

UPDATE OF THE 1st IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION
AND IMPACTS OF THE COOPERATION PROGRAMME
“INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC
OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020”

4th DELIVERABLE: FINAL REPORT

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List of Abbreviations

AIR:	Annual Implementation Report
CA:	Certifying Authority
CBC:	Cross-border Cooperation
CP:	Cooperation Programme
CPR:	Common Provisions Regulation
EC:	European Commission
EP:	Evaluation Plan
EQ:	Evaluation Questions
ESIF:	European Structural and Investment Funds
ESF:	European Social Fund
ERDF:	European Regional Development Fund
IPA:	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
ETC:	European Territorial Cooperation
EU:	European Union
JS:	Joint Secretariat
JSC:	Joint Steering Committee
JMC:	Joint Monitoring Committee
MA:	Managing Authority
PA:	Priority Axis
SO:	Specific Objective
TA:	Technical Assistance
ToR:	Terms of Reference
TP:	Thematic Priority

Executive Summary

The present final Report examines the performance of the Interreg IPA CBC Programme Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 'architecture', to gauge its effectiveness in operationalizing the strategic choices and the goals set.

The present evaluation covers in depth analysis and evaluation of the implementation of the Programme up to 30.06.2021 in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. It assesses the progress achievement of the Performance Framework Indicators and the relevance of the intervention logic with the Programme's Strategy. The present report evaluates the performance of the communication strategy and examines the need to be updated. More over the impact of the Programme is assessed.

The evaluation employed a robust mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection and evaluation methods tailored to each evaluation task. The key to evaluation is also an understanding of the Programme's role.

The Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" (CCI: 2014TC16I5CB009) was approved by the European Commission on August 6, 2015 by the decision C (2015) 5655. The Programme was amended twice. The first revision concerned the adoption and the incorporation of the "Performance Framework" in the programming document (Decision C (2017) 6650/25.9.2017) while the second amendment approved by Decision C (2019) 7322 / 8.10.2019 concerned the title of the Cooperation Programme which is modified as follows "Interreg - IPA CBC Greece – the Republic of North Macedonia". Interreg IPA CBC Programme aims to *"enhance territorial cohesion by improving living standards and employment opportunities holding respect to the environment and using the natural resources for tourism"*. This objective is pursued along five Strategic choices: 1. Promote Employment, 2. Improve access to social and health care and promote social inclusion and Community Development, 3. Touristic Development and better use of cultural and natural heritage, 4. Improve transport conditions and checkpoints and promote green transport and 5. Environmental protection and sustainable management of natural resources.

The total funding of the Cooperation Programme amounts to 45,470,066 €. Priority Axis 1 has been allocated with 40%, Priority Axis 2 has been funded with 50%, the largest amount among the three Axes of the Programme, and the Technical Assistance (Priority Axis 3) has been allocated with 10% of the total budget.

Total EU payments (cumulated) to the end of June 2021 amount to approximately over 55%, while the EU average is circa 60%.

Regarding the Calls, out of a total budget of 45,470,066 € available to the Programme, a total of 25,008,537 € (55%) of the budget has been included in the 1st Call for Project Proposals (MIS Code 2637, which was launched on December 2015) and the relevant Call (MIS Code 1720) of Priority Axis (PA) 3 "Technical Assistance. Additionally, in the frame of the 2nd Call for Projects' Proposals (MIS 3971, which was launched on December 2019), an amount of 6,000,000 € was planned for new projects. In total, fifty-four (54) projects have been approved under the two (2) Calls for Project Proposals of the INTERREG - IPA CBC Programme Greece - the Republic of North Macedonia, forty-two (42) projects under the 1st Call and twelve (12) projects under the 2nd Call.

The evaluation of Programme's progress concerns the forty-two (42) projects of the first Call as the twelve (12) projects of the second Call haven't been contracted until 30.06.2021. The evaluation finds that "INTERREG IPA CBC Programme Greece – Republic of North Macedonia" is on track for delivering Programme Specific Objectives and results. It is meeting, and often

exceeding, its targets and fulfilling its objectives despite its late start and the challenges faced due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the evaluation of the Programme's projects shows that the achievement of outputs and results is considerable. With regard to the indicators, the self-reported contribution of the projects is much higher than the Programme has set. This is due to the different interpretations of the indicator methodologies from the Programme Structures and the beneficiaries. Nevertheless, the contribution that current project achievements are making to IPA CBC Programme targets for 2023 is already substantial, so that it can be extrapolated that target values will be achieved at the end of 2023. Especially considering that the projects of the 2nd Call that are to start during the last quarter of 2021 will contribute to Programme's targets.

Regarding the impact evaluation, this is based on a theory-based approach considering the available budget, data and capacity. Conclusions related to the impact are mainly based on assumptions, since the current Programme did not have a critical mass of finished projects at the time of the evaluation. However, the forty projects of PAs 1 and 2 have a considerable impact on policy change at local/regional or national levels. Moreover, the Programme is consequently aligned with the three EU 2020 Strategy objectives: smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth.

The Interreg IPA CBC Programme has a well-defined management structure MA/JS/CA (Managing Authority/Joint Secretariat/Certifying Authority). Each body has specific functions and responsibilities, which are widely determined, by the regulatory framework. The adequateness of the distribution of roles and processes is confirmed by the overall results of the Programme management. The Programme is managed smoothly and according to the planned activities and established targets.

Decisions concerning the Programme are taken by consensus, striving for a balance of interests and positions. The consensual decision-making process is actively supported by the MA/JS that provides well-prepared and evidence-based background material. The Programme bodies have established adequate mechanisms to involve relevant stakeholders during programming and implementation.

During 2020-2021 the Covid-19 pandemic has posed huge operational and strategic challenges but this has highlighted the importance and value of the highly committed staff and responsive and flexible systems.

Summarizing the findings, the following conclusions are drawn per Evaluation Module/Question:

Evaluation Module A: Programme Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the Cooperation Programme has been greatly achieved, despite the late approval of the Programme. This is reflected in the selection of projects that serve the goals of the individual Specific Objectives as set. The effectiveness of the CP is also documented by the high degree of efficient cooperation between the authorities (JMC, MA/JS, AA, CA) but also the beneficiaries with the authorities and the minor problems during the implementation of the projects, which were partly due to delays attributed to the exogenous factor of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Specifically, the Figures for contracted projects are satisfactory for both Priority Axes. Similarly, all Thematic Priorities and Specific Objectives have been activated, and an overall 95.20% of the total budget is contracted. The total EU payments to the Programme converge to the ESIF EU Average as the interim payments have increased significantly during 2020-2021. As of 30.06.2021 the financial implementation under both Priority Axes (1 & 2) has exceeded 25% of their 2023 target values. According to projections of expenditure for the next years based on

the current projects under implementation it is expected to achieve the financial targets for both Axes. To this end, the projects of the 2nd Call will cover the balance of the Programme’s budget. Regarding the implementation progress of the operational output indicators based on the contracted projects, most of the indicators have achieved the Programme’s target in both Priority Axes,. A prediction of output values shows that the achievement of their target values can be expected for the total of the Specific Objectives.

Evaluation Module B: Performance Framework of the Cooperation Programme

Regarding the Performance Framework, its’ progress is satisfactory. Programme implementation is on track, and the level of verified expenses is satisfactory until the end of June 2021, although the pandemic has stressed the implementation efforts of beneficiaries. The Key Implementation Steps and the output indicators show that the Programme set a base for a successful implementation. The new projects under the second Call will ensure the achievement of the Programme’s targets. The significant delays that occurred during previous years in the verified expenses have been overcome thanks to measures that have been taken by MA and JS in order to accelerate the expenses verification procedures.

Evaluation Module C: Programme’s Efficiency

There is an essential improvement in the Programme’s Efficiency during the first semester of 2021 as the approved expenditure has been increased by 10% compared to 30.12.2020. In total, 38.34% of the total funding has been verified as eligible expenses.

The total of Priority Axis 1 output indicators has already achieved the Programme's targets, and the available funds are sufficient to succeed the goals.

Priority Axis 2 has a positive picture in total too. The real picture of Priority Axis 2 will be improved significantly, as the projects of the 2nd Call will contribute to Programme’s target and take into account that many projects overperform, surpassing their targets.

In total, the available sources are sufficient to succeed the goals of the two Axes taking into consideration the suggested reallocation of the Priority Axis 3 unused funds in favor of the two Axes of the Programme.

Evaluation Module D: Consistency of the intervention logic within the Cooperation Programme Strategy

The analysis shows that the intervention logic is still relevant, based on the current macroeconomic, social and environmental status of the intervention area and the appropriate legal and policy developments. The structure of the intervention logic is appropriate to mitigate the last years new needs the increased flows of refugee, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the intervention logic allows for multiple synergies between the Specific Objectives.

Evaluation Module E: Revision of the Cooperation Programme

The overall analysis showed that the Programme has been founded in a solid planning document that assessed the challenges and opportunities that the intervention area is facing.

Furthermore, considering the progress of the Programme in all different levels, as well as the current status of the economic, social and environmental parameters, there is no justified need for revision and modifications of the Programme at this stage while new projects are in a

contracting phase, except the budget’s reallocation. Such a modification is also supported by the fact that there are unused funds in Priority Axis 3, which will be reallocated in two Priority Axes which will overperform just after the contracting of the projects of the 2nd call. Finally, a closer look on the overestimation or underestimation of the unitary costs for some of the SOs should take place.

Evaluation Module F: Update of the Communication Strategy

Overall, up to 30.06.2021, the Programme’s Communication Strategy implementation serves absolutely the achievement of its Specific Objective. Respectively, the general objective of transparency is being achieved through a multidimensional approach. From the point of the implementation progress of the Communication Strategy, the first phase was successfully completed, while the second one is still going and the third one entered in an implementation stage as the results and the outputs achieved are disseminated.

Evaluation of the Programme’s communication strategy highlights the vital role of effective and efficient communication in its activities. The Programme uses a wide variety of communication tools and approaches and has increasingly taken efforts to improve its brand and visual identity. Communications are relevant and well delivered. In a survey that was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2021 among 99 beneficiaries, applicants, potential applicants and other type of respondents the feedback that was received regarding the communication strategy was positive.

Impact Assessment

Conclusions related to the impact are mainly based on assumptions, since the current Programme at the time of the evaluation did not have a critical mass of finished projects. Most of the projects in the frame of the 1st Call are still in the main phase of their implementation (10% of the projects have been concluded).

Taking into account that the examined projects have not yet finalized their implementation, it can be concluded that current performance levels and thus also the projects’ final contributions to all SOs will considerably increase further. In every case the forty (40) examined projects have a considerable impact on policy change at local/regional or national levels. However, it is still difficult to conceive the overall impact in the region and the broader area.

It is worth mentioning that projects will indeed contribute to the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth priorities of the Europe 2020 Strategy, as it is analyzed in the relevant section. The sum of indirect contributions of the Programme will also help reducing territorial disparities between regions in Europe and thereby support the EU’s territorial cohesion objective. Moreover, the improved policies will trigger a sequence of effects of different kinds, which leading to positive changes in the socio-economic situation or environmental conditions of the territories covered by project partners. These positive short or medium-term changes will also positively support other development targets. On the other hand, some adverse effects may also be produced, as in the case of increased tourism that can result in the rise of traffic, environmental pollution, etc.

Significant delays and Contributing factors

The Managing Authority and the Programme Structures had to face and overcome some significant delays, which affected the Programme’s performance.

A negative point in terms of the effectiveness was the **delays that occurred during the initial approval** by the European Commission of the INTERREG IPA CBC Programme Greece – Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020” compared to other Interreg Programmes due to the delayed approval of IPA regulations. Although the First Call for project proposals was launched in a period less than four months from the approval of the Programme by the EC with a budget more than three times higher compared to the respective one of the 1st Call of the previous programming period (launched quite two years after the approval of the Programme by the EC).

However, the period between the publication of the evaluation results of the 1st Call for project proposals and the signing of the 1st Subsidy Contract is the longest one compared with those of the previous programming period. This remarkable delay was due to two critical issues:

- Need to **align with the differences between the EU external rules (PRAG)** applicable in IPA Programmes and the EU & national procurement rules applicable to the Member States. Since the Greek partner beneficiaries receive pre-financing through the Public Investment Programme (public funding), the alignment of the PRAG and National & EU rules should be done before the contracting of the projects. A coordination effort, extremely time-consuming, has been carried out by the Managing Authority and the Commission Services to align the difference between the EU external rules (PRAG) and the rules applicable to the Member States. In addition, the Managing Authority published an IPA procurement manual, which was very well received by the project beneficiaries.
- Long negotiation period with the projects because of **the large number of projects** in one single Call (40) and the numerous project beneficiaries (184). To be noted, that in the previous programming period, the total number of projects contracted under the two first calls of proposals was 38, in a period of two years, while the total number of 179 partner beneficiaries was only achieved after the contracting of the projects approved under the 3rd Call for proposals only one year before the closure of the previous Programme. Nevertheless, during the current programming period, negotiation procedures for contracting include also IPA partner beneficiaries (a task performed by the EU Delegation in previous programming period, since IPA partners were signing separated contracts/ grant agreements).

It's worth to be mentioned that in October 2018 (3 years after the launch of the Programme), more than 85% of the Programme's budget allocated to Priority Axes 1 and 2 has been contracted, while at the same time within the last programming period it had only started the negotiation & contracting procedure for the projects approved under the 1st Call resulting to the contracting of less than the 25% of the Programme budget only one year later (in a period of 4 years). Moreover, in the previous programming period, the contracting of 85% of the Programme budget was only achieved only two years before the Programme closure.

Despite the late approval, the Cooperation Programme is back on track. The **effectiveness of the Cooperation Program has significantly been achieved**, which is reflected in the selection of projects that serve the goals of the individual Specific Objectives asset. Specifically, the Figures for contracted projects are satisfactory for both Priorities. Similarly, all Thematic Priorities and Specific Objectives have been activated (an overall 95.20% of the total budget is contracted by 30.06.2021, as referred previously).

A significant delay concerned **the lag in the development of the Greek integrated MIS** due to several challenges the setting up of an integrated MIS was prone to within the Programme Structures and beyond. However, these have successfully been tackled, and the system has been functional since 2018. The Managing Authority worked in close cooperation with the special Services of MIS in order to finalize the electronic system.

