Draft ORIENTATION PAPER
Transnational Cooperation Programme
North West Europe 2021-2027
Executive Summary

This Orientation Paper is a document of the Commission aimed at launching a discussion on the North West Europe Programme 2021-2027 (future NWEP) with participating countries concerned. It does not represent the negotiating position of the European Commission, but is destined to provide ideas, options and orientations on the thematic focus of the future programme. The current 2014-2020 programme area includes (regions in) the following Member States: Ireland, United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, France, Germany, and Switzerland as a third country.

The geography and financial support of the future NWEP would be significantly different compared to the current one\(^1\). Switzerland has requested withdrawing from the future programme.

The guiding principles for drawing this Orientation Paper are the following:

1. Coherence with Macro-Regional Strategies and Sea-Basin Strategies: The future NWEP will have only few links with the European Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) and the European Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). Article 15 (3) of COM(2018)374 does therefore not apply to this programme. However, it is recommended that the programme seek synergies and complementarities with the Atlantic maritime strategy, where relevant.

2. The Functional Area principle: A functional area is generally characterized by interdependencies or links within territories, where functional connections either unite or isolate territories and areas influenced by them. For transnational cooperation, functionalities can be found from common characteristics, challenges and development potentials and the need and potential to address them with the aim of delivering tangible results. Transnational cooperation is reaching its full potential when there is a strong will among participating countries to address those challenges jointly.

3. The Thematic Concentration principle: In view of limited budgetary resources and the requirement to focus support in areas where EU funds can achieve the highest benefit, the programme should concentrate on thematic key areas. EU funds under the future NWEP would therefore focus on a limited set of objectives and policy areas, thus achieving the highest possible impact, in terms of efficiency of funding and result orientation, taking into account the European Green Deal;

Based on these principles, the European Commission recommends concentrating the available ERDF contribution on, and under:

**Policy Objective 1** (a smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation),

**Policy Objective 2** (a greener, low-carbon Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate adaptation and risk prevention and management),

**Policy Objective 5** (a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives)

**Interreg-specific objective** (A better Interreg governance).

\(^1\) The potential participation of the UK in the programme depends on the outcome of negotiations on the future relationship.
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A. Introduction

1. This Orientation Paper sets out the key characteristics of the 2021-2027 North West Europe (NWE) programme area, which includes six Member States: Ireland, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxemburg, and Germany. The potential participation of the United Kingdom in the programme depends on the outcome of negotiations on the future relationship. Switzerland has requested withdrawing from the future programme.

2. This paper will serve as a basis for discussion between Member States, programme authorities and the European Commission on the Transnational Cooperation Programme for North West Europe 2021-2027 (future NWE). It does not represent the negotiating position of the European Commission, but is destined to provide ideas, options and orientations on the thematic focus of the future NWE. The paper relies on the profound analysis of relevant studies and other documents, and takes into account lessons learned from the previous and current NWE programming periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. Moreover, account has been taken of national, regional and other Interreg programmes operating in the area concerned, and of the European Semester Country Reports 2019 including their respective Annex D for the six participating Member States.

3. The current 2014-2020 NWE transnational programme area covers seven Member States and one non-EU member, and is home to more than 190 million people living in 96 regions, which include many of the most dynamic economic growth areas in Europe. The GDP per head (2018) of all participating Member States (and CH) scores above the EU-28 average (from 104% in FR to 254% in LU). However, GDP per head varies substantially across regions. While in most regions in DE, BE, NL, and IE, GDP per head exceeds the EU-28 average substantially, in other regions, in particular in FR (with the exception of Île de France), in South/East BE, and in North IE, this indicator is clearly below the average. In this context, it is interesting to note that French regions (with few exceptions) are the only ones in the whole NWE territory that are affected by net labour migration, a reinforcing trend since 2012-2016.

4. The current NWE territory presents several urbanized areas, including some cross-border areas (in FR, BE, NL, and LU, for example Lille/Tournai), and the DE/FR/CH border area, densely populated metropolitan agglomerations (such as London and Paris) and important urban centres (such as Dublin, London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Luxemburg, Stuttgart, or Zurich). Certain parts of the territory are exposed to challenges resulting from large rivers (NL, DE, FR, LU), others (DE, FR, CH) share Alpine challenges. The territory has large coastal areas (in IE, UK, NL, BE, DE, and FR) served by important harbours and includes important European transport corridors. The NWE area also comprises a number of rural areas (in BE, FR, DE) with a more remote character. This urban/rural divide within NWE also affects the levels of accessibility of its regions.

5. Cooperation across borders within the current programme area of NWE is taking place on many different levels/settings, in particular under other Interreg programmes, but increasingly also under ERDF mainstream programmes. Investments resulting from all types of programmes should indeed be taken into account, with the aim of avoiding thematic overlaps and creating synergies and complementarities with these programmes.

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2 CCI 2007CB163PO014.
3 CCI 2014TC16RFTN001.
5 Classification according to the 2014-2020 NWE (CH regions not included).
7 ESPON, 2020.
6. The current cooperation area of NWE is not directly connected to a macro-regional or sea-basin strategy. However, parts of the territory are covered by the Atlantic maritime strategy (regions in IE, and FR), the North Sea Strategy (regions in NL, BE), the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (DE), and the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (regions in DE, FR).

B. Foundation and challenges of the functional area of North West Europe

7. The cooperation area of the current 2014-2020 NWEP comprises the following countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRELAND</td>
<td>the whole territory (2 regions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED KINGDOM</td>
<td>the whole territory (40 regions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NETHERLANDS</td>
<td>9 regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BELGIUM</td>
<td>the whole territory (11 regions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRANCE</td>
<td>13 regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUXEMBURG</td>
<td>the whole territory (1 region)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GERMANY</td>
<td>20 regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWITZERLAND</td>
<td>the whole territory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. A functional area is generally characterized by interdependencies or links between territories, where functional connections either unite or isolate territories and areas influenced by them. For transnational cooperation, functionalities represent common characteristics accompanied by common challenges and development potentials. Transnational cooperation is reaching its full potential when there is a strong will to address those challenges and potentials jointly.

