

Interreg



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IPA ADRION

Harvesting Report

Feedback from Interreg VI-B Interreg Adriatic Ionian
Programme on the Future Shape of Interreg

Approved on 18 December 2024



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Introduction

The Interreg VI-B IPA Adriatic Ionian programme (hereinafter: IPA ADRION) presents the outcomes of the post 2027 consultation held in year 2024.

The consultation contributes to the wide DG Regio initiative aimed at collecting inputs and suggestions from Interreg stakeholders to be included in the policy debate on the future of Interreg. According to DG REGIO, *“The future Interreg should be based on the experience of programmes, stakeholders and citizens. They are those who are the most concerned by the policy and know best the needs for territorial cooperation across the EU and along its external borders”*.

This initiative, announced along with the Interreg forum held in Santiago de Compostela (Spain) on 25-27 October 2023, is expected to be concluded by end of 2024 with the submission, by each Interreg Programme, of an *“harvesting report”*.

DG REGIO provided guidance on how to implement this exercise through its document *“Guide for shaping together the Future Interreg”*¹.

IPA ADRION Managing Authority (MA)/Joint Secretariat (JS) submitted a proposed methodology and an indicative calendar to the Monitoring Committee (MC) on occasion of the 8th MC meeting held in Zagreb (HR) on 19-20 February 2024, which envisaged:

- Taking advantage from Interreg Volunteer Youth support.
- Considering programme core Technical Assistance financial constraints.
- Consultations performed also through the contribution of National Contact Points.
- Consultation to be carried out via web/online.
- Taking advantage of events organized at Adriatic-Ionian level by relevant organizations.
- Addressing to key stakeholders only.
- Possible implementation of joint questionnaires in cooperation with other Interreg programmes (either transnational or located in the same geographical area).

The MC gave mandate to MA/JS to carry out the consultation process on Interreg post 2027.

The consultation was supported by the involvement of an Interreg Volunteer Youth, Ms Larisa Dumitrescu.

The survey was characterised by the following steps:

- 1) Joint online stakeholders' consultation
- 2) Organization of a joint workshop with Interreg CBC Italy-Croatia, Interact and the strategic project EUSAIR Facility Point, held on occasion of the EUSAIR Forum held in Sibenik (HR) on 16 May 2024. The workshop gathered feedback from ca 50 stakeholders. The workshop collected feedbacks on opportunities for territorial cooperation within the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region, issues that can be most effectively addressed from a transnational perspective, elements of current cooperation that are successful and should be maintained or strengthened, obstacles for an effective cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region, and how can the EUSAIR framework be optimally used to enhance coordination and cooperation in the region, ensuring better utilisation of Interreg project outcomes.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/publications/guides/2023/guide-for-consultations-to-shape-the-future-interreg-toolkit_en

- 3) Organization of a workshop addressed to the IPA ADRION 1st call granted beneficiaries held in Bled (SI) on 23 October 2024. The workshop gathered feedback from 74 stakeholders according to the same set of survey questions prepared for the online consultation.

The workshop held on 23 October 2024 in Bled (SI) and addressed to the IPA ADRION 1st call granted beneficiaries.

The 74 participating beneficiaries were involved in dedicated 6 groups of ca 10 persons each. To ensure all groups and beneficiaries to express their opinion both on challenges and solutions, half of the groups answered questions No 1, 2, 7, 8 + question 9, whereas the remaining ones the questions 3, 4, 5, 6 and question 10.

Their feedback helped in further in depth going to some feed backs received.

The present document summarizes stakeholders' feedback on what is currently working well and what would need some improvements in transnational cooperation. Collected information has contributed to elaborate some policy recommendations aimed at inspiring the dialogue/discussion on how transnational cooperation should look like in the next programming period.

In line with other transnational programmes, IPA ADRION did not implement any activities aimed at directly consulting citizens as they are reached by the granted projects and are not direct beneficiaries themselves of granted initiatives.

1. Methodological approach - Online consultation of stakeholders

An online consultation took place from 24 April to 14 June 2024. The survey was done in cooperation with five other transnational programmes:

- EURO MED,
- CENTRAL EUROPE,
- NEXT MED,
- ALPINE SPACE,
- SUDOE.

to avoid overlaps and reduce the burden on both programmes and stakeholders.

The survey was based on the 10 key questions outlined in the DG REGIO Consultation Toolkit.

IPA ADRION promoted the survey via its programme web site and its social media: LinkedIn, and X.

The survey gathered 711 feedback, out of them 232 (32,6%) contributed to IPA ADRION specific analysis. This final figure comes from the analysis of data and after having deleted duplicates (9) and added those questionnaires which referred to ADRION programme even if the question 1 *What is the key challenge in your area, which should be addressed through transnational cooperation?* was left blank.

Preliminary feedback on the interest of respondents to the survey was communicated to the IPA ADRION MC on occasion of the 11th MC meeting (online, 23 September 2024).

1.1. Thematic analysis

The exported data were received by the Central Europe transnational programme.

The data analysis was performed in autumn 2024 with the support of ChatGPT Model 4.0, specifically for topic modelling, which is a widely adopted method for extracting themes from large datasets. This approach is considered common and reliable, as it offers efficiency and accuracy in identifying patterns and topics from unstructured text; moreover, it also facilitates further insights into qualitative data. This blend of automation and human input enabled a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the data, highlighting both commonalities and unique sector-specific concerns.

Data to be analysed were processed according to the following:

Data cleaning

The data was exported from the survey tool. Raw data exported from the survey tool was thoroughly cleaned to remove inconsistencies, irrelevant information, and duplicate entries. This process ensured that the responses analysed were consistent and suitable for thematic grouping.

Categorization

Each respondent was categorized into one of four primary sectors: Public, Private, Education, or Non-Profit/NGO. This step provided clearer insights by enabling sector-specific comparisons and helped capture the unique challenges and perspectives within each sector.

1.2. Text analysis

The AI-driven analysis unfolded in the following steps:

- **Topic Modelling with Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA):** An LDA model was employed to detect recurrent themes by analysing word distributions within responses. This method was instrumental in uncovering dominant topics, which were then labelled based on prominent keywords and context. For instance, each topic was then interpreted and labelled to represent its thematic content, such as “Sustainability & Environmental Focus” or “Capacity Building & Knowledge Transfer Focus.”
- **Validation with Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA):** To ensure accuracy, LSA was applied to identify semantic relationships between keywords. This cross-validation helped refine themes, verifying that the LDA model had captured significant and representative topics within each sector’s feedback.

As some answers were short and not contextualized, the results should be treated cautiously. Statements demonstrating a lack of knowledge of the programme rules and requesting what IPA ADRION is already offering were not taken into account (e.g.: advance payment to IPA beneficiaries, higher co-financing rate, equal funding sources for ERDF and IPA beneficiaries).

To have a broader understanding of the responses and improve Interreg, a longer exchange with the different types of stakeholders could be beneficial.

The analysis was based on the questions included in the “Guide for shaping together the Future Interreg” slightly reshaped by the temporary consortium of the aforementioned transnational programmes as reported in the table below.

Two specific questions were added regarding the IPA ADRION Programme (questions No 9 and 10):

| | |
|---|--|
| Questions as reported in the European Commission Toolkit “Guide for shaping together the Future Interreg” | Questions reported in the post 2027 survey of Interreg VI-B IPA ADRION Programme |
|---|--|