Verified expenses lag from the actual expenses of the Programme and its projects due to the **complicated nature of the procedure for verification**. The advancements that have been done in this respect with the simplification of the procedure after the electronic platform has been operationalized have minimized the lag time for the verification of the expenses. A **specific timeline** for the verifications of expenditure has been adopted. A noteworthy improvement is the integration of FLC verifications into the MIS.

Another significant delay that has to be overcome was **the delays in pre-financing** and the **financing of activities in the Republic of North Macedonia**. During the previous Programming period, under centralized management by the Delegation of the EU, IPA project beneficiaries were eligible to receive the biggest share of the EU contribution upon signature of their grant contracts. This wasn't available under the current Programme modalities (an advance payment of 20% beneficiaries of North Macedonia were entitled to receive). The limited fiscal space in the partner country in conjunction with the lack of Beneficiaries' own resources necessitated the adoption of a formula for the financing of project activities. The Managing Authority had proactively reserved the pool of funds from the Programme's pre-financing. A series of detailed rules and procedures adopted by a large number of Programme Bodies in both countries. Finally, the Managing Authority and Certifying Authority issued a guidance, which regulated the flow of funds and is a guarantee against bottlenecks in the smooth financing of project activities.

The Programme's Structures **have identified the causes of delayed certification of expenditure** in the financing of activities in the Republic of North Macedonia. Measures have been taken **to facilitate the projects implementation and payments of incurred expenses of IPA partners**. The Secretariat has identified lengthy bureaucratic procedures that caused bottlenecks in the funding of projects. More specifically, the transfer of EU funds from Greek municipalities, acting as Lead Partners, was delayed due to internal rules of the Lead Partners organizations. The Joint Secretariat intervened to speed up the procedures and release the red tape involved. In doing so, the Secretariat cooperated with the Certifying Authority to reach a consensus on the procedures.

Additionally, in order to support and accelerate the procedures in the Republic of North Macedonia, it was decided to establish the new structure, "**Monitoring and Control Officer (MCO)**". MCO offers supporting services to the National operating structure and Antenna officer based in Bitola. The MCO plays an important role, particularly in providing assistance to Finance and Control Officer and Irregularity Officer during the supervision of FLC controllers on the project site visits. He supports the National structure on a day-to-day basis for collecting and processing the reference data to generate various reports on management verification and national co-financing payments to IPA beneficiaries. Also, the MCO coordinates the work established under the service contract between the service provider and the designated team of the National Structure regarding the activities for developing the Information module.

The effectiveness of the Cooperation Programme is also documented by the high degree of efficient cooperation between the authorities (JMC, MA / JS, AA, CA) but also the beneficiaries with the authorities and the minor problems during the implementation of the projects, which were partly due to delays attributed to the exogenous factor of the Covid-19 pandemic. **The Covid-19 pandemic has marked the years 2020-2021**. All Cooperation Programmes have suffered from the suspension of physical meetings and cross-border activities. **IPA Programmes have been disproportionately affected**: Borders with non-EU countries were essentially closed since March. Exchanges were permitted from the Evzoni main border crossing only, for a limited number of people and with special permission. As a result, most of the projects' implementation has been delayed by an average of 4-8 months. Nonetheless,

the **Programme Authorities proactively safeguarded the smooth implementation of the projects:**

- Project extensions were granted.
- Activities were revised to reflect the new state of play. As such, several meetings and exchanges took place online.
- A significant number of projects underwent extensive budget modifications and revisions in order to transpose physical events into online events.
- Risk management processes were put into place in order to take precautions in those cases where activities could not be substituted or delivered online.
- Despite the limited fiscal space on both sides of the border, particular effort was put to ensure that Project Beneficiaries enjoyed uninterrupted cash-flows and were adequately funded.
- In cooperation with the Certifying Authority, the 7th Accounting Year saw the introduction of Payment Claims adjusted to the Project Beneficiaries' actual monetary needs. Therefore, more frequent payment claims took place to ensure the uninterrupted funding of Projects.

In order to support the smooth implementation of the Programme, Managing Authority and Programme Structures, have taken into consideration lessons learned from the past. The Management Structures of the Programme itself (both at Managing Authority and Joint Secretariat level) acted in a much more effective and efficient way, taking advantage of its much more experienced and qualified human resources. Therefore, a series of training and support seminars for project beneficiaries and their staff has been organized in both countries. The Programme Authorities opted to capitalize on the excellent cooperation and relationships between beneficiaries, documented during the previous Programming Period. As such, extended project partnerships were favored. In addition, the Secretariat assumed the negotiation and contracting procedures of IPA partner beneficiaries. This responsibility was performed by the EU Delegation during the previous programming period. The inherent coordination difficulties in dealing with large partnerships delayed the project implementation.

Nonetheless, the Programme Structures capitalized on the lessons learned and revised its internal procedures to cope with the elevated workload and specific issues raised. Therefore, it is well-positioned to address the demands of the Calls successfully. At the same time, the project beneficiaries enhanced their capacities by their direct involvement in more demanding projects.

As it is presented above, it is evident that **Managing Authority and the Programme Structures cooperate** from the very beginning of the Programme's implementation **with the Greek Authorities** (i.e., Certifying Authority) and the relevant **Authorities of North Macedonia** to be more productive and address all the obstacles that cause bottlenecks in the funding and delays in the implementation of the projects.

Recommendations – Lessons Learnt

Considering the analysis and the evaluation findings of the IPA CBC Programme, the following recommendations and lessons learnt are concluded:

- An update of the budget allocation should be made right after the contracting of the 2nd Call projects to check against the potential achievement of financial targets and the need for the launch of an additional Call for i.e strategic project.

- Emphasis should be put on the new projects approved in 2021 that will have a limited implementation duration and on a small number of projects, that are in progress and phasing implementation failures.
- The existing indicators lists must be used and, if appropriate, they must be modified to fit the Programme context. It must be ensured that all categories of interventions are tracked and reported.
- It is crucial to secure that systematic data collection is realistic for each indicator and can be traced. It is appropriate to set a methodological framework for determining the values declared in the MIS, in order to allow their objective control by the primary control, during the administrative and on-the-spot verifications during the approval of progress reports but also during the Programme evaluation process.
- Systematical support is recommended to be given to the beneficiaries. Very supportive actions could be communication on a regular basis and provision of training courses through material that will be provided by the website, the Programme's social media, or the info-days. The training could be enriched with webinars, which will then be available via Youtube for beneficiaries and other stakeholders. It is recommended that future training programmes/seminars be more practice-based. Attention must be paid to less experienced stakeholders.
- Given the fact that many projects will reach their end in the following period, increased focus should be given to the dissemination of the results. To ensure a prosperous new Programme, the strategic communication and positioning should be strengthened throughout the Programme period. This involves target communication towards key decision makers as well as clear communication in relation to main policy agendas and developments.
- In future digital and social media communication will become even more active and require a stronger emphasis and resources. This concerns both the strengthening of social media communication, as well as interactive platforms where the communication among community members is facilitated.
- The new programming period should facilitate capitalization on the 2014-2020 experience. Aside to some gaps or inconsistencies concerning the targets of the indicators that have to be improved, the current monitoring and management approach thus also be used in the period 2021-2027.
- In the new Programme 2021-2027, the organizations that are directly responsible for the planning and implementing the strategies and policies must be involved in the life-cycle of the Programme and as project partners.
- Regarding the indicators of new Programme 2021-2027, attention must be paid in their use. It is recommended to be ensured the continuity where possible with the most frequently used indicators in previous Programme 2014-2020. It is proposed to use more common indicators included in the specific regulations rather than Programme-specific to measure and evaluate the interventions in order to avoid the time-consuming complicated methodologies of defining the indicators, indication of the method of calculation, source, timing, possible links with other indicators etc.

- The new Programme for 2021-2027 should carefully assess the new indicator target values in the course of the programming process (based on the current experiences and by taking into account the future Programme available budget) and also ensure that future projects' own definition of target values is realistic.
- In the 2021-2027 Programme, complementarities to other instruments and EU policies (i.e. HORIZON, COSME, Digital Europe Programme, Life Programme, EU Biodiversity Strategy, European Green Deal) must be exploited.

Επιτελική Σύνοψη

Η παρούσα τελική Έκθεση εξετάζει την απόδοση της «αρχιτεκτονικής» του Προγράμματος Interreg IPA CBC Ελλάδα – Δημοκρατία της Βόρειας Μακεδονίας», έτσι ώστε να εκτιμήσει την αποτελεσματικότητα όσον αφορά την υλοποίηση των στρατηγικών επιλογών και στόχων που έχουν τεθεί.

Η αξιολόγηση περιλαμβάνει σε βάθος ανάλυση και αξιολόγηση της υλοποίησης του Προγράμματος έως τις 30.06.2021 σε όρους αποτελεσματικότητας και αποδοτικότητας. Αποτιμά την επίτευξη προόδου των δεικτών του πλαισίου επιδόσεων και τη συνάφεια της παρεμβατικής λογικής με τη στρατηγική του προγράμματος. Η παρούσα έκθεση αξιολογεί την απόδοση της επικοινωνιακής στρατηγικής και εξετάζει την ανάγκη επικαιροποίησης της. Περαιτέρω αξιολογείται ο αντίκτυπος του Προγράμματος.

Η αξιολόγηση χρησιμοποίησε έναν ισχυρό συνδυασμό ποιοτικών και ποσοτικών μεθόδων συλλογής και αξιολόγησης δεδομένων προσαρμοσμένων σε κάθε εργασία αξιολόγησης. Κλειδί για την αξιολόγηση είναι επίσης η κατανόηση του ρόλου του Προγράμματος.

Το Interreg IPA CBC Program "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" (CCI: 2014TC16I5CB009) εγκρίθηκε από την Ευρωπαϊκή Επιτροπή στις 6 Αυγούστου 2015 με την απόφαση C (2015) 5655. Το Πρόγραμμα τροποποιήθηκε δύο φορές. Η πρώτη αναθεώρηση αφορούσε την υιοθέτηση και την ενσωμάτωση του «Πλαισίου Επιδόσεων» στο έγγραφο προγραμματισμού (Απόφαση Γ (2017) 6650/25.9.2017) ενώ η δεύτερη τροποποίηση που εγκρίθηκε με την απόφαση Γ (2019) 7322 / 8.10.2019 αφορούσε τον τίτλο του Προγράμματος Συνεργασίας ο οποίος τροποποιήθηκε ως εξής «Interreg - IPA CBC Greece – the Republic of North Macedonia». Το πρόγραμμα Interreg IPA CBC στοχεύει στην «ενίσχυση της εδαφικής συνοχής βελτιώνοντας το βιοτικό επίπεδο και τις ευκαιρίες απασχόλησης με σεβασμό στο περιβάλλον και κάνοντας χρήση των φυσικών πόρων για τον τουρισμό». Αυτός ο στόχος επιδιώκεται με πέντε στρατηγικές επιλογές: 1. Προώθηση της απασχόλησης, 2. Βελτίωση της πρόσβασης στην κοινωνική και υγειονομική περιθαλψη και προώθηση της κοινωνικής ένταξης και της κοινοτικής ανάπτυξης, 3. Τουριστική ανάπτυξη και καλύτερη χρήση της πολιτιστικής και φυσικής κληρονομιάς, 4. Βελτίωση των συνθηκών μεταφοράς και των σημείων ελέγχου και προώθηση των πράσινων μεταφορών και 5. Προστασία του περιβάλλοντος και βιώσιμη διαχείριση των φυσικών πόρων.

Η συνολική χρηματοδότηση του Προγράμματος Συνεργασίας ανέρχεται σε 45.470.066 €. Στον Άξονα Προτεραιότητας 1 έχει διατεθεί το 40% του προϋπολογισμού, στον Άξονα Προτεραιότητας 2 το 50%, το μεγαλύτερο ποσό μεταξύ των τριών Αξόνων του Προγράμματος, και στην Τεχνική Βοήθεια (Άξονας Προτεραιότητας 3) έχει διατεθεί το 10%.

Οι συνολικές πληρωμές (σωρευτικές) της ΕΕ μέχρι το τέλος Ιουνίου 2021 ανέρχονται κατά προσέγγιση σε ποσοστό άνω του 55%, ενώ ο μέσος όρος της ΕΕ είναι περίπου 60%.

Όσον αφορά τον επιμερισμό του συνολικού διαθέσιμου προϋπολογισμού του Προγράμματος ύψους 45.470.066 € μεταξύ των Προσκλήσεων, ποσό 25.008.537 € (55%) του προϋπολογισμού συμπεριλήφθη στην 1η Πρόσκληση Υποβολής Προτάσεων Έργων (Κωδικός MIS 2637, η οποία ξεκίνησε τον Δεκέμβριο του 2015) και στη σχετική Πρόσκληση (Κωδικός MIS 1720) του Άξονα Προτεραιότητας (ΑΠ) 3 «Τεχνική Βοήθεια», ενώ για την 2η Πρόσκληση Υποβολής Προτάσεων Έργων (MIS 3971, που ξεκίνησε τον Δεκέμβριο του 2019), προγραμματίστηκε η διάθεση ποσού 6.000.000 € για νέα έργα. Συνολικά, έχουν εγκριθεί πενήντα τέσσερα (54) έργα στο πλαίσιο των δύο (2) προσκλήσεων υποβολής προτάσεων έργων του Προγράμματος INTERREG - IPA CBC Ελλάδα - Δημοκρατία της Βόρειας

Μακεδονίας, εκ των οποίων σαράντα δύο (42) έργα στο πλαίσιο της 1ης πρόσκλησης και δώδεκα (12) έργα στο πλαίσιο της 2ης πρόσκλησης.