9. Different types of functional areas can be identified, such as functional urban areas, functional rural areas, urban-rural partnerships, cross-border areas, and transnational or macro-regions. In the NWE territory, several functional urban areas (Dublin, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Lille/Tournai, Luxembourg, Stuttgart, and Zurich), and potential cross-border/transnational functional urban areas (BE/NL/LU and FR/DE/CH) can be defined. Moreover, activities are particularly intense in several cross-border regions of the NWE territory (NL, DE, BE, FR and LU).

10. The current NWEP operates in a geographically atypical functional area. Cooperation in this functional area started in 1995 with the “Conference of the Regions of North-West Europe”, covering BE, NL, LU, parts of Germany, Northern France and the South-West of the UK. Following the operation of the Conference in 1999, two Interreg II C programmes were established. The Rhine/Meuse Action Plan (IRMA) operated from Den Haag and aimed at tackling flooding risks for the countries along the Rhine/Meuse Rivers (NL, BE, DE, LU, and CH). The densely populated North West Metropolitan Area (also called Central Capitals Region) was operating from London and comprised the metropolitan areas of BE, FR, DE, LU, NL, IE and the UK. These two programmes were the founders of the later Interreg III B NWEP and consequently the predecessors of the current NWEP. Therefore, the NWE functional area was considered as a combination of geographical challenges.

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8 Maritime Strategy for the Atlantic Ocean Area. COM(2011) 782 final. 21.11.2011. The maritime strategy is implemented through an Atlantic action plan. The plan is currently under revision and will focus on four priority areas emerged clustered under mutually reinforcing pillars: Pillar I – Ports as gateways and hubs for the blue economy; Pillar II – Blue skills of the future and ocean literacy; Pillar III – Marine renewable energy; Pillar IV – Healthy ocean and resilient coasts. https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/ares-2019-3453988_en
9 North Sea Commission Initiative for the North Sea.
10 ESPON, 2017.
imposed by the catchment area of the Rhine/Meuse Rivers, combined with a strong cooperation among the metropoles in this territory.

11. The current NWEP encompasses some of the technologically and economically most advanced regions in the European Union. Expenditure for Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) as percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is relatively high, with three Member States (DE, BE, and FR) above, and NL, LU and IE below the EU-28 average (2.06%)\(^{13}\). Many regions (NL, North BE, Île de France, and South DE) are among the leaders in innovation performance, whereas others (IE, North West FR, and South BE) are still strong\(^{14}\). However, there are no regions within the NWE territory with moderate or weak innovation performance.

12. Due to the high density of population and infrastructure in metropolitan and other urban areas of the NWE territory, as well as large transport infrastructure in many areas, energy consumption is substantial, resulting in air pollution and high GHG emissions, side by side with a relevant exposure to climate-related challenges. Moreover, given the location of many urban centres close to coastal areas and large rivers, risks related to climate change, such as flooding and drought, which may lead to decreased river navigability, are equally present in almost all areas. However, the potential to adapt to climate change is generally high, with few exceptions (IE, parts of FR). In green economy, many of the NWE regions qualify as very high/high economic performers with high potential (IE, NL, Paris and South DE), while others (in BE, FR) may be less capable\(^{15}\).

13. In transport, the current NWE territory includes some of the best-connected areas (BE, NL, LU, DE, London and Paris), whereas in some regions, above all in FR and IE, accessibility remains an important challenge\(^{16}\). Seven of the European Union TEN-T core network corridors are crossing the territory. Linked to this, air pollution resulting from road, inland waterway and maritime transport is also a critical issue in the area.

14. From a social inclusion perspective, NWE regions all together are ranking above the EU-28 average\(^{17}\), even though there is a clear divide between less performing regions (FR, South BE) and more developed regions (NL).

15. Quality of governance is considered as being increasingly relevant for sound implementation of place-based and sustainable regional development strategies. In this respect, the majority of NWE regions are generally well placed, though few exceptions (parts of BE and FR) exist\(^{18}\).

16. A delimitation of the functional area of NWE could also be defined as the so-called “blue banana area”, comprising the set of metropoles in the areas, such as Manchester, Birmingham, London, Rotterdam, Hague, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels, Düsseldorf, Dortmund, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Genoa, Turin and Milan\(^{19}\).

17. The current NWEP implements its strategy through supporting projects. The territorial distribution of projects provides valuable information on where the programme could have an impact and where

\(^{13}\) Eurostat, 2017.
\(^{14}\) EC, 2017b. ESPON, 2014.
\(^{15}\) ESPON, 2014.
\(^{16}\) ESPON Atlas, 2014.
\(^{17}\) EC, Social Progress Index, 2016.
\(^{19}\) The “blue banana” corridor (established in 1989 by a group of French geographers) is expanding over Central and Western Europe, stretching from North West England to Greater London, German Rhineland, Alsace, Southern Germany, Switzerland, and Northern Italy. See also EC, 1999.
not. Consequentially, regions with fewer lead and project partners benefit less from programme support. Most partners are located in the “Lille-Amsterdam-Dortmund” triangle, followed by Ireland, Scotland and Northern France. The concentration of funding could therefore serve as an indicator for a delimitation, which would comprise the “Lille-Amsterdam-Dortmund” triangle as a sub-category of the “blue banana area” mentioned before. In fact, the border region between France and Belgium, Wallonia, Southern Netherlands and Luxembourg stand out as areas where funding is concentrated. The picture remains similar for the distribution of support in France, and the UK with the exception of Scotland. At first sight, the economically well-performing regions dominate and receive most of the financial support. This is also true when analysing the distribution of funding per priority: ‘Innovation’ and ‘Resource and materials efficiency’ are clustered in BE, NL, LU, as well as in bordering areas of FR and DE.

