



# Deriving collaborative aims and outcomes: A case-study of cross-border cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe

Evaluation

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**Abstract**

This article draws on a study of cross-border cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe to examine the ways in which common aims are derived in collaborative ventures. It identifies that a lack of clarity can emerge as aims can be variously derived, belong to a single agency or be owned by individual actors. Aims may also be externally imposed by funding bodies. Aims can be explicit and thus open to evaluation or either assumed or hidden, neither of which are likely to be subject to formal monitoring. The process of deriving outcomes and the impact of the nature of funding (to programmes rather than to collaborative partnerships) are discussed. I argue that there is a need to know what success might look like, something at odds with the *ex post* nature of much evaluation. The problems of evaluating collaboration are made more complex by the intangible nature of some of the outcomes such as learning, connections and capacity.

**Keywords**

Central and Eastern Europe, collaboration, common aims, network governance, outcomes

**Introduction**

The attention devoted to evaluation of public policy is not always matched by a similar attention to the way in which policy aims are derived. This article seeks to examine the links between aims and outcomes in a specific policy setting: cross-border collaboration in Central and Eastern Europe. I will argue that a focus on outcomes should be balanced by an understanding of how aims are derived and that the identification of aims is not as unproblematic as it may appear. I will look at the extent to which evaluation is linked to the achievement of aims and at the complexity of aims demanded by different players in collaborations – local and national government, external funders and local communities who may each have hidden, assumed or explicit aims.

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The process of measuring outcomes and outputs from collaborative projects is dependent on the clarity of the processes for deriving common aims. The apparently straightforward task of agreeing common aims is more complex; the compromises needed to achieve political agreement 'often leave objectives vague, ambiguous and imprecise' (Uusikylä and Valovirta, 2007: 413). As well as these compromises, the nature of cooperation means that, as well as the stated aims of the partnership, there will be aims of individual partner organizations and even of individual actors. Aims that are explicit are open to evaluation but aims may also be assumed or hidden (Huxham and Vangen, 2005: 62). In multi-organizational settings, problems arise in measuring the network governance process (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009: 240). As resources for collaboration generally come from outside agencies such as the EU, I question whether externally imposed evaluation processes capture the benefits of the collaboration, concentrated as they are on individual programmes rather than the collaboration as a whole. In addition, evaluation must necessarily focus on the explicit aims.

The article initially seeks to identify the broad aims of one cross-border collaboration in Central and Eastern Europe, whether explicit or hidden/assumed. It stresses the dynamic nature of collaborative aims. It goes on to look at the identification of outcomes and success and the problems of the evaluation process. I consider the local perceptions of the outcomes of collaboration and at negative experiences of monitoring and evaluation. I conclude by suggesting that there is some way to go in developing adequate evaluative tools for collaborations, particularly given the importance of intangible outcomes.

## Method

This article draws on a wider study of cross-border collaboration in Central and Eastern Europe between sub-national entities (counties and provinces) in Hungary, Romania and Serbia: the DKMT Euroregion.<sup>1</sup> In the course of this research some 50+ individuals were interviewed either individually or in small group sessions. These respondents included local politicians, local and regional officials, national government officials, EU representatives both in the field and in Brussels and participants in local NGOs in the regions studied.

The data from these interviews and from documents of the collaboration and commentaries on it were recorded and coded. Respondents are not identified but their responses do identify their background and country. This provides essentially a snapshot case study of the collaboration at a time when both Hungary and Romania had become EU members and Serbia's candidacy was beginning to achieve greater credibility. From this wider study I have drawn out material on aims and evaluation but I recognize that, in this article, I am looking at two ends of the policy spectrum and not at the strategies or implementation of the collaboration.<sup>2</sup>

## Common aims

Agreement about the aims of a collaboration between partners may seem to be a given. As Huxham and Vangen describe: 'Common wisdom suggests that it is necessary to be clear about the aims of joint working if partners are to work together to operationalise policies' (2005: 61). However, conflicting motives for and practices of cooperation may not allow for such simplicity. Organizations may cooperate for different reasons; they may be willing participants or they may feel press-ganged into joint working. Equally, mechanisms for identifying joint aims need to be put in place: 'in multi-organizational spheres of effectiveness the target setting should take place as strategic discussion by a relevant collection of actors' (Uusikylä and Valovirta, 2007: 415). Huxham and

**Table 1.** Matrix of aims (unpopulated)

Whose aims ↓	Explicit aims	Assumed aims	Hidden aims
Aims of collaboration			
Aims of organization			
Aims of individual			
	Style of aims →		

Vangen provide a typology of aims which illustrates this motivational complexity distinguishing between **ownership**, whose aims they are, and **style**, the openness or otherwise of the aims (2005: 62). Aims may be: agreed by the collaboration; those of partner organizations; or those of an individual. Aims may be explicit, assumed or even hidden. This can be represented by a matrix (Table 1).

Following this it can be seen that the apparently simple task of identifying aims is more complex. There may be conflict between, for example, explicit aims of the collaboration, assumed aims of individual partner organizations and hidden aims of individuals. To a degree, this is inevitable. Collaborations draw on the synergy of different strengths in different organizations so these same differences are likely to lead to different purposes (Huxham and Vangen, 2005: 82). This typology gives a framework for classifying aims within the DKMT where this complexity seems manageable but it is easier to establish explicit aims than others. I also recognize that aims change and there needs to be an understanding of the dynamic nature of shared aims.