Η αξιολόγηση της προόδου του Προγράμματος αφορά τα σαράντα δύο (42) έργα της πρώτης πρόσκλησης καθώς τα δώδεκα (12) έργα της δεύτερης πρόσκλησης δεν έχουν ανατεθεί μέσω συμβάσεων μέχρι τις 30.06.2021. Από την αξιολόγηση προκύπτει ότι το «Πρόγραμμα INTERREG IPA CBC Ελλάδα – Δημοκρατία της Βόρειας Μακεδονίας» βρίσκεται σε τροχιά επίτευξης των Ειδικών Στόχων και αποτελεσμάτων του προγράμματος. Εκπληρώνει και συχνά υπερβαίνει τους στόχους του παρά την καθυστερημένη έναρξη και τις προκλήσεις που αντιμετωπίζει λόγω της πανδημίας Covid-19. Επιπλέον, η αξιολόγηση των έργων του Προγράμματος δείχνει ότι η επίτευξη δεκατεσσάρων (14) εκροών και δέκα (10) αποτελεσμάτων είναι σημαντική. Όσον αφορά τους δείκτες, η αυτό-αναφερόμενη συνεισφορά των έργων είναι πολύ μεγαλύτερη από αυτή που έχει ορίσει το Πρόγραμμα. Αυτό οφείλεται στις διαφορετικές ερμηνείες των μεθοδολογιών των δεικτών από τις Δομές του Προγράμματος και τους δικαιούχους. Ωστόσο, η συμβολή που έχουν τα τρέχοντα έργα στους στόχους του Προγράμματος IPA CBC για το 2023 είναι ήδη σημαντική, με συνέπεια να μπορεί να προβλεφθεί ότι οι τιμές στόχοι θα επιτευχθούν στα τέλη του 2023. Ειδικά, αν ληφθεί υπόψη η συμβολή στους στόχους του Προγράμματος των έργων της 2ης πρόσκλησης που θα ξεκινήσουν κατά το τελευταίο τρίμηνο του 2021.

Όσον αφορά την αξιολόγηση επιπτώσεων, αυτή βασίζεται σε μια θεωρητική προσέγγιση που λαμβάνει υπόψη τον διαθέσιμο προϋπολογισμό, τα δεδομένα και τις δυνατότητες. Τα συμπεράσματα σχετικά με τον αντίκτυπο βασίζονται κυρίως σε υποθέσεις, καθώς το τρέχον Πρόγραμμα δεν εμπεριείχε ένα σημαντικό αριθμό ολοκληρωμένων έργων κατά τη στιγμή της αξιολόγησης. Παρ' όλα αυτά, τα σαράντα έργα των ΑΠ 1 και 2 έχουν σημαντικό αντίκτυπο στην αλλαγή πολιτικής σε τοπικό/περιφερειακό ή εθνικό επίπεδο. Επιπλέον, το Πρόγραμμα είναι κατά συνέπεια ευθυγραμμισμένο με τους τρεις στόχους της στρατηγικής ΕΕ 2020: έξυπνη, βιώσιμη και χωρίς αποκλεισμούς ανάπτυξη.

Το πρόγραμμα Interreg IPA CBC έχει μια καλά καθορισμένη δομή διαχείρισης (Διαχειριστική Αρχή/Κοινή Γραμματεία/Αρχή Πιστοποίησης). Κάθε φορέας έχει συγκεκριμένες λειτουργίες και ευθύνες, οι οποίες καθορίζονται σε μεγάλο βαθμό από το κανονιστικό πλαίσιο. Η επάρκεια όσον αφορά την κατανομή των ρόλων και των διαδικασιών επιβεβαιώνεται από τα συνολικά αποτελέσματα της διαχείρισης του Προγράμματος. Το Πρόγραμμα διαχειρίζεται με ομαλό τρόπο και σύμφωνα με τις προγραμματισμένες δραστηριότητες και τους καθορισμένους στόχους.

Οι αποφάσεις που αφορούν το Πρόγραμμα λαμβάνονται με συναίνεση, επιδιώκοντας ισορροπία συμφερόντων και θέσεων. Η διαδικασία συναινετικής λήψης αποφάσεων υποστηρίζεται ενεργά από το τη ΔΑ/ΚΓ που παρέχει καλά προετοιμασμένο και τεκμηριωμένο υλικό. Οι φορείς του προγράμματος έχουν δημιουργήσει επαρκείς μηχανισμούς για να εξασφαλίσουν τη συμμετοχή των ενδιαφερομένων μερών κατά τον προγραμματισμό και την υλοποίηση.

Κατά τη διάρκεια του 2020-2021, η πανδημία Covid-19 έχει θέσει τεράστιες επιχειρησιακές και στρατηγικές προκλήσεις, αλλά αυτό έχει αναδείξει τη σημασία και την αξία του ιδιαίτερα αφοσιωμένου προσωπικού και των ευέλικτων συστημάτων με γρήγορη ανταπόκριση.

Αναλύοντας τα ευρήματα, εξάγονται τα ακόλουθα συμπεράσματα ανά Ενότητα/Ερώτηση αξιολόγησης:

Ενότητα αξιολόγησης Α: Αποτελεσματικότητα προγράμματος

Η αποτελεσματικότητα του Προγράμματος Συνεργασίας έχει επιτευχθεί σε μεγάλο βαθμό, παρά την καθυστερημένη έγκριση του Προγράμματος. Αυτό αντικατοπτρίζεται στην επιλογή έργων που εξυπηρετούν τους επιμέρους Ειδικούς Στόχους όπως εκείνοι έχουν τεθεί. Η αποτελεσματικότητα του ΠΣ τεκμηριώνεται επίσης από τον υψηλό βαθμό αποτελεσματικής συνεργασίας μεταξύ των αρχών (Κοινή Επιτροπή Παρακολούθησης, Διαχειριστική Αρχή / Κοινή Γραμματεία, Ελεγκτική Αρχή, Αρχή Πιστοποίησης) αλλά και των δικαιούχων με τις αρχές και τα δευτερεύοντα προβλήματα που εμφανίστηκαν κατά την υλοποίηση των έργων, ήταν εν μέρει λόγω καθυστερήσεων που αποδίδονται στον εξωγενή παράγοντα της πανδημίας Covid-19.

Συγκεκριμένα, τα Στοιχεία για τα έργα που έχουν συμβάσεις είναι ικανοποιητικά και για τους δύο άξονες προτεραιότητας. Παρομοίως, έχουν ενεργοποιηθεί όλες οι Θεματικές Προτεραιότητες και οι Ειδικό Στόχοι και έχουν συναφθεί συμβάσεις για το 95,20% του συνολικού προϋπολογισμού. Οι συνολικές πληρωμές της ΕΕ στο πρόγραμμα συγκλίνουν στον μέσο όρο του ΕΔΕΤ της ΕΕ, καθώς οι ενδιάμεσες πληρωμές έχουν αυξηθεί σημαντικά κατά την περίοδο 2020-2021. Στις 30.06.2021 η υλοποίηση σε χρηματοοικονομικούς όρους και στους δύο Άξονες Προτεραιότητας (1 & 2) έχει υπερβεί το 25% των τιμών-στόχων για το 2023. Σύμφωνα με προβλέψεις των δαπανών για τα επόμενα χρόνια με βάση τα τρέχοντα έργα υπό υλοποίηση, αναμένεται να επιτευχθούν οι χρηματοοικονομικοί στόχοι και για τις δύο Προτεραιότητες. Προς εκπλήρωση αυτού του σκοπού, τα έργα της 2ης Πρόσκλησης θα καλύψουν το υπόλοιπο του προϋπολογισμού του Προγράμματος. Όσον αφορά την πρόοδο υλοποίησης των επιχειρησιακών δεικτών εκροών με βάση τα έργα με σύμβαση, οι περισσότεροι δείκτες και στους δύο άξονες προτεραιότητας έχουν επιτύχει τον στόχο του Προγράμματος. Μια πρόβλεψη των τιμών εκροών δείχνει ότι η επίτευξη των τιμών-στόχων τους μπορεί να αναμένεται για το σύνολο των Ειδικών Στόχων.

Ενότητα αξιολόγησης Β: Πλαίσιο Επιδόσεων του Προγράμματος Συνεργασίας

Όσον αφορά το Πλαίσιο Επιδόσεων, η πρόδοός του είναι ικανοποιητική. Η υλοποίηση του προγράμματος βρίσκεται σε καλό στάδιο και το επίπεδο των επαληθευμένων δαπανών μέχρι το τέλος Ιουνίου 2021 είναι ικανοποιητικό, αν και η πανδημία έχει δυσκολέψει τις προσπάθειες υλοποίησης των δικαιούχων. Τα Βασικά Βήματα Εφαρμογής και οι δείκτες εκροών δείχνουν ότι το Πρόγραμμα έχει θέσει τη βάση για μια επιτυχημένη υλοποίηση. Τα νέα έργα στο πλαίσιο της δεύτερης πρόσκλησης θα διασφαλίσουν την επίτευξη των στόχων του Προγράμματος. Οι σημαντικές καθυστερήσεις που σημειώθηκαν τα προηγούμενα έτη κατά τη διάρκεια επαλήθευσης των δαπανών έχουν ξεπεραστεί χάρη στα μέτρα που έχουν ληφθεί από τη Διαχειριστική Αρχή και την Κοινή Γραμματεία για την επιτάχυνση των διαδικασιών επαλήθευσης δαπανών.

Ενότητα αξιολόγησης Γ: Αποδοτικότητα του Προγράμματος

Παρατηρείται ουσιαστική βελτίωση στην Αποδοτικότητα του Προγράμματος κατά το πρώτο εξάμηνο του 2021 καθώς η εγκεκριμένη δαπάνη έχει αυξηθεί κατά 10% σε σχέση με την 30.12.2020. Συνολικά, το 38,34% της συνολικής χρηματοδότησης έχει επαληθευτεί ως επιλέξιμη δαπάνη.

Το σύνολο των δεικτών εκροών του Άξονα Προτεραιότητας 1 έχει ήδη επιτύχει τους στόχους του Προγράμματος, και τα διαθέσιμα κεφάλαια επαρκούν για την επίτευξη των στόχων.

Επιπλέον, και ο Άξονας Προτεραιότητας 2 προβάλλει συνολικά μια θετική εικόνα. Η πραγματική εικόνα του Άξονα Προτεραιότητας 2 θα βελτιωθεί σημαντικά, καθώς τα έργα της 2ης

Πρόσκλησης ξεκινήσουν να συμβάλουν στον στόχο του Προγράμματος, και λαμβάνοντας υπόψη ότι πολλά έργα υπερπαποδίδουν, ξεπερνώντας τους στόχους τους.

Συνολικά, οι διαθέσιμοι πόροι επαρκούν για την επίτευξη των στόχων των δύο Αξόνων λαμβάνοντας υπόψη και την προτεινόμενη ανακατανομή των αχρησιμοποίητων κεφαλαίων του Άξονα Προτεραιότητας 3 με κατεύθυνση τους άλλους δυο Άξονες.

Ενότητα Αξιολόγησης Δ: Συνέπεια παρεμβατικής λογικής εντός της Στρατηγικής του Προγράμματος Συνεργασίας

Η ανάλυση δείχνει ότι η παρεμβατική λογική εξακολουθεί να είναι σχετική, με βάση την τρέχουσα μακροοικονομική, κοινωνική και περιβαλλοντική κατάσταση της περιοχής παρέμβασης, και τις κατάλληλες νομικές και πολιτικές εξελίξεις. Η παρεμβατική λογική είναι κατάλληλη για τον μετριασμό των νέων αναγκών των τελευταίων ετών, των αυξημένων προσφυγικών ροών και της πανδημίας COVID-19. Επιπλέον, η λογική παρέμβασης επιτρέπει πολλαπλές συνέργειες μεταξύ των Ειδικών Στόχων.

Ενότητα Αξιολόγησης Ε: Αναθεώρηση του Προγράμματος Συνεργασίας

Η συνολική ανάλυση έδειξε ότι το Πρόγραμμα έχει βασιστεί σε ένα συνεκτικό έγγραφο σχεδιασμού που εκτιμά τις προκλήσεις και τις ευκαιρίες που αντιμετωπίζει η περιοχή παρέμβασης.

Επιπλέον, λαμβάνοντας υπόψη την πρόοδο του Προγράμματος σε όλα τα διαφορετικά επίπεδα, καθώς και την τρέχουσα κατάσταση των οικονομικών, κοινωνικών και περιβαλλοντικών παραμέτρων, δεν υπάρχει δικαιολογημένη ανάγκη για αναθεώρηση και τροποποίηση του Προγράμματος σε αυτό το στάδιο, ενώ νέα έργα βρίσκονται σε φάση σύναψης σύμβασης, με εξαίρεση εκείνης για την ανακατανομή του προϋπολογισμού. Μια τέτοια τροποποίηση ενισχύεται και από το γεγονός ότι υπάρχουν αχρησιμοποίητα κεφάλαια από τον Άξονα Προτεραιότητας 3, τα οποία θα ανακατανομηθούν σε δύο Άξονες Προτεραιότητας που θα υπερπαποδώσουν αμέσως μετά την ανάθεση των έργων της 2ης πρόσκλησης. Τέλος, θα πρέπει να δοθεί προσοχή στην υπερεκτίμηση ή υποεκτίμηση για τα μοναδιαία κόστη για ορισμένους από τους Ειδικούς Στόχους.

Ενότητα Αξιολόγησης ΣΤ: Επικαιροποίηση της Επικοινωνιακής Στρατηγικής

Συνολικά, έως τις 30.06.2021, η υλοποίηση της Επικοινωνιακής Στρατηγικής του Προγράμματος εξυπηρετεί απόλυτα την επίτευξη του Ειδικού Στόχου του. Αντίστοιχα, ο γενικός στόχος της διαφάνειας επιτυγχάνεται μέσω μιας πολυδιάστατης προσέγγισης. Όσον αφορά την πρόοδο των φάσεων υλοποίησης της Επικοινωνιακής Στρατηγικής, η πρώτη φάση ολοκληρώθηκε με επιτυχία, ενώ η δεύτερη βρίσκεται ακόμη σε εξέλιξη και η τρίτη μπήκε σε στάδιο υλοποίησης με την έναρξη της διαδικασίας διάχυσης των αποτελεσμάτων του έργου.

Η αξιολόγηση της επικοινωνιακής στρατηγικής του Προγράμματος υπογραμμίζει τον ζωτικό ρόλο της αποτελεσματικής και αποδοτικής επικοινωνίας. Το Πρόγραμμα χρησιμοποιεί μια μεγάλη ποικιλία επικοινωνιακών μέσων και προσεγγίσεων, και καταβάλλει ολοένα και περισσότερες προσπάθειες για τη βελτίωση της επωνυμίας και της οπτικής του ταυτότητας. Οι ενέργειες επικοινωνίας είναι σχετικές και καλώς εκτελεσμένες. Σε έρευνα που διεξήχθη το τέταρτο τρίμηνο του 2021 μεταξύ 99 δικαιούχων, αιτούντων, πιθανών αιτούντων και άλλου τύπου ερωτηθέντων, τα σχόλια που λήφθηκαν σχετικά με την επικοινωνιακή στρατηγική ήταν θετικά.

