Sharing Expertise

Project Application and Assessment

in European Territorial Cooperation Programmes: Analysis of 2007-2013 Practices

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INTERACT is designed to capitalise on the vast pool of experience and expertise accumulated through INTERREG in the areas of regional development, cross-border cooperation, transnational cooperation and interregional cooperation.

This publication was drafted based on extensive analysis of practices used in 2007-2013 programming period. The author of this publication is Polona Frumen who is a member of the INTERACT Point Viborg team.

Introduction

The selection process, as one step of the programme management cycle, begins with the receiving of project applications and finishes with the contracting of selected projects. During the programme preparation stage, the following two processes are most important: agreeing on assessment criteria and defining the application form. Assessment criteria is based on core programme values and principles, thus determines the success of the programme by enabling the approval of relevant, high quality projects, which contribute to the achievement of the programme's objectives. Assessing project quality relies on adequate information submitted during the application stage. Assuring the application form provides the right scope for obtaining this information as well as sufficient guidance to the potential applicants is crucial in this sense. This handbook explores the link between these two steps and provides an overview of different practices in European Territorial Cooperation programmes across Europe.

INTERACT undertook an analysis of approximately twenty European Territorial Cooperation programmes representing all three strands of ETC programs. The focus of the analysis was on the selection process, assessment criteria and the application form including its annexes. Programme documents (operational programmes, programme manuals, application packs) published on programme websites were a main source of information, however, where available, internal programme documents used to guide the process (e.g. assessment manual) were studied as well.

In the first section of this handbook, the selection and assessment process are presented to clarify the terminology used across the ETC world. In the second section, you can find a summary of findings from the analysis. The analysis reveals great deal of similarities, which presents an opportunity for harmonisation of application forms and assessment criteria. Eight assessment categories were identified and arranged in two groups - content-related and implementation-related. These were used to group examples of assessment and application form questions used in ETC programmes. The third section gives an overview of these questions, but it does not imply that using these will optimise programme performance. Each programme should look at it from its unique perspective and use what is appropriate and needed.

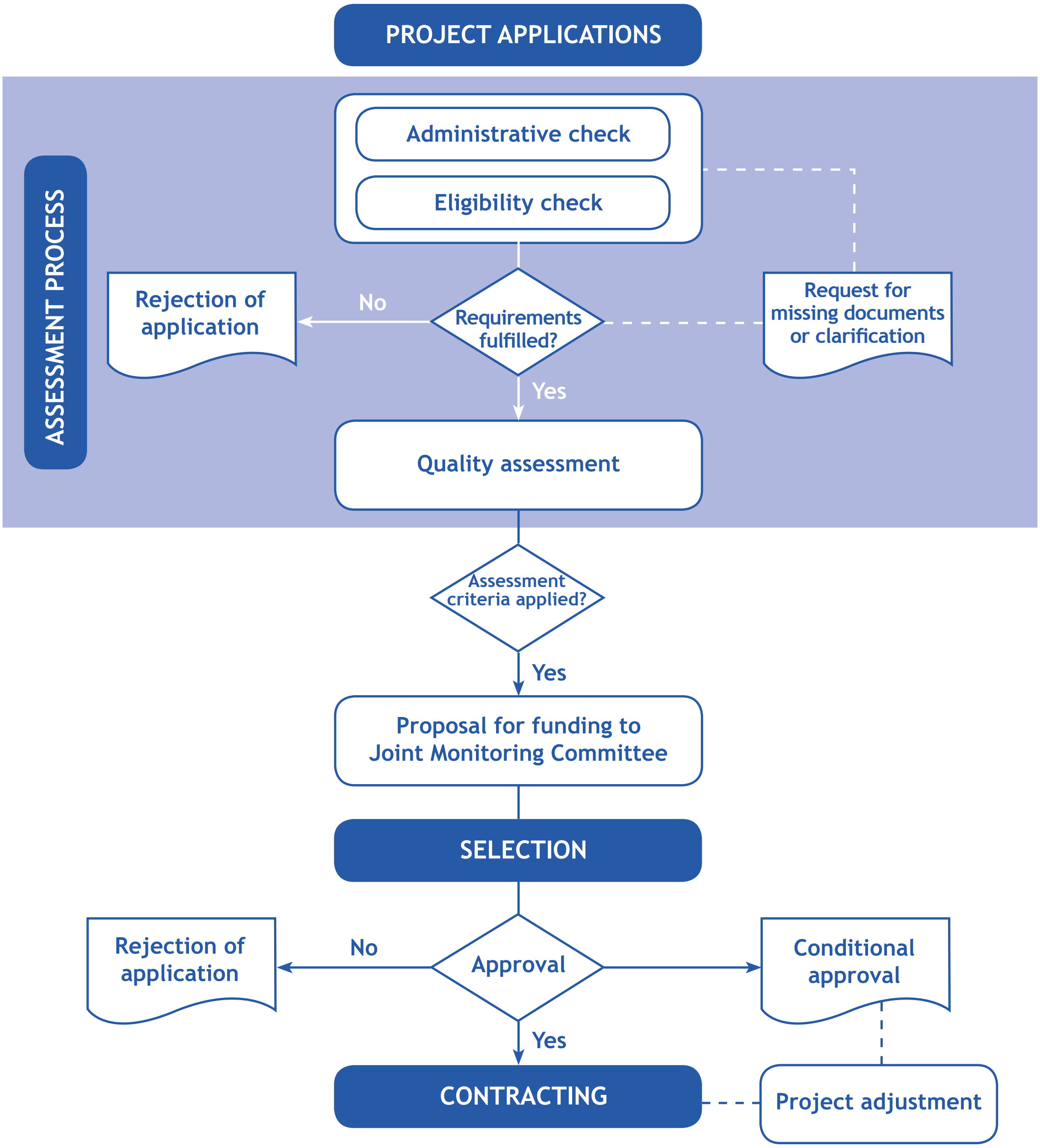
Contents

Figures and tables

1 Selection process

The aim of the selection process is to select projects which contribute most to the achievement of programme objectives. It begins with the received project applications and finishes with the selection of the projects. There are four phases within selection process: (1) call for proposals with received project proposals; (2) assessment process divided in three steps (a) administrative check, (b) eligibility check, (c) quality assessment; (3) selection procedure followed by a decision from Joint Monitoring Committee; (4) contracting of selected projects.

Figure 1: Selection process



1.1 Assessment process

Assessing projects is an important step in the selection process as it assures transparency and accountability of EU funds spending. By establishing and publishing assessment criteria, the quality standards, against which projects are assessed, are set. They are needed to secure quality of programme implementation and to guide applicants towards considering important issues before applying.

