

What is a 'macro-regional project'?

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Input paper

Introduction

EU macro-regional strategies (MRS) arise from a need to find more targeted solutions to common societal challenges. The MRS become efficient frameworks to engage relevant stakeholders in defining and implementing strategic actions and macro-regional projects (being called flagships, projects, example projects in different MRS). They are complex initiatives considering different perspectives.

Experience in implementation of the MRS shows that actions identified in the Action Plans¹ are well understood by the stakeholders, while the term 'project'² is causing misunderstanding.

This **paper is aiming to collect different inputs to the question on what is a macro-regional project as well as to provide some additional thoughts to it. The paper does not aim to replace a definition of a macro-regional project in different strategies** but only to compile various views and practice observations into a single document.

What is a macro-regional project?

Keeping in mind that MRS look for targeted solutions to address common societal challenges that cannot be solved solely on local, regional or national levels but requires transnational cooperation, **macro-regional project is seen as jointly established development processes to respond to actions defined in the Action Plan and implemented through interlinked activities** (e.g. meetings, groups, networks, platforms) **and operations** (called

Macro-regional project is: jointly established development process that aims to create a broad impact and achieve objectives and targets of the MRS. Macro-regional project is implemented through interlinked activities (e.g. thematic working groups, networks) and operations (projects).

¹ Action Plan accompanying the respective EU macro-regional strategy, respectively the [Action Plan for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region](#), the [Action Plan for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region](#), the [Action Plan for the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region](#), the [Action Plan for the Alpine Region](#).

² In a MRS context 'project' is meant development process aiming to create broad impact to the macro-region; and not a single project encompassing group of activities aiming to achieve specific objective of that project within defined time period and allocated budget.

also projects under some of funding programmes/ funding instruments).

In all four MRS macro-regional projects are named and described differently, however, in all of the definitions a common element is that it is a **strategic action across the macro-region aiming at bringing a change and making an impact to respond to a macro-regional challenge. Certainly it contributes to objectives and targets of the MRS and is implemented under (strategic) actions defined in the Action Plan accompanying the macro-regional strategy.**

Various stakeholders, funding instruments and programmes implement operations (projects). However, in order for a project to be recognised as a macro-regional project, it has to become development process including elements of **macro-regional relevance, transnationality, complementarity** and **impact** or **change**.

What characterises a macro-regional project?

Macro-regional project:

- is a process, not a one-time activity;
- aims to address a challenge defined in the Action Plan;
- contributes to objectives, priorities, targets and indicators defined in the Action Plan;
- is jointly agreed and developed, implemented and monitored by relevant stakeholders so they all share responsibility for the change it brings;
- have a clear macro-regional added value;
- integrates different perspectives and funding;
- is transnational or has transnational dimension, even if implemented regionally or nationally;
- by its structure is interlinking different activities (processes, like meetings, working groups, networks, platforms, etc.) and funded operations (projects);
- requires time for preparations, implementation and monitoring;
- considers cross-cutting aspects of the topic (interlinkages with other themes/ priorities/policies of the MRS).

Structure of a macro-regional project

Following definitions of macro-regional projects by different MRS, **macro-regional project is seen as a single project or as a process**. Actually, experience shows that 'project' or 'process' should not be seen as 'one or another'. A project can be initiated by a process (other activities, developments) or be an outcome of it. 'Projects' and 'processes' are interlinked to fulfil desired objective. Taking into account that often in MRS coordinators are interlinking various operations (projects), term 'project chain' is also used in the MRS context (see below).

What steps to be considered when developing a macro-regional project?

Step 1: **Choose societal challenge** (usually defined in the Action Plan) and **identify the macro-regional added value** in addition to local, regional, national value. Consider **what change this macro-regional project wish to address**. The Action Plans of MRS are listing broad scope of macro-regional challenges.

Step 2: Make a stakeholder analysis, **identify stakeholders** that can bring about change.

A greater involvement of all countries of the macro-region gives a greater chance for real policy impact.

