



EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)
Needs Assessment for closer cooperation
between PACs and other relevant stakeholders



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This publication illustrates a Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders.

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APM	<i>Association of Project Management</i>
CBC	<i>Cross Border Cooperation</i>
CoR	<i>European Committee of the Regions</i>
Council	<i>Council of the European Union</i>
DG	<i>Directorate-General</i>
DG ENV	<i>Directorate-General for Environment</i>
DG MOVE	<i>Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport</i>
DG REGIO	<i>Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy</i>
D-LAP	<i>Danube Local Actors Platform</i>
DSP	<i>Danube Strategy Point</i>
DSTF	<i>Danube Sturgeon Task Force</i>
DTP	<i>Danube Transnational Programme</i>
EBRD	<i>European Bank for Reconstruction and Development</i>
EC	<i>European Commission</i>
EESC	<i>European Economic and Social Committee</i>
EIB	<i>European Investment Bank</i>
EP	<i>European Parliament</i>
ESF	<i>European Social Fund</i>
ETC	<i>European Territorial Cooperation</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
EUSDR	<i>EU Strategy for the Danube Region</i>
ICPDR	<i>International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River</i>
MLG	<i>Multi-level governance</i>
MRS	<i>Macro-regional strategies</i>
NC	<i>National Coordinator</i>
NGO	<i>Non-Governmental Organisation</i>
OECD	<i>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</i>
PAC	<i>Priority Area Coordinator</i>
PA	<i>Priority Area</i>
RoP	<i>Rules of Procedure</i>
SG	<i>Steering Group</i>
TEN-T	<i>Trans-European Transport Network</i>
TF	<i>Task Forces</i>

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Introduction

In the field of territorial integration of the European Union (EU), the macro-regional strategies (MRS) represent a unique instrument for cooperation in a transnational framework. The MRS such as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) combine, on the one hand, the superordinate European strategies (Europe2020, Lisbon Strategy) and, on the other hand, the prior regional initiatives (European Territorial Cooperation, ETC) of the EU. With macro-regions new political spheres of action develop, which also entails a change in their objectives and the stakeholders involved, along with the EUSDR Priority Areas (PAs). The need for close cooperation of PAs with a variety of stakeholders lies within the definition of macro-regional strategies, as these *“benefit from strengthened cooperation contributing to achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion”*¹.

To capture the nature of the macro-regional framework an EUSDR operational evaluation, including a survey, was conducted aiming at highlighting the workflows, processes and success factors for a synergetic implementation, as well as examining gaps and obstacles to a successful implementation and the potential needs. According to the results of the online-survey, the *“added value of the EUSDR was rated highest in terms of improving existing cooperation mechanisms and networks and/or creating new ones”*², while *“coordinated funding of projects and better cooperation are needed most in the Danube Region”*³. This is of particular relevance, as the EUSDR is implemented, among others, through projects and processes whose mechanisms and concrete activities are intended to trigger change among the actors and stakeholders involved.

This publication presents an assessment of needs for closer cooperation and contacts between PAs, Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) and relevant stakeholders, based on the findings of the Operational Evaluation as well on publications from the European Commission (EC), the Council and Joint Statements of the Ministers of the EUSDR⁴.

The first part of this publication presents a descriptive analysis of the importance of collaboration for MRS and the EUSDR. In the following, the definition of stakeholders, stakeholder processes/activities and/or the causalities between governance measures and stakeholder-induced change are presented in more detail. Official documents and reports in the multi-level policy framework will be used on the one hand, and good practices from the four Pillars of the EUSDR will be presented on the other.

In a second analytical-explorative part of the publication, the need for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders is elaborated in a targeted approach together with the PACs/PAC teams. To this end, based on the concepts of project management, a stakeholder identification survey and two consecutive workshops on stakeholder management and stakeholder engagement were conducted.

¹ European Commission (2013). Report from the EC to the EP, the Council, the EESC and the CoR concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies, COM(2013) 468 final, p. 3. [Online](#).

² Metis (2019). Evaluation of the effectiveness, communication and stakeholder involvement of the EUSDR, p. 36. [Online](#).

³ Metis (2019): 35.

⁴ The Needs Assessment was elaborated by Danube Strategy Point (DSP) and represents a deliverable of the DSP, financed by Interreg Danube Transnational Programme (DTP). It was developed under the activity focused on facilitating the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the SG and PAC meetings (deliverable D.M.4.1).

This publication thus aims to provide practical tools to support PAs in their (daily) work processes and to maintain and consolidate stakeholder management/engagement so new initiatives are geared towards the joint implementation of the EUSDR. The publication might be used as source of information for the National Coordinators (NCs) and for the Steering Group (SG) members when designing processes and activities related to stakeholder management and engagement. The processes and tools that have been jointly developed are by no means to be understood as mandatory for the PAs, but should rather provide an optional framework to cooperate with their stakeholders and to identify reliable partners for the implementation of the EUSDR actions. It is up to the PAs to decide to what extent this framework is applicable for the PAs.

1. Towards a strategic cooperation: Importance of cooperation for MRS and the EUSDR

The EUSDR is an integrated policy-framework taking into account the different economic, social and territorial situations within the Danube basin and thus providing a further tool for the implementation of EU cohesion policy. Cooperation in this macro-region is essential to address and to overcome challenges that the states can only tackle together. Cooperation across EU borders in the Danube region remains crucial. Accordingly, macro-regional strategies build on strategic elements, such as the common goals and a common governance structure, and also have a political element with concrete implementation measures. Cooperation takes place on the basis of activities and actions related to *strategic objectives*⁵ of the Strategy, which describe the strategic and long-term changes that are expected to be achieved in a longer time frame.

The toolbox of collaboration and cooperation in the EUSDR offers a variety of different forms of **strategic cooperation**, which can be linked and/or interdependent. These are briefly described in the following table as follows⁶.



institutionalised cooperation
formalised cooperation involving the institutions in the Region e.g. to overcome geopolitical differences from nine EU and five non-EU member states



political cooperation
political strategy that is based on cooperation and exchange with others to purposefully align benefits with cooperation partners e.g. for peace development with the involvement of European neighbour states as part of a political cooperation



functional cooperation
multi-level governance structure enables cooperation across administrative/political spaces (functional relations) e.g. for better and more effective cooperation through a softer (not necessarily institutionalised) and more functionally oriented approach

⁵ European Commission (2020). Commission staff working document Action Plan. The Communication from the EC to the EP, the Council, the EESC and the CoR. European Union Strategy for Danube Region, p.6: 1. Counteracting Climate Change, 2. Stimulating Sustainable Development, 3. Establishing and enforcing Knowledge Society, stimulating the Economy and fight Poverty, 4. Improving Mobility and Connectivity, 5. Enhancing Democracy, sound Administration and strong Involvement of Civil Society and Youth. [Online](#).

⁶ Cf. Metis (2019): 29 et seq. Illustration by the DSP, icons: www.flaticon.com.



soft territorial cooperation

cooperation based on soft governance to address issues which established 'hard' (legislative or contractual based) structures may face difficulties with, e.g. through capacity building of actors involved or capitalisation on a convergence of interests



multi-level governance cooperation

new forms of governance and cooperation in a highly complex multi-level environment (stakeholders are confronted with high levels of uncertainty) which can be addressed in an experimental way, e.g. operating through trial and error initiatives/actions



transnational cooperation

initiatives across national borders e.g. to take up common emerging economic, social or environmental issues that cannot be solved by a country on its own (based on shared resources such as the Danube river)

Table 1: Forms of strategic cooperation

The Strategy also includes **cooperation at the operational level** between and through the PACs and Steering Groups (SGs)⁷, which complements cooperation at strategic level, as described in the table above, including the EC (DG REGIO), the High-Level Group and National Coordinators (NCs) in the EUSDR. In this respect, governance plays a significant role as it describes *"the process to be addressed - how and by whom the Strategies are implemented, joint actions initiated and financed"*⁸. The resulting roles and responsibilities for key stakeholders when cooperating in the Strategy are detailed in the *EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper*⁹ which aims to improve coordination and cooperation in view of further enhancing the commitment to the Strategy and its effective implementation.

