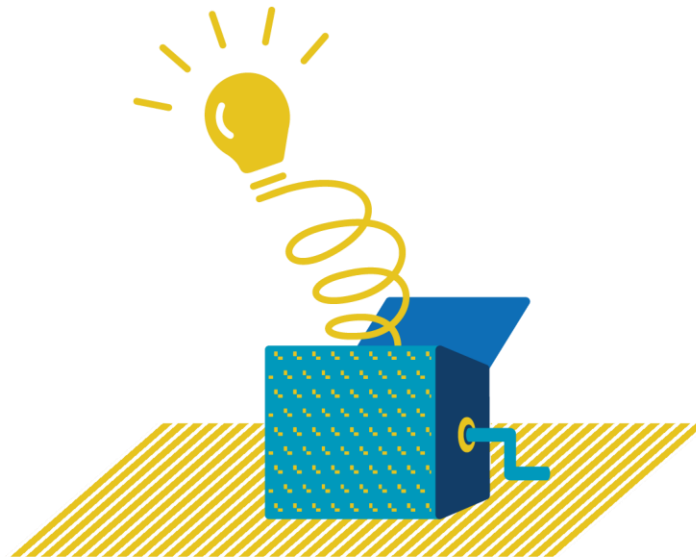


Interreg Project Management Handbook

Stage 1/5: Project idea generation

November 2025

This document provides a step-by-step guide to developing an Interreg project, from shaping the initial idea to building strong partnerships and engaging stakeholders. Its purpose is to support project developers in effectively refining, testing and presenting their project concepts to maximise their chances of success.



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Publisher Interact Programme

Date 11.2025

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Interact



Co-funded by
the European Union
Interreg

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1. Start of an Interreg project

Every project starts with an idea which is provoked by a need or a problem that has been insufficiently solved or not solved at all. Next, a project developer needs to find out if someone else (preferably from a neighbouring country) has the same (or similar) need. At this point you may not yet approach other people, but it is advisable to know that you are not alone in your need. If possible, try to understand if your need is of a common or joint character.

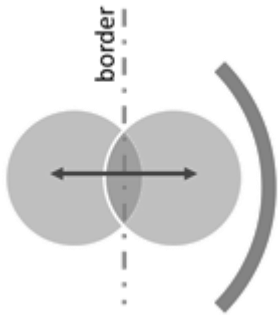
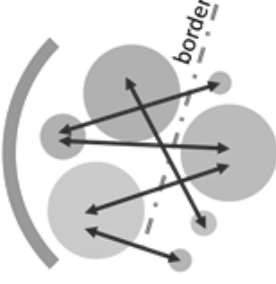
<p style="text-align: center;">Joint needs</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Common needs</p> 
<p>1. These are problems/needs/opportunities that cross borders and need to be tackled on both sides, or even further afield (in the case of interregional and transnational territories, including macro-regional strategies and sea basins) if there is to be an improvement. Positive action on one side of the border should automatically have a benefit for the other side of the border.</p>	<p>2. These are common needs that are related to similar issues on both sides of the border. However, actions on one side of the border do not necessarily lead to an automatic positive effect on the other side of the border.</p>
<p>Examples:</p> <p>pollution, environmental protection, transport links, improving/securing border crossings, etc.</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p>the need to promote economic development may be a priority in towns on both sides, but there is no guarantee that the reasons why or the best solutions will be the same.</p>

Table 1: Joint versus common needs

One of the benefits of Interreg is that project developers are encouraged to come up with original and innovative ideas, sometimes even visionary. But there are many projects out there and even more project ideas. The question is why some of these ideas survive and stand out from the rest. Some ideas develop into successful projects simply because they are worth spreading.

1.1. Interreg project characteristics

If you are looking for funding from Interreg programmes you need to be aware of the context and specificities of these programmes. In principle, the only successful ideas are those which will contribute to the programme results. However, there are other Interreg project characteristics you need to consider before developing your project idea further. These are not the only criteria which contribute to the development of a good project proposal, but they are the first ones to look at because they constitute the fundamental justification of a project in the eyes of future partners and of the programme.

Interreg project characteristics:

1. Demand-driven project

As mentioned before, a project should respond to the specific needs of target groups. The target groups are end users of project outcomes (outputs and results) - i.e., people and organisations which will benefit from the project. At the idea stage project developers need to know if there are users interested in using the project results

A project lacking users would be like a company launching a product on the market without having first explored if there are customers interested in buying that product.

Project developers often work with their target groups in the framework of their regular jobs, yet their needs need to be verified and demonstrated when presenting an Interreg project proposal. The target group's needs determine the choice of partners, outputs and activities. Involving target groups from this stage is therefore important for the success of the project

2. Relevant project

Project developers need to make sure that the project idea is relevant for the programme they want to apply to. The project is relevant when it addresses a challenge of the programme territory (as identified in the Interreg Programme) and contributes to the priorities of other (territorial) strategies covering the programme territory. Programme scope is defined by a combination of the five policy objectives of the 2021-2027 EU cohesion policy, along with the two additional policy objectives specific to Interreg or EU macro-regional strategy (where relevant), and bottom-up policies such as those reflecting the challenges and needs specific to the communities and territory of the programme area. Challenges of the macro-region are defined in the action plan, which is part of the macro-regional strategy (See macro-regional strategies websites). The project developer can contact the relevant coordinator of a macro-regional strategy, to define and learn more about the demands of the area of interest.

Already at this stage you should also be aware of the limitations of the programme you will be applying to - e.g., due to limited resources, some Interreg programmes might not be able to finance infrastructure projects

You must pay close attention to what has been prioritised by the programme you are applying to. The programmes are more focused, which defines the limits of what you can focus on. If your project idea doesn't fit that scope, there will be little (if no) room for tweaking and making it look like it fits.