Step 3: **Start building a macro-regional project and confirm relevance** (flagship, strategic project, action, as referred in different MRS). In case a macro-regional project is built by other stakeholder and not thematic (priority, policy, pillar, action) coordinator, the respective (macro-regional) thematic coordinator and priority, policy, pillar, action steering group/coordination group should be addressed to confirm a need and relevance of macro-regional project in question. Then, relevant stakeholders should be addressed to involve them in defining a macro-regional project.

Involvement of relevant actors in the process raises awareness and strengthens ownership of the MRS.

Step 4: **Plan your macro-regional project** – set up stakeholder groups and keep them involved in defining and planning activities (meetings, groups, networks, platforms) and operations (projects, where necessary). Share ownership!

The macro-regional project (built on interlinked activities and projects) has a potential to become the main format for implementation of MRS, integrating different perspectives and funding, involving various relevant stakeholders and aligning funding.

Step 5: **Implement, monitor and evaluate impact** of a macro-regional project. Set targets and indicators, find information for setting baselines, monitor and evaluate it towards impact and change the development process makes – steer macro-regional project in cooperation with stakeholders.

Macro-regional strategies have a potential to play an important role in the coordination of different funding sources (local, regional, national, EU), thought coordination between thematic coordinators and funds as well as openness of funding sources towards responding to the needs of the MRS and cooperation should be further worked on.

Communicate progress made by a macro-regional project (streamline indicator usage for showing the success, collect evidence about the changes in the region; identify concrete achievements; and communicate added value of the MRS in relation to other policy frameworks).

In cooperation with thematic (priority, policy, pillar, action) coordinator evaluate if a macro-regional project (implemented complementary projects, activities and networks) led to sufficient response to a priority/action defined in the Action Plan. Should it be so, the Action Plan would need amendment, should you have more aspects to consider to respond to the challenge, continue with designing additional processes.

Do not underestimate role of stakeholders involved in the process! They will help to make macro-regional project results sustainable and will ensure spill over effect of the project.



How to measure implementation of a macro-regional project?

A macro-regional project is initiated due to recognised gap or challenge in a macro-region. Impact and change made through implementation of a macro-regional project is desired outcome of it. It can be social, economic, environmental, policy or any other impact.

Due to broad thematic of the MRS, impact made by macro-regional project can be – better coordinated and implemented policy, change in approaches/ ways of addressing certain challenge, development of new ways, etc.

Assuming that a macro-regional project is aiming at changing or developing new ways of addressing relevant policy, it is often expected to bring policy impact or policy change.

The envisaged policy impact defines:

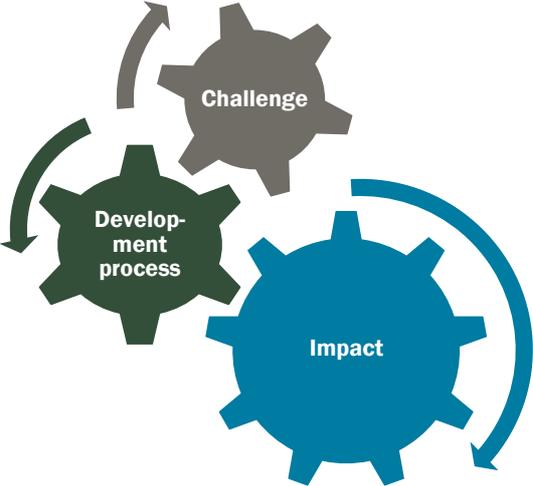
- which problem areas are to be addressed (the macro-regional project scope);
- which stakeholders are to be involved;
- what formats are needed within the macro-regional project (macro-regional development process);
- what interventions (regular operations (projects), initiatives, meetings, networks, etc.) are relevant, and
- consequently, what funding needs to be attracted and aligned - for achieving the envisaged change.

Thus, desire for a change and an impact is the red thread throughout the macro-regional project.

Macro-regional project should focus on measuring a change made towards achieving objectives to combat societal challenge.

Macro-regional project is evaluating impact (even its components) to the macro-region instead of measuring results.

