Final report

Evaluation of programmes financed under the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms for the period 2014-2021

Evaluation of the Programme

"Local Development and Poverty Reduction"

June **2025**

Iceland Liechtenstein Norway grants

REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA
Ministarstvo regionalnoga razvoja
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Evaluation of Programmes Financed under the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms for the Period 2014–2021

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"Local Development and Poverty Reduction"

Final report

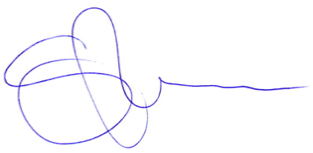
Report compiled by:

Mila Bulić – Key expert 1

Gabrijela Marin – Key expert 2

Date: 16 June 2025

Mila Bulić
Key expert 1



Gabrijela Marin
Key expert 2

The undersigned hereby confirm that the information presented in this report is accurate and reflects the findings and conclusions of the authors.

PROJECT SHEET

Report	Final report
Contract number	04-C-U-1064/24-21
Name of the project	Evaluation of programmes financed under the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms for the period 2014-2021
Evaluated programme	Local Development and Poverty Reduction
Duration	16 December 2024 – 16 June 2025
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Contractors/Address	WYG Consulting Ltd., Ulica grada Vukovara 269 G, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia, OIB: 04303799227

Acronyms

CARNET: Croatian Academic and Research Network

CfP: Call for Proposal

CTE: Centres for Training and Education

DPP: Donor programme partner

EEA: European Economic Area

EU: European Union

ERF: Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences

EQ: Evaluation question

ESI: European Structural and Investment

FER: Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing

GMPE: Ground Motion Prediction Equations

HK-DIR: Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills

ICT: Information and communication technology

LDPR: Local Development and Poverty Reduction

LSC: Lika-Senj County

MRDEUF: Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds

NDS: National Development Strategy

NFP: National Focal Point

OECD: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

PDP: predefined project

PGC: Primorje-Gorski Kotar County

PO: Programme Operator

PP: Project promoter

VPC: Virovitica-Podravina County

SDC: Split-Dalmatia County

STEM: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

ToR: Terms of Reference

ZC: Zadar County

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Executive summary

Programme short name	HR-LOCALDEV
Programme Operator	Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds - Croatia (HR)
Host Programme Area	PA10 Local Development and Poverty Reduction
Financial Mechanisms	EEA Grants, Norway Grants
Programme grant in EUR	**€ 27,424,310.14**
Programme co-financing in EUR	**€ 4,839,584.14**
Final incurred amount in EUR	**€ 30,031,254.41**
Final incurred rate %	**93.08 %**

The Local Development and Poverty Reduction Programme (LDPR Programme) was launched in September 2020, with the signing of the LDPR Programme Agreement. As the next step, LDRP Programme Implementation Agreement was signed between the parties on 19 April 2021. While the first project commenced on 1 July 2021, the majority began in the second half of 2022, with an official end date set for April 2024. However, due to approved extensions, the last project was completed on 31 January 2025.

The total budget for the LDPR Programme was EUR 32,263,894.28, comprising European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants, national co-financing, and funds allocated for bilateral relations. Out of the total LDPR Programme budget, EUR 30,031,254.41 was incurred. The final absorption rate of the allocated funds to the LDPR Programme was thus slightly above 93%.

LDPR Programme presented an important initiative that sought to strengthen social and economic cohesion in Croatia by promoting inclusive and sustainable development, particularly through education. The LDPR Programme strengthened the skills and competences of primary school teachers and students, with particular emphasis on the STEM disciplines. It also supported the advancement of innovative classroom infrastructure and the improvement of the overall learning environment. By supporting the primary education system, LDPR Programme enhances student achievements in secondary and tertiary education. It also contributes to strengthening local communities, enhances employment opportunities, and promotes self-employment in the future**.** An important aspect of the LDPR Programme was to provide funding for less developed areas, where fewer opportunities were offered, and students with special educational needs (both children with disabilities and gifted children). Other key investment areas of LDPR Programme were regional planning and disaster preparedness.

Opportunities for such investments had up to LDPR Programme been very limited, meaning that LDPR Programme most prominently contributes to the development of underfunded policy areas, thus creating strong added value in comparison to other available measures.

The LDPR Programme was successfully completed in the available time period, i.e., by 30 April 2025. All planned results were achieved through the implementation of 34 projects. To highlight some:

- Improved ability in STEM teaching was achieved in case of 93% of professionals through the implementation of 146 educational programmes;
- STEM skills were improved in case of 85% of pupils participating in the implementation of 254 educational programmes;
- Classroom infrastructure and equipment for the development of functional STEM classrooms were upgraded in 69 primary schools;
- Four Regional Science Centres for Primary Education in the STEM area were developed.

Although the LDPR Programme was successfully completed and the planned results achieved, several notable challenges arose during otherwise smooth implementation of projects. The main factors that caused delays were the implementation of public procurement procedures, adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, lengthy preparation and approval process of projects' quarterly implementation reports, and staffing issues. However, they were successfully mitigated due to effective and flexible management by the Programme Operator (PO) on the one hand, and on the other hand, by the high motivation and strong commitment of project promoters.

Financial resources of the LDPR Programme were adequately planned given its scope and implementation timeframe. Human resources for the implementation of the LDPR Programme of both the PO and many project promoters were however strained due to heavy workloads. Administrative burden was primarily noticeable regarding the reporting requirements.

The LDPR Programme enabled strong collaboration between project promoters and partners at both national and international level. These partnerships positively impacted beneficiaries and communities, especially in STEM and inclusive education. Many project promoters plan to continue the cooperation with their donor partner.

Specific measures to ensure the sustainability of results financed under the LDPR Programme were defined for each project. Good practices include further knowledge transfer, trainings, networking, and similar activities. Finally, many project promoters plan to or have already included the newly developed programs into their schools' curricula through a diverse range of extracurricular activities designed for children with and without special educational needs.

To ensure smoother project implementation in future similar programmes, the experts recommend to the PO to undertake measures regarding strengthening the administrative capacities on both sides – the project promoters' and the PO's. Furthermore, the PO is invited to consider approving larger advance payments and introducing the payment method from the start to help project promoters better manage their project budgets. Finaly, procedural clarity and communication could be additionally improved by implementing an online platform with dedicated sections (FAQs) and examples of forms and documentation - such as properly completed reports, reporting checklists, thereby reducing the administrative burden on programme managers.

Other measures to improve the effectiveness of investments had been identified with regard to the implementation of reviews of educational materials to ensure quality and curriculum alignment, mandatory surveys to assess improvements in STEM skills, and finally collaboration between project promoters and their partners to support more impactful, sustainable international partnerships.

Introduction

This Final Report on the Evaluation of the Programme "Local Development and Poverty Reduction" (LDPR Programme) contains a description of the LDPR Programme's context, the methodology used, answers to evaluation questions (EQs), followed by main findings and recommendations. Annexes to the repot include:

- Annex 1 Projects funded under "Local Development and Poverty Reduction" Programme in the financing period 2014-2021
- Annex 2 List of Documents Reviewed during Desk Research
- Annex 3 Annex 3 Biographies of Evaluation Experts

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the achievement of the LDPR Programme's objectives through the implemented projects, the alignment of the conducted activities with the LDPR Programme's objectives and identify areas for improvement while providing guidelines for enhancing future projects. The evaluation assessed the relevance and coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and impact of the LDPR Programme and its components, the importance and value that bilateral cooperation added to the results and outputs, and to the daily implementation of the LDPR Programme's activities.

Context

Local Development and Poverty Reduction Programme

The period of the LDPR Programme preparation and its predefined projects (PDPs) and Calls for Proposals (CfPs) was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). The pandemic had a strong negative impact on local economies, further worsening the situation in less developed regions. Additionally, the 2020 earthquakes in the suburbs of the City of Zagreb and the underdeveloped Petrinja region, further deteriorated the quality of life for the local population in the affected areas. On top of that, inflation and the 2022 energy crisis caused by the global geopolitical situation, such as the war in Ukraine, further endangered households with low incomes, limited investments and slowed down overall progress.

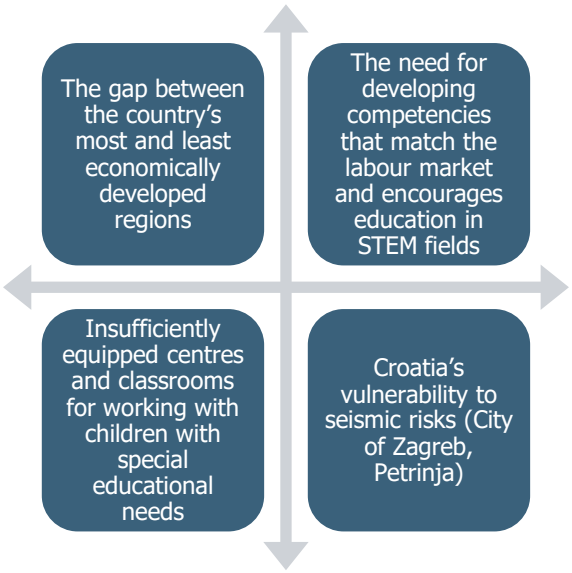
In spite of these unfavourable circumstances, LDPR Programme was successfully prepared and adopted in September 2020 with the signing of the LDPR Programme Agreement. Its implementation was launched in April 2021 with the signing of LDPR Programme Implementation Agreement as its potential positive contribution became ever more needed and welcome.

The National Focal Point (NFP) in Croatia is the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds (MRDEUF), and its Directorate for Strategic Planning and Coordination of EU Funds, Sector for EU programmes and International Financial Mechanisms, Service for Coordination of EU Programmes and Programming of International Financial Mechanisms. While the NFP bears overall responsibility for the achievement of the objectives of both financial mechanisms and for monitoring the progress and quality of LDPR Programme's implementation, the LDPR Programme's implementation itself is

managed by MRDEUF's Service for Management, Monitoring and Evaluation of EU Programmes and International Financial Mechanisms within the Sector for EU programmes and International Financial Mechanisms, falling under the Directorate for Strategic Planning and Coordination of EU Funds, and serving as the **Programme Operator (PO)**. In addition, the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-DIR) was the Donor Programme Partner for the LDPR Programme, designated to provide expert support to the PO during LDPR Programme's implementation.

The main challenges that the LDPR Programme seeks to address are presented in the following Figure.

Figure: LDPR Programme's context



These challenges were translated in the LDPR Programme's objective – **strengthening social and economic cohesion** in Croatia.

The LDPR Programme was to achieve **five key outcomes**.

Outcome 1: Improved skills and competencies of teachers and other professionals in primary education

The LDPR Programme's activities aimed to **enhance the quality of education at the primary level** by supporting teachers' and educational staff's professional development. A small grant scheme titled "Improved Skills and Competencies of Teachers and Other Educational Workers in Primary Education" was introduced to provide resources for training, development programmes, and other initiatives aimed at improving educators' skills and competencies, ultimately benefiting students across the country. It was in the modality of a temporary open call, published on 3 May 2021, with a three-month deadline for the submission of project proposals set for 2 August 2021. Only one modification was made to the CfP in June 2021, encompassing only minor changes. The minimum grant that could have been awarded to an individual project was EUR 50,000.00, and the maximum EUR 200,000.00. A total of 55 grant applications were received and in May 2022 9 projects were contracted with the total allocation of EUR 1.382.580,48. Projects

aimed to enhance the quality of education by strengthening the competencies of teachers and other educational staff in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), entrepreneurship, and active citizenship, thereby contributing to the reduction of social and economic disparities among EU countries. The projects also focused on children with special educational needs. Most project activities included teacher training, the development of learning materials and manuals, the revision of school curricula, and the creation of non-formal educational programmes for extracurricular activities. Project promoters were three schools, two NGOs, two adult education institutions, one regional development agency, and one national agency, all active in the primary education sector.

Outcome 2: Enhanced STEM skills

To meet the growing demand for STEM skills, the LDPR Programme's activities promoted STEM education and aimed to **improve student performance in STEM**. A dedicated CfP titled "Strengthening STEM skills in primary schools and development of Regional Science Centres for STEM education in primary schools" was launched to support projects that enhance STEM learning environments, boost student engagement, and encourage more students to pursue STEM careers, thereby contributing to the development of a highly skilled workforce. Under the same CfP, Projects aiming to strengthen the STEM competencies of teachers and students to enhance the future generations' competitiveness in the labour market, particularly for students with special educational needs were also supported. The CfP was also implemented as a temporary call, published on 29 April 2021, consisting of two components (A and B), and with a three-month period for submission of project proposals under Component A, ending on 28 July 2021, and a four-month period under Component B, ending on 27 August 2021. One amendment to the CfP was made in June 2021, consisting of several minor changes. Total available amount of financing under Call 2 was EUR 22.270.362, of which EUR 10.000.000 was allocated for Component A "Developing STEM skills through equipping school classrooms with STEM equipment", and EUR 12.270.362 for Component B, "Establishing Regional Science Centres for STEM education in primary schools". Under Component A, the minimum amount of grant that could have been awarded to an individual project was EUR 200.000,00, and the maximum EUR 1.000.000,00, while under Component B, the minimum amount was EUR 1.000.000,00 and maximum EUR 3.000.000,00. A total of 96 project applications were received for Component A, 18 of which were contracted. Under Component B, 20 project applications were received and 4 projects contracted. All projects were contracted in July or October 2022 with the total allocation of EUR 21.775.421,70.

