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Good quality project preparation

The information material based on presentation for Annual Event in Växjö, Sweden 25 October 2023

1   Introduction

The objective of this training material is to provide an overview of the assessment process as **a self-assessment tool** for individuals preparing the Application Form for submission under the Interreg South Baltic Programme 2021 - 2027. The materials consist of **a compilation of criteria** and **the common mistakes** associated with each criterion, based on the experiences of assessors. The analysis of the criteria is preceded by basic information about the project's assessment process. Additionally, practical advice is offered on project preparation and key considerations to review prior to submitting the project. The crucial information is **bolded**.

The document provides **a condensed overview** of the key details, but it should not be considered a substitute for the programme documents. It is advisable **to thoroughly review the Programme Manual with Annexes, Guidelines on filling in and submitting the Application Form, and other relevant call documents** before the preparation of the Application Form, as these resources contain comprehensive information.

2   Overview of project selection and assessment

The assessment process consists of stages:
1.   Admissibility and eligibility check.
2.   State aid assessment and quality assessment.

The admissibility and eligibility check are carried out by the Joint Secretariat in co-operation with Contact Points delegating to national authorities, which contributes to the eligibility and capacities check of the partners from their Member States. For the eligibility verification of SMEs, their fulfilment of the definition of a micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) is checked along with their financial, organizational and/or management capabilities to implement the project.
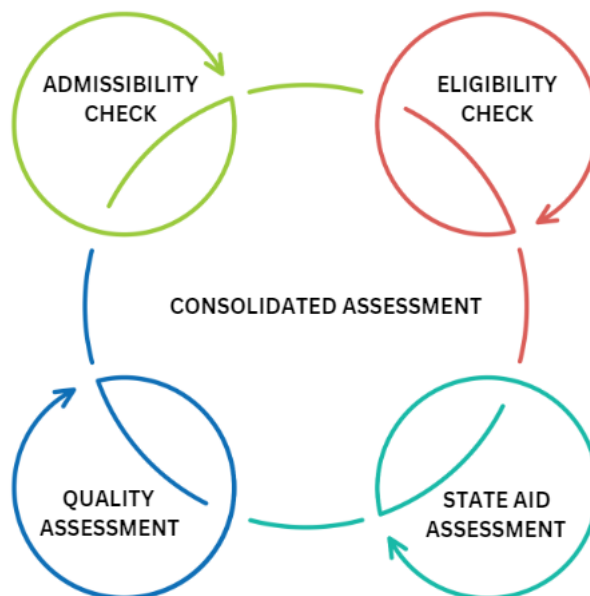
Within the admissibility and eligibility check, it is possible to supplement and/or correct the submitted application at the Joint Secretariat's request.

The State aid assessment is aimed at checking the State aid relevance of a project proposal. State aid assessment is carried out by independent external experts in line with the provisions included in Programme Manual Chapter IV Section 9 State aid.

The **quality assessment** of each project proposal is performed by two JS staff and independent external experts. On the basis of 3 assessment sheets, the JS prepares its final **consolidated assessment** for each project, which integrates the findings of the assessors.

A detailed description of the selection process and assessment criteria are described in Annex 6 to the Programme Manual.

The chart shows steps of the assessment presented in the order of the process.

3   Admissibility and eligibility check

The Application Forms submitted under a given call in the WOD2021 (within the Central Information and Communication Technology System, CST2021) are subjected to an **admissibility and eligibility check**.

The verification has a YES/NO character, where 'NO' means automatic rejection of the project.

3.1   Admissibility criteria

1. The Application Form attached with the Supplementary Application Form submitted in the WOD2021 electronic system (CST2021) within the set deadline.
2. All obligatory annexes are submitted in the electronic system (e.g., Project Partner Declarations, Declaration of compliance with the DNSH principle, Letters of Commitment).
3. The annexes to the Application Form are signed, where necessary, by the authorized signatories.
4. The Application Form and all annexes are compiled in English.
5. Project is assigned to Programme Priority; its Measure contributes to at least one Programme obligatory output and relevant to this output's result indicator.
6. Co-financing is secured, in line with the Programme thresholds and project Application Form.
7. Significant inconsistencies were checked.

3.2   Eligibility criteria

1. The lead partner is an eligible organization.
2. All project partners are eligible organizations.
3. The project fulfils the minimum requirements for partnership (at least 2 eligible partners from the Programme Area from 2 different Member States).

3.3   Admissibility and eligibility criteria - most common mistakes

- **Supplementary Application Form is not delivered.**
- **A project partner is not an eligible organization, highly relevant for SMEs and NGOs mainly due to financial capacity and registration date of SME is less than 3 years before the announcement of the call for proposals.**
- **Lead Partner's status is "other entities established under public or private law".**
- Different signatories on documents and in SAF.
- Wrong financial amounts, PP's own contribution less than 20%.
- Relevant documents are not delivered.