In this respect, PACs are *"key facilitators of the Strategy and serve as a strong liaison between their PA's groups of actors by offering a platform for exchanging and coordinating initiatives, stakeholders, policy processes and information"*¹⁰ and thus form the heart of cooperation in the Strategy. The underlying need for this publication for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders also stems from their roles and responsibilities, as *"PACs are designated for all PAs [...] who ensure – together with their Steering Groups – the implementation of the Action Plan defined for the PA by agreeing on planning with targets, indicators and timetables, and by making sure there is effective cooperation between project promoters, programmes and funding sources"*¹¹.

Next to the concept of strategic cooperation, this publication also draws on the **concept of development of cooperation**¹², which unfolds in different stages. This concept refers to the fact that international *"cooperation needs to be built, and that different stages of cooperation are necessary, before a real strategic cooperation can be achieved"*¹³. Cooperation can range from a simple exchange of information at a meeting to jointly developed/implemented strategies. These steps can be sequential, complementary or combined. A higher level of cooperation does not necessarily reflect a

⁷ Cf. Metis (2019): 21.

⁸ European Commission (2014). Report from the EC to the EP, the Council, the EESC and the CoR concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies, COM(2014)284, p. 3. [Online](#).

⁹ EUSDR (2020). EU Strategy for the Danube Region Governance Architecture. [Online](#).

¹⁰ EUSDR (2020): 6. [Online](#).

¹¹ Metis (2019): 24 and based on the governance description of the EUSDR. [Online](#).

¹² Developed by Dr. Joachim Beck, former director of the Euroinstitut in Kehl, Germany. [Online](#).

¹³ Metis (2019): 12 and Interact (2004). Project Management Handbook II, p. 9. [Online](#).

better implementation of the EUSDR, as the objectives and actions to be implemented always have to be taken into account. However, the concept of development of cooperation can point the way towards a real strategic cooperation.



Figure 1: Development of cooperation.

Not only at strategic level, but also at operational level, it is important that the right stakeholders are involved as it is key *“to empower relevant stakeholders and implementers (NCs, PACs, SGs, etc.) and increase the ownership of the relevant line ministries on the national level”*¹⁴. By involving a wide range of stakeholders, common challenges are addressed more comprehensively with joint efforts of cooperation and coordination. Stakeholders help to consider and take into account various perspectives to the macro-regional challenges, make results of macro-regional activities and processes sustainable and ensure spill-over effects. With the empowerment of dedicated stakeholders, ownership and commitment to the respective PA’s collaboration process is facilitated at different multi-level governance (MLG) spheres.

2. Findings in official documents and reports

The implementation of the macro-regional strategies represents the joint work of a complex multi-level and multi-stakeholder system comprising transnational, cross-sectoral and cross-regional actors involved in identifying and tackling common challenges. Over time, the importance and the intensity of cooperation has risen progressively, so that in 2018 the respondents to the survey conducted for developing the Operational Evaluation of the EUSDR rated the highest added value of the EUSDR in terms of *“improving existing cooperation mechanisms and networks and/or creating new ones”*¹⁵. At strategic level, substantial differences in the cooperation with the stakeholders were highlighted at PA level as regards the participation of line DGs, representatives of national ministries and other institutions such as EP, CoR, EIB, EESC, EBRD or the World Bank. At operational level, it was generally accepted that an increased involvement of additional stakeholders representing regional and local authorities, academia and research institutions, private sector and civil society would be beneficial in terms of added value and impact of the activities. The active participation of the decision-makers in the PA and SG activities was seen as enabler to trigger and accelerate changes at policy level.

Similar findings to the EUSDR Operational Evaluation were already presented in the COWI study, which highlights the participation of new actors across sectors, countries and level as a key added value of the macro-regional strategy¹⁶.

¹⁴ EUSDR (2020): 2. [Online](#).

¹⁵ Metis (2019): 36.

¹⁶ Cf. COWI (2017). Study on macro-regional strategies and their links with Cohesion Policy. Final report, p. 78. [Online](#).

Furthermore, the 3rd Report from the Commission on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, issued in 2020, acknowledges the progress achieved and the efforts made for increasing the involvement of the various stakeholders in the governance of macro-regional strategies: *“The MRS approach has allowed **new stakeholders** to be involved and **new dynamics and new ways of cooperating** to be developed. All the MRS are making efforts to involve civil society in work on thematic areas. Implementing bodies are increasingly connected with civil society. Participation by local communities strengthens the bottom-up dimension of the MRS actions, especially those focused on increasing youth involvement in the MRS process, which are becoming more and more significant in all four MRS”*¹⁷.

Throughout the entire duration of EUSDR implementation, the challenges in identifying and coordinating various stakeholders, were addressed at different territorial levels. However, the need *“to mobilise regions, cities, agencies and institutions such as universities, private business and civil society, encouraging them to network, cooperate and participate in the implementation and development of macro-regional strategies”*¹⁸ remained a priority to focus at throughout the 10 years and was reflected in the MRS and EUSDR key documents.

From very early stages of EUSDR implementation, a clear and long-term commitment of the stakeholders was pointed out as a prerequisite for the success of the macro-regional concept¹⁹. In this respect, the active participation of political stakeholders, with decision making powers, from the EU, national, regional and local level, as well as an increased participation of the social and economic partners, including the private sector, was explicitly mentioned: *“[The Council of the European Union] emphasises the necessity for more active participation of the private sector, regional, local and civil society stakeholders in the implementation of the strategies, which can be achieved, inter alia, through setting the appropriate conditions for those stakeholders to apply with projects for funding”*²⁰.

Moreover, positive results of the efforts for an EUSDR improved coordination are mentioned in the Report from the Commission to the EP, the Council, the EESC and the CoR on the implementation of macro-regional strategies, issued in 2016: *“The EUSDR has also made the governance system more effective by strengthening coordination between policies and institutions at national level. It has facilitated reaching out to relevant stakeholders at both national and local level, as well as continued dialogue with civil society organisations”*²¹.

¹⁷ European Commission (2020). Report from the EC to the EP, the Council, the EESC and the CoR on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies COM(2020)578, p. 9. [Online](#).

¹⁸ Council of the European Union (2017). Council conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies, p. 4. [Online](#).

¹⁹ Cf. Council of the European Union (2013). Council conclusion on added value of macro-regional strategies, p. 3. [Online](#).

²⁰ Council of the European Union (2013): 5. [Online](#).

²¹ European Commission (2016). Report from the EC to the EP, the Council, the EESC and the CoR on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies COM(2016)805, p. 7. [Online](#).

Nevertheless, in order to fully benefit from the results of policy and operational measures undertaken in the framework of the EUSDR, *“active cooperation of all interested international, national and regional organisations, regional and local communities in areas where actions of mutual interest can be identified, respecting the initiatives of the civil society”*²² was further encouraged.

In addition to the above-mentioned, the declarations adopted by the ministers on the occasion of the EUSDR Annual Fora underlined the role of certain stakeholder categories²³ in pushing forward the implementation of the Strategy. Thus, in 2016 the EUSDR ministers responsible for Research and Innovation called upon all the stakeholders – *“the European Commission, national and transnational authorities, universities, academies of sciences and other public and private research institutions – to continue in their efforts to contribute to the overall development of a knowledge-based society in the Danube Region”*²⁴. Furthermore, in 2017, the declaration of the ministers responsible for the implementation of EUSDR emphasised the need *“to address the macro-regional challenges in a holistic, integrated manner, taking into account perspectives and experiences of local actors and civil society as important contributors to and beneficiaries of the EUSDR, as means to increase the ownership”*²⁵. The Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region adopted in 2020, stressed the importance of *“strengthening the support and widening the stakeholder platform, which includes broad spectre of actors in particular better participation and involvement of the younger generation in the Danube Region”*²⁶.

The mind-set of citizens and institutions has shifted from a transactional to a more collaborative view of interaction, collaboration and cooperation between citizens, regions, national states (EU and non-EU likewise) and the European Union²⁷. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of well-established and resilient networks in the Danube Region came to be more self-evident in ensuring a wide stakeholder engagement and transforming MRS actors into active participants in jointly developing solutions to macro-regional challenges. Therefore, multifaceted evolvments require permanent evolvment and adaptation in successively changing societal, economical and natural conditions. Under all these circumstances, *“permeability shall be ensured, by avoiding monopolisation of activities resulting from involvement of only limited circles of stakeholders. Thus, further mobilization, more coherent and due involvement of actors shall be pursued within the governance of*

²² Council of the European Union (2011). Council conclusions on the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, p. 2. [Online](#).

