

Interreg
Atlantic Area



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Interreg Atlantic Area

Post-2027 Consultation of Stakeholders and Citizens

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**Interreg Atlantic Area Programme 2021-2027
Managing Authority and Joint Secretariat**



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1 INTRODUCTION: background and main objectives

The Managing Authority (MA) of the Interreg Atlantic Area was required to contribute to the broad consultation implemented by the European Commission’s Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG Regio).

According to DG Regio, the main goal is to foster an open debate about developments and changes to shape the **future of cooperation in the following programming period**. The European Commission (EC) recalls that only by **bringing policy instruments closer to people and places** would it be possible to present a convincing narrative for strong territorial cooperation in the post-2027 and call for consultations to involve citizens. Within this broad initiative from DG Regio involving all Interreg programmes, the Interreg Atlantic Area is engaged in shaping the future of Cohesion Policy by listening to and considering different views not only from stakeholders but also from citizens on how to improve the lives of those living and working in the Atlantic Region.

Considering the opportunity to reach a privileged audience, the Programme will take advantage of the results of this consultation to discuss the basis of the future Programme.

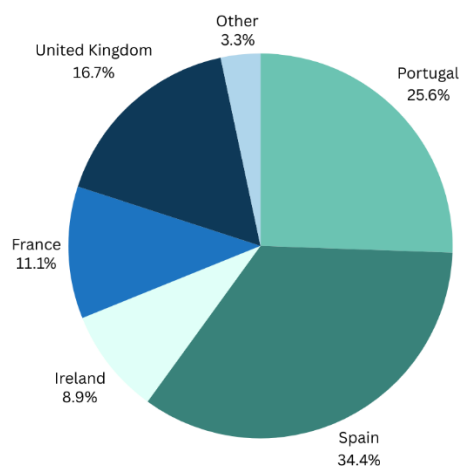
The present document follows the structure proposed by DG Regio,¹ starting with the systematisation of consultation of the stakeholders, continuing with a brief presentation of the consultation of citizens, and concluding with the recommendations for post-2027.²

2 CONSULTATION OF STAKEHOLDERS

2.1 Main stakeholders consulted

The consultation was conducted based on the Programme database, comprised of stakeholders spread through the Atlantic (see Figure 1). Through the dedicated online survey, **90 answers** were gathered.

Figure 1 - Answers by country (%)



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Survey.

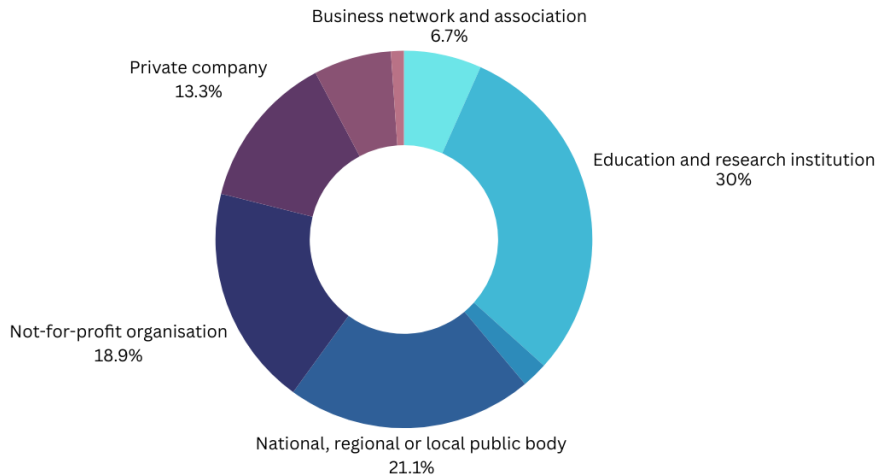
From these 90 responses, the more representative group was “Education and research institutions” (30.0%), followed by “National, regional or local public bodies” (21.1%). The main shortcoming was the lack of responses from “Civil society and third sector organisations.” Even so, 18.9% of answers come from “Not-for-

¹ European Commission [DG Regio] (2023), *Guide for Shaping Together the Future Interreg. Interreg Post-2027*, henceforth EC Toolkit.

² Online surveys, the hackathon design, and other documents may be provided upon request.

profit organizations” frequently devoted to working with civil society and third-sector organisations. It is interesting to acknowledge that private companies actively contributed to the survey, corresponding to 13.3% of the total answers.

Figure 2 - Answers by entity type (%)



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Survey

In addition to the online survey, a set of **13 interviews** were addressed to the following relevant stakeholders:

Atlantic Arc Commission, Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions; *Association Climatologique de la Moyenne-Garonne et du Sud-Ouest*; *Conseil départemental des Pyrénées-Atlantiques*; *Préfecture de la région Pays de la Loire* (France)

European Regions Network for the Application of Communications Technology; National University of Ireland Galway; Northern & Western Regional Authority (Ireland)

Câmara Municipal de Santo Tirso; *Instituto Superior Técnico - Universidade de Lisboa*; *Agência para o Desenvolvimento e Coesão, I.P.* (Portugal)

Centro Tecnológico del Mar - Fundación CETMAR; *Dirección General de Fondos, Ministerio de Hacienda*; *Universidad de Cantabria* (Spain)

2.2 Methods of consultation

We carried out the stakeholders’ consultation in conjunction with an *ex-post* evaluation of the Programme 2014-2020, taking advantage of the fact that this assessment was assigned to an external consultant (ECORYS) who knows our governance model and stakeholders very well.

The MA negotiated with the consultant to introduce the main questions suggested by the EC Toolkit, creating synergies and preparing a tailored online survey for the Interreg Atlantic Area to gather stakeholders’ views and experiences with the Programme.

The **online questionnaire** was built with two types of questions. Closed-ended questions were designed to allow respondents to express their opinions within a ranked scale of responses on a predetermined set of options to facilitate 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 April 16, 2024. The Joint Secretariat (JS) launched it to the Programme beneficiaries, ensuring compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The JS also sent two kind reminders during the duration of the questionnaire, which was closed on May 10, 2024.

The consultation with stakeholders was completed with **interviews** conducted by the external evaluation team throughout May and June 2024. These interviews mainly aimed to gain further relevant insights from key stakeholders. Interviews were held with the Executive Secretary of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) Atlantic Arc Commission and the national or regional authorities represented in the Programme. In addition, the evaluation team conducted interviews with project beneficiaries from eight selected case studies.

Artificial Intelligence tools (ChatGPT) were used to support the analysis of the open answers.

2.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

In this section, a systematisation of the results from the online survey and the interviews are gathered by question.

1. *What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with other regions from the eligible area of the Programme?*

For a transnational Interreg Programme, the first question from the EC Toolkit³ was not adequate since the focus was related to the border. The question was adapted for the online survey and interviews. A SWOT analysis was conducted based on the open answers, and its systematisation is provided below.