4   Quality assessment

Quality assessment criteria are divided into categories:

- Strategic criteria (assess the relevance of the project proposal in relation to the specific territorial challenge/needs and to the Programme Measure):
    - Project relevance;
    - Cooperation character;
    - Project intervention logic;
    - Partnership relevance;
    - Horizontal criteria.
- Operational criteria (assess the viability and the feasibility of the proposed project)
    - Work plan;
    - Communication;
    - Budget;
- Plus checking the relevance of the application to be labelled as operation of strategic importance.

5 Evaluation scale

Each criterion is evaluated according to a five-point scale (full points to be given):

4 – excellent: The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. The provided information is clear and coherent. Any shortcomings are minor.

3 – good: The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.

2 – adequate: The proposal addresses the criterion to a sufficient level, but some aspects have not been met fully or are not explained in full clarity or detail.

1 – insufficient: The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are serious shortcomings and/or the provided information is of low quality.

0 – poor: The criterion is inadequately addressed by the proposal, or the required information is missing.

6 Consolidated assessment – points

The average of the points received under each criterion is calculated and later weighted as shown in the example below:

CRITERION	POINTS RECEIVED			AVERAGE OF POINTS RECEIVED	WEIGHT	CONSOLIDATED POINTS
	Assessor 1	Assessor 2	Assessor 3			
Project relevance	2	2	1	1.67	20%	0.33
Cooperation Character	1	1	1	1.00	20%	0.20
Project intervention logic	2	3	3	2.67	10%	0.27
Partnership relevance	2	3	2	2.33	15%	0.35
Horizontal criteria	2	2	2	2.00	5%	0.10

Work plan	1	2	2	1.67	10%	0.17
Communication	2	3	3	2.67	10%	0.27
Budget	2	3	2	2.33	10%	0.23
SUM:					**100%**	**1.92**

Thresholds:

1. **Sum** of consolidated points: **2 or higher.**

2. **Average of points** received in the **strategic criteria** Project relevance, Cooperation character, Project intervention logic, Partnership relevance: **higher than 1.**

3. **Average of points** received in strategic criterion **Horizontal criteria**: **higher than 2.**

If a project fails to meet any of the above thresholds, it will be presented to the Monitoring Committee as a project not recommended for funding.

7 The quality assessment criteria

7.1 Project relevance – what is being assessed

1. Project addresses common territorial challenges or opportunity.
2. Project answers real needs of the target groups.
3. Project is in line with the addressed Programme Measure.
4. Project matches the focus of the call (if any).
5. Building on existing practices.
6. Avoiding overlaps and replications with other projects.
7. Going beyond existing practices.
8. Contributing to strategies.

7.2   Project relevance – most common mistakes

- **Not in line with the selected Programme Measure.**
- **Too general focus.**
- **Target groups or their needs are not identified.**
- The project is not examined in the context of already implemented projects.
- Insufficient justification for the necessity of implementing the project (lack of statistical data and analysis on the current situation provided).
- The project is not linked to strategies.

7.3   Cooperation character - what is being assessed

1. The cross-border approach is demonstrated and justified.
2. Project outcomes cannot be achieved without cooperation.
3. Clear benefit for the partnership, target groups and for the Programme Area as such.
4. Cooperation criteria are fulfilled: - joint development, - joint implementation, - joint staffing, - joint financing.

7.4   Cooperation character – most common mistakes

- **Cross-border approach and/or relevance is weak.**
- Not balanced territorial focus.
- Local character of project activities.
    - Mirroring activities instead of real cooperation.
    - **Especially in the case of infrastructural investments.**
- Cooperation criteria are not fulfilled.
- Some partners have a budget and are active in a limited number of work packages only.

7.5   Project intervention logic - what is being assessed

1. Intervention logic is clearly defined and consistent.
2. Project objective is specific, realistic and achievable.
3. Contribution to Programme output and result indicators.
4. Quantification is sufficient, realistic and in line with the Programme rules.
5. Outputs are durable.
6. Outputs are replicable.

7.6   Project intervention logic – most common mistakes

- **Project objective is too general.**
- **Outputs are not in line with the Programme provisions (Annex 7):**
  - Pilots without testing character;
  - Joint development/implementation is not demonstrated;
  - Solutions are not aiming at activating stakeholders;
  - Solutions are fragmented;
  - Not clear and/or correct quantification.
- Taking up or upscaling (RCR104) the solutions (RCO116) is not clear.
- Durability is not sufficient.

7.7   Partnership relevance - what is being assessed

1. Relevant actors are involved.
2. Balanced with respect to the levels, sectors, territory.
3. Partners complement each other.
4. Experience and competence.
5. Capacity to implement the project.
6. The roles of partners are clearly explained.

7.8   Partnership relevance – most common mistakes

- **Relevance of the partnership is weak:**
  - Important sectors are not represented in the partnership.
  - Many partners with similar profiles.
- **Partnership is not balanced from the territorial point of view.**
- A project partner contributes to only a limited number of activities.
- Unclear roles of PPs.