²³ The thematic focus of the EUSDR Annual Fora, and therefore the associated stakeholder groups and categories, vary according to the thematic focus of the hosting EUSDR Presidency. [Online](#).

²⁴ EUSDR (2016). Joint Statement of Ministers responsible for Research and Innovation of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, p. 1. [Online](#)

²⁵ EUSDR (2017). Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. [Online](#).

²⁶ EUSDR (2020). Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, p. 3. [Online](#)

²⁷ Bergström et al (2020). EU Macro-regional Strategies – Laboratories for a New Europe – A qualified non-paper by key stakeholders in the four macro-regional strategies, p. 4. [Online](#).

*the strategy – at different territorial (EU, international, national, regional, local), institutional and sectoral level*²⁸.

Summarising, it is generally acknowledged that throughout the years continuous efforts to widen stakeholder networks as well as to ensure an increased and more effective involvement of multi-level governance actors in the implementation of the Strategy were made. At the same time, the dynamics generated by rapidly changing economic, societal and institutional conditions call for agile adaptive measures and tools for managing and engaging various types of stakeholders maintaining resilient, yet flexible cooperation networks. As new stakeholders are identified as potential contributors to the implementation of the Strategy, new means for an improved cooperation culture and smart governance approaches should apply. For example, recent recommendations²⁹ explicitly mention young people as a target group to be addressed and involved in the future. Securing their long-term participation and commitment might request revised communication plans and tools, new and more interactive approaches in exploiting synergies and bridging the participation gap³⁰.

3. Good practices

The following chapter seeks to provide concrete examples of approaches adopted by several EUSDR PAs in order to maintain and enhance the engagement of different categories of stakeholders in EUSDR implementing activities. It builds mainly on the information published on PAs' websites and studies as well as on reports to the Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) and to the EC. To complement the above-mentioned sources, bilateral interviews with PACs and PAC teams were conducted aiming to collect up-to-date details as regards the processes established and carried out at PA levels.

As mentioned previously, desk research has shown a vast variety of stakeholders and equally numerous and heterogeneous ways in approaching, co-interested and involving them into PA implementation activities. It is clear that a *one size fits all approach*, as general approach, does not fulfil the requirements for an efficient management of stakeholder involvement in the EUSDR. From the perspective of the interviewed PACs, a high degree of **flexibility** is needed, so that challenges are assessed and tackled individually. A flexible framework to understand the relations between different actors and different levels of governance should be ensured. Also, the use of different forms of coordination is important to support dialogue between public authorities, businesses, the industry, academia, research institutions and civil society organisations (see PA good practices below).

²⁸ EUSDR (2019). Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan, p. 29. [Online](#). The Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan (2019) represented the primary basis for the EUSDR Revised Action Plan. It was elaborated by the DSP upon the request of the EUSDR NCs. Following its approval by the EUSDR NCs, the document was handed over to the EC/DG REGIO.

²⁹ Council of the European Union (2020). Council Conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, p. 5: Calls on participating countries/regions to ensure effective involvement of national/regional/local stakeholders, citizens and civil society, including young people, in the implementation of the MRS. [Online](#).

³⁰ The participation gap refers to the differences in the engagement of various stakeholder groups/categories, as some of those being highly involved in the EUSDR implementation whilst others are participating to macro-regional activities to a lesser extent.

However, several other *common aspects* were underlined. Firstly, individual **key-persons** are the drivers of a steadily increased involvement of stakeholders in the PAs. Addressing the right persons at the appropriate decision-making level, with thematic field expertise, good interpersonal connections and the will to engage in activities and initiatives of the EUSDR could make the difference. Regardless of their hosting institution, professional background or leadership style, key-persons often create a so-called “core group” that contributes decisively to move forward a certain initiative. Furthermore, their constant and active involvement ensures efficient knowledge transfer and avoids duplication in the planning and implementation processes.

Another aspect is related to **communication**. Multi-level governance patterns and transnational networks work across boundaries to achieve sound and visible results. In this respect, communication tools are used for building a shared understanding of the challenges, added value and benefits for different types of stakeholders. Effective communication channels and organisations that support innovation and experimentation are central to achieve a greater stakeholder participation as they often act as communication hubs. In addition to that, visibility is ensured through participation of PACs (and their teams) in relevant EUSDR events such as Annual Fora and plays a significant role in widening stakeholder circles.

The non-exhaustive practices presented below were chosen to highlight the diversity and flexibility of the stakeholder groups as well as the variety of potential communication activities to be carried out to achieve an enhanced stakeholder involvement. Similar methods and tools might be already in use in other PAs to bring actors together. Several similar approaches and other best practices examples were shared among the PAs during the workshops presented in chapter 5.



Political support for higher policy impact

In EUSDR PA 1a, unlocking potential of transport on water to contribute to growth and welfare in the Danube Region calls for the availability of waterway infrastructure that meets common standards along the entire transport axis. To achieve this aim, a strong involvement of the EU, in particular DG MOVE and the TEN-T Coordination, and national authorities is crucial. Since the adoption of the EUSDR Action Plan in 2010³¹, joint efforts of the PACs and SG members contribute to ensure long-term political commitment to the common goals in this PA, through regular recommitment of the Danube Ministries of Transport.

At the core of PA 1a’s work for reinforcing political support stays the *Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan for the Danube and its navigable tributaries*, a rolling document that provides a basis for coordinated actions on transnational level and for highlighting concrete achievements. The impact of the changes produced by transnational cooperation at operational level is regularly brought to the attention of the of political level (EU Commissioners, Ministers, State Secretaries) in order to increase awareness and create the framework for further developing appropriate measures to tackle common macro-regional challenges. Every two years the Ministers of Transport of the Danube riparian states are asked to reaffirm their will to cooperate for the establishment of a common Level of Service of the waterway infrastructure and of joint initiatives with

³¹ European Commission (2020). [Online](#).

respect to the sharing of resources and joint infrastructure investments. In 2020, upon the invitation of the EU Transport Commissioner, the Danube Ministers of Transport, with the exception of Hungary, signed the *Conclusions on effective waterway infrastructure rehabilitation and maintenance*³². Similar documents were adopted in 2018, 2016, 2014, 2012 on the occasion of Danube Ministerial Meetings held mainly in Brussels side by side with other relevant events (e.g. TEN-T days).

Effective and timely progress monitoring of the Masterplan's implementation is considered a key element for a successful cooperation across countries. For this purpose, a common regular monitoring and reporting mechanism coordinated by PA 1a was established in 2012. National reports – so-called National Action Plans - of the signatory states are collected and integrated into a EUSDR consolidated report which is presented to relevant stakeholders.

The PA 1a SG plays a significant role in this process, by appealing to the Ministers of Transport to reaffirm their commitment to the implementation of the Masterplan.

Furthermore, the Coordinators and the SG members of PA 1a participate both in identifying gaps and finding solutions to tackle them in a coordinated manner, thus ensuring the framework for an effective dialogue across governance levels.

From the organisational point of view, a network of stakeholders is actively involved in the elaboration and endorsement of the Ministerial Conclusions. At national level, harmonisation is ensured through exchanges among representative structures in the line ministries, in close consultation with the NCs. At European level, relevant Directorates in the EU Commission (DG MOVE, DG ENV, and DG REGIO) and the "Corridor Coordinators" are part of the elaboration and endorsement process. Permanent Representations of the EUSDR member states in Brussels ensure the efficient coordination between the national and macro-regional level. Additionally, effective time management is considered essential to conduct several rounds of consultations before all signatory parties agree on the final version of a document.



Task Forces for efficient EUSDR implementation

PA 6 has the complex mission to preserve biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils. Consequently, the wide thematic range brings a fairly high number of public authorities and non-governmental institutions acting in the respective fields. Furthermore, effective measures in environmental protection require permanent dialogue and collaboration between national, regional and local authorities and international organisations, academia and civil society organisations.

