

**Interreg V-A
Latvia–Lithuania
Programme 2014–2020
Impact Evaluation**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Interreg V-A Latvia-Lithuania Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 (hereinafter referred to as 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 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 current evaluation (i) examines 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, and (ii) evaluates the achievement of the Programme's specific objectives (hereinafter referred to as SO) and the changes brought about in the Programme's territory.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHANGES IN THE PROGRAMME TERRITORY

The evaluation utilised a **theory-driven impact evaluation model**, which was developed using the approach of contribution analysis. The findings and conclusions regarding each SO are summarised below:

PRIORITY 1: SUSTAINABLE AND CLEAN ENVIRONMENT THROUGH COOPERATION

SO 1.1. TO INCREASE NUMBER OF VISITORS THROUGH DEVELOPING NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE	SO 1.2. TO INCREASE INTEGRATION AND EFFICIENCY OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	SO 1.3. TO REGENERATE PUBLIC AREAS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS
<p>PROJECTS: 24 ERDF: 12,6 M EUR</p> <p>1,13M Increase of visits to cultural and natural heritage sites</p> 	<p>PROJECTS: 14 ERDF: 7,2 M EUR</p> <p>88 Organisations supported</p> 	<p>PROJECTS: 5 ERDF: 2,6 M EUR</p> <p>38 ha Land surface rehabilitated</p> 

SO 1.1. To increase number of visitors through developing natural and cultural heritage

The SO 1.1 aims to increase the number of visitors to the Programme area by enhancing the cultural and natural heritage. It focuses on improving and developing tangible and intangible heritage assets, while developing and promoting joint services and products as well as innovative and sustainable solutions for tourists, visitors and the local society, ultimately resulting in a growth in visitor numbers.

Activities promoted accessibility to cultural and heritage objects or sites, developing tourism infrastructure, promoting joint tourism attractions and cross-border tourism routes, developing unified visual identities and common marketing strategies, as well as the capacity building of various tourism related stakeholders.

At the territorial level, the projects have played a crucial role in creating, restoring, and promoting tourist attractions. **An increase of 1,149,264 visits to cultural and natural heritage sites and attractions** has been promoted. Initially planned result indicator has exceeded almost three times. Since some projects have recently finished, their long-term effects are anticipated in the coming years. Statistical data on overnight stays reflect a positive trend, surpassing planned numbers. The Programme brought changes via continuous support to the preservation of the cultural and natural heritage as well as tourism projects over several planning periods.

Initially the Programme intended to address the seasonality of tourism, but Covid-19 pandemic shifted the focus to treat the lockdowns and their negative effects on tourism flows. Yet, pandemic restrictions facilitated novel travel experiences for local tourists, leading them to explore nature-based tourism routes and attractions in the Programme area thus promoting the achievement of planned changes in tourism. Additionally, the innovative concepts generated within these projects are successfully scaled up and transferred to other partnerships, regions, and even other cross border programmes.

SO 1.2 To increase integration and efficiency of environmental resource management

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. E.g., several projects addressed **disaster and environmental risk management** issues: activities involved planning, coordination, and implementation of strategies to minimize the impact of natural or human-made disasters on the environment and communities; several projects worked to **reduce pollution**: activities involved development of strategies, adoption of environmentally friendly practices in industries and agriculture; projects on **sustainable management of natural resources**; other projects focused upon **efficient management of green infrastructure**. All projects engaged the general public through educational and information activities, as well as collaborated with NGOs and professional organisations.

Throughout project implementation **88 organisations** have established cooperation. Organisations shared knowledge and best practices thus leading to increased capacities. 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.

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. Also, other private organisations may feel reluctant to implement the environmental considerations into their economic operations, since these solutions entail costs for the operators. 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 and regulations.

SO 1.3. To regenerate public areas with environmental problems

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.