18. Geographically, the current NWEP is very much associated with a sea basin, the North Sea, though it also covers the English Channel, which is linked with the Atlantic Ocean. The Interreg North Sea programme\(^{20}\) can be seen as the biggest potential competitor due to very similar thematic and geographical coverage (a major part of the Netherlands and Flanders as well as the UK – East of England and Scotland). Nevertheless, financial analysis suggests that the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme\(^{21}\), rather than North Sea, is perceived as a competitor to the NWEP. In addition, the Interreg ‘2Seas’ programme, whose area is entirely included in the NWEP, is the main competitor, as it covers 80% of the NWEP themes.

19. Nonetheless, the programme area includes an important European river catchment area, the Rhine/Meuse. All participating countries are associated with at least one of these sea or river basins. Consequently, one could argue that the functional area of the NWEP is delimited according to common challenges present along sea and river basins, and that the future NWEP is to be a platform for tackling these challenges jointly. On the other hand, the relevance of mountain range related challenges is relatively low, though these may be present in FR, DE, and CH\(^{22}\).

20. It has also to be noted that there are numerous national, regional and cross-border Cohesion Policy programmes active within and across the programme area, with partly substantial geographical and thematic overlaps between programmes. It must be an objective for the future programming to reduce thematic overlaps, by creating more complementarities and better coordination among all programmes operating in the area.

21. As the geography for the NWEP was designed in the 1990s in a framework for tackling jointly common territorial challenges, which have been transformed into thematic challenges, a better combination of these would be required, taking into account the functional area perspective. As to the challenges for the future NWEP, it can be noted that there is a strong link between certain thematic priorities of the current NWEP (see point 26 below) and Policy Objectives (PO) 1, 2 and 4 available for the future programming period 2021-2027. For the other thematic priorities, this relationship is average (PO 3) or low (PO 5).

22. Despite representing one of the most developed EU areas, the NWE programme area is facing in several regions significant territorial development needs. The main challenge for the future NWEP could therefore be to reduce developments gaps between less and more developed regions. More specifically, a number of challenges present in the programme area, such as mitigating climate

\(^{22}\) Meideros, 2018.
change and adapting to it, reducing air pollution, addressing increased mobility, and socio-demographic change, persist and could be considered under the future NWEP.

23. **Orientation**: A number of territorial challenges are persisting in the NWE territory. These are linked to geography and in particular, from the Rhine/Meuse river catchment area, which covers a large number of regions in the NL, BE, LU, FR, DE and CH, and whose challenges are related to transport, environment and climate change. The triangle “Lille-Amsterdam-Dortmund” could be an additional delimitation, which is economically well performing and is attracting substantial financial support from the current programme. The challenge would be to develop the innovative potential of this core area including adjoining regions. Finally, the NWE territory also comprises a number of rural and/or coastal areas with a more remote character, located in IE, BE, FR, and DE. This urban/rural/coastal divide within NWE also affects the levels of accessibility of its regions. NWE is characterized by high levels of heterogeneity among its regions, and many of these differences seem to be increasing with time. As a result, one of the main challenges for the NWE area is to manage excellence and diversity at once. One of the fundamental aims of the future NWEP could be is to stimulate transnational cooperation between various stakeholders in the NWE area to improve territorial cohesion.

**Lessons learned from previous programming periods:**

24. The **NWEP 2007-2013** was focussed on four strategical thematic priorities (allocation/%):

1. Knowledge-based economy and innovation (EUR 167 million/24%)
2. Sustainable development of natural resources and risk management (EUR 225 million/32%)
3. Sustainable transport solutions and ICT (EUR 148 million/21%)
4. Strong and prosperous communities (EUR 135 million/19%)

25. The overall aim of the 2007-2013 NWEP was to capitalise on the cooperation between key actors to address territorial issues across the NWE area. This was in order to contribute to NWE’s economic competitiveness while equally promoting regionally balanced and sustainable development. Under each priority, projects were implemented under three specific programme objectives, with clear references to territorial development needs under each priority and objective.

26. A large number of institutions (1,153) were involved in programme implementation, whereof 28% public organisations and 72% public-private service providers, and 114 projects were funded and concentrated in BE, NL, FR, and the UK, with a particular focus on the capital regions. The programme achieved or over-achieved its operational and financial target values in all priorities, and projects were highly relevant to EU2020. The final evaluation report underlines the programme contribution in particular to fighting poverty and social exclusion, sustainability, innovation and application of research. An impact assessment showed that a large majority of projects concerned sustainable and smart growth, in particular business R&D investments. The programme had a strong and positive impact on design and implementation of policies, such as environment, transport, climate change, energy, enterprise and R&D, and on production of new knowledge and sustainable practice in many areas. Joint design, development, decision-making, implementation and dissemination above legal requirements were another positive outcome of the programme.

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26 NWE, 2015b, p.5.
27. Although some regions of the NWEP area overlapped with the Atlantic maritime strategy and the Macro-Regional Strategy for Danube Region\(^\text{28}\), the thematic focus of the programme was different\(^\text{29}\). Furthermore, the programme had (partial or full) overlaps with 21 other Interreg programmes, of which the majority shared comparable priorities\(^\text{30}\). Some problems occurred with definition of indicators and subsequent reporting.

