local public bodies | *(a) Public sector*<br>*(d) public-private organisations and public enterprises* | ***Local public authority*** (municipality, etc.), ***regional public authority*** (regional council, etc.), ***national public authority*** (Ministry, State Agencies, etc.), **sectorial agency (**local or regional development agency, environmental agency, energy agency, employment agency, etc.), ***infrastructure and (public) service provider*** (public transport, utility company: water supply, electricity supply, sewage, gas, waste collection, etc., airport, port, railway, etc.) |
| Education and research institutions | *(b) Research sector* | ***Higher education and research*** (university faculty, college, research institution, RDT facility, research cluster, etc.) and ***education training centre and school*** (primary, secondary, pre-school, vocational training and education, etc.) |
| Private companies | *(c) Private sector* | ***Micro, small, medium sized enterprises*** |
| Not-for-profit organisations | *(e) Civil society sector* | ***Interest groups*** (NGO, trade union, foundation, charity, voluntary association, club, etc.), ***not for profit organisations*** (voluntary sector, charity organizations, cooperatives, etc.), |
| | *(c) Private sector* | ***Business support organisations*** (chamber of commerce, chamber of trade and crafts, business incubator or innovator centre and business clusters, etc.) |
| International, transnational and cross-border organisations | *(f) International and transnational organisations* | ***EEIG*** (European Economic Interest Grouping), ***EGTC*** (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation), Duero – Douro , etc., ***international organisation under national law, under international law*** |

The engagement of diverse and pertinent stakeholders is crucial in ensuring optimal project implementation, efficiency, and efficacy. Additionally, they play a strategic role in facilitating the dissemination and utilisation of achieved outcomes and products. The following graph illustrates the participation of the different stakeholders, which indicates a **balanced distribution** in terms of the public sector, representatives of the private sector and

[31] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme Manual 2014-2020.

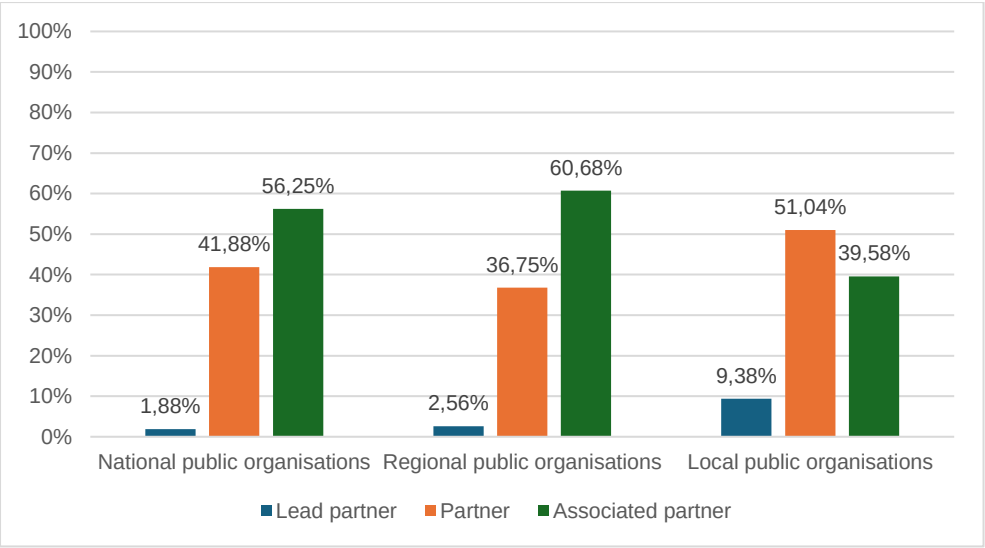
research actors across the Programme. As shown in the following graph, the public sector[32] accounts for 34.24% of partners, closely followed by the research sector[33] (30%) and representatives of the private sector[34] (23.81%).

Graph 9: Overview of the type of actors involved in the partnerships




Specifically, **public sector** entities constituted 34.24% of the Programme's partners, encompassing local, regional, and national public organisations. Thus, all three levels of policy-making bodies were represented in the Programme. Going into more detail, there were slightly more national public organisations (166) compared to regional (126) and local (112). However, national and regional public organisations were more likely to participate as Associated partners (56.25% and 60.68%,[35] respectively), compared to local public organisations (39.58%).

Graph 10: Distribution of public sector participation



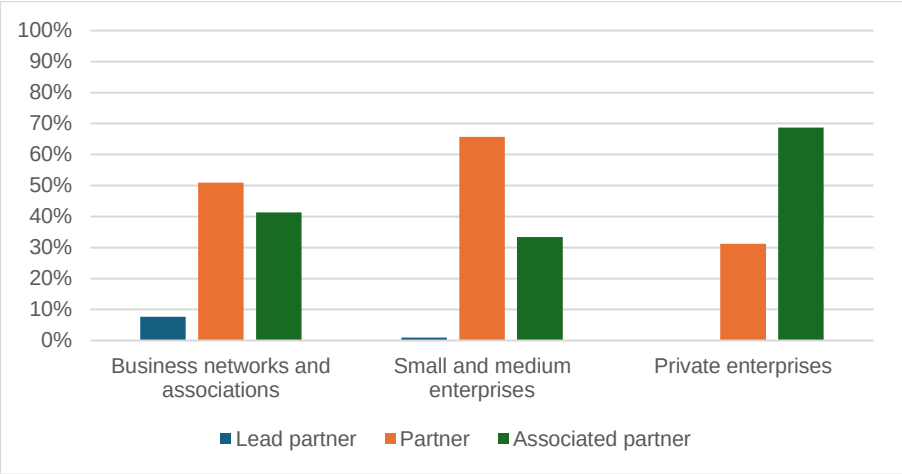

[32] National, regional and local public organisations.
[33] Universities and higher education; Research and innovation organisations and University or research and innovation centre
[34] Business networks and associations; Small and medium enterprises and Private enterprises
[35] This percentage indicates the share of national/regional public organisations participating as Associated partners out of the total number of national/regional public organisations.

The participation of these public organisations was evident across the four priority axes in projects such as *CAPITEN*, which involved a wide range of local and regional public authorities. These authorities played a crucial role in promoting economic development and job creation by enhancing local natural and cultural heritage. The inclusion of the public sector is instrumental in ensuring the sustainability of results and facilitating implementation at the political level once the project has concluded.

Another key actor effectively engaged in the Programme is the **private sector**, comprising SMEs, business networks and associations, and private enterprises. The private sector represented 23.8% of the Programme stakeholders and it is worth noting that this was the first programming period in which SMEs could participate as partners, as further detailed in the following evaluation question.

The following graph provides an overview of the distribution of private sector organisations across the three types of partners. Additionally, both business networks and associations, as well as SMEs, primarily participate as partners, whereas private enterprises are predominantly involved as Associated partners. It should be noted that the role of Lead partners was limited to not-for-profit private partners. This restriction accounts for the low number of private partners involved in this role.[36] The success of the Programme in the involvement of this type of partners can be evidenced through projects such as REDAWN or Triple-C with a high participation of the private sector.

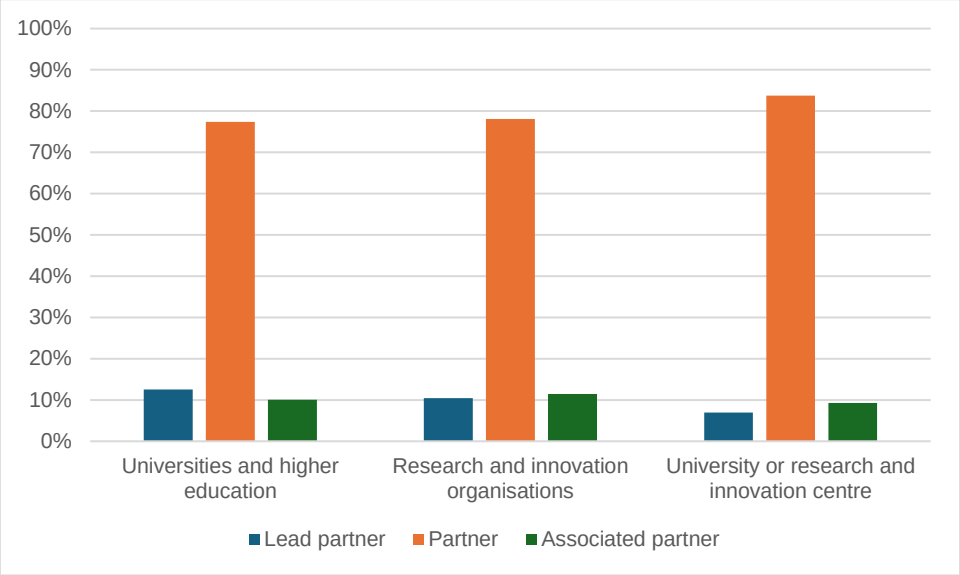
Graph 11: Distribution of private sector participation




Also, from the partnership analysis arising from the project reports, over 330 partners come from the research/academic sector, with the highest presence of universities and higher education centres (almost 200). In terms of their specific involvement, on average 10% of them participated as Lead partners (the distribution by type of centre can be seen below), with the majority of them, 80% on average, participating as partners, and the remaining 10% of average as Associated partners.

[36] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020: Approved Cooperation Programme.

Graph 12: Distribution of the participation of the academic sector




Overall, the Programme has effectively supported the involvement of different partners across the projects, including the policy relevant actors and the private sector. The Programme has not only effectively facilitated the involvement of diverse partners across various projects, including policy-relevant actors and the private sector, but has also fostered the creation of **quadruple-helix** partnerships. This approach has enhanced cooperation among different partners and regions, enabling the sharing of experiences and mutual learning, ultimately generating a greater impact within the territory. Notable examples of these quadruple-helix partnerships include ATLANTIC-SOCIAL-LAB, CIRCULAR-SEAS, and 3D-PARE, among others.

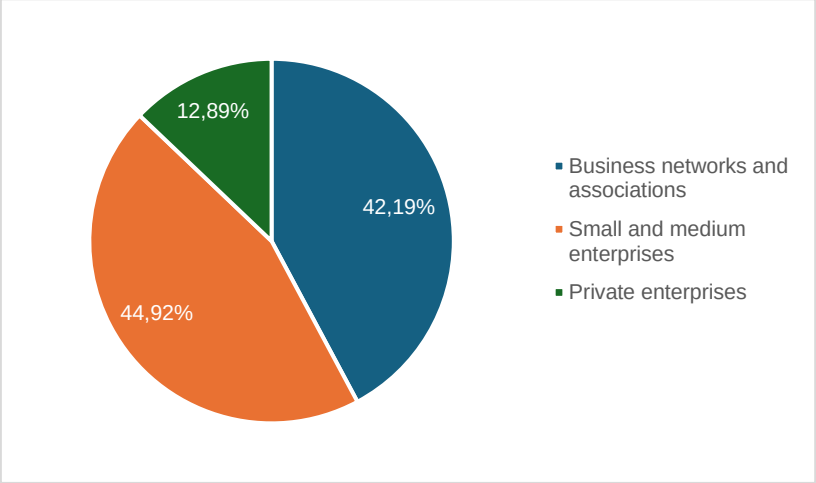
## 3. Was the Programme able to attract new, relevant partners?

Overall, the partnerships of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 were very similar to the 2007-2013 period. Despite this similarity, the Programme was able to attract new and relevant partners. The number of applications and the increased engagement in subsequent calls indicate that the Programme successfully reached a broader and more diverse group of stakeholders. Specifically, during the 2014-2020 programming period, the Programme was able to attract a new important partner: **SMEs**. The programming period 2007-2013 included different types of partners; however, SMEs and other profit-distributing enterprises could only be considered Associated partners and could not contract for service provision to project partners due to the conflict of interests[37]. For the 2014-2020 programming period, the Programme regulation allowed for their participation, although it limits their participation as Lead partners to not-for-profit private partners.[38]

The following graph presents the distribution of private actors. The data indicates a diverse involvement of different types of business entities across projects, with SMEs being the most represented group (44.94%), very closely followed by business networks and associations (42.19%), and, finally, private enterprises (12.89%).

[37] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme Manual 2007-2013
[38] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme Manual 2014-2020

Graph 13: Distribution of private actors

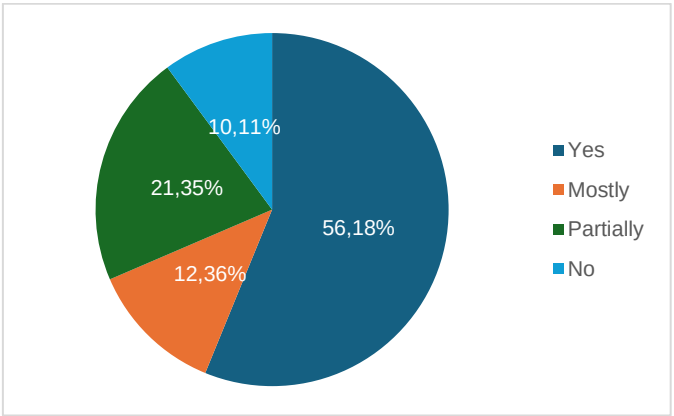



The inclusion of the private sector is of great importance, as many beneficiaries highlighted that collaboration with private entities brings new perspectives to project development. This collaboration facilitates the scaling up of innovative solutions and their integration into the relevant market(s). Such inclusion was also enabled by pre-existing networks that had previously collaborated with SMEs and other private entities. The online survey results reflect the relevance of including the private sector, as the vast majority of respondents indicate the participation of the private sector in their projects has generated further added value, as illustrated in Graph 14.

Notably, the private sector has been recognized for adding significant value to projects through its **expertise** and **agility**. Respondents highlighted that private companies bring a **pragmatic and business-oriented approach**, which contrasts with more academic perspectives, and help drive projects towards **tangible results**. The flexibility of private partners in procurement and execution was often cited as highly valuable, contributing to the smooth progression of various initiatives. For instance, specific projects noted that the involvement of startups and companies was crucial for initiating activities and maintaining momentum. The exchange of experiences and ideas facilitated by these collaborations enriched the projects, aligning them more closely with real-world applications and industry needs.

Moreover, the **expertise** provided by the private sector was particularly beneficial in areas such as **product development and technology**. Their practical knowledge and experience helped to enhance the overall quality and relevance of project outcomes.

Graph 14: Overview of beneficiaries' opinion on the extent to which the private sector generates an added value



Below, several illustrative examples of key projects that not only involved the private sector as partners but also specifically targeted this sector as part of their activities are presented. These examples highlight the diverse roles and contributions of private sector entities within these projects.

**AHFES: A quadruple helix AA healthy food ecosystem for growth of SMEs**

This project aimed at improving the overall competitiveness and growth of SMEs in the value chain of healthy food & lifestyles by contributing to enhancing a transnational innovation ecosystem that helps SMEs access knowledge, partners and markets and align their products and services to consumer needs and expectations.

The private sector was not only the target group but has also been included in the partnership, with a large number of business associations and networks from the different AA regions participating as partners and Lead partner.

The project has developed a training programme for SMEs and conducted nine face-to-face online and hybrid trainings on seven key sustainability areas, reaching over 250 participants, of which 154 were enterprises.

**BLUE-GIFT**

This project helped companies in the AA to test next generation marine renewable energies in real sea environments to prove that power can be economically generated from the water. The private sector facilitated the validation and demonstration of new technologies in real environments, which could accelerate their adoption in the market and encourage investment in renewable energies. During its lifetime, the project worked with 45 SMEs to develop its objectives. Additionally, the Atlantic Arc Ocean Energy Roadmap developed showed that in 5-10 years, the project would have incorporated 15 new technologies into the market, all developed by SMEs.

**ATLANTIC-KET-MED**

This project offered direct support to companies so that they can develop new products and bring them to the market. The private sector was a core partner in this project, facilitating the transfer of technology and knowledge from research to the marketplace. It oversaw the development of several outputs like five new industrial training modules, three in KETs, two others in Scalable Innovation + Industrie 4.0.

## 4. To what extent were the Programme and the projects sustainable?

The main objective and emphasis of this question is the potential longevity of the projects and their outcomes, which may persist beyond the Programme's duration. Understanding this distinction is vital for assessing the enduring value and effectiveness of the interventions facilitated by the Programme.

The in-depth analysis of the 71 financed projects has enabled the identification of numerous channels through which the projects have achieved the sustainability of their results. Additionally, the views of the beneficiaries, gathered through an online survey, corroborate these findings.

Projects have generated outputs and results that are sustainable over time in the AA region. As such, **92.22% of beneficiaries** who participated in the online survey indicated that the **outputs and/or results** of their project **continued over time**. Many responses highlighted the **ongoing use of project outputs** such as leaflets, practical guides, new methodologies, tools, databases, and publications. Several responses mentioned the **successful application and impact of developed methodologies, prevention techniques, environmental standards,**

**and management plans** in various fields, such as pest control, flood risk mitigation, carbon neutrality planning, and mycotoxin contamination prevention. Additionally, numerous responses emphasised the **continuation of collaboration and partnerships among project stakeholders**, leading to further projects, research proposals, and business opportunities. As an example, **3D-PARE** developed a Joint application call for projects in which the partners identified the more appropriate call and applied together to satisfy common interests.

Additionally, the survey also gathered information on key sustainability measures implemented at the project level. Many projects implemented **long-term management solutions**, extending for at least three years post-project completion, to ensure the sustainability of project outcomes. This includes strategies and action plans such as the Atlantic Arc Ocean Energy 5-10-Year Roadmap from BLUE-GIFT.[39] Additionally, the tools developed were designed to be **interoperable and standardised** as well as made **publicly available** through dedicated websites, guaranteeing long-term access and application by final users. The *SSF Impact Perceptions Tool* of the project **CABFishMan** or the *Risk-based prediction tool* of **SIRMA** are some examples of sustainable outputs and results.

Similarly, the beneficiaries defended that it is necessary to involve the target groups in the implementation of the projects to enhance the sustainability of results. Through the creation of networks and constant follow-ups, the sustainability of the Programme can be enhanced. As an example, **EMPORIA4KT** has developed an Atlantic Business Angel network as a funding resource in the blue economy to provide a qualified list of contacts and guidelines for researchers looking for funding. Similarly, **AGRITOX** created an Innovation Exchange Network that includes various stakeholders of the area of food toxicity as an instrument to exchange information and enhance cooperation between them.

Additionally, 21.11% of survey respondents indicated that their project has continued through public funding. these, 26.32% have continued through the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027, while over half of them (52.63%) through national funding. Additionally, 21.05% have opted for other EU funds including: Next Generation, Horizon Europe or Interreg Sudoe.

In conclusion, while the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 depended on Cohesion Policy funds and thus required ongoing financial support for sustainability, the projects it supported have demonstrated robust longevity and impact. The high continuation rate of project results, supported by long-term management solutions and collaborative networks, underscores their enduring value beyond the Programme's lifespan. Moreover, the transition of many projects to subsequent funding sources, such as the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027 and national and EU funds, reflects a proactive approach to maintaining momentum and expanding the reach of their outcomes. This holistic view affirms the Programme's role not only in achieving immediate results but also in laying a sustainable foundation for regional development and cooperation in the AA.

[39] Atlantic Arc Ocean Energy 5–10-year Roadmap. BLUE-GIFT project. https://bluegift.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/SEE-Blue-GIFT_Atlantic-Arc-Ocean-Energy-Roadmap_V1.0.pdf

## 3.4. Evaluation of the Programme communication strategy

| TOPIC 3: Evaluation of the Programme communication strategy | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| **1. Was there sufficient awareness and knowledge by the different target groups about the activities and achievements of the Programme?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Level of match between the information and communication policy and the communication actions undertaken / results**<br>**Level of coverage of the communication plan**<br>**Level of relevance** |
| **2. Did the management bodies of the Programme ensure an adequate communication flow in the Programme area?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Level of match between the information and communication policy and the communication actions undertaken / results**<br>**Level of outreach of communication actions** |
| **3. Did the Programme communication measures efficiently reach the relevant target groups?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Level of match between the information and communication policy and the communication actions undertaken / results**<br>**Level of efficiency of communication measures** |
| **4. Did the Programme contribute to raising projects' capacity to communicate their accomplishments?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Level of match between the information and communication policy and the communication actions undertaken / results**<br>**Level of impact in communication strategies of projects** |
| **5. What were the necessary improvements in the communication strategy based on the evaluation findings?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries<br>**Documents**: Communication Strategy of the Programme, guide for project communication, identity manual, etc | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey<br>Case studies | **Identification of needs addressed in relation to communication strategy** |
| **6. What were the suggestions and specific forms of capitalisation on projects experience to implement?** | **Stakeholders: MA, JS and NCs**<br>**Documents: Communication Strategy, IP, Project** implementation **reports, other territorial cooperation IPs and Good Practices in capitalisation and Programme Documents** | **Desk research**<br>**Interviews**<br>**Online survey**<br>**Case studies** | **Identification of other IPs Good practices in capitalisation**<br>**Specification of concrete actions for the capitalisation of experience and outcomes: capitalisation strategy**<br>**Proposal of forms of capitalisation** |

## 1. Was there sufficient awareness and knowledge by the different target groups about the activities and achievements of the Programme?

The Interreg Atlantic Area Communication Strategy for the 2014-2020 period details the different target groups and the information to be provided, as well as describes the activities that need to be carried out.[40] A summary description of the target groups, their composition and the information that is to be provided is included in the table which follows:

The information provided was tailored to each target group to ensure that it was relevant to them.

Table 5: Information for Target Audiences

| Target Audiences | Composition | Information to be Provided |
|---|---|---|
| **Potential Beneficiaries** | Networks, public agents, not-for-profit organisations or business organisations concerned with the Programme priorities being able to collaborate in the promotion of transnational cooperation (external partners) or to benefit of funding, becoming potential project applicants (potential beneficiaries) | • What are the funding opportunities<br>• How to develop a high-quality project<br>• How to prepare a successful project application<br>• Where to find partners |
| **Beneficiaries** | Organisations involved in funded projects as Lead partners or project partners – beneficiaries from previous period and new ones | • What are the rules and procedures of the Programme<br>• How to implement a high-quality project<br>• How to communicate clearly outputs and results<br>• What are the tools and activities provided, and how to use them |
| **Multipliers** | Public and private key decision-makers concerned with the Programme priorities and with issues on transnational cooperation, interested in Programme results as inputs for their strategies and policies; strategic organisations; technical end users | • What are the projects results which could provide positive input in the public policy they are responsible for<br>• Which are the good practices that can be used for the benefit of improving citizens' quality of life |
| **General Public** | AA Citizens and EU citizens, which benefit indirectly from transnational cooperation and Structural Funds | • Where are projects' results being implemented for the benefit of citizens' quality of life<br>• How efficiently and soundly are public funds being used |
| **Managing Structures** | MA, JS, Audit Authority, Certification Authority, National Contact Points, MC | • Which are the roles and responsibilities of all Programme bodies and how are they performed<br>• Updated rules and procedures<br>• Data related with Programme/projects implementation and how to timely access it |

[40] Interreg Atlantic Area 2014-2020 Programme Communication Strategy

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Other Programmes and networks** | IPs, Interact, other cooperation networks in the Atlantic (such as CPMR, CVAA, RTA, Support Team for the AAP) | • Which are the common management issues and needs<br>• Which are the Programmes and networks results on common themes<br>• Identification and exchanging state of art of implementation and management tools |

In relation to **beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries**, a wide range of guiding documents, manuals and training were developed to guarantee an adequate level of awareness of the Programme opportunities and application and implementation procedure. This included the Programme Manual, the Applicant's User Guide, Guidance on the correct use of the EU emblem in project communication, as well as concrete guiding documents for each call, among others. According to the survey results, most respondents (64.04%) agreed that the information they received about the Programme was satisfactory, with an additional 15% rating the information as excellent. Conversely, only four respondents (4.5%) expressed dissatisfaction with the information received. These findings indicated that, overall, the Programme's communication strategy was effectively reaching its target audiences.

Additionally, in view of reaching further stakeholders such as **multipliers and the general public,** key dissemination events such as the AA Annual Events or the annual Atlantic Stakeholder Platform Conferences in which the Programme participated in workshops and with stand exhibitions, as well as organising workshops such as the one held October 2021 about "Making the most of natural and marine resources for the benefit of the Atlantic regions" were organised. Additionally, the NAs participated throughout the programming period in a large number of national, regional and local events to disseminate the results of the project to multipliers and the general public, and attract potential beneficiaries to the Programme. These events also encouraged the promotion of the projects and their achievements and became a networking hub both at a regional and national level. As a way of example. The Irish NC participated in 7 meetings and in 4 events in 2018 to promote the Programme (Southern Regional Assembly Members meeting, Presentation to Sligo IT Research Staff, Regional Tourism Think Tank, NUI Galway-Hydrogen Event).[41] Similarly, in 2019 the Spanish NC participated in three regional forums held in Alicante, Arrecife and Cuenca and in 2 conferences, the 4th meeting of ITI Azul Commission and COP25 where the Programme was presented.[42]

The Programme not only organised key events but also participated in those hosted by other organisations, such as the "European Maritime Day" May 2017, Poole, UK, the "Business2Sea – Ocean Forum" WHERE, June 2017, or the European Week of the Regions and Cities in October 2020. During this latter event, and as a way of example, the Programme contributed to a workshop on Cooperation for a Greener Europe, organised by Interact, and participated in a workshop by DG MARE on a new approach to the Atlantic maritime strategy. Additionally, it took part in an exhibition titled "No Borders with Transnational Cooperation," which was jointly organised with other IPs.

Furthermore, key **channels of communication** were employed in order to maximise the outreach of the communication activities, including LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and the official webpage, ultimately enhancing the dissemination of the Programme and project results and achievements.

The Programme administration utilised various channels to disseminate the results, including annual meetings and other events. These mechanisms not only provided insights into the outcomes of the projects and the Programme, but they also enhanced the overall transparency.

Moreover, the Programme also ensured awareness among the **managing structures** by clearly defining the roles of the various bodies in the *INTERREG ATLANTIC AREA PROGRAMME 2014-2020 Approved Cooperation*

[41] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2018.
[42] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2019.

*Programme.* Additionally, regular and close communication among the different bodies was maintained through the MC meetings and ad-hoc communications.

Finally, the communication strategy of the Programme has been characterised by a common branding across the different IPs "with the aim of increasing visibility and recognition of Interreg funds and results".[43]

As indicated by the interviews conducted as part of the evaluation, the Interreg Common Branding and image for the Programme is more powerful than the sum of the different communication strategies of IPs. Numerous synergies were reinforced in communication with other Programmes, as well as with Interact, to develop this unified branding and provide greater visibility to the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. This represents a novelty for this Programme compared to its predecessor from 2007-2013.

## 2. Did the management bodies of the Programme ensure an adequate communication flow in the Programme area?

The management bodies of the Programme were instrumental in ensuring the efficient flow of information and its appropriate dissemination to all stakeholders. The Interreg Atlantic Area Communication Strategy clearly outlined the communication roles and responsibilities of the various authorities, and this is illustrated in the following table. This allocation of roles and responsibilities has been crucial to delineate concrete tasks and ensure efficient coordination across management bodies.

Table 6: Overview of communication roles and responsibilities

| Means of communication | Managing Authority | Joint Secretariat | National Correspondents | Monitoring Committee |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication rules | Proposes Programme rules and supervise EC and Programme requirements | Supports MA in the definition of rules and verify the conformity with requirements | Opinion on MA rules proposals and verify the conformity with national requirements | Approval of Programme communication rules |
| Communication strategy | Prepares and review proposals and supervises implementation | Supports MA in the preparation of proposals and ensure implementation | Opinion on MA proposals and support implementation at national level | Approval of Communication Strategy and revisions |
| Marketing and Communication Plans | Supervises the preparation and implementation of Communication Plans | Prepares proposals and implements marketing and Communication Plans | Opinion on proposals and implements national communication activities | Approval of the Marketing and Communication Plans |

[43] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 Communication Strategy.

