

# Alpine Space programme

Evaluation of efficiency and effectiveness:  
application and selection procedures

14 | 20

Executive summary

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## Purpose and methodology

The Alpine Space 2014-2020 programme is half-way into its implementation and aims at understanding in how far its management settings are supporting the achievement of its goals. This evaluation ought to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of programme procedures, and whether they are fit for supporting the preparation, submission and selection of projects<sup>1</sup>. It looks at the services offered to applicants, at the functions and interplay of programme bodies, and at their capacity to address the needs of applicants and select projects meeting high qualitative standards. It aims at identifying areas of improvement or good practices in view of bettering the programme management and implementation in this 2014-2020 period. Findings from this evaluation are also meant to inform the design of a future Alpine Space programme post 2020.

This evaluation was conducted by a team of joint secretariat (JS) / managing authority (MA) staff members and external, independent evaluation experts. The JS ensured the overall coordination of work, performed the collection and analysis of the necessary information, with the MA's contribution. Activities where the need for functional separation was higher, such as interviews and moderation of focus groups, were conducted directly by the external experts who have also proofed the evaluation concept, the analysis carried out by the JS and have finally formulated recommendations.

Data sources for this evaluation include:

- administrative data and desk research
- a web survey to applicants
- focus group with beneficiaries (lead partners and partners)
- interviews to national coordinators, with the presence of alpine space contact points (ACP) where possible, as wells as to MA and JS staff members
- outcomes of previous evaluations of the Alpine Space programme.

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<sup>1</sup> The objectives and cornerstones of this evaluation were set in the programme evaluation plan, approved by the programme committee (PC) on 15-16 December 2015. Its content and methodology were then further detailed in an evaluation concept designed by the joint secretariat and the managing authority (JS and MA) with the support and review of external experts, and in coordination with the steering group on evaluation (ESG). The concept was approved by the PC on 29 November 2016. This evaluation focuses on application and selection procedures.



An as wide as possible range of stakeholders has been involved in the preparation and development of this evaluation: steering group on evaluation (ESG)<sup>2</sup>, that contributed to the design of this evaluation and reviewed this evaluation report;

- project applicants from both approved and rejected projects, that offered their perspective as end users and their proposals for improvement;
- national coordinators, ACP and staff members of the MA and JS, who expressed their opinions in interviews;
- external evaluation experts, who provided guidance, input and independent review.

Gathering the expertise and hearing the opinion of these stakeholders was key to the programme in view of improving its management, both in the short and long term. In this regard, it should be noted that some of the evaluation activities registered a limited response rate<sup>3</sup>.

## Features of the evaluation

### Evaluation questions

The aspects to be appraised and the relevant evaluation questions were set in the Alpine Space evaluation plan and the relevant evaluation concept. They tackle four main aspects:

- Support to applicants
- Application process
- Selection procedure
- Functioning and coordination of programme bodies

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<sup>2</sup> The ESG has been established in the year 2016. It has been set up with the objective of steering the overall programme evaluation and supporting the implementation of the evaluation plan. Its tasks range from providing input for the development of evaluation questions, to contributing to the definition of terms of reference for the selection of evaluation experts and to analysing the outcomes of evaluations (reports). The ESG is meant to represent the programme stakeholders and allow their participation in the implementation of the evaluation plan. It is composed of members of the PC, MA, JS and a national expert on evaluation (from the Italian national level) and also the EC is invited to join the group. Based on the partnership principle as stipulated in the EU code of conduct for ESI funds, the participation of programme stakeholders (e.g. from economic sector, civil society, etc.) to the ESG was encouraged (nominations from the Partner States). Coordination with the PC is ensured by the PC Chair and MA/JS.

<sup>3</sup> This applies to the survey that was addressed to all applicants participating in call 2. This comprised applicants whose proposals were selected/rejected in both step 1 and 2, thus covering a timespan of one year between the first submission of the project proposal and the invitation to the survey. The response rate was limited to 11% or 117 respondents.