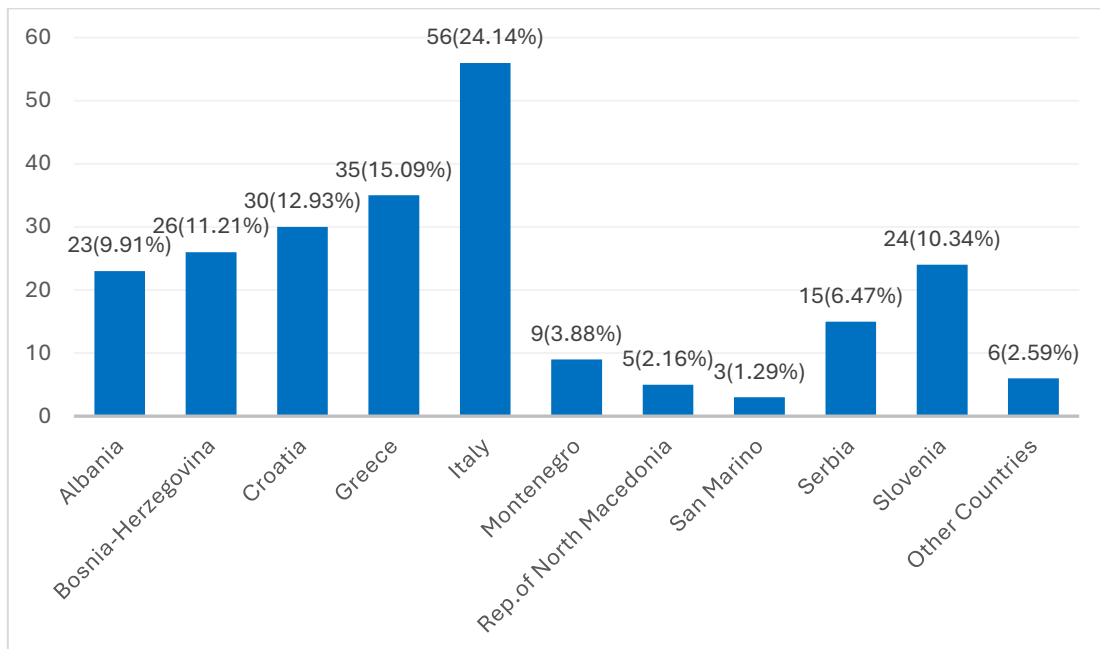
| | |
|--|--|
| Question 1: Is living next to a border an opportunity or a disadvantage? | <i>Skipped due to irrelevance for transnational programmes.</i> |
| Question 2: Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area? | Question 1: What is the key challenge in your area, which should be addressed through transnational cooperation? |
| Question 3: What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced? | Question 2: What are key benefits that transnational cooperation offers to stakeholders like you? |
| Question 4: What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved? | Question 3: Do you see any shortcomings in how your transnational cooperation efforts are currently supported? If yes, please explain. |
| Question 5: What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area? | Question 4: What are concrete obstacles in your area, which prevent stakeholders like you from cooperating transnationally with other partners? |
| Question 6: Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why? | Question 5: Are there things that you would like to do through transnational Interreg programmes but currently you cannot? If yes, please explain. |
| Question 7: What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg? | Question 6: What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in the future Interreg transnational programmes? Please explain how Interreg (or its role within Cohesion Policy) should change in the future to make transnational cooperation more effective. |
| for some infrastructure projects? | Question 7: Should the funding focus of transnational Interreg programmes change? What would be your transnational dream project? For example: Should transnational programmes also finance larger investment and infrastructure projects? Or is the current focus on capacity-building and pilot investments fitting well? |
| Question 9: What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country (governance)? | Question 8: Do you have any additional ideas for facilitating cooperation with your counterparts in other countries in the future? For example, in terms of coordination, governance, etc. |
| Question 10: What would be the cooperation project of your dreams? | Integrated into question 7 on funding focus. |
| | Question 9: In your opinion, what is the added value of cooperating with Western Balkan partner countries in the context of Interreg? |
| | Question 10: In your opinion, how should transnational cooperation support the youth? |

For example through educational training, exchange programmes, etc.

1.3. Data on surveys participation

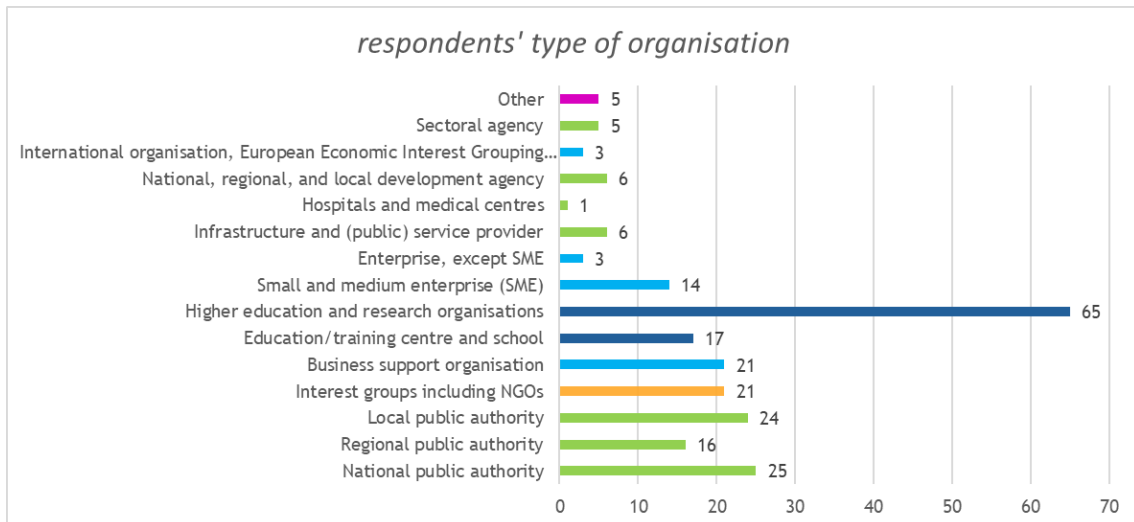
The joint survey was open from 24 April to 14 June 2024 and received overall 711 replies. Among them, 232 were addressing the IPA ADRION participating countries: majority of them are from ERDF participating countries (62,5%), and 87 (37,5%) from the IPA ones.

Italy emerged as the most represented country, contributing at 24,14% (56 respondents), followed by Greece at 15,09% (35 respondents) and Croatia at 12,93% (30 respondents). Bosnia-Herzegovina also had a notable presence with 11,21% (26 respondents). The other participating countries included Albania (9,91%), Slovenia (10,34%), Serbia (6,47%), Montenegro (3,88%), the Republic of North Macedonia (2,16%), and San Marino (1,29%). Additionally, 2,59% of respondents were from other countries, further enhancing the diversity of perspectives within the programme area. This diverse territorial background underscores the regional engagement and collaboration among different countries in the Interreg IPA ADRION programme landscape.

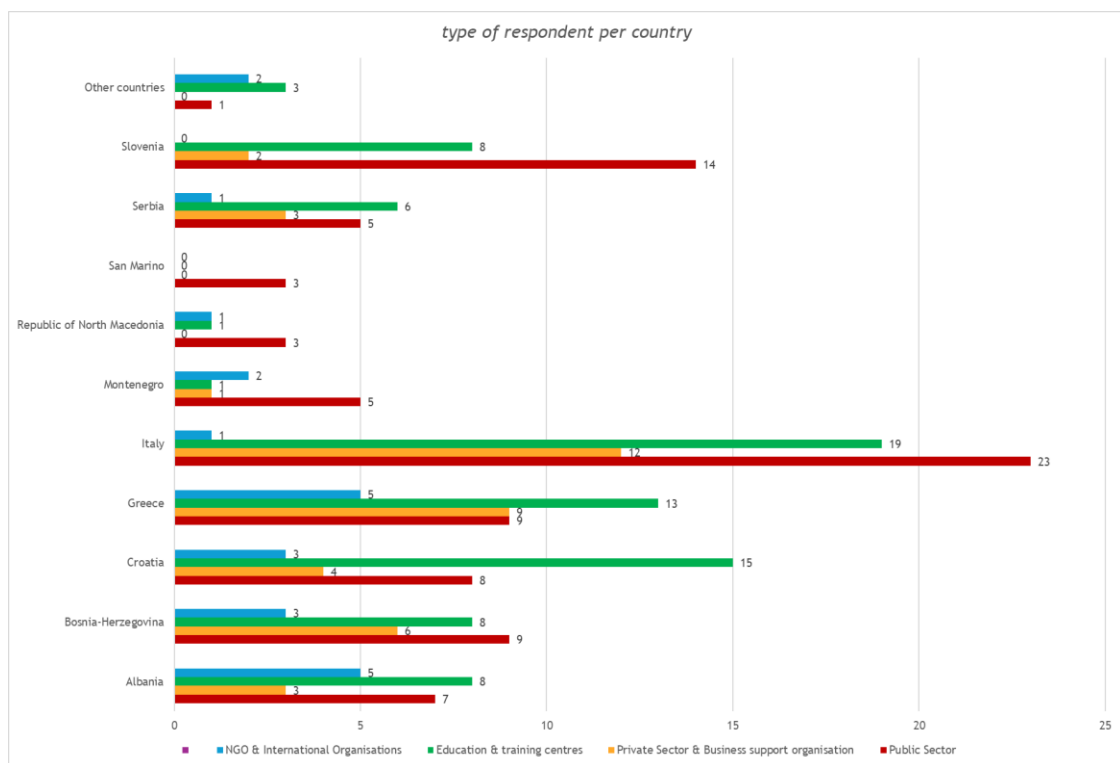


1.4. Respondents' institutional background

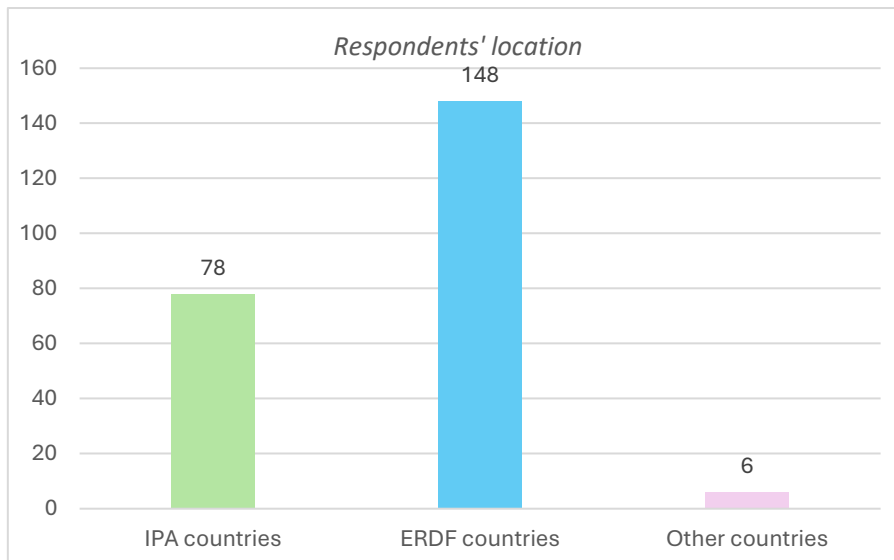
Participants' profile evidences a wide diverse sectoral representation, stretching from public authorities at different level (national, regional, local) to development agencies and SMEs.