3. Result-oriented project

In this programming period the notion of a result as “the immediate advantage of carrying out the project, telling us about the benefit of using the project main outputs. It should describe the change the project is aiming for and contribute to the programme result indicator” is strongly emphasized. The project result is what justifies the need to carry out the project.

Project management monitors activities and expenditure to keep projects on track, while result-oriented management monitors performance measures to keep the results on track. Being clear about the results you are striving to achieve will help you get everyone’s energy aligned toward the same achievements. Cooperation is then easier and so is decision-making when problems or difficult choices arise.

A project is result-oriented when project partners agree on what they will achieve (change) together, where (area) and for whom (target groups).

4. Project requires cooperation

Interreg programmes are cooperation based. For a project idea to be relevant, project developers need to combine the programme inputs (and, if relevant, macro-regional challenges) with their own ideas about the best way to address the needs they are interested in on either side of the border.

In general terms, when projects respond to easily-identifiable reasons for cooperation, like in the case of joint reasons, the scope, content and partnership structure of the project often develop directly out of the reasons identified. In other cases, the precise scope and content of cooperation are less clear at the start of the project and are defined during the development phase. This is often the case in projects addressing common reasons where partner regions will be aware of the challenges they face, but often much less clear about what action to take (this is the main thing they want to learn from their partners). More preparation work is normally required for this kind of project.

Partnerships applying for funds in Interreg programmes are required to develop and implement their project together. In addition, they must ensure either joint financing or joint staffing during the project implementation.

1.2. How to present your project idea

A structured presentation of project ideas can help partners and other key stakeholders, as well as programming authorities, understand and assess whether they want to get involved. To engage new partners in your project idea and to consult the programme, you should make sure you clearly state way what you want to do, why and how. Try to make your description as simple, clear and concise as possible – even the most complex and technical matters can be explained in simple language. You may find the following table of some assistance when structuring your idea.

Project idea description

Name of the project It should be one clear sentence. You may also suggest an acronym if you have one already, as this will ease communication and make your idea easily recognisable.

Organisation and contacts of the project developer Name of the organisation and contact details of the person in charge: it will be easier for the potential partners to contact you if your details appear on the same page as the project idea.

Programme Indicate to which programme you wish to submit the project proposal. Add a link to the programme website for the interested parties to gain additional information.

Priority and specific objective Choose the programme priority and its specific objective within which you plan to submit your proposal. It is advisable that you also share key information such as output and result indicators relevant to the specific objective chosen.

Background and needs Describe which needs and potentials the proposal is addressing. This is the main justification for the project, and answers the fundamental question: why should we do it?

Objectives and results (expected achievements) Describe what change the project intends to achieve compared to the initial situation. Propose the first draft of project objectives and results.

Partners already on board Provide a list of key information, where such exists, about the organisations already willing to participate in the project.

Sought partners Describe the type of organisations you are looking for. You may be very specific if you already know what kind of organisation has the required authority, competences and skills - e.g., municipalities. In this case, you may also specify if you are looking for a partner in each territory. Otherwise, you may indicate desired features such as jurisdiction and expertise.

Timeframe Propose an indicative duration of the project (check programme rules), potential start date and when the project needs to be submitted to the programme for assessment.

Many programmes offer an online project idea database where you can either upload your own project idea or browse through ideas already submitted. You will find that project idea forms in each programme may differ from one another, and from the table offered above. Always refer to the official information and forms made available by the programme.

Even if you have a fairly clear idea of what you want to do, allow flexibility so interested partners can contribute to shaping the purpose and objectives of the project. Participating in an international project implies that the project idea must reflect the needs of all partners.

2. Building a partnership

Cooperation projects must always be based on a need to work together – or more often a set of interlinked needs around the same issue. This basic principle is spelled out in the regulatory requirement that all partnerships cooperate on joint development and implementation of the project idea¹. Project managers therefore need to strike a careful balance between developing the core idea far enough to give a clear vision of the project to potential partners, but not so far that there is no room for input and changes from the rest of the partnership. The first success in a good partnership should be the discovery of unexpected insights, resources and knowledge within the partnership, and improvements to the original project proposal on this basis.

One consequence of programme recognition of the importance of joint development is an increasing focus on the need to involve ‘the right partners (Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 Art. 23.4). Most application forms for this programming period (including the Interact HIT application form) focus on identifying the precise needs that every project partner is hoping to address through the project, and the capacity that they bring to the partnership to help it achieve its objectives. This should ensure that all partners are moving in the same direction and feel a strong sense of ownership of the project idea. Many programmes and some countries offer preparation costs for project developers to cover the costs involved.

2.1. Project partnership

Interreg project development is about using new international contacts to shake up how organisations work and achieve a better result. A good partnership mix is one of the best ways of doing this.

When developing project partnership for your project you need to consider (1) the programme’s minimum requirements for an Interreg project partnership, and (2) which project partners are needed to be able to achieve project objectives and results.

Tips when considering the right partnership mix:

a) Eligible partners

Interreg programmes have clear rules about which organisations are eligible for funding, and these vary from programme to programme. There are rules about the type of organisation (for example, in some programmes private sector organisations are not eligible) and the location of the organisation (there are some limitations if an organisation is located outside the eligible programme area).

b) Partnership size

One important rule is that biggest is not always best. The size of partnership can impact the efficiency of project implementation, particularly in terms of reporting and financial

management, where large amounts of information will need to be collected and coordinated, and delays from some partners are almost inevitable. Choose partners that are crucial for the successful implementation of the project.

c) Partnership composition

Project partners should have the right expertise and knowledge to contribute to the project's development and, later, implementation of the project. The project idea should be in line with the strategic focus of partner organisations, to ensure that partner organisations (rather than just individuals) are motivated to take an active part in project development and implementation. Both similarities and complementarities in expertise are valuable for all partnerships:

- Partners often have **similar expertise**, which helps ensure that joint project activities can be efficiently implemented in each partner country, and that partners have a similar understanding of key issues. More importantly, partners will most often aim to address similar problems and therefore be motivated to take an active part in the project.
- **Complementarity** means that the skills of one partner match the needs of other partners. It is of course unusual to find a perfect match, but looking for complementarity between partner specialisations can be useful for ensuring successful exchange of experience between partners (i.e., learning from each other) and delivering one of the key Interreg benefits.