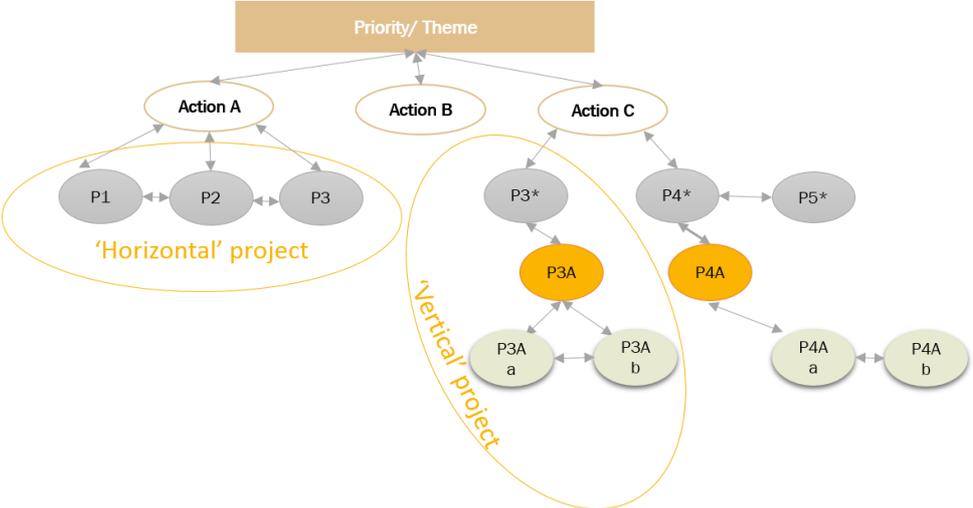
Despite almost ten years in implementation, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) is only now starting to make sense of its modus operandi, formalizing the macro-regional project - flagship as a vehicle for change/an impact.



What is a ‘project chain’ and ‘project – to policy loop’?

In implementation of MRS, more often terms ‘project chain’ and ‘project – to policy loop’ are used. When developing ‘project chains’ and ‘project –to policy loops’, those allow to set up and manage flexible and responsive process. They also ensure more sustainability for operations (projects), activities, networks, etc. if those are placed in the process.

‘Project chain’ is a process where several operations (projects) are interlinked within one priority, policy, pillar, action. ‘Project chain’ can be built interlinking projects implemented in parallel under priority, policy, pillar, action (shown below as ‘horizontal project’) or in successional order one after another (shown as ‘vertical project’). Picture below is used for illustration only.



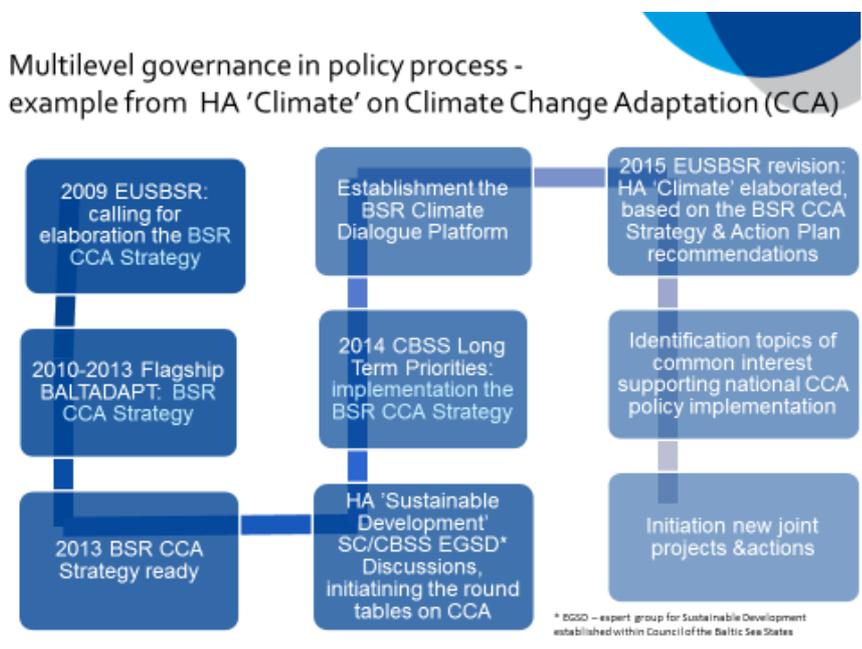
'Project – to policy loop' used by funding programmes showcase impact operations (projects) make to the territory.