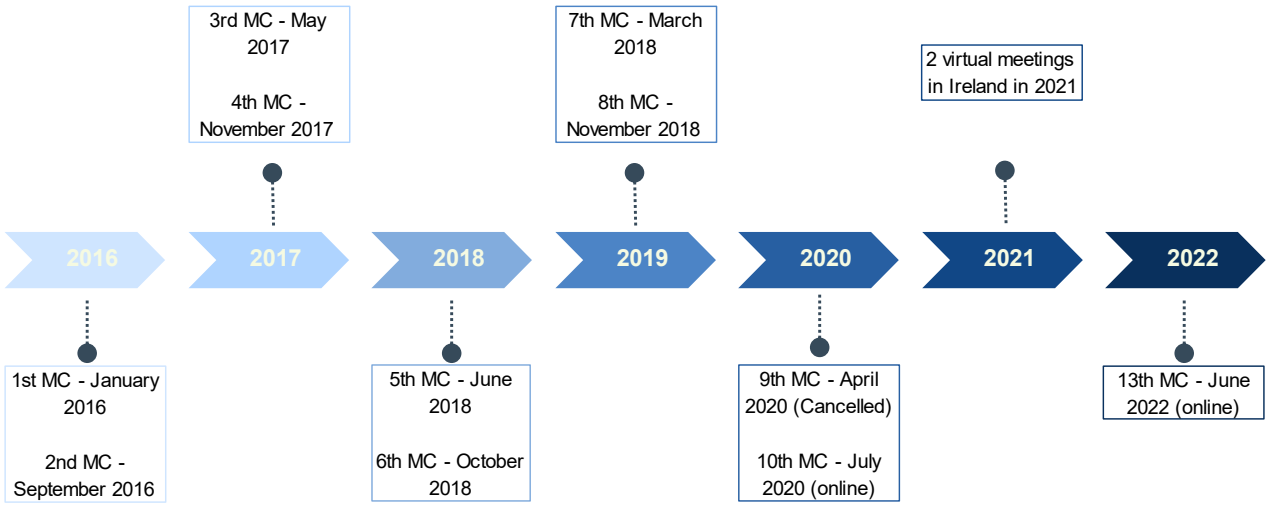
| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Programme website | Defines specifications and coordinates the implementation of Programme website | Supports MA in the specifications and implementation of the Programme website | Opinion on the specifications and implementation of the Programme website | Opinion on the specifications and implementation of the Programme website |
| Communication guidance and tools | Supervises the preparation and implementation of guidance and tools | Prepares proposals and implements communication guidance and tools | Opinion on proposals and supports implementation at national level | Approval of the Programme Manual (communication guidance) |
| Monitoring, assessing and reporting | Coordinates the monitoring, evaluation and annual reporting on communication | Supports MA in the monitoring, evaluation and annual reporting on communication | Contribute with national information to the evaluation and annual implementation reports | Approval evaluation and annual implementation reports |

The communication across the different bodies was ensured through different meetings including MC Meetings, preparatory meetings, bilateral meetings and ad-hoc contacts between NAs and the MA and/or the communications' officer at the JS. Additionally, seminars and workshops were jointly organised with NCs, to provide support to the beneficiaries and the FLC and attended by a JS staff member across the four MS of the Programme and the United Kingdom.

The **MC** held two annual meetings each year throughout the whole period, except in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and in 2022. A summary of the meetings is provided in the following figure. As illustrated, the MC meetings were held regularly, typically twice a year. This frequency facilitated cooperation and maintained close communication among the partners.

Expanding on this, the **consistent scheduling** of these meetings allowed for timely discussions on progress and challenges, fostering a collaborative environment. The disruption in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic was an exception, underscoring the unprecedented impact of global events on routine operations. Similarly, in 2022, two additional MC meetings were held in relation to the 2021-2027 programming period. Despite this, the regularity of the meetings during other years contributed significantly to the effective management and coordination of activities among the committee members.

Figure 6: Timeline of Monitoring Committee Meetings




Apart from these physical and online meetings, **written consultations** were held throughout the periods, particularly in relation to the drafting and approval of the EP of the AA. Furthermore, the NCs also held numerous events throughout the programming period with key national, regional and local stakeholders to further disseminate the projects' and Programme's results.

Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic generated a further need for cooperation and coordination across the Programme bodies and for projects which demanded greater support. As such, the **adoption of video conferencing methods** facilitated expedited communication throughout the remaining period. The annual implementation reports since 2020 collect key evidence on the efforts of the MA, JS and NAs in developing online events and meetings to continue supporting the partners, as well as disseminating the Programme.

Despite the overall satisfaction with regards to the communication flow of the Programme, as confirmed during the series of interviews with all relevant Programme Bodies, further and close coordination across the programme bodies as well as devote greater efforts to disseminate the results to the general public have been evidenced as challenging.

## 3. Did the Programme communication measures efficiently reach the relevant target groups?

One of the main objectives of the communication strategy of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 was to reach new relevant target groups. The aim of the Programme was to increase the representation of all target groups: public and private entities, academia and the civil society. In this sense, it increased efforts to reach stakeholders from different typologies and regions that would strengthen the projects' partnerships and the Programme itself. Further information on the partnerships can be found in section 3.3 on the *Effectiveness of the Involvement of Stakeholders*, which concludes the effective engagement and participation of relevant target groups, such as policy partners and the private sector.

Table 7: Overview of activities envisaged in the communication strategy

| OBJECTIVE | TARGET | TACTIC/APPROACH | ACTIVITIES |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Strengthen linkages and empowerment of Programme bodies** | Managing structures | Ensure internal functioning between Programme bodies<br>• Provide all information related with Programme implementation<br>• Promote opportunities for discussion and decision on relevant matters of the Programme | Website (management area), participation and dissemination of events, contributions to publications, meetings |
| **2. Increase knowledge about the Programme added value and make achievements visible** | All target audiences | Raise awareness about the Programme added value and provide information to be transferred<br>• Promote opportunities to communicate the Programme and projects achievements… | Website, events, social media social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), publications, press relations, list of operations, online digital library, list of external partners/disseminators, kick-off event, creation of a contact list of relevant media, dissemination of graphical ID of the Programme… |
| **3. Strengthen linkages with other transnational Programmes and networks** | Other Programmes and networks | • Promote exchange of experiences and definition of common tools<br>• Disseminate news and other relevant information about other cooperation Programmes and networks… | Website (management area), network activities, contributions to publications, meetings… |
| **4. Attract relevant potential beneficiaries and strengthen their capacity to present high quality proposals** | Potential beneficiaries | Create visibility to AA brand<br>• Increase knowledge about project calls, conditions and tools for application process | Website, events, online partners search, projects ideas, Programme manual, FAQ, informative sessions, meetings… |
| **5. Enhance ability of beneficiaries to implement high quality projects** | Beneficiaries | Empower beneficiaries with competences and tools to deliver high quality projects, …. | Website, training sessions, thematic seminars, Programme manual, FAQ, visits to projects, meetings, applicants' package, project Leader and partners contact list |
| **6. Make projects achievements visible and enable transfer of results** | All target audiences | Ensure project partners have knowledge and tools to communicate their results …. | Website, events, social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), training sessions, publications, online digital library, press relations, ongoing advice for |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | partners on communication activities |
| **7. Promote practical implementation of results** | Multipliers | • Promote events to communicate projects achievements and successful stories<br><br>• Promote opportunities to allow networking between partners and key decision makers<br><br>• Involve press in all public events organised. | Website, events, social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), digital and print publications, Videos, Online library, Press relations |

As indicated in the first evaluation question of this section, a wide range of activities and events were developed throughout the programming period tailored to the concrete needs of each target group, as indicated in the previous table. These included:

- **Dissemination through the Programme website and social media** (LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube). The public consultation launched in 2021 to evaluate the communication performance of the Programme revealed that the main tools used to disseminate information included: (one) website, (two) news flash, (three) events and, lastly, (four) social media.

- **Organisation of key events and participation in external events** at the EU, national, regional and local levels to enhance the dissemination of Programme and projects results, reach potential beneficiaries and build networks across relevant stakeholders. Apart from the AA Annual Events or the Atlantic Stakeholder Platform Conferences above-mentioned, the Programme organised key training sessions with beneficiaries of the different calls, participated in the organisation of a joint campaign for the 30 years of Interreg, launched between October 2020 and January 2021 on social media and developed the Atlantic Projects Awards. The MA and the JS were also involved in three network meetings promoted by Interact to discuss future post 2020 options for ETC Programmes.[44] Additionally, the Programme bodies have been present in a large number of external events, including Business2Sea Forum, European Week of Cities and Regions in Brussels, the European Maritime Day, etc.

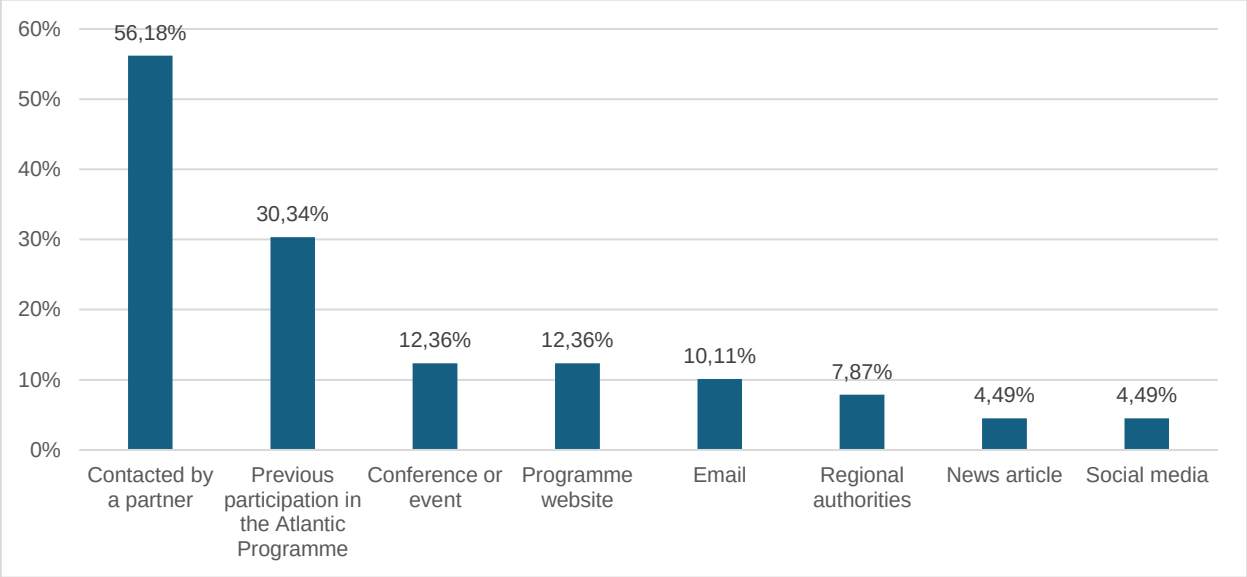
- **Guidelines and supporting documents, as well as training** both to programme bodies but also to beneficiaries to ensure an adequate implementation of the Programme and projects.[45]

A key dimension to properly evaluate the effectiveness in reaching the relevant target groups refers to the **channels of communication**. According to the survey results and illustrated in the following graph, the **majority** of beneficiaries (56.18%) learned about the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 through **contact with another partner**, while 30.34% had previously participated in the Programme. Conferences and events were the third most successful channel, accounting for 12.36%. This highlights the **importance of networking** in promoting the AA, increasing its attractiveness, maintaining engagement, and drawing the attention of new partners. Email communication was responsible for 10.11%, while regional authorities informed 7.87% of the beneficiaries. News articles and social media were the least common sources, each contributing 4.49%.

[44] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual implementation reports.
[45] Further information on Programme's support towards projects' communication can be found in the following evaluation question.

Therefore, the above indicates that networking has played a significant role in reaching the relevant targets, while social media, a key communication channel in recent years, has not been that effective, showing room for improvement in the following programming periods.

Graph 15: Overview of communication channels




## 4. Did the Programme contribute to raising projects' capacity to communicate their accomplishments?

This evaluation question involves determining whether the Programme has enhanced projects' capabilities to disseminate their achievements effectively. By examining the support and tools provided, a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which the Programme has empowered projects to highlight their accomplishments is provided herewith, fostering transparency and continued engagement.

The previous evaluation questions have already indicated the existence of a **wide range of Programme's support measures towards projects**. Nonetheless, further detailed assessment is also included under this question.

As indicated previously, the **overall communication of the Programme was enhanced in the 2014-2020 period compared to the 2007-2013 period**. This reinforcement was also implemented at the project level. As such, the Programme Manual section *6.3 Communication* provides clear definitions of project roles in communication, as well as guidelines. Particularly, it defines the following, indicating the relevance of projects in communicating the Programme:

"*Projects are therefore ambassadors of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme and are able to influence policies and instigate changes in behaviours to have a positive impact on the Programme area."*

Particularly, the Programme enhanced projects' communication through establishment of **a mandatory communication Work Package (WP)**. As such, in the Application Form, projects had to demonstrate how they would communicate the project activities and results, identifying the main communication actions, target audiences, deliverables, calendar, and budget. Additionally, each project had to appoint a **communication manager** responsible for developing and implementing the communication plan and setting up processes to

involve all partners in communication activities. The communication manager was also responsible for liaising with the JS for communication purposes.

Additionally, approved projects received **support from the JS** in the implementation of the communication package, and particularly in relation to the legal requirements associated with the project branding, events and posters. The support provided by the JS included: Brand Design Manual, Programme logos, editable logos for the approved projects; Template for project posters A3, etc. Particular support was provided through the *Guidelines for Projects Communication* which clearly detailed the requirements to be complied with, steps to be carried out, and supporting materials.

The beneficiaries have been offered different **dissemination resources for the projects**, in addition **to communication-specific training** by the Programme that aimed to improve the dissemination and communication of the projects. Among others, the JS provided guidance and organised training sessions for beneficiaries to comply with the EC and national regulations and with the Programme communication rules. [46]

Additionally, through the Programme's engagement in initiatives such as the European Maritime Day[47] or the Atlantic Stakeholder Platform Conferences,[48] the projects gained visibility and the overall implementation of the Programme was disseminated. Furthermore, the Programme published information on the projects and their results on social media and online platforms, such as the official website or the Programme activity reports. All this encouraged the scientific and academic dissemination of the projects' results, making them available for external institutions and researchers.

Moreover, within the programming period, the **Programme has encouraged the beneficiaries of the projects to participate in different initiatives** such as podcasts or thematic activities. Similarly, it has promoted the participation of the projects in international contests such as the Atlantic Projects Awards, in which projects such as *EBB, Safer*, *CleanAtlantic* or *Hylantic* won in different categories, or the SLAM initiative of the EC, in which over 13 projects participated.

Overall, the Programme has proven effective in enhancing projects' capacity to communicate their accomplishments through the implemented measures, validated by the online survey findings. According to the results obtained in the survey, most respondents (74.16%) agreed that the **Programme has successfully helped the communication and diffusion of the projects**. A 23.60% considered that it just partially achieved this objective, while only a 3.37% disagree with the statement.

## 5. What were the necessary improvements in the communication strategy based on the evaluation findings?

The reinforcement of the communication strategy in the 2014-2020 period has been crucial to enhance the dissemination of the Programme and projects' results and increase the engagement of partners. Moreover, the evidence demonstrates that the communication strategy has succeeded in reaching relevant target groups and promoting the dissemination of projects' results.

However, based on the analysis conducted and on the findings from the previous evaluation questions, as well as the feedback collected through the online survey, key areas for improvement have been identified:

- **Further enhancement and exploitation of social media's communication potential.** According to the online survey findings, social media was one of the least effective communication channels. However, it

[46] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2018
[47] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2017
[48] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. Annual Implementation Report 2022

has significant potential for reaching both potential beneficiaries and the general public in disseminating the Programme's results. Therefore, in future programming periods, social media should be reinforced through the communication strategy.

- **Increase dissemination to the general public**. The consultation carried out for the purpose of the present evaluation has revealed challenges in communicating the project's results to the general public, largely due to its technical aspects. Nevertheless, it is crucial to raise awareness of the Programme's results among the citizens who directly and indirectly benefit from its interventions and impact. Utilising social media and hosting events targeting stakeholders and citizens who are not yet part of the AA community could enhance outreach to the general public.
- **Continuation of efforts devoted to communication**, such as the communication package and support provided to projects, is essential. The communication strategy of the 2014-2020 Programme has proven effective; therefore, future programming periods should follow this established path.
- **Continue building synergies with other relevant Initiatives, Programmes or Action Plans,** as for instance, the series of events which are being organised by the Programme with INTERACT and with the AAP on Blue Synergies, trying to activate working relationships and alignment in between the Atlantic Maritime Strategy and the Programme.
- **Further communication activities in collaboration with other IPs.** The AA developed several online articles jointly written with other Programmes, including Interreg Danube[49], Interreg Indian Ocean[50] and also North-West Europe.[51] These divulgation articles not only fostered transnational collaboration across Interreg but also help disseminate the Programme's results outside the AA.

## 6. What were the suggestions and specific forms of capitalisation on projects experience to implement?

The objective of this evaluation question is to understand the diverse forms and mechanisms employed by the different projects to capitalise on their results and increase their impact. The sustainability and long-term impact of project outcomes depend significantly on the strategic integration and utilisation of accumulated knowledge and resources. This evaluation focuses on identifying the mechanisms through which the Programme and projects can enhance their sustainability and scalability, thereby maximising their impact.

In order to attain this goal, the **Programme followed a dual approach**: (1) ensuring that financed projects scale-up results from past projects and (2) enhancing the development of capitalisation measures to increase the impact of their results.

**Regarding the first dimension**, the Programme Manual under section *2.2.2. Drafting a Proposal: some concepts and guidelines*, point 11 focuses on *Capitalisation*. It indicates that:

"*Experience shows that projects do not necessarily start from scratch but take into account lessons learnt or research from previous projects at regional/national or European levels, demonstrating their added value. Projects*

[49] Interreg Highlights. Cross-border cooperation when floods cross borders. https://interreg.eu/interreg-highlights/cooperation/cross-border-cooperation-when-floods-cross-borders/
[50] Interreg Highlights. Two oceans, one goal: you are what (and where) you eat. https://interreg.eu/interreg-highlights/cooperation/two-oceans-one-goal-you-are-what-and-where-you-eat/
[51] Interreg Highlights. Pumping up a greener transport in Europe with Hydrogen. https://interreg.eu/interreg-highlights/pumping-up-a-greener-transport-in-europe-with-hydrogen/

*are, therefore, encouraged to build on previous experiences. For several specific objectives in the Cooperation Programme, the aim is indeed to implement or apply existing solutions by optimising, adapting or improving them. Note that duplication of activities carried out by other projects or Programmes will not be supported*".

Additionally, Section 1.6, "Project Background," of the PAF indicated whether the projects were based on previous AA projects and/or the results of other Programmes or policies. In cases of an affirmative response, a detailed description was required on how the project builds upon the results of such previous projects.

**In relation to the second dimension** towards the promotion of the capitalisation of the results of the projects financed under the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020, two key measures were implemented at the Programme level:

- **Mandatory WP on capitalisation** for all projects.
- **Specific call (Call 3) on the continuation and/or capitalisation of funded projects** through the first and second calls.

The **WP** on capitalisation was effective in ensuring that projects considered the mainstreaming of their results. As indicated in previous evaluation questions, 74.16% of beneficiaries reported through the online survey that their project contained concrete measures for the capitalisation of results. This novelty, compared to the previous programming period, showed commitment towards extending the impact of the Programme outside the AA.

Additionally, the Programme launched a **concrete call** (the third call of the Programme) to enhance the continuation and/or capitalisation of projects financed through the first and second calls of the Programme. Concretely, the call had two strands:

- *Additional activities*: included new activities within the objectives of the project, new partners and/or transnational exchange of knowledge to learn from each other.
- *Capitalisation activities*: encompassed additional capitalisation activities, transfer of project results to mainstream Programmes, the inclusion of project results into policies that help to overcome the negative impacts of Covid-19, and support recovery and/or creation of clusters of projects.

Despite the fact that the concept of capitalisation was not defined in any of the relevant EU regulations under the 2014-2020 Programming period, in 2016, Interact produced a first global definition of capitalisation which is presented below:[52]

**INTERACT definition of capitalisation:**

***A building process aimed at consolidating the capital built by Interreg projects and programmes, with the objectives of:***

- *Making the knowledge and results generated by projects more accessible, thus improving the transfer of knowledge;*
- *Obtaining additional results through benchmarking and detailed content analysis, building on existing knowledge and experience;*
- *Promoting the re-use and/or transfer of this knowledge and these results, to boost performance and delivery;*
- *Raising awareness and improving the communication of results in specific fields of regional policy.*

[52] INTERACT Capitalisation Management Toolkit https://www.interact-eu.net/media/377/download/30-11-22%20Capitalisation%20Toolkit%202.0%20-%20Implementing.zip?v=1

At the project level, numerous results towards the follow-up and capitalisation of project results have been identified in the mapping exercise conducted by the evaluation team, which can be found in the catalogue of results compiled in the sample of results under Annex 1 of the report. Among the above-mentioned measures implemented at the project level, and as a way of summary, the project AA-FLOODS, which aimed at enhancing prevention, warning, coordination and emergency management tools for floods al local scales, has achieved the capitalisation of one of the implemented pilot actions.[53]

A pilot action on Rivers overflow early warning System was tested on the Andalusian Genil river in Écija. Based on the results of this pilot action, a project led by Écija and part of the AA-FLOODS initiative, has secured €3.8 million in **Next Generation EU** funding through *the FLUBIOGENIAL project*. This spin-off project will allow investments in civil works and forestry actions, which will be put into practice many of the Hydraulic, Environmental, Territorial and Hydrological Planning actions designed in the AA-FLOODS' project.

The online survey, as well as the in-depth desk research conducted, have enabled the identification of the main capitalisation measures implemented **at the project level**.

- One frequent measure was **stakeholder engagement** through meetings, workshops, and thematic events. These initiatives aimed to involve policymakers, industry representatives, and local communities in effectively adopting and integrating project results.
- Projects also prioritised **disseminating their findings widely**. This included publishing in scientific journals, circulating newsletters, maintaining informative websites, and leveraging social media. Such efforts catered to both academic audiences and the general public, maximising the visibility and utility of project outcomes.
- To ensure continued relevance and implementation, many projects developed **action plans and roadmaps**. These strategic documents outlined clear steps and strategies for post-project activities, guiding stakeholders on how to utilise and build upon project results effectively.

Furthermore, certain projects invested in **training and capacity-building programmes**. These initiatives empowered stakeholders with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement project results in diverse contexts, enhancing their long-term impact and sustainability. Finally, despite having identified some capitalisation results based on extensive desk research of project reports, the structure of the reporting system has limited the capacity to assess the results of the third call and the capitalisation results. The system did not collect information concretely on the third call. Rather, as the third call of proposals was open only to projects already funded through the first and second call of proposals, the MC decided that projects continued the reporting on the new activities in the system. Consequently, the reporting was not restricted exclusively to the third call, thereby rendering the identification and evaluation of its impact and outcomes more complex.

[53] AA-FLOODS Spin-off. https://aafloods.eu/aa-floods-spin-off-funded-with-e-4m/

## 3.5. Compliance with strategic environmental assessment

| TOPIC 4: Compliance with strategic environmental assessment | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| **1. Were environmental aspects considered sufficiently in the phases of project evaluation and selection?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs<br>**Documents**: Programme Documents (annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects packages, project implementation reports, other relevant documents and guidelines on SEA) | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Level of correlation between the project selection process and the recommendations included in the SEA report**<br>**Indicators information capacity about environmental aspects** |
| **2. Is there a need for other environmental indicators to be included in the monitoring for future programming periods? Which ones?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs<br>**Documents**: Programme Documents (annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects packages, project implementation reports, other relevant documents and guidelines on SEA) | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online Survey | **Strengths and weaknesses of the indicator system** |
| **3. Were environmental aspects/ gender taken sufficiently into consideration in the project evaluation and selection phases?** | **Stakeholders: MA, JS and NCs, Lead partners/Beneficiaries**<br>**Documents: Programme Documents (annual implementation reports, IP, call for projects packages, other relevant documents and guidelines on gender equality)** | **Desk research**<br>**Interviews**<br>**Online Survey**<br>**Case studies** | **Level of correlation between the project selection process and the recommendations included on the horizontal principle on gender equality**<br>**Stakeholders' perception level on gender equality** |

### 1. Were environmental aspects considered sufficiently in the phases of project evaluation and selection?

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 placed great emphasis on **three core horizontal principles to** be applied across the Programme and projects. These include: (i) sustainable development, (ii) equal opportunities and non-discrimination and (iii) equality between men and women.

The natural landscapes and biodiversity shared among Atlantic territories are fundamental to their growth, serving as the foundation and driving force. **Key economic sectors** in the region, including maritime activities, renewable energies, and tourism, rely heavily on the quality and sustainable management of these natural resources. Despite these resources, the region faces numerous threats and vulnerabilities exacerbated by its extensive coastline and the impacts of climate change. As a result, **sustainable development was a horizontal priority** of the

Programme during the 2014-2020 programming period.[54] Particularly, the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 **supported six SO (out of seven)** under which transnational cooperation projects addressed environmental needs and challenges contributing to sustainable development.

Environmental integration and sustainable requirements were not specifically included in the wording of the ToR of the three calls under the 2014-2020 programming period. However, project proposals had to define their foreseen environmental measures to contribute to this horizontal principle in the **PAF**. Section 4.9.1 referred to *Sustainable development (concrete and real measures to contribute to sustainable development and environment)*, providing a specific section for the beneficiaries to explain their potential contribution to this principle. In this sense, the Programme has demonstrated its commitment towards sustainable development and has fostered the engagement of the projects with the environment and the sustainability goals. Additionally, this section has ensured that the project selection process positively considered contributions towards sustainable development, even though it was not included in the selection criteria.

The above is confirmed by the fact that the majority of the beneficiaries who participated in the evaluation survey (88.76%) **agreed that the environmental aspects were sufficiently taken into account** during the selection procedure. They considered that projects were selected based on their potential environmental benefits by addressing challenges such as marine pollution, environmental protection, risk management or renewable energy. However, the relevance of the environmental aspect in the selection and evaluation processes goes further, and the beneficiaries have identified some key aspects that they consider having been positively taken into account such as minimising the environmental impact or complying with national and international legislation in this regard.

Furthermore, during the implementation phase and throughout the programming period, the projects had to **inform periodically** about their activities supporting sustainable development and the evolution of such initiatives. As in the PAF, the **Progress Reports and Final Reports** had a section covering the area of sustainability. The projects had to specify the expected outcomes and the achieved results per period, in order to **increase transparency** and **keep the Programme updated** with the possible environmental impacts that the projects' activities could involve.

Most projects have positively contributed towards this horizontal principle since, given their nature, most of them were related to sustainable development. Apart from the content of the intervention, projects have also implemented key measures to enhance their contribution towards this horizontal principle. For example, projects aimed at **reducing the use of paper and unnecessary trips** to reduce waste generation, such as IN 4.0. Similarly, projects such as SAFER also reported the use of **digital tools, online meetings and electronic documents** as much as possible to support environmental sustainability

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme Manual 2014-2020, under section *1.3 Horizontal principles*, indicated applicants and beneficiaries the need to promote this horizontal principle through activities, outputs and results. It also explained the obligation to detail in the application form the concrete measures to be applied for the enhancement of this principle.

Overall, the environmental aspects were included both in the application and selection process. Nonetheless, further guidance on the scope and content of how projects contribute to this horizontal principle could be developed in future programming periods, focusing on capacity building.

[54] Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020: Approved Cooperation Programme.

## 2. Is there a need for other environmental indicators to be included in the monitoring for future programming periods? Which ones?

