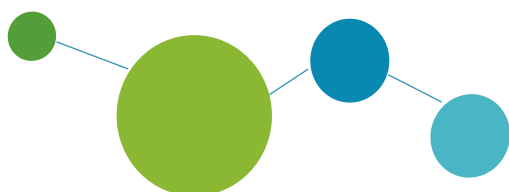




EVALUATION PLAN

Interreg Programme Slovenia-Hungary
for the programme period 2021-2027



CONTENT:

1	INTRODUCTION	2
2	OBJECTIVES AND COVERAGE	3
2.1	<i>Evaluation objectives</i>	3
2.2	<i>Coverage</i>	3
2.3	<i>Existing knowledge.....</i>	4
3	COORDINATION AND IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK	5
3.1	<i>Roles and responsibilities</i>	5
3.2	<i>Synergies with other programmes and initiatives</i>	6
3.3	<i>Sources of evaluation</i>	7
3.4	<i>Use and communication of evaluation results.....</i>	7
3.5	<i>Quality assurance.....</i>	8
3.6	<i>Financial resources.....</i>	8
4	TIMING AND PLANNED EVALUATIONS	9
4.1	<i>Efficiency and effectiveness evaluation of the programme</i>	9
4.1.1	<i>Timing.....</i>	9
4.1.2	<i>Focus.....</i>	9
4.1.3	<i>Main guiding questions</i>	9
4.1.4	<i>Sources of data.....</i>	10
4.1.5	<i>Possible methods</i>	10
4.1.6	<i>Estimated budget.....</i>	10
4.2	<i>Ongoing impact evaluation.....</i>	10
4.2.1	<i>Timing.....</i>	10
4.2.2	<i>Focus.....</i>	11
4.2.3	<i>Main guiding questions</i>	11
4.2.4	<i>Sources of data.....</i>	11
4.2.5	<i>Possible methods</i>	12
4.2.6	<i>Estimated budget.....</i>	12

1 INTRODUCTION

The evaluation plan of the Interreg programme Slovenia-Hungary (IP SI-HU) is a strategic document that sets out the evaluation strategy for the entire implementation of the programme in the period 2021-2027, taking into account lessons learnt from evaluations made in the previous programme periods. The present Evaluation Plan defines the objectives of the foreseen evaluations and sets their operational framework including timeline and type, methodological approach and data needs well as assessment of needed budget. It also outlines the roles and responsibilities of the programme bodies in planning evaluations and implementing follow-up actions that are based on evaluation outcomes.

In operational terms, the implementation of the evaluation plan supports the programme implementation by providing and ensuring:

- a smooth evaluation process and providing an evaluation framework during implementation,
- timely and relevant evaluations regarding the programme's implementation phase and reporting requirements towards the European Commission (EC),
- appropriate financial and personnel resources for evaluation activities,
- relevant information regarding programme progress,
- feedback from stakeholders (programme structures, beneficiaries, target groups, etc.) regarding the implementation of the programme (calls, implementation of projects, reporting, etc.),
- proposal of recommendations for further implementation of the programme,
- follow-up and communication of the evaluation findings/results.

The ultimate purpose of the independent programme evaluations is contribution to:

- assessing and, if necessary, adjusting the delivery system of the programme with a view to better efficiency and effectiveness, so that high quality of services throughout all stages of the project life-cycle is guaranteed,
- revisiting the intervention logic by analysing the project results and deriving the programme impact with a view to relevance, sustainability, and added value of the co-financing in order to ensure and document that the programme delivers visible and sustainable outcomes.

The Evaluation Plan of the IP SI-HU was developed in compliance with the provisions of Article 35 of the Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on specific provisions for the European territorial cooperation goal (Interreg) supported by the European Regional Development Fund and external financing instruments (*Interreg regulation*).

In addition, the evaluation plan builds on the Commission's guidance document:

- Commission Staff Working Document (SWD (2021) 198 final): Performance, monitoring and evaluation of the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the Just Transition Fund in 2021-2027, Brussels, 8.7.2021¹,

¹ [https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=SWD\(2021\)198&lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=SWD(2021)198&lang=en)

- Guidance Document on Monitoring and Evaluation - European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund, Concepts and Recommendations, March 2014².

According to the regulation, the Evaluation Plan shall be drawn up by the Managing Authority (MA) and submitted to the Monitoring Committee (MC) no later than one year after the adoption of the programme for approval. The IP SI-HU was adopted by the EC on 14 November 2022. The present Evaluation Plan was drafted by the MA with the assistance of the Joint Secretariat (JS) and submitted for approval to the MC at its 2nd Monitoring Committee meeting held on 11-12 September 2023. Following its adoption, it will be sent to the EC for information through the System for Fund Management in the European Union (SFC2021). The Evaluation Plan is a public document, prepared and adopted in English language, and will be available on the programme website www.si-hu.eu.