Activities implemented within the contracted projects included teacher training, workshops, equipping STEM classrooms, developing learning materials, and creating educational programmes to foster STEM competencies through extracurricular activities. Project promoters under Component A were primary schools (15), mostly in underdeveloped areas, and their founders – legal persons and local government units (3). Project promoters of the four projects establishing Regional Science Centres for STEM education in primary schools were two cities (Ludbreg and Šibenik), and two counties (Split-Dalmatia and Osijek-Baranja). A Regional Science Centre for STEM education in primary schools is an informal form of cooperation between schools, local

and regional self-government units and other interested stakeholders (including the Republic of Croatia) aiming to establish the premises and conducting specialized activities for pupils at the local or regional level.

Outcome 3: Enhanced tools for creating equal opportunities in education for pupils with disabilities

The LDPR Programme's activities aimed to foster **inclusive education** by creating **better opportunities for students with disabilities**. One predefined project, titled 'Enhanced Tools for Creating Equal Opportunities in Education for Pupils with Disabilities - ATTEND' (PDP1), and contracted on 1 July 2021, is dedicated to improving educational tools and resources, ensuring that pupils with disabilities have access to quality education tailored to their needs, thereby promoting equal opportunities within the education system. Project Promoter was the Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNET), in partnership with the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences (ERF), and the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing (FER) on Croatian side, and the City of Reykjavik and its Department for Education and Youth, the Icelandic partner. The total grant awarded to PDP1 was EUR 4.235.294,41 EUR.

Outcome 4: Enhanced strategic planning at national and regional levels

The LDPR Programme's activities sought to strengthen Croatia's planning capacities at the national and regional levels. A predefined project, 'Enhanced Strategic Planning at Regional and Local Levels in Croatia' (PDP2), supports the development of strategic frameworks that enable local and regional governments to plan and implement sustainable development projects more effectively. The project was contracted on 31 August 2022. Its objective was to **improve governance**, foster **regional collaboration**, and contribute to balanced development across the country following the National development strategy. The project promoter was MRDEUF and its Sector for Strategic Planning and Development Management, with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as project partner. The total grant awarded to PDP2 was EUR 1.082.579,00.

Outcome 5: Improved knowledge base for the development of seismic risk policies

Finally, the LDPR Programme aimed to address Croatia's vulnerability to seismic risks by improving the country's knowledge base on seismic hazards. On 25 February 2022, the predefined project 'Investigation of Seismically Vulnerable Areas in Croatia and Seismic Ground Motion Assessment' (PDP3) was contracted. The project focused on identifying vulnerable areas and assessing seismic risks. The purpose of the project was to reduce seismic risk for the Republic of Croatia, enhancing **preparedness and resilience**. This provided crucial data for developing policies aimed at minimising the impact of earthquakes and strengthening disaster preparedness and resilience in affected regions. The project promoter was the Faculty of Science, University of Zagreb, Department for Geophysics, and project partner the University of Bergen, Department for Planet Earth. PDP3 was contracted in the amount EUR 2,520,687.00.

In parallel, LDPR Programme strongly encouraged **institutional cooperation** between stakeholders in Croatia and donor states by financing projects involving cooperation with partners from Norway, Lichtenstein or Iceland. Finally, 33 out of 34 contracted projects included cooperation with a donor project partner.

By the end of LDPR Programme's implementation period, i.e., 30 April 2025, **all 34 projects were successfully completed. This led to LDPR Programme's planned results not only being achieved, but surpassed**. Most significant benefits were visible through improvements in student and staff skills, STEM infrastructure, and equal education opportunities for students with disabilities. Successful implementation was largely driven by the high motivation and strong commitment of both project promoters and their partners. Another success factor was continuous guidance and support provided to them by the PO, i.e., the MRDEUF.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation covered all 34 projects[1] implemented within the LDPR Programme. The evaluators used standard data collection and analysis methods to answer the evaluation questions. Relevant documents and data from secondary (administrative) sources formed the backbone of data sources. They were supplemented by primary sources, relying on interviews and field visits. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in analysing the collected data. The evaluation was based on data triangulation using the sources and methods described below.

Desk Research

The desk research relied greatly on the repository of available programming documents, and the preliminary analysis of available documents and data sources[2].

Interviews

As a qualitative research method, interviews supplement and clarify the results of the desk research and enable in-depth insight into LDPR Programme's implementation and achievements. The target groups encompassed the Service for Management, Monitoring & Evaluation of EU Programmes and International Financial Mechanisms within MRDEUF as the Programme Operator, and the Project Promoters of the 34 implemented projects. Four semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Programme Operator and Project Promoters were conducted online for the evaluation:

- 26 February 2025: Interview with the Programme Operator
- 13 March 2025: Interview with the Project Promoter of the project ATTEND – Enhanced Tools for Creating Equal Opportunities in Education for Pupils with Disabilities (PDP1)
- 13 March 2025: Interview with the Project Promoter of the project Pametno selo – Capabilities of a smart village (45)

[1] For short descriptions of projects, see Annex 1

[2] The key documents that were considered for the desk research are listed in Annex 2

- 20 March 2025: Interview with the Project Promoter of the project STEM Tech – STEM Tech (78A)

Field Visits

Field visits were conducted for three projects. They were essential to assess the LDPR Programme's impact in real-world contexts and gain a deeper understanding of its practical implementation. These visits observed how the objectives translate into tangible outcomes, by engaging directly with stakeholders, and identifying any challenges and successes on the ground. By combining qualitative insights from the field with quantitative data, it was ensured that the evaluation captured a holistic view, enhancing the credibility and relevance of our findings. The field visits were made for the following projects:

1) 19 March 2025: Bio Mozaik Krš i more - Bioeconomy, schools and gardens of Wisdom, Sustainability, Knowledge, Action, Innovation and Creation for our karst and sea (80A)
2) 02 April 2025: RZC PAN HR - Regional scientific center of Pannonian Croatia (11B)
3) 03 April 2025: InClass4Future - Inclusive Classroom of the Future (28)

Research Findings by Evaluation Criteria

RELEVANCE/COHERENCE

EQ1: To what extent is programme design relevant to the country's context and coherent with national strategies? In relation to the priority areas, how does the programme provide added value?

LDPR Programme is highly relevant to the Croatian national context, well-aligned with and complementary to strategic priorities in education, local development, and poverty reduction. It addresses the compounded challenges of regional disparities, the COVID-19 pandemic, and natural disasters (earthquake), particularly in underdeveloped areas. Also, LDPR Programme most prominently contributes to the development of underfunded policy areas, thus creating strong added value in comparison to other available measures.

Since joining the EU in July 2013, Croatia's macroeconomic performance has notably improved. Nevertheless, large demographic and socio-economic disparities across its regions persist. The gap between the country's most and least economically developed regions (the City of Zagreb and Pannonian Croatia, respectively) is continuously increasing. In 2013 GDP per capita in Pannonian Croatia was 63% lower than that of Zagreb, and increased additionally to 66% in 2021. Moreover, all counties reported population shrinkage between 2011 and 2021, with underdeveloped regions losing more population. Such trends led to Croatia reforming its legislative and strategic planning framework for regional development in 2017. That and other reforms culminated in the

adoption of the ***National Development Strategy 2030 (NDS 2030)***, which included, among other, Strategic Goal 2 "Educated and employed people", and Strategic goal 12 "Development of assisted areas and areas with development specificities", relevant to LDPR Programme.

Furthermore, in the period 2014-2020, Croatia undertook various measures to encourage local development and reduce poverty. It did that notably by implementing ***EU Cohesion Policy***, and using significant European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds' resources to stimulate regional and local development. In particular, MRDEUF implemented the ***Programme for Integrated Physical, Economic and Social Regeneration of Small Towns in War-Affected Areas***, co-financed from European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds, which represented a new approach to integrated investments implemented in five deprived pilot areas (Beli Manastir with the municipality of Darda, Benkovac, Knin, Petrinja and Vukovar). The goal to be achieved through this territorially based approach was, among other things, to support integrated physical, economic and social regeneration of deprived areas, reduce social inequality, exclusion and poverty, improve infrastructure, strengthen growth potential, and strengthen social inclusion. This programme is therefore complementary to LDPR Programme which enabled investments into the strengthening of social and economic cohesion through the financing of projects in the field of primary school education with an emphasis on the STEM field.

At the same time, it continuously worked on developing its own ***System of strategic planning and development management***, at both regional and local levels, with additional focus on underdeveloped areas. Additionally, Croatia adopted the *Act on Regional Development* in 2014, followed by, among other, ***Law on Assisted Areas*** (i.e., underdeveloped areas). In addition, under the ***2014-2020 Rural Development Programme for Croatia***, and its priority *Social inclusion and local development in rural areas*, financing was allocated for Measure 7: "Basic services and village renewal in rural areas", aimed at creating non-agricultural jobs through the diversification and development of small enterprises.

Regarding the Croatian education system, surveys indicated that the achievement of Croatian pupils at primary school level is lower in some STEM area subjects in comparison with other countries, which indicates that pupils finishing primary school generally tend to lack certain skills which might help them to achieve better results later on at mid-level or at higher levels of education. In relation to that, policy measure 2.3. of the ***National Plan for the Development of the Education System until 2027*** – "*Improving the implementation of the curriculum and the quality of teaching*" – relies on the implementation of projects for strengthening capacities for STEM teaching and projects aiming to increase the STEM skills of pupils in primary schools under the LDPR Programme. In addition, under this National Plan, measures under Specific Objective 6 are aimed at supporting children with developmental needs and disabilities, and measures under Specific Objective 7 gifted children. Therefore, by financing projects targeting the improvement of education of children with developmental needs and disabilities and gifted children, the LDPR Programme supports the achievement of national policy objectives.

Although effective use of EU funds, educational and social policies, and regional development strategies had led to considerable progress, there was a need for continued efforts to reduce regional disparities, strengthen educational and employment opportunities, and better integrate social innovations. Moreover, challenges remained in effectively implementing policies that support sustainable poverty reduction and improve living standards across all regions of Croatia.

With that in mind, during the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2021, Croatia had access to various programmes and projects funded by the EEA FM which additionally helped in achieving its strategic objectives. In the same vein, contributions from Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein through this mechanism contributed to reducing social and economic disparities in Croatia, while strengthening bilateral relations with beneficiary countries, as a notable additional value.

Against this general context, and the described national policy and strategic framework, **LDPR Programme presented an important initiative that sought to contribute to both a more balanced regional development, and the development of the primary education system.** .

Namely, **the 34 projects implemented under LDPR Programme align with the legal framework of Croatia**. As most of the projects focused on improving educational staff and students' competencies, the projects especially reflect the objectives of the strategically important national documents relevant to the education system. LDPR Programme is in line with the ***National Strategy for Science and Education***, which emphasises the importance of accessible, inclusive, and quality education for all. The strategy highlights the need for developing competencies that match the labour market and encourages education in STEM fields. In addition, *local development programmes* invest in educational institutions, especially in less developed areas, thus enabling equal access to education regardless of place of residence or social status. They also include education for students and teaching staff in the fields of STEM, ICT, active citizenship, and entrepreneurship, to reduce poverty and stimulate the local economy. LDPR Programme thus supports such activities in primary schools in underdeveloped regions, through investment in equipment, teacher education, and curriculum development.

LDPR Programme primarily addressed the needs and the challenges related to supporting the development of the creation of a primary education system that will enable better achievements at the later stages of the education process and thus contribute to increased job prospects in future in the underdeveloped regions.

Furthermore, both the national strategy and LDPR Programme support cooperation among institutions, partnerships with civil society, and the introduction of innovations in the educational process. This strengthens local communities' capacity to independently recognise and solve problems, which is the foundation of sustainable development. Opportunities for such all-encompassing measures had up to LDPR Programme been very limited, meaning that LDPR Programme most prominently contributes to the development of underfunded policy areas, thus creating strong added value in comparison to other available measures.

LDPR Programme further aligns with the ***National Curriculum Framework***, *the* ***National Curriculum for Primary Level Education***, *the Subjects Curricula (biology, chemistry, physics, natural sciences, technical education, computer science, and mathematics)*.

