

D1.3.1 Manual to define a set of criteria for IFs and rules for the development of concept documents

*Activity 1.3. Advancement of key strategic ideas and development of the framework
for the implementation formats (IFs)*

1 Introduction

The *Manual to define a set of criteria for IFs and rules for the development of concept documents* serves as a practical guide for the selection, evaluation, and development of implementation formats under the *EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region* framework. It is intended for members of Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs), policymakers, governance support projects partners and other stakeholders involved in the operationalization of the *EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region* Action Plan. It aims to enhance the quality, consistency, and strategic alignment of implementation formats, ensuring they effectively contribute to macro-regional objectives. Thus, it represents a preparation phase of implementation formats development enabling their further operationalisation (implementation stage).

Importantly, this deliverable represents a revision and extension of the original *Background Paper* developed within the EUSAIR Facility Point¹ and Facility Point Plus projects during the previous programming period (2014-2020). While the core purpose remains the same, namely, to define implementation formats and establish procedures for their development, this Manual introduces updated methodologies, tools, and templates based on lessons learned, feedback from capacity-building workshops, and evolving governance needs. It reflects both the strategic direction introduced by the revised EUSAIR Action Plan of 2024 and the operational improvements introduced through the SP4EUSAIR – *Support to Development and Implementation of Strategic Implementation Formats* governance

¹ The project was implemented and financed under the priority axis 4 of the INTERREG V B ADRION – Adriatic-Ionian Transnational Cooperation Programme 2014-2020. For its operation, a total amount of 11.5 million EUR was dedicated for the period from May 2016 to December 2022 and prolonged until 31 October 2023.

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support project. By consolidating past approaches and aligning with current needs and strategic developments, this manual offers a more structured and pillar-centric framework to support TSG members, stakeholders and governance support projects partners in the continuous improvement of the *EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region* implementation.

2 Strategic Framework

The *EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)*, established in 2014, is a comprehensive macro-regional strategy that fosters multilevel and cross-sectoral cooperation among ten countries, including four EU Member States and six non-EU countries. Its primary objective is to achieve economic prosperity, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and better connectivity in the Adriatic-Ionian Region through coordinated and strategic actions. To move from strategic vision to concrete action, the EUSAIR is operationalized through its Action Plan – a document that outlines the key priorities, translating high-level EUSAIR’s objectives into targeted actions and initiatives across five thematic Pillars: *Blue Sustainable Economy, Connecting the Region, Environmental Quality, Sustainable Tourism and Improved Social Cohesion*.

In response to emerging challenges and evolving EU policy priorities, the EUSAIR Action Plan was thoroughly revised in 2024, resulting in a more focused, dynamic, and outcome-oriented document. The revision process incorporated extensive stakeholder consultation and introduced an improved governance structure, strategic objectives, and a clearer definition of implementation formats (IFs). The IFs under each Pillar, such as strategic projects, action plans and master plans, are coordinated by TSGs and supported by three EUSAIR strategic governance support projects: *Facility Point – Supporting the EUSAIR governance for improved cooperation, StEP – Stakeholders Engagement Point* and *SP4EUSAIR – Support to Development and Implementation of Strategic Implementation Formats*.

A major advancement of the revised EUSAIR Action Plan is the prioritization and standardization of IFs, supported by the transnational project teams and unified governance approach. This has resulted in more coherent, focused, and mature project pipelines across Pillars.

Moreover, a core feature of the revised EUSAIR Action Plan is the systematic use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to monitor the implementation and effectiveness

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of IFs across all five Pillars. Each TSG is responsible for developing, applying, and reporting on a specific set of KPIs tailored to topics and actions under their Pillar. To ensure coherence and comparability, the revised EUSAIR Action Plan encourages the harmonization of monitoring approaches across Pillars.

KPIs serve multiple purposes:

- **Monitoring implementation:** KPIs track the advancement of selected actions, such as the number of strategic project proposals developed, submitted, or funded.
- **Measuring performance and outputs:** This includes quantifiable initiatives such as the number of cross-border partnerships formed, joint research initiatives launched, patents filed, or pilot projects completed.
- **Ensuring strategic alignment:** KPIs assess how well the implemented actions contribute to the broader objectives of EUSAIR and the EU, including alignment with the Green Deal, Digital Agenda, and Cohesion Policy.

Importantly, KPIs are not uniform across all Pillars, but are adapted to reflect the thematic specificities and strategic focus of each area, ensuring that progress is measured in a way that is both relevant and meaningful to the unique objectives, challenges, and implementation priorities of each Pillar.

3 Typology of IFs

The chapter provides an in-depth overview of how IFs have been used to operationalize strategic priorities within each Pillar. It draws on findings from Activity 1.1 *Report on Current Flagships and Developed Implementation Formats* (Activity 1.1), interviews with Pillar Coordinators (PCs), and capacity building workshops (Activity 1.2. *Collecting Key Strategic Ideas from Flagships and Other Relevant Sources at Regional, National, Transnational, and Macro-Regional Levels* (Activity 1.2)) conducted through the SP4EUSAIR project to map existing practices, identify successful approaches, and highlight areas for improvement. Building on this empirical foundation, the chapter also introduces a refined classification system for IFs that consolidates lessons learned and provides a coherent structure for guiding the future design, development, and Implementation of initiatives across the macro-region. This typology has been revised and developed under the framework of all three EUSAIR governance support projects: Facility Point, StEP and SP4EUSAIR, together with Interact during the workshop held on 20–21 May 2025 in Ancona, ensuring consistency, usability, and strategic alignment across all Pillars.

3.1 Mapping across Pillars

Understanding how IFs have been used within each Pillar is essential to assessing the operationalisation of strategic objectives and identifying opportunities for improvement. The mapping process conducted under Activity 1.1 of the SP4EUSAIR project provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of implementation, highlighting both successful practices and persistent challenges. This work was built on documentation from the EUSAIR Facility Point and Facility Point Plus projects (2014-2020), examined the revised EUSAIR Action Plan, and included structured engagement with PCs and TSG members.