2 OBJECTIVES AND COVERAGE

2.1 EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The programme area between Slovenia and Hungary has identified several potentials, needs and challenges expressed by the actors in the programme area that clearly show that the territory is facing important challenges that can be jointly addressed. The programme is focusing on a limited number of thematic areas and will increase the level of cross-border cooperation capacity, new development and common solutions to identified challenges.

The overall aims of the programme are to reduce territorial disparities in the cross-border region, to drive change and take opportunity of new development trends by pooling resources across the national borders in order to be better prepared for the future and to alleviate border obstacles to better cooperate across national borders in specific areas.

2.2 COVERAGE

This Evaluation Plan covers the cross-border cooperation programme IP SI-HU. The programme is funded from the ERDF. The plan covers the entire programme period taking into account the programme's efficiency and effectiveness and its impact, taking into account that at latest by end of June 2029 the impact evaluation of the programme has to be completed.

The Slovenia-Hungary Interreg programme area for the period 2021-2027 includes the following four eligible regions (with NUTS codes):

- Pomurje (SI031) and Podravje (SI032) statistical regions from Slovenia and
- the counties of Vas (HU222) and Zala (HU223) from Hungary.

The programme area of the IP SI-HU overlaps with other transnational as well as with some cross-border programmes. However, a joint evaluation plan or joint evaluations with other programmes are not considered feasible as geographical and thematic overlaps with other programmes are only partial and as intervention logic differs between programmes.

² http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2014/working/wd_2014_en.pdf

This plan sets out the minimum evaluation activities. Should it become evident during the programme implementation that additional evaluation activities would be necessary to better meet the evaluation objectives; this plan might be adapted on the initiative of the MC or MA.

2.3 EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

The evaluations should consider the outcomes of previous evaluations and relevant analyses carried out by the programme in the previous periods and during the programming process for the present period. The listed documents are available on the programme website.

The main reference document for the evaluations is the approved **Interreg Programme Slovenia-Hungary 2021-2027**, where the programme strategy, priorities, objectives, indicators, financing and basic programme structures and procedures are described.

The conclusions of **the analysis of the programme area including the SWOT analysis** which was carried out by external experts in the course of drafting the Interreg Programme Slovenia-Hungary in 2021 are integrated in Section 1 of the approved Interreg Programme.

The **Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Interreg Programme Slovenia-Hungary** was published in 2022. In the beginning it provides an overview of the main characteristics of the strategic environmental assessment with the vision and mission of the programme, its priorities and financing. In the following parts it further includes the current state of the environment in the programme area and the likely evolution thereof with(out) implementation of the programme and recommended measures to protect, reduce or prevent the negative effects of programme implementation; it concludes with the monitoring measures.

The Methodological document on indicators was prepared by the programme and published in 2022 to describe the methodology behind the definition of the indicator baselines.

The **Final impact evaluation of the Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovenia-Hungary for the period 2014-2020** was conducted by external experts and published in 2022. The programme was evaluated alongside several evaluation tasks: direct comparison of programme objectives and results, evaluation of programme/project implementation using the programme/project indicators, evaluation of the programme strategy and analysis of the relevance of project results, evaluation of programme communication activities and functioning of programme structures.

Besides the impact evaluation, the ongoing evaluation of the previous programme performed by independent external evaluators, focussed on the assessment of the programme effectiveness and efficiency, assessing the progress of project implementation in relation to thematic, territorial and policy-oriented achievements. Recommendations addressed both the implementation of the ongoing programme and the design of the new Interreg Programme. Among others, recommendations for the new programming period consisted in ensuring an optimal match between stakeholders' needs and programme funding, simplification and harmonisation of implementing/reporting procedures, intensive capacity building for applicants fostering a harmonised understanding of indicators, etc.

Last but not least, also **the Communication Strategy for the Interreg Programme Slovenia-Hungary** which sets out the objectives of the programme communication, its target groups and partners as well as means to reach them should be considered and evaluated.

3 COORDINATION AND IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

3.1 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The MA and the MC are key programme structures in the evaluation process. The Interreg regulation mentions the MA as the main responsible actor and the MC in a supervising function.

Monitoring Committee

The MC has a controlling and decisive role in the creation and implementation of the Evaluation Plan. All programme partners are represented in the MC and can therefore directly steer the evaluation process.