	Lead partner	Partner 1	Partner 2	Partner 3
Specific objective 1	Significant experience, for example ...	Some experience, for example ...	Significant experience, for example ...	Minor experience, including ...
Specific objective 2			No experience... Particularly interested in learning about ...	
Specific objective 3	...	No experience... Particularly interested in learning about

Table 2: Grid for assessing partners' complementarity

2.2. How to identify the right partners

You need to find partners who can help you turn your idea into a unified set of activities and convincing results. You will need to work closely with all partners for the whole of the project, so getting the right mix is essential. You might have to turn some organisations away. Briefly stated, key criteria for partners are:

- Shared needs with other partners and complementary expertise (to support exchange of experience).
- Knowledge of the relevant issues, to contribute to the content of the project.
- Commitment, enthusiasm and trust towards other partners (willingness to take part actively already during project development).

Financial resources (to participate in project preparation, pre-finance project activities ahead of each claim and secure their own contribution).

a) Existing contacts

Existing contacts often form the core of the partnership. The familiar partners can often identify new partners through organisations where they have contacts. Strong contacts like this can facilitate preparation of the project proposal, as there is a pre-existing understanding of working methods and goals, and less need for trust-building.

Some border areas, especially in the case of established EGTCs (or other previously established cooperation structures), have a strong background in partnership working, previous cooperation experience and prior knowledge of partners. Networks established within priorities of macro-regional strategies could be also considered. Where these cooperation structures exist, they will often be able to help identify suitable, reliable partners.

However, old partners are not without risk. Many programmes are cautious about approving projects based around 'the same old faces' and prefer to see new combinations of partners to avoid repeat projects based on the same content. Project managers should also be aware of the risk of 'old' and 'new' groups forming, and should work hard to integrate new partners as soon as possible, making them feel welcome and valued. Even where existing partnerships are strong, the possibility of bringing in new partners and ideas should always be explored

b) New partners

Completely new partnerships can develop and successfully deliver Interreg projects. Most programmes run partner search events, websites and other programme support services to assist this process. Building a partnership from the start requires more time and preparatory work (including regular partnership meetings), and it becomes even more important to be clear and open about the objectives and activities of the project.

Any partnership-building process should start with an assessment of each partner's ability to contribute to the project, both in technical and financial terms, based on the written project idea. The active participation and commitment of potential partners during the preparatory phase can provide a good indication of their abilities and willingness to contribute to project implementation at a later stage. If a partner is inactive or shows no motivation during project preparation, it is worth considering whether to include them in the partnership. Partners who are completely new to Interreg may well need additional support throughout the whole implementation process.

Organisations also operate differently in different countries, and it is not always easy to find the right partner organisation that will be able to implement the project in the same way in the partner country – a region in your own country may be a very different thing to a region in a partner country. This often means that more than one potential partner needs to be identified.

c) Involving the private sector

Interreg programmes are increasingly focusing efforts on economic development as a response to the weaknesses exposed by the financial crisis that began in 2008. Extensive economic cooperation has long been an objective of the programmes, as it will allow EU countries to unlock the same economies of scale and effective regional specialisation as are found in our main competitors. In the past there were extensive barriers to achieving this type of cooperation within Interreg, but the financial crisis has created a clear incentive to remove

these barriers at every level, and a great deal has been achieved. As a result, an increasing number of programmes are not only accepting but also actively promoting private sector involvement.

Private sector partners bring in new skills, knowledge, attitudes and contacts. Many programmes promote a 'triple helix approach': Behind this terminology is recognition of the fact that the private, public and academic sectors need to work together in balanced partnerships on the development of an effective, modern knowledge economy in the regions where they are based. The terminology gets an extra twist in 'quadruple helixes'. This simply means that the users of new products and services should be involved in developing them – for example, through open innovation processes. Programmes have responded to the need to involve private enterprises in very different ways. There are two basic responses which can be understood through looking at the programme's financial tables. Programmes that operate based on 'Total public funding' (as opposed to 'Total funding') do not allow private sector beneficiaries. Programmes operating based on 'Total funding' will allow private sector financing, and studying the programme's financial tables will allow you to see the amount of private sector funding expected. Nevertheless, even programmes operating with private sector funding can have very different approaches as to how this should be done, and it is vital to study the rules of the programme you are applying to.

Where programmes do not allow private companies to be beneficiaries and receive European funds, the private sector will need to be approached indirectly through, for example, business associations or chambers of commerce. Projects are limited to activities that will not give a competitive advantage to any business involved.

Other programmes have embraced the opportunities provided by various State Aid schemes, which allow limited public funding of enterprises for several specific purposes. Regardless of the nature of their participation, private sector beneficiaries also need to be aware of a range of programme requirements regarding their participation, which in many cases differ significantly from standard business practices.

Check the programme rules on private sector participation before approaching private partners

Private sector participation comes with an administrative workload which may be new and unwelcome to most companies. Despite this, many projects have successfully included the private sector by identifying project benefits that can compensate for the added administration. Examples include the positive publicity of being involved in activities for the public good, access to policy and decision makers, access to research, and access to new networks and partners.

2.3. Partnership development stages

Partnership building is far more than matching needs and managing financial questions. If it is going to work, it needs to involve building friendships and trust. On one level this means acknowledging the need for face-to-face meetings and social contact after the end of the working day – contacts that are based exclusively on virtual contact on work issues tend to be fragile. On another level, it also means acknowledging that development of the most meaningful types of cooperation is going to take time: People who have just met for the first time are not going to make long-term binding commitments to each other.