To enable a nuanced and evidence-based analysis of each Pillar, SP4EUSAIR applied a mixed methodology combining quantitative and qualitative tools. An online survey gathered feedback on stakeholder involvement, the maturity and relevance of existing IFs, and mechanisms used for their development. This was followed by in-

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depth, semi-structured interviews with each PC, structured around key themes such as Pillar governance, topic selection, flagship and IFs development, criteria for IF prioritisation, stakeholder engagement, funding and sustainability, cross-pillar collaboration, and monitoring and planning processes.

This methodological approach ensured that the mapping was not merely descriptive but also diagnostic, providing a structured understanding of the main challenges and capacity needs faced by each Pillar in developing high-impact, strategically aligned IFs. Based on the findings of this exercise, the *Report on Current Flagships and Developed Implementation Formats* (D1.1.1) was produced, capturing lessons learned and laying the groundwork for a more targeted and supportive approach to future implementation planning.

Building on this, Activity 1.2 launched a second phase of engagement through the design and delivery of tailored capacity-building workshops for each Pillar. These workshops were aligned with the specific thematic priorities, development stages, and institutional realities of each TSG. Their objectives included identifying and refining strategic project ideas, aligning proposals with relevant funding sources, improving technical and procedural understanding among stakeholders, and preparing supporting documentation such as terms of reference (ToR).

In some Pillars, workshops focused on enhancing project design and submission capabilities (e.g., Pillars 1, 3, 4, and 5), while in others, the emphasis was on the development of foundational documents such as master plans and feasibility studies (e.g., Pillar 2). The use of interactive methods, including real-time polling tools and collaborative exercises, ensured high levels of stakeholder engagement. After each session, a *Working report on key strategic ideas* (D1.2.2) was produced to document key conclusions and define concrete next steps. These reports collectively inform the *Knowledge based report on established key strategic ideas* (D1.2.3), intended to guide the next phase of IF development.

Overall, the mapping and capacity-building activities carried out under SP4EUSAIR represent a significant advance in EUSAIR governance. By adopting a Pillar-specific,

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participatory, and evidence-based approach, the project has contributed to a more coherent, responsive, and strategically aligned framework for identifying and developing IFs across the Adriatic-Ionian Region. This approach also ensures that new IFs are grounded in real needs, supported by stakeholders, and designed to deliver tangible macro-regional impact. What follows is a synthesis of the current state of implementation across all five Pillars, providing insight into how different IFs have been applied, adapted, and prioritised in practice.

Pillar 1 Blue Sustainable Economy

TSG1 has adopted **strategic projects** as its primary IF. This format has proven most suitable for addressing the Pillar's thematic scope and delivering cross-national impact in a targeted, result-oriented manner. To date, five strategic projects have been developed under Pillar 1, while two strategic projects were submitted to the Interreg Adrion programme (but were rejected during the Admissibility and Eligibility Check phase).² Besides the mono-pillar projects, three cross-pillar projects were developed in cooperation with other TSGs to address interconnected strategic priorities and enhance integrated regional development.³

The capacity-building workshop, held on the 21st of February 2025, aimed to strengthen the future development of strategic projects under Pillar 1 by addressing past challenges and identifying clear pathways forward. TSG1 members and PCs confirmed that strategic projects will remain the preferred IF but should be more action-oriented, modular, and closely aligned with relevant funding sources. Importantly, TSG1 members reached a consensus to jointly develop up to three new

² AIM-FRISH - *Evaluating freshness and authenticity with real-time non-destructive methods to increase the value-added of Adriatic Ionian microregion-produced fish*, AMOS - *Developing a cost-effective observatory system, tailored to the needs of Aquacultures with remote access, real-time data, and forecast capabilities*, EURYNOME - *The Effects of anthropogenic pressures and climate change in the nutritional and commercial value of two small pelagic fish species of importance to ADRION region fisheries: Biodiversity and energy flow from the Ecosystem to the final product*, FishTourAIR - *Fishing tourism and ichthyotourism diversification activities in the Adriatic-Ionian Region*, and SeaSusPack - *Sustainable packaging of fish and seafood based on marine bioresources*.

³ BLUECULTURE - *Development of Macro-Regional Cluster on BlueCulture Technologies and creation of International Competence Centre*, WAI-TP: WATERBORN - *Adriatic-Ionian Technology Platform*, and ICZM&MSP - *Establishment a Community for the sustainable management of maritime activities in the AIR*.

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strategic project ideas by the end of 2025, as well as review relevant funding sources that could support the identified strategic ideas. Following the capacity-building workshops, to facilitate the process, a questionnaire was developed to help prioritize subtopics within which new strategic project ideas will be developed. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify the most relevant and commonly supported subtopics within Pillar 1, ensuring that the resulting strategic ideas align with shared regional priorities and interests.

Pillar 2 Connecting the Region – Transport

TSG2 on Transport focused on the development of the **macroregional master plan**⁴ and **strategic projects** as IFs. Furthermore, in collaboration with other TSGs two cross-pillar projects⁵ have been developed.

Through the capacity-building workshop held on June 25th, 2025, key insights from TSG2 on Transport members were successfully gathered to inform the finalization of ToR and further development of the feasibility study on the *Integrated Railway System for Passenger Transport in the Adriatic-Ionian Region*. The ToR will define scope, methodology, required expertise, deliverables, and timeline for expert engagement on the feasibility study development.

Pillar 2 Connecting the Region – Energy

The TSG2 on Energy implementation strategy includes **master plans, action plans, and strategic projects** as selected IFs. To date, one master plan⁶ and action plan⁷ were developed, including one cross-pillar project⁸, developed in coordination with Pillar 4.