Respondents' institutional background according to their country of origin is provided below:



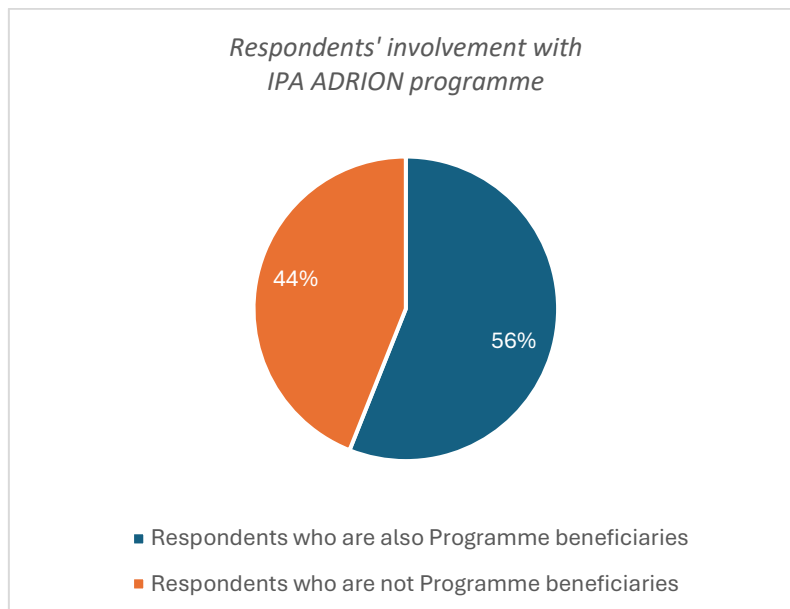
The analysis of respondents' institutional backgrounds per participating countries shows the prevalent presence of institutions located in the ERDF participating countries (64%); respondents from IPA participating countries are 34% of the total.



Our of the 232 respondents, 56% of respondents have been/are beneficiaries of ADRION/ IPA ADRION programme.

This percentage tells that:

- a) received feedback are well grounded and based on direct experience; and
- b) the survey has been positively perceived by a wide range of stakeholders which know Interreg and IPA ADRION and would like to be part of its community: this is an important information taking into account the participating countries involved in the programme.

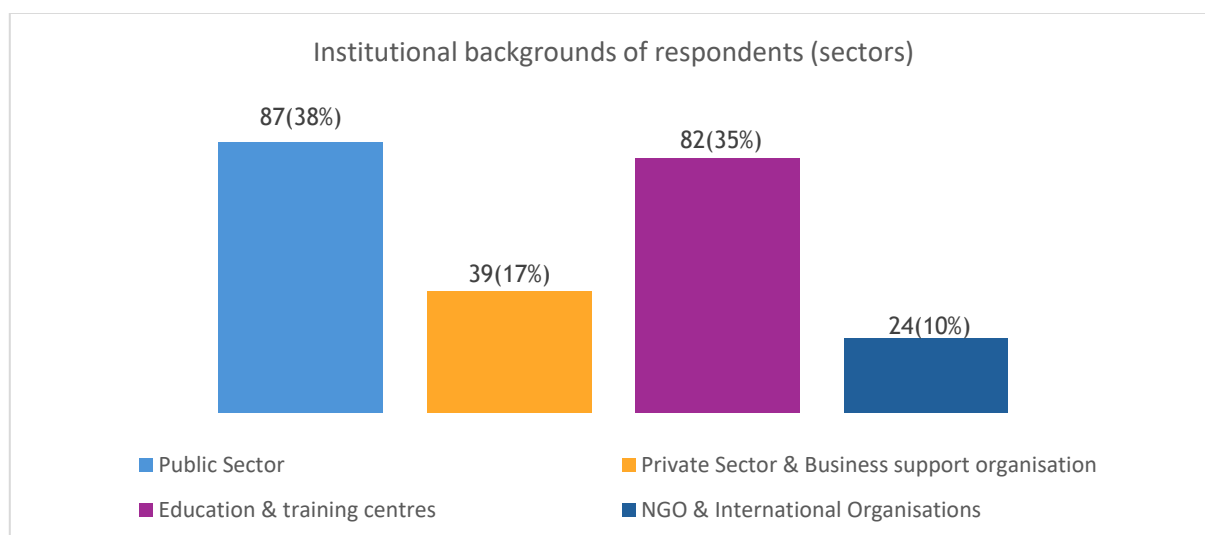


The analysis of the institutional backgrounds of the respondents (Public, Private, Education, or Non-Profit/NGO) reveals a diverse composition across various sectors. The public administrative sector - local, regional, national public administrations, development agencies (hereinafter: public sector) - is the most represented, accounting for 38% of respondents. The education and training sector, which also includes research organizations (hereinafter: education sector), closely follows with 35%. SMEs and other enterprises (hereinafter: private sector) are 17% of the total, while NPO/NGO sector, which also includes International

Organisations and European Economic Interest Groups (hereafter: NGOs, sector), comprises 10% of respondents. Three respondents were grouped under “other” category.

Public and education bodies amount altogether to 73% of the total. Details about the respondents, both in absolute figures and in percentages are provided in the charts below.

Detailed information on institutional categorization is provided in Annex 1.



1.5. Typology of participants to the workshop addressed to beneficiaries

As far as the workshop held in Bled is concerned², 55% participants declared being representatives of public authorities and 39% of education and research related organizations, while 5% represented SMEs and other is 2%.

74% of respondents declared being experienced with Interreg projects and 26% considered themselves beginners. Finally, 85% of them declared being familiar with other EU granted projects (e.g.: Horizon, Life, Erasmus+ etc). This overview allowed the programme to verify the reliability of the feedback received during the online consultation.

2. Overview of stakeholder survey feedback

In the present chapter an overview of the most significant elements reported in the received feedback is reported.

The analysis was supported by AI tools and further refined by proof reading and validation to ensure accuracy and alignment with the programme’s Objectives. This combined approach allowed for a comprehensive and precise analysis of stakeholder feedback while maintaining the integrity of the insights provided.

² Investigation through Slido.

2.1. Question 1: What is the key challenge in your area that should be addressed through transnational cooperation?

The respondents highlighted the following challenges: environment, economic development and innovation, cultural heritage and tourism, education, knowledge transfer and capacity building, and governance.

Environmental challenges: natural disasters and marine protection were evidenced by the respondents of the public sector, while minimization of carbon food print, including green technologies, renewable energy, waste management and sustainable mobility were highlighted by the respondents working in the research department.

Low economic development: A relevant number of respondents identified the economic development as a challenge, with a focus on innovation, competition and support to SMEs. The public sector also evidenced unemployment and low demand for research and innovation by microenterprises, while NGOs sector focused on the links between sustainable growth and young people. The private sector focused on digitalization and the transfer of new technologies.

Lack of innovation on Cultural heritage preservation: the need of setting in place innovative services able to leverage cultural and creative activities (private sector), sustainable tourism.

Skills deficiency: Other identified challenges were the role of education and knowledge transfer. Enhancing skills and knowledge through transnational cooperation was seen as a crucial way to address regional issues and build stronger capacities within regions: all respondents representatives emphasised the need for capacity building, also focusing on training programs to address skill gaps and enhance governance for effective project management.

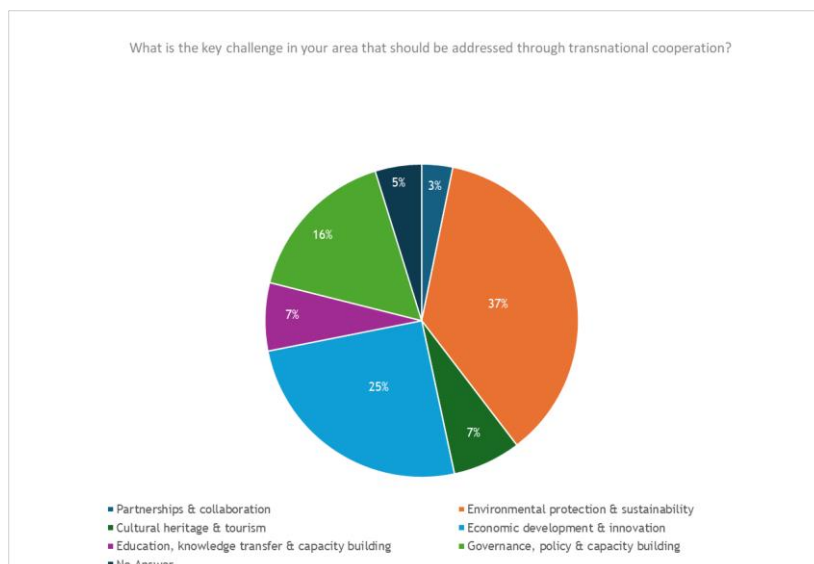
The NGOs sector proposed a combination of challenges highlighted both by the public and the private sectors.

