



briefing

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The final evaluation completed: “BONUS has been in many ways a great success”

The final evaluation of BONUS, the joint Baltic Sea research and development programme (Art 185), was undertaken in late 2016 and early 2017 by a panel of five independent experts appointed by the European Commission. It was carried out as an obligation stipulated by the September 2010 BONUS legislative Decision made by the European Parliament and the Council. The evaluation assessed in particular the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, EU added value as well as BONUS’ coherence with other EU policies and programmes.

At the time of the evaluation, BONUS had reached its mid-point of implementing the BONUS Art 185 programme; and in October 2017, at the time of the release of the evaluation, the total of projects funded by BONUS Art 185 had amounted to 40, of which the 13 innovation projects had been completed while the rest are still being implemented. A further few synthesis projects will be funded from the final call opened in 2017 with a view that the last project funded in BONUS Art 185 completes its implementation by September 2020.

The following pages offer a summary of the conclusions of the final evaluation, accompanied with BONUS commentary (*in italics*).

HIGHLIGHTS

“Our overriding conclusion is that BONUS has been in many ways a great success”

On relevance

“BONUS was and remains a relevant response to the environmental and policy issues identified in the Baltic Sea region and to the difficulty of joint programming from the national level.”

“BONUS remains relevant also in the sense that more environmental problems are becoming prominent than before...”

“BONUS has also made a small but potentially important contribution to EU science diplomacy by including the Russian Federation and strengthening scientific links with the relevant Russian research community.”

On effectiveness

“Without exception, everyone we interviewed was full of praise for the effectiveness, efficiency, transparency and honesty of the administration by the BONUS EEIG in the context of the requirements of an Article 185 programme. It is well managed and operates orderly monitoring arrangements that allow it to report in a clear way to its principals.”

“BONUS has enhanced research capacity in the Baltic Sea macroregion and increased both the quantity and the quality of relevant scientific output.”

“...the [BONUS Strategic Research] Agenda encouraged multiple national funders to become involved... [and it] became an extension of national strategies...”

“The long-term nature of states’ commitment to BONUS ensured that in certain cases spending on Baltic Sea research was maintained irrespective of other budgetary pressures.”

On efficiency

“BONUS has been very efficient. Its SRA [Strategic Research Agenda] was well constructed on the basis of wide consultation and has been updated.”

“The governance structures have worked well, BONUS has acted as a faithful agent to its principals using clear, fair project selection and transparent administration methods.”

“Given the complexity of the administration task imposed by Article 185, the Secretariat is efficient and has an extremely good reputation among researchers and other stakeholders alike.”

“BONUS has clearly made contributions to a wide range of EU policy objectives by providing research contributions, as our analyses of thematic overlaps and complementarities show.”

On EU added value

“We have explored the EU Added Value of BONUS under various dimensions. BONUS contributes to all...”

“Stakeholders believe that BONUS provides a platform for co-operation in research activities on the issues related to the Baltic Sea that could not be organised from the national level.”

“BONUS has reduced the fragmentation of research and made it more integrated and interdisciplinary than before.”

“It [BONUS] allows the scientific communities to get wider perspective, get new knowledge from the fellow researchers from other countries and move to international level. For smaller participating states it increases critical mass.”

“BONUS pulls together the available resources, provides a greater impact from research and raises its international visibility. It stimulates dialogue among the participating states and with the Russian Federation and contributes to collaboration in terms of socio-cultural exchange.”

“Most of the work required partnership and there was additionality: much of the work would not have been undertaken without BONUS funding; some of the work would have been done nonetheless, but at smaller scale, more slowly, with higher risk, and so on.”

On coherence

“We have conducted extensive analysis into its thematic coherence and found that BONUS coheres well with other aspects of EU policy. Correspondingly, BONUS respects the subsidiarity principle: it is not something the participating states could do on their own. It adds advantages of scale, combines complementary national efforts, extends cross-border policy and scientific and

policy communities, encourages the use of common standards, coordinates research efforts contributing to the implementation of EU policy, addresses key societal challenges, helps structure part of the European research community and research agenda and plays a small role in scientific diplomacy.”