Αξιολόγηση Επιπτώσεων

Τα συμπεράσματα που αφορούν τον αντίκτυπο του Προγράμματος βασίζονται κυρίως σε υποθέσεις, καθώς το τρέχον Πρόγραμμα κατά τη στιγμή της αξιολόγησης δεν έχει έναν σημαντικό αριθμό ολοκληρωμένων έργων. Τα περισσότερα έργα στο πλαίσιο της 1ης Πρόσκλησης βρίσκονται ακόμη στην κύρια φάση υλοποίησής τους (το 10% των έργων έχει ολοκληρωθεί).

Λαμβάνοντας υπόψη ότι τα εξεταζόμενα έργα δεν έχουν ακόμη ολοκληρώσει την υλοποίησή τους, μπορεί να συναχθεί το συμπέρασμα ότι τα τρέχοντα επίπεδα απόδοσης και συνεπώς και οι τελικές συνεισφορές των έργων θα αυξηθούν σημαντικά. Σε κάθε περίπτωση, τα σαράντα (40) έργα που εξετάστηκαν έχουν σημαντικό αντίκτυπο σε επίπεδο αλλαγής πολιτικής σε τοπικό/περιφερειακό ή εθνικό επίπεδο. Ωστόσο, εξακολουθεί να είναι δύσκολο να εκτιμήσει κανείς τον συνολικό αντίκτυπο στην περιοχή και ευρύτερα.

Αξίζει να σημειωθεί ότι τα έργα θα συμβάλουν πράγματι στις προτεραιότητες για έξυπνη, βιώσιμη και χωρίς αποκλεισμούς ανάπτυξη της στρατηγικής «Ευρώπη 2020», όπως αναλύεται στη σχετική ενότητα. Το άθροισμα των έμμεσων συνεισφορών του Προγράμματος θα συμβάλει επίσης στη μείωση των εδαφικών διαφορών μεταξύ των περιφερειών στην Ευρώπη και ως εκ τούτου θα στηρίξει τον στόχο της εδαφικής συνοχής της ΕΕ. Επιπλέον, οι βελτιωμένες πολιτικές θα πυροδοτήσουν μια σειρά δράσεων διαφορετικών ειδών, που θα οδηγήσουν σε θετικές αλλαγές στην κοινωνικοοικονομική κατάσταση ή στις περιβαλλοντικές συνθήκες των περιοχών που καλύπτονται από τους εταίρους του έργου. Αυτές οι θετικές βραχυπρόθεσμες ή μεσοπρόθεσμες αλλαγές θα στηρίξουν θετικά και άλλους αναπτυξιακούς στόχους. Από την άλλη πλευρά, ενδέχεται να προκληθούν και ορισμένες δυσμενείς επιπτώσεις, όπως στην περίπτωση του αυξημένου τουρισμού που μπορεί να οδηγήσει σε αύξηση της κυκλοφορίας, ρύπανση του περιβάλλοντος κ.λπ.

Σημαντικές καθυστερήσεις και παράγοντες που συνετέλεσαν σε αυτές

Η Διαχειριστική Αρχή και οι Δομές του Προγράμματος έπρεπε να αντιμετωπίσουν και να ξεπεράσουν ορισμένες σημαντικές καθυστερήσεις, οι οποίες επηρέασαν την απόδοση του Προγράμματος.

Αρνητικό σημείο ως προς την αποτελεσματικότητα ήταν οι καθυστερήσεις που σημειώθηκαν κατά την αρχική έγκριση από την Ευρωπαϊκή Επιτροπή του Προγράμματος INTERREG IPA CBC Ελλάδα – Δημοκρατία της Βόρειας Μακεδονίας 2014-2020» σε σύγκριση με άλλα Προγράμματα Interreg, λόγω της καθυστερημένης έγκρισης των κανονισμών IPA. Αν και η Πρώτη Πρόσκληση Υποβολής Προτάσεων Έργων προκηρύχθηκε σε διάστημα μικρότερο των τεσσάρων μηνών από την έγκριση του Προγράμματος από την Ευρωπαϊκή Επιτροπή με προϋπολογισμό υπερτριπλάσιο σε σύγκριση με τον αντίστοιχο της 1ης Πρόσκλησης της προηγούμενης προγραμματικής περιόδου (που ξεκίνησε δύο χρόνια μετά την έγκριση του Προγράμματος από την Ευρωπαϊκή Επιτροπή), το διάστημα μεταξύ της δημοσίευσης των αποτελεσμάτων της αξιολόγησης της 1ης Πρόσκλησης Υποβολής Προτάσεων Έργων και της υπογραφής της 1ης Σύμβασης Επιδότησης είναι το μεγαλύτερο σε σύγκριση με αυτά της προηγούμενης προγραμματικής περιόδου. Αυτή η αξιοσημείωτη καθυστέρηση οφειλόταν σε δύο κρίσιμα ζητήματα:

- **Ανάγκη ευθυγράμμισης των εξωτερικών κανόνων της ΕΕ (PRAG) που ισχύουν στα Προγράμματα IPA και των εθνικών και ενωσιακών κανόνων προμηθειών που ισχύουν για τα κράτη μέλη.** Δεδομένου ότι οι Έλληνες δικαιούχοι εταίροι λαμβάνουν προχρηματοδότηση μέσω του Προγράμματος Δημοσίων

Επενδύσεων (δημόσια χρηματοδότηση), η ευθυγράμμιση μεταξύ των κανόνων PRAG και εκείνων της ΕΕ και εθνών πρέπει να γίνει πριν από τη σύναψη συμβάσεων έργων. Μια προσπάθεια συντονισμού, εξαιρετικά χρονοβόρα, έχει πραγματοποιηθεί από τη Διαχειριστική Αρχή και τις υπηρεσίες της Επιτροπής για την ευθυγράμμιση των εξωτερικών κανόνων της ΕΕ (PRAG) και των κανόνων που ισχύουν για τα κράτη μέλη. Επιπλέον, η Διαχειριστική Αρχή δημοσίευσε ένα εγχειρίδιο προμηθειών IPA, το οποίο έτυχε πολύ καλής υποδοχής από τους δικαιούχους των έργων.

- Μεγάλη περίοδος διαπραγμάτευσης για τα έργα λόγω **του μεγάλου αριθμού έργων** σε μία μόνο πρόσκληση (40) και των πολυάριθμων δικαιούχων (184). Πρέπει να σημειωθεί ότι στην προηγούμενη προγραμματική περίοδο, ο συνολικός αριθμός των έργων που ανατέθηκαν, σε διάστημα δύο ετών, στις δύο πρώτες προσκλήσεις υποβολής προτάσεων ήταν 38, ενώ ο συνολικός αριθμός των 179 δικαιούχων εταιρών επιτεύχθηκε μόνο μετά τη σύναψη συμβάσεων έργων που εγκρίθηκαν στο πλαίσιο της 3ης πρόσκλησης υποβολής προτάσεων μόλις ένα χρόνο πριν από το κλείσιμο του προηγούμενου Προγράμματος. Ωστόσο, κατά την τρέχουσα προγραμματική περίοδο, οι διαδικασίες διαπραγμάτευσης για τη σύναψη συμβάσεων περιλαμβάνουν και δικαιούχους εταιρών IPA (έργο που εκτελούσε η Αντιπροσωπεία της ΕΕ στην προηγούμενη προγραμματική περίοδο, αφού οι εταιρείες IPA υπέγραψαν χωριστές συμβάσεις/συμφωνίες επιχορήγησης).

Αξίζει να αναφερθεί ότι τον Οκτώβριο του 2018 (3 χρόνια μετά την έναρξη του Προγράμματος), για πάνω από το 85% του προϋπολογισμού του Προγράμματος που διατέθηκε στους Άξονες Προτεραιότητας 1 και 2 είχαν συναφθεί συμβάσεις, σε αντιδιαστολή την ίδια χρονική περίοδο κατά την τελευταία προγραμματική περίοδο είχε μόνο ξεκινήσει η διαδικασία διαπραγμάτευσης και σύναψης συμβάσεων για τα έργα που εγκρίθηκαν στο πλαίσιο της 1ης Πρόσκλησης, με αποτέλεσμα η σύναψη συμβάσεων για ποσοστό κάτω του 25% του προϋπολογισμού του Προγράμματος να γίνει ένα χρόνο αργότερα (συνολικά περίοδος 4 ετών). Επιπλέον, κατά την προηγούμενη προγραμματική περίοδο, η επίτευξη ποσοστού 85% του προϋπολογισμού του Προγράμματος σε επίπεδο συμβάσεων συνέβη μόλις δύο χρόνια πριν από το κλείσιμο του Προγράμματος.

Παρά την καθυστερημένη έγκριση, το Πρόγραμμα Συνεργασίας έχει επανέλθει σε σωστή τροχιά. **Η αποτελεσματικότητα του Προγράμματος Συνεργασίας έχει επιτευχθεί σε σημαντικό βαθμό**, γεγονός που αντικατοπτρίζεται στην επιλογή έργων που εξυπηρετούν τους επιμέρους Ειδικούς Στόχους. Συγκεκριμένα, τα Στοιχεία για τα έργα με συμβάσεις είναι ικανοποιητικά και για τις δύο Προτεραιότητες. Ομοίως, έχουν ενεργοποιηθεί όλες οι Θεματικές Προτεραιότητες και οι Ειδικό Στόχοι (συνολικά το 95,20% του συνολικού προϋπολογισμού έως τις 30.06.2021 καλύπτεται με συμβάσεις, όπως αναφέρθηκε προηγουμένως).

Μια σημαντική **καθυστέρηση αφορούσε την ανάπτυξη του ελληνικού ολοκληρωμένου συστήματος MIS**, λόγω διαφόρων προκλήσεων που εμφανίστηκαν εντός των Δομών του Προγράμματος και όχι μόνο. Ωστόσο, έχουν αντιμετωπιστεί με επιτυχία και το σύστημα λειτουργεί από το 2018. Η Διαχειριστική Αρχή εργάστηκε σε στενή συνεργασία με τις ειδικές Υπηρεσίες του MIS για την οριστικοποίηση του ηλεκτρονικού συστήματος.

Οι επαληθευμένες δαπάνες υστερούν σε σχέση με τις πραγματικές δαπάνες του Προγράμματος και των έργων του λόγω της **περίπλοκης φύσης της διαδικασίας επαλήθευσης**. Οι πρόοδοι που έχουν συντελεστεί μετά την έναρξη λειτουργίας της ηλεκτρονικής πλατφόρμας έχουν οδηγήσει σε απλοποίηση της διαδικασίας επαλήθευσης και σε ελαχιστοποίηση του χρόνου επαλήθευσης των δαπανών. Έχει υιοθετηθεί ένα συγκεκριμένο χρονοδιάγραμμα για τις επαληθεύσεις των δαπανών. Μια αξιοσημείωτη βελτίωση αποτελεί η ενσωμάτωση των επαληθεύσεων FLC στο MIS.

Μια άλλη σημαντική **καθυστέρηση** που έπρεπε να ξεπεραστεί αφορούσε τις δραστηριότητες **προχρηματοδότησης και χρηματοδότησης στη Δημοκρατία της Βόρειας Μακεδονίας**. Κατά την προηγούμενη προγραμματική περίοδο, υπό κεντρική διαχείριση από την Αντιπροσωπεία της ΕΕ, οι δικαιούχοι IPA ήταν επιλέξιμοι να λάβουν το μεγαλύτερο μερίδιο της συνεισφοράς της ΕΕ με την υπογραφή των συμβάσεων επιχορήγησης. Αυτό δεν ήταν εφικτό βάσει των υφιστάμενων όρων του Προγράμματος (οι δικαιούχοι της Βόρειας Μακεδονίας δικαιούνταν να λάβουν προκαταβολή 20%). Το περιορισμένο δημοσιονομικό περιθώριο στη χώρα εταίρο σε συνδυασμό με την έλλειψη ιδίων πόρων των Δικαιούχων κατέστησε αναγκαία την υιοθέτηση μιας φόρμουλας για τη χρηματοδότηση των δραστηριοτήτων του έργου. Η Διαχειριστική Αρχή είχε δεσμεύσει προληπτικά κεφάλαια από την προχρηματοδότηση του Προγράμματος. Επιπλέον, μια σειρά λεπτομερών κανόνων και διαδικασιών υιοθετήθηκαν από μεγάλο αριθμό Φορέων του Προγράμματος και στις δύο χώρες. Τέλος, η Διαχειριστική Αρχή και η Αρχή Πιστοποίησης εξέδωσαν οδηγία, η οποία ρύθμιζε τη ροή των κεφαλαίων και συλλογούσε εγγύηση για την αποφυγή κωλυμάτων και την εξασφάλιση ομαλής χρηματοδότησης των δραστηριοτήτων του έργου.

Οι Δομές του Προγράμματος **έχουν εντοπίσει τα αίτια της καθυστερημένης πιστοποίησης των δαπανών** κατά τη διαδικασία χρηματοδότησης δραστηριοτήτων στη Δημοκρατία της Βόρειας Μακεδονίας. Έχουν ληφθεί μέτρα **που διευκολύνουν την υλοποίηση των έργων και την πληρωμή των υλοποιημένων δαπανών των εταίρων IPA**. Η Γραμματεία έχει εντοπίσει χρονοβόρες γραφειοκρατικές διαδικασίες που δημιουργούσαν κωλύματα κατά τη διαδικασία χρηματοδότησης των έργων. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, η μεταφορά κονδυλίων της ΕΕ από ελληνικούς δήμους, που ενεργούσαν ως κύριοι εταίροι, καθυστέρουσε λόγω εσωτερικών κανόνων αυτών των οργανισμών. Η Κοινή Γραμματεία παρενέβη για να επιταχύνει τις διαδικασίες και να μειώσει τη γραφειοκρατία. Στο πλαίσιο αυτό, η Γραμματεία συνεργάστηκε με την Αρχή Πιστοποίησης για την επίτευξη συναίνεσης σχετικά με τις διαδικασίες.