Political and institutional fragmentation: Governance and policy alignment across borders was also stressed: respondents pointed out the need for better policy frameworks and governance models that can facilitate smoother cooperation across different regions and countries.

The public sector's feedback indicated that strengthening governance frameworks is crucial for effective environmental management and sustainable development. It pointed out the need for harmonisation of data collection processes and standardised sustainability criteria at the EU level.

The education sector identified various governance challenges, including the need for standardised procedures and improved cooperation between EU and non-EU countries. The focus on capacity building through training programs was also noted as essential for enhancing institutional effectiveness.

The chart below shows the relevance of the main identified challenges.



Interesting quotes from respondents:

“Enhancement of tourist activity through new innovative services, building on cultural and creative activities and on Blue Growth”

“It is important that the project idea is developmental and related to research and the scientific community”

“The key challenge in Greece, particularly for SMEs like ours, is the integration of innovative maritime technologies and sustainable practices. Transnational cooperation can provide access to new practices (...)”

“Capacity building through exchange of best practice”

“Strengthening institutional capacities of public administration”

“Adoption of EU values”

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

Topics evidenced in the survey were confirmed by the beneficiaries consulted in Bled.

Beneficiaries added further topics, stemming from content ones - like transport decarbonisation (including aviation and maritime transport), health, civil protection, security, digitalisation, enlargement and human capacity (including brain drain, youth engagement) to those affecting programme implementation (administrative burden and interpersonal communication skills).

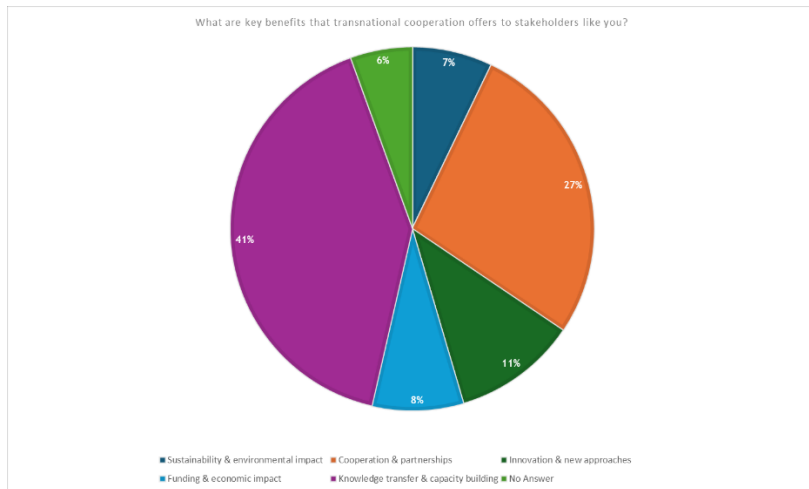
2.2. Question 2: What are key benefits that transnational cooperation offers to stakeholders like you?

Respondents confirm the contribution of **transnational cooperation** to face the challenges evidenced in Question 1.

Exchange of practices: Support to innovation through the exchange of experience, adoption of new technologies, innovative solutions, and creative approaches to regional concerns was also mentioned as one of the main benefits of transnational cooperation.

Transnational Cooperation: All respondents recognised the added value of transnational cooperation, which makes it possible to carry out activities deemed relevant, which otherwise would not happen without external public support, with the exchange of knowledge, practices and networking which only Interreg

offers. More specifically, respondents from the public sector evidenced the support that IPA ADRION can provide in terms of transferability and scalability of successful initiatives.



Interesting quotes from respondents from respondents:

- *“Better environmental governance for biodiversity and nature conservation with less duplication of work”*
- *“To operate in close contact with other member and non-member countries, thus promoting a technical collaboration”*
- *“Connecting organisations between states and within different areas”*
- *“I think these programmes are great as it helps build solidarity among EU communities. Without EU support via INTERREG, we would not have the chance to work together”*
- *“Collaboration with partner institutions in developing products, capitalization of previous research and increase of capacity for research through networking”*
- *[transnational cooperation] “opens doors to new ideas and perspectives, fostering innovation and creative solutions to complex challenges”*
- *“This cooperation could also open doors to enhanced funding opportunities, crucial for supporting research and development initiatives”*
- *“Remarkable learning process from EU best practices”*
- *“We learn a lot from other countries, we can replicate useful models to our territory”*
- *“Transnational cooperation offers wide range of valuable information to project partners, as it provides them with great and overall source of information and data and experience sharing. Previous experience of project partners can be replicated in cooperating areas”*

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

The benefits of transnational cooperation were widely recognised among participants in the consultation event. Beneficiaries emphasised how transnational projects benefit from effective working models, based on the building of wide and long-lasting networks, exchange of knowledge and practices, ideas and data collection. The importance given by transnational cooperation to upgrade individual knowledge was also emphasised: free learning, possibility of hiring young professionals, exchanges to identify solutions not available yet are some examples.

More remarkable benefits are for the IPA beneficiaries: IPA ADRION was considered as an opportunity to get better prepared in view of future enlargement, access EU standards, and to improve and upgrade professional skills.

2.3. Question 3: Do you see any shortcomings in how your transnational cooperation efforts are currently supported?

The purpose of this question was to identify systemic programme weaknesses that hinder the potential of transnational cooperation.

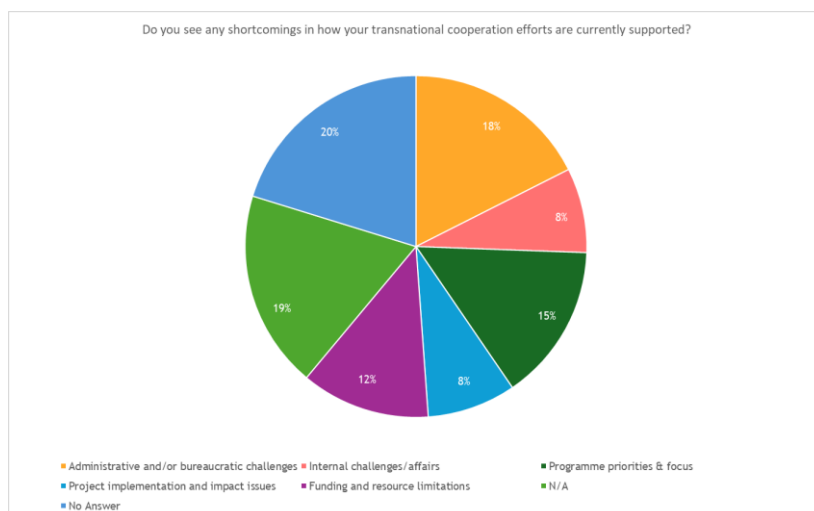
This question was not answered by all respondents (53 missing feedback, i.e.: 23%); while others stated that they did not see any shortcomings in the way the support for transnational projects was designed (49 answers, i.e.: 21%), for a total of 44%.

Bureaucracy and administrative burdens: identified shortcomings are relate to the perceived high level of bureaucracy and administrative burden, which is seen as a relevant barrier, hindering the potential participation of those beneficiaries/entities, in particular of SMEs with limited administrative capacity. Reporting requirements and slow reimbursement are also element of concern; the compliance with some rules in the construction of the budget was perceived as too binding and limiting the possibility of effectively testing experimental solutions. The current time span between application and project start is considered too long.

Weak local institutional support: Some respondents also expressed concerns about the lack of interest and support from local institutions/authorities due to a lack of awareness and a weak attitude to cooperation.

Programme limited budget: As IPA ADRION is considered as a relevant instrument, its limited financial resources for the needs of the programme area are a matter of concerns for respondents: the comparison with the higher available resources of the cross-border programmes was highlighted. Such limitation prevents the funding of infrastructures, in particular in the IPA countries.

Programme funding scheme: The structure of the programme in terms of Specific Objectives is considered too narrow and not always adequate to the identified needs, leaving little room for broader or more innovative approaches.



Interesting quotes from respondents:

- *“One significant shortcoming is the complexity and bureaucracy involved in the application and reporting processes. These can be particularly burdensome for SMEs with limited administrative resources”*
- *“There is not enough knowledge, competence and political awareness at local, regional and national level”*
- *“It seems that the thing they lack is involvement of public authority (local, regional, national), which should, in my opinion, become mandatory in order to prove that the grant beneficiaries have written their proposal having in mind activities to be performed after the project ends”*
- *“There is a too strong focusing on the programmes on certain themes, so that one has to renounce or force the research to them. It should be possible, explaining, access also with other themes”*
- *Sometimes pre-defined limitations in project budget result in limited possibility to effectively test the experimental solution designed in the framework of the transnational project*
- *“Funding Constraints- Although the budget is significant, there may be constraints on funding, which can limit the scale and impact of the projects supported”*

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

Beneficiaries confirmed the shortcomings emerged in the survey and evidenced the poor connection with the mainstream programmes and other Interreg programmes and the need of streamlined call calendars among Interreg programmes.

They also evidenced how some programme’s requirements reveal difficult establishing links with citizens and transfer of project results to decision-makers prove to be challenging; full engagement of public authorities which perceived project implementation as an additional workload requires a change of mindset.