To quantify the relevance given to environmental indicators and the impact that the projects have had in this regard, the Programme defines a number of **indicators to measure environmental performance.** These environmental indicators are specific for each Priority Axis and organised per SOs, with the aim of assessing the evolution of each field through adequate and personalised measures. The indicators are divided into two different types: output indicators and result indicators. These indicators are listed in the tables below:

Table 8: Overview of output indicators

| OUTPUT INDICATORS | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Priority Axis** | **Specific objective** | **Indicator** | **Units** |
| 2 | 2.1 | Additional capacity of renewable energy production | Mw |
| 2 | 2.1 | Greenhouse gas reduction | Tons of CO2 equivalent |
| 3 | 3.1 | Population benefiting from flood protection measures | Number |
| 3 | 3.1 | Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures | Number |
| 4 | 4.1 | Total surface area of rehabilitated land | Hectares |
| 4 | 4.1 | Surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status | Hectares |
| 4 | 4.2 | Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites of cultural and natural heritage and attractions | Number |

Table 9: Overview of result indicators

| RESULT INDICATORS | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Priority Axis** | **Specific objective** | **Indicator** |
| 2 | 2.1 | Degree of political commitment to foster local dynamics aiming to increase energy efficiency and develop renewable energy sources |
| 2 | 2.2 | Comprehensiveness of public policies for eco-innovation and green growth |
| 3 | 3.1 | Comprehensiveness of public policies in view of improving the resilience of land and maritime areas to climate and nature changes |
| 4 | 4.1 | Comprehensiveness of public policies in view of improving the biodiversity and the ecosystems services |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4 | 4.2 | Comprehensiveness of public policies valuing the cultural and natural assets in view of local economic development |

Through their participation in the survey, most of the respondents (over 78%) agree that, overall, the available **environmental indicators were mainly effective** and enough to measure sustainability. Just 13.64% considered that the indicators were partially effective, and 7.95% said that the indicators were not adequate for measure the environmental impact.

In this sense, the Programme succeeded in the selection of environmental indicators and the beneficiaries generally considered that the chosen indicators helped to analyse the relationship of the environmental scope with the results obtained in the projects. Even though measuring environmental sustainability is sometimes difficult in this type of (soft) results and types of Programmes, this enabled them to evaluate the impact and quantify the outcomes produced. In this sense, the environmental indicators were adequate for measuring the environmental sustainability of the projects.

However, as indicated in question 5 under section 3.2, there are some limitations that give room for improvement. Particularly, some indicators allowed for varying degrees of interpretation by beneficiaries, resulting in sometimes non- accurate target values (either too low or too high). Consequently, increased concreteness is suggested to ensure a common understanding of the indicator as such, which would lead to a more bottom-up and evidenced-based calculation of the target values.

### 3. Were environmental aspects/ gender taken sufficiently into consideration in the project evaluation and selection phases?

The **environmental aspects** in the selection and evaluation processes have already been discussed in the first question of this section above.

Regarding **gender equality** and **non-discrimination,** these are two of the main principles defended by the regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 Common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund.[55] Specifically, article 7 under *Title I: Principles of Union support for the ESI funds* within *Chapter II: Common Provisions applicable to the ESI funds*, establishes the *Promotion of equality between men and women and non-discrimination*. As a result, both were included as horizontal principles in the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020. These principles refer to the prohibition of direct and indirect discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation, as well as equal opportunities and equal treatment for men and women. Although the Approved Cooperation Programme indicated that no concrete actions uniquely aimed at these principles would be developed, these principles have informed the design and implementation of all the supported projects.

Similar to the sustainable development principle, these horizontal principles were not specifically defined in the **TOR** of the three calls of the 2014-2020 programming period, but sections 4.9.2 and 4.9.3 of the **PAF** were focused on *Equal opportunities and Non-discrimination (specific actions foreseen to avoid discrimination and promote equal opportunities)* and *Gender equality (Specific actions to ensure equality between men and women)* respectively. These required the projects to define how gender equality and inclusion would be tackled throughout the implementation, and how they were aligned to national and international legislation. In this sense, the

[55] Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 on the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Agricultural Fund. https://eurlex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2013/1303/oj

Programme demonstrated the relevance of both aspects in the selection and consequent implementation of the projects, while ensuring the protection of these principles.

This assumption was supported by the respondents of the survey, as **over 80% agreed these considerations were important during the selection procedure.** Just 8.99% of the respondents considered that they were partially relevant or that they did not have evidence on the importance the Programme gave to these aspects in the selection process, while only 5.62% stated that gender and inclusion were not taken into account.

Throughout their implementation under the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020, **most projects ensured their commitment to gender equality and non-discrimination.** They promoted gender balance and encouraged the participation of women in all aspects and activities, while aiming to protect inclusion against any form of discrimination. The information was reflected in the Progress and Final Reports, which included one section per principle so that the projects could define the evolution and achievements periodically.

Projects financed by the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 have **ensured non-discrimination and gender equality by promoting equal representation within project teams and throughout recruitment processes**. Measures implemented include selecting **event venues and formats to ensure accessibility** for all target group members, as reported by ADSA projects. Additionally, efforts have been made to ensure **gender equality in all dissemination and training workshops** and to promote the presence of women throughout the implementation phase of the SEA-TRACES project.

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme Manual 2014-2020, under section *1.3 Horizontal principles*, indicated applicants and beneficiaries the need to promote these horizontal principles through activities, outputs and results. It also explained the obligation to detail in the application form the concrete measures to be applied for the enhancement of this principle.

Overall, gender equality and non-discrimination were included both in the application and selection process. Nonetheless, further guidance on the scope and content of how projects contribute to these horizontal principles could be developed in future programming periods, focusing on capacity building.

## 3.6. Impact evaluation

| TOPIC 5: Impact evaluation | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| **1. What has changed in the cooperation area of the Programme in terms of governance, integration policies, sustainable economic development and other dimensions?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews | **Potential added value of the Programme – governance and sustainable economic development perspective**<br>**Correlation between the IP' objectives and the other strategic documents' objectives**<br>**Identification of good practices contributing towards the EU 2020 strategy and various dimensions of sustainable economic development in the region** |

| TOPIC 5: Impact evaluation | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| **2. How did the Programme contribute to that change and how were the effects of the Programme distributed in the Atlantic Area (cities, rural areas, tourist zones, etc.)?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EEC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews | **Potential added value of the Programme – governance and sustainable economic development perspective**<br>**Mapping of distribution of changes and effects of the Programme in the region** |
| **3. Which continued interventions would be needed in this field? More specifically, what are the key areas/themes or sectors able to contribute to the development and cohesion of the Atlantic Area?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | **Potential added value of the Programme – governance and sustainable economic development perspective**<br>**Strategic recommendations for the Programme implementation and in view of the next programming period** |
| **4. How could the Programme amplify valuable results outside the Interreg "bubble", namely through defining common objectives for proper joint dissemination of results targeting, ideally, a transfer of practices and results to other actors and territories for their integration into local, regional, national and European policies and strategies?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | **Identification of opportunities for transfer of results**<br>**Identification of synergies and capitalisation of results** |
| **5. How did the priority axes and specific objectives contribute to broader policy goals, particularly those of Europe 2020, the territorial agenda, the horizontal principles defined by the Programme and the EC (non-discrimination, sustainable development, etc.) and dimensions such as the quality of citizens' life?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, EC<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area and the Territorial Agenda | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | **Potential added value of the Programme – international perspective**<br>**Correlation between the IP' objectives and the other strategic documents' objectives**<br>**Identification of good practices contributing towards the EU 2020 strategy, the territorial agenda and the horizontal principles of the Programme** |
| **6. Can best practices be identified (if so, which ones) in each of the Programme's priorities for potential replication and dissemination?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, annual reports, projects reports (implementation reports and final reports), SIGI | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | **Identification of best practices for potential replication and dissemination** |
| **7. What was the type of improvements that can be demonstrated (qualitative and** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | **Main lessons learned** |

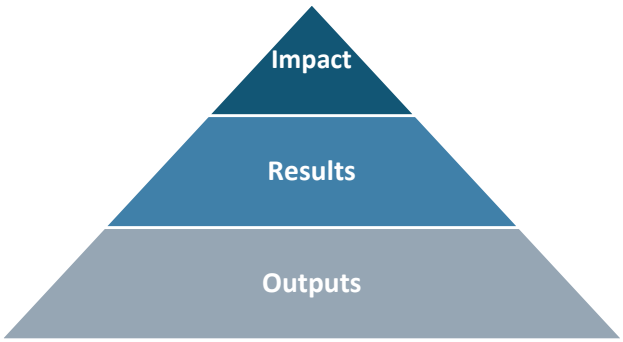
| TOPIC 5: Impact evaluation | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Evaluation Questions** | **Sources of information** | **Techniques / Tools** | **Main Indicators/Answers** |
| **quantitative) and necessarily reflected by the indicators?** | **Documents**: All Programme Documents, annual reports, projects reports (execution reports and final reports), SIGI | | **Number and description of success factors and weaknesses**<br>**Level of satisfaction of the managers and beneficiaries**<br>**Operational recommendations for Programme implementation** |
| **8. How relevant was the relationship between the Programme and the Atlantic maritime strategy, and how should this interaction be followed in future programming periods?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS, EC, experts on the strategy<br>**Documents**: All Programme Documents, EU2020 Strategy, Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area, AAP, online resources from Atlantic Assistance Mechanism | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Case studies | **Potential added value of the Programme – international perspective**<br>**Correlation between the IP' objectives and the Atlantic Strategy objectives**<br>**Identification of best practices related towards a positive contribution to the Atlantic strategy** |
| **9. What was the potential impact of Brexit on the Programme?** | **Stakeholders**: MA, JS and NCs, Programme beneficiaries<br>**Documents:** All Programme Documents, annual reports, projects reports ( reports and final reports) | Desk research<br>Interviews<br>Online survey | **Perception of Programme managers and beneficiaries**<br>**Operational recommendations for Programme implementation post Brexit** |
| **10. What was the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?** | **Stakeholders: MA, JS and NCs, Programme beneficiaries**<br>**Documents: All Programme Documents, annual reports, projects reports** implementation **reports and final reports)** | **Desk research**<br>**Interviews**<br>**Online survey** | **Perception of Programme managers and beneficiaries**<br>**Operational recommendations for Programme implementation post Brexit** |

## 1. What has changed in the cooperation area of the Programme in terms of governance, integration policies, sustainable economic development and other dimensions?

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 has, within the magnitude of its allocated budget, contributed to the sustainable development of the Atlantic cooperation area through the achievement of a substantial number of outcomes, including the creation and enhancement of new services, solutions and tools as well as by influencing national and sub/national policies. The Programme's intervention logic is based on funding projects that generate a wide array of outputs, which in turn lead to measurable outcomes or results and ultimately substantiate a contribution towards a positive change in the cooperation area. By supporting a wide range of initiatives, the Programme aims to foster innovation, enhance regional collaboration, and drive sustainable development, ensuring long-term benefits for the communities involved.

The pyramid model illustrated in the figure below effectively visualises this hierarchy, emphasising the foundational role of outputs, the transitional role of results, and the ultimate goal of the contribution towards a lasting impact evidencing the transnational added value.

Figure 7: Pyramid relation between outputs, results and impact




At the base of the pyramid lie the **outputs**. The evaluation team has identified over 500 outputs produced by the financed projects. From the physical execution of the projects and the production of the above-mentioned outputs, projects have achieved results, understood as tangible products, services, and deliverables generated across the **71 supported projects**. The evaluation team has conducted an extensive identification, mapping, classification and description of these results, leading to the elaboration of a catalogue of more than 200 identified results: *'Sample of Representative Results Achieved By Projects. Interreg ATLANTIC AREA PROGRAMME 2014-2020'*, each of which contributes substantially to the fulfilment of the Programme's objectives (this catalogue can be found under Annex 1 of the evaluation report).

The sample of the identified results contained in the catalogue have been categorised as follows:[56]

- *New transformative solution created*,
- *Creation of new services*,
- *Follow-up and capitalisation of achieved project results*,
- *Action plan or strategy developed*,
- *Design and testing of pilot actions*,
- *New methods and tools developed*,
- *Creation of local and/or regional networks*,
- *Enhanced and new capacities created*,
- *Supporting structures for SMEs*,
- *Enhancement of existing services*.

Over the different categories, the largest categories of results refer to the **development of new methods and/or tools,** the development of **action plans** or **strategies,** and the **creation of new transformative solutions.** Below, the report goes through all these categories, explains what they entail and the positive effects that they bring to the Atlantic Cooperation Area, outlining some key examples to illustrate these effects.

## A) New transformative solutions created

The mapping exercise conducted, which can be found in the sample of results, has identified 23 **new transformative solutions**. These outcomes represent a series of innovative developments achieved through projects that introduce novel approaches to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by the region. By utilising

[56] A definition of each category can be found in the '*Sample Of Representative Results Achieved By Projects'* document under Annex 1

cutting-edge technologies and methodologies, these projects exemplify a forward-thinking approach to regional development.

The innovative nature of these transformative solutions lies in their ability to reframe and tackle existing issues in ways that were previously unexplored. By leveraging advanced technologies and pioneering methodologies, these initiatives offer practical applications and strategies that are both effective and sustainable. The deployment of such novel solutions is crucial in addressing the unique socio-economic and environmental challenges prevalent in the AA.

These outcomes contribute significantly to the Programme's overarching goals by generating a substantial positive impact across the AA. They provide new, viable methods for addressing key regional challenges, ranging from environmental sustainability and climate resilience to socio-economic development and cultural heritage preservation. This positive impact is not only immediate but also sets a precedent for future projects, showcasing the potential for scalable and replicable innovations.

For instance, as part of the project ***EERES4WATER*** *(Promoting Energy-water Nexus resource efficiency through Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency)*, a **solar reactor was designed, constructed and tested for decontamination of pharmaceutical compounds and phenol**. It consisted of optimised and low-cost solar reactor/collector for wastewater treatment and foster resource efficiency. It is a complete system development with photovoltaic energy integration for auxiliary systems.

Additionally, another example can be found in the project ***JONAS*** *(Joint Framework for Ocean Noise in the Atlantic Seas)* project. This project developed the **Passive Acoustic Monitoring for Python (Pam2Py)** to monitor marine mammals. It facilitated accurate ocean sound monitoring by compensating for differences in recording hardware and standardising sound pressure level (SPL) calculations. Pam2Py, being open source, runs independently of proprietary software and introduces the Exchange Data Format (EDF) for streamlined metadata integration and data exchange. This format supports the integration of both recorded and modelled SPL data, **enabling comprehensive analysis of the ocean soundscape across diverse teams and equipment**.

## B) Creation of new services

The Programme has also contributed to the development of the AA through the **creation of new services** that addressed the existing needs of the AA. Notably, the mapping exercise has identified **11 new services**. The projects financed by the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 have been particularly instrumental in developing new services that cater to the diverse requirements of the regions and stakeholders within the AA, thereby fostering economic growth and sustainability across the Atlantic regions.

The introduction of new services under this Programme reflects a strategic approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by the Atlantic regions. The ***SEAFOOD-AGE*** *(Smart and eco-innovative SEAFOOD processes and products for healthy AGEing)* project developed the **Smart Predictive Label** (SPL). It is a system designed to **assist retailers and consumers** in gathering product information in order to be able to make better decisions. It ensures the **integrity and wholesomeness of Ready-To-Eat (RTE) products**. SPLs guarantee temperature control and automatically detect and inform about safety issues or quality deterioration. To do so, smart labels combine hardware (temperature) sensors with software sensors (predictive models) to make predictions about quality and safety risks allowing to send alarms or to re-evaluate shelf life.

Another key service was developed as part of the ***DAIRY-4-FUTURE*** project *(Propagating innovations for more resilient dairy farming in the AA)* project. It developed an **index of sustainability credentials for dairy products** in the AA. It is a multi-criteria rating system for the sustainability credentials of milk at the farm gate. The ranking system can be used in dairy companies for marketing, regional quality assurance schemes and farm advisors to evaluate performances and identify areas of improvement.

## C) Follow-up and capitalisation of achieved project results

A key contribution of the Programme, as prominently highlighted throughout the Interreg Approved Cooperation Programme and evidenced by the focus of the third call on capitalisation, is the **follow-up and capitalisation of achieved project results**. This process ensures that the valuable insights and innovations generated by the projects are not only preserved but also effectively utilised to maximise their impact. By capitalising on these results, the Programme has enhanced the sustainability and scalability of project outcomes, fostering continued development and wider dissemination of best practices. The mapping exercise has identified **15 examples** of follow-up and capitalisation of projects' results.

This strategic approach not only has reinforced the Programme's objectives but also contributed to regional economic growth, encouraged cross-border collaboration, and driven forward the collective advancement of participating communities. The emphasis on capitalisation underscores the Programme's commitment to delivering long-term benefits and creating a legacy of success that extends beyond the initial project lifecycles.

The partners of the ***3DPARE*** *(Artificial Reef 3D Printing for AA)* project set up a **joint application call for projects to continue monitoring the state of artificial reefs**. The findings of the project were consolidated into a collaborative proposal to ensure ongoing monitoring of the artificial reefs (AR) beyond the project's conclusion. Through research and networking at various events, the partners identified the most suitable project call for submission. This collective application aligned with and fulfilled the shared interests of all partners involved.

Another key example towards the capitalisation and sustainability of results beyond the project lifetime refers to the **Capitalisation and Sustainability Plan** developed by ***ATLANTIC-GEOPARKS*** partners to ensure the continuity of the project. It included the foreseen activity plan and communication strategy for the 5 years after the project ended. This plan entailed a common agreement across partners, as well as an analysis of capacity, constraints and enabling factors to ensure the continuity of the project and its expansion.

## D) Action plan or strategy developed

One of the main mechanisms for effectively enhancing the further development of the AA and generating transnational value-added lies in the capacity to shape policies. Thus, the development and implementation of robust **action plans and strategies** is crucial. The mapping sample of results provides a detailed and comprehensive overview of a sample of **40 identified action plans and strategies** formulated within the framework of the Programme.

These plans and strategies serve as pivotal instruments for increasing the outputs and outcomes of projects and for advancing their implementation by integrating them into key local, regional, and/or national strategic documents. This integration facilitates the amplification of project results and ensures their sustained application within broader strategic frameworks.

Numerous guidelines targeting policymakers were developed throughout the projects, evidencing the relevance of scaling-up project results to the policy sphere. An illustrative example is the **Recommendations for strengthening environmental sustainability in the ecosystem for innovation in healthy food & lifestyles in the AA** developed by ***AHFES*** *(A quadruple helix AA healthy food Ecosystem for growth of SMEs)* project**.** This document contained a set of recommendations oriented to policy makers on how they could facilitate and further support the introduction of environmentally sustainable practices and the green transition, as a key component for SME innovation, competitiveness, and growth.

Other examples include the design of action plans such as **Atlantic Arc Ocean Energy 5–10-year roadmap for the Marine Renewable Energy (MRE) sector** developed by ***BLUE-GIFT*** *(Blue Growth and Innovation Fast Tracked)* project. The document aimed at synchronising transnational efforts to look at how regional government could in the future put in place supportive policies for the sector taking into consideration that the support of the

public sector is crucial as MRE moves forward. This document provided a framework on how to test the next generation of Marine Renewable Energies (MRE) in a real sea environment and proved that this type of technology can be used to obtain alternative sources of power from the oceans.

## E) Design and testing of pilot actions

The pilot actions refer to small-scale, innovative initiatives implemented to test, develop, and demonstrate new approaches, methods, or solutions in a real-world setting. These actions are intended to address specific challenges and opportunities within the AA. The essence of **pilot actions** lies in their **innovative nature**. They are designed to bring novel ideas, technologies, or processes into practice, particularly those that have not yet been widely implemented. By focusing on experimentation, these actions allow stakeholders to test hypotheses and gather practical insights, creating a space for learning and adaptation. Despite their small scale, pilot actions are strategically aimed at achieving **scalability and transferability.** The goal is to ensure that successful outcomes can be expanded or replicated in other regions or contexts, thereby amplifying their benefits beyond the initial implementation area.

Ultimately, the design and testing of pilot actions become a critical mechanism for driving innovation and regional cooperation. By testing and demonstrating new solutions in a collaborative and real-world setting, they help pave the way for sustainable development across the diverse and dynamic Atlantic regions of Europe. As such, the mapping sample of results compiles 18 illustrative examples from financed projects.

The ***AA-FLOODS*** *(Enhanced Prevention, Warning, Coordination and Emergency Management Tools for Floods at Local Scales)* project designed and implemented **three different pilot actions** with regards to **prevention, early warning and crisis management in relation to floods**. **Pilot Action 1** focused on modelling torrential rain runoff at a local scale to enhance prevention and crisis management in eight flood-prone cities with varying terrains. By integrating 3D cartography, urban rain gauges, and sanitation network mapping, AA-FLOODS simulated runoff scenarios and the combined impact of river overflows. The findings were incorporated into Local Action Plans.

With regard to early warning, **Pilot Action 2** involves testing an early-warning flooding system for the Genil river sub-basin in Andalusia. It included deploying a sensor network to monitor rivers and integrate data into the Spanish Ministry of Environment's system, providing real-time access for pilot cities and partners. The main conclusions are lessons learned enhanced the developed Prevention Plans. Additionally, it should be highlighted that this pilot action has received additional funding from Next-Generation to capitalise on the results of the project in this region and enhance the sustainability of the project.

Finally, **Pilot Action 3** focused on managing water discharges from Odelouca and Arade reservoirs during heavy rains and floods, integrating LIDAR 3D maps to model hydrological and hydraulic scenarios. AA-FLOODS created Flood and Risk Maps, a Flood Risk Management Plan, and innovative water discharge protocols for the AA, enhancing preventive planning and coordination during flood events to minimise material and human impacts.

Another illustrative example refers to the different pilot actions developed as part of ***Hylantic*** *(Atlantic Network for Renewable Generation and Supply of Hydrogen to promote High Energy Efficiency)* project. The project established a transnational network to promote the efficient use of hydrogen within the maritime sector. This initiative addressed three fundamental components: the production of green hydrogen utilising renewable and sustainable energy sources, the efficient and safe storage of hydrogen, and the supply of hydrogen to various maritime applications using technologies such as fuel cells and combustion engines. To achieve this, the project implemented a series of pilots to test advanced technology across three fundamental areas. These pilots included the **successful demonstration of a PEM electrolyser in a marine environment**, confirming that hydrogen can be produced using PEM technology in such settings; the development of a **reactor prototype optimised for H2 production** for the safe storage and production of hydrogen for use in marine systems and coastal infrastructure;

and the **construction, testing, and public demonstration of an innovative hydrogen combustion engine**, which represented a significant advancement in maritime transportation technology.

## F) New methods and tools developed

The co-funded projects within the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 have also developed an extensive number of innovative methodologies and technological advancements, constituting the category with the highest number of identified results.

These outcomes encompass the creation of **cutting-edge tools and methodologies** designed to address diverse regional challenges and opportunities comprehensively. The positive impact of these new tools and methods manifests in their capacity to optimise processes, stimulate innovation, and enhance the competitiveness of the region. Moreover, their significance lies in their potential to promote optimal practices and contribute substantively to the sustained socio-economic advancement and resilience of the AA.

With over **100 new methods and tools** identified as outcomes in the context of the present evaluation, as example, many projects developed new **apps** available in the market, such as the **AGEO app** developed by ***AGEO*** *(Platform for Atlantic Geohazard Risk Management)* project and designed to monitor geohazards (landslides, rockfalls, earthquakes, floods) in the AA and is available to the general public. ***ATLANTICGEOPARKS*** *(Transnational Promotion and Cooperation of the Atlantic Geoparks for sustainable development)* also developed a **Mobile application for interpretation (Geo-cAPPture)**. This app interpreted a series of sites across the Route using a range of techniques and engaging several audiences. The app enabled a system of 'virtual collecting' of specimens and characteristic features at each location, creating an overall collectable package along the Route.

Other results refer to the creation of **new databases and monitoring tools**. Examples include the **Climate change indicators database** developed by the project ***SIRMA*** *(Strengthening Infrastructure Risk Management in the AA)* for the efficient management and mitigation of natural hazards in terrestrial transportation modes in the AA. It contains climate change indicators under different scenarios for each selected location that remain freely available on the project website for estimating the vulnerability/consequences on transportation infrastructure. Similarly, ***CABFISHMAN*** *(Conserving Atlantic Biodiversity by Supporting Innovative Small Scale Fisheries co-Management)* project also developed **CABFishMan GeoTool**, an open access, online web tool designed to provide key evidence in support of management decisions for SSFs in the Northeast Atlantic, providing comprehensive, harmonised and accurate geographical data and maps related to the distribution and estimated value of cultural heritage derived from small-scale fisheries activity.

Further results include the development of available **online platforms** such as the **Triple-C platform** developed by ***TRIPLE****-C (Capitalising Climate Change projects in Risk management for a better AA resilience)* that entailed a digital collection of best practices that compiled all the knowledge and information of the existing projects on prevention and management of risks associated with climate change.

Ultimately, **new innovative methodologies** to address key challenges of the AA were also developed. ***AT VIRTUAL*** *(Open Innovation to improve response in maritime security and safety in the AA)* developed the **Hybridisation methodology**, an online tool for hybridisation, to accelerate the development and adoption of technological solutions provided by digital enablers and applied to the needs of MSTCs. Similarly, the ***PROTOATLANTIC*** *(Development and validation of a Programme for the prototyping and exploitation of innovative ideas)* project developed the **Protoatlantic methodology** that consisted of a validated and replicable methodology that allowed researchers and start-ups to find funds and expertise to develop ideas.

## G) Creation of local and/or regional networks

The exchange of knowledge among critical partners, along with their interconnection, is crucial for establishing a robust ecosystem across the AA, especially in sectors that are less integrated. As such, one of the key results of the Programme relied on the **creation of local and/or regional networks** of crucial stakeholders. Particularly, the mapping exercise contained in the sample of results has identified a sample of **14 networks created**. These networks facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices across diverse stakeholders, from government agencies and academic institutions to businesses and civil society organisations. By pooling resources and aligning policies, these networks enhance innovation, resilience, and sustainable development. This collective effort amplifies regional impact, promotes economic growth, and strengthens international visibility, showcasing a transformative approach to transnational cooperation.

The ***SEA-TRACES*** *(Smart Traceability and Labeling ToolBox for a Sustainable Seafood Production)* project created **SEATRACENET, the Seafood Traceability Network**, which entails a free access platform for exchanging information, expertise and perspectives on seafood traceability, labelling, and authenticity testing running beyond the project lifetime.[57] The main **target members and audience** include the seafood industry, academia, government, EU seafood regulation enforcement bodies and consumers alike. This network aims to connect European expertise in seafood authenticity testing, promote collaboration and data sharing, and exchange ideas on new tools and standardised approaches. It seeks to ensure EU laboratories and authorities access expert advice on testing protocols, disseminate innovations for detecting seafood fraud, foster cooperation among relevant laboratories, raise awareness about sustainable seafood production, and establish a significant presence in policy and technical committees on seafood traceability, labelling, and authentication.

Another illustrative example referred to the **formal network of urban World Heritage (WH) sites in the AA** created as part of the ***ATLASWH*** *(Heritage in the AA: Sustainability of the Urban World Heritage Sites)* project. This network entails long-lasting cooperation through the formal establishment of a network, aimed at the dissemination and capitalisation of results and lessons learnt that were obtained during the project. The action was completed upon the “Cooperation Agreement between World Heritage Sites”.

## H) Enhanced and new capacities created

The results of the various projects financed under the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 focused not only on the creation of new services, solutions, pilot actions, strategies, and tools but also on the **development and enhancement of capacities** across the AA population. This emphasis on capacity building has had a profound and positive impact on the region. By equipping individuals and organisations with new skills and knowledge, the Programme has fostered a more resilient and adaptable workforce. Enhanced capacities have enabled local communities to better address economic, environmental, and social challenges, thereby promoting sustainable development and regional cohesion. The mapping sample of results contained in the sample of results provides an overview of **15 identified capacities** that were enhanced and created throughout projects.

These capacity-building initiatives have also facilitated greater innovation and competitiveness, empowering stakeholders to leverage new opportunities and drive regional growth. Through these efforts, the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 has not only achieved its immediate project goals but also laid the foundation for long-term prosperity and strengthened the overall socio-economic fabric of the AA.

The ***ATLANTICCULTURESCAPE*** *(Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) inspired by Designated Land and Seascapes in the AA)* project developed and trained a **pool of networked, knowledgeable, and well equipped AtlanticCultureScape ambassadors and tour guides**. It encompassed a training of local stakeholders with the aim of providing them with the professional qualifications and skills required to become Tour Guides. Local guides

[57] Seafood Traceability Network. https://seatracenet.eu/

were helped to promote network and cluster across the AA and locally with other tour guides. Similarly, it aimed to provide opportunities and training for tour guides on how to use Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in tourism.

