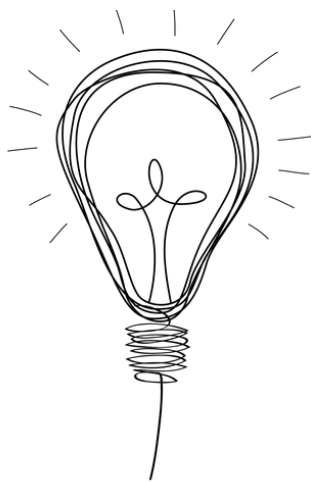# Interreg V-A Latvia–Lithuania Programme 2014–2020

Impact Evaluation

Final Report

By SAFEGE Baltija

2023

Evaluation Report prepared by SIA "SAFEGE Baltija"
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INTRODUCTION

The Interreg V-A Latvia-Lithuania Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 (hereinafter referred to as the Programme) covers a territory extending from the western Baltic Sea to the external EU border with Russia and Belarus in the east. The goal of the Programme is to promote sustainable socio-economic development in the Programme's regions, making them more competitive and attractive for living, entrepreneurship, and tourism. The Programme has four priorities and eight specific objectives (hereinafter referred to as the SO), which are demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 INTERREG V-A Latvia–Lithuania Cross–Border Cooperation Programme 2014 - 2020
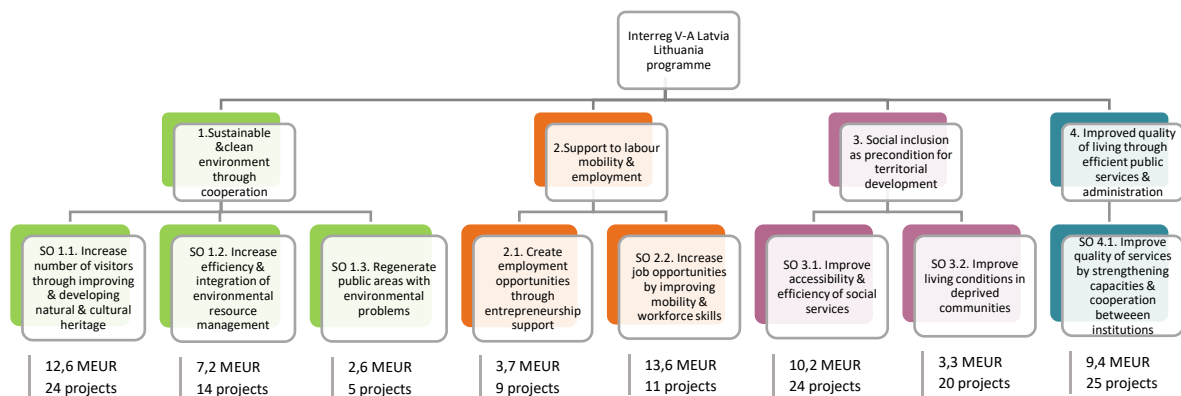
The eligible Programme territories are Klaipeda, Telsiai, Siauliai, Penevezys, Utena and Kaunas counties in Lithuania and Kurzeme, Zemgale, Latgale regions in Latvia, see *Figure 2*.

Cooperation between both countries in the framework of Interreg started during the 2000–2006 programming period within Latvia–Lithuania–Belarus Interreg IIIA Priority within the Baltic Sea Region INTERREG IIIB Neighborhood Programme. Cooperation continued with the Latvia–Lithuania Cross Border Cooperation Programme under ETC Objective 2007–2013. The investments were made in the area of business promotion, education, transport and accessibility, protection of joint natural resources, joint public services, environment and tourism.

The evaluation is carried out in accordance with European Parliament and Council (EU) Regulation No. 1303/2013 of 17 December 2013, which defines common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, as well as general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, and repeals Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006, Article 56.

The evaluation is also conducted in line with the Evaluation plan of the Interreg V-A Latvia-Lithuania Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 and the Programme's work plan for 2023, which identifies the need for an impact assessment.

The evaluation comprises **two specific objectives**:

▶ Evaluate the impact of the Programme on cross-border cooperation culture and the added value of cross-border cooperation in the development of the Programme's territory.
▶ Evaluate the achievement of the Programme's SOs and the changes brought about in the Programme's territory.


I METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodological framework of the evaluation is based on a **theory-driven impact evaluation model**, which is developed using the approach of contribution analysis. This approach is based on the systematic analysis of Theories of Change (ToC) to help determine the contribution of an intervention to achieving planned objectives. The ToC provides a systematic description of desired social changes, serving as the basis for strategic planning, decision-making processes, and evaluation planning. The ToC describes the planned intervention (policy) and the causal links between its key elements that lead to the achievement of planned results – the intended changes. The ToC also includes the Programme's context, which encompasses the socio-economic, institutional, legal, and political environment in which the Programme is implemented, as well as the assumptions of the parties involved in the

implementation regarding the desired implementation strategy and mechanisms necessary to achieve the Programme's objectives.

The chosen methodological approach not only allows for assessing the degree of result achievement but also enhances understanding of the intervention's contribution to observed outcomes, improving comprehension of why results have been or have not been achieved, and the role of the intervention and other influencing factors. Contribution analysis offers a systematic approach to obtaining credible claims that either confirm the postulated theory of change or suggest a revision if results indicate otherwise, see figure below:

Figure 2 Steps of Contribution analysis
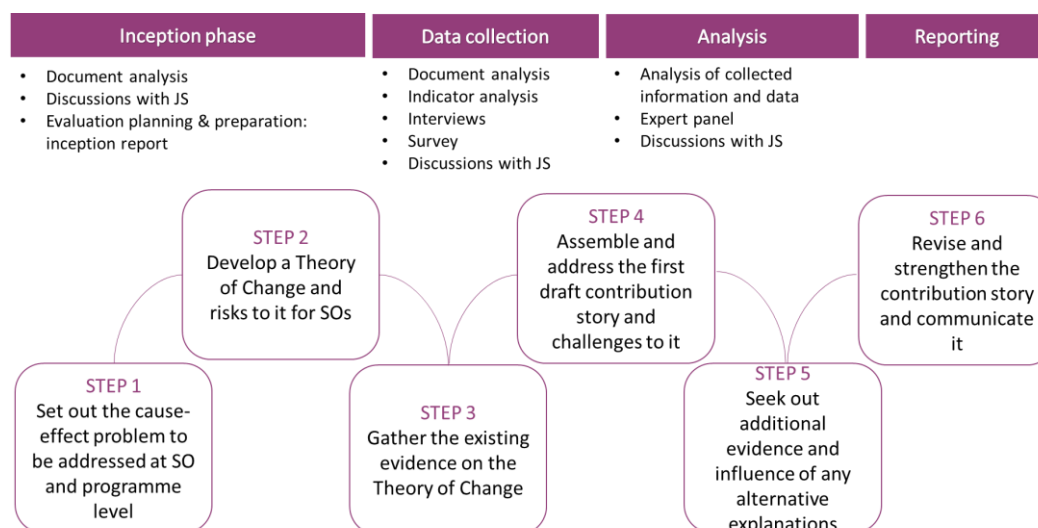
Contribution analysis helps to understand the likelihood that the intervention has or has not contributed to the observed outcomes. Contribution analysis is carried out in an iterative, step-by-step process consisting of six steps:

- ▶ Define the cause-and-effect problem to be addressed at the SO and Programme level.
- ▶ Develop/review the theory of change for each of the SOs.
- ▶ Collect existing evidence (data) to test the developed theory of change.
- ▶ Summarize and evaluate the Programme's contribution, identifying where evidence is lacking or where alternative explanations are available.
- ▶ Seek additional evidence or alternative explanations for observed changes.
- ▶ Review and refine the Programme's theory and the extent of its contribution.
- ▶ Thanks to the contribution analysis approach, Programme stakeholders will be able to understand which of the interventions have yielded the best results and impact, how the Programme has brought about changes, and which factors have contributed to or hindered it. In simpler terms, it helps answer the questions of what has worked, for whom, and in what context.

Evaluators performed analysis of each stage of the intervention's cause-and-effect chain, formulating assumptions and risks, and then systematically seeking appropriate evidence. This approach is used to address evaluation questions 4.2.1 – 4.2.6. 2.2., evaluate the achievement of the Programme's SOs and the changes brought about in the Programme's territory for each SO.

The results of the analysis are summarized in a short summary (contribution story) and visualized using ToC. To read the ToC one should start from the bottom left (activities) and then proceed up to the assumptions, etc., see picture below. The left column represents the intervention logic of each SO defined in the Programme's documents, but the right column represents assumptions made by the evaluators. Assumptions are factors, that are needed to elevate from one intervention level to the next, and to provide the cause – effect relationships explored by the evaluation.

Figure 3 Steps of the Intervention Logic
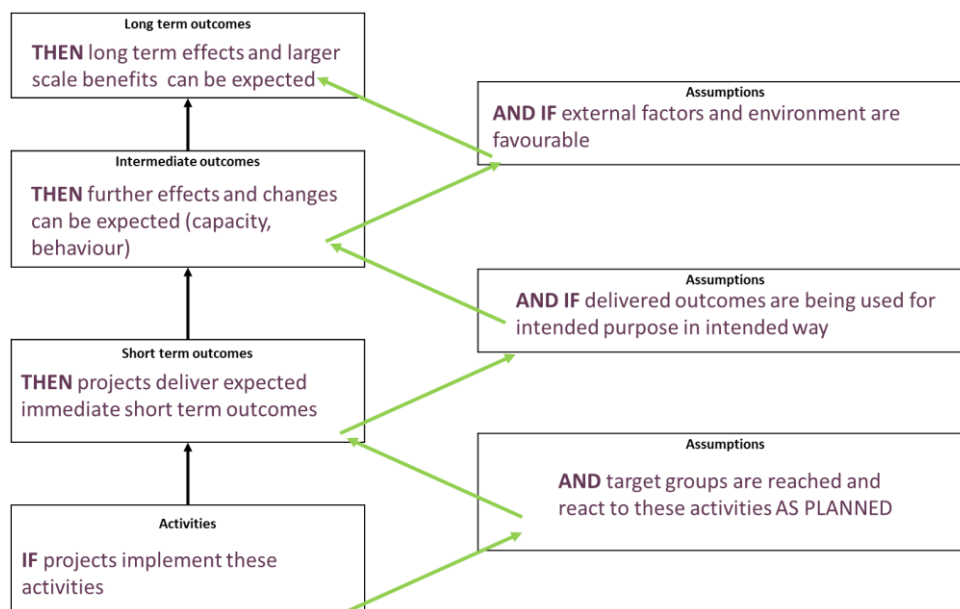
1.1. DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Methods for data collection for the evaluation included desk research on the existing material (qualitative and quantitative) provided by the Joint Secretariat (JS), an electronic survey and personal interviews conducted online.

The document analysis of existing materials covered relevant documents related to the Programme, namely the Programme document and the Programme manual, information derived from the electronic monitoring system (eMS) and the projects, including project reports, web sites and materials produced in the projects. The Programme management provided data on Programme outputs, that constitute evidence of achievement of indicators planned.

Interviews with the Programme bodies and project managers/partners form an important part of the evaluation data collection process. Already at the inception phase, discussions were held with the JS about the intervention logic and ToC for the SO. The interviews conducted during the data collection phase complement the picture emerging from the document analysis about the results and effects of the Programme. The interviews of the lead and project partners focused on the project achievements and the questions around the SO the project promotes. Partners of a total of 26 projects were interviewed, incl. lead partners and project partners.

The **electronic survey** complements the findings of the document analysis and interviews. The survey provides a broader view of the implementation of the Programme and projects, as well as the project results. The electronic survey was sent to all project partners.

An electronic survey was conducted in October 2023, aimed at Lead Partners and Project Partners, with a focus on project results, impact on target groups and cross-border cooperation. There were 58 responses received to the survey. The main results of the survey are presented below.

The survey received 34 responses (59%) from people whose organisations are located in Lithuania and 24 responses (41%) from people whose organisations are located in Latvia.

53% of the respondents represented an organisation that had the role of the lead partner in the project. 47% of the respondents were from organisations that acted as project partners. The survey received most answers from the projects under SO 1.1. *To increase number of visitors to the Programme area through improving and developing cultural and natural heritage objects, services and products* (26% of all survey respondents) and SO 3.1. *To improve accessibility and efficiency of social services* (21% of all survey respondents), that are both SO with the largest number of projects respectively (except for SO 4.1.)

Graph 1 shows the shares of different SOs among the survey respondents.
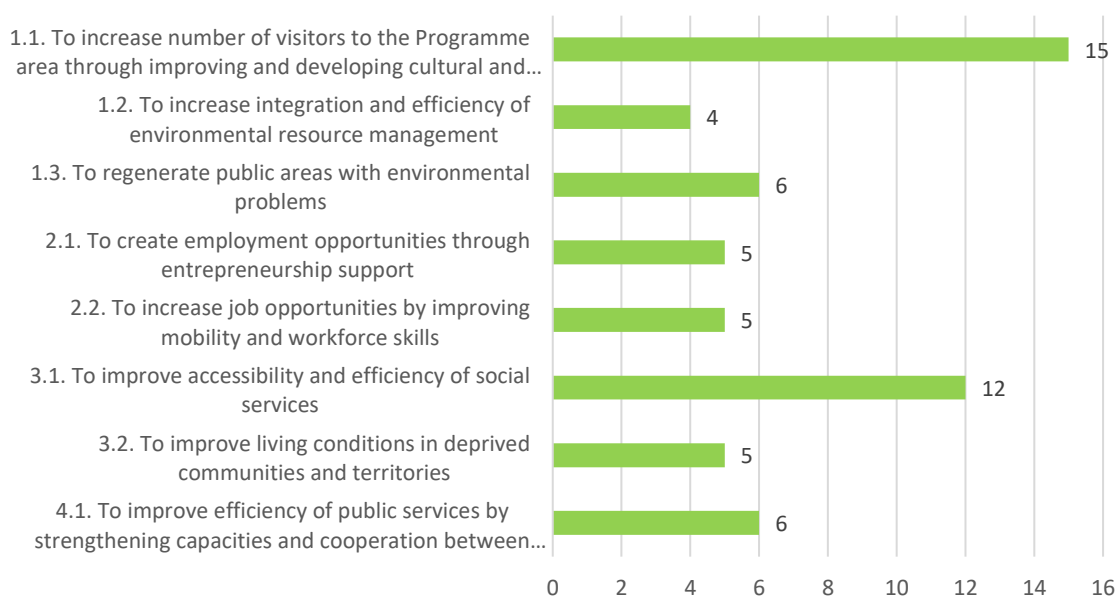
Graph 1. Specific Objectives among the survey respondents

1.2.   EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The Report has been drafted to respond to individual evaluation questions. The relationship between the Evaluation Questions and the Report structure is provided below:

Evaluation question	Chapter, sub-chapter
4.2.1. Whether the Programme's support was effectively used by the specific target group to achieve the specific objective	See under UTILITY OF PROGRAMME SUPPORT
4.2.2. Which of the supported activities have yielded the best results in achieving the specific objective.	Evaluation question answered for each SO under ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH
4.2.3. For which of the Programme's direct or indirect beneficiaries and under what circumstances project activities have yielded the best results in achieving the specific objective.	Evaluation question answered for each SO under ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH
4.2.4. Short-term results - what qualitative changes in existing objects, services, products, processes, etc. (depending on the specific objective) have been facilitated by the Programme's contribution. How valuable are the short-term results resulting from the Programme's contribution.	Evaluation question answered for each SO under IMMEDIATE CHANGES
4.2.5. Mid-term results - to what extent and what changes in the Programme's territory have been facilitated by the Programme's contribution.	Evaluation question answered for each SO under EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY
4.2.6. Long-term impact of results - which of the changes observed or suggested in the Programme's territory can be attributed to the Programme's contribution.	Evaluation question answered for each SO under LONG TERM IMPACTS
To what extent the Programme has facilitated cross border cooperation in environmental, employment generation, social inclusion, tourism sectors and public services, and added value of the cross border cooperation in devlopment of the Programme's territory.	Evaluation question answered for each Priority under Chapter III CONTRIBUTION AND ADDED VALUE OF CROSS BORDER COOPERATION

II ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHANGES IN THE PROGRAMME TERRITORY

PRIORITY 1

This priority is addressing the challenges and opportunities related to the **sustainable and clean environment**. This priority has three SOs: **SO1** is related to the promotion and advancement of tourism while simultaneously ensuring the sustainable preservation of the natural and cultural heritage; **SO2** is associated with common efforts aimed at enhancing environmental resource management; **SO3** is targeted at the regeneration of public areas with environmental problems.

SO 1.1 To increase number of visitors to the Programme area through improving and developing cultural and natural heritage   objects, services and products

The aim of the SO is to increase number of visitors to the Programme area through improving and developing cultural and natural heritage. The support was aimed at advancing and promoting cultural and natural heritage objects or intangible assets, services, and products, meanwhile enhancing the development of innovative environmentally-friendly, eco and cultural tourism solutions and offers.

As result it was expected to improve the cultural and natural heritage objects, services and products, ensure sustainable development, thus increasing number of visitors.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

The figure below illustrates the ToC of SO1, including main activities and short term, intermediate as well as long term outcomes. It is essential that key influencing assumptions are identified for each level of outcomes and expected changes. In the ToC, each of the elements shown in the figure was evaluated attributing one of four levels:
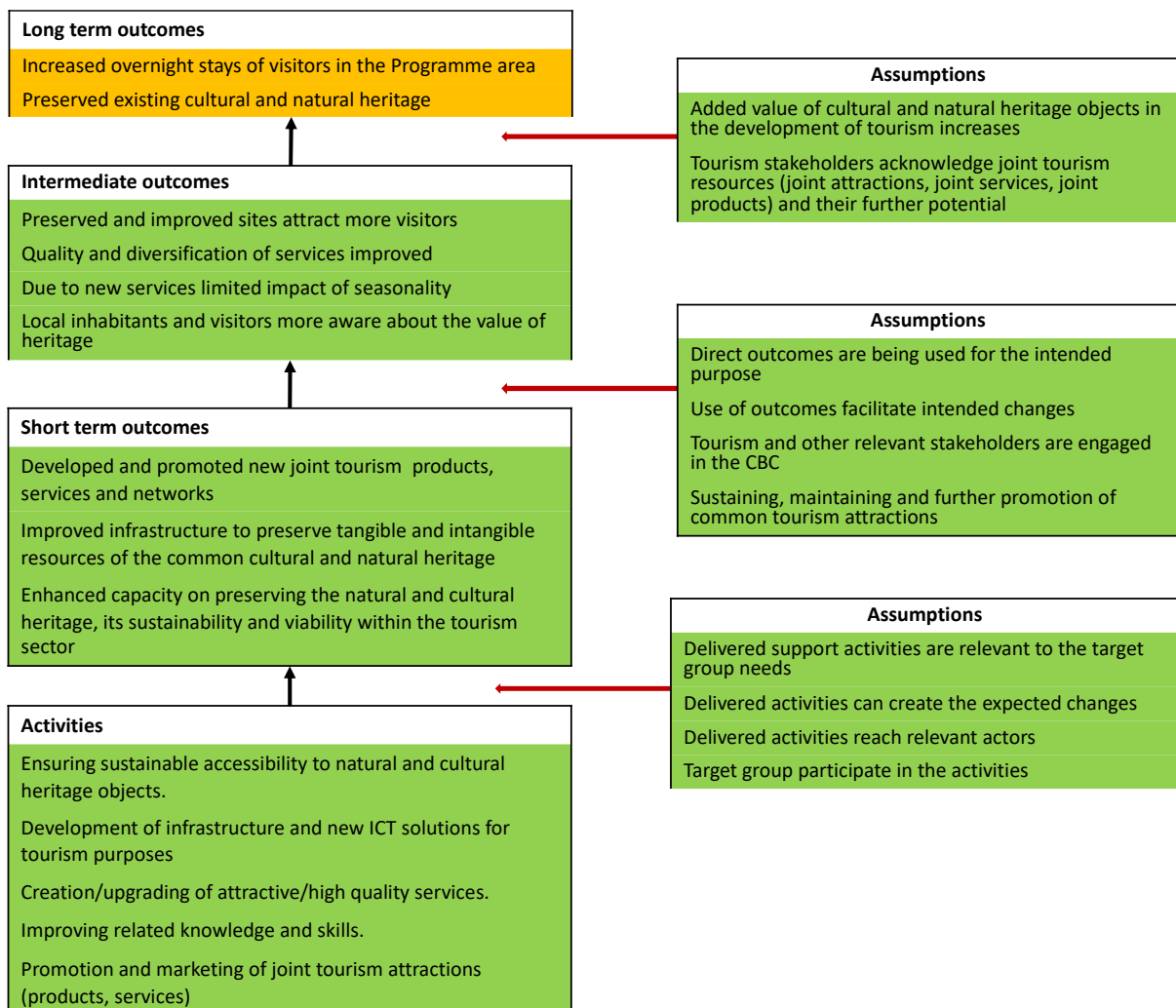
There is substantial evidence supporting achievement of the intended objectives and assumptions. In general, the implementation of this SO and its role in achieving the anticipated changes has been affirmed at the highest (green) level.

The ToC delineates a framework aimed at achieving outcomes through planned activities. These include ensuring sustainable accessibility to natural and cultural heritage, developing infrastructure and ICT solutions for tourism, creating/upgrading high-quality services, improving knowledge and skills, and promoting joint tourism attractions. Short-term outcomes envisaged involve the development and promotion of new tourism products, services, and networks, enhanced infrastructure for heritage preservation, and increased capacity in preserving the natural and cultural heritage within the tourism sector. These outcomes hinge upon assumptions that the delivered support activities align with target group needs and they actively participated in, possess the potential for expected changes, and effectively reach relevant actors in the tourism sector.

Evaluators have examined the project documentation, materials and other information about project short-term outcomes, also, the survey and interviews of project representatives confirm this the direct relationship and contribution of project activities to intended short-term outcomes of the Programme. The projects have been implemented in two directions, in particular, some have addressed **tangible and intangible cultural, historical and crafts heritage**, while others have highlighted the importance of **nature and its values in tourism**. However, all projects made efforts in developing new joint tourism products, services and networks, such as common tourism routes, new interactive and digital tourism entertainments and organised various events promoting natural and cultural values of both regions on national and international scale.

Partner organisations acknowledge the efforts invested in jointly developed projects. The Programme has provided support to the tourism development throughout several planning periods, that has engendered a consequential effect on tourism projects. Recently finished projects still expect envisaged long-term changes, however the results of the evaluation indicate the fulfilment of the assumption that may lead to expected positive changes. Those tourism projects previously executed (in 1st call of this Programme and from previous planning periods) are presently yielding the envisaged long-term outcomes, thereby providing impetus for the initiation and continuation of novel tourism development projects.

