

First macro-regional strategies' workshop on water

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Report

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Introduction

The EU macro-regional strategies (MRS, Strategies) address challenges shared within a functional area. They also aim at better implementation of the EU policies and more coordination of existing institutions and financial resources. Currently, there are four MRS adopted and in different implementation stages addressing similar thematic priorities.

Taking into account above said as well as following on earlier initiatives for exchanges across the Strategies, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region "Water quality" priority area (EUSDR PA4) in cooperation with Interact Programme initiated a first get-together of experts working on water-related issues in all four MRS – Baltic Sea Region, Adriatic and Ionian Region, Alpine Region and Danube Region. The workshop was focusing on freshwater-related matters and common freshwater-marine issues (e.g. nitrates, plastic pollution, migratory species and adaptation to climate change). Besides exchanging knowledge and sharing experiences on how the water matters are addressed in the different macro-regions, outlining main challenges, exchanging best practices and lessons learnt, the workshop was aiming at identifying the potential for further exchanges. Representatives of all four MRS were present at the event, joined by European Commission, the EUSDR PA4 Steering Group members¹ and other relevant actors².

¹ Representatives of national/regional authorities, international organisations, like International Sava River Basin Commission Secretariat, International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, Carpathian Convention.

² Representatives of Embassy of Romania in Hungary, Ministry of Interior if Hungary, TRENECON Ltd.

EU updates on the developments of the macro-regional strategies and water-related activities

Short interventions from the European Commission DG ENVIRONMENT and DG REGIO opened the meeting presenting, respectively, updates on the EU water-related activities and further developments of the Strategies. The presentation of DG ENVIRONMENT highlighted several ongoing processes that are linking and influencing the implementation of the MRS. Making the best out of the MRS work, coordination and synergies with related activities/processes at EU level are essential. Giacomo Luciani, DG ENVIRONMENT highlighted that most of water-related challenges could be addressed only by coordinating and joining efforts at macro-regional and EU levels.

During the discussion, the question of how thematic coordinators could provide inputs to the policy debate was raised. It was concluded that joint events of thematic coordinators from the macro-regional strategies (like this one); regular interactions and exchanges across the Strategies; involvement of international organisations in the macro-regional strategies' steering/coordination groups as well as interlinking the work of the macro-regional thematic coordinators with relevant international/supranational organisations (like regional conventions where the EU is a party) are highlighted as some of the existing good practices. Measuring of the Strategies' achievements/synergies can be performed at two levels: at the governance level by, for example, analysing synergies established among line ministries in the macro-region in question and at project level by, e.g. analysing projects initiated by the macro-regions.

Odd Godal, DG REGIO presented main conclusions from the recent High-Level Group of the MRS (held on 1 March 2018, Brussels, Belgium). Several points from the High-Level Group meeting should be considered in further discussion:

- the Committee of the Regions is highlighting a need for the EU to develop territorial vision which goes beyond borders;
- the European Parliament is appealing for more involvement and role of the multilevel governance actors in the implementation of the Strategies;
- European Commission is inviting countries of the Strategies to favour more integrated policy approach in the Cohesion Policy.

A short reference to the study '[Macro-regional strategies and their links to Cohesion Policy](#)' contracted by DG REGIO and conducted by a consortium led by COWI was made, especially highlighting identified drivers and barriers in the implementation of the Strategies. **The participants of the workshop expressed their interest to exchange on the identified drivers and barriers in the implementation of the Strategies, in case the follow-up workshop would be organised.**

It was reminded that DG REGIO is currently working on a consolidated report on the implementation of the MRS. The report will be published in December 2018 and every two

years thereafter. Importance of building synergies and ensuring those throughout the implementation of the Strategies and at all governance levels was stressed.

During the discussion it was highlighted that the EU will aim at mainstreaming funds and facilitating their use after 2020.

First outcomes of the MRS research on waters

Attempting to identify common 'water' related matters across the MRS, the EUSDR PA4 contracted TRENCON Ltd. to perform the analysis. Although at the early stage of the research, it can be concluded that MRS play a role at the EU level since 60% of EUROPE are covered by the macro-regions. The MRS are addressing similar objectives and broad thematic priorities. Level of detail of the MRS documents, e.g. Action Plans, varies as well as provided definitions of the sub-objectives, targets and indicators, projects and potential financing.

Respecting uniqueness and diversity in approaches in the MRS, the research, focusing on several **thematic areas**, identifies **questions that are common** for all four MRS and could serve basis for continues exchanges. As such are defined:

- a) **water quality and availability**; more specifically, pollution control (nutrients, plastics, toxic substances) and integrated and smart water resource management;
- b) **environmental risks related to waters** such as droughts and water scarcity; floods; prevention, forecast techniques or eco-friendly solutions;
- c) **water in support of biodiversity**: ecological state of waters; water-related ecosystems and migratory fish species.

In addition to above listed, the experts highlight relevance of **climate change and adaptation**, and **spatial planning**. Furthermore, experts gave their suggestion for **activities across the MRS**, like:

- a) policy-making and planning ((integrated) policy formulation; spatial planning /land use /landscapes /rural areas; River Basin and Coastal Management Plans; flood management plans);
- b) focussing on spaces: wetlands, coastal areas; connecting ecosystems / blue corridors, floodplains;
- c) climate change: adaptation, research and planning.