⁴ *Adriatic-Ionian Region Master Plan for Transport.*

⁵ WAI-TP: WATERBORNE – *Adriatic-Ionian Technology Platforms*, and ADRIOCYCLETOUR – *ADRIatic IONian CYCLE route for sustainable TOURism.*

⁶ EUSAIR MPE – *Master Plan of Energy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region.*

⁷ EUSAIR AP – *Action Plan (Road Map) towards a EUSAIR Power Exchange and Natural Gas Trading Hub.*

⁸ STETAI – *Sustainable Tourism through Environmental Energy Technologies in Buildings of High Architecture Interest.*

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In addition to the already existing IFs, the Pillar 2 TSG on Energy has defined a pipeline of **high-priority**⁹ and **priority**¹⁰ **concept ideas** (Strategic-level formats and Knowledge and Support formats) intended to evolve into new IFs. Among these, the *Renewable Energy Road Map* development was selected as the immediate next step in IFs development and became the focus of capacity building workshop held on April 30th, 2025. The workshop served to align strategic needs with expert support and to define the scope for ToR for future technical assistance in developing the *Renewable Energy Road Map*.

Pillar 3 Environmental Quality

Within Pillar 3, **strategic projects** have been adopted as the primary IFs because they allow participating countries to focus on concrete actions. A total of 14 strategic project ideas¹¹ have been developed under Pillar 3, while four were approved for financing. In addition to mono-pillar projects, Pillar 3 has also contributed to two cross-pillar projects¹² in coordination with Pillars 1 and 4.

The capacity-building workshop, held on March 13th 2025, aimed to strengthen the ability of TSG3 members to develop high-quality project proposals and to strategically

⁹ *Renewable Energy Road Map for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, EUSAIR Conference on Confronting the Global Climate Change Challenge, and Road Map 2026 for Energy Market Integration in the Adriatic-Ionian Region.*

¹⁰ *EUSAIR Forum on Energy Efficiency for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, Hydrogen Production and Development Valley for the Western Balkans Region, Artificial Intelligence Prospects and Use in the Energy Systems for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, New Power Supply for Increased Electrification through the Adriatic and Ionian Region: Electric Vehicles, Data Centres and New Applications, Renewable Energy Communities for Cohesion in the Adriatic and Ionian Region, Clean Fuel Use for Maritime Transport through the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, Providing Financial Assistance to Energy and Transport Projects through the Adriatic and Ionian Region.*

¹¹ *ASOSCoP – The Adriatic-Ionian Regional Contingency Plan for Emergency Oil Spills in the Adriatic Sea, 3MPS – Monitoring and management of marine protected species, PET HAB ECO – Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystem, Bio-Shelters – Botanical Gardens as Biodiversity Shelters and Nurseries, FORREST READAPT + SEC-DIV CONIFERS – Renewal of the adoption of coppice forest in a drastically changing environment – Secure diversity through a holistic approach for the most threatened Mediterranean conifer ecosystems: combining genetic, physiology, biodiversity indexes, germination, and restoration, COSFI-MAR – Towards the long-term in-situ conservation, sustainable fisheries, and improving the marine environments in the Adriatic-Ionian Region, Security and safety of blue and green infrastructure as a key factor of sustainability of the blue and green corridors, regarding climate changes, and NEATNESS – Clean the Adriatic and Ionian Sea from the plastics.*

¹² *ICZM&MSP – Establishment a Community for the sustainable management of maritime activities under the AIR, and ADRIONet – Managing Tourism Flows in Protected Areas.*

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align them with available funding opportunities. During the session, it was confirmed that strategic projects will remain the preferred implementation format for Pillar 3. As a direct outcome of the workshop discussion with TSG3 members and PCs, COSFIMAR and BIO-SHELTERS were submitted under the Interreg IPA ADRION 2021-2027 second Call for proposals. Participants also agreed that the next step within Pillar 3 will be the development of a new flagship initiative titled *Promoting climate change adaptation and disaster risk prevention through River Basin Management (RBM), ICZM, and MSP*. Furthermore, TSG3 members expressed the necessity for external expert support to consolidate the *FOREST READAPT* and *SEC-DIV-CONFINERS* initiatives into a single, unified project fiche and to assist in preparing the corresponding application form for future calls for proposals, while a separate project fiche will also be prepared for the *NEATNESS* project to improve its maturity and readiness for funding.

Pillar 4 Sustainable Tourism

As identified through interviews with PCs, the preferred IFs under Pillar 4 are **strategic projects**, because they offer a concrete, result-oriented approach to addressing the specific challenges and opportunities of the Adriatic-Ionian Region. A total of seven strategic projects¹³ have been conceptualized to date. In addition to the mono-pillar projects, four cross-pillar projects¹⁴ were also developed through collaborative efforts involving TSGs from different pillars.

However, implementation has so far been limited. One project was submitted for funding under the previous programming period, which failed to pass the eligibility

¹³ LIVING THE SEA 4.0 – *Digitalisation of the cultural heritage of fishing traditions and fish industry for the creation of virtual*, AIR Cultural Routes – *Adriatic-Ionian Region Cultural Routes Tourism Governance Model: An opportunity for the EUSAIR area*, CruiseAir – *Destination Management Plan's preparation for Cruise destinations within the Adriatic-Ionian Region*, CultTourAIR – *Survey on cultural tourism demand in the Adriatic-Ionian Region*, AIRPRODEST – *Adriatic-Ionian Strategy and Solutions for Smart Integrated Destination Management based on Multiple Intelligence Systems*, Green Mapping for the Adriatic-Ionian Region – *Supporting Development and Market Access for Responsible and Sustainable Tourism Destinations and Micro/SME Operations in the EUSAIR Region*

¹⁴ ADRIONCYCLETOR – *ADRIatic IONian CYCLE route for sustainable TOURism*, ADRIONet – *Managing Tourism Flows in Protected Areas*, BLUECULTURE – *Development of Macro-Regional Cluster on BlueCulture Technologies and creation of International Competence Center*, STETAI – *Sustainable Tourism through Environmental Energy Technologies in Building of High Architectural Interest*

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check. To address these gaps, a capacity building workshop was organized on February 3rd 2025, with the goal of equipping TSG4 members with the tools and competencies necessary for successful project development. As a result, it was agreed that the overarching goal for the current programming period is to update and prepare all seven strategic project proposals. However, particular focus was placed on three of them, i.e., LIVING THE SEA, GREEN MAPPING, and AIRPRODEST, which were submitted on the second Interreg IPA ADRION 2021-2027 Call for proposals.