The evaluation results confirm that the changes are taking place in a positive direction, but the changes are taking place over a relatively longer period, so it is important for the continuity of the Programme to continue driving changes in the field of tourism.

Long term outcomes

Increased overnight stays of visitors in the Programme area

Preserved existing cultural and natural heritage

Assumptions

Added value of cultural and natural heritage objects in the development of tourism increases

Tourism stakeholders acknowledge joint tourism resources (joint attractions, joint services, joint products) and their further potential

Intermediate outcomes

Preserved and improved sites attract more visitors

Quality and diversification of services improved

Due to new services limited impact of seasonality

Local inhabitants and visitors more aware about the value of heritage

Assumptions

Direct outcomes are being used for the intended purpose

Use of outcomes facilitate intended changes

Tourism and other relevant stakeholders are engaged in the CBC

Sustaining, maintaining and further promotion of common tourism attractions

Short term outcomes

Developed and promoted new joint tourism products, services and networks

Improved infrastructure to preserve tangible and intangible resources of the common cultural and natural heritage

Enhanced capacity on preserving the natural and cultural heritage, its sustainability and viability within the tourism sector

Assumptions

Delivered support activities are relevant to the target group needs

Delivered activities can create the expected changes

Delivered activities reach relevant actors

Target group participate in the activities

Activities

Ensuring sustainable accessibility to natural and cultural heritage objects.

Development of infrastructure and new ICT solutions for tourism purposes

Creation/upgrading of attractive/high quality services.

Improving related knowledge and skills.

Promotion and marketing of joint tourism attractions (products, services)

- GREEN – indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;
- ORANGE - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;
- RED - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;
- GRAY - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

Overall, it can be concluded the domain of tourism, incl., preservation of common natural and cultural heritage, has advanced and achieved a substantial degree of maturity.

ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH (4.2.2., 4.2.3)

This SO supported the largest number of projects. In total 24 projects were supported. Projects implemented various activities. Projects developed joint innovative and sustainable tourism attractions based on the common cultural and natural heritage. Importantly, the projects created new unified tourism attractions and/ or products, including tourism trails or routes that covered multiple regions and municipalities in both countries.

In addition to physical investments aimed at enhancing tourism infrastructure, projects have also considered the preservation and advancement of common intangible assets. Furthermore, to maintain and enhance joint natural and cultural values, various ICT solutions were created

and set-up. These solutions either improve the tourism experience, provide entertainment, attract more tourists, or enable visitors and tourists to have real-life experiences in virtual spaces.

The projects fostered the development of mutual natural heritage in an environmentally sustainable manner, creating valuable tourism attractions not only on local, but on the international scale. Projects enhanced the accessibility of previously not recognised common natural resources, for instance projects "Geo Tours" LLI0483 or "UniGreen" LLI 10 revealed previously not recognised natural resources as an interesting and unique value for tourists and visitors.

During this planning period of the Programme, projects fully leveraged the marketing and promotional aspects of their jointly developed tourism products. Most of projects established a unified visual identity or the brand for their tourism offers, adopted common marketing strategies, and executed joint marketing campaigns aimed at local and international tourists.

It is positive that most of the projects assessed the need for capacity building, networking and engagement of most important stakeholders, like, tourism information centres of municipalities, tour guides, cultural institutions, tourism associations and other tourism related umbrella organisations. Projects improved knowledge of tourism stakeholders and fostered awareness regarding the sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism.

According to the respondents of the survey, the Programme's support was effectively used to achieve the SO. Project partners strongly agree that projects were implemented according to the plan (4.4 points) and outputs were achieved (4.8 points). The project brought benefits to participating regions (4.8 points) and responded well to the needs of the target group (4.7 points), intended results were achieved (4.7 points) and the projects will have lasting impact on the target group (4.6 points).
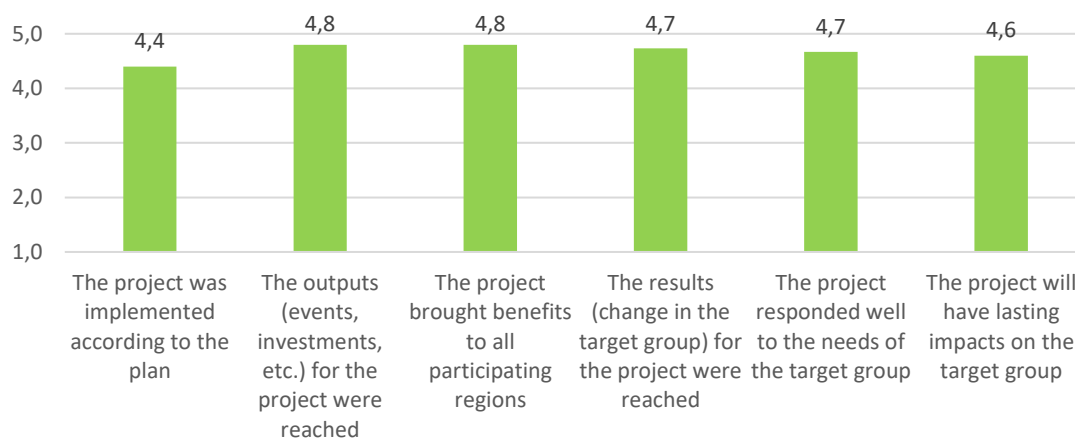
Graph 2 Results of the projects in SO 1.1.

IMMEDIATE CHANGES (4.2.4)

In the field of tourism, the ability of project partners has substantially increased, that can be further used for the creation of joint tourism offers and attractions. The significant contribution of regional organizations, tourism associations, and other overarching bodies in the tourism sector is noteworthy, not only in the development of common tourism offers and attractions but

also in their positive impact on enhancing the capacity of tourism stakeholders within the common Programme area.

The projects have demonstrated remarkable results. The projects considered common values, that were "packaged" in attractive tourism offers, thus promoting the Programme territory and available tourism destinations for visitors and tourists.

Projects created common marketing strategies and visual identities to promote new commonly created tourism offers on national and even on international scale. By pooling resources and expertise and enhancing the visibility, partners promoted the Programme area as an attractive tourism destination. It should be mentioned that the impact of COVID-19 has been an additional stimulating factor for local tourists to change their tourism and travel behaviours and experience tourism objects in domestic and neighbouring regions.

Projects have successfully diversified tourism offers, for instance, by discovering previously unknown, but remarkable and significant natural objects that attract new groups of "nature loving" tourists (LLI-10, LLI-483, LLI-349, LLI-448).

> *"It was easy to find a common theme for the project, as both countries have a valuable natural heritage that was not previously recognized for its tourism potential. Professional geologists were involved in the project, who trained tourism specialists on how valuable and unique natural objects can be better presented from the potential of tourism."*

The projects demonstrated how to make the historical and cultural heritage in the Programme territory attractive and attractive, highlighting craftsman traditions, local farming, the heritage of castles and manors in the region, common historical traditions and rituals of the solstice and other important holidays, historical events important to both countries. These initiatives emphasized the significance of craftsmen traditions, local farming practices, the valuable heritage of castles and manors, common historical traditions and rituals pertaining to solstices and other significant holidays (LLI-65, LLI-181, LLI-313, LLI-464, LLI-539). Furthermore, these endeavors showcased historical events of mutual importance to both countries (LLI-187, LLI-447).

Collaboration allowed regions to diversify their tourism offerings, and proved that cross-border projects can create comprehensive and diverse tourism packages to a broad range of tourist interests.

It is crucial to highlight that the Programme has made substantial contributions towards enhancing the existing tourism-related infrastructure in municipalities and regions, thereby improving the accessibility and visibility of tourist facilities. The Programme support has strengthened the tourism sector. Investments in the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, as well as research and protection of shared values, have deepened the understanding of society and tourism stakeholders regarding our common heritage and its pivotal role in the historical development of both countries. Notable projects such as Balts' Road (LLI-187), Explore Balts (LLI-447), SunRoute (LLI-464), and 4SeasonsParks (LLI-313) merit special recognition.

> *"Improving the infrastructure is a significant benefit, because without it, it is impossible to engage stakeholders and ensure proper development of tourism attractions. Also, the support for the installation of interactive and modern equipment and information stands in order to make it more convenient for modern travellers to access tourist information, view objects and experience better emotions".*

Projects have enhanced infrastructure development, which is an important attribute for the involvement of partners in the cross-border cooperation projects. Upgraded tourism facilities and enhanced accessibility contribute to a seamless and enjoyable travel experience for tourists exploring the Programme regions.

Despite the considerable impact of COVID-19 restrictions on social interactions and physical meetings, the projects managed to engage experts and professionals of the fields related to tourism, cultural and natural heritage. They established collaborative groups and networks in a virtual setting and later in post-Covid period convened in-person. Evidence from the projects indicates that several of cross-border collaborative groups established are still actively collaborating and maintaining communication even beyond the project implementation phase.

Knowledge exchange and skill development is an important direction, which in general contributed both to the implementation of existing projects and continue further wider partnerships. Projects fostered knowledge exchange among partners, but also, tourism professionals were involved in cross-border initiatives sharing expertise, acquiring new skills and industry trends, enhancing their overall competence on the tourism industry, its recent and further development trends.

The respondents of the survey strongly agree that the projects have improved the tourism related infrastructure (4.7 points) and created joint tourism services and other attractions (4.6 points). Project representatives also agree that the capacities of tourism related stakeholders have been increased (4.5 points).
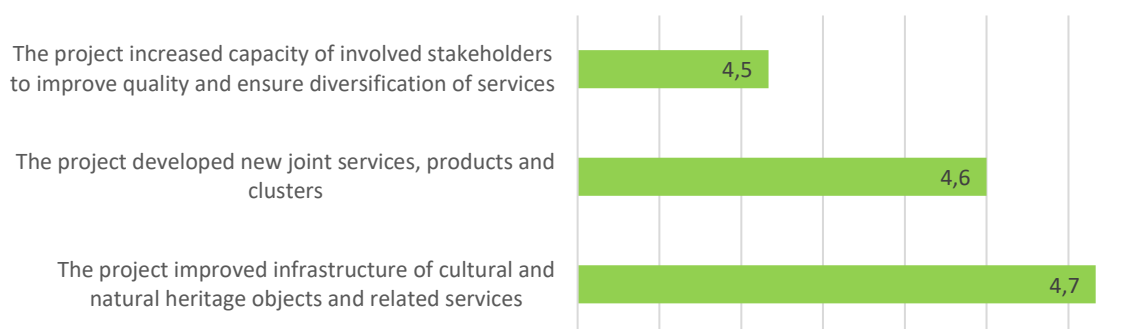
Graph 3 Short- term results of the projects in SO 1.1.

EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY (4.2.5, 4.3)

In this SO, the total number of projects is notably higher in comparison to other SOs, resulting in a significant impact of these projects on the Programme's territory. Especially significant are the regional projects that encompassed more than ten partners and ensured a broad geographical coverage. At the local level, projects have played an important role in creating, restoring, and promoting various tourist attractions.

From the interviews, it can be established that some of the projects have been completed only this year, and the most significant effects and larger long-term effects can be assessed in the following years.

However, it is worth emphasizing that the Programme in this SO has significantly exceeded the planned result indicator. **An increase of 1,149,264 visits to cultural and natural heritage sites**

and attractions giving a substantial contribution to the advancement of sustainable tourism. Initially planned result indicator has been exceeded almost three times.


Graph 4 Mid-term results of the projects in SO 1.1.

The respondents of the survey strongly agree that projects have contributed to following changes in the Programme territory: the improved sites attract more tourists (4.7 points), local inhabitants and visitors are more aware about the value of heritage (4.5 points) and tourism services have been improved and diversified (4.5 points). To a lesser extent the Programme has contributed to new tourism services mitigating the seasonality impacts on the tourism (3.5 points).

LONG TERM IMPACTS (4.2.6)

As you can see in the ToC, long term impacts have been marked with orange, which indicates that changes are taking place gradually and their impact can be expected in a longer term. It should be noted that there is observed significant increase in terms of overnight stays. The statistical data on the overnight stays of tourists reflect that the Programme has exceeded the planned number of overnight stays within the regions of the Programme.
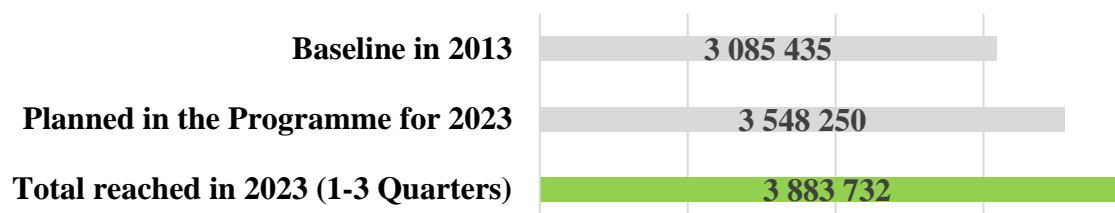
Graph 5 Number of overnight stays of visitors in the Programme area

Source: Central Statistics Bureau of Latvia[1] and Oficial Statistics Portal of Lithuania[2]

In addition, although the Programme has made a significant contribution to the preservation and sustainable development of various important cultural and natural heritage objects, the project partners recognize that there are still significant challenges in this area that need to be further developed.

Although the statistical data show a positive trend in the increase of overnight stays of tourists, the project representatives are more cautious about the positive impacts of their projects (2.9 points), arguing that most of recently finished projects will show their effects in the longer term.

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[1] https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START__NOZ__TU__TUV/TUV051c/table/tableViewLayout1/
[2] https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize#/

The respondents of the survey agree that the project will have a long-term contribution to preservation of cultural and natural heritage in the Programme area (4.3. points).
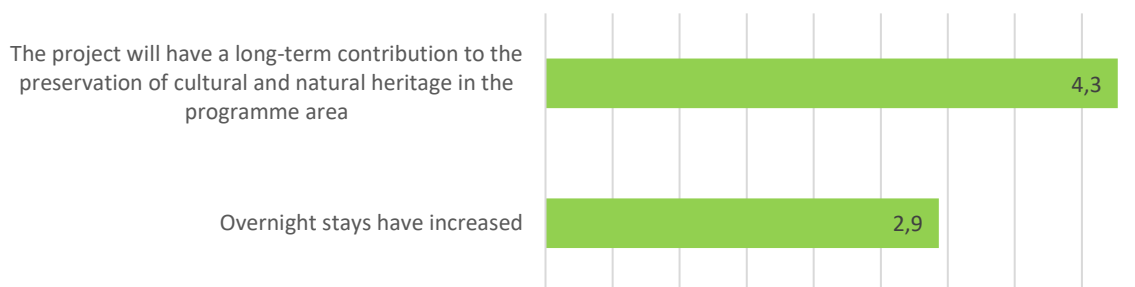
Graph 6 Long-term results of the projects in SO 1.1.

SO 1.2 To increase integration and efficiency of environmental resource management

The aim of this SO is to improve integration and efficiency of environmental resource management by promoting cooperation among involved stakeholders at all levels. It was expected to result in a higher level of capability to handle protection and restoration of biodiversity and soil, promotion of ecosystem services, including activities related to Natura 2000 sites and green infrastructure. It was expected that active and coordinated cooperation through planning, implementation, monitoring and other relevant activities should ensure more integrated and efficient management of environmental resources. The Programme emphasized development of practical and concrete solutions to improve efficiency of environmental resource management.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

The internal logic of the SO 1.2. presumes that the project partners have implemented activities in support of joint environmental resource management, exchange of practices, trainings, seminars and other actions, improvement of nature infrastructure and equipment, educational and awareness raising activities and joint environmental risk management actions, incl., purchase of related equipment and infrastructure. The evaluators have checked whether projects have implemented activities in relations to these areas. Further, the evaluators have assumed that the intended organisations and target groups have participated in activities, that the results and deliverables demonstrate required quality and expertise, and involvement of relevant research and education institutions has been secured.

It was expected that the projects should deliver results: improved green infrastructure, improved capacities of the involved actors, and more active coordination and cooperation in planning, implementation and monitoring of natural resources management activities. The evaluators did seek evidence regarding these expected results to determine the degree of achievement, and factors that have contributed or affected achievement of these results.

Further, assumptions were made that necessary provisions are in place to translate these direct outcomes into mid-term changes: outcomes produced by the projects are being used accordingly, that cooperation and coordination effects last after completion of the projects.

These efforts should lead to more integrated and efficient management of natural resources, integration of environmental, economic and social considerations into the decision-making process, promoted principles of ecologically sustainable development and joint contribution of supported organisations towards environmental resource management.

Further, after the completion of the projects, the long-term outcomes are expected to materialise in sustainable management of the environmental resources in the Programme area, which requires dedicated resources (financial, human, legal) for implementation of the strategies, methodologies, planning documents, etc., developed by the projects, i.e., these long-term outcomes mostly fall outside the direct reach of the partner organisations, and depend on the policy makers at national and local levels.

The overall relationship between the activities, direct outcomes, mid-term and long-term effects and supporting assumptions is demonstrated in the ToC for SO 1.2. The color coding shows the evaluation findings regarding the degree of achievement of the planned outcomes and the assumptions that are considered necessary.

1.2 To increase integration and efficiency of environmental resource management

Long term outcomes

Sustainable management of the environmental resources in the Programme area

Developed strategies, methodologies, planning documents are being implemented and sufficient resources are allocated for these activities

Intermediate outcomes

More integrated and efficient management of natural resources

Environmental, economic and social considerations effectively integrated in the decision-making process

Promoted principles of ecologically sustainable development

Supported organisations jointly contribute to environmental resource management

Direct outcomes are being used for the intended purpose

Cooperation and coordination effects last after completion of the projects

Short term outcomes

Active coordination and cooperation in planning, implementation and monitoring of natural resources

Promoted green infrastructure solutions

Improved capacities of the involved actors

Delivered activities can create the expected changes

Relevant research / educational institutions participate

Target group participate in the activities

Activities

Joint environmental resource management activities

Joint environmental risk management actions

Exchange of practices, trainings, seminars and other actions

Improvement of nature infrastructure and equipment

Educational and awareness raising activities

GREEN – supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

ORANGE - both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

RED - evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

GRAY - no or very little evidence was identified.

ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH (4.2.2., 4.2.3)

The projects implemented under the SO address various aspects of environmental resource management:

Several projects address **disaster and environmental risk management** issues. These projects strive to establish systematic approach for identifying, assessing, and mitigating potential risks and vulnerabilities related to disasters and environmental hazards. Activities involve planning, coordination, and implementation of strategies to minimize the impact of natural or human-made disasters on the environment and communities. E.g., implementation of joint training, workshops and procurement of compatible equipment to respond to Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) accidents, considering the frequent transportation of hazardous substances across Latvian and Lithuanian borders (LLI-195 ATOM); development of cooperation to efficiently detect potential risks, facilitate the flow of operational information, and provide effective environmental and civil protection against environmental and civil disasters (LLI-232 DERMR), introduce new technologies, particularly specialized drones, for surveillance and monitoring of fire and rescue operations (LLI-267 EMERG_TECH).

The goal of several projects is to **reduce pollution** that can have detrimental effects on ecosystems, human health, and biodiversity. These projects work on development of strategies, adoption of environmentally friendly practices in industries and agriculture, promotion of public awareness and education about responsible environmental behaviour. E.g., development of policy measures and recommendations for reducing pharmaceuticals and micropollutants in the environment (LLI-527 MEDWwater); estimation, monitoring, and reduction of plastic pollutants in the Latvian-Lithuanian coastal area using remotely sensed features (Earth observation and drones) and awareness-raising (LLI-525 ESMIC); assessment of potential and economic aspects of catch-crop solutions as a prominent agro-environmental measure for reducing water pollution from agricultural sources in the transboundary Venta and Lielupe river basins (CATCH POLLUTION LLI-49).

Projects on **sustainable management of natural resources** focus on responsible and balanced use of natural assets to ensure the longevity, health, and resilience of ecosystems and the services they provide. E.g., sustainable management of river lamprey stocks implemented stock assessment methodology, combining classical techniques and new molecular approaches, identified migration obstacles in 40 rivers, and transferred spawners over obstacles, and releasing millions of larvae (LLI 310 Lamprey); new methodology for estimating ecoflow in compliance with water standards for protected areas under the Water Framework Directive (WFD), Birds, and Habitats Directive was developed (LLI-249 ECOFLOW), and E-flow calculation model utilised (LLI-533 TRANSWAT), joint management tools, measures, and systems for conservation of biodiversity in open wetland habitats developed (LLI-306 Open Landscape), solutions for management of flooding, unstable hydrological regimes, overgrowth with reeds and bushes, water quality problems, in lakes designed (LLI-449 LIVE LAKE).

Integrated and collaborative solutions were implemented to foster **efficient management of green infrastructure**, e.g., integrated ecosystem and landscape concepts into local and regional planning (ENGRAVE LLI-291), developed green infrastructure in natural and semi-natural ecosystems of urban wetlands (Urb-Area LLI-472), reconstructed historical park areas, developed interactive outdoor learning programs (Save Past for Future LLI-476).

All projects engaged the general public through educational and information activities, as well as collaborated with NGOs and professional organisations. Municipal authorities,

environmental agencies, and national decision-makers were actively involved. Additionally, educational and scientific institutions participated as partners or contractors, contributing essential academic expertise. The inclusion of stakeholders ensured that the formulated strategies and approaches were aligned with the needs and expectations of the various target groups.

Thus, the evaluation concludes that projects supported under the Programme have implemented activities in relation to all priority areas identified during the programming, and there is evidence to support such conclusions.

IMMEDIATE CHANGES (4.2.4)

The Programme estimated the target value: 98 organisations cooperating in projects. This target has been slightly underachieved and **88 organisations have established cooperation** throughout project implementation.

While Latvia and Lithuania may seem well-connected and relatively similar, the projects revealed differences and cooperation offered opportunities for testing and experimentation in diverse settings. Organisations shared knowledge and best practices thus leading to increased capacities, that helped to develop holistic solutions and consider a broad range of factors and contexts.

