

EXTERNAL EVALUATION – SHORT REPORT

Evaluator: Ms Suzana Lange

“Promotion of regional cooperation in South East Europe
in the field of quality infrastructure”

Country | Region: South East Europe
Project number: 2012.2458.3
Implementation period: 12/2012 - 03/2016
Executing agency: Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt
Political counterpart: n/a
Main implementing partners: National metrology institutes and national accreditation bodies
from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia,
Montenegro and Serbia
PTB | Working Group: Q.51 Europe and the CIS
PTB | Project coordinator: Mr Stefan Wallerath
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List of abbreviations

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BMZ	German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DeGEval	German Evaluation Society
EA	European Cooperation for Accreditation
EMPIR	European Metrology Programme for Innovation and Research
EU	European Union
EURAMET	European Association of National Metrology Institutes
MLA	Multilateral agreement
NAB	National accreditation body
NMI	National metrology institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ODA	Official development assistance
QI	Quality Infrastructure
PTB	Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt
SEE	South East Europe

1. Project Description

The evaluation covers the BMZ-financed project „Promotion of regional cooperation in South East Europe (SEE) in the field of quality infrastructure (QI)“. The SEE QI project, with a funding amount of EUR 500.000, started in December 2012 and ended in March 2016. There was an add-on of EUR 50.000 financed by other sectoral BMZ funds assigned to PTB to cover follow up regional activities in the area of accreditation and metrology until the end of June 2016.

Due to the cross-border nature of the project, there is no political counterpart. The main implementing partners are national metrology institutes (NMI) and national accreditation bodies (NAB) from the six Western Balkan countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The target groups of the projects are the consumers as well as enterprises, retailers and laboratories that depend on the availability and use of external QI services.

The SEE QI project objective is “The continuous improvement of internationally recognised regional and national quality infrastructures (focussing on metrology and accreditation) facilitates EU integration of SEE countries.”

The project objective corresponds to the five project indicators, which follow the structure of the different intervention areas of the project.

1. NMIs of the SEE region assume an active part in the EURAMET/WELMEC focus group on facilitating national metrology infrastructure development or its successor institution (deputy chair, speaking notes, written contributions) and shape the working programme (plan of activities, hosting of further trainings).
2. NMIs of SEE countries receiving official development assistance (ODA) are embedded in the design of a European Metrology Programme for Innovation and Research (institutionalised participation in relevant committees for capacity development).
3. NABs of the region are interlinked through jointly and continuously conducted regional training activities and self-dependent regional assessor trainings/exchange.
4. The number of assessments performed by regional assessors - either registered in the regional database or being recommended by partner ABs - has increased.
5. The number of signed EA-MLA for different fields of accreditation is increased.

2. Assessment of the project

The aim of the evaluation is to identify changes that have occurred as a result of the project, to find out which are the success factors and to provide recommendations for similar PTB projects or a potential SEE follow up project.

The evaluator assessed the project on the basis of the five internationally recognised criteria of the OECD Development Aid Committee (DAC) and the five success factors of the management model Capacity WORKS. PTB decided to focus the evaluation on the achievement of the project objectives and impact from the point of view of development policy rather than in terms of the completion of specific technical aspects. PTB issued additional specific evaluation questions on the added value of regional cooperation for the partners (consequences of a "one size fits all" approach, institutionalised versus informal networks, regional cooperation in conflict sensitive areas, bilateral versus regional cooperation...).

The evaluator is Ms Suzana Lange, a freelance consultant for quality assurance of international cooperation projects (EU-X Consulting). She has a Master's degree in Political Sciences and is a certified organisational developer. Ms Lange complies with the DeGEval evaluation standards.

For the assessment of the project, PTB provided to the evaluators all key project documents. The evaluation report is based mainly on findings from 36 interviews performed in June and July 2017 with representatives of partner institutions, other QI stakeholders, staff of related technical assistance projects and QI networks, PTB staff and international/regional experts. For budget reasons, interview partners in only three out of the six partner countries could be met face-to-face, whereas the other

interlocutors were interviewed by telephone. The PTB project coordinator chose Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania to be visited (5-9 June 2017) for reasons of representativeness and need for further investigation.

In total, the documents and interviews provided sufficient information, clarifications and individual perspectives to get a well-rounded view of a variety of perceptions of the project.

2.1 Status of the change process

Relevance

The PTB SEE QI project corresponds to BMZ's development cooperation strategies. Technical cooperation in QI proves to be a good vehicle for regional reconciliation and regional approximation. The project supports the Western Balkan countries in their EU accession efforts and in their integration into European QI networks. The project activities facilitate their access to the EU common market as well as regional trade and collaboration. The project's regional "one size fits all" approach was in general well appreciated. Nevertheless, it might be questioned whether the project could have achieved more by reorienting its third phase towards a stronger focus, a more heterogeneous group of beneficiaries and a more consequent exit strategy.

The relevance is rated with good (2,0).

Effectiveness

Over the last ten years, the beneficiary institutions made significant progress in the fulfilment of EU requirements and in the international recognition of their QI services. In the field of metrology, all Western Balkan countries participated in EURAMET meetings and activities during the project duration. Currently only two of them play a very active role in EURAMET bodies and benefit as full members of EURAMET's research and cooperation programme EMPIR. In the field of accreditation, NABs were very active during the round tables and other project activities, but when it comes to independently organised common activities, the engagement stops. The regional exchange of assessors is well anchored. In addition to successes on networking level, there are also technical developments on individual and organisational level of NABs and NIMs, which can be attributed to project support.

The effectiveness is rated with good (2,3).

Impact

The most important impact is the increased availability of internationally recognised QI services in SEE. In the area of metrology, more CMCs are submitted and more laboratories are accredited. In the area of accreditation, additional EA-MLA were signed. The international recognition of these new services is in some cases unstable due to fluctuation of qualified staff, lacking investments in continuous learning and improvement by the QI institutions/the governments, and/or a lack of sufficient demand for services. The experts' advocacy for a smart specialisation in SEE in the sense of a strategic regional division of work in line with justified national/regional needs is not shared by interviewed NABs and NIMs, who prefer to set up as many services as possible in their own countries. Ten years of PTB-SEE cooperation contributed to building up trust as a precondition for long-term (complementary) regional cooperation. The PTB project stimulated triangular cooperation with other SEE countries and started assisting the Western Balkan countries to find a market for their services in less developed countries. The impact of the project is rated with satisfactory (2,7).

Efficiency

The number of implemented activities is high compared to the relatively small budget of 500,000 Euro for three and a half years, six countries and two fields of activities. PTB technical assistance projects in general are characterised by a low level of staff costs, as there is no permanent office infrastructure in the partner countries. The biggest share of the project budget went into trainings and meetings. Host institutions provided logistical support. Only per diems and travel costs to and from airports had to be covered by the participants themselves. The challenge for beneficiary countries to provide own contributions for the participation in international activities was not tackled during the project. The project used and combined different formats to reach its goals. The expertise, also the less cost-intensive input of SEE "outer circle" experts, was well appreciated by beneficiaries.

The efficiency of the project is rated with good (2,0).

Sustainability

Formalised cooperation, especially in the area of metrology, was triggered and shaped by ten years of PTB technical cooperation. Whereas it was mainly set up before, the PTB project phase 2012-2016 nevertheless contributed to its consolidation. The opportunities created by the project are not fully used by all Western Balkan countries, especially not by the less developed countries, mainly because of the unwillingness of Western Balkan governments to cover travel costs. The PTB project also consulted beneficiaries in informal network development: The regional exchange of assessors works well, and some joint assessments were organised. To satisfy continuous training needs, the beneficiaries count on cooperation projects instead of taking own initiative and building on contacts with neighbours and experts established during the past three regional PTB projects. Even for ad hoc informal cooperation that does not cost money, only very few examples of self-initiative could be named. The sustainability of the project is rated with satisfactory (3,0).

2.2 Success factors for the observed results and change processes

Strategy

The overall strategic framework of the project is defined by the integration into European QI networks and the approximation with the EU. The 2012-2016 phase prepared the ground for more self-sustainable SEE networks in metrology and accreditation. Within this broad strategic framework, the beneficiaries were free to choose their priorities. In fact, this broad support helps countries to set up services without prioritisation in regard to their market needs, which is in opposition to a more efficient and effective smart specialisation in SEE. After years of horizontal institution building it might be time to leave horizontal and routine tasks to the countries themselves and focus on a more strategic approach. Assessment of Strategy: currently achieved: 60%, potentially achievable: 90%

Cooperation

The project concentrated on bringing together peers from SEE NABs and NMIs and on facilitating their integration into institutionalised and ad hoc networks. This narrow set of beneficiaries neglects chances that arise out of a more heterogeneous multi-level approach: Including potential clients and consumers carries the potential to create a common understanding of QI and more business relations. Involving the political level might raise their understanding of the necessity to finance international QI activities, to discuss smart specialisation and/or to improve the (implementation of the) legislative framework. There was a good use of synergies with ongoing PTB bilateral projects in BiH and Serbia, with GIZ and with a parallel ongoing regional QI project, whereas contact to other EU projects was rather minimal. Assessment of Cooperation: currently achieved: 75%, potentially achievable: 90%

Steering structure

The partners appreciated the flexible and demand-driven steering approach: During annual accreditation roundtables/ EURAMET meetings beneficiaries suggested and discussed common activities. Those ideas in which at least three countries showed interest were selected. Whereas the beneficiaries showed high engagement in the identification of activities, this was not necessarily the case for the implementation. Strict selection of activities and participants, which might have contributed more to a smart specialisation in SEE, was not enforced. A certain co-financing by the partners already during project implementation should be considered to ensure a strong link to partners' own priorities and the continuation of cooperation after the project ends. More ongoing communication between the partners might have strengthened the networks. PTB's role in the project coordination was seen positively. Assessment of Steering structure: currently achieved: 75%, potentially achievable: 100%

Processes

PTB saw its role as facilitator of the long-term peer-to-peer cooperation of NABs and NMIs. The actual training activities supported by the project covered a broad range of topics. The triangular cooperation with experts from the "outer circle" of more developed SEE countries implementing activities has shown good results. The QI interviewees appreciate practical hands-on formats and working on real challenges/procedures more than classroom or simulation exercises. This is well explored in a regional project by bringing in individual experiences of network members. There should be a stringent exit strategy and transfer of more process ownership to the members of the networks themselves. Assessment of Processes: currently achieved: 80%, potentially achievable: 90%

Learning and innovation

In comparison to other regional technical assistance projects, this PTB SEE QI project had its focus on the creation of sustainable forms of regional cooperation. Consultancy on network development and management, its facilitation and consolidation were among the main project outputs. Both for institutionalised and informal networks, own contributions of beneficiaries - financial ones and engagement/initiative - are needed to instill it with life. Ad hoc informal contacts are easier to establish and maintain but they can easily be disrupted in case of staff turnover, which is a current phenomenon in SEE institutions.

Assessment of Learning and innovation: currently achieved: 80%, potentially achievable: 90%

3. Learning processes and learning experience

PTB decided to focus the evaluation on the achievement of the project objectives and impact from the point of view of development policy rather than in terms of the completion of specific technical aspects. Additional specific evaluation questions on the added value of regional cooperation for the partners have been issued by PTB:

Bilateral versus regional cooperation approach?

All beneficiary country representatives interviewed saw an added value in assistance provided on the regional level, even those benefitting from a much more intense and targeted bilateral assistance. Regional cooperation is seen as more appropriate for horizontal issues of interest for all countries and for the implementation tasks that cannot be done by one country alone. Other arguments for regional cooperation provided were e.g. gained insights into developments in neighbouring countries, sharing the path of harmonisation with EU/ international requirements, acquaintance with different sources of information and models, informal information on problem solving and setting up of personal networks for everyday contact. To go for regional cooperation, the benefit on national, organisational or individual level has to be clear. An interesting observation of one of the interviewees was the comparison that bilateral assistance is needed to work on weaknesses, whereas regional assistance is more beneficial when participants are strong enough to make own contributions. In fact, the willingness to provide own contributions is also the bottleneck for the sustainability of created formalised or informal regional networks.

Consequences of a "one size fits all" approach

Although some of the more developed institutions expressed the opinion that PTB SEE QI project activities were sometimes on a too basic level, the vast majority said that they could benefit despite development gaps. Some of the arguments mentioned as to why it is good to offer activities for all six countries together were similar preconditions (language, problems, state of mind,...) leading to a good common understanding, dynamic development paths, the one size goal of EU integration for all Western Balkan countries, the positive competition and the provision of real-life experience by others. However, the open "one size fits all" approach also carries the risk that the institutions which participate in activities cannot absorb/use the gained knowledge, or that services in the region are duplicated without enough demand.

Regional cooperation in conflict-sensitive areas?

It is remarkable how positive the collaboration between SEE partners was described by all interviewees, both in accreditation and in metrology. All beneficiaries were hosting events and participating in events, regardless of the nationality of other participants and hosts. Everybody reported a very friendly and

constructive atmosphere during project events. Informal and formal collaborations between all different countries seem to be rather motivated by interest than by historical or political proximity. Interviewees highlighted in general the binding aspects, such as a common language, the interest in technical matters, a shared service mentality for industry, etc., and not the diverging points, e.g. political conflicts. This is an impact that can be mainly attributed to the first two phases, when cooperation relations after the Balkan wars were more fragile. Now NAB and NMI staff seems to know and trust each other. On the other hand, due to fluctuation of personnel, there are always new people joining the QI institutions, so the current project was helpful for their integration into the regional SEE community.

Institutionalised versus informal networks?

Both for institutionalised and informal networks, own contributions - financial ones and engagement/initiative - are needed to instill them with life. Ad hoc informal contacts are easier to establish and maintain but they can easily be disrupted in case of staff turnover, which is a current phenomenon in SEE institutions. For institutionalised cooperation, beneficiaries have to be ready in terms of willingness and financial means to contribute resources. The benefits of regional cooperation have to be clearly identified, discussed and re-discussed to motivate the beneficiaries to engage in a regional network.

4. Recommendations

Recommendations to partners

- The institutionalised networks that were supported by the project and that create interesting opportunities for NMI and NAB are not fully used by all Western Balkan countries. The own financial contributions to use these opportunities, relatively small when compared to the past efforts of the setting up as well as the financing provided by other sources, should be brought up by the Western Balkans government themselves.
- During ten years of cooperation trustful working and personal relations with peers from Western Balkans, SEE and EU countries were set up. These relations are only useful and can only endure, when instilled with life, based on self-initiative of NABs and NMIs. The risk of fluctuation of personal in SEE institutions might be encountered by more frequent and more formal usage of links.
- As it is expensive to set up and maintain QI services, especially for small countries, and as there are limited national and regional needs, smart specialisation in SEE in the sense of a strategic regional division of work should be further explored.
- The link of donor cooperation project to regional strategies such as the SEE 2020 strategy and different national strategies might be strengthened.

Recommendations for a potential SEE follow up project

- Due to dynamic developments in QI and to further existing development needs of SEE QI institutions, a follow up technical assistance project is justified. After ten years of horizontal support, a more focused approach should be chosen, while horizontal and routine tasks should be left to Western Balkan countries themselves. Within this more narrow cooperation framework, based on thorough analysis and impact assessment regarding chosen sectors/topics/fields (with the participation of SEE line ministries), there could again be room for flexible demand-driven support.
- When supporting the setting up of peer networks or thematic networks, not all costs of the meetings and activities should be financed by the project, but beneficiaries should contribute a certain level of own financial and staff contributions already during project duration.
- Instead of homogenous groups encompassing all Western Balkan countries, "islands of cooperation" could be supported, where (heterogeneous) institutions (including the private sector) interested in and concerned by a special topic come up with the initiative for a common activity. Consultancy in beneficiaries' project identification might be part of PTB's project support.
- The line ministries should be better informed and involved in the project. e.g. as official project partners or as participants of activities.
- The project should stimulate smart specialisation of QI institutions in SEE.
- The benefits of regional cooperation have to be clearly identified, discussed and re-discussed to motivate the beneficiaries to engage in a regional network.

Recommendations for PTB Q5

Before starting with recommendations, it first has to be stated that a lot of positive lessons learned can be gained out of the ten-year PTB-SEE cooperation, such as the remarkable integration of project activities into the formalised EURAMET Focus group, the transition from development cooperation to scientific cooperation in the framework of EMPIR with its various formats adapted to small countries' needs, the triangular support provided by more developed SEE countries, and the promotion of various beneficial formats of ad hoc cooperation and support.

- When beneficiaries get used that trainings are free of charge, it is questionable if/how they will cover continuous training needs in the future without external project support. Covering travel costs is a problem for some beneficiary countries and prevents the continuation of collaboration both on regional and international level. If these own contributions are not provided, a set up network will not be able to sustain.
A project should require the partners to contribute own resources already during the project duration, to increase the perceived value of activities and to prepare the path for self-initiated follow up. To involve political decision-makers in project activities might raise the awareness about the necessity and the willingness to provide resources for regional/international cooperation.
- It is part of the project's responsibility to stimulate and critically steer the development of efficient and complementary skills in beneficiary countries (smart specialisation) - provided that the right partners are on board instead of contributing to duplication of non-sustainable services by capacity building provided free of charge.
- After having kicked off regional exchange as external facilitator and built a base of trust and positive experiences of the added value of cooperation, there should be a stringent exit strategy and a transfer of process ownership to members of the networks.
- Ongoing communication between partners contributes to the development of more ownership, accountability and thereby stronger networks.
- Cooperation projects offer the chance to establish the necessary, but often neglected cooperation relations between the private and the public sector. Including potential clients and consumers bears the chance to create a common understanding of QI and more business relations. Involving the political level might raise their understanding of the necessity to finance international QI activities, to favour smart specialisation, to remove administrative barriers and/or to improve the (implementation of the) legislative framework.
- Working on practical hands-on formats and real challenges/procedures is appreciated. This is an option that can be well exploited in regional cooperation projects by bringing in individual partners' facilities and contacts as well as past experiences for the benefit of all.