## Aims of the collaboration/explicit aims

Respondents close to the collaboration were asked to identify the aims of the collaboration. Responses varied from broad objectives to individual projects/schemes. I sought to categorize these into the broad sectors in which the aims fell: four broad sectoral categories: economic, environmental, transport and culture. Given the nature of cross-border collaboration these aims are perhaps to be expected. Stokłosa, writing of the Spree/Neisse/Bober Euroregion, identifies similar sectors: economic commerce and tourism, agriculture, forestry and environment, youth sport and culture and information (2007: 234). While there was a strong set of common priorities, there was not a narrow common check list. There was recognition that while there was a wide range of specific aims, their number and scope needed to be managed: ‘The Mayors are committed to small but precise goals’ (Local Govt Official, Vojvodina). Table 2 attempts to summarize the sectors referred to by respondents broken down into national/EU responses, local/regional government aims and those of NGOs.

This Table demonstrates a wide spread of sectoral aims and a broad consensus but an absence of absolute clarity or unity of purpose between the partners. However, DKMT does demonstrate a strong strategic approach (DKMT, 2005) and some growing recognition of the need to manage aims:

The original regional development plan [1999] was done in an office not in partnership. No-one realised the importance of planning. The 2007–13 document was done in real partnership with six working groups, a regional innovation strategy, regional labour market approach and an elaborate Euro regional strategy. (Regional agency, Romania)

The explicit aims identified by respondents correspond largely with the stated aims of the collaboration outlined in the DKMT strategy (2005). The given fundamental goal of the Euroregion is

**Table 2.** Specific aims of DKMT identified by respondents

AIM	EU/National Govt	Local/Regional Partners	NGO	Total
N = *	7	14	7	28
<b>Economic development</b>				<b>35</b>
Infrastructure	5	9	4	18
Tourism	3	6	1	10
Innovation and enterprise	2	4	1	7
<b>Transport</b>				<b>17</b>
Infrastructure	2	1	1	4
Border crossings	1	4	4	9
Security issues	–	1	1	2
Visas	–	–	2	2
<b>Environment</b>				<b>20</b>
Environment	3	2	–	5
Water Management and flooding	3	4	1	8
Water quality	–	4	–	4
Agriculture	1	1	1	3
<b>Culture</b>				<b>17</b>
Culture	1	6	4	11
Minorities	–	–	2	2
Youth	–	3	1	4
<b>Others+</b>	–	6	4	<b>10</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>99</b>

\*N = Number of interviews with collaboration partners where aims were identified (interviews with groups and individuals are treated as equivalents).

+Governance/Communication 5, Education 3, Health 2.

the ‘establishment of a solid system of relations based on jointly developed infrastructure and an information basis and supporting the spread of innovation in order to improve the quality of life of the population of the DKMT region’ (2005: 55). This would be achieved through four key actions:

1. Increasing social cohesion in the region;
2. Improving communications;
3. Strengthening interregional economic relations;
4. Concerted sustainable nature and environmental protection.

While the second, third and fourth actions are strongly replicated in the respondents focus on transport infrastructure, economic development and innovation and environmental protection, the Cohesion aim is less clearly articulated. Cohesion is a feature of issues such as minority rights, culture and communication of information which were discussed. However, Cohesion as an aim was not explicitly at the forefront of the responses although it may be an assumed outcome.<sup>3</sup>

Examples of economic collaboration include industrial and innovation parks, exchanges of best practice and shared promotions at trade fairs. Most of these examples tended to be bilateral rather

than trilateral and to be ‘parallel projects’ rather than truly joint initiatives. Environmental projects and priorities focused on water management, influenced perhaps by the floods of 2005, water quality and eco-tourism. One of the consequences of the neglect of border regions over a period is the development of biodiversity along the borders giving rise to opportunities to exploit the natural habitat. Transportation aims broadly sought to increase cross border activity. New and improved crossing points were priorities at Chenai between Hungary and Romania providing a direct link from Timisoara to Szegeed and at Kalabija, west of Subotica, where improvements could provide an alternative to the heavily used crossing point at Horgos. Security issues such as drugs and trafficking were not generally seen as high priorities by local partners. Cultural aims were seen as important by those nearest to borders and by NGOs. People-to-people projects were ‘small spend but big impact. I would have tried to allow more people-to-people funds as they are very popular’ (National Govt, Hungary).

Finally, it was recognized that aims will evolve and change over time and that this process has to be channelled. The creation of thematic focus groups in the collaboration helped this process and there was a view that cross-border health entitlements would be a potential new area for cooperation. Change was not just generated internally, they also had to adapt to national development plans which had common aspects but which did not reflect the specific needs of border regions (Local Govt, Hungary).

## **Organizational aims**

The explicit aims were supplemented by specific local interests among respondents. For example in Arad, health care issues and the development of the local airport were seen as priorities. In Timisoara restoring the Bega canal and cross-border rail connections were highlighted. For Subotica municipality a new by-pass to link to the border crossing at Kalabija was the main issue. Although these aims were included in the Table 2, they tended to reflect organizational priorities rather than those of the collaboration as a whole. The DKMT was seen as an overarching partnership through which the priorities of individual organizations could be pursued and negotiated: ‘It is not always easy; some of our priorities don’t fit, some are ok today but not tomorrow’ (Local Govt, Romania). This issue of aims is further complicated by the aims of funding programmes, as the same respondent noted: ‘We have to try to fit our objectives to the objectives of the funding programmes’ (Local Govt, Romania).