Additional examples of these results include the **International Summer School in Hydrogen & Fuel Cells Technology**, organised by the ***HYLANTIC*** *(Atlantic Network for Renewable Generation and Supply of Hydrogen to promote High Energy Efficiency)* project in Porto in 2023. This academic gathering served as a pivotal platform for advancing understanding of fuel cell technology, hydrogen production methodologies, and safety protocols associated with hydrogen applications. Moreover, the event fostered productive collaborations among prominent researchers and industry stakeholders keenly engaged in these specialised domains. Participants benefited from insightful discussions and the exchange of cutting-edge research findings, thereby enhancing collective expertise and paving the way for future innovations in sustainable energy technologies.

### I) Supporting structures for SMEs

The private sector constitutes a crucial actor within the AA, and its participation has expanded notably from the previous programming period to the 2014-2020 period of the Programme. As a result, significant outcomes encompass the establishment of **support frameworks aimed at advancing the development and enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs**, thereby stimulating growth throughout the AA.

There is a need to bolster support for the private sector, particularly SMEs, which serve as foundational elements of regional economies. By cultivating an enabling environment for SMEs' growth through initiatives such as enhanced access to finance, technological innovation facilitation, and comprehensive business development support, the Programme has engendered profound positive impacts. These efforts not only augment SMEs' competitiveness but also catalyse job creation, nurture entrepreneurial activities, and stimulate overall economic expansion throughout the AA. Effective support for the private sector and SMEs plays a crucial role in advancing sustainable development objectives, fostering regional integration, and ensuring sustained economic prosperity across the Atlantic region.

Therefore, a wide range of supporting structures for SMEs exists, encompassing the creation of business models, training and capacity-building Programmes, and the design of prototypes for firm utilisation, among others. The sample of project results includes **nine identified supporting structures**.

For example, ***ENHANCEMICROALGAE*** *(High added-value industrial opportunities for microalgae in the AA)* project launched **micro grants open call for pilot demonstrations in SMEs**. It consisted of a start-up support Programme to select teams of entrepreneurs and startups in the AA to develop and test novel products and services based on microalgae involving one or several of the EnhanceMicroalgae application fields. The selected SMEs received financial support and advice in the field of microalgae provided by the EnhanceMicroalgae partners.

Similarly, this project also supported SMEs through the enhancement and creation of new capacities through the **Hosting and Mentoring Programme**. This Programme provided early-stage start-ups access to a workspace with all the essential amenities, value-added resources, and services, as well as technical mentoring. It has worked as an incubation in which the five entrepreneur teams that took part in the startup Programme received tailored mentoring covering all facets of innovation implementation, spanning from business development to protection of intellectual property rights.

Additional examples include the **Accelerator Programme** developed by ***PROTOATLANTIC*** *(Development and validation of a Programme for the prototyping and exploitation of innovative ideas)*. It became the first accelerator Programme focused on European Blue Growth, developing a European Ecosystem for prototyping projects, from pre-seed to start-up. The PROTOATLANTIC Accelerator Programme helped entrepreneurs and start-ups to take their products to market, find the suitable customer/user segments, implement the right business model, generate revenue and user growth, develop scalable/profitable distribution channels, enhance the team knowledge on other

areas, and where appropriate, raise venture capital from investors who believe in their vision. It encompassed a boot camp, mentoring, and a demo-day.

### J) Enhancement of existing services

Within the framework of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 projects, the concept of **enhancing existing services** assumes critical importance as a strategic endeavour aimed at refining and strengthening established service provisions within the region. This category delves into initiatives dedicated to advancing and broadening current services, underscoring the Programme's dedication to fostering sustainable development and regional progress. The discussion examines the profound positive impacts associated with these enhancements, including heightened efficiency, expanded accessibility, and greater service quality. By elevating standards of existing services, these efforts not only meet current demands more effectively but also lay the groundwork for future innovations and heightened economic sustainability throughout the AA. The mapping exercise carried out has identified **16 examples of enhanced services**.

For example, as part of the ***ATLANTICONBIKE*** *(The EuroVelo 1, a unique cycling-tourism destination for a green growth)* project, the **development of pedelec** (bicycle with electric assistance) was encouraged and supported pedelec rentals, an existing service, expand accessibility to categories like women and the elderly. In order to promote their usage, a booklet gathering recommendations of good practices to exploit this potential and promote pedelec among tourists and inhabitants was created. As a way of fostering public and private key-stakeholders collaboration, local demonstrations of pedelec were organised, while sharing insights about the market towards private and public stakeholders.

Similarly, other projects such as ***MMIAH*** (*Recovery and valorisation of maritime, military and industrial heritage of the AA coast)* also promoted existing services. In this case **8 disused heritage assets were recovered and ready for public use**, included in the inventory of tourist assets of each project territory. These assets contributed to making the tourist industry more attractive. Additionally, other examples include the **stock market** developed by ***FAN-BEST*** *(Funding Atlantic Network for Blue Economy Technology Transfer)*. It is a digital catalogue with updates of technology and innovations with big potential for industrial use of marine and maritime resources to promote their implementation across the AA.

From all the above, the evaluation report shows that the Programme has demonstrated efficacy in transforming inputs and outputs into a large number of tangible results across diverse categories, thereby yielding significant positive impacts in the AA. These outcomes encompass advancements in economic development, technological innovation, and regional cohesion, all of which contribute to enhancing the socio-economic landscape of the participating regions.

Finally, at the apex of the pyramid (Figure 7) is the **impact**, signifying the overarching and long-term changes engendered by the aggregate outputs and results. Impact pertains to the significant, enduring, and **positive transformational change** that materialise within the territory as a consequence of the Programme's activities, generating crucial **transnational added value**. These transformations underscore the broader, positive influence exerted on the region, indicating the ultimate success and sustainability of the Programme.

Overall, **the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 fostered a more integrated and cooperative regional approach, leveraging transnational collaboration to achieve sustainable development and address common challenges effectively**.

## 2. How did the Programme contribute to that change and how were the effects of the Programme distributed in the Atlantic Area (cities, rural areas, tourist zones, etc.)?

The outputs and results specified in the previous question provide an overview of the different approaches through which the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 has contributed to the change in the cooperation area. Through the achievement of the results as detailed above, the Programme has influenced the AA. **These Programme outcomes do not differ greatly from the different types of territory: cities, rural areas, and tourist zones, although, as explained below, some projects do target specific geographical areas in the territory**.

In this way, several examples of specific projects targeting concrete geographical areas, particularly, rural, coastal. and touristic areas, are outlined below:

- ***TRAILGAZERBID*** aimed to **revitalise and re-imagine rural communities** by developing a shared vision for the sustainable development of walking and recreational trail sites across the AA. The project was based on the idea of communities managing these trails, promoting the concept of slow tourism so that these small communities can manage them in a sustainable way. It targets tourists looking for unique walking or cycling experiences offered by small rural or remote areas that are placed in regions with a natural charm. Among its objectives, the project developed a community trail plan for each of the 8 pilots and provided a model of best practices for the future long-term development of rural communities.

- In relation to coastal areas, ***MMIAH*** helped **preserve the identity and enhanced the image of the coastal edge of the AA** through the recovery and valorisation of disused maritime, military and industrial heritage, facilitating their social use and generating value-added activities around them to promote cultural tourism as a factor of economic sustainability. One of its main objectives was to develop cultural tourism through historical reenactment. The Atlantic coast is the maritime gateway to Europe, and coastal cities represent its accesses, so the conservation and valorisation of their coastal heritage with homogeneous criteria will lead to an improvement of their image and common identity.

- Lastly, many projects targeted tourism areas such as BODAH, Atlantic Geoparks, MOSES or TIDE. The main objective of the ***Atlantic Geoparks*** project was to **promote and disseminate the geological and cultural heritage of the Atlantic Geoparks as a foundation for a sustainable tourism strategy**. The project had a significant impact on increasing the number of tourists and visitors to the Geoparks and boosting the economic activity of the sector surroundings tourism. Additionally, it aimed at influencing regional policies by raising awareness among public authorities about the need to legislate and manage geological areas in a sustainable manner.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the Programme has had a fairly spread implementation across all territories in the Atlantic cooperation area, although specific projects have targeted key areas, such as rural, coastal, and tourism sectors, highlighting their significant influence within these regions.

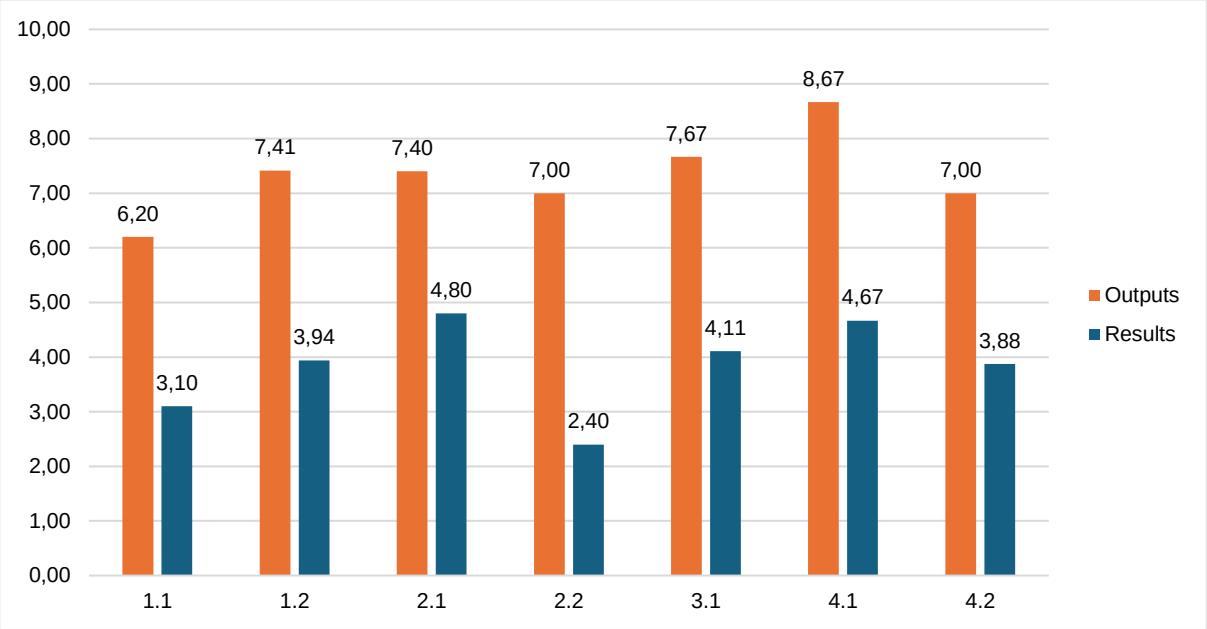
## 3. Which continued interventions would be needed in this field? More specifically, what are the key areas/themes or sectors able to contribute to the development and cohesion of the Atlantic Area?

The four Priority Axes through the seven SOs have contributed to the development and cohesion of the AA. The catalogue of outputs and results developed as part of this evaluation allows for a deeper understanding of the impact of each Priority Axis and SO and, consequently, the more successful areas of intervention.

The following graph shows the average number of outputs and results per project financed by each SO, enabling the comparison across them despite different budget allocations among the Priority Axes and SOs. As it can be observed, a wide range of outputs and results have been developed throughout the different Priority Axes and SOs, evidencing the effectiveness of the Programme priorities. Nonetheless, some findings emerged:

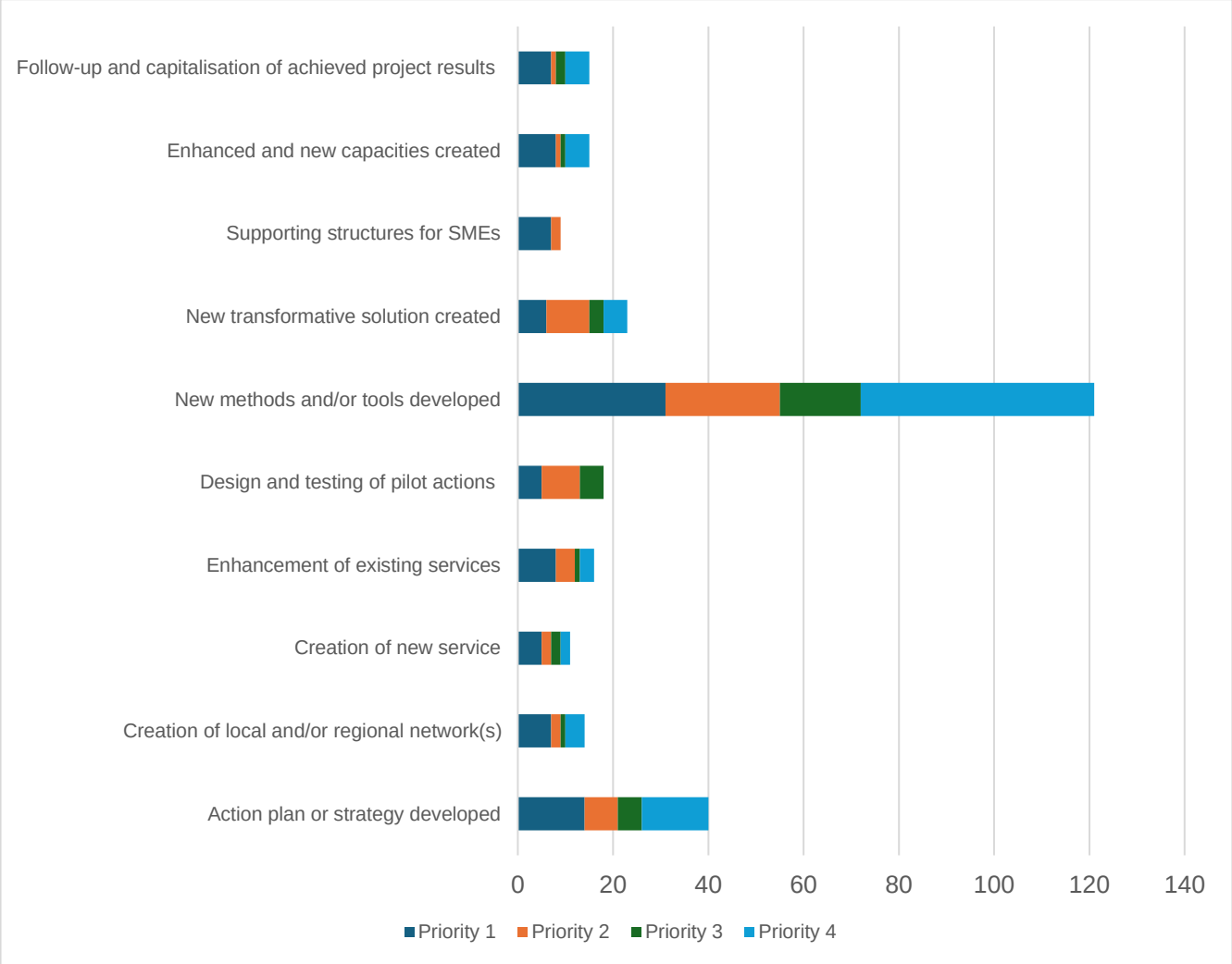
- The SOs with the largest proportion of outputs and results developed include SO 4.1, SO 2.1, SO 1.2 and SO 3.1.
- SO 2.2 shows a pronounced drop from the average number of outputs produced to the average number of results produced compared to the other SO.

Graph 16: Average number of outputs and results per project and Specific Objective




Additionally, as indicated previously, the sample of identified results conducted by the evaluation team provides a comprehensive categorisation of the identified results. The graph presented illustrates the catalogue of results per Priority Axis. The graph depicts the distribution of results across the four Priority Axes, highlighting the contribution of all projects towards a positive impact in the AA without major differences across Priority Axes. As indicated in previous evaluation questions, the largest category of results pertains to the development of new methods and tools aimed at addressing the diverse challenges of the AA. This is followed by the development of action plans and strategies designed to foster the implementation of these results and their incorporation into local, regional, and/or national policies.

Graph 17: Overview of results per category and Priority Axis




Overall, the analysis conducted based on the catalogue of outputs and results identified enables to conclude that all four defined priorities were pertinent and have generated substantial outputs and results that ultimately have had a significant impact in the AA. Therefore, in alignment with the findings from the first evaluation question of this section, the Programme has achieved a large number of outputs and results throughout the different Priority Axes and SOs.

## 4. How could the Programme amplify valuable results outside the Interreg “bubble”, namely through defining common objectives for proper joint dissemination of results targeting, ideally, a transfer of practices and results to other actors and territories for their integration into local, regional, national and European policies and strategies?

Amplifying the valuable results of the Programme beyond the Interreg "bubble" requires a strategic approach to dissemination that transcends traditional boundaries, focusing on the capitalisation of results to regions outside the Interreg AA. This strategy is essential for ensuring that the Programme's results are not only recognised but also integrated into broader local, regional, national, and European policies and strategies. Through collaborative

efforts and a unified dissemination framework, the Programme can maximise its impact, fostering widespread adoption and implementation of its best practices across various governance levels and geographic regions.

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 placed great emphasis on broadening the impact of valuable results beyond the Interreg "bubble". The strategic approach was triple:

- **Mandatory WP on capitalisation** for all projects.
- **Specific call (Call 3) on the continuation and/or capitalisation of funded projects** through the first and second calls.
- **Inclusion of countries outside the AA.**

The design and results of the WP, as well as in Call 3, have already been detailed in the evaluation question *number six. What were the suggestions and specific forms of capitalisation on projects experience to implement?* under section 3.4. However, further details in relation to their effects in amplifying results outside the Interreg bubble are included in this evaluation question.

The WP on capitalisation and the third call resulted in a greater emphasis on the capitalisation of results at the project level, ensuring that all projects contained concrete measures and strategies. Although the primary focus of the WP and the additional call was not on scaling-up the results beyond the AA, both instruments have been proven to be valuable for amplifying results outside the AA.

Ultimately, the last approach entailed the **increased participation of countries outside the AA**. Compared to the 2007-2013 period, in which only two partners from outside the AA participated, in the 2014-2020 period, the value rose to 31 partners. The inclusion of partners from outside the AA facilitates the adoption of the developed solutions in regions outside the AA, increasing the impact of the Programme outside the AA "bubble", and also allowing partners from the AA region to benefit from new knowledge and ways of working from outside the area.

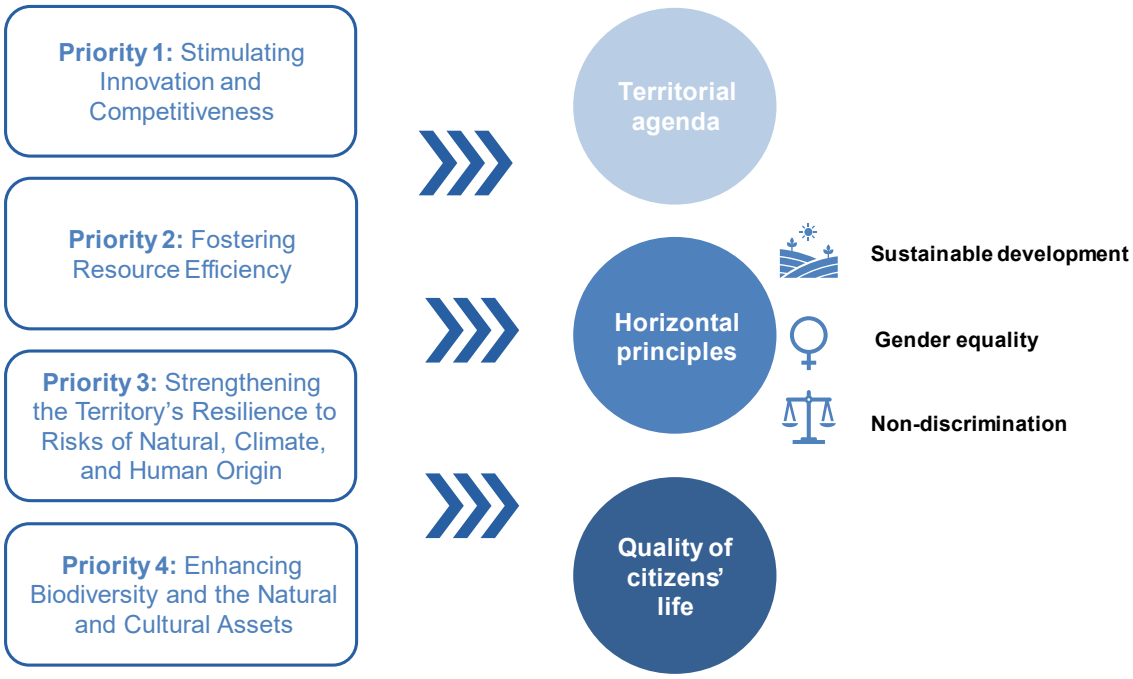
As a result of this triple approach, the online survey results indicate that 73.33% of respondents considered that the results of their projects could be translated into other areas or territories outside the Atlantic regions and 24.44% thought so with certain modifications. Therefore, the Programme had the potential to amplify results outside the AA through the transfer of key results to regions with common challenges.

As such, it becomes crucial to **disseminate the results of the Programme to other EU Programmes** but also to the **national and regional levels**, to ensure that the results can be transferred and capitalised. Additionally, building and fostering networks of actors enables the creation of linkages across project partners and also stakeholders outside the AA that could potentially benefit from the outputs and results produced as part of the Programme.

## 5. How did the priority axis and specific objectives contribute to broader policy goals, particularly those of Europe 2020, the territorial agenda, the horizontal principles defined by the Programme and the EC (non-discrimination, sustainable development, etc.) and dimensions such as the quality of citizens' life?

Overall, the priorities of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting sustainable development, territorial cohesion, and improving the quality of life for citizens, with varying degrees of emphasis across different EU goals.

Figure 8: Overview of Programme's alignment with broader policy goals




The **first priority**, ***"Stimulating Innovation and Competitiveness"*,** aligned highly with the EU Territorial Agenda by promoting balanced territorial development and reducing disparities through fostering innovation and competitiveness. This priority enhanced regional economic performance, leading to job creation and economic growth, which directly impacts the quality of citizens' lives. However, the alignment with horizontal principles such as non-discrimination was moderate, as while fostering innovation could indirectly support sustainable development, specific actions targeting non-discrimination might have been less prominently featured.

The **second priority, "*Fostering Resource Efficiency*",** also shows a high level of alignment with the EU goals across all three categories. By focusing on the sustainable management of resources, this priority supported the balanced and sustainable territorial development emphasised in the Territorial Agenda. It aligned well with horizontal principles by directly promoting sustainable development and significantly enhanced the quality of citizens' lives by contributing to a cleaner environment and better living standards.

The **third priority, "*Strengthening the Territory's Resilience to Risks of Natural, Climate, and Human Origin*",** also shows high alignment with EU goals. Enhancing resilience supported sustainable territorial development and aligned well with horizontal principles by promoting sustainable development and reducing vulnerabilities. This priority was crucial for improving the quality of citizens' lives by increasing safety and well-being, making regions more resilient to various risks.

Lastly, the **fourth priority, "*Enhancing Biodiversity and the Natural and Cultural Assets*",** aligns highly with the EU Territorial Agenda, horizontal principles, and the quality of citizens' lives. Protecting and enhancing natural and cultural assets supported balanced and sustainable territorial development, aligned well with sustainable development goals, and promoted the conservation of biodiversity and cultural heritage. This priority directly benefited citizens by ensuring a healthy environment and enriching cultural life.

In conclusion, the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 is fully aligned with broader EU policy goals. By focusing on stimulating innovation, fostering resource efficiency, enhancing resilience to risks, and protecting biodiversity and cultural assets, the Programme has made significant strides in improving economic performance,

environmental sustainability, gender equality, non-discrimination, and the overall quality of life for citizens throughout the Atlantic region. These efforts reflect a strategic alignment with EU goals, promoting balanced territorial development and addressing key challenges while reinforcing the region's resilience and cultural richness.

## 6. Can best practices be identified (if so, which ones) in each of the Programme's priorities for potential replication and dissemination?

The Programme has achieved a wide range of outcomes and results through the 71 supported projects, as illustrated in the first question of this section. Nonetheless, the evaluation team has conducted an in-depth analysis of eight projects financed by the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 throughout the four Priority Axes and seven SOs to showcase in detail the main results and impact achieved, with a focus on the sustainability and capitalisations of results, offering in this way an exemplification of good practices and success factors.

The methodology followed for the selection of the case studies, with a detail overview of the set of objective criteria employed, can be found in section 2.3.4 of the report.

This showcasing takes the shape of eight concrete case studies/factsheets of the following eight projects:

Table 10: Selected case studies

| Priority Axis | Specific Objective | Project | Lead Partner country |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1.1 | SAFER | Ireland |
| 1 | 1.2 | AYCH | United Kingdom |
| 2 | 2.1 | SEAFUEL | Ireland |
| 2 | 2.2 | NEPTUNUS | Spain |
| 3 | 3.1 | AGEO | Portugal |
| 3 | 3.1 | RISK-AQUASOIL | France |
| 4 | 4.1 | CLEANATLANTIC | Spain |
| 4 | 4.2 | ATLANTICONBIKE | France |

Each case study was developed using primary documentation pertinent to the selected project, supplemented by an in-depth interview with the respective Lead partner. The analysis of the information was guided by the following thematic pillars:

- Consistency and quality of partnership,
- Main results and innovative aspects,
- Main lessons learned from the implementation of the project.

- Key success factors to guarantee a successful project implementation and results' achievement.
- Territorial impact,
- Sustainability of the outcomes,
- Capitalisation of achieved results.

The specific insight given by these case studies is to show evidence of the performance, quality and scope of the Programme through an inductive approach. The case studies fiches below cover both a descriptive and analytic function, allowing the comparison between the strategic aspects of the projects belonging to different Priority Axes:

| **SAFER** - *Smart Atlantic Seafood Clusters* | |
|---|---|
| **Geographical scope** | Bretagne (France), Border, Midland and Western (Ireland), Northern Ireland (UK), Norte (Portugal) and Cantabria (Spain). |
| **Total cost and Funding received** | Total funding: EUR 2,237,188.18<br>ERDF funding: EUR 1,677,891.14 |
| **Period** | 70 months: from 02/10/2017 to 31/07/2023. |
| **Partnership** | The **partnership** was formed by **11 beneficiaries**. The **Lead partner** was European Regions Network for the Application of Communications Technology (Ireland).<br><br>The partnership included **eight partners**, encompassing two partners from Ireland, France, Spain and Portugal. Additionally, in terms of the typology of partners, the partners included the following: two regional public organisations, two business networks and associations, two SMEs, one university and higher education and one transnational organisation. The two **Associated partners** are public bodies from Ireland and Canada, particularly a national public organisation and a university and higher education, respectively.<br><br>Overall, the partnership showed a balanced geographical distribution, as well as in terms of the typology of partners, showing a quadruple-helix partnership. |
| **Priority covered** | *Priority Axis 1:* Stimulating Innovation and Competitiveness<br>*SO 1.1:* Enhancing innovation capacity through cooperation to foster competitiveness |
| **Summary** | The project has **improved innovation in the seafood sector** across the Atlantic through increasing **technology adoption** and **transnational cooperation**. The project has served to map more than **80 innovation services** that were made available for seafood companies and has implemented **11 pilots** using Industry 4.0 solutions, enhancing the innovation capacity and efficiency of the sector. |
| **Main results and innovative aspects** | The project has contributed to the **modernisation of a sector that still works in a traditional way**, enhancing environmental sustainability, competitiveness and resilience of the aquaculture sector. It has **positively impacted seafood companies** through the adoption of 4.0 technological solutions and services, generating **tangible results**. |
| **Lessons learned** | **Engage private companies through an open call**. In the initial phase of collaboration with companies, the partners invested significant effort in presenting the project to potential users and stakeholders. This process was time-consuming, largely due to the inherent characteristics of private |

| | |
|---|---|
| | enterprises, and substantial resources were allocated to engaging these companies and demonstrating the advantages of adopting this novel technology.<br>In the extension of the project through the third call, they opted for an open call to all seafood companies of the AA and the number of applications received equalled the number of companies previously contacted individually during the project's initial presentation. |
| **Success factors** | • **Balanced partnership** with the inclusion of policymakers, the research sector and, particularly, the private sector, including two SMEs as partners.<br>• The partnership demonstrated a **high level of commitment**, particularly in the support and engagement of companies.<br>• The **third call** allowed the project to increase the impact through the implementation of five additional pilots as well as enhance the capitalisation of the project. |
| **Territorial impact** | The project has delivered **customised technological solutions** to seafood companies in the AA. Moreover, the project's impact was amplified by expanding from the initially planned five pilot projects to 11, thereby encompassing a **greater number of regions** and significantly enhancing the territorial impact. |
| **Sustainability** | From the 11 implemented pilots, at least five **have continued over time**. Therefore, five companies continue to implement the 4.0 advanced technological solutions.<br>The **ELOXIRAS® RAS water solution** by APRIA Systems S.L., an innovative process for treating and reusing marine and brackish water, underwent pilot testing and is currently operational both at the **Spanish Institute of Oceanography in Santander** and in Cultivos Piscicolas Marinos, S.A. (**CUPIMAR**).[58]<br>Furthermore, WiSAR Lab piloted the remote monitoring of water quality in Collaborative Laboratory, Association for a Sustainable and Smart Aquaculture (**S2AQUAcoLAB**), which continued after the project.[59]<br>Moreover, improving the manufacturing production control system through technology continues to be implemented several firms across the AA. Particularly, it has continued in **NorteSea**,[60] a seafood company in the Norte region in Portugal, and in **Mytilimer**, a French firm.[61] Additionally, this last firm did not only continue with the pilot service Manufacturing Execution System by Pole Mer Bretagne Atlantique, but also **hired additional services** to that company after the finalisation of the project. Hence, demonstrating the need for modernisation of the sector and also **long-lasting impact of the project after its finalisation**.<br><br>Ultimately, the **project webpage** remains available offering a catalogue of technology services by the project partners to be applied to the seafood sector. |
| **Capitalisation** | The project has made substantial contribution to the **Smart Specialisation Strategy 2021-2027 of Cantabria** through the utilisation of the main results of the project.<br><br>Additionally, the partnership **applied to the first call of Interreg Atlantic Area** Programme **2021-2027** with a project on 5.0 Industry in the seafood sector. Despite not being selected, the different partners continue to work in this direction. |
| **Link** | https://saferatlantic.eu/ |

[58] SAFER Pilot detail: Process for marine water treatment. https://saferatlantic.eu/PilotDetail?psid=154
[59] SAFER Pilot detail: IoT based wireless solution to remote monitoring water (Portugal) https://saferatlantic.eu/NewsDetail?MediaNewsId=1441
[60] SAFER Pilot detail: Manufacturing production control system (Portugal) https://saferatlantic.eu/PilotDetail?psid=111
[61] SAFER Pilot detail: Manufacturing production control system (France) https://saferatlantic.eu/PilotDetail?psid=110

| **AYCH –** *Atlantic Youth Creative Hubs* | |
|---|---|
| **Geographical scope** | The project has enhanced the whole AA through the diverse activities carried out focusing on the youth. It has implemented actions and achieved results throughout the 5 MS without a focus on concrete areas. |
| **Total cost and Funding received** | Total funding: EUR 4,547,092.36<br>ERDF funding: EUR 3,410,320.39 |
| **Period** | 70 months: from 17/09/2018 to 20/11/2023 |
| **Partnership** | The **partnership** was formed by 15 beneficiaries. The **Lead partner** was Devon County Council (United Kingdom).<br>The partnership included **seven partners** and **seven Associated partners**. The partners included three actors from Spain and one from France, Ireland, Portugal and the United Kingdom, respectively. In terms of typology, it involved two SMEs, one private enterprise, one business network and association, one university, one research and innovation organisation and one civil society organisation.<br><br>The **Associated partners** were mainly Spanish actors although the partnership also incorporated key actors from Ireland, Portugal and the United Kingdom. The Associated partners entailed mainly public actors such as local and national organisations and public enterprises as well as civil society and third sector organisations.<br><br>Overall, the partnership covered the whole AA although it included a high presence of Spanish beneficiaries. Additionally, given the nature of the project towards youth employment, the public and private sector as well as civil society had a great weight in the partnership. |
| **Priority covered** | *Priority Axis 1:* Stimulating innovation and competitiveness<br>*SO 1.2.* Strengthening the transfer of innovation results to facilitate the emergence of new products, services and processes |
| **Summary** | The project has focused on the **creation of spaces where the youth population can develop a series of technological and entrepreneurial abilities**. It has fostered an innovative model to strengthen the employability of young people between 16 and 30 years old in the cultural and creative industries. AYCH has given long-term support to participants to: raise their awareness of entrepreneurship, help them to develop their projects, support some of them in the creation of an activity and directed others towards training, internships or jobs. |
| **Main results and innovative aspects** | The project has fostered young entrepreneurship through different activities including local and **transnational creative jams,** which entailed 3-day intensive creative events; the **Idea incubation Programme,** which enabled the transformation of ideas into reality and initiated the development of creative business; **residences** that encompassed days of immersive experiences where participants collaborate with other young innovators at a different hub to develop their ideas from incubation; **internships** or the **Ambassadors' Programme** that brought young people to have first-hand experience in a variety of different AYCH activities.[62] Ultimately the project has been able to generate |

[62] Atlantic Youth Creative Hubs. https://www.aych-2030.eu/aych/

| | |
|---|---|
| | 150 new jobs, generated 377 of which 102 were new to the market and provided new skills to the youth of the AA. [63]<br>The **most innovative aspect** of the project has been the **active inclusion of the youth population**. Young people participated in some of the steering committees, making them more didactic and engaging, and ensuring that their voices were heard. As a matter of example, a steering committee was organised in France where young people were the managers. |
| **Lessons learned** | The project focused on young entrepreneurship and, consequently, included the engagement of youth. A key lesson learned regarding youth engagement pertains to the necessity of more **immediate interaction** compared to other target groups to ensure their sustained involvement. Additionally, the project underscored the **potential role of youth in enhancing communication and expanding outreach to a broader young audience.** |
| **Success factors** | • A key success factor has been the high **level of engagement of youth people** and the fact that the project has been very **democratic**, allowing young people to participate across the different activities and even in steering committees.<br>• Additionally, the **creation of regional ecosystem** across the AA through the different hubs across the MS also enhanced project implementation and particularly the sustainability of results beyond the lifetime of the project. |
| **Territorial impact** | The project has generated a large impact on youth within the AA, with 45 cities and regions adopting the AYCH methodology. The project has fostered youth entrepreneurship and employment across the region.[64] |
| **Sustainability** | The project results are not only sustainable given the fact that 150 jobs were created, numerous young people formed and acquired new skills but also due to the ideas incubated and prototypes developed. Additionally, the **different Hubs, except the one in the UK, continue their work,** which guarantees the sustainability and continuation of projects' results beyond the lifetime of the project.[65] |
| **Capitalisation** | The results of the AYCH project have been capitalised through the **follow-up project ATLIC** financed by **Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027**. The ATLIC project builds on the results and experience acquired from AYCH to enhance innovation and youth entrepreneurship in the AA but focusing on the **blue economy**.[66] |
| **Link** | https://www.aych-2030.eu/es/aych/ |

| **SEAFUEL -** *Sustainable integration of renewable fuels in local transportation* | |
|---|---|
| **Geographical scope** | The geographical scope of this project focused on **isolated regions**, encompassing the Canary Islands, the Aran Islands and Madeira, as well as targeting Northern Ireland and Southwest UK. |
| **Total cost and Funding received** | Total funding: EUR 4,467,693.84<br>ERDF funding: EUR 3,350,770.38 |
| **Period** | 68 months: from 01/12/2017 to 30/07/2023 |

[63] AYCH Information Leaflet https://www.aych-2030.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/aych_infograph_A1_003.jpg
[64] Ibid.
[65] AYCH. Hubs in action. https://www.aych-2030.eu/hubs-in-action/
[66] ATLIC Project. https://atlic.eu/en/

| | |
|---|---|
| **Partnership** | The **partnership** was formed by **21 beneficiaries**. The Lead partner was the National University of Ireland Galway (Ireland).<br><br>The partnership included **seven partners**, encompassing four partners from the UK, and one from Spain, Ireland, and Portugal, respectively. In terms of typology, the partnership included two SMEs, one business network and association, one research and innovation organisation, one university, one public enterprise and one civil society organisation. Additionally, the partnership involved **13 Associated partners** mainly from Spain (six Associated partners), as well as from the UK (two), Ireland (two) and Denmark, Belgium and Iceland. The Associated partners covered the public, private and research sector.<br><br>Overall, the partnership covered not only the AA but also countries outside the AA, covering the different typologies of actors, encompassing a quadruple-helix partnership given the nature and objectives of the project. |
| **Priority covered** | *Priority Axis 2*: Fostering resource efficiency<br>*SO 2.1*: Fostering renewable energies and energy efficiency |
| **Summary** | The project enhanced the use of **renewable resources** across the AA to power the local **transport fleet and support the shift towards a low-carbon economy**. The project has demonstrated the viability of **hydrogen** as a fuel to be used by the **local transport authorities**. It covered not only technical innovation through a demonstration plant, but also social and policy aspects to facilitate the transferability to other regions to facilitate sustainable mobility. |
| **Main results and innovative aspects** | The project established a plot **Hydrogen Refueling Station** (HRS) in the Canary Islands, located in Tenerife at the Institute of Technology and Renewable Energies (ITER). This pilot installation produced green hydrogen through the electrolysis of water and supported a fleet of eight hydrogen vehicles. Additionally, five **renewable energy roadmaps to influence policy makers** were developed.<br>The project is characterised by its innovativeness, which includes:<br>- **Employing islands as experimental sites** for renewable energy, expanding this initiative across various regions, and establishing connections with non-European islands that are interested in adopting the model.<br>- Investigating **tourists' perceptions** of hydrogen (H2) by providing them with H2-powered vehicles and analysing how their views evolve.<br>- Developing a **comprehensive map** of AA islands, ranking them based on criteria such as demand and legal frameworks, to determine **the most favourable islands for integrating H2 into their ecosystems.** |
| **Lessons learned** | The **inclusion of key technical partners** with expertise and knowledge in the concrete area of the project. It has been identified that having electrolyser manufacturers among the partners would have alleviated significant challenges, as it was a critical component of the plant. |
| **Success factors** | • A key enabling factor has been the **alignment with EU policies** such as the Green Deal and the Hydrogen Valleys, which have fostered the development and relevance of renewable energy production. As such, it has bolstered the relevance of the project.<br>• Cooperation with other IPs through the **Hydrogen Triple Alliance**, the first cross-Interreg hydrogen partnership of its kind.[67] This alliance allowed wider reach, extended to other communities, and combined data from these green hydrogen projects. It incorporated the HUGE |

[67] Community Hydrogen Forum. http://communityh2.eu/about-us/

| | |
|---|---|
| | project financed by Interreg Northern Periphery Artic and GENCOMM financed by Interreg North-West Europe. |
| **Territorial impact** | The project has generated a great positive impact on the targeted isolated regions, promoting their shift towards green transport as well as enhancing the use of hydrogen. Particularly, the project has positively impacted the territory in Tenerife where the pilot Hydrogen Refuelling Station was established. |
| **Sustainability** | The partner responsible for the pilot plant is currently implementing key modifications with the aim of relocating it back to Tenerife to continue supplying hydrogen fuel for buses. In addition to the ongoing efforts of this partner, other partners are also advancing this work through additional projects detailed in the following section. |
| **Capitalisation** | A notable outcome of the project is that several partners, leveraging their technological and developmental insights gained, have embarked on new projects and obtained European funding for expansion. SEAFUEL has acted as the catalyst for this growth.<br>- In the **Canary Islands**, some partners, including ITER (Institute of Technology and Renewable Energy) or TITSA (Interurban Transport of Tenerife), have joined the **Renewable Hydrogen Hub Cluster Canary Islands**. The hub aimed at producing green hydrogen through the establishment of two hydrogen plants in Tenerife and Gran Canaria, similarly to the one developed in SEAFUEL. The initiative, having been formally introduced to the Government of the Canary Islands, seeks to obtain public co-financing through the collaborative submission of projects to the European 'Next Generation' funds.<br>- Madeira, in collaboration with the western part of Ireland, submitted a **Project Development Assistance** (PDA) application to promote hydrogen (H2) usage.[68] Regional authorities and local partners are working together on this initiative, with SEACAPs providing additional support for the project's development.<br>- The **west coast of Ireland** is progressing in hydrogen-related activities, particularly due to the funding of the **SH2AMROCK** hydrogen valley project.[69] This project aims to link hydrogen production in Ireland with the decarbonisation of transport services.<br>Additionally, other projects **outside the AA** have emerged because of the SeaFUEL project. Particularly, the National University of Ireland Galway is the coordinator of the **ANEMEL project** financed by Horizon Europe, which aims at making green hydrogen from plentiful and sustainable resources, such as saline and waste waters through electrolysis powered by green energy, as in SEA FUEL.[70] Moreover, it also participates as a partner in **GREEN HYSLAND** project financed by Fuel Cells and Hydrogen Joint Undertaking (FCH JU) which aims at deploying a fully-functioning Hydrogen (H2) ecosystem in the island of Mallorca.[71] |
| **Link** | https://www.seafuel.eu/ |

[68] 15 European regions will receive Project Development Assistance. https://www.clean-hydrogen.europa.eu/media/news/15-european-regions-will-receive-project-development-assistance-2023-01-15_en
[69] SHAMROCK project. https://www.sh2amrock.eu/
[70] ANEMEL project. https://anemel.eu/
[71] Green Hysland Project. https://greenhysland.eu/

| **NEPTUNUS -** *Water-Energy-Seafood Nexus: Eco-Innovation and Circular Economy Strategies in the AA* | |
|---|---|
| **Geographical scope** | The project included partners from the five MS of the AA, as well as Switzerland. Nonetheless, the methodology and ecolabel developed from the project are intended to be applied across the entire AA. |
| **Total cost and Funding received** | Total funding: EUR 2,504,503.31<br>ERDF funding: EUR 1,878,377.48 |
| **Period** | 49 months: from 30/06/2019 to 31/07/2023 |
| **Partnership** | The partnership is formed by **38 beneficiaries**. The **Lead partner** is the University of Cantabria (Spain).<br>The partnership included **12 partners**, encompassing four partners from Ireland, three from Spain, two from Portugal and France, and one from the United Kingdom. Additionally, in terms of the typology of partners, it was dominated by universities and research and innovation centre (seven), followed by three private enterprises, one national public organisation and one education and training centre.<br>The partnership included **25 Associated partners**, predominately from Spain, but it also included actors from Portugal, Ireland, France and Switzerland. In terms of typology, the majority of them (11), were private enterprises, although it also included national and regional public organisations and cross-border organisations, among others.<br><br>The partnership was very complete, especially given the large number of beneficiaries, ensuring geographical balance. It also incorporated actors from the academia and research sector, the public sector, and a high presence of the private sector. |
| **Priority covered** | *Priority Axis 2*: Fostering resource efficiency<br>*SO 2.2*: Fostering Green Growth, eco-innovation and environmental efficiency |
| **Summary** | The project has primarily promoted the **environmental sustainability**, as well as the economic and social sustainability, of the fisheries sector in the AA through **eco-labelling**. |
| **Main results and innovative aspects** | The main result of the project refers to the strategy related to **Water-Energy-Seafood NEXUS Footprint** and is twofold. On one side, the project has developed a **Nexus Ecolabel**. On the other side, the project not only developed and used the **Nexus methodology** to analyse the impact on the entire supply chain, but it also made it freely available on the project webpage. Therefore, the result entails an innovative tool that **interlinks the water and energy costs and impacts on the nutritional content of products**. Overall, this **innovative tool** allowed consumers to make decisions based on nutritional content. This optimised both environmental impact and nutritional content. The main innovative aspect of the project relied on the Nexus methodology. |
| **Lessons learned** | A significant lesson derived from the project underscores the importance of **expanding collaboration with the public sector as formal partners**. While policy makers were involved in the project as Associated partners, their inclusion as full partners would have been more conducive to achieving project objectives and fostering sustainable outcomes through the inclusion of results in local, regional or national strategies. |
| **Success factors** | • The **interest and high level of engagement of the partnership** have been proven to enhance the project implementation and results. Additionally, the high **demand for the service from the seafood sector** has also facilitated the implementation as well as the sustainability of the project. |

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| | • Moreover, the ecolabelling of products was reinforced at the EU level. The **alignment with key EU policies** strengthened the project.<br>• Finally, a key success factor was the **possibility to transfer funding between partners**, which is not allowed in many Programmes. This has allowed the project to react to the changing environment and the problems that emerged as a consequence through the transfer of budget and activities across partners. |
| **Territorial impact** | The project generated a positive territorial impact in the regions of the AA through the implementation of the Nexus methodology and ecolabel of the different products produced by the AA, benefitting not only producers but also consumers from the different AA regions. |
| **Sustainability** | The key aspect that has enabled and secured the sustainability of the project is **the existence and availability of the Nexus methodology and, hence the tool to assess products**. This tool is available on the project website.[72] Particularly, the project is aware, through the different partners, of the demand by certain firms for the Nexus methodology and willingness to implement the Nexus ecolabel, evidencing the sustainability and continuation of the results beyond the project lifetime. |
| **Capitalisation** | The partnership of the NEPTUNUS aims to capitalise the project results and will apply for the new call for proposals under the **Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027 with NEPTUNUS 2.0**. More specifically, this project will aim at capitalising on the results of NEPTUNUS and target additional areas related to the fishing sector such as services (restaurants). |
| **Link** | https://neptunus-project.eu/ |

| **AGEO** - *Platform for Atlantic Geohazard Risk Management* | |
|---|---|
| **Geographical scope** | Bretagne (France), Southern and Eastern Ireland, Lisboa and Madeira (Portugal), Canary Islands (Spain), Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) |
| **Total cost and Funding received** | Total funding: EUR 3,223,240.32<br>ERDF funding: EUR 2,417,430.24 |
| **Period** | 50 months: from 01/06/2019 to 31/07/2023. |
| **Partnership** | The **partnership** consisted of 13 beneficiaries. The **Lead partner** was Instituto Superior Técnico from Lisbon University (Portugal)<br><br>The partnership included 12 **partners**, encompassing six partners from Portugal, three from Spain, two from France, one from the UK, and one from Ireland. Additionally, in terms of the typology of partners, the partners included the following: five national public organisations, five universities, one local public organisation, one SME and one civil society organisation. |
| **Priority covered** | *Priority Axis 3*: Strengthening the territory's resilience to risks of natural, climate and human origin.<br>*SO 3.1*: Strengthening risk management systems |
| **Summary** | The project aimed at **improving the overall risk management system of natural geohazards** in the AA. The project **engaged local communities** to actively participate in risk preparedness and monitoring and incorporate local capacities into risk management systems through pilot actions in France, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain. |

[72] NEPTUNUS WEF 1.0 Tool. https://neptunus-project.eu/results/

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| **Main results and innovative aspects** | The project impacted five selected regions across four AA countries through the implementation of five **Citizens' Observatory pilots** that engaged local communities, raised awareness of geohazards among the population, and allowed for the identification of key recommendations. The focus on people and their engagement and involvement in relation to geohazards is a key innovative aspect of the project. Additionally, the project developed and launched an app which is currently available. The **AGEO App** has been designed to monitor geohazards in the AA. Both the app and the current AGEO platform will be available for the next five years. |
| **Lessons learned** | The main lesson learned relies on **strengthening the partnership through teambuilding sessions**. These meetings proved to be very successful in fostering stakeholders' engagement and participation, creating also a more relaxed environment. Even if not always held, these sessions are seen as a mechanism that should be regulatory ensured and implemented for a more fluid and effective development of the project. |
| **Success factors** | • **Flexibility and broadness of the proposal** have been crucial**.** The flexibility and comprehensiveness of the proposal allowed the project to better adapt to changing environmental conditions. This flexibility was also given to the partners themselves, who have been heavily involved. As a result, reticence towards proposed novelties or changes has been avoided, with participants feeling listened and cared for.<br>• **Collaborative approach and communication across the partnership**. The partnership adopted a flexible approach rather than imposing a rigid methodology, thereby fostering stronger working relationships. |
| **Territorial impact** | AGEO has launched several Citizens' Observatory Pilots on geohazards, engaging with local communities to actively participate in risk preparedness and monitoring, while incorporating local capacities into risk management systems. This has promoted a better management of the environment, so that regional authorities and relevant stakeholders are better prepared to adapt to climate change and potential risks occurring in the Atlantic Territory. |
| **Sustainability** | The **App and platform** created through the project as a way of monitoring geohazards in the AA are still available and will continue to be so for the **next five years**.<br>Furthermore, the **AGEO project book** will be published by Springer in September. It will be available as an open-source e-book, enabling a permanent access to the methodologies and main results of the project in the future. The book will also contain two QR codes that give direct access to the app and the platform. |
| **Capitalisation** | The teams in charge of the pilot actions have continued after the finalisation of the project. The key members of Lisbon City Council (CML) from **the pilot Multihazard Citizens' Observatory in Lisbon** (Portugal) are still working together in the **RESIST** program, the city program to promote the seismic resilience of private and municipal building stock and public urban infrastructures.[73] The programme is funded by the Lisbon Municipality budget.<br><br>Additionally, members of Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI) involved in the pilot **Citizens' observatory on rockfalls and rockfall-triggers in Giants' Causeway and Carrick-a-rede** (Northern Ireland) have also continued collaboration. Particularly, work has continued in collaboration with key stakeholders including the Department for the Economy, The National Trust, NI Environment Agency, Causeway Coast AONB Management Group and Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Group. They are working in in geohazard issues in in areas beyond the AGEO pilot site, covering various large parts of Northern Ireland. |

[73] https://informacoeseservicos.lisboa.pt/prevencao/resiliencia-urbana/projetos/

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| | From April 2023 to the end of December 2023, key members of Spanish Geological and Mining Institute (IGME), which were in charge of the **pilot Citizens' observatory on rockfalls and rockfall-triggers in the Canary Islands** (Spain), obtained funding from the General Directorate of Security and Emergencies of the Canary Islands Government. The funding was for the following action "Analysis of rockfall hazard for emergency management in the Canary Islands (Spain)". At present, the IGME team continues to work together with the maintenance of the ground movement database (BDMOVES).<br><br>The key members of University of Western Brittany are still working together on OSIRISC, the pilot **Citizens' observatory of vulnerability to coastal Risks in Brittany** (France), which is an integrated observatory of coastal risks of erosion and marine flooding. OSIRISC continues through Litto'Risques partnership in Finistère, with funding from Finistère county.[74] Additional funding from Brittany Region (2024-2027) is allowing to progressively deploy the observatory and partnership with other local authorities in Brittany, outside Finistère county. Also, the methodology is being transposed to Reunion Island, with funding from government services in Reunion Island.<br><br>Finally, the University of Maderia (UMa), which was in charge of the pilot **Citizens' observatory of slope instability monitoring in Madeira Island** (Portugal), is still working together with Local Civil Protection from Funchal Municipality, and exploring the data with AI from the seismographs and meteorological stations, funded by AGEO project, for the understanding of patterns of evolution of seismicity and meteorology in Madeira. |
| **Link** | https://ageoatlantic.eu/ |

| **Risk-AquaSoil -** *Atlantic Risk Management Plan in water and soil* | |
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| **Geographical scope** | The focus of the project was on rural areas of the following regions: Andalusia, Asturias, Basque Country (Spain), Aquitaine (France), Border, Midland and Western Ireland, Centro (Portugal), Cornwall and Isles of Scilly (United Kingdom) |
| **Total cost and Funding received** | Total funding: EUR 2,307,860.91<br>ERDF funding: EUR 1,730,895.67 |
| **Period** | 74 months: from 31/05/2017 to 31/07/2023. |
| **Partnership** | The partnership consisted of **15 beneficiaries**, with the **Lead partner** being: Association Climatologique de la Moyenne-Garonne et du Sud-Ouest (Climatology) (France).<br><br>The partnership included **seven partners**: two from Spain, two from Portugal, one each from Ireland, Portugal, and the UK. Additionally, in terms of the typology of partners, the partners included the following: Local public organisations (one); Civil society and third sector organisations (one); Research and innovation organisations (two); Universities and higher education (two) and Public enterprises (one).<br><br>Also, seven **Associated partners** formed part of the partnership: two from Spain, two from France and one each from Portugal, the UK, and Ireland. Regarding the typology: Regional public organisations (two); Civil society and third sector organisations (one); Business networks and associations (two); Research and innovation organisations (one) and National public organisations (one). |

[74] https://www.risques-cotiers.fr/

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| | Overall, the partnership showed a balanced geographical distribution with the inclusion of a wide variety of actors coming from different sectors. |
| **Priority covered** | *Priority Axis 3*: Strengthening the territory's resilience to risks of natural, climate and human origin<br>*SO 3.1*: Strengthening risk management systems |
| **Summary** | The objective of this project was to develop a **comprehensive plan and joint initiative for efficient risk management and increased recovery capacity in rural areas of the Atlantic,** mainly focusing on **soil erosion, water and soil management and damage compensation systems.** Through transnational cooperation, the project partners tackled the adverse effects of climate change, particularly on agricultural lands. |
| **Main results and innovative aspects** | In order to describe the climate situation and its impacts, **data** from European partners and from its own climatological network was **gathered**. The collection of this data has ensured the capacity to anticipate future risks by comparing the experiences of different countries. This has thus facilitated the selection of activities to be carried out, and communication with local actors. Also, **mapping exercises** were part of the project. Additionally, a **web-based simulation application** has been developed in order to effectively advice technicians, farmers and advisors.<br><br>As per the innovative aspects, a **tool for forecasting the risk of floods on small rivers** and the **risk of pollution was created**. This enabled people to use those tools to improve the warnings and increase their shared knowledge on the topic. |
| **Lessons learned** | One of the main lessons learned from this project is the critical importance **of fostering diverse partnerships and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration,** as it brings together varied perspectives, expertise, and resources that are essential for tackling complex challenges more effectively. Also, the **adaptation to emerging and unexpected contextual challenges** throughout the project implementation enabled a more efficient achievement of objectives and the overall impact of the project. All over, the experience underscored the value of continuous learning, adaptation, and community engagement for achieving long-term environmental resilience and societal benefits. |
| **Success factors** | • The **active participation and enrolment of partners** enabled a smoother project development, thereby facilitating the achievement of its objectives.<br>• Also, the **diverse and interdisciplinary nature** of the **partnership** has played an important role. Integrating knowledge from different sectors and regions has been crucial for addressing complex environmental challenges like climate change. |
| **Territorial impact** | The Risk-AquaSoil project has contributed to a better coordination for the detection and management of risks on the territory, and rehabilitation of rural areas (both maritime and terrestrial), associated with risks of natural, climatic, and human origin. It has also ensured improved alignment with national, regional, and local policies. |
| **Sustainability** | One factor ensuring the sustainability of the project can be seen in **English partners** (Westcountry Rivers and The Rivers Trust) **continuing with the work, as well as in the University of Coimbra**, which is still tackling the issue of how the media is addressing climate change. Additionally, the Project monitoring equipment deployed for mapping potential risks has been designed to continue beyond the lifespan of the project, and a magazine that covers some of the initiatives undertaken along the project has been created. This last tool is publicly available online. |
| **Capitalisation** | The results of the project have been capitalised through the incorporation of the methodology developed during Risk-Aquasoil into the **ClimAlert project financed under Interreg Sudoe 2021-2027** |

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| | **Programme.**[75] This project provides a transnational early alert service for climate risks related to water, along with a platform aggregating comprehensive information from various locations. This aims to enhance the capacity of administrations and economic and social stakeholders. |
| **Link** | https://www.riskaquasoil.eu/ |

| **CleanAtlantic -** | *Tackling marine litter in the AA* |
|---|---|
| **Geographical scope** | Galicia (Spain), Bretagne and Pays-de-la-Loire (France), Border, Midland and Western Ireland, Lisboa and Madeira (Portugal), Highlands and Islands and Cumbria (United Kingdom). |
| **Total cost and Funding received** | Total funding: EUR 4,174,271.22<br>ERDF funding: EUR 3,130,703.41 |
| **Period** | 71 months: from 01/09/2017 to 31/07/2023 |
| **Partnership** | The **Lead partner** was the Centro Tecnológico del Mar - Fundación CETMAR (Control and Management of the Marine Environment and Resources) (Spain). The **partnership** was formed by **19 beneficiaries** of which 13 were partners from Portugal (four), Spain (three), France (three), the UK (two), and Ireland (one). In terms of the typology of partnership, five of them were national public organisations, two were regional public organisation, two universities and higher education, one SME, one transnational organisation, one research and innovation organisation and one international organisation.<br><br>The five **Associated partners** are from the UK, Spain, Ireland and France. Four of them were national public organisations and one belonged to the group of international organisations.<br><br>Overall, the partnership, composed by partners with a great share of experience, showed a balanced geographical distribution with the majoritarian presence of national public organisations. |
| **Priority covered** | *Priority Axis 4*: Enhancing biodiversity and the natural and culture assets<br>*SO 4.1*: Improving the protection of biodiversity and enhancing ecosystems' services |
| **Summary** | The project addressed the issue of **marine litter**, focusing on **enhancing knowledge and capabilities to prevent, monitor, and reduce these residues, as well as promoting awareness and behaviour change**. Overall, it aimed to improve access to knowledge, and enhance the capacity to model, monitor, reduce, or clean up marine litter, while also fostering awareness on this problematic. |
| **Main results and innovative aspects** | A series of **exercises** were conducted to **collect and analyse data**, facilitating not only access to information but also knowledge. This was achieved through the development of **online databases and platforms** that provided access to various initiatives, thereby sharing experiences across different regions. Additionally, **maps** were used to support this effort. **Awareness efforts** have also taken place, with the Programme developing campaigns, games and educational tool in this respect.<br><br>As innovative factors, the project adopted a **holistic approach to environmental monitoring and management**, emphasising the value of existing knowledge alongside aspects of prevention and monitoring, while also including the **end user** in the process. This allowed the achievement of significant innovation in technological aspects. Considerable effort was dedicated to developing applications useful |

[75] https://climalert.net/

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| | for both citizen science and research. The project also involved advanced work with **robotics**, including the **application of artificial intelligence** in technological developments and the use of drones. |
| **Lessons learned** | The main lesson learned was the **inclusion of end users at various territorial levels**, along with the **involvement of organisations capable of amplifying the Programme's impact** when it comes to monitoring and advancing towards marine litter prevention, such as Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR). These actors have contributed to the active monitoring and prevention of marine litter, while also engaging in the creation of apps, awareness activities, etc. This has secured **valuable input and feedback on local needs** and priorities related to marine litter, enhancing the impact of the project. Additionally, leveraging **consortium members' prior experience** in similar networks enhanced collaboration effectiveness, improving overall implementation and results consecution. |
| **Success factors** | • **Previous experience in Interreg cooperation.** The fact that some consortium members had already been part of previous networks established under the Programme positively impacted its work. Many of the organisations involved in the Atlantic marine litter project had previously collaborated on other pollution issues, such as accidental spills of hydrocarbons or chemicals. This prior network experience facilitated working together, with members being aware of each other's strengths.<br>• Additionally, having the **end users involved** from the very beginning of the project was crucial as it provided crucial feedback and enhanced the assessment of the marine litter situation. This inclusive approach ensured a more efficient and comprehensive advancement towards the project's objectives. |
| **Territorial impact** | The project has ensured the protection of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the AA by enhancing capabilities for the prevention, monitoring, and removal of marine litter. This was achieved through the creation of various tools that have significantly contributed to its effective development. |
| **Sustainability** | The main sustainability strategy relied on the **willingness of the organisations** to maintain the network, even on a voluntary basis. Hence, sustainability was ensured at the consortium level, with many organisations already involved in monitoring marine litter or prevention activities. Moreover, databases, apps, procedures, and protocols developed are still being actively used. Additionally, an initial strategy to sustain the project was thoughtfully developed to ensure the project's long-term viability. Nonetheless, the successful securing of a continuation project meant that the immediate implementation of this strategy was not required. |
| **Capitalisation** | A new project, **Free-litterAT, has been financed by Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027,** which is based on the results and work carried out in CleanAtlantic.[76] Its main goal is to protect the variety of life in the ocean by coming up with new and creative ways to stop and reduce marine litter. The project emphasises prevention more significantly, while still including WP focused on enhancing monitoring capabilities and improving prediction models like CleanAtlantic. This prevention is fostered through awareness campaigns, the creation of technical solutions for facilitating the implementation of systems, etc.<br>Regarding the consortium, it has secured new additions, coming from a diversity of countries and sectors, increasing the share of public organisms and research organisations. |
| **Link** | https://www.cleanatlantic.eu/ |

[76] https://freelitterat.eu/

| **AtlanticOnBike -** *The EuroVelo 1, a unique cycling-tourism destination for a green growth* | |
|---|---|
| **Geographical scope** | The geographical scope of the project covers the territories of the Atlantic Coast Route, including the coast of Portugal, interior of Spain, west coast of France, the UK and Ireland.[77] |
| **Total cost and Funding received** | Total funding: EUR 5,263,273.86<br>ERDF funding: EUR 3,947,455.93 |
| **Period** | 73 months: from 01/07/2017 to 31/07/2023. |
| **Partnership** | The **partnership** was formed by **12 beneficiaries**. The **Lead partner** was the Conseil départemental des Pyrénées-Atlantiques (Directions Aménagement Equipement Environnement, Tourisme, Coopération européenne in France).<br><br>The partnership included **seven partners**, encompassing one partner for each of the five MS of the AA and one partners from Belgium and another from Norway. Additionally, in terms of the typology of partners, the partners included the following: four civil society and third sector organisations, two national public organisations and one public-private organisation. Additionally, the partnership counted with **four Associated partners**, three from Ireland and one from the United Kingdom, involving national public organisations and two civil society.<br><br>Overall, the partnership showed a balanced geographical distribution, with the inclusion of partners outside the AA and with a strong presence of public authorities and civil society. |
| **Priority covered** | *Priority Axis 4*: Enhancing biodiversity and the natural and culture assets<br>*SO 4.2*: Enhancing natural and cultural assets to stimulate economic development |
| **Summary** | The project developed and promoted a **sustainable European tourism destination** based on one of the longest fascinating European long distance cycle routes: *EuroVelo 1 – Atlantic Coast Route*. |
| **Main results and innovative aspects** | The main result of the project was the establishment of EuroVelo 1 – Atlantic Coast Route, as well as key transnational touristic products such as gastronomy, biking and fishing suitable circuits. Additionally, the project has innovated by establishing a **European-level route** that was previously non-existent, and by implementing an **economic impact assessment tool** used at European level. This tool facilitates the exchange and comparison of pertinent economic data. |
| **Lessons learned** | The **inclusion of public actors and policymakers** is crucial for ensuring the **effective implementation** of the project and enhance the sustainability of results. Their active involvement not only enhances the relevance and applicability of results but also fosters **long-term commitment** and institutional support, crucial for the enduring impact of the initiative. |
| **Success factors** | • The pivotal factor contributing to success has been the **partnership**. Motivation, active participation, alongside the partners' experience, expertise, and knowledge, have proven indispensable for the project's successful implementation.<br>• Additionally, the inclusion of **technical consultants** was crucial for the technical part of the project, generating added value to the project. |

[77] Atlantic Coast Route. https://pro.eurovelo.com/download/document/Map%20Eurovelo%201.%20Atlantic%20Coast%20Route.pdf

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| **Territorial impact** | This project has generated a great positive impact throughout the territory of the Atlantic Coast Route through the promotion of sustainable tourism, promotion of cycling and economic development of the area. |
| **Sustainability** | The AtlanticOnBike project served as a foundation for the **EuroVelo 1 Partnership** (formerly called LTMA – Long-Term Management Agreement).[78] This partnership was signed for 2021-2023 with partners from Norway, Ireland, France and Spain and run in parallel with the extension of AtlanticOnBike in 2022-2023. After the end of the first 3-year of EuroVelo 1 Partnership in 2023, they are currently finalising **a new partnership for 2024** focused on communications and involving partners from Norway, Ireland and France. Nonetheless, discussions are still held regarding the inclusion of additional countries and the scope of the transnational cooperation to be addressed. |
| **Capitalisation** | ATLANTICONBIKE has not only been able to capitalise on its results but also builds on the experience of CIRCULDOUCE financed by POCTEFA. Additionally, the Lead partner of ATLANTICONBIKE was also presented in another two **POCTEFA** projects focusing on sustainable tourism and cycling: EDERBIDEA[79] and BICIMUGI[80].<br><br>Finally, the Lead partner is also preparing a **new cross border project** building on the results of ATLANTICONBIKE in collaboration with actors within Guipuzcoa and Navarra (Spain). |
| **Link** | https://en.eurovelo.com/ev1 |

## 7. What was the type of improvements that can be demonstrated (qualitative and quantitative) and necessarily reflected by the indicators?

In assessing the effectiveness of the Programme, it is crucial to identify and substantiate improvements through both qualitative and quantitative measures. These improvements must be accurately captured and reflected by specific indicators, providing a comprehensive evaluation of the Programme's impact. This inquiry aims to elucidate the types of improvements that can be demonstrated through these indicators, emphasising the significance of both tangible (quantitative) and intangible (qualitative) outcomes in offering a holistic understanding of the Programme's efficacy.

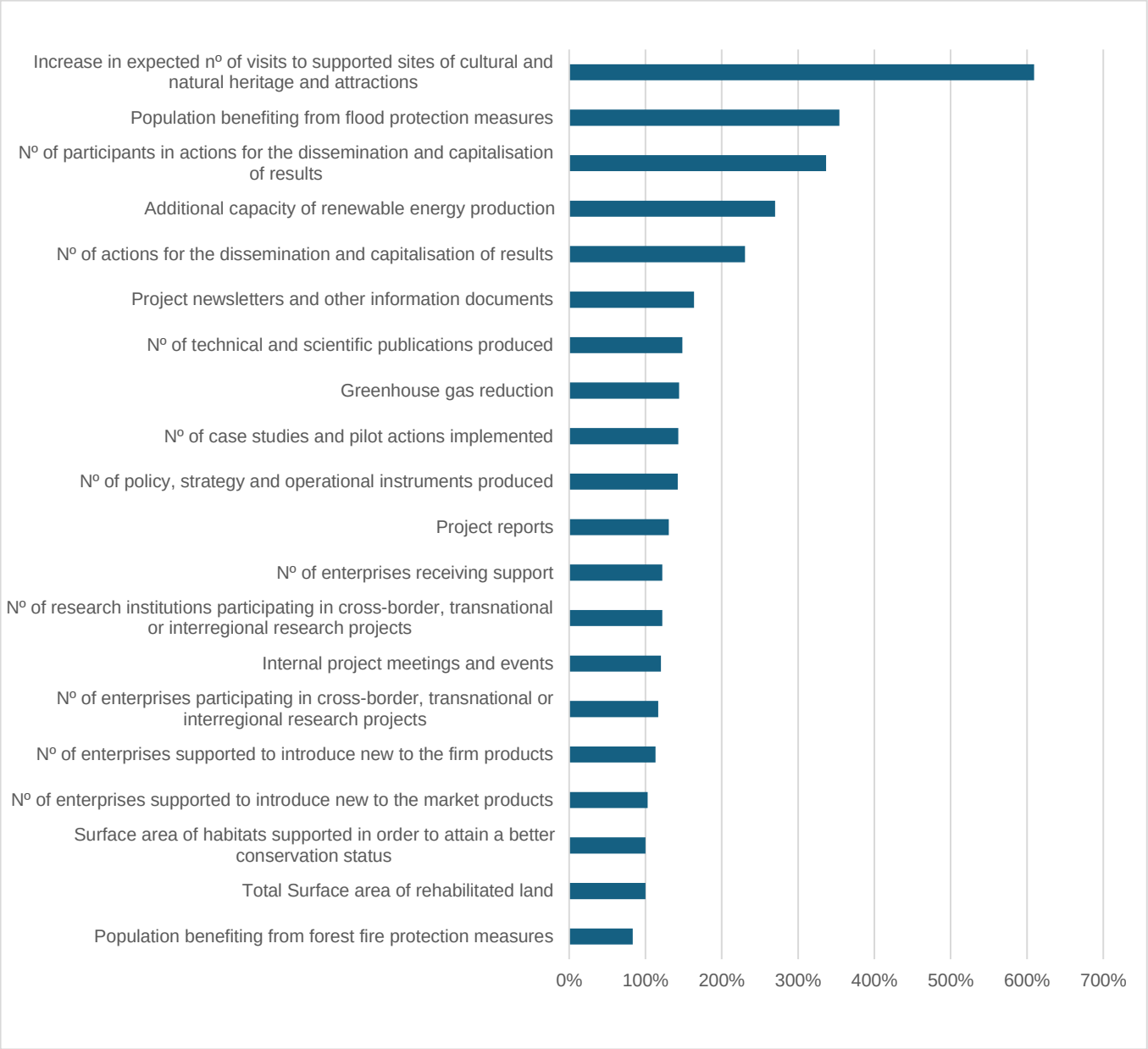
The annual implementation reports have consistently provided a comprehensive overview of the output indicators, milestones, and targets delineated within the performance framework. This information has been systematically collected and disseminated annually, categorised by Priority Axis and SO. Collectively, the reports indicate that the physical execution of the Programme has been satisfactory, with targets being met and, in certain instances, even exceeded.

The indicators covered by the Programme have been detailed in the evaluation fifth question under section 3.2. Therefore, please refer to that section for further insights regarding the indicators. Overall, as illustrated in the first question of this section, the Programme has been able to develop a wide range of outputs and results, ultimately leading to a positive impact in the AA.

[78] EuroVelo 1 Partnership https://pro.eurovelo.com/projects/2021-07-03_ltma-eurovelo-1-atlantic-route
[79] EDERBIDEA Project. https://urarenbailarak.eus/es/ederbidea/
[80] BICIMUGI Project. https://www.bicimugi.eu/

Regarding outputs, as illustrated by the output indicators in the following graph, they have been attained and, in the majority of instances, have surpassed the defined targets. Consequently, these indicators mirror the results of the mapping exercise, demonstrating a significant level of output development that not only meets but also exceeds the established targets, thereby contributing substantively to the Programme's objectives and outcomes.

Graph 18: Level of achievement of output indicators




Overall, the output indicators provide a comprehensive overview of the results of the Programme, which have been further elaborated in the first question of this section and can be found in the mapping sample of results. The indicators reflect the large contribution of the different projects to the Programme's objectives through the number of actions implemented, the population and actors benefiting from them, as well as key environmental areas improved such as the enhancement of the capacity to produce renewable energy.

## 8. How relevant was the relationship between the Programme and the Atlantic maritime strategy, and how should this interaction be followed in future programming periods?

The Commission adopted an Atlantic maritime strategy in 2011 in response to repeated calls from stakeholders for more ambitious, open and effective cooperation in the Atlantic Ocean area. Following a bottom-up consultation in the five MS with Atlantic coasts (Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Portugal), an action plan was developed that set out practical steps to be taken in these areas. The AAP was adopted in May 2013.

The action plan considers responses to the challenges of delivering growth, reducing the carbon footprint, using the sea's natural resources sustainably, responding effectively to threats and emergencies and implementing an "ecosystem" management approach in Atlantic waters.

The 2013–2020 AAP underwent a mid-term review in 2017 to assess its performance and draw lessons from its implementation to pave the way for the future. The Mid-term Review of the AAP, based on an independent study and a stakeholder consultation, found that by 2017, the plan had spurred over 1200 new maritime projects and nearly 6 billion euros of investments. Based on the findings of the mid-term review, notably the potential of the action plan to create even more impact on the coastal economy, the EC took concrete steps in order to safely steer the Atlantic Maritime Strategy into a promising future.[81]

The revised AAP 2.0 was communicated by the EC on 23 July 2020. Its main objective is to unlock the potential of the blue economy in the AA while preserving marine ecosystems and contributing to climate change adaptation and mitigation.

The AAP 2.0 includes four pillars that represent a practical way to make the common vision a reality. All pillars are integrally interconnected and transregional by nature and address key challenges and aim to foster sustainable blue growth and contribute to greater territorial cooperation and cohesion in the EU AA. The pillars focus on issues that one coastal region and one single State cannot solve alone, or on issues where it is more efficient to act together and deliver on challenges that matter in the daily lives of people living in the coastal areas:

- Pillar I: Ports as gateways and hubs for the blue economy,
- Pillar II: Blue skills of the future and ocean literacy,
- Pillar III: Marine renewable energy,
- Pillar IV: Healthy ocean and resilient coasts.

In this context, the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020, within **section 4.4 on the Contribution of planned interventions to Sea basin strategies**, offers a comprehensive and explicit indication of how the Programme is aligned with the maritime strategy and how the definition of the SOs and the type of actions to be supported take it into account.

There is just one exception to the above, as actions to improve accessibility and connectivity (Priority three of the Action Plan) have not been prioritised under the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020, since the Programme in the previous programming period of 2007-2013 showed a very scarce demand of projects under former Priority 3 related to accessibility and transport.

[81] The Atlantic Strategy and the 2013-2020 Action Plan. https://atlantic-maritime-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/atlantic-strategy-glance/atlantic-strategy

Further into the assessment of the relevance of the Atlantic Maritime Strategy to the Programme, **several concrete actions and mechanisms have been put in place** and **can be evidenced** in order to ensure the complementarity and the contribution of the Programme to the Maritime strategy:

1. Stronger governance links have been established between the Interreg Atlantic Programme and the Action Plan, whereby a MA representative recurrently participates as an observer to the Atlantic Steering Committee meetings, delivering concise interventions updating on the implementation of the Programme and outlining possibly common actions.

2. On the latter on common actions, and to illustrate this point, in 2023, and in the Atlantic Strategy Stakeholder Conference (19 October 2023), the Interreg Atlantic Programme co-organised with the Atlantic Assistance Mechanism, Interact, DG MARE and DG REGIO the event: "Blue Synergies: Maximising Funding Impact in the Atlantic Sea Basin". The event aimed to foster collaboration and explore the potential synergies between the Atlantic Strategy and the funding Programmes operating in the area, bringing together Atlantic Strategy's stakeholders, funding authorities, the business community, and project owners. It constituted the first attempt to create a platform for discussions and idea exchange. Building on specific regional project examples, and on the opportunities provided by the Strategy, the event participants exchanged experiences on how to design and deliver joint initiatives and build the needed processes for a sustainable blue economy in the AA.

3. In view of the success of the first edition of the Blue Synergies event, in November 2024, and in the context of the Atlantic Strategy Stakeholder Conference and the back-to-back Interreg Annual Event, a second edition of this event bringing together stakeholders and funding authorities will take place. The event will be once again co-organised between the Interreg Atlantic Programme, INTERACT, the AAP Assistance Mechanism, DG REGIO and DG MARE.

4. The guiding principles for the selection of operations foresee that, when applicable, projects should show their coherence with and contribution to the Atlantic Area Maritime Strategy. In this way, under section 4.10 of the Application Form, project promoters are explicitly asked if the project is based on one of the Atlantic Strategy Priorities and, if so, which one. In this sense, more than 90% of the approved projects reflect this alignment with one of the Priorities of the Strategy. Being this a positive factor towards the contribution of the Programme to the Maritime Strategy, when assessing the actual 'Quality Award Criteria' for the Calls for Proposals, the contribution to the Atlantic Strategy is not reflected, so no extra points are received from this end.

5. Similarly, both the projects' intermediate and final reports have a specific section (sections 3.10.1 and 3.10.2) where, if relevant, projects need to explain how the activities and results achieved contribute to the Atlantic Area Maritime Strategy's Action Plan.

6. Furthermore, the Programme Annual Implementation Report describes how the Programme as a whole contributes to the Atlantic Area Maritime Strategy. In this sense, section 11.3 on the Contribution to macro-regional and sea basin strategies offers detailed information on the above.

7. In terms of projects implementation, a large number of blue economy-related projects supported by the Programme can be found. Concretely, almost 50% of the supported projects (35 out of the 71) have a direct or indirect link with the sustainable development of one or more blue economy sectors.[82]

[82] Projects linked to the sustainable blue economy supported by the 2014-2020 Atlantic Programme: ACCESS2SEA, 3DPARE, ATLANTICK-KET-MED, ALERTOX-NET, EBB, NEPTUNUS, NANOCULTURE, BLUE-GIFT, AT-VIRTUAL, BLUEPORTS, CIRCULAR-SEAS, INTEGRATE, BLUE-HUMAN, CEPHS AND CHEFS, ENHANCEMICROALGAE, FANBEST, IFADO, ARCWIND, MONITOR, PORTOS, REDAWN, AA-FLOODS, MYCOAST, PRIMROSE, RISK-AQUASOIL, CABFISHMAN, CAPITEN, CLEANATLANTIC, JONAS, COCKLES, MONITOOL, MOSES, OCEANWISE.

8. Examining in detail the achieved results, again, a substantial amount of blue economy-related outcomes are identified, including, as a way of example:

- *First generation sensors for in situ determination of several components in water for aquaculture (NANOCULTURE),*
- *Guidelines produced to inform Atlantic policymakers on the sustainable fabrication of artificial reefs (3DPARE).*
- *Tools for safe operations of aquaculture and renewable energy facilities (MYCOAST),*
- *Sustainable development index and blue growth guidelines for aquaculture (MOSES),*
- *GIS spatially referenced database of coastal and marine sectors (MOSES) Forecast of marine renewable energy production in ports (PORTOS),*
- *CleanAtlantic marine litter transport tool (CLEANATLANTIC).*

## 9. What was the potential impact of Brexit on the Programme?

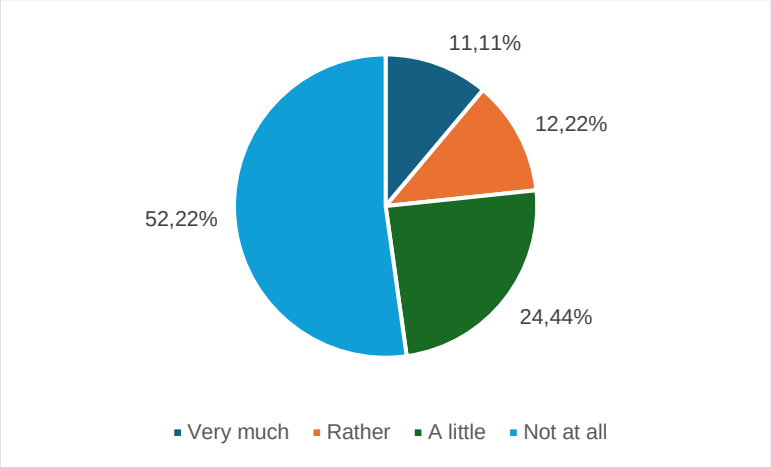
In a 2016 referendum, citizens of the UK voted to either remain or leave the EU. A narrow majority chose the latter option, and in 2020, the UK officially left in a process that came to be known as BREXIT. This marked a significant shift in the UK's political and economic landscape, with ongoing discussions about its long-term impact. The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 also faced the uncertainty that BREXIT brought to the projects that worked with UK partners.

Therefore, in order to address potential challenges, the Programme allocated the majority of available funding in the first two calls for proposals to ensure effective implementation and the inclusion of UK partners throughout the Programme. Consequently, the impact of Brexit was minimised and largely confined to the **Programme level** rather than affecting projects. The primary impact, therefore, was on the timing of the calls for proposals.

At the **project level**, the implementation was slightly influenced by the **uncertainty** regarding the continuation of UK partners in the Programme and the eligibility of costs. Nonetheless, in the end no UK partners ultimately withdrew from projects, thereby avoiding the negative impact on projects.

The results of the survey conducted for the purpose of the evaluation confirm that **most of the projects were not impacted by BREXIT**. More than half of respondents (52.81%) responded that it did not have any impact on the development of the project. At the same time, 24.72% of respondents stated that it had only affected them a little, and just 11.24% reported that BREXIT had affected their projects either moderately or very much. The main impact of projects was related to delays in samples and materials transportation and higher associated costs.

Graph 19: Level of impact of Brexit on the development of project reported by beneficiaries




Overall, the potential impact of Brexit was effectively mitigated, primarily influencing the timing of the calls for proposals. Despite the uncertainty generated by Brexit, the Programme successfully minimised its effects on individual projects. This strategic approach ensured that the overall objectives were met and that UK partners remained integral to the Programme's success.

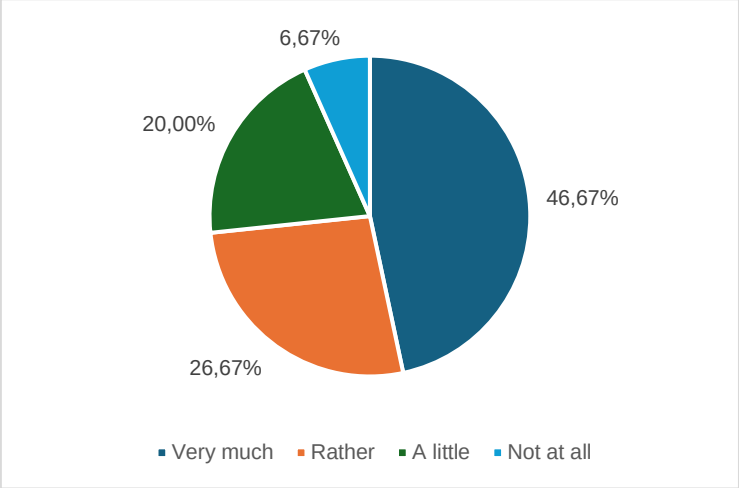
## 10. What was the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Covid-19 pandemic was an unprecedented challenge that led to a period of uncertainty at a global level. For this reason, transnational strategies and international relations were affected, especially by national and international regulations on mobility and on interpersonal interactions. The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 also experienced the effects of the global pandemic, and both the Programme authorities, and the partnerships of the projects had to adapt to this new situation.

The Programme started to implement measures early to address the challenge. It proved to be **flexible** with the timelines and gave the projects an **automatic extension** of 6 months. Furthermore, it was **provided case-to-case** support to address the modification requests and allow the necessary changes for the adequate implementation of the projects. As a result, one of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the longer duration of projects from the initial maximum 36 months duration. Additionally, this was also influenced by the third call for proposals.

Additionally, **most of the projects of the 2014-2020 Programme were negatively affected** by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the results of the survey, around 46.07% of the total respondents considered that the pandemic affected their projects very much. Moreover, 26.97% experienced a moderate impact and a 20.22% answered that the implementation of the project was slightly affected by Covid-19. Therefore, just 6.74% of the participants responded that the pandemic did not affect the development and outcomes of the projects.

Graph 20: Level of impact of Covid-19 on the development of project reported by beneficiaries




The analysis of the beneficiaries' answers, as well as the analysis of the project reports, has enabled the identification of the main impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most projects reported **delays in implementation**. One of the most immediate and pervasive effects of the pandemic was the disruption of timelines and schedules for Programme activities. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and health protocols meant that planned activities had to be postponed, modified or cancelled. This led to a backlog of activities and a re-evaluation of project timelines.

As such, not only delays in implementation took place but also **modification of activities**. The situation created by the pandemic led to minor and sometimes substantial modifications of the planned activities to adapt to the current situation without severely impacting the objectives and planned results of projects. Despite the overall success in adapting to the effects of Covid-19, some projects had to cancel certain activities. For example, within the MMIAH project, several shows and fairs in the tourist industry, where the project's results were intended to be shared, had to be cancelled due to the pandemic situation. In line with this, as part of the AtlanticCultureScape project, most of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) events had to be cancelled, having this a highly negative effect on local ICH and tourism providers.

An additional impact refers to the **shift from physical meetings and events to online events**. With physical gatherings rendered impractical or unsafe, there was a rapid shift towards virtual platforms for events and communication. Conferences, seminars, training sessions, and project and Programme meetings moved online. This shift accelerated digitalisation efforts within organisations, forcing them to quickly adopt and integrate new technologies. While this digital pivot enabled continuity in some respects, it also highlighted disparities in digital access and skills, impacting engagement levels. Virtual events, although efficient, often lacked the interpersonal dynamics and spontaneity of in-person interactions, influencing participant engagement and interaction quality.

Finally, it should be noted that the third call, which enabled the continuation and capitalisation of project results, effectively allowed projects to carry out their planned activities and achieve their goals despite the adverse effects of Covid-19.

To sum up, despite the impacts of Covid-19 at the Programme and project levels, Programme bodies, NCs and beneficiaries agreed on the adaptability of both the Programme and the projects to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, having demonstrated the success of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 in this regard. Hence, although the Covid-19 pandemic implied changes and adaptability of both the Programme and the projects, it did not have a major impact on the overall development, as the mitigation actions succeeded, and good results were achieved.

# 4. Conclusions and recommendations

## 4.1. Conclusions

### Overarching conclusions

#### Programme performance: A financial execution of 99.9%

The Programme has successfully executed the available allocated budget of 140 million euros, supporting a total of 71 projects. The global financial execution rate stands at 99.9%. The general performance of the Programme bodies complied with the Guiding Principles, with the decision-making process of the Atlantic Programme bodies following a similar structure to that of other Interreg Operational programmes, thereby leading to a complete financial execution of the available funds by the Programme.

#### Solid set of aggregated results along the different thematic priority axes of the Programme

The evaluation shows that, through the implementation of its 71 funded projects in the four thematic Priorities, the Atlantic Programme has achieved a wide array of concrete and tangible results, which, in an aggregated manner, contribute to the sustainable development of Europe's Atlantic façade.

In this way, a sample of more than 200 specific outcomes can be identified, comprising the development of new tools and methods, the identification and testing of new transformative solutions to tackle common challenges in the Atlantica Area, or the design and endorsement of full-fledged Action Plans or Strategies understood as concrete roadmaps which set the path towards reaching a set of objectives in one or more specific areas of regional development in the cooperation area.

These outcomes of the Programme which trigger a positive change in the Atlantic area have been identified, mapped, classified and described for the purpose of the present evaluation, offering in this way a robust sample of concrete achievements directly supported by the Programme.

These outcomes refer to the multiple sectors and the four thematic priorities that the Programme tackled, having the sustainable blue economy as the most common pattern. If we discuss specific topics of fields of activities:

Regarding **Priority Axis 1** (*Stimulating Innovation and Competitiveness*), the main focus of the supported projects has been the marine sector and the promotion of the **blue economy.** Specifically, the identified results coming from the projects supported by this Priority Axis have driven innovation and competitiveness in key sectors within the AA related to the blue economy, such as **seafood, aquaculture, and maritime shipping**. Many are the examples which can be found, including developments of novel approaches for evaluating seafood quality, fraud identification tools to support EU control laboratories combatting mislabelling or concrete measures to protect European consumers. Also, achievements can be evidenced in the domain of sustainable food production, including the creation of innovative and sustainable business models for aquaculture and a basis for quality job creation and fixing people to the concerned territories.

Furthermore, and in relation to one of the most critical sectors of the Atlantic economy, the *maritime shipping industry*, projects have contributed to the advancement of the sector by, for instance, developing growth measurement tools that forecast the impact of investments in innovative processes and helping SMEs in the naval sector plan their technological transformation. Innovation has also been fostered through capacity-building schemes designed to share knowledge in the naval sector and promote the transfer of expertise across the main stakeholders within the industry.

Finally, this Priority Axis has had a focus on SMEs support as the key engines for jobs and growth, contributing to the establishment of solid public private partnerships, clusters' development, capacity building schemes and accelerators for innovation and take up of new technologies by the market.

Regarding **Priority Axis 2** (*Resource Efficiency*), outcomes of the projects have been found on promoting *marine renewable energy* and in this way notable examples include the development of transformative solutions such as a solar energy pilot prototype for low-cost wastewater decontamination technology or testing and piloting offshore wind energy through the assessment of the AA's potential, alongside feasibility studies of various floating structures in various geographical areas of the Atlantic façade to encourage the adoption of wind as an energy source.

Additionally, projects funded under this priority have promoted the use of alternative energy sources, such as geothermal and hydrogen, through pilot testing, models validation, and the creation of new patents for the circularity of hydrogen production sites and its storage.

Further targeted sectors under this priority include *energy efficiency and pollution reduction*, with key outcomes coming from the development of big-data software applications for water management, aimed at reducing energy consumption and increasing efficiency in specific water systems. Pollution reduction and energy efficiency were also promoted through innovative solutions for renewable energy storage in ports, taking into account port characteristics and energy consumption patterns. Lastly, significant results included the development of sustainable eco-innovative products such as for instance the creation of an integrated 3D printing system to manufacture green products for maritime industries, helping to reduce environmental impact on the ocean.

The continued work of the Programme under **Priority Axis 3** (*Strengthening the Territory's Resilience to Risks of Natural, Climate, and Human Origin*) has primarily focused on enhancing the capacity of regions to *prevent and manage territorial risks*, or key adverse climate events such as *floods, and coastal risks,* key to the population living in the Atlantic territories. This contribution has been channelled by the Programme through the development of alert systems, observatories for climate change prevention and mitigation or the development of risk prevention and management plans.

Specifically, in *aquaculture*, the Programme has contributed to maximising food safety and increasing the resilience of the sector. This contribution has taken place through the development of water toxin sensors for aquaculture and a transnational alert system for biotoxin and microbial risks, which prevents their spread to shellfish production areas, a significant problem experienced by the sector.

In order to improve the ability to prevent, mitigate, and manage *floods,* supported projects under this Priority have implemented pilots for prevention, early warning, and crisis management, as well as the development of local action plans for flood prevention and emergency response.

*Coastal risk management* has also been enhanced through the establishment of a coastal observatory for the AA, aimed at improving coastal monitoring and forecasting tools to better support responses to hazards and emergencies. Other significant outcomes under this priority involve risk management for soil and water, including the development of tools to forecast flood risks in small rivers and assess pollution risks.

Under **Priority Axis 4** (*Enhancing Biodiversity and Natural and Cultural Assets*), the Programme has continued its extensive efforts focusing on *promoting tourism and protecting biodiversity*, where the link to the *marine ecosystems* is again present. The contributions to the positive development of the territory under this priority include notable achievements towards the consecution of the protection of the region's biodiversity, such as the creation of patents for designing artificial reefs using large-scale 3D printing and low-impact, bio-receptive materials, which promote biodiversity while reducing pollution through the use of biomaterials. Additionally, strategic action plans and guidelines have been developed, with some having been already implemented, to assist policymakers in effectively protecting biodiversity.

Cultural heritage and tourism within the AA have also continued to be fostered through projects aimed at recovering key cultural assets pertaining to the territories, for instance via virtual platforms and incorporating them into permanent exhibitions or visitable sites, enhancing the historical memory of different AA regions and cities.

Overall, the Programme has effectively generated significant impacts in the main sectors of the AA through the various outcomes arising from the funded projects. The analysis of the outcomes identified has been enhanced by an in-depth examination of key projects presented as case studies (section 3.6), highlighting notable **success stories** across the four priority axes. These success stories demonstrate positive impacts through the development of new services, patents, tools, and action plans that have persisted beyond the project's duration, ensuring long-term benefits for the AA.

The outcomes of the projects, and the overall impact of the Programme through the consecution of a solid set of outcomes, have not only contributed to the development of the territories pertaining to the AA but have also helped to advance broader EU policy goals. In particular, the Programme has reinforced its alignment with and support for sustainable development, territorial cohesion, and the enhancement of citizens' quality of life.

In parallel, by focusing on stimulating innovation, fostering resource efficiency, increasing resilience to risks, and protecting biodiversity and cultural assets, the Programme has made significant strides in improving economic performance of the regions and promoting environmental sustainability in Europe's Atlantic façade.

Additionally, considering the blue economy focus of the many of the identified projects' outcomes, the Programme shows a high level of alignment with the Atlantic Maritime Strategy and has positively contributed to achieving its goals and objectives. Consequently, there is evidence on the high level of correspondence with the four pillars defined in the revised Atlantic Action Plan (AAP 2.0).

In this sense, and as evidenced by the analysis of outcomes carried out and showcased for the purpose of this final evaluation, the Programme has positively contributed to the innovation and competitiveness of ports relating to Pillar I of the AAP 2.0, as well as the advancement of marine renewable energy through Priority Axis 2, contributing to Pillar III of the AAP 2.0. Furthermore, a significant proportion of outcomes have targeted marine litter and pollution reduction contributing to Pillar IV of the AAP 2.0. Ultimately, although to a lesser extent, key training and educational outcomes have fostered blue skills across the AA (Pillar II of the AAP 2.0). Building on this foundation and reflecting on the results and contributions of the Programme from 2014 to 2020, the alignment with the Atlantic Maritime Strategy and the Atlantic Action Plan has been further strengthened.

Based on the above, the Programme has demonstrated its capacity to generate significant positive impacts in the AA that could have not been achieved without the EU support. Specifically, it has played a crucial role in fostering innovation and competitiveness within the regions, while promoting resource efficiency and the use of renewable energies, as well as enhancing biodiversity and cultural initiatives across the AA. Consequently, the Programme can claim to be a meaningful instrument for driving regional economic development in the AA by facilitating collaboration among countries and encouraging transnational partnerships.

### Responding to two significant external shocks: the sanitary crisis and Brexit

The Programme management structure was able to address the two main external shocks that the Programme was subject to: the impact of the **Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit**. In order to minimise the external challenges that took place throughout the Programme period, the Programme bodies carried out different measures to effectively tackle the effects of Brexit in 2018 that implied uncertainty regarding the continuation of UK partners, and the financial and administrative instability caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Firstly, the potential impact of Brexit was effectively mitigated, primarily influencing the timing of the calls for proposals. Despite the uncertainty generated by Brexit, the Programme successfully minimised its effects on

individual projects. This strategic approach ensured that the overall objectives were met and that UK partners remained integral to the Programme's success.

Secondly, the Covid-19 pandemic was an unprecedented challenge that led to a period of uncertainty at a global level. For this reason, transnational strategies and international relations were affected, especially by national and international regulations on mobility and on interpersonal interactions. The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 also experienced the effects of the global pandemic and both the Programme authorities, and the partnerships of the projects had to adapt to this new situation.

The Programme started to implement measures early to address the challenge; it proved to be **flexible** with the timelines and gave the projects an **automatic extension** of 6 months. Furthermore, they **provided case-to-case** support to address the modification requests and allowed the necessary changes for the adequate implementation of the projects. As a result, one of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the longer duration of projects from the initial maximum of 36 months duration. Additionally, this was also influenced by the third call for proposals. Despite the impacts of Covid-19 at the Programme and project levels, Programme bodies, NCs and beneficiaries agreed on the adaptability of both the Programme and the projects to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, having demonstrated the success of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 in this regard. Hence, although the Covid-19 pandemic implied changes and adaptability of both the Programme and the projects, it did not have a major impact on the overall development, as the mitigation actions succeeded, and good results were achieved.

### Financial management and monitoring: Overcoming the challenges posed by SIGI during the first years of the Programme’s implementation

One of the main challenges the Programme encountered during its first years was the non-functioning platform to upload projects and expenses, outlined in the mid-term evaluation as well. The MA of the Programme managed to hire a new company that took over the previous one to develop SIGI V.2. During the transition period, the Programme continued working under a contingency plan, so no data was lost, and the audit trail was kept. With the changes introduced in SIGI V.2. the system now supports the project’s life cycle stages, from applications and selection processes to the submission of progress reports and payment claims. The system allows to adequately measure the results and outputs, measuring them against the objective and the established targets. The IT platform has different functionalities depending on the type of user.

## Specific conclusions by topic

### Calls for proposals

In terms of main bottlenecks and lessons learned: overall, the calls for proposals encountered one significant bottleneck due to the **extensive length of the first call**. The two-stage procedure extended the timeline, placing an additional burden on the human resource component of the JS. The **timing of calls** for proposals during the 2014-2020 programming period was significantly influenced by Brexit, resulting in a concentration of calls and available funding in the first half of the programming period.

In terms of the **structure of the calls**, the Programme included two regular calls followed by a third call focused on capitalisation. This last call was a novelty, as it was open only to projects from the previous calls in order to finance follow-up activities and/or capitalisation of results. As a result, the structure design allowed to **increase the impact of projects** financed in the first two calls, with a focus on capitalisation and sustainability of results.

The identified results of this call cover aspects related to the continuation and the launching of new project activities, together with substantial efforts for raising awareness and improving the outreach of results to wider audiences in specific fields of regional policy within the capitalisation level. Additionally, the reporting system was

not exclusive to the third call, thereby limiting the capacity to assess and identify the main results and impact of the third call.

Additionally, this structural design facilitated the commitment of a substantial portion of the available funding during the initial phase of the Programme, as the third call had a significantly lower financial allocation, ensuring **high financial execution rates**.

### System of indicators

Overall, the system of indicators has been successful in providing an overview of the accomplishments of projects in relation to the original targets set and the final achievements. This has allowed to quantify the outputs and consequently the results of projects. Therefore, they have provided a good vision of the Programme implementation. Some indicators showed very high execution rates, well exceeding the set targets. For these indicators, targets could probably be more ambitious in the future.

Other indicators, such as number of actions implemented, population and actors benefiting from them, as well as key environmental areas improved, or the enhancement of the capacity to produce renewable energy reflect the large contribution of the different projects to the Programme's objectives. However, some of these indicators are difficult to quantify in a systematic and consistent manner. The Programme could offer more guidelines to the projects on the quantification of such indicators to ensure consistent and comparable numbers across them.

The Programme succeeded in the selection of environmental indicators and the beneficiaries generally considered that the chosen indicators helped to analyse the relationship of the environmental scope with the results obtained in the projects.

### Partnerships

Partnerships in the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 have effectively included all relevant partners, ensuring geographical coverage. As such, beneficiaries have reported, through the online survey, overall satisfaction with their projects' partnerships in terms of geographical coverage, typology of partners, as well as the number of partners.

The project prototype financed by the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 encompasses a partnership of 16 beneficiaries, including the Lead partner, eight partners, and seven Associated partners. Geographically, the projects boast a diverse representation from the five countries, with the (most) typical Lead partner coming from Spain, ensuring a broad international collaboration.

The typology of partners is carefully structured to align with Priority 1, which has historically funded the largest number of projects. As such, the project prototype features a balanced representation of the private, public, and research sectors, with each sector representing around 30%. This balanced composition ensures a comprehensive approach, integrating diverse perspectives and expertise. Additionally, there is a minor representation from civil society and public-private and public enterprises, contributing to the project's multifaceted nature and broad stakeholder engagement. As a result, the Programme has been effective in including all relevant partners and fostered the creation of **quadruple-helix** partnerships.

Finally, the Programme has shown great effectiveness in the involvement of the **private sector**, particularly SMEs. While in the 2007-2013 Programme SMEs and other profit-distributing enterprises could only be considered Associated partners, for the 2014-2020 programming period, the Programme (following the relevant EU Regulation) allowed for their participation. As a result, the private sector has represented 23.81% of all partners. Additionally, beneficiaries have highlighted, through the online survey, the relevance of including the private sector, with the majority of respondents indicating that the participation of the private sector in their projects has generated further added value.

### Communication strategy

A wide range of guiding documents, manuals and trainings were developed to guarantee an adequate level of awareness of the Programme opportunities, and application and implementation procedure. This included the Programme Manual, the Applicant's User Guide, Guidance on the correct use of the EU emblem in project communication, as well as concrete guiding documents for each call, among others. Beneficiaries generally agreed that the information they received about the Programme was adequate. The Programme administration utilised various channels to disseminate the results, including annual meetings and other events. These mechanisms not only provided insights into the outcomes of the projects and the Programme, but also enhanced the overall transparency. Overall, the Programme's communication strategy was effectively reaching its target audiences.

In terms of project support to communication, the Programme enhanced projects' communication through the establishment of **a mandatory communication WP**. In the Application Form, projects had to demonstrate how they would communicate the project activities and results, identifying the main communication actions, target audiences, deliverables, calendar and budget. Additionally, each project had to appoint a **communication manager** responsible for developing and implementing the communication plan and setting up processes to involve all partners in communication activities. The communication manager was also the person responsible for liaising with the JS for communication purposes.

Moreover, the **Programme has encouraged the beneficiaries of the projects to participate in different initiatives** such as podcasts, thematic activities or even international contests.

The management bodies of the Programme were instrumental in ensuring the efficient flow of information and its appropriate dissemination to all stakeholders. The Interreg Atlantic Area Communication Strategy clearly outlined the communication roles and responsibilities of the various authorities. This allocation of roles and responsibilities has been crucial to delineate concrete tasks and ensure efficient coordination across management bodies.

### Horizontal principles

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme Manual 2014-2020 under section *1.3 Horizontal principles* indicated to applicants and beneficiaries the need to promote the environmental assessment through the activities, outputs and results. It also explained the obligation to detail in the application form the concrete measures to be applied for the compliance with these principles.

Most projects have positively contributed towards the environmental horizontal principle given their intrinsic nature, most of them related to sustainable development. Apart from the content of the intervention, projects have also implemented key measures to enhance their contribution towards this horizontal principle. Generally, the environmental aspects were included both in the application and selection processes. Nonetheless, further guidance on the scope and content of how projects contribute to this horizontal principle could be developed in future programming periods, focusing on capacity building.

Throughout their implementation under the 2014-2020 Atlantic Programme, most projects ensured their commitment to gender equality and non-discrimination. They promoted gender balance and encouraged the participation of women in all aspects and activities, while aiming to protect inclusion against any form of discrimination. Overall, gender equality and non-discrimination were included both in the application and selection process. The information was reflected in the Progress and Final Reports, that included one section per principle so that the projects could define the evolution and achievements periodically.

Nonetheless, further guidance on the scope and content of how projects contribute to these horizontal principles could be developed in future programming periods, focusing on capacity building.

### Alignment with broader policy goals

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 is fully aligned with broader EU policy goals. By placing an important focus on stimulating innovation, fostering resource efficiency, enhancing resilience to risks, and protecting biodiversity and cultural assets, the Programme has made significant strides in improving economic performance, environmental sustainability, non-discrimination, and the overall quality of life for citizens throughout the Atlantic region. These efforts reflect a strategic alignment with EU goals, promoting balanced territorial development and addressing key challenges while reinforcing the region's resilience and cultural richness.

Both in programming phase and implementation and execution of projects, the relevance of the Atlantic Strategy for the Interreg Area Programme is high, with a solid and constant process in the alignment of both initiatives, with concrete examples of cooperation on governance and communication.

### Amplifying results outside Interreg

The Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 placed great emphasis on broadening the impact of valuable results beyond the Interreg “bubble” with a triple approach consisting of:

- **A mandatory WP on capitalisation** for all projects, which resulted in a greater emphasis on the capitalisation of results at the project level, ensuring that all projects contained concrete measures and strategies.
- **Specific call (Call 3) on the continuation and/or capitalisation of funded projects** through the first and second calls.
- **Inclusion of countries outside the AA.** Compared to the 2007-2013 period, in which only two partners from outside the AA participated, in the 2014-2020 period, the value rose to 31 partners. The inclusion of partners from outside the AA facilitates the adoption of the developed solutions in regions outside the AA, increasing the impact of the Programme outside the AA “bubble”, and also allowing partners from the AA region to benefit from new knowledge and ways of working from outside the area.

Although the primary focus of the WP and the additional call was not on scaling-up the results beyond the AA, both instruments have proven to be valuable for amplifying results outside the AA. Amplifying the valuable results of the Programme beyond the Interreg "bubble" requires a strategic approach to dissemination that transcends traditional boundaries, focusing on the capitalisation of results to regions outside the Interreg AA. This strategy is essential for ensuring that the Programme's results are not only recognised but also integrated into broader local, regional, national, and European policies and strategies. Through collaborative efforts and a unified dissemination framework, the Programme has maximised its impact, fostering widespread adoption and implementation of its best practices across various governance levels and geographic regions.

### Best practices

The in-depth case studies that were developed have enabled the identification of key best practices and successful factors common across projects. Particularly, the case studies have highlighted the role of **partnerships** in ensuring the success of projects. Several key features have been identified. Firstly, a balanced partnership in terms of typology of partners, including the private, public, and research sector, as well as other organisations such as third sector organisations has proved to foster implementation and impact of projects. This shows the relevance of building **quadruple-helix** partnerships.

Similarly, partners with a **high level of expertise** in relation to the topics of the projects, as well as counting with **experience in participating in Interreg Atlantic or other IPs**, have been identified as a key success factor. Additionally, a high level of commitment and interest from partners becomes critical to ensure effective implementation and achievement of results.

Finally, another success factor refers to the **alignment with broader EU policies** and initiatives that stand behind the project's relevance. Projects that have been successful in implementation and capitalising on their results showcase the fact that the alignment to key EU priorities and strategies has enhanced their project by supporting their relevance.

### Impact: the Atlantic Programme as a dynamic tool to stimulate and support policies

As showcased throughout the evaluation report, the Programme has demonstrated efficacy in transforming crucial inputs and outputs into substantial results across diverse categories, thereby yielding significant positive impacts in the AA. These outcomes encompass advancements in economic development, technological innovation, and regional cohesion, all of which contribute to enhancing the socio-economic landscape of the participating regions. Impact pertains to the significant, enduring, and **positive transformational change** that materialises within the territory as a consequence of the Programme's activities, generating crucial **transnational added value**. These transformations underscore the broader, positive influence on the region, indicating the ultimate success and sustainability of the Programme.

The Programme has had a fairly widespread implementation across all territories in the Atlantic cooperation area, although specific projects have targeted key areas such as rural, coastal, and tourism sectors. All four defined priorities were pertinent and have generated substantial outputs and results that ultimately have had a significant impact in the AA. The Programme has achieved a large number of outputs and results throughout the different Priority Axes and Specific Objectives.

Overall, **the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 fostered a more integrated and cooperative regional approach, leveraging transnational collaboration to achieve sustainable development and address common challenges effectively**.

### Sustainability of results

The in-depth analysis of the 71 funded projects has enabled the identification of numerous channels/ways/methods through which the projects have achieved the sustainability of their results. Some of these identified channels or paths to ensure the durability of the project's results after closure include: follow-up projects funded by both EU or national sources, continued activities led by the involved partners or the adoption of publicly available tools and methodologies developed as part of the projects illustrate the sustainability of results beyond the lifetime of projects.

While the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 depended on Cohesion Policy funds and thus required ongoing financial support for sustainability, the projects supported have demonstrated robust longevity and impact. The high continuation rate of project outputs, supported by long-term management solutions and collaborative networks, underscores their enduring value beyond the Programme's lifespan. Moreover, the transition of many projects to subsequent funding sources, such as the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027 and national and EU funds (Next Generation, Horizon Europe or Interreg Sudoe), reflects a proactive approach to maintaining momentum and expanding the reach of their outcomes. This holistic view affirms the Programme's role not only in achieving immediate results but also in laying a sustainable foundation for regional development and cooperation in the AA.

### Looking into future implementation periods

The Interreg Atlantic Area 2014-2020 Programme has been effective in generating a positive impact in the AA through transnational collaboration across countries. Based on the evaluation findings, there are three areas where to put the focus in future implementation periods: core future lines of action have emerged in order to enhance the impact of the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme:

- First, building on the growing presence of the private sector and the added value it provides in the consortia and ultimately in the impact of projects, a growing presence of the private sector is crucial to ensure the uptake of key innovations in the market and, ultimately, make them accessible to the society. Public-private partnerships have showed great potential and added value to facilitate the adoption of technologies by the territories.

- Secondly, the evaluation has identified key synergies with other Interreg programmes as well as with national and regional programmes supported by EU funding (for instance ERDF mainstream Operational Programmes). These synergies, which have already been explored, should be continued to do so as it will undoubtedly represent a powerful instrument in the future to enhance and capitalise key results of the Programme's supported projects into the national and sub-national context.

- Finally, the thematic analysis of the Programme's main results showcases the decisive support the Programme is providing to sustainable blue economy related projects. However, several other strategic lines of action should be maintained and reinforced in future programming periods. These include supporting SMEs and entrepreneurship by fostering innovation and competitiveness, as well as advancing digitalisation. Additionally, adapting to climate change and mitigating key territorial risks is essential in the current context and should be further strengthened, along with the promotion of renewable energy production.

## 4.2. Recommendations

### Recommendation 1:

The TA volume of resources and their distribution between the management bodies was sufficient to guarantee efficient management of the Programme and is fully compliant with the above-mentioned Regulation (EU) 1299/2013 and common practice with the rest of the Interreg funded Programmes. Based on the evaluation findings, **reinforcing the human resources of the JS** could be useful for delivering the required support to projects. In this context, the MA should remain as adaptable as possible to the evolving needs of the Programme to guarantee the effectiveness in the implementation of funds.

### Recommendation 2:

Acknowledging the improvements of SIGI v2 with reference to the previous system, further future efforts should be directed towards **reducing the platform's complexity and enhancing its user-friendliness**. Beneficiaries have recognised the positive developments of the platform but have also identified the need for improvements in this area to facilitate project implementation and reporting. In this way, the conducted online survey offers some concrete pointers where Programme beneficiaries have identified areas for improvement.

Particularly, beneficiaries have also identified some room for improvement in relation to **better organisation and management of documentation** within the platform. Therefore, SIGI could benefit from the inclusion of folders and a more organised platform to facilitate navigation. A final area for improvement includes the inclusion of an **autosave feature** within SIGI to ensure data is saved automatically and the process simplified.

### Recommendation 3:

The output indicators have provided a comprehensive understanding of the achievements of the Programme with a high level of accomplishment across all the indicators. However, some indicators have reached very large ratios of achievement due to the target set but also to the difficulty in quantifying them. Therefore, the **targets for some indicators could be more ambitious and greater guidance and detailed information on each indicator and its measurement should be provided** to ensure common understanding across beneficiaries and avoid room for interpretation.

### Recommendation 4:

The reporting system (progress reports and final reports) has been effective in showing the projects' progress, and also the main outputs and results achieved by the project over the implementation period. Nonetheless, reports seem to be quite complex and **subject to repetitive information**. For future programming periods, it could be useful to consolidate documentation to avoid repetitive entries and lighten the reporting process, **particularly with regards to horizontal sections** in the progress reports.

### Recommendation 5:

**Enhancement of synergies** with other relevant initiatives at the EU level but also national level. For instance, the Programme's collaboration with INTERACT and the AAP on Blue Synergies through a series of organised events aims to activate working relationships and achieve alignment between the Atlantic Maritime Strategy and the Programme. Continuing with such activities could be highly beneficial for future Interreg Atlantic Area Programmes.

Additionally, building on key collaboration with other IPs through the development of several jointly written online articles, it is highly recommended to continue and further increase cooperation with other IPs to enhance the capitalisation of results.

Ultimately, taking into consideration the role of national and regional actors, it would be advisable to foster collaboration with NAs in charge of national programmes such as ERDF with the aim of capitalising the results of the Programme and enhance the existing synergies.

**Recommendation 6:**

The overall communication of the Programme was enhanced in the 2014-2020 period compared to the 2007-2013 period with a mandatory WP on communication, a common Interreg branding and extensive guidelines and materials provided to beneficiaries. Additionally, it has proven effective in reaching the relevant target groups. Nonetheless, the consultations carried out as part of this evaluation have revealed that the **potential of social media is not yet fully exploited**. Therefore, in the future, it is strongly recommended to further exploit social media's communication potential.

**Recommendation 7:**

**Further guidance, clarity and specific training** are needed regarding the approaches that projects should follow to contribute to the various horizontal principles defined in the Programme. Although projects have positively contributed to these three horizontal principles, the manual and guidelines provided to beneficiaries lack sufficient detail on the types of activities and approaches to be followed.

**Recommendation 8:**

The Programme has devoted greater efforts towards the capitalisation of project results through the mandatory WP and the third call. Nonetheless, the potential of the call to effectively capitalise results was not fully exploited due to the fact that in many cases the call was used as an extension and continuation of the project activities. For the future, it is highly recommended to **place the focus of the call concretely on capitalisation activities**, with clear guidance on the exact concept of capitalisation, the objectives of the call and expected results, and the types of activities to be carried out.

**Recommendation 9:**

Following the previous recommendation, projects financed by the third call did not follow a specific reporting process. Since the third call for proposals was exclusively open to projects already funded through the first and second calls, these projects continued reporting on new activities within the existing system. This limits the available evidence specifically attributable to the third call for proposals. For the future, **it is highly recommended that capitalisation calls undergo a specific reporting process** in order to guarantee the collection of evidence, progress, and results of the projects.

**Recommendation 10:**

On the basis of the previous recommendations, it is highly recommended to not only develop a concrete reporting system for capitalisation calls but also a **tailored reporting approach**. This would entail creating concrete sections in the actual reports forms focused on the capitalisation objectives defined by INTERACT with the aim of being able to determine the activities carried out as well as the results achieved with regard to:

- Making the knowledge and results generated by projects more accessible, thus improving the transfer of knowledge;
- Obtaining additional results through benchmarking and detailed content analysis, building on existing knowledge and experience;

- Promoting the re-use and/or transfer of this knowledge and these results, to boost performance and delivery;
- Raising awareness and improving the communication of results in specific fields of regional policy.

A tailored approach would facilitate the assessment and traceability of the results and impact of capitalisation calls.

**Recommendation 11:**

Consider the development of a process leading to the joint preparation of a **roadmap for liaising activities between the Interreg Atlantic Programme and the AAP**. This roadmap for liaising activities should not be limited to specific exchanges but rather trying to build a strong, long-term collaborative arrangement and the facilitation of structured exchanges.

This roadmap could be structured around a limited number of SOs, which could eventually include aspects related to facilitate the exploitation, sharing and reuse of knowledge, experiences and project results by the INTERREG Atlantic Programme projects or to encourage the transfer of practices and results to other actors and territories and their integration into local, regional, national and European policies and strategies (mainstream).

# 5. Annexes

- Annex 1: Sample of representative results achieved by projects
- Annex 2: Bibliography consulted so far
- Annex 3: Topic guide interviews with Programme Authorities
- Annex 4: Topic guide interviews with National Authorities
- Annex 5: Topic guide interview with CPMR
- Annex 6: Topic guide interview with DG MARE
- Annex 7: Topic guide interview with the Audit Authority
- Annex 8: Topic guide interviews with Beneficiaries
- Annex 9: Online Survey questionnaire

# ANNEX 1: Sample of representative results achieved by projects. Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

Annex included as a separate document.

# ANNEX 2: Bibliography consulted

| Area | Document |
|---|---|
| Programme level | Interreg Atlantic Area Cooperation Programme |
| | Interreg Atlantic Area 2014-2020 Evaluation Plan |
| | Annual Implementation Report (2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022) |
| | Midterm evaluation of Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020 |
| | Calculation of result indicators' values |
| | Atlantic Area Publication Project's Results |
| | Atlantic Area in numbers |
| | SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19): Provisions related to the eligibility of expenditures associated to cancelled missions and other activities. Provided by the Managing Authority of the Programme. |
| | Interreg Atlantic Area - Euro Velo - Atlantic on Bike – forlengelse av prosjektet. (2022). Provided by the Managing Authority of the Programme. |
| | Written Agreement concerning the participation of organizations from countries located outside the eligible Area. Norway. Interreg. Provided by the Managing Authority of the Programme. |
| | Joint Meeting of Managing Authorities of ERDF and Interreg Programmes in the Atlantic Sea Basin. (2024). Provided by the Managing Authority of the Programme. |
| | Documents on the Covid-19 situation and the impact on Interreg Atlantic Area projects: proposal for the extension of the implementation period. Provided by the Managing Authority of the Programme. |
| | Interreg Atlantic Area 2021-2027 Programme |
| Strategic framework | Action Plan for a Maritime Strategy in the Atlantic Area European Commission Action Plan - Delivering smart, sustainable and inclusive growth |
| | Maritime Strategy Framework Directive |
| | Maritime Spatial Planning Directive |
| | Territorial Agenda EU 2020 |
| | Europe 2020 Strategy |
| Legal framework | Regulation (EU) Nº. 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Regional Development Fund and on specific provisions concerning the Investment for growth and jobs goal and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1080/2006 |
| | Regulation (EU) Nº.1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council on common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund |
| | Regulation (EU) Nº. 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal |
| | Delegated Regulation (EU) Nº 481/2014 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council with regard to specific rules on eligibility of expenditure for cooperation Programmes |
| | Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) n° 821/2014 laying down the rules for the application of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013. |
| | Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on specific provisions for the European territorial cooperation goal (Interreg) supported by the European Regional Development Fund and external financing instruments |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and of the Cohesion Fund |
| Communications | Guidelines for projects' communication |
| | Guidance on the correct use of the EU emblem on projects communication |
| | Brand design manual |
| Project level | Calls for proposals Interreg Atlantic Area 2014-2020 |
| | Interreg Atlantic Area 2014-2020 Project Results |
| | COVID-19: provisions related with projects implementation |
| | Progress reports and Final reports from the projects, downloaded for the SIGI Platform |

# ANNEX 3: Topic guide interviews with Programme Authorities

# Final Evaluation
# Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

# INTERVIEWS WITH PROGRAMME BODIES
## TOPIC GUIDE

**April 2024**

**Section 1. Calls for proposals and management**

1. Initially, the calls for proposal experienced some delay. Would you say that enough measures were taken to reduce the impact of the delay on the Programme?
2. What would you say have been the strengths and weaknesses of the procedure?
3. What has been done to improve the calls for proposals and selection procedures in order to achieve the best transnational projects to achieve the Programme's objectives?
4. How have environmental aspects been included during the projects' selection process? What about gender criteria?

**Section 2. Reporting system and communication strategy**

1. What have been the main strengths and weaknesses of the progress reporting system?
2. What key features of the monitoring enable to effectively quantify the execution of the Programme?
3. How would you rate the level of familiarity of the beneficiaries with the system of indicators?
4. What has been done to ensure that indicators effectively capture the environmental and gender aspects?
5. How have the achievements of the Programme been communicated to the stakeholders and disseminated among the beneficiaries?
6. What type of support was given to beneficiaries to enhance the communication of project's results?

**Section 3. Partnerships**

1. Have there been concrete measures at the Programme level to ensure the inclusion of the right partners (particularly political level partners and the private sector)?
2. Do you have an intuition on whether new types of partners were attracted? If so, how and why?
3. Taking into account the results of the 2014-2020 period, what types of relevant partners would be useful to engage with in future programming periods?

**Section 4. Main results achieved and impact on the territory**

1. Are you aware of any best practices within the projects from the 2014-2020 period in terms of impact, sustainability of results and typology of partners involved?
2. What were the main changes in terms of governance and integration policies that affected the development of the 2014-2020 Atlantic Programme?
3. How has the Programme enhanced cooperation with national funds? And with other European Funds such as the Interreg, Horizon Europe, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, or the Programme for the Environment and Climate Action?
4. What measures have been implemented to mitigate the consequences of challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the Brexit? Have there been additional measures to enhance the Programme's adaptability?
5. How have the results of the Programme contributed to achieve the objectives of the Atlantic Maritime Strategy Action Plan?

**Section 5. Sustainability and capitalisation of results**

1. In order to enhance the continuation of the outputs and/or results of the Programme, have there been any measures/initiatives to promote the sustainability of results? Could you provide examples of good practices?
2. Have there been specific measures to promote the capitalisation of outputs and/or results of Atlantic 2014-2020 projects? If so, which? Were they effective?
3. Overall, were the results obtained throughout the Programming period replicable to other regions of the Atlantic Area? And outside the Atlantic Area? If available, please provide examples.
4. Could you identify any measures/strategies to attain replicability of results (*in relation to potential mechanisms, actors involved, etc.*)?

**Section 6. Post-27**

1. Taking into account the lessons learned from the 2014-2020 programming period, could you identify key areas for improvement and their inclusion into future programming periods to ensure development and cohesion of the Atlantic Area? (*Eg: partnership, priorities, strategy, dissemination, etc.*)

# ANNEX 4: Topic guide interviews with National Authorities

# Final Evaluation
# Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

# INTERVIEWS WITH NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

## TOPIC GUIDE

**May 2024**

**Section 1. Efficiency and Effectiveness of Programme procedures**

1. In your opinion, what has been the performance of the Programme decision-making processes involving your country and the different Programme bodies? Any success factors worth noting or constraints?
2. After the amendments of SIGI and the creation of SIGI v.2, is this system efficient and adequate for the needs of the Programme? Any strengths and weaknesses?
3. Taking into consideration the different external factors affecting the Programme (such as Covid-19, Brexit, SIGI platform...), what would you consider the main lessons learned and good practices in terms of Programme management are?
4. Do you consider that the human resources of the MA, JS and particularly the national authorities are adequate to fulfil their obligations? Any concrete suggestions for the future (e.g.: additional staff, training on certain areas, etc.)?

**Section 2. Calls for proposals**

1. The timeline of the proposals concentrated the first two calls in the first part of the programming period and a third call in 2021 focusing on capitalisation of the projects funded in the first two calls. Was this procedure efficient? Any lessons learned you would like to discuss?
2. What would you say have been the strengths and weaknesses of the calls for proposals procedure?

**Section 3. Main results achieved and impact in the territory**

1. Please indicate some concrete examples of projects results that in your opinion have had some positive impact in general at regional level and, in particular, in your country. And in terms of replicability of those results, could you identify any best practice coming from other key projects?
2. How do you think the Programme has contributed to the governance and economic development of the Atlantic Area? Do you have any specific examples in mind?
3. Amplifying results outside of the Interreg 'bubble' with an emphasis on collaboration with other actors and initiatives has been a priority of the Programme. Are you aware of any concrete measure implemented to support this, such as transfer of practices and results to other actors and territories for their integration into local, regional or national policies or regulation?

**Section 4. Post-27 period**

1. Taking into account the lessons learned from the 2014-2020 programming period, could you identify key areas for improvement and their inclusion into future programming periods to ensure development and cohesion of the Atlantic Area? (*Eg: partnership, priorities, strategy, dissemination, etc.*) What key areas and/or sectors would you consider that should be added, continue to be included and/or reinforced in future programming periods to enhance the development and cohesion of the Atlantic Area?
2. Based on your experience in the implementation of the 2014-2020 period, what types of relevant partners would be convenient to enlarge the Programme's impact in future programming periods?

# ANNEX 5: Topic guide interview with CPMR

# Final Evaluation
# Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

# INTERVIEWS WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS
## TOPIC GUIDE

**May 2024**

**Questionnaire:**

1. Can you describe the interaction between the Interreg Programme and the Atlantic Commission of the CPMR? Has it evolved throughout time? What do think should be the next steps?

2. What areas and/or sectors could be further enhanced through the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027 and beyond to ensure larger contributions towards a sustainable development of the Atlantic Facade?

3. Looking back at the Interreg Atlantic Programme 2014-2020, do you consider that it has effectively contributed to the achievement of the objectives of the Atlantic Maritime Strategy Action Plan? If yes, how?

4. Could you identify key areas for improvement and their inclusion into future programming periods to ensure development and cohesion of the Atlantic Area? (*Eg: priorities, strategy, dissemination, etc.*) What key thematic areas and/or sectors would you consider that should be added, continue to be included and/or reinforced in future programming periods to enhance the development and cohesion of the Atlantic Area?

5. Based on your experience, what types of relevant partners would be convenient to enlarge the Programme's impact in future programming periods? What role do you continue to envisage for regional/ local authorities in the post-27 programming period?

# ANNEX 6: Topic guide interview with DG MARE

# Final Evaluation
# Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

# INTERVIEWS WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

## TOPIC GUIDE

**May 2024**

**Questionnaire:**

- Can you describe the interaction between the Interreg Programme and the Atlantic Action Plan decision making bodies? Has it evolved throughout time? What do think should be the next steps?

- Looking back at the Interreg Atlantic Programme 2014-2020, do you consider that it has effectively contributed to the achievement of the objectives of the Atlantic Maritime Strategy Action Plan? If so, how?

- What areas and/or sectors could be further enhanced through the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027 and beyond to ensure larger contributions towards the Atlantic Maritime Strategy Action Plan?

- Finally, with respect to BREXIT, in both the Programme and the Action Plan the United Kingdom is no longer present, how would you rate the impact of the country's departure?

# ANNEX 7: Topic guide interview with the Audit Authority

# Final Evaluation
# Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

# INTERVIEWS WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS
## TOPIC GUIDE

**May 2024**

**Questionnaire:**

1. Can you briefly describe the role of the Audit Authority within Interreg Atlantic Area Programme?

2. Do you consider that the audit certification process of expenses is efficient (e.g. role of first level controllers, etc.)? Any weaknesses and strengths you have identified throughout the implementation of the 2014-2020 Programme?

3. Acknowledging the general framework contained in the EU regulations fully applicable to the Programme, would you consider that there is room for making the certification processes more agile?

4. How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact the audit certification process? What measures have been adopted to overcome these challenges? What impact (if any) did Brexit have on the Programme?

# ANNEX 8: Topic guide interviews with Beneficiaries

# Final Evaluation
# Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2014-2020

# INTERVIEWS WITH BENEFICIARIES
## TOPIC GUIDE

**May 2024**

**Overall Performance**

1. Please provide a brief overview of the project (objectives, partnership, thematic areas, etc.) and your role as Lead partner.
2. What have been the main results and added value of your project?

**Partnership**

1. In relation to the partnership, do you consider it a success? Was there enough presence of policy-relevant partners? And from the private sector?
2. Are there any features of the partnership you would have changed/done differently?

**Implementation and main results**

1. Did the project achieve its expected and planned results?
2. What would you consider the main strengths and weaknesses of the project have been?
3. What would be the key 'innovative' aspects of what the project has achieved?
4. Could you identify any success factors and key lessons learned from the implementation of your project?
5. What impact did the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit have on the implementation and consecution of results?
6. Did the project positively contribute towards the three horizontal principles: (i) sustainability, (ii) non-discrimination and (iii) gender equality? If yes, how?

**Impact and sustainability of results**

1. Are the results of the project currently been used? And are those results continuing over time?
2. What (if any) sustainability/perdurability measures or procedures have been implemented?
3. Could you identify any enabling factors towards the sustainability and capitalisation of project results?
4. Could you identify the main impacts your project has had specifically on the territory?

# ANNEX 9: Online Survey questionnaire

## INTRODUCTION

Dear Beneficiary,

This electronic survey is launched in the framework of the final evaluation of the Atlantic Area Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 that is currently being undertaken by the consulting company Ecorys.

This survey represents a very important input for the Programme's evaluation, and it will allow us to consult all beneficiaries of the Programme and learn about their experience in order to continuously improve the design and implementation of the Programme.

The questionnaire is structured around 7 sections:

1. Calls for proposals
2. Selection procedure
3. Implementation and key results
4. Results of your project, lessons learned and suggestions
5. System of indicators
6. Reporting system
7. Communication

Please note:

- The survey will only take approximately **15-20 minutes** of your time.
- We assure you that any information you provide will be handled in strict accordance by data protection regulations and will only be made available in an aggregated and anonymous form.
- You can answer using any of the official Programme languages.
- If you participate in more than one project, please submit one survey per project.

The established deadline for submission is May 3rd. Should you require any assistance or further information, please contact Ms. Lucía Nájera (lucia.najera@ecorys.com) or Ms. Carmen Hoya (carmen.hoya@ecorys.com) at Ecorys: Tel: +34 91 5980851

On behalf of the Managing Authority of the Interreg Atlantic Area, we thank you very much in advance for your time and effort.

### *Identification*

1. **Please select your country** *(select only one)*

1) France
2) Ireland
3) Spain
4) Portugal
5) United Kingdom
6) Other (please specify)

**2. Please indicate the NUTS3 region where your organisation is based:** *(select only one)*

| France | Ireland | Spain | Portugal | United Kingdom |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Calvados | Border | A Coruña | Alto Minho | West Cumbria |
| Charente | West | Álava | Cávado | East Cumbria |
| Charente-Maritime | Mid-West | Asturias | Ave | Warrington |
| Corrèze | South-East | Vizcaya | Área Metropolitana do Porto | Cheshire East |
| Creuse | South-West | Cantabria | Alto Tamega | Cheshire West and Chester |
| Cotes-D´Armor | Dublin | Cádiz | Tamega e Sousa | Manchester |
| Deux-Sèvres | Mid-East | El Hierro | Douro | Greater Manchester South West |
| Dordogne | Midland | Fuerteventura | Terras de Trás-os-Montes | Greater Manchester South East |
| Eure | | Guipúzcoa | Oeste | Greater Manchester North West |
| Finistère | | Gran Canaria | Região de Aveiro | Greater Manchester North East |
| Gironde | | Huelva | Região de Coimbra | Blackburn with Darwen |
| Haute-Vienne | | La Gomera | Região de Leiria | Blackpool |
| Ille-et-Vilane | | La Palma | Viseu Dao Lafoes | Lancaster and Wyre |
| Landes | | La Rioja | Beira Baixa | Mid Lancashire |
| Loire-Atlantique | | Lanzarote | Médio Tejo | East Lancashire |
| Lot-et-Garonne | | Lugo | Beiras e Serra da Estrela | Chorley and West Lancashire |
| Maine-et-Loire | | Navarra | Área Metropolitana de Lisboa | East Merseyside |
| Manche | | Ourense | Alentejo Litoral | Liverpool |
| Mayenne | | Pontevedra | Baixo Alentejo | Sefton |
| Morbihan | | Sevilla | Lezíria do Tejo | Wirral |
| Orne | | Tenerife | Alto Alentejo | City of Bristol |
| Pyrénées-Atlantiques | | Vizcaya | Alentejo Central | Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire |
| Sarthe | | | Região Autónoma dos Açores | Gloucestershire |
| Seine-Maritime | | | Região Autónoma da Madeira | Swindon |
| Vendée | | | | Wiltshire CC |
| Vienne | | | | Somerset |
| | | | | Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole |
| | | | | Dorset |
| | | | | Cornwall and Isles of Scilly |
| | | | | Plymouth |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Torbay |
| | | | | Devon CC |
| | | | | Isle of Anglesey |
| | | | | Gwynedd |
| | | | | Conwy and Denbigshire |
| | | | | South West Wales |
| | | | | Central Valleys |
| | | | | Gwent Valleys |
| | | | | Bridgend and Neath Port Talbot |
| | | | | Swansea |
| | | | | Monmouthshire and Newport |
| | | | | Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan |
| | | | | Flintshire and Wrexham |
| | | | | Powys |
| | | | | Scottish Borders |
| | | | | Dumfries & Galloway |
| | | | | East Ayrshire and North Ayrshire mainland |
| | | | | South Ayrshire |
| | | | | South Lanarkshire |
| | | | | Caithness & Sutherland and Ross & Cromarty |
| | | | | Inverness & Nairn and Moray, Badenoch & Strathspey |
| | | | | Lochaber, Skye & Lochalsh, Arran & Cumbrae and Argyll & Bute |
| | | | | Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles) |
| | | | | Orkney Islands |
| | | | | Shetland Islands |
| | | | | Belfast |
| | | | | Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon |
| | | | | Newry, Mourne and Down |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Ards and North Down |
| | | | | Derry City and Strabane |
| | | | | Mid Ulster |
| | | | | Causeway Coast and Glens |
| | | | | Antrim and Newtownabbey |
| | | | | Lisburn and Castlereagh |
| | | | | Mid and East Antrim |
| | | | | Fermanagh and Omagh |

*Other (please specify)*

**3. Are you Lead partner or partner?** *(select only one)*

1) Lead Partner
2) Partner

**4. What type of entity are you?** *(select only one)*

A. National, regional, or local public body;

B. Education and research institution;

C. Not-for-profit organisation;

D. Civil society and third sector organisation;

E. Public entreprise ;

F. Public-private organisation ;

G. Private company;

H. Business network and association;

I. International, transnational and cross-border organisation.

**5. To which call for proposals does your project belong?**

1) First Call
2) Second Call
3) Third Call

**6. Which of the objectives does your project belong to?** *(select only one)*

- Objective 1.1 Enhancing innovation capacity through cooperation to foster competitiveness
- Objective 1.2 Strengthening the transfer of innovation results to facilitate the emergence of new products, services and processes.
- Objective 2.1 Fostering renewable energies and energy efficiency
- Objective 2.2 Fostering green growth, eco-innovation and environmental efficiency
- Objective 3.1 Strengthening risk management systems
- Objective 4.1 Improving the protection of biodiversity and enhancing ecosystems' services
- Objective 4.2 Enhancing natural and cultural assets to stimulate economic development

**7. How did you get to know about the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme?**
*(multiple choice)*

- Conference or event
- Contacted by a partner
- Email
- News article
- Previous participation in the Atlantic Programme
- Programme website
- Regional authorities
- Social media

*Other (please specify)*

**8. Have you previously participated in the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme?** *(select only one)*

Yes No

## 1. ***Calls for proposals***

**9. Did the Programme's priorities and the calls for proposals provide an answer to your needs and expectations as a potential beneficiary?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

## 2. ***Selection procedure***

**10. How would you rate the following aspects of the application process**?

| | Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Administrative burden | | | | |
| Transparency | | | | |
| Formal requirements | | | | |
| Timing | | | | |
| Efficiency of the procedure | | | | |

**11. Do you believe that gender equality considerations were sufficiently taken into account in the selection procedure?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

*Please elaborate on your previous response (open)*

**12. Do you believe that environmental aspects were sufficiently taken into account in the selection procedure?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

*Please elaborate on your previous response (open)*

## 3. ***Implementation and key results***

**13. Are you satisfied with the support that you received from the Programme's authorities during the implementation of your project?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No N/A

**14. How has your project contributed to the overall objectives of the Programme?**

*Open question*

**15. For each of the following aspects, please assess whether and to what extent they have helped with the successful implementation of your project:** *(select only one per row)*

| | Yes | Mostly | Partially | No |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bureaucratic and administrative procedures | | | | |
| Good availability of the Programme's tools and requirements | | | | |
| Good support, follow-up and monitoring by the Programme´s authorities | | | | |
| Budget amount | | | | |
| Budget composition and distribution | | | | |
| Requirements related to 1st level control | | | | |
| Certification process | | | | |
| Definition of Programme priorities | | | | |
| Organisation of the calls for proposals | | | | |
| Good cooperation intensity | | | | |
| Balanced implication of the project partners | | | | |
| The composition of the partnership | | | | |
| The number of partners | | | | |
| The experience (in EU funds and/or Interreg Atlantic Area) and knowledge of partners | | | | |
| Others (please specify) | | | | |

**16. For each of the following aspects, please assess whether and to which extent they have hindered the performance of your project:** *(select only one per row)*

| | Yes | Mostly | Partially | No |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bureaucratic and administrative procedures | | | | |
| Scarce availability of the Programme's tools and requirements | | | | |
| Scarce support, follow-up and monitoring by the Programme´s authorities | | | | |
| Budget amount | | | | |
| Budget composition and distribution | | | | |
| Requirements related to 1st level control | | | | |
| Certification process | | | | |
| Definition of Programme priorities | | | | |
| Organisation of the calls for proposals | | | | |
| Scarce cooperation intensity | | | | |
| Difficulties in working in a network | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unbalanced implication of the project partners | | | | |
| The composition of the partnership | | | | |
| The number of partners: too large | | | | |
| The number of partners: too limited | | | | |
| Lack of experience (in EU funds and/or Interreg Atlantic Area) and knowledge of partners | | | | |
| Others (please specify) | | | | |

**17. Has the composition of your partnership been balanced in terms of:** *(select only one per row)*

| | Yes | Mostly | Partially | No |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Geographical coverage | | | | |
| Typologies of partners | | | | |
| Number of partners | | | | |

*Would you improve anything? (open)*

**18. Do you think that the participation of the private sector in your project has generated further added value?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

*Please comment (open)*

**19. Did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the development of your project?** *(select only one)*

Very much Rather A little Not at all

*Please elaborate on your previous answer (open)*

**20. Did BREXIT affect the development of your project?** *(select only one)*

Very much Rather A little Not at all

*Please elaborate on your previous answer (open)*

## 4. ***Results of your project, lessons learned and suggestions***

**21. Would you consider that the project achieved its intended objectives?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

**22. How would you rate the impact of the project on the regional development of the targeted area?** *(select only one)*

- Strong positive impact
- Moderate positive impact
- Mixed impact

- Limited impact
- Negative impact

**23. Could you specify the typology of outcomes and/or results that your project has produced from the following list?** *(multiple choice)*

Creation of a new service
Enhancement of an existing service
Creation of regional network(s)
Creation of local network(s)
Support of SMEs
New transformative solution created
New methods and/or tools developed
Action plan or strategy developed
Introduction of pilot actions

**24. From the typology indicated above, could you provide one concrete example of a tangible outcome/result that your project has generated and has positively impacted in the territory? (Please give a brief description)**

*Open ended*

**25. Taking into consideration the obtained results, could the results derived from your project be applied to other areas or regions within the Atlantic Area?** *(select only one)*

- Yes
- With modifications
- No

**26. Could the results obtained in your project be translated into other areas or territories outside the Atlantic regions?** *(select only one)*

- Yes
- With modifications
- No

**27. Do you consider that there is a need for some infrastructure projects to be implemented in transnational cooperation?** *(select only one)*

Yes No

*If "yes", please elaborate (open)*

**28. Have the outputs and/or results of the project continued over time?** *(select only one)*

Yes No

*If "yes", please specify how (open)*

**29. What sustainability measures were taken to ensure the lasting impact of the project on regional development?**

*Open question*

**30. Can you identify any best practice to ensure the sustainability and long-term impacts of Interreg Atlantic Area projects?**

*Open question*

**31. Has the project continued its implementation through public funding?** *(select only one)*

Yes No

***31.a If "yes", through which type of funding?*** *(select only one)*

- Atlantic 2021-2027 Programme
- National funds
- Other EU funds

***31.b If "other EU funds", please specify***

*Open ended*

**32. Did your project contain concrete measures for the capitalisation of results?**

*Open ended*

**33. Are there actions that you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?**

*Open ended*

**34. What could be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country?**

*Open ended*

**35. Has the project opened new areas of development that had not been considered before?** *(select only one)*

Yes No

*If "yes", which ones? (open)*

**36. Could the results obtained in the project be used in the private sector?** *(select only one)*

Yes No Don't Know

**37. What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg?**

*Open ended*

## *5. System of indicators*

**38. Did the indicators accurately reflect the intended goals and objectives of the project?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

**39. Did the indicators effectively measure the outcomes/results of the project?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

**40. Do you consider that the available environmental indicators were adequate/enough to measure sustainability?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

*Please elaborate and provide suggestions*

**41. Do you consider that the available indicators were adequate/enough to measure gender equality?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

*Please elaborate and provide suggestions*

## *6. Reporting system*

**42. How would you rate the following features of the SIGI v2. (IT platform)?** *(select only one per row)*

| | Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interface and accessibility | | | | |
| Operability and user experience | | | | |
| Management of documented data | | | | |
| Support throughout the project life cycle | | | | |
| Measurement of project results and outputs | | | | |
| Other (please specify) | | | | |

**43. How would you rate the SIGI v2. Platform?** *(select only one)*

Excellent Good Fair Poor

**44. Could you identify any characteristic of the SIGI v2. that could be improved in order to obtain better results?**

*Open question*

## *7. Communication*

**45. Do you consider that the Programme has effectively supported the communication and diffusion of your project?** *(select only one)*

Yes Mostly Partially No

*If yes, please indicate what has been the most effective support.*

**46. How would you rate the information received about the activities and achievements of the Programme?** *(select only one)*

Excellent Good Fair Poor

**47. What, if anything, could have been done to improve the communication strategy of the Programme? Please provide suggestions (e.g.: additional communication channels or methods)**

*Open question*

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**As part of the evaluation that is currently being carried out, we will conduct in depth case studies of some projects. If your project is proposed as a case study, would you be willing to be included and contacted in this regard?**

*Yes No*

Thank you so much for the time devoted to the survey and your useful insights.