Considering the above mentioned, ensuring participatory multilevel governance is one of the basic principles for the implementation of PA 6 *on the ground* (EUSDR stakeholders / project idea owners are to initiate and implement projects with relevance for the EUSDR)³³. In this respect, the Priority Area Coordinators introduced a framework for open and transparent discussion for all the stakeholders willing to bring their contribution in the thematic field – the so-called PA 6 Task Forces.

³² Website of the EUSDR PA 1a. [Online](#).

³³ EUSDR Priority Area 6 (2019). Opportunities and proposals for a revised roadmap, p.15. [Online](#).

Task Forces (TF) represent the solution implemented by PA 6 in response to the need to facilitate dialogue and collaboration among multilevel governance actors and in order to work jointly on a common issue as well as to provide a link between implementation and the policy level. Therefore, they have a heterogeneous composition and are generally open to stakeholders willing to contribute to the implementation of PA 6 targets and actions.

In 2019, there were seven TF involved in the implementation of PA 6. Altogether they form the backbone of PA 6 implementation representing drivers and information multipliers.

One of the TFs is the Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF)³⁴ which was established in 2012 and brings together NGO delegates, groups of sturgeon experts, representatives of the ICPDR, the EUSDR and national governments participating on voluntary basis. The core group comprises 11 members from five countries, whereas the larger network has 60 members from 12 countries³⁵. During the last nine years of operation, activities developed by the TF members led to the elaboration of a high cooperation level in the form of Action and Management Plans, production of studies, reports and publications. Moreover, their members were partners in transnational or EU projects. In addition, periodic meetings of the Task Force members and participation in EUSDR relevant events contributed to an increased visibility and awareness of the work and results of the TF.

The activity of DSTF is considered as a growing process based on the principles of flexibility, continuity, adaptability and transparency. The internal organisation of the TF was refreshed for better managing the internal processes, taking operational decisions and managing the relations with non-members and external organisations. In this respect, Rules of Procedure (RoP) were adopted and a new General Assembly along with a new Executive Committee were elected. The presence of the Task Force leaders as observers in the SG meetings is part of a bottom-up driven process focused on supporting the existing and emerging initiatives, thus backing up actions by feasible projects.

On the funding side, the activities of the Task Forces are further supported by the PACs through their PAC technical assistance project 2021-2024 under the Danube Transnational Programme.



Fostering Diverse Engagement through Stakeholder Conferences

In PA 9, stakeholder conferences are already a long-lasting tradition. The first event of the series took place in 2012 in Vienna and was attended by a wide range of participants from all 14 Danube Region countries: governmental and non-governmental organisations active in the field of human capital building, education and labour market, experts, researchers, international donors and media representatives. Around 160 participants exchanged on cooperation possibilities in order to jointly identify adequate responses to the needs and challenges in the Danube Region.

In 2020, the 8th edition of the event was held online in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It focused on discussing smart and social responses to the pandemic in fields such as education, training and labour

³⁴ Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF). [Online](#).

³⁵ EUSDR Priority Area 6 (2019): 78. [Online](#).

market, and benefited from the participation of representatives of the European Commission and the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe Secretariat. Inputs from the OECD and representatives of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (Autonomous Province of Trento) were provided to the participants, thus expressing the high political commitment at EU and international level. The event stands as proof that online tools can be adapted so to support efficient stakeholder dialogues among multi-level governance actors. All in all, the event was characterised as “*experimentalist*”³⁶.

The format, the “venue” and the agendas of the events have differed over the years. In all cases, their overall objective was to enhance EUSDR cooperation both at strategic and operational level and to support coordination and interaction between PAs, line ministries, NGOs, EC, EU programmes and other experts with diverse backgrounds.

Over the years, stakeholder conferences enjoyed the constant support of various institutional partners and received highly positive feedback from the participants. These facts encouraged the Coordinators’ teams to explore further ways to generate synergies and create links between different actors and/ or networks. In addition, the use of various communication tools and channels contributed to an improved information flow and transfer of good practices. The EUSDR PA 9 Project Folder³⁷ was elaborated in 2019 and provides an overview of on-going and selected finished projects as well as some project ideas for which Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR serves as a common umbrella. Flyers and newsletters are regularly produced and distributed to the subscribers. In 2017, the Danube Project Support Toolkit was published, and Progress Reports on the activities of the PA are disseminated regularly. PA 9 regularly shares information on its website and social media accounts and the DSP supports the PA 9 as multiplier in this respect. According to PA 9, EUSDR social media accounts managed by the DSP contribute to a great extent to improve the visibility of the PAs’ activities when sharing PA 9 posts. This could potentially also attract additional stakeholders.

The PACs and SG members are the main information multipliers in EUSDR PA 9 as they disseminate the information to relevant national, regional and local institutions. Challenges experienced over time related to explaining the abstract concept of macro-regional strategies and its policy-coordination mechanisms, making a clear link between the Danube region Strategy and the Danube Transnational Programme, highlighting the diversity of potential funding sources and formats for collaboration and emphasising the added value of transnational cooperation. Thematic groups established under PA 9 and the network of ESF Managing Authorities³⁸ in the Danube Region contributed to further enlarging the stakeholder circles.

³⁶ EUSDR Priority Area 9 (2020). Smart and Social Responses to the Crisis: How Education, Training and Labour Market Policies can contribute towards a Resilient Danube Region, p. 5. [Online](#).

³⁷ EUSDR Priority Area 9 (2018). Project Folder. Investing in People and Skills. Priority Area 9 - Projects and Initiatives. 4th Edition. [Online](#).

³⁸ EUSDR ESF Managing Authorities Network. [Online](#).



Streamlined Multi-Level Stakeholder Dialogue

According to the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper *“The PACs are key facilitators of the Strategy and serve as a strong liaison between their PA’s groups of actors by offering a platform for exchanging and coordinating initiatives, stakeholders, policy processes and information”*³⁹. Similar to other PAs, this role of PA 10 was fulfilled by initiating and establishing or facilitating the establishment of different partnerships, networks and platforms.

In 2014, the Steering Group of PA 10 adopted a new working structure, consisting of four advisory committees and four related stakeholder platforms. One of these platforms was D-LAP – the Danube Local Actors Platform⁴⁰. Ever since its establishment the platform has contributed to a streamlined and transparent dialogue between local, regional, urban administrations, social partners, civil society and academia as well as to further develop multilevel participative governance.

The strategic policy framework provided by the Strategy follows a top-down coordination mechanism that aims to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of local regional and national governance structures and territorial cooperation. The D-LAP platform provides a counterbalance to this, offering local level actors and civil society an institutionalised platform for participation in the EUSDR. Amongst others, it further offers cities and municipalities the opportunity to interact, exchange and have structured consultations in a broader context and to become an active part in macro-regional policy development. In doing so it encourages the development of participative governance and place-based strategies at the local, regional, national and macro-regional level and identifies issues where particular attention to civil society development and involvement in the Danube Region is needed.

The platform benefited of the participation of a high number of institutions from the beginning. Still, over time the PACs devoted their efforts to identify and engage new stakeholders. Their active and constant presence in conferences and meetings, highlighting the added value of the participation in the platform (access to information, networking, and engagement in dialogues with high level representatives) contributed to a greater visibility and therefore led to a permanent increase in the members number (up to almost 400). A special remark was done as regards the challenges in making a point on the modus operandi of the Strategy and increasing the commitment of the stakeholders towards the Strategy and its goals.

Activities developed within D-LAP framework are based on the needs and proposals presented by the members. In order to facilitate exchanges, the PACs conduct surveys on a regular basis and organise thematic meetings, if deemed necessary. One of the factors which contributed to an increased participation was the active engagement of the relevant stakeholders in the set-up of the meetings. Besides, another aspect that brought additional interested actors was related to permanent communication on funding availability adapted to the needs of civil society and local actors.

A flexible approach of the activities allowed timely identification of potential thematic directions to be followed (e.g. cooperation with PA 11 on fighting trafficking of human beings, CBC cooperation of metropolitan regions, upcoming events on youth involvement in the EUSDR).

³⁹ EUSDR (2020): 6. [Online](#).

⁴⁰ The Danube Local Actors Platform (D-LAP). [Online](#).