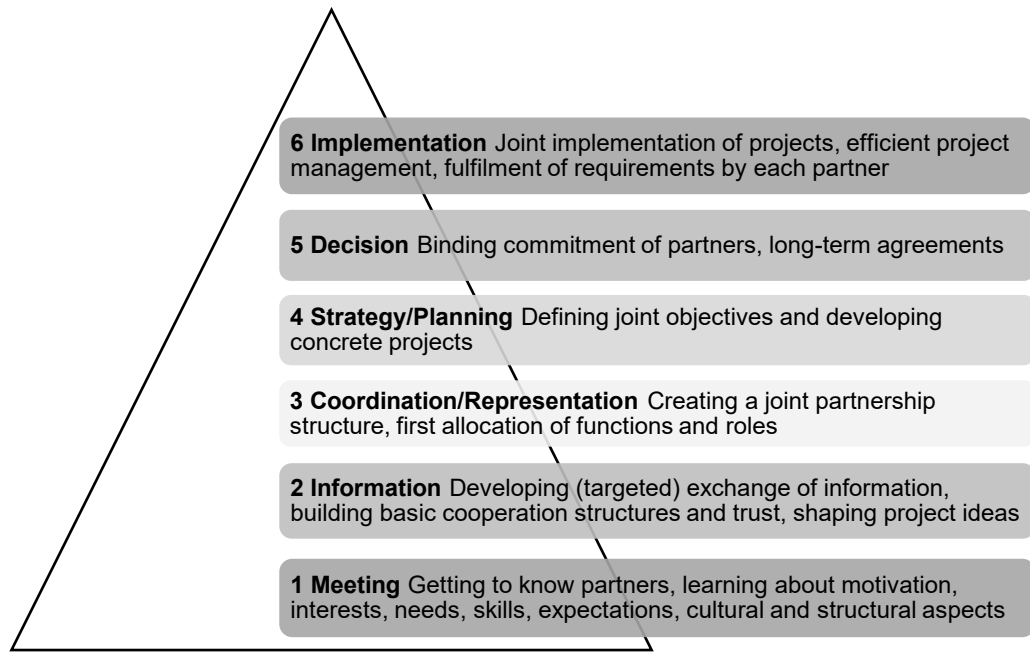


Figure 1: Developing partner cooperation

The chart above shows the different stages through which international cooperation typically develops - from the first contacts in meetings, networks, etc. to the stage where the solid partnerships are in place and ready for successful implementation of development projects. The main point applies equally to all projects: Joint implementation activities requiring high cooperation and trust are unlikely to succeed without previous exchange and relationship building.

While informal meetings and exchange of information usually involve a wider number of related organisations (networks) but usually not a high degree of depth or close cooperation, the number of organisations (potential partners) involved decreases, the higher up the chain the partnership moves. In other words, committing to closer cooperation on increasingly specific ideas will mean that more and more of the less active stakeholders' step back from the project.

Some partner relationships remain for a long time (or even always) on level 1 and 2, while others can move relatively fast from initial meetings to close cooperation, depending to a large extent on interests, motivation and the needs of the partners involved. New partnerships should reflect on how many of these partnership building activities can be carried out during development of the application, and how many will form part of the actual project. This should contribute to a realistic assessment of how far the partnership **can expect to come in terms of the final project's outcomes** – from a continued exchange of information to a commitment to combine forces in future developments.

3. Project's stakeholders

Stakeholders are anyone who has an interest in a project or will be affected positively or negatively by its outputs and results. Stakeholders are both internal to an organisation (i.e., staff and management) or external (i.e., people, groups, institutions or other organisations). They are also those who can significantly influence, positively or negatively, the project and are therefore important to its success. Stakeholders are an indispensable part of the life of the project which needs to be systematically addressed.

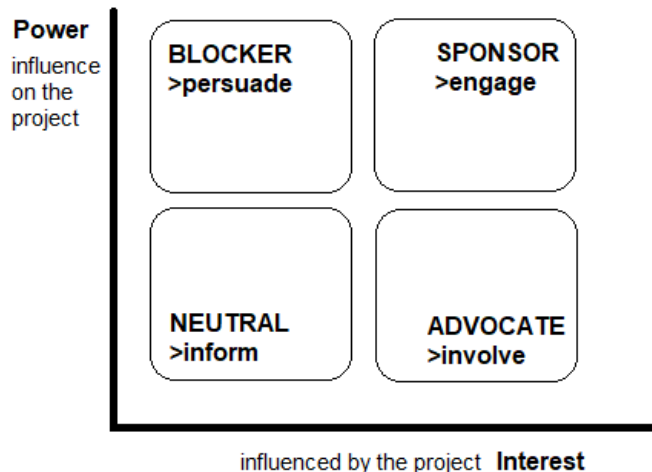
When considering project partnership, it can be helpful to think about whether all of the local stakeholders in each partner region are effectively represented, and whether there would be a benefit in involving national, European or even global organisations. An inclusive approach to local stakeholders helps to ensure that all concerned voices are heard and that project proposals are designed to minimise resistance and integrate all the most useful suggestions. In addition, informal cooperation through a project can be an effective way for national bodies and ministries to explore each other's positions in a non-committal setting – and can therefore serve as the forum for developing subsequent, more formal, cooperation. Even on a national level, many project partners report that international perspectives and partners can be a good way of breathing new life into discussions within each country and introducing fresh ideas.

3.1. Analyse project's stakeholders

The stakeholder analysis is the identification of a project's key stakeholders, an assessment of their interests, and the ways in which these interests affect project riskiness and viability. It should always be prepared at the beginning of a project, even if it is just a quick list of the stakeholders and their interests. Such a list can be used to draw out the main assumptions which are needed if the project is going to be viable, and some of the key risks. It contributes to project design and helps to identify appropriate forms of stakeholder participation.