The organizational aims of NGOs can be seen to differ from those of government agencies both local and national. They had a greater emphasis on cultural people-to-people cooperation and, where infrastructure/transport priorities featured, they tended to be linked to removal of barriers that borders create for people-to-people links. Where economic and environmental links are stressed by NGOs, these were more likely to be around micro-businesses and cross-border tourism projects. There were differences between organizational priorities of governments and NGOs. While some in government prioritized ‘flagship’ infrastructure projects even when, as with the restoration of canal and historic rail networks, these were long-term and were signifiers of cross-border linkages rather than deliverers of clear economic outputs, NGOs saw these long-term projects as causing a loss of momentum and prioritized people-to-people projects around cultural or cross-border communication because of their immediate impact. NGOs also highlighted the visa problem because of the costs it added to projects and its impact on labour mobility. On another level, they saw cross-border cooperation as:

European integration from below, engaging communities at a grass-roots level. Don’t neglect the most basic cooperation: village-to-village, school-to-school. (NGO, Vojvodina)

However, despite these differences, the predominant view was that infrastructure and people-to-people projects were not mutually exclusive:

the aims and objectives are to promote economic development and social relations between three countries, establishing common projects and ensuring EU cross-border funding reaches across different sectors. (NGO, Romania)

It was also possible that economic cooperation would flow from cultural cooperation:

the main context (of cross-border cooperation) was cultural exchange at the beginning but our aim was to support economic cooperation and exchange. (Local Govt, Vojvodina)

## Individual aims

Cross-border work attracts motivated and determined people. Officials can develop expertise and networks which enhance their position in the organization: ‘The main goal (of cooperation) is economic but thanks to the Euroregion people know each other more and can (put in place) an infrastructure to promote the Euroregion’ (Regional official, Hungary). The development of capacity among individuals in organizations, particularly around complex funding packages provides further individual motivation:

Procedures for selection and approval of CARDS, PHARE and ERDF set quite a problem to synchronise rules and guidelines, it’s not easy. You have to stick to it but arguments go on and on. (National official, Hungary)

Individual politicians may also use access to collaborations to enhance their local position and status both in the locality, nationally and internationally (Jacoby, 2004: 219). Sørensen and Torfing recognize that successful network actors ‘may be rewarded by upgrading their political status’ (2009: 249) However, the interactions within collaborations are not always positive:

There is a lack of confidence of national government, a jealousy in national government of regional players. We need to go beyond this and lobby for regional interests. (NGO, Romania)

For politicians the quality of cooperation depended on the effort to establish and re-establish political links leading to greater economic cooperation (Regional Govt, Vojvodina) while for some NGOs in Serbia, there seemed to be a separate undercurrent. Many of the people in these NGOs appeared to have a background, prior to 1991, in wider Yugoslav civil society. Fagan’s study of environmental groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina makes a similar point ‘expertise and know-how are available locally and can be mobilised on the basis of professional ties, loyalties and connections dating back to the socialist period’ (2008: 647). For some in Serbia, the collaborations with Hungary and, in particular with Romania, were the wrong collaborations. Their interest lay in re-establishing links with Bosnia and with Croatia; almost to a return to their roots by re-creating, if not a Yugoslav federation, then a pan-Slavic cultural consciousness.

## Assumed aims

It is difficult to separate out the less explicit aims. The absence of cohesion as an explicit aim among respondents may simply reflect that cohesion is an obvious and assumed aim, particularly

as Structural Funds are embedded in the EU's Cohesion Policy. Components of a cohesion policy were individually highlighted (albeit most frequently by NGOs) but it is possible that, because cohesion is a less tangible outcome than economic development or environmental protection, it was an assumed rather than explicit aim. A second assumed aim is the maximization of European funding (Kennard, 2002: 202). The Commission saw cross-border programmes as 'preparation for larger investment down the line' (Commission official, DG Regio). As Popescu has noted Euroregions were 'territorial frameworks where East Europeans would prepare for EU membership by practising multi-level governance' (2008: 424). While in the Euroregion people had begun with a 'dash for cash' approach it was apparent this approach had evolved:

In 1997–2003 the main goal was to get as many projects approved as possible. Now we are 'investors' with strategic economic plans. (Regional Agency, Hungary)

For Serbia, an assumed aim of cross-border programmes was to access European funding and to transfer best practice. In the absence of EU membership, cross-border cooperation gave Serbia excellent contacts with EU networks. Serbia's partners recognized this:

Cooperation is essential for Serbia as non-EU members. It's not that we want to tell them what to do but we can progress ideas from Serbia and advise them on proposals for developing a logistics strategy and creating a regional innovation agency. (Regional Agency, Hungary)

The rapid pace of change caused by EU membership in Romania led to the view that economic and political cooperation needed to be linked (Serbian Chamber of Commerce).

## Hidden aims

In terms of identifiable hidden aims these differ from country to country. For Hungary, which had the largest number of cross-border communities, the issue of re-connecting with minorities lay not far below the surface. Intercultural projects and networks were seen as important in Hungary. For administrators and civil society the Euroregion was 'a vehicle for strengthening the links with Hungarian communities on the other side of the border and consequently an instrument of national policy' (Branea, 2003: 87). Hungarian minorities in Serbia and Romania also saw cross-border working as giving them significance beyond their size and a regional role as a hub and as a partner of choice and leader in INTERREG and other programmes.

For Romania the hidden aim was perhaps the reverse of Hungary's. Even with the desire to adapt structures to receive EU funding, Romania was ambivalent about decentralization initiatives allowing 'limited decentralization rather than any genuine transfer of power and democratic legitimacy or recognition of regional identity' (Dobre, 2008: 597). This ambivalence spread to the minority community:

Serbia is more into people-to-people cooperation than Romania. It's to do with politics. Many Hungarians in Romania are reluctant to engage in cross-border cooperation for fear of building up the issue. They are not very courageous in applying. (National Govt, Hungary)

For Serbia cross-border collaboration gave access to the European Union. As the prime partner in collaboration, Vojvodina was able to use its pre-eminent position on the EU's border to promote itself: 'we use political connections to promote the economy of Vojvodina with partners across

**Table 3.** Matrix of aims (populated)

Whose aims ↓	Explicit aims	Assumed aims	Hidden aims
Aims of collaboration	Infrastructure projects Environmental improvement Culture & communications	Achieving cohesion Accessing funding streams Capacity-building	
Aims of organization	Cross-border links Infrastructure People-to-people	Promotion of local interests Capacity-building	Promotion/suppression of borders and cross-border minority interests
Aims of individual	Deliver outcomes	Project and policy development	Personal/career enhancement
<b>Style of aims →</b>			

Europe' (Politician, Vojvodina). The hidden aim of the AP was a differentiation of the modern Euroregion from stereotypical views of Serbia itself.

## Dynamic aims

There is recognition that aims are dynamic; they change but there is also a need to create means for managing that change. There were conflicting views on how cross-border working had changed. One veteran felt that after an initial revitalization of links between countries which had been isolated from each other prior to 1989, 'the character of cooperation diminished' (National Govt, Hungary). Others more closely associated with the DKMT region felt it did review its aims 'Strategic objectives for the development of the region are changing over time, cooperation has to evolve' (Local Govt, Romania).

Examples of the region responding to change included the adoption of thematic focus groups, specifically around health, disaster prevention and agriculture which exemplified both proactive strategic developments and reactive responses to local circumstances. Most important was the capacity of the collaboration to re-invent itself through, for example a restructuring in 2003 and by adopting a formal legal entity through the Public Utility Company (PUC) model in 2005/6.

## Key findings: Common aims

The identification of common aims follows Huxham and Vangen's recognition of the need to identify whose aims are overt, assumed or hidden. A key finding is that there are strong broadly shared aims of economic development, cultural exchange, environmental and transport improvements even though there is no common checklist of aims. Although aims are largely open, there are both assumed and hidden aims although these can be harder to identify. I have suggested cohesion and funding as assumed aims and sought to suggest some hidden aims which allow an attempt to populate the Matrix of Aims identified by Huxham and Vangen (Table 3).

Huxham and Vangen suggest that the Collaboration may have assumed aims but cannot have hidden aims (2005: 62).

With the exception of the cohesion aim, which I have treated as an assumed aim, there is a broad sectoral congruence between the explicit aims of the respondents and those of the DKMT strategy. For Koppenjan, network collaboration assumes agreement, joint objectives or even joint programmes

(2008: 701). Cohesion may have been subsumed within culture but, for the Commission, it relates to wider challenges of addressing spatial inequalities through the creation of easier movement of goods, labour and capital and in diminishing the role of national boundaries as barriers to these. This links to the hidden aims of promoting or suppressing the role of borders. National governments wish to ensure that borders are not subject to challenge or ambivalence, the European Union seeks to remove territorial barriers to growth, mobility and exchange.

There are variations between the aims of government organizations and those of NGOs, with the latter tending to highlight culture and people-to-people exchanges over infrastructure and minority rights over economic development. These differences were matters of degree rather than absolutes and may be linked to the fact that NGOs tend to promote smaller projects and these are more likely to be in the areas of culture, tourism and environment.

## Identifying outcomes

My focus has been on institutions, processes and actors in collaborative settings. Outcomes may be seen as lying beyond the collaborative process but, if collaborative advantage is the creation of added value, I would argue that it is necessary to identify how that added value emerges and whether it can be linked to achievement of common aims as identified in Table 2. As Leeuw points out evaluation is needed 'to bring order to the potential complexity (some may say chaos) of all the partnering arrangements' (2002: 7).

Given the necessity of understanding and identifying the advantage or inertia resulting from collaboration, it is surprising that evaluating outcomes is not more significant in the theory of Collaborative Advantage. Huxham and Vangen identify success as a policy-generated theme (2005: 38) but it is one of 18 themes and may result from a process-centred theory pre-dating the recent, almost obsessive shift, towards performance measurement and outcome management: 'the "mushrooming of indicators" results in information overload' (Koppenjan, 2008: 705). However, outcomes are not ignored entirely, both learning and capacity-building are themes which implicitly focus on outcomes, albeit within the collaborative process. Outcomes are also important for the trust-building loop 'each time an outcome meets expectations, trusting attitudes are reinforced' (Huxham and Vangen, 2005: 154). Similarly the leadership theme is seen as being crucial to achieving outcomes but it is recognized that collaborations are 'thwarted by difficulties and dilemmas so the outcomes are often not as intended' (2005: 212) – a timely reminder of the possibility of unintended consequences.

One of the dangers of partnership working is that the collaboration may be seen as an end in itself or, worse a form of creeping centralization (Davies, 2002). In the UK, performance management of partnerships was introduced at a relatively late stage in their development and this pattern appears to be being repeated. That is not to say that there was no monitoring or evaluation but in the EU this has tended to be on a project or programme basis with differing methodologies and standards and accountability to different Commission Directorates rather than as an assessment of the collaboration as a whole. Leeuw has also referred to the problem of 'emphasis on single measures of success rather than [on] the underlying objective' (2000: 9). Further, the evaluation process can be seen to prioritize specific measures or outputs over sustainable change or outcomes: 'there is a tendency for some projects to chase quantity not quality' (DG Regio).

I would argue that, if the achievement of agreed aims is important, then there must be a conception of what success might look like and an understanding of how to know when objectives have been achieved. This understanding should be tempered by a recognition that there may be intangible assets created by partnerships such as connections, learning and capacity. Sørensen and

Torring see intangible outputs as being difficult to quantify (2009: 260). We may need to move beyond ‘linear “input-output-outcome” models of policy evaluation’ (Boydell et al., 2008: 213). Koppenjan questions whether collaborative outcomes can be measured effectively using *ex-ante* formulated objectives because they cannot accommodate dynamic aims (2008: 701). Achieving outcomes from cooperation is also demanding: ‘for any idea to cross the border between the concept and the reality it is vital that all those that begin the race have the stamina, perseverance and interest to reach the finish line’ (Cernicova, 2004: 146).

## What might success look like?

One issue for collaborations is whether participants have a picture of what success might look like and whether that vision is shared. In discussing Common Aims I identified explicit, assumed and hidden aims. Formal evaluation is concentrated on explicit aims – the areas of economic development, infrastructure, transport, environment and culture. The cohesion-building aim, explicit in the DKMT strategy document but hidden in the responses, is less likely to be the subject of formal monitoring. I made the point that Common Aims are more complex than at first sight; that the collaboration, its constituent partners and individual actors may each have different, possibly conflicting aims. For example, I noted the apparent tension between proponents of large infrastructure projects and those of smaller people-to-people cultural exchanges, particularly from the NGO sector. Koppenjan echoes this when he refers to multiple objectives of participants and questions the extent to which outcomes ‘intertwine actors’ diverging objectives’ (2008: 702).

Even if there is a shared vision of success, the prime measure will inevitably be focused on the explicit aims of the collaboration and of its major projects. Even in well established collaborations, there have been doubts about the existence of strong outcomes. Scott writing of the Baltic region states ‘results in terms of capacity, innovation, physical development and employment growth are exceedingly hard to trace’ (2003: 148). In contrast, Central and Eastern European collaborations see themselves as borrowing from initiatives perceived as being successful, such as the Rhine ‘once seen as the “great divide” by the French and Germans (now) considered as an unparalleled axis and pole of development’ (Hansen, quoted in Grix and Knowles, 2003: 155).

A picture of successful cross-border collaboration could include a broad outcome of cross-border prosperity and innovation, successful project development and implementation, strong cross-border mobility and a symbolic shift in the status and perception of borders. As suggested, evaluation narrowly focused on a project by project basis is unlikely to inform these measures of success:

We have accomplished projects and achieved indicators . . . on the other hand results are not just about measuring the project but its impact. We don’t have joint mechanisms to summarize the cumulative effect of projects and their outcomes not outputs. (RDA, Hungary)

As Koppenjan notes different actors will use different perspectives to answer the question of effectiveness (2008: 700).

Equally, there was a recognition in the Commission that success was about more than indicators and that learning was a part of success. They identified three key learning points:

Identify valued elements of the project early, adapt to new ways of working and develop mechanisms to manage complex projects. (DG Regio)

Perceptions of success, therefore, would include not just measurable outputs but less tangible results such as learning, capacity-creation and exchange:

the production of intangible assets in the form of knowledge and understanding which enhances partners' capacity to act to achieve organizational goals and contribute to the public good. (Boydell et al., 2008: 221)

Unfortunately, the evaluation processes as they exist are poorly framed to capture such assets; indeed they may not be particularly good at capturing outputs let alone broader indicators of success.

## **Problems of the evaluation process**

There was a catalogue of criticism of evaluation and monitoring by respondents from almost every level. Concerns were expressed about what was being monitored:

[I am concerned] with the process: monitoring is focused on financial monitoring, less on what is really achieved. Bills and invoices must accord to the rules. 100% of the money must be spent but it is equally important how the money is spent. (National Govt, Hungary)

There were also criticisms that projects and programmes were evaluated rather than partnerships and that this monitoring is not only costly but comes after the event rather than being built into the process:

Evaluation comes after the programme and can cost 7% of the technical assistance to pay for the use of consultants and technical experts. (RDA, Hungary)

Others, including even the Commission, recognized these weaknesses:

Evaluation is post-hoc; it's not part of the process. (DG Regio)

Similar points were even made by the people paid to evaluate programmes:

A very large flagship grant scheme had over-complex design and proved unmanageable . . . assistance was disbursed with pervasive delays. (MWH Consortium, 2006: 6–7)

Criticisms were also directed at the methodologies adopted in the evaluation and monitoring processes:

I've done a number of assessments of cross-border projects but evaluation is not done on systematic terms. (Council of Europe)

[we are] trying to evaluate projects with different funding streams and without uniform statistical bases from different countries. (National Govt, Hungary)

These concerns with the evaluation process may simply reflect the fact that people do not like being evaluated, that evaluation comes with the package of assistance and that it is hard to challenge the necessity of it, even though the methodology may be faulty:

Policy evaluation, although not meeting with a lot of enthusiasm among many national officials who had to apply it, was difficult to oppose since it was advocated as a general 'enlightened policy instrument' focusing on improving the efficiency of the intervention. (Bauer, 2002: 780)

Bauer goes on to describe evaluation as not being 'optimally applied', lacking 'scientific reliability' and as 'number fetishism' (2002: 781), criticisms reflected in the views of many DKMT participants. Mihalache, referring to Romania has identified the slow emergence of an evaluation culture and a 'lack of common understanding of what evaluation means' (2009: 475).

Despite this, there remains a need to focus on what any funding stream has achieved and not simply to satisfy the funders:

We need to see results; we need to have cooperation to get results and results to get cooperation. If people don't see the benefits in everyday life, they don't get the results. (Local Govt, Vojvodina)

External evaluation is seen by Sullivan and Skelcher as 'an irrelevance because it serves the interests of the [commissioner] rather than the collaborations themselves' (2002: 106). The problems seem to lie not with the principle of evaluation and monitoring but with the way it is implemented and managed. It is bolted on to projects rather than being part of them and is seen as being externally driven. Process and targets appear to have been imposed for the benefit of external agencies, as Sanderson states there can be a 'top-down orientation to evaluation to promote accountability and control' (2000: 438). The alternative of local self-set indicators does exist but appears to be squeezed out by the formal external evaluations. The evaluation process was felt to highlight failure rather than success and to underestimate the importance of the learning which emerges from experiencing failure as well as success:

Cooperation with many partners will lead to experience of failure. We know what has worked and failed to work and learn from the feedback loop. (Local Govt, Vojvodina)

If the top-down external evaluation is seen as failing to recognize outcomes effectively, would a more locally driven form of evaluation be better at identifying success?

## Local perceptions of outcomes

The suspicion and cynicism around top-down evaluation was, ironically, mirrored in much of the local perception of the tangible outcomes of the DKMT collaboration. The Free Minds assessment in 2003 of 'Seven Barren Years' (Branea, 2003) may have been harsh and linked to NGO perceptions of exclusion, but some of the conclusions continued to have contemporary currency:

In terms of economic resource, there's little to show [from cross-border cooperation] the main gains are cultural. (NGO, Romania)

We're not too happy with the results [of DKMT]. We want more concrete results, we're not happy with the interaction between organizations and county councils. We need someone to mediate. (Serbian Chamber, Romania)

This locally perceived lack of progress can be linked to a range of factors at a local, national and European level. At the local level limited resources may explain the gap between expectations and achievements, particularly in people-to-people projects. This problem was common to Euroregions,

not just to DKMT: 'people-to-people projects are chronically underfunded and faced with bureaucratic restrictions' (Scott, 2003: 148). It may also be linked to the visibility of projects:

Outcomes are not always obvious – projects like factory renovation and waste water treatment – they involve the partnership but the results are invisible. (Local Government, Vojvodina)

There are also issues about ownership of the collaboration. If the collaboration is managed exclusively on a government-to-government agenda, NGOs will not necessarily appreciate the results:

Cross-border cooperation is not easy to evaluate in terms of benefits/outcomes. There are limited visible outcomes and [a tension between] support to civic activities and a focus on the state sector. (NGO, Vojvodina)

Lack of control over project selection was a further factor in some cases, particularly when people felt they had to chase the available funding despite their own priorities:

One negative experience was to receive 300,000 Euros for a web portal when what was needed was a new well for drinking water. We can't access the water but we can send photos and information. (Local Govt, Vojvodina)

At the national level, the existence of restrictive visa regimes, lack of confidence in the capacity of regional authorities and limited capacity all contributed to poor perceptions of cooperative programmes. As the evaluation of the Romanian PHARE programme states: 'inadequacy at the political: administrative interface ... can indicate a lack of political commitment' (MWH Consortium, 2006: 28). Cross-border cooperation is also only one of many programmes, most of which did not contain a cross-border element: 'A negative view of the approach taken by EQUAL or LEADER would be to stress the danger of cross-border cooperation ending up largely ignored within the larger programmes' (Magennis et al., 2006: 26). Other national barriers included a lack of common systems such as tendering procedures and asymmetry in decision making structures, although DKMT appeared to have made progress in tackling this. A final problem was reluctance of national governments to back cross-border cooperation or in some cases even to clarify the legal competences of regional and local bodies to cooperate.

At the level of the European Commission, problems were experienced when different countries were dependent on differing funding programmes whose rules and procedures may vary and which may bring with them different levels of resources (National Govt, Hungary). The evaluation of the Romanian PHARE programme identified both National and Commission Authorities as the key reasons for delays and saw that 'delays in the administration of some grant schemes affected their efficiency and had a negative knock-on effect on subsequent assistance' (MWH Consortium, 2006: 10). Delays were seen as being caused by inexperience, high levels of staff turnover and overly bureaucratic procedures but delays were apparent, not just in evaluation but in project selection and approval. The PHARE evaluation did hold out some hope when it noted that 'delays are a treatable phenomenon' (MWH Consortium, 2006: 60). This emphasizes a point made by Leeuw that 'evaluation however well intended will have unintended and undesired side-effects that jeopardise effectiveness and efficiency' (2002: 10).

Local perceptions of outcomes could form a part of the cocktail of evaluations but issues around participation in project selection and the visibility of projects would need to be addressed. It would also be necessary to focus on the overall programme rather than simply evaluate on a

project-by-project basis. The key would be to find new ways of aggregating projects to form a more visible programme and to market the Euroregion in a more positive way as a 'Citizens Euroregion' rather than one belonging to a small elite cadre, whether of politicians or officials, of European experts and specialists.

### **Light in the gloom?**

If the formal evaluation and monitoring process was inadequate because of its overbearing and costly nature and some local perceptions of the outcomes of cross-border cooperation tended towards the negative, what value is there in the promotion of the Euroregion? In part local responses should be seen as reflecting frustration at the slow progress together with the tendency of failure to obscure success. In fact successes are often 'banked' while outstanding projects and failures tend to rankle. There was unfinished business: even Branea refers to DKMT as 'still a promise to be fulfilled' (2003: 89) and Cernicova writes:

Maybe these cooperative projects have little to show for the time being but they may ... look with confidence to the older cooperative ties of the cross-border type. (2004: 143)

There were specific examples of success – Arad Airport Cargo terminal, Mures River Management (MWH Consulting, 2006: 16–18), border-crossing openings and technology parks (Cernicova, 2004: 141–3). Although people-to-people projects were not necessarily well funded, they had a strong symbolic value: 'People-to-people may have small results but they have high visibility. Big infrastructure projects have less visibility – both are equally needed' (NGO, Vojvodina). As well as these tangible successes, there was evidence of intangible benefits emerging from the collaborative process:

The main outcome of cooperation is building relationships, highly developed relationships. Europe has put pressure on the Romanian national government to cooperate and Romanian national authorities are in fear of being blamed if it fails. (NGO, Romania)

This outcome of causing Romanian central government to move, albeit slowly towards supporting stronger cooperation at a local level was also noted by the PHARE evaluation:

progress has been made in civil service reform, in shifting the balance between central and local administration and in separating policy-making from through both reform of deconcentrated agencies and a fundamental change in the role of the prefecture. (MWH Consortium, 2006: 15)

O'Dowd also recognizes the less tangible outcomes of collaboration across borders: 'their symbolic value is nevertheless important for they serve as spatial metaphors which suggest bridge building and peaceful border change' (2003: 29). The need for time for collaboration to develop and the importance of learning were widely recognized:

It's quite easy working step-by-step. DKMT has been a learning organization ever since it was set up. We are trying to learn from other co operations so that we don't have to reinvent things. (Local Govt, Romania)

Finally the DKMT cross-border collaboration needs to be seen in context. One of the few comparative evaluations of cross-border working compared 18 bilateral sets of collaboration in Southern and Eastern Europe based on a range of over 50 dimensions. The Romania: Serbia pairing

was rated second only to that of Hungary: Croatia. Hungary: Serbia was rated third and Hungary: Romania fifth (Council of Europe, 2003). This suggests that in the regional context, although cross-border tensions remain across the region, the DKMT was one of the most developed collaborations:

The key results [of cross-border cooperation] have been the promotion of investment in the region, harmonisation of regional strategies, the emergence in the Euroregion of social cooperation and sharing of regional development concepts. (National Govt, Hungary)

## Key findings: Defining outcomes

The evaluation process appears flawed, costly and not timely – centring too much on post-hoc evaluation – and focusing on projects and programmes rather than partnerships. Despite these negative experiences of evaluation and local frustration at the time regional cooperation has taken to emerge, there are positive outcomes which may not always be recognized. Aims and outcomes are linked, although this is easier with the explicit aims of the collaboration than with assumed aims such as cohesion. The cohesion aim appears to have been subsumed in the culture/people-to-people arena while in EU terms cohesion clearly has an economic imperative around economic inclusion, reduction of spatial inequality and growth in competitiveness.

The identification of intangible assets, such as learning, is a challenge that evaluation and monitoring processes might not be able to capture consistently: ‘a pitfall may be determining effectiveness by using *ex-ante* formulated performance measures, leaving no room for learning or anticipating changed circumstances’ (Koppenjan, 2008: 711). A number of learning points did emerge from evaluation, such as the need to decentralize decision making, reform public administration and the need to ‘strengthen capacity for public policy formulation and implementation’ (MHW Consortium, 2006: 22). It seems clear that more time and effort needs to be devoted to understanding the less tangible outcomes of collaboration and ways in which these can be built in to evaluation processes.