Pillar 5 Improved Social Cohesion

Pillar 5 was introduced following the 2023 revision of the EUSAIR Action Plan, with a mission to address key socio-economic challenges in the Adriatic-Ionian Region, such as demographic change, youth engagement, labour market transformation, and the social dimension of green and digital transitions. As the newest pillar, it is still in the development phase and has not yet formalised any IFs.

In response to the lack of an established implementation framework, a capacity-building workshop was organized on February 6th 2025, to equip TSG5 members with the necessary tools for identifying funding sources, structuring project development, and aligning proposals with macroregional goals. The workshop highlighted **strategic projects** as the most suitable IFs, given their capacity to address complex and cross-cutting social issues through multi-stakeholder and cross-border collaboration. As a result of workshop discussions, TSG5 members agreed to focus on the development of up to three new strategic project ideas by the end of 2025. Following the capacity-building workshop, a questionnaire was developed to help prioritize most relevant subtopics within which new strategic project ideas will be developed and that reflect shared priorities and areas of greatest interest among TSG5 members.

3.2 IFs Types

During the EUSAIR implementation workshop held from 20th – 21st May 2025 in Ancona, Italy, the participating stakeholders (Lead partners of the three EUSAIR governance support projects and Interact representatives) reached a common

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understanding and agreement on the typology of IFs used within EUSAIR. This agreement enabled the establishment of a clearer and more functional framework for guiding strategic planning, project development, and support actions across all EUSAIR Pillars and governance support projects.

The IFs were categorized and structured as follows:

- **Strategic-level formats:** flagships, action plans, master plans, road maps.
- **Project-level formats:** strategic projects/projects.
- **Knowledge and Support Formats:** studies, actions, other formats.

3.2.1 Strategic-Level Formats

3.2.1.1 Flagship

A flagship is a high-priority, implementation-oriented initiative within the EUSAIR, designed to address the most pressing challenges and opportunities shared across participating countries. Rather than being a single project, a flagship functions as an umbrella framework composed of multiple, interconnected and complementary IFs, such as projects, networks, collaboration platforms, or road maps, that work together toward a common strategic goal and are carefully structured to contribute to one or more actions defined in the EUSAIR Action Plan. Flagships are defined by TSGs, approved by the EUSAIR Governing Board, and are expected to deliver measurable impact by contributing to specific outputs and indicators. With a strong macro-regional dimension, each flagship aims to generate significant added value through coordinated action, strategic alignment, and cooperation across borders.

So far, a total of 16 flagships¹⁵ have been developed across all EUSAIR Pillars. These flagships reflect the EUSAIR's commitment to fostering strategic, cross-border cooperation and delivering tangible results through well-coordinated, multi-actor initiatives. Each flagship addresses specific macro-regional challenges and

¹⁵ A1.1 Report on existing flagships and developed implementation formats: <https://www.adriatic-ionician.eu/download/report-on-existing-flagships-and-developed-implementation-formats/>

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opportunities, contributing to the overall coherence and impact of EUSAIR implementation.

3.2.1.2 Action Plans/Master Plans

Within the EUSAIR framework, the implementation of macro-regional priorities relies on two complementary IFs – action plans and master plans. These tools serve distinct yet interconnected functions, guiding both operational and long-term planning processes and ensuring alignment with the broader objectives of the EUSAIR.

An **action plan** is a strategic planning document that provides overall direction within the scope of a Pillar or its strategic actions. To avoid confusion, it is important to differentiate between the EUSAIR Action Plan – the overarching strategic document accompanying the EUSAIR – and Pillar-specific action plans, which translate strategic actions into operational steps. A **master plan** is a comprehensive sectoral planning framework relevant for some, but not necessarily all, EUSAIR Pillars. It offers long-term, cross-border visions in areas such as transport, energy, and tourism, where coordinated investment and infrastructure planning are required.

Pillar-specific action plans are thematic guiding documents that outline specific objectives, proposed actions, timelines and responsibilities within a defined policy area. They serve as operational tools to translate broader strategic goals into actionable steps, ensuring that policy initiatives are systematically broken down into manageable tasks. These plans not only provide a guideline for achieving macro-regional priorities but also serve as a common framework for coordinating multiple projects across various stakeholders and funding sources. Action plans help ensure consistency across different stakeholders by providing a unified framework that aligns efforts at national, regional, and local levels with broader macro-regional goals. They maximize efficiency and impact through strategically sequenced interventions, achieving short-term results while preparing for long-term objectives. Progress is tracked via measurable indicators and timelines, ensuring accountability and flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, ultimately driving successful implementation of the plan's goals.

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Master plans are long-term, strategic frameworks designed to guide the development of sectors requiring high coordination. They align national policies with macro-regional and EU goals to address shared challenges and ensure cross-border collaboration. Their core features include: long-term visioning, focusing on sustainable growth and addressing future trends and challenges; cross-border collaboration, ensuring coordinated infrastructure development and harmonizing policies across countries; feasibility and investment planning, identifying financial needs and guiding investment allocation to achieve regional development goals.

In the context of EUSAIR, master plans also serve as frameworks for multilateral cooperation. They help align national priorities with the broader goals of macro-regional cooperation. Given the varying political, economic, and social contexts across the Adriatic-Ionian Region, action plans provide means to address specific regional needs while maintaining overall coherence with EU policy frameworks. Master plans play a pivotal role in shaping the future development of the Adriatic-Ionian Region by offering integrated, long-term visions that align with macro-regional and EU priorities. As such, they serve as foundational documents for guiding future investment, project implementation, and overall success of EUSAIR initiatives.

3.2.1.3 Road Map

A **road map** is a strategic document designed to provide a clear and structured path forward for a specific policy area, programme, or initiative. It outlines a series of prioritized steps, goals, timelines, and actions that need to be achieved to reach a defined set of objectives. Road maps help stakeholders understand the overall direction and vision of a project or initiative by breaking down complex goals into manageable tasks.

