

Call for proposals and assessment: Perspectives and road ahead

Interreg Knowledge Fair session report | March 2024

Overview

During this session we delved into non-standard calls, such as targeted and capitalisation calls, Small Project Fund, Operations of Strategic Importance, and strategic projects. In addition, we kicked off the discussion on the potential role of AI in supporting the process of call preparation and assessment.

Session agenda

Introduction from Interact

Glimpse into context and setting the scene

Programmes approaches: panel discussion

Monika Schönerklee-Grasser, Interreg Central Europe
Christopher Parker, Interreg Northern Periphery and Arctic
Francesca Bonesso, Hrvoje Grancarić, Interreg Italy-Croatia
Dragan Đurišić, Interreg IPA Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Montenegro
Krzysztof Kolanowski, Interreg Poland-Saxony

The potential role of Artificial Intelligence (AI): A game-changer in supporting the process of call preparation and assessment or a threat to fairness?

Helena Järviste, Interreg Estonia - Latvia

Joint reflection and discussion

Methodology

The session gathered 53 participants who shared and exchanged on their programme's experiences related to the preparation of specific calls for proposals such as targeted, capitalisation calls, OSI, SPF and strategic projects. Programme representatives – panelists – provided a presentation of their call context. They highlight challenges faced during call definition, identification of gaps, assessment grids/criteria, and the process of driving their Monitoring Committees towards targeted calls or identifying niche programme interests.

The discussion was focused on:

- What are the main advantages/disadvantages of introducing different types of calls i.e. targeted calls, capitalisation calls, OSI, SPF or strategic projects?
- What are the main challenges in assessing these specific types of calls?
- How to improve the assessment process?
- How do programmes consider the role of AI in supporting the workload?
- What can be done to simplify the process?

Panel discussion

Monika Schönerklee-Grasser, Interreg Central Europe

- Targeted call

Call for small places (small-scale projects). The aim of the call is to test innovative approaches for making peripheral and rural areas more attractive places to work and live in. The call has a different scope than classic projects addressing the specific territorial challenges of small places, such as demographic change, lack of public services of general interest, limited accessibility and skilled work force. Co-creation approach: active participation of MC delegations in call design.

Highlighted points

- Preparing for calls requires significant effort and attention to detail.
- Experts conduct surveys and interviews with relevant stakeholders and institutions to gather valuable insights.
- Consulting directly with key stakeholders plays a crucial role in shaping the design of the call itself.

Road ahead: it includes a focus on the capitalization call for the joint valorization of transnational (TN) and cross-border cooperation (CBC). This area remains largely unexplored, although also Baltic Sea Region (BSR) has made some initial attempts in this direction.

Christopher Parker, Interreg Northern Periphery and Arctic

- Capitalisation call

Highlighted points and road ahead

- Arctic Cooperation coordinated Clustering call 2024 – 2025: cooperation with other Northern programmes (i.e. Aurora programme)
- Deciding whom to involve in the call procedures is essential for effective implementation.
- ISO1 was utilized to enhance capacity.

- When creating Terms of Reference (ToR), it's beneficial to break down subthemes, discuss them beforehand, conduct testing, determine the target group, identify beneficiaries, and select partners and Lead Partners (LPs).

Francesca Bonesso, Hrvoje Grancarić, Interreg Italy-Croatia

- Operation of Strategic Importance

A top-down approach put in place for the preparation of the OSI call include a desk analysis, elaboration of supporting documents and finalisation of the contents. The identification of the OSI WG involved selecting a few members per country for each SO, along with EUSAIR TSG Pillar representatives and 5 external experts. The Working Group has established the Terms of Reference, which encompass thematic descriptions. These descriptions outline the theme, objectives, macro-activities, output indicators, expected outputs, partners to involve, and cross-border dimensions.

Highlighted points

- Very thoughtful and yet time consuming with varied contribution;
- Complex internal decision-making;
- Different territorial specificities;
- Heterogeneous working group composition.

Joint reflection

Programmes shared a common concern regarding OSI: Its purpose was unclear, and it was introduced late in the regulations. Many programmes hesitated to implement SI without a formal call, with some prioritizing the publication impact only.

Ensuring a fair project assessment raises questions about conflict of interest (COI). Namely, project selection can proceed without a formal call, but final decisions must be made by the Management Committee (MC).

Dragan Đurišić, Interreg IPA Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Montenegro

- Small Project Fund

Highlighted points and challenges ahead for call definition

- Eligibility of applicants, final recipient's micro and small enterprises in order to avoid companies established solely for the purpose of obtaining a grant:
 - Be established under the national law in the respective participating country and Programme area
 - Applicants must be registered at least 12 months prior to the deadline for the submission of Applications

- Verification of financial capacity of applicants: must have an annual income for the last closed financial year in amount at least equal to amount of grant requested (financial allocation for specific partner, not total project)

- Partnership requirements:
 - The number of partners in the application (2-4), bilateral or trilateral partnership with applicants from all 3 participating countries
 - Size of the financial allocation
 - Number of applications and contracts per applicant, only in one application and one contracted project per call?

Krzysztof Kolanowski, Interreg Poland-Saxony

- Strategic projects

The strategic call faced challenges due to unclear objectives among decision-makers, compounded by the absence of a Joint Secretariat (JS) at the time. Consequently, decisions were made independently on each side of the border, leading to a lack of cohesion and effectiveness.

In this regard, the JS during the assessment of core projects under ordinary call for proposals would recognise and consider relevant aspects of the project proposal and “upgrade” the proposal to the strategic project level. However, this doesn’t follow any increase on the proposed budget and related activities.

The potential role of Artificial Intelligence (AI): A game-changer in supporting the process of call preparation and assessment or a threat to fairness?

Helena Järviste, Interreg Estonia - Latvia

Helena Järviste, Head of JS, Estonia-Latvia programme, shared programme experience developing custom GPT and testing it for call assessments and monitoring purposes. The programme benefited from being part of a wider mapping of AI user cases in the public sector in Estonia. However, as the programme is using Jems and not the national fund monitoring system, the use of national AI solutions would be too complex. Instead, the programme has developed a custom GPT, which is an open tool, therefore, special attention has to be paid to remove any sensitive information before it is used for analysis.

Highlighted points:

- ✓ AI is already used by some of the programmes, the big potential is in administrative, repetitive tasks e.g., checking eligibility of institutions. In addition, it has proven to be useful also in project reporting and monitoring.
- ✓ AI is not so different from previous practices regarding staff workload reduction, e.g., it could be compared to hired external expert.

- ✓ In terms of assessment AI can be helpful (especially in some parts), but will not fully replace the officer involvement and the need to assure four-eyes principle in assessments, especially as AI is limited in analysing the overall picture;
- ✓ AI should be treated as a tool (the quality of input or lack of it > will equal the quality of output), so there is a need to learn how to use it properly.

Reflections, plans for follow up

Interact will continue to coordinate follow-up actions facilitating exchanges among programmes regarding call for proposals and assessment procedures paired also on the insights gained from the session discussions.

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