



**Ex-ante Evaluation  
and  
Strategic Environmental Assessment  
of the  
European Territorial Cooperation Programme  
Austria- Hungary 2014-2020**

**Ex-ante Evaluation Report  
on**

- Draft Final Cooperation Programme Version 08 October 2014
- Comments by drafting team on EaE recommendations from 15 September 2014
- Amendments by Programming Group (within final draft) from 14 October 2014

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# 1. Background

## 1.1. Ex-ante Evaluation and Strategic Environmental Assessment

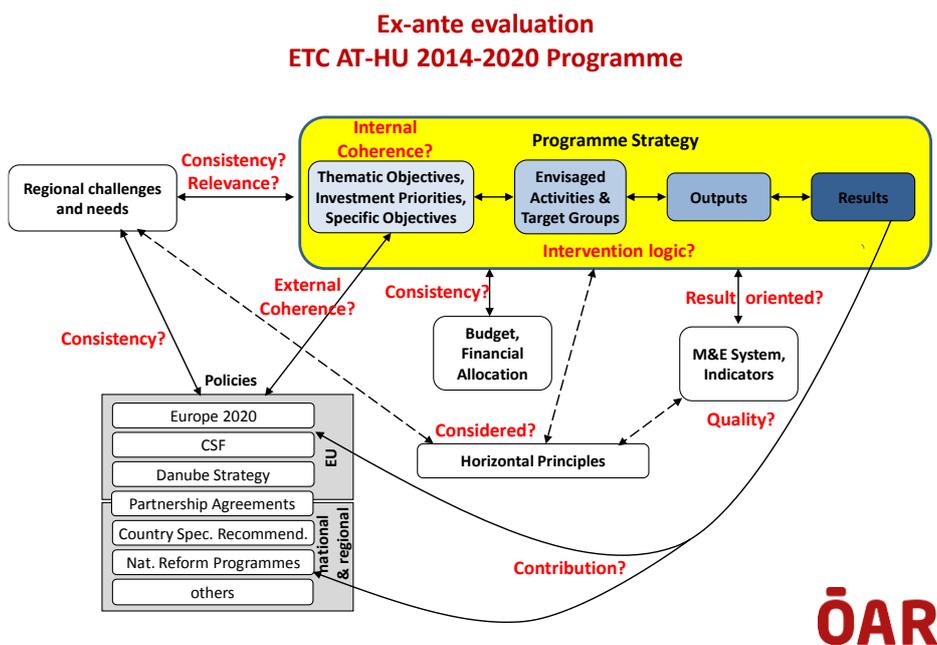
Based on a tender procedure the ex-ante evaluation and Strategic Environmental Assessment for the ETC AT-HU Programme 2014-2020 have been assigned to the team led by ÖAR Regionalberatung GmbH.

The **overall objective** for this ex-ante evaluation and SEA support is to deliver the ex-ante evaluation as well as the documents related to the SEA in accordance with the relevant EU and national regulations and the overall work schedule for the elaboration of the Programme 2014-2020. In specific:

- Implementing the ex-ante evaluation of the programme ETC AT-HU 2014-2020 in compliance with Article 48 of the CPR;
- Implementing the SEA, as part of the ex-ante evaluation, in compliance with the stipulations of the Directive 2001/42/EC.

## 1.2. The scope of the ex-ante evaluation

The ex-ante evaluation has as overarching objective the improvement and strengthening of the final quality of the programme.



Picture 1: Overview on Ex-ante evaluation

According to Article 48(3) of the CPR, the appraisal of the ex-ante evaluation needs to cover the following **key elements**:

1. **Programme strategy**. The evaluation should appraise the proposed Programme strategy by verifying the coherence, consistency and relevance of the Programme objectives with the identified challenges and needs within the Cohesion Policy framework outlined by the Europe 2020 Strategy, as well as the adequacy of the selected Thematic Objectives and Investment Priorities. The evaluation should also examine the internal coherence of the Programme strategy as well as its relation with other relevant instruments and policies (external coherence).
2. **Indicators, monitoring and evaluation**. The evaluation should appraise the chosen output and result indicators with regard to their relevance to the Programme Priority axes (objectives and actions to be supported), as well as their clarity in terms of understanding and interpretation. The appropriateness and realism of the set baselines and target values as well as the suitability of the milestones selected for the performance framework should also be evaluated. The evaluation should also examine the adequacy of human resources and administrative capacity for the management of the Programme, as well as the suitability of the procedures for monitoring the Programme and collecting the data necessary to carry out evaluations. The evaluation of these elements should take into account also previous experiences of the relevant Programme authorities.
3. **Consistency of financial allocations**. The evaluation should appraise the consistency of the allocation of budgetary resources with the objectives of the Programme, looking at the identified challenges and needs that were the reasons for choosing the objectives as well as at the planned actions.
4. **Contribution to Europe 2020 Strategy**. The evaluation should appraise the potential contribution of the programme to the Europe 2020 objectives and targets, in connection with the evaluation of the Programme strategy and taking into account the size of the Programme.
5. **Horizontal principles**: the evaluators should assess the provisions to anchor horizontal EU principles like equal opportunities, environmental sustainability in the Programme.
6. **Strategic Environmental Assessment**. The final ex-ante evaluation report should integrate the results of the SEA summarising the SEA process and outlining how it was taken into account in the programme design (including the opinions expressed).