Key elements include:

- **Clear Direction:** Provides long-term vision and purpose.
- **Actionable Steps:** Breaks down tasks and milestones.
- **Prioritization:** Identifies key actions for immediate focus.
- **Timelines:** Sets deadlines and schedules for progress.

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- **Coordination:** Aligns efforts across stakeholders.
- **Flexibility:** Allows for adjustments as circumstances change.

In sum, a road map serves as a critical planning tool that guides efforts, monitors progress and ensures that all involved parties are aligned in working toward the desired outcomes. Whether used for long-term strategic planning or short-term project management, road maps offer a comprehensive approach to navigating complex initiatives.

3.2.2 Project-level formats

3.2.2.1 Strategic projects

Strategic projects/projects may be deemed as a backbone of EUSAIR implementation. The primary goal of strategic projects is to outline tasks necessary to achieve the specific objectives or outcomes anticipated in the flagship. Also, they can represent mature, high-priority interventions that translate the visions and priorities outlined in action plans, master plans, and road maps into tangible outcomes. These projects are aligned with macro-regional objectives, EU priorities (such as the European Green Deal and Digital Europe), and available funding sources. When defining projects, it is important to distinguish between the terms *project fiche* (concept note) and *project proposal*.

- A **project fiche** (concept note) is a short document that outlines the project idea, rationale, objectives, expected outputs, and potential funding sources, and identifies the Pillar and Flagship it addresses. Project fiches are prepared at the TSG level, by TSG members or relevant stakeholders, and submitted to all TSG members for review. They are approved through consensus during TSG meetings. Once approved and adopted, a funding-specific *project proposal* can be developed.
- A **project proposal** is a more detailed description of the project, typically prepared using the application form required for a specific funding call. It includes comprehensive information about the partnership, territorial context, work packages and activities, budget, and other relevant elements.

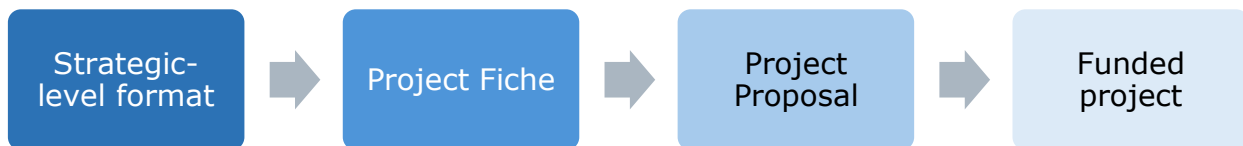
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Moreover, projects (project fiches and project proposals) are categorised as:

- **Mono-pillar projects**, which target objectives within a single EUSAIR Pillar.
- **Cross-pillar projects**, which address challenges that span across multiple Pillars, encourage inter-Pillar cooperation and integrated solutions.

Once the project proposal is evaluated and approved, it becomes a concrete project implemented by dedicated partnerships under the guidance of the respective TSGs, ensuring that implementation stays aligned with the overarching goals of the EUSAIR. These projects not only deliver concrete results on the ground but also strengthen macro-regional cooperation and contribute to long-term territorial cohesion in the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

The project development process follows a structured path:



3.2.3 Knowledge and Support Formats

3.2.3.1 Studies

Studies refer to research and analytical work that underpin the implementation of EUSAIR objectives and serve as a foundation for informed decision-making. This category encompasses a wide range of planning and assessment documents – such as strategic studies, feasibility studies, investment studies, development plans, and impact assessments, that provide essential knowledge and guidance for the preparation and implementation of flagships and projects. These studies may be initiated as standalone exercises or as preparatory phases for future other IFs development.

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3.2.3.2 Actions

Actions represent concrete implementation activities and targeted interventions that contribute to flagship objectives but do not necessarily require the full development of a project fiche or proposal. Examples include pilot actions, workshop series, stakeholder platforms, awareness-raising campaigns, or the establishment of cooperation networks.

However, the use of the term action should be approached carefully. In the context of the EUSAIR Action Plan, actions are defined as strategic interventions endorsed by the EUSAIR governance structures and intended to achieve the overarching objectives. These may involve new governance approaches, improved policy coordination, policy reviews, support for ongoing regional initiatives, or cross-sectoral networking. TSGs, with the support of the EUSAIR governance support projects, work to operationalise these actions, frequently serving as a bridge between strategic objectives and project-level implementation.

3.2.3.3 Other Formats

Depending on the specific needs and context of each Pillar, additional implementation mechanisms may be employed. These can include: ToRs for the development of targeted studies or expert analyses; educational and capacity-building materials developed in support of specific training programmes or workshops; methodological guidelines or implementation toolkits tailored to thematic priorities, etc. These flexible instruments complement formal projects and studies by providing technical, methodological, or thematic support necessary for effective flagship delivery.

4 Rules for development of IFs

The development of IFs within the EUSAIR framework has been shaped by strategic groundwork carried out during the previous programming period, most notably through the EUSAIR Facility Point project, funded under the Interreg Adrion 2014-2020 programme and coordinated by the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development of Slovenia. Within this initiative, Work Package T.2 *Facilitating strategic project Development* focused on defining a common methodological framework for identifying, validating, and supporting the development of IFs across all Pillars.

A key result of this work was the development of *Background Paper*¹⁶, which provided guidance for ensuring transparency, consistency, and strategic alignment in the development process. The Background Paper introduced a structured approach involving stakeholder engagement, evaluation procedures, and alignment with funding sources. Additionally, two important tools were developed as part of the Paper: *Background paper Annex 1 Project idea draft template* (standardized project idea template used to draft IF proposal, including objectives, activities, macro-regional relevance, and alignment with EUSAIR objectives), and *Background paper Annex 2 Proposal of additional information required for Project partners from Member states to engage the external expert* (a supporting form for defining the scope of external expertise required for further project development and enabling structured engagement through public procurement).

