

Post 2027 | Consultation Report

9. Sustainability

14 January 2025

Embracing sustainability in Interreg

This report is one of Interact's [Post 2027 Consultation reports](#)

Overview

Sustainability has been a key focus in this programming period, with significant Interreg resources allocated to environmental projects. However, it is not because Interreg is financing green solutions that it is automatically operating most sustainably. Horizontal principles have been introduced, but current regulations do not require the full integration of sustainability into programme and project planning, implementation, or the monitoring of environmental impacts.

Methodology

The need to strengthen sustainability within Interreg interventions was first raised during the [Interreg Knowledge Fair session](#). It was further discussed in the following webinars: [Embracing Environmental Sustainability in Interreg](#), in May 2024, [Green Public Procurement in Practice](#), in November 2024.

The topic of sustainability as a horizontal programme and project management practice was also highlighted during the Greener Europe session at the Harvesting event. Additionally, a questionnaire was conducted during the Harvesting event, allowing programmes to share their input, including contributions gathered during the coffee break session.

Current status

A clear trend has emerged: some programmes have begun or expressed a willingness to move beyond basic compliance with horizontal requirements and actively integrate sustainability into programme and project implementation.

Examples include:

- **Providing guidance and training:** programmes are offering guidance on greener events, horizontal principles, monitoring and reducing carbon footprint, social inclusiveness, economic sustainability, SDGs, etc. Workshops, webinars, and other capacity-building activities are dedicated to these topics.
- **Incorporating sustainability into project quality:** considering sustainability as a feature of high-quality projects, assessed and rewarded at the project selection phase, and monitored during the project implementation.
- **Aligning with the SDGs:** some programmes, for example Interreg Aurora, are actively integrating United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into project implementation. Projects are required to choose the SDGs they are contributing to and promoting those in their communication, but also putting them in practice – e.g. a specific workshop is organised at the start of each project to discuss how partners can best approach SDGs.
- **Carbon footprint calculator based on data from Jems:** The Euro-MED programme developed a carbon footprint calculator that automatically extracts data from the Joint Electronic Monitoring Software (Jems). All projects are required to report on carbon emissions throughout their project implementation. Feedback from projects has been positive, and this approach, presented at several events, has been well-received by participants.

At the same time, programmes noted a lack of resources and support necessary to adopt a more holistic approach to sustainability. To address this, programmes suggested that mapping current sustainability practices would be beneficial. As a result, this mapping is provisionally planned for the first half of 2025.

During Harvesting event discussions on flexibility and adaptability and greener Europe, the Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) principle and the requirement to conduct a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) were highlighted as not fully relevant to Interreg and as potential barriers to flexibility. To explore programme perspectives further, specific survey questions were dedicated to these requirements.

DNSH principle is often perceived as a formality, an administrative burden, or not adding any value (if not linked to a tangible action). Several programmes view it as a relevant principle, but with unclear guidance on how to apply it in practice.

Similarly, in the current period, the process of applying the Strategic Environmental Assessment principle (SEA) was perceived as not relevant and meaningful. Some programmes considered the

reason being that Interreg is not largely oriented towards investments and negative impacts are not expected. Moreover, it was noted that the operational programme document is too general to assess the environmental impact properly.

Considerations for Post 2027

Feedback from programmes indicates that **sustainability should be addressed more holistically, both through legislative improvements and by providing greater support to programmes**. A potential solution is to analyse sustainability and horizontal principles as a whole, with a clear vision of how they can be effectively integrated and embedded into programme and project planning and implementation.

Given current Interreg's efforts, led by programme pioneering initiatives, some more robust requirements and more importantly dedicated EC guidance could be issued early in the programme preparation process. This would provide clarity and allow the principles to be effectively integrated across all stages of programme and project implementation.

What would be your vision for the future?

- **Review the legal framework and supporting guidance:** ensure a clear, coherent approach to sustainability requirements to avoid treating it as a tick in a box.
- **Support the integration of sustainability in a holistic way:** support programmes in embedding sustainability in a more holistic way into the programme and project lifecycle and to support programmes in adopting sustainable project and programme management approaches.
- **Incorporate sustainability elements in HIT:** include sustainability as part of the assessment criteria, in application form and project reporting/monitoring templates of the Harmonized Implementation Tools (HIT).
- **Establish a community:** create a platform for sharing knowledge, experiences, and best practices related to sustainability in Interreg programme and project management. Interact can support this process.
- **Monitor environmental impact continuously:** track the environmental impact of Interreg interventions. For example, consider including a carbon footprint calculator in the next monitoring system. The Euro-MED programme's integration of a carbon calculator into Jems could serve as a model. Testing this with several volunteer programmes in the current period could provide valuable lessons for post-2027 planning.
- **Promote green procurement:** advocate for wider adoption of green, circular etc. procurement practices across Interreg programmes and projects.

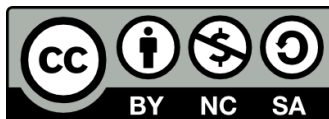
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Furthermore, understanding and knowledge evolves throughout the programming period. If you spot something out of date or inconsistent, please contact us at communication@interact.eu

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