LDPR Programme also aligns with the *curricula of cross-subject themes*: Entrepreneurship, Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Civic Education, and Sustainable Development. The curricula of cross-subject themes focus on active learning strategies with a multidisciplinary approach to learning and teaching. Entrepreneurship is a tool for developing entrepreneurial spirit, problem solving, and encouraging active citizenship, all relevant in the context of fostering local development. LDRP Programme is further linked to the cross-subject theme of civic education, as it focuses on active citizenship, rights, responsibilities, and participation in the community. Through civic education, students learn to analyse and recognise the needs of vulnerable groups in the community (the poor, the elderly, the unemployed, national minorities, and children with disabilities). Moreover, ICT can play a key role in increasing the efficiency, accessibility, and sustainability of local development initiatives. Likewise, ICT enables better resource management, easier access to information, and new business opportunities. Local development and poverty reduction initiatives in these four areas financed under the LDPR Programme directly support strengthening of social and economic cohesion as the main objective of LDPR Programme.

LDPR Programme is also coherent with applicable regulations, such as the ***Regulation on Primary and Secondary Education for Students with Disabilities*, and *2021 Guidelines for working with students with disabilities***. Due to a lack of equipment, space, and teacher competencies in working with assistive technology, the implementation of the LDPR Programme in certain parts of Croatia allowed for the provision of fully adequate education for students with disabilities through acquired assistive technology. The implementation of the LDPR Programme also put special attention on activities for gifted students , which aligns with the ***2022 Guidelines for Working with Gifted Children and Students***.

When it comes to the three PDPs under LDPR Programme, they are aligned with the following policy and strategic documents specifically:

PDP1 – This project focused on supporting children with disabilities, aiming to ensure equal access to education. This objective aligns with the priorities outlined in the *Strategy for Education, Science, and Technology*, as well as with the *Regulation on the Education of Students with Disabilities* and its accompanying Guidelines.

PDP2 – *Law on the System of Strategic Planning and Development Management of the Republic of Croatia* (Official Gazette No. 123/2017); *Rules on Monitoring and Reporting on the Implementation of Strategic Planning Documents* (Official Gazette No. 6/2019); *Law on Regional Development of the Republic of Croatia* (Official Gazette Nos. 147/14, 123/17, 118/18), and the National Development Strategy 2030.

PDP3 – *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia* (2017, Official Gazette No. 73/17), which identifies earthquakes as one of the three major natural disaster risks in the Republic of Croatia; *Disaster Risk Assessment for the Republic of Croatia*.

The LDPR Programme translates principles and strategic objectives of the above-mentioned documents into real life projects, as well as facilitates compliance with the legislative framework. Projects under the LDPR Programme are financed in policy areas in which available resources had been limited, meaning that LDPR Programme most prominently contributes to the development of underfunded policy areas, thus creating strong added value in comparison to other available measures.

Opportunities for all-encompassing measures in primary education system had up to LDPR Programme been very limited.

The majority of project promoters also confirmed that LDPR Programme provided added value by enhancing support and ensuring equal access to education for all students, with a particular focus on students with special educational needs (including students with developmental difficulties and gifted students) in primary education. Furthermore, schools and project promoters have noted that without the support of LDPR Programme, they would not have been able to acquire such advanced equipment, materials, and infrastructure. PO also emphasized that improvements in infrastructure and staff competencies have directly benefited students, enhancing their overall competencies, which aligns with the core objectives of LDPR Programme.

Finally, the LDPR Programme enabled the development of Regional Science Centres for STEM education in primary schools which will be integrated into the network of institutions supporting the education of gifted children and pupils through extracurricular activities, following the adoption of the *Ordinance on the Education of Gifted children and pupils*.

EQ2: To what extent does the programme complement or has synergy with EU initiatives? What is the added value of the programme compared with similar EU initiatives?

LDPR integrates seamlessly with EU and international initiatives.

The projects implemented within the LDPR Programme are in synergy with current European initiatives such as:

- ***European Pillar of Social Rights***

By supporting the improvement of the primary education capacity in (STEM) teaching, and by enhancing the (STEM) skills of pupils in primary schools, the LDPR Programme provided pupils with equal opportunities for primary education and acquisition of competencies for becoming active and responsible citizens and ultimately successfully integrating into the labour market. Furthermore, by equipping the Centres for Training and Education (CTEs) with assistive technologies, the LDPR Programme helped schools in providing high quality education to children with disabilities and achieving better educational success for children with disabilities. Through these investments, the LDPR Programme directly adheres to the principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights – Education, training and life-long learning, principle 3 – Equal opportunities, and principle 17 – Inclusion of people with disabilities.

- ***EU Digital Education Action Plan***

By focusing on ICT skills and equipping schools with assistive and digital learning technologies, the LDPR Programme supports both developing a high performing digital education ecosystem (priority 1 of the EU Digital Education Action Plan), and enhancing digital competences for the digital transformation (priority 2 of the EU Digital Education Action Plan).

- ***EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027***

By giving special attention to projects from less developed areas, the LDPR Programme's regional and local development efforts contributed directly to the EU Cohesion Policy goals of reducing disparities between regions and promoting sustainable regional development.

- ***Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning***

By financing projects aiming to provide quality education in the four thematic areas – STEM education, information and communication technologies (ICT) in education, entrepreneurship in skills development and increased job prospects, and active citizenship, the LDPR Programme aligns with the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning emphasising the importance of developing key competencies such as mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering, digital competence, citizenship competence, and entrepreneurship competence.

- ***EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030***

Inclusive and accessible education, as one of the objectives of the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, is supported through the LDPR Programme, namely by financing projects in primary schools which implement programmes for working with pupils with difficulties (under Call 1 and Call 2), and by investing in assistive technologies and teacher training (under PDP 1).

- ***The EU Framework for Education and Training of Gifted Students***

Both focus on capacity building for educators to support diverse learners, including those with advanced potential. Additionally, there is a shared goal of creating stimulating, high-quality learning settings that allow gifted and talented students to thrive. Financing initiatives in this domain, namely programmes for working with gifted pupils was enabled through Call 1 and Call 2 of the LDPR Programme.

Additionally, PDP1 is aligned with the following key documents:

- ***The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*** – defining under article 24. the obligation of the States Parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning;
- ***The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*** – obliging the State Parties to enable to a mentally or physically disabled child enjoying a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community, including education;
- ***The European Disability Strategy 2010–2020*** – calling for actions to remove legal and organisational barriers for people with disabilities to general education and lifelong learning systems; provide timely support for inclusive education and personalised learning, and early identification of special needs; provide adequate training and support for professionals working at all levels of education and report on participation rates and outcomes; and

- ***The Council of Europe Disability Strategy*** – putting emphasis on work and activities regarding improved access for persons with disabilities to information, education and training, as one of the cross-cutting themes of the Strategy.

The alignment between the abovementioned documents and PDP1 is established at the level of both the overall and the specific objective of PDP1. The overall objective of PDP1 is to support the creation of effective preconditions contributing to equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities and their better and more successful inclusion into the society. The specific objective of the project is to improve the education of children with disabilities by providing access to special assistive technologies as well as an adequate and efficient usage of these technologies in educational activities of children with disabilities.

By facilitating the development and modernization of seismic hazard assessment in Croatia and shaping of seismic risk reduction policies, the PDP3 is further aligned with the following documents:

- The ***Seismological Affairs Act*** – which defines seismological activities of special social interest as activities of monitoring, registering and analysing seismic phenomena, collecting and processing data on the manifestation of seismic phenomena on land, buildings and other structures;
- ***Directive 2007/2/EC of March 2007 on establishing an Infrastructure for Spatial Information in the European Community (INSPIRE)*** – emphasizing the need to collect geological data, data on natural risk areas, identifying geo-hazards, ensuring safer construction, providing data needed for environmental planning and earthquake monitoring in EU Member States;
- The standard HRN EN 1998-1, ***Eurocode 8: Design of Structures for Earthquake Resistance*** – laying down special rules for masonry buildings constructed in seismic areas and referring to the seismic hazard map;
- The ***Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030—***a global framework adopted by 187 United Nations member states (including Croatia) – recognizing state institutions as the primary actors responsible for disaster risk

reduction and requires that this responsibility be shared with other actors, including local authorities, the private sector, the non-governmental sector and others; and

- The ***European Commission Communication COM(2016) 739*** – which highlights the necessity of integrating disaster risk reduction into national policies across all EU Member States.

EFFECTIVENESS

EQ3: To what extent has the programme achieved the planned results, taking into account the specific issues of the programme?

The LDPR Programme has achieved the planned results through its projects, despite the challenges described under EQ4. The planned results within Outcome 1 have even been overachieved. The same is observed for all results within Outcome 2 and Outcome 3, and most results within Outcome 5. Regarding Outcome 3 and Outcome 5, the overachievement of results was also facilitated by increasing the funds allocated to the two PDPs.

LDPR Programme was successful in providing support to teachers and other primary education workers for the purpose of long-term development of skills that meet the needs of the labour market, and providing pupils with equal opportunities for primary education, competencies for becoming active and responsible citizens, and ultimately facilitating their successful integration into the labour market. Furthermore, the planned objectives related to infrastructure improvements have been met - planned equipment was procured, and construction works were completed as intended.

The evidence of these achievements is presented in the following table presenting the achieved values for indicators used to monitor the LDPR Programme's outcomes and outputs.

Table 1 Indicators for LDPR Programme's outcomes and outputs

OUTCOME 1: Improved skills and competencies of teachers and other professionals in primary education			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Share of teachers and other professionals in primary education who declare improved skills/competences in areas of STEM, ICT, entrepreneurship and active citizenship	n/a	70%	96%
Level of satisfaction with the quality of enhanced competences	n/a	3,5	6,49
Output 1.1: Approaches and practices in promoting skills and competences for STEM area, ICT, entrepreneurship and active citizenship upgraded			

INDICATOR	BASELINE VALUE	TARGET VALUE	ACHIEVED VALUE
Number of intellectual outputs generated by improving skills and competences	0	30	58
Number of professionals trained on the use of teaching models, methods, strategies	0	75	687
Output 1.2: Institutional cooperation for sharing knowledge and good practices on skills and competencies at all levels of education			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of institutions involved in cooperation activities	0	7	117
OUTCOME 2: Enhanced STEM skills			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Share of professionals self-reporting on improved ability in STEM teaching	n/a	70%	93%
Share of pupils self-reporting on improved STEM skills	n/a	50%	85%
Output 2.1: Classroom infrastructure and equipment for development of functional STEM classrooms upgraded			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of schools introducing STEM classrooms	0	10	69
Number of schools with improved services	0	10	111
Output 2.2: Regional Science Centres developed			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of Regional Science Centres developed	0	2	4
Output 2.3: STEM skills of professionals in primary education upgraded			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of educational programmes (TOT) for STEM skills, ICT, entrepreneurship and active citizenship for professionals implemented	0	4	146
Number of educational programmes for STEM skills, ICT, entrepreneurship and active citizenship for pupils implemented	0	4	254
Number of staff participating in the development and testing of teaching models, practices and education activities for STEM-	0	300	1.644

based skills, ICT, entrepreneurship and active citizenship			
Number of pupils enrolled in STEM programmes/courses	0	2.000	9.970
Number of pupils participating in extracurricular classes	0	200	9.194
OUTCOME 3: Enhanced tools for creating equal opportunities in education for pupils with disabilities			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of beneficiaries of services provided or improved	0	1.000	2.170
Output 3.1: Schools for children with special educational needs equipped with assistive technology			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of special-needs schools equipped with assistive technologies	0	27	34
Number of professionals trained	0	450	1.324
Number of pupils trained in use of assistive technologies	0	1.000	2.170
OUTCOME 4: Enhanced coordination at national and regional (local) levels			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of County Development Agencies declaring improved project-related public services	0	21	21
Share of professional staff who declared improved relevant skills and competences for the efficient and timely implementation of NDS 2030	n/a	100%	100%
Output 4.1: Capacity building workshops, and other training sessions implemented			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of professional staff trained in efficient and timely implementation of NDS 2030	0	75	86
Number of seminars organised	0	5	5
Number of study tours organised	0	2	2
Output 4.2: Knowledge sharing activities implemented			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of multi-stakeholder regional development fora	0	3	3

Number of participants at multi-stakeholder regional development forums	0	100	128
Output 4.3: Analysis of the approach to deliver the NDS though integrated investments at the regional and local levels conducted			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Multi-level Governance Report on Integrated Investments drafted	NO	YES	YES
Output 4.4: Specific recommendations for Croatian regions developed			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of tailored policy recommendations issued by OECD for regional-level policy makers	0	4	4
OUTCOME 5: Improved knowledge base for development of seismic risk policies			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of key stakeholders informed on project results	n/a	10	34
Number of peer-reviewed scientific publications submitted	5	8	15
Output 5.1: Seismically most vulnerable areas in Croatia monitored and investigated			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of fault regions mapped and seismogenic potential estimations	0	1	1
Number of earthquake shaking scenarios calculated	0	1	2
Number of Ground Motion Prediction Equations (GMPE) representative for the territory of Croatia developed	0	1	1
Output 5.2: Capacity building for earthquake research in Croatia			
INDICATOR	**BASELINE VALUE**	**TARGET VALUE**	**ACHIEVED VALUE**
Number of newly installed seismic instruments	25	53	66
Number of researchers supported	0	5	5
Number of maps (e.g., seismic fault maps), lectures, videos, promotional materials	0	5	14