Table 1 – SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Enhanced funding opportunities for diverse areas such as sustainable aquaculture, hydrogen technologies, and marine biotechnology.</p> <p>Strong emphasis on fostering cooperation, knowledge-sharing, and networking among countries, often leading to innovation and shared solutions.</p> <p>Support for cutting-edge research like remote sensing, green technologies, and seismic resilience.</p> <p>Flexible thematic: the Programme addresses varied societal challenges, from climate change to marine renewable energy and digital transformation and caters to a wide array of stakeholders.</p> <p>Capacity building with the promotion of webinars, training, and in-person networking to</p>	<p>Excessive Bureaucracy</p> <p>Limited Accessibility: high costs for some stakeholders (e.g., SMEs) and difficulties navigating funding models or co-funding requirements.</p> <p>Brexit Impact: the exclusion of the UK and associated challenges in working with UK partners limit collaboration opportunities.</p> <p>Complexity of Requirements: varied requirements across programmes, and "reinventing the wheel" in administrative processes.</p> <p>Insufficient focus on smaller, more specific projects and challenges in engaging underrepresented regions and stakeholders.</p>

³ "Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?", EC Toolkit.

strengthen participant expertise and build stronger consortia.	
Opportunities	Threats
<p>Digital and Technological Integration: expansion of initiatives like Digital Twin and using sensors, drones, and remote sensing for environmental and territorial management.</p> <p>Facilitating SME and industry participation through simplified funding models and targeted support.</p> <p>Emphasis on emerging societal needs, green technologies, and climate resilience opens new project opportunities.</p> <p>Post-COVID reconnection: increased demand for face-to-face networking, capacity-building workshops, and transnational seminars enhances stakeholder cooperation.</p>	<p>Funding delays: Prolonged payment timelines strain stakeholders, particularly SMEs.</p> <p>Administrative burden and resistance to change: bureaucratic inertia and slow adoption of recommendations (e.g., harmonization of requirements, administrative simplifications) could slow program improvements.</p> <p>Exclusion of non-EU partners: Brexit and geographic restrictions hinder collaboration with potential centres of excellence and partners outside the EU.</p> <p>Lack of long-term support: limited resources for sustaining project outcomes after initial implementation threaten long-term impact.</p>

2. Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in the Interreg Atlantic Area?

The contribution for question 2, proposed in the EC Toolkit, was elaborated based on the analysis of the answers provided through the online survey without asking this question explicitly but instead doing qualitative analysis of all the answers covering several dimensions of the policy tool, named related to the identification of concrete contributions on how to maximise the funding impact of the policy instrument in the Atlantic Region for the benefit of its citizens. The **sustainable blue economy** emerges as the most representative strategic area for territorial cooperation in our territories, integrating inclusive economic growth, innovation and environmental protection in key areas such as:

- marine renewable energy (tidal stream power, open-sea test sites, hydrogen production, distribution, and safety protocols);
- sustainable management of marine resources (fisheries, aquaculture, biotechnology);
- resilience to climate change through nature-based solutions, aligned with the Nature Restoration Law, highlighted as crucial for protecting coastal areas and marine biodiversity, platforms to address extreme events (e.g., storms, flooding), advanced technologies like sensors, e.g., to address pollution and environmental risks, digital twins (**Digital Twin of the Interreg Atlantic Area**), and spatial planning (e.g., integration with the Copernicus Programme through a "**Regional Copernicus**" approach);
- transnational and cross-border collaboration for knowledge-sharing and innovation.

In the figure below, the relative importance attributed by respondents to the several topics is represented through the word cloud based on their input. The larger and bolder the word, the more frequently it was emphasized or deemed necessary.

Figure 3 – Word Cloud - Biggest potential for the Interreg Atlantic Area



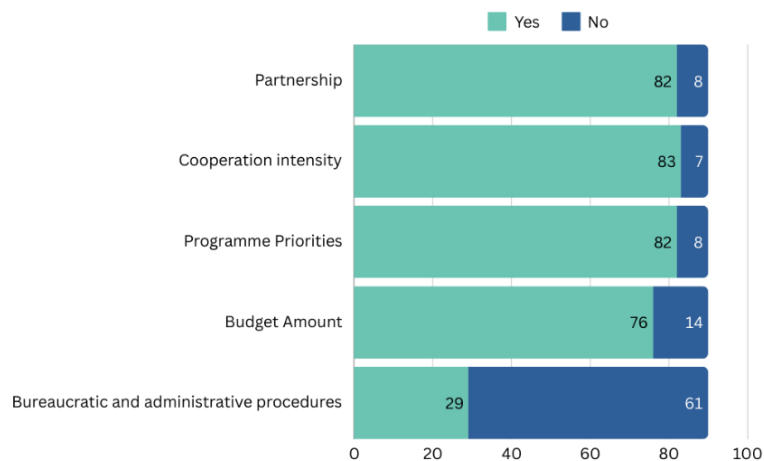
Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Survey.

From the qualitative analysis of the open-answers and also based on one of the questions of our dedicated survey, "Can you identify any best practice to ensure the sustainability and long-term impacts of Interreg Atlantic Area projects?", it was also possible to identify the highest-ranked practices stakeholders named as critical to achieving sustainability and long-term impact: stakeholder engagement, SMART goals,⁴ training and knowledge transfer, and capitalisation of results.

3. What currently works well and should be preserved or reinforced?

Contributions for this question and the following question 4 on what does not work well and should be improved were jointly gathered. A set of options was offered to respondents. The data below provides a systematisation of the contributions regarding the online survey.

Figure 4 – What currently works well in this Cooperation Programme and should be preserved?

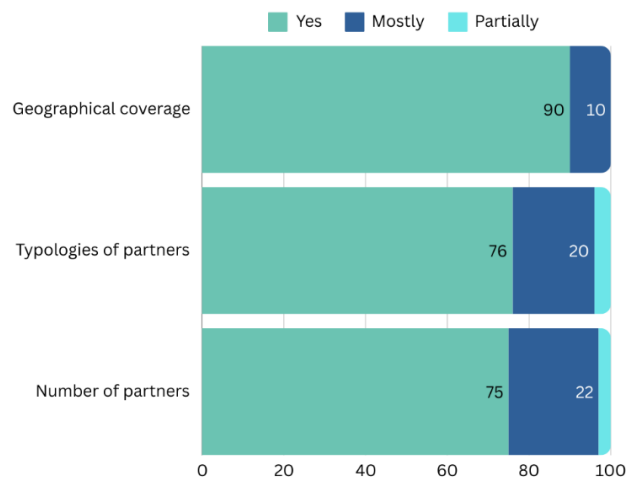


Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Survey.

Partnerships and **cooperation intensity** were highly recognized as dimensions of the Programme that have effectively worked well. The analysis of the answers shows overall satisfaction with projects' partnerships in terms of geographical coverage, typology of partners, and the number of partners, with over 80% of stakeholders agreeing or mostly agreeing on their effectiveness across all three categories (see Figure 5).

⁴ "SMART" stands for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

Figure 5 – How well does the partnership work? (%)



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Survey.