Επιπρόσθετα, προκειμένου να υποστηριχθούν και να επιταχυνθούν οι διαδικασίες στη Δημοκρατία της Βόρειας Μακεδονίας, αποφασίστηκε η ίδρυση της νέας δομής, **«Υπεύθυνος Παρακολούθησης και Ελέγχου (ΥΠΕ)»**. Ο ΥΠΕ προσφέρει υποστηρικτικές υπηρεσίες στην Εθνική δομή και στον υπεύθυνο της Antenna που εδρεύει στη Μπίτολα. Ο ΥΠΕ διαδραματίζει σημαντικό ρόλο, ιδιαίτερα στην παροχή βοήθειας προς τον Υπεύθυνο Οικονομικών και Ελέγχου και στον Υπεύθυνο για ζητήματα Παρατυπίας κατά την επίβλεψη των ελεγκτών της FLC στις επισκέψεις στον χώρο του έργου. Υποστηρίζει την εθνική δομή σε καθημερινή βάση για τη συλλογή και την επεξεργασία των δεδομένων αναφοράς για τη δημιουργία διαφόρων εκθέσεων που αφορούν την επαλήθευση της διαχείρισης και τις πληρωμές της εθνικής συγχρηματοδότησης προς τους δικαιούχους IPA. Επίσης, ο ΥΠΕ συντονίζει τις εργασίες που καθορίζονται βάσει της σύμβασης υπηρεσιών μεταξύ του παρόχου υπηρεσιών και της καθορισμένης ομάδας της Εθνικής Δομής και αφορούν την ανάπτυξη της ενότητας πληροφόρησης.

Η αποτελεσματικότητα του Προγράμματος Συνεργασίας τεκμηριώνεται επίσης από τον υψηλό βαθμό αποτελεσματικής συνεργασίας μεταξύ των αρχών (Κοινή Επιτροπή Παρακολούθησης, Διαχειριστική Αρχή / Κοινή Γραμματεία, Ελεγκτική Αρχή, Αρχή Πιστοποίησης) αλλά και των δικαιούχων με τις αρχές, και τα δευτερεύοντα προβλήματα κατά την υλοποίηση των έργων, ήταν εν μέρει λόγω καθυστερήσεων που αποδίδονται στον εξωγενή παράγοντα της πανδημίας Covid-19. **Η πανδημία Covid-19 σημάδεψε τα έτη 2020-2021**. Όλα τα Προγράμματα Συνεργασίας έχουν πληγεί από την αναστολή των φυσικών συναντήσεων και των διασυννοριακών δραστηριοτήτων. **Τα προγράμματα IPA έχουν επηρεαστεί δυσανάλογα**: Τα σύνορα με χώρες εκτός ΕΕ έκλεισαν ουσιαστικά από τον Μάρτιο. Επιτρέπονταν συναλλαγές μόνο από την κύρια συνοριακή διέλευση των Ευζώνων, για περιορισμένο αριθμό ατόμων και με ειδική άδεια. Ως αποτέλεσμα, η υλοποίηση των περισσότερων έργων έχει καθυστερήσει

κατά μέσο όρο 4-8 μήνες. Ωστόσο, **οι Αρχές του Προγράμματος έλαβαν προληπτικά μέτρα για να διασφαλίσουν την ομαλή υλοποίηση των έργων:**

- Δόθηκαν παρατάσεις στα έργα.
- Οι δραστηριότητες αναθεωρήθηκαν για να αντικατοπτρίζουν τη νέα κατάσταση. Ως εκ τούτου, πολλές συναντήσεις και συναλλαγές πραγματοποιήθηκαν διαδικτυακά.
- Ένας σημαντικός αριθμός έργων υπέστη εκτεταμένες τροποποιήσεις και αναθεωρήσεις προϋπολογισμού προκειμένου φυσικά γεγονότα να γίνουν διαδικτυακά.
- Τέθηκαν σε εφαρμογή διαδικασίες διαχείρισης κινδύνων προκειμένου να ληφθούν προφυλάξεις σε εκείνες τις περιπτώσεις όπου οι δραστηριότητες δεν μπορούσαν να αντικατασταθούν ή να γίνουν ηλεκτρονικά.
- Παρά τον περιορισμένο δημοσιονομικό χώρο και στις δύο πλευρές των συνόρων, καταβλήθηκε ιδιαίτερη προσπάθεια για να διασφαλιστεί ότι οι Δικαιούχοι του Έργου απολάμβαναν αδιάλειπτες ταμειακές ροές και χρηματοδοτούνταν επαρκώς.
- Σε συνεργασία με την Αρχή Πιστοποίησης, κατά το 7ο λογιστικό έτος εισήχθησαν Αιτήσεις Πληρωμής προσαρμοσμένες στις πραγματικές χρηματικές ανάγκες των Δικαιούχων του Έργου. Ως εκ τούτου, πραγματοποιούνταν συχνότερες αιτήσεις πληρωμής για τη διασφάλιση της αδιάλειπτης χρηματοδότησης των Έργων.

Προκειμένου να υποστηρίξουν την ομαλή υλοποίηση του Προγράμματος, η Διαχειριστική Αρχή και οι Δομές του Προγράμματος έλαβαν υπόψη τους διδάγματα από το παρελθόν. Οι Δομές Διαχείρισης του Προγράμματος (τόσο σε επίπεδο Διαχειριστικής Αρχής όσο και σε επίπεδο Κοινής Γραμματείας) έδρασαν με πολύ πιο αποτελεσματικό και αποδοτικό τρόπο, αξιοποιώντας το πολύ πιο έμπειρο και καταρτισμένο ανθρώπινο δυναμικό τους. Ως εκ τούτου, μια σειρά σεμιναρίων κατάρτισης και υποστήριξης για τους δικαιούχους του έργου και το προσωπικό τους έχει λάβει χώρα και στις δύο χώρες. Οι Αρχές του Προγράμματος επέλεξαν να αξιοποιήσουν την άριστη συνεργασία και τις σχέσεις μεταξύ των δικαιούχων, που καταγράφηκαν κατά την προηγούμενη Προγραμματική Περίοδο. Ως εκ τούτου, ευνοήθηκαν έργα με διευρυμένες συνεργασίες. Επιπλέον, η Γραμματεία ανέλαβε τις διαδικασίες διαπραγμάτευσης και σύναψης συμβάσεων για τους δικαιούχους εταίρους IPA. Αυτές οι δραστηριότητες εκτελέστηκαν από την αντιπροσωπεία της ΕΕ κατά την προηγούμενη προγραμματική περίοδο. Οι εγγενείς δυσκολίες συντονισμού λόγω των μεγάλων συνεργατικών σχημάτων καθυστέρησαν την υλοποίηση των έργων.

Παρ' όλα αυτά, οι Δομές του Προγράμματος αξιοποίησαν τα διδάγματα του παρελθόντος και αναθεώρησαν τις εσωτερικές τους διαδικασίες για να αντιμετωπίσουν τον αυξημένο φόρτο εργασίας και τα συγκεκριμένα ζητήματα που τέθηκαν. Ως εκ τούτου, είναι σε θέση να αντιμετωπίσουν με επιτυχία τις απαιτήσεις των Προσκλήσεων. Ταυτόχρονα, οι δικαιούχοι του έργου ενίσχυσαν τις ικανότητές τους με την άμεση εμπλοκή τους σε πιο απαιτητικά έργα.

Όπως παρουσιάζεται παραπάνω, είναι προφανές ότι η **Διαχειριστική Αρχή και οι Δομές του Προγράμματος** συνεργάζονται από την αρχή της εφαρμογής του Προγράμματος **με τις Ελληνικές Αρχές** (δηλαδή την Αρχή Πιστοποίησης) και τις αρμόδιες **Αρχές της Βόρειας Μακεδονίας** για να είναι πιο παραγωγικές και να αντιμετωπίζουν τις καθυστερήσεις στην υλοποίηση των έργων όλα τα εμπόδια που ανακύπτουν κατά τη διαδικασία της χρηματοδότησης.

Προτάσεις - Διδάγματα

Λαμβάνοντας υπόψη την ανάλυση και τα ευρήματα της αξιολόγησης του Προγράμματος IPA CBC, συνάγονται οι ακόλουθες προτάσεις και διδάγματα:

- Μια επικαιροποίηση της κατανομής του προϋπολογισμού θα πρέπει να γίνει αμέσως μετά τη σύναψη των συμβάσεων για τα έργα της 2ης πρόσκλησης για να ελεγχθεί αν δυνητικά επιτυγχάνονται οι οικονομικοί στόχοι και αν υπάρχει ανάγκη δημιουργίας μιας πρόσθετης πρόσκλησης, π.χ. για στρατηγικό έργο.
- Έμφαση πρέπει να δοθεί στα νέα έργα που εγκρίθηκαν το 2021 και θα έχουν περιορισμένη διάρκεια υλοποίησης, και σε μικρό αριθμό έργων που βρίσκονται σε εξέλιξη και αντιμετωπίζουν αποτυχίες στην υλοποίηση.
- Οι υπάρχουσες λίστες δεικτών πρέπει να χρησιμοποιηθούν και, εάν χρειάζεται, να τροποποιηθούν ώστε να ταιριάζουν στο πλαίσιο του Προγράμματος. Πρέπει να διασφαλιστεί ότι όλες οι κατηγορίες παρεμβάσεων παρακολουθούνται και αποτυπώνονται σε αναφορές.
- Είναι σημαντικό να διασφαλιστεί ότι η συστηματική συλλογή δεδομένων είναι ρεαλιστική για κάθε δείκτη και μπορεί να ιχνηλατηθεί. Είναι σκόπιμο να τεθεί ένα μεθοδολογικό πλαίσιο για τον προσδιορισμό των τιμών που δηλώνονται στο MIS, ώστε να επιτρέπεται ο αντικειμενικός έλεγχός τους κατά το στάδιο αρχικού ελεγχού, κατά τις διοικητικές και επιτόπιες επαληθεύσεις κατά την έγκριση των εκθέσεων προόδου αλλά και κατά τη διάρκεια της διαδικασίας αξιολόγησης του Προγράμματος
- Συνιστάται η παροχή συστηματικής υποστήριξη στους δικαιούχους. Πολύ βοηθητικές ενέργειες θα ήταν η επικοινωνία σε τακτική βάση και η παροχή εκπαιδευτικών μαθημάτων μέσω υλικού που θα μπορούσε να παρέχεται μέσω του ιστότοπου, των μέσων κοινωνικής δικτύωσης του Προγράμματος ή των ημερίδων ενημέρωσης. Η εκπαίδευση θα μπορούσε να εμπλουτιστεί με διαδικτυακά σεμινάρια, τα οποία στη συνέχεια θα ήταν διαθέσιμα μέσω Youtube για τους δικαιούχους και άλλους ενδιαφερόμενους φορείς. Συνιστάται τα μελλοντικά εκπαιδευτικά προγράμματα/σεμινάρια να δίνουν μεγαλύτερη έμφαση στην πρακτική. Πρέπει να δοθεί προσοχή σε λιγότερο έμπειρους ενδιαφερόμενους.
- Δεδομένου ότι πολλά έργα θα φθάσουν στο τέλος τους την επόμενη περίοδο, θα πρέπει να δοθεί μεγαλύτερη έμφαση στη διάδοση των αποτελεσμάτων. Για να εξασφαλιστεί ένα νέο επιτυχημένο πρόγραμμα, η στρατηγική επικοινωνίας και παρουσίασης θα πρέπει να ενισχυθεί καθ' όλη την διάρκεια του Προγράμματος. Αυτή προτείνεται να περιλαμβάνει στοχευμένη επικοινωνία με τους βασικούς φορείς λήψης αποφάσεων καθώς και σαφή επικοινωνία σε σχέση με τις κύριες εξελίξεις και ατζέντες πολιτικής.
- Στο μέλλον, η επικοινωνία μέσω κοινωνικών δικτύων και ψηφιακών μέσων αναμένεται να γίνει ακόμη πιο συχνή, και άρα θα χρειαστεί να της δοθεί μεγαλύτερη έμφαση και πόροι. Επισημαίνεται η σημασία της ενίσχυσης της επικοινωνίας τόσο μέσω κοινωνικών δικτύων όσο και μέσω διαδραστικών πλατφόρμων στις οποίες διευκολύνεται η επικοινωνία μεταξύ των μελών της κοινότητας.
- Προτείνεται η νέα προγραμματική περίοδος να διευκολύνει την αξιοποίηση της εμπειρίας από την περίοδο 2014-2020. Εκτός από ορισμένα κενά ή ασυνέπειες σχετικά με τους στόχους των δεικτών που πρέπει να βελτιωθούν, η τρέχουσα προσέγγιση παρακολούθησης και διαχείρισης προτείνεται και για την περίοδο 2021-2027.
- Στο νέο Πρόγραμμα 2021-2027, οι οργανισμοί που είναι άμεσα υπεύθυνοι για τον σχεδιασμό και την εφαρμογή των στρατηγικών και των πολιτικών πρέπει να συμμετέχουν στον κύκλο ζωής του Προγράμματος και ως εταίροι του έργου.

- Όσον αφορά τους δείκτες του νέου Προγράμματος 2021-2027, πρέπει να δοθεί προσοχή στη χρήση τους. Συνιστάται να διασφαλίζεται η συνέχεια όπου είναι δυνατόν με τους πιο συχνά χρησιμοποιούμενους δείκτες στο προηγούμενο Πρόγραμμα 2014-2020. Για τη μέτρηση και την αξιολόγηση των παρεμβάσεων, προτείνεται η χρήση πιο κοινών δεικτών που να περιλαμβάνονται στους ειδικούς κανονισμούς και όχι ειδικών για το πρόγραμμα, προκειμένου να αποφευχθούν οι χρονοβόρες και πολύπλοκες διαδικασίες που αφορούν τον καθορισμό των δεικτών, της μεθόδου υπολογισμού, της πηγής, του χρόνου, των πιθανών σχέσεων με άλλους δείκτες κ.λπ.
- Το νέο Πρόγραμμα για την περίοδο 2021-2027 θα πρέπει να εκτιμά προσεκτικά τις τιμές-στόχους των νέων δεικτών κατά τη διαδικασία προγραμματισμού (με βάση την πρόσφατη εμπειρία και λαμβάνοντας υπόψη τον διαθέσιμο προϋπολογισμό του μελλοντικού Προγράμματος) και επίσης να διασφαλίζει ότι οι ορισμοί των στόχων των μελλοντικών προγραμμάτων είναι ρεαλιστικοί.
- Στο Πρόγραμμα 2021-2027, οι συμπληρωματικότητες με άλλα μέσα και πολιτικές της ΕΕ, (π.χ. HORIZON, COSME, Πρόγραμμα Ψηφιακής Ευρώπης, Πρόγραμμα Life, Στρατηγική της ΕΕ για τη βιοποικιλότητα, Ευρωπαϊκή Πράσινη Συμφωνία) πρέπει να αξιοποιηθούν.