There are examples and experiences where macro-regional projects have an impact on the policy.

'Project– to policy loop' is a process where a link between a macro-regional project and a policy change is ensured.
In this context macro-regional project can initiate policy discussion/change as well as be an outcome of it.

Horizontal Action 'Climate', EUSBSR

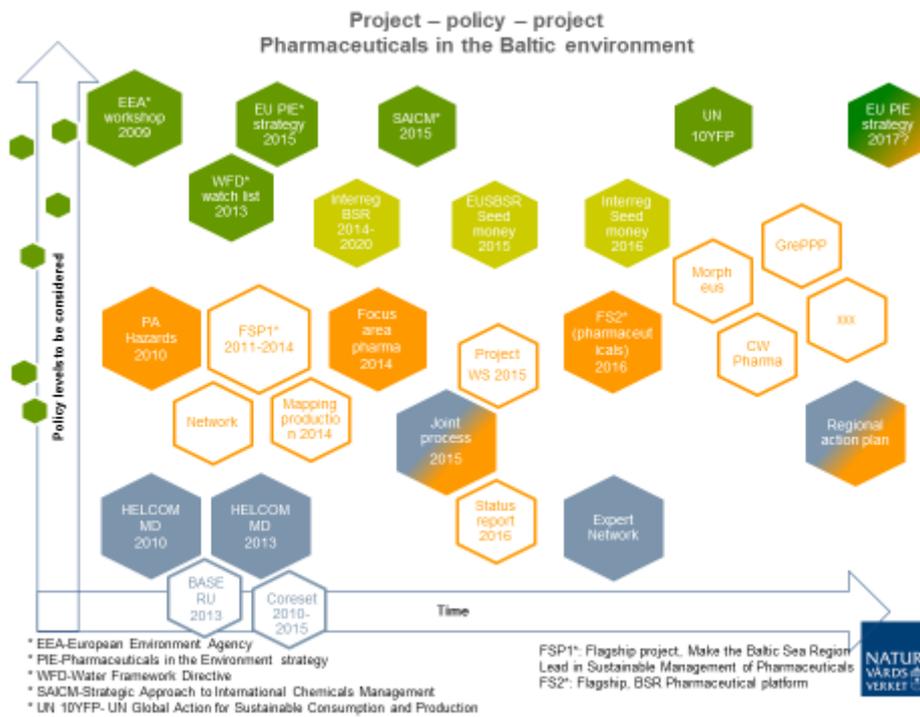
'Project – to policy loop' was initiated by the transnational project [BALTADAPT](#) as a direct response to the strategic decision addressed in the macro-regional strategy. As an outcome of the project [Baltic Sea Region-Wide Climate Change Adaptation Strategy](#) (CCAS) and its [Action Plan](#) were developed. The further implementation the CCAS becomes one of the CBSS strategic actions. As the CCAS highlighted the need for setting up a BSR level framework for following-up the CCAS and improving transnational climate cooperation, the CBSS member countries decided to establish the Baltic Sea Region Climate Dialogue Platform - a policy process in order to facilitate knowledge exchange among the Member States, to support the development and implementation of national climate policies and advance joint climate actions in the Baltic Sea Region. The Baltic Sea Region Climate Dialogue Platform becomes a new Flagship of the EUSBSR. For further details and developments please see the process in the slide below.



