



briefing

number 24

FEBRUARY 2015

BONUS interim evaluation 2014

■ An interim evaluation of BONUS, the joint Baltic Sea research and development programme, was undertaken in 2014 by a panel of five independent experts appointed by the European Commission. It was carried out as a requirement of the September 2010 BONUS legislative Decision of the European Parliament and the Council. The evaluation considered BONUS's 1) relevance, 2) effectiveness, 3) efficiency, 4) EU added value and 5) coherence with other policies and programmes. Furthermore, to strengthen the potential outcomes of BONUS, the experts made nine recommendations that were adopted by the European Commission which considered these to be founded upon an appropriate analysis and sound methodology. The recommendations will be followed up as part of the Commission's oversight of the BONUS programme together with the BONUS Secretariat. Recommendations two and three concerning the provision of national funds were considered of particular importance.

On the relevance of BONUS:

The objectives of BONUS were established in response to the multiple natural and human induced pressures, which are causing serious harm to the environmental status of the Baltic Sea and its capacity to sustainably provide the goods and services upon which the region depends.

The Baltic Sea is almost entirely enclosed, with a low rate of recirculation and complex interdependencies between ecosystems, human activities, land and sea. The Evaluation

“Overall, the Evaluation Panel is very impressed by BONUS’s achievements founded upon the development of transnational and trans-disciplinary cooperation, of human and institutional capacities, of information sharing and the trust in the integrity of all actors within the management of successive phases of the programme. The Evaluation Panel is confident that there will be further major advances in policies and management actions to enhance the sustainable use of the Baltic Sea ecosystem resulting from the outcomes of BONUS that would not have been achieved without this integrated approach.”

The chair of the Independent BONUS Interim Evaluation Panel,
Professor Peter R. Burbridge, 28 October 2014

“If BONUS would not exist, it would have to be invented.”

The Finnish Baltic Sea Ambassador Ms. Erja Tikka,
responsible for Finland's overall Baltic Sea policy and EUSBSR relations,
BONUS Interim Evaluation report, 28 October 2014



Report highlights the continued importance of the integrated approach of BONUS. It is emphasised that the involvement of all Baltic Sea states is essential since it supports a common understanding and coordinated actions to address the challenges facing the Baltic Sea.

In response, BONUS has undertaken wide stakeholder consultation and developed in agreement with all participating states a policy-driven 'BONUS strategic research agenda 2011–2017' that defines the essential research needs and priorities to be addressed to improve the environment of the Baltic Sea and to enable sustainable development, which will support the economies of the Baltic States.

BONUS continues to overcome the regions' previously fragmented environmental research programming and has established a durable, cooperative, interdisciplinary and multinational research programme. It provides knowledge to underpin science-based management and sustainable development for a better future of the Baltic Sea.

The integration that has been achieved between national research programmes within BONUS has been possible following ten years of increasingly close cooperation supported by the preceding ERA-NETs.

Overall, the Evaluation Panel concludes that the original objectives, which justified the establishment of BONUS remain relevant and implementation of its strategic research agenda will support research and innovation that continues to address the ongoing challenges facing the Baltic.

On the effectiveness of BONUS:

The Evaluation Report considers that BONUS has achieved a high level of transnational scientific integration through the common definition of research topics and a common excellence-based evaluation of project proposals undertaken by independent experts without regard to nationality. This approach together with networking activities has created a transnational research community which has substantially reduced fragmentation of Baltic Sea research and reinforced integration between national research programmes.

The Evaluation Report found that BONUS EEIG's operational management is guided by a comprehensive and appropriate set of procedures. BONUS EEIG was considered to operate effectively as a dedicated implementation structure undertaking operational management and ensuring the application of common funding rules.

Following interviews and observation, the governing Steering Committee was considered to be effective, with trust between its members and a constructive problem-solving approach. The Commission attends as observer within the Steering Committee and its interjections were considered valuable to support constructive discussions within the legal framework of BONUS.

Common funding rules and a single budget for each BONUS call for research proposals ensure financial integration. Projects are selected following a centralised evaluation undertaken by independent experts applying FP7 rules and strictly on the basis of a list ranked by score without considering other factors, such as national quotas.

"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 focusses 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 2020¹, 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."...

Excerpts from the REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL: Interim Evaluation of the Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme BONUS, 30 January 2015

At the time of the report, the European Union and the participating states have jointly supported 7 research and 13 innovation projects to the value of EUR 32 million addressing important topics such as reducing nutrient inputs from the shore, boosting sustainable fisheries, supporting improved monitoring of the marine environment and the effects of combined marine activities. Following a third call, grants supporting further projects that were successfully evaluated by independent experts applying FP7 rules are now being finalised and additional calls will be implemented until completion of the BONUS programme in 2017.

Within the innovation projects, enterprises comprise 25% of beneficiaries, 16% of these are SMEs. Due to the more basic research drive approach, only 3% of the beneficiaries within the viable ecosystem research projects are SMEs and consequently, measures are needed to increase the participation of SMEs.

Drawing upon the scope of the projects supported and the outcomes from related research supported by the previous ERA-NETs, the Evaluation Report considers that the quality of BONUS supported research is expected to be high and widely cited.

The Evaluation Report valued the programme's proactive communication policy, which regularly publishes newsletters, bulletins and specific briefings. BONUS communicates actively within relevant organisations such as HELCOM, JPI Oceans and ICES. BONUS is also a frequent keynote speaker

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/>

within marine research events and within other events related to research and other fields of collaboration, e.g. the European Maritime Day, the EurOCEAN conference and the EU Baltic Sea Region Strategy Forum. BONUS EEIG has surveyed the effectiveness of its dissemination activities and will use these results to sharpen its focus and increase the take-up impact of its communications to maximise the impact.

BONUS's impact is likely to be increased by its open data access policy and the use of publicly available data-bases for metadata, which will make the results more widely available and enable a better understanding of the mechanisms, which threaten the environment of the Baltic Sea.

BONUS supports a Young Scientist Club with events to promote broader career skills such as skills for presentation of research to a non-scientific audience. Such events support the capacity of researchers to engage with a wider community and consequently increase the impact from their work.

National funding commitments from the participating states have been provided at the start of the BONUS programme for its entire duration. Some of the participating states have committed more funds than others. Experience from the first BONUS calls shows a mismatch between the national funds committed and the corresponding funds needed to support the successful national beneficiaries following the outcome of each evaluation. In some cases, the national funds foreseen are insufficient to support the demand from their successful national beneficiaries. So far, this has been overcome by flexibility from the participating states concerned that have provided additional funding. Establishing these case-by-case solutions has caused uncertainty, taken time and delayed the time to grant.

Another issue concerns the proportion of the national contributions to BONUS provided as in-kind infrastructure for free of charge use within BONUS projects. BONUS EEIG had foreseen that the value of in-kind contributions would be 25% of the total national contributions, which is the maximum value allowed in the Decision. However, early indications are that less national in-kind infrastructure contributions have been provided than expected. If continued, the foreseen cash contributions from some of the participating states will be insufficient and will need to be increased to compensate for this shortfall.

On the efficiency of BONUS:

The BONUS Secretariat employs seven persons and the Evaluation Report assesses this as being sufficient to manage the programme with limited spare capacity in case of sickness, holiday etc. The running costs of BONUS are limited to EUR 5 million within the Decision and the Evaluation Report considers that at 5% of total costs, this represents good value. The Evaluation Report also notes that the participating states provide additional resources to the Secretariat outside of the BONUS Art. 185 structure to support additional activities such as workshops, publications and dissemination.

The Evaluation Report notes that the strategic phase took longer than the 18 months foreseen, mainly due to difficulties formulating detailed implementation modalities within

the required legal framework, which could be agreed by all parties concerned.

The average proportion of relevant national research funds channelled through BONUS was estimated, within the Evaluation Report, to be 14%. The Evaluation Report states that the administration of national funding contributions separately by each national funding institution has caused unnecessary complexity. As a consequence, for each call, BONUS EEIG must conclude separate funding agreements with each national funding institution concerned to ensure correct payments of national funds, the application of common funding rules and to ensure audit rights. National funding institutions then administer their payments to their respective beneficiaries in line with the funding agreement. This multiplies the funding streams and administration. At project level, each beneficiary receives two streams of funding and must make two reports to BONUS EEIG and nationally. It is obviously not efficient to manage multiple funding streams in this way within an integrated programme.