> *For instance, the Catch Pollution LLI-49 project produced varying results in different areas. This presented a valuable chance to conduct experiments on both sides of the border, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding. The availability of certain information in Lithuania that was not accessible in Latvia, and vice versa, further enriched the overall picture.*

While overall experience with cooperation was satisfactory and it contributed to shared learning, attention was brought to the issue, that in some instances the partners may have different views on the expected quality and standard of the results. This needs to be addressed through establishment of joint steering bodies and joint understanding of requirements and goals.
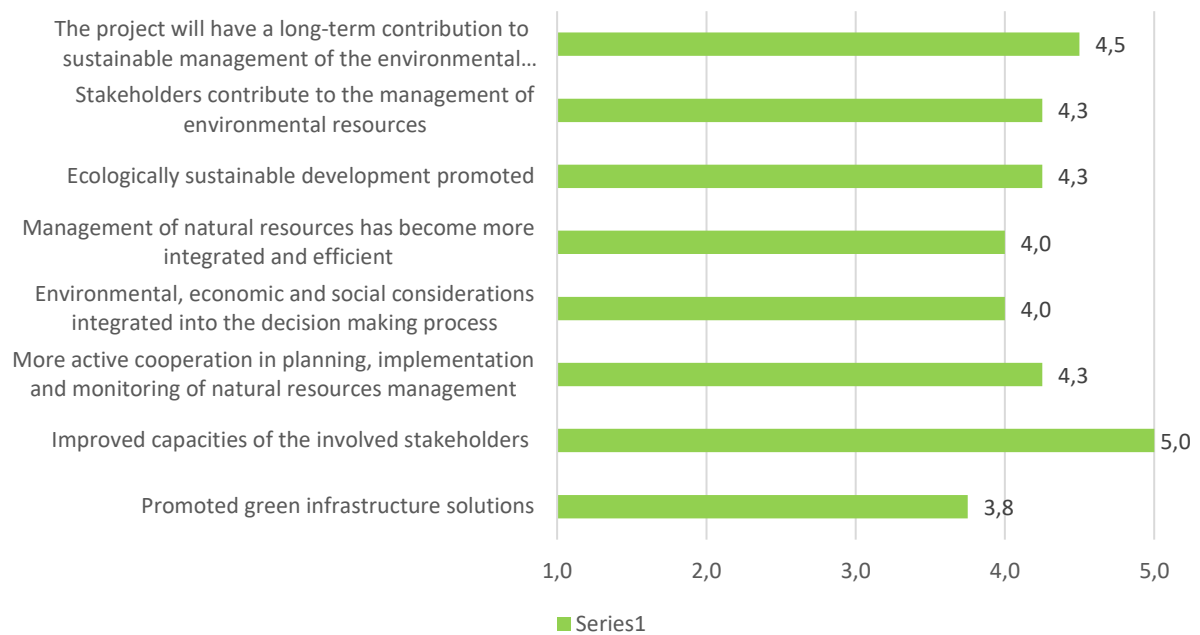
Collaboration among entities helped to design and implement joint training programmes to address common challenges, especially in areas of common problems and joint solutions.

> *E.g., LLI-195 ATOM project implemented joint exercises, training courses, and workshops to respond to Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) accidents, given that hazardous substances are frequently transported across the Latvian and Lithuanian borders, and the border area is located in high-risk sites such as the Ignalina nuclear power plant in Visaginas.*
>
> *In LLI-267 EMERG_TECH project, innovative emergency combat techniques were developed through the introduction of new technologies (specialized drones, for surveillance and monitoring of fire and rescue operations). A specialized training program was crafted to instruct personnel on use of this equipment, and drone instructors from both countries were educated to disseminate their knowledge to other officers in fire and security services.*

Also, the survey of project partners show opinion that the projects have substantially **contributed to enhanced capacities** of the involved organisations, that are expected to promote more efficient and integrated approach to management of natural resources.

SO 1.2.

	Value
The project will have a long-term contribution to sustainable management of the environmental…	4,5
Stakeholders contribute to the management of environmental resources	4,3
Ecologically sustainable development promoted	4,3
Management of natural resources has become more integrated and efficient	4,0
Environmental, economic and social considerations integrated into the decision making process	4,0
More active cooperation in planning, implementation and monitoring of natural resources management	4,3
Improved capacities of the involved stakeholders	5,0
Promoted green infrastructure solutions	3,8

■ Series1

From the partners' perspective very valuable Programme's contribution was development of green infrastructure objects and supply of equipment for maintenance and improvement of these objects. These incentives are expected to improve situation locally, since these objects and purchased equipment are owned and managed by individual partners. Nevertheless, this opportunity has increased awareness among the direct users of the infrastructure and enabled the partner organisations to respond more efficiently to the local challenges.

EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY (4.2.5, 4.3)

Research activities and the development of methodological materials have provided valuable support for project partner organizations, facilitating the translation of strategic-level documents into regional and local planning documents. E.g.:

> *Zemgale Region Landscape and Green Infrastructure Plan was a significant contribution, being the first planning document in Latvia specifically crafted to contribute to the implementation of the European Landscape Convention (ELC). The ELC, a treaty adopted by the Council of Europe in 2000, aims to advance the protection, management, and planning of European landscapes, giving particular attention to their quality, diversity, and sustainable development. The convention advocates for a comprehensive planning approach considering cultural, ecological, and social aspects. As a result, the Zemgale Region plan served as one of the initial steps in integrating the principles of the Convention into the day-to-day activities of regional and local planning specialists, and it provides guidelines to other regional and local authorities for integrating the principles of the ELC into practical planning endeavours.*

The partners and even other organizations have expressed appreciation for the relevance and quality of the project outcomes. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that implementing further actions based on these documents necessitates additional resources — financial, human and legal resources. Unfortunately, local administrations often do not prioritize these resources as they contend with more pressing needs. Also, other private organisations may feel reluctant to implement the environmental considerations into their economic operations, since these solutions entail costs for the operators. E.g.:

The project Ecoflow developed methodology for estimating ecoflow in compliance with water standards for protected areas under the Water Framework Directive (WFD), Birds, and Habitats Directive. Recognizing that the prevailing requirements posed a threat to fish populations, the project introduced novel calculations and models tailored for local Hydropower Stations (HES). These adaptations call for increased flow and resources to facilitate fish transportation pathways, leading to additional costs and diminished income for HES operators. Consequently, there is a pressing need for the development of new national-level regulations to enforce these requirements. Furthermore, consideration should be given to establishing support mechanisms for operators to navigate the associated challenges.

Several projects addressed integration of ecologically sustainable developed and reduction of pollution throughout implementation of activities. There is an evidence that these outcomes have provided valuable incentives and increased knowledge, know-how and awareness. E.g.

The outcomes of the Catch Pollution LLI-49 project are deemed valuable and insightful by both local farmers, eager to enhance soil quality and crop yields, and the national administration. The national administration utilizes these results to craft River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs), essential tools in integrated water resources management. The RBMPs can be further developed to assess the results and improvements achieved through this approach, particularly in terms of reduced pollution.

The outcomes of the projects exhibit greater potential for implementation when national authorities express interest and actively integrate these incentives into their strategic planning documents. This is particularly evident in situations where the information provided is relevant for shaping strategic measures. For example, in instances where the projects have developed tools for change and the national-level administration establishes a regulatory framework and support incentives, there is a high potential for achieving mid-term and long-term changes.

Throughout the project implementation, partner organizations forged strong cooperative ties, working together to achieve shared goals. The collaboration was notably valuable, enhancing the quality, relevance, and scope of the outcomes. However, post-project, the intensity of cooperation tends to diminish, as organisations continue to operate within their relevant national legal and financial frameworks.

LONG TERM IMPACTS (4.2.6)

The project partner organisations have highly rated long-term contribution of the projects towards sustainable management of environmental resources. Evidence indicates that, in numerous instances, the materials generated by the projects are actively employed in the development of planning and policy documents, that are expected support sustainable environmental resource management.

The Catch Pollution LLI-49 project showcased the practical advantages of cultivating certain crops in reducing pollution and enhancing soil quality. This motivated farmers to adopt these crops in their fields. Additionally, the project shared insights with the Ministry of Agriculture (Lithuania), influencing the inclusion of relevant information in their CAP Rural Development Programme, along with supportive measures. Overall, the area dedicated to catch-crops in arable land increased from 16,463 ha in 2018 to 39,442 ha in 2022 in Lithuania. While the project is just one factor contributing to this change, it undeniably provided valuable knowledge and information to facilitate and support this transformation.

Conversely, in scenarios where project outcomes hinge heavily on local-level decision-makers and individual organizations, and where achieved results may be susceptible to being overridden by economic concerns and pressures, the likelihood of generating a significant and enduring impact through project activities diminishes. In such cases, partners and interested organizations often depend on further external funding for implementation of incentives.

SO 1.3. To regenerate public areas with environmental problems

The projects supported under the SO were primarily dedicated to the regeneration of degraded urban public territories. Both countries share common challenges related to contamination inherited from military and industrial sites operated during the Soviet era.

Project activities included physical rehabilitation of sites, development of methodologies, guidelines, study visits, public awareness activities, exchange of experience, etc.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 1.3 THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

Long term outcomes

Improved sustainable municipal environment for inhabitants and visitors

Improved territories are accessible and used by inhabitants and visitors

Intermediate outcomes

Promoted sustainable and resource-efficient revitalisation of municipality-owned brownfields

Fostered cooperation among all relevant stakeholders

Increased number of households not facing pollution, grime and other municipal environmental problems

Direct outcomes are being used for the intended purpose

Data available on households, that have improved conditions due decreased pollution and environment problems

Short term outcomes

Revitalised brownfield sites

Identified the best practices for the planning and implementation of sustainable brownfields revitalisation

Delivered activities are relevant to the target group needs

Delivered activities can create the expected changes

Activities

Pilot investments in municipal brownfield sites, including the deconstruction of derelict buildings

Concepts and primary designs for brownfield revitalisation

Experience exchange in municipal planning

Dissemination of good practices

GREEN – supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

ORANGE - both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

RED - evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

GRAY - no or very little evidence was identified.

IMMEDIATE CHANGES (4.2.4)

As the result of Programme's intervention, **38.35 ha of land surface** has been rehabilitated with direct support from the Programme.

EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY (4.2.5, 4.3)

The regeneration of degraded territories is a widespread challenge, and the Structural Funds offer substantial support for addressing it. However, the Programme's impact extends beyond the Structural Funds as the Programme fostered the development and implementation of innovative methods, e.g.:

> *BrownReg LLI-325 project supported development, implementation and dissemination of innovative and environmental friendly methods for regeneration of brownfields. Project partners included research institution and municipalities. The project used innovative approach of phytoremediation, that was used for the first time for cleaning and revitalizing of soils of brownfields. Phytoremediation is a cost-effective and environmentally friendly way to clean up contaminated sites. It is a sustainable technology that can be used to treat a wide range of contaminants. As research continues, phytoremediation is likely to become even more effective and widely used. The project published best practice guidelines for municipality planners, professionals and public in cooperation between the university and municipalities.*

The projects also strived to increase the knowledge and capacities of the territorial planners on planning and implementing sustainable brownfield revitalisation through training, exchange of good practice and study visits to other locations in Europe. These activities are expected to contribute to increased cooperation among all relevant stakeholders and sustainable and resource-efficient revitalisation of municipality-owned brownfields.

The Programme also refers to increased number of households not facing pollution, grime and other municipal environmental problems, as an intended outcome of the SO. Some of the projects include reference to concrete number of households, but in other cases they refer to general public or all inhabitants of the area.

LONG TERM IMPACTS (4.2.6)

It is very reasonable to believe that projects have contributed to improved municipal environment for the use of inhibitors and visitors. Since the territories are public, there are no barriers for the inhabitants to use these for leisure and activities.

CONTRIBUTION STORY

The contribution story for SO 1.3. is considered as follows:

> *The Programme provided support to design concepts and pilot investments for brownfield revitalisation, along with capacity building and experience exchange activities.*
>
> *This has contributed to improved planning and implementation capacities for sustainable brownfields revitalisation and revitalised brownfield sites.*
>
> *Among other effects are a fostered cooperation among the stakeholders, promoted sustainable revitalisation of municipality-owned brownfields, but it is not clear to what extent these solutions are resource-efficient, as such calculations are not demonstrated by the project*

partners. As a result, the households are benefiting from reduced not pollution and other environmental problems.

Thus, the Programme has directly contributed to improved municipal environment for inhabitants and visitors. It is assumed that the solutions are sustainable, and does not require additional resources.

PRIORITY 2 Support to labour mobility and employment

The budget for Priority Axis 2 was 17.63 million euros. This constituted 25.3% of the ERDF budget for the Programme. All available support was committed to 20 projects.

Priority 2 aims at promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility in the Programme area. Priority 2 has two SOs; SO 2.1 To create employment opportunities through entrepreneurship support, and SO 2.2 To increase job opportunities by improving mobility and workforce skills. The Programme aimed to promote the idea of entrepreneurship in the Programme area and to help local inhabitants become more open and capable of becoming involved in entrepreneurship. The Programme tried to achieve this goal by increasing the skills of the local inhabitants, reducing barriers to mobility and by providing new business opportunities. Priority 2 intervention has two SOs which are described in greater detail in the following chapters.

SO 2.1. To create employment opportunities through entrepreneurship support

SO 2.1. aims at creating a supportive environment and conditions for the creation of employment possibilities in the Programme population. Measures are targeted in particular to the creation of local employment in fields related to traditional crafts, food etc. Another aim is to facilitate entrepreneurship and new business models in the fields of the knowledge economy. The main intervention approach of the SO is to implement projects via different kinds of education institutions and entrepreneurship support networks and services.

The main target groups are potential local entrepreneurs and self-employed persons including youngsters. Already active entrepreneurs also represent significant target group. The direct beneficiaries are public authorities and public equivalent bodies, NGOs, research/educational institutions, enterprises and local inhabitants and visitors.

SO 2.1 has one result indicator, the number of newly established businesses per year and three output indicators, the improved /created business support services as result of the cross-border cooperation, improved or created business support infrastructure objects that ensure indirect business support, and the number of enterprises receiving non-financial support.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

A ToC describes how a desired objective is expected to be realised in a particular context. It aims to show how a set of actions or activities is expected to lead up to a desired change. The picture below shows the ToC for SO 2.1. It also includes a colour coding representing estimation regarding the level of change achieved, based on the available evidence described further below.

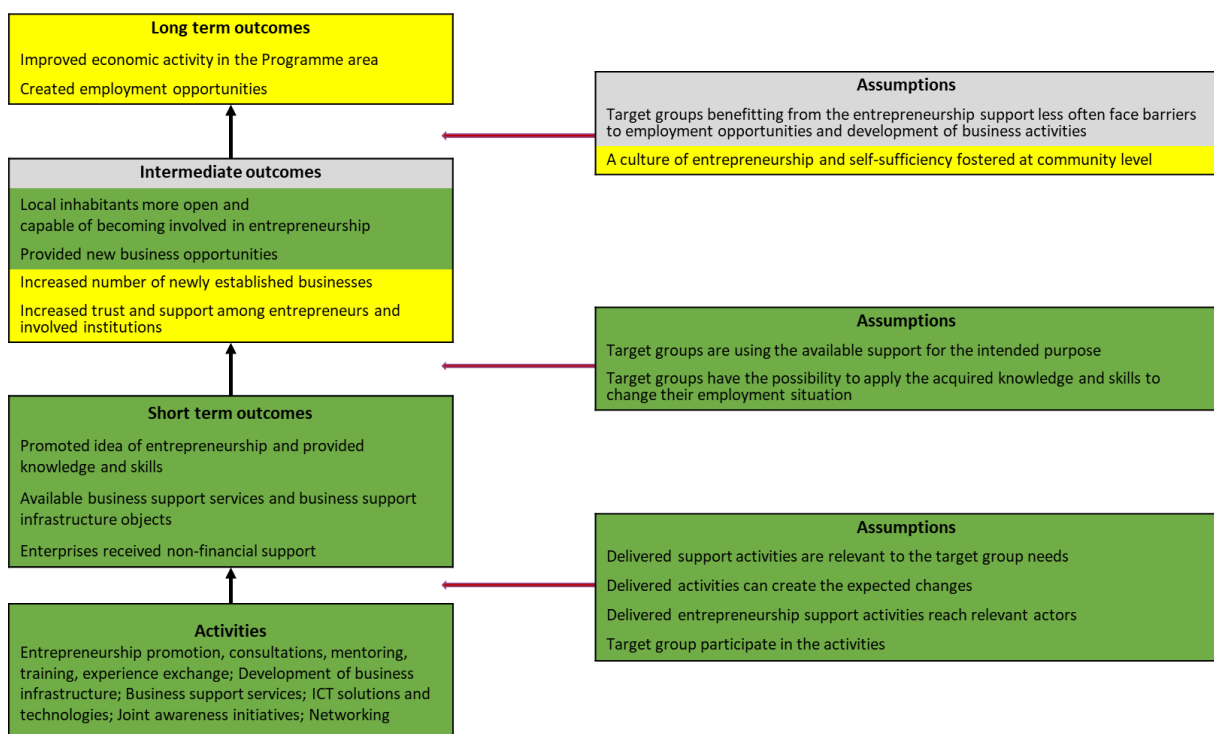The contribution claim for SO 2.1 is as follows:

IF Latvia-Lithuania programme projects will promote entrepreneurship idea, providing relevant services, infrastructure and non-financial support AND the target groups will engage by improving their knowledge, skills and competencies, AND are motivated using the created support and applying acquired knowledge and skills, THEN increased entrepreneurship activity can be expected THAT will lead to improved economic activity in the programme area.

The Programme provided support for entrepreneurship promotion activities, consultations, mentoring, training, experience exchange, development of business infrastructure, business support services, ICT solutions and technologies, joint awareness initiatives and networking.

The main expected short-term outcomes are promoted idea of entrepreneurship among the target groups, available business support services and business support infrastructure objects and enterprises receiving non-financial support. If certain assumptions hold true, these outcomes will lead to the following intermediate outcomes: thanks to provided knowledge and skills local inhabitants are more open and capable of becoming involved in entrepreneurship; with the help of provided new business opportunities the number of newly established businesses shall increase.

For the long-term outcome, increased economic activity, to be observed, the target groups benefitting from the entrepreneurship support must face fewer barriers to getting employment or developing their business activities. The risks are related to the influence of external factors that slow down economic activities, reduce demand and affect the activity of the market.

SO 2.1 To create employment opportunities through entrepreneurship support

Long term outcomes
Improved economic activity in the Programme area
Created employment opportunities

Assumptions
Target groups benefitting from the entrepreneurship support less often face barriers to employment opportunities and development of business activities
A culture of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency fostered at community level

Intermediate outcomes
Local inhabitants more open and capable of becoming involved in entrepreneurship
Provided new business opportunities
Increased number of newly established businesses
Increased trust and support among entrepreneurs and involved institutions

Assumptions
Target groups are using the available support for the intended purpose
Target groups have the possibility to apply the acquired knowledge and skills to change their employment situation

Short term outcomes
Promoted idea of entrepreneurship and provided knowledge and skills
Available business support services and business support infrastructure objects
Enterprises received non-financial support

Assumptions
Delivered support activities are relevant to the target group needs
Delivered activities can create the expected changes
Delivered entrepreneurship support activities reach relevant actors
Target group participate in the activities

Activities
Entrepreneurship promotion, consultations, mentoring, training, experience exchange; Development of business infrastructure; Business support services; ICT solutions and technologies; Joint awareness initiatives; Networking

GREEN – supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

ORANGE - both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

RED - evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH (4.2.2., 4.2.3)

Spectrum of activities implemented within the supported projects

Nine projects have been funded under this SO during the Programme period. Several projects have focused on **entrepreneurship promotion among young people** (LLI-143, LLI-147, LLI-155, LLI-186). Part of these projects aimed to encourage youngsters to develop new business ideas and start their own businesses. These projects provided educational and advisory services, and mentoring activities helping young people to identify business development opportunities, develop new business models and act. Others focused on providing non-formal education opportunities for school-aged children to develop entrepreneurial thinking, knowledge, and skills. These projects aim to fill the gap in non-formal education opportunities for children interested in entrepreneurship and provide them with the necessary support and resources to develop their business ideas.

Another group of projects are dedicated to providing **non-financial support to existing and emerging entrepreneurs** through training, consultations, capacity-building activities, mentoring, networking and promotional activities (LLI-138, LLI-384, LLI-416). These projects aim to support specific target groups - local artisans, local food product producers and creative industries representatives.

Two projects concentrated on creating and strengthening the **entrepreneurship support system** (LLI-131, LLI-157) with an aim to promote business development and provide support services to entrepreneurs. This included the establishment of new business support centers, strengthening existing support centers, and collaboration with other business support institutions as well as the creation of mentor-consulting networks, elaboration of training programs, creating supporting infrastructure, IT tools and platforms for cooperation.

Across all projects, the most common activities included training, skills development, networking, mentoring and experience sharing integrating the cross-border aspect in different actions in many ways. The projects have promoted direct interaction between entrepreneurs and business support providers and developed and tested various methods and tools for the further development of business ideas and the establishment of new companies.

Target groups have been interested in participating in the projects and found them relevant

The main target groups of the projects were existing SMEs, local artisans, food producers, children, pupils, young students, recent graduates and teachers, mentors, and entrepreneurship promotion experts.

A considerable number of entrepreneurs have been benefitting from the provided support while many people with potential business ideas and youngsters have also participated in the projects. As such, it has been mostly successful in attracting participants, though challenges were also evident. Many activities were initially built around face-to-face interaction. In some projects, Covid-19 significantly complicated implementation and made it more difficult for the participants to engage and interact with each other. In many cases, the measures were successfully implemented remotely by creating new solutions allowing even wider reach.

The active participation of the target groups in project activities indicates that they saw the activities offered as relevant to their needs. There was no evidence found indicating that relevant actors were not reached by activities. Project participants were generally found easily enough but some challenges emerged at the level of project partners, where some entities had to leave the project due to lack of financial resources hindering their active involvement in project activities.

Evidence shows that the most significant results in terms of volume in achieving the SO have been achieved by activities aimed at strengthening the entrepreneurship support system. These results are achieved largely due to the activities of one project, which included strategic collaboration in creating a cross-border mentor-consultant network, e-learning platform and tools (LLI 131).

One of the most important target groups of the projects was existing entrepreneurs, who are usually not easy to reach and engage. According to the interviews, the relevance to their needs and the quality of the activities offered are important factors for the involvement of entrepreneurs.

> *Entrepreneurs do not like wasting time. Time is money, there is no time to spend it on nonsense. If the training is not good, the entrepreneur will not come. That is a good measure of whether an event is worthwhile. If it is a one-man enterprise, then he will definitely not waste time. But if he does come, then it is a sign that we are doing the right thing. Every participant should be valued. The participation of the entrepreneurs, their interest, is proof that the project was a success. /LLI 131/*

Another important factor promoting the participation of entrepreneurs is their trust in the project partners and confidence in the idea and its benefits. This is evidenced, for example, by the willingness of entrepreneurs to engage as mentors in support activities.

> *But the activity of the mentoring network shows that entrepreneurs trust us, are ready to get involved. It is voluntary work. When the entrepreneurs themselves got involved in the project, they said that they would like to have such a person by their side - to tell them in a simple way what rakes they have climbed, and what experience they can give. It's a cool opportunity for them to get involved and also social responsibility. /LLI 131/*

Reports provided under the Programme and interviews carried out with the beneficiaries provide the necessary evidence that the **assumptions** in respect to the transformation of project outputs into immediate outcomes hold true. Delivered support activities are relevant to the target group's needs and are designed and delivered in a way that can create the expected changes. Delivered entrepreneurship support activities have reached relevant actors and target groups have actively participated in those.