### 1.3. The ex-ante evaluation process

Throughout the programming process the tight cooperation between the Contracting Authority, programming team, ex-ante evaluators and SEA team can be characterized by a spirit of mutual appreciation and joint efforts to contribute to the quality of the Cooperation Programme.

Since April 2013 the **Ex-ante evaluation** team has been in regular contact with the drafting team and the Managing Authority. It provided inputs and reflections for the discussions of the Programming Group and the drafting and also written Ex-ante evaluation reports on the draft OP versions of November 7<sup>th</sup> 2013, June 5<sup>th</sup> 2014 and July 9<sup>th</sup> 2014. This dialogue can be seen as important aspect for the success of the programming process.

By beginning of October 2014, the Cooperation Programme has reached a high degree of coherence and consistency and most of the recommendations of the ex-ante evaluation have been integrated. In the case that recommendations have not been followed, the drafting team provided respective explanations.

In particular chapter 1 (analysis) and chapter 2 (priority axes) are providing continuous chains of arguments starting with the description of the status quo and existing territorial challenges up to intended results to be achieved and respective actions to be implemented. Overall the proposed actions of the Cooperation Programme well reflect the situation in the border region Austria-Hungary.

The system of indicators, typically one of the most challenging components of each Cooperation Programme, has been continuously developed and amended during the whole programming process. Ex ante evaluators contributed to its enhancement by a number of recommendations and topics for discussion. Vast majority of recommendations have been accepted and reflected in the final version of the OP.

However, few recommendations from previous Ex-ante evaluation reflections are still pending, but they are of minor relevance and do not contrast with the overall quality of the Cooperation Programme. These pending recommendations are briefly presented in the following section. The numbering of the recommendations relates to the respective EaE questions elaborated on within the previous ex-ante evaluation report from June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

The **Strategic Environmental Assessment** (SEA) was carried out simultaneously to the preparation of the programme as part of a joint contract of Ex-ante Evaluation and Strategic Environmental Assessment.

The purpose of the SEA was to provide a high level of protection of the environment and to contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of the programme with a view to promoting sustainable development.

For that, the SEA evaluated possible environmental impacts related to priorities of the CBC AT-HU 2014-2020 programme and gave recommendations on how to enhance the quality of the programme in respect to environmental aspects.

The Environmental Report, the main document of the SEA, is available as a separate document. The Environmental Report is dated from June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and based on the programme draft of June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

The SEA was carried out simultaneously to the preparation of the programme: in an iterative process the SEA team provided recommendations on how to enhance the programme concerning its environmental impact. The version of the programme the Environmental Report is based on, therefore already has been enhanced in respect to environmental aspects.

#### **1.4. The final OP draft**

This final Ex-ante Evaluation report is based on the Cooperation Programme ETC Austria-Hungary 2014-2020 draft from 08 October 2014 and later amendments. The report checks in particular in how far recommendations of the ex-ante evaluation on the previous Cooperation Programme draft have been integrated. Furthermore a concluding summary along the most important aspects of the Cooperation Programme is provided.

## **2. Pending recommendations**

### **2.1. Section 1: Strategy**

#### **Recommendation 1.4: Vocational education systems**

→ To consider deleting the harmonization of vocational education systems (p. 10 and 29) under 3d since the development of the cross-border labour market only indirectly contributes to strengthening the competitiveness of SMEs

### **Recommendation 1.8: Vocational education systems**

→ To consider deleting the action “Harmonization of the vocational education systems ...” under 3d in order to achieve a full alignment of the actions proposed in the cooperation programme with the key actions of the CSF.

### **Recommendation 1.9: Vocational education systems**

→ To consider deleting the action “Harmonization of vocational education systems ...” and the respective output under TO 3d.

EaE recommended to generally reconsider the integration of vocational training for strengthening the competitiveness of SMEs. The main reason has been that vocational training would better fit into Thematic Objective 10 - which was not among the priorities of the Cooperation Programme. The Programming Group took this issue into thorough consideration and decided to provide a more precise explanation on the importance of vocational training and its interrelation as labour market instrument for the competitiveness of SMEs.