The experts see a high potential for continuing exchanges across the MRS for closer cooperation and institutional developments. The research will be finalised in late autumn 2018. The initiative of the EUSDR PA4 and the research performed are much appreciated. The EUSDR PA4 was kindly asked to share the outcomes of the study with all the participants of the meeting.

Water-related activities in the Strategies: challenges, experiences and lessons learnt

The next session was focussing on sharing implementation related questions and activities as addressed under the particular Strategy, in particular:

- The water-related activities within the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) are addressed under the EUSDR Priority Area 4 'Water Quality', Priority Area 5 'Environmental risks' and Priority Area 6 'Biodiversity'.
- The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) addressed water topics under the Policy Area 'Hazards', Policy Area 'Nutri' and Policy Area 'Bioeconomy'.
- The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) is addressing the water topics under two of its pillars: Pillar 1 'Blue growth' and Pillar 3 'Environmental quality'.
- Last but not least, the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) addressed the water topic under the Action Group 6 'Resources' where a specific sub-topic 'Integrated and sustainable water management' is defined.

Unfortunately, due to overlapping commitments, representatives of the EUSBSR Policy Area 'Nutri' and Policy Area 'Bioeconomy' and the EUSAIR Pillar 1 'Blue growth' could not participate in this meeting.

The thematic coordinators/ representatives of the thematic coordinators provided general information about the governance of the MRS but also presented main activities. Link to all the presentations delivered during the meeting is available below.

The paragraph below reflects only general conclusions from the presentations and the flowing discussion.

- All the thematic coordinators/ representatives of the thematic coordinators mentioned clear links between the macro-regional work and EU policy framework/legislation they operate, highlighting having common grounds for addressing water-related topics at macro-regional level.
- Finding a niche, building collaboration and defining clear distinction in tasks of the MRS and supranational organisations has been one of the issues addressed by older MRS. Currently, cooperation between the MRS and supranational organisations is found mutually benefiting and enriching.
- There is a definite need for building and maintaining interlinks across various thematic priorities of the MRS. Interlinking to agricultural sector was highlighted as especially important. The EUSAIR Pillar 3 coordinators developed an inter-pillar matrix within the EUSAIR, stressing links and interdependencies of the activities implemented under the different EUSAIR pillars. It is considered a good example.
- The meeting provided an opportunity by listening to approaches taken by the particular MRS to consider possibilities for further openings and cooperation, e.g. the upcoming EUSDR work on pharmaceuticals and agriculture could benefit from the EUSBSR experiences in dealing with these topics. In this respect the EUSBSR pharma platform

provides a good example of not only focusing on projects, but also on processes (supporting activities and policy development in order to bring project results up to policy level).

- Thematic coordinators are making efforts in interlinking their activities, networks and relevant organisations as well as supporting projects that are about to bring macro-regional added value. The coordinators devote their efforts for capitalising on project results and promoting those by e.g. running thematic project poles, like within the EUSDR PA4 or furthermore moving from implementing projects to developing macro-regional processes, like in case of the EUSBSR PA 'Hazards'. In simple words, the MRS can support in placing single (transnational) projects in wider territorial and policy contexts, this way demonstrating the main distinction between the MRS and funding programmes, especially Interreg transnational programmes. In January 2018 Interact published an input paper ['How macro-regional strategies deliver: workflows, processes and approaches'](#) that can be used as an input for further consideration.
- When discussing the potential for further exchanges across the MRS, in addition to thematic topics for collaboration listed above, several suggestions for cooperation on governance questions were provided, such as:
 - a) thematic coordinators may consider participation in steering group meetings of another thematic area within the same MRS or beyond;
 - b) for the sake of information exchange across the MRS, the thematic coordinators could share information provided in various reports;
 - c) meetings for the MRS thematic coordinators could be organising back-to-back or jointly with other MRS events, e.g. Annual Forums;
 - d) more regular exchange of information/opinions across the MRS or among the thematic coordinators of the same MRS could be ensured, e.g. on policy/EU directive reviews; implementation and updates on Climate adaptation strategy; EU supervision surveys; by identifying transferable topics and knowledge across the MRS, etc. Please see more proposals for collaboration in the presentation of the EUSDR PA5 coordinator.
 - e) Thematic coordinators, respecting different environments they operate, look for solutions to implement the MRS most efficiently. Facing a challenge on the representation of the countries to the PA steering groups, the EUSDR PA6 have established seven working groups/task forces to address topics listed under the PA6 of the EUSDR Action Plan. This could be a good solution to keep commitment and interest of broad stakeholder groups (civil society, NGOs, academia and policy level) in the MRS implementation. Chairs of these working groups/task forces are observers of the PA6 steering group and are able to provide links between the groups and to PA6 coordinators.