28. The **NWEP 2014-2020** centres on **three thematic objectives (priority axes)** (allocation/%)\(^\text{31}\):

1. Innovation (EUR 218 million/35%)
2. Low carbon (EUR 244 million/39%)
3. Resource and materials efficiency (EUR 158 million/25%)

Projects are implemented under **five specific objectives**:

ad 1. To enhance innovation performance of enterprises throughout NWE regions
ad 2. To facilitate the implementation of low-carbon, energy and climate protection strategies to reduce GHG emissions in NWE
ad 2. To facilitate the uptake of low carbon technologies, products, processes and services in sectors with high energy saving potential, to reduce GHG emissions in NWE
ad 2. To facilitate the implementation of transnational low-carbon solutions in transport systems to reduce GHG-emissions in NWE
ad 3. To optimise (re)use of material and natural resources in NWE

29. The territorial challenges of the programme have been grouped according to the Europe 2020 Strategy\(^\text{32}\). Given that for smart growth, significant disparities existed at the same of programme design across the participating regions, labour mobility and research networks was to be encouraged, while ensuring that new knowledge is translated into commercial applications\(^\text{33}\). Climate change adaptation and in particular water management, which was successfully funded under the previous NWEP, was no longer a core issue for transnational cooperation, since different government levels have taken up this challenge. The inclusive growth challenge was transferred from priority 4 (2007-2013) under priority 1 (social innovation) of the programme, but later on it was found to be more relevant on local than on transnational level. Consequently, the NWEP 2014-2020 was focussed on smart growth and environmental issues.

30. The distribution of ongoing projects appears to be well balanced between priorities and specific objectives\(^\text{34}\). Project partners of 55 approved projects so far (whereof 30 approved in 2018) are concentrated in the programme area centre, but also involve IE and Northern UK, which is an improvement as to the previous programming periods\(^\text{35}\). In particular, at least 15 projects (16%) have a UK lead partner, and more than 169 UK partners (18% of all partners) are involved in more 82 projects (87% of all projects), while 20% of programme funds have been allocated to these UK partners. Allocations to the other participating countries are approximately as follows: Belgium 16%, France 18%, Germany 16%, Ireland 8%, Luxemburg 2%, the Netherlands 20%, and Switzerland 0%. The involvement of the UK is therefore substantial, both in terms of budget and content\(^\text{36}\), as well as in project design and implementation. On the other hand, projects under the ‘Innovation’ and

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\(^{29}\) NWE, 2015a, p. 19.

\(^{30}\) NWE, 2015b, p.5.


\(^{33}\) Medeiros, 2018, p. 185.

\(^{34}\) NWE, 2018, 3.1.

\(^{35}\) Medeiros, 2018, p. 188.

\(^{36}\) NWE, 2018, 5.a) 5.
‘Resource and materials efficiency’ priorities are clustered in BE, NL, and LU, as well as in bordering areas of FR and DE.

31. Due to the thematic shift of the programme in favour of competitiveness, ‘low carbon’ investments and resource efficiency, interested institutions and other parties had to change their visions into the new funding areas. This shift also influenced the communication strategy. Partnerships are still relevant for delivering specific objectives and partners from different types of organisations and less covered territories are needed to deliver concrete outputs and results37. However, it was also found that some themes are not sufficiently covered and in particular, those linked to environmental challenges (such as CO2 capture, circular economy, traffic management, land/soil, and plastics38.

32. The current NWEP delivers satisfactory outputs, and most of the indicators will be overachieved, though financial implementation remains behind schedule, also because projects are spending less money than envisaged. Closer result and impact orientation is a recommendation resulting from experience under the previous NWEP 2007-201339. Therefore, projects under the NWEP 2014-2020 are generally contributing the programme’s specific objectives with concrete results, which support the formation of strong partnerships and exchange of knowledge. This underlines the programme’s main contribution consisting in increasing capacity, learning and demonstration projects40. Overall, the support from the programme spreads well between poor and well-performing regions, thus helping to reduce disparities in regions where projects are operating. There is a positive contribution of the programme to cross-border and international cooperation in smart and sustainable growth41.

33. With a view to the future NWEP, the evaluators recommended an adjustment of the intervention logic and result indicators, with the aim of better capturing qualitative contributions to enablers, such as cooperation, coordination and governance42. There is a need for improvement of the measurement of results and impact on project level via the indicator system. Many regions are still not involved in the programme, and the distribution of beneficiaries of projects is not equal across the programme area. It would therefore be important to allow newcomers to attract the programme, for example private partners or civil society actors. According to the evaluators, it would be advisable to include more regions than the centrally located ones, e.g. rural areas, which have not participated yet, with the aim of contributing more to the reduction of territorial disparities in a geographically visible way. The trend to involve more partner countries may be justified in certain cases, for example business support, but the evaluators consider the need for a better reconnection between themes and areas for the future NWEP. The principle of designing geography first and the territorial and thematic justification second, might have led to thematic choices that are disconnected from territorial challenges. It would therefore be advisable to improve definition of indicators and selection criteria, with the aim of better allocating projects to territorial strategies.

34. Two external factors have been found to facilitate the programme’s contributions to the Europe 2020 Strategy. First, other national and regional ESIF programmes operating within the NWE territory, and Interreg programmes with similar activities, which overlap with the NWE, as well as other national or regional funding schemes and programmes for the relevant policy fields with more substantial funding than the NWEP.43 Such synergies are more prominent in certain countries (NL), which undertook, efforts to match NWE projects with other national strategies or funding sources. At

37 Medeiros, 2018, p. 189.
38 NWE, 2018, 3.1.2.
40 NWE, 2018, ii–iii.
41 NWE, 2018, iii–iv.
42 NWE, 2018, ii–iii.
43 NWE, 2018, p. 73–74.
the same time, there is a strong overlap with other Interreg programmes, in particular ‘2Seas’ and ‘Atlantic Area’ that are the main competitors for the NWEP. For the future NWEP, it is therefore important, according to the evaluators, to promote complementarity and coordination among Interreg programmes, with the aim of creating more clarity for applicants and maintaining attractiveness of the NWEP. More coordination with national authorities and with other Interreg programmes operating in the area would therefore rationalize the use of programme resources and restrict competition, and avoid that project applicants and consultants go ‘shopping’ among available programmes in the area.