The evaluation questions are the following:

Aspects	Evaluation questions
Support to applicants	1. How well are programme bodies (ACP and JS) supporting (potential) applicants in project generation?
Application process	2. How effective are application procedures? How well are application procedures targeting the programme objectives and envisaged results? In particular for the 2-step application process: how efficient is it for applicants and programme bodies; in how far is it supporting high quality projects to be submitted to the programme? Are there areas for improvement?
Selection procedure	3. In how far are the project assessment criteria and procedures as well as selection process sound, transparent and fair, aiming at high quality projects to be funded? 4. How well is the programme explaining to applicants the results of project evaluation and selection (be it approval or rejection) and supporting them for further improvement (in case of resubmission)?
Functioning and coordination of programme bodies	5. In how far are decision-making processes at programme level clear and transparent? 6. How are the interactions between the programme bodies organised? 7. Are their functions and responsibilities clearly established? 8. How effective is the coordination among these bodies? 9. How effective is the coordination with other Interreg programmes and EUSALP? 10. In which cases a better coordination is necessary?

## State of play of the programme implementation

The programme is half-way in its implementation period and has so far launched three calls for proposals, including an invitation for a EUSALP project. Whereas call 3 is still open, the other calls have been fully managed and closed, resulting in the approval of 33 projects and the commitment of 55% of the programme budget. All calls registered a high interest and a significant increase in the number of applications, compared to the 2007-2013 period. As many as 445 applications for funding have been received in these three calls of the 2014-2020 period against only 412 for the entire 2007-2013 period and its five calls for proposals. This represents an increase by 8% so far, which goes up to 65% when comparing a similar timeframe (i.e. the first two calls in both programme periods). Such an increase demonstrates the attractiveness of the programme. Because the programme budget for the co-financing of projects increased by only 7% across the two funding periods<sup>4</sup>, this also means that demand for funding exceeded by far the supply, thus leading to higher competition among applicants and a lower success rate than in the past.

<sup>4</sup> This includes both the ERDF allocation and national match funding, net of the technical assistance budget.



## Key findings of the analysis of efficiency and effectiveness

The outcomes and findings of the evaluation activities carried out are presented here along the evaluation questions set out in the programme evaluation plan and the relevant evaluation concept.

### Support to applicants

According to the evaluation findings, the programme is effective in supporting applicants in project development and satisfaction among them has increased compared with the 2007-2013 period. The support services offered to applicants at the stage of project development is tailored to different needs and levels of knowledge of the programme (including for newcomers).

Direct feedback and individual consultations are considered by beneficiaries as the most useful support in improving the project proposals. The support from ACPs is most useful as regards project generation in the first step of the application procedure, whereas the JS is most useful in providing assistance in the second step. The satisfaction on ACP support varies from country to country, due to an unequal availability and lack of uniform messages provided to applicants.

Programme events are well-attended and appreciated. Match-making events should be provided on a larger scale to help especially newcomers better understand the programme expectations and to find new partners.

The programme website offers a good repository of documents for applicants but its organisation could be reviewed and additional functions added so as to ease its use. Overall, the programme documents are largely used by applicants, with the exception of the e-monitoring system (eMS) guidance being under-used. Programme documents provide relevant and useful information for the development of project proposals. The use of e-tools (e.g. tutorials) could be further explored. The project idea and partner search tools are meant specifically for newcomers, and are less used by the majority of (other) applicants.

### Application process

The programme is successful in attracting applications and (potential) beneficiaries. The number of requests for funding has increased by 65% compared to the previous programme (first two calls of both programmes). Lower success rates of proposals are linked to greater attractiveness of the Alpine Space 2014-2020 programme and the increase in the number of applications against a level of funding which has not proportionally increased.



Programme procedures are mostly effective in targeting the programme objectives and envisaged results in terms of specific objectives and types of beneficiaries (including private partners). Measures such as thematic terms of reference have proved successful in attracting proposals in areas of particular interest for the programme, e.g. addressing migration challenges and/or tackling the underachievement of some of its specific objectives, although there is still room for improvement in this regard. However, two of the seven specific objectives of the programme are under-achieved, namely specific objective 2.2 – “Increase options for low carbon mobility and transport” and specific objective 3.1 – “Sustainably valorise Alpine Space cultural and natural heritage”.

