



Action Plan of the Interreg Europe Project KISS ME

Knowledge and Innovation Strategies involving SMEs
in the context of Interreg

Euregio Rhine-Waal



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Preface

From 1 January 2017 until the end of June 2019 the Euregio Rhine-Waal, the EGTC Euroregion Pyrenees-Mediterranean, HAMAG-BICRO, Hedmark County Council and Värmland County Administrative Board have worked together in the first phase of the Interreg Europe project “KISS ME”. KISS ME, which stands for “Knowledge and Innovation Strategies involving SMEs” aims to improve the innovation capacity and competitiveness of SMEs in European border regions by comparing and sharing approaches.

Especially at times in which various challenges threaten the solidarity and unity among the EU-member states, it is important to set examples proving that we can achieve more if we work together. Working together, however, must not only stay a nice idea on paper, but also has to be put into practice.

Representing around 99% of all enterprises within the EU, SMEs deserve special attention for a good reason. They are important contributors to European prosperity but can only survive on a competitive market, if they keep generating innovative products and services. However, due to their size and limited resources, they often face a number of challenges in this process.

Especially in European border regions, the situation for SMEs is two-fold: on the one hand, border regions offer great opportunities, because there are markets of two or more countries in easy reach. On the other hand, borders still possess a barrier effect, although physically invisible. In order to make sure that SMEs can fully exploit the border regions’ potential, it is essential for governments and public authorities to provide adequate support through tailored policy instruments. Unfortunately, as so often, this is easier said than done.

Thus, the partners of the KISS ME project have worked together for the last 2.5 years within the framework of the EU interregional cooperation programme Interreg Europe to identify ways to improve the supporting policy instruments for SMEs and better engage them in these schemes. Closely working together with other European border regions and the different stakeholders therein, and being open to share experience and best practices is what made the KISS ME project successful. It was primarily designed to improve knowledge and innovation strategies for SMEs in our European border regions, but it also set a great example for the importance of European cooperation and solidarity in practice.

This Action Plan proudly presents the work that has been done in the first phase of the project and contains concrete measures on how to optimise the *INTERREG A Deutschland-Nederland programme*. The second phase of the project will be coined by effectively implementing these measures in our region.



1. Executive Summary

KISS ME is a project coordinated by the Euregio Rhine-Waal in which four different border regions come together to share experiences and good practices on how to better increase innovation capacity and competitiveness of SMEs by enhancing the existing policy instruments. The geographic distribution of the KISS ME project partners and the combination of more experienced and rather new cross-border policy instruments formed a promising and fruitful basis for a constructive policy learning process. In this process, we have seen that the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme is implementing many good approaches already. However, within the framework of the policy learning process in exchange with our European partners, it became evident, that there is still room to optimise the programme in order to make it more attractive for and applicable to SMEs and that good approaches from other European border regions might be transferred to the Dutch-German region as well. This action plan intends to demonstrate the potential for positive modifications within the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme. In doing so, it draws on the experience gained within the policy learning process of the KISS ME project and tackles different factors within the programme. The opportunities for modifications proposed in this action plan can be summarised as follows:

Making language and culture training an integral part of projects in the Interreg DE-NL programme

Language and cultural barriers majorly hem cross-border cooperation (CBC) and cause high costs in the phase of project building as well as at later stages of project implementation. The proficiency of English is not as self-evident as some policy makers might think. Therefore, trainings on language and culture, e.g. in the form of workshops, should become integral, mandatory parts of Interreg CBC projects.

Making sustainability a scoring criterion for the assessment of project applications

Improving the innovation capacity of SMEs and environmental sustainability are two key factors of the EU 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Since the strategy functions as reference framework for activities at EU, national and regional levels, also the INTERREG A CBC programmes contribute to these overall targets. Although the INTERREG A DE-NL programme already comprises a strategic initiative on low-carbon economy, there is still room to intensify the efforts towards the EU 2020 goals with regard to sustainability. Therefore, environmental sustainability should become a scoring criterion for the assessment of project proposals within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme alongside the innovative and economic criteria, such as market potential, and should be added to the scoring form used for the assessment of project applications.

Reducing the duration for the approval processes for new project application

The length of bureaucratic processes can present a hindering factor for SME participation or deter SMEs from engaging in the programme at all. Although these processes are already relatively short within the Interreg DE-NL, there is still potential for improvement, e.g. with regard to the approval process for new projects. Therefore, a concrete benchmark setting a particular guideline for the maximum duration of the approval process should be included in the programme text.



Stronger focus on fostering innovation in young enterprises and entrepreneurial students in a cross-border context

Young enterprises, especially start-ups, have appeared more strongly on the “economic agenda” across Europe in the recent years and, even more so than SMEs, they need tailored support schemes to grow and establish themselves as an enterprise. Although there is a growing number of open facilities for start-ups in all of the KISS ME partner regions, the involved cross-border policy instruments do not yet offer a tailored business support opportunities for start-ups or entrepreneurial students who aim for the transfer from university to business. This is despite the fact that start-ups generally bear a high innovation potential and could therefore contribute strongly to the programme’s innovation objectives. Thus, the promotion of start-ups should be made a priority sector within the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme including a strategic initiative.

‘Cross-border ambassadors’ and organising face-to-face events for experienced and new project partners

SMEs often do not know about the possibilities to receive funding within the framework of the INTERREG A programme or consider it too bureaucratic and complicated to get involved in CBC. Encouragement and promotion illustrating the benefits of CBC and INTERREG are more credible if they come from other SME entrepreneurs than from public organisations, governments or agencies. Moreover, due to the programme’s particularity, e.g. with regard to application processes and funding guidelines, actors who have already been involved in Interreg projects are more likely to engage with the programme than “new” actors. Therefore, the organisation of face-to-face events with a thematic focus within the fields of the Interreg priority sectors can present an efficient way to implement the role of “cross-border ambassadors” and foster the promotion of the programme and the acquisition of new potential project partners in the region.