A pragmatic method of carrying out a stakeholders' analysis is to map them in a graph (see figure below). This will allow identified stakeholder organisations to be assigned to a category based on which the appropriate form of participation can be decided.

On its vertical axis, the graph represents an increasing degree of power or the extent to which the project is influenced by the decision of the stakeholders. On the horizontal axis, stakeholders will be organised based on their increasing level of interest in the project, hence on the extent to which they are affected by it. To start populating this map you should place organisations that exert a strong influence on the project, but are also highly influenced by it, in the top right corner. Conversely, organisations that have little interest as well as power, should occupy the bottom left corner of the square.



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Commission the work. Their actions and decisions will have a high influence on the outcomes of the project. This group is also highly interested in these outcomes. This is obviously the most important area which needs to be carefully analysed, as these stakeholders are relevant to the decision-making process in the project.	Support the work. Even though these organisations are unlikely to affect the project, they might in return be highly affected by it. It is the responsibility of the project to address these stakeholders' interests, especially in order not to become a threat to them and induce their shift towards the "blocker" position.	Neutral to the work but might move towards any other position. Their decisions are unlikely to have serious consequences on the project and they have little interest in the purpose of the project. They are not irrelevant to the project because they might move towards a different area based on the relations, they have with other stakeholders	May hinder the work of the project. Organisations that have a strong power on the project outcomes, but no direct interest. These organisations may represent a risk to the project; however, if appropriately addressed they may become neutral, or even better
These are key players, so focus efforts on this group. Involve them in the project decision-making/governance bodies. Engage and consult them regularly.	Involve them and show consideration. Make use of interest through involvement in low-risk areas. Keep them informed and consult them on interest areas.	Keep them informed via general communication.	Engage and consult on the interest area and try to increase the level of interest.

The achievements of the project and programme objectives are strongly interdependent. This is because the programme has the biggest power on the project in terms of approving the funding, and the highest interest. Since projects are those implementing the programme strategy, the programme should be considered a stakeholder.

3.2. Engage project's stakeholders

In each instance, partners will have to decide who the appropriate stakeholders are and to what extent some or all of them should be involved. Involving a larger rather than smaller number of people is not necessarily better. Also, it is important to remember that not all stakeholders will be interested or able to participate. In a participatory approach the role of the stakeholders is to share their experiences and expectations.

Engage:

1. Their engagement is necessary for the project results to reach beyond the partnership and produce a lasting effect.
2. Highest degree of involvement at the stage of project preparation and implementation.
3. Make sure their needs and expectations are constantly reflected in the project.
4. Plan project activities for direct engagement in the project – for example, at decision-making points.

On the top right corner of the graph there are those organisations which are important to the project because they can highly influence it and share a high level of interest in it. Project partners also belong to this cluster. They are pro-active players in the joint development of the project idea and participate in the entire decision-making and planning.

However, when developing a project, the partners should not forget that those stakeholders who are not partners still have an interest in and influence on the project. In some cases, they will be “excluded-partners” as a consequence of the need to keep the partnership within a workable size. They are potential multipliers with the capacity to reach out and beyond the project partners.

Therefore, their involvement is of definite relevance to the project, and they should be identified and addressed in a way that is appropriate to the level they influence the project and the extent the project may affect them. If they are disregarded, the project might find out too late that it is going down a route which will not secure the expected results, and radical adjustments will have to be made.

Involve:

1. Decent degree of involvement at the stage of project preparation. It is important to be aware of their needs.
2. During implementation, keep surveying their needs.
3. Engage with them with initiatives, also at local level.
4. Foresee specific activities in the project work plan.

In the bottom right corner of the graph, all the organisations that have expectations from the project will be grouped. They might become users of the outputs, or they will benefit from the project results. Their participation in the project should be quite active. Their involvement since the beginning of the project is important - e.g., to survey their needs and interests and thereby better understand how the project can address them.

Having these stakeholders on board from the start serves two purposes:

1. First, that their voice is heard on a matter that is going to affect them. If the project is inclusive, their support should be secured, and it should increase the possibility that the changes the project is seeking to achieve will actually happen.
2. Secondly, by establishing a relationship with these stakeholders the partners can gauge potential obstacles which might be raised by this group and could push them in the direction of the top-left box. Without any dialogue with these stakeholders the project would have very little chance of predicting such risk and may jeopardize its work.

Within this area you find the **project target groups**, defined as:

- Individuals and organisations directly and positively affected by the project outputs.
- Not necessarily receiving a financial grant and not even directly involved in the project as partners.
- The target groups may exploit project outputs for their own benefits.
- The target groups may be people or organisations external to the project partners, as well as internal to it, depending on the project.

Many project promoters find it useful to carry out a needs analysis with particular focus on the project target groups, to support project development. A clear link between the project idea and target group needs is indispensable; the target groups are customers of the project. Their role in the mainstreaming of project results is key. Mainstreaming is defined as the process by which project results are adopted as part of the standard systems and procedures of an organisation, and, by extension, of a community - if the project result involves a change of behaviour.

Inform:

1. Low degree of involvement at the project preparation stage.
2. Consider for project communication activities. Engage with them with initiatives, also at local level.

The people and organisations grouped in the bottom left corner are those unlikely to represent a risk, or an opportunity, for the project. Their capacity to affect the results is limited, as well as their interest in the project purpose or use of the outputs. Even though the priorities of this group lie somewhere outside the immediate scope of the project, they will be interested in being kept informed on the project, and with time they may well move towards the right-hand side of the graph. At this stage of the project, it will be worth noting these organisations and considering their participation in the framework of the project outreach strategy later in the project development.

Persuade:

1. Modest degree of involvement at the stage of project preparation, but it is important to be aware of their interests.
2. To gain support, inform about the project expected benefits from their point of view.
3. During implementation, keep surveying their position.
4. Engage with them only with focused and targeted initiatives.

No matter how good a project idea might be, there will always be stakeholders who by taking, or not taking, decisions will negatively influence the work of the project. These stakeholders should not be disregarded; they occupy the top left corner of the graph, and they should be persuaded about the value of the project so that their level of interest increases. For this to happen, the communication that goes out to them should highlight their interest in the project and not be a hypothetical value of the project per se. Failing to convey the message from their point of view will reduce the chances that they will change their position from blockers to sponsors or neutral. It is important to identify them at the start of the project and begin building a targeted relationship. Engaging with these organisations might be challenging, especially if they belong to the same partner organisation (internal stakeholders).

The minimum effort required towards internal stakeholders is to make sure that all people whose work is required by the project are aware of what is expected from them and are in a condition to perform it. Projects often experience administrative problems in their own organisations when they must implement programme rules. Problems range from difficulties in securing the necessary staff and other resources, to conflicts between financial systems. All these difficulties can delay a project.

Engaging stakeholders in your project is a continuous and resource-intensive task. Focus on the most important ones from all clusters and involve them during the development and implementation of your project.

Example: Stakeholder mapping

Disclaimer: *the analysis of stakeholders is not an exact science. You may even disagree with some of the suggestions in this example. This tells you that:*

- *Stakeholders' identification, analysis and engagement are matters to negotiate and agree with the partners.*
- *Different countries have different systems in place which may make the same or similar organisations assume different roles in the map. Be aware of these differences and allow flexibility in the project to address the matter in the most effective, yet cooperative, way.*

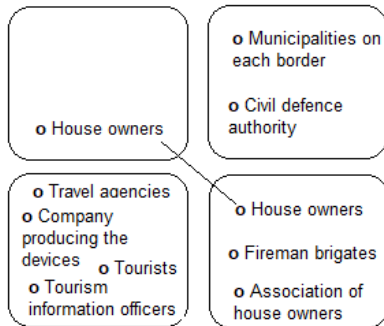
The reference for deciding whether a certain organisation is more or less affected by the project is the project result. When in doubt, prioritise on this basis.

Project idea

A cross-border area is subject to high risk of fires and is sparsely populated during most of the year. However, during the summer season tourists occupy most of the houses. Therefore, the population increases drastically exactly when there is a higher risk of fire.

The project idea proposes to equip each household (in agreement with the municipalities on either side of the border) with a device automatically notifying the closest fire department in either country. This will allow fire brigades from either side of the border to reduce their response time to the fire site and will reduce the risk of fatalities.

Power
influence on the project



influenced by the project **Interest**

Partners: municipalities on each side of the border, fire brigades.

Target groups: Association of house owners, house owners.

Other stakeholders: tourism offices, travel agencies, tourists, company producing the devices.

Municipalities (sponsor)

The municipalities on each side of the border have the authority to decide on a matter such as equipping households with specific safety devices. They also carry the responsibility of overseeing that the people in the region are safe, and that the tourism sector does not suffer from the risk of fire. They are therefore the organisations with the highest interest in the project, as well as higher capacity to influence its success, and they should be involved in the project as partners.

Municipalities are not target groups because they are not directly affected by the outputs - i.e., the fire alarm devices.

Firemen (sponsor)

The firemen are those who will benefit from the project outputs, in the sense that they will be able to better respond to any possible fire. Their work is strongly influenced by the project: without the device they would not be able to coordinate their intervention as effectively. They have a strong influence on the project (they might refuse to agree on a joint response plan), and they are strongly affected by its actions. Firemen should also be partners.

Association of house owners (advocate)

They have a high interest in the project because they want to preserve the value of their properties. They have some influence on the project because they can lobby house owners who are against the project, to change their minds. The association would benefit from the installation of the fire alarm devices or from a faster rescue plan, yet other individuals would benefit more. The association is a target group.

The association might be a partner in the project; however, it has no power over the firemen, or specific authority in matters of civil protection. This means it may lack capacity to enforce the project.

House owners (advocate or blocker)

This group can assume contradicting positions. On one side, they could refuse to allow the installation of the devices for privacy reasons. They may not want a sensor recognising their

presence in a specific room of the house at any given time of the day. In doing this they reduce the overall benefit to another group, that of the firemen who would need to verify if there are people in the house. If a large number of house owners assume this position, the project will fail. On the other hand, if they accept this condition they may improve their chances of survival in a possible fire.

Company producing the devices, tourism offices, travel agencies (neutral)

These other stakeholders are not decisive to the success of the project. They may provide additional support to the achievement of the results, but they lack the capacity to enforce the project.

3.3. Methods for engaging with stakeholders when preparing a project

Stakeholder involvement can be realised in various ways. When defining the stakeholder groups, careful consideration should be paid to how the groups should be involved. In some cases, consultations are organised in the framework of seminars or conferences on the topic of the project, while in other cases dedicated meetings can be set up with the participation of relevant stakeholders.

There is a long list of methods for engaging with stakeholders that can be easily accessed online; below we list the most common ones.

Methods for sharing information and awareness:

1. Make use of the space and tools available at each programme's website and/or events.
2. Exploit existing fora, such as professional online networks on social media or experts' platforms.
3. Contact macro-regional strategy coordinators to reach wider stakeholder groups.
4. Use your network as a multiplier: share information and ask your network to re-share it.

Methods for gathering specific input:

- *Questionnaires and surveys:* This is a structured way of obtaining information which can be easily analysed. They can reach a very large audience, especially when online surveys are used. The questions should be written in a neutral form, not leading those answering.
- *Focus groups:* This is effective in small groups, if facilitated by an expert or experienced facilitator. It can lead to very relevant results, but it is rather resource intensive. Face-to-face focus groups organised at local level are a very effective way of approaching stakeholders and establishing a trust relationship. Later in the project the group can be "transferred" to professional social media platforms, enabling a less time-intensive, but equally informative exchange.
- *Workshops:* These are structured group discussions with a specific aim - e.g., to solve a problem or analyse a topic. It is a useful method for gathering experts from different fields/ backgrounds. As with the focus groups, it is resource intensive. In this case too, a first face-to-face meeting might be an investment in future cooperation. However, to maintain momentum, the support of online platforms could be used later.