This methodology marked a clear improvement in structuring decision-making around IFs development and has significantly contributed to a more coordinated and transparent process. As the EUSAIR has evolved, however, new challenges and needs have been recognized, reflecting the changing dynamics within the Adriatic-Ionian Region and the growing maturity of Pillar structures. Experiences gathered from

¹⁶ <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/download/background-paper-work-package-t-2-focused-on-facilitating-strategic-project-development/>

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across the Pillars, along with insights from interviews with PCs and feedback from TSG members, have pointed to several areas where the current approach could benefit from further refinement and adaptation:

- **Variations in how the methodology is applied across Pillars** leading to differing levels of procedural clarity and project maturity.
- **A need for more flexible tools and templates**, particularly for non-project formats such as flagships, action plans, master plans, or road maps.
- **Differences in the quality and completeness of project fiches**, often linked to varying levels of support or access to expert assistance.
- **Interpreting differences regarding evaluation criteria**, which have at times limited comparability and made prioritisation more complex.
- **Challenges in cross-pillar coordination**, especially where integrated procedures or joint assessment frameworks are not clearly defined.

An updated and more flexible approach is therefore proposed, one that reinforces the role of TSGs in shaping IFs content, enables context-sensitive development of different IFs, and facilitates stronger engagement with stakeholders across governance levels. Based on the experience and lessons learned, the following section outlines the key directions for revising the tools and rules that will guide the **next generation of IFs development** across the EUSAIR.

4.1 Key directions for revising the development and evaluation framework

Building on the experience of the Facility Point project and guided by the feedback gathered through SP4EUSAIR activities, a revised approach to the development and evaluation of IFs has been proposed, which addresses previously identified challenges and needs.

The revised framework builds on the foundations established in the original *Background Paper*. Still, it shifts from a single-template approach to a more modular and user-centric system that better reflects the diversity of IFs used under EUSAIR.

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It aims to enhance the transparency, usability, and effectiveness of the selection and development process while ensuring continued alignment with macroregional objectives.

The following key improvements guide the revised framework:

- 1. Introduction of IF-specific templates:** To address the limitations of the former one-size-fits-all template (*Background paper Annex 1*), four dedicated templates have been developed, one for each IF: flagships, action/master plans/road maps, projects and knowledge and support formats. These templates reflect the specific structure, purpose, and expected maturity of each IF type, providing a clearer and more tailored starting point for concept development. Each template is supported by a corresponding evaluation list adapted to the format's nature and intended impact.
- 2. Modular template structure:** All templates follow a modular format to ensure clarity, coherence, and completeness of proposals. While sections such as strategic relevance, stakeholder involvement, and expected results are common across all formats, their level of detail and specific focus vary depending on whether the format is strategic (e.g., flagship, action/master plans/road maps), operational (e.g., project), or supportive (e.g., studies, pilot actions, expert tools).
- 3. Enhanced evaluation framework:** The evaluation list used for assessing proposals has been revised and adapted to match the structure of the new templates. While still grounded in the predefined six EUSAIR Broad Criteria¹⁷ common to all Pillars, each IF includes a tailored set of evaluation questions and scoring logic.
- 4. Clearer procedural steps and workflow:** The revised framework introduces a streamlined and well-defined process, from idea generation and stakeholder engagement through to development, expert support, and final endorsement.

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This clarifies the role of all actors involved: TSG members, PCs, applicants, and governance support project partners, while ensuring procedural consistency across Pillars.

5. Improved accommodation of cross-pillar and horizontal priorities:

Cross-pillar initiatives are now better integrated into the development process through harmonised templates and evaluation forms. Proposers are encouraged to highlight connections to other Pillars and horizontal themes such as digitalisation, climate resilience, or social inclusion, with procedures in place to support joint evaluation and coordination.

6. User-centric design: The revised tools have been developed with a strong emphasis on clarity, consistency, and ease of use. The identification of user requirements was informed by earlier SP4EUSAIR project activities, including feedback from TSG members and interviews with PCs. These inputs helped shape a more practical and accessible approach, particularly for users with varying levels of experience in IFs development. As a result, the templates and evaluation tools feature clear instructions, logically structured sections, and illustrative examples, supporting the preparation of well-aligned and complete proposals across all IF types.

These improvements form the basis of the revised development and evaluation framework that will be operationalised through a dedicated Toolkit, presented in the following chapter. The Toolkit compiles the new templates, evaluation lists, and practical guidance into a single, accessible package to support the generation of high-quality, strategically aligned implementation formats under the EUSAIR.

4.2 Toolkit for the development and selection of IFs

This chapter presents the practical tools that support the revised approach to the development and selection of IFs under the EUSAIR framework. Building on lessons learned, the toolkit introduces a set of user-centric, structured templates and evaluation lists designed to improve the quality, consistency, and strategic alignment of proposals across all five Pillars. It has been developed to respond to the need to:

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- Guide the transformation of strategic ideas into fully developed IFs.
- Ensure consistency and transparency in the preparation and evaluation of IFs.
- Support different types of formats (e.g., project fiches, flagships, roadmaps, action/master plans, or analytical tools).
- Enable evidence-based decision-making by providing a harmonised structure for scoring and assessment.

The **toolkit standardizes the preparation and evaluation phase of IFs** by offering a clear methodological and procedural framework. It ensures that all IFs are defined consistently, assessed transparently, and aligned with EUSAIR's macroregional objectives.

It applies to **all EUSAIR stakeholders** involved in IFs development who can act as initiators of strategic ideas (idea owners/applicants), particularly TSGs, PCs, governance support projects, external experts and all other relevant stakeholders (target groups).

However, the **ideation phase**, i.e., how strategic ideas are collected and/or generated is left to the **internal procedures of the TSGs**. i.e., Pillars. These processes may include thematic national-level consultations, open calls for idea submission, or identification of strategic ideas through policy dialogue. The toolkit, on the other hand, **provides a template that supports** the collection and/or generation of ideas, as well as a **framework for the evaluation of** those ideas once identified. The formal selection and endorsement of IFs remain under the sole responsibility of each TSG, in line with their internal decision-making processes.