35. Because of a possible mismatch between territories and challenges (see point 31), programmes may have become more rigid, technical and complex, and with less expertise in content. It might therefore be important to reshape programme areas, and to develop territorial strategies with measurable indicators and selection criteria for projects, including those contributing to softer aspects of cohesion and development. A transnational programme should cover a geographical area that shares common challenges, which require cooperation across border in order to be properly addressed. Such challenges could be related to a large river or sea basin, or concern a ‘transnational territorial capital’, such as renewable energy sources, larger industrial or rural areas, or areas presenting environmental risks. The current NWEP encompasses the North Sea basin, the English Channel (linked to the Atlantic Ocean) and the Rhine/Meuse river basins. The programme fills a critical gap for cross-border, international cooperation. Some problems or issues are best solved through co-operation across borders, as domestic funding programmes fail to provide support beyond administrative boundaries. The future NWEP could be based on these common challenges, and could address issues of transboundary air pollution, green economy, development gaps between regions, and climate change.

36. Given these aspects, it would therefore be recommendable to reconsider the current match between territories and challenges. This would lead the European Commission to redefining the functional area(s) of the future NWEP. All remaining Member States would cover the Rhine/Meuse/Moselle Rivers catchment area, and challenges resulting from transport, low-carbon policies, and climate change could be addressed under the future NWEP. Common challenges resulting from metropolitan agglomerations located in the NL, BE, DE, LU and FR could also be considered within the same or a similar functional area. On the other hand, certain more remote regions in FR and DE, which would still be covered by other transnational programmes, such as the Atlantic Sea, the Danube or the Alpine Space programmes, could be excluded from the future NWEP. The aim would be to focus on the functionalities of the Rhine/Meuse catchment area and the knowledge-based urban metropoles linked to this area.

37. In the 2014-2020 programming period, 6 Interreg V-B Transnational and 15 Interreg V-A CBC Programmes coexist in the NWE area, which partly overlap with the territory of the NWEP. In addition, there are a large number of national and regional ESIF mainstream programmes for the seven participating Member States, which cover the relevant national and/or regional territory participating in the programme. Annex 1 lists the programmes and the different thematic objectives

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44 NWE, 2018, i.
45 Spatial Foresight, 2018.
46 Interact, 2017b.
47 EC, 2017.
48 NWE, 2018, iv.
49 The NWEP could address Inland waterway transport and linked to this envisage the inclusion of the two Northern regions in the Netherlands, also in view of the Dutch and the European Green Deal, and based on interim findings of the LIFE project “CLINSH” (Clean Inland Shipping).
supported by these programmes, also with a view to the objective of the future NWEP to achieve complementarities with other programmes in the NWE area.

C. Investment objectives linked to the challenges

38. In this section, orientations are presented with respect to the five policy objectives (PO) and one (of two) Interreg-specific objective\(^ {50}\), under which funding of the future NWEP could take place. As outlined in section B, a number of common challenges would justify the delimitation of the NWE territory as one functional area though, according to the evaluators of the current NWEP 2014-2020, it might be worth looking for a better matching between territorial and thematic challenges.

39. The NWE functional area could be considered as a combination of geographical challenges imposed by the Rhine/Meuse river basins and a strong cooperation among the metropoles located in the territory. This is independent of whether the geographical delimitation of the future NWEP is being adapted due to other factors or the reshaping of other transnational programmes in the area (e.g. the Atlantic Sea and/or North Sea programmes).

PO 1: A smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation

40. The NWE area encompasses some of the most technologically developed regions in the European Union. Innovation and business support is a core area of support under the current NWEP, which is significantly contributing to connecting universities, R&D centres and businesses. The current NWEP aims strongly at promoting innovation and competitiveness of the territory\(^ {51}\). Urban areas in NWE are innovation locations, and innovation and its economic application is largely concentrated in capital and other larger cities\(^ {52}\).

41. Smart specialization strategies developed by Member States and regions are an expression of sound innovation policies and as such of interest to non-EU countries, too, which are willing to improve their innovation systems. Cooperation across borders could provide additional incentives for the development of innovation systems inside and outside the EU with a view to establishing global value chains. Therefore, transnational cooperation could aim at investing in R&D and innovation in areas where e.g. metropolitan agglomerations and the transport corridors between them, share common challenges and can cooperate effectively across the NWE territory. Potential areas in which the future NWEP could operate are traffic management with a particular view to air pollution, circular economy\(^ {53}\), regional smart specialization (FR, IE), social innovation, and addressing the challenges of overpopulated urban spaces.

42. Orientation: The future NWEP could promote innovation and R&D to better connect the regions, in particular in their respective smart specialization priority areas. Regions could complement their assets and potentials in order to attain critical mass and necessary scope to compete together at global scale. Innovation could support business and research needs, which address social challenges, environmental protection, water management needs resulting from climate change, air pollution, sustainable transport and renewable energies. The focus could be on supporting sets of projects to develop, connect and share testing and demonstration facilities, with the aim of accelerating market uptake and scale-up of innovative solutions in common specialization priority areas. Moreover,

\(^{50}\) The external Interreg-specific objective “a safer and more secure Europe” does a priori not apply to this programme.