The main principles of project assessment are:

- **Objectivity of assessment:** Separation of responsibilities between information activities and assessment is ensured. Each assessor must to be free of any conflict of interest. The assessors should present an unbiased opinion regarding the project.
- **Equal treatment:** All received applications shall be dealt with in compliance with procedures agreed upon for the respective programme. The quality of application content shall be assessed by at least two independent assessors.
- **Transparency of assessment:** The potential applicants have to be informed of conditions and assessment processes in the programme. The reasons for recommending a project for rejection or approval should be clear and justified.
- **Professionalism:** Recommendations made based on assessments should not raise questions regarding the quality of the assessment.
- **Analysis:** Recommendations made should demonstrate that the project has been assessed against core assessment criteria and its relevance for the programme has been confirmed.
- **Take account of information presented in the application only:** Allowing projects to change the content of the application after the deadline for submission gives an unfair advantage. It can also raise issues of objectivity and undermines the credibility of recommendations made. Questions of how many applications the programme receives in a call and how many resources can be invested in clarifying issues certainly plays a role as well. On the other hand, discarding project applications due to relatively small, formal mistakes could be considered a waste of resources invested not only by the projects, but the secretariats as well (any support given for project development). This is why one should try to find a balance between equal and objective assessment as well as the level of formality one wishes to operate with.

The assessment process begins as soon as the call for proposals closes (if the call is not on-going) when all project applications are submitted. First, the programme checks the admissibility and eligibility of projects and only then will the quality assessment start when core assessment criteria are applied.

A programme might consider preparing, in advance, different templates enabling qualitative assessment (assessment grids, assessment reports, standard letters to be sent to applicants) to be used throughout the entire process. They should be prepared in a way which allows assessors to include basic data (project title and acronym, project number, lead partner, etc.) as well as a date and signature to the document. It is important that templates allow some flexibility to accommodate case specific issues.

1.1.1 Administrative check

The administrative check verifies if:

- the proposal has been delivered to the correct location by the required deadline (day, time of day);
- the proposal is complete (number of copies, documents required);
- the application and its annexes are signed where required;
- the electronic version of the proposal has been sent.

Failure to comply with some of these criteria may lead to immediate rejection (e.g. application not delivered by the required time). In some other cases the project might be requested to, for example, send missing documents.

1.1.2 Eligibility check

The purpose of an eligibility check is to verify the basic programme and call requirements. Usually the following is checked:

- number of partners and countries involved;
- eligibility of all partners (legal status, territorial eligibility – area);
- minimum and maximum budget requirements – total, ERDF contribution, costs per budget line or cost category, costs per partner;
- availability of co-financing (match-funding), including minimum requirements and its type (e.g. cash versus in-kind);
- time limits (start, end dates and duration of the project);
- fulfilment of the minimum cooperation criteria (at least two of the four criteria fulfilled, depending on the programme rules);
- compliance with programme objectives and priorities;
- financial capacity check of project partners (especially private partners, if they are eligible);
- public procurement compliance check (where relevant);
- state aid compliance check (sometimes only for projects above the threshold).

Some programmes also have quality oriented and eligibility questions, which require deeper analysis of the project already at this stage. Examples of such questions are:

- Will the project tackle the territorial challenges of the programme?
- Are requirements for cross-border/transnational character met? The answer to this question depends on how the programme interprets these, but in general, assessors need to consider partnership spread, nature of results (e.g. infrastructure projects) and impact of activities.
- Are these types of activities eligible? Usually this question is linked to specific programme requirements regarding project activities, e.g. pure study projects without concrete follow-up actions are not eligible; or in case of investments only small-scale investments are eligible.
- Will the project have a major negative impact on the environment and does it comply with national environmental regulations?

In some programmes, admissibility and eligibility of projects are checked at the same time as each other. They are based on questions which can be answered with “yes,” “no” or “not relevant for particular project”. A “no” answer can lead to (1) outright rejection of the application or (2) request for further information or clarification. Negative outcomes could be avoided if and when the project carefully reads the programme requirements published in call for proposals and other programme documents and by contacting the programme secretariat when in doubt.

1.1.3 Quality assessment

In cooperation programmes, **project assessment** is understood as the third step of the **selection process**, namely the quality assessment. It implies in-depth assessment of the project. Many programmes are still using the term “evaluation” to describe the project assessment process. It does, however, create confusion as “evaluation” alternatively implies judgement of an on-going or completed process. In general, when we speak about **project evaluation**, we actually mean evaluation of the project during or after implementation to judge its achievements (scope and quality of outputs and results) and impact.

As mentioned before, various conclusions regarding the quality of the project can already be drawn based on the eligibility check (e.g. partnership spread, intensity of cooperation, relevance of the selected theme and activities for the programme). Nevertheless, the quality of the project is assessed from different perspectives at this stage. How does one assess projects to ensure quality? In general, quality is subjective – it is a matter of perception and individual judgement. It is necessary to ensure that project quality requirements are collectively understood and supported by all relevant programme bodies. However, will a well-written application always result in a good quality project?

Based on the analysis of several cooperation programmes, it can be observed that programmes mainly assess the following:

- to what extent the project will help the programme achieve its objectives;
- to what extent are the project outcomes beneficial to its target groups;
- what is the added value of the project;
- will project partnership succeed in delivering of the proposed outcomes;
- will project management enable a successful implementation of the project.

1.2 Two-step application procedure

Two-step application procedure is used in programmes where a substantial number of project proposals are expected and it has, in this case, the following advantages:

- less time consumption and technical assistance resources are needed as not all projects are assessed in depth;
- easier time management;
- saved capacities and costs at applicant level;
- possible coaching from the development of the project idea to its full proposal (if only limited number of proposals are invited to submit the full project proposal);
- there is a lowered risk of investing extensive efforts in assessing many low quality proposals.

There are more options on how to organise the two-step application procedure:

- **Concept note model** – the beneficiaries submit only certain parts of the full application form in the first step. If selected, the beneficiary will then submit the entire project proposal, including the already submitted concept note. The content of the concept note is binding, which means that a project cannot be changed in the final application form submitted.
- **Expression of interest model** – the beneficiaries submit an expression of interest, which in usually a shorter version of the application form. The content of it is not binding in the case of submitting the full application form in the second step, but it should not veer significantly from what was initially proposed.

Based on experience shown from different programmes, a combination of these two models is the most beneficial. In the first step, the beneficiaries must submit an Expression of Interest (EoI), often only electronically, to speed up the process. The programmes usually ask for a description of project objectives and main activities, foreseen outputs and results, estimated overall budget and the structure of the partnership. The pre-selected EoIs are then invited to apply using the second step, submitting full application. The project data from EoI can be changed only to some extent (e.g. the budget can increase up to 20% or only two partners can be changed) and is binding in some parts (e.g. project objectives, proposed results). Please note that pre-assessment of project, which is offered to projects by some programmes, is only optional and the decision is not binding and therefore, the project can still be submitted.