IMMEDIATE CHANGES (4.2.4)

Projects delivered on their promise to promote and support entrepreneurship

Nine implemented projects reported that a total of 27 business support services have been improved or created, 18 business support infrastructure objects created that ensure indirect business support, and 815 enterprises received non-financial support. The planned target values are fully reached especially regarding the number of enterprises receiving non-financial

support. Target value of this indicator was exceeded already after the first two project calls leading to revision of the target value. The revised target value (546) is exceeded by 149% reportedly due to a particular contribution from one project (LLI 131).

The survey results show an overall optimistic view of the immediate impact of projects. The respondents of the survey are convinced that the expected changes in the target groups are reached (4.8 points) and agree that the projects responded well to the needs of the target group (4.6 points). Respondents are overall positive about the durability of impacts on the target group (4.5 points).
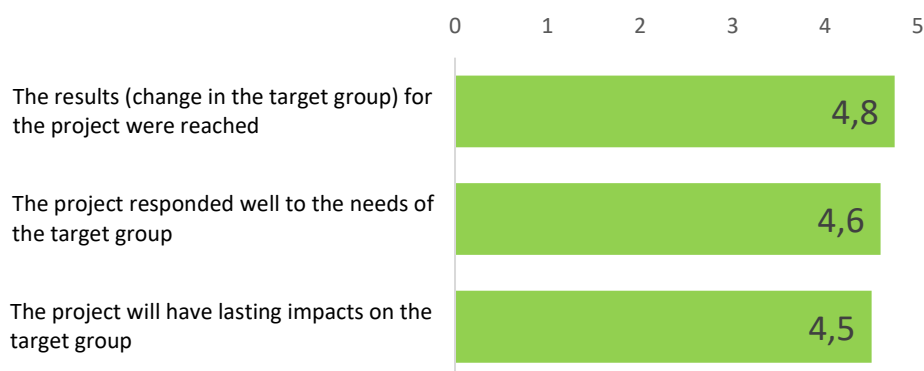
Reported results indicate that projects have successfully **promoted the idea of entrepreneurship**. Several projects have particularly addressed young people starting from the first grades and primary school age (LLI 155), during their studies and directly after (LLI 143, LLI 147) focusing on equipping students and recent graduates with the tools and mindset needed to start entrepreneurship activities.

> *For instance, the LLI 143 Ready for Business project targeted students and recent graduates in business science, young people who have a business idea and/or are willing to start their own business and founders of newly established enterprises. By simulating the process of business start-up and development, this initiative aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurship, incorporating elements such as principles of informal game-based learning, main principles of business disciplines, the experience of existing entrepreneurs, and real-life business cases. This multifaceted approach not only provided theoretical knowledge but also instilled practical insights, preparing the youth for the challenges of the entrepreneurial world.*

Others focused on **providing knowledge and skills** to different target groups including youngsters, existing entrepreneurs, and educational institutions. For young and aspiring entrepreneurs, projects have provided a platform for high-quality training courses, inspirational networking events, and discussions about the business support environment. These initiatives enhanced their theoretical knowledge and exposed them to practical experiences. Projects have also targeted existing entrepreneurs, providing them with opportunities to enhance their skills and expand their businesses.

> *For instance, the LLI 138 Bee project encouraged and supported local artisans to develop new business ideas and initiatives in the field of creative craftsmanship. These adults who are proficient in various traditional skills and crafts were provided with business-related knowledge and skills necessary for creating competitive products and reaching new markets.*

For educational institutions, projects have resulted in the development of educational resources that can be integrated into their curricula.

The LLI 157 BEE Lab project published 'Good Practice and Entrepreneurship Promotion book' that was presented to students, serving as a valuable tool for entrepreneurship education. This book will continue to be used as a tool for teaching entrepreneurship and related subjects across various faculties.

According to projects, in various trainings, experience exchange events and formats were engaged a notable number of participants. That automatically implies their exposure to entrepreneurship ideas and uptake of knowledge and skills at a certain level.

Acquired evidence shows that projects have **contributed to establishment of various business support services**. Several of them are novel and unique for the Programme area, with effects such as wider territorial and content coverage and new functionality (LLI 131, LLI 157, LLI 186). Others have found new uses for existing solutions thus widening the target audience (LLI 155). These projects have focused on enhancing the capacity of business support institutions and creating networking platforms.

For instance, the LLI 131 Business support project facilitated the establishment of business support centers and the improvement of existing infrastructure, ensuring that these institutions are equipped to provide the necessary support to aspiring entrepreneurs. The project has led to the increased technical and knowledge capacity of business support institutions and created a cooperation network between these institutions. But the LLI 157 BEE Lab project aimed to create a mentor network, upgrade the facilities, and provide different training options to support entrepreneurs.

Some projects report an **established business infrastructure**. This is understood as various equipment for business support centres, equipment for training and video conferences, equipment for craftsman workshops and renovation of premises as well development of online platforms for training and advisory services. (LLI 131, LLI 138, LLI 155, LLI 157).

For example, the LLI 131 Business support project has established two new business support centers - Aizkraukle business support center and Rokiškis Library, business and NGOs cluster "Enterprising library". These centers serve as important hubs for entrepreneurs, providing them with the necessary resources and guidance. The work of these centers is supported by an online platform with an integrated advisory system for entrepreneurship.

Interviews have revealed a few additional immediate effects that contribute to the quality and availability of entrepreneurship support. In particular, project implementation as such has helped entrepreneurship support service providers to better identify target groups, get to know them better and find out more about their needs. This in turn helps to improve and better target services.

When we are working, we only meet individual artisans. The project allows us to meet more such people. It gives an opportunity to come to the training courses, to meet like-minded people, to share experiences, to be together. We also learn more, we get to know these people. It is important to know them, and their plans. Then we can plan further projects, trends, and what is needed. We and they continue to cooperate in both training and activities. We talk about what they need next. /LLI 138/

EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY (4.2.5, 4.3)

New businesses and people's willingness to start a business are the most evident effects

There is mixed evidence that the Programme has attained its expected intermediate outcomes:

- Local inhabitants are more open and capable of becoming involved in entrepreneurship;
- Provided new business opportunities;
- Increased number of newly established businesses

The Programme support was targeted at creating employment opportunities through entrepreneurship support. Projects have carried out a wide range of different entrepreneurship support activities reaching an impressive number of target groups. There is some evidence of the further effects of this support leading to the **establishment of 41 new enterprises** (LLI 157, LLI 186, LLI 384). These enterprises are established during the project implementation period. Project reports indicate that at least four projects expected to promote the establishment of 68-71 new enterprises. However, no information about newly established enterprises is available after the closure of the projects. Interviews confirm that the beneficiaries themselves have not planned to collect or compile such information, nor has the Programme requested it.

The expected effects on the Programme territory are primarily related to the **openness and capability of people in the Programme area to become involved in entrepreneurship**. Project activities concentrated on specific target groups aiming at the provision of skills and motivation as well as providing support services, tools and an enabling environment. The anticipated effects were encouraged development of business ideas or developing and improving existing businesses. At this point the direct influence zone of projects ends and further effects depend on the activity of project target groups in using the provided support and tools and making decisions to actually start entrepreneurship.

Interview results highlight some evidence of an **enhanced entrepreneurial mindset** among project participants with an increased inclination towards entrepreneurship. A shift in mindset is evident when project participants officially register their business, continue to work on their business ideas, apply for funding from other programmes.

> *People are moving on, already implementing their own projects, for example from the Leader programme. For example, one artisan got funding from Leader and set up an open workshop and demonstration place at her homestead. They found a way to do it. We provide information on rural support projects, Leader projects. We are happy for those who are going further and are already implementing projects on their own. The Centre can be that platform, support for the first step. I am very happy that they see the opportunities, they become stronger, they grow muscles, they can work on their own. /LLI 138/*

The results of the survey confirm the generally positive view on the intermediate effects. The respondents of the survey are convinced that the local inhabitants are more open and capable of becoming entrepreneurs (4.5 points) and have been provided with new business opportunities (4.5 points). Respondents are overall positive that the number of newly established businesses is increasing (4.25 points).

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Local inhabitants are more open and capable of becoming entrepreneurs					4,5	
New business opportunities have been provided					4,5	
The number of newly established businesses is increasing					4,25	
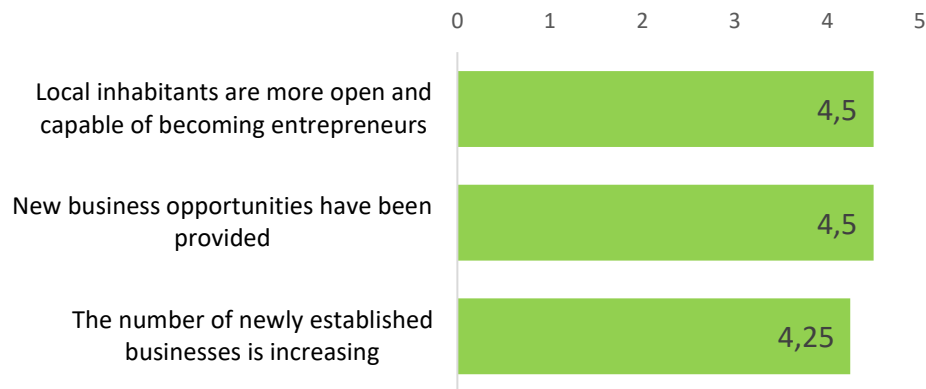
Participation in projects has provided individuals with valuable resources, information and opportunities, further fuelling their entrepreneurial aspirations. The project experiences have also fostered a **sense of trust and support among entrepreneurs and involved institutions** as an unexpected effect. Interview respondents suggest that the collaborative nature of these initiatives has created a conducive environment for entrepreneurs to seek guidance and support from relevant institutions. There are also indications of improved collaboration among institutions involved in providing entrepreneurship support services.

> *So the project definitely helped to strengthen trust between support institutions and entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs are not only thinking about themselves but are socially responsible and ready to help each other. [..]*
>
> *I would say that strong cooperation is more likely to have a bigger effect. It is important for us to know what everyone is doing so that we can give contacts and understand to whom this idea fits better. Then we can send the entrepreneur to each other.*

In addition to the increased entrepreneurial activity the projects have also had **positive territorial effects**. For instance, the establishment of a business support center in Aizkraukle (LLI 131) has led to the initiation of new activities such as monthly meetings, networking events, and entrepreneurs' days. This has created a meeting place for entrepreneurs and facilitated the exchange of ideas and resources, thereby promoting further economic growth in the area.

Acquired evidence suggests that the **assumptions** have been identified correctly. Analysis of project documentation and results of interviews indicate that project outcomes are being used for the intended purpose and facilitate intended changes. Thus the programme theory in this regard holds true. The acquired evidence suggests that it is only possible to track individual, isolated cases, which demonstrate the creation of new businesses and the greater openness of programme participants to entrepreneurship. This evidence is largely anecdotal and based on personal information from single respondents. The Programme does not have systematic ways and tools to track and verify these planned changes, especially in terms of new business creation.

LONG TERM IMPACTS (4.2.6)

There is limited evidence to suggest that the Programme has attained its expected long-term outcome and has **improved economic activity in the Programme area**. The likelihood of such changes is influenced by various external factors such as economic trends, crises and unexpected circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. There is some evidence that points to the Programme's contribution to improving economic activity in the Programme area.

One of these contributing effects has been the **creation of employment opportunities** for the local population. Some projects that were working with local artisans and craftsmen (LLI 138, LLI 384) have led to the de-registration of economic activity, with individuals choosing to stay in their local areas and engage in entrepreneurial activities. This has been particularly significant for those returning from abroad, who were previously uncertain about whether to move to urban areas or stay in their rural communities. The projects have provided them with the necessary support and resources to start developing and selling products themselves, thereby contributing to the local economy.

Moreover, the projects have fostered a **culture of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency**. Participation in projects has demonstrated the possibilities of working as an entrepreneur, developing and organizing their own business. This has empowered individuals to become small producers, designers and craftsmen, who are actively working without relying on benefits from the municipality.

Furthermore, the projects have had a lasting impact on the development of **entrepreneurship skills and knowledge in the community**. The initiatives targeted at children and youngsters have resulted in a better understanding of business and entrepreneurship, with teachers and librarians also becoming more competent in this regard. Under the project LLI 155 this has led to the establishment of a youth center, which serves as a long-term result of the projects and provides young people with a place to gain knowledge and engage in meaningful activities.

CONTRIBUTION STORY

The contribution story for SO 2.1 is as follows:

> *The Latvia Lithuania programme support primarily concentrated on promoting the idea of entrepreneurship especially among youngsters and local craftsmen, providing knowledge and skills, contributing to the establishment of various business support services and establishment of business infrastructure.*

> *This has contributed to increased capability of people in the programme area to become involved in entrepreneurship. An enhancing entrepreneurial mindset in a few cases resulted in the establishment of new businesses but this effect is still not sufficiently traceable.*

> *Among other effects are a fostered sense of trust and support among entrepreneurs and involved institutions as well as the creation of an enabling environment for regular meetings and exchange of ideas and resources.*

> *The programme has directly contributed to the creation of few employment opportunities. In the long term, it may have provided a positive impulse for the development of a culture of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency at the community level.*

While the Programme's primary goal centered on fostering new businesses, its principal emphasis lay in promoting entrepreneurship among children and young people, supporting existing entrepreneurs (such as craftsmen and creative workers), and fortifying the entrepreneurial support system. Consequently, the Programme has directly resulted in the creation of relatively few new businesses. However, it has left an impact on aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly among young individuals. The Programme has also played a pivotal role in bolstering the confidence and commitment of those already engaged in entrepreneurship.

An additional noteworthy effect is the cultivation of closer collaboration among existing enterprises, including active participation in mentoring activities and enhanced cooperation with business support institutions. Despite these positive outcomes, there is room for the Programme to enhance its efforts in tracking and encouraging the ongoing impact of projects even after their completion.

SO 2.2 To increase job opportunities by improving mobility and workforce skills

SO 2.2. aims at creating a more competitive labour market by aligning skills with industry needs, enhancing cross-border mobility, and fostering collaboration between various stakeholders. It anticipates boosting job opportunities through these concerted efforts. The SO 2.2 addresses unemployment, especially the skills gap and mismatch between available skills and those demanded by the labour market. This is expected to be done by enhancing education and vocational training through curriculum improvements, lifelong learning initiatives, and better collaboration between educational institutions and businesses. The second area of focus is enhanced labour mobility by removing physical obstacles to cross-border mobility and increasing information exchange on job opportunities.

The main target groups are local inhabitants, especially those who face long-term and youth unemployment, entrepreneurs, educational/vocational institutions as well as visitors. The direct beneficiaries are public authorities and public equivalent bodies, NGOs, research/educational/ vocational institutions, enterprises and local inhabitants and visitors.

SO 2.2 has two Programme-level result indicators:

- the number of people receiving upgraded skills matching labour market needs per year, and
- the number of commuters per day.

SO 2.2 has three Programme-specific output indicators:

- total length of reconstructed or upgraded roads,
- number of participants in joint local employment initiatives and joint training, and
- created or improved educational and training infrastructure objects planned for joint use.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

A ToC describes how a desired objective is expected to be realised in a particular context. It aims to show how a set of actions or activities is expected to lead up to a desired change. The picture below shows the ToC for SO 2.2. It also includes a colour coding representing estimation regarding the level of change achieved, based on the available evidence described further below.

Based on the intervention described above, the evaluation team proposed the following SO 2.2 contribution claim:

> *IF the Latvia-Lithuania programme will support quality and capacity improvements of education and vocational training, and lifelong learning, AND remove physical and informational obstacles to cross-border mobility, AND students of improved education and lifelong learning programmes will acquire better matching skills and knowledge, THEN people will have better opportunities to find a job in the programme area, AND the labour mobility in the region will increase.*

The validity of this contribution claim is assessed during the evaluation and possible corrections will be made based on the evidence found.
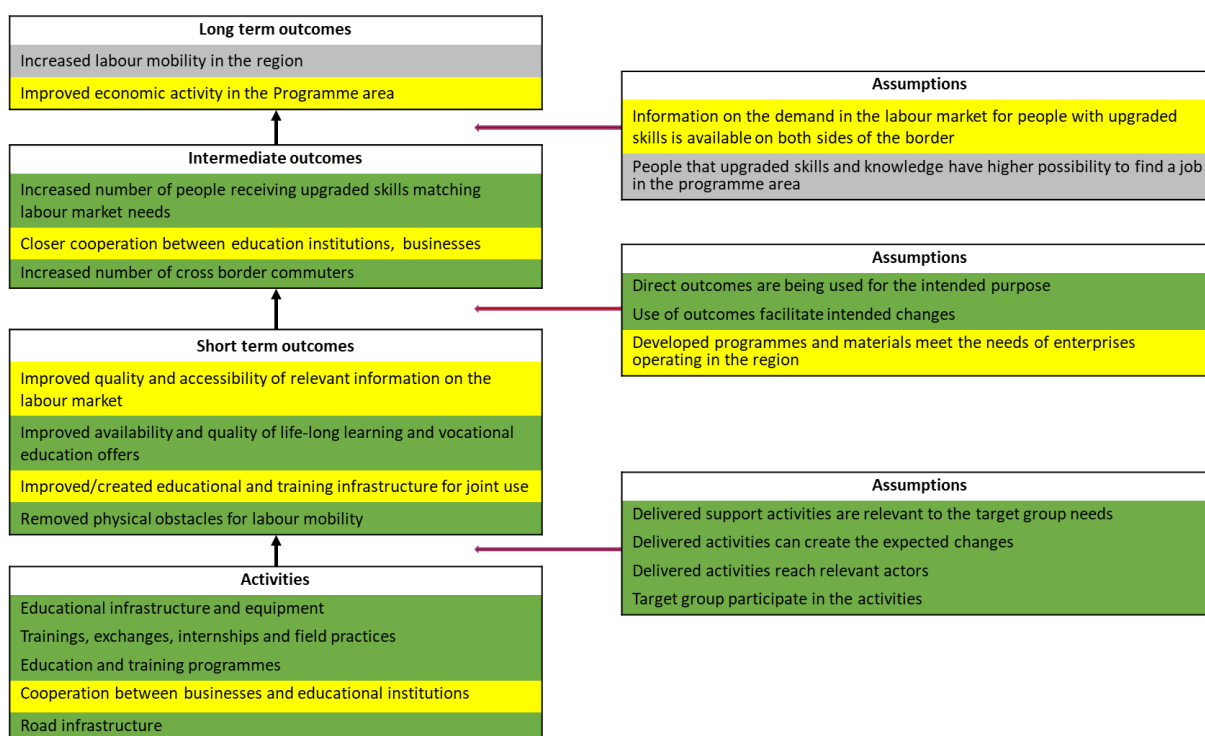
The Programme provided support for educational infrastructure and equipment, mobility and training programmes, training, exchanges, internships and international field practices, job fairs and information exchange, cooperation between businesses and educational institutions, and building of road infrastructure.

The main expected short-term outcomes are improved quality and accessibility of relevant information on job market needs and offers, improved availability and quality of life-long learning and vocational education offers, improved/created educational and training infrastructure objects planned for joint use, and removed physical obstacles for labour mobility.

If certain assumptions hold true, these outcomes will lead to the following intermediate outcomes: thanks to improved and more relevant education and lifelong learning programmes number of people receiving upgraded skills matching labour market needs is increasing; thanks to jointly elaborated programmes and created infrastructure there is a closer collaboration between involved educational institutions, as well as businesses; thanks to renovated cross-border road infrastructure number of cross border commuters shall increase.

For the long-term outcome, increased labour mobility and improved economic activity, to be observed, the target groups benefitting from better and more relevant education offers must have possibilities to apply the acquired knowledge and skills, i.e the information on labour market needs and offers is available on both sides of the border and people who have upgraded their skills have higher possibilities to find a job in the Programme area. The risks are related to the influence of external factors that slow down economic activities, reduce demand and affect the activity of the market.

SO 2.2 To increase job opportunities by improving mobility and workforce skills

Long term outcomes
Increased labour mobility in the region
Improved economic activity in the Programme area

Assumptions
Information on the demand in the labour market for people with upgraded skills is available on both sides of the border
People that upgraded skills and knowledge have higher possibility to find a job in the programme area

Intermediate outcomes
Increased number of people receiving upgraded skills matching labour market needs
Closer cooperation between education institutions, businesses
Increased number of cross border commuters

Assumptions
Direct outcomes are being used for the intended purpose
Use of outcomes facilitate intended changes
Developed programmes and materials meet the needs of enterprises operating in the region

Short term outcomes
Improved quality and accessibility of relevant information on the labour market
Improved availability and quality of life-long learning and vocational education offers
Improved/created educational and training infrastructure for joint use
Removed physical obstacles for labour mobility

Assumptions
Delivered support activities are relevant to the target group needs
Delivered activities can create the expected changes
Delivered activities reach relevant actors
Target group participate in the activities

Activities
Educational infrastructure and equipment
Trainings, exchanges, internships and field practices
Education and training programmes
Cooperation between businesses and educational institutions
Road infrastructure

GREEN – supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

ORANGE - both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

RED - evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

GRAY - no or very little evidence was identified.

ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH (4.2.2., 4.2.3)

Eleven projects have been funded under this SO during the Programme period. Ten of them focus on improving vocational training and lifelong learning offers and one on improving labour mobility.

Four projects are primarily focused on improving the **quality of vocational education and training** (LLI 24, LLI183, LLI 184, LLI 415). These projects focus on the development of vocational education offers, improvement of education infrastructure, joint training and experience exchange. These projects contain a strong element of collaboration between partnering schools (LLI 183, LLI 24) or collaboration with the industry (LLI 184).

Several projects are focused on the improvement of both **vocational education and professional qualification offers** (LLI 42, LLI 315). These projects are working in specific sectors (maritime transport, construction and restoration). In addition to improving vocational education offers, they also address the professional upskilling education and training offers for professionals already working in the sector.

Another group of projects are dedicated to the development of vocational or professional education offers related to **specific skills, solutions, or approaches** (LLI 75, LLI 206, LLI 352, LLI 338) of high variety e.g. CAD/CAM designing and working with industrial robots, GIS, neuro sensorimotor disorders field, or cultural and creative industries.

Across all projects, the most common activities included the development/upgrade of study programmes, qualification upgrading programs for working specialists, career development

programmes and development of methodical materials; improvement of educational services by upgrading training equipment and raising the qualification of teaching staff; piloting new programmes for students and teachers, utilizing new training equipment and common learning materials, promoting mobility of trainees between institutions.

One project (LLI 280) deals with the improvement of **labour mobility** in the Programme area by reconstructing several cross-border roads connecting settlements of regional importance.