In accordance with Article 30 of the Interreg regulation, the MC approves the Evaluation Plan and possible subsequent amendments and revisions that might arise from emerging needs. The MC reviews the progress made in the implementation of the Evaluation Plan and examines the follow-up given to findings of evaluations.

Managing Authority

In accordance with Article 35 of the Interreg regulation, the MA has the responsibility to draw up an evaluation plan and submit it to the MC no later than one year after the adoption of the programme. The MA has to submit the evaluation plan, and any of its amendments approved by the MC, to the EC for information. The MA will ensure evaluations related to the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, and Union added value, with the aim to improve the quality of the design and implementation of the programme.

In accordance with Article 35, the MA shall ensure the necessary procedures to produce and collect the data necessary for evaluations. The supervision of the implementation of the planned evaluations lies in the responsibility of the MA. Explicitly, this means taking care of the evaluations, monitoring the transparency and correctness of the tendering procedures for the implementation of the respective evaluation by competent external evaluators, accompanying the drafting of the evaluation reports and ensuring appropriate follow-up. In addition, the MA enables the evaluators' access to the information needed for conducting evaluations as far as possible.

The MA will publish all evaluations on the programme website www.si-hu.eu.

Joint Secretariat

The functions of the JS include support and execution of all day to day necessary work in the field of evaluation. This includes work in the preparation, coordination and the ongoing revision of the Evaluation Plan and work in the design, coordination and monitoring of evaluations as well as reporting to the MC and the Commission. The JS also supports the external evaluators in gathering the necessary data for evaluations (from the e-Monitoring System (Jems), from beneficiaries, National authorities (NA), etc.) and conducts some basic analyses. The JS also takes over the coordinating role between the MA NAs and evaluators.

Experts

The Interreg regulation states that evaluations are to be carried out by experts (internal or external) that are functionally independent. The programme intends to guarantee an efficient use of the human and financial resources allocated to evaluation activities as well as to ensure ownership of such activities from the programme. Therefore, a mixed approach of internal and external expertise can be expected.

In case evaluation experts cannot be found within the institution, evaluations will be carried out by external experts especially when complex issues such as impact evaluations are concerned and when complex methodologies or data collection have to be applied and carried out. The JS will provide them with information and input from the monitoring of the approved projects, programme developments and ongoing discussions. Data collection will be completed by the experts whenever necessary (e.g. through surveys).

For the evaluation of effectiveness, efficiency and the communication strategy, the MA/JS will provide the main data and reference analysis and then external experts will review them.

Bilateral Working Group

The operational coordination of the activities of the MA, NAs and the JS concerning the evaluations will be carried out through the regular meetings of the Bilateral Working Group (BWG).

Involvement of programme partners

For the purpose of evaluations and participation of competent partners in the programme evaluation, national experts covering the thematic fields of the programme specific objectives may be engaged to provide specific inputs to the programme evaluation, its findings and follow-up measures. They could be the nominated advisors of the MC, competent in a certain thematic field or civil servants consulted during the drafting of the Interreg Programme to establish the baseline values of the programme indicators.

In addition, other programme stakeholders and beneficiaries as well as general public will be contacted for the purpose of the evaluations through surveys, interviews and consultation events. The findings of the external evaluators will be cross-checked with beneficiaries and stakeholders. The results of evaluations will be shared through the programme communication channels.

3.2 SYNERGIES WITH OTHER PROGRAMMES AND INITIATIVES

The programme will strive to increase the quality and impact of project results by ensuring capitalization of results of previous projects and networking with others other EU programmes, in particular with nationally implemented ESI funds, Interreg and centralised EU programmes, thus create synergies. Further synergies will be sought also with relevant macro regional strategies (EU Strategy for Danube Region (EUSDR)). This principle will be followed also in programme evaluation. Therefore, evaluators will also consider synergetic effects of operations funded by these different sources in the programme area as far as this will be possible considering the availability of data on both sides of the border.

3.3 SOURCES OF EVALUATION

As a general rule the evaluations are conducted by functionally independent experts from the programme bodies.

External (including in-house) expertise in the implementation of evaluations

As far as necessary the programme will resort to external expertise for the implementation of evaluations, in particular when complex topics are concerned, for example to evaluate the programme impact where sophisticated methodologies are required for the collection and analysis of diverse data. Following the principle of objectivity external service providers are also more suitable for any evaluations concerning the programme processes and structures.

When selecting external service providers for the execution of evaluations national and EU public procurement rules shall be respected. At the same time, the procedure should allow participation of service providers from both sides of the border. In addition to price, quality criteria shall be applied, which can be set separately for each evaluation. The external service provider shall be in close contact with relevant programme bodies throughout the evaluation process.