Improving Communication and branding of the Interreg DE-NL Programme

Many actors along the border do not know about the (funding) opportunities available within the framework of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme and do not consider working across the border an option. This refers to both businesses and the broader public. Therefore, a more comprehensive, up-to-date and targeted communication strategy for the programme is needed. This can be implemented through mainstreamed branding, including ‘branding templates’ for projects running within the framework of the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme, such as PowerPoint templates for project presentations, uniform branding emblems and a branding guide supporting Interreg projects in their communication.



2. General Information

Project	<i>KISS ME</i>
Partner Organisation	<i>Euregio Rhine-Waal</i>
Other partner organisations (involved if relevant)	<i>N/A</i>
Country	<i>Germany</i>
NUTS2 region	<i>Düsseldorf</i>
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3. Policy Context

- The Action Plan aims to impact:
- Investment for Growth and Jobs programme
 - European Territorial Cooperation programme
 - Other regional development policy instrument

Policy instrument addressed:

Interreg VA Germany-Netherlands (Interreg DE-NL): Priority axis 1: “Increase of cross-border innovation capacity of the programme area” – investment priority 1b, thematic objective “Increase of product and process innovations in sectors which are relevant for the border region”

Since 1991 the Dutch-German border region benefits from the European Union’s structural funds within the framework of the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme. This policy instrument aims to promote innovation and development in the region (*innovation*) and to deconstruct the barrier effect of the border (*cohesion*). Within the last 28 years since the programme’s introduction, a great number of cross-border projects and other initiatives have been funded and implemented within the programme area reaching from the coast of the North Sea to the Lower Rhine area, around 460 km along the Dutch-German border. The total budget of the programme has amounted to ca. 440 million Euro for the period of 2014 – 2020, out of which 222 million Euro have been provided by the European



Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

In order to better cater to the programme's objectives, two main priority axes have been established which in turn comprise several key sectors crucial for the border region.¹

Priority axis 1: Increase of cross-border innovation capacity of the programme area

Promoting the competitiveness in the region by means of a infrastructure of high-tech enterprises and research institutions improves the market potential and presents the first priority of the programme. In order to achieve this objective, creating cross-border networks and clusters, as well as promoting cross-border knowledge transfer and product innovations is essential. In doing so, the programme mainly funds projects tackling product and process innovations in SMEs.

To achieve these objectives in the field of innovations, five key sectors were identified:

- Agribusiness/Food
- Health & Life Sciences
- High-Tech Systems & Materials (HTSM)
- Logistics
- Energy/low-carbon economy

For each key sector, an expert group consisting of representatives from the economic, scientific and public sector elaborated a so-called "strategic initiative". These strategic initiatives build the framework for all project carried out within a particular key sector and ensure the targeted use of funding for projects within the Interreg programme.

Priority axis 2: Socio-cultural and territorial cohesion in the programme region

Strengthening the social-cultural and territorial cohesion in line with the EU2020-priority of inclusive growth forms the second priority of the programme. Projects running under this priority aim to deconstruct the barrier effect of the border and to intensify interactions between citizens and institutions across the border. In doing so, priority 2 tackles the following thematic fields:

- Employment, Education and Culture
- Nature, Landscape and Environment
- Structure and Demography
- Networks on local and regional level

Projects carried out within the framework of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme are typically organised as open/umbrella projects, semi-open projects or closed projects.

¹ The third priority is allotted to the technical assistance to the project, such as managing authority, certifying authority, first level control, etc.



In open projects, a consortium of core partners is predetermined. The core partners acquire and support actors, such as SMEs (depending on the project's content and priority), who carry out subprojects within the framework of the umbrella project. For these subprojects, the bureaucratic processes, e.g. with regard to application and cost reimbursement procedures, are usually facilitated by the core partners. A relatively small part of the project budget is assigned to the core partners for administration, consultation and monitoring; the larger part of the budget is used for the implementation of subprojects.

In semi-open projects, there is also a consortium of core partners who is assigned a relatively small part of the budget for the project management. The largest amount of the budget is assigned for already developed subprojects, usually carried out by the core partners; a smaller amount is available for the implementation of other subprojects, analyses, etc.

In closed projects, a predetermined consortium of partners uses the full budget for predetermined projects, work packages or activities.


The implementation of the policy instrument "INTERREG VA Germany-Netherlands 2014-2020" is already far advanced. Only 0.7 % (949,844.16 €) of the originally available budget for projects within the *Priority axis 1: Increase of cross-border innovation capacity of the programme* area can be still allocated to new projects within the current programming period. Accordingly, the preparation process for the programming period 2021-2027 has also started already. The delegation responsible for drafting and negotiating the INTERREG DE-NL programme for the next programming period convenes regularly to draft the new programme regulations based on the framework communicated by the European Commission. This preparation process for the INTERREG DE-NL programme for 2021-2027 is also quite far advanced. The first version of the new programme regulations will be submitted in the course of 2020.

4. Actions

4.1. Making language and culture training an integral part of projects in the Interreg DE-NL programme

4.1.1. Background

In the course of the policy learning process within the KISS ME project, it became evident, based on the experience in all participating border regions, that language still presents major barriers for cross-border cooperation (CBC). Especially in regions, in which there are huge differences between the national languages, this majorly hems CBC. Moreover, English proficiency for the use as working language is not as self-evident as some policy makers might think. These language barriers cause high costs in the phase of project building as well as at later stages of project implementation and leave potential for projects in border regions unused. Moreover, the ignorance of cultural differences and



cultural characteristics of the respective project partner can also hinder the smooth implementation of CBC projects and negatively affect the projects' effectiveness and outcome, or hinder actors from participating in CBC at all. As the study "Mental Border Obstacles"², one of the best practices from the Swedish-Norwegian border region identified within the KISS ME project, has illustrated, the factors impeding businesses from working across the border are more often than not of a cultural nature. Additionally, as identified in the Joint Analysis generated within the framework of the KISS ME project, sufficient language skills are one of the key success factors for the effective implementation of CBC. In order to overcome these barriers, the INTERREG DE-NL programme should focus more on language and cultural differences and make them integral, eligible parts of Interreg projects.