Project assessment is much shorter in the first step as only some parts of the quality assessment are applied, due to the shorter project description. Formal requirements and partner eligibility are not checked to avoid a higher workload at the national level. The assessment in the first step focuses more on the content of the project, namely its objectives and results, whereas in the second step, all assessment criteria are applied. In both steps, the final decision is made by the monitoring committee.

1.3 Selection decisions

In many programmes, projects are either approved or rejected after the assessment process, but there are also programmes which continue to use additional options such as:

- approval with conditions;
- rejection with a recommendation to re-apply.

It seems that programmes approve projects with conditions usually, when they don't have sufficient projects in the pipeline. Conditions need to be clear, met within deadline and cannot fundamentally change the project. The procedures in place need to clarify who verifies the conditions have been met (Joint Technical Secretariat, Managing Authority, Monitoring Committee). Again, one needs to strike a balance between the amount of effort invested in such procedures and the alternative of inviting the project applicant to come back for the next call.

Often the following conditions are used:

- excluding certain elements (equipment, activities) which are not relevant to the achievement of project objectives;
- reducing the budget (overall or for certain budget lines), because it is unrealistic (impact on overall project delivery must be verified though);
- cutting ineligible expenditure (e.g. 10% and 20% rules);
- modifying the budget by rearranging the costs in the budget lines;
- modifying the time plan (activities can be implemented in a shorter time or may require a longer period);
- adjusting co-financing due to lower budgets in some countries;
- involving additional stakeholders (e.g. national institutions).

There are times in the programme's life cycle when conditional approvals are well justified, e.g. when money in a given priority is more or less spent and when the programme is running its last calls. Many programmes are also willing to provide additional support to the strategic project if necessary (e.g. approve with conditions and help with some management issues, improving indicators, etc.).

If the conditions are not met or if there are too many significant changes needed, the programme can reject the project with a recommendation to re-apply.

2 Analysis and findings

INTERACT undertook analysis of approximately twenty European Territorial Cooperation programmes from all three strands. The focus of the analysis was on the selection process, assessment criteria and application form and its annexes. Programme documents published on programme websites were the main source of information, but, when available, internal programme documents were used to guide the process (e.g. assessment manual) and studied as well.

This Handbook offers a summary of findings and examples from different practices across Europe regarding project application forms and assessment criteria and it takes into account many aspects which make cooperation programmes unique compared to other programmes (e.g. transnationality, cooperation criteria). The examples given are by no means a comprehensive list as there are other practices that are also successful in the given context.

2.1 Assessment methodology

2.1.1 Assessors

Every project is assessed by at least two assessors, which are selected among Joint Technical Secretariat staff, Managing Authority, consultants with specific sectoral knowledge, university professors, other ministry staff, regional bodies, Steering Committee members, etc.

Different practices, when selecting an assessment team were observed, such as:

- the assessment team consists of either programme staff (usually JTS staff) or external experts (usually in programmes with a substantial number of project applications);
- in some programmes external experts are used only in cases where a specific knowledge is needed (thematic or horizontal issues experts);
- one of the two assessors is external and the other is a member of JTS, which results in better representation of programme and transnational/cross border aspects during assessment.

In case of using external assessors, the programme might consider:

- inviting them to programme meetings about specific programme themes where sub-themes, interpretations, priorities related to the theme are discussed together with project officers;
- arranging regular briefings between external assessors and programme staff;
- using the same external experts (more than one per theme and from different countries participating in the programme), especially if they are “tested” and reliable;
- identifying cases where external expertise is necessary (if not using them on regular basis);
- inviting them to monitoring/steering committee meetings.

The following table lists advantages and disadvantages of selecting internal and external assessors based on consultation with programmes.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of internal and external assessors

	Internal assessors	External assessors
ADVANTAGES	• Involved in identifying programme priorities/ objectives • Know the programme well • Have a better understanding of the specificity of cooperation programmes • Experienced with regard to what does/doesn't work • Knowledge of what is there (projects, results) • Can detect early warning signs • Commitment	• Have the necessary professional background • Possess specialised knowledge • A fresh look at the issues • Are independent from both the applicants and the JMC/MA/JTS • Remain anonymous to the applicants
DISADVANTAGES	• Are not impartial • Lack of sectoral experience • High staff turn-over • Inexperienced new staff assessing projects • Capacity (in the event that too many applications are received)	• Often no in-depth knowledge about the programme • Lack of knowledge on Territorial Cooperation • They don't have to "live" with the consequences from their recommendations • Tend to focus on their field, leaving some aspects of the quality assessment aside • Are eventually not as committed to assessment as the Joint Technical Secretariat • Costs

2.1.2 Assessment approach

There are two approaches which programmes use when assessing projects: descriptive and numerical. Some examples of the scale used in numerical assessment approach are presented in the table below.

Table 2: Examples of numerical assessment scales

Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3
1 - poor / very poor	-2 - very poor	0 - insufficient
2 - fair / poor	-1 - poor	1 - sufficient
3 - good / adequate	0 - fair	3 - appropriate
4 - very good / good	+1 - good	5 - completely appropriate
5 - excellent	+2 - excellent	

Lately, the practitioners recommended using the third example in the above table as it does not have the weakness of the "middle" option, which is often used by assessors. It is possible that middle scores carry much less information and in fact do not illustrate the quality of an aspect.

To give more emphasis on the assessment criteria which programme considers most relevant, weighting of scores and/or setting of thresholds is used. The programmes use either the first or second option or even a combination of the two possibilities (see example below).

While **weighting scores**, each assessment category is multiplied with the pre-agreed number (depends on the importance of the assessment category) and the final score is taken into account.

The aim of the **threshold** is to approve only those projects above a certain level, despite the fact that there are funds available for all projects. Some programmes use the threshold for the level of categories as well, e.g. a minimum 50% of score must be achieved in the category of relevance and outcomes.

Table 3: Example of weighting and thresholds

Criterion	Max score	Weighting	Weighted Final Score
CONTENT-RELATED CRITERIA			
Relevance	10	X3	30
Added value	10	X3	40
Outcomes	10	X4	40
Horizontal issues	10	X1	10
IMPLEMENTATION-RELATED CRITERIA			
Partnership / management	10	X3	30
Methodology (work plan)	10	X2	20
Budget	10	X2	20
Communication	10	X1	10
TOTAL			**200**
QUALITY THRESHOLD (65 %)			**130**

The **descriptive approach**, which can be found in the cooperation programmes, is more qualitative as it does not use scores, but rather a descriptive assessment of the project. There is an indication of the quality of the assessment criteria (high, medium, low), but the description which is attached matters as it explains the reasons for approving or rejecting the project.