Резиме на главните точки

Овој финален извештај ги испитува перформансите на „архитектурата“, на Програматата Interreg IPA CBC Programme Greece -Republic of North Macedonia, за се измери нејзината ефикасност во операционализација на стратешките избори и поставените цели.

Оваа Евалуација опфаќа длабинска анализа и евалуација на имплементацијата на Програмата до 30.06.2021 година во однос на ефективноста и ефикасноста. Го проценува напредокот на постигнувањата на Рамковните индикатори за перформанси и релевантноста на логиката на интервенцијата со Стратегијата на Програмата. Овој извештај ги оценува перформансите на комуникациската стратегија и ја испитува потребата да се ажурира. Понатаму се оценува влијанието на Програмата.

Евалуацијата употреби робусна мешавина на квалитативни и квантитативни методи за собирање и евалуација на податоци прилагодени на секоја задача за евалуација. Клучот за евалуација е исто така разбирањето на улогата на Програмата.

Програмата Interreg IPA CBC "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" (CCI: 2014TC1615CB009) беше одобрена од страна на Европската Комисија на 06 август 2015 година преку Одлуката С (2015) 5655. Програмата беше изменета двапати. Првата ревизија се однесуваше на усвојувањето и вградувањето на „Рамката за изведба“ во програмскиот документ (Одлука С (2017) 6650/25.9.2017 година), додека втората измена одобрена со Одлуката С (2019) 7322 / 8.10.2019 година, се однесуваше на насловот на Програмата за соработка која е изменета на следниов начин "Interreg - IPA CBC Greece – the Republic of North Macedonia". Програмата Interreg IPA CBC има за цел "подобрување на територијалната кохезија преку подобрување на животниот стандард и можностите за вработување со почитување на животната средина и користење на природните ресурси за туризам". Оваа цел се следи преку пет стратешки избори: 1. Промовирање на вработувањето, 2. Подобрување на пристапот до социјална и здравствена заштита и промовирање на социјалната вклученост и развој на заедницата, 3. Туристички развој и подобро користење на културното и природното наследство, 4. Подобрување на транспортните услови и контролни пунктови и промовирање на зелен

транспорт и 5. Заштита на животната средина и одржливо управување со природните ресурси.

Вкупното финансирање на Програмата за соработка изнесува 45.470.066 €. Приоритетната оска 1 е распределена со 40%, Приоритетната оска 2 е финансирана со 50%, најголемиот износ меѓу трите оски на програмата, додека на техничката помош (приоритетна оска 3) е доделен процент 10% од вкупниот буџет.

Вкупните плаќања на ЕУ (кумулирани) до крајот на јуни 2021 година изнесуваат приближно над 55%, додека просекот на ЕУ е околу 60%.

Што се однесува до повиците, од вкупниот буџет од 45.470.066 € на располагање на Програмата, вкупно 25.008.537 € (55%) од буџетот се вклучени во првиот повик за предлози на проекти (MIS код 2637, кој беше објавен во декември 2015 г.) и соодветниот повик (MIS код 1720) на Приоритетна оска 3 „Техничка помош. Дополнително, во рамки на вториот повик за предложување на проекти (MIS 3971, кој беше објавен во декември 2019 година), беше планирана сума од 6.000.000 евра за нови проекти. Свкупно, одобрени се педесет и четири (54) проекти според двата (2) повици за предлози на проекти на INTERREG - IPA CBC Програмата Грција - Република Северна Македонија, четириесет и два (42) проекти во рамките на 1-ви повик и дванаесет (12) проекти според вториот повик.

Евалуацијата на напредокот на Програмата се однесува на четириесет и два (42) проекти од првиот повик бидејќи дванаесетте (12) проекти од вториот повик не беа со склучен договор до 30.06.2021 година. Евалуацијата открива дека Програмата "INTERREG IPA CBC Programme Greece – Republic of North Macedonia" е на пат за реализација на специфичните цели и резултати на програмата. Ги исполнува и често ги надминува своите цели и ги исполнува своите цели и покрај доцниот почеток и предизвиците со кои се соочува поради пандемијата Ковид-19. Понатаму, евалуацијата на проектите на Програмата покажува дека постигнувањето на одливи и резултати е значително. Што се однесува до показателите, самопријавениот придонес на проектите е многу поголем од она што го има поставено Програмата. Ова се должи на различните толкувања на методологиите на индикаторите од Програмските структури и од корисниците. Како и да е, придонесот што го даваат тековните проектни достигнувања кон целите на Програмата IPA CBC за 2023 година е веќе значителен, така што може да се екстраполира дека целните вредности ќе се постигнат на крајот на 2023 година. Особено ако се има предвид дека проектите од вториот повик кои треба да започнат во последниот квартал од 2021 година ќе придонесат за целите на Програмата.

Што се однесува до евалуацијата на влијанието, ова се заснова на пристап заснован на теорија, земајќи го предвид расположливиот буџет, податоци и капацитет. Заклучоците поврзани со влијанието главно се засноваат на претпоставки, бидејќи тековната програма немаше критична маса на готови проекти во времето на евалуацијата. Сепак, четириесетте проекти на PAs 1 и 2 имаат значително влијание врз промената на политиките на локално/регионално или национално ниво. Понатаму, Програмата е следствено усогласена со трите цели на Стратегијата на ЕУ 2020: паметен, одржлив и инклузивен раст.

Програмата Interreg IPA CBC има добро дефинирана структура на управување MA/JS/CA (Управувачки орган/Заеднички секретаријат/Оддел за сертификација). Секое тело има специфични функции и одговорности, кои се широко определени со регулаторната рамка. Адекватноста на распределбата на улогите и процесите е потврдена од вкупните резултати на управувањето со Програмата. Програмата се води непречено и според планираните активности и утврдените цели.

Одлуките во врска со Програмата се носат со консензус, стремејќи се кон рамнотежа на интереси и позиции. Процесот на консензуално донесување одлуки е активно поддржан од MA/JS кој обезбедува добро подготвен бекграунд материјал заснован на докази. Телата на Програмата имаат воспоставено соодветни механизми за вклучување на релевантните засегнати страни во текот на програмирањето и спроведувањето.

Во текот на 2020-2021 година, пандемијата Ковид-19 постави огромни оперативни и стратешки предизвици, но тоа ја истакна важноста и вредноста на високо посветениот персонал и одговорните и флексибилни системи.

Сумирајќи ги наодите, се извлекуваат следните заклучоци по модул/прашање за евалуација:

Модул за евалуација А: Ефективност на програмата

Ефективноста на Програмата за соработка е во голема мера постигната, и покрај доцното одобрување на Програмата. Ова се рефлектира во изборот на проекти кои им служат на целите на поединечните Специфични цели како што се поставени. Ефективноста на СР е документирана и со високиот степен на ефикасна соработка помеѓу властите (JMC, MA / JS, AA, CA) но и корисниците со властите и помалите проблеми при реализацијата на проектите, кои делумно беа поради доцнењата кои се припишуваат на егзогениот фактор на пандемијата Ковид-19.

Поточно, бројките за договорените проекти се задоволителни за двата Приоритети. Слично на тоа, активирани се сите Тематски приоритети и Специфични цели, а вкупно 95,20% од вкупниот буџет се договорени. Вкупните плаќања на ЕУ за Програмата се приближуваат кон Просекот на ЕУ за ESIF бидејќи привремените плаќања значително се зголемија во текот на 2020-2021 година. Од 30.06.2021 година, финансиската имплементација според двете приоритетни оски (1 и 2) надмина 25% од нивните целни вредности за 2023 година. Според проекциите на расходите за следните години врз основа на тековните проекти под имплементација, се очекува да се постигнат финансиските цели за двата Приоритети. За таа цел, проектите од вториот повик ќе го покриваат билансот на буџетот на Програмата.

Што се однесува до напредокот на имплементацијата на индикаторите за оперативни резултати засновани на договорените проекти, и во двете Приоритетни оски, повеќето од индикаторите ја постигнаа целта на Програмата. Предвидувањето на излезните вредности покажува дека достигнувањето на нивните целни вредности може да се очекува за вкупниот број на Специфични цели.

Модул за евалуација Б: Рамка на перформанси на Програмата за соработка

Во однос на Рамката на Перформанси, нејзиниот напредок е задоволителен. Имплементацијата на програмата е на добар пат, а нивото на потврдени трошоци е задоволително до крајот на јуни 2021 година, иако пандемијата ги нагласи напорите за имплементација на корисниците. Клучните чекори за имплементација и показателите за одлив покажуваат дека Програмата поставува основа за успешна имплементација. Новите проекти во рамките на вториот повик ќе обезбедат постигнување на целите на Програмата. Значителните доцнења што настанаа во текот на претходните години во проверените трошоци се надминати благодарение на мерките што ги преземаа Управувачкиот орган и Заедничкиот секретаријат со цел да се забрзаат процедурите за проверка на трошоците.

Модул за евалуација С: Ефикасност на програмата

Има суштинско подобрување во Ефикасноста на Програмата во текот на првиот семестар од 2021 година бидејќи одобрените расходи се зголемени за 10% во споредба со 30.12.2020 година. Вкупно, 38,34% од вкупното финансирање е верификуван како прифатливи трошоци.

Вкупниот број на излезни индикатори од Приоритетната оска 1 веќе ги постигна целите на Програмата, а расположливите средства се доволни за да се постигнат целите.

Приоритетната оска 2 има севкупно позитивна слика. Вистинската слика на Приоритетната оска 2 ќе биде значително подобрена, бидејќи проектите од вториот повик ќе придонесат за целта на Програмата и ќе земат предвид дека многу проекти имаат преголеми перформанси, надминувајќи ги нивните цели.

Севкупно, достапните извори се доволни за да се постигнат целите на двете Оски имајќи ја предвид предложената прераспределба на неискористените средства од Приоритетната оска 3 во корист на другите две програмски Оски.

Модул за евалуација D: Доследност на интервентната логика во рамките на Стратегијата на програмата за соработка

Анализата покажува дека интервентната логика е сè уште релевантна, врз основа на тековниот макроекономски, социјален и еколошки статус на областа за интервенција и соодветните правни и политички случувања. Структурата на интервентната логика е соодветна за ублажување на новите потреби од последните години, зголемениот проток на бегалци и пандемијата COVID-19. Понатаму, логиката на интервенција овозможува повеќекратни синергии помеѓу Специфичните цели.

Модул за евалуација E: Ревизија на Програмата за соработка

Целокупната анализа покажа дека Програмата е втемелена во солиден плански документ кој ги проценува предизвиците и можностите со кои се соочува областа за интервенција.

Понатаму, имајќи го предвид напредокот на Програмата на сите различни нивоа, како и моменталната состојба на економските, социјалните и еколошките параметри, нема оправдана потреба од ревизија и измени на Програмата во оваа фаза додека новите проекти се во фаза на договор, освен прераспределбата на буџетот. Ваквата измена е поткрепена и со фактот што има неискористени средства во Приоритетната оска 3, кои ќе бидат прераспределени во две Приоритетни оски кои ќе имаат преголеми перформанси веднаш по склучувањето договори на проектите од вториот повик. На крај, треба да се направи подетален преглед на преценувањето или потценувањето на унитарните трошоци за некои од SO.

Модул за евалуација F: Ажурирање на Стратегијата за комуникација

Севкупно, до 30.06.2021 година, имплементацијата на Комуникациската стратегија на Програмата служи апсолутно за постигнување на нејзината Специфична цел. Соодветно, општата цел за транспарентност се постигнува преку мултидимензионален пристап. Од аспект на напредокот на имплементацијата на Комуникациската стратегија, првата фаза беше успешно завршена, додека втората се уште трае, а третата влезе во фаза на имплементација како што се дисеминираат резултатите и постигнатите резултати.

Евалуацијата на комуникациската стратегија на Програмата ја нагласува виталната улога на ефективната и ефикасна комуникација во нејзините активности. Програмата користи широк спектар на алатки и пристапи за комуникација и сè повеќе презема напори да го подобри својот бренд и визуелен идентитет. Комуникациите се релевантни и добро испорачани. Во анкетата што беше спроведена во четвртиот квартал од 2021 година меѓу 99 корисници, апликанти, потенцијални апликанти и друг тип на испитаници, повратните информации што беа добиени во однос на комуникациската стратегија беа позитивни.

Проценка на влијанието

Заклучоците поврзани со влијанието главно се засноваат на претпоставки, бидејќи тековната Програма во моментот на евалуацијата немаше критична маса на готови проекти. Најголем дел од проектите во рамки на 1-виот Повик сè уште се во основната фаза на реализација (10% од проектите се договорени).

Имајќи предвид дека испитуваните проекти сè уште не ја финализирале нивната имплементација, може да се заклучи дека сегашните нивоа на изведба, а со тоа и конечниот придонес на проектите за сите SO дополнително ќе се зголемат значително. Во секој случај, четириесет (40) испитувани проекти имаат значително влијание врз промената на политиките на локално/регионално или национално ниво. Сепак, сè уште е тешко да се замисли целокупното влијание во регионот и пошироката област.

Вреди да се спомене дека проектите навистина ќе придонесат за паметните, одржливи и инклузивни приоритети за раст на Европската Стратегија 2020. Збирот на индиректните придонеси на Програмата, исто така, ќе помогне во намалувањето на територијалните разлики помеѓу регионите во Европа и со тоа ќе ја поддржи целта за територијална кохезија на ЕУ. Понатаму, подобрените политики ќе предизвикаат низа ефекти од различни видови, нешто што ќе доведе до позитивни промени во социо-економската состојба или условите на животната средина на териториите опфатени од проектните партнери. Овие позитивни краткорочни или среднорочни промени позитивно ќе поддржат и други развојни цели. Од друга страна, може да се појават и некои негативни ефекти, како во случајот на зголемен туризам, нешто што може да резултира со пораст на сообраќајот, загадување на животната средина итн.

Значителни одложувања и фактори кои придонесуваат за тоа

Управувачкиот орган и Програмските структури мораа да се соочат и да надминат некои значителни доцнења, кои влијаат на перформансите на Програмата.

Негативна точка во однос на ефективноста беа **доцнењата што настанаа при првичното одобрување** од Европската комисија на програмата INTERREG IPA CBC Greece – Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" во споредба со другите Interreg програми поради одложеното одобрување на регулативите за IPA. Иако Првиот повик за предлози на проекти беше објавен во период помалку од четири месеци од одобрувањето на Програмата од страна на ЕК со повеќе од три пати поголем буџет во споредба со соодветниот од првиот повик од претходниот програмски период (објавен по две години по одобрувањето на Програмата од страна на ЕК).