Internal expertise in the implementation of evaluations

When appropriate, some analyses are carried out internally by the programme bodies which include smaller status reports at the beginning of the programme implementation or gathering of data for evaluations (for example surveys with beneficiaries and stakeholders regarding the performance of programme bodies, functioning of programme implementation tools, effectiveness of programme communication, etc.).

An interactive exchange between the external evaluators and JS is foreseen. The JS will provide external evaluators with relevant data from the programme monitoring system, programme documents, results of any internal analyses and any other relevant information needed to execute the contracted evaluations.

One JS employee is operatively responsible to follow the evaluation process according to the programme's Evaluation Plan; others are called in upon necessity.

To ensure good knowledge on evaluations necessary for drawing up the Terms of Reference of public procurements and to steer and monitor the evaluation process, the JS staff will regularly take part in trainings offered, especially by Interact, carry out self-studies and exchange with other programmes.

3.4 USE AND COMMUNICATION OF EVALUATION RESULTS

Evaluation results will optimize the programme implementation and achievement of programme objectives, therefore, it is necessary to make them available to programme bodies.

They will be presented and discussed within the MC. The MA and JS will propose to the MC follow-up measures to meet relevant recommendations suggested by the evaluators. The implementation of measures approved by the MC is carried out by relevant programme bodies under the coordination of the MA and supervision of the MC.

Relevant results of evaluations will also be communicated to interested authorities for their use in policy development and decision making as well as to other programme partners and stakeholders.

With regard to the transparency of the programme, the results of the evaluations carried out pursuant to Article 35 of the Interreg regulation will be available to the public on the programme website.

As suggested in the EC Guidance Document on Evaluation Plans the evaluation reports accompanied by supporting documents will be uploaded to the SFC2021 and made available to the EC.

3.5 QUALITY ASSURANCE

To ensure the quality of programme evaluations, sufficient time will be foreseen to plan and procure evaluations. Specific criteria will be defined in the terms of reference for the selection of evaluation experts. They will relate in particular to competences and expertise in evaluation, in particular evaluation of Cohesion policy and ETC programmes. Evaluators will be required to use a sound methodology in the performance of their tasks. They will also be required to produce inception, interim and final reports on the evaluations carried out. The MA with the assistance of the JS will be responsible for quality control of the outsourced evaluation activities.

The MC will be regularly informed about the progress on evaluation activities and their outcomes and will also receive the evaluation reports.

In order to ensure a good quality of data including a harmonised understanding of result-orientation and indicator definitions, the JS is carrying out intensive capacity building and training of applicants and beneficiaries. Comprehensive guidance to applicants and beneficiaries is provided in the programme manual as well as through several workshops and trainings. This is of particular importance since indicator targets and reported progress will serve as relevant input to the programme evaluation.

An interactive exchange between the evaluation team and the JS is foreseen in order to provide the evaluators with practical insights into programme implementation and the progress of projects identified during the monitoring process.

The JS is closely following the guidance and trainings on evaluation provided by the EC and INTERACT. JS members have already participated in various seminars organised by INTERACT on programme evaluation, evaluation plan and impact evaluation. If considered necessary, also other relevant trainings will be attended in order to maintain and increase the MA/JS expertise on evaluation.

In addition, exchange with other programmes on the evaluation approaches and process will be continued.

3.6 FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Based on the estimated evaluation needs and the overall budget available from the Technical Assistance budget (TA) for external expertise, a maximum amount of 80.000 EUR is reserved for carrying out evaluations in the period 2021-2027 according to the present Evaluation Plan for the outsourced external evaluators. The financing of trainings and in-house external experts, if available, is foreseen from the TA budget and is not part of the evaluation budget.

4 TIMING AND PLANNED EVALUATIONS

For the planned evaluations a schedule has been created, which is presented in the points below. According to the Guidance Document of the EC, all information on evaluations that are planned more than three years in advance should be regarded as indicative.

4.1 EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAMME

The efficiency and effectiveness evaluation assesses the efficiency and effectiveness of programme procedures and activities with the aim to improve the quality of the programme's implementation.

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess effectiveness and efficiency of the programme management system and programme implementation. Efficiency refers to the use of financial/administrative resources in relation to outputs and results. Effectiveness refers to the degree to which set objectives and targets are achieved.

The efficiency and effectiveness evaluation will be carried out by functionally independent internal experts (if available) or with the support of external experts and will provide data for the mid-term review of the MA.

4.1.1 Timing

The efficiency and effectiveness evaluation of the programme will be performed once during the programme duration. It will start in the second half of 2024 and be finished until March 2025.