Table 4: Example of qualitative assessment

Criteria	High	Medium	Low	Comments
Contribution to transnational and regional development			X	The project does not apply a comprehensible transnational approach as most pilot project activities contribute to limited urban, but not transnational, regional development. The actions taken to deliver an EU level agenda are not convincing, benefits generated are not clearly defined.

Most of the cooperation programmes are using a combination of both approaches, meaning the scoring of each project, with additional indications of the project's strengths and weaknesses provided as comments.

2.1.3 Assessment tools

Guidance for assessors – programmes prepare an assessment manual, which can have the following characteristics:

- it is an agreement between programme partners regarding how certain topics should be understood and assessed;
- it gives guidance to assessors, either external or internal, experienced or less experienced, but above all, it explains, in a coherent way, what the programme values;

- it usually comprises basic rules and main principles of the assessment, description of the selection process of the assessors, the assessment procedure and timelines, rules governing correspondence and the handling of documents, different templates in annexes (assessment sheet, declaration of impartiality and confidentiality, request for missing documents and clarifications, rejection/ approval letter, etc.);
- if the programme uses external assessors, the guidance is more detailed and also includes basic information about the programme;
- some programmes offer additional guidance for assessors by explaining in which cases projects should get a certain score, e.g. the project gets the highest score because it demonstrates strong cooperation as it complies with at least four of the cooperation criteria.

Assessment sheets

- Vary in length and complexity from programme to programme.
- Mostly they are first filled in by each assessor individually, then a joint assessment sheet is prepared, usually based on a discussion within JTS or a group of assessors.
- It is helpful for assessors if the sheet indicates where the information needed for assessing certain topic can be found on the application form, especially when the consistency of the project is checked.
- If developed in on-line or Excel format, interconnected entry fields are possible – there is no need to retype or calculate the scores separately and manually.

2.2 Assessment criteria

- There are many similarities between assessment criteria (what is assessed) throughout the EU. In general, quality assessment of the proposal encompasses three elements: the quality of the proposal (how relevant the project is for the programme), cooperation element (e.g. does the project meet the four cooperation criteria); operational assessment (does the project meet all programme requirements, such as respecting budget lines limits).
- Assessment criteria can be adjusted according to the type of projects (e.g. strategic projects) or the type of call for proposal (e.g. two-step application procedure). In such cases, the programme has one set of assessment criteria, which is extended or more strict.
- Some programmes made an attempt to better explain assessment criteria. A description of what must be fulfilled, in order to reach a certain score, is provided for each criterion.
- Based on selected assessment questions as well as the weighting and/or setting of thresholds, some conclusions regarding what a programme values in their project can be made.
- Many programmes have a list of assessment questions to guide the assessors. Many ask questions such as: “Is the project contributing to the achievement of the programme’s objectives?” which leads to a simple yes or no answer. A better way of asking the same question would be: “To what extent is the project contributing to the achievement of the programme’s objectives?” because the answer offers the possibility to rank the projects according to their contribution to the programme’s objectives.

2.3 Application form and its annexes

2.3.1 Application form design

- Application forms vary in length and complexity from programme to programme. Some programmes keep it simple and short (additional explanations are presented in the annexes) while others prefer to review all the information in one document and see it explained in detail.
- In general programmes ask for the same information in the application form (with a few exceptions), just in a different way or using different words. Therefore, it seems it would be possible to have a

shorter and harmonised application form used across Europe, in all cooperation programmes, where some sections can be added by each programme to satisfy needs, specific to certain programme area.

- More similarities can be found within programmes in one strand, e.g. budgets in cross border programmes are usually more detailed than budgets in transnational programmes.
- Completing the application form and assessing it is much easier if information about a certain topic is in one place and well structured. Therefore, programmes try to avoid asking for duplicate information in different parts of the application form, e.g. asking for the communication strategy in one chapter of the application form and additionally requiring a separate work package for it. To avoid repetition of certain descriptions (e.g. project results in relation to the project objectives / activities / indicators) tables and other tools are used in order to shorten the application form and to keep related descriptions in one place.
- From a technical point of view, the application forms are designed in either Word or Excel format, or as an on-line application. Whatever is used, it needs to be tested before putting it on-line. Excel format and on-line application offer possibilities to link several programme documents (e.g. application form, assessment sheet, monitoring system, project reports, etc.) and to link different entry fields within these documents (e.g. there is no need to retype project partners in application forms as they can be selected from the drop down menu). These formats require a limitation of space in all entry fields, which also helps projects to stay focused while entering only the most relevant information. However it needs to be checked for enough space to obtain all information needed in assessing the quality of the project.
- Language of the application form sometimes plays an important role, especially if it is not in the applicant's language. Cross border programmes use either English as a neutral language, or languages of both participating countries. Programmes using bilingual application forms state that the translations are often not of a good quality, but it is very beneficial for the partnership, as partners are forced to understand each other. In case of discrepancies between application forms in one language versus the other, the programme decides beforehand which language is primary (e.g. mother tongue of the lead partner) or asks the project to explain the contradiction after the project submission.

2.3.2 Terminology and guidance for applicants

- Every programme possesses guidance documents for applicants. Besides the operational programme, there is the programme manual (explaining details of programme implementation) and an application guide (containing technical information on how to fill in the application form and content).
- EU jargon is quite difficult to understand for some project developers. Therefore programmes needs to provide explanations for some core terms used in programme documents; especially because programmes are not consistent in using the same terms for the same issues (e.g. in some programmes there are phases and activities, in others actions and tasks or actions and activities[1]). It might be confusing for applicants in areas covered by more cooperation programmes. It would be more user-friendly if all cooperation programmes, or at least programmes covering the same territory, would use the same terminology for common issues.
- More and more programmes are using examples when explaining how to fill in the application form. They often give examples of indicators (what is a result and what is an output) or they explain certain terms (e.g. innovation).
- Using the same terms throughout programme documents is very important. For non-native speakers of a certain language, usually English, it is difficult to distinguish what is an objective, goal or aim and, if the term keeps changing, the applicant may not be able to follow.

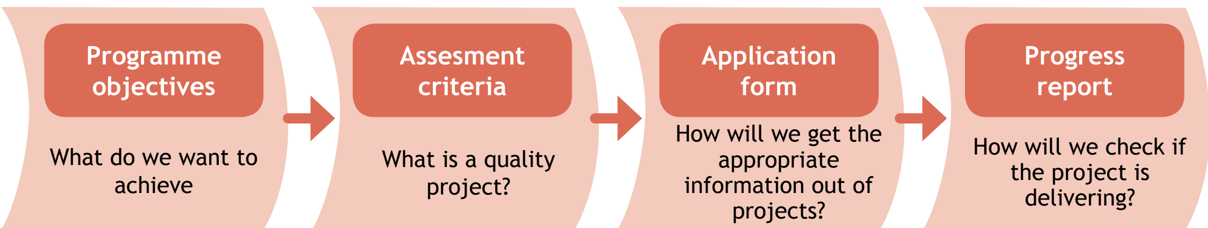
[1] Analysed only in programmes using English as a programme language or having their documents translated also into English.