The main target groups of the projects were people seeking industry-demanded skills, education institutions, and industrial companies. This includes students studying updated subjects in study programmes, working specialists attending qualification upgrading programmes/courses, personnel with updated qualifications working in education institutions, and participants in joint pilot training. The final beneficiaries also include the general public, which include current employees from the industry seeking additional skills and competencies, students of vocational schools and colleges, unemployed people seeking retraining, and university students striving for more practical skills.

The active participation of the target groups in project activities indicates that they saw the activities offered as relevant to their needs. The most actively represented target groups are students and teachers. There is comparatively less evidence of the systematic involvement of the sector's entrepreneurs in project activities. In most projects, the specific needs of companies operating in the region were identified thanks to the educational programme developers' experience in the sector and contacts. Only a few projects involved systematic and regular cooperation with enterprises, research into their needs and involvement in programme development and validation.

> *For instance, in the project LLI 184 students, teachers, and business companies representatives met in 12 joint workshops and worked on real-life business problems, visited cross-border business companies, and carried out discussions. These collaborative workshops allowed students to understand better cross-border business and labour market environment and to purify business problems provided for the study process.*

Reports provided under the Programme and interviews carried out with the beneficiaries provide the necessary evidence that the **assumptions** with respect to the transformation of project outputs into immediate outcomes hold true. Delivered support activities are relevant to the target group's needs and are designed and delivered in a way that can create the expected changes. Delivered activities have reached relevant actors and target groups have actively participated in those.

IMMEDIATE CHANGES (4.2.4)

Ten implemented projects reported that in total 4454 persons participated in joint local employment initiatives and joint training, 29 educational and training infrastructure objects for joint use were created or improved, and 45,95 km of cross-border roads were reconstructed or upgraded. The planned target values are reached and even exceeded. The number of persons participating in the training is exceeded almost twice (192%), and there are two more educational and training infrastructure objects created than expected. The number of trained persons is exceeded to a large extent due to a particular contribution from one project (LLI 75).

The survey results show an overall optimistic view of the immediate impact of projects. The respondents of the survey are convinced that the expected changes in the target groups are reached (4.8 points) and that projects will have lasting impacts on the target group (4.8 points).

Respondents are overall positive that the projects responded well to the needs of the target group (4.6 points).

	0	1	2	3	4	5
The results (change in the target group) for the project were reached					4,8	
The project will have lasting impacts on the target group					4,8	
The project responded well to the needs of the target group					4,6	
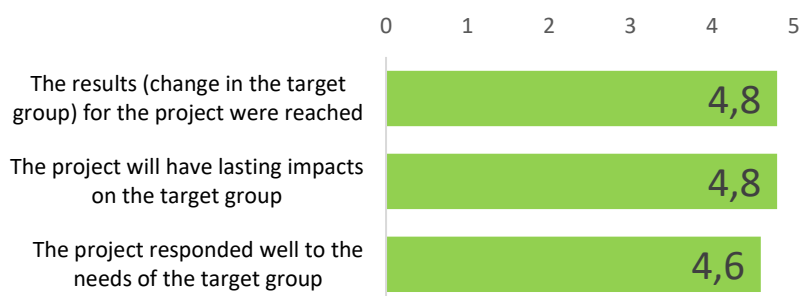
Reported results indicate that projects have successfully **improved the availability and quality of life-long learning and vocational education offers**. According to reports projects have developed or improved 47 different vocational education or lifelong learning educational programmes. In addition, several projects have developed or improved specific courses that are taught as part of the existing or new programmes. The highest number of educational programmes are developed by projects focusing on the improvement of vocational education and training offers in specific fields (electrical engineering and high voltage technologies, maritime transport, transport vehicles, textile and graphic design, landscape design and agro-tourism, agriculture and technologies, and construction and restoration - LLI 24, LLI 183, LLI 42, LLI 315). In a few cases, there are developed joint programmes that are being taught together by partners across the border (LLI 184, LLI 415).

Comparatively less convincing evidence can be found assuring **improved quality and accessibility of relevant information on labour market needs and offers**. Only two projects aimed to collect information on labour market needs and opportunities available on both sides of borders and made this information available. In one case, the project collected information on employment services in both countries and posted brief descriptions and links to the relevant services on its own website. In the second case, more extensive research and analysis has been carried out and a specific digital tool (a demand and supply map) has been developed. Unfortunately, only small effects of these efforts can be observed after the completion of projects. Some of the published links to websites are no longer active or available at the addresses originally indicated, which calls into question the sustainability of the results.

For instance, in the project LLI 75 teachers and a project working group together with target groups, social partners and scientists analysed possibilities of workforce supply and demand of existing and required skills in the region and created a digital version of a workforce supply and demand map. By the end of the project, there were registered 84 job offers from various companies and 22 registered persons looking for vacant job places. Unfortunately, the digital map currently is not accessible on partners' websites.

Several projects **improved or created educational and training infrastructure for joint use**. Reportedly 29 educational and training infrastructure objects for joint use were created or improved. Some of this infrastructure was shared and jointly used during project implementation. After the end of the projects, there is little evidence of further infrastructure sharing among project partners. In most projects, the created infrastructure is used primarily by the responsible partner for the delivery of educational programmes. In a few cases, a broader use of the infrastructure was noted. These are situations where project partners continue regular

cooperation after the end of the project, engaging in other projects or where the infrastructure is accessible to a wider target audience.

> *For example, in the project LLI 315 Panevezys vocational education and training centre together with Zalenieki Commercial and Craft school adapted their VET programmes and established a Restoration House in Zalenieki. The Restoration House is being used for interest-related education, compulsory education, international joint training activities, and workforce masterclasses. Both partners continue cooperation under Erasmus+ programme projects and organise joint international trainings in the established Restoration Centre.*

There is clear evidence proving the **removal of physical obstacles for labour mobility**. The cross-border road sections are built, the traffic is moving and the partners regularly monitor the traffic volume. A total of three cross-border road sections were reconstructed and built:

1) 163 Mažeikiai - LV border (0.0-9.209 km) + P106 Ezere-Embute-Grobina (0.07-13.95 km);
2) 2912 Žeimelis - Vileišiai - LV border (0.0-5.1 km) + V1028 LT border-Bērzi-Bauska (7.44-14.62 km);
3) 3647 Pandėlys - Suvainiškis - LV border (13,3-18,3 km) + P75 LT border- Jēkabpils (56,08-60,50 km) + V961 Nereta-Sleķi, (0,10-1,15 km).

All these sections help to connect larger centres on both sides of the border (e.g. Liepāja-Mažeikiai, Pakrojis-Bauska, Joniškiai-Jēkabpils) and form a stronger infrastructure network across the border.

Cross-border mobility changes are indirectly indicated by the increased participation of visitors from neighbouring countries in each other's events, visits to tourist sites located close to the reconstructed road sections etc.

EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY (4.2.5, 4.3)

There is overall positive evidence that the Programme has attained its expected intermediate outcomes:

- Increased number of people receiving upgraded skills matching labour market needs;
- Closer cooperation between education institutions, businesses;
- Increased number of cross-border commuters.

Reportedly, in total 4454 **persons participated in joint local employment initiatives and joint training**. The number of persons reached is almost double the target number. The majority of those reached are students of vocational training programmes and other interested persons. It should be noted that more than half of all persons reached have been reached by two projects (LLI 75, LLI 42) implemented by universities, which run a range of study programmes for both students and working professionals.

The most tangible territorial effects of the Programme are related to the **development of road infrastructure and the consecutive increase of commuters**. Despite the mobility restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable change in mobility habits, with an increase in the usage of the reconstructed road sections in the border areas. This has led to a shift in the behaviour of people crossing the border, with the reconstructed sections being used more frequently. The availability of high-quality road infrastructure in border areas has led to a bigger transport mobility in the reconstructed sections of the road than it was before. As indicated by interviews, now people are choosing to use reconstructed roads in both sides

of the border to achieve local and regional centres, receive necessary services and goods, for business purposes.

> *The number of commuters on Ezere-Embute-Grobina road grew from 2500 to 3500 cars on average and the volume did not drop during COVID. On the Bauska-Berzi road, the intensity dropped slightly during COVID-19. It was 1500, climbed to 2000, then dropped. Now it is up to about 2000. We assumed that about 500 units chose it as an alternative. There are summer commuters (tourism) and also some locals who go shopping. People from the south come to Bauska, and also attend events in Latvia. In the Ezere section, Latvians go to Mažeikiai. But in the Adžūnai section, a lot of Latvians go to Bauska. Number of commuters on Jēkabpils road is fluctuating - the section between the border and Nereta climbed from 250-300 to less than 1000, but during the COVID-19 the road was closed completely (with a block). We calculate that on all reconstructed sections number of commuters on average increased 3 times with a decrease during COVID-19 period.*

The improved road infrastructure has also brought about changes, particularly in terms of **travel routes and patterns**. For example, people from Nereta, who previously took a detour via Skaistkalne, now have a more direct and efficient route, shortening their travel distance by a dozen or more kilometres. This highlights the positive impact of the projects on improving connectivity and reducing travel time for the local population.

It is important to note that there have been some unplanned effects as well. For instance, the influx of Lithuanians on the Bauska side was not anticipated, indicating a **potential shift in cultural tourism patterns**. This suggests that the projects have not only influenced mobility patterns but also had broader socio-cultural implications, attracting tourists to new destinations.

Overall, monitoring data shows an average three-fold increase in mobility on the reconstructed roads on both sides of the border. However, the exact effects on cross-border labour mobility are not being tracked due to the lack of technical solutions that would allow accurate cross-border mobility tracking.

Some evidence was identified to suggest that because of participation in projects **cooperation between the educational institutions** is taking place on a regular basis. Most explicit evidence of such cooperation is in cases where either a joint programme has been developed (LLI 184, LLI 415), or where infrastructure is being jointly used (LLI 315). In most cases, regular cooperation exists among the VET schools; very little evidence was identified on continued cooperation between education institutions and businesses. Cooperation with businesses mostly occurs on a case-by-case basis where educational services are provided to the industry, e.g. upskilling training programmes for professionals or the provision of study materials (LLI 42, LLI 352). Evidently, cooperation with businesses has not been the primary focus for projects, which raises questions about the real relevance of the improved programmes to the labour market needs of the sector.

Reports provided under the Programme and interviews carried out with the beneficiaries indicate several **additional territorial effects**. In one case Programme support has played a decisive role in the development of an internationally competitive higher education programme on service design located in the programme region (Kuldīga, Latvia). The Programme`s project supported the implementation of training, coaching and mentoring programme for adult education in the field of cultural and creative industries and the establishment of a prototyping workshop. This project laid the foundations for the conceptualization and further development of the idea of starting an international academic programme on service design. The new programme is being implemented in the venues of Kuldīga Needle Factory, where the

prototyping workshop is also located. The municipality renovated the venues using the ERDF funds and the study programme was further developed by the Latvian Academy of Arts with support from ESF funds. The new study programme is being implemented for 3 years and has received 5 years of financing from the Erasmus Mundus programme. There are various effects observed on the local, regional and national scale (economic and social benefits).

> *The city has become alive. The creation of the programme and the centre brought young, smart people from all over the world. There is a vibrant buzz of people who actively participate in sports, and cultural events, go to cafes and shops everywhere and are fitting into local life. We calculated the financial contribution to the city - 30 students, on average bring 700-800 EUR each per month to the city. In total, the programme leaves around 1.5 MEUR for the local economy. Here are coming also many foreign lecturers. There are also public events, conferences, and events for citizens. We would like to transfer the design thinking to the local government as well as there is interest from both sides. I hope it will work. The only problem is the language barrier.*

Acquired evidence suggests that the **assumptions** have been identified correctly. Analysis of project documentation and results of interviews indicate that project outcomes are being used for the intended purpose and facilitate intended changes. Thus, the programme theory in this regard holds true. The evaluation found only some evidence proving that developed programmes and materials meet the needs of enterprises operating in the region. This evidence is largely anecdotal and based on personal information from single respondents. The main reason for this is that projects have largely failed to systematically involve businesses in the design and development of content of educational programmes. Consultations with enterprises have taken place, but they have been sporadic, and there is no information on the regular development of educational content to adapt to changes in labour market demand.

LONG TERM IMPACTS (4.2.6)

There is limited evidence to suggest that the Programme has attained its expected long-term outcome and has **improved economic activity in the Programme area**. The likelihood of direct influence of the Programme is limited by various other factors among which the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and related economic fluctuations are the most notable.

However, there is some evidence showing the Programme's contribution to improving economic activity in the Programme area. The most obvious contributing effect of the Programme is its role in enhancing the educational landscape in the region. Participation in the Programme has brought together various educational institutions, has led to the improvement of the educational content and offers and has improved the skills of the workforce in specific sectors. Project intervention thus has created good preconditions for further development of economic activity in the Programme area.

There is some evidence of more specific economic effects in the form of **new economic opportunities (the Bilbao effect)**. For instance, the LLI 338 project has served as a stimulus for the further development of a new academic study programme on service design in Kuldīga. The programme is located in the building of the former needle factory that was renovated with the support of ERDF funds. In the immediate vicinity of the needle factory building a renovation of formerly dilapidated buildings is underway, with an aim to create a new health and rehabilitation centre. The initial investment has therefore served as a 'catalyst' for the development of the area and the launch of new investment projects that are transforming previously degraded areas.

No specific evidence was identified confirming the **Programme's influence on labour mobility**, both at the local level and across the border. The most evident effect of mobility and transfer of goods can be linked to the reconstructed cross-border road sections that are being used more frequently both by people and for freight. During the project implementation, there were a series of joint cross-border activities, including theoretical and practical training, study visits, internships, and joint creative workshops. After the end of projects, there are no further indications of such labour mobility. The Programme does not have systematic ways and tools to measure and track such effects, especially at the cross-border scale.

CONTRIBUTION STORY

The contribution story for SO 2.2 is as follows:

> *The Latvia Lithuania programme support primarily concentrated on improving education and lifelong learning programmes, educational infrastructure, training, experience exchange, cooperation and building road infrastructure.*
>
> *This has resulted in improved and more up-to-date life-long learning and vocational education offers in different sectors and removed physical obstacles to labour mobility. The process has involved mutual learning and cooperation mainly between educational institutions. Evidently, cooperation with businesses has not been the primary focus in most cases.*
>
> *In several cases, the educational infrastructure and programmes developed during the implementation of the projects have been used jointly. After the end of the projects, there has been no evidence that the joint use of results continues - the programmes are largely operating separately.*
>
> *In some cases, the programme has played a decisive role in the development of highly competitive educational offers, that have a high impact potential not only in the programme area but also on a much wider scale. The programme has successfully reduced barriers to physical mobility. However, there is insufficient evidence to show that it has also had an influence on labour mobility.*

PRIORITY 3

SO 3.1 aims to **promote social inclusion of vulnerable groups** through identification of needs and possible solutions, networking between social service providers and stakeholders, improvement of infrastructure and equipment, improvement of the competencies of specialists providing social service, improvement of quality, diversification of innovative services/ solutions and finally through informative campaigns.

Examples of vulnerable groups in the Programme context are disabled people, people suffering of addictions, people facing violence, elderly people and at-risk children.

As result it was expected to improve the quality, cost–effectiveness and sustainability of social services, to establish social networks and partnerships between local government and local stakeholders and to improve social infrastructure and create joint social services.
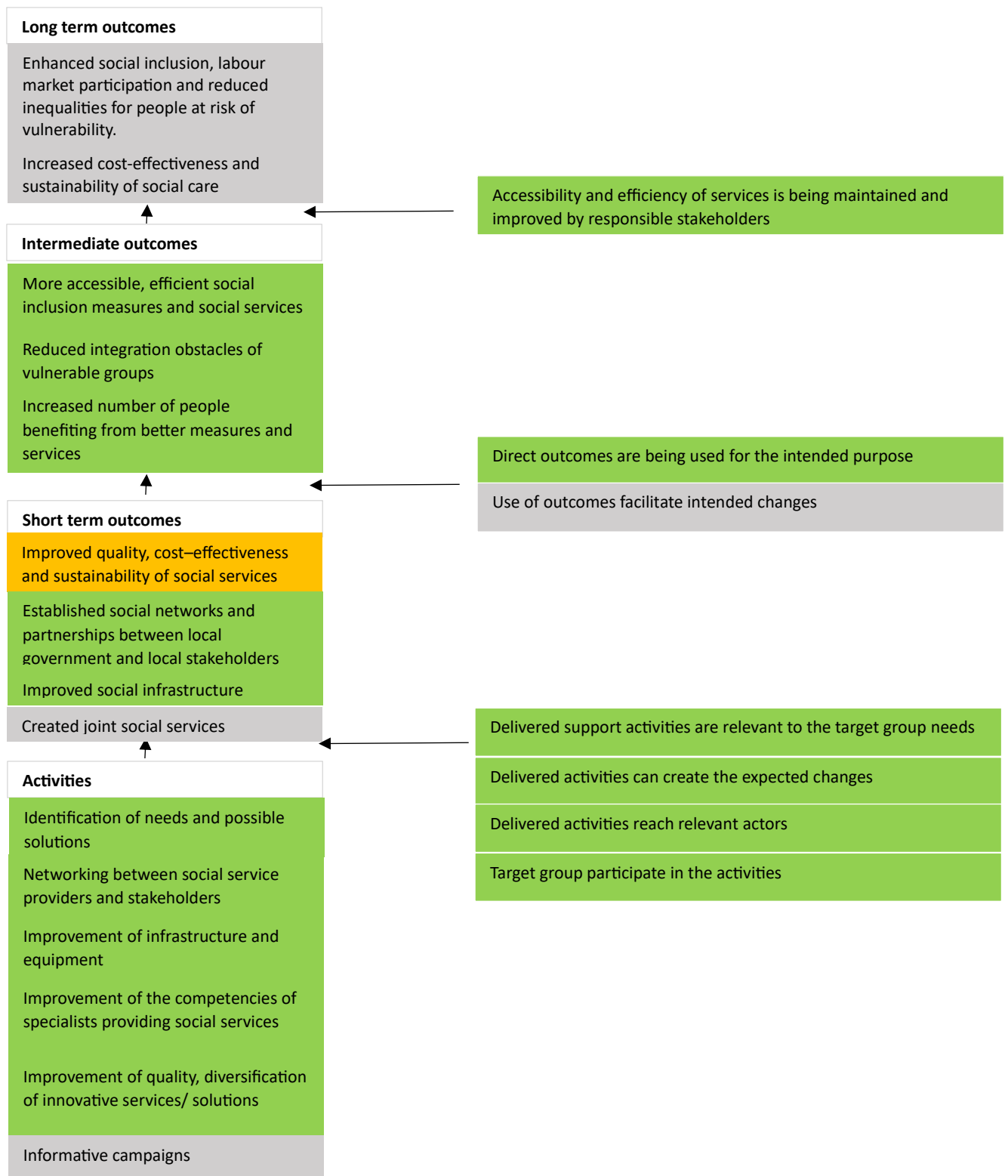
In medium term Programme intended to ensure more accessible, efficient social inclusion measures and social services, to reduce integration obstacles of vulnerable groups and to increase the number of people benefiting from better measures and services.

In long term Programme aimed to enhance social inclusion, labour market participation and reduce inequalities for people at risk of vulnerability, as well as to increase the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of social care.

The figure below illustrates the theory of change of SO 3.1., including main activities and short term, intermediate as well as long term outcomes. It is essential that key influencing assumptions are identified for each level of outcomes and expected changes.

In general, the implementation of this SO and its role in achieving the anticipated short-term and intermediate outcomes has been confirmed. However, compelling evidence on the long-term impact is lacking.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 3.1 THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

Long term outcomes

Enhanced social inclusion, labour market participation and reduced inequalities for people at risk of vulnerability.

Increased cost-effectiveness and sustainability of social care

Accessibility and efficiency of services is being maintained and improved by responsible stakeholders

Intermediate outcomes

More accessible, efficient social inclusion measures and social services

Reduced integration obstacles of vulnerable groups

Increased number of people benefiting from better measures and services

Direct outcomes are being used for the intended purpose

Use of outcomes facilitate intended changes

Short term outcomes

Improved quality, cost–effectiveness and sustainability of social services

Established social networks and partnerships between local government and local stakeholders

Improved social infrastructure

Created joint social services

Delivered support activities are relevant to the target group needs

Delivered activities can create the expected changes

Delivered activities reach relevant actors

Target group participate in the activities

Activities

Identification of needs and possible solutions

Networking between social service providers and stakeholders

Improvement of infrastructure and equipment

Improvement of the competencies of specialists providing social services

Improvement of quality, diversification of innovative services/ solutions

Informative campaigns

GREEN – supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

ORANGE - both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

RED - evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

GRAY - no or very little evidence was identified.

ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH (4.2.2., 4.2.3)

Projects undertook various activities to promote social inclusion of vulnerable groups, including joint training and experience exchange events for staff and specialists and educational activities for the target group (workshops, summer camps, excursions, competitions etc.).

New social services and methodological materials were jointly developed and tested by the Latvian and Lithuanian partners. Examples of new social services include teams of professional care-takers providing home-based social assistance to seniors (LLI-341), system for family assistance to improve social integration of family members of mentally disordered people (LLI-368) and social-psychological support service system developed by integrating benefits of multi-sensory rooms and social psychological support techniques (LLI-163).

Examples of methodological materials include guidelines for multifunctional centres of social services and inclusive events in Latvia and Lithuania (LLI-425), recommendations for out-of-family care support (LLI-405) and methodology for the treatment of mental and behavioural disorders using sensory integration for children and adults (LLI-336).

New technologies and equipment was purchased to increase the availability and quality of services and ensure the sustainability of project results. For example, Visaginas "Verdene" gymnasium equipped a classroom for disabled students and repaired the sports ground, whereas Aleksandrovas boarding school for the disabled children equipped a relaxation space and an educational nature path adapted for use by disabled people. Outdoor classrooms were created in both schools (LLI-151).

Majority of project partners were public institutions or public equivalent bodies (88%). Several NGOs, higher education institutions and other types of partners were included and accounted for 12% of project partners.

According to the respondents of the survey, the Programme's support was effectively used to achieve the specific SO. Project partners strongly agree that projects were implemented according to the plan (4.8) and outputs were achieved (4.8 points). The projects responded well to the needs of the target group (4.8 points), intended results were achieved (4.8 points) and the projects will have lasting impact on the target group (4.8 points).
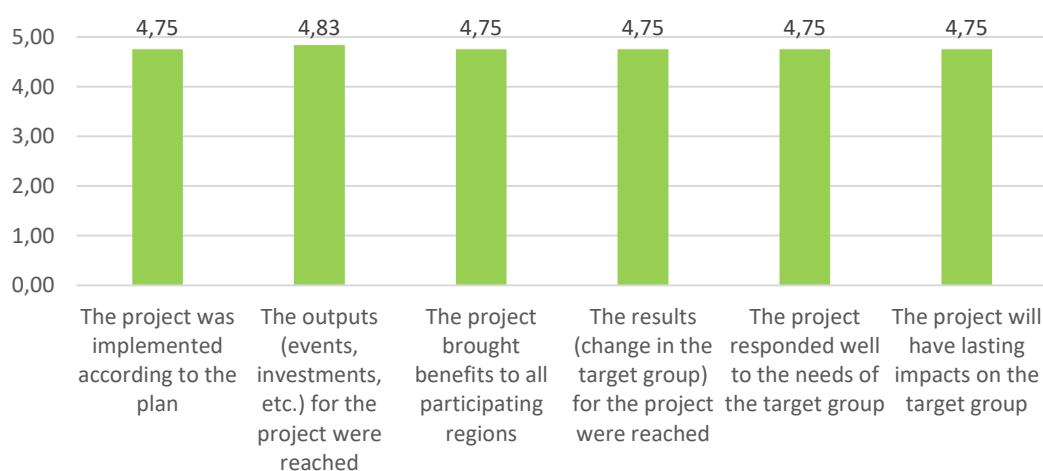
The main direct or indirect beneficiaries of the activities were: local public authorities and their institutions, in particular schools, social care providers; other public institutions, including

hospitals and universities; vulnerable groups (children and youth with special needs, people with special needs, seniors, youth at risk and other persons using social services and social integration measures), specialists working with vulnerable groups (social workers, teachers, trainers, medical workers etc.) and families (including foster families, adoptive parents, and guardians), which members belong to vulnerable groups.

More specifically, projects focused on: disadvantaged children and youth (12 projects), adult persons with special needs (9 projects), children with special needs (6 projects), elderly (7 projects); one project could cover several target groups. 1 project focused on women and children – victims of domestic violence.

According to the respondents of the survey, the projects responded well to the needs of the target group (4.8 points), intended results were achieved (4.8 points) and the projects will have lasting impact on the target group (4.8 points).

IMMEDIATE CHANGES (4.2.4)

The Programme estimated two target values: created/improved 55 social services and infrastructure and created/improved 116 social inclusion measures. This target was slightly underachieved, as **41 social services and infrastructure were created or improved** and **102 social inclusion measures were created or improved**.
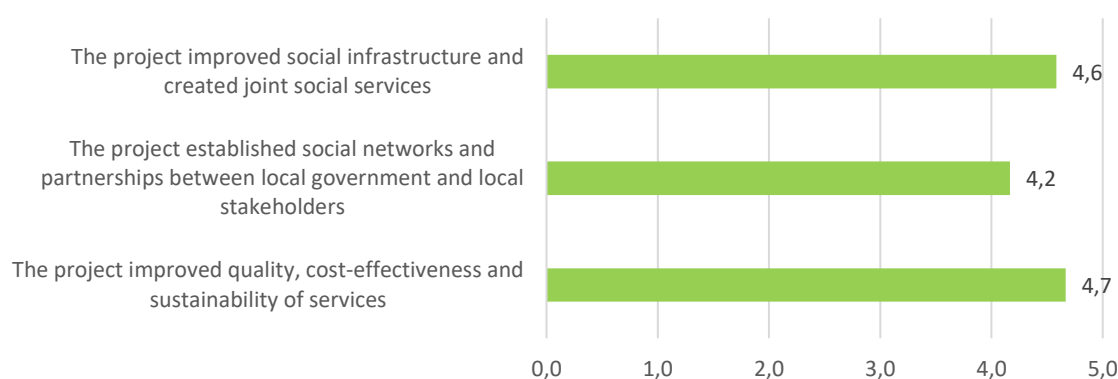
The respondents of the survey strongly agree that the projects have improved social infrastructure and created joint social services (4.6 points), as well as improved the quality, cost-effectiveness and sustainability of these services (4.7 points). Project representatives also agree that the projects have established social networks and partnerships between local government and local stakeholders (4.2 points).

Regarding the activities that worked the best, interviewees named the following: experience exchange and forming new cross-border partnerships, various events for the target groups (trainings, camps etc.), support for specialists working with the target groups. Study trips within and outside the Programme territory were named as very important activities, as they provide new ideas and inspiration to specialists working with the target groups.

> *A trip to Sweden, which is a leader in social care, was very useful. It gave us inspiration and new ideas. We could see with our own eyes how it happens. Social service managers were very satisfied with the trip. Ideas for a future project arose (LLI-341, Aging in Comfort).*

There is a consensus that project short-term results have been successfully achieved.

EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY (4.2.5, 4.3)

The respondents of the survey strongly agree that projects have contributed to following changes in the Programme territory: the number of people benefitting from better social inclusion measures and social services has increased (4.7 points), the obstacles to integrate vulnerable groups have reduced (4.6 points) and social inclusion measures and social services have become more accessible and efficient (4.6 points).
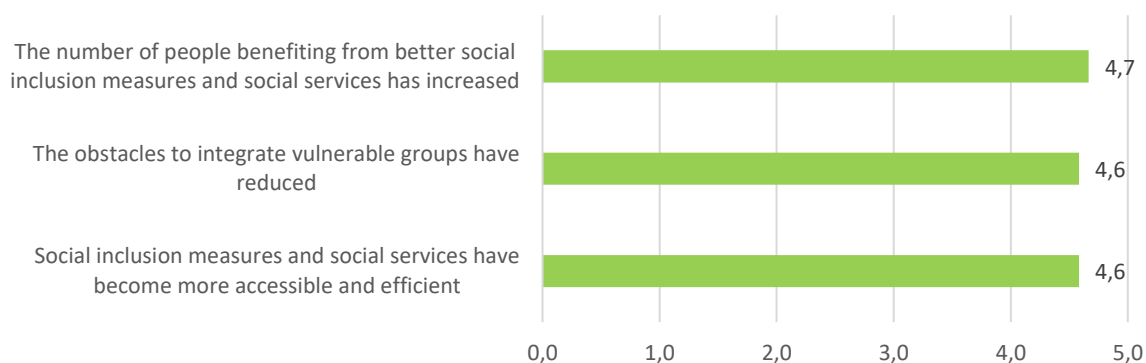
In interviews, project partners have provided more detailed information on the mid-term effects of the projects. The new services developed have increased the number of people benefitting.

> *In project LLI-436 SEE ME, two joint summer camps were organised for disabled children, which they enjoyed very much. There are no special camps like this in the region. Many of the children left their houses for the first time, which was a big adventure for them.*

Project partners emphasized that project have not only improved or created more accessible, efficient social services and social inclusion measures, but also helped to raise awareness and address stereotypes.

> *A lot of stereotypes were broken, as before the project many teachers were reluctant to work with disabled persons (LLI-163, POZCOPING).*
>
> *New skills help to strengthen the whole society, we are becoming more open. Some craftsmen started doing workshops for groups of people with special needs, which they did not do before (LLI-404, New Skills).*

Project have been able to make the society more open to the target group members, for example, by showing how disabled children can contribute to society. This helps to mitigate integration obstacles of the target group.

> *The project LLI-436 SEE ME was very successful for partners, for society, for our towns in terms of understanding what we can achieve together with children with special needs. Teachers and local societies now understand better how to provide opportunities for these children, they see, that these children can do much more than expected.*

Finally, the social inclusion measures have become more accessible and efficient. Also, communities are more aware of various new and improved social services and social integration measures.

> *Awareness regarding home care is increasingly. Already during the development of the project there was interest from many municipalities, not everyone could be involved. Similar minibuses have been bought by other municipalities after the project, also in other projects or from their own budget (LLI-341, Aging in Comfort).*

There is a consensus that project mid-term results have been successfully achieved.

LONG TERM IMPACTS (4.2.6)

Regarding long-term impact of the results, the respondents of the survey strongly agree that the project will have a long-term contribution to enhancing social inclusion, increasing labour market participation, and reducing inequalities for people at risk of vulnerability (4.6 points). They also agree that the projects will contribute to increased cost-effectiveness and sustainability of social care in the Programme area (4.2 points).
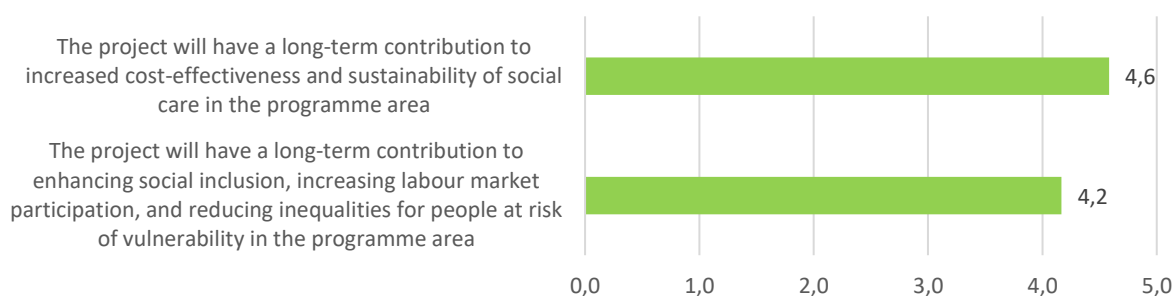
The interviewees explained that project results are still being used and even adapted to new target groups. New technologies, methodologies and training programmes have been integrated into the everyday work of organisations.

> *Methodologies and equipment developed in the project for children and adults suffering from mental and behavioural disorders is now being used for refugees from Ukraine and potentially could be used also to treat burn out syndrome (LLI-336, SUPER)*
>
> *Some children still go to animal shelter in Visaginas and help there. Children taking part in the agricultural programme are selling some products in markets and invest money in well-being of children. In Dagda, they have the most potential in selling things, wooden toys, Christmas decorations, candles. They also have 3D printers and make key rings. They are sold in fairs (LLI-436, SEE ME).*

Project have increased sustainability and, in some cases, also cost-effectiveness of social care.

> *Within the project LLI-368 ReSocialization, the package of innovative social inclusion measures was optimized, developed, diversified and applied in Rokiškis and Daugavpils Psychiatric Hospitals. As a result, a more transparent approach is being applied, treatment process has become shorter and reintegration into society starts sooner.*
>
> *The hospitals communicate with social care institutions and other medical institutions, they present the materials produced within the project. Other organisations can receive consultations, if they are interested, and share experience.*
>
> *As a result of the project LLI-341 Aging in Comfort, people's living standards are improving. People have the opportunity to live in their own homes and receive care. The home care service is developing, purchased equipment is used, and it is more cost-efficient than living in care institutions.*

It is reasonable to conclude that the Programme has contributed to enhanced social inclusion, labour market participation and reduced inequalities for people at risk of vulnerability. However, in majority of cases, compelling evidence on the long-term impact is lacking, as projects do not collect such information after finalising the activities.

We also believe that the projects have contributed to the sustainability of social care by increasing the knowledge and skills of people providing these services, by developing new methodologies and acquiring new technologies. However, the increase in cost-effectiveness remains an open question, as higher availability and higher quality of social services require additional funding. On a wider scale there are economic gains from reintegration into the society and labour market.

SO 3.2 To improve living conditions in deprived communities and territories

Specific objective 3.2 aims to create conditions that **facilitate socio- economic activity of deprived communities** and solve their problems through joint mapping and actions to activate communities, networking activities in education, culture, healthy lifestyle and other fields, creation, upgrading or equipping social spaces and small-scale infrastructure works.
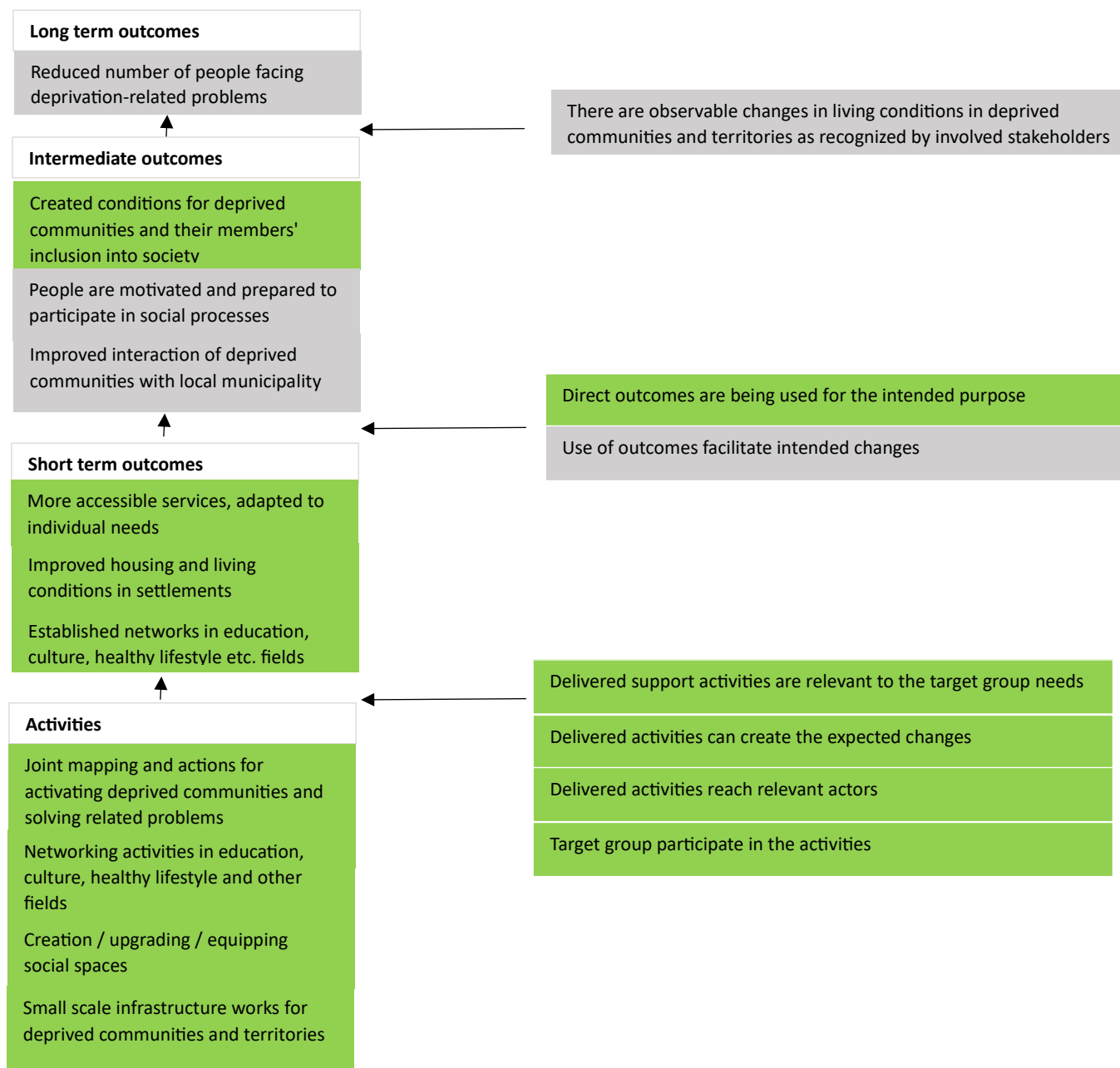
As result it was expected to provide more accessible services, adapted to individual needs, to improve housing and living conditions in settlements and to establish networks in education, culture, healthy lifestyle and other fields.

In medium term Programme intended to create conditions for deprived communities and their members' inclusion into society, to raise people's motivation and preparedness to participate in social processes and to improve interaction of deprived communities with local municipality.

In long term Programme aimed to reduce the number of people facing deprivation-related problems.

The figure below illustrates the theory of change of SO 3.2., including main activities and short term, intermediate as well as long term outcomes.

In general, the implementation of this SO and its role in achieving the anticipated short-term outcomes has been confirmed. However, compelling evidence on the intermediate and long-term outcomes is lacking.

Long term outcomes

Reduced number of people facing deprivation-related problems

There are observable changes in living conditions in deprived communities and territories as recognized by involved stakeholders

Intermediate outcomes

Created conditions for deprived communities and their members' inclusion into society

People are motivated and prepared to participate in social processes

Improved interaction of deprived communities with local municipality

Direct outcomes are being used for the intended purpose

Use of outcomes facilitate intended changes

Short term outcomes

More accessible services, adapted to individual needs

Improved housing and living conditions in settlements

Established networks in education, culture, healthy lifestyle etc. fields

Delivered support activities are relevant to the target group needs

Delivered activities can create the expected changes

Delivered activities reach relevant actors

Target group participate in the activities

Activities

Joint mapping and actions for activating deprived communities and solving related problems

Networking activities in education, culture, healthy lifestyle and other fields

Creation / upgrading / equipping social spaces

Small scale infrastructure works for deprived communities and territories

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GREEN – supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

ORANGE - both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

RED - evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

GRAY - no or very little evidence was identified.

ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH (4.2.2., 4.2.3)

Projects included various activities, such as creation of more accessible services, improvement of public spaces, creation of cross-border networks and providing training and organising various events focused on education, culture, healthy lifestyle and other fields to reduce social

exclusion, enhance community engagement, and improve the overall well-being of the targeted communities.

Projects emphasized cross-border cooperation, fostering partnerships and enhancing networking to address common challenges. The projects addressed issues such as social deprivation, unemployment, poverty, social vulnerability, and the need for educational opportunities and sports and recreational facilities.

Projects organised training and created methodological materials. Examples of trainings include lectures on entrepreneurship (LLI-323), training for young people on the prevention of harmful habits and the prevention of bullying, training for seniors on the promotion of physical activity and stress management (LLI-516) and creative history and memory writing classes for youth together with seniors (LLI-541).

Various joint events were held, including festivals, fairs, sport games, family celebrations, summer camps for children and youth. Examples of join events include "up crafting" festivals (LLI-489), night basketball tournament (LLI-524), festivals "The Healing Water" with underwater cinema (LLI-541), performances of new style of theatre to the deaf and blind people (LLI-377), craft fairs and folklore festivals (LLI-323).

Small-scale investments included provision of equipment for youth centres, training and cultural institutions, creation or improvements of children playgrounds, skate parks, and areas for recreation and sports.

Majority of project partners were public institutions or public equivalent bodies (82%). Several NGOs were included and accounted for 18% of project partners.
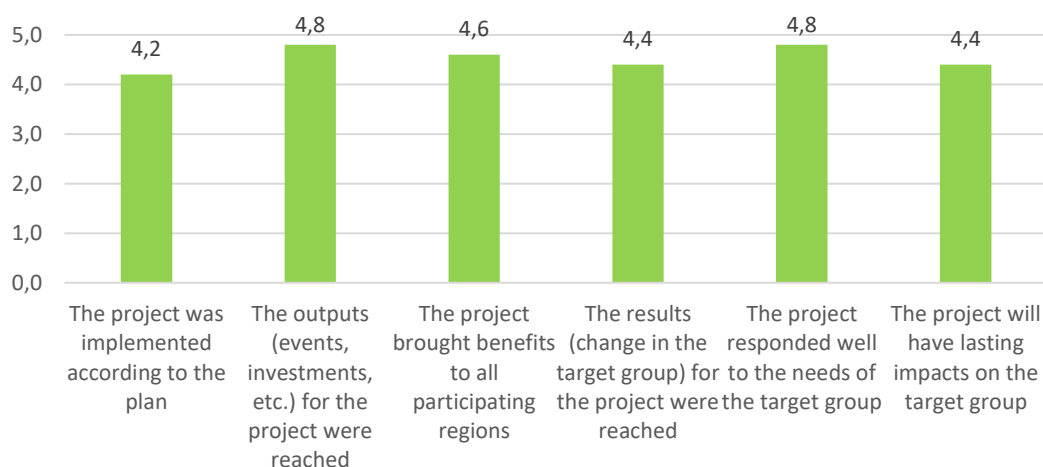
According to the respondents of the survey, the Programme's support was effectively used to achieve the SO. Project partners strongly agree that intended outputs were achieved (4.8 points). Project partners also agree, that intended results were achieved (4.4 points). Covid-19 pandemic required some changes in the projects. However, project partners indicate that projects were implemented according to the plan (4.2 points).

The main direct or indirect beneficiaries of the activities were: local public authorities and their institutions, including education and training institutions, youth centres, sport centres, social care centres, cultural centres, libraries; interest groups, including NGOs, sport clubs, day centres, organisations working with children and youth.

The main target groups were local communities (12 projects), in particular youth and children (9 projects) and seniors (3 projects); one project could cover several target groups. One project focused on a specific target group – deaf and blind people.

The respondents of the survey strongly agreed that the projects responded well to the needs of the target group (4.8 points). They also agreed that the projects will have lasting impact on the target group (4.4 points).

IMMEDIATE CHANGES (4.2.4)

The Programme estimated the target value: 85 deprived communities participating in the regeneration activities. This target has been overachieved as **89 deprived communities participated in the regeneration activities.**
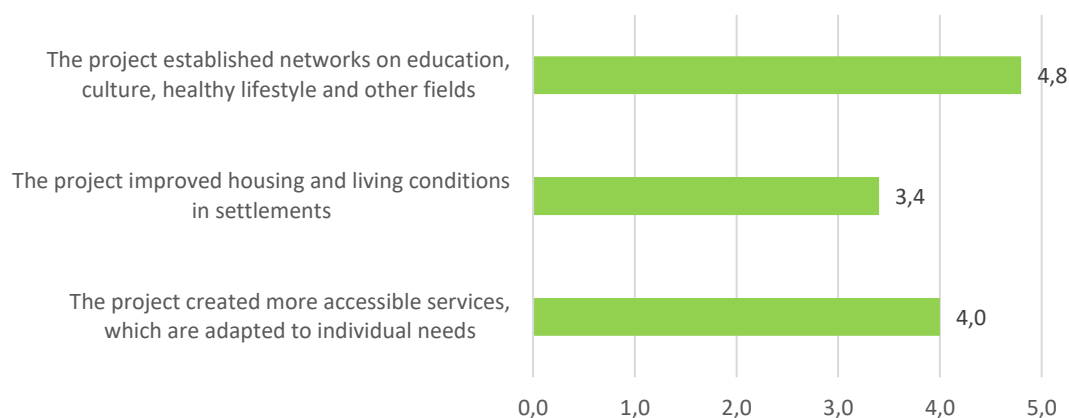
The respondents of the survey strongly agree that the projects have established networks on education, culture, healthy lifestyle and other fields (4.8 points). Project representatives also agree that the projects have created more accessible services, which are adapted to individual needs (4.0 points). At the same time, respondents are reluctant to confirm that projects have improved housing and living conditions in settlements (3.4 points).

Creation of networks provided an opportunity to exchange knowledge and learn from each other, e.g.:

> *Lithuanian partners gained a lot from knowledge exchange, as they had just opened a youth centre and had a lot of questions how to ensure its operation. Latvian partners already had a youth centre running and could share their lessons learned (LLI -282 Youth empowerment).*

Project activities also created new services for the target groups, adapted to their needs, e.g.:

> *In the project LLI -282 Youth empowerment, two joint camps for youth were organised, one in Latvia and one in Lithuania. The target group benefited from going abroad, they learned to overcome cultural and language barriers. Furthermore, camps used informal methods, which youth appreciated, as some of them had bad previous experience with events and camps, which used mainly formal methods and were not adapted to the needs of youth.*
>
> *Equipment was purchased for the youth centres. For example, in Latvia a sound recording studio was created and is still actively used by youth. Methodical material, lesson plans using non-formal education methods were produced for youth workers.*

To sum up, in most of project short-term results have been achieved (establishment of networks and creation of more accessible services). However, there is not enough evidence to confirm that the projects have improved housing and living conditions in settlements.

EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY (4.2.5, 4.3)

In medium term, project have created conditions for deprived communities and their members' inclusion into society. Specialists have improved their skills and knowledge, new equipment and infrastructure has been purchased, which gives communities the opportunity to receive new and improved services. In many projects, lasting contacts have been established between project partners across borders, something which can continue even after the project has ended and also help facilitate future joint projects.
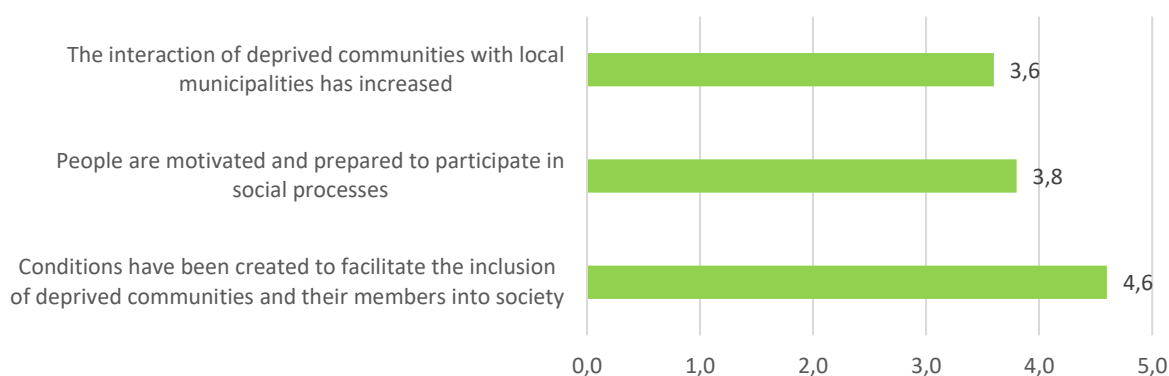
The respondents of the survey strongly agree that conditions have been created to facilitate the inclusion of deprived communities and their members into society (4.6 points). Project representatives also tend to agree that people are more motivated and prepared to participate in social processes (3.8 points) and that the interaction of deprived communities with local municipalities has increased (3.6 points). At the same time, regarding these two statements the opinion is divided.

Also interviews confirm that new opportunities are provided and used by the target groups, e.g.

> *Young people have an opportunity to come to the youth centre and spend their time usefully and develop their talents. During the project LLI -282 Youth empowerment, new groups of youngsters were attracted – youth from the parishes surrounding the town, which did not use the services before the project.*
>
> *Youth have become more active and feel more connected with the local community.*

As for the mid-term results, there is a consensus that projects have created conditions to facilitate inclusion of deprived communities. However, regarding the contribution of projects to motivating people to participate in social processes and interaction of deprived communities with local municipalities, there's not enough evidence to confirm these statements.

LONG TERM IMPACTS (4.2.6)

The respondents of the survey are reluctant to confirm that projects will have a long-term contribution to reducing the number of people facing deprivation-related problems in the Programme area (3.2 points).

The project will have a long-term contribution to reducing the number of people facing deprivation-related problems in the programme area � chart bar **3,2**

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0,0    1,0    2,0    3,0    4,0    5,0
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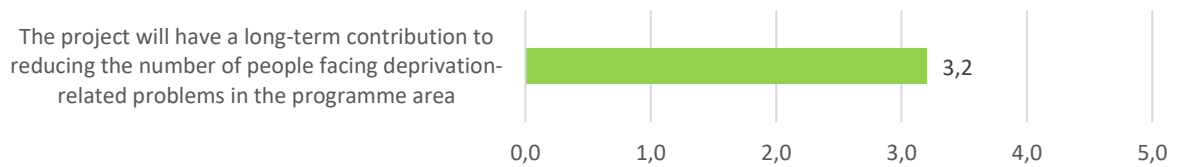
It is reasonable to conclude that the Programme has made contributions to creating conditions for reducing the number of people facing deprivation-related problems. However, small interventions as the projects in this SO are unlikely to cause visible long-lasting change. Also, social change needs time and continuous effort in long-term perspective.
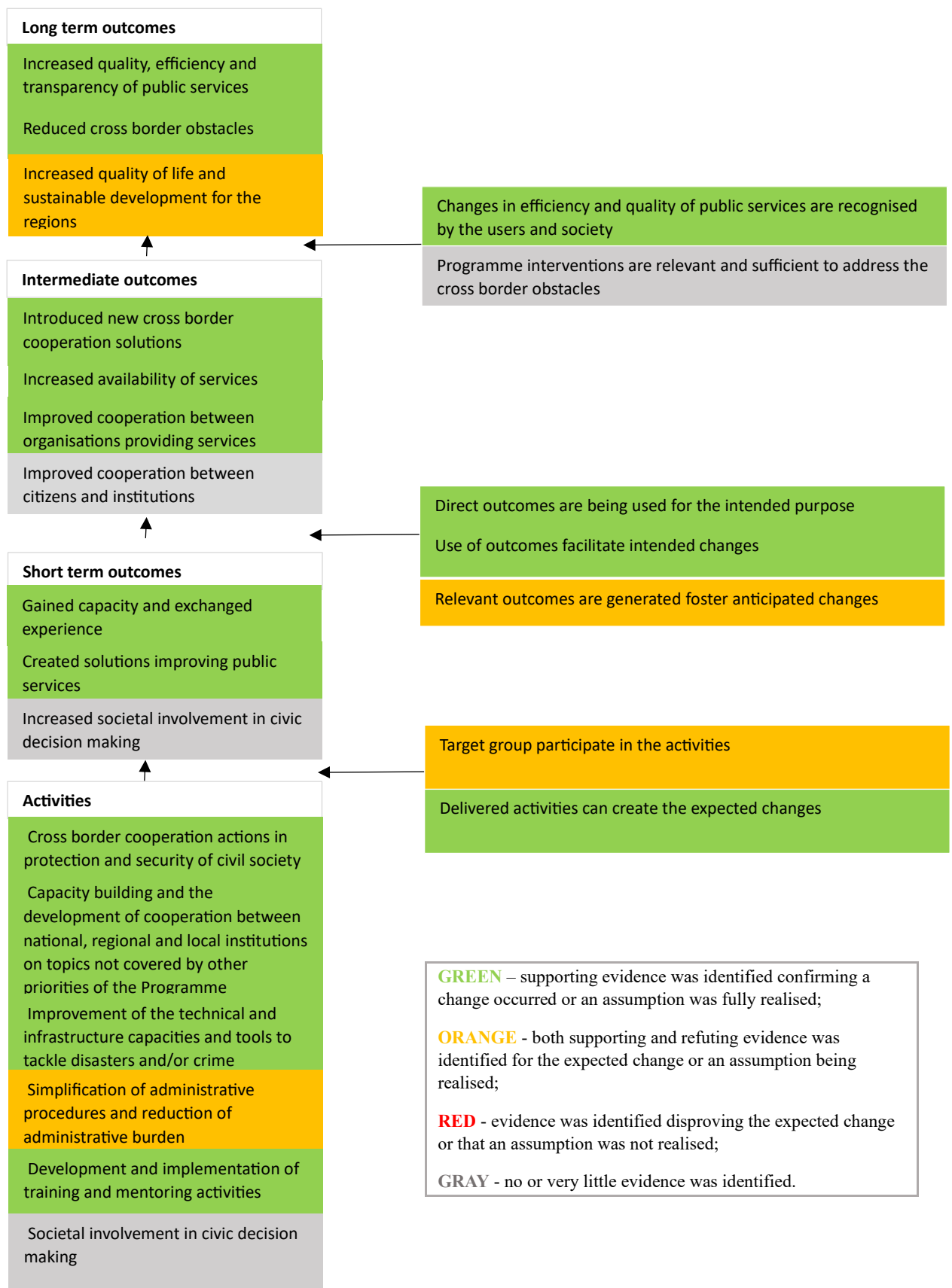
PRIORITY 4

There is one SO under the Priority 4:

SO 4.1. Improve the effectiveness of public services by enhancing competence and collaboration between institutions

Priority 4 aims to improve **effectiveness of public services** by promoting legal and administrative cooperation, capacity building measures (e.g., trainings, workshops and consultations), simplification of administrative procedures and reduction of administrative burden, raising administrative cost-efficiency, modernisation and optimisation of public administration processes including development of interactive information and communication measures, development/improvement of management tools and quality management systems and joint ICT solutions. Also, it was planned to increase cooperation between citizens and institutions.

As result it was expected to create solutions improving public services (efficiency, transparency, organisational processes and management, increased societal involvement in civic decision making and reduced cross border obstacles). This approach is expected to encourage greater societal involvement in civic decision-making and reduce obstacles across borders. Ultimately, these improvements are anticipated to contribute significantly to an enhanced quality of life and sustainable development within the regions.

PRIORITY 4 THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

Long term outcomes

Increased quality, efficiency and transparency of public services

Reduced cross border obstacles

Increased quality of life and sustainable development for the regions

Changes in efficiency and quality of public services are recognised by the users and society

Programme interventions are relevant and sufficient to address the cross border obstacles

Intermediate outcomes

Introduced new cross border cooperation solutions

Increased availability of services

Improved cooperation between organisations providing services

Improved cooperation between citizens and institutions

Direct outcomes are being used for the intended purpose

Use of outcomes facilitate intended changes

Relevant outcomes are generated foster anticipated changes

Short term outcomes

Gained capacity and exchanged experience

Created solutions improving public services

Increased societal involvement in civic decision making

Target group participate in the activities

Delivered activities can create the expected changes

Activities

Cross border cooperation actions in protection and security of civil society

Capacity building and the development of cooperation between national, regional and local institutions on topics not covered by other priorities of the Programme

Improvement of the technical and infrastructure capacities and tools to tackle disasters and/or crime

Simplification of administrative procedures and reduction of administrative burden

Development and implementation of training and mentoring activities

Societal involvement in civic decision making

GREEN – supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

ORANGE - both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

RED - evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

GRAY - no or very little evidence was identified.

ACTIVITIES AND THEIR REACH (4.2.2., 4.2.3)

Notably the Programme has supported a significant number of projects aimed to **tackle disasters and increase security of society.** Several projects have addressed these issues through capacity building activities, joint training, preparation of guidelines and action plans, and small-scale infrastructure and equipment procurement (LLI 224, LLI 92, LLI 213, LLI 258, LLI 194, LLI 82, LLI 302, LLI 269, LLI 289, LLI 372, LLI 523, LLI 451, LLI 441, LLI 449, LLI506). Project partners included emergency medical services, law enforcement institutions, rescue services, education institutions, local and regional authorities.

Another distinct group of projects were dedicated to **modernisation of public services through digitalisation** – libraries have introduced modern and interactive information and communication technologies (LLI 89, LLI 110), local authorities have developed e-modules and mobile apps and citizen profiles online, where citizens can find information about their benefits (LLI 152), teaching competencies and technical capacities of STEM educators have been increased (LLI 542), digitalisation of cemetery management systems carried out (LLI 437).

Also, **capacity building of institutions and organisations** have been supported in various fields – environment, health, cultural heritage preservation, spatial planning (LLI 59, LLI 350, LLI 512, LLI 431). Activities included joint events: workshops, training events, coaching sessions, exchange, conferences, camps, study visits, – bringing together specialists from both countries.

While the Programme aimed to support **cooperation between citizens and institutions**, interest from civil society organisations has not been prominent, and cooperation has not been supported directly. It is noted that the projects included a wide range of information activities aimed at general public, but these activities placed the society at the recipient end, rather than promoted direct partnership. However, during the interviews it was noted that civic engagement and participation is low in general both in Latvia and Lithuania – volunteering is not recognised and practised. This could explain the low interest and activity. Also, funding arrangements are not favourable for small scale NGOs, that could limit potential of the Programme to activate civil society actors, particularly in remote areas and border regions.

IMMEDIATE CHANGES (4.2.4)

The Programme estimated the target value: 151 institutions cooperating in project. This target has been overachieved and **190 institutions have established cooperation** throughout project implementation.

Cooperation was carried out through organisation of joint workshops, training events, conferences, study visits, etc. These joint activities facilitated problem-solving, and helped to find common solutions to the identified problems and challenges, e.g.:

> *Under the project ResCo LLI-213 National Emergency Medical Service (Latvia) carried out joint training activities with the Lithuania counterparts how to respond to large scale disaster, that involved also other relevant institutions (fire services, local administrations). The jointly created objects, methods, and approaches within the project have facilitated the exchange of best practices and the development of a shared approach to effectively address cross-border emergencies, especially when resources are limited.*

In other situations, study visits, workshops, and events have helped institutions draw inspiration from successful practices in other countries and identify new possibilities and ideas, that the project partners can adapt and implement in their organisation, e.g.:
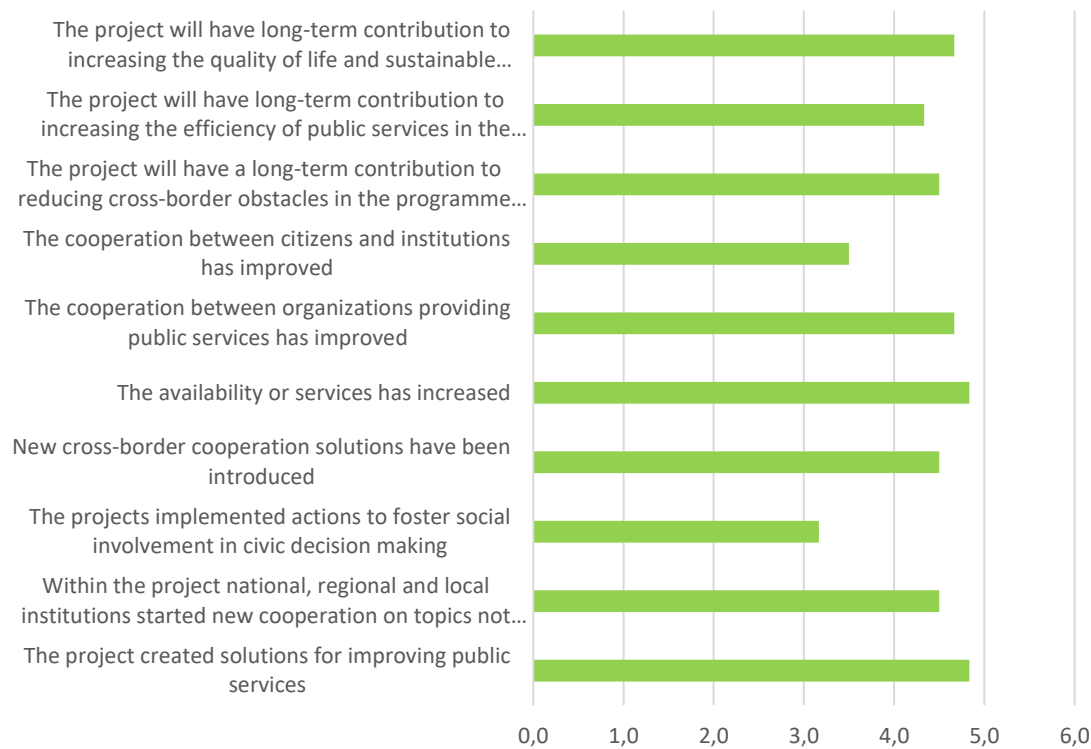
> *Jelgava city library carried out a study visit to France, where they observed that the library had established a seed exchange point. Although, this activity was not initially foreseen in the project, this idea was adapted and implemented in Jelgava city library afterwards. Also, cooperation between libraries in Latvia and Lithuania helped to increase publicity and attract more participants to the events organised, e.g., the final event of the family competition was organised in Lithuania, that increased the motivation to participate and to visit the neighbouring country.*

Collaboration is generally regarded as a mutually enriching experience at both organizational and personal levels. This collaborative dynamic involves all partners benefiting from a variety of positive outcomes, including introduction of new perspectives, exchange of shared ideas, and facilitation of mutual learning. At the organizational level, cooperation often results in a broader and more diversified pool of knowledge and expertise. Each partner brings unique insights, skills, and resources to the table, creating a synergy that goes beyond what individual entities could achieve independently. On a personal level, individuals have the opportunity to broaden their horizons and enhance their skills. Exposure to different working styles, approaches, and cultural perspectives fosters personal growth and professional development. The exchange of ideas and experiences can spark creativity and innovation, enriching each participant's understanding of their field.

> *Within the project All for Safety, LLI-372 the firefighters from the State Fire and Rescue Service of Latvia and the Fire and Rescue Department of Lithuania established cooperation and organised joint training, competitions and teambuilding activities. The joint training activities served as a platform for the exchange of expertise, best practices, and development of unified approach for responding to emergency situations. Firefighters from both services had the opportunity to share their experiences, learn from one another, and collectively address challenges. The inclusion of competitions and team-building activities not only enhanced the professional skills of the participants but also fostered a sense of camaraderie and unity. These shared experiences contribute significantly to the development of a cohesive and resilient firefighting community that can collaborate seamlessly in times of crisis.*

Issues that affected intensity and quality of cooperation were related to COVID-19 pandemical restrictions – travel and joint activities had to be postponed or cancelled at certain periods. While many activities were transferred to virtual environment, the partners confirmed that they preferred meetings in person as these helped to establish closer contacts and trust.

Therefore, it is **concluded** that the Programme activities **have contributed** to increased capacity and exchange of experience, created solutions for improvement of public services, but there is **no direct evidence**, that the Programme activities have targeted societal involvement in civic decision making. These findings are also supported by the results of the survey, where respondents have acknowledged input of the projects regarding improved public services, new cooperation incentives among organisations, increased availability of services, but there is a lesser rating on projects' contribution towards societal involvement in civic decision making and cooperation between society and institutions.

The project will have long-term contribution to increasing the quality of life and sustainable…	
The project will have long-term contribution to increasing the efficiency of public services in the…	
The project will have a long-term contribution to reducing cross-border obstacles in the programme…	
The cooperation between citizens and institutions has improved	
The cooperation between organizations providing public services has improved	
The availability or services has increased	
New cross-border cooperation solutions have been introduced	
The projects implemented actions to foster social involvement in civic decision making	
Within the project national, regional and local institutions started new cooperation on topics not…	
The project created solutions for improving public services	

0,0   1,0   2,0   3,0   4,0   5,0   6,0

EFFECTS ON THE TERRITORY (4.2.5, 4.3)

The evaluation process revealed compelling evidence indicating that projects under the SO have **enhanced collaboration among organisations**, particularly within law enforcement institutions, emergency medicine and rescue services. The collaboration activities have facilitated problem-solving, and improved inter-organisational relationships, that have led to the establishment of a joint approach in several cases:

> *The project ResCo LLI-213 has fostered collaboration between emergency services from Latvia and Lithuania. After the project, the emergency services have been invited to participate in the civil defence commissions established by the local municipalities to respond to crisis. Also, joint protocols between emergency services in both countries have been established to facilitate coordinated response to large-scale calamities occurring in close proximity to the border. This level of cooperation ensures a swift and effective reaction to emergencies, transcending national boundaries.*

It is reasonable to conclude that in several instances, the projects have been instrumental in the modernization of operations through the provision of equipment. This has resulted in the digitalization of various processes, including operational procedures and interactions with service users. This has likely **contributed to more efficient and streamlined services**, resulting in more satisfactory user experience and increased demand for services.

> *Within the project LLI-110 introduction of new technologies and digitalisation has helped to streamline the technical processes, and increase the efficiency of work. As a result, the time that was previously consumed by manual tasks and administrative processes is now redirected toward the development of new and engaging activities, including puppet theatre performances, excursions, games, and various other creative learning activities. In Jelgava city the library has been able to expand its role beyond a traditional repository of books, transforming into a dynamic community space. Post-project statistics shows increase in the number of library users in Jelgava city. Prior to the project, 16% of Jelgava inhabitants were library users, and this*

figure has now risen to 20%. Also, throughout implementation of the project the Jelgava City library established relationship with the Embassy of Lithuania, which organises creative masterclasses and exhibitions of Lithuanian artists in the library.

However, there is a lack of direct evidence that these projects have facilitated improved cooperation between citizens and institutions. While the projects have demonstrated efficacy in fostering collaboration among organizations, the connection to enhanced cooperation with citizens remains less substantiated. It suggests that further emphasis or specific initiatives may be needed to address this aspect of cross-border cooperation.

LONG TERM IMPACTS (4.2.6)

The assessment reveals that the projects within the Programme have made substantial contributions to enhancing the quality, efficiency, and transparency of public services across various sectors, including civil security and health, education, library services, etc.

While the Programme has supported exchange and cooperation, the impact of the Programme in reducing cross-border obstacles is less direct, as the projects were not specifically aimed at simplification of administrative procedures and reduction of administrative burden, given that these obstacles are primarily associated with diverse legal frameworks, which are challenges that can typically be resolved at the national level. Indirectly, activities may have contributed to solving some administrative barriers, albeit these achievements cannot be solely and directly attributed to the project interventions:

> *E.g., there was an AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA ON THE CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN THE PROVISION OF AMBULANCE SERVICES IN THE BORDER AREA BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA signed in 2019, that is related to the activities of the project ResCo LLI-213, but it was not achieved with direct contribution of the project.*

Additionally, the Programme's impact on the macro-level factors influencing quality of life and sustainable development in the regions is acknowledged but is seen as a part of a larger and more complex landscape shaped by broader social and economic dynamics.

UTILITY OF PROGRAMME SUPPORT (4.2.1)

In general, utility is a measure of the usefulness of a product or service in terms of its ability to satisfy a specific need or want. It is a concept that is frequently used in economics to describe the value that a product or service provides to a consumer or society.

In this evaluation the term is used to describe the relevance and usefulness of the project activities in terms of addressing the specific needs of the target group, changing the behaviour of the target group and leaving a long-lasting effect on the target group.

The results of the survey show that projects were very successful in implementing the foreseen activities. Participants of the survey strongly agree that they managed to reach the intended outputs (investment, events, etc.). They also strongly agree that projects have reached results in terms of making changes in the behaviour of the target group. Exceptions are SO 2.1. and SO 3.2., where the participants of the survey agree that they have managed to reach the intended results, albeit to a smaller extent than in other SOs.