Policy Area 'Hazards', EUSBSR

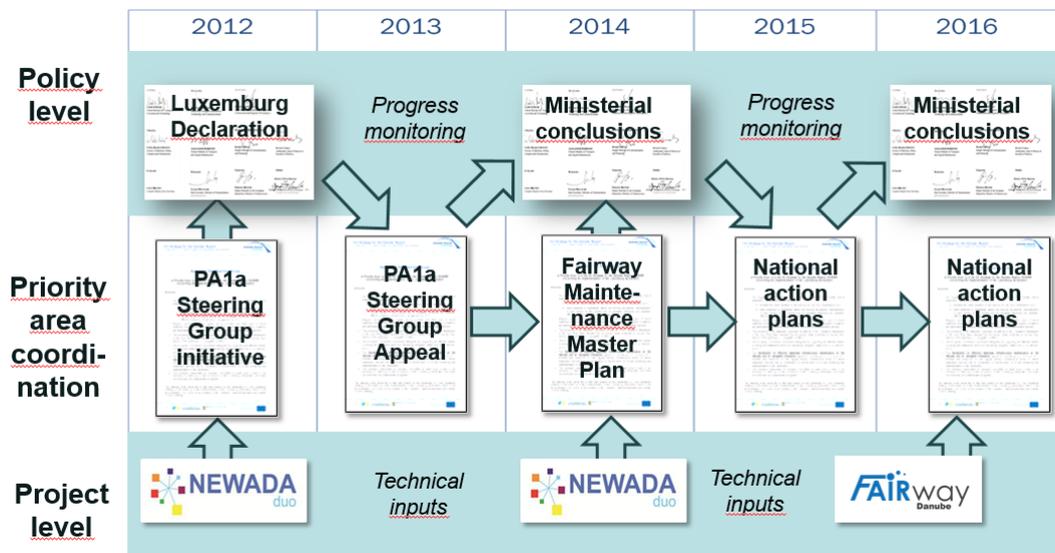
Implementation process (time) and complexity of the 'project – to policy loop' is well illustrated by Swedish Environmental Protection Agency acting as a coordinator for the EUSBSR Policy Area 'Hazards'. It was highlighted that it is important to see 'project – to policy loop' is a context of developments on the ground in regional and national, as well as

macro-regional, EU and even international levels. Cross-sectorial links need to be considered. Some of the projects initiated within the ‘project – to policy loop’ were never implemented although thoroughly planned. The conclusion shows that ‘project – to policy loop’ has experimental nature and to implement the process relevant time for its implementation should be allocated.



Priority Area 1a Navigation, EUSDR

The activities of Priority Area 1a ‘Navigation’ (see chart below) showcases how the macro-regional body (‘Steering Group’) triggers the interaction between projects and policy and thereby works as a hub and interface between the different levels, ministries and implementing bodies. It also illustrates how the Interreg project “Newada” developed into a clearly macro-regional one – “Fairway Danube” – with a different funding source, the Connecting Europe Facility. The MRS here establishes a loop that ensures the consistency and coherence between the different levels, but also throughout different projects and programmes.



Open issues to be considered and followed up when designing a macro-regional project

- **Resources:** Working on ‘project –to policy loop’ requires time, appropriate human and funding resources. Due to these and transnational nature of the coordinators’ work, allocating relevant human resources and finding appropriate funding is a challenge. In general, there is a lack of tailor-made funding that responds to the needs of macro-regional strategies.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Engagement of relevant national representatives in the ‘project –to policy loop’ is a crucial point for the success of the MRS, yet at the same time it’s a challenge that macro-regional coordinators are facing.
- **Policy impact on national level:** Internal (national) coordination mechanisms established in the countries of the MRS differ significantly. There is a question if and what information from the steering/coordination group of the thematic area is further communicated in the home country. Roles and responsibilities of the focal points to the thematic steering/coordination groups are not well assumed. Constantly changing steering/coordination group members is another challenge.
- **Involvement of Commission services:** There should be closer coordination with and more direct involvement of relevant Directorates-General of the European Commission in the implementation of the thematic priorities/policies/actions of the MRS. Outcomes of the macro-regional projects can be better used as an input to the EU level policy development.
- **Strategic aspect beyond projects:** The MRS are not necessarily perceived as integral part of institutional responsibilities as well as funding programmes, therefore, often outcome of the macro-regional framework is measured by number of implemented transnational projects. Instead the MRS should focus on developing and maintaining policy dialogue, change and impact.