



# CONSULTATION OF STAKEHOLDERS AND CITIZENS, INTERREG POST 2027 INTERREG AURORA



<b>1 Consultation of stakeholders</b> .....	<b>3</b>
1.1 Main stakeholders consulted .....	3
1.2 Methods of consultation .....	3
1.3 Summary of the input on the key questions .....	5
1.4 Interesting quotes .....	12
<b>2 Consultation of citizens</b> .....	<b>13</b>
2.1 Main citizens consulted .....	13
2.2 Methods of consultation .....	14
2.3 Summary of the input on the key questions .....	15
2.4 Interesting quotes .....	17
<b>3 Recommendations for post-2027</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>4 ANNEX 1</b> .....	<b>20</b>



# 1 Consultation of stakeholders

## 1.1 Main stakeholders consulted

As the stakeholders consulted are too numerous, see Annex 1 for full list of organisational names.

Border-councils

Business support organisations

Centres for Economic development, Transport and the Environment

City representatives

Cluster organisations

County administrative boards

Destination development organisations

Environmental institutes

Forest centres and agencies

Ministries

Micro- small and middle sized companies (MSMEs)

Municipalities

Museums

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

Regional Councils

Research institutes

Sámi councils

Sámi parliaments

Tourist boards

Universities of applied sciences

Universities

Vocational colleges

Youth Councils

## 1.2 Methods of consultation

Information about Interreg post 2027 and the consultation process was shared on the Interreg Aurora webpage, [www.interregaurora.eu](http://www.interregaurora.eu). The page has been updated during the progress of the process. An illustration to represent the Interreg Aurora programme area was also created (see title page), to accompany the message of the consultation. Information and survey links was also shared on [interreg.no](http://interreg.no).

### Survey

An online stakeholder survey was produced in English, the Interreg Aurora programme official language, and North Sami as it is a unique feature of Interreg Aurora that the programme is integrated with Sápmi and the indigenous Sami people. Information was spread about the

## Aurora

online survey on the Interreg Aurora webpage and social media. E-mails to all beneficiaries were sent out. The survey was open between mid-April and mid-June and got 140 responses.

### Interviews

Interviews were held online, during August-December. Respondents were representatives from:

- The Sámi Parliament of Sweden
- The Sámi Parliament of Norway
- The Saami Council in Sweden
- The Kvarken Council EGTC
- The North Calotte Council
- The Council of Torne Valley
- The Barents Regional Youth Council

Kvarken Council is the only EGTC of the Aurora programme area. The Sámi Parliament of Finland also got the question to participate but had to cancel the meeting, they decided to take the opportunity to deliver written answers to the stakeholder questions by e-mail instead. A total of nine stakeholder representatives were interviewed.

### Workshops

One workshop was held with the Monitoring Committee of the Interreg Aurora programme at a meeting in Kiruna, Sweden, in May. Another workshop was held with the Steering Committees of Interreg Aurora (Steering Committee Sápmi and Steering Committee Aurora) during a meeting in Bodø, Norway, in June. Total number of participants in stakeholder workshops were about forty.



Figure 1 Workshop with the Interreg Aurora Monitoring Committee

### 1.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

#### 1. Is living next to a border an opportunity or disadvantage?

##### Opportunity (81% of survey respondents):

###### CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Ideas and influences from the neighbouring country, cultural exchange, learning more languages and easier cross-border cooperation and knowledge transfer.

###### BROADER BUSINESS AND LABOUR MARKET

Opportunities such as joint economical- and employment areas were highlighted. In those cases, cross-border contacts can be an important part of the everyday life. Easier networking and more work opportunities were also arguments for this.

###### JOINT ACTIVITIES AND MANAGEMENT

Joint management of endangered species, joint test activities, joint activities in research and education were all examples brought up as opportunities.

##### Disadvantage (2% of survey respondents)

Several respondents expressed that they (as representing smaller organisations located close to a land-border) don't feel prioritized in the programme compared to larger organizations in the area, like universities and border-area institutions.

Sami actors express that the borders makes it hard to practice some of the traditional livings, like reindeer herding, as it is hard to travel with herding dogs, weapon and animal transports.

*"National borders characterises the Sami collaboration. It is something that we need to consider all the time."*

Interview respondent

##### Not applicable, do not live close to a border (17% of survey respondents)

*"If you live close to a border you do not think it is good or bad. It is very clear from a Sápmi perspective. We live and make a living where we are, and we make the most out of the situation that we have. It is both."*

Interview respondent

Other answers state that they do not think in terms of borders.

#### 2. Where is the biggest potential for territorial cooperation in your area?

From all methods used in the consultation, the areas mentioned below are frequently mentioned.