The table above shows, but it should be emphasised, that through the projects:

- **687 teachers and other educational staff in primary education were trained** in the areas of STEM, ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship while 96% of them declare to have improved skills/competences in areas of STEM, ICT, entrepreneurship and active citizenship;
- **Improved ability in STEM teaching is achieved in case of 93% of professionals** through the **implementation of 146 educational programmes**
- **STEM skills are improved in case of 85% of pupils** participating in the **implementation of 254 educational programmes**;
- Classroom infrastructure and equipment for the development of functional **STEM classrooms were upgraded in 69 primary schools**;
- **Four Regional Science Centres for Primary Education in the STEM area have been developed**;
- Tools for creating equal opportunities in education for pupils with disabilities have been enhanced – **34 CTEs are now equipped with assistive technologies**, **1.324 professionals are trained to apply assistive technologies** in their everyday work, and **2.170 pupils are trained in use of assistive technologies**;
- Coordination at the national and regional (local) levels has been strengthened through capacity building events (trainings on efficient and timely implementation of NDS 2030, five seminars, and two study tours), knowledge sharing initiatives (three multi-stakeholder regional development fora), and policy design related activities (Multi-level Governance Report on Integrated Investments, and four tailored policy recommendations issued by OECD for regional-level policy makers). As a result, the **21 county development agencies** that participated in the project activities **reported significant improvements in public services related to the project as a result of the activities**. Professional staff from the county development agencies involved in the project reported, in evaluation questionnaires, that they gained improved relevant skills and competencies. The training and capacity-building activities, as well as the study visits provided through the project, effectively equipped staff with the necessary expertise to support the strategy;
- The **knowledge base for the development of seismic risk policies has been improved** through mapping and seismogenic potential estimations, earthquake shaking scenarios calculations, and development of a Ground Motion Prediction Equations (GMPE) representative for the territory of Croatia, on the one hand, and on the other hand, by installing new seismic instruments, and supporting of researchers; and
- The **bilateral cooperation** between project promoters in the Republic of Croatia and donor project partners was **established**.

Finally, there are examples of results achieved which were not foreseen. For example, within PDP1 'Enhanced Tools for Creating Equal Opportunities in Education for Pupils with Disabilities', the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences (ERF) developed

a digital manual to complement the project's educational activities and materials and procured additional equipment for which the need arose during project implementation.

To gain a better insight into the improvement of STEM skills, their measuring techniques should be further developed. When it comes to assessing the improvement of STEM and other competencies of both, teachers and other professionals, and pupils, project promoters used survey questionnaires approved by MRDEUF representatives. The minimum content for such a questionnaire was proposed by MRDEUF and was primarily focused on collecting information on the satisfaction with the activities, and improved competences from the self-assessment perspective. Project promoters could use these questionnaires to collect additional relevant information if needed. The review of these questionnaires revealed that they lacked relevant indicators for measuring the improvement of specific competencies, such as STEM skills. Therefore, it is recommended that the PO liaise with experts holding qualifications in the natural sciences and in teacher education programmes (subject-specific pedagogy and educational psychology)-to develop a more robust monitoring and evaluation framework. It is essential to have baseline and monitoring data to accurately assess the result of project activities.

EQ4: Which factors have influenced/influence the achievement or non-achievement of the planned outcomes?

All the planned outcomes were achieved. The LDPR Programme was successfully implemented due to effective and flexible management by the PO and committed project promoters and partners.

During LDPR Programme implementation the POs effective and flexible management was demonstrated through **several key actions**. These included:

- Providing to project promoters a detailed and extensive implementation documentation package and organizing workshops at the beginning of the implementation phase.
- Being responsive and available for any ad-hoc support to project promoters during project implementation. This often meant assisting them on a daily basis (for example, via emails, phone calls, virtual meetings), sometimes facilitating the cooperation of project promoters and their partners.
- Close monitoring of project procurement plans based on risk assessment (i.e., the PO made the analysis of procurement plans and shortlisted the ones to be monitored closely).
- Increasing funds for projects with potential to achieve even better results than originally planned.
- Finding solutions to address any arising challenges in a timely manner. For example, when the unstable market caused shortage of products, late deliveries, and notable price increases, mitigation measures implemented included:
    - Introducing the payment method – it was available for costs of works and purchase of equipment higher than EUR 5.000,00, not yet paid by the project promoter, and only after the advance payment had been fully spent and verified by the PO. When opting for the payment

method, the project promoter firstly had to express interest in using this method to the PO. The PO then amended the grant contract, which later allowed the project promoter to request the payment of costs of works and purchase of equipment from the PO based on the offer or the invoice issued by the supplier.

- Reallocation of funds between different budget items (from the ones that generated savings).
- Introduction of the flexibility measure (allowing project promoters to implement activities beyond 30 April 2024 with own and/or other funds).
- Flexibility when it came to the number of goods and works procured.

On the side of project promoters and partners, the **successful implementation of projects was largely driven by their high motivation and strong commitment**. Their dedication and active involvement played a crucial role in ensuring the projects were carried out effectively and with great focus. Both project promoters and partners consistently worked hard to overcome challenges and deliver impactful results, demonstrating a strong sense of ownership and responsibility throughout the process. Success can also be attributed to higher interest from project participants which was then accommodated within project activities. Success can also be attributed to higher interest from project participants which was then accommodated within project activities, and **transfer of knowledge between project promoters and their partners** which was in particular beneficial for small project promoters (for example, local rural schools).

EFFICIENCY

EQ5: To what extent is the programme adapted to the institutional and administrative capacities of the programme operator and project promoters?

LDPR Programme was not fully adapted to the institutional and administrative capacities of project promoters and partners. This especially refers to primary schools and smaller institutions with limited or no previous experience of implementing projects financed from EEA and Norway grants. Such project promoters often overestimated their existing capacities or capacities that would be needed for the implementation of their projects. This in turn caused additional administrative burden for the PO, as such project promoters required more extensive support and closer monitoring during project implementation than originally anticipated.

Administrative capacities needs in terms of project implementation were anticipated and reflected in the CfPs documentation, under the mandatory eligible activity of project management and administration. Examples of such activities included project management, coordination, monitoring, reporting on project activities. The implementation of these activities was possible through in house capacities or procured services, when the project promoters estimated that they needed external support.

Even though the project promoters demonstrated having the necessary implementation capacities within their project applications, during the implementation it was noted that they sometimes did not have enough staff (internal or external) dedicated solely to perform administrative tasks, and to ensure the implementation of project activities, including public procurement in line with the project contract. Therefore, the implementation of projects posed a significant challenge for such project promoters, especially if they had limited or no previous experience with the implementation of projects financed from EU and/or EEA funds. As a result, the requirement to prepare and submit to the PO extensive quarterly reports respecting the defined timeline, created sometimes difficulties for many project promoters, despite being informed about their content through the implementation workshops, various guidelines and instructions issued and shared by the PO.

Weak implementation capacities of some project promoters posed a challenge for the PO. During the interview phase, the representatives of the PO stated that they had adequate management and monitoring capacity taking into account the size and scope of the LDPR Programme. Namely, the PO consisted of 13 people (of which nine were permanently employed, and four on a fixed-term basis). However, they also stated that with these capacities it was a challenge to manage the LDPR Programme, as many project promoters lacked the necessary competencies and administrative capacity. Therefore, they relied heavily on assistance provided by the PO. Such circumstances meant that PO's capacities which were originally intended for, among other things, timely report reviews and approvals, were often occupied by actively supporting the project promoters in the implementation of their projects.

EQ6: To what extent were the programme activities implemented in the available time period?

Programme activities were successfully implemented in the available time period, i.e., by 30 April 2025. However, certain steps took longer than provided for.

Namely, under CfP 1 and 2, counting from the first day following the deadline for submission of grant application to the date of the Funding Decision, the award procedure should have lasted the maximum of 180 days (i.e. 6 months). On the basis of the Funding Decision for each approved project, a project contract was to be concluded between the PO and the project promoter. In reality, **the award procedure lasted longer than planned**. The funding decisions were adopted in March 2022 (for CfP1), and June 2022 (for CfP2), i.e., 8 and 11 months following the deadline for submission of grant applications, respectively.

The PO made significant efforts to explain to project promoters relevant reporting requirements as well as present them with templates of implementation reports including the reimbursement claims. However, many project promoters struggled with meeting the reporting deadlines but also the PO's quality standards for these reports. As a result, project promoters sometimes missed to submit to the PO complete implementation reports including all necessary supporting documentation in a timely manner. This caused **delays by the PO in providing feedback on submitted reports, and**

consequently approving them. Such delays impacted negatively the project promoters. For example, two of the interviewed primary schools, from CfP 1 and 2A, stated that they had to invest additional time and effort to secure pre-financing of their project activities before receiving funds from reimbursement claims.

Although certain steps of LDPR Programme implementation took longer than provided for, most project activities were implemented within the initially planned timeframe. Some project promoters however requested and were granted extensions. Project implementation varied between 12 and 31 months, for projects contracted within the two CfPs. They were carried out between May or July 2022 and 30 April 2025, depending on the date of signing of the grant contract. The PDPs' implementation lasted 24 months (PDP2), 34 months (PDP1), and 32 months (PDP3). The extensions were also approved under the flexibility measure allowing project promoters to continue the implementation of project activities beyond 30 April 2024, i.e. until 30 April 2025 at the latest. The implementation periods for four projects in total were extended under the flexibility measure compared to their originally planned duration (CfP1 project 22, CfP2 projects 24A and 8B, and PDP3). The application of flexibility measure allowed the four project promoters to: accommodate for the unavailability of the donor project partner, implement construction works including special permits, install additional equipment purchased following the increasing of the budget, and change the location of works.

EQ7: What are the main factors that cause delays in implementation and in what ways?

The main factors that caused delays were the implementation of public procurement procedures, adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, lengthy preparation and approval process of projects' quarterly implementation reports, and staffing issues at projects' level.

Although the LDPR Programme was successfully completed and the planned outcomes achieved, **several notable challenges arose** during otherwise smooth implementation of contracted projects. The most significant factors, highlighted by project promoters interviewed or visited during fieldwork, relate to the following:

- **Project proposal development** – The preparation process of the PDPs, implemented in collaboration with the donors, was lengthy due to the fact that the review of PDPs by the donors took longer than initially expected.
- **Communication between project promoters and partners** – The communication between project promoters and partners was not always sufficiently clear and effective (in particular regarding sharing of relevant details), which caused some organizational challenges during project implementation especially in projects including more than one partner.
- **Procurement of equipment** – One of the main causes of delays in implementing project activities was the implementation of public procurement procedures. This was caused by limited experience of some project promoters with public procurement requirements. Another challenge was the limited number of suppliers for the required

equipment, for example for assistive technologies and seismological equipment (PDP1 and PDP3).

- The **COVID-19 pandemic affected the timeline of certain project activities** as it created market instability and broader disruptions. This led to rising prices of works and equipment, and their unavailability in the market. Project promoters therefore needed to adjust project activities and financing to accommodate higher costs and longer delivery dates than those foreseen by their grant contracts. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and health and safety measures delayed training activities and postponed some on-site activities.
- **Organisation of project activities within the project implementation period.** The previously mentioned delays with the procurement of equipment sometimes led to the reshuffling of the planned sequence of activities. As a result, certain activities were implemented simultaneously, although they were planned to be implemented subsequently. For example, in some projects teachers were trained to use the new equipment at the same time that they were expected to already begin teaching their students on how to use it.
- **Project financing model** – The need to procure equipment was not always matched by the availability of the project promoters' financial resources. In certain cases, the advance payments and the reimbursement of costs on behalf of the PO did not allow for a sustainable cash flow. The advanced payments were deemed as insufficient. Therefore, some project promoters reported being forced to seek financial assistance from their founders, and local or regional government units. Others resorted to taking out loans or temporarily reallocating funds from other ongoing projects, which were later reimbursed once funding became available.
- Another element identified as possibly time-consuming was **the obligation of project promoters who were direct budgetary users to request and receive approval of the PO to implement the payment for the costs incurred towards the suppliers of goods/services**. This was further confirmed by one project promoter who stressed during the interview that this administrative step unnecessarily burdened the financial and timely implementation of the project.
- Some project promoters faced **internal staffing issues**, including turnover of key personnel, which disrupted project coordination and slowed decision-making. Additionally, some primary schools, which were acting as the project promoters, lacked the administrative capacity and experience with EEA or EU-funded projects, making it difficult to meet quarterly reporting requirements and follow procurement procedures.

The PO also experienced strain due to staff turnover as well as a significant number of projects under implementation by project promoters with limited capacities. Such project promoters then relied heavily on PO's assistance, occupying their capacities more than was planned and creating **administrative overload** for them. The PO regularly provided comments on the submitted reports, which led project promoters to revise their reports, resulting in delays. As a consequence, on some occasions project promoters had not yet received feedback on a previous quarterly implementation report when they were already required to submit the next one. Waiting for the feedback and approval of the reports affected the payment of partners, suppliers, and others.