2.4. Question 4: What are concrete obstacles that prevent stakeholders like you from cooperating transnationally with other partners?

This question is linked to the previous one and focuses on the day-to-day difficulties encountered by potential applicants and beneficiaries in applying/implementing IPA-ADRION projects. While some of the feedback is very similar to that on shortcomings, the focus here is on obstacles stemming from national frameworks and beneficiaries' capacities.

Similarly to the previous question, question 4 was not answered by all respondents (29 missing feedback, i.e.: 12,5%); additional 12,5% of respondents stated the absence of obstacles, confirming their satisfaction with the current state of the programme and the vision of transnational cooperation.

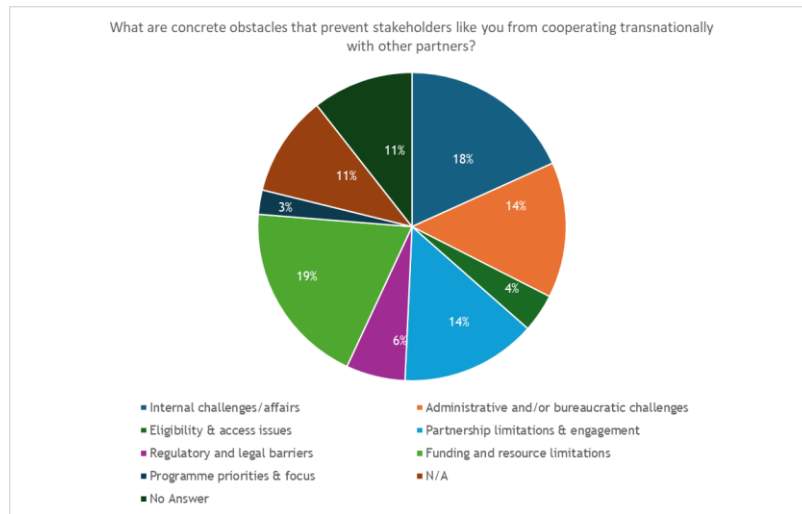
Lack of expertise and resources: Respondents highlighted difficulties in engaging and working with partners due to staff shortages, lack of expertise in project implementation and internal decision-making problems, as well as limited knowledge of English.

In contrast to the difficulties at partner level reported above in project implementation, particularly the education sector (universities) considered the programme rules limiting the participation of the same institution to be too restrictive.

Institutional fragmentation: Differences in national laws and regulations from one country to another were cited by both the private and the public sector (e.g.: intellectual property and data protection, created significant barriers to cooperation) slowing down the implementation of proposed solutions and undermining project impact on the territories.

Relevant administrative burdens: Overall, the programme's bureaucratic requirements and procedures were highlighted again and perceived as an obstacle to cooperation.

Narrow Programme thematic perspective: In a similar vein to what was highlighted in question 3, some respondents highlighted the difficulties in matching stakeholder’s needs with the Specific Objectives of the programme.



Interesting quotes from respondents:

- *“Short-sighted consideration of local authorities on most updated thematic of transnational cooperation”*
- *“Limited decisional and economic independence connected to internal organisation”*
- *“Lack of institutional capacities, i.e. human resources”*
- *“In cases where it is necessary to cooperate and obtain appropriate documents from the authorities of the republic or local administration, the procedures are complex and take a long time”*
- *“The only obstacle was the limited number of the applications that a faculty is eligible to put in for the specific call”*
- *“Consortium building is exhausting and time consuming. Finding suitable and responsive partners is a non-natural task which hampers our capacities to apply for projects”*
- *“Sometimes, the different national laws can be an obstacle to develop the transnational cooperation”*

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

As far as obstacles are concerned, participants to the workshop confirmed what already highlighted in the survey.

In terms of project implementation, they also identified difficulties in the application of national legislation and public procurement rules. Cash flow issue hampers the participation of some potential applicants.

Beneficiaries expressed difficulties to establish solid links with decision-making bodies either due to the multidiscipline oriented projects or to their high turnover in some participating countries.

According to them, Interreg innovative approach should also consider the acceptance of possible failures.

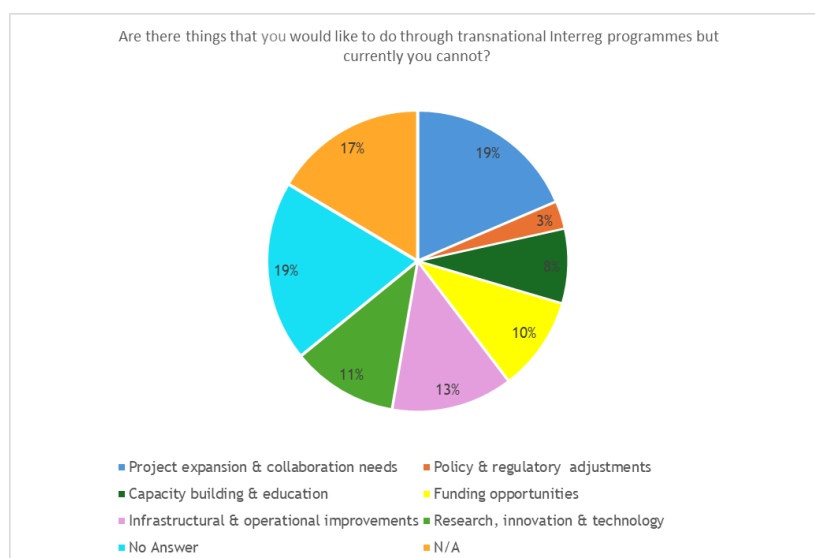
2.5. Question 5: Are there things that you would like to do through transnational Interreg programmes but currently you cannot? If yes, please explain.

Similarly to the previous questions 3 and 4, 20% of respondents (46 missing feedback) did not provide any feedback on this question, and additional 17% (39 missing feedback) considered the current funding focus and set-up of the programme satisfactory. Overall, it can be assumed that 39% of the respondents are pleased with the current programme design.

The relevance of transnational cooperation is also accompanied by a relevant interest in innovation and research which requires a higher budget for projects and a flexible financial approach.

The suggestions received do not contradict what IPA ADRION already supports, but highlight the perception of the importance of certain issues (what) and provide suggestions on how they can be addressed (how):

- Supporting research and innovation, in particular regarding circular economy, environmental sustainability and disaster management.
- Expanding project cooperation, e.g.: health. Current topics such as tourism, agri-food and green technologies are confirmed.
- Supporting capacity building, with a focus on governance models and labour market adaptation to address regional social challenges. Support for training was also called for by all respondents, with a focus on innovation, sustainability and digitalisation, health and climate change, activities supporting young people for future job opportunities.
- More accessible funding mechanisms, including targeted financial support for SMEs (e.g.: mentorship, networking, innovators, startups across borders).
- Implementing more pilot actions, including small-scale infrastructure.



Interesting quotes from respondents:

- *“Provide training and innovation that can be used in the market to foster competitiveness”*

- *“The programs could be strengthened with the exchange of personnel between the various transnational entities, on a voluntary basis”*
- *“Yes, we would like more dedicated programs that facilitate direct integration of academic coursework with transnational projects, enhancing real-world application experiences for students”*
- *[...] “funding initiatives focused on technology commercialisation, knowledge transfer, and entrepreneurship support, while also facilitating networking, mentorship, and access to funding opportunities for innovators and startups across borders”*
- *“We would like more opportunities of infrastructural investments through pilot actions”*
- *“Interreg programs could foster the development of innovation ecosystems and promote technology transfer by supporting cross-border collaboration among research institutions, businesses, and entrepreneurs”*
- *“While existing programmes support sector-specific projects, there's a need for more initiatives that foster cross-sectoral innovation, combining expertise from different fields such as technology”*

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

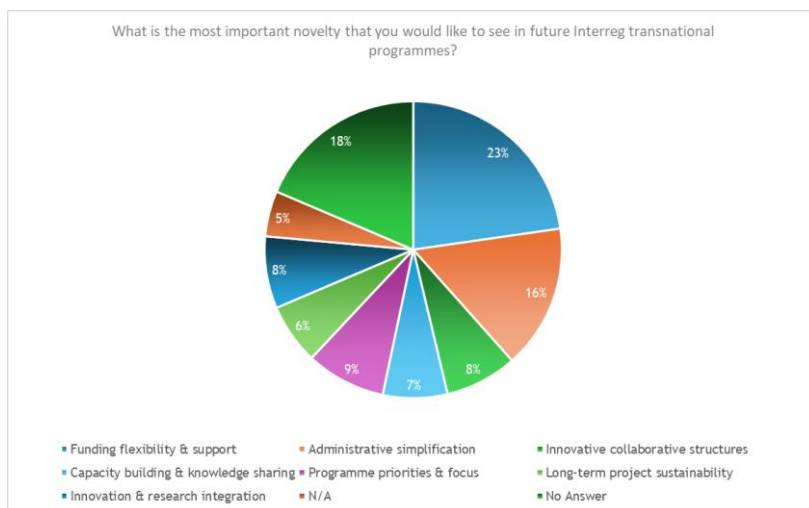
While confirming the outcomes of the online survey, the participants evidenced further interesting hints:

- Support of multidisciplinary projects, combining e.g. environmental and social innovation topics
- The creation of a hub to facilitate the search for funding opportunities across funding schemes
- The creation of a platform for exchanging ideas and synergies also apart from the launch of the call and among granted projects
- Crowdfunding training
- Internship for students and exchanges among schools with Interreg stakeholders.