###### SAFETY AND SECURITY

Reflecting the current times, safety and security are important topics to all stakeholders. It is a wide topic spanning over questions such as security of supply (sustainable energy, food and Indigenous food, goods, clean water, fuels), increased local food production and agricultural preparedness for a changing climate, civil preparedness, civil security, cybersecurity, civil defence, and military mobility infrastructure. Related issues are also the wellbeing of nurses and caregivers in health and social sector (robust health care) and the wellbeing of teachers. Both sectors face similar challenges regarding lack of personnel, ageing personnel, and high turnover of staff.

#### CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION AND NATURE CONSERVATION

Climate change adaptation and climate solutions is frequently mentioned as having a great potential for further developed cross-border collaboration. Including actions like dealing with multiple stressors, watershed management, invasive species, biodiversity loss, environmental pollution, disease monitoring (in forests and animals) and cooperation to standardize methods within different sorts of environmental mapping. Work with climate adaptation within sub-area Sápmi, by Sámi actors, also has great potential according to stakeholders.

#### GREEN TRANSITION

Production of green energy, hydrogen development (and other renewable fuels), battery industry. Sustainable mining, reduction of landfill and new industries to the region is also mentioned. Talent attraction is mentioned as a potential, but also something that is currently lagging when new industries are establishing.

#### SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY

Increasing cross-border mobility for locals and meeting the needs for development of the travel infrastructure (trains, buses, flights, road quality etc) is a reoccurring theme in the consultation. In the sparsely populated areas, travels are longer and travel expenses higher, and actors seem to think that Interreg doesn't cover the real costs of travelling within the programme area. Stakeholders mention the potential of Interreg helping to build a foundation of arguments of what is needed in terms of infrastructure. Digitalization and network infrastructure, especially in rural areas, is also frequently mentioned.

#### CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND TOURISM

People-to-people cooperation, sharing cultural differences, languages, traditions. Increased youth engagement and influence and increased youth cooperation are topics that come back. Cultural tourism and tourism around the world heritages in the programme area is also mentioned.

#### EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND INNOVATION

Cross-border collaboration in higher education, joint research activities and research cooperation within arctic knowledge is frequently mentioned. The need for more experts in the area, and sharing of the scarce expertise there is, is also mentioned as important. Student exchange, from early age to post-doc, is also mentioned as desirable.

Research and innovation within sub-area Sápmi has untapped potential according to stakeholders. Sámi actors highlight that they often get placed in the culture category whereas they see an immense potential in other areas, not normally considered.

#### BUSINESS, JOINT LABOUR MARKET AND PLACEBRANDING TO ATTRACT WORKFORCE

Today there are obstacles making it complicated for those who wish to expand their business to the other side of the border. There is a need both for entrepreneurs and labour force in many sectors. Capacity building for MSME: s is also frequently mentioned and other areas that comes up are generational change, balance between preservation and industrialisation, business cooperation across borders, digitalisation, and AI.

#### SÁPMI

*"The biggest need and potential lie in supporting the Sámi culture, language, and traditional livelihoods like reindeer herding. Cross-border collaboration is essential for addressing shared languages such as climate change, biodiversity loss and the preservation of Sámi culture and*

*languages”*

Other needs mentioned are Sami rights and practical solutions to increase the services in Sami languages like automatic translations, municipal and state services in Sami and preservation of Sami heritage.

### **3. What currently works well in this cooperation and should be either preserved or reinforced?**

The programme area carries a long tradition of cultural exchange, as well as youth exchange and cooperation. There is a positive attitude between areas and willingness to cooperate.

The regions share many cultural similarities and democratic values. Many seem to think that their current cross-border collaboration (in example, in their ongoing Interreg Aurora projects, research collaborations etc) works well and should be preserved. The interest for the Interreg Aurora programme is high in the 2021-2027 programme period. Several stakeholders lift that it is easy to find cross-border cooperations and that the trust among the stakeholders is strong, as well as the trust between regional and local partners and organisations.

*“It is really good that also “soft” areas, such as culture are included, not only technology/business. I hope to see that these kind of priority areas are also included in future programs.”*

Survey respondent

*“The current possibilities (within Interreg) should be more known to the public.”*

Survey respondent

#### **PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT & ADMINISTRATION**

Many stakeholders seem satisfied with the content of the current programme, the possibility to run small-scale projects as well as regular projects, the possibility to have project idea consultations and the possibility to have the possibility to complete the applications. The structures and administration of both the Managing Authority and the Joint secretariat are lifted as well functioning from the stakeholders. They also think that a decentralised secretariat (as it is in current programme period) brings more regional knowledge to the programme. They appreciate a strong programme communication from the Interreg Aurora programme, as well as a strong focus on implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals in the funded projects.

Amongst areas that needs to be reinforced there are some areas that are mentioned frequently:

#### **SUB-AREA SÁPMI**

The Sub-area Sápmi is seen as strong and important and should be reinforced. Sami actors highlight the need for further reinforcement of Sami languages, Sami traditional knowledge, cultural entrepreneurship, Duodji (Sámi handicraft) and Indigenous food culture connected to resilience and security of supply.

#### **CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION AND NATURE CONSERVATION**

With examples highlighted earlier, and especially emphasising the joint interest in preserving and improving environmental status in the programme area.

*“There is some cooperation that I know of in nature conservation, which could not be done without the cross-border cooperation and here the Interreg funding is a critical incentive for cooperation.”*

Survey respondent

*“All mentioned topics (conservation biology, restoration ecology, and climate change mitigation) must remain in the programme, and additional funding will most likely be required because of ongoing (extensive) budget cuts in terms of state funding.”*

Survey respondent

#### CULTURAL COLLABORATION AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Increased collaboration between ongoing projects. Sectors such as gaming, music and tourism are highlighted areas to further reinforce.

#### RURAL AREAS CHALLENGES

Common challenges in rural areas need to be reinforced. Examples are mobility solutions, infrastructure investments, communication networks and health care.

#### 4. What currently does not work well in this cooperation and should be improved?

##### CO-FUNDING

Applicants find it difficult and uncertain to apply for co-funding, as the co-funding is structured differently in different countries and regions of the programme.

##### EQUAL FUNDING IN THE PARTNERSHIP – EU-FUNDING AND IR-MIDLER

Another reoccurring theme in this consultation is the cross-border collaboration with Norway and the fact that the funding percentage and allocation of IR-midler is lower than the EU-funding. Many actors would like increased cooperation with Norway but find it difficult to cooperate on equal terms.

##### INVOLVEMENT OF SMALL ORGANISATIONS

Small actors (NGOs, youth organisations, MSMEs, small- and rural municipalities etc) do not always have the capacity to run a project as it is structured now, neither the capacity to plan for a project.



Figure 2 Interreg Aurora programme area

##### MOBILITY IN THE PROGRAMME AREA

There are many different thoughts regarding the current programme geography. However, stakeholders seem to agree that the options for travelling leave more to wish for. Physical meetings are challenging and sometimes time consuming to arrange as the transportation options in the programme area are very few (even more so in the far north) and expensive. The possibility to cover higher travel expenses for travelling between countries in the programme area is frequently mentioned, as well as a great need for a better transport infrastructure (especially in the rural areas). Public transport is non-existent in some areas.

##### SÁMI INVOLVEMENT AND ANCHORING

Concerning sub-area Sápmi, Sami actors highlight that it is very important to maintain the requirement that projects within the sub-area should always have Sami actors involved or good anchoring in the Sami society.

Other comments on this topic includes language barriers, different currencies, and legislations.



## 5. What are the major obstacles for a good cooperation in your area?

### ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY IN SMALL ORGANISATIONS

Stakeholders agree that a good Interreg project management requires a lot of resources as it is now. They wish for stronger support systems and simplified procedures, with further information and education so that actors get a higher knowledge of what the programme is and what they can do within it. Possible solutions that they present is to find ambassadors for the programme, to highlight success stories even more, to offer even more extensive support from the programme administration and to offer pre-project funding to ease the burden of setting up partnerships and writing applications. More efforts to bring new and smaller actors, in example NGOs and youth organisations, into the programme is also asked for.

### CO-FUNDING AND FUNDING PERCENTAGE EU/IR

The Finnish system with national funding is highly appreciated amongst the beneficiaries and something they wish to see in the other countries as well. A sole source of co-funding for Interreg Aurora projects and/or a higher funding percentage from Interreg are some solutions presented. There are also ideas stating that certain groups, like youth or applications within sub-area Sápmi, could receive a higher funding percentage or be fully funded by Interreg.

Harmonised funding percentage in the programme area (between EU-funding and IR-midler) and more resources to the Norwegian managing organisation is also frequently mentioned as well needed.

### PROGRAMME GEOGRAPHY AND MOBILITY

The current Aurora programme area is large and with few travel options in many areas. Possible solutions mentioned are a stronger focus on infrastructure and sustainable travel options as well as suggestions to make more sub-areas in the programme for easier communication.

Other common obstacles mentioned were in example trade regulations and tax rules, cultural differences as well as language barriers.

## 6. Are there things you would like to do under Interreg but cannot? Why?

It seems like many respondents are quite satisfied with the opportunities that the current programme structure brings. In example, they mention in several sections of the questionnaire that they are happy about the opportunity to run both small-scale and regular projects. However, several stakeholders lift the need for the possibility for a longer Interreg project duration, five to six years instead of three. Possibility to have a stronger focus on youth (from very young ages) and educational activities is also desirable. To be able to run social- and healthcare projects, without a technological focus, is also wished for, as well as investments in laboratories and other infrastructure.

## 7. What is the most important novelty you would like to see in the future Interreg?

### CO-FUNDING AND FUNDING PERCENTAGE

As stated under question 5, the Finnish system with national funding is highly appreciated amongst the beneficiaries and something they wish to see in the other countries as well (guaranteed co-funding on a national level). A single source of funding for Interreg Aurora projects and/or higher funding percentage from Interreg are some solutions presented.

## Aurora

The possibility to apply for all funding in one application is desired. There are also ideas stating that certain groups, like youth or applications within sub-area Sápmi, could receive a higher funding percentage. Harmonised funding percentage in the programme area (between EU-funding and IR-midler) and more resources to the Norwegian managing organisation is also frequently mentioned as well needed.

### FLEXIBILITY IN PROJECT DURATION

Especially those who request a longer project duration (seems to be mostly projects under priority 1 and 2 that have this need) finds this question very important.

### INCREASED YOUTH FOCUS

Increased focus on youth and more flexibility in working with youth (also young ages, such as primary school students), students and education is asked for.

### EXCHANGE PROGRAMS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Short-term cross-border exchange programs for professionals within the programme area comes up in several sections in survey answers, as well as in interviews and workshops.

### JOINT ARENAS AND EVENTS

Our stakeholders want to meet more frequently in real life – and they would like the programme to facilitate the meetings. Annual programme events, innovation forums, awards, competitions, parties, conferences, festivals and joint research facilities are some of the ideas.

Other wishes that the stakeholders lift are for example; AI tools (for project planning, budgeting, reporting and communication), one joint reporting platform for all countries involved, and also further user involvement in the service design of the programmes and project reporting. One common application portal for all Interreg programmes in the area is also a concrete idea. There is also an emphasis on the needs of the sparsely populated areas, to adapt the legislations to their specific needs. There is often a need for capacity building projects. A few voices raise that they would like to be able to hand in applications in their own language, rather than English.

*“A dedicated Sámi cross-border development fund could be a transformative addition. It could support culture and languages, traditional livelihoods, climate change adaptation, youth programs, etc. Importantly, this fund should include streamlined processes to ensure accessibility for small Sámi organizations and direct support for traditional livelihoods facing climate challenges.”*

Survey respondent

## 8. Is there a need for some infrastructure projects?

**No 45%**

**Yes 55%**

### More details, if the answer “yes” is selected

#### MOBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE

There is a great need for increased physical communication in large parts of the Aurora programme area. The railway infrastructure as well as the road conditions needs to be upgraded to make it more robust and meet both current and future needs. Increased possibilities to travel by public transport and commute sustainable, for example by biogas buses or electric aviation, is said to make a great difference both for locals as well as for cross-border collaboration and

tourism. Also, the condition of smaller roads that are used e.g. in forestry, tourism, recreation etc needs to be improved. A need for infrastructure projects regarding the accessibility, security of supply, civil protection, clean energy etc is also mentioned. Besides the needs for direct investments into infrastructure, joint investigations, plans, and strategies are also mentioned as very important.

*"We have got the feedback from our decision makers that 'if you find this (joint infrastructure projects) equally important, why don't you have any representatives from the other country with you?' You also need to be seen and heard together when it comes to the cross-border topics."*

Interview respondent

#### RELIABLE CONNECTION

Reliable internet connection is crucial to be able to work, run projects and live where you want. It is important that no areas are left behind in the transition to 6G for example. There is a risk that those still reliant on 3G will be left behind, which could increase the depopulation. More extended mobile phone coverage in the mountain areas is raised as an important safety issue.

#### MAKERSPACES AND JOINT RESEARCH FACILITIES

There are ideas about an infrastructure of physical "makerspaces" for design prototyping and knowledge- and experience exchanges between the countries within the programme area - to ride upon the long tradition of Scandinavian design and innovativeness. The need for joint research facilities is also mentioned.

### **9. What should be done to facilitate the work with your counterparts in another country?**

#### MOBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Possibilities to travel easier between the countries without the need to first go to Stockholm, Helsinki, or Oslo as well as more ecologically sustainable ways to travel across borders is needed.

#### HIGHER BUDGET FOR TRAVEL COSTS FOR PROJECTS

Higher budget for travelling would enable more physical meetings. The SCOs available are not always convenient when it comes to covering the high travel expenses. Real cost options for travel expenses are wished for.

#### NETWORKING AND MATCHMAKING

Thematic cross-border networking meetings/seminars, annual programme events as well as staff exchange activities are mentioned.

#### CO-FUNDING AND FUNDING PERCENTAGE

As stated before, harmonizing co-funding possibilities and funding percentage from the programme in all three countries as well as the possibility to apply from one single source.

### **10. What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?**

Several actors answered that they are running their dream project right now or are about to send in an application of their dream project. Most answers are in line with current priorities within the programme and touches upon research and innovation, joint nature management, lifelong learning, capacity building and so on. Other answers cover many of the topics mentioned under potentials and obstacles. See examples below, in quotes and word-cloud.

Aurora

*“Then we would make a project to create a space for everyone working with cross-border questions. A house, where also authorities and public actors can come and work with cross-border related questions. A place where students can intern, where there would be seminars arranged and so on. The location should be somewhere along the border. Not necessarily just Haparanda/Tornio. It should be a centre for cross-border matters! There is one good example, in Charlottenberg there is a place run by the border services Sweden-Norway. The land border runs through the actual house and different authorities are working there.”*

Interview respondent

*“It would be interesting to run an Interreg-project between the twelve border committees. Now, it’s probably hard as their organisations belong to different programme areas.”*

Interview respondent



Figure 3 Dreamprojects of stakeholders

1.4 Interesting quotes

*“Involve the users when implementing new systems/tools (for example, in financial reporting).”*

Survey respondent

*“The time frames of most awarded conservation projects are not sufficient, and it is not possible to apply for a second project if the conservation measures are the same. This is a big problem when there is no state funding for actions aimed at fulfilling environmental goals set by the EU.”*

Survey respondent

## Aurora

*"The Interreg priorities are clear and easy to understand but it is not always the case that they are harmonised with the co-funders priorities. That means that you always have to consider carefully what you would like to do. Often it is not Interreg that sets the limits to what's possible, rather the co-financiers. To simplify the co-funding structures, that if anything would definitely give more projects from Sápmi. Or another alternative is to raise the funding percentage from Interreg so that the total percentage of funding that you have to solve from elsewhere would be smaller."*

Interview respondent

*"National decisions are sometimes hindering the cross-border collaboration. And this with Norway, this that we don't know when and to what extent they can be part of an Interreg project. That is a bit of an obstacle. ...A large programme area is positive! I see great opportunities in the Interreg Aurora programme."*

Interview respondent

*"Living near a border is both an opportunity and a challenge. For the Sámi, whose traditional lands span across national borders (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia), it provides a unique opportunity to preserve their cultural unity and pursue shared development goals. However, it can also create disadvantages due to administrative and legal barriers that hinder free movement, cooperation, and resource sharing."*

Survey respondent

*"Oh, I have a very good example from earlier (about a dream project)! It was a youth project, that we didn't know what it would result in. For youth, by youth. We were one of the co-funders. That, that you take a bunch of people that are interested in developing something but that you don't know from the beginning what the end results will be. I strongly question how it is possible to work with innovation in Interreg, if you already before the project starts need to describe what the end result will be. The youth project went really well and got great results."*

Interview respondent

*"Something as simple as funding of ordinary business/operational funding for cross-border organisations (would be a good novelty), so that you have a stable organisation that can apply for development funds. We are an organisation that have cross-border cooperation in our core and if we would have a small sum every year, say 100 000, where the demand from the funding organisation, Interreg in example, could be that you have carried out the annual meeting, a couple of steering group meetings etc. That would mean that we would be better equipped to deliver even greater results for the project money."*

Interview respondent

*"We would like to include more children and youth as target groups as we are working with culture, but find the regulations restricting."*

Survey respondent

## 2 Consultation of citizens

### 2.1 Main citizens consulted

In the consultation of citizens, the main focus of the Interreg Aurora programme has been to capture the voices of the youth (age 16-30) in the programme area (Sweden, Finland, Norway), as well as the Sámi people - as Interreg Aurora is the only Interreg programme that is integrated with Sápmi and the indigenous Sámi people. A focus was set on youth and Sámi organisations in the

programme area, with some previous knowledge of EU, and cross-border cooperation.

## 2.2 Methods of consultation

### Interviews

Online interviews were held in August-October with youth representatives from the programme area. Two persons representing Barents Regional Youth Council (one of them responsible for indigenous peoples working group and the other one chair of the council) and one person a secondary school student with a high interest of EU-matters. Four of the students participating in the citizens workshop in Tornio were also interviewed together (in person, at the event) more in depth on the citizens questions. The question was posed to more citizens representatives, but these were the ones that we got hold of. A total of seven interview respondents.

### Workshop

An in person workshop in the border city of Tornio (border between Finland and Sweden) was held in the beginning of October with 90 participants, whereof 69 secondary school students and 21 teachers. All of them were participating in the event 'Borderless North' arranged by the Interreg Aurora project Aurora Entrepreneurialis that works with entrepreneurship in schools. The workshop and the citizens-questions fit very well in to the theme of the event and the participants of the workshop showed great enthusiasm.



Figure 4 Workshop with citizens

### Survey to citizens

An online survey in English and North Sami was sent out to Youth councils and Sami youth council in the programme area in Norway as well as project members of Interreg Aurora projects focusing on youth (in all three countries of the programme). The survey was also put up (with qr-code on poster) at the event Kultur Sápmi in Jokkmokk, Sweden – an event that gathered participants from all of Sápmi. The survey was open from mid-August until the end of September. Unfortunately, only two participants answered the citizens survey even though reminders were sent out.

## 2.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

### 1. Is living next to a border an opportunity or disadvantage?

As most citizens answering to this question answered in a workshop-format where they worked in groups, it is hard to tell exactly how many thought it was an opportunity or disadvantage – or neither of it. Many groups listed both opportunities and disadvantages in their answers and some answered that they don't live close to a border.

*"Our border is peaceful, that's not the case everywhere."*

Interview respondent

#### Opportunities

Respondents generally seem appreciate the closeness to the border, making it possible to go across and buy other types of groceries and having more products to choose from in general. Closeness to the border brings more study- and work opportunities, closeness to more industries, business opportunities (tourism was often given as an example of a sector benefiting). More possibilities for travel (eg. access to more airports), more diverse possibilities for leisure activities and hobbies. Another important opportunity frequently mentioned was that closeness to the border gives more diversity in society, more cultural differences and cultural- and language exchange which could minimize negative preconceptions. It also brings the possibility to use several languages, and to get increased language skills. Another opportunity highlighted was civil safety, with shared resources in healthcare and police forces for example.

#### Disadvantages

Different laws and regulations was frequently brought up as an obstacle. Risks such as risk for conflict between countries, the risk that pandemics can spread easier between countries if the borders are open, the risk of smuggling of illegal goods, risk of young people getting into criminal activities and the risk of people shopping only on the cheaper side of the border which leads to even more price increase on the other side of the border.

### 2. In the place where you live, what are the main topics where cooperation is needed?

#### WORK LIFE AND BUSINESS

Work life, youth employment and opportunities for business (tourism and berry picking mentioned as examples). Import and export, innovation, and tech-exchange.

*"Projects like Interreg projects make it possible to live and work where you are."*

Interview respondent

#### MOBILITY

Better connections for travelling in the area. Transport corridors.

#### REGIONAL ATTRACTIVENESS

Joint place branding, to keep people in the regions and to attract new inhabitants.

#### EDUCATION

School cooperations on all levels, from early age to post-graduate. Teacher exchange and student exchange.

#### CULTURAL EXCHANGE

People to people collaboration to overcome negative assumptions and history, learning and understanding about cultures, respect for other people, anti-racism. Common events and activities for young people. Sports and sport events. Language practice. Art- and culture projects.

#### SAFETY AND SECURITY

Military defence, safety, and security. New NATO membership effects. Civil preparedness, like getting essential information out quickly to those who work across borders. Food and energy resilience, sustainable production.

#### CLIMATE ADAPTATION AND NATURE CONSERVATION

Climate adaptation, protecting the environment, climate solutions, nature conservation.

#### WELFARE

Sharing resources in emergency-, hospital and health care services. Ongoing dialogue between police, social services, and border control.

Other comments include wishes about a common recycling system between countries (also deposit-refund system for cans and bottles).

### 3. Can you name an Interreg project that you find useful in the place where you live?

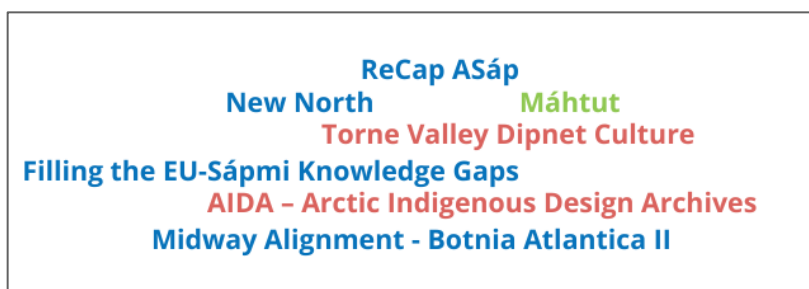


Figure 5 Projects mentioned

### 4. In your daily life, what are the biggest difficulties for (cross-border) cooperation?

Differences in language and communication, different currencies, differences in salaries, different time zones, different laws and regulations, different education systems (and lacking knowledge about the education system in the other countries). Also, the pension system differs, which can be difficult for old people if they move across borders. Difficult bureaucracy in general. Different traffic rules and legislation for different kind of vehicles differs between countries. The distances in the area are vast and there are not many options for transportation or commuting. Travelling with pets across borders is difficult (this is also mentioned by Sami actors as an obstacle for those who have working dogs for reindeer herding). Lacking cooperation between emergency/health care services is also mentioned as an obstacle.

### 5. What would be the cooperation project of your dreams?

In the answers to the question about a dream project, there were many similar answers. See examples and frequent topics below:





Figure 6 Dream projects, citizens

## 2.4 Interesting quotes

*"A dream project would be... something with EU-knowledge! There are not many young people that knows about programmes like Interreg Aurora and all the projects that are running. That kind of project I would love to run. Like an example, Haparanda where I live has a very low participation in the EU election. If one would work with teaching and informing about ongoing projects, what EU does for the region and so on I think it would boost the election participation just by people knowing more about the possibilities that EU gives."*

Interview respondent, 19 years, Sweden

*"I didn't notice the border until covid. It was just another part of the city until the border closed."*

Interview respondent, 16 years, Finland

*"Develop train connections between Sweden and Finland."*

Workshop participant, on the question about a dream project

*"A closer school collaboration between Norway, Finland and Sweden."*

Workshop participant, on the question about a dream project

*"Solve the salmon-problem together."*

Workshop participant, on the question about a dream project

*"Cross-border art camp for artists from both countries."*

Workshop participant, on the question about a dream project

*"It is difficult to cooperate between emergency/health care services. People can be moved between ambulances just because they need to cross the border to the nearest hospital."*

Workshop participant, on the question about difficulties

*“People to people collaboration, in order to overcome negative assumptions and history, learning and understanding about cultures, respect for other people, anti-racism.”*

Workshop participant, on the question about topics with need for cross-border collaboration

*“ A joint Nordic application system for higher education (is needed). In Kirkenes, Norway, it is closer to go to Rovaniemi (Finland) to study than to go to Troms. But if you want to go study on the other side of the border it is suddenly as bureaucratic and complicated as if you were about to go study in Spain or another southern European country, despite it being so close geographically.”*

Interview respondent, 29 years, Norway

### 3 Recommendations for post-2027

This chapter outlines recommendations for Interreg post-2027, based on the consultation input.

#### **3.1 Topics to be covered by Interreg**

The 2021-2027 Interreg Aurora programme, with its current priorities and specific objectives, is generally seen as wide and inclusive by stakeholders.

It is recommended to keep and reinforce the unique values of the programme. Keep and reinforce sub-area Sápmi as well as the possibility to run projects with ‘soft values’ such as culture focus, language projects, arts, music, handicraft and similar.

Climate change adaptation and nature conservation is seen as very important and something highly needed also in the future programme periods.

Sustainable mobility, mobility in the infrastructure question, is seen highly needed in the sparsely populated programme area of Interreg Aurora, but the current priorities covering sustainable mobility are not fully adapted to the unique conditions of the programme area. Other comments includes desires to make direct investments in infrastructure projects.

The possibility to work with safety and security in projects in various ways is central in the answers of the consultation.

#### **3.2 Geography of programmes**

There are different thoughts about the programme geography. In general, most stakeholders seem satisfied with the possibilities that the current programme bring and doesn't request any changes. The current programme area carries a unique character, with its large sparsely populated areas, integration of Sápmi and the Indigenous Sami people, the boreal forests and other unique nature and culture values.

There are several mentions of the thought of a smaller programme area or more sub-areas within the programme. This goes hand in hand with the mentions of the challenges when it comes to traveling within the current programme area. As a background, the Interreg Aurora programme is new in the period 2021-2027 and is a merge between former Interreg Nord and Interreg Botnia-Atlantica. There was also a programme amendment in 2023, which brought two new regions into the programme. The southernmost regions in Finland have expressed that they have a hard time identifying with the programme.

## Aurora

In contrast, some request a larger area of cooperation, in example, possibility to cooperate also to the south, to the Baltic area or along all the border between Sweden and Norway. In the same direction there are suggestions that the programmes with partly shared programme areas would become one programme (Aurora and NPA), to limit overlaps. Interreg NPA is the programme with most similarities to Interreg Aurora when it comes to unique values, like sparsely populated areas and Indigenous peoples.

### 3.3 Implementation of programmes/projects

In general, stakeholders seem satisfied with the current implementation of the programme. It is seen as an advantage that the joint secretariat is decentralised in the regions of the programme.

The Sápmi part of the programme should be kept and reinforced. There is a wish from Sami stakeholders to increase the resources when it comes to Programme Officers in the Joint Secretariat dedicated to working with sub-area Sápmi. The Sami parliament of Sweden express a wish to manage the Sami part of the programme.

Some recommendations based on the answers in the consultation:

- Investigate whether it's possible to further facilitate for small companies and small organisations with limited capacity to participate in Interreg projects.
- Investigate flexibility in funding percentage from the programme and harmonisation between participating countries (EU/IR funding).
- Investigate further simplifications for applicants and beneficiaries.
- Investigate possibilities to further tailor support to Indigenous needs.
- Investigate if it is possible to make room for more flexibility in the priorities and specific objectives.
- Investigate the structures of co-funding to the programme. Stakeholders ask for a simplified system.

Other comments on implementation concerns wishes for increased youth focus in the programme, a possibility to run projects longer than three years, exchange programs for professionals, a joint reporting platform for Interreg projects and more possibilities for stakeholders to meet and network (facilitated by the programme).

## 4 ANNEX 1 – Main stakeholders consulted Interreg Aurora post 2027

### **Main stakeholders consulted by the Interreg Aurora programme:**

Arctic Economic Council  
Barents Regional Youth Council  
BusinessOulu  
Centria University of Applied Sciences  
Centre for Distance-spanning Technology  
Centre for Economic development, Transport and the Environment of Lapland  
Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment of Southern Ostrobothnia  
City of Oulu  
City of Umeå  
City of Vaasa  
County Administrative Board of Västerbotten  
County Administrative Board of Norrbotten  
County Governor of Troms and Finnmark  
Creative Crowd AB  
Etelä-Pohjanmaan liitto  
Etelä-Pohjanmaan ELY-keskus  
Fell Lapland Development  
Finnish Environment Institute  
Finnish Folk Music Institute  
Finnish Forest Centre  
Finnish Lapland Tourist Board  
Finnmark fylkeskommune  
Gold of Lapland  
Inari Municipality  
Into Seinäjoki Ltd  
Jakobstadsregionens Utvecklingsbolag Concordia  
Kainuu  
Kalix Municipality  
Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, Norway  
KS Nord-Norge  
Keski-Pohjanmaan liitto  
KulturÖsterbotten, Folkmusiksällskapet r.f.  
Kvarken Council EGTC  
Ministry of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure, Sweden  
Lapin liitto  
Lapland University of Applied Sciences  
Luleå Business Region AB

## Aurora

Luleå University of Technology  
Meänsuomi föreeninki  
Metsähallitus Forestry Ltd  
MidtSkandia  
Moskosel Creative Park  
Natural Resources Institute Finland (LUKE)  
Nordic music creators  
Nord University Business School  
Nordland fylkeskommune  
Norwegian Institute for Bioeconomy Research (NIBIO)  
Norwegian institute for nature research (NINA)  
Novia, University of applied sciences  
Oy Merinova Ab  
Piteå Science Park  
Pohjois-karjala  
Pohjanmaan liitto  
Pohjois-Pohjanmaan liitto  
Pohjois-Pohjanmaan ELY-keskus  
ProAgria Oulu ry  
Regional Council of Ostrobothnia  
Regional Council of Kainuu  
Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia  
Regional Council of Västerbotten  
Regional Council of Västernorrland  
Restproduktberarbetning i Boden AB  
RISE Processum AB  
Runosong Academy  
Rural Economy and Agricultural Society Norrbotten-Västerbotten County  
Salten outdoor advice  
SALT Lofoten AS  
SAK, Oulun toimipiste  
SINTEF Narvik  
Skellefteå Museum ab  
SMB Norway  
Skogstekniska klustret  
Statsforvalteren  
Studentföreningen Musikmakarna  
Svenska Österbottens förbund för utbildning och kultur  
Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth  
Swedish Forest Agency  
Swedish Lapland Visitors Board

## Aurora

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences  
Sør-Varanger Development company  
The Council of Torne Valley  
The North Calotte Council  
The Saami Council in Sweden  
The Sámi Parliament in Finland  
The Sámi Parliament in Norway  
The Sámi Parliament in Sweden  
Troms fylkeskommune  
Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö  
UiT The Arctic University of Norway  
Ung Företagsamhet Norrbotten  
Umeå Municipality  
Umeå University  
Uminova eXpression AB  
University of Helsinki, Ruralia institute  
University of Oulu  
University of Vaasa  
Vaasan Sähkö Oy (electric utility)  
Visual Magic Education AB  
Vocational College of Ostrobothnia  
Vocational College Lappia  
Västernorrlands museum  
WWF Sweden