The intended outputs (events, investments, etc.) were reached

The intended results (change in the target group) were reached
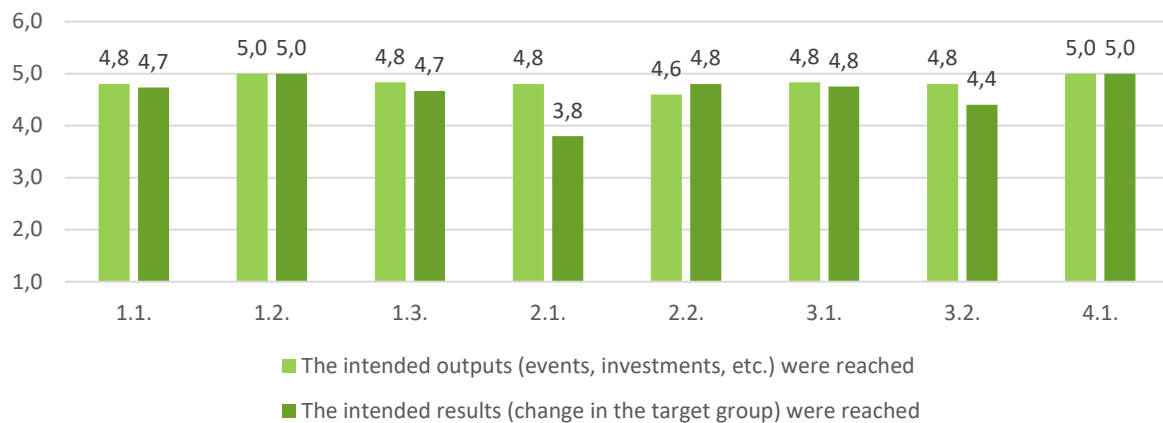
In terms of addressing the specific needs of the target group, participants of the survey strongly agree that their projects responded well to the needs of the target groups. Again, projects of SO 2.1. agree with this statement, but to a slightly lower extent.

Regarding the long-term impacts on the target group, participants of the survey from SOs 1.1., 1.2., 2.2., 3.1. and 4.1. strongly believe that their projects will have lasting impact on the target group. As for SO 3.2., participants of the survey agree that their projects have long-term impacts. At the same time, the participants of the survey representing SO 1.3. and SO 2.1. are reluctant to confirm that their project have lasting impact on the target group.

The project responded well to the needs of the target group

The project will have lasting impacts on the target group
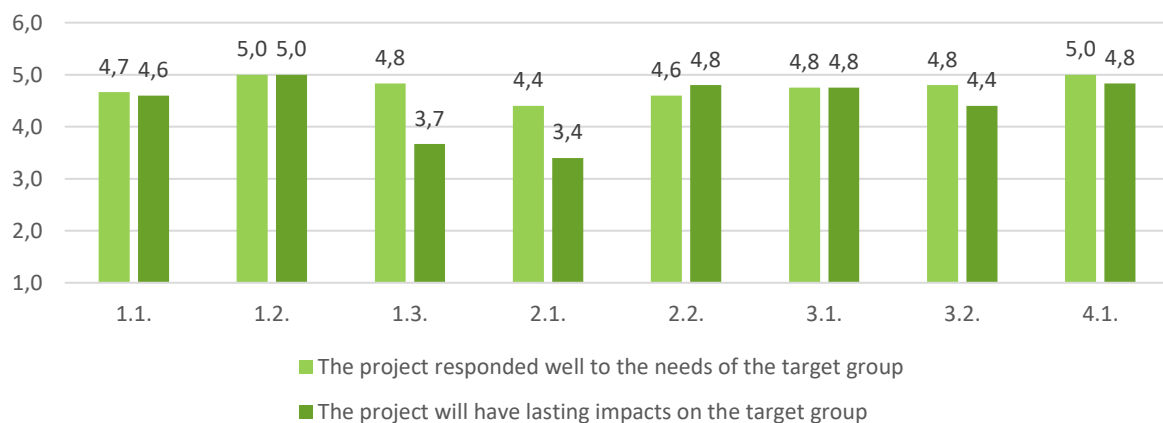
To conclude, according to the projects surveyed, majority of Programme SOs demonstrate a high utility in terms of addressing the needs of the target groups, reaching the intended results and having a lasting impact on the target groups. In two SOs, however, long-term effects have not been confirmed by the survey.

Factors facilitating and impeding reaching the project objectives

Participants of the survey and project partners interviewed mentioned numerous factors that helped them or challenged them in reaching the project objectives and making sure that projects are relevant and useful. These factors can be divided into internal and external factors and are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

|	Facilitating factors	Impeding factors
Internal factors	▶ Effective collaboration and leadership: Increased understanding of mutual needs and goals among partners fosters close cooperation, led by efficient leadership. Long-lasting partnerships thrive on understanding each other's strengths and weaknesses. ▶ Project management expertise: Well-developed project management skills, efficient teamwork, enthusiasm of the project team, and the application of experience gained from prior projects enable efficient planning and execution.	▶ Language and communication challenges: A language barrier, inadequate English skills, and expensive translations hinder smooth communication. ▶ Lack of capacity and human resources: Insufficient capacity, lack of human resources for project management, support for inexperienced partners, and burnout among specialists pose obstacles. ▶ Unforeseen changes: Unplanned project alterations, including changes in teams, partners, and work specifications, disrupt project continuity. ▶ Financial constraints: Challenges with cash flow for NGOs and private sector organisations, coupled with inadequate budgets for specific activities (e.g. communication), present financial hurdles.
External factors	▶ Interest and support from stakeholders at various levels and across sectors: Engagement of decision makers, partnerships with municipalities and regions, creating new networks of interinstitutional cooperation, collaboration with private sector entities and support from local politicians facilitate smoother implementation of projects. ▶ Engagement and support of local society: Active involvement and support from the local community and target groups are vital for the success and sustainability of projects.	▶ Impact of Covid-19 pandemic: More emphasis on online events and reduced face-to-face interactions due to pandemic restrictions. Changes in project timelines and extensions due to pandemic-related disruptions. ▶ National differences: Differences across countries in legislation, sectoral approaches, and various support systems (e.g. social support systems) affecting project implementation. Legal and bureaucratic hurdles: Legal issues, bureaucratic processes, public procurement regulations, de minimis regulations, and reporting requirements posing challenges. ▶ Other external factors: External factors such as the war in Ukraine, weather conditions, and increased construction costs challenged project implementation.

To sum up, successful execution of projects depends on understanding mutual needs, well-developed project management skills, and enduring partnerships that leverage strengths and weaknesses. However, language barriers, insufficient capacity, unforeseen changes and

financial constraints disrupt smooth project execution. Engaging stakeholders across sectors, ensuring active involvement and support from local communities, addressing national differences, minimising bureaucratic procedures and efficiently dealing with unforeseen external changes is vital to ensure project success and sustainability.

III CONTRIBUTION AND ADDED VALUE OF CROSS BORDER COOPERATION

Participants of the survey strongly agree that the projects had a significant cross-border contribution. Projects focused on problems that are shared in the cross-border area (4.6) and created or strengthened cross-border networks (4.6). Cross-border cooperation was necessary for the successful implementation of the project (4.6) and brought added value to the project (4.6). Respondents of the survey also agree that projects benefitted from specialised knowledge and skills in different regions (4.2.).

In term of long-term effects, participants of the survey strongly agree that the implementation of the projects has created additional opportunities for cross-border cooperation in terms of new projects and networks (4.5).
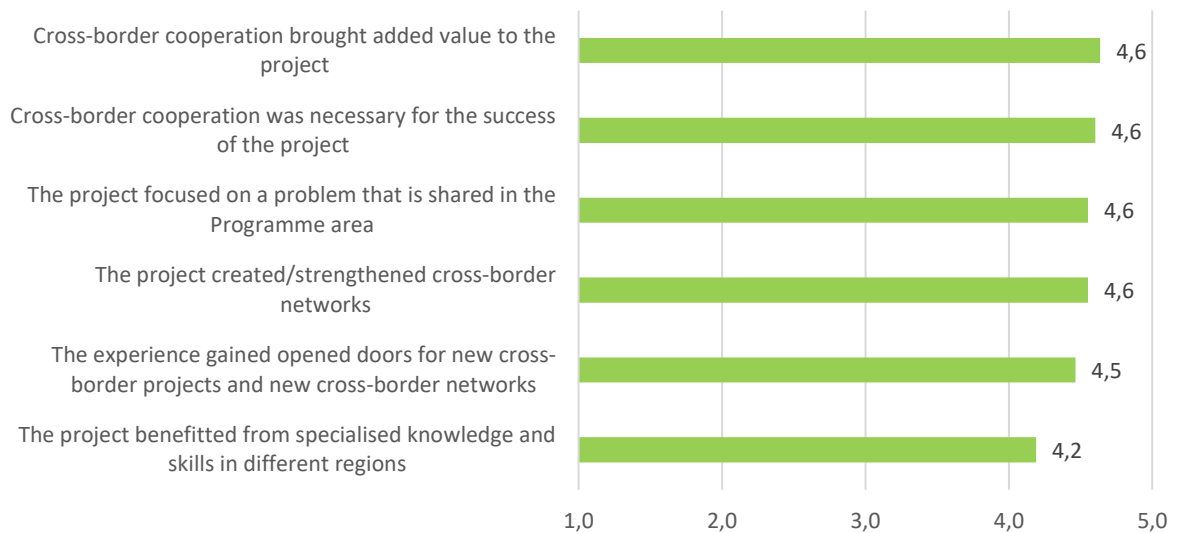
For further analysis, contribution of the projects towards development of cross border cooperation culture and added value has been analysed in three dimensions:

Each dimension captures a distinct aspect of the overall impact, providing valuable insights into the broader outcomes of cross-border cooperation efforts.

Individual Dimension	Changes to the attitudes, skills, and knowledge of individuals involved. It assesses the extent to which individuals have developed cross-cultural understanding, communication and collaboration capabilities
Institutional Dimension	The impact on institutions refers to institutional changes, processes, and structures that emerge from cross-border cooperation. It examines adaptation of institutional practices to incorporate lessons learned and experiences from the partner organisations gained through project implementation
Sectoral Dimension	This dimension focusses on sectoral and policy level changes that stem from innovations, agreements and decisions achieved throughout cross-border cooperation projects.

Under **PRIORITY 1** at an individual level, projects have engaged various stakeholders associated with tourism, including guides, tourism information center staff, cultural and historical specialists, as well as nature or environmental experts and researchers, thereby enhancing their capacity for collaboration and deepening knowledge of the natural, cultural and historical heritage of bordering regions.

Exchange of best practices among tour guides fostered better understanding of the common and specific values of natural, cultural and historical heritage of all regions involved. Moreover, tourism information center staff have benefitted from shared knowledge and resources, resulting in improved visitor services and enriched destination promotion strategies.

Cultural and historical specialists, through cross-border collaboration, have gained exposure to diverse perspectives of using common cultural resources for the purpose of tourism and enhanced the authenticity and exclusivity of joint tourism offers.

> *"Mutual cooperation of tourism related specialists, like tourism guides, craftsmen, employees of tourism information centres, museums, and other public tourism attraction sites, have been strengthened. They now possess more clear goals and understanding of future needs to be tackled through cross border cooperation. They are engaged in the envisioning and generation of new common ideas for future cooperation activities"* (LLI-187; LLI-447).

Nature and environmental experts have contributed with specific knowledge on various natural objects and sites that can be promoted as the tourism attractions in the eco or nature-based tourism routes. Also, tourism experts involved in cross-border projects have expanded their ecological awareness and contributed to sustainable tourism practices.

> *"It is very important to attract field (or content) experts in a timely manner, who are also able to understand the specifics of both countries. Such experts who understand the specifics and common values of both countries are important for the success of the project. (LLI483)"*

Tourism related individuals engaged in cross border initiatives and established common professional networks and communication platforms enduring relationships and active communication beyond the project duration in such further amplifying the positive impacts of cross-border cooperation in the field of tourism. This sustained collaboration has not only enriched the individual capacities of these stakeholders but has also contributed to the overall resilience and attractiveness of the cross-border tourism landscape.

Similar findings are identified within SO 1.2. and SO 1.3. projects - individuals have had the opportunity to explore and experience different practices and approaches to similar challenges.

Exposure to different working styles, approaches, and cultural perspectives fosters personal growth and professional development. It is noted, that personal contacts established within the Programme remain after completion of the projects, albeit communication is less intense.

On the institutional level, within the SO 1.1. cooperation among the partner organizations have become more profound. Participation in projects appears less cumbersome as in the previous planning periods of this INTERREG programme. Collaboration and communication with partners have improved. From the previous experience, collaboration with already known partners provides benefits. There is an understanding of how partner institutions operate and collaborate, also, experience of weaknesses of each partner requiring increased oversight.

> *"There is an improved ability to identify common goals and needs. Previously, each party brought individual needs to the table, but now there is an ability to define shared challenges and problems and collectively formulate objectives" (LLI-483).*

Partners exhibit enhanced proficiency in collaboration and implementation of international projects on a larger geographical scale and within larger partnerships, also outside the Programme area. In this sense, the capacity of planning regions and larger municipalities to coordinate partnerships that cover several regions and include a large number of partner organizations is highly commendable.

> *"Here also thanks to the Programme Secretariat for applying the approach of "Consult first before punish", it was encouraging and very helpful in building the capacity of organizations in cross-border cooperation and communication" (LLI-464).*

Within SO 1.2. the projects have demonstrated efficacy in fostering collaboration among organizations, and it has reportedly resulted in a more complex, more profound approach to solving common environmental issues. On the other hand, after completion of the projects, cooperation is not priority for the organisations, as other, more pressing issues take precedence.

On the sectoral dimension, tourism is very relevant topic for cross-border cooperation, since partners on both sides of the border share objectives to develop and implement internationally significant tourism initiatives, offers or products. This cooperative paradigm offers advantages and immediate project outcomes in the form of common tourism routes or other attractions for tourists. Projects have notably proved following benefits in the context of tourism:

Cultural enrichment: cross-border projects have facilitated the exchange of cultural and historical insights and practices, enriching the tourism experience for both tourism stakeholders, tourists and other visitors. Through collaborative efforts, project partnerships were able to showcase diverse cultural heritage, traditions, and crafts of Programme regions, contributing to a more immersive and authentic tourism experiences.

Sustainable tourism practices: cross-border projects significantly emphasized sustainable tourism practices. Partnerships across borders enabled the sharing of best practices in environmental conservation, resource management, and community engagement, fostering a more responsible and sustainable tourism industry.

Economic stimulus: cross-border tourism projects generated economic benefits by attracting visitors to explore interconnected Programme regions and were motivated to stay longer (for overnight stays) within the Programme area. This influx of tourists can stimulate local economies, supporting businesses, creating job opportunities, and contributing to overall regional development. The Programme support was important driver for developing tourism in the Programme area during the Covid-19 pandemic, when tourists were limited in travels to

further tourism destinations and could discover new tourism experiences in their own and neighboring regions changing their travelling behaviours.

> *"Tourism projects in general are grateful for cross-border cooperation, they have changed their character from such ordinary physical infrastructure improvement needs to the creation of a joint, modern, ambitious tourism product or tourism offer" (LLI-464).*

The cross-border cooperation in tourism not only amplifies the industry's appreciation for collaborative efforts but also yields a spectrum of benefits ranging from cultural enrichment and economic stimulus to sustainability and resilience. The collective actions provided by cross-border cooperation among various tourism stakeholders involved in projects yield a resultant effect that exceeds or diverges from the individual capacities of one particular organisation or the municipality.

> *"The municipalities of both countries are practically next to each other, within a short and quick reach, and this is the tool that stimulates cooperation in order to be able to do something more ambitious together" (LLI-447, LLI-187).*

Under SO 1.2. the most important contribution and added value from the cooperation was related to joined efforts to foster implementation of strategic-level EU documents into national, regional and local planning documents. In this respect cooperation helped to identify the most relevant methods, modules and lessons learnt.

It is concluded that the **highest maturity** level of cross-border cooperation is observed under the SO 1.1. in terms of intensity, quality and added value for sectoral development.

Under the **Priority 2** cross-border cooperation at the individual level has been instrumental in fostering mutual trust, expanding perspectives, and providing opportunities for personal growth. Cross-border cooperation has played a pivotal role in building trust among individuals. Projects allowed to establish contacts, learn to know each other and trust each other. This trust-building aspect is an important precondition for further collaboration between organizations.

Cross-border projects have been helpful in helping people expand their perspectives, develop personally, and gain a better awareness of the practices and innovations of their counterparts across the border.

> *We have projects that are close to our hearts, that allow us to broaden our perspective, to allow our staff to do other things for a change, to grow experience, to see what is happening in the world, even just across the border. /LLI 138/*

One of the main challenges for cross-border cooperation at the individual level is the language barrier that limits mutual learning and the possibility to be involved in certain activities. This highlights the need for effective communication strategies, particularly when working with partners who may have different language capabilities.

> *Language probably is the main barrier. If the event is in English, you can select participants based on who knows English. It is restrictive, but reality. /LLI 338/*

Institutionally, cross-border projects have fostered a culture of cooperation, enabling organizations to solve complex situations and create stronger bonds. Partner organisations adopted a pragmatic approach leveraging the strengths of cross-border collaboration while acknowledging and addressing the inherent challenges.

> *We abandoned the idea of joint procurement from the start. We realised that there would be no joint contracts for construction. Legislation is different and shared bills, contracts etc - who*

answers for what? But we did coordinate socially - how to organise the work sequentially - who would do it first, who would do it later, etc. /LLI 280/

Participation in projects is an important driver for development for the institutions. There is no specific financing or goals related to the establishment of cross-border cooperation at institutions. Availability of funding also brings the understanding and appreciation of the necessity of cooperation.

This cooperation would not have started without the Programme. We don't plan cross-border cooperation on a daily basis, we have our own goals and tasks. In the future, it will be more and more difficult because of the financial and budgetary situation. It was good to have the opportunity. Cross-border cooperation is put everywhere in the planning documents, but it is without money. The projects make us think about cooperation. Once a project is approved, then it is a job to be done. There are benefits for both sides; to see how things work elsewhere. The experience is often transferred to our region, to the centre. /LLI 138/

After the participation in projects cross-border cooperation, while not a daily occurrence, remains a vital aspect of regional development. The remaining contacts have created bounds and direct lines of communication that make solving any issues faster and easier.

If there is a need, there is someone to talk to. There is a responsiveness based on previous cooperation. /LLI 155/

Another effect is established cross-border networks that are highly appreciated for future collaboration and projects.

By going through one project, you can get access to a common network of partners and thus expand the possibilities of cooperation. /LLI 131/

Additionally, cross-border cooperation projects have proven to be a valuable platform for knowledge exchange and resource sharing. It has enabled participants to gain insights into new funding mechanisms and project management approaches providing organizations with the necessary skills and knowledge that differs from their usual practice.

The Interreg programme allows public authorities like us, working in a very specific sector, to understand the principles of mobilising external funding. What is it like to attract external funding? We are used to working with the national budget, with earmarked funding under the SFs. It is difficult to understand how to compete in a tender with others. It's a new ABC, new skills needed. Now the Interreg experience makes us realise that it is not only about referrals, but also about delivering results, change. This is project thinking. This is definitely a good added value for us.

Under **Priority 3** on individual level projects have given opportunity to establish new contacts, expand professional networks, share experiences, learn and support each other on cross-border scale.

Teachers had the opportunity to discuss and look for solutions based on their various experiences. During the summer schools, there were several difficulties that teachers had to overcome together. Shared experiences helped them. Contacts remain and are used as a resource for motivation and support (LLI-436 SEE ME).

On institutional level, projects created or strengthened already existing cross-border partnerships. Project partners continue to collaborate, new projects and initiatives have been

jointly developed and implemented. For less experienced organisations, projects have increased their capacity and facilitated internationalisation.

> *The project LLI-404 had a very significant impact on our organisation (Anyksciai art incubator - art studio), as this was the first international project we implemented. It opened new opportunities for us. Now we try to apply for larger projects, e.g., in Creative Europe and Erasmus programmes. Also, our English skills have improved.*

Furthermore, the capacity building effect of the projects in several cases has reached beyond the partnerships by involving in the project activities smaller organisations, which are not official partners of the projects.

> *We involved an NGO working with people with special needs in the cross-border cooperation activities of the project. They established contacts with a peer organisation in Latvia and now continue collaboration on their own. We are happy about the fact that we created new opportunities for other stakeholder (LLI-368, ReSocialization).*

On sectoral level, projects have provided opportunity to learn from different experiences and systems in Latvia and Lithuania, thus contributing to increased knowledge and skills in the sectors.

> *In the project LLI-436 SEE ME, project partners benefited from a transfer of valuable knowledge. In Lithuania, there are very few boarding schools for children with special needs, so the staff does not have experience in providing all day care. On the other hand, Latvian partners had a very valuable experience in organizing trips and overnight activities for children with special needs.*

> *In the project LLI -282 Youth empowerment, youngsters benefitted a lot from going abroad and learning to overcome cultural and language barriers. Also, staff of municipalities benefited from the project. As Kuldiga town was more experienced in youth work than Panevezys at that time, the Latvian partner had the opportunity to share their knowledge and see what they have achieved and the Lithuanian partner had the opportunity to learn from peers in Latvia.*

Under **Priority 4** cooperation is considered a positive stimulus to exchange experience, working practices, lessons learnt among the individuals and organisations. Cross border cooperation has been especially important in areas of civil security and rescue operations, as it helped to facilitate the coordination of potential cross-border operations. Cross border cooperation established under the projects has helped to build trust and confidence between the relevant services, which can make it easier to cooperate on security issues in the future, and develop common approaches to security challenges.

IV LESSONS LEARNED AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

During the evaluation there were several observations that could be considered for future programmes:

- ▶ While the Programme has installed a structured and rigid reporting systems, the current system covers only projects' implementation progress and direct outputs. It is not possible to trace any wider effects that the projects may have generated. Such information could be useful for observing the Programme's impact in future. During

the interviews it was noted that often the beneficiaries do not think about the wider effects, as they concentrate on the direct outcomes, therefore added value and wider effects may "get lost" if not captured timely. Also, often there is a time gap between actual implementation and wider impact, therefore current project reporting system cannot trace them.

It is recommended to encourage a follow-up to trace the impact of the projects after their completion – information on wider effects, continued cooperation, policy effects. Such information could be traced through additional follow-up reports required from the project partners and/or follow-up interviews with the JS. These reports could further serve as an entry-point for the subsequent impact evaluation.

▶ Throughout the project implementation, partner organizations forged strong cooperative ties, working together to achieve shared goals. The collaboration was notably valuable, enhancing the quality, relevance, and scope of the outcomes. However, it was reported by the project partners, that post-project the intensity of cooperation tends to diminish, as organisations continue to operate within their relevant national legal and financial frameworks.

It is recommended to provide a follow-up funding for targeted cooperation activities post-project implementation. E.g., exploration of lessons learnt, multiplication of positive results, depending on maturity and quality of project results.