Despite the general satisfaction, stakeholders provided suggestions regarding partnerships. Notably, the most regularly mentioned area for reinforcement was the need for greater **involvement of the private sector and small and medium enterprises (SMEs)**. Many respondents consider these partners could bring practical insights and innovation, which were sometimes lacking due to an overrepresentation of academic institutions. Most respondents (68.5%) believe **the private sector brings added value, and their presence should be kept and even reinforced. More diversity in partnerships**, including other less common participants as environmental economists and third-sector organizations, is also mentioned. Higher diversity will enrich the partnership and enhance project outcomes. These contributions are aligned with the importance of having **quadruple-helix partnerships**.

The open answers to the survey and the interviews show the Programme is highly recognized for its role as a **facilitator** in the sense of promoting cooperation between relevant partners, bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders, and **acting as a bridge between territorial needs** that can support the harmonisation of procedures in different regions, promoting the adoption of best practices learned together.

The **policy priorities** are strongly signalled as working well and should be kept (91.1% of the answers). The analysis of the answers on this dimension showcases the recognition of the **decisive support the Programme provides to a sustainable blue economy** and its role as a **promoter of novelty** and a **catalyst for positive transformation in the Atlantic**. Several other strategic lines of action were highlighted for maintenance and reinforcement in future programming periods. These include **supporting SMEs and entrepreneurship** by fostering innovation and competitiveness and **advancing digitalisation**. Additionally, **adapting to climate change** and **mitigating key territorial risks** emerge as essential and should be further strengthened, along with promoting **renewable energy production**.

4. *What currently does not work well and should be improved?*

Stakeholders firmly identified the **bureaucratic and administrative procedures** as a shortcoming, considering there is an excessive administrative burden (see Figure 3 above). The analysis of open answers and interviews shows stakeholders want a more operational instrument by reducing bureaucracy, streamlining processes, simplifying reporting, and having common funding regulations between countries. On this last point, several contributions highlighted that member states' adaptations to EU regulations create additional pressure on the management of projects.

5. *What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?*

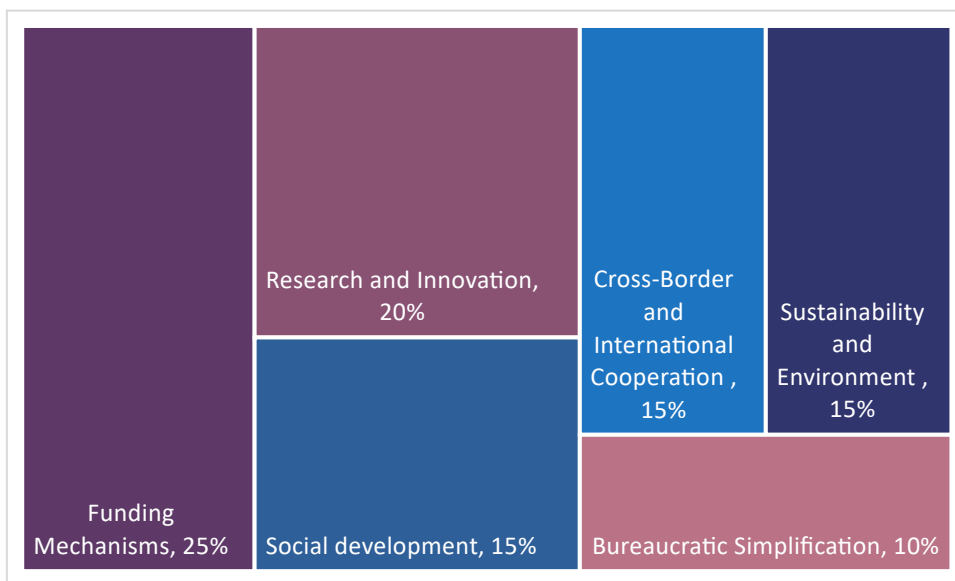
Regarding this question, the central element identified by stakeholders is, again, the **bureaucracy**. The associated burden is pointed out as being responsible for the lack of involvement of civil society, as well as limiting the engagement of private companies, namely ‘start-ups’.

The open answers also mention the request for direct funding for start-ups, more funding for exploratory activities with uncertainty about the outcome, less prescriptive, and more willingness to accept failure.

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

For this question, the survey adopted an open format for the answers. Based on the analysis of contributions, the following main topics were identified.

Figure 6 – Actions that you would like to do under Interreg but cannot



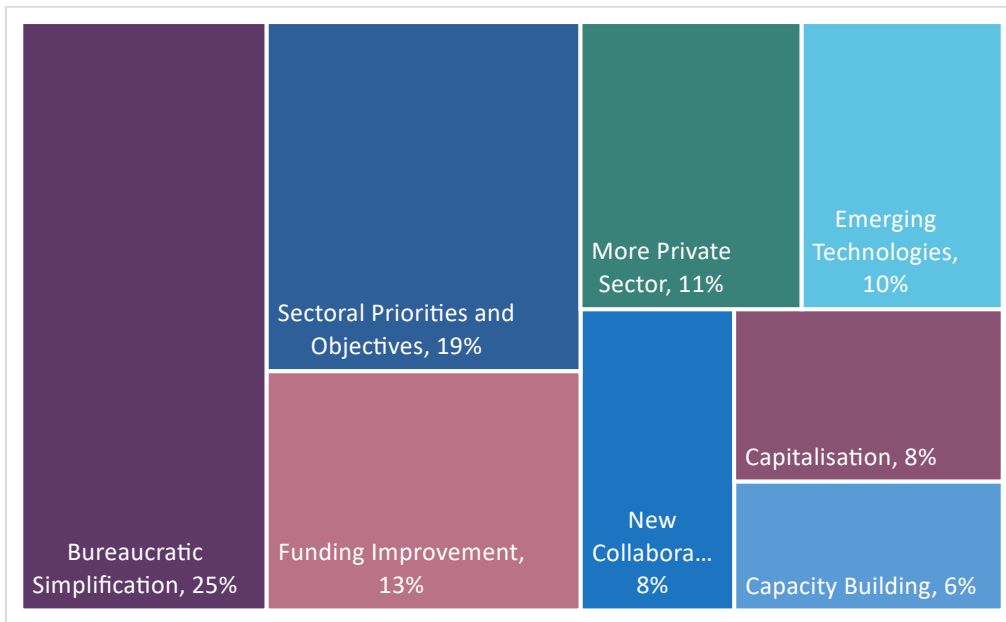
Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Survey.

The **most frequent responses** were related to cascade funding, direct funding for startups, addressing the matching funding requirement, funding for exploratory and high-risk actions, and difficulty accessing funds post-Brexit.

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

Similarly to question 6, the survey adopted an open format for gathering the answers. The following main topics were identified.

Figure 7 – Novelty in Interreg Atlantic Area



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Survey.

The most repeated answers stressed the need for **less bureaucracy**, reducing the administrative burden of projects, and **specific objectives** to support partners in priority areas like sustainable aquaculture, marine biotechnology, decarbonization of maritime transport and shipping industries, and renewable energy. Encouraging the **involvement of private companies**, including **startups**, was also mentioned several times.

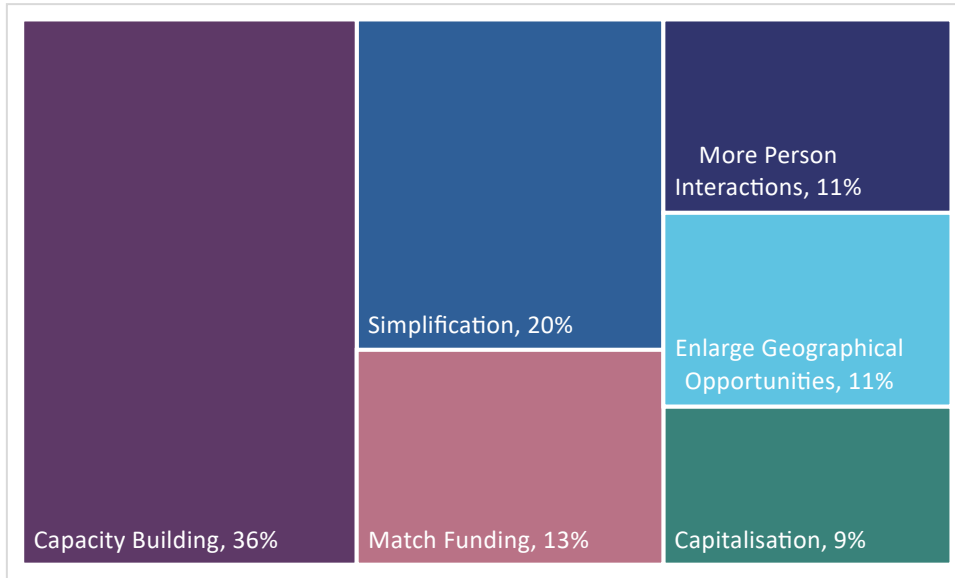
8. Do you consider that there is a need for some infrastructure projects to be implemented in transnational cooperation?

The majority of respondents, 58%, answered no to this question. Since this is not a qualified majority, it was interesting to analyse the justification for the affirmative answers (42%). From these 42% of answers saying yes, there is emphasis on the importance of **joint, strategic, and nature-based infrastructures** to address the Atlantic Area's unique needs. Transnational cooperation is seen as critical for leveraging resources, expertise, and capabilities across borders to achieve impactful, scalable, and sustainable infrastructure projects. Several answers focus on supporting infrastructures with **historical and architectural value** for the Atlantic territories, as well as **transport infrastructure projects** (e.g., EuroVelo long-distance cycling routes). **Maritime energy infrastructure** projects like hydrogen system infrastructures to generate and distribute green hydrogen have been mentioned several times, with an emphasis on strategic infrastructure investment that single regions cannot support (e.g., water and ocean-related projects).

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

Similarly to questions 6 and 7, the survey adopted an open format for answering this inquiry. The analysis of contributions converges to some topics already identified for questions 5 and 6, oriented towards governance considerations. The table below lists the main issues.

Figure 8 – Facilitate the work with your counterparts from another country



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Survey.

Stakeholders suggested more capacity building initiatives to **build trust between counterparts**, as well as **greater harmonisation of public procurement regulation between member states**, less administrative burden and **facilitation of working with partners outside the EU**, particularly from the UK.

2.4 Interesting quotes

As mentioned, consultations were done based on an online questionnaire and a set of interviews conducted by an external consultant. During the interview, participants were informed that the interview would not be recorded and that the objective was not to publish quotes that could directly identify them but rather to identify common patterns and denominators across all interviewees. We completed this section by gathering interesting quotes from the answers provided by the Atlantic Arc Commission, which was interviewed, and also sent answers in writing to be disclosed.

“Interreg Atlantic Area contributes to Atlantic territorial cohesion & development. It has kept the Atlantic Area cohesive despite changing geopolitical context. The geography of the programme works well as it allows Atlantic stakeholders to have a privileged access to an EU fund, avoiding fierce competition like in other EU centrally managed funding programmes, which tend to privilege bigger organisations/stakeholders already well inserted in EU networks”.

“Compared to cross-border programmes where regional politicians participate in all the monitoring committees and have their say on project selections, INTERREG Atlantic Area may remain a little bit more technical. This has a positive aspect of course for day-to-day management but may lack connection with strategic decisions made at the regional level for territorial development. If we could work on that, we would not only gain in terms of visibility, but also sustainability of project results”.

“ISO1 objective should be maintained to ensure the capitalisation of the projects and their contribution to transnational strategies”.

Elise Wattrelot, Executive Secretary of the Atlantic Arc Commission

3 CONSULTATION OF CITIZENS

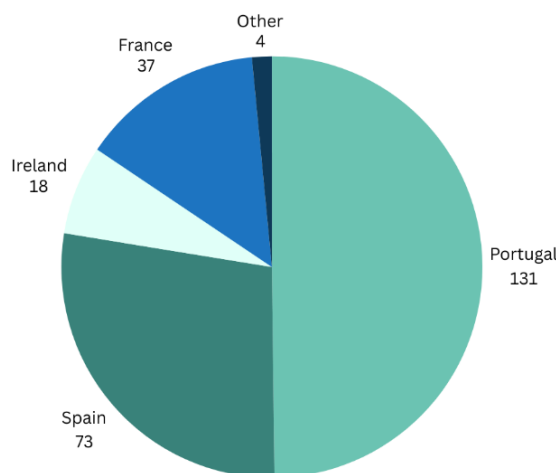
3.1 Main citizens consulted

In the follow-up of the request made by the EC, the MA accepted the challenge of consulting with citizens and not just to stakeholders due to the importance of **giving a voice to the public** and avoiding being restricted to the familiar pattern on stakeholders’ consultations. For several years, it has been highlighted the need to engage citizens to support European democracies. As Alemanno (2018:1)⁵ emphasis “[t]here is a widespread conviction that without greater and more effective involvement from its citizens, the European Union is condemned to fail”, sustaining that the EU must “urgently embrace an entire new participatory paradigm that puts citizens at the forefront of agenda setting and monitoring power.” Indeed, despite the introduction of provisions on democratic principles by *The Treaty of Lisbon*⁶ and citizens’ participation not being “a panacea for the democratic malaise witnessed at the European or national level (...), it is a bold and important stepping stone in the process of adapting and improving the EU’s democratic and governance model, which is necessary if the EU27 want to confront the ongoing agglomeration of chronic and acute crises. (...) Citizens’ buy-in will be essential to ensure that Europeans feel a sense of ownership when it comes to making hard choices and co-determining the future of their continent.” (Emmanouilidis and Stratulat, 2024:1)⁷.