\(^{51}\) NWE, 2015b, p. 15.

\(^{52}\) ESPON, 2017, 9.1.

\(^{53}\) ESPON, 2017, 6.3.2., and INTERREG NorthWest Europe project “LaMiLo” quoted.
development of new methods and better indicators for measurement of results and impact could also be funded under this PO.

43. **Orientation**: Cooperation could focus on pilot feasibility studies, with the aim of exploring “soft” measures to improve traffic management throughout the NWE area. Such measures could also include ICT solutions for coordinating traffic flows, promote multimodal transport and optimize sustainable logistics and behavioural patterns of operators, including circular economy approaches. Topics could include addressing the negative externalities of road and inland waterway transport, such as congestion and air pollution, and interruption of ecosystem continuity. The future NWEP could also promote deployment of new technologies, e.g. alternative fuels infrastructure, digitizing transport, integrated traffic management systems, and automated and connected driving and sailing. It could further support coordination and dialogue related to these topics across the borders. As cities and regions face similar challenges resulting from mobility, it could be useful to provide a platform where they can coordinate their efforts to develop automated driving corridors, cross-border public transport, low emission zones, environmental certification of vessels or integrated ticketing.

44. **Orientation**: There is a strong overlap with ETC programmes in the area, with a lack of complementarity. Overlaps stimulate a ‘comparative’ approach to ETC by applicants who may choose programmes offering a better success rate, a better co-funding rate or more simple procedures than the NWEP. The future NWEP could be better coordinated with other EU programmes operating in the area. These could include directly managed EU programmes such as Horizon Europe and the Connecting Europe Facility, with the aim of achieving synergies and complementarities with respect to actions funded under this Policy Objective, which is currently (see Annex 1) - and most probably also in future - funded under almost all such relevant EU programmes.

**PO 2: A greener, low-carbon Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate adaptation and risk prevention and management**

45. Becoming the world’s first climate-neutral continent by 2050 is the greatest challenge and opportunity of our times. To achieve this, the European Commission presented the European Green Deal in December 2019, the most ambitious package of measures that should enable European citizens and businesses to benefit from sustainable green transition. Measures accompanied with an initial roadmap of key policies range from ambitiously cutting emissions, to investing in cutting-edge research and innovation, to preserving Europe’s natural environment.

46. Supported by investments in green technologies, sustainable solutions and new businesses, the European Green Deal can be a new EU growth strategy. Above all, the European Green Deal sets out a path for a transition that is just and socially fair. It is designed in such a way as to leave no individual or region behind in the great transformation ahead.

47. Climate change mitigation and adaptation are relevant challenges for the future NWEP. Metropolitan agglomerations and urban areas in particular are issuing substantial GHG emissions, and are facing traffic congestions and related issues. Promoting sustainable road and waterborne transport could not only reduce emissions of GHG but also of air pollutants which are currently significantly affecting

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54 NWE, Implementation Evaluation, 2.4.1.
the population in sea coastal areas (maritime transport) and river shore areas (inland waterway transport). Given the location of many urban centres close to coasts and rivers, the NWE territory is particularly exposed to climate change related risks, such as flooding on the one hand, and low river water levels resulting from drought, on the other hand.

48. Energy transition policies are crucial for the future state of the environment in the whole NWE territory. Most NWE regions have a good green economic performance and potential, which could be developed, with the aim of becoming a space of green excellence. Circular economy could be a supported policy for promoting resource efficiency, also in association with traffic management (see point 32). The strong knowledge-based capacity of the participating countries, and many of their regions and urban agglomerations presents a solid basis for pilot projects and initiatives under this PO, and results could be disseminated to other regions of NWE. With respect to its performance (IE, DE, NL, CH) and potential (FR) of green economy, the NWE territory is in an excellent position to contribute significantly to a low-carbon Europe. In this context, stimulating the cross-border SME environment (BE, LU, FR) by increased cooperation, sharing of best practices and economies of scale between SMEs from different Member States, could be another challenge. Themes would preferably include market integration and participation and labour mobility.

49. **Orientation:** The future NWEP could invest in adaptation and mitigation of risks resulting from climate change (large storms, floods and droughts). Particular focus could be laid on coastal and river catchment areas, such as the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea and the Rhine/Meuse river basins. Such projects and initiatives could address issues such as water quality and river navigability. In addition, closer synergies between existing infrastructures for coastal protection would improve the monitoring of the coastline’s evolution in the EU Atlantic area. Compiling an inventory of existing regional adaptation strategies and infrastructures, and sharing best practices could be supported under the future programme.

50. **Orientation:** The programme could promote low-carbon strategies for the entire territory, with a particular view to developing those regions where the low-carbon energy performance is still relatively low (parts of BE, FR). Investments could include development of innovative and sustainable road and waterborne transport solutions with low emissions of air pollutants, and could support the implementation of Emission Control Areas\(^56\) and their extension. Investments leading to efficient energy consumption and reinforced use of renewable energies could complement relevant national low-carbon strategies and national air pollution control programmes. In this context, Maritime Spatial Planning\(^57\) could also be taken into account, where relevant.

51. **Orientation:** Moreover, the future NWEP could promote the circular economy. Cooperation, exchange of experience and coordination for developing joint initiatives in conjunction with relevant EU policies could lead to pilot projects and initiatives, which could be also applicable in all NWE areas.