Сепак, периодот помеѓу објавувањето на резултатите од евалуацијата на 1-виот Повик за предлози за проекти и потпишувањето на Првиот Договор за субвенционирање е најдолг во споредба со оние од претходниот програмски период. Ова извонредно одложување се должи на две критични прашања:

- Треба да се усогласат разликите помеѓу надворешните правила на ЕУ (PRAG) кои се применуваат во програмите IPA и правилата на ЕУ и правилата на

Националните набавки што се применуваат на земјите-членки. Бидејќи грчките партнери-корисници добиваат предфинансирање преку Програмата за јавни инвестиции (јавно финансирање), усогласувањето на PRAG со националните правилата и правилата на ЕУ, треба да се направи пред склучување на договори за проектите. Напорот за координација, кој одзема многу време, беше спроведен од страна на Управувачкиот орган и службите на Комисијата за да се усогласи разликата помеѓу надворешните правила на ЕУ (PRAG) и правилата што се применуваат за земјите-членки. Дополнително, Управувачкиот орган објави еден IPA прирачник за набавки, кој беше многу добро прифатен од корисниците на проектот.

- Долг период на преговарање со проектите поради **големиот број проекти** во еден повик (40) и бројните корисници на проекти (184). Да се напомене дека во претходниот програмски период, вкупниот број на проекти договорени на двата први повици за предлози беше 38, во период од две години, додека вкупниот број од 179 партнер-корисници беше постигнат само по склучување договори за проекти одобрени според третиот повик за предлози само една година пред затворањето на претходната Програма. Како и да е, во текот на тековниот програмски период, процедурите за преговарање за склучување договори ги вклучуваат и IPA партнери-корисници (задача што во претходниот програмски период ја извршуваше Делегацијата на ЕУ, бидејќи IPA партнерите потпишуваа одвоени договори / договори за грантови).

Вреди да се спомене дека во октомври 2018 година (3 години по започнувањето на Програмата), повеќе од 85% од буџетот на Програмата доделен на приоритетните оски 1 и 2 беше договорен, додека во исто време во последниот програмски период само што ја започна процедурата за преговарање и склучување договори за проектите одобрени според првиот повик што резултираше со склучување договори за помалку од 25% од буџетот на Програмата само една година подоцна (во период од 4 години). Дополнително, во претходниот програмски период, договарањето на 85% од буџетот на Програмата беше постигнато само две години пред затворањето на Програмата.

И покрај доцното одобрување, Програмата за соработка се врати на вистинскиот пат. Беше постигната **значителна ефективност на Програмата за соработка**, што се рефлектира во изборот на проекти кои им служат на Специфичните цели. Поточно, бројките за договорените проекти се задоволителни за двата Приоритети. Слично на тоа, активирани се сите Тематски приоритети и Специфични цели (вкупно 95,20% од вкупниот буџет е договорен до 30.06.2021 година, како што беше наведено претходно).

Значително доцнење се однесуваше на доцнењето околу развојот на грчкиот интегриран MIS поради неколку предизвици од кои поставувањето на интегриран MIS во рамките на програмските структури и пошироко беше проблематично. Сепак, тие предизвици успешно се решени, а системот е функционален од 2018 година. Управувачкиот орган работеше во тесна соработка со специјалните служби на MIS со цел финализирање на електронскиот систем.

Потврдените трошоци заостануваат од реалните трошоци на Програмата и нејзините проекти поради **комплицираната природа на постапката за верификација**. Напредокот што беше постигнат во овој поглед со поедноставување на постапката по операционализацијата на електронската платформа го минимизираше времето на доцнење за верификација на трошоците. Усвоен е **конкретен временски рок** за верификација на расходите. Едно забележително подобрување е интегрирањето на верификациите на FLC во MIS.

Друго значајно доцнење што треба да се надмине беше **доцнењето на предфинансирањето и финансирањето на активностите во Република Северна Македонија**. Во текот на претходниот Програмски период, под централизирано управување од страна на Делегацијата на ЕУ, корисниците на IPA проектите имаа право да го добијат поголемиот дел од придонесот на ЕУ по потпишувањето на нивните договори за грантови. Ова не беше достапно според тековните програмски модалитети (корисниците на Северна Македонија имаа право да добијат авансна исплата од 20%). Ограничениот фискален простор во земјата-партнер во врска со недостатокот на сопствени ресурси на корисниците наложија усвојување формула за финансирање на проектните активности. Управувачкиот орган проактивно го резервираше фондот на средства од предфинансирањето на Програмата. Низа детални правила и процедури беа усвоени од голем број програмски тела во двете земји. Конечно, Управувачкиот орган и органот за Сертификација издадоа упатство, кое го регулира протокот на средства и сочинува гаранција против „тесните приоди“, во непреченото финансирање на проектните активности.

Структурите на Програмата ги **идентификуваа причините за одложеното потврдување на трошоците** за финансирање на активностите во Република Северна Македонија. Преземени се мерки за **олеснување на имплементацијата на проектите и плаќањето на направените трошоци на IPA партнерите**. Секретаријатот идентификуваше долги бирократски процедури кои предизвикуваа „тесни приоди“, во финансирањето на проектите. Поконкретно, трансферот на средства од ЕУ до грчките општини, кои дејствуваат како Водечки партнери, беше одложен поради внатрешните правила на организациите на Водечките партнери. Заедничкиот Секретаријат интервенираше за да се забрзаат процедурите и да се отстрани бирократијата. Притоа, Секретаријатот соработуваше со Органот за Сертификација за да се постигне консензус околу процедурите.

Дополнително, со цел да се поддржат и забрзаат процедурите во Република Северна Македонија, беше одлучено да се формира новата структура **„Службеник за мониторинг и контрола (МСО)“**. Службеникот МСО нуди услуги за поддршка на Националната оперативна структура и до Антена службеник со седиште во Битола. Службеникот МСО игра важна улога, особено во обезбедувањето помош до Службеникот за финансии и контрола и до Службеникот за неправилности за време на надзорот од страна на контролорите на FLC при посетите на локацијата на проектот. Тој секојдневно ја поддржува Националната структура за собирање и обработка на референтните податоци за генерирање различни извештаи за верификација на управувањето и национално кофинансирање на IPA корисниците. Исто така, Службеникот МСО ја координира работата воспоставена според договорот за услуги помеѓу давателот на услугата и назначениот тим на Националната структура во врска со активностите за развој на Информативниот модул.

Ефективноста на Програмата за соработка е документирана и со високиот степен на ефикасна соработка помеѓу властите (JMC, MA / JS, AA, CA) но и корисниците со властите и помалите проблеми при реализацијата на проектите, кои делумно беа поради доцнењата кои се припишуваат на егзогениот фактор на пандемијата Ковид-19. **Пандемијата „Ковид-19“ го одбележа периодот 2020-2021**. Сите програми за соработка претрпеа суспензија на физички состаноци и прекугранични активности. **IPA програмите беа непропорционално погодени**: границите со земјите кои не се членки на ЕУ беа суштински затворени од март. Премин беше дозволен само од главниот граничен премин Евзони, за ограничен број луѓе и со посебна дозвола. Како резултат на тоа, поголемиот дел од имплементацијата на проектите беше одложен во просек за 4-8

месеци. Сепак, **програмските власти проактивно го заштитуваа непреченото спроведување на проектите:**

- Беа дадени продолжувања на проектите.
- Активностите беа ревидирани за да ја одразат новонастанатата состојба. Како такви, беа одржани неколку состаноци и размени на мислење преку Интернет.
- Значителен број проекти претрпеа обемни измени и ревизии на буџетот со цел да се пренесат физички настани во онлајн настани.
- Почнаа да се применуваат Процесите за управување со ризик со цел да се преземат мерки на претпазливост во оние случаи кога активностите не може да се заменат или да се спроведат онлајн.
- И покрај ограничениот фискален простор од двете страни на границата, беа вложени особени напори за да се осигури дека Корисниците на проектите ќе уживаат во непрекинати парични текови и ќе бидат соодветно финансирани.
- Во соработка со Органот за сертификација, во 7-та пресметковна година беа воведени побарувања за плаќање приспособени на реалните парични потреби на корисниците на проектот. Поради тоа, имаше почести барања за плаќање за да се обезбеди непречено финансирање на Проектите.

Со цел да се поддржи непречено спроведување на Програмата, Управувачкиот орган и Програмските Структури ги земаа предвид лекциите научени од минатото. Структурите за управување на самата програма (и на ниво на Управувачкиот орган и Заеднички Секретаријат) дејствуваа на многу поефективен и поефикасен начин, искористувајќи ги многу поискусните и поквалификувани човечки ресурси. Затоа, во двете земји беше организирана една серија на семинари за обука и поддршка на Корисниците на проекти и нивниот персонал. Програмските власти избраа да ја капитализираат одличната соработка и односите меѓу корисниците, документираны во текот на претходниот програмски период. Како такви, беа фаворизирани проширени проектни партнерства. Дополнително, Секретаријатот ги презеде процедурите за преговарање и склучување договори на IPA партнери-корисници. Оваа одговорност во претходниот програмски период ја извршуваше Делегацијата на ЕУ. Инхерентните тешкотии во координацијата за справувањето со големите партнерства ја одложија имплементацијата на проектите.

Како и да е, Програмските структури ги искористија научените лекции и ги ревидираа своите внатрешни процедури за да се справат со зголемениот обем на работа и со покренатите конкретни прашања. Затоа, сега се добро позиционирани успешно да одговорат на барањата на повиците. Во исто време, корисниците на проекти ги зајакнаа своите капацитети со нивно директно вклучување во попребирливи проекти.

Како што се спомнува погоре, очигледно е дека Управувачкиот орган и Програмските структури соработуваат од самиот почеток за имплементацијата на Програмата со грчките власти (т.е. Органот за сертификација) и релевантните власти на Северна Македонија, за да бидат попродуктивни и да ги пронајдат сите пречки кои предизвикуваат „тесни приоди,, во финансирањето и доцнење во реализацијата на проектите.

Препораки – Научени лекции

Имајќи ги предвид анализите и наодите од евалуацијата на IPA CBC Програмата, заклучени се следните препораки и научени лекции:

- Ажурирање на распределбата на буџетот треба да се изврши веднаш по склучувањето договор на проектите на вториот повик за да се провери дали е можно постигнување на финансиските цели и потребата за објавување на дополнителен повик, значи за стратешки проект.
- Треба да се стави акцент на новите проекти одобрени во 2021 година кои ќе имаат ограничено времетраење на реализација и на мал број проекти кои се во тек и се соочуваат со неуспешна имплементација.
- Постојните списоци со индикатори мора да се користат и, доколку е соодветно, тие мора да се изменат за да одговараат на контекстот на Програмата. Мора да се осигура дека сите категории на интервенции се следени и пријавени.
- Од клучно значење е да се обезбеди дека систематското собирање податоци е реалистично за секој индикатор и може да се следи. Соодветно е да се постави методолошка рамка за утврдување на вредностите декларирани во MIS, со цел да се овозможи нивна објективна контрола од примарната контрола, при административните и теренските проверки при одобрувањето на извештаите за напредокот, но и за време на процесот на евалуација на Програмата.
- Се препорачува да им се даде систематска поддршка на корисниците. Многу поддржувачки активности би можеле да сочинуваат комуникација на редовна основа и обезбедување на курсеви за обука преку материјал што ќе биде обезбеден од веб-страницата, социјалните медиуми на Програмата или дневните работилници. Обуката може да се збогати со вебинари, кои потоа ќе бидат достапни преку Youtube за корисниците и другите засегнати страни. Се препорачува идните програми/семинари за обука да бидат базирани повеќе на пракса. Мора да се посвети внимание на помалку искусни чинители.
- Со оглед на фактот дека многу проекти ќе завршат во наредниот период, треба да се посвети поголем фокус на дисеминација на резултатите. За да се обезбеди просперитетна нова програма, стратешката комуникација и позиционирањето треба да се зајакнат во текот на програмскиот период. Ова вклучува целна комуникација со клучните носители на одлуки, како и јасна комуникација во врска со главните агенди на политики и случувања.
- Во иднина комуникацијата со дигиталните и социјалните медиуми ќе стане уште поактивна и ќе бара поголем акцент и ресурси. Ова се однесува и на зајакнувањето на комуникацијата со социјалните медиуми, како и на интерактивните платформи каде што е олеснета комуникацијата меѓу членовите на заедницата.
- Новиот програмски период треба да го олесни капитализирањето на искуството од периодот 2014-2020. Покрај некои празнини или недоследности во однос на целите на индикаторите што треба да се подобрат, сегашниот пристап на мониторинг и управување ќе се користи и во периодот 2021-2027.
- Во новата програма 2021-2027, организациите кои се директно одговорни за планирањето и спроведувањето на стратегиите и политиките мора да бидат вклучени во животниот циклус на Програмата и како проектни партнери.

- Во однос на показателите од новата програма 2021-2027, мора да се посвети внимание при нивното користење. Се препорачува да се обезбеди континуитет каде што е можно со најчесто користените индикатори во претходната Програма 2014-2020. Се предлага да се користат повообичаени индикатори вклучени во специфичните регулативи наместо специфични за програмата за да се мерат и да се оценуваат интервенциите, со цел да се избегнат сложените методологии кои одземаат многу време за дефинирање на индикаторите, наведување на методот на пресметка, изворот, времето, можните врски со други индикатори итн.
- Новата програма за 2021-2027 година треба внимателно да ги процени целните вредности на новите индикатори во текот на процесот на програмирање (врз основа на тековните искуства и земајќи го предвид идниот расположлив буџет на Програмата) и исто така да се осигури дека дефиниција за целните вредности на идните проекти е реалистична.
- Во Програмата 2021-2027, мора да се искористат комплементарности со другите инструменти и политиките на ЕУ (значи ХОРИЗОН, COSME, Дигитална Европска Програма, Програма Живот, Стратегија на ЕУ за биолошка разновидност, Европски зелен договор).

1. Introduction

The present report is the fourth deliverable of the “Update of the 1st Implementation Evaluation and Impacts of the Cooperation Programme “INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020” in the framework of the contract between Managing Authority of European Territorial Cooperation Programmes and the company RISE.