4.3 Overview of templates

The toolkit includes the following templates, each annexed to this Manual:

- **Annex 1 Flagship Initiative Concept Template**: Intended for strategic-level initiatives that serve as umbrella frameworks for coordinated action. This template focuses on defining long-term objectives, macroregional relevance,

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linkages to actions in the EUSAIR Action Plan, and the expected ecosystem of supporting activities.

- **Annex 2 Project Fiche Template:** Designed for proposing concepts of strategic projects aligned with agreed priorities, this template includes a description of tentative work packages and activities, expected results, and alignment with relevant thematic and cross-cutting objectives. Once a relevant funding call is identified, the completed template serves as a concept note that can be further developed into a full project proposal, in line with the applicable guidelines for applicants.
- **Annex 3 Master Plan/Pillar-specific Action Plan/Road Map concept Template:** Suited for long-term planning instruments that outline multi-actor pathways and coordinated actions across territories. The template supports the articulation of sectoral or cross-sectoral priorities, sequencing of interventions, and policy alignment at macro-regional and national levels.
- **Annex 4 Knowledge and Support Formats Template:** This flexible template allows for the definition of indirect contributions to EUSAIR goals and includes adjusted evaluation logic to reflect the non-project nature of these formats.

Each template includes structured sections covering:

- General information and title,
- Strategic alignment with the Pillar priorities and EUSAIR Action Plan,
- Objectives,
- Expected outcomes/results,
- Macroregional impact.

Where necessary, technical support (external support) for IFs preparation may be engaged in line with the rules and procedures of the **relevant governance support project**. In such cases, the governance support project (specifically the relevant lead or project partners) acts as the contracting authority and initiates the process for procuring external experts. These experts provide tailored assistance to IF initiation

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in the development of the respective IFs. Thus, in the context of external engagement, the original *Background Paper Annex 2* has been revised:

- **Annex 5 External expert engagement form:** outlines the standard procedure and documentation for requesting expert support. It specifies required competencies and is used by governance support projects when engaging external experts through public procurement. This ensures transparency and consistency in the provision of technical assistance. The form can be combined with any other template if the involvement of an expert is necessary for further development within the framework of governance support projects.

4.3.1 Evaluation and scoring

To ensure a transparent and consistent selection process, templates (Annex 1- 4) are accompanied by an evaluation list adapted to their type. These revised evaluation tools build on the six Broad Criteria introduced in the EUSAIR Action plan and *Background Paper* but are now tailored to reflect the unique characteristics of each implementation format category.

The evaluation lists provide:

- Format-specific assessment questions,
- Scoring scales adapted to the expected maturity and impact,
- Sections for comments and recommendations.

These tools are intended for use by TSG members as evaluators or external evaluators. Their purpose is to support strategic decision-making, ensure comparability across proposals, and strengthen the maturity and quality of the EUSAIR implementation pipeline.

4.4 Responsibilities and use of Toolkit

The development of IFs follows a structured process involving multiple actors, clearly defined roles, and a set of tools provided in this Toolkit. The steps below outline how strategic ideas are transformed into actionable IFs and prepared for implementation:

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ACTIONS TAKEN PRIOR TO THE USE OF TOOLKIT (IDEATION PHASE)

Step 1: Ideation of Strategic Ideas

- **Who can propose:** Any relevant stakeholder (e.g., TSG member, PC, public authority, private sector, academia, civil society, etc.) can propose a strategic idea.
- **To whom:** Proposals are submitted to the TSGs.
- **How:** Each TSG follows its internal procedures to collect and generate ideas.
- **Purpose:** Ensure alignment with macroregional needs and EUSAIR Action Plan priorities.

USE OF TOOLKIT (PREPARATION PHASE)

Step 2: Drafting and Development of the IFs

- **Responsibility:** The proponent of the idea (idea owner) is responsible for drafting the IF using the relevant template provided in the Toolkit.
- **Support:**
 - The TSG provides guidance in template preparation (if necessary).
 - If needed, external experts may support the drafting process.
- **Expert engagement:**
 - Coordinated by governance support projects (e.g., Facility Point, STeP, SP4EUSAIR) based on information collected via *Annex 5* if needed

Step 3: Evaluation and Formal Adoption

- **Responsibility:** The TSG evaluates the completed IF template and formally adopts it or rejects it.
- **Tools used:** Evaluation lists and scoring guidance included in the Toolkit templates.

ACTIONS AFTER IFs ADOPTION (IMPLEMENTATION STAGE)

Step 4: Transition to Implementation

- **Trigger:** If adopted, the IFs are ready to move into the implementation stage.
- **Scope of implementation:**
 - May involve preparing a project proposal for funding.
 - May lead to the execution of a strategic document (e.g., pillar-specific action plan, master plan, roadmap).
 - May include delivery of knowledge and support tools (e.g., studies, guidelines, toolkits, etc.).
- **Expert engagement:**
 - Coordinated by governance support projects (e.g., Facility Point, STeP, SP4EUSAIR) based on information collected via *Annex 5* if needed
- Details on this stage will be provided in: *Deliverable D2.1.1 – Handbook for the Preparation of Project Proposals for Each Strategic Implementation Format.*

5 Conclusion

The Manual represents a consolidated framework for the development, evaluation, and implementation of IFs within the EUSAIR governance system. Developed under the SP4EUSAIR project, it reflects a comprehensive effort to systematise the procedures, tools, and responsibilities involved in turning strategic ideas into actionable, high-quality implementation formats. It builds upon the foundations laid in previous governance support project, EUSAIR Facility Point (2014-2020), while introducing updated methodologies, revised templates, and clearly defined rules that respond to the evolving needs of the macroregional context.

The Manual promotes a harmonised and user-centric approach that strengthens the strategic alignment of IFs with EUSAIR priorities, enhances procedural transparency, and supports consistency across all Pillars and governance support projects. With the accompanying Toolkit (annexed templates), this Manual is both a practical and strategic resource that supports IFs preparation and evaluation. It is intended to guide idea owners, governance actors, TSG members, and all relevant stakeholders in developing robust, mature, and impactful formats that advance the goals of the EUSAIR and contribute to deeper cooperation and cohesion across the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

All templates (annexes) included in the Manual are considered as living documents and their application will be treated as part of a *pilot phase* until the end of the SP4EUSAIR project. In order to better reflect their user-centric character, a feedback loop will be established with TSGs and stakeholders. Through this mechanism, continuous feedback will be collected and integrated to refine and improve the tools and procedures throughout the remaining project implementation period.