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\(^{56}\) Emission Control Areas have a high impact on the reduction of ship emissions. They currently exist in the North Sea, the English Channel, and the Baltic Sea: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0188

\(^{57}\) The last ministerial meeting of the North Sea Energy Cooperation endorsed a new work programme to address these issues. https://kefm.dk/media/12744/joint-statement-on-the-deliverables-of-the-energy-cooperation-between-the-north-seas-countries.pdf
PO 3: A more connected Europe by enhancing mobility and regional ICT connectivity

52. The NWE territory encompasses some of the best connected regions in the European Union, such as BE, NL, LU, DE, and Paris agglomeration), whereas certain regions (in FR, IE) have still large potential for improvement. Connectivity within NWE regions benefiting from Trans-European Networks (TEN-T) is crucial and therefore, transport corridors have to be better explored and TEN-G continuity has to be ensured. On the other hand, many NWE regions are suffering from negative side effects of good accessibility, in particular those mentioned before. Therefore, cooperation, coordination and exchange of experience is also required to mitigate negative effects resulting from road traffic, such as congestion, noise, bad air quality, and environmental damage (BE, NL, LU, DE, FR), and maritime and inland waterway transport, where relevant.

53. Orientation: The future NWEP should not invest in large-scale transport projects improving accessibility, as for this purpose other EU (ERDF, CEF); national and regional funds with larger financial means would be available. Certain actions addressing negative external effects from transport could be envisaged under PO2.

PO 4: A more social Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights

54. With a few exceptions (in FR, BE), NWE regions figure among those EU-28 regions that have an above-the-average index of social inclusion. However, there is a clear divide between less-developed regions and more developed regions (in BE, NL, DE). Consequently, the programme could address issues of labour force mobility and integration of labour markets, with the aim of stimulating employment in certain regions. Reducing unemployment of young, long-term and elderly job-less people and strengthening lifelong learning could also be an area to address. While overall demographic dynamism is considered a strength of the NWE area, there are also regions where population is decreasing because of out-migration (almost exclusively in FR), and which would need attention especially under a demographic aging perspective.

55. Orientation: Challenges related to unemployment in certain regions of the future NWEP and changing needs on the labour markets including labour force mobility across borders could be tackled by the ESF+, in particular under their national and regional programmes under PO4, or other sources.

PO 5: A Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives

56. The current NWE programme seeks to reduce gaps between the economically weaker and the stronger regions. In most countries, poverty and social exclusion is visible in larger urban areas, in particular excluded neighbourhoods, while in rural areas, such phenomena are less visible. Sustainable and integrated strategies could be developed and implemented, also between partners of different countries, if appropriate (BE+NL, FR+DE), with the aim of improving accessibility of citizens to services of general interest, such as energy, administrative e-services, e-health, education, social affairs and services related to climate change and adaptation to it, the quality of the environment, and others.

57. Orientation: Measures to promote capacities and empowerment on local level can help weaker and excluded these areas to become more visible. Cooperation and exchange of experience on a larger NWE scale, involving partners from different countries and regions, could be supported under the

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**future NWEP.** Innovative approaches (including in metropoles and other functional urban areas) could be developed jointly with the aim of improving access to services of general interest in such places. The creation of innovative city clusters and networks for tackling emerging challenges could also be promoted. The use of small project funds could be envisaged for better implementation. In this respect, complementarity and coordination with innovation-related investments contributing to sustainable urban development and supported under relevant national and regional mainstream programmes is important.

58. **Orientation:** The future NWEP could support bottom-up territorial strategies to consider the specificities of inner-peripheries and smaller areas (incl. coastal regions and islands) threatened by out-migration and fragmentation.

**INTERREG-specific objectives:** Better INTERREG governance

59. According to the Commission proposal for a 2021-2027 ETC Regulation, 15% of the ERDF funding for an Interreg programme shall be allocated to the Interreg-specific objective of ‘a better Interreg governance’. In particular, the programmes aligned with macro-regional strategies and sea-basin strategies should support the governance of such strategies.

60. The NWE functional area has, with few exceptions (in FR, BE) a high potential for implementing place-based and sustainable development strategies, due to its good quality of government. The current programme management is decentralized, consisting of a regional managing authority and a monitoring committee composed of participating countries taking the decisions. The concentration of responsibilities sometimes provokes conflicts between national interests and interests of transnational cooperation. As Member States are measuring their “success rate” by the return of funds to their own territory, the “national” side of the programme is very visible.

61. Member States have decided to set up contact points (facilitators) rather nationally than at programme level. Both existing contact points and the Joint Secretariat of the programme provide technical assistance to beneficiaries, a situation which provokes lack of continuity between both types of technical support. As programme facilitators have to deal with contradictory missions (national versus cooperation interests), project development can be negatively affected, i.e. lead to reduced efficiency of project selection and weaker monitoring of results. The future role of local stakeholders (contact points) is therefore an important issue. ETC programmes in the NWE area should establish a coordinating body. Coordination should start in the Contact Point drafting phase (when establishing thematic priorities, co-financing rates etc.). This could be supported through a scoping study to find the specificities of NWE projects, and a study identifying the territorial needs of NWE compared to other programmes in the area and to other territorial dimensions (e.g. CBC).

62. **Orientation:** In the future NWEP, a better separation of functions of the national contact points and the Joint Secretariat could be promoted. Voting by majority instead of consensus voting in the monitoring committee could also be reconsidered, in order to avoid that decisions are blocked by one Member State. The programme could also promote better local governance, with the aim of allowing citizens to propose and operate projects independently of a partnership between countries.

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60 The Interreg-specific objective ‘a safe and more secure Europe’ does a priori not apply to this programme.

61 EC, Quality of Government Index, 2017.
63. In addition, programme governance should be based on the partnership principle\(^{62}\), which is a key feature covering the whole programme cycle including preparation, implementation and participation in monitoring committees, building on the multi-level governance approach and ensuring the involvement of economic, social and environmental partners. Examples of good practice include involving representatives of different interests in the programming process; involving them in programme evaluation or other strategic long-term tasks, such as setting up temporary working groups, consulting all members efficiently on key documents. An active involvement of partners should be ensured by their participation in key steps. Technical Assistance can be made available from the programme to facilitate their full involvement during the whole programme cycle.