3 Main assessment and application form categories

An effective set of assessment criteria should guide applicants, assessors and decision makers towards submitting and selecting projects which have the highest potential to fulfil programme objectives. This step should not be viewed in isolation, but it needs to be linked to the establishment of programme objective and the development of application and report forms.

In order to obtain information needed, the precise questions need to be on the application forms. To ensure the necessary link, the application form should be developed after the assessment criteria has been decided on and approved. Once the programme implementation process is under way, programme objectives will need further reflection in order to ensure that the project is being implemented towards the targets, which have been initially set and approved. This means that also project-reporting forms are a good way to ensure that programme objectives are fulfilled through the lifetime of selected projects.

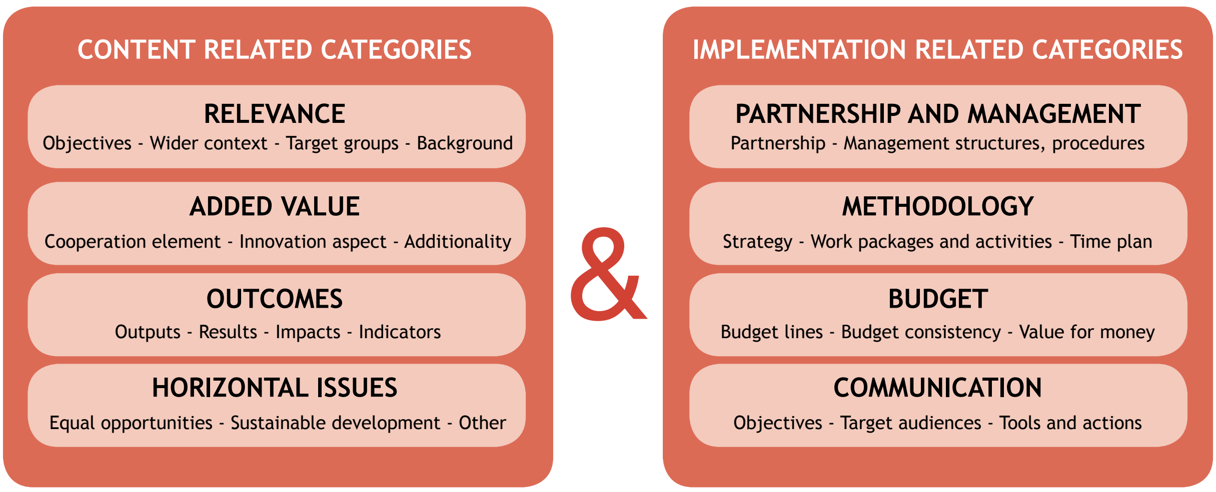
Figure 2: The process



Based on the analysis of assessment criteria and application forms in different programmes, eight main assessment categories were identified and arranged in two groups - content-related and implementation-related categories. Many programmes group their assessment criteria in a similar way, although some do not use any division. The first group, **content-related categories**, answers the question "What will be achieved and why?" The second, **implementation-related categories**, focuses on "How will the project be implemented and how will the resources be used?"

The categories are listed as they usually appear in the application forms and offer a selection of assessment and application form questions. First, the assessment questions were grouped and then, the application form questions requiring the same information were added. These types of questions are most commonly used in the programmes, nevertheless in some questions the terminology has been changed for common understanding. Many questions are relevant for more than one category, but for the overview to be more user-friendly, we have placed them where they belong best.

Figure 3: Assessment and application form categories



3.1 Content-related categories

3.1.1 Relevance

Relevance refers to checking the relevance of the relationship between the project's objectives and the programme objectives (to what extent the project contributes to the achievement of the programmes objectives) and wider context. The main challenge is to assess if, as well as to what extent, the project will contribute to the achievement of the programme objectives. Some programmes made an attempt to identify different levels of project's contribution to the achievement of priority objectives, so they have also developed assessment criteria per priority, based on areas of intervention (e.g. To what extent does the project promote development of business clusters and centres of excellence?).

When assessing the wider context of the project, programmes ask for at least an explanation of its contribution to the Lisbon and Gothenburg agenda. Several programmes additionally assess the consistency with other European, national, regional, or local strategies and/or agendas. However, the programme strategy itself must be in accordance with all relevant agendas and strategies. Therefore, if the project is in line with the programme, it should also be with the agendas and strategies. Sometimes it is expected for projects not to know, in detail, what their wider objectives are, especially smaller cross-border projects. It is advised to first decide why a programme needs such information and then how detailed it should be.

In this category the background of the project (where the idea came from) in the relation to the target groups' needs (for whom is the project intended) and the prior work completed (not to overlap or to repeat activities) is checked to verify the need for a project.

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Core question

Why and how is the project relevant to the programme area?

Table 5: Types of assessment and application form questions for category "Relevance"

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Objectives • How relevant is the project to the programme (consistency with the programme objectives / priorities)? • Are objectives specific enough in defining what needs to be achieved? • Are objectives measurable? Will it be possible to measure whether the objectives have been achieved? • Is it possible to achieve (time and resources, external factors) the objectives within the project lifetime? **Cohesion policy; Lisbon and Gothenburg Agendas; national, regional, local strategies and polices; EU policies** • To what extent is the theme tackled clearly in line with ...? • To what extent will the project contribute to ...?	**Objectives** • Define project objectives (global and specific). • How will the project help to achieve the programme's objectives? • Describe the project objective's contribution to achieving the objectives of the relevant Priority and Area of Intervention. **Strategies and policies** • Contribution to the strengthening of the economic capacity of the programme area – Lisbon Agenda • Contribution to the sustainable development – Gothenburg Agenda (or EU Sustainable Development Strategy) • Consistency with the local, regional and national policies • Coherence and compatibility with the other EU policies (e.g. Cohesion Policy) • Relation to the EU regulations in relation to the selected Priority

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Target groups • How well are relevant target groups defined? Is it clear for whom the project is intended? • How much potential does the proposal have to make a difference and will it have a lasting impact on target groups? • To what extent are the results relevant for the target group's needs? Can target groups make use of the outputs/results for concrete activities? **Background** • What evidence is there of real demand for the project, of addressing a gap in the programme area? • What evidence is there that the project will vitally contribute to the needs of the programme? • To what extent is the proposal expected to provide a significant and sustainable contribution in solving the problem targeted? • Is the issue focused enough?	**Target groups** • Who needs the outcomes of this project and who will benefit from them (including indirect beneficiaries)? • How will the target groups benefit from the project outcomes? • How were the target groups consulted during project development (if relevant)? **Background** • What is the need/reason for proposing this project? • What problem(s) and/or issue(s) will be addressed? • How were the problem(s) and/or issue(s) identified (consultation with target groups, research outcomes etc.)? • What has been done in the past to address these needs?

In the next table, an interesting approach to asking projects to indicate their consistency with Lisbon and Gothenburg agendas is presented (example form North Sea Region Programme).

Table 6: Example from North Sea Region Programme

Please indicate which of the following classifications applies to the project:			
The project contributes to the aims of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy[2] and the Lisbon Strategy in a way that:	high	low	neutral
Economic policy supports social progress and	☐	☐	☐
the project promotes a prosperous, innovative, knowledge-rich, competitive and eco-efficient economy for increasing economic growth, more and better jobs and	☐	☐	☐
it makes Europe and its regions a more attractive place to work and invest.	☐	☐	☐
Social policy underpins economic performance and	☐	☐	☐
the project promotes a democratic, socially inclusive, cohesive, healthy, safe and just society.	☐	☐	☐
Environmental policy is cost-effective and	☐	☐	☐
ensures the improvement of the quality of life by tackling environmental pollution and promoting sustainable consumption and production	☐	☐	☐
Economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection go hand in hand, by promoting:	☐	☐	☐
the integration of considerations in these three spheres so that they reinforce each other	☐	☐	☐
the coherence between European Union policies as well as between local, regional, national and global actions.	☐	☐	☐

[2] The European Council of June 2006 adopted an ambitious and comprehensive, renewed Sustainable Development Strategy for an enlarged EU. It builds on the Gothenburg strategy of 2001 and is the result of an extensive review process which started in 2004.

3.1.2 Added value

Within cooperation programs, the question of added value is addressed in many different ways. On the application form, it is reflected in either the basic question of "What is the added value of the project?" or the questions are formed in relation to other project dimensions, e.g.:

- value in terms of investment or innovation;
- value of the cooperation or of the partnership;
- value to the already completed projects.

When assessing **added value**, it usually encompasses: (1) the socio-economic effect the project will have, (2) the added value of deploying cooperation, (3) the added value of using EU funds (the so-called additionality element of the structural funds). Therefore we have divided this category in these three sub-categories and added questions related to the project's relationship to other projects and programmes.

The **cooperation element** is assessed from two different perspectives: (1) the need for the cooperation – why the objectives cannot be reached without cross border or transnational cooperation, and (2) the value that the cooperation brings – what effect will the cooperation have on the partnership and project results. To determine the intensity of cooperation the four cooperation criteria (joint development, joint implementation, joint financing, joint staffing) are used.

As there were many projects implemented in the cooperation programmes so far, some programmes assess project's relationship with other projects, either running or closed. Projects are asked to state whether and how they will use results from previous projects and how they will make alliances with projects implemented within different programmes, either national or international.

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Core question
How valuable is the project for the programme area? Where does it make a difference?

Table 7: Types of assessment and application form questions for category "Added value"

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Socio-economic effect • How big / significant is the impact of the results on the programme area? **Cooperation element** • How well is the need for cooperation demonstrated and how credible is the assurance of implementation? • Do the activities lay ground for the development of a sound (new) network among the institutional actors beyond the duration of the project? • How well are the four cooperation criteria demonstrated in the project proposal?	**Socio-economic effect** • Describe cross-border/transnational values of outcomes either due to practical use by the project target groups or by being used as a model solution which can be transferred to other locations. **Cooperation element** • Why is cross-border (CBC) / transnational (TNC) cooperation necessary for the achievement of expected results? • Explain why the project objectives cannot be efficiently reached at national, regional or local level. • CBC: Describe in what way the cross-border effect is demonstrated. • TNC: Describe the intersectoral and multidisciplinary dimension of the project related to the objectives of the programme. • Indicate which four cooperation criteria the project meets and explain how.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Additionality • To what extent does the project show itself to be additional in the sense that the public intervention will add to what would otherwise be done? **Other programmes and projects** • Is the project an addition to projects already implemented in the programme area? • Would it be better (content wise) for a project to be financed by a different programme – national/EU? • Should a project be a continuation of a project, does it show a clear need for this extension and also demonstrate that activities/outcomes do not overlap? • Is there no overlap with other projects?	**Additionality** • In what way would the project be implemented without public intervention? **Other programmes and projects** • Explain the relationship (links and synergies) of the project with other projects and activities at national, regional, local or community level. • How you plan to use the results of previous projects (list the specific result(s) and specify how the results will be used)? • How will you cooperate with running or applying projects?

3.1.3 Outcomes

Outcomes in cooperation programmes refer to outputs, results and impacts of a project. They usually appear in two different places within the application form: as a description of what will be achieved and as indicators, mostly predefined by the programme. It is important to measure what needs are to be measured, not just what is measurable. What can be measured is not always relevant, which means also using qualitative measures.

Measuring programme success relies on setting up a strong link between programme and project indicators. To secure this the programme has to establish a system that efficiently links outcomes and indicators in the application form. An example is presented in the table below.

Table 8: Example of programme and project indicators links

Priority result	Project result	Project result indicators
Strengthened international performance of innovation sources and improved links to SMEs	Increased transnational research activity of SMEs in different fields of energy techniques in the project area	Number of entrepreneurs and SMEs taking part in transnational research and development projects carried out by the R&D organisations participating in the project
		Number of transnational research or development projects in the participating R&D organisations designed in co-operation with SMEs

In order to set realistic targets, projects could be given the opportunity to quantify some indicators after the project approval, or to even set new or different indicators based on discussions with the programme.

Many programmes are also interested in the durability and transferability of the project results. Most project results can be durable (used after project closure by project partners or different target groups); however, many of them cannot be transferred to other organisations/regions/countries because they address a specific issue or a problem in programme area.

? **Core question**

To what extent will the project deliver outcomes contributing to the programme's objectives?

Table 9: Types of assessment and application form questions for category "Outcomes"

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Outcomes • Are outcomes clearly defined, realistic (achievable) and quantified? • Is it likely that the expected outcomes can be achieved through the proposed methodology and planned activities? • Are the outcomes durable (durability) – if not, is it justified? • Are outputs and results applicable and replicable elsewhere (transferability)? • Are the outcomes in accordance with the selected target groups and meeting their needs? **Indicators** • Are the chosen indicators in accordance with the expected outcomes and proposed activities? • Is description of indicators adequate (description, measurement, baseline and target value)? • Are there any unrealistic indicators (not achievable)? • Are any indicators missing?	**Outcomes / Indicators** • Predefined indicators to choose from • Adding additional indicators • Description of project results and outputs • Description of long-term effects of the project **Usability of outcomes (if relevant)** • How, when and by whom will the outputs be used? • How will the durability of the project's results be ensured? • How will the project results be financially and institutionally maintained after project closure? • How can the project's results be directly or indirectly used in other areas or by other target groups in the future?