Whichever method you choose, make sure that it is proportionate to the relevant level of participation of the different groups of stakeholders, and remember that a large variety of

solutions can easily be conducted online with a significant saving of resources - time, money and CO² emissions.

4. Fine-tuning the project idea

Participating in an Interreg project implies that the project idea needs to reflect the interests of all partners. The project idea should represent a joint agreement of what is to change, where and for whom. The evolution of the project idea and of the project partnership is an interdependent process. The project is influenced by the partners; likewise, the partnership is shaped by the purpose and scope of the project.

4.1. To be agreed at this stage

When new partners-to-be come together they are normally enthusiastic about the new challenges and contacts that the project will bring. The partner that proposes the idea often – but not always – becomes the facilitator of the various ideas and inputs from partners. The facilitator's role will be to maintain this motivation while making sure that it does not result in unrealistic expectations about the project. This is particularly important during discussions about the purpose and scope, the foundation of any project, which should be focused and clear.

Project purpose	Project scope
<p>Purpose is the reason why something is done or used; the aim or intention of something.</p>	<p>Scope is the extent of a given activity or subject that is involved or relevant.</p>
<p>Partners discuss questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · <i>Why should we do it?</i> <p><i>What improvements will the project bring compared to the present situation?</i></p>	<p>Partners discuss questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · <i>What needs to be changed?</i> · <i>What factors can we influence?</i> <p><i>How can we influence them?</i></p>
<p>Partners should be knowledgeable of the needs, problems, potentials and assets that exist in their area, and use them as the basis for contributing to the definition of a future improved situation – the project purpose.</p> <p>The purpose has to be jointly agreed within the partnership. Without sharing a common purpose, partners would lack motivation for committing to the project.</p> <p>A clear understanding of the purpose from the beginning will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ make it easier to plan resources and activities. ○ reduce the risks of underperformance or partner withdrawal during project implementation. 	<p>To agree on the scope of the project means to define the area of intervention: what the project will do and what it will not do to reach the result. The starting point is again the knowledge that each partner will have about specific needs, problems, potentials and assets that need to be addressed, and of the factors that can be influenced to make a change.</p> <p>Defining the project scope will involve prioritisation of the various ideas. The project focus shall be narrowed to a level that is realistically achievable.</p> <p>Considering the resources available at this stage is also necessary – partnership, time limitations and budget.</p>

Table 3: Project purpose and scope

The main source of idea development material is partners' discussion and expertise. Meeting with partners and potential partners to discuss ideas is certainly a good practice, since it allows

immediate feedback on each other's interests and suggestions. The development of the partnership is an important process, and the time it takes from a first meeting to definite commitment should not be under-estimated. It is also well-known that even the closest friends can argue when money is involved.

However, not everything can be covered in a project, and ideas need to be narrowed down to relevant and realistic objectives. To reach a high level of agreement that satisfies all interested parties it is advisable to circulate a project idea draft beforehand among the meeting attendees, as well as a clear statement on the purpose of the meeting, to manage expectations. This should reduce the risk of the exchange among potential partners generating frustration and misunderstandings.

To organize and coordinate a meeting that has such a large scope as developing project ideas is not an easy task. The ideas of partners will often fall outside the original idea of the project. During the first stages of planning the scope can be adjusted to include new objectives, but at a relatively early stage the actual results need to be defined. This decision is essential so the project developer can communicate, 'What this project is about'. The project developer must consider ideas "outside the scope" carefully, balancing the need to create a project with coherent activities and objectives against the need for project partners to feel that their input is valued. This process is best managed face-to-face and becomes more challenging, for example, via email exchanges.

Good practice examples for a project idea development meeting:

1. Circulate a project idea draft prior to the meeting.
2. Communicate the expectations for the meeting.
3. Use working tools that stimulate participation and creativity, like flipcharts, post-it notes and boards. This will also make it easier to keep an eye on "the big picture".
4. Ask a colleague not involved in the discussion to take notes.
5. Make sure to capture all inputs and organise the information in a logical order. It could be helpful to start by drawing a mind map.
6. Use decision-making techniques. These will support you when it is time to set priorities.
7. Conclude the meeting by stating the expected benefits at the end of the project.

It is very likely that one meeting will not be sufficient to conclude the negotiation process, and further exchange among partners and partners-to-be will take place via email and other electronic forms of exchange. Make sure that you have a common base for a discussion: a good practice is to update the project idea description shared at the beginning of the process with the decisions made at the meeting and use this as a joint working tool. There are several online platforms where the project idea document can be uploaded and simultaneously edited by different users, leaving the updates visible.

4.2. Test the project idea

The main source of project idea development material is partner discussion and expertise. To refine project ideas and ensure their relevance, project developers should carry out a range of activities to check the project's focus and options.

In addition, project developers should be aware **that Interreg has been running for the past 35 years**, during which time thousands of projects have been financed. This means that there is a huge capital of knowledge and experience to build on which cannot be ignored when preparing a new proposal. Furthermore, the competition has increased, and several organisations have developed specific Interreg-expertise gained through participation in different projects. So, before investing time and resources in drafting a complete application form, it is advisable to get a good understanding of the state of the art.