Excerpts from the Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme BONUS, Final evaluation Report of the Expert Group, Written by the Expert Group, June – 2017, European Commission, October 2017



CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

The evaluation expert group also pointed out a number of challenges for consideration:

THE PANEL WAS not convinced of the usefulness of the recently proposed extension BONUS to cover the North Sea, which does not share the specific characteristics of the Baltic Sea and which would dilute the attention paid to the urgent problems of the Baltic. Were BONUS to be further generalised, its objectives would more easily be served by the more efficient arrangements of the Framework Programme. A further complication with a North Sea extension would be that most of the relevant coastline belongs to Norway, an Associated State, or to the UK whose willingness and ability to participate in such programmes appears uncertain in the context of Brexit.

BONUS response:

Major benefits are foreseen from transferring experiences from BONUS to the adjacent Northern European shelf sea. BONUS has collaborated for several years with national funding agencies surrounding the North Sea, identifying the added value, relevance and challenges of the planned new programme as well as analysing the similarities and differences of the two ecosystems and the policy landscapes. In summer 2017, a high level support for extension to cover the North Sea was expressed by ministers of the Baltic and North Sea countries to Commissioner Carlos Moedas confirming that the initiative will be viable despite the challenging geopolitical situation. Also, it is noteworthy that since the start of Brexit negotiations, the interest expressed by the UK towards the future programme has increased.

WHICHEVER INSTRUMENT IS used, a future focus needs to be on how to reduce or eliminate barriers to joint programming at the Member State level and in particular the reluctance to use a real common pot. An unfortunate effect of the co-funding principle, however, is that BONUS has had the biggest effects on capacity in the countries best able to afford national contributions. In contrast, the absolute effects in the small states have been modest, even though it can be argued that capacity building is most urgent among them.

BONUS response:

BONUS aims gradually towards more flexible funding practises. A good example of this is the funds matching in-kind infrastructure contributions by the participating states. These funds are distributed from a common pot for filling the funding gaps of the member states. Despite the modest funding shares of the small states BONUS has provided a platform for cooperation in research activities on the issues related to the Baltic Sea that could not be organised from the national level. It has allowed the scientific communities to get wider perspective, get new knowledge from the fellow researchers from other countries and move to international level. For smaller participating states it has increased critical mass.

BONUS'S INFLUENCE ON policy has been diffuse – partly because much of the work it does supports existing regulatory and policy process rather than more visible policy changes and partly because the interface between the programme and policymakers has tended to involve communication of results rather than policymaker involvement in goal-setting, despite the involvement of policymakers in the strategic research agenda. It appears that policymaker involvement needs to be even more intensive, potentially requiring greater involvement of national ministries in order to strengthen the link from research to policy. Given that BONUS tackles problems that have both scientific and behavioural elements, there is probably a need to involve social sciences in future work.

BONUS response:

The policy impact of the projects can be evaluated after the end of the projects. A recent impact study on BONUS found that 70 % of results published in papers come out in first 5 years after the end of projects. Hence, this evaluation came too early to be able to fully assess BONUS influence on policies. BONUS projects have planned joint actions to present their results to the key end-users and stakeholders. Good examples are BONUS symposia – two first ones took place in October 2017 and third is planned for March 2018. More BONUS symposia on various policy-relevant issues will be held during the wrap-up stage of BONUS. While a number of national level ministries and governmental agencies are involved in BONUS – as funders, many national level sector ministries and agencies have been directly engaged in setting the programme's goals through the BONUS strategic research agenda process. Links and close collaboration with HELCOM on how to implement the projects' results in policy are continuous and have increased in importance even more as the BONUS projects are maturing.

"...THE RATHER BOTTOM-UP nature of the [strategic research agenda process], ...brings a risk of losing focus while the opportunity to introduce new topics together with the revision of the Agenda further encourages this tendency to fragmentation.