At PA level, a greater outreach is obtained by using various communication tools to organise the information flow throughout the Danube Strategy including the PA 10 website, social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter) and events (face to face meetings, online meetings, extended SG meetings). Furthermore, SG members and actors such as the Danube Civil Society Forum, the Central European Initiative, the Council of Danube Cities and Regions and the European Association of Border Regions act as engaged multipliers of information reaching towards wide networks of stakeholders.

It should be noted that all EUSDR PAs have developed methods and tools to tackle the stakeholder engagement in their activities. The practices presented above are given by way of illustration and are not exhaustive. Similar approaches and other best practices examples were shared among the PAs during the workshops presented in chapter 5.

4. The core of closer cooperation with stakeholders: Communications Management

Before moving on to an in-depth analysis of stakeholder involvement and cooperation within the EUSDR, the following chapter focuses on the terminology in the context of stakeholder management in general. The definitions and tools presented in the following paragraphs are taken from project management literature, however, they may just as much be used for the Priority Areas' implementation of the Danube Region Strategy.

In project management any person or organisation interested in a project can be termed as stakeholder⁴¹. More specifically, a stakeholder is defined as an individual, group or organisation who *is actively involved in a project or can affect or can be affected by a project and its outcomes in a positive or negative way*⁴². For the purpose of EUSDR stakeholder management and engagement as laid out in this paper, a differentiation **between actively involved stakeholders** in the implementation of the Strategy and **affected stakeholders** by the Strategy is made, the focus being on the first.

A targeted consideration and/or involvement of relevant stakeholders is part of effective project communications management, as also described in the EUSDR Communication Strategy⁴³. The project communications management process includes the following five steps and is depicted as a circle, as identified stakeholders may be reviewed from time to time to adapt to possible changes in project implementation⁴⁴:

⁴¹ Cf. Lester (2014). Project Management, Planning and Control. Sixth Edition. Butterworth-Heinemann – Elsevier, p. 33.

⁴² PMI (2008). A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge. 4th edition. Project Management Institute, Inc., p. 23.

⁴³ EUSDR Communication Strategy (2020), p. 11 et seq.: Target Groups and Effective Messaging. [Online](#).

⁴⁴ PMI (2008): 249; illustration by DSP, icons: www.flaticon.com.

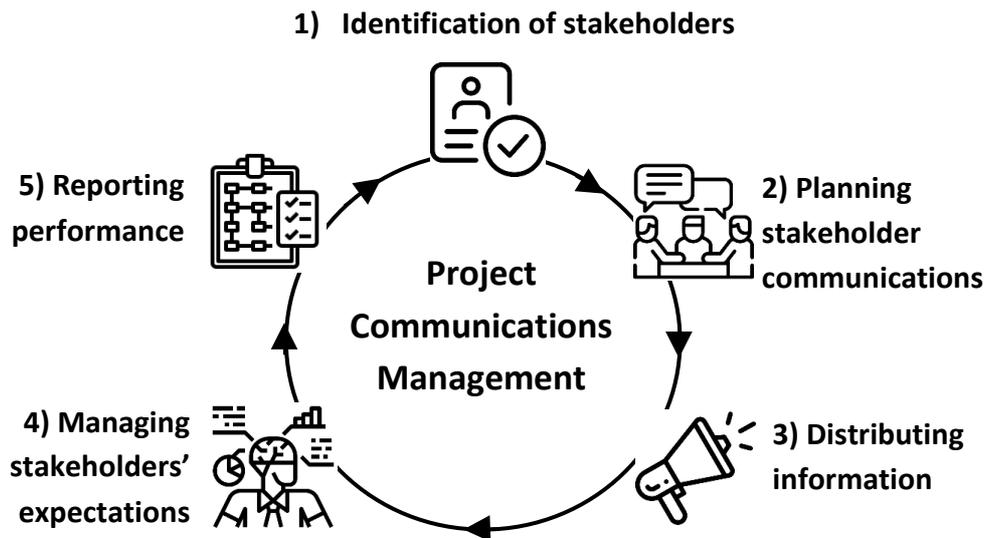


Figure 2: Project Communications Management.

Steps 1 and 2 can be summarised under *stakeholder management* and steps 3 to 5 under *stakeholder engagement*:

Stakeholder Management: The systematic identification, analysis, planning and implementation of actions designed to engage with stakeholders.

Stakeholder Engagement: The practice of influencing a variety of outcomes through consultation, communication, negotiation, compromise, and relationship building.

Source: APM - Association of Project Management (2013)⁴⁵ quoted after Andrew Bell (2017)⁴⁶

Step 1 – Identification of stakeholders

The process of listing, classifying and assessing the influence of stakeholders is termed stakeholder analysis⁴⁷. For classification purposes, identified stakeholders can be grouped according to their power and interest / power and influence / influence and impact or according to the Salience model, describing classes of stakeholders based on their power (ability to will), urgency (need for immediate attention), and legitimacy (appropriateness of involvement). The EUSDR Communication Strategy can give further guidance in the process of identifying stakeholders.

Step 2 – Planning stakeholder communications

To set up a stakeholder Communications Management Plan, the requirements and methods of communication should be established for each stakeholder/stakeholder group. This entails

⁴⁵ Murray-Webster et Dalcher (2013). APM Body of Knowledge. 6th edition. Association for Project Management.

⁴⁶ Project Management Blog by Andrew Bell. [Online](#).

⁴⁷ Cf. Lester (2014): 33.

determining the (information) needs of stakeholders as well as the way information is communicated to them, also see EUSDR Communication Strategy⁴⁸. Project resources are expended only on communicating information that contributes to success, or where a lack of communication can lead to failure⁴⁹. A basic Stakeholder Communications Management Plan can be established in the form of a matrix along the lines of 1) the identified stakeholder, 2) their key interests and issues, 3) methods and technologies for communication and 4) timeframe and frequency for communication.

Step 3 – Distributing information

In step 3, the first step of the stakeholder engagement process, the previously established Communications Management Plan is implemented. The implementation of the Communications Management Plan may entail stakeholder notifications about the general status of the specific EUSDR activity, changes in the activity, meeting minutes and other documents describing the activity, feedback from stakeholders concerning the activity and lessons learned etc.

Step 4 – Managing stakeholders’ expectations

To manage stakeholder expectations is the process of communicating and working with stakeholders to meet their needs and addressing issues as they occur. This involves communication activities to influence stakeholders’ expectations, negotiating and influencing stakeholders’ desires in order to increase the likelihood of acceptance and clarifying and resolving concerns and identified problems.

Step 5 – Reporting performance

Reporting performance is the process of collecting and distributing performance information, including status reports, progress measurements, and forecasts. The performance reporting process involves the periodic collection and analysis of baseline versus actual data to understand and communicate the progress in implementing Priority Area specific activities. In the case of Priority Area’s activities, the EUSDR Communication Strategy provides key performance indicators which can support the monitoring of communication activities towards stakeholders.

As for reporting and monitoring beyond communication, from 2022 onwards EUSDR reporting will be carried out via the new EUSDR Monitoring, including an online reporting tool for Priority Area Coordinators. Coordinating the PACs’ reporting with that of the DTP and the EC, the online EUSDR reporting tool will cover nine major fields and in this way will offer a next step to a comprehensive overview of

- 1) main achievements in the respective reporting period,
- 2) horizontal activities and principles,
- 3) capitalisation,
- 4) funding,
- 5) cooperation with EUSDR main stakeholders,

⁴⁸ EUSDR Communication Strategy (2020), p. 19 et seq.

⁴⁹ Cf. PMI (2013). A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge. 5th edition. Project Management Institute, Inc., p. 253.

- 6) Steering Groups,
- 7) involvement and cooperation with other stakeholders,
- 8) policy development and
- 9) opportunities and challenges.

Therefore, the Monitoring Tool for Reporting on the Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR will not only provide a good basis for performance reporting towards stakeholders, it will also provide the opportunity to review PA specific cooperation with EUSDR main stakeholders as well as with other stakeholders (see points 5 and 7) in order to optimise PA specific stakeholder management and engagement, as described in this chapter.

Possible tools to support each of the five above-described steps of communications management were introduced at two PAC workshops on stakeholder management and engagement organised by the Danube Strategy Point on 26th May 2021 and 7th October 2021. These two workshops are the focus of the following chapter.