To test the strength of the project idea, you could carry out the following activities:

- a) **Background research** and review of existing studies, with particular focus on target groups' needs and the identification of gaps in existing services/products, as well as thematic gaps identified by the programmes.
Background research is often carried out to obtain further information about the project context and possible project impact. The research should cover the thematic field of the project to assess the level of maturity in the field of intervention for each part of the target area.
An assessment of existing services in the relevant intervention area can also be carried out to make sure that the project does not duplicate any existing activities being carried out by other organisations.
- **Check complementarity and duplication** compared to previously-funded projects: ideas should complement (and not duplicate) other projects being carried out in the programme area.
Project developers therefore need to know how the project fits into existing projects and how the project is likely to influence their activities. The application will need to demonstrate how the project is different and how communication and learning will be secured between similar projects. Project ideas that are too close to an existing project may be rejected.
If two similar ideas are under development, they may be asked to combine these into one larger partnership. In some cases, programmes might also discourage project development on a specific issue if it is felt that the projects approved so far already cover the theme sufficiently. It is therefore very useful to consult programme management on this issue before developing the project application.
Information on most projects financed by Interreg can be found not only on the websites of each Interreg programme, but also in the official database of all Interreg projects implemented since year 2000: www.keep.eu. Where macro-regional strategies exist, coordinators of these strategies would be key persons to address, as they have an overview of the projects within the specific theme and relevance for the macro-region. These projects are not limited to Interreg projects only.
- b) **Avoid 'saga' projects** - i.e., projects that are continuations of previous projects. Such projects could be a good way of keeping the activities for individual projects within realistic limits. For example, a first project might develop feasibility studies or strategies, and a follow-up project could implement actions developed based on the first project. Project promoters therefore would be tempted to apply for Interreg funding with a view to develop the project idea further (building on previous results) during the next round of

calls. This 'multi-stage project approach' helps to set and achieve realistic project objectives within the timeframe of the project but adds a long-term perspective to cooperation which cannot be assumed.

In fact, there is no guarantee that the follow-up project will be funded, and in many cases, programmes are unwilling to fund the same partners to carry out similar activities in more than one project. Every follow-up project must develop the activities carried out in the first project, and an added-value must be demonstrated. Follow-up projects that just offer more of the same will almost certainly be rejected.

Considering the long tradition of Interreg in many European countries, many programmes consider the development of feasibility studies and action plans as an intermediate project deliverable and would not accept that a project stops at that stage. The delivery of documents such as strategies, reports and studies are no longer considered a sufficient outcome of a cooperation programme. Make sure that you are aware what types of outputs and results are expected and requested by the programme.

- c) If possible, pilot the project idea** (or parts of the project idea) to identify any potential weaknesses or areas where the project idea can be further strengthened.

It is a precondition of successful project implementation that partners are experienced in the field of the planned project. In some cases, partners have already carried out 'pilot-type' activities, which can be used as a stepping-stone for the development of the project idea (or parts of it). These methods can underpin the project concept and help to support the project idea with key stakeholders (and programme management in particular).

Pilots show that the project idea is realistic and will increase confidence in the ability of the partnership to implement the next stage. However, a strong word of warning is needed. Projects must make sure that the main idea is not just a repeat of the pilot on a bigger scale. There is a need to demonstrate that activities build on what has been learnt or done so far. Applications that seek funding for existing activities will be rejected.

Considering the long tradition of Interreg in many European countries, many programmes consider the development of feasibility studies and action plans as an intermediate project deliverable and would not accept that a project stops at that stage. The delivery of documents such as strategies, reports and studies are no longer considered a sufficient outcome of a cooperation programme. Make sure that you are aware what types of outputs and results are expected and requested by the programme.


4.3. Consult the programme

Programme management and/or Joint secretariats (JS) should be consulted regularly for advice and feedback on the idea, and for partnership development. These clarifications contribute to a better understanding for both project developers and programme management about how the project responds to the programme objectives and targets. If a project already has a good understanding of the main issues in the programme documents, consultations can be used for fine-tuning the project, so it is more likely to be approved. Projects should review received feedback carefully and consider adjusting proposals accordingly, as the comments received are likely to reflect the outcome of the assessment during the selection process.

Options	Description
Info-Day events or online seminars	To explain the strategy of the programme and the type of projects the programme is currently interested in, as well as some of the requirements.
Project pre-assessment	Project developers can submit their project idea using templates available on the programme's website and will get a programme's informal opinion about their project idea, either at an event or via other means.
Thematic seminars and partner search events	To bring together stakeholders from different sectors to discuss ideas and meet potential partners.
Supporting documentation	In addition to the Cooperation Programme, Interreg programmes prepare factsheets, guidance and application manuals where project developers can easily access all relevant information needed for project development.
Templates	Templates such as project idea, project partnership agreement, application form, progress report, etc.
Project idea web database	An online portal listing all project ideas in a programme, and types of partners those other projects are looking for.
Targeted assistance	In cases where project developers from different regions/countries are working simultaneously on a similar topic, the programme might suggest merging project ideas.
Individual project consultations	Between partners and Joint Secretariat staff based on a project idea submitted.
Network of national / regional contact points (CP)	To inform about the programme and the national context, facilitate country-specific partner searches (you can also contact CPs in other countries where you are looking for partners) and provide tips and advice for project development.

Table 4: Example of programmes' events and tools for project development support

5. Project idea generation checklist

	Success criteria	Yes	No	Comments
Project idea	Project is demand-driven: Identified target groups will be able to benefit from the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Project is result-oriented: Project will make a change by addressing the need of the target groups.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Project is relevant: Project contributes to the programme objectives and results as identified in the Cooperation Programme.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Project requires cooperation: The project would not succeed without international cooperation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Partnership	The relevant organisations needed to address the need and achieve project objectives are involved.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	The partnership is balanced with respect to levels, sectors and territory.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Partner organisations have experience and competence in the thematic field concerned, as well as the necessary capacity to implement the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Project's stakeholders	Potential project's stakeholders and their roles have been identified.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Stakeholders to be addressed have been prioritised.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Core stakeholders have been contacted and engaged according to their interests.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Testing project idea	The partners have made use of available knowledge and built the project on existing results and practices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	The programme has been consulted and comments considered.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	If relevant, the project idea has been tested.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	