## **2.2. Section 2: Priority axes**

→ Target value has to be defined for result indicator for IP 7b) to measure the accessibility of regional centres to TEN-T infrastructures

Detailed definitions, baselines and targets for result indicators have been defined in a separate Guide on Indicators. This document has still to be finalized according to the latest changes in the OP text (new indicators, baselines, targets have to be described and briefly justified, both result AND output indicators have to be described).

## **2.3. Section 3: Financing plan**

### **Recommendation 3.2: Weighting of funds**

→ To consider a lower weighting of funds for labour market measures within IP 3d.

→ To consider a higher weighting of funds for tourism development within TO 6.

The Programming Group decided to leave the funds unchanged since their weighting well reflect the prospective projects in this field. This decision is in line with the decisions of the PG on EaE recommendations related to vocational training.

### **General comment on allocation of funds**

→ Within its last meeting on 14 October 2014 the Programming Group decided to change the allocation of funds as follows:

- TO 3d: 11% instead of 12%
- TO 6: 31% instead of 37%
- TO 7: 30% instead of 28%
- TO 11: 22% instead of 17%

This amendment can be justified as interpretation of the actual needs and challenges within the Programme area. However, being a last minute decision of the Programming Group it has to be noted that the consistency of deriving the content of the Cooperation Programme from the regional needs and challenges has obviously been less thorough as in previous steps of the programming process.

### **2.4. Section 4: Integrated approach to territorial development**

No pending recommendations

### **2.5. Section 5: Implementation provisions**

No pending recommendations

### **2.6. Section 6: Coordination**

No pending recommendations

### **2.7. Section 7: Reduction of the administrative burdens for beneficiaries**

No pending recommendations

### **2.8. Section 8: Horizontal principles**

No pending recommendations

### **2.9. Section 9: Separate elements**

No pending recommendations

### 3. Executive summary

Generally the Cooperation Programme AT-HU 2014-2020 shows a high level of coherence and consistency. It is well elaborated and addresses the territorial challenges and needs through adequate actions. The main findings of the Ex-ante evaluation and SEA are:

Ex-ante Evaluation Component	Conclusions and recommendations
<b>Involvement of stakeholders</b>	
<i>Involvement of stakeholders in the programme design</i>	The Cooperation Programme has been elaborated in an intense process involving relevant stakeholders from both countries in a Programming Group. The parallel regional discussion process on needs and strategies for the programme region (RECOM) achieved a high involvement of additional stakeholders and the regional population for defining the main issues to be considered for the common development of the region. Furthermore specific presentations and discussions of the future Programme have been held.
<b>Programme strategy</b>	
<i>External coherence</i>	The Cooperation Programme is a coherent document which is well in line with external strategies, policies or programmes and in particular with the Danube Strategy (EUSDR) as well as the Austrian and Hungarian National Reform Programmes and Partnership Agreements. The key actions of the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) are considered within the proposed actions of the Cooperation Programme..
<i>Internal coherence</i>	The Cooperation Programme is internally coherent. It comprises of a traceable intervention logic with clear chains of arguments starting with the description of key territorial challenges and needs up to specific objectives and intended results. The proposed actions are well reflecting the intentions of the respective Priority axis to address the identified territorial challenges.
<i>Linkage between supported actions, expected outputs</i>	The Cooperation Programme describes well the linkages between actions, outputs and desired results. These consistent correlations allow the assumption that the proposed support will be demanded by the beneficiaries, be valuable for the target groups and finally lead to

Ex-ante Evaluation Component	Conclusions and recommendations
<i>and results</i>	the intended results.
<b>Indicators, monitoring and evaluation</b>	
<i>Relevance of proposed indicators</i>	<p>The programme includes a comprehensive system of indicators that is likely to capture the most important effects of the intervention. All result indicators are clearly related to the specific objectives and reflect the planned operations and cover the most important intended changes described in the respective section “The results, which the Member States seek to achieve with EU support”. Output indicators have been defined for all investment priorities. The indicators are relevant to the expected outputs of all envisaged actions.</p> <p>The system of indicators includes eight common output indicators. All output indicators are clear, relevant to the content of the planned interventions and are likely to contribute to the change in result indicators.</p>
<i>Clarity of proposed indicators</i>	<p>Definitions of all indicators, as well as description of methods for data collection have been provided in a separate draft Guide on Indicators that will finalized by October 22, 2014 in order to allow a common understanding about the progress of the programme.</p> <p>Result indicators that are coming from statistics gathered by statistical offices have a commonly accepted normative interpretation, while result indicators designed for this CP that shall be gathered by surveys/ are indicators where definition and description of methods for data collection has been described in the separate Guide on Indicators.</p>
<i>Quantified baseline and target value</i>	<p>The formulation of the output indicators allows quantification in every case. Result indicators obtained through statistics can have a quantified baseline, while those established and measured later through surveys, expert reports and traffic modelling will be developed in a quantifiable way. Result indicators’ baselines will use the latest available data.</p> <p>Baselines for output indicators will be zero. Their target values have</p>