With this consultation, the Interreg Atlantic Area wanted to offer a small contribution to this endeavour, despite recognizing the limitations of this attempt since the probability of having a balanced and unbiased sample for the consultations was low. It must be understood as an exploratory exercise. The **main goal** was to **identify citizens' perceptions of the impacts of the Interreg Atlantic Area**, understand their priorities for the future of the policy tool, and formulate recommendations for the Post 2027.

The **consultation targeted young people (under 30) living in the Programme's eligible area**. The distribution by country of the online survey consultation in absolute terms (**263 answers**) is presented below (Figure 9). Of this population, 22 per cent are under 18 and 56 per cent are female.

Figure 8 – Number of answers by country location



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Citizens Survey.

⁵ Alemanno, A. (2018), “Beyond Consultations: Reimagining EU Participatory Politics” (Carnegie Europe, 5 December 2018) (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2018/12/beyond-consultations-reimagining-eu-participatory-politics?lang=en¢er=europe>, accessed on November 2024).

⁶ OJ 2007 C 306/1.

⁷ Participatory democracy at the EU level: How to break the invisible ceiling?, *The EU Democracy Reform Observatory*, Observatory Report, March 2024, https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2024/Participatory_Democracy_paper_v4.pdf, accessed on November 2024.

During the **full day hybrid event** that was also organised (see the next section), we also had 46 young participants (18-30 years) in person and 21 online, from all the member states participating in the Programme.

3.2 Methods of consultation

The consultation was narrowed by **targeting young people, mostly 18-30**. The MA invited the Interreg Atlantic Area funded [project ATLIC](#), which aims to create a **youth entrepreneurship community** inspired by the sustainable blue economy and involves partners located in all member states participating in the Programme. The involvement of ATLIC guaranteed the transnational dimension of the consultation.

Two consultation methods were adopted: an [online survey](#) and ideation exercises organized during a [full-day event around a hackathon](#). Besides, the Programme launched the **online questionnaire** on Europe's Day. It was open for one month and distributed in English *via* several channels, including the Programme website, social networks, and the Programme partners' contact lists. We also asked IVY to share the link among the young volunteers.

As mentioned, **263 answers were gathered for one month**, with the survey duration being established considering the other method chosen to complete the consultation, the hackathon, planned for mid-June. The input from the online survey was needed to prepare the ideation exercises. The hackathon was done with a sample of young people representing the Atlantic regions involved in the project ATLIC during the hybrid event: "Building Tomorrow: Interreg Atlantic Discussed by the Next Generation," 17 June 2024, at *Fábrica de Santo Thyrso*, Portugal. The hackathon was designed based on the insights gathered from the online survey, starting with a systematization to recall the Post 27 context and main goals.

During the event, **groups were organized to brainstorm and iterate on their ideas**: fun and gamified aspects or incentives to maintain enthusiasm. ATLIC provided facilitators to guide the teams and promote collaboration, communication, and ideation around problem-solving without stopping their creativity. At the end of the exercise, the groups presented their outputs to the audience, composed of young people, members of the municipality where the physical event took place, academia, and community members. The event ended with an open discussion with the Vice-Rector of the University of Porto, in charge for Entrepreneurship, Knowledge Valorisation, and Strategic Planning. The event allowed us to complement the results gathered from the online survey, using statistical descriptive measures and qualitative techniques to analyse the outcomes.

3.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

The consultation with citizens used the five questions proposed by the EC to gather perceptions on the Programme's impact and future directions. They are listed below. A set of choices was offered to collect the respondents' views on the justification of their choices, considering a **Likert scale (1 to 5)**.

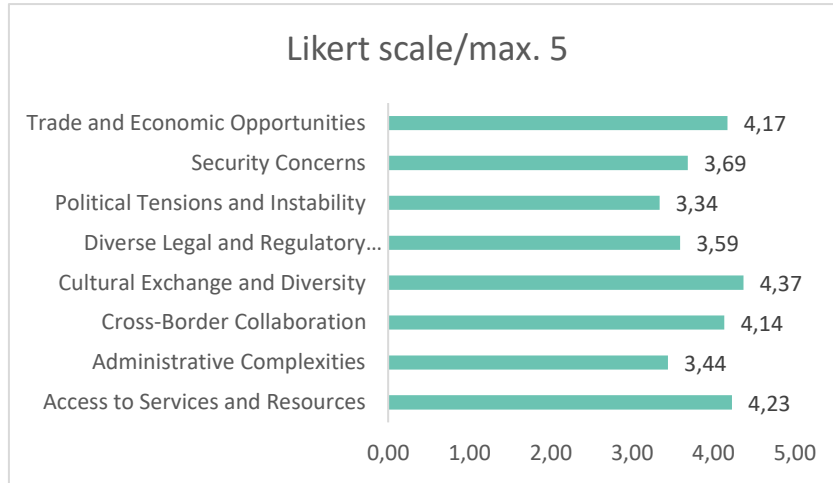
1. Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage?

Despite the Programme being transnational and not cross-border, it was decided to keep the question for this survey since ATLIC has been closely working with communities near borders, namely between the Norte region in Portugal and Galicia in Spain. The overwhelming majority of responses answered '**opportunity**' (97.72%). Given that most responses came from these two regions (59%), the citizens of these regions see a real benefit in cooperation. The proximity between the idioms, Portuguese and Gallego, may explain a substantial part of this result.

Regarding the justifications for considering living next to a border an 'opportunity' (see Figure 9), the factors perceived as important were **cultural exchange and diversity**, and **access to services and resources**, closely followed by **trade and economic opportunities** and **cross-border collaboration** (higher than 4). **Security**

concerns are understood as slightly important (≈ 3.5), and **political tensions** and **instability and administrative complexities** are perceived as neutral (3).⁸

Figure 9 – Why is living next to a border an opportunity?

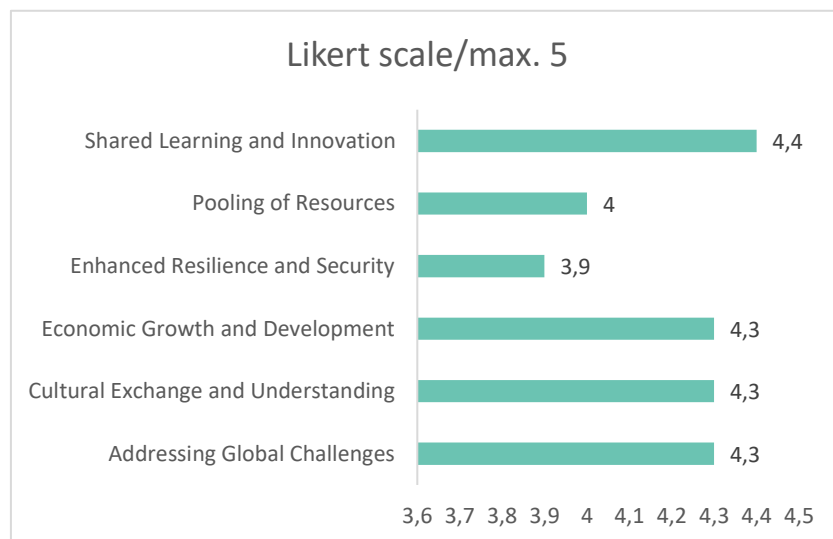


Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Citizens Survey.

2. In the place where you live, what are the main topics where cooperation is needed?

By requiring the key areas where cooperation is needed, this question helps to target future needs that should be addressed by the policy tool. The responses show that the proposed topics are all considered important (>4 and <4.5). The top thematic perceived as necessary is **environmental sustainability** (4.35), closely followed by **education and lifelong learning** (4.33). These answers were expected since the bulk of respondents are students (63%).

Figure 10 – What are the main topics where cooperation is needed?



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Citizens Survey.

⁸ The scores by topic are calculated considering the sum of all points by answer divided by the total number of responses (=263). The same applies to all the figures in the section dedicated to the citizens consultation.

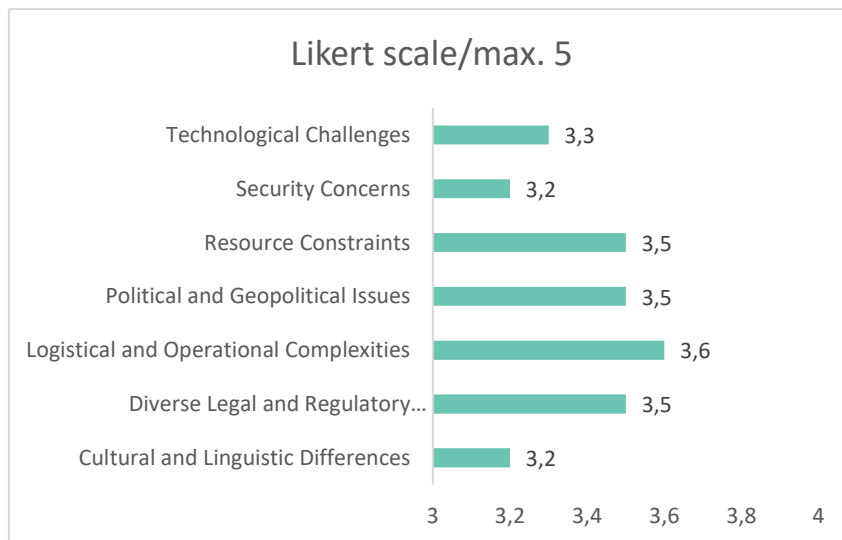
3. Can you name an Interreg project that you find useful in the place where you live?

This question is relevant to assess the impact of existing Interreg projects on young people's perceptions and, eventually, to identify success stories that could inspire future initiatives. According to the answers, only 81 over 182 can name an Interreg project they find helpful in their residence location. Some respondents have been involved in previous activities organized by the project ATLIC, so there is a positive bias in the answers, with 51% of positive answers (41) identifying this project. The remaining positive answers (40) identify 10 projects beyond ATLIC (e.g., 4PORT, LICCO), 3 Interreg programmes (Interreg Atlantic Area, POCTEP, and POCTEFA), and a few thematic. This outcome clearly shows that **young people are not yet sufficiently aware of Interreg projects** and that there is a real need to communicate through different channels if the target is these citizens.

4. What are the most significant difficulties associated with transnational cooperation in your daily life?

By exploring the perceptions about obstacles to cooperation, it is possible to identify areas for improvement. It is interesting to note the low scores obtained by the themes of **security concerns** (3.22) and **cultural and linguistic differences** (3.24). This is probably explained by the fact that the regions of the Atlantic Area are relatively less prone to public security problems and that culture and language are closer to a considerable part of the respondents, like those from Norte of Portugal and Norte of Spain. With relatively more relevance (still below 4) are **logistical and operational complexities** and **diverse legal and regulatory frameworks**. Interestingly, young people also identified **legal and regulatory obstacles** to cooperation, recalling that the excess bureaucracy was one of the most critical obstacles to the transnational cooperation stakeholders identified.

Figure 11– Main difficulties for transnational cooperation



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Citizens Survey.

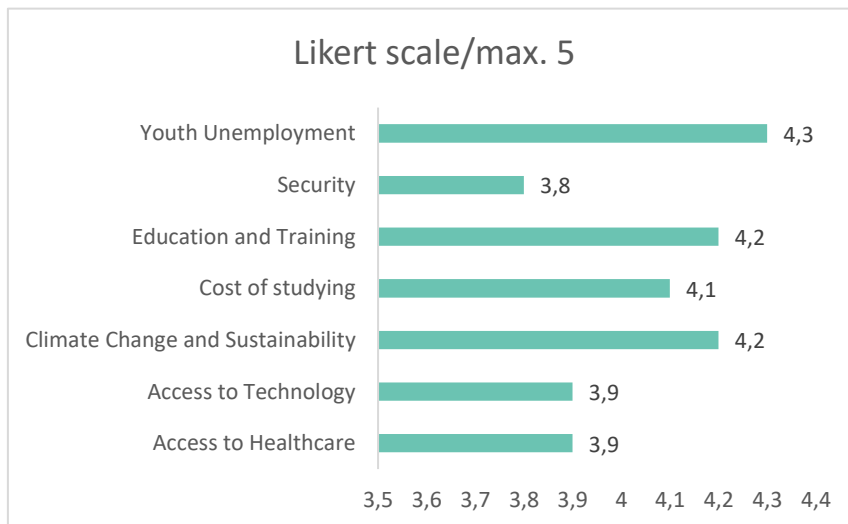
5. What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

This question was not addressed to stakeholders since several other questions were constructed to allow for the elaboration of project proposals for the Atlantic regions for a knowledgeable audience. However, for the citizens group targeting young people, the question is adequate by encouraging ideation around innovative and ambitious solutions, reflecting their aspirations and priorities for the future of their territories. Here is an overview of the main themes identified for “dream projects”.

- **Fighting against climate change and promoting sustainable development**, with proposals including seminars, projects, and awareness-raising workshops aimed at young people.
- **Support for young entrepreneurs and creators**: creating collaborative workspaces and support programmes for young entrepreneurs to facilitate access to needed resources and networks.
- **Mobility and intercultural exchanges**: more exchange programmes like Erasmus, which promote the mobility of young people and intercultural dialogue, not only as students but also as young workers.
- **Transport improvement and social inclusion**: develop sustainable transport on a regional and transnational scale, particularly needed for people living outside urban areas.
- **Cooperation and knowledge sharing**: transnational exchange of best practices in areas such as health and education, and collaborative projects between universities and businesses.
 - Highlighted the importance of projects to promote economic cooperation and innovation, pooling of problems and solutions, and creating synergies between different sectors.
- **Agriculture and environmental protection**: improve the welfare of farm animals and use data science to help farmers and wine producers combat crop diseases.
- **Attractiveness of rural and border areas**: make rural and border areas more attractive to young people, both culturally and economically.

The consultation included some more questions, for example: “Are there particular issues or challenges young people face that could benefit from transnational cooperation efforts?” (Figure 12) Overall, the answers to this question and the analysis of open answers allowed the identification of the concerns that young people have today in various lines of work for the future. The most rated challenge was **youth unemployment and education and training**, followed by **climate change and environmental challenges**.

Figure 12– Particular challenges young people face that could benefit from transnational cooperation



Source: Online Interreg Atlantic Area Citizens Survey.

During the hackathon, the groups worked around identified **challenges and proposed project ideas**. The **infographic** below shows several challenges, including **lack of youth civic participation, access to information** and the **risks of fake news, education and learning, entrepreneurship, transports, water management, youth unemployment, environment and sustainability**, and solutions presented during the event.

Figure 13– Infographic “Building Tomorrow: Interreg Atlantic Discussed by the Next Generation”



3.4 Interesting quotes

The quotes reproduced here were taken from the online survey, and although they are anonymous, they represent the views of the population surveyed.

“The cooperation project of my dreams could be a cooperation project where participants from different universities cooperate to co-create a new University Alliance which includes partners from the Interreg Atlantic Area”.

“Probably find out the problematic areas of which country and use them to help each other. For example, in Portugal our national health system works pretty well so we could help other developed countries in this area, sharing good practices or knowledge”.

“Reduction of bureaucracy and taxes during the new businesses incubation to help the competition with business outside of EU. Connection and networking with other entrepreneurs and with the organizations, business and stakeholders related with the new businesses and the developed solutions. Creation of synergies between profiles on the different areas”.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POST–2027 AND CONCLUSION

The **consultations were meaningful at several levels**, not only when analysing the results but also when preparing the exercises. This first step required the adoption of planning and strategic thinking at an early stage about the future of the policy instrument, which will **undoubtedly favour the programming of the next generation of the Interreg Atlantic Area**.

Based on the results of both consultations, a set of recommendations was made, organised around the topics proposed in the EC Toolkit and displayed below.

a) Topics to be covered by the Interreg Atlantic Area

Most answers from stakeholders recognized that the topics they would choose to address central challenges in the Atlantic Region **have already been adopted as policy objectives (PO) by the Programme and should be kept and reinforced**, focusing on **improving the value chain**. Due to the intrinsic characteristics of Atlantic regions, these choices were expected, namely the **orientation towards the Ocean in several dimensions**, like economics, innovation, environment, energy, and culture. **Blue and Green** are the primary targets pointed out by both consultations, with **the green transition** highlighted in strict connection with the need for a **healthy Atlantic Ocean** and where **digitalisation** appears as a fundamental tool. The **consultation with citizens mostly converged on the same themes** despite highlighting more concerns typical of the target inquiry group. These youth were worried about **youth unemployment** – a severe problem in many Spanish regions – and **education**. Citizens also highlight a topic related to the **social inclusiveness of the youngest living in peripheral areas**, which the Programme could explore since PO5, "A Europe closer to citizens," is not currently a policy priority. The table below systematizes the main points.

<p style="text-align: center;">Climate change, sustainability, and green infrastructure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Renewable energy and offshore renewables - highlight for pilots on international collaboration. ○ Nature-based solutions and infrastructures aligned with EU climate targets, e.g., advanced safety strategies and innovative engineering solutions for hydrogen storage and water management. ○ Sustainable aquaculture and fishing activities, targeting the improvement of the value chain. ○ Frameworks to reduce transportation risks: green ports. ○ Forums for local population discussions and idea sharing, namely with young people. ○ Risk-based predictive models. ○ Sustainable products, processes, and packaging development aligned with the circular economy principles. ○ Long-distance cycling infrastructure. 		
<p>Governance and Knowledge Sharing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improve governance in the Atlantic Region by stimulating cooperation on data acquisition, modelling, and knowledge sharing. ○ Involve universities, research institutions, and administrative bodies in knowledge transfer and policy efficiency. 	<p>Cultural, Social, and Economic Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Social innovation and welfare: socially inclusive projects targeting youth, the elderly, and marginalized groups. ○ Programmes for children focused on the environment and healthy oceans: educational practices to promote almost instinctive ‘green behaviours’. ○ Include a Youth consulting board in the Atlantic like the OECD Youthwise. ○ Sustainable tourism and tourism assets to celebrate natural and cultural heritage: rediscovery of historical heritage; support geoparks and geo tourism. ○ Media and arts value chains. ○ Promote interdisciplinary initiatives and incorporate sustainable, aesthetic, and inclusive activities. 	<p>Digital Tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Simulate scenarios and aid decision-making. ○ Fund transnational research hubs and joint exploratory research.
<p>Marine Biotechnology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ New products based on blue biotechnology. ○ Knowledge dissemination on marine resource valorisation. ○ Blue innovations by integrating marine biotechnology research. 		

Based on the above, the **main recommendation** at this level is to **keep the policy orientation** of the Programme, with the **possibility of explicitly including PO5**, namely, to **target specific population citizens as the youth**. A concrete proposal was the promotion of activities that put young people in touch with older people to share knowledge, particularly about technology, to help older people follow the digital transition. Another proposal was the creation of a **youth council for the Atlantic Region**, inspired by the OECD Youthwise.

The recent document prepared by Draghi (European Commission, 2024, henceforth the Draghi Report),⁹ a crucial blueprint with detailed findings and multiple suggestions for action to promote a sustainable growth trajectory for Europe based on increasing competitiveness, identified “**a joint plan for decarbonisation and competitiveness**” as a **fundamental area for action**. As the perceptions gathered from the consultations show, the **Programme has a crucial role at this level that is recommended to be reinforced**, funding projects on the

⁹ European Commission (2024), *The future of European competitiveness: Report by Mario Draghi*. European Commission. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en

development of **decarbonised industrial value chains** and recently supporting projects focused on **transferring the benefits of decarbonisation to the people living and working in the Atlantic**. As the **Draghi Report states**, only this **transference of benefits may increase Europe's competitiveness**. The views gathered from the consultations stress **digitisation and artificial intelligence as fundamental tools to bring added value to several diverse sectors**, from Ports and energy to culture and sustainable tourism, aligned with Draghi's view on the absolute need for Europe to unlock the innovation potential and the associated processes of diffusion in an era featured by the imminence of a technological revolution related to artificial intelligence.¹⁰

b) Geography of the Interreg Atlantic Area

A frequent input from the stakeholders' consultation is the request for the Programme to expand geographical collaboration opportunities, including re-engagement with UK stakeholders and centres of excellence outside the Interreg regions, namely in Canada. The citizens' consultation mentions the relevance of including peripheral areas. Despite some of these regions being included in the eligible area of the Programme (e.g., Azores, Madeira, and Canary Islands), the consultation work with the young people target groups and the project ATLIC clarified the difficulties involving groups from these territories. A relevant **recommendation** on this topic is to **enlarge the cooperation geography by involving relevant transatlantic partners and more peripheral Atlantic areas**.

c) Implementation of the Interreg Atlantic Area

As for this dimension, the most common perception refers to the **complexity of the administrative procedures**. **Simplification** was also flagged as critical to **enable partnerships with private entities**. The other key message was to have **less prescriptive frameworks** to empower more diverse outcomes and respond to emerging needs.

Flexibility was also mentioned as critical to promoting the **involvement of startups** and **funding high-risk exploratory actions**.

Furthermore, ensuring **funding for post-project capitalisation** activities was frequently mentioned in open answers, with suggestions for establishing **cascade funding mechanisms**. Simplification was also identified as critical at this level since **streamlining processes** is needed to promote these cascade mechanisms.

The recommendation is to **reduce bureaucracy** and **allow flexibility** and **less prescriptive measures** to enhance the impact and inclusivity of the Interreg Atlantic Area, aligning it more closely with stakeholders' needs and regional development goals. **This view is fully aligned with the Draghi Report**, which points to the **bureaucratic burden** produced in Europe as one of the **constraints on Europe's ability to compete effectively**.

d) The composition of partnerships and the involvement of companies, including start-ups

The consultation with stakeholders recognised the **role of the Programme as a facilitator** by promoting cooperation between relevant partners, bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders, and **acting as a bridge between territorial needs** that may support the harmonisation of procedures in different regions by promoting the adoption of the best jointly learned practices.

The Programme was also perceived as a **critical instrument for promoting novelty through cooperation**. In this dimension, stakeholders emphasise the importance of **engaging the private sector to drive innovation** and put

¹⁰ A technological revolution is much more than a collection of technology systems. For a review on technological revolutions and techno-economic paradigms see, for example, Perez, C. (2010). Technological revolutions and techno-economic paradigms. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34(1), 185–202. According to Perez (2010), a technological revolution, as a major disruption of the growth potential of an economy, is the core for a vast innovation opportunity space, bringing a set of novel associated generic technologies, infrastructures, and organisational principles that may increase enormously the efficiency and effectiveness of all industries and activities. Nevertheless, the capacity to profoundly transform the rest of the economy and society must also be in place to consolidate significant productivity and expansion. For this development to occur, the co-evolution of the processes of diffusion of the technological revolution and its techno-economic paradigm and their assimilation by the economy and society must occur.

ideas, inventions, and novelty in the market. As mentioned, the Programme has received several requests to facilitate the participation of private companies, mainly by reducing their administrative burden. Indeed, most respondents (68.5%) considered that the **private sector brings added value**, and their presence should be kept and even reinforced. The open answers also mention the request for **direct funding for start-ups**, more **funding for exploratory activities**, less prescriptive, and **more willingness to accept failure**, leading to the theme of **failure and innovation**. Exploring this dimension can give us valuable information about innovation management. In a context characterised by a **fundamental need for Europe to “profoundly refocus its collective efforts on closing the innovation gap with the US and China, especially in advanced technologies”** (The Draghi Report, p.2), the views from those on the ground, aligned with the scientific literature on economics and innovation that identify **failure as an intrinsic part of innovation**, fuelling exploratory learning and enabling the accumulation of knowledge (e.g., Rhaïem and Amara, 2021)¹¹ are particularly valuable to call for a **shift in the policy mindset**.

The **added value of cooperation is firmly recognised**, and there is a precise **appraisal of the Interreg Atlantic Area as a promoter of strong partnerships and innovation**, particularly highlighted in association with **green/climate change** and **sustainable blue economy** in the Atlantic Region. It is **recommended that this role be reinforced in the future**.

The **quadruple helix approach** currently recommended by the Programme to build partnerships is recognised as promising and crucial to **enhancing the capitalisation and sustainability of results**. Moreover, based on the answers obtained from stakeholders, there is a general perception of the considerable value of capitalising on existing resources and knowledge. The Programme was identified as a relevant platform for amplifying significant outcomes throughout the Atlantic Region. It is **recommended that the Programme continues to facilitate the building of capitalisation actions** to create the conditions to stimulate joint actions between stakeholders and **consolidate the capital built by other programmes** (Interreg or not).

In sum, based on the consultations, a **set of valuable recommendations**, well aligned with EU primary policy goals and that will **undoubtedly benefit the intervention logic of the future Interreg Atlantic Area**, can be highlighted.

1. **Leverage transnational collaboration:**

- a. Promote large-scale, high-impact projects that pool resources and expertise from multiple regions, especially in sectors like renewable energy, transportation, and marine sustainability, such as distributed tidal stream power networks or coordinated hydrogen refuelling systems, to position the Atlantic Area as a global leader in marine renewable energy
- b. Develop and connect open-sea test sites to accelerate innovation in marine renewable energy and support scalable solutions for decarbonisation.
- c. Support green hydrogen production, storage, and distribution, including refuelling stations and safety protocols, to position the Atlantic Region as a leader in hydrogen innovation.
- d. Support infrastructure for marine biotechnology and sustainable aquaculture to ensure these sectors move up the value chain and remain globally competitive.
- e. Support sustainable infrastructure like cycling networks, including collaboration with EuroVelo, to promote eco-friendly tourism and connectivity across the Atlantic.

2. **Address common challenges across the Atlantic regions** by targeting projects in areas like water management (droughts, flooding, or access to clean water), coastal resilience, and transport, which

¹¹ Rhaïem, K., Amara, N. (2021), “Learning from innovation failures: a systematic review of the literature and research agenda”, *Rev Manag Sci* 15, 189–234.



require cooperation to optimise resources, reduce environmental impact, and prevent duplication of efforts, targeting nature-based solutions.

3. **Support shared research hubs** able to boost critical developments in cutting-edge areas, such as marine biotechnology, hydrogen systems, and nature-based solutions.
4. Support projects integrating **emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, sensors, and drones** to improve regional monitoring, resilience, and productivity.
5. **Simplify access to funding and reduce bureaucracy**, namely, to encourage broader participation from SMEs, and smaller beneficiaries like startups and civil organisations.
6. **Promote flexible funding**, for example, to address local needs and allow for experimentation while keeping transnational goals.
7. **Capitalisation and legacy phases for projects**: to ensure results continue to deliver value beyond the project timeline, building on existing successes and avoiding redundancies.
8. **Focus on scaling**: prioritise projects demonstrating potential for scaling across multiple regions and aligning with transnational goals, such as standardisation of technologies or cross-border networks.
9. **Encourage global partnerships with non-EU countries** (e.g., Canada, the UK, and ultra-peripheral regions in the Atlantic) through joint initiatives that address shared challenges and leverage mutual expertise.
10. **Coordinate with other programmes**: seek synergies with initiatives like Horizon Europe, Connecting Europe Facility, or LIFE to maximize funding opportunities and align objectives.
11. Empower young people in the Atlantic Region, contributing to the creation of a **Young Atlantic Council**.