3.1.4 Horizontal issues

Programmes have mostly selected three types of horizontal issues: equal opportunities and non-discrimination, sustainable development, often covering only the environmental aspect, and innovation. Other horizontal issues that appear mainly in cross border projects are: human resource development, innovation, information and communication technology. Some programmes even have area specific horizontal issues, such as mountain area, maritime issues, etc.

In most cases, projects are asked to indicate if a certain horizontal issue (1) has a main focus in the project, (2) is positive or neutral and (3) to justify it. Some programmes offer also a possibility to indicate negative impacts that a project might have, but it must be explained how these will be mitigated. When assessing horizontal issues, some programmes use the same scoring system as other assessment criteria, while in others, scoring only matters when deciding between projects with the same final score.

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Core question

Are the project activities in line with horizontal issues?

Table 10: Types of assessment and application form questions for category "Horizontal issues"

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Equal opportunities and Sustainable development • Is the positive impact relevant and well justified? • Has the applicant considered any potentially negative impacts the project may have and have they proposed any steps or actions to mitigate these? • In the case of any investment projects, have basic environmental standards been incorporated into the design of the proposed project? **Innovative aspects** • Does the project demonstrate new solutions that go beyond the existing practice in the sector/ programme area/participating countries? • Does the innovative aspect of the proposal regard one of the following: theme of intervention, the state of the art, the composition of the partnership, the working methods used and/or capitalisation initiatives? • What evidence is there that the approach is really innovative? • Was the project able to avoid duplication of existing work?	**Equal opportunities and Sustainable development** • How will the project theme and/or day-to-day management address the specific horizontal issue directly and indirectly? • Have key target groups, dealing with these issues, been meaningfully involved in the project development and how will the project outcomes positively affect them? • What activities are proposed for the mitigation of potential negative effects? • If the project involves investments, please provide relevant documentation which deals with environmental aspects. **Innovative aspects** • What is innovative in your project? / Which elements of your project do you consider innovative? • In what way, or how different, are the project and its expected results from the results already achieved in other current or past projects?

Equal opportunities are mainly looked at from the perspective of equality between men and women. However the following should be considered as well:

- equality between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation,
- between persons with a disability and persons without and
- between persons with dependants and persons without.

When assessing or describing **sustainable development**, all three components (economically viable, ecologically sound and socially acceptable activities) must to be taken into account. When focusing more on environmental issues, more detailed questions can be raised within the application form, e.g. the project needs to indicate to what extent (low, high, neutral) the project will impact different environmental features such as biodiversity, flora and fauna, soil, water, air and climatic factors, landscape, energy efficiency, use of renewable and non-renewable resources, adaptation to climate change, transport demands, accessibility and mobility. However, if the programme would like to know more about the extent of the impact, a scale such as the following can be offered to projects[3]:

- Activities simply comply with environmental regulations.
- Actions that deal with pollution from past activities or actions that promote physical regeneration.
- Actions that put in place environmental infrastructure to reduce the negative environmental impact of development activities.
- Actions that help organisations to meet increasing environmental standards.
- Actions that improve the resource efficiency ("eco-efficiency") of existing activities.
- Actions that support, as well as encourage, new types of activity or behaviour using fewer environmental resources, or producing less pollution, than existing activities in the area.

[3] Example adapted from a practice used in CBC Northern Ireland, the Border Region of Ireland and Western Scotland programme.

Innovative aspects are considered as a horizontal issue in many programmes, besides the fact that innovation as such, is also a priority in many of them. This difference in practical approach can actually be traced to theoretical discussions, where innovation is distinguished from the innovative aspects. In general, an innovation is an effort of one or more individuals/organisations to create economic profit through a qualitative change[4]. This is why, one could expect, it is set as a priority. In cases of horizontal issues, the element of economic profit is missing, but rather the focus is on innovative features, leading to new approaches, methodologies and practices. It does not seem that these considerations, from the definition, are part of the programming processes and for this document, such a discussion may be too theoretical. Regardless, it is worth to bear them in mind, as they can shed new light on how to work with innovation.

3.2 Implementation-related categories

3.2.1 Partnership and management

The partnership and management category is divided in two sub-categories: (1) project partners and partnerships as such, and (2) content related and financial management of the project. When assessing both, especially structures and procedures, one need to take into account project and partnership size, as "more" is not always justified. The size and composition of the partnership must be derived from project objectives and activities, not the other way around.

Previous **experiences** in implementing and/or managing EU-funded projects, preferably cooperation projects, are often assessed. External managers can be hired to manage the project; specific thematic experts within partner organisations are needed for actual implementation of the project. Some programmes prefer experienced partnerships which have worked together before while others encourage the inclusion of inexperienced partners within established partnerships to promote cooperation.

When assessing **partnership** quality, the following aspects are important: intensity, composition, relevance, size and geographical spread. Intensity relates to the partners' adequate involvement in project implementation and the gaining of benefits from it. Relevance, size and composition of the partnership as well as its geographical spread strongly depend on the project objectives and activities. This means including partners from different levels (national, regional, local) and sectors (thematic, private-public).

Management deals with the question of whether or not the partnership will be able to manage the project according to the project needs and the programme's rules. There are different roles in projects to secure a sound management of the project: content manager, financial manager, work package leaders, committee leader, etc. Not all projects need several different multi-level structures in order to manage the project; it depends on the size of partnership and project. Management procedures are, on the other hand, more dependent on the programme's rules, which need to be respected.

[4] Joseph Schumpeter

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Core question

To what extent is the partnership competent to deliver envisaged outcomes?

Table 11: Types of assessment and application form questions for category “Partnership and management”

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Quality of partnership • Do partners have proven experience and competence in the thematic field concerned? • Is there a balance between well-experienced and less experienced partners in the field tackled by the project regarding project experiences? • Are partners proportionally involved in project development and implementation? • Is there evidence that all partners are playing a significant role in the partnership and getting a real benefit from it? • How intensive is the cooperation (four joint cooperation + other criteria)? • Is there an appropriate balance of partners with respect to the levels, sectors, territory?	**Quality of partnership** • Describe the relevance of the chosen partnership in relation to the objectives of the project and its implementation. • What are the partners’ competences and experiences in the field tackled? • Describe the cross-border/transnational experience which the partner has in terms of participation / management of cooperation projects. • Relevance of the partner in the project: How will the partner contribute to the content of the cooperation and benefit from it?
Management (structures, procedures) • Does the proposed core team of the Lead Partner have adequate experience for managing the project? • Are management structures in line with the project size, duration and needs? • Are management structures and procedures clear, transparent and fair? Are all partners involved in decision-making? • How well explained is the issue of how the partners will monitor, coordinate, control and execute different tasks? • How are risk and quality management ensured? • Does the project management include regular meetings among project partners, clear responsibilities of the partners involved and a transparent internal communication system? • Are the administrative and financial management procedures explained and are they adequate?	**Management (structures, procedures)** • Describe the experience and skills of the core management team. • Describe main coordination tasks and the way the day-to-day management of the project will be organized (content and financial management). • Decision-making, monitoring and evaluation structure of the project; competences and procedures. • Describe the expected constraints and risks related to project implementation. • Describe the finance management structure and foreseen procedures including monitoring, day to day management, roles and responsibilities of each partner.