As the result **38.35 ha of land surface** has been rehabilitated with direct support from the Programme. The program encouraged use of innovative methods for regeneration of degraded territories, e.g., phytoremediation (BrownReg LLI-325). It also supported training, exchange of good practice and study visits to increase the knowledge and capacities of the territorial planners. These activities set the Programme intervention apart from the Structural Funds incentives, and indicates the added value of the Programme.

There is evidence to conclude that the projects have contributed to improved municipal environment for the use of inhibitors and visitors, i.e., the wider objective of the SO 1.3. It is assumed that the solutions are sustainable, and do not require additional resources.

PRIORITY 2: SUPPORT TO LABOUR MOBILITY AND EMPLOYMENT

SO: 2.1. TO CREATE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP SUPPORT			SO: 2.2. TO INCREASE JOB OPPORTUNITIES BY IMPROVING MOBILITY AND WORKFORCE SKILLS		
PROJECTS: 9	PARTNERS: 34	ERDF: 3,7 M EUR	PROJECTS: 11	PARTNERS: 35	ERDF: 13,6 EUR
27	18	850	4454	29	45 km
Business support services improved/ Created	Business support infrastructure objects improved or created	Enterprises received non-financial support - improved business models, products, new markets	Persons participated in joint local employment initiatives and training	Educational and training infrastructure objects for joint use created or improved	Reconstructed or upgraded roads
					

SO 2.1 To create employment opportunities through entrepreneurship support

Specific objective 2.1. aimed at creating a supportive environment and conditions for creating employment possibilities in the Programme population. Measures were targeted toward creation of local employment and facilitating entrepreneurship and new business models in the fields of the knowledge economy. The main target groups were potential local entrepreneurs and self-employed persons including youngsters as well as active entrepreneurs. With joint efforts by 9 projects amounting to 3,7 MEUR were improved or created in total 27 business support services and 18 business support infrastructure objects, and 850 enterprises received non-financial support.

This has increased openness and 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. The Programme could do more to encourage follow-up on the impact of projects after their completion.

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

SO 2.2. aimed at creating a more competitive labour market by aligning skills with industry needs, enhancing cross-border mobility, and fostering collaboration between various stakeholders. It anticipated boosting job opportunities through these concerted efforts. The SO 2.2 addressed unemployment, especially the skills gap and mismatch between available skills and those demanded by the labour market. This was 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 was enhanced labour mobility by removing physical obstacles to cross-border mobility and increasing information exchange on job opportunities. The main target groups were local inhabitants, especially those who face long-term and youth unemployment, entrepreneurs, educational/vocational institutions as well as visitors.

With joint efforts by 11 projects 29 educational and training infrastructure objects for joint use were created or improved, involving 4454 persons that participated in joint local employment initiatives and trainings. 45,6 km of roads were reconstructed and upgraded enhancing cross-border mobility. 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, which raises questions about the real relevance of the improved programmes to the labour market needs of the sector.

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 provision, which has 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 influenced labour mobility.

PRIORITY 3: SOCIAL INCLUSION AS PRECONDITION FOR TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

SO: 3.1. TO IMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY AND EFFICIENCY OF SOCIAL SERVICES

PROJECTS: **24** PARTNERS: **72** ERDF: **10,2** M EUR

41

Social services and infrastructure created or improved



102

Social inclusion measures created or improved



SO: 3.2. TO IMPROVE LIVING CONDITIONS IN DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES AND TERRITORIES

PROJECTS: **20** PARTNERS: **39** ERDF: **3,3** M EUR

89

Deprived communities participated in the regeneration activities: improvement of public spaces, networks, events



SO 3.1 To improve accessibility and efficiency of social services

The Programme aimed 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.

The projects contributed to enhanced social inclusion, labour market participation and reduced inequalities for people at risk of vulnerability. **41 social services and infrastructure were created or improved** and **102 social inclusion measures were created or improved**. Furthermore, projects helped to raise awareness and address stereotypes making society more open. The SO also 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.