2.6. Question 6: What is the most important novelty that you would like to see in future Interreg transnational programmes?

In line with the previous questions addressing to shortcoming and obstacles, respondents have defined the following elements for novelty/improvement:

- Greater flexibility of funding and support for small-scale infrastructure investments; possibility of funding granted transnational activities to sustain collaborative networks after the finalization of the project activities
- Encouraging the identification of innovative cooperation frameworks to facilitate the establishment of effective partnerships (e.g. networking events, thematic networks to facilitate knowledge sharing, accessible databases of partners including relevant information such as their status, needs).
- More participatory approaches to discuss transnational programmes (e.g.: permanent round tables)
- Supporting capacity building and training, including dedicated technical assistance in project management, platforms for sharing experiences and replicating successful models
- Adding new topics, e.g.: health, migrant flows, research, including those not supported by other EU programmes.
- Combining support for larger scale projects and long-term sustainability with local initiatives in line with EU priorities.



Interesting quotes from respondents:

- *“Future programmes should incorporate more flexible funding mechanisms that allow for adaptation to emerging challenges and opportunities”*
- *“Possibility for financing transnational activities after the conclusion of the project”*
- *“Follow-up projects to assess and improve previous initiatives/implementations”*
- *“Emphasis on the connectivity and upgradeability of implemented projects”*
- *“A serious, expert top-down approach outlining the ideal partnership able to deal with politically oriented territorial priorities”*
- *“Permanent round table to discuss transnational programmes”*
- *“An idea could be, in future Interreg transnational programmes, the establishment of a readily accessible database of pre-vetted partners who are committed to cooperation. This database would provide detailed information on partners' needs, status, and eligibility, streamlining the proposal development process and minimizing delays caused by administrative issues. Moreover, there should be mechanisms in place to identify and address inactive partners, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently, and projects remain dynamic and effective”*
- *“Incorporating advanced digital collaboration tools tailored specifically for transnational projects would be revolutionary. These tools would support seamless communication, data sharing, and project management across different languages and cultural contexts, leveraging AI to provide real-time translations and cultural context insights, thus reducing misunderstandings and enhancing collaboration efficiency”*
- *“Enabling capacity building activities in the form of mobility schemes and exchanges, to facilitate transnational partnerships in research and innovation”*

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

The following additional possible novelties were suggested for consideration:

- Sub-granting within the project
- Use of national ERDF funds for Interreg programmes
- More opportunities for exchanges between projects
- Grant for applied research

- Application of seal of excellence approach (bigger chances in the future for not granted projects; commit regions with follow-up funding of finalized projects)

2.7. Question 7: Should the funding focus of transnational Interreg programmes change? What would be your transnational dream project?

Out of the 232 participants to the survey, 49 respondents (21%) did not reply to this question, while 27 (11,6%) expressed their satisfaction with regard to the current content focus.

Received contribution provided suggestions regarding³:

- a) The change of topics (what)
- b) The granted actions (how)

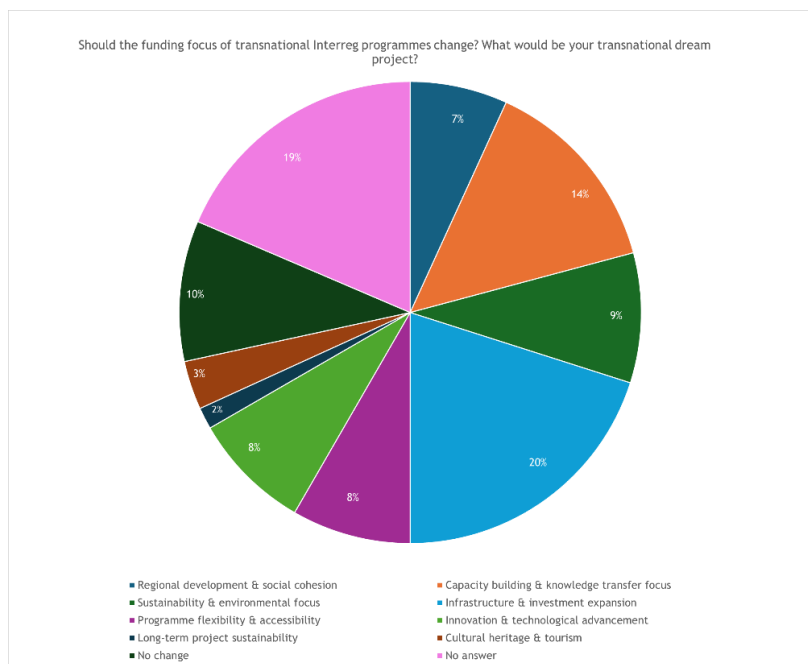
As far as the change of topics, received feedback is more oriented in empowering/adding themes for cooperation rather than on a radical change of focus, namely:

- a) Innovation, technology transfer and environmental support should be further encouraged, including the testing of innovative solutions, new products and pilot projects
- b) Digital innovation, including smart cities and the use of AI and big data in several areas of intervention (maritime technology, urban mobility)
- c) Social issues, such as the phenomenon of shrinking regions, are seen as relevant to both the public and private sectors
- d) Cultural identity and heritage conservation, including sustainable tourism combined with the modernisation of museums
- e) Capacity building, training activities and international education.

Regarding the type of granted actions, respondents expressed again their interest in **pilot actions** and **small-scale infrastructures**.

They also highlighted the need to rethink the life of projects, considering the possibility of benefiting from additional support to sustain the results achieved and to scale up successful initiatives beyond the end of the project.

³ Repeated requests for flexibility have not been reported.



Interesting quotes from respondents:

- *“Capacity building and pilot sites with some applied applications (applied research) are fitting well”*
- *“The current focus on capacity building, governance tools, and pilot investments is fine”*
- *“The program is good but as I said need to be more flexible and work together with applicants”*
- *“I believe bigger investments should be funded at the central government level, with capacity-building handled by Interreg”*
- *“Projects should live beyond their duration, providing long-term benefits to citizens”*
- *“A reserve fund for sustaining impactful projects after completion would ensure long-term success”*

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

The workshop with beneficiaries provided an opportunity to explore some of the statements already made during the survey, namely:

- Create synergies with different funding programmes and other Interreg programmes
- Focus on new experimental collaboration
- Getting funds for equipment for next period (continuation of COST actions)
- Identify new ways to show programme impacts; hard investment can help
- Cross-border platform for digitalisation; education platform continuously updated, offering courses; digital availability
- Provide pre-financing to all partners
- Envisage projects of different financial sizes

2.8. Question 8: Do you have any additional ideas for facilitating cooperation with your counterparts in other countries in the future? For example, in terms of coordination, governance, etc.

Respondents indicated several suggestions to facilitate cooperation. In addition to the already repeated reduction of the administrative and bureaucratic burden, hints addressed to the entire project cycle management:

Project preparation:

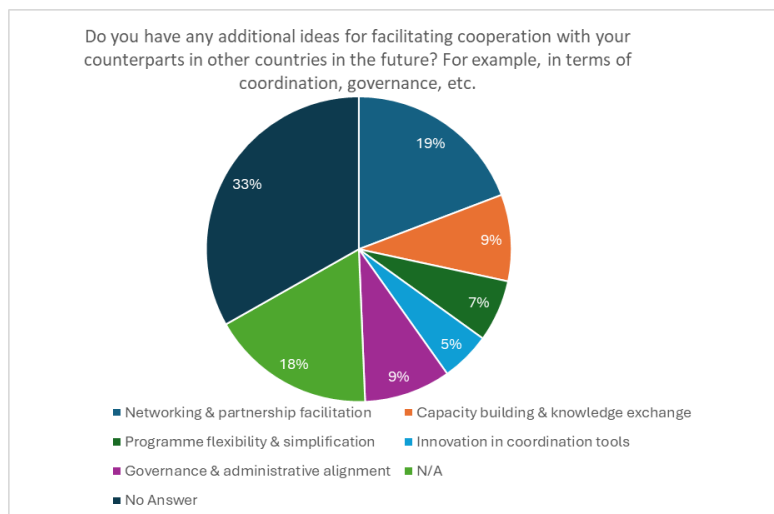
- Supporting partner identification: creating structured opportunities for networking and collaboration, including more face-to-face meetings, dedicated platforms for partner matchmaking and ongoing partner engagement, and a repository of institutions willing to collaborate in a transnational context to facilitate the quadruple helix approach (public sectors)
- Supporting project ideas and their follow-up through dedicated meetings and encouraging long-term partnerships, peer learning and mentorships (education and NGOs sectors)

Horizontal supported activities at programme level

- Ongoing training and knowledge-sharing opportunities facilitated by thematic experts, including embedding project ideas in macro-regional strategies opportunities (public sector)
- Staff exchanges
- Promote targeted decentralised information and support, in particular in underdeveloped areas.