On the EU added value within BONUS:

The Evaluation Report notes that the Baltic is a complex environment with many interconnected actors in diverse fields ranging from transport, tourism, fisheries, planning and agriculture. The Baltic Sea is an almost enclosed environment, where the principles of a circular economy need to be applied to ensure long-term sustainable development. The Baltic Sea is mainly surrounded by EU member states, consequently it is a region where a coordinated macro-regional EU action such as BONUS provides a large impact.

The EU intervention helps to overcome fragmentation and facilitate the creation of a critical mass of knowledge and financial resources to address the challenges facing the Baltic Sea. The contributions of participating states have provided a direct 50% leverage towards the EU's investment. The Evaluation Report considers that BONUS's objectives could not be achieved without the intervention of the EU.

The Evaluation Report observes that BONUS has developed an efficient cooperation mechanism using memoranda



of understanding to enable entities from the Russian Federation to participate without any EU support. The Commission considers that this participation is valuable to facilitate common approaches to tackling issues of EU concern within the Baltic.

On the coherence of BONUS:

BONUS is a cross-cutting initiative, which is appropriate for the diverse challenges facing the Baltic Sea. The Evaluation Report refers to BONUS's important contribution to the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and its object to "save the sea". For example, BONUS is explicitly referenced within the Commission Reports on "Governance of Macro-Regional Strategies"², "The Added Value of Macro-Regional Strategies"³, "Implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region"⁴ and the Communication "European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region"⁵.

BONUS also supports innovation, which contributes to supporting a sustainable 'Blue economy' in line with the objectives of the Commission Communication "Blue Growth opportunities for marine and maritime sustainable growth"⁶ and the specific reference to BONUS made within the Staff Working Document "A Sustainable Blue Growth Agenda for the Baltic Sea Region"⁷.

BONUS is acknowledged to contribute towards sustainable fisheries within the Baltic Sea in line with the EU Common Fisheries Policy⁸. Also, BONUS addresses the land/sea interface and supports establishment of common approaches to measurement of 'Good environmental status' in line with the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive⁹.

BONUS is coherent with the work of the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) and the administration of the Helsinki Convention, which is the principal international agreement to protect the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea. BONUS is observer within this body and the Evaluation Report emphasises the importance of BONUS research towards implementation of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan.

2 COM(2014) 284, May 2014

3 COM(2013) 468, June 2013

4 COM(2011) 381, June 2011

5 COM(2012) 128, March 2012

6 COM(2012) 494, September 2012 and http://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy/blue_growth/

7 SWD(2014) 167, May 2014

8 http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/index_en.htm

9 Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy

About the interim assessment process and the reports featured and referenced in this briefing document:

The Commissions conclusions following the interim evaluation are described within the Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: "Interim Evaluation of the Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme BONUS" adopted on 30 January 2015 (COM(2015) 34).

The Commission considers the methodology applied by the Expert Panel sound. The main data sources used for the assessment were documents concerning the BONUS programme, related EU policies and other programmes associated with the Baltic Sea region. Interviews have also been undertaken with a wide range of internal and key stakeholders. These allowed for a triangulation of data and have thus contributed to robust conclusions.

Since at the time of the interim evaluation, it was too early in the implementation phase to draw conclusions from research supported by BONUS, it is reasonable that preliminary conclusions have been drawn from the scope of research supported and the results from research grants within similar fields supported by the preceding ERA-NETs.

COM(2015) 34 : **REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL: Interim Evaluation of the Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme BONUS, 30 January 2015** <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1422618055862&uri=COM:2015:34:FIN>

Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme BONUS, Interim Evaluation Report, 28 October 2014
<http://ec.europa.eu/smart-regulation/evaluation/search/download.do?documentId=12453881>

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BONUS is funded jointly from the national research funding institutions in the eight EU member states of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden located around the Baltic Sea and the European Union's Seventh Programme for research, technological development and demonstration by a total of EUR 100 million for the years 2011–2017. Russia participates in BONUS through bilateral agreements using its own resources.