Projects provided a valuable opportunity to learn from different experiences and systems in Latvia and Lithuania. For less experienced organisations, projects increased their capacity and facilitated internationalisation via new partnerships and new projects. Capacity building effect in several cases reached beyond the partnerships.

There is a consensus among the project partners that project short-term and mid-term results have been successfully achieved. However, compelling evidence on the long-term impact is lacking, as projects do not collect such information after finalising the activities.

SO 3.2 To improve living conditions in deprived communities and territories

The Programme aimed 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.

The projects addressed issues such as social deprivation, unemployment, poverty, social vulnerability, and the need for educational opportunities and sports and recreational facilities.

In total, **89 deprived communities participated in the regeneration activities**. 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.

By most of the 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. As for the mid-term and long-term results, there is a consensus that projects have created conditions to facilitate inclusion of deprived communities. Furthermore, the programme has made contributions to creating conditions for reducing the number of people facing deprivation-related problems. However, compelling evidence on the intermediate and long-term outcomes is lacking.

PRIORITY 4: IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIVING THROUGH EFFICIENT PUBLIC SERVICES AND ADMINISTRATION

SO: 4.1. IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC SERVICES BY ENHANCING COMPETENCE AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS

PROJECTS: **25**

PARTNERS: **78**

ERDF: **9,4 M EUR**

190

Institutions have established cooperation

Digitalisation of services:
modernisation of public services:
libraries, schools, etc



Security and safety: cooperation
among emergency, law enforcement,
rescue services



Capacity building: environmental,
health, cultural heritage preservation,
spatial planning issues



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

The Programme has supported a significant number of projects aimed to **tackle disasters and increase security of society** through capacity building activities, joint training, preparation of guidelines and action plans, and small-scale infrastructure and equipment procurement. 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, education institutions, local administration entities. Also, **capacity building** of institutions and organisations have been supported in various fields – environment, health, cultural heritage preservation, spatial planning. 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.

190 institutions have established cooperation throughout project implementation. Cooperation was carried out through of joint workshops, training events, conferences, study visits, etc. The collaboration activities have facilitated problem-solving, and improved inter-organisational relationships. 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 likely contributed to more efficient and streamlined public services, resulting in more satisfactory user experience and increased demand for services.

Indirectly, activities may have contributed to solving some administrative barriers, albeit these achievements cannot be solely and directly attributed to the project interventions. 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.

CONTRIBUTION AND ADDED VALUE OF CROSS BORDER COOPERATION

Contribution of the projects towards development of cross border cooperation culture and added value has been analysed in three dimensions: individual, institutional, sectoral.

Under **Priority 1** notably tourism related individuals engaged in cross border initiatives and established common professional networks, that endure beyond the project duration. There is improved cooperation quality compared to previous planning periods of this INTERREG programme. The planning regions and larger municipalities demonstrate capacity to coordinate a large number of partner organizations and cover larger territorial scope. It is acknowledged that tourism is very relevant topic for cross-border cooperation, since partners share similar aims and aspirations. Under SO 1.2. cooperation helped to identify the most relevant methods, modules and lessons learnt to foster implementation of strategic-level EU documents into national, regional and local planning documents. To a lesser extent cross border cooperation was observed under SO 1.3.

Under the **Priority 2** cross-border cooperation helped establish contacts, learn to know each other and trust each other. This trust-building aspect is an important precondition for further collaboration between organizations. Partner organisations balanced the strength of cross-border collaboration with the inherent challenges: different regulatory frameworks, language barriers. The remaining contacts have created direct lines of communication that make solving any issues faster and easier.

Under **Priority 3** projects have given opportunity to establish new contacts, expand professional networks, share experiences, learn and support each other. Notably, for less experienced organisations, projects have increased their capacity and facilitated internationalisation. Projects have provided opportunity to learn from different experiences and systems in Latvia and Lithuania, thus contributing to increased knowledge and skills.

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.