Programme rules

- Increased use of simplified cost options and pre-financing (education and NGO sectors)
- Non-applicability of state aid rules



Interesting quotes from respondents:

- *“Maintaining thematic clusters with both longstanding and new partners is crucial. These clusters foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collective problem-solving”*
- *“In-person partner meetings should always be prioritised over virtual ones, as personal contact leads to better communication and collaboration”*

- *“More pre-project meetings are needed to ensure alignment and commitment before launching initiatives”*
- *“Technical tables on large themes, like natural hazard prevention, should involve rotating expert teams to promote equitable project distribution”*
- *“Think tanks could help align specific projects with larger macro strategic goals, making cooperation more impactful”*
- *“Focusing efforts through expert exchanges ensures that we’re learning from each other effectively”*
- *“Coordination between overlapping programmes needs to be strengthened to avoid duplication of efforts”*

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

Participants emphasised the importance of **study visits** as a powerful mean for fostering learning, relationship-building, and cultural exchange among stakeholders.

They highlighted that creating **synergies** between Interreg programs and mainstream EU initiatives could strengthen links to address complex transnational challenges effectively.

Promoting **peer learning, job shadowing, and twinning** opportunities was seen as particularly beneficial for newcomers to the Interreg community.

They also called for organised **partner search events** and targeted meetings to enhance networking opportunities, ensuring that stakeholders can connect easily and effectively across borders.

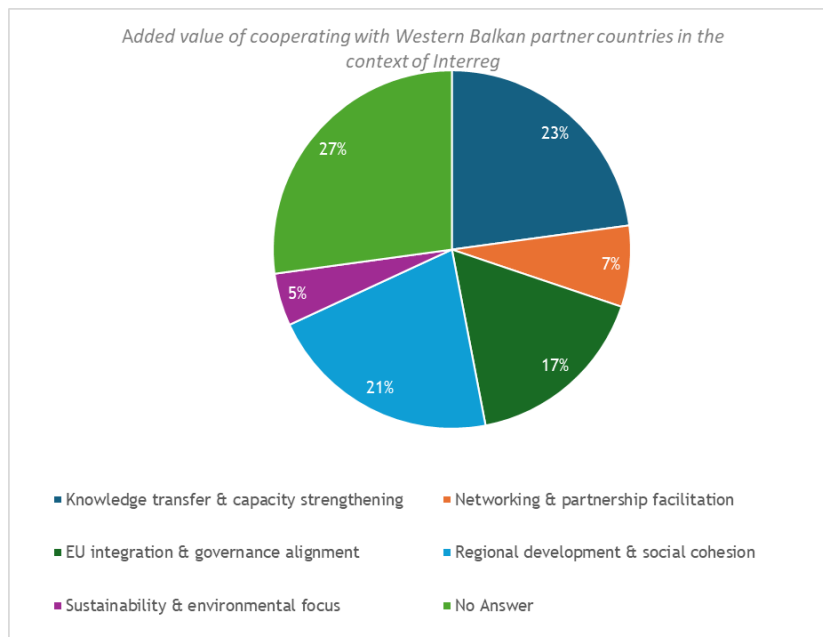
3. Specific questions to Interreg VI-B IPA ADRION Programme

3.1. Question No 9: In your opinion, what is the added value of cooperating with Western Balkan partner countries in the context of Interreg?

Out of the 232 respondents to IPA ADRION survey, 104 feedback was received, i.e.: 45% come from ERDF countries, and 59, i.e.: 25% from IPA countries. 30% of total respondents did not provide any feedback to this question. Received feedback evidence more, therefore, the point of view of the former.

Co-operation with the Western Balkan countries is seen as important to contribute to a smooth enlargement process and to establish and/or strengthen strong ties with new future neighbours; in particular, EU integration and government alignment with EU standards, as well as the need to make environmental policies more effective were highlighted.

Support to knowledge transfer and strengthening capacity are perceived as a valid contribution to this goal.



Interesting quotes from respondents:

- *“The inclusion of Western Balkan in the EU ecosystem is strategically crucial given the actual international situation and should be strengthened also considering the close ties that already exists between these countries and their neighbouring EU countries. Cooperation in Interreg projects is pivotal in easing their integration in EU also in light of possible EU enlargement.”*
- *“Transferability and replicability of solutions and knowledge already in place in EU countries can support faster developments of similar issues in WB partners regions”*
- *“It facilitates the understanding of EU regulations and directives on the part of Western Balkan countries. I believe that for European countries, it strengthens the relationship with their regional neighbours”*
- *“Through joint projects and initiatives, Western Balkan countries can strengthen their institutional capacity, administrative skills, and technical expertise. This capacity building is crucial for promoting sustainable development, improving governance structures, and effectively implementing EU policies and regulations”*

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

The feedback from the consultation event on the added value of cooperating with Western Balkan partner countries in the context of Interreg highlighted key priorities.

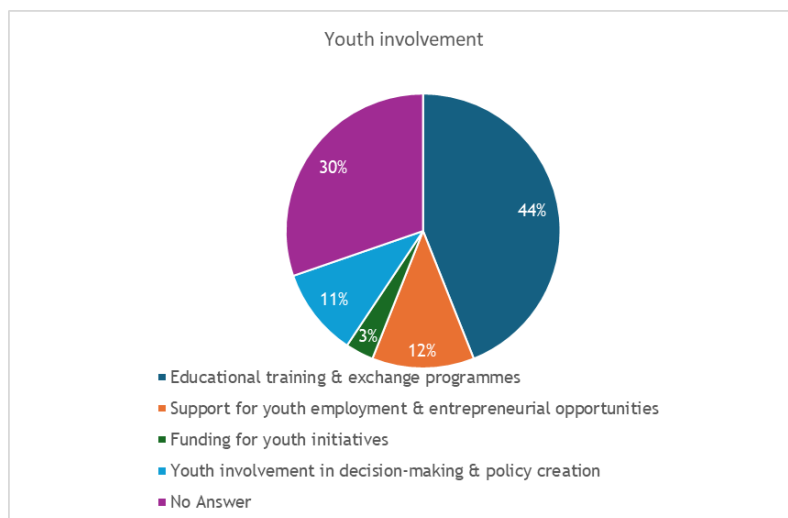
Participants stressed the need for **capacity building at institutional and business levels**, focusing on **knowledge transfer through study visits and collaborative projects**. Creating a community-networking environment was identified as essential for bridging differences and fostering cooperation among diverse partners.

3.2. Question No 10: In your opinion, how should transnational cooperation support the youth? For example, through educational training, exchange programmes, etc.

Out of the 232 respondents to IPA ADRION survey, this question received 97 feedback, i.e.: 42% from ERDF countries, and 57, i.e.: 24,5% from IPA countries. 77 potential respondents, i.e.: 33%, did not answer

The feedback collected from respondents points to several elements for reflection to set in place comprehensive support mechanisms that foster personal growth, cultural exchange, and professional development within the framework of Interreg programmes:

- Training and exchange educational programmes, with participants advocating increased funding for initiatives that facilitate mobility and scholarship, internships and Informal learning, including summer schools, workshops, practical learning experiences and networking opportunities to better prepare young people for the demands of the modern workforce
- Young people involvement in project implementation (even through quotas), as well as in the decision-making processes related to transnational projects (including the setting up youth councils or advisory boards)
- Support to youth entrepreneurship by providing funding opportunities, mentoring programmes and resources for innovative start-ups, as well as opportunities for internships and job placements within funded projects was also stressed.



Interesting quotes from respondents

- *“Transnational cooperation can play a crucial role in supporting youth by providing them with opportunities for personal and professional development, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and empowering them to actively engage in addressing global challenges. By investing in the development and empowerment of youth through transnational cooperation initiatives, stakeholders can harness the energy, creativity, and potential of young people to build a more inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable future for all”*
- *“There should be a greater number of training sessions with young people, and speakers from the scientific fields related to the project should be included”*
- *“Transnational cooperation can facilitate the implementation of educational programs, in the specific objective of the project. Also, it can facilitate exchange programs that could offer students or young*

people the chance to gain international experience, cultural awareness and language proficiency. Transnational cooperation can support the creation of youth networks and platforms that enable young people to connect, collaborate and share experiences across borders. It would be significant to give grants or scholarships and funding for small research projects to students”

Contribution from the workshop with beneficiaries

Workshop beneficiaries confirmed what reported in the survey. They also suggested to consider **partnership criteria** to reinforce the youth pillar, ensuring young people are actively **engaged as contributors** within projects rather than solely as beneficiaries, and dedicated resources for granting **youth-centred projects**. Activities such as **hackathons and awareness-raising campaigns** were suggested to engage youth using tools aligned with their interests and communication styles.

4. Policy recommendations

The Adriatic Ionian programme area reflects a miniature version of the European continent: it includes, among others, one of the EU’s founder member state (Italy), the last country which joined the EU in the last decade (Croatia), a set of Western Balkan countries willing to become the new EU members, and one non-EU country. It is the crossroads of the past and future of the European Union.

The concept of “territoriality”⁴ which is one of the backbones of the cohesion policy and which combines several elements like the “place-based” approach, the sense of ownership and capability in involving all relevant interested actors is, however, well understood by the respondents, who are also aware that its potential has not been fully exploited yet.