3.2.2 Methodology (work plan)

Methodology discusses checking the internal logic of the project. It refers to the work plan and its links to project objectives and results. Consistency of the entire project is checked, based on the description of project’s strategy and methodology.

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Core question
Will the chosen methodology enable successful implementation of the project?

Table 12: Types of assessment and application form questions for category "Methodology"

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Needed • Are all the activities within the work packages needed? Are any overlapping? • Are activities balanced at appropriate levels (national, regional, local)? • Are all outputs needed to achieve project objectives? **Logical** • Are project objectives adequate to the needs of the target groups? • Are the activities relevant to the objectives? • Will planned results lead to achievement of the project objectives? • Do the proposed work packages/activities lead to the proposed outputs? • Are work packages logically inter-related? • Do activities of the partners correspond with descriptions of their main activities in the project? • How clear and logical is the sharing of tasks? • Are activities and outputs in a logical time-sequence? **Feasible** • Is the overall methodology realistic and consistent? • Is it feasible that the project will be completed in the proposed time and with proposed resources?	**Strategy and methodology** • Describe the strategy and methodology of the project's implementation in order to achieve each project objective. • Time plan: work packages, activities, months, years, budget, and partners. **Work packages and activities** • Most common in work packages: - title - timeframe - responsible and involved partners - geographical location - strategic focus and/or main objectives - description and approach - activities and milestones (also: activities outside programme area and in third countries, detailed activities of single project partner) - qualitative and quantitative description of the outputs and results + follow-up indicators - budget per work package (also: estimated % of total project budget allocated to WP, costs per activity, common/shared costs) - other: links to other work packages • Work packages (usually max. 8): WP1 Project preparation (if eligible), WP2 Project management, WP3 Information and Publicity

Many programmes ask for detailed descriptions of each work package and in a different way, e. g. not many request work package objectives or budget per activity, but almost all ask for descriptions of activities and a list of involved partners. On one hand, it forces the projects to really think through the entire project, but on the other hand projects lose flexibility and this loss could inhibit the full achievement of project objectives.

3.2.3 Budget

Project budgets tell us how many financial resources are needed in order for the objectives to be achieved. Budget proportionality and value for money are mainly assessed. In most programmes, the budget is checked in relation to the proposed activities, not the envisaged results.

To be able to assess the costs of activities, a more detailed budget is needed, which is the case in most cross border programmes. Very detailed budgets in transnational programmes are rare because of the bigger partnerships and higher project costs. Although there is less de-commitment risk and it is easier to assess when planning is detailed, the more general budgets allow for more flexible implementation of the project.

However project budgets need to be checked carefully, because often we spot:

- unrealistic figures or spread of funds across the project lifetime,
- uneven split of funds across partnership,
- partners not contributing to co-financing,

- excessive staff costs and/or external expert costs which often leads to risk of ineligible expenditure,
- threat to value for money,
- over-budgeting and de-commitment.

Some inconsistencies in the project are sometimes justified due to the different cost levels in different countries and other project specifics. An extra field can be added to the budget section in application forms, where a project could explain why some inconsistencies have occurred.

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Core question

Is the budget requested in reasonable relation with proposed outcomes?

Table 13: Types of assessment and application form questions for category "Budget"

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
Balance • Is the budget reasonable and does it possess good value for money (budget versus activities and outcomes)? • Is there a balanced and realistic financial contribution between partners? • How suitable are the expenditures in comparison with the size and the financial capacities of each partner? • Are costs per year/period in line with project and programme dynamics? • Is the budget allocated for each WP appropriate and is there a balance between the WPs? • Are there any unclear or unrealistic costs?	**Budget summary** • Total budget • Co-financing table **Budget specifics** • Per WP, per partner, per period, per budget line • Separately for: ERDF, IPA and/or ENPI partners and partners outside programme area or EU • Budget for activities implemented outside EU or eligible area • Budget explanation / justification - if needed
Budget lines • Is there additionality of external expertise? • Are the need for transnational/cross-border investments and equipments shown? • Are there any excessive costs within budget lines, if so are they justified? Some examples: - staff costs do not exceed 40% of the total budget of the project - work package management max 10-15% - content work packages should encompass the majority of budget allocations - external expertise is lower than staff costs - travel costs are in line with proposed activities • Is there a reasonable sharing of common costs?	**Budget lines** • Most common budget lines: staff costs, external experts and services, travel and accommodation, meetings and events, promotion and publication, equipment and infrastructure, other (e.g. insurance) and financial charges and guarantees, overheads, general costs • Additional budget lines: in-kind contributions, revenues, VAT, ineligible costs • External experts and services - Explain the reasons why these activities cannot be implemented by the partnership with own resources. • Investment and equipment - Explain the cross border/transnational character of the investment. • Common costs - methodology for sharing costs

3.2.4 Communication

The communication element of project implementation is gaining importance, but the excessive or impropriate communication activities could also result in ineffective communication. Most programmes request a description of communication activities in one of the pre-defined work packages. However, a lack of emphasis put on assessing these activities, in relation to the project topic and results, was observed.

Not many project partners have communication experts on board. Therefore, it would be beneficial if the programmes offer more guidance on how to develop a communication strategy and what communication tools and methods would be appropriate for specific project topics.

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Core question

How will the project be effectively communicated?

Table 14: Types of assessment and application form questions for category "Communication"

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA (AC) What needs to be assessed?	APPLICATION FORM (AF) What information needs to be obtained?
• Are communication activities in line with: - project theme - target groups - proposed activities - proposed outcomes • Are all relevant target groups addressed? • Does the communication strategy include: - all partners - innovative and progressive (web-casting, blogs) communication techniques - explanations about ETC and EU	• List project's communication objectives. What is communication going to help you achieve? • List the main target audiences of the project and their main messages. • List the main communication tools and actions planned for the different target groups during the course of the project. • List the evaluation tools which will be used to sustain the effectiveness and intensity of both internal and external communication (e.g. questionnaires, web-statistics, etc).