BONUS response:

The first step in developing the Agenda in 2010 involved a broad, unrestricted consultation with variety of actors resulting in to ca 200 suggestions. Then the further steps (BONUS Fora, strategic orientation workshops and repeated consultations with the key macro-regional policy actors, e.g. HELCOM and VASAB) allowed to maintain clear focus on the most urgent policy-relevant issues. Thus, a balanced combination of the "bottom-up" and the "top-down" approaches achieved an unprecedented level of comprehensiveness (e.g. embracing complex marine, maritime and drainage basin issues from natural science, engineering, societal science and humanities perspectives) and farsightedness. BONUS regards these features among its most significant assets.



WHILE BONUS HAS increased total research capacity, some of the smaller states are in greater need of capacity building in the form of people and physical resources than some of the larger ones. BONUS' requirement that national and EU financial contributions should match means that this imbalance is not addressed.

BONUS response:

Future funding mechanisms addressing the imbalance between small and large states will be planned within the preparation of the continuation of BONUS in close cooperation with the European Commission. Proposed special capacity building mechanism would be useful. Considering the current BONUS, there are

activities within the projects enabling to fill the gap between high and lower intensity countries. Training of researchers is very important for BONUS and is introduced as one sub-criterion when evaluating the proposals. Training sessions are often open not only to the project partners but to all BONUS countries. The BONUS programme also runs a popular Young Scientist Club and related training programme for improved transferrable skills open to all young scientists around the Baltic Sea – it is noteworthy that four out of six Young Scientist Club training sessions organised by BONUS have been held in the lower intensity countries with high attendance by local students and scientists. Furthermore, through multinational projects, those less research-intensive countries have been able to also benefit from shared infrastructures.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE FINAL EVALUATION PANEL:

1. At this stage, BONUS should be allowed to run its course without the imposition of further recommendations. One exception is that BONUS should be encouraged to consider whether the addition of a small number of projects aiming to improve its linkage to the policymaking process would be useful
2. Article 185, in the BONUS implementation, imposes a high degree of complexity on those involved with it. The biggest cause of this is the lack of a single common pot. Working-level discussions with the participating Member States will not remedy this situation, which is prevalent also in other instruments and is a significant barrier to joint programming. The Commission should consider whether it can exert influence over the Member States at a higher level, so that regulatory impediments can be addressed from the top down
3. Our discussion of BONUS highlighted that it provides a temporary solution that risks becoming more permanent because the environmental issues take a long time to resolve and the tolerance of Article 185 to the lack of a single common pot allows the Member States to avoid addressing ways and means to create one. This imposes a systemic risk of lock-in, so that the Framework Programme ceases to play its key role as a change agent. The Commission should consider requiring future users of Article 185 to define an exit strategy, as a condition for receiving funding. This strategy should explain how, why and when the programme will cease to be dependent upon Article 185 funding – either because it will no longer be needed or because it plans to find an alternative source of income
4. The Article 185 co-funding mechanism militates against differentially building capacity among weaker participants. The Commission should consider whether it can introduce rules that would permit such capacity building
5. Any continuation of BONUS would naturally have to be consistent with the objectives and rules of the Framework Programme as well as other relevant policies. The Commission should consider adding the following criteria in the case of BONUS
 - i) There should be a real common pot for funding.
 - ii) The proposal and strategy should explain the 'exit': how, when and why will EU funding no longer be required?
 - iii) It should include a mechanism to allow more capacity building among the participating Member States with limited national budgets.
 - iv) It should address behavioural as well as scientific problems and devise mechanisms to demonstrate greater potential for policy effects. This will probably involve a greater role for social sciences.
 - v) It should continue to engage the Russian Federation.

All excerpts from the Joint Baltic Sea Research and Development Programme BONUS, Final evaluation Report of the Expert Group, Written by the Expert Group, June – 2017, European Commission, October 2017
http://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/index_en.cfm?pg=h2020evaluation

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