The survey indirectly confirms that Interreg is an opportunity to involve territories in cohesion, development and sustainability policies. Interreg represents all these concepts. Respondents see Interreg not only as a grant funding, but a catalyst of a series of opportunities of individual and collective/joint growth: it is not by chance that respondents gave great emphasis also to the projects preparation and follow up phases.

The following recommendations are based on the feedback received by potential and final beneficiaries’ perspective regarding Interreg VI-B IPA ADRION Programme.

AREAS OF INTERVENTION AND SYNERGIES

Rationale:

Interregional cooperation offers a unique opportunity to prepare the ground and/or reach the *last mile* activities aimed at reaching shared efficient and effective responses to borderless challenges and needs.

Recommendation:

Transnational Interregional cooperation is the foremost instrument for the identification of shared solutions on common concerns across borders and sectors. **Current areas of interventions (themes) should be combined with new ones** according to the following:

- Environment: climate change, biodiversity, circular economy, decarbonization.
- Digitalisation and data management: innovative digital tools, platforms, and processes
- Youth and new skills: youth engagement, addressing skills gaps, and aligning workforce capabilities with emerging market trends.

⁴ Interact: Territorial Package - March 2022 - Bringing territoriality into Interreg.

- Innovation: smart specialization strategies, innovation linked to the maritime sector
- Cultural heritage and tourism
- Health
- Transport
- Human capacity (addressing brain drain, youth engagement)

Enlargement is considered as a cross-cutting topic.

Selected themes should be exploited by supporting cross-sectoral projects linked to place-based potential: e.g. contributing to smart specialisation strategies, fostering/strengthening thematic or zero-carbon clusters are prime examples. The potential for spill-over effects in smaller programme geographical areas should also be considered.

Rationale:

Overall, full transnational cooperation potential, in particular regarding its rooting on the territory remains untapped and further exploitation is possible.

There is a wealth of information available from the Interreg legacy which could be used more effectively. The Keep.eu database, Interreg Programme and Interact websites, EU Open Data Portal, Interreg Newsletters and Publications are notable examples.

Recommendation:

Transnational Interreg cooperation should continue promoting territoriality by strengthening and identifying new approaches to foster the quadruple helix approach and anchor granted activities to policy and strategies goals at EU, national/regional and macro-regional level.

Given its territorial roots, transnational territorial cooperation is the ideal candidate for coordinating synergies with other sectoral funding sources and continue capitalising already achieved results.

Synergies could only be effective if supported by the necessary mutual recognition and involvement of other programmes/funding sources concerned. The use of non-binding guidance with a view to unlocking these synergies, both at the national level and at the EU level would be beneficial.

Similarly, exploring more structured connections with other Interreg transnational and cross-border cooperation (CBC) programmes could enhance coordination, streamline efforts, and maximize the impact of regional cooperation initiatives

These tasks shall foster a shared understanding of Interreg's potential, prevent duplication, and maximise complementarities. However, to successfully carry out this new task, dedicated resources and ongoing dialogue with key actors will be essential, starting already in the programming phase.

BUILDING AN INTERREG ECOSYSTEM

Rationale:

The evolution of Interreg has not only impacted its vision and approach to programmes, along with the subsequent programme periods, but also the way in which project proposals are designed. Over time, these have been adjusted accordingly to ensure compliance with the increasingly structured programme requirements. The respondents advocate the establishment of a structured environment that facilitates the dissemination of ideas and the formation of partnerships based on the regular exchange of information concerning the skills and experience of the parties involved. Similarly, the need of a more structured projects follow up has been highlighted to maximize their impact on the territories.

Recommendation:

Potential beneficiaries need to be nurtured and supported as from project design: existing programmes platforms aimed at encouraging networking and exchanges should become a **unique permanent supporting tool for the partner search and thematic exchanges**.

Dedicated grants and/or follow up measures should be envisaged to ensure a continued follow-up of completed projects in order to capitalise on the EC's financial support and secure their effective integration into the reference community.

SIMPLIFICATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL PROCEDURES

Rationale:

Some respondents have indicated that they view administrative and regulatory burdens as a deterrent to their participation in Interreg projects, in particular with regard to smaller organisations. Financial reporting is perceived as particularly burdensome; moreover, pre-financing mechanisms for all beneficiaries is considered as beneficial to facilitate their participation, in particular of private bodies and NGOs. IPA ADRION efforts in introducing simplified cost options and pre-financing of IPA beneficiaries (already in the previous programming period) have been acknowledged and should be continued.

Recommendation:

It would be beneficial to investigate the potential for utilising **more comprehensive cost options** in order to reduce the time and costs associated with the verification of expenditure and project reimbursement. This could facilitate the involvement of a more diverse range of stakeholders, including NGOs and civil society organisations, which may possess less experience in Interreg project management but can nevertheless contribute valuable skills and expertise in ensuring that project outcomes are firmly embedded in the local context. Measures to offer pre-financing mechanisms to all beneficiaries should be considered.

Rationale:

The implementation of pilot or demonstration actions, including small-scale infrastructure, is seen by respondents as a viable method of making projects more responsive to the needs of beneficiaries and thus strengthening the sense of community

Recommendation:

Granting of **pilot or demonstration** actions should be based on the specific transnational aspects of the programme. This requires ensuring that the programme has adequate financial resources to maintain cost-effectiveness and to enable a diverse range of potential beneficiaries to benefit from EU support.

Rationale:

Respondents call for flexibility in project management also to face unpredictable situations

Recommendation:

Greater **flexibility in the next legislative framework** should be envisaged to meet the upcoming needs and challenges.

ENLARGEMENT AND LAGGING BEHIND REGIONS

Rationale:

Interreg transnational programmes serve as an efficacious instrument in facilitating the enlargement process. There is a substantial body of evidence attesting to the efficacy of expertise and know-how transfer, as exemplified by the inaugural EU enlargement in 2004.

Similarly, transnational cooperation has been demonstrated to be an effective mechanism for reducing disparities between regions. IPA ADRION's role in facilitating the transfer of expertise and promoting development is aligned with the fundamental principles of cohesion policy.

Recommendation:

One of the principal objectives for the future should be to continue contributing to chapter 22 of enlargement. The **process of capacity building** should be reinforced and made to align with the future selected thematic objectives, rather than being considered as a standalone activity. Interreg transnational programmes like IPA ADRION should continue to encourage cooperation between EU and non-EU countries.

The implementation of transnational programmes can be an ideal tool to address the needs of multiple types of beneficiaries operating at national or local levels. Exchanges of students, public officials and also employees of the private sector (SMEs) could facilitate the process of enlargement, cooperation and growth.

It would be beneficial to pursue analogous approaches and avenues for assistance in the less-developed regions of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) countries (e.g. the so-called "inner areas"). This could entail establishing dynamic networks to disseminate the outcomes achieved in previous granted projects, ensuring a "second life" for successful initiatives and their continued utility.

In light of evolving priorities and shifting resource allocations, it is important for Interreg programmes to clearly demonstrate their continued relevance and impact, ensuring they remain a key instrument for addressing cross-border challenges and fostering regional cooperation.

Contributing to intangible values such as cohesion, building trust and solidarity, increasing cooperation are the true essence of growth that would devote dedicated measurement: participating in Interreg projects and managing Interreg programmes is an expression of being European.

In addition to that, the role of IPA ADRION as one of the four transnational programmes supporting the macro-regional strategies and the link between the macro-regional policy thematic guideline and its embedding in the programming document can still be further exploited and valorised.

The IPA ADRION programme is eager to engage proactively with Commission representatives and is prepared to assist in developing new forms of cooperation, particularly in relation to its contribution to the macro-regional strategy.

Annex A: Composition of sectors

To ensure a clear and organised analysis of the survey feedback, the 232 responses from various organisation types were grouped into four broader sectors. Below is the composition of respondents by sectors:

▪ Public sector

The Public sector includes entities involved in governance, public services, infrastructure, and regional development.

- National public authority: 25
- Regional public authority: 16
- Local public authority: 24
- Infrastructure and (public) service provider: 6
- Hospitals and medical centres: 1
- National, regional, and local development agency: 6
- Sectoral agency: 5
- Museum (Re-assigned from "Other"): 1
- Development Agency of Local Authorities (Re-assigned from "Other"): 1
- Regional Intergovernmental Organisation representing Balkans Ministry of Agriculture (Re-assigned from "Other"): 1
- Association of provincial public body (Re-assigned from "Other"): 1

Total: 87 respondents

▪ Private sector

The Private sector includes entities focused on commercial activities, innovation, and economic development.

- Business support organisation: 21
- Small and medium enterprise (SME): 14
- Enterprise, except SME: 3
- Environmental Studio (Re-assigned from "Other"): 1

Total: 39 respondents

▪ Academic and research sector

The Academic and research sector encompasses organisations dedicated to knowledge creation, education, and scientific research.

- Higher education and research organisations: 65
- Education/training centre and school: 17

Total: 82 respondents

▪ Non-profit and non-governmental sector (NPO/NGO sector)

This sector includes organisations focused on advocacy, social causes, and the public good.

- Interest groups including NPO/NGOs: 21
 - International organisation, European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG): 3
- Total:** 24 respondents