I also suspect that, particularly at the local level, positive outcomes are ‘banked’ and the shortcomings of collaborative working may be overemphasized. There is insufficient marketing of success or branding of projects as being part of the Euroregion. This is an inversion of Cernicova’s conclusion that: ‘success stories are many, what most participants keep ‘mum’ about are the failures’ (2004: 146) but, particularly among NGOs, the feeling of exclusion heightens the disappointment at slow but real achievement and for all participants the frustrations with the process may lead to a lack of expectation of tangible outcomes. A response to this might be to increase the amount and emphasis on evaluation. Boydell et al. warn against this, seeing ‘a real danger that the overproduction of information may easily become an institutional defence’ (2008: 214). Bauer is even more concerned that ‘increased evaluation requirements might actually erode governance rather than improve it thus damaging the inter-organisational collaboration’ (2002: 783).

Rather than more evaluation, efforts might be better directed at: defining the links between aims and outcomes of the collaboration as a whole; more locally derived and perceived outcomes; and identifying intangible as well as tangible assets. It needs to be simple and to be integrated locally in what Sanderson refers to as a common sense ‘rational cycle of goal specification, design, implementation, evaluation and redesign’ (2000: 437). Above all collaboration needs a shared picture of what a successful outcome would look like to ensure that people know when they have succeeded.

## Conclusions

The evaluation of outcomes should be a specific theme of collaboration and it naturally links to the identification of common aims. Explicit aims identified focused on a broad consensus around economic development, communications infrastructure, environment and culture but there are more aims than the open and explicit. Not only does the collaboration have aims but so too do the participating institutions and individual actors. Aims may be assumed and hidden as well as explicit and this complexity could, if not managed, contribute to inertia.

In reality, if either institutions or individuals have aims they wish to realize through the collaboration, this heightens their interest in ensuring the collaboration is successful and continues, thus giving them an added commitment to achieving the explicit aims of the collaboration and even the aims of others, providing these aims do not conflict with their own. Further, participants working on collaborations within participating agencies may shift their loyalty from their host institution to the collaboration itself.

An issue in the DKMT was the importance of the aim of cohesion – a clear EU priority and one specifically identified in the DKMT strategy, yet neither strongly identified by respondents, except as an element of culture nor as a focus of evaluation or monitoring. I sought to treat cohesion as an ‘assumed’ aim in two ways – either taken for granted as an outcome of collaborative activity around economic growth and the creation of transport and communication infrastructure or as an outcome of the cultural exchange activity. Neither approach appears particularly satisfactory and the issue remains unresolved.

With this exception and the previously noted difference of emphasis between the NGO sector and local government around the relative balance of importance between cultural and infrastructure projects, the identification of common aims appears to be an example of positive collaborative experience. The only reservation is that at present, while the supply of funding is increasing, the prospect of continued growth of resources and development of projects seems assured. The test of making tough choices about priorities has not yet been reached.

The identification of outcomes presents a less positive picture. The experience of the process of monitoring and evaluation, focusing on projects and programmes rather than on the collaboration itself is not without problems. Priorities determined externally rather than locally appear to predominate. This has had a negative impact on perceptions of the outcomes of the collaboration. I suggest that there may be a tendency to ‘bank’ positive outcomes and focus on the negative but, given the view that success breeds success, these negative perceptions may be a source of inertia. I have argued that collaborations need to have a vision of what success would look like. Koppenjan, by contrast, questions the effectiveness of *ex ante* performance management (2008). This contradiction can be resolved by seeing the need to have a vision as being linked to locally negotiated aims (Eden and Huxham, 2001: 374) as opposed to the external imposition of a performance management framework. While evaluations may not keep pace with changing agenda (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002: 106), an emphasis on knowing how to gauge success **for the collaboration** is essential and this may require the development of new evaluative tools.

I also suggest that intangible outcomes of collaboration such as learning, capacity-building and the creation of a collaborative infrastructure (through channels of exchange and communication) are less easy to capture through conventional monitoring. The NGO sector, as a potential beneficiary of the creation of intangible assets, does not appear to feel included in such processes. Externally directed monitoring programmes, capturing outputs which may not be linked to locally derived common aims, may be a source of inertia or at the least a limiting factor on the creation of advantage. Local perceptions of outcomes are more mixed but there does appear to be a need to

identify and communicate both aims and positive outcomes more effectively if the collaboration is to be promoted and popularized more effectively. Uusikylä and Valovirta describe this process as a shift ‘from performance management to performance governance’ (2007: 409). The importance of linking aims to outcomes is stressed by Sorensen and Torfing who suggest that the real strength of governance networks lies in ‘defining a complex set of objectives . . . rather than in delivering the outputs that produce the desired outcomes’ (2009: 240).

## Notes

1. The area covers the del Alföld (Southern Great Plain) region of Hungary, the West Region of Romania (sometimes called the Banat) and the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in Serbia. DKMT stands for the major Rivers of the area Danube, Kris, Mures and Tisa.
2. The full research can be accessed as a PDF file at: <http://www.wolverhamptonlabour.com/cgi-bin/cm.cgi?fa=display&cmrid=&ln=CM000391&pop=N&targetid=56&targetname>
3. The DKMT report specifically refers to social cohesion. However, the EU concept of cohesion generally refers to the need to reduce inter-regional inequalities of wealth and development through, for example, programmes of structural funding, and generally this was the way cohesion was used rather than discourses about, for example, minority rights.

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