4.1.2. Action Description and Expected Impact

Trainings on language and culture should become integral parts of Interreg CBC projects. This can be implemented in the form of workshops that have to be given to the consortium of a project within the first year after the project's approval. In doing so, each project should have a particular amount of funding reserved for a workshop on language and culture within the project budget. Core contents of these workshops could be raising awareness for linguistic and cultural differences, basic information on history and culture, and the building of intercultural communication skills. The requirement for projects to have a mandatory language and culture training in the course of their project duration should be clearly indicated in the programme regulations.

Including language and culture trainings in the programme making them integral parts of the projects will directly serve the policy instrument's objective to further deconstruct the border and its barrier effect. Moreover, from an economic point of view, fostering awareness and mutual understanding among the project partners will facilitate and stimulate CBC and the implementation of projects. In doing so, it will improve both productivity and effectiveness, and the sustainability of the projects beyond the funding period and the cooperation between the partners. In the long term, due to the facilitated implementation of innovation projects with SMEs, their innovation capacity will increase. Altogether, deconstructing these linguistic and cultural barriers will ultimately lead to more projects, better implementation of the programme, more sustainable project results, and will bring the actors participating in the projects closer together.

For some projects running within the framework of the INTERREG VA Germany-

² The study "Mental Border Obstacles", conducted by the Øresund Institute, identify the main obstacles that impede people and businesses from working across the border based on in-depth interviews with SME-entrepreneurs and border- and business organisations along the Norwegian-Swedish border. Find more information and all KISS ME best practices here: www.interregeurope.eu/kissme/good-practices

Netherlands programme, the regional programme management has already approved intercultural workshops a part of the curriculum of the projects (e.g. the projects ROCKET, Digipro and Ipro-N). This can be considered a pilot for the proposed action. As a next step, the proposed action of having mandatory language and culture trainings should be included in the programme regulations to become a mandatory element of all projects.

As previously described in the policy context, only 0.7 % of the originally available funds can be still allocated to new projects under *Priority axis 1: Increase of cross-border innovation capacity of the programme area*. This makes a modification of the current programme regulations, which comes with a relatively complex administrative process due to the policy instruments' governance structure, relatively unlikely. However, the preparation process for the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027 has already been initiated and is already quite far advanced. The new version of the programme regulations are expected to be finalized in 2020 – which still falls in the second phase of the KISS ME project. Due to this special situation with the policy instrument INTERREG VA Germany-Netherlands, this action is intended to be incorporated and implemented in the INTERRG VIA Germany-Netherlands 2021-2027 programme. Taking into account that a new version of the programme regulations for the future programme will be finalised in 2020, monitoring of the action plans' impact will still be possible.

4.1.3. Players involved

Firstly, the programme partners of the Interreg DE-NL programme forming the monitoring committee are able to modify the policy instrument with regard to the inclusion of the proposed language and culture trainings in the programme text.

These partners include: the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitalisation and Energy of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development of Lower Saxony, the Province of Groningen, the Province of Friesland, the Province of Drenthe, the Province of Flevoland, the Province of Overijssel, the Province of Gelderland, the Province of North Brabant, the Province of Limburg, the Ems-Dollart-Region, the EUREGIO, the Euregio Rhine-Waal, and the Euregio Rhine-Maas-North.

The monitoring committee convenes regularly, around three times a year. The action plan will be presented to the monitoring committee at their meetings. Additionally, the members of the monitoring committee will receive the action plan individually. Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears to potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners have formed a



preparation committee. The action plan will also be presented to this committee, in order to fathom out and ultimately exploit the potential of the proposed action to be implemented on programme level in the future Interreg programme.

On the second stage, in the phase of implementation in practice, the regional programme management will have to monitor the compliance of the projects with their obligation to organise these kind of trainings within their project plan.

Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears the potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners have formed a preparation committee. With regard to possibly incorporating the proposed action into the programme regulations of the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027, the preparation committee has invited the KISS ME project coordinator to present the action plan to the committee.

4.1.4. Timeframe

Trainings on language and culture could become an integral part of each project running within the Interreg DE-NL programme. In doing so, this action is not limited to the duration of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2014 – 2020, but can be implemented in the programme period 2021 – 2027.

4.1.5. Indicative Costs and Funding Source

When implementing the action to have mandatory trainings on language and culture for each project running within the framework of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme, the projects should be assigned extra budget for the organisation of these trainings which the projects would have to include in their budget plan when drafting the project application. This extra budget would have to cover the hiring of a culture and language coach to lead the training, as well as room rental and catering for the workshop. However, these additional costs per project would only lead to a limited amount of extra costs per project.