Once the procedures outlined in this Manual are formally adopted, targeted communication activities should be undertaken to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are informed, engaged, and equipped to apply the new framework

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effectively. Building on established communication channels and a shared understanding among governance actors, these efforts will lay the foundation for potential digitalization of processes. Such digital transition would contribute to streamlining administrative procedures within TSGs, reducing workload, and enhancing the overall efficiency and transparency of IFs development across the EUSAIR.

6 Annexes

- Annex 1 Flagship initiative concept template
- Annex 2 Project fiche template
- Annex 3 Master Plan/Action Plan/Road Map concept template
- Annex 4 Knowledge and support formats template
- Annex 5 External expert engagement form

7 Glossary

- **Action (EUSAIR Action Plan):** Actions within each Topic are the specific interventions planned by EUSAIR governance structures and stakeholders to achieve the defined objectives and targets. These actions may include new approaches, enhanced coordination in policy-making, policy reviews, support for ongoing processes, and networking initiatives. The TSGs, supported by the EUSAIR governance structure, will work to translate these actions into concrete project development processes, collaborating with stakeholders to bring added value to the region.
- **Action (Implementation format):** Actions represent concrete implementation activities and targeted interventions that contribute to flagship objectives but do not necessarily require the full development of a project fiche or proposal.
- **Action Plan (Implementation Format – Pillar-specific Action Plan):** An Action Plan is a type of implementation format used in EUSAIR that includes a detailed list of tasks that must be completed prior to designing a project or establishing its objectives within specific Pillar.
- **Action Plan (EUSAIR):** The *Action Plan* was developed to translate EUSAIR's objectives into tangible outcomes by identifying specific priorities for the Adriatic-Ionian Region. It addresses key challenges and opportunities in the Adriatic-Ionian Region through its structured Pillars and Topics. It outlines priorities and interventions, including policy coordination and networking, to be developed into concrete projects by TSGs and stakeholders. In alignment with the *Evaluation of the EUSAIR* outcomes regarding the need for revision, *Action Plan* was revised between January 2022 and June 2023.
- **Flagship:** Flagship is a high-priority initiative within a macro-regional strategy that addresses key challenges and opportunities, delivering significant added value to the region. Flagship functions as an umbrella framework composed of multiple, interconnected and complementary IFs, such as projects, networks,

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collaboration platforms, or road maps, that work together toward a common strategic goal and are carefully structured to contribute to one or more actions defined in the EUSAIR Action Plan.

- **Implementation formats:** The implementation format serves as a comprehensive framework in EUSAIR that terminologically encompasses various projects and initiatives. In terms of SP4EUSAIR and this document, these formats include flagships, pillar-specific action plans, master plans, road maps, strategic projects (mono-pillar or cross-pillar), and knowledge and support formats (studies, actions and other formats) designed and developed by the TSGs and/or other stakeholders to achieve its strategic goals.
- **Master plan:** A master plan is type of implementation format in EUSAIR that refers a dynamic, long-term planning document that provides a conceptual framework to guide future growth and development in a specific field. It connects various aspects such as underfunded actions or projects, cultural environments, and settings that are not fully addressed by the EUSAIR Action Plan or Flagships. A master plan includes analysis, recommendations, and proposals for the development of macro-regional strategic projects.
- **Other formats:** Additional implementation mechanisms that may be employed depending on the specific needs and context of each Pillar (e.g., ToRs for the development of targeted studies or expert analyses; educational and capacity-building materials developed in support of specific training programmes or workshops; methodological guidelines or implementation toolkits tailored to thematic priorities, etc.). These flexible instruments complement formal projects and studies by providing technical, methodological, or thematic support necessary for effective flagship delivery.
- **Road map** is a strategic document designed to provide a clear and structured path forward for a specific policy area, programme, or initiative. It outlines a series of prioritized steps, goals, timelines, and actions that need to be achieved to reach a defined set of objectives. Road maps help stakeholders understand the overall direction and vision of a project or initiative by breaking down complex goals into manageable tasks.

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- **Strategic projects (projects):** Strategic projects are type of implementation formats in EUSAIR whose primary goal is to outline tasks necessary to achieve the specific objectives or outcomes anticipated in the flagship. Also, they can represent mature, high-priority interventions that translate the visions and priorities outlined in action plans, master plans, and road maps into tangible outcomes. These projects are aligned with macro-regional objectives, EU priorities and available funding sources. When defining projects, it is important to distinguish between the terms *project fiche* (concept note) and *project proposal*.
 - A **project fiche** (concept note) is a short document that outlines the project idea, rationale, objectives, expected outputs, and potential funding sources, and identifies the Pillar and Flagship it addresses. Project fiches are prepared at the TSG level, by TSG members or relevant stakeholders, and submitted to all TSG members for review. They are approved through consensus during TSG meetings. Once approved and adopted, a funding-specific *project proposal* can be developed.
 - A **project proposal** is a more detailed description of the project, typically prepared using the application form required for a specific funding call. It includes comprehensive information about the partnership, territorial context, work packages and activities, budget, and other relevant elements.

Projects (project fiches and project proposals) are categorised as:

- **Mono-pillar projects**, which target objectives within a single EUSAIR Pillar.
- **Cross-pillar projects**, which address challenges that span across multiple Pillars, encourage inter-Pillar cooperation and integrated solutions.
- **Studies:** Studies refer to research and analytical work that underpin the implementation of EUSAIR objectives and serve as a foundation for informed decision-making (e.g., strategic studies, feasibility studies, investment

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studies, development plans, and impact assessments, etc.). They may be initiated as standalone exercises or as preparatory phases for future other IFs development.