According to Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, Article 56 “Evaluation during the programming period” par.3, *“the managing authority shall ensure that evaluations, including evaluations to assess effectiveness, efficiency and impact are carried out for each programme on the basis of the evaluation plan and that each evaluation is subject to appropriate follow-up in accordance with the Fund-specific rules. At least once during the programming period, an evaluation shall assess how support from the ESI Funds has contributed to the objectives for each priority. All evaluations shall be examined by the monitoring committee and sent to the Commission...”*.

In a midterm operational evaluation, the evaluation of the effectiveness of Programme implementation is a key element. Effectiveness is determined by different factors, in particular the level of achievement of targets and objectives. The midterm situation is an adequate moment in time to observe progress in implementation and first achievements in order to be able to assess whether the Programme is right on track or needs operational adjustments.

The present deliverable elaborates and evaluates the Programme’s implementation up to 30.06.2021 in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, the achievement of the Performance Framework Indicators, the relevance of the intervention logic with the Programme’s Strategy, as well as the Communication Strategy of the Programme. Furthermore, we assess the impact of its implementation on the eligible (geographical) area but also on a broader economic, social and environmental implementation framework.

The present evaluation as a mid-term assessment intends to provide feedback so that Programme Authorities and stakeholders can keep on track and, if necessary, re-orientate the Programme. In the present report is included the evaluation of the communication strategy as well.

The evaluation findings should serve as a tool for improving the quality of future Programme implementation, and as one of the bases for planning future policies for the development of the Interreg IPA Programme in the coming financial period.

2. The Interreg Programme IPA CBC Programme "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020"

The Programme supports regional cooperation between Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia. The Programme's overall objective is to *«enhance territorial cohesion by improving living standards and employment opportunities holding respect to the environment and by using the natural resources for upgrading of the tourism product»*.

The Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" (CCI: 2014TC16I5CB009) was approved by the European Commission on August 6, 2015 by the decision C (2015) 5655. The Programme was amended twice. The first revision concerned the adoption and the incorporation of the "Performance Framework" in the programming document (Decision C (2017) 6650/25.9.2017) while the second amendment approved by Decision C (2019) 7322 / 8.10.2019 concerned the title of the Cooperation Programme which is modified as follows "Interreg - IPA CBC Greece - the Republic of North Macedonia".

Budget

The total budget allocated to the Programme is 45,470,066.00€, out of which 38,649,552.00€ (85%) is Union Support and the 6,820,514.00€ (15%) the National Counterpart.

Eligible area

The **eligible Cross Border Area**¹ is identical to the one of the previous Programming Period 2007-2013, with a total border length of 246km, covering an area of 29,259 km² (14,422 km² in Greece and 14,837 km² in the Republic of North Macedonia) and has a total population of 2.4 million inhabitants, covering 3 territorial units at NUTSII level (Regions) and 9 territorial units at NUTS III level (Districts).

The eligible area is located in the west-central Balkan Peninsula. The Programme covers five Nuts III Regions in Greece namely, Thessaloniki, Pella, Kilkis, Serres and Florina and four Nuts III Regions in the Republic of North Macedonia, namely Pelagonia, Vardar, Southeast and Southwest.

The Programme area extends across the entire border area of Greece – Republic of North Macedonia and neighbors with Bulgaria (east) and Albania (west). It is part of the most south-eastern non-insular area of EU, and it is situated between three seas: the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Ionian-Adriatic Sea.

As a general rule, in the eligible area of the Republic of North Macedonia, urban centers tend to be larger than in Greece. The population in the Greek eligible area as well as in the Republic of North Macedonia has decreased the past five years (2016-2020) by 0.66% and by 0.72%, respectively. High unemployment rates, both on total active population and on youth is the main common concern as it also leads to young and skilled staff migrating out of the eligible

¹ Greece – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia IPA Cross-Border Programme 2007-2013, CCI : 2007 CB 16 I PO 009, APPROVED REVISION, OCTOBER 2011

area. The region is characterized by highly educated youth as many, large and high-level academic institutions with several specialties are located in the eligible area. Although there is a large percentage of highly educated young people, unemployment rates remain extremely high. The existence of several urban centers in the eligible area might create job opportunities for young educated people. At the end of 2019 Greece hosted over 186,000 refugees and asylum-seekers. On the other hand, North Macedonia did not experience the same waves of refugees as Greece. As far as GDP is concerned, the two countries remain in an ascending trajectory until 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic began and led to a major slowdown in economic activity.

Table 1: NUTS regions covered by the cooperation Programme

Code	NUTS 2	NUTS 3
EL 52	CENTRAL MACEDONIA	
EL522		Thessaloniki
EL523		Kilkis
EL524		Pella
EL526		Serres
EL53	WESTERN MACEDONIA	
EL533		Florina
MK00	NORTH MACEDONIA	
MK001		Vardarski
MK003		Jugozapaden
MK004		Jugoistočen
MK005		Pelagoniski

Sources: a. 2nd Revision of the Cooperation Programme "INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020" (Oct. 2019), b. COMMISSION REGULATION (EU) No 1319/2013 of 9 December 2013 amending annexes to Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS)

Map 1: Cooperation area



Source: http://www.ipa-cbc-Programme.eu/com/4_The-Programme

Expected results

The **expected** results of the Programme are the following:

- Improved health and social services for the population living in the cross-border region
- Further jobs created in the tourism sector
- Improved access to local transport infrastructures, faster connections to main corridors, efficient border crossing services, transport services using innovative technologies
- Improved waste management or recycling systems
- Improved measures addressing natural risks (floods, forest fires) and environment protection

Programme's structure

The Programme is built upon the following three Priority Axes:

Priority Axis 1: Development and Support of Local Economy

Priority Axis 2: Protection of Environment – Transportation

Priority Axis 3: Technical support'

The four **Thematic Priorities** and the seven **Specific Objectives** of the "Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece – Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" are presented below:

Table 2: Thematic Priorities and Specific Objectives of the IPA CBC Programme

PRIORITY AXIS 1: DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT OF LOCAL ECONOMY	
Thematic Priority / Specific Objective	Description
Thematic Priority	a. Promoting employment, labor mobility and social and cultural inclusion across borders
Specific Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.1. Create employment opportunities for educated graduates by exploiting comparative advantages of the cross-border area, preferably with the use of innovative tools and practices • 1.2. Improvement of preventive health care and social services of children and elderly population
Thematic Priority	d. Encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage;
Specific Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.3 Improve the attractiveness and promote tourism in the crossborder area to enhance employment in tourism
PRIORITY AXIS 2: PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENT –TRANSPORTATION	
Thematic Priority / Specific Objective	Description
Thematic Priority	c: Promoting sustainable transport and improving public infrastructure

Specific Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2.1. Upgrade public infrastructure to improve road travel time, safe border crossing and promote energy efficiency towards green transport• 2.2 Sustainable management and recycling of bio-wastes
Thematic Priority	b. Protecting the environment and promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management
Specific Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2.3 Sustainable management of protected areas, ecosystems and biodiversity• 2.4 Prevention, mitigation and management of natural disasters, risks and hazards

3. Evaluation framework

3.1 Regulatory Framework

3.1.1 European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020: Key regulations

Common Provisions Regulation (CPR)

- Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and re-pealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006.
- Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 447/2014 laying down rules for implementing Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013.
- Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 480/2014 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013.

ERDF Regulation

- Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Regional Development Fund and on specific provisions concerning the Investment for growth and jobs goal and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1080/2006.

ETC Regulation

- Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on specific provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal.

IPA Regulations

- Regulation (EU) No 231/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 establishing an Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II).
- Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 447/2014 of 2 May 2014 on the specific rules for implementing Regulation (EU) No 231/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an Instrument for Pre-accession assistance (IPA II).

Strategic framework

- EUROPE 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, Communication from the Commission, COM(2010)2020 final.
- Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020: Towards an Inclusive, Smart and Sustainable Europe of Diverse Regions, Gödöllő, May 2011.
- Sixth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion: Investment for jobs and growth. Promoting development and good governance in EU regions and cities, European Commission, July 2014.

3.1.2 Working papers – Guidance documents from DG REGIO

The most relevant documents for impact evaluations are:

- The Programming Period 2014-2020. Guidance document on Monitoring and Evaluation. Cohesion Fund and European Regional Development Fund, Concepts and Recommendations. March 2014.
- The Programming Period 2014-2020. Monitoring and Evaluation of European Cohesion Policy. European Regional Development, European Social Fund and Cohesion Fund. Guidance Document on Evaluation Plans. Terms of References for Impact Evaluation(s). Guidance on Quality Management of External Evaluations. February 2015.
- Theory based evaluation. Based on material produced for DG Regional Policy by Frans L. Leeuw.
- Evaluation of innovation activities. Guidance on methods and practices. European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional Policy. 2012.
- Guidance for the Design of Quantitative Survey-Based Evaluation. Riccardo Scarpa. 2012.
- Guidance for the design of qualitative case study evaluation. Prof Frank Vanclay. 2012.
- The updated Sourcebook now has more information on impact evaluation(s) (Counterfactual and Theory Based Impact Evaluation):
 - EVALSED: The resource for the evaluation of Socio - Economic Development, 2013.
 - EVALSED Sourcebook: Methods and Techniques.

3.2 Programme's Documents

Indicative reviewed documents will include Programme's Basic Documents such as:

- Cooperation Programme (1st version and its revisions) which defines the priorities as well as the programming and EU funds required to achieve these priorities.
- Communication Plan which provides the strategic framework and basis for the Programme communication activities.
- Evaluation Plan (2016) sets out the evaluation strategy for the entire implementation period of the Programme, taking into account lessons learned from evaluations made in previous programming periods and the budgetary framework.
- Ex-Ante Evaluation of the Programme.
- Strategic Environmental Assessment which highlights the potential positive environmental impacts of the Programme and for assessing the environmental effects of certain interventions and for integrating environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption process. The potential impacts are referring to environmental purposes and sustainable development.
- The Annual Reports which summarize key information on the implementation of the cooperation Programme for the year concerned, including on financial instruments with relation to the financial and indicator data.
- 1st Evaluation of the Implementation and Impacts of the Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2014-2020" - Final Report.

3.3 Evaluation questions related to the main evaluation criteria

The evaluation questions are related to the following evaluation criteria:

Relevance: To what extent are the Programme objectives justified in relation to needs?

Effectiveness: To what extent have the objectives been achieved? Have the interventions and instruments used produced the expected effects? Could more effects be obtained by using different instruments?

Efficiency: Have the planned outputs been achieved at the lowest cost?

Utility: Are the expected or unexpected effects satisfactory from the point of view of direct or indirect beneficiaries?

Sustainability: Are the results including institutional changes durable over time? Will they continue if there is no more public funding?

3.4 Evaluation Data Requirements

A good evaluation relies on good quality data. The evaluation questions will determine which data needs to be collected, and when. This may be monitoring data or new data which needs to be collected specifically for the evaluation through surveys and interviews with stakeholders.

The specific data required for an evaluation will have to be identified in the first step of planning an evaluation: it could be that the Programme needs to start collecting data before the Programme activities will actually be implemented, to ensure that the situation before the intervention can be captured (define the “baseline”).

Evaluators depend on data: the raw material that once collected is organized, described, grouped, counted and manipulated by various methods and techniques. Distinctions are often drawn between **data that are primary - generated** as a direct consequence of a Programme or intervention - and **secondary - generated** for other purposes and pre-exist the Programme or intervention.

For example, secondary data sources might include:

- Statistical sources such as ELSTAT and EUROSTAT.
- Information from the Monitoring Information System (M.I.S.) on the progress of implementation (physical and financial scope) of the Programme in total and Programme’s projects.
- Open Data Platform of the European Commission, which is available on the website: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>
- Deliverable 2: “Monitoring Methodology for the Programme Indicators”, Technical support of the B1 Unit/Joint Secretariat of the Interreg IPA Cross Border Cooperation Programme CCI 2014 TC 16 I5Cb 009, May 2019.
- Interviews / communication with MA executives, as Managing Authority (MA) and members of the Joint Secretariat (JS) of the Programme.
- Annual reports of development authorities or federations of enterprises, and
- Administrative records of public employment agencies, taxation returns, qualifications, and training data

3.5 Evaluation Questions to be approached

In the frame of the present evaluation six questions sets will be answered:

- Evaluation Module A: Programme Effectiveness
- Evaluation Module B: Performance Framework of the Programme
- Evaluation Module C: Programme Efficiency
- Evaluation Module D: Consistency of the intervention logic within the CP Strategy
- Evaluation Module E: Revision of the Cooperation Programme
- Evaluation Module F: Update of Communication Strategy

Subsequently, the Evaluation Modules and the respective answers to the individual questions to evaluate the implementation of the Cooperation Programme "GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020" are presented below.

It is noted that in addition to the above Evaluation Modules and their individual questions, the evaluation of the Programme will also take into account the questions raised in the approved Evaluation Plan of the Cooperation Programme "GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020".

The Terms of Reference included in the relevant service contract have significantly defined the methodological approach utilized in the current report.

4. Evaluation Module A: Programme Effectiveness

The Effectiveness of the Cooperation Programme focuses on the assessment of the implementation progress of the Programme in terms of efficiency per Priority Axis and Thematic Priority by 30.06.2021.

The effectiveness evaluation aims to determine how the current outputs and results of projects are helping to reach the seven specific objectives (SOs) of the IPA CBC Programme. This question is explored at two levels:

- First, by comparing the currently achieved outputs with the planned target values that the projects stated in their application forms. This analysis of the performance of projects in reaching their self-determined final target values is possible for all relevant output indicators. However, an interpretation of the aggregated performance levels of projects should be made with care since a "statistical bias" may exist in the monitoring data for some indicators.
- Second and more important, by determining the contributions that the currently achieved project outputs are making to the pre-defined target values for 2023 of the IPA CBC Programme. The already achieved contribution levels are significant "landmarks" that predict the likely success in reaching the strategic and specific objectives of the IPA CBC Programme until the end of 2023.

In this chapter, an analysis will be conducted based on the relevant Efficiency Evaluation Methods and the conclusions regarding the progress of the Programme. Moreover, we will try to identify the Programme's objectives that show a significant deviation from the initial planning and search for this deviation's underlying causes. To this end, we will analyze the key factors that have positively or negatively influenced the effectiveness of implementation to strengthen (wherever possible) the factors that have positively impacted the effectiveness of implementation and, above all, to address those with negative effects.

The analysis will be based on the MIS data as Programme's, Project Reports, the Annual Implementation Reports, and informative material that MA and JS have provided.

4.1 Implