

# EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Need Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs)

## Annex III

### Executive aspects of organising Steering Group meetings



## I. Pre-meeting

For some Priority Areas it has been difficult to involve the members of the Steering Group between and in advance of meetings, as members often have little time to engage with EUSDR in general and the PA in particular, other than attending the actual Steering Group meeting. However, the recurring weakness is still the irregular and non-proactive participation in SG meetings. In the following, examples are given of how the members of a Steering Group can be actively involved in the PA prior to an SG meeting and how their participation can be increased focusing on organisational factors such as common aims, adequate resources, understanding group and working processes and an appropriate structure. In this respect, factors such as the **frequency** of the meeting, the **location** and the **formulation and preparation of the agenda** can play a decisive role. In many of the RoP of the PAs as well as in their projects under the specific calls of the DTP for financial support of PAC activities, the frequency of SG meetings is determined according to **at least two meetings per year** envisaged. In doing so, PACs can consult with their SGs on exchanging and coordinating initiatives, stakeholders, policy processes and information and strive to make the strategy work in a semi-annual circle. **Too frequent meetings** can lead to **repetition of discussions** and a lack of development of the collective goal. If the work of the PAs and the project are on track one may still meet, but if necessary the PAs may have a shorter meeting or might consider online meetings to keep the SG informed. The same applies, if the project cannot progress effectively but ad hoc meetings might be necessary. Notwithstanding, Steering Group meetings need to be **regular to be effective**.

Another important aspect of preparing for SG meetings is the location, as the *“location of meetings was also mentioned as an obstacle for a strong involvement”*<sup>1</sup>. As already mentioned, SG meetings might be held **online** (via tools such as Skype, WebEx, GoToMeeting, Zoom etc.) or **on-site**. On-site face-to-face meetings, offer the possibility for PACs to organise a meeting at **rather low expenses** (e.g. use of own infrastructure, such as venue and catering) and with **low bureaucratic and technical effort**, as the conditions on the ground are known. For this reason, it might be difficult or even impossible for some PAs to organize an SG meeting at a foreign location and **justify it accordingly**. However, it may be more appropriate for SG members to organise the meetings in **different locations**, for example in each of the EUSDR participating states. The fact that Steering Group members are **actively involved** in the work of the PA with the organisation of a meeting offers another advantage, thus increasing the number of participants. In addition, **rotating the responsibility for co-chairing and co-organising** each meeting by different SG members might engender a **sense of ownership**. When organising an SG meeting, one may also consider the **possibility of organising an SG meeting in Brussels** to facilitate the participation also of other EC representatives of the respective line DGs. For these SG meetings it *“might be useful to combine several meetings”*<sup>2</sup> and to set these up **back-to-back with a conference or stakeholder meeting** in Brussels. As it was *“suggested to provide logistics to PACs to be able to organise events in other MS”*<sup>3</sup>, the DSP gives **organizational support** as a **capacity-building and knowledge purpose**, to support **PACs and NCs of non-EU countries** for organizing SG meetings. Whatever form of on-site meeting is chosen, the venue should be **accessible and comfortable** for all participating PACs and SG members using adequate resources and, if needed, support from outside bodies and individuals for a well prepared meeting based on convenience for all.

One of the first steps in the organisation of a SG meeting is the preparation and dispatch of an **invitation**, which in the best case may already include the location. In any case, the invitation should

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<sup>1</sup> Metis (2019): 41.

<sup>2</sup> Metis (2019): 42.

<sup>3</sup> Metis (2019): 42.

be accompanied by a draft agenda. An **appropriate and timely** invitation will make the members of the Steering Group aware that it is a **privilege to be part of the Steering Group** and that their **contributions will be invaluable**. It might be also a way to communicate and remind them that SG members are at the **forefront of Priority Area development** and that their participation is **essential for the implementation of the Strategy**. PACs may send out invitations through **e-mail at least one month before the due date** of the SG meeting. When developing a schedule ahead of an SG meeting, it may also be considered to send a **save-the date e-mail** to the participants two weeks prior to the invitation. A timely sent save-the-date e-mail allows guests to mark the date on their calendars, prepare for time off work and plan other meetings, events and holidays around it. The following information required may be further provided when sending the e-mails: a **concise, formatted subject line**, the **meeting date and time (time zone)**, the **location of the meeting**, the **meeting purpose** and **any expected outcomes**. In doing so, important information should be put close to the top and not buried in a text block. In addition, attention may also be paid to avoid using unfamiliar abbreviations, especially in the subject line.

Thus, the overall goal of an invitation (and the accompanying save-the-date e-mail) is that it holds everyone accountable for the **same expectations**. This ensures that the PACs and the SG are on the same page and **working towards the same goals**, which keeps things **efficient and productive** while also **keeping frustration low**.

Other information that either might go into the meeting invitation or into a separate e-mail are **working documents or reports**. A **sufficient timeframe** to distribute these items is **at least 14 days prior** to the meeting to allow the members sufficient preparation time (or according to the RoP of the PA). In preparation for an SG meeting, documents can be sent out **for review and/or discussion and/or to be voted on beforehand** and to provide the meeting with **feedback and proposals for amendment**. In doing so, the active engagement and ownership of SG members can be enhanced. The documents may include drafts, reports, proposals, conclusions, plans, research papers or studies, which are shared and discussed by those invited to the meeting. One may also consider to inform the participants again about the agenda and minutes of the last meeting to determine the status quo. Attaching these documents directly to the (invitation and/or save-the-date) e-mail is **convenient and fast**, but it **may cause problems**. Hence, it should be avoided to send large attachments. One may consider that stakeholders will **open the attachments on mobile devices**, which can be a challenge with some files. To solve the problem, a link to an **online location** where stakeholders can preview and/or **download meeting documents** may be considered. If such a solution for this is not available, one may share links to files using free file sharing services such as WeTransfer, Dropbox or Google Drive. To avoid problems in federal countries due to need for internal feedback and coordination loops it is recommended to ensure *“safeguard discipline in sending documents for consultation”*<sup>4</sup>.

As regards the agenda, SG meetings should be *“organised as **appealingly as possible, including interesting and relevant topics**”*<sup>5</sup>. Hence, the agenda formulation and preparation may be designed accordingly to control the direction of the meeting and the active engagement of the participants. Without an agenda the meetings would lose focus and thus discussion is hardly possible. The agenda needs to include the order in which the discussions are planned, the key topics and any instructions (e.g. date, time, location) or material the stakeholders should read before the meeting. Further, the goals and expectations may be defined beforehand to allow for questions and discussion. In any case, the agenda should be attached to the invitation to allow participants to prepare in advance. In

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<sup>4</sup> Metis (2019): 61.

<sup>5</sup> Metis (2019): 41.

addition, an information sheet can also be provided, with possible hotel offers, a map of locations as well as assistance with travel and arrival. One may also consider the “*financing of travel costs, particularly of non-EU Member States*”<sup>6</sup>, which could solve some of the above-mentioned issues regarding non-participation of members.

## II. On-site meeting

The core aspects of effective Steering Group meetings include on-site meeting factors such as **personal or interpersonal and organisational factors**. At personal level, SG meetings usually have a **chair or moderator** whose task is to **steer and conclude the discussion**. This task is usually performed by one or both PACs as defined in the RoP of the PAs. In addition to **controlling the content**, it is also the task of the chair to get an **overview of the discussions, create time for debate** of the issues in the meeting and to get the **overall picture of the meeting** while not to get into the heat of the discussion but by **encouraging decision making**<sup>7</sup>. The overview position of the chair allows to think abstract about arguments and issues to get clarity. In this role, the chair is there to make it easier for the whole group to reach its goals and to present the SG members the power and limitation of what can be achieved in the meeting. To strengthen the sense of ownership it may be proposed to **rotate the responsibility for chairing** of SG meetings. During the SG meeting, it should be ensured that all, but especially new members, **feel comfortable** and that they are **involved in the discussion**, for example by introducing them at the beginning of the meeting. As decision-making powers of the SG members remain unsatisfactory, the chairperson may **include active elements** for the participants in the meeting (e.g. voting by tool, or collecting suggestions on a flipchart), making **positive suggestions**, asking **questions**, offering **alternatives** as well as **building on suggestions**, and **testing ideas** if necessary<sup>8</sup>. In any case, it is necessary to designate a person to **take notes** and **draw up minutes** of the meeting. The minutes should comprise a **clear list of points and actions**, indicating when and by whom the upcoming actions and steps will be carried out while meeting deadlines. Meeting minutes are of central importance for understanding **future reference and analysis of discussions**. It can be helpful to record (parts of) the meeting, however, this has to be agreed with the participants.

On the other hand, organisational factors concerning the venue and setup of an on-site meeting are also important. It is the organiser's responsibility to **prepare the room**, including **coordinating** the meeting, finding appropriate **seating arrangements** (e.g. format of the arrangement of tables) and ensuring that drinks or other **refreshments are available**. Hence, the chair may make sure everyone knows the **time and place of the meeting** and provide a **reception table** to welcome SG members in front of the room and to display a **signature and a participants list**. For the convenience of the SG members, one may also provide notes, pens, information material or printed versions of the distributed documents, such as the agenda or the meetings minutes of the previous SG meetings. The organiser of the SG meeting may also check if the **meeting place is warm, quiet and comfortable**, with **enough seats** for everyone and that the **technical equipment** is properly functioning and, if necessary, have a technician on site. Regarding the coordination of the meeting, the chair should take care of the **time schedule** to start and end the SG meeting on time. One may also consider to use ‘parking lot items’, which are points on the agenda that could be discussed at a later time in order to get through the contents of the SG meeting. With regard to the agenda, the chair should **explain the agenda** and say which items are under discussion and which are subject to decision. Before the **agenda is adopted**, the chair could clarify if there are any other items, which need to be discussed. This section shows that

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<sup>6</sup> Metis (2019): 41f.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Metis (2019): 26.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Metis (2019): 63.

the planning and coordination of an SG meeting is especially important in the phase before the actual meeting. Nevertheless, it can be of significant help to the organisers of SG meetings if a team or stakeholders of the Steering Group on-site support them.

Almost all of the Priority Areas have established Rules of Procedure. Nevertheless, it could at least be considered to also **draft PA-wide RoP for all SGs** based on the already existing RoP of the Priority Areas. In these, minimum fundamental requirements could be agreed on, such as how frequency of the meetings, the location of the meetings, the proposed format for agendas as well as meeting minutes, who prepares, drafts and distributes the meeting minutes and the attendance and decision making policy.

### III. Follow-up meeting

The last, but nevertheless one crucial aspect of Steering Group meetings is the follow-up, which should be performed in any case, whether the meeting was held online or on-site. With a **targeted follow-up**, a **good momentum of a meeting can be used to enhance visibility** of the Strategy on national, regional and local level. It may further avoid that participants have the feeling that nothing more happens afterwards. In addition, a targeted follow-up could help to **tighten the network**, as the active role of Steering Group members is addressed and their **visions for the upcoming period is represented** in the upcoming points of actions. In doing so, the visibility of the Strategy as such as well as of the progress and achievements of the PA will be enhanced. As regards the Steering Groups, *“the decision-making, planning and consultation processes [are] considered as transparent and responsive”<sup>9</sup>*.

An effective Steering Group meeting follow-up could include **the parameters of the meeting minutes, the signature list, photos and above all the next steps**. The circulation of the meeting minutes may follow as soon as possible and endeavoured to be sent no later than within a week, or based on the PA’s Rules of Procedure. By circulating the decisions and points of actions as soon as possible after the meeting, it can be ensured that the minutes accurately **reflect the decisions and discussions** of the SG meeting. Further, it can help to get the SG members by oneself **moving on the proposed actions** they have agreed upon, as *“the tendency of answers is that it is weak, taking into account [...] the lack of motivation and proactive approach in SGs”<sup>10</sup>*. On the other hand, the follow-up can also **include a written procedure** if no decisions were taken during the Steering Group meeting. This might be useful if, for instance, participants with no voting rights were present, or if there are still issues to be decided upon in the respective national/local ministries. It makes sense for SG members to take time to make informed decisions; however, parameters might be set for how long decision-making should take. In doing so, there will be no rushing in decisions, but efficiency can be facilitated so that SG members are not left to push back deadlines.

One may also consider performing a **follow-up questionnaire** after a SG meeting, which could help in analysing the effectiveness of the Steering Group or in identifying and sharing learning from the development work conducted so far. To clarify information and provide guidance and feedback not only questionnaires can be used but also **platforms** such as the EUSDR Annual Forum to **tighten networks**. Steering Groups can take an active role for instance in presenting their visions for the upcoming year in sessions or in having a stand.

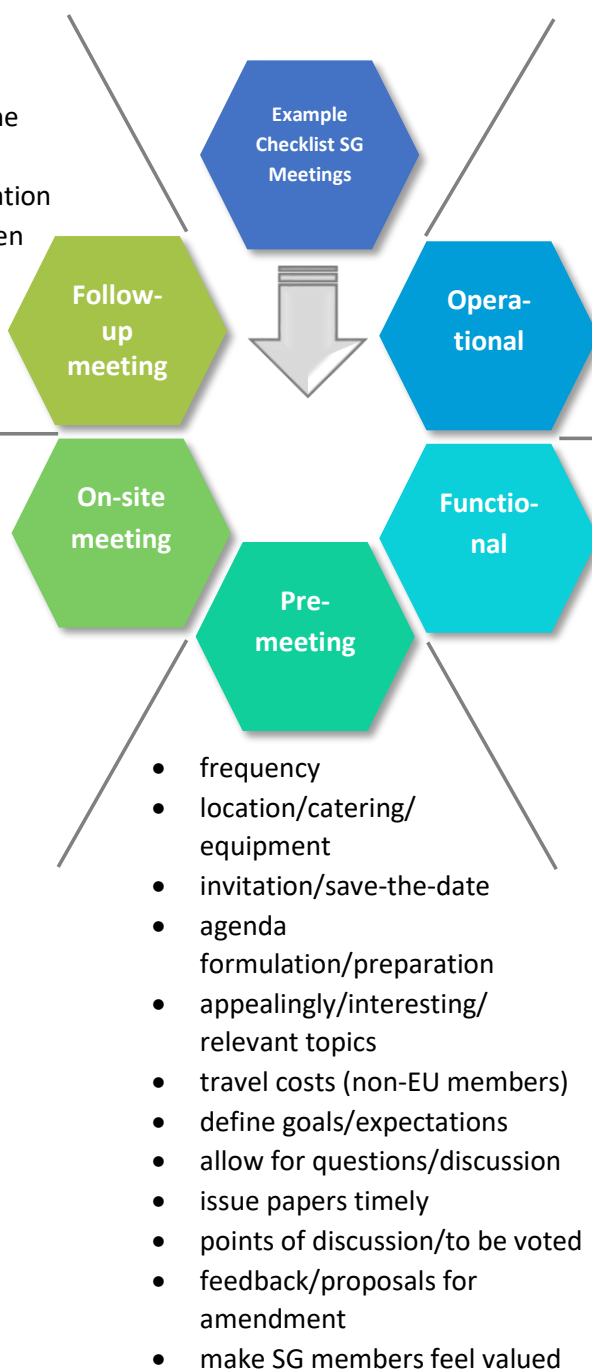
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<sup>9</sup> Metis (2019): 40.

<sup>10</sup> Metis (2019): 42.



- meeting minutes
- signature list
- photos/videos
- enhancing visibility of the Strategy
- dissemination/capitalisation
- using platforms to tighten networks
- next steps
- written procedures if necessary



- Rules of Procedure
- leadership and administrative skills
- trans-national
- inter-institutional
- inter-sectorial
- expert involvement
- diverse stakeholders
- key persons and core group
- right mix and size of the group

- chair/facilitator to steer
- take notes/make minutes
- time schedule
- 'parking lot' items
- time for debate
- encourage decision-making
- engender a sense of ownership (rotation)
- chair/facilitator to

- frequency
- location/catering/equipment
- invitation/save-the-date
- agenda
- formulation/preparation
- appealingly/interesting/relevant topics
- travel costs (non-EU members)
- define goals/expectations
- allow for questions/discussion
- issue papers timely
- points of discussion/to be voted
- feedback/proposals for amendment
- make SG members feel valued

- setup of SG (covered thematic issues)
- common projects/actions
- build/strengthen capacities
- continuity of SG members
- simplify/reduce administration
- clarification of definitions of functions/responsibilities
- mandate and capacity for decision making
- focus on thematic implementation