Despite increased administrative costs at programme level and the length of the procedure, the 2-step application adopted by the programme is preferred to a single-step procedure both by applicants and by programme body members. It keeps low the administrative burden for applicants and improves the quality of proposals. Stakeholders consider the application procedure as time-consuming but (on average) not more than in other Interreg programmes. The time for the preparation and submission of the application form (AF) is also overall considered as sufficient. The limited space in some sections of the AF (work plan) constrains the applicants to vulgarise and shorten the content description.

The programme has reduced administrative burden for applicants. The application has been made completely paperless for them, through the use of the eMS (developed by INTERACT). However, simplification could be pushed forward for instance in the rationalisation of national requirements. National requirements indeed represent a source of additional complexity for the applicants. It is in particular difficult for the lead partner (LP) to monitor the process of verification of all the requirements, which differ from country to country and from step 1 to step 2.

## Selection procedure

The assessment criteria are clear and coherent for a majority of programme stakeholders. The programme expectations could be further clarified as regards the relevance of the partnership and transnationality. Terms of reference could give more specific guidance to support applicants in delivering high quality projects. Thematic expertise could help the JS to assess the quality of projects proposals in specific fields (e.g. innovation).

The results of the selection procedure are adequately explained to applicants through a comprehensive assessment report, which is the main source of information on the selection outcomes. The transparency and harmonisation of the process could be enhanced to further ensure an equal access to information to all applicants.



## Functioning and coordination of programme bodies

The functioning and coordination of programme bodies throughout the evaluation and selection procedure is perceived as effective by all the stakeholders. The coordination between JS and ACP could still be reinforced. Regarding external coordination, the programme is well connected to relevant stakeholders of the cooperation area and outside, such as other Interreg programme and the EU Strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP).

## Recommendations from the external evaluators

### Support to applicants

In general stakeholders are satisfied with the quality of the programme documents, website and of the online tools.

Direct feedback and individual consultations are considered by beneficiaries as the most useful support in improving the project proposals. Nonetheless, room for improvement was identified: the programme (both at transnational and national/regional level) should make additional efforts in ensuring an as much as possible harmonised approach and similar support to applicants.

From the evaluators perspective, support to applicants could be further improved by investing additional resources (if available) in:

- additional opportunities for applicants for direct consultations;
- increasing the support/guidance provided by the JS to the ACP;
- more match-making events to support newcomers in partners' search.

### Application process

Programme authorities shall monitor negative effects which could derive from the low success rate, in particular the risk of discouraging potential applicants under specific objectives SO 2.2. and 3.1.

Programme authorities shall verify to which extent difficulties in attracting partners under SO 2.2. and SO 3.1 derive from the quality of the programme communication/support or whether instead from the fact that the two SOs do not reflect the current needs/challenges of the programme area.





Despite the increased administrative costs at programme level and length of the application procedure, the 2-step approach preferred to the single-step procedure and shall be maintained for regular calls. Any modification to the AF (i.e. increase of the space available in some sections) shall take into account possible effects in terms of increase of the time needed to assess the proposal.

Regarding national requirements, any effort to harmonise the approaches adopted in the different partner countries, and reducing the number of requirements, would lessen the complexity of the application process for applicants.

## Selection procedure

The possibility to further reduce the number of criteria adopted should be verified. Even if criteria are clear and coherent, the assessment process is still complex due to the significant number of criteria to be considered.

In the case of specific fields (e.g. innovation), thematic expertise could help the JS to assess the quality of projects proposals.

Applicants are generally satisfied with the explanations provided on the outcomes of the evaluation and selection procedure but transparency could be enhanced. It appears of particular relevance that all applicants receive the same level of information.

## Functioning and coordination of programme bodies

Regarding coordination between the programme bodies, analysing the needs for further improvements in the coordination between JS and ACP may be beneficial.

Regarding external coordination and in the perspective of the elaboration of the future programme, programme authorities shall ensure the coordination with the initiatives of EUSALP and shall stimulate opportunities for strategic discussions in the programme committee.



## List of acronyms

ACP	Alpine Space contact points
AF	Application form
eMS	Electronic monitoring system
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESG	Evaluation steering group
EU	European Union
EUSALP	European macro-regional strategy for the Alps
LP	Lead partner
MA	Managing authority
PC	Programme committee