4.1.2 Focus

The focus of the evaluation is set on:

- programme management and implementation,
- project application, selection procedures,
- Communication Strategy,
- management of Technical Assistance funds,
- project reporting and reimbursement procedures,
- first experiences with small-scale projects, including analysis of partnerships,
- performance framework milestones for all indicators by specific objective for end-2024.

4.1.3 Main guiding questions

The general guiding questions will be defined in more detail in the Terms of Reference.

- a) How efficient are the programme structures?
- b) How efficient and effective are the programme procedures?
- c) How user friendly are programme procedures and forms?
- d) In how far was simplification and harmonisation of procedures achieved?
- e) Are there any improvements necessary in the programme procedures?
- f) Are there any bottlenecks identified in programme procedures and how could they be surpassed?
- g) What is the progress of the programme towards achieving the targets of the specific objectives?
- h) What are the highlights of project implementation?
- i) What are the features of the partnerships? Do they reflect the expectations of the programme?

- j) Has the programme attracted new applicants and beneficiaries with introducing small-scale projects and in what way?
- k) How has the programme achieved certain visibility in local environment by introducing small-scale projects?

- l) What is the progress in implementation of communication strategy and achievement of the set objectives?
- m) How is the programme perceived by target groups, especially relevant stakeholders and the general public?

4.1.4 Sources of data

- Surveys,
- Jems,
- as defined in the Methodological Paper on Indicators,
- public data registers,
- project outputs and deliverables,
- interviews.

Data collected by the MA and JS through the regular progress monitoring of projects (including information on project achievements, output indicators, performance framework and financial data) and documented within the programme monitoring system will serve as relevant input for the evaluation.

4.1.5 Possible methods

- data collection and analysis,
- desk research,
- surveys,
- feedback questionnaires,
- interviews.

4.1.6 Estimated budget

The estimated budget for the evaluation of the programme's efficiency and effectiveness is up to 30.000 EUR.

4.2 ONGOING IMPACT EVALUATION

The impact evaluation assesses how support from ERDF has contributed to the objectives for each priority. The impact of the programme shall be evaluated and disentangled from any other trends and developments in the programme area.

4.2.1 Timing

In 2026, the first part of the impact evaluation with a focus on small-scale projects and the first concluded standard projects is foreseen to start. By the end of the programme period (2027), the first impact evaluation report should be submitted.

By 2028, a significant number of project results will be available, therefore, the final part of the impact evaluation will start (with an approximate duration of 6-12 months), so that the data of the impact evaluation will be available by 30 June 2029 to the EC.

4.2.2 Focus

It is the focus of the evaluation to assess the impact of the programme on the programme area by evaluating it apart from other trends and developments in the region. It should capture the effects of the programme as a whole and its performance as regards each specific objective. In more detail the evaluations will focus on:

- impact evaluation of priorities 1-3,
- the output and result indicator values linked to the programme specific objectives, taking into consideration the targets for output and result indicators achieved by 2029,
- reviewing the intervention logic,
- target groups, indicative activities and types of beneficiaries,
- horizontal principles,
- communication Strategy.

4.2.3 Main guiding questions

The general guiding questions will be defined in more detail in the Terms of Reference.

- a) How well are the (standard and small-scale) project objectives, outputs and results aligned with expectations of the programme as set in the Interreg Programme (intervention logic)?
- b) What is the progress of the programme towards achieving the targets of the specific objectives in terms of expected results, activities, target groups, types of beneficiaries and indicators?
- c) What change was achieved in the programme area in terms of meeting the needs and challenges of the programme area as identified in the Interreg Programme?
- d) Identification of gaps between what was achieved and what are the remaining/emerging needs of the area at the time of the evaluation.
- e) How well was the integrated approach to territorial development followed?
- f) How well was the territorial balance respected?
- g) What programme activities would be needed or recommended for post 2027 period related to the thematic concentration in order to increase the impact and ensure the sustainability of the financial assistance provided?

The impact of the activities on environmental elements and the environmental performance of the programme should be analysed against the indicators stated in the Environmental report (Figure 16) and evaluation criteria as part of the overall evaluation of the Programme.

4.2.4 Sources of data

- Jems,
- public data registers,
- project outputs,
- surveys,
- interviews.

4.2.5 Possible methods

A theory based approach as defined in the EC Guidance Document will be used for the impact evaluation. This approach follows each step of the intervention logic identifying causal links and mechanisms of change, answering the question why and how an intervention works.

- desk research,
- interviews,
- surveys,
- feedback questionnaires,
- SWOT analysis of the programme.

4.2.6 Estimated budget

The estimated budget for the impact evaluation is 50.000 EUR.