Ex-ante Evaluation Component	Conclusions and recommendations
<p><i>Suitability of milestones</i></p> <p><i>Administrative capacity, data collection procedure and evaluation</i></p>	<p>been quantified for 2023. Considering the actions and forms of support as well as the financial allocations, the targeted values are realistic.</p> <p>Target values have been set for result indicators in the draft Cooperation Programme which plans to set them for 2022 and plans the reporting to 2018 and 2023. As for result indicators established and measured through surveys the targets have to be established after the baseline survey is available.</p> <p>The programme document includes quantified targets for 2022 for all output indicators, most targets are based on detailed calculations based on costs of similar operations in the past, these calculations have been provided to the EaE team. In the case of operations and output indicators that are new to the programme, targets have been set realistically.</p> <p>The performance framework identified for each priority axis of the draft Cooperation Programme includes financial indicators, key implementation steps and output indicators with milestones and targets for 2018 and 2022, respectively. Milestones and targets are realistic and relevant. Data sources for milestone and target values are in all cases obtainable from the monitoring system and from JMC decisions.</p> <p>Monitoring indicators along with planned management and control arrangements described in the draft Cooperation Programme are likely to provide relevant and timely data for decision making, reporting and evaluation of the CP. No bottlenecks can be expected which might impede management, monitoring and evaluation of the programme based on previous experience.</p>
<b>Consistency of financial allocation</b>	
<p><i>Consistency of financial allocation</i></p>	<p>There is an overall comprehensive logic provided regarding the financial allocations. Size and number of expected projects are taken into account and the proposed actions are coherent with the specific objectives and the identified challenges and needs.</p>

Ex-ante Evaluation Component	Conclusions and recommendations
<b>Contribution to Europe 2020 Strategy</b>	
<i>Contribution to Europe 2020 and macro-regional strategies</i>	The Cooperation Programme AT-HU is well in line with the objectives and targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy. It specifically contributes to the Thematic objectives 3d, 6c, 6d, 6f, 7b, 7c, and 11 in a balanced way. Furthermore the Cooperation Programme is clearly coherent with the priorities and targets of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) in particular related to Thematic objective 6.
<b>Horizontal principles</b>	
<i>Equality between men and women, non-discrimination and sustainability</i>	The horizontal principles of equality between men and women as well as non-discrimination are sufficiently indicated in the Cooperation Programme. There are references to respective requirements of applicants and to the selection process of projects.
<b>Strategic Environmental Assessment<sup>1</sup></b>	
<p><i>Environmental impact of the Programme</i></p> <p><i>Considerations of environmental aspects into the OP</i></p>	<p>Generally, it must be said that it is a very environmentally friendly programme. Many thematic priorities are aimed at environmentally relevant topics (improvement of water quality, development of nature reserves and cultural heritage, development of sustainable transport systems). In particular, the promotion of regulatory cooperation is very important for environmental issues.</p> <p>The greatest danger lies in the additional sealing by certain investments. Although the program provides only small-scale investments in infrastructure, it must be ensured, that all projects are aiming at a wise use of natural resources and taking care of biodiversity and habitats.</p> <p>The situation in the organization of protected areas and water quality is at least improved. There is still major groundwater pollution, but the</p>

<sup>1</sup> A detailed assessment of the environmental impact of the programme can be found in the Environmental Report.

Ex-ante Evaluation Component	Conclusions and recommendations
	<p>trend is upward. No significant upward trend is assessed for biodiversity and red list species, although especially in the protected areas many efforts are envisaged to improve the situation.</p> <p>The situation regarding traffic is similar. While there are strong efforts of the Programme to better organize the traffic and introduce sustainable transport systems, nevertheless, the car and truck traffic will remain the fastest growing segment.</p> <p>To enhance the environmental quality of the programme draft, the suggestions for reformulations and environmental relevant indicators set out in the SEA were delivered to the drafting team at an early stage of programming within qualitative feedback loops. This strategic consulting enabled the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of the Operational Programme with a view to sustainable development. By implementing these recommendations and the in general strong environmental focus of the programme, the final version of the programme constitutes an optimized alternative itself and was therefore chosen as final version.</p>