

Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme (BONUS)

2009/0169(COD) - 30/01/2015 - Follow-up document

This Report presents the results of an Interim Evaluation in compliance with Article 13 of the Decision (862/2010/EU) of the European Parliament and Council concerning the participation of the Union in a Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme (BONUS) undertaken by several Member States.

Purpose of the report: the Decision requires the Commission to undertake an Interim Evaluation of BONUS no later than 31 December 2014 to assess progress towards the objectives set out in the Decision, as well as proposing recommendations to further enhance integration, quality and efficiency of implementation (including scientific, management and financial integration). The Interim Evaluation also assesses to what extent the financial contributions from the Participating States are appropriate, given the demands of their national research communities.

An Independent Panel with five experts has undertaken the Interim Evaluation of BONUS and their findings are provided within a detailed Evaluation Report.

This Report summarises the main conclusions of the Interim Evaluation and includes the Commission's observations.

Baltic Sea ecosystem and the programme's objectives: the Baltic Sea is unique: semi-land locked, one of the world's largest brackish water bodies, partially covered by winter ice, surrounded by nine States, eight of whom are EU Members. The Baltic Sea environment has been seriously affected by many pressures; both natural and man-made. These include pollutants such as dumped chemical weapons and heavy metal compounds. Also high levels of nutrients are linked to oxygen depleted dead zones, algal blooms and impacts on the natural fauna and flora. The unique biodiversity of the Baltic Sea Region has been further affected by the introduction of non-endemic alien organisms, fishing, maritime traffic, offshore activities, changing weather patterns, growing economies with increasingly intense agricultural practices and expanding coastal populations.

These pressures have seriously reduced the capacity of the Baltic Sea to provide the sustainable goods and services upon which the region depends directly and in terms of social, cultural and economic benefits.

Against this background, it has been considered that science can address these challenges and provide solutions to the urgent environmental problems facing the Baltic Sea. As a consequence, BONUS was established following the Decision of the European Parliament and Council as a joint undertaking of Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Finland and Sweden ("the Participating States") with the participation of the EU.

The overall objective of BONUS is to enhance the Baltic Sea Region's research capacity so as to underpin the development and implementation of 'fit-for-purpose' regulations, policies and management practices, to respond effectively to the major environmental and key societal challenges the region faces now and will face in the coming years.

This interim evaluation report covers progress of BONUS towards achieving its objectives.

Main conclusions from the interim evaluation report: on the basis of the evaluation report carried out by experts, the Commission considers that **BONUS is progressively achieving its objectives and has**

successfully established an integrated Research and Development Programme to tackle the challenges facing the Baltic Sea.

BONUS overcomes fragmentation of research programmes, brings together a variety of skills and focuses this effort on creating the essential knowledge and innovative solutions to overcome the Baltic Sea's environmental problems.

BONUS's macro-regional approach to the Baltic and its catchments has enabled stronger impact than a broader programme directed towards the EU as a whole could have achieved. The establishment of closer links between BONUS and the Baltic Sea Region Programme further enhances the impact and is in line with the objectives of Horizon 2020, which also seeks to further enhance synergies between research and European Structural and Investment Funds.

BONUS integrates research programming, supports establishment of a European Research Area and contributes to several key policies, notably:

- the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region,
- the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive,
- the EU Common Fisheries Policy and the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan.

Whilst a durable integration has been achieved with a particularly high level of scientific and managerial integration, there have been **difficulties concerning financial integration.**

Recommendations from the expert group: to strengthen the potential outcomes of BONUS, the Evaluation Report recommends to:

1. develop a synthesis of the research supported by BONUS since its start as an ERANET until its current status as an Article 185. This should highlight the achievements and impacts;
2. move towards the pooling of national funds to reduce the number and complexity caused by different funding streams. This would ensure more efficient management, reduce time to grant and overcome difficulties associated with applying common funding rules within national administrations;
3. take steps to increase the provision of in-kind infrastructure contributions to BONUS projects. For example, national administrations could provide incentives to partly subsidise the provision of infrastructure to BONUS. If the in-kind provision of infrastructure cannot be increased, further national cash contributions will be necessary to ensure that BONUS is fully implemented;
4. take steps to ensure that BONUS projects build synergies and network with other projects and initiatives within the Baltic Sea Region;
5. increase the interaction between the BONUS Advisory Board and the Steering Committee by, for example, virtual online meetings;
6. focus communications which highlight the impacts arising from BONUS towards the needs of specific stakeholder groups: institutions, conventions, policies, Directorates-Generals of the Commission, ministries and regional authorities, including those responsible for regional development;
7. the Participating States and the Commission should strengthen strategic communication on the potential of BONUS funded research results for policy to the different Directorates-Generals involved and within Horizon 2020;
8. improve the monitoring of BONUS by more systematic acquisition and analysis of data on the outcomes and impacts arising from BONUS by for example ensuring the regular effective surveying of stakeholders' opinions and by tracking the trends in the total amount and proportion of national funds channelled through BONUS;
9. target the communication of calls for proposals towards SMEs and provide additional support towards applications by SMEs and facilitate their incorporation within developing project consortia.

Commission feedback: overall, the Commission accepts these recommendations. Their implementation will be followed up as part of the Commission's oversight of the BONUS programme.

Recommendations concerning the provision of national funds are considered particularly important. **Separate administration of national funds for domestic beneficiaries has caused a less efficient structure.** The lack of a 'real common pot' to pool national funds risks insufficient national funding being available to support successful beneficiaries from certain countries within later BONUS calls.

To avoid this, the Participating States must be able to ensure that sufficient national funding is available to support all beneficiaries within successful BONUS projects. Early indications also show a potential shortfall in the value of national in-kind infrastructure contributions provided. Any shortfall will need to be addressed by either providing more in-kind infrastructure for free use within BONUS projects or by increasing national cash contributions. Otherwise, a serious shortcoming will be that BONUS is not be implemented to the programmes expected full financial value of EUR 100 million.

Also, in line with these recommendations, the Commission will seek to more systematically acquire and analyse relevant data to improve monitoring of the impacts arising from the BONUS programme and will strengthen the communication of relevant outcomes towards relevant services within the Commission.