5. The Need for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders

The stakeholder involvement in the EUSDR was one of the governance aspects examined in the EUSDR Operational Evaluation conducted in 2019. As part of this evaluation, key implementers of the Strategy, including NCs, PACs and SG members, were asked to which degree on a scale from 1 to 6 (with 6 being best) they perceived relevant stakeholders to be involved in the implementation of the Strategy⁵⁰. Well-founded statements on stakeholder involvement can only be made looking at each Priority Area in detail as these are based on their specifics such as personal relationships, actions from the EUSDR Action Plan or internal project/stakeholder management. However, the resulting mean value of 3.67 (n=51) in response to this question indicates room for improved stakeholder involvement within the EUSDR, which was taken up by the Danube Strategy Point in its work programme.

To address the need for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders, an example stakeholder analysis was conducted with the PACs and their teams. As described in the previous chapter, stakeholder analysis refers to a number of different techniques or tools to identify and understand the needs and expectations of key stakeholders' interests necessary to strategically plan the PA implementation. Thereby, stakeholder analysis refers to the process of listing, classifying and assessing the influence of stakeholders to identify and understand their key needs and expectations. The stakeholder analysis conducted with the PACs and their teams was dedicated to exchanging ideas on the main tools and methods used to identify the most important stakeholders in EUSDR PAs and to identify the most efficient solutions to gain their support e.g. via communication tools. The results of this exemplary task will be the subject of this chapter.

Following the project communication management, the analysis was carried out in three steps, which included **stakeholder mapping** (identification of stakeholders), **stakeholder management** (prioritisation, planning and implementation of actions designed to engage with stakeholders) and

⁵⁰ Cf. Metis (2019): 38.

stakeholder engagement (distribute, manage and report on stakeholder information and expectations). Different methods were chosen to implement the stakeholder analysis as illustrated in the figure below. In order to **identify the stakeholders**, a survey developed by the DSP was conducted among the PACs and their teams in advance. The topics of stakeholder management and stakeholder engagement, on the other hand, were jointly explored in two consecutive online workshops.

- 
Preliminary PAC survey: Who are your stakeholders?
An overview of recent PA stakeholder cooperation
- 
Workshop for PACs I: Understand your stakeholders!
A workshop on stakeholder management
- 
Subsequent workshop for PACs II: Plan with your stakeholders!
A workshop on stakeholder engagement

Figure 3: Stakeholder analysis performed.

- 
a. Who are your stakeholders?
An overview of recent PA stakeholder cooperation

PACs and their teams were invited to fill in a preliminary survey to the workshops in an excel format, which focused on the identification of the stakeholders relevant at PA level, as well as on the stakeholders that are needed for the effective implementation of each action included in the EUSDR Action Plan. Another aspect covered by the survey referred to the cooperation stages with the identified categories of stakeholders⁵¹. In this exercise PAs mapped their stakeholder cooperation in general and more specifically based on the actions to be implemented, with different stakeholder (groups), among stakeholders of different governance levels and among external and internal stakeholders.

Stakeholder mapping is vital as stakeholders are important for the success of a project/PA implementation. There are usually many stakeholders, which leads to many and different expectations and impact on a respective PA. It therefore can be useful to gain a clear understanding of who the key stakeholders are, what their expectations are and what motivates them in cooperating with a certain PA. To better communicate with stakeholders and to develop appropriate management strategies as well as to satisfy stakeholders, all potential stakeholders shall be mapped⁵².

The detailed overviews created by the PACs and their teams in the survey as well as the graphic illustration serve as an overview of the distribution of PA cooperation structures. This exercise, is about presenting the stakeholders in all their diversity, as at this stage all stakeholders are listed, regardless the level of their significance to the implementation of the PA (stakeholder list). It is also important to

⁵¹ Identified categories of stakeholders in the survey include: funding institutions, relevant line DGs, civil society/NGOs/social partners, regional/local authorities, transnational institutions, projects and Poles of the DTP, experts/observers/consultants, private sector/businesses/SMEs, academia/think tanks and others.
⁵² Cf. PMI (2013): 391.

note, that each PA overview strongly depends on the context of the respective PA (e.g. thematic areas and actions), so that a low cooperation level does not necessarily mean that cooperation is not as good as at a higher cooperation level. The overview can help the PAs to see potentials and, if necessary, to consolidate, deepen or establish new cooperation patterns.



As you list your stakeholders, keep in mind that they fall into two main categories: those who are affected by the implementation of the PA and those who contribute to its implementation.

The final version was distributed among all PACs and their teams before the workshop including the graphical illustration of their input. The stakeholder mapping survey created by the DSP can be used as it is as a **EUSDR stakeholder mapping tool** (Annex I) for each PA. If the stakeholder identification is to be reviewed again (e.g. on a regular yearly basis by the PAs) the information in the tool can be easily updated to create a new overview for comparison. In this way, stakeholder behaviour in consecutive periods can be overviewed, managed and adjusted if necessary.



Table 2: Overview of stakeholder mapping per PA.



b. Understand your stakeholders!
A workshop on stakeholder management

The **stakeholder management** workshop conducted with PACs and their teams was designed to identify the potential influence or support of each stakeholder listed in the stakeholder mapping. It is important to narrow down the focus of the listed stakeholders and to analyse the roles and expectations of all those stakeholders as the importance for the PA and their expectations in this regard may have a stronger or weaker impact on the implementation of joint activities, depending on the stakeholder (group). The workshop therefore aimed at classifying accordingly, as well as elaborating and determining the appropriate level of communication with the stakeholders in terms of their influence and/or interest in the respective PA⁵³.

The advantages of an optimised stakeholder management lie in new collaborative strands that emerge, or existing collaborations that can be deepened, reviewed or revitalised. The concrete benefits for Priority Area Coordinators and their teams are shown in the following table⁵⁴.



Gathering evidence-based input:

It may be difficult to keep track of and maintain detailed expertise on all topics in a PA. Often, key stakeholders can provide valuable insights that can help to keep a PA on track and successful.

Benefit:

PACs and their teams can ensure effective collaboration between satisfied, engaged, productive and understanding stakeholders.



Gaining more resources:

If stakeholders have a comprehensive understanding of what it takes to support the PA, they can help secure the people, tools and resources needed to successfully implement the PA.

Benefit:

PACs and their teams can receive valuable support, commitment and/or advocacy in promoting the objectives of the PA.



Building trust:

By consistently engaging stakeholders in a process, mutual trust can be built that can maintain and lead to support for upcoming activities/projects.

Benefit:

PACs and their teams can build stronger relationships for future implementation as well.



Planning ahead:

Consistent feedback from your key stakeholders helps to anticipate feedback and requirements for future activities/projects in the PA's work plan.

Benefit:

PACs and their teams can take control of how decision-making processes will play out in the future.

Table 3: Benefits of stakeholder management.

The **Stakeholder-Power-Interest-Grid** is the leading tool in visually assessing key stakeholders and to group these “stakeholders based on their level of authority (‘power’) and their level or concern (‘interest’)”⁵⁵ in terms of PA implementation. The position that a stakeholder is allocated on the grid shows the actions PACs and their teams may take with them; e.g. key stakeholders (“manage closely”

⁵³ Cf. PMI (2013): 390.

⁵⁴ PMI (2008); illustration by DSP, icons: www.flaticon.com.

⁵⁵ PMI (2013): 396.

stakeholders) are prioritised in project communications to ensure appropriate effort to communicate and manage their expectations and to keep them satisfied.