- Throughout the discussion, the participants highlighted a need for allocation of more funding to the water-related priorities, project preparations and evermore working on the institutional capacity building of the organisations/institutions responsible for the respective policy or coordination. It is especially crucial but not exceptional for the organisations/ institutions of the non-EU countries regarding to smooth project management.
- The participants stressed links and interdependencies between freshwater and seawater matters. The inputs by the EUSAIR Pillar 3 showed the necessity for addressing both within the MRS. Enhanced cooperation between the institutions working on the EUSDR and Black Sea is significant. The mentioned example demonstrates the need for expanding interregional collaboration not only across the MRS but beyond, where relevant.
- Furthermore and repeating already mentioned, all the participants agreed that there is a clear need for addressing climate change and adaptation, and spatial planning dimensions within the MRS work on water.

Outcomes of the roundtable discussion

Complementing initial inputs by the thematic coordinators of the MRS, the last session was organised around the following core questions:

- 1) What emerging issues can be identified in the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies, with a specific focus on funding, stakeholder involvement, policy impact/link, new challenges?
- 2) Is there a need for continuation of exchanges and cooperation across the MRS on water management questions?

Summarising the discussion, the following can be underlined:

- 1) **Funding:**
 - Thematic coordinators underlined a need for the alignment of funding and embedding of the MRS relevant topics in the funding programmes and schemes post 2020 as well as to emerge to more different funding possibilities. The participants highlighted a need for a real embedding and alignment of the funding programmes to the MRS.
 - Funding flexibility and availability regarding governance support is needed. In particular, there is funding gap to support cooperation across thematic areas or the MRS, like for exchange events, jointly organised events, networks, capacity building activities, etc., primarily when joint events are organised.

- Several funding programmes support water-related projects; however, thematic coordinators face challenges to identify 'the right funding instrument at the right time'.
- In the Baltic Sea region, a network of the ERDF Managing Authorities is established. The network is aiming at supporting the EUSBSR implementation by providing funding to the macro-regional projects. This is a good example for allocating national and regional ESI Funds programmes for transnational cooperation.

2) **Policy impact, links between the MRS and policies:**

- Participants highlighted clear links between the policies and the MRS that ensures the MRS efficiency.
- Expectations towards the MRSs are high; therefore, it is essential to maintain interest in the thematic priorities and deliver results that would lead to the policy impact.
- Stronger national commitment to the MRS would support thematic coordinators more, especially in conveying results achieved to the policy level. National coordinators of the MRS plays a significant role here.
- The added value of the MRS is demonstrated through strategic/macro-regional projects. Giving the more prominent role to the flagships (macro-regional projects and processes) could help in approaching policy level representatives. However, the flagship leaders sometimes need a capacity building activities in this regard.
- Thematic coordinators may consider mainstreaming water management topics into other sectors/topics dealt by the MRS. This may increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their work as well as general awareness.

3) **Stakeholder involvement:**

- Each of the MRS, depending on the focus of the thematic area, is building stakeholder networks. However, all the thematic coordinators/representatives of thematic coordinators highlighted a need for involving 'new' stakeholders in their work, e.g. business sector; agricultural sector representatives and civil society. The EUSALP representative highlighted that good cooperation history in the Alps supports in engaging stakeholders in the MRS implementation. It is important to engage stakeholders in the processes (implementation of the MRS) not treating them only as 'end users' of the delivered MRS results.
- Increasing public awareness on the MRS was highlighted as a task for the MRS success. Therefore, the participation of the MRS thematic coordinators to events and communicating the MRS work is important.

During the discussion, it was referred several times that thematic coordinators need to reflect and respect changing environment for the MRS implementation, meaning - to observe and address new emerging macro-regional challenges.

The discussion confirmed interest in continuing exchanges and collaboration across the MRS. It was highlighted that even though not all practices can be copy-pasted due to the different circumstances in the different MRS, cooperation can increase efficiency and reduce costs, increase knowledge and experience as well as give an opportunity to create common standpoints. The exchange could continue on the following issues:

- **Shared topics/themes** as identified above.
- **Governance** matters, like setting up and maintaining thematic steering groups for the MRS implementation; stakeholder involvement; addressing drivers and barriers in the MRS delivery; cooperation between supranational organisations and thematic coordinators of the MRS; moving from national perceptions of the shared challenges to international/macro-regional thinking etc.
- **Implementation processes, questions and approaches** at thematic priority level, e.g., exchanging practices on the thematic coordinators' work; sharing lessons learnt and developing further ideas on how to move from implementing projects within the MRS to working with macro-regional processes; capacity building; stakeholder involvement; how to ensure more policy impact through the macro-regional work; funding; cross-thematic cooperation within the MRS, etc.

The meeting provided the first opportunity for networking and exchanges across the MRS in a horizontal understanding of the field of water. The EUSDR PA4 in cooperation with Interact will consider further possibilities for collaboration and networking. Taking into account the conclusions from the meeting presented above, it can be proposed to continue exchange on specific thematic within a Task Force to be set up by the EUSDR PA4 and on the MRS governance-related questions in a workshop organised jointly by Interact and EUSDR PA4 in the first half of 2019.

Annex:

- Presentations provided during the workshop are available [here](https://www.danubewaterquality.eu/files/directory/141) (or by copying the link: <https://www.danubewaterquality.eu/files/directory/141>).