7.9   Horizontal criteria - what is being assessed

1. Equal opportunities and non-discrimination, including accessibility for persons with disabilities:
   - Analysis of barriers and needs of groups at a risk of discrimination;
   - Project activities shall not result in discrimination;
   - Project activities and outputs are accessible to anyone.
2. Gender equality:
   - Equal opportunities between men and women;
   - Messages free from gender stereotypes, gender-sensitive language.
3. Sustainable development:
   - Sustainable development at the stages of its preparation, implementation and use of project outputs;
   - In line with the environmental protection requirements arising from applicable EU and national law.

7.10 Horizontal criteria – most common mistakes

- **Neutral contribution is declared.**
- Not all criteria are considered comprehensively.
- Data and analysis on barriers are not presented.
- Only general statements.
- Specific actions are not planned.

7.11 Work plan - what is being assessed

1. Activities and deliverables are relevant to the proposed outputs and results.
2. Appropriate task distribution between partners.
3. Realistic time plan.
4. Activities, deliverables and outputs are in a logical sequence.
5. Infrastructural investments are justified and have cross-border character.
6. Sound project management approach.
7. Quality management.
8. Risk mitigation.

7.12 Work plan – most common mistakes

- **(Some) activities do not aim at delivering project outputs and results.**
- **Shared LP responsibilities.**
- Too general descriptions.
- Deliverables:
  - **Overlap with outputs.**
  - Not relevant for monitoring the progress of implementation.
- **Communication activities consist of a separate WP.**
- Timetable is not logical.
- Lack of joint approach.
- Missing information on infrastructural investments.
- Quality management and risk mitigation are not planned.

7.13 Communication – what is being assessed

1. Communication objectives, target groups, activities and tools are relevant and contribute to achieving the overall objective of the project.
2. Communication plan is realistic.
3. Transferring solutions.
4. Target groups are involved in project activities.

7.14 Communication – most common mistakes

- **Objectives are not specific.**
- **No difference between the beginning and end of the project.**
- **Actions do not aim on actively involving the target groups.**
- **Communication activities are planned in a separate WP.**
- Too general information and activities.
- Quantification of the target groups is not provided or too modest.
- Channels and activities are not appropriate for the target groups.
- Project and associated partners are identified and counted as target groups.

7.15 Budget

1. Project demonstrates value for money.
2. Sufficient and reasonable financial resources are planned.
3. Budget is coherent and proportionate.
4. Project Partners' budgets correspond to their roles.
5. Budget is appropriate in relation to the planned activities, project outputs and results.
6. Budget distribution per cost category and work package is in line with the work plan.
7. Costs related to external expertise and services, equipment and infrastructure and work are specified in the application.
8. The lump sum is correctly planned.
9. Flat rates are correctly calculated and planned.

7.16 Budget – most common mistakes

- **Too high budget -> low value for money.**
- **Cost-sharing.**
- **No information on budget items in Cost Categories 4-6. Items are not justified.**
- **Budget is imbalanced between Project Partners.**

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- **Main part of the budget is attributed to equipment and infrastructure that makes this investment the main goal of the project.**
- Budget is not consistent with the work plan:
  - With the roles of Project Partners.
  - Over or underestimated work packages.
  - Too high costs planned for management.
- DE, DK and LT partners do not plan FLC costs.
- Flat rates for CC2 and CC3 are not correctly planned.

7.17 General mistakes in application forms

- Obligatory fields of the (S)AF are not completed.
- Too general information provided.
- Differences between SAF and WOD2021.
- Guidance messages in SAF are ignored.

8 Cornerstones of a good application

- Have a clearly defined challenge with cross-border nature.
- Develop relevant and balanced partnership.
- Deliver clear intervention logic, indicators in line with Programme provisions.
- Analyze the problems and demonstrate **positive contribution** for horizontal criteria.

Different parts of the application are interlinked, making one mistake may have negative spill-over effects.

9 Key actions of project development

- Get familiar with relevant Programme provisions:
    - Programme Measure in the Cooperation Programme;
    - Programme Manual;
    - Annex 6 Project selection process and criteria;
    - Annex 7 Indicator factsheet;
    - Application guidelines.
- Follow the recommended order of steps (Programme Manual V. / 1.1).
- Screen already implemented projects:
    - https://southbaltic.eu/
    - https://keep.eu/
- Take part in consultations (follow recommendations if relevant).
- Take part in webinars.
    - Contact the Joint Secretariat if needed.
    - Self-assess the project with a fresh eye against Annex 6.
    - Check the AF in preview mode in WOD2021 before submission.

10 Other advice what (not) to do

- Prepare your project from general to detail – check eligibility criteria first, then build your idea based on real needs which will be fulfilled by the project objective and go to project outputs.

- Check if your project is in the line with the programme – not every Energy friendly project will be suitable for renewable sources, not every touristic will follow sustain tourism rules.

- Give specific and concrete info about your project at the very beginning of your application.

- Use simple and concrete language. If there is 10 000 characters to fill in, you don't have to maximize it.

- Give a complete and comprehensive information in the AF.

- Follow guidelines but don't copy criteria or manual.