4.2. **Making sustainability a scoring criterion for the assessment of project proposals**

4.2.1. Background

Improving the innovation capacity of SMEs and sustainability are two key factors of the EU 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Since the strategy functions as reference framework for activities at EU, national and regional levels, also INTERREG A

CBC programmes contribute to these overall targets. Strongly reflecting the overall EU goals in the regional programmes will ultimately lead to increased visibility and presence of the EU on the regional level. Moreover, in the interregional learning process of the KISS ME project, several characteristics of the ecoInside project, dealing with sustainable, climate-driven growth and running within the framework of the Interreg A Sweden-Norway Inner Scandinavia programme, could be identified as a best practice, both with regards to their content and structure.³

Considering the fact that resource efficiency and environmental sustainability become more and more pressing issues in society, both politics and the industry will be expected to pay increasing attention to these factors. This means, that SMEs will only be able to ensure future, long-term competitiveness, if they adjust their products and services to the increasingly pressing calls for sustainability and resource efficiency. This will go hand in hand with the increasing need to find innovative solutions to these challenges.

Although the INTERREG A DE-NL programme already comprises a strategic initiative on low-carbon economy, there is still room to intensify the efforts towards the EU 2020 goals with regard to sustainability. In order to increase the efforts towards more sustainability within the programme, environmental sustainability should receive a more prominent position within the projects running within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme. Therefore, alongside innovative and economic criteria, such as market potential, environmental sustainability should become a scoring criterion for the assessment of project proposals within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme.

4.2.2. Action Description and Expected Impact

When assessing the quality of new project proposals in order to decide if they will be approved and consequently, funded within the framework of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme, certain pre-determined scoring criteria are consulted. In doing so, the higher the proposal's fulfilment rate of these criteria, the more likely it is approved. The scoring criteria should, therefore, be amended by the criterion "sustainability". This means that, alongside economic scoring factors, such as market potential and the potential for continuance beyond the Interreg funding period, environmental sustainability should also be made a scoring factor and added to the scoring form used during the approval process. This, as previously described, will intensify the programme's contribution to the EU2020 strategy and thus, increasingly foster smart, sustainable and inclusive growth within the programme region. The correspondence with the EU's overall targets will in turn lead to increased visibility and presence of the EU on the regional level. Moreover, with sustainability being a current hot topic and gaining increasing attention from businesses,

³ For more information on the KISS ME good practices, visit www.interregeurope.eu/kissme/good-practices

customers and consumers, there are more and more SMEs working in the field of sustainability across all sectors. Consequently, establishing sustainability as one of the scoring criteria within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme could, firstly, increase the attractiveness of the programme for (new) SMEs working in this field, and, secondly, increase the likelihood for sustainability projects to be approved. Thus, the programme will be able to attract more projects with potentially new project partners, and to contribute more strongly to the overall targets of the EU2020 strategy.

Secondly, the regional programme management who supports the actors in the project application process will be able to include the factor of sustainability in the application checklist used to monitor the quality and completeness of project applications. Moreover, the programme management, which supports the projects in the application process, will be able to influence the projects' accordance with sustainability.

4.2.3. Players Involved

Firstly, the programme partners of the Interreg DE-NL programme forming the monitoring committee are able to modify the policy instrument on programme level with regard to the proposed action to make sustainability a scoring criterion for the assessment of project proposals within the programme and adjust the scoring form used for the assessment of project applications accordingly.

These partners include: the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitalisation and Energy of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development of Lower Saxony, the Province of Groningen, the Province of Friesland, the Province of Drenthe, the Province of Flevoland, the Province of Overijssel, the Province of Gelderland, the Province of North Brabant, the Province of Limburg, the Ems-Dollart-Region, the EUREGIO, the Euregio Rhine-Waal, and the Euregio Rhine-Maas-North.

The monitoring committee convenes regularly, around three times a year. The action plan will be presented to the monitoring committee at their meetings. Additionally, the members of the monitoring committee will receive the action plan individually. Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears to potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners have formed a preparation committee. The action plan will also presented to this committee, in order to fathom out and ultimately exploit the potential of the proposed action to be implemented on programme level in the future Interreg programme.



Additionally, at a second stage, with regard to implementation, the Regional Programme Management will apply the changed in practice by using the adjusted scoring form with regard to sustainability as a scoring criterion when assessing new project applications.

Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears the potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners have formed a preparation committee. With regard to possibly incorporating the proposed action into the programme regulations of the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027, the preparation committee has invited the KISS ME project coordinator to present the action plan to the committee..

4.2.4. Time Frame

Making sustainability a scoring criterion for the assessment of project proposals should be included within the Interreg DE-NL programme regulations as soon as possible. As a second step, the scoring form for the assessment of project applications should in turn be adjusted accordingly. In doing so, the changes are not limited to the duration of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2014 – 2020, but can be an appropriated approach with regard to the programme period 2021 – 2027.

4.2.5. Indicative Costs and Funding Source

Considering the fact that this measure would only add a scoring criterion to the assessment process for new projects within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme, there would be no additional costs, and therefore, no additional funding sources needed.

4.3. Reducing the duration for the approval processes for new project application

4.3.1. Background

In the exchange of experience and policy learning process with the European partner regions within the framework of the KISS ME project, the length of the bureaucratic processes within the Interreg A CBC programmes was often subject of discussions and was identified as a hindering factor for SME participation. Although these processes are already relatively short within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme, compared to other Interreg CBC programmes, there is still potential for improvement, e.g. concerning the approval process for new projects. Currently, the duration for the approval process often causes delays for project partners and can ultimately have a negative impact on the successful

implementation of the project. Moreover, it can also present a factor deterring SMEs from participating in INTERREG at all. This, however, is not the case within ‘umbrella projects’, meaning, in projects, in which a permanent partner consortium attracts and supports SMEs to carry out subprojects. Hereby, the approval process for subprojects is facilitated and thus, less lengthy. In this context, the B Light scheme running within the Interreg A Croatia-Hungary programme, and the project “Rocket” running within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme were identified as good practices.⁴ Therefore, in order to further optimize the programme and its effectiveness, it is essential to tackle the issue of shortening the decision-making processes with regard to project approvals for all projects, also beyond the scope of umbrella projects. As a first but important step, this can be achieved by adding a concrete benchmark on the maximum duration of the approval process to the programme regulations.