An example power-interest-grid with stakeholders is illustrated in the figure below⁵⁶. This categorisation can help to determine the importance of each stakeholder to engage with the respective PA for the greatest benefit of the project and/or PA implementation. This was the subject of the first workshop and its overall objective was to **support the PACs and their teams in discovering additional ways to maintain and strengthen stakeholder management within their PAs.**

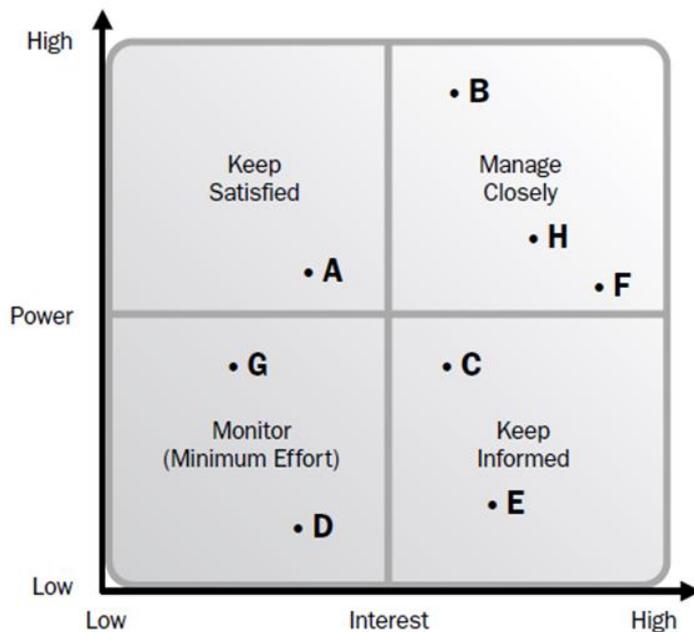


Figure 4: Example power-interest-grid with stakeholders.

In the actual implementation of the workshop 'Understand your stakeholders!' the participants (PACs and their teams) looked at each stakeholder group (or in a PA possibly also per individual stakeholder) and determined how important they are for the success of the implementation of the Pillar/PA. For this purpose, stakeholders were categorised as high/medium/low important. This rating is key as a lot of time and effort may be spent working with stakeholders who may be of low importance to the implementation of the project/PA, while time spent on stakeholders who are very important may be neglected. After identifying and prioritising their stakeholders, the participating PACs and their teams focused on understanding the stakeholders and how they might think about the PA/activities/project. The **needs of the stakeholders**, how to engage, cooperate or communicate with them with the aim of satisfying them, and thus maintaining or increasing commitment in the PA, were worked out together. Based on the fact that the stakeholders have a stake or interest in the respective Pillar/PA, the workshop participants worked out what this stake or interest in particular is. For example, in some cases the stakeholders may need information from the PA, in other cases the PA may need resources from the stakeholders.

⁵⁶ PMI (2013): 397.

Starting from an exchange on the previously conducted stakeholder mapping and along guiding questions prepared, the PACs and their teams worked on templates per Pillar. These templates were prepared by DSP and made available via the online tool Miro. The templates can also be used in future by the respective PA as a **EUSDR tool for stakeholder management** (Annex II).



Remember that the status of your stakeholders may change during the course of the PA implementation. Stakeholder analysis leads to the planning of effective stakeholder communication.

As described in depth, it can reduce the success of a PA if there is no, little or untargeted communication. The better the communication, the smoother the implementation of PAs can be and the easier it will be to understand stakeholders' needs. In this context, the PACs and their teams first received an introduction to the goals, stakeholders, strategies and activities relating to the PA communication. To channel and time the communications between the respective PA and each stakeholder, PAs may communicate the EUSDR vision (Together we build a prosperous region with a healthy environment, equal societies and high living standards), slogan (Prosperity through Diversity) and goals for the Danube Region (EUSDR Action Plan) when **approaching stakeholders**. They may further promote their work within the EUSDR to increase support for the macro-regional cooperation while highlighting common 'grand challenges' beyond borders that need joint solutions (e.g. pollution, climate change, unemployment, lack of connectivity etc.) and emphasise the added value obtained by using common and/or shared resources and knowledge. Based on the communication objectives *raising awareness about EUSDR and sharing information on cooperation, funding opportunities and stakeholders' engagement* as outlined in the EUSDR Communication Strategy, the PACs and their teams gained deeper insights into effective messages and deliverable content.

In terms of **methods and tools to target stakeholders**, they can be the same, but the content may differ depending on the interests, main activities and goals of the stakeholders. It is therefore crucial to speak the language of the different stakeholders. One may not address an NGO with the same message that would be used for a government agency or a scientific organisation. The information (content and messages) should therefore be presented in a way that meets the needs of the stakeholders, not as an offer to be 'sold'. Possible methods and instruments for addressing stakeholders are presented in the following table.



Invitations to **events** dedicated to a certain group of stakeholders, as participants or speakers (e.g. conferences/round tables)

Invitations to participate in **surveys** launched for a specific PA (e.g. on involvement; thematic assessment)



Dedicated **newsletters**, using the language of the targeted stakeholders (e.g. a PA newsletter twice a year)

EUSDR targets briefly presented in **leaflets/flyers** dedicated to a specific topic for the targeted stakeholders (e.g. as info material)

Invitations to **consultations** or **debate sessions** on a specific topic, for one/several PAs (e.g. written consultation; physical or virtual sessions)

Individual periodical **meetings** with each potential stakeholder institution/ organisation (e.g. physical or virtual meetings)

Shared **calendar** on future events in which institutions may be interested (e.g. including a short description of the objectives of the event)

Table 4: Methods and instruments for addressing stakeholders. Source of icons: www.flaticon.com

Again, the EUSDR Communication Strategy provides a good overview of which communication channels can be chosen for which stakeholder (groups)⁵⁷. In addition, the method of **storytelling** was presented in relation to the EUSDR narrative to address stakeholders. The storytelling steps for writing successful stories include a general problem, a specific problem, related expectations and how solutions work, and finally evidence of successful solutions. Storytelling techniques also help illustrate key messages for EUSDR audiences in line with the EUSDR narrative⁵⁸.



c. Plan with your stakeholders!

A workshop on stakeholder engagement

The consecutive workshop conducted with PACs and their teams was dedicated to **stakeholder engagement** and focused on various techniques to communicate, manage and engage with various types of stakeholders to better understand and ensure how the implementation of set objectives in a PA can be supported by relevant stakeholders. This workshop had the objective to support the PACs and their teams in exploring ways to attract and involve individuals, groups, and organisations who may be affected by the (implementation of the) PA or may affect the (implementation of the) PA.

The advantages of an optimised stakeholder management lie in new collaborative strands that emerge from the practice of influencing a variety of outcomes through consultation, communication, negotiation, compromise, and relationship building. The concrete benefits for Priority Area Coordinators and their teams are shown in the following table:



Forum for exchange:

It offers stakeholders who will affect or be affected by the outcomes of the PA implementation a chance to voice their opinions.

Benefit:

PACs and their teams can ensure effective collaboration between satisfied, engaged, productive and understanding stakeholders.



Interdependency:

It enables the PA to identify who their key stakeholders are and understand the relationship they have within the thematic field.

Benefit:

PACs and their teams can build stronger relationships also for the future implementation.

⁵⁷ EUSDR Communication Strategy (2020): 23 et seq. [Online](#).

⁵⁸ EUSDR Communication Strategy (2020): 14 et seq. [Online](#).



Proficiency:

It brings stakeholders and the PA together to pool knowledge, experience, and expertise to cooperate and co-create solutions.

Benefit:

PACs and their teams can receive valuable support.



Networking:

It helps build collaborative partnerships and new relationships that generate value.

Benefit:

PACs and their teams can optimise their opportunities by engaging with stakeholders to better influence their impact in decision making.

Table 5: Benefits of stakeholder engagement.

In order to provide a working basis and concrete examples for stakeholder engagement, four designated experts from respective sectors of interaction (funding, academia, NGO and businesses) were invited. PACs and their teams were invited to exchange ideas with the PAC colleagues as well as with the invited experts on possible approaches for closer cooperation with relevant stakeholders. The overview helped to identify potentials and, if necessary, to consolidate, deepen or establish new forms of cooperation. The following experts were invited to the workshop to provide a broad basis for discussion and knowledge exchange:

Funding sector	Academia sector	NGO sector	Business sector
Anita Fürstenberg-Lucius	Prof. Zdravko Kačič	Tayisiya Symochko	Balázs Barta
Director of Lending Operations in Central and South Eastern Europe, European Investment Bank	Rector of the University of Maribor, President of the Danube Rectors Conference	Deputy Director of Uzhorod Development Agency	Managing Director of Pannon Business Network, Leader of the Working Group Artificial Intelligence of PA 8

Table 6: Experts invited to the workshop on stakeholder engagement.