64. In accordance with the orientations concerning the selection of POs above (section C), a stronger link with relevant national and regional EU Cohesion Policy programmes, as well as cross-border programmes is crucial. According to the proposed legislation\(^{63}\), Member States are encouraged to include cooperation activities with other countries under their national and regional programmes. PO 3 (transport and connectivity) and 4 (employment) are not explicitly considered for the future NWEP, but cooperation activities under these POs could be promoted under relevant national and regional EU Cohesion Policy programmes, Horizon Europe, Connecting Europe Facility, Invest Europe, and/or other Interreg programmes, where appropriate. Links to strategic cooperation frameworks, such as the Atlantic maritime strategy and its revised action plan, could also be established.

D. Conclusions for the 2021-2027 period for the cooperation area, including strategic orientations and relationship to macro-regional strategies/sea-basin strategies

65. Based on the considerations elaborated in the previous sections for transnational cooperation topics, it is proposed to consider the thematic focus of the future NWEP as outlined in the table below.

66. European Semester Country Reports 2019 for the six EU Member States concerned (IE, BE, NL, LU, DE, and FR) and their respective Annexes D, identify potential areas for cooperation. Cooperation should therefore be promoted between Transnational Programmes and CBC Programmes covering the same territories, as well as between Transnational Programmes and other EU Programmes, with a particular attention to EU Cohesion Policy programmes covering the same region or Member State and the same Policy Objectives. This should always happen in close coordination with the DG REGIO geographical units responsible or relevant Commission services. The list of 2014-2020 programmes (CBC and ERDF) is attached to this document (Annex 1).

67. In addition, the future NWEP should also take into account, in its thematic and territorial challenges and its responses to these, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region, and the Atlantic maritime strategy, all covering parts of the NWE programme area.


\(^{63}\) Proposal for a Regulation COM(2018)375, Article 17 (3) (d).
**PO1**

- Cooperation in projects that scale up innovation solutions across regional ecosystems, in particular in smart specialization priority areas;
- Promotion of social innovation and R&D in this field, innovation and R&D in employment, environmental protection, resource and material efficiency, low-carbon strategies, circular economy, water management, transport, air pollution and renewable energies, with a particular view on cooperation among SMEs from different Member States;
- Cooperation in sets of projects to develop, connect or make complementary use of testing and demonstration facilities to accelerate market uptake;
- Cooperation in pilot feasibility studies, aiming at exploring “soft” measures to improve traffic management, including ICT solutions for coordinating traffic flows, promote multimodal transport and optimize sustainable logistics and behavioural patterns of operators;
- Cooperation in addressing negative externalities of road and inland waterway transport, such as congestion, air pollution, and ecosystems interruptions.
- Cooperation in deployment of new technologies for road and inland waterway transport, e.g. alternative fuels infrastructure, digitizing transport, integrated traffic management systems, and automated and connected driving and sailing; and in coordination and dialogue related to these topics across the borders;
- Cooperation in developing a platform for coordination of actions and initiatives to develop automated driving corridors, cross-border public transport, low emission zones, environmental certification of vessels, and integrated ticketing.

**PO2 (strongest focus)**

- Cooperation and exchange of experience in terrestrial protected areas in order to protect environmentally sensitive areas especially in urban agglomerations; such initiatives could include air and water quality investments;
- Cooperation in developing low-carbon strategies, with a particular view on regions with a relatively low green economic performance;
- Cooperation in reducing energy consumption and use of renewable energies;
- Cooperation in reducing emissions from maritime and inland waterway transport as well as ports, and improving water management and river navigability (flooding and droughts);
- Cooperation in the circular economy, in particular in areas with high potential;
- Cooperation in mitigating effects on waste production and waste management;
- Cooperation and exchange of experience and coordination for developing joint initiatives in conjunction with relevant EU environmental policies, and pilot projects and initiatives, which could be also applicable in all NWE areas.

**PO 5**

- Cooperation in promoting capacities and empowerment on local level;
- Cooperation in innovative approaches with the aim of improving access to services of general interest in metropoles and other functional urban and rural areas;
- Cooperation in innovative city clusters and networks for tackling emerging challenges;
- Use small project funds for better implementation;
- Cooperation in innovation-related investments contributing to sustainable urban development and supported under relevant national and regional mainstream programmes;
- Cooperation in bottom-up territorial strategies for inner-peripheries and smaller areas threatened by out-migration and fragmentation.

**Interreg-specific objective of better governance (15%)**

- Joint approaches for a better separation of functions of the NCP and the Joint Secretariat;
- Joint approaches for better local governance, with the aim of allowing citizens to propose and operate projects independently of a partnership between countries;
- Joint development of new methods and better indicators for measuring results and impact.

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64 See Recital 19 and Articles 14 and 15 (2) of the Proposal for a Regulation COM(2018)374 of 29.5.2018.
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- Luxemburg

**NB:** The allocation of the Thematic Objectives (TO) of the 2014-2020 programming period to the proposed Policy Objectives for 2021-2027 has been approximately done based on the following definitions:

- **TO1:** Strengthening research, technological development and innovation
- **TO2:** Enhancing access to, and use and quality of, information and communication technologies
- **TO3:** Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs
- **TO4:** Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy
- **TO5:** Promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management
- **TO6:** Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency
- **TO7:** Promoting sustainable transport and improving network infrastructures
- **TO8:** Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility
- **TO9:** Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination
- **TO10:** Investing in education, training and lifelong learning
- **TO11:** Improving the efficiency of public administration
Annex 2

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