As previously described in the policy context, only 0.7 % of the originally available funds can be still allocated to new projects under *Priority axis 1: Increase of cross-border innovation capacity of the programme area*. This makes a modification of the current programme regulations, which comes with a relatively complex administrative process due to the policy instruments’ governance structure, relatively unlikely. However, the preparation process for the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027 has already been initiated and is already quite far advanced. The new version of the programme regulations are expected to be finalized in 2020 – which still falls in the second phase of the KISS ME project. Due to this special situation with the policy instrument INTERREG VA Germany-Netherlands, this action is intended to be incorporated and implemented in the INTERRG VIA Germany-Netherlands 2021-2027 programme. Taking into account that a new version of the programme regulations for the future programme will be finalised in 2020, monitoring of the action plans’ impact will still be possible.

4.3.2. Action Description and Expected Impact

During the approval process, project applications have to pass through many different stages and decision-making departments. Overall, the reasons for the long duration of the application process are manifold. This makes it difficult to identify and implement one particular measure to speed up the process. However, at this moment, the programme regulations do not include a guideline on the maximum duration of the approval process; nor are there any agreements among the decision-making parties on the time frame for approval processes. Therefore, this action plan suggests including a guideline which sets a particular benchmark for the maximum duration of the approval process in the programme regulations.⁵ On the one hand, this will give the decision-making parties a reference point for the approval process and presents a binding guideline for all parties

⁴ For more information on the KISS ME good practices, visit www.interregeurope.eu/kissme/good-practices

⁵ This action plan would like to suggest a benchmark of 16 – 18 weeks.



involved. On the other hand, this benchmark will provide the applicants with more predictability and planning security for their project and therefore, potentially increase the programme's attractiveness for SMEs.

4.3.3. Players Involved

Firstly, the programme partners of the Interreg DE-NL programme forming the monitoring committee are able to modify the policy instrument on programme level with regard to the proposed action to reduce the duration for the approval processes for new project applications within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme.

These partners include: the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitalisation and Energy of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development of Lower Saxony, the Province of Groningen, the Province of Friesland, the Province of Drenthe, the Province of Flevoland, the Province of Overijssel, the Province of Gelderland, the Province of North Brabant, the Province of Limburg, the Ems-Dollart-Region, the EUREGIO, the Euregio Rhine-Waal, and the Euregio Rhine-Maas-North.

The monitoring committee convenes regularly, around three times a year. The action plan will be presented to the monitoring committee at their meetings. Additionally, the members of the monitoring committee will receive the action plan individually. Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears to potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners have formed a preparation committee. The action plan will also presented to this committee, in order to fathom out and ultimately exploit the potential of the proposed action to be implemented on programme level in the future Interreg programme.

Taking into account the duration of the procedure to change the programme text, the monitoring committee should first agree to a maximum duration for the approval process (from application submission until approval decision) in a declaration of intent, which should be communicated to the projects receiving the remaining funding within the current programme period.

Moreover, a concrete benchmark for the duration of application processes should then completely be included in the programme regulations for the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027.

This will be proposed to and discussed within the monitoring committee meetings and the monitoring committee members individually. The decision hereabout will be followed-up



regularly in the monitoring committee meetings.

Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears the potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners have formed a preparation committee. With regard to possibly incorporating the proposed action into the programme regulations of the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027, the preparation committee has invited the KISS ME project coordinator to present the action plan to the committee.

4.3.4. Time frame

Reducing the duration for the approval processes for new project applications should be included within the Interreg DE-NL programme regulations as soon as possible. In doing so, this is not limited to the duration of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2014 – 2020, but can be implemented for the entire programme period 2021 – 2027. Since changes on the programme level might take some time, the monitoring committee will be approached with the request to agree first on concrete benchmark for the duration for approval processes by means of a declaration of intent.

4.3.5. Indicative Costs and Funding Source

Since this action only requires an optimisation of processes and an amendment to the programme regulations, no additional costs have to be expected, and therefore, no funding source is needed.

4.4. **Stronger focus on fostering innovation in young enterprises and entrepreneurial students in a cross-border context**

4.4.1. Background

Young enterprises, especially start-ups, have received more attention in the recent years and have appeared more strongly on the “economic agenda” across Europe. Even more so than SMEs, start-ups need tailored support to grow and establish themselves as an enterprise. Moreover, often germinating out of universities, entrepreneurial students who intend to found their own business need tailored, easily accessible assistance to take the transferral step from university to business. In addition, the factor of internationalisation plays an important role for the start-ups’ potential. A supportive infrastructure for SMEs therefore encompasses both the availability of affordable, accessible open spaces, labs and office spaces, and the availability of suitable, rather low-threshold funding and support schemes.

Within the framework of the KISS ME project, the consortium has seen some great examples of open facilities for start-ups across all sectors during the interregional site visits in each partner region, such as the BioCentre Zagreb, the Karlstad Innovation Park, Startplatz Düsseldorf and the Canodrom in Barcelona.⁶ Although there is a growing number of open facilities for start-ups in all of the KISS ME partner regions, the exchange of experience process highlighted, that none of the involved cross-border policy instruments offered a particular focus or tailored financial support opportunities for start-ups. Considering that the policy instruments involved in the KISS ME projects are all instruments for border regions, thus, fostering the cooperation between actors in two different countries, they are also highly attractive and beneficial for start-ups and young entrepreneurs with regard to their internationalisation process. As some good practices have shown, such as the International Pressure Cooker and the Young SMEs subsidy scheme, which had been running within the project “Knowledge Alliance Rhine-Waal” in the recent INTERREG A DE-NL programme⁷, even low-threshold measures can hereby render a significant impact with regard to business creation, growth and internationalisation for start-ups. Therefore, the INTERREG A DE-NL programme should put a stronger focus on fostering innovation in young enterprises and entrepreneurial students in a cross-border context and make the programme more accessible and suitable for start-ups. This will help to attract new project partners and enterprises to the programme and contribute strongly to the programme’s objective of generating innovation in the region.

As previously described in the policy context, only 0.7 % of the originally available funds can be still allocated to new projects under *Priority axis 1: Increase of cross-border innovation capacity of the programme area*. This makes a modification of the current programme regulations, which comes with a relatively complex administrative process due to the policy instruments’ governance structure, relatively unlikely. However, the preparation process for the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027 has already been initiated and is already quite far advanced. The new version of the programme regulations are expected to be finalized in 2020 – which still falls in the second phase of the KISS ME project. Due to this special situation with the policy instrument INTERREG VA Germany-Netherlands, this action is intended to be incorporated and implemented in the INTERREG VIA Germany-Netherlands 2021-2027 programme. Taking into account that a new version of the programme regulations for the future programme will be finalised in 2020, monitoring of the action plans’ impact will still be possible.

4.4.2. Action Description and Expected Impact

⁶ For more information visit <http://www.biocentre.hr/en/>; <http://karlstadinnovationpark.se/>; <https://www.startplatz.de/>; <https://canodrom.com/>

⁷ For more information on the KISS ME good practices, visit www.interregeurope.eu/kissme/good-practices

In order to make the INTERREG A DE-NL programme more accessible and suitable for start-ups, their promotion should be made a priority sector. In doing so, a strategic initiative should be elaborated on the example of the existing strategic initiatives. Since all the projects carried out within these priority sectors are based on the principles of the strategic initiatives, designated use of funding is guaranteed and project quality will improve. Therefore, adding the promotion of start-ups as a priority sector with a strategic initiative will lead to more prominence of start-ups in the programme and in turn, make the Interreg A DE-NL programme a more visible, attractive and suitable instrument for start-ups. Hence, access to finance will be facilitated for start-ups in the border region and it will be made it easier for start-ups to receive funding. Moreover, due to the generally high innovative potential of start-ups, including their promotion to the programme will contribute strongly to the programme's innovation objectives. Considering the facilitated cooperation across the border, participating in the Interreg A DE-NL programme will also help start-ups in their internationalisation process at an early stage. With regard to the availability of more and more open space facilities for start-ups in the region, adding the promotion of start-ups to the INTERREG A DE-NL programme with a strategic initiative will present a complementary step in building up a strong infrastructure for start-ups in the Dutch-German border region.

4.4.3. Players Involved

Firstly, the programme partners of the Interreg DE-NL programme forming the monitoring committee are able to modify the policy instrument on programme level with regard to the proposed action to include the promotion of start-ups as a priority sector of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme with a strategic initiative.

These partners include: the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitalisation and Energy of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development of Lower Saxony, the Province of Groningen, the Province of Friesland, the Province of Drenthe, the Province of Flevoland, the Province of Overijssel, the Province of Gelderland, the Province of North Brabant, the Province of Limburg, the Ems-Dollart-Region, the EUREGIO, the Euregio Rhine-Waal, and the Euregio Rhine-Maas-North.

The monitoring committee convenes regularly, around three times a year. The action plan will be presented to the monitoring committee at their meetings. Additionally, the members of the monitoring committee will receive the action plan individually.

Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears the potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners



have formed a preparation committee. With regard to possibly incorporating the proposed action into the programme regulations of the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027, the preparation committee has invited the KISS ME project coordinator to present the action plan to the committee.

4.4.4. Time frame

Including the promotion of start-ups as a priority sector of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme with a strategic initiative will need to be agreed on by the monitoring committee as a first step. As a second step, a strategic initiative would have to be generated by a suitable group of experts. This process will take up some time. Therefore, this action is not limited to the duration of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2014 – 2020, but can further be followed-up and implemented in the programme period 2021 – 2027.

4.4.5. Indicative Costs and Funding Source

Adding the promotion of start-ups as a priority sector with a strategic initiative of the programme, will broaden the thematic fields in which projects can be funded within the INTERREG A DE-NL programme. In doing so, the elaboration of a strategic initiative by an expert group will be necessary. The costs for the elaboration will be dependent on the composition and mode of operation of this expert. Although these costs can hardly be estimated at this point of time, they can be expected to be only incur on a one-time basis and thus, remain relatively low.

4.5. **‘Cross-border ambassadors’ and organising face-to-face events for experienced and new project partners**

4.5.1. Background

As aforementioned, SMEs often do not know about the possibilities to receive funding within the framework of the INTERREG A programme or consider it too bureaucratic and complicated to get involved in CBC. This is not only the fact for the Dutch-German border region, but also presents a challenge in other European border region, as identified in the interregional learning and exchange of experience process among the European partner regions within the KISS ME project. However, encouragement and promotion illustrating the benefits of CBC and Interreg are more credible, if they come from other SMEs and entrepreneurs than from public organisations, governments or agencies. Therefore, entrepreneurs who work or have worked cross-border successfully should take the role of “cross-border ambassadors” spreading information and promoting the benefits of CBC within the Interreg DE-NL programme.



Moreover, due to the particularity of the Interreg programme, e.g. with regard to application processes and specific funding regulations, it is easier for actors who have already been involved in Interreg projects to engage with the programme repeatedly. They are familiar with the programme's specific set up and its regulations, and already have an established network of partners across the border. In the interregional learning process, this phenomenon was regularly referred to by the KISS ME consortium as "Interreg family". On the one hand, this enables partners across borders to establish a long-term commitment and thus, bears the potential for long-term developments. On the other hand, however, this also bears the risk of excluding actors that have not been involved in the INTERREG A programme yet and limits the programme's efficiency and outreach to a circle of actors who already knows about the benefits of the programme. The challenge, therefore, is to expand the circle of actors engaging with the Interreg programme ideally involving both experienced actors and "newcomers" in joint projects. By means of the networks of partners already involved in Interreg projects and the promotion of the programme through entrepreneurial "cross-border ambassadors", new potential partners can be reached more easily and effectively.

4.5.2. Action Description and Expected Impact

An efficient way to implement the role of "cross-border ambassadors" and foster the promotion of the programme with new potential project partners in the region is the organisation of face-to-face events with a thematic focus within the fields of the Interreg priority sectors, such as High Tech Systems & Materials, Agrobusiness & Food, Health Care & Life Science, etc.

In doing so, all existing projects fitting the particular thematic focus should be invited. Moreover, the project partners should be asked to also promote the event among their networks in order to reach actors that have not been involved in the Interreg programme yet. This increases the potential to attract new actors and ensures a mixture of both experienced and new actors at the face-to-face event. In doing so, experienced actors function as "cross-border ambassadors" promoting the benefits of Interreg and CBC, and simultaneously displaying the outputs and developments of their projects. It is hereby essential that the face-to-face events are organised regularly, e.g. yearly or every 2 years, in order to build sustainable contacts and maintain the network of actors, which is crucial for fruitful CBC.

This will expand the reach of the Interreg DE-NL programme, help to attract more potentially new actors and ultimately increase the programme's efficiency and attractiveness to a wider circle of actors in the region. Moreover, face-to-face events with existing projects and new actors from the region offer a great opportunity to network and find potential project partners for future cooperation, and enable the existing projects to explore synergies.



4.5.3. Players involved

Firstly, the programme partners of the Interreg DE-NL programme forming the monitoring committee are able to modify the policy instrument on programme level with regard to the inclusion of the proposed action concerning the organisation of regular face-to-face events for existing projects and potential new project partners.

However, the organisation of these events would not lie with the projects, but with the Joint Secretariat and can thus, be included in the programme as a ‘supporting measure’. Due to the responsibility of the Joint Secretariat, these measures can be implemented before the action has been factually included in the programme regulations.

Since the Euregio Rhine-Waal is hosting the JS, the JS has already been involved in the drafting of the Action Plan. As a second step, after having finalised the Action Plan, the JS will be approached in order to fathom out how the proposed action can be implemented in an efficient and timely manner.

Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears the potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners have formed a preparation committee. With regard to possibly incorporating the proposed action into the programme regulations of the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027, the preparation committee has invited the KISS ME project coordinator to present the action plan to the committee.

4.5.4. Timeframe

As abovementioned, the organisation of face-to-face events could be included as a supporting measure within the Interreg DE-NL programme for the entire programme period 2021 – 2027. Hereby, the meetings should be organised regularly, e.g. yearly or every 2 years.

4.5.5. Indicative Costs and Funding Source

As mentioned before, the organisation of these face-to-face events would lie with the Joint Secretariat. The costs would mainly have to cover room rentals and catering for the events. Some funds of the remaining budget could be used to organise these face-to-face events during the current INTERREG A DE-NL programme. For the implementation of the proposed action in the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, some extra budget should be assigned to the Joint Secretariat, specifically for the organisation of these



events.

4.6. Improving Communication and branding of the Interreg DE-NL programme

4.6.1. Background

In the exchange with the stakeholders and partners of the KISS ME partner regions, and based on the long experience in the Dutch-German border region, it became evident, that many actors along the border do not know about the (funding) opportunities available within the framework of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme and do not consider working across the border an option. Naturally, this negatively affects CBC and makes the programme prone to attract only a limited circle of actors who are already familiar with the programme. Moreover, the broader public is not about the benefits of Interreg and CBC either, and thus, remains ignorant about the EU's concrete efforts and accomplishments for their lives in their region. In order to increase awareness for the benefits of CBC, both with businesses and the public, a more comprehensive, up-to-date and targeted communication strategy, including uniform, mainstreamed programme branding, is needed.

4.6.2. Action Description and Expected Impact

One measure to improve communication and branding is to offer uniform and mainstreamed 'branding templates' for projects running within the framework of the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme, such as PowerPoint templates for project presentations and uniform branding emblems in addition to the Interreg logo. This can be implemented through a particular symbol representing the programme and its thematic objectives.

Example:





All Interreg Europe projects are required to use the origami above in their respective colour together with their project logo in every communication item or project presentation. The different colours hereby illustrate the different thematic objectives of the programme (yellow for 'Research and innovation capacity', turquoise for 'SME competitiveness', dark green for 'low-carbon economy' and light green for 'Environment and resource efficiency'). This increases the recognition factor and creates some kind of 'common identity' between the projects. Moreover, due to the pattern similar in all Interreg Europe project, the programme becomes more visible to the broader public. Similar branding mechanisms could also be conceivable for the Interreg DE-NL programme.

The symbol for branding should not replace the Interreg DE-NL logo in combination with the EU flag. In fact, the logo generator, available on the INTERREG A DE-NL programme website, can simply add a particular symbol in a pre-defined colour corresponding with the project's thematic objective (such as the origami, e.g. using blue for priority axis 1; using red for priority axis 2). This will not only increase the recognition value for projects among themselves, but will also increase the visibility of both the projects and the programme with the broader public due to the uniform branding and the unique symbolism.

These uniform and mainstreamed branding items, as well as a branding guide for projects supporting them in their project communication and use of the branding material, should be made available on the website of the Interreg DE-NL programme (www.deutschland-nederland.eu).

Using uniform branding will foster the creation of a 'cross-border identity', which is a prerequisite for establishing successful CBC, according to the Joint Analysis of the KISS ME project. In doing so, the frequent use of mainstreamed branding and an improved communication strategy will increase the programme's visibility in the region, fostering the prominence of the programme with potential partners for CBC projects and the broader public. In doing so, new project partners who have not participated in CBC or Interreg before will be attracted more easily, and the broader public will be made more aware of the concrete efforts of the EU on a regional level.

4.6.3. Players involved

Firstly, the programme partners of the Interreg DE-NL programme are able to modify the policy instrument on programme level with regard to the inclusion of the proposed actions concerning branding and programme communication.

These partners include: the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitalisation and Energy



of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Ministry of Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development of Lower Saxony, the Province of Groningen, the Province of Friesland, the Province of Drenthe, the Province of Flevoland, the Province of Overijssel, the Province of Gelderland, the Province of North Brabant, the Province of Limburg, the Ems-Dollart-Region, the EUREGIO, the Euregio Rhine-Waal, and the Euregio Rhine-Maas-North.

Secondly, the Joint Secretariat would have to take the necessary measures to generate the templates and a branding/communication guide and make them available on the programme website. For generating a streamlined branding symbol, an external designer should be hired; for the modification of the logo generator to include the new branding symbols external technical support would need to be hired.

Due to the responsibility of the Joint Secretariat, these measures could be implemented before the action has been factually included in the programme regulations.

Since the Euregio Rhine-Waal is hosting the Joint Secretariat, its representatives have already been consulted during the drafting of the Action Plan. As a second step, after having finalised the Action Plan, the Joint Secretariat will be approached in order to fathom out concretely how the proposed action can be implemented in an efficient and timely manner. As a first step, a PowerPoint template can be generated by the Joint Secretariat's communication staff and made available on the programme website, initially for voluntary use.

Considering the fact that the preparation and drafting for the next INTERREG A DE-NL programme phase (2021 – 2027) is currently happening, the action plan bears the potential to have a sustainable impact on the future programme as well. For the preparation of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2021 – 2027, the programme partners have formed a preparation committee. With regard to possibly incorporating the proposed action into the programme regulations of the policy instrument for the programming period 2021-2027, the preparation committee has invited the KISS ME project coordinator to present the action plan to the committee.

4.6.4. Timeframe

The implementation of this action to improve communication and branding, e.g. by offering streamlined communication templates on the programme's website for the Interreg DE-NL programme could be started immediately, because the first steps of implementation do not require a change on programme level. In doing so, the implementation is not limited to the duration of the INTERREG A DE-NL programme 2014 – 2020, but can be further implemented for the entire programme period 2021 – 2027.



4.6.5. Indicative Costs and Funding Source

The measure to improve programme communication and branding would only be linked to minor costs: a template for project presentations and a branding guide for projects helping them with their communication can be drafted by the communication staff of the Joint Secretariat and uploaded on the website, practically by no additional costs. The service of designing a branding symbol, potentially available in different colours depending on the project's thematic objective, as well as the modification of the logo generator would have to be contracted on a one-time basis by external suppliers. However, these costs would occur once only and remain relatively low in their amount.

5. Conclusion

For the last 2.5 years the KISS ME project has engaged in a policy learning process by sharing experiences, ideas and approaches with other European regions. In doing so, the KISS ME project partners were not only able to get interesting insights into the methods and workings of other cross-border policy instruments, such as the Interreg VA programmes, but were also able to evaluate the policy instrument in their region. As for the Interreg VA Germany-Netherlands programme, we have seen that many things are already working well. Since the programme's establishment more than 25 ago, notable successes and developments were achieved in the region; the projects running within the Interreg Germany-Netherlands programme render and have rendered remarkable innovations and were able to establish long-term cooperation across the border. In spite of the success, however, proven tools and methods have to be critically evaluated continuously in order to assess their added value and impact since conditions and structures in a region are also subject to change over time; what has proven successful in the past might not always be suitable for the present or the future. Therefore, for continued success, it is crucial to always stay open to new approaches, perspectives and methods and not rest on one's laurels. In this context, being open to new approaches does not necessarily mean that old ones have to be given up, but it means that there might always be some potential to do even better.

The policy learning process within the framework of the KISS ME project has rendered a number of interesting insights. The exchange with stakeholders from other regions and the site visits illustrated many interesting approaches that can serve as an inspiration and demonstrate innovative ideas for the Dutch-German border region. The identified best practices highlight some of these successful approaches from the KISS ME partner regions and present a fruitful input and new perspectives for other border regions in Europe.

This Action Plan presented the main results and insights derived from the interregional policy learning process within the Interreg Europe project KISS ME. The results are an attempt to illustrate possible potential for improvement within the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme in order to keep optimising the programme and make it even more supportive for and attractive to SMEs which play a crucial role for innovation in our region. Although we are aware that changes cannot happen overnight,



we hope that the Action Plan can give some constructive input for the INTERREG A Germany-Netherlands programme and are proud to contribute a small part to optimising this successful cross-border policy instrument.

Date: 19

Signature:

Endorsement:

This Action Plan was presented to the Monitoring Committee of the INTERREG VA Germany-Netherlands Programme at a Committee Meeting on 28 June 2019 at the Town Hall of Venray. The Monitoring Committee is the highest body of the programme. The political representatives of all programme partners have a seat in the committee. The Monitoring Committee monitors the implementation of the programme and steers the overall strategy of the programme. It also ensures that the cooperation programme is implemented effectively and according to the rules.

The Action Plan was sent to the members of the committee by email on 29 May 2019 and presented by the KISS ME Project Coordinator at the committee meeting on 28 June 2019. The Monitoring Committee of the INTERREG VA Germany-Netherlands programme positively acknowledged the action plan and its envisaged actions.