EQ8: How can the factors that cause delays be best mitigated?

The factors contributing to delays could be mitigated through applying additional specific measures. They could improve overall programme management and ultimately lead to more efficient project implementation.

Most importantly, sufficient administrative capacities on both sides – the project promoters' and the PO's should be ensured.

- Project promoters should set up a **management team consisting of at least two persons** working full-time on project activities and administration, i.e., the project manager and financial/administrative manager as this seems crucial to effectively manage the project and fulfil reporting duties.
- The PO should **specify tasks and time needed to implement specific functions for the management and monitoring** of any similar future programmes, i.e., conduct a workload analysis. Such an analysis should inform on the number of persons needed. The PO should consider allocating capacities working full time to ensure stability, continuity, and efficient transfer of knowledge.
- Capacity building of project promoters in the area of reporting and financial management via **additional meetings organized by the PO throughout the project lifecycle**, i.e., beyond the implementation workshops for project promoters organized by the PO upon signing of grant contracts should be implemented. These events should be structured as practical workshops and ~~serve to~~ explain the procedural aspects of the projects providing valuable opportunities for networking and experience sharing. For example, three months into project(s) implementation (contracted within a certain CfP), additional workshops could be organised for project promoters to clarify any uncertainties regarding reporting requirements and overall project management, while offering concrete examples of good practices, possibly simulating the preparation of reports. This would be the opportunity for project promoters to further explore the topics presented during implementation workshops and within the implementation documentation package shared by the PO.
- The role of **periodic monitoring meetings** could be further explored. The PO is invited to review the scope, format, and topics discussed during these meetings as this could allow the PO, project promoters and partners to efficiently identify and better address any emerging challenges, share lessons learned, and review the project's progress in terms of timelines, budgeting, and procurement, and make any necessary adjustments. Also, it would be good to refer to specifics of final documentation, including how to compile comprehensive reports, manage financial records, and meet all compliance requirements.
- If possible, approving higher amounts of financial resources for project promoters at the very beginning of the project (i.e., **higher advance payments**) should be considered. This could be especially beneficial for project promoters and partners that do not have their own source of income but are financed by their founder (i.e. primary schools which are founded by regional or local authorities). This would allow them to focus on the implementation of activities and procuring

the necessary equipment essential for the implementation of the activities, rather than investing resources into securing the necessary financing from the funders.

- **The payment method should be available from the very beginning of the project implementation**, and under clearly prescribed conditions. This could help project promoters overcome solvency issues during project implementation. Reflecting the fact that the preparation of the quarterly implementation reports – by the project promoters, and their approval – by the PO, was sometimes implemented with delays, **reviewing and extending both the deadlines for preparing and approving implementation reports** could be considered. This could help plan more realistically the implementation steps on both sides. Developing further guidelines or a checklist with concrete examples of information to be presented within the report to illustrate what each section should ideally look like might streamline compliance with the requirements.

- **The implementation process should be digitised**. This could be done through an online platform, managed by the PO, where all project promoters can connect, interact, and share experiences. This platform could serve as a hub for collaboration, offering a space for discussion on challenges, solutions, and best practices. By facilitating peer-to-peer communication, the platform would help reduce misunderstandings, promote knowledge exchange, and foster a supportive community among project partners. Moreover, the platform should store all the guidelines and instruction for projects promoters in a single location, videos from organized events including those previously shared via emails. Finally, it could incorporate an interactive page with regularly updated FAQs. In the future, the PO could consider establishing, as part of this online platform, a module for project implementation. This would help to streamline the communication and the cooperation between the PO and project promoters and partners during the implementation period.

EQ9: Are there more efficient ways to achieve programme results?

The room for improving the efficiency of programme results is observed in relation to the quality of prepared educational and training content, and skills and competencies development.

- Expert review(s) of produced workshops/training materials, teaching documents etc., should be conducted by university specialists in the field, didacticians. This should be done to ensure that the planned activities are scientifically grounded, age-appropriate, and aligned with the curriculum of the relevant subjects (an example of an excellent workshops for students can be the collaboration with the University of Osijek during the project Regional Scientific Centre of Pannonian Croatia (RZC PAN HR)).
- Improvements in (STEM) skills and competencies should be measured and evaluated beyond the self-assessment perspective.

EQ10: How many financial and human resources are needed for the preparation and implementation of the programme? Which elements bring administrative burden? Are there elements of programme preparation and implementation that could be simplified?

Financial resources of the LDPR Programme were adequately planned given its scope and implementation timeframe. Human resources for the implementation of the LDPR Programme of both the PO and many project promoters were however strained due to heavy workloads. Administrative burden was primarily noticeable regarding the reporting requirements.

According to the original LDPR Programme Agreement, the allocated budget was EUR 30,588,235.00. This included EUR 26,000,000.00 in grants, and EUR 4,588,235.00 in national cofinancing. Following five amendments to the LDPR Programme Agreement, the total budget for the LDPR Programme amounted to **EUR 32,263,894.28**. Out of this amount, the grant amount was EUR 27,424,310.14, and national cofinancing EUR 4,839,584.14.

Out of the total LDPR Programme budget, EUR 30,031,254.41 was incurred. **The final absorption rate of the allocated funds to the LDPR Programme was thus slightly above 93%**. In addition, all of the five LDPR Programme outcomes were achieved. This points to the sufficiency of the funds allocated to the LDPR Programme considering its defined scope, outcomes and timeframe that was available for its implementation.

During the interview phase, the representatives of the PO stated that they had ~~adequate~~ management and monitoring capacity considering the size and scope of the LDPR Programme. Namely, the PO consisted of 13 people (of which nine were permanently employed, and four on a fixed-term basis). However, they also stated that with these capacities it was a challenge to manage the LDPR Programme, as **many project promoters lacked the necessary competencies and administrative capacity**. Therefore, they relied heavily on assistance provided by the PO.

Such circumstances meant that PO's capacities which were originally intended for, among other things, timely report reviews and approvals, were often occupied by actively supporting the project promoters in the implementation of their projects. **With more staff the PO could accommodate the increased demand for ad-hoc and project specific assistance** that many project promoters asked for during the implementation of their projects and ensure the timely approval of quarterly implementation reports submitted by project promoters.

When it comes to the **administrative capacities of project promoters**, this evaluation showed that they **were insufficient** (in terms of number and experience) to ensure compliance with all of the requirements stemming from the project contracts. This in particular concerned the preparation and submission of the quarterly implementation reports. Therefore, many project promoters struggled with meeting the reporting deadlines and submitting the complete reports containing all the necessary

supporting documentation. This challenge was not limited to the project promoters alone; project partners also faced considerable difficulties in gathering the various types of evidence required to substantiate their costs. Foreign project partners, in particular, expressed surprise at the extensive documentation and evidence they were expected to provide.

Setting up a **management team in the project promoters' institutions** could help mitigate this challenge. Such teams could consist of at least two persons, working full-time on project activities and administration, for example, a project manager and a financial/administrative manager.

Moving forward, to ease the administrative burden, **simplifications could be considered with regard to reporting requirements**, for example by following some of the approaches or guidelines outlined below:

- Reporting deadlines could be reviewed and extended (both the deadlines for preparing and approving implementation reports);.
- guidelines or a checklist could be developed. They should contain concrete examples of information to be presented within the implementation report, illustrating what each section should ideally look like. This might streamline compliance with the requirements.
- Digital communication platform could be developed.

SUSTAINABILITY AND IMPACT

EQ11: What has the impact of the programme on project partners and final beneficiaries been? How has the programme contributed to improving the quality of life of target groups and final beneficiaries?

The LDPR Programme enabled strong collaboration between project promoters and partners at both national and international level. These partnerships positively impacted beneficiaries and communities, especially in STEM and inclusive education. Teachers and students benefited from enhanced skills, new curricula, and greater engagement in Teachers and students benefited from enhanced skills, newly developed curricula, and increased engagement in STEM, ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship, influencing their educational and career paths.

- The programme enabled strong collaboration between project leads and local partners through EEA and Norwegian funding.
- International partnerships positively impacted beneficiaries and communities, especially in STEM and inclusive education.
- Regional science centres and special schools improved their programmes by adopting new technologies and practices.
- Local partners gained valuable experience, strengthening their future capacity.
- Teachers and students benefited from enhanced skills, new curricula, and greater engagement in STEM, influencing their educational and career paths

Project promoters and local project partners emphasised that they would not have been able to establish the cooperation and create joint results without the support of the LDPR Programme. They highlighted the **significant value of collaboration** with donor project partners, noting that these partnerships had a positive effect on both final beneficiaries and the local community.

For example, **positive impact on STEM skills is expected** on national and PISA exams, the researchers at the Faculty of Science are continuously publishing new work based on the collected data, and repurposing procured instruments, schools for children with disabilities are reporting on the continuous and growing set of users of procured assistive technologies, opportunities in education for pupils with disabilities, as well as the sensibilisation of the general public on the importance for inclusive education is increased, the regional science centres are refining and continuing their programmes following the project's implementation, while also collaborating to enhance programme quality and strengthen their future role within the education system.

County project partners particularly benefited from the LDPR Programme, with networking opportunities, exposure to more advanced practices coming from more developed economies and societies, and the chance to directly implement the projects themselves. These experiences have provided **valuable knowledge and strengthened their capacity for future initiatives**.

For donor project partners participating in projects financed under LDPR Programme resulted in gaining international experience and cultural competence, acquiring insights into different ways of problem-solving, and getting a chance to connect with international network of professionals which could prove useful when planning larger EU initiatives.

The LDPR Programme had a profound impact on the final beneficiaries as well. **Teachers** had the opportunity to **enhance their skills**, especially by observing and experiencing positive examples from other countries, which inspired new teaching approaches and ideas.

For students, the LDPR Programme introduced new school curriculum activities and opened up pathways for personal and academic development. Many students gained valuable **insights into various career perspectives, particularly in STEM fields**, which sparked interest and influenced their future educational choices. Some primary school students, inspired by the new opportunities, enrolled in high schools with a focus on STEM subjects, furthering their academic and career aspirations. Furthermore, students could participate in local ecological projects and conduct research in the school gardens, also serving as a place to acquire STEM competencies. They could also explore the quality of water and air in their community, alternative energy sources, and energy efficiency.

EQ12: To what extent are the expected benefits from the programme likely to be sustained in the five years after the end of the programme?

Specific measures to ensure the sustainability of projects financed under the LDPR Programme were defined for each project. They ensure sustaining the

project results by maintaining the equipment and continuing projects' activities. Good practices include further knowledge transfer, trainings, networking, and similar activities. Many project promoters plan to continue the cooperation with their donor partner. Finally, many project promoters plan to or have already included the newly developed programs into their schools' curricula. Therefore, the benefits from the LDPR Programme are likely to be sustained in the following five-year period.

As per project contracts, project promoters and project partners are obliged to **ensure the sustainability of project results for a period of at least five years after the project completion**. A prerequisite for this is to ensure financial and institutional sustainability of the project. Financial sustainability means securing sources of revenue to finance activities which shall be carried out in the period after the project completion, as well as securing sources of revenue to finance maintenance of the equipment. Institutional sustainability means ensuring the necessary human resources and business processes to continue the implementation of activities after the project completion, and also appropriate institutional support to ensure the sustainability of project results after completion of funding.

Specific measures to ensure the sustainability of projects financed under the LDPR Programme are defined for each project:

- Firstly, in section 6 (for projects financed from Call 1), section 7 (for projects financed from Call 2) or section 4.7 (for PDPs) of the project application which is attached to the project contract, and
- Secondly, in section 5 of the final report.

Additionally, project promoters and project partners are obliged to keep any buildings purchased, constructed, renovated or reconstructed as well as the equipment procured under the project, in their ownership for a period of at least 5 years following the completion of the project and to continue to use such buildings for the benefit of the overall objectives of the project for the same period. They should also keep any buildings purchased, constructed, renovated or reconstructed as well as the equipment procured under the project properly insured against losses such as fire, theft and other normally insurable incidents both during project implementation and for at least 5 years following the completion of the project. Finally, they required to set aside appropriate resources for the maintenance of any buildings purchased, constructed, renovated or reconstructed as well as the equipment procured under the project for at least 5 years following the completion of the project.

This evaluation revealed that many projects have planned for **sustainability through knowledge transfer, partner networking, and the continuation of educational activities** aiming at developing of the competencies of future users. **Some projects are planning to sustain their impact through extracurricular programs,** while others showcase their achievements at County Professional Councils.

For example, under CfP1, project 45 "Capabilities of a Smart Village", envisaged the following sustainability measures: further work with children, especially through the Clubs of Young Technicians and Scientists and the Volunteer Club, additional

engagement of partners through their activities and in further work with gifted children. The project promoter will also, in interaction with the Municipality of Babina Greda, continue to encourage connections and visits to the economic sector in the form of career guidance for interested young people.

Likewise, under project 33, "hobIT", the practical learning model in school gardens will continue to be implemented and the results presented to the wider community. Project partners, schools from the surrounding area, local communities, parents and family farms, and all school employees will be invited as guests. Everything will be accompanied by a media radio show on the local radio, announcements on the guest pages, an announcement on the school page, and the municipality page. Student will be participating in cooperative fairs and local events such as Honey Day, and Gljivarijada. Every year, the garden will be upgraded with a new technological innovation, for example the creation of a rotary composter. This will be followed by the expansion of the orchard and the creation of new ecological horticultural gardens.

Notable examples of sustainability measures are found in PDP1 and the "Bioeconomy, schools and gardens of Wisdom, Sustainability, Knowledge, Action, Innovation and Creation for our karst and sea" project (80A).

- PDP1: the sustainability of the projects is ensured through the continued use of acquired resources and long-term commitments from partners. Partners FER and ERF will maintain and utilize the newly established Assistive Technology Laboratory (AT Lab) and the upgraded Augmentative and Alternative Communication Laboratory for clinical research, teaching, and professional development. These labs will help educate future rehabilitators and support scientific research. The City of Reykjavik will continue using the project equipment for training and supporting children with developmental disabilities at Klettaskóli. Additionally, CARNET has signed agreements with involved institutions to maintain the equipment for five years, ensuring ongoing support and investment in assistive technology.
- "Bioeconomy, schools and gardens of Wisdom, Sustainability, Knowledge, Action, Innovation and Creation for our karst and sea" project (80A): sustainability is ensured by establishing local centres of excellence in the Split Dalmatia County. Participating schools have developed long-term planning documents outlining activities to be implemented over the next five years. The project enhanced student cooperatives, ensuring their continued operation and the use of acquired equipment for future work and training. The learning programs and practical work models will be integrated into broader systems of excellence, with support from all project partners and stakeholders, ensuring the project's legacy and impact.

All of the projects under the LDPR Programme were successfully implemented and their results achieved. This led to, among other things, to enhanced capacities of professionals and other staff to implement education programmes in STEM and other areas. It can be concluded that, with this, the **solid foundations for sustainability of project results were established**.

Currently there are no requirements for project promoters regarding the reporting on sustainability measures implemented in the period after the completion of the project through which the PO could confirm that the achieved results are maintained.

However, to monitor the sustainability of projects over the next five years, the PO intends to implement on-the-spot controls. As per the plans presented to the evaluators, the on-the-spot control should take place once a year, in case of projects larger than one million euros, while for project smaller than one million euros, the PO plans to organize one on-the-spot control in the five-year period.

The PO has not yet developed a methodology to implement the announced on-the-spot controls. Having in mind the challenges that project promoters and project partners faced during the project implementation period, and the sustainability related requirements stemming from their project contracts, **while carrying out the planned checks, the PO should**:

- Examine the administrative capacities in place to continue the implementation of activities after the project completion;
- Investigate whether the funding of activities is continued since the long-term sustainability of the projects largely depends on funding from local and regional authorities, as they are the founders of many schools that were acting as project promoters;
- Make sure that the buildings purchased, constructed, renovated or reconstructed as well as the equipment procured, are used as initially planned.

Finally, to ensure long-term benefits of the achieved results, a more systematic approach is needed. For instance tracking the educational progress of students who participated in project activities would help assess whether these initiatives have encouraged further education, particularly in fields like STEM.

BILATERAL COOPERATION

EQ13: How and to what extent do bilateral partnerships (at programme and project level) add value to programme implementation and results, programme operator, donor Programme partner, project promoters and donor project partners?

LDPR Programme was implemented with a notably strong bilateral component. This is reflected through the fact that 33 out of 34 projects included cooperation with a donor project partner. Furthermore, project promoters are continuing their collaborations with international partners, engaging in other projects, thereby ensuring that the positive impacts of the LDPR Programme extend beyond its initial scope.

The **positive experiences** with donor project partners are consistently highlighted, particularly with regard to the excellent training sessions organised by them, reflecting a strong bilateral relationship that has added significant value to the entire LDPR Programme. These partnerships facilitated mutual learning, innovation, collaboration,

and sustained communication, all of which were crucial to the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of the LDPR Programme.

Donor programme partner (DPP) and PO cooperated extremely well during LDPR Programme preparation and implementation. For example, DPP helped organise the matchmaking event, streamlining LDPR Programme's objective with the objectives of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2020. Moreover, they provided valuable advice in the project selection and implementation phases. Their involvement and support helped to better implementation in line with the relevant financing framework.

Bilateral cooperation played a pivotal role in enhancing LDPR Programme's overall quality and fostering innovation. Donor project partners contributed their expertise and provided valuable practical insights, which Croatian partners were able to adapt to their local context. There was a great value for both sides in the exchange of knowledge and practices, which was achieved through study visits and in-person meetings.

The project promoters and local partners gained exposure to new practices they had not previously encountered. Additionally, the donor project partners conducted teacher training, shared their experiences, and provided ongoing support during project implementation.

The best partnerships content-wise were achieved with public and civil donor entities (i.e. schools, higher education institutions, and NGOs) due to their specialised experience in the field of education, while private entities usually provided good support but tended to approach the project more as service providers.

EQ14: In what ways could bilateral cooperation be further improved?

While cooperation among project partners has already been exceptionally strong, there are several opportunities to further enhance collaboration and ensure the success of future projects.

To build on this positive momentum, we recommend the following initiatives:

- Consider **organising and promoting matchmaking events as soon as possible** after the publication of CfPs to support early establishing of partnerships as this could help ensure full alignment of project promoters and project partners' needs and expectations during project preparation, and thus strengthen their collaboration during project implementation.
- Consider setting up and maintaining **a database of potential partners**, including their profile, to ease the search for suitable project partners early on. Enable search using key words and/or areas of expertise and interests. Provide a possibility for potential applicants to pitch their project ideas via the platform.
- Introduce the **requirement to hold regular meetings between project promoter and project partner(s)** on a monthly or quarterly basis, depending on the project scope and duration.
- Promote long-term cooperation: Fostering sustainable, long-term partnerships is essential for the continued success of collaborative projects. **Encouraging**

partners to extend their cooperation beyond the current project will help build a strong network and create opportunities for future collaboration. Long-term relationships can lead to more impactful, continued initiatives that benefit all involved.

- **Promote and share successful examples**: Highlighting successful case studies and examples of best practices from previous projects can inspire and motivate partners, as well as provide practical insights into overcoming challenges. Sharing these examples through newsletters, online platforms, and during events will help disseminate knowledge and encourage others to adopt proven strategies.
- At the end of each project implementation, ask the project promoter and partner(s) to fill in a short, standardised **survey to assess the partnership**.

Key findings

Key finding 1: LDPR Programme is highly relevant to the Croatian national context and integrates seamlessly with EU and international initiatives. It is well-aligned with and complementary to strategic priorities in education, local development, and poverty reduction. It addresses the compounded challenges of regional disparities, the COVID-19 pandemic, and natural disasters (earthquake), particularly in underdeveloped areas. Also, LDPR Programme most prominently contributes to the development of underfunded policy areas, thus creating strong added value in comparison to other available measures.

Key finding 2: All the planned outcomes were achieved. Teachers benefitted from professional development and access to innovative teaching methods and tools, particularly by learning from donor project partners. Students, especially in primary schools, were introduced to new curricula, with a particular emphasis on STEM education, which has positively influenced their academic interests and career aspirations. The LDPR Programme was successfully implemented due to effective and flexible management by the PO and committed project promoters and partners.

Key finding 3: LDPR Programme was not fully adapted to the institutional and administrative capacities of project promoters and partners. This especially refers to primary schools and smaller institutions with limited or no previous experience of implementing projects financed from EEA and Norway grants. Such project promoters often overestimated their existing capacities or capacities that would be needed for the implementation of their projects. This in turn caused additional administrative burden for the PO, as such project promoters required more extensive support and closer monitoring during project implementation than originally anticipated.

Key finding 4: Programme activities were successfully implemented in the available time period, i.e., by 30 April 2025. The main factors that caused delays were the implementation of public procurement procedures, adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, lengthy preparation and approval process of projects' quarterly implementation reports, and staffing issues at projects' level.

Key finding 5: The reporting process was at times seen as overly demanding by project promoters and partners, which created difficulties while preparing quarterly implementation reports and supporting documentation. While the cooperation with the PO was generally perceived as positive, communication and procedural clarity could be additionally improved through digital tools and targeted support.

Key finding 6: Consistently positive experiences with donor project partners were highlighted, especially regarding training sessions and knowledge exchange. Bilateral cooperation improved the quality of LDPR Programme implementation by introducing new methodologies and practical insights that project promoters successfully adapted to local contexts. Project promoters gained valuable experience from international collaboration, exposure to best practices, and increased capacity to independently design and implement projects in the future.

Key finding 7: All of the projects under the LDPR Programme were successfully implemented and their results achieved. This led to, among other things, to enhanced capacities of professionals and other staff to implement education programmes in STEM and other areas. With this, the solid foundations for sustainability of project results – which project promoters are obliged to ensure for a period of at least five years after the project completion – were established.

Recommendations

To enhance administrative efficiency, reduce delays, ensure smoother project implementation, as well as strengthen collaboration and support more impactful, sustainable international partnerships in future programmes, the following key recommendations are provided by the experts. Further details can be found in the replies to evaluation questions.

- The PO should implement a workload analysis to inform on the number of persons needed to manage any future similar programmes efficiently, and implement the strengthening of its administrative capacity accordingly.
- Project promoters should set up a management team consisting of at least two persons working full-time on project activities and administration.
- Introduce the requirement to hold regular meetings between project promoter and project partner(s) on a monthly or quarterly basis, depending on the project scope and duration.
- Develop further guidelines or a checklist pertaining to the preparation of implementation reports to streamline compliance with the requirements.
- Implement capacity building of project promoters in the area of reporting and financial management via additional joint events organised by the PO throughout the project lifecycle.
- Consider reviewing and extending the deadlines for preparing and approving implementation reports. This could help plan more realistically the implementation steps on both sides.

- Digitalise the implementation process through an online platform to streamline the communication with project promoters during the implementation period.
- Higher advance payments should be considered to ensure smoother implementation of activities by project promoters.
- The payment method should be available from the very beginning of the project implementation to help project promoters overcome solvency issues during project implementation.
- Consider organising and promoting matchmaking events as soon as possible after the publication of CfPs to support early establishing of partnerships.
- Consider setting up and maintaining a database of potential partners to ease the search for suitable project partners early on.
- At the end of each project, ask the project promoter and partner(s) to fill in a short, standardised survey to assess the partnership.
- To monitor the sustainability of projects over the next five years, the PO intends to implement on-the-spot controls. While carrying out the planned on-the-spot controls, the PO should:
  - Examine the administrative capacities in place to continue the implementation of activities after the project completion;
  - Investigate whether the funding of activities is continued since the long-term sustainability of the projects largely depends on funding from local and regional authorities, as they are the founders of many schools that were acting as project promoters; and
  - Make sure that the buildings purchased, constructed, renovated or reconstructed as well as the equipment procured are used as initially planned.
- Tracking the educational progress of students who participated in project activities should be required from project promoters as this would help assess whether the funded initiatives have encouraged further education, particularly in fields like STEM.
- To gain a better insight into the improvement of STEM skills, their measuring techniques should be further developed. This could be done by expanding the suggested scope of obligatory surveys implemented by project promoters. To this end, the PO should liase with experts in the field of education to develop a more robust monitoring and evaluation framework beyond the self-assessment perspective.
- For a limited number of projects (sample), expert review(s) of produced workshops/training materials, teaching documents etc., should be conducted by university specialists in the field, didacticians.

Annex 1 Projects funded under "Local Development and Poverty Reduction" Programme in the financing period 2014-2021

The following table presents all of the projects implemented under the LDPR Programme.

Table 2 List of projects in the Local Development and Poverty Reduction Programme

PROJECT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
Outcome 1: Improved skills and competencies of teachers and other professionals in primary education	
5. Effectively Active TEACHING and LEARNING on ENTREPRENEURSHIP in economically underdeveloped and rural areas (PODUZMI)	The PODUZMI project aims to develop and implement an innovative entrepreneurship education model in the municipality of Gračac through the professional development of teachers and other educational staff at Nikola Tesla Primary School. Project activities include teacher training in STEM, Information and communication technology (ICT), entrepreneurship, and active citizenship, equipping the school with necessary resources, and developing a handbook with a focus on materials adapted for working with students with special needs and national minorities.
22. Human resource capacity building in primary education for work with gifted pupils in the areas of entrepreneurship and active citizenship (DAR)	The project aims to strengthen the capacities of teachers in five primary schools in the Republic of Croatia for working with gifted students in the areas of active citizenship and entrepreneurship. The project is expected to result in enhanced skills and competencies of teachers and other educational staff, the implementation of new teaching models based on collaborative learning and digital technologies, and the development of learning materials.
26. Artificial Intelligence in STEM education (AI in STEM education)	The project aims to enhance the competencies of 300 teachers working in 60 primary schools across all counties of the Republic Croatia. The project focuses on the development of curricula and teaching materials aimed at improving STEM competencies. Key activities include an online course on the use of artificial intelligence in STEM education, mobile workshops for teachers, a mentorship programme, and webinars.
27. Islands of Student Entrepreneurship and EcoSocial Innovation for Sustainable Development of Split-Dalmatia County (OPERA SDŽ)	The project addresses the issue of insufficient competencies among teachers and other educational staff employed in primary schools on the islands of Šolta, Hvar, and Vis, particularly in the areas of civic and entrepreneurial competencies. Project activities include teacher training and the development of a non-formal extracurricular programme, with a dedicated section focusing on students with special needs.
28. Inclusive Classroom of the Future (InClass4Future)	The project aims to enhance the competencies of teachers, professional associates, and school principals in using innovative

PROJECT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
	teaching methods (STEM and ICT) to ensure the effective inclusion of students with special needs. Key project activities include training for 40 teachers from three primary schools, equipping sensory classrooms and a sensory garden, and developing a pedagogical, methodological, and didactic handbook for teachers. Emphasis is placed on the creation of digital materials to support teachers in designing individualised curricula.
33. Well, I really want to be an entrepreneur! (hobIT)	The project focuses on enhancing the skills of 35 teachers and other educational staff in the fields of STEM, ICT, and entrepreneurship in schools across Osijek-Baranja County. Project activities include teacher training, the development of a practical learning model in school gardens, the creation of a curriculum for the 'Entrepreneurship' extracurricular activity, and the development of a handbook with a focus on materials designed to support teachers in working with students with special needs (students with learning difficulties and gifted students).
37. Learning Entrepreneurship 5.0 (UP 5.0)	The project aims to develop a model for strengthening the competencies of teachers from the less developed areas of the Vukovar-Srijem and Osijek-Baranja counties in leading student cooperatives and integrating the cross-curricular topic of entrepreneurship into teaching practice, thereby promoting cooperativism in the long run. Project activities include teacher training in the fields of STEM, ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship. The project will result in the creation of a handbook for cooperative leaders, including materials for working with students with special needs.
40. ICT 4 Te@chers (ICT 4 Te@chers)	The project aims to enhance the teaching competencies of 25 teachers and other educational professionals through the application of modern ICT in the Vukovar-Srijem County. Project activities include the development and implementation of an educational programme on an e-learning platform, with a special focus on digital materials for working with students with special needs and adapting teaching methods accordingly.
45. Capabilities of a smart village (Pametno selo)	The objective of the project is to enhance the skills and competencies of 14 teachers and other educational professionals at Mijat Stojanović Primary School (Vukovar-Srijem County) in the fields of STEM, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship, with a focus on working with gifted students. Project activities include teacher training, equipping schools with didactic tools, and revising three school curricula for extracurricular activities, with an emphasis on developing materials for working with gifted students.
Outcome 2: Enhanced STEM Skills	
14 A. From idea to STEM skills in schools (STEM u školama)	The project aims to enhance the STEM skills of students and teachers from six primary schools in the Croatian Posavina region. Project activities include teacher training, the establishment of STEM classrooms, equipping an observatory, a series of educational

PROJECT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
	workshops, and the development of 27 educational programmes aimed at fostering STEM skills, ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship, with a focus on gifted students and those with disabilities.
15. NEW STEM Kutina – the ALPHABET of the future (NSKABCB)	The project aims to enhance the STEM competencies of 100 teachers and 600 students in five primary schools in the city of Kutina. Project activities include equipping five STEM classrooms, providing teacher training, and implementing educational programmes to foster STEM skills, ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship, with a focus on gifted students and those with disabilities.
22 A. Improving infrastructure and advancing STEM skills in primary schools in Vukovar-Srijem County (STEMajmo)	The project aims to strengthen STEM skills and develop STEM content in five primary schools in rural areas of Vukovar-Srijem County. Planned activities include training and professional development for teachers and other educational staff, introducing five new extracurricular activities, equipping seven STEM classrooms along with additional school infrastructure (school gardens and outdoor classrooms), with a focus on an educational programme that includes children with disabilities.
23 A. Strengthening STEM skills in primary schools in Zadar County (STEM COUNTY)	The STEM COUNTY project aims to enhance teachers' and students' STEM skills in thirteen primary schools in Zadar County. In addition to gifted students, the target group includes students from a school specialised in educating children with various disabilities. Project activities include teacher training and professional development, as well as equipping thirteen classrooms where extracurricular activities based on STEM principles will be conducted.
24 A. Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics in the 2nd Elementary School Varaždin (Full STEAM ahead!)	The project aims to enhance the STEM skills of students and teachers at II Primary School Varaždin by introducing a school-wide STEAM framework at all levels of the educational programme. This will be achieved through the implementation of innovative teaching methods based on gamification, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality. Project activities include teacher training, equipping four classrooms and an observatory, establishing a multifunctional STEAM space, and developing 15 curricula and educational programmes tailored to gifted students and those with learning difficulties.
34 A. Quality Education for a Modern Primary School (KOZMOS)	The project aims to enhance the STEM, ICT, active citizenship, and entrepreneurship skills of students, teachers, and other educational staff at Dalj Primary School in Osijek-Baranja County. Project activities include teacher training, investment in school infrastructure (such as an outdoor STEM classroom), and the development of educational programmes for extracurricular activities, with a focus on students with special needs.
37 A. STEM - my education (STEM me)	The project aims to improve teachers' and students' digital and STEM competencies. Activities include investments in school

PROJECT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
	infrastructure by equipping classrooms that will be used for conducting STEM activities. The project also involves teacher training and workshops, while the enhancement of students' STEM skills are expected to be achieved through project activities (such as herb cultivation) and various extracurricular and elective activities, with a focus on students with disabilities and gifted students.
43 A. Tesla's room (Teslina učionica)	The objective of the project is to enhance the STEM skills of teachers and students at Sibinjskih Žrtava Primary School in Brod-Posavina County. Activities include teacher training, enabling them to transfer knowledge into extracurricular/after-school activities (11 programmes) for students from grades 1 to 8. The project also involves investing in school infrastructure by adapting a classroom with a STEM garden. An emphasis is placed on developing ten programmes for students with special needs.
46 A. Strengthening STEM skills through ecology in the Elementary School Zrinski Nuštar (EKO-RURAL4STEM)	The project aims to improve the STEM skills of 35 teachers and other educational staff at Zrinski Nuštar Primary School (Vukovar-Srijem County), enabling them to apply the STEM learning approach in regular classes with students and in extracurricular activities. Project activities include teacher training, equipping the school (with four multimedia classrooms and a STEM classroom), and developing seven extracurricular activities with an emphasis on creating programmes for students with disabilities.
51 A. Ready-STEM-Grow (Ready-STEM-Grow)	The project aims to strengthen the competencies of teachers, other educational staff, and students in the STEM field across three Catholic primary schools in three Croatian counties. The project aims to use modern teaching strategies to help students adopt an integrated approach to problem-solving. Project activities include equipping each school with a STEM classroom, providing teacher training, developing educational programmes for students, with an emphasis on involving as many students with special educational needs as possible.
53 A. Explore and grow with STEM (raSTEMo)	The project aims to enhance the STEM competencies of teachers, students, and other educational staff at Josip Kozarac Primary School in Lipovljani, Sisak-Moslavina County. Project activities include teacher training/workshops, the development of educational programmes for extracurricular activities (eight), with an emphasis on including students with special educational needs. Additionally, the project involves equipping the school with three STEM classrooms, an arboretum, and additional STEM equipment.
54 A. Be a STEMfluencer (Budi STEMfluencer)	The project aims to modernise, renovate, adapt, and equip a total of six STEM classrooms in three primary schools in the city of Zagreb, providing the necessary equipment required to introduce STEM into regular lessons and extracurricular activities for 1 550 students, including 146 students with disabilities and 107 potentially gifted students. The project will strengthen the

PROJECT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
	capacities and STEM skills of 36 teachers at OŠ Lučko, 21 teachers at OŠ Vugrovec-Kašina, and 45 teachers at OŠ Nikole Tesle. In addition, the project, in collaboration with a team of Norwegian experts, will create a STEM library with content for regular lessons and extracurricular activities, which will be accessible to all schools nationwide.
61 A. STEM for planet Earth (S.P.E.)	The project aims to develop STEM skills in nine teachers at Vladimir Nazor Primary School in Đakovo and 150 students, including those with special needs, through the modernisation of two classrooms and the procurement of appropriate equipment. The focus is on strengthening support for equal educational opportunities for primary school children and developing skills applicable to the labour market, including those in STEM fields.
66 A. The development of STEM programme in Stari Jankovci elementary school (STEM Stari Jankovci)	The project aims to help 21 teachers, and 150 students develop STEM skills by equipping school classrooms at Stari Jankovci Primary School with STEM equipment. Project activities include the implementation of five different programmes to improve students' skills in the STEM field, active citizenship, and entrepreneurship, procurement of equipment, establishment of an outdoor classroom, and a laboratory. The five programmes to be implemented are: 1. "STEM through the School Garden" 2. "Young Programmers" 3. STEM Basics 4. STEM Plus 5. Young Entrepreneurs and Active Citizens.
68 A. SMART BICC - Budinščina for Collective and Community (SMART BIZZ / SMART BICC)	The project aims at improving STEM skills for 10 teachers, the headmaster, and 147 students at Vladimir Nazor Primary School in Budinščina, including 26 students with special educational needs. Through the modernisation of school spaces and the procurement of STEM equipment, along with bilateral cooperation with partners, activities related to STEM teaching, ICT, and entrepreneurship will be conducted. Additionally, activities to strengthen students' STEM skills will be carried out through the application of new methods and learning models. The project aims to enhance STEM skills and create equal opportunities for students who have faced challenges in accessing quality education due to socioeconomic factors.
78 A. STEM Tech (STEM Tech)	The project aims to strengthen the STEM competencies of 15 educational staff members and 150 students (34 students with special needs) at Ivana Gorana Kovačića Primary School in Delnice, equipping classrooms with STEM equipment. The project aims to implement five different programmes to improve students' skills in STEM, active citizenship, and entrepreneurship, while also establishing bilateral cooperation. New learning models and field trips will be applied for students to destinations such as the Nikola Tesla Memorial Center in Smiljan, the Višnjan Observatory, the Croatian Natural History Museum in Zagreb, the Nikola Tesla Museum in Zagreb, and the Peek&Poke Museum of Computing and Information Technology in Rijeka.

PROJECT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
80 A. Bioeconomy, schools and gardens of Wisdom, Sustainability, Knowledge, Action, Innovation and Creation for our karst and sea (Bio Mozaik Krš i more)	The project involves primary schools from the inland and coastal areas of the Split-Dalmatia County (SDC). This is the first phase of a broader regional excellence project for the SDC, which is part of the national strategic project 'Izvrsna.Hr', initiated by the county in cooperation with Centers of Excellence in Lika-Senj county, Osijek-Baranja County, and Virovitica-Podravina County. Direct inputs include investments in the infrastructure and equipment of 10 primary schools, 16 innovative STEM classrooms, 9 STEM gardens, 8 ICT classrooms, and 10 entrepreneurial and project-based school centres for active citizenship. It will also establish a sustainable system of rewards and support for at least 60 teachers, and the formation of 10 STEM/ICT and 10 entrepreneurial/project teams. The project will develop and implement four STEM programmes (with a focus on bioeconomy and technology), six programmes in the areas of ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship for a minimum of 50 teachers, and four STEM programmes and 10 programmes in ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship for at least 200 students, including at least 75 students with special educational needs. Additionally, the project will further develop the programmes and activities of the centres of excellence. The project aims to establish a sustainable microregional excellence system in the area, with the primary goal being the development of excellence in primary education in the fields of STEM, ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship, with a focus on bioeconomy and biotechnology.
91 A. STEM in Elementary school Vrgorac (STEM u OŠ Vrgorac)	The project aims to develop STEM skills in 14 educational staff members and 240 students (15 gifted students and 11 students with developmental disabilities), modernise classrooms, and procure STEM equipment. This will be achieved through the implementation of the following programmes: STEM Researchers, Active Citizenship, and Entrepreneurship.
11 B. Regional scientific center of Pannonian Croatia (RZC PAN HR)	The project aims to strengthen the capacities of primary schools in the Osijek-Baranja County, Virovitica-Podravina County (VPC), and surrounding areas, to improve STEM skills for at least 100 educational staff members. The project foresees the establishment of a regional scientific centre headquartered in the Osijek-Baranja County (Josipovac Punitovački), with branches in VPC (Slatina and Suhopolje), where STEM activities will be conducted for the entire Pannonian Croatia. The Regional Science Centre PAN HR, which will be established, aims to attract schools from the surrounding area and enhance STEM capacities, ICT, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship through new learning models, equipment, and infrastructure.
1 B. Regional Science Centres for STEM education in primary schools – LORI (LORI)	The project aims to establish LORI, a suitably equipped Regional Science Centre for primary education and STEM activities. The project aims to enhance the STEM skills of educational staff in the city of Ludbreg, with a focus on 20 teachers, and to improve STEM

PROJECT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
	skills in 300 students. It will involve the procurement of STEM equipment, the development of three new STEM programmes, and six educational programmes in STEM fields that have not yet been implemented in Croatia but will be introduced into the informal education system. These programmes will be made available to students and teachers in 33 primary schools.
3 B. Regional Science Centre – RaSTEM (RASTEM)	The project aims to establish the Regional Science Centre RaSTEM and develop STEM competencies among teachers and students, with a focus on robotics and STEM technologies in climatology and meteorology. The goal is to train one to two teachers from each partner primary school, totalling at least 15 teachers, who will undergo a 120-hour trainer training in STEM technologies in meteorology and robotics. Experts from the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing (FER) and representatives from the Croatian Robotics Association will conduct the training, and these teachers will then educate their colleagues. The training will also cover entrepreneurship. The project is expected to enhance the skills of 15 teachers and 205 students in primary schools in the Šibenik-Knin County. It will also establish and equip the Regional Science Centre 'RaSTEM', which will be located at eight sites: in the Šibenik City Incubator and seven primary schools, with three located in the City of Šibenik and four in surrounding areas.
8.B. 'Adriatic Regional Science Centre for Skills Development in the Field of STEM, ICT, Entrepreneurship and Active Citizenship' (Adriatic RSC STEM)	The project aims to strengthen the capacities of primary education institutions in the Split-Dalmatia county (SDC), Lika-Senj County (LSC), and surrounding areas with the goal of improving STEM skills among teachers and other educational staff. It is planned to establish the Regional Science centre 'Jadranski RZC STEM' (RZC) with its headquarters in SDC and a branch in LSC. The RZC aims to attract neighbouring schools to ensure that teachers and students have high-quality access to STEM educational content. The 'Jadranski RZC STEM' will be headquartered in Solin at the Primary School Don Lovre Katić, with branches in Gospić, in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County (PGC) at the Primary School Kostrena, and a branch in the Zadar county (ZC) at the Pakoštane Primary School.
Outcome 3: Enhanced Tools for Creating Equal Opportunities in Education for Pupils with Disabilities	
PDP 1 – Enhanced Tools for Creating Equal Opportunities in Education for Pupils with Disabilities (ATTEND)	The project aims to ensure equal opportunities in the education of students with developmental disabilities who are educated in special schools (Centres for Vocational Training and Education - CTE) through the implementation of assistive technology. Project activities include training for educational staff and principals, online and in-person, as well as the creation of software and digital learning content. The project is led by the Croatian Academic and Research Network - CARNET, in partnership and collaboration with the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences (ERF) and the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing (FER) from the

PROJECT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
	University of Zagreb, in collaboration with the city of Reykjavik, Department of Education and Youth.
Outcome 4: Enhanced Strategic Planning at National and Regional Levels	
PDP 2 - Enhanced Strategic Planning at Regional and Local Levels in Croatia (NRS)	The project aims to strengthen Croatia's capacity for planning at the national and regional levels through the development plans of individual regions, project implementation, and regional cooperation in accordance with strategic documents and the Cohesion Plan 2021–2027. Project activities include workshops/trainings for regional coordinators, exchange of best practices, and the creation of guidelines for the development of individual Croatian regions. The main partner is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which will analyse the existing management model, provide training, and propose development guidelines.
Outcome 5: Improved Knowledge Base for Development of Seismic Risk Policies	
Investigation of Seismically Vulnerable Areas in Croatia and Seismic Ground Motion Assessment (CRONOS)	The project aims to modernise the assessment of seismic hazards in the Republic of Croatia to reduce the impact of devastating earthquakes on people and property in the future. Project activities include field research, investment in infrastructure for predicting seismic ground movements in collaboration with the Norwegian Geophysical Community, and public awareness through educational activities or scientific publications. The project is led by the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Science, with the University of Bergen, Department of Earth Sciences, as a partner.

Annex 2 List of Documents Reviewed during Desk Research

- Regulation on the implementation of the European Economic Area (EEA) Financial Mechanism 2014-2021[3]
- Regulation on the implementation of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2014-2021[4]
- Memorandum of Understanding on the Implementation of the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021
- Memorandum of Understanding on the Implementation of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2014-2021, signed between Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Croatia

Programme documents:

- Programme Agreement between The Financial Mechanism Committee and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds – Croatia, for the financing of the Programme "Local Development and Poverty Reduction", and its amendments (five in total)
- LDPR Programme Concept Note
- Programme Implementing Decision
- Annual Programme Reports for years 2021, 2022 and 2023;
- Minutes from the Annual Meeting within the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 in Croatia, as held in September 2022, 2023 and 2024, respectively.
- Final Programme Report (2024-2025)
- Programme Indicators Monitoring Table
- Calls for proposals documentation (forms, amendments and annexes)
- Recordings of the Matchmaking event and three informative workshops for project applicants for the two Calls for Proposals (CfP1, CfP 2A and CfP 2B)
- Presentations from two introductory workshops on project implementation for project promoters and partners
- Guidelines for management and financial monitoring of project implementation for project promoters (June 2023), including 22 annexes (additional instructions and various templates that project promoters need to use during project implementation)
- Practical instructions to project promoters provided by the PO during projects' implementation (18 documents)

Project documents:

- Overview Table of all the Projects
- Project contracts including project application forms and accompanying annexes and appendices for all the projects (34 projects)
- Final project reports per each of the three Calls for Proposals
- Final project reports for the three predefined projects

[3] Adopted by the EEA Financial Mechanism Committee pursuant to Article 10.5 of Protocol 38c to the EEA Agreement on 8 September 2016 and confirmed by the Standing Committee of the EFTA States on 23 September 2016, as amended on 9 December 2021, on 29 April 2022, on 2 February 2023 and on 14 March 2024

[4] Adopted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs pursuant to Article 10.5 of the Agreement between the Kingdom of Norway and the European Union on a Norwegian Financial Mechanism for the period 2014-2021 on 23 September 2016, as amended on 25 October 2021, on 21 April 2022, on 27 January 2023 and on 15 February 2024

Annex 3 Biographies of Evaluation Experts

Sectoral experts

Key Expert 1: Mila Bulić
Mila Bulić completed her studies in biology and chemistry and worked as a schoolteacher for many years. She got her master's degree and doctorate at the Faculty of Science of the University of Split (biology major) and obtained the title of Doctor of Science in interdisciplinary fields of science, the field of educational science. She is employed as an assistant professor at the Faculty of humanities and social sciences in Split, at the department for Teacher education, where she teaches the Teaching Methods of Science Subjects and the course Health Education and STEM Gifted Students. At the Centre for Research and Development of Lifelong Education, teaches Methods of the natural sciences and interdisciplinary fields. She was the deputy head of the Department for Teacher education and is currently the coordinator for 60 teaching bases of the faculty. She has mentored several diploma theses and is currently a mentor for the preparation of a doctoral thesis. She writes scientific papers, reviews and participates in professional and scientific projects. The University of Split appointed her as a member of the expert team in The European University of the Seas SEA-EU project on tasks related to the area of Sustainable Development. From 2020 to 2022, she was a collaborator, coordinator of part of the activities on the competitive national project 'Learning biology in an epidemiologically adapted research environment' (IP-CORONA-2020-12-3798) co-financed by the Croatian Science Foundation. She participated in several international projects ('Students learn about civic engagement - socially useful learning in nature and environmental protection', 'Service-learning', 'Participate in sustainable development', 'How healthy is Europe?', 'Citizen of Careland', 'Concept of Energy in the teaching curriculum', etc.) and was on several study trips abroad. She regularly presents at national and international scientific conferences. She is the editor of books of abstracts, conference proceedings, editorial monographs in English. She is the author of methodical manuals, textbooks, workbooks, knowledge tests, teaching sheets, didactic material for teaching Nature and Society, Nature, Chemistry for primary and secondary schools. She received recognition from the University of Split for the introduction of service learning. With a team of experts from the University of Split, the Subgroup Society - Education created the Strategy for the Development of the City of Split until 2030.
Key Expert 2: Gabrijela Marin
Gabrijela Marin holds a master's degree in the didactics of natural sciences and possesses extensive experience as a biology teacher in primary and secondary schools. In 2022, she earned the title of Outstanding Advisor in Biology and currently serves as the Head of the Zadar County Council of Biology Teachers. Throughout her career, she has made significant contributions to numerous international projects aimed at fostering innovative educational practices. In 2018, she participated in the project

'New Angles of Good Practices in Inclusion for All Students'. From 2020 to 2023, she contributed to the EU-funded initiative 'On the Path to Reducing Disaster Risk', and between 2020 and 2022, she was actively involved in the project 'Learning Biology in an Epidemiologically Adapted Research Environment'. Additionally, during Croatia's curricular reform, she participated in the development of key strategic documents. Gabrijela is currently employed at the Ante Kuzmanić Medical School, where she has played an instrumental role in the EU project 'MEDICINSKA+: Enhancing the Work of the Ante Kuzmanić Medical School as a Regional Center of Competence in the Healthcare Sector'. She also has considerable experience as a school coordinator, overseeing the preparation of annual evaluation reports for the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education.

WYG experts

Evaluation expert – Mladen Vojković

Mladen Vojković, Managing Director of WYG, has 15 years of experience in human resources development, public administration reform and regional development and 12 years of experience in monitoring and evaluating projects, programmes and politics. As a team leader and evaluator, he has participated in numerous project and programme evaluations in the fields of employment, institutional development, management, cross-border cooperation, horizontal principles, etc. Mladen was one of the Key Experts in the evaluation of the Operational Program Effective Human Resources 2014 - 2020 (Group 4: Evaluation of Priority Axis 4 "Good governance", Group 6: Evaluation of the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the implementation of the OPEHR and ESF interventions according to the regional and local representation criteria with evaluations of horizontal principles), and a Team Leader of evaluations of different CBC programmes (Croatia-Slovenia, Croatia-Serbia, Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Montenegro).

Quality assurance expert – Jelena Kljaić Šebrek

Jelena Kljaić Šebrek, Director of WYG, has more than 15 years of experience in preparing and implementing projects funded by EU funds (IPA programme, Structural Instruments, Union Programmes, Territorial Programmes cooperation, Integrated Territorial Investment). She gained work experience as a manager of many projects in which she coordinated project activities and led project teams. Jelena has been a lecturer for many years in the field of preparation and implementation of projects financed by EU funds. She holds a PhD in quantitative economics. She has extensive experience in project evaluation in the field of research and development, and she has developed evaluation methodologies for many project and programme evaluations. Jelena was one of the experts who participated in the interim evaluation of the Operational Program Effective Human Resources 2014–2020.

Quality assurance expert – Ninon Gautier

Ninon is Head of Monitoring, Evaluation and Research at WYG, with over seven years of experience conducting evaluations and studies. She is a seasoned project manager with a proven track record of designing and applying a broad range of methodologies, including stakeholder consultation, crafting targeted questionnaires, conducting

interviews, performing qualitative and quantitative analyses, and quality reviewing deliverables. Ninon has led several high-profile evaluations, including, most recently, the midterm evaluation of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFAF) for the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. This role encompassed data collection, in-depth analysis, and reporting, ensuring that all outputs met stringent quality standards. Ninon's international experience and fluency in French, English, and Spanish and working knowledge of Norwegian, equips her with a nuanced understanding of diverse contexts. Ninon combines linguistic proficiency with deep expertise in quality assurance.

Evaluation expert and project coordinator – Mona Manojlović

Mona Manojlović, a Consultant at WYG with a master's degree in political science, has over four years of experience with the preparation and implementation of projects financed by EU funds. Most of her work focuses on evaluation projects – she participated in five evaluations of the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the Operational Programme Effective Human Resources 2014-2020, four evaluations of the cross-border cooperation programmes, and numerous evaluations of small-scale projects financed by EU funds. As part of her work, she has focused on documentation and data analysis, collecting and processing quantitative and qualitative data, and providing recommendations based on the analysis. She is also experienced in coordinating teams of experts and managing projects in the domain of evaluations. Most recently, Mona was running an Impact Evaluation of the Cooperation Programme Interreg V-A Slovenia - Croatia 2014-2020.

Evaluation expert and project coordinator – Dario Gašparić

Dario Gašparić holds a master's degree in political science and a certificate in the Development and Management of EU-funded Projects. He has been working as a consultant and project manager at WYG for four years, where he has mostly worked on the preparation and implementation of projects financed by the EU and other organisations. His day-to-day work mostly consists of contacts with contracting authorities, communication with experts, monitoring of contract implementation and reporting. Dario is also experienced in data collection and analysis, and he has also participated in many evaluations in the socio-economic sector. His most recent work includes the Final evaluation of the project Support to Vocational Education and Training Reform in Kosovo (Phase II) and a project evaluation of "Establishment and implementation of systematic energy management and development of a new financing model".