During the event the most important prerequisites needed to facilitate the dialogue among PACs and their teams and different types of stakeholders from different groups (regional/local authority or NGO, financial institution, university/academia, businesses) were emphasised in the presentations by the experts. Based on the prerequisites gained from stakeholder management and in the light of developing a **stakeholder engagement plan** (Stakeholder Communications Management Plan), the experts presented to the PACs and the teams the most effective methods to approach the experts/decision-makers in their institution, the communication channels the experts/decision-makers use and the information and support that is needed from a potential partner (e.g. a Priority Area) in order to participate in an initiative and/or project. Above that, the experts showed successful cooperation experiences, stressing what went well and what may be improved in the future.

A stakeholder engagement plan can be used to understand the stakeholder communication and engagement requirements presented by the experts and discussed in the previous stakeholder management process in order to assess, evaluate and, if necessary, adjust the level of stakeholder engagement in the required activities of PA implementation. The process of creation and maintenance of relationships between the PAs and stakeholders, with the aim to satisfy their respective needs and requirements within PA implementation boundaries is manifested in the stakeholder engagement

plan. This plan “*identifies the management strategies required to effectively engage stakeholders [...and...] can be formal or informal, highly detailed or broadly framed, based on the needs*”⁵⁹ in the implementation of the PA. The whole process of systematic identification, analysis, planning and implementation of actions designed to engage with stakeholders as well as the practice of influencing a variety of outcomes through consultation, communication, negotiation, compromise, and relationship building (see chapter 4) is outlined in the **EUSDR stakeholder engagement plan** (Annex III).

With regard to the steps in the PA development of such a plan, the DSP directed the participants in storytelling manner from stakeholder management to stakeholder engagement. After the expert’s presentations, the participants were divided into three groups (cross-Pillar and cross-PA wise). In three rounds, each with a different expert, the PACs and their teams were able to engage the stakeholders (experts) present and had the opportunity to recruit and involve individuals and organisations that could be affected by, or influence the PA implementation. In these speed discussions, the management of stakeholder expectations was developed on a stakeholder engagement template as a process of communicating and working with stakeholders (experts) to meet their needs and solve problems as they occur. As a method for gathering input, Google-Jamboard was used, with guiding questions provided to stimulate the discussions. PACs and their teams were provided with the **EUSDR stakeholder engagement template** (Annex III) in the follow-up of the workshop.

As regards the stakeholders’ expectations and desires, the participants named clear aims and benefits, awareness raising and strong involvement, joint best practice examples and interesting activities, personal connections and transparency and common goals. On the other hand, the participants also identified concerns and problems that included the lack of resources (time, funding and workload) and roots at local level, the online environment and fading interest, weak communication among the different levels involved, the bottleneck of the 3 NOs and possible legal irregularities on national level.



There are specific requirements for stakeholder participation and engagement in each PA and for each EUSDR action. The aim of stakeholder engagement is not to point to an ideal situation, but to share different good practices that can inspire and support the development of further activities.

The steps outlined are designed to support PACs and their teams in setting and managing stakeholder expectations. In this way, it may be easier to clarify in which phases of the PA implementation the respective key stakeholders should be involved and within which deadlines feedback is needed, for example. It may also help to create a review cycle within a PA, and thus to list and evaluate the results of PA communication with stakeholders and to reconsider their involvement if necessary. When looking at the overall picture, it may also be useful to look at which new stakeholders appear on the scene and how PAs can engage with them.

⁵⁹ PMI (2013): 402.

Conclusions

The thematic elaboration of actions and the best possible use of resources to implement the EUSDR at Priority Area (PA) level are essential, as is the involvement of different stakeholders therein. In the majority of situations, in order to achieve sustainable results, consolidated and functional and resilient multilevel governance (MLG) structures need to be established and further supported to develop sustainable macro-regionally relevant activities. Depending on the available resources, working groups, platforms and networks may be established with the purpose to focus on specific thematic topics and to propose transnational cooperation solutions to the macro-regional challenges.

Across time, the elaborated EUSDR key documents pointed out towards different aspects related to the cooperation of relevant stakeholders at macro-regional level. In 10 years of EUSDR implementation, political and operational decision factors constantly recommended the development of activities focused on further mobilisation, more coherent and intensified involvement of a wide range of institutions in jointly planning and implementing activities at the Danube Region Strategy level.

With regard to the optimal mix of stakeholders necessary for triggering and accelerating operational and policy changes, the official documents, the good practices identified at PA level and presented in this document as well as the conclusions of the workshops on stakeholder management and engagement prove that the *one size fits all* approach is not a feasible mode of operation. Measures and actions tailored to individual stakeholder group needs should be developed and implemented in close relation to the overall economic and societal transformations. Therefore, proactivity, dynamism and flexibility are among the core values to be considered when aiming towards an increased involvement of (additional) stakeholders into the EUSDR. Depending on the desired societal change to be produced through transnational cooperation, the participation of decision-making actors representing different territorial levels and sectors may be ensured in appropriate frameworks and at the right time, so as to maximise the benefits for all participants.

As emphasised by the participants in the first workshop, stakeholders' management may be a useful instrument to ensure effective cooperation between engaged and productive organisations interested in implementing certain EUSDR relevant activities. By consistently engaging and involving the stakeholders in the projects and processes initiated at PA level, stronger relationships are built, as constant feedback loops ensure an improved information flow. The needs for support expressed by the stakeholders may be taken aboard and considered while deciding on future PA activities, so shaping the future development of the PA. On the other hand, if the stakeholders gain a comprehensive understanding on the focus and the priorities of the thematic area, more resources (people, tools, finances etc.) for an efficient implementation may be secured.

The EUSDR PAs have varying approaches when identifying relevant stakeholders and documenting their objectives and priorities. Nevertheless, those steps are necessary (if not mandatory) to choose the best methods and channels to reach them. To facilitate the work on stakeholders mapping conducted at PA level, the DSP developed the EUSDR stakeholder mapping tool (Annex I). The tool may be regularly used to also emphasise the developments in time as regards different categories of

stakeholders. At the same time, in the process of listing, classifying and assessing the interest and the influence of the stakeholders (stakeholder analysis), the EUSDR stakeholder management tool (Annex II) may be used to gain a comparative perspective of the status quo of the current resources available to support the PA implementation.

The involvement of specific actors in the EUSDR implementation might be an institutional and sometimes a personal decision. That is why it is often necessary to combine methods, techniques and tools to communicate and engage with various types of stakeholders, so as to deepen the common understanding on how joint objectives in implementing a PA can be mutually supported. In this respect the EUSDR Communication Strategy and the EUSDR Communication Guide offer examples and suggest PA tailored methods and tools for an improved communication.

In an environment characterised by a high mobility of human resources, such as the macro-regional strategies, gaining and maintaining the support of relevant stakeholders requires long lasting exchange of information on their institutional goals, needs and challenges. As it was mentioned during the second workshop, tools and capacities to enable stakeholder engagement are further aspects to be considered in order to close the existent gaps as regards the stakeholders' awareness, motivation and participation. The EUSDR stakeholder engagement plan (Annex III) may facilitate the bridging of such gaps. However, there is room for further exploring and testing additional methods for an enhanced involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of the EUSDR PAs.

The fact that certain groups of stakeholders share common characteristics (public institutions, NGO networks, youth organisations etc.), eases the transfer of best practices among the EUSDR PAs. Thus, practical, efficient and transferable techniques and/or tools for stakeholder management and engagement could further be jointly analysed by the PACs and their teams in order to identify potentials and establish new cooperation and to consolidate and deepen existing cooperation. Given the importance of mobilising people and institutions in EUSDR implementation, the DSP will continue to develop activities and tools to support and facilitate the dialogue and knowledge sharing between the EUSDR actors and identified relevant stakeholders, on the basis of the needs expressed by the PAs.

Annexes

Annex I – EUSDR stakeholder mapping tool (stakeholder survey)*

Annex II – EUSDR stakeholder management tool (stakeholder templates)*

Annex III – EUSDR stakeholder engagement plan and template (stakeholder communication)

* Annexes I and II were made available to all PACs and their teams prior to and respectively after the workshops. If you are interested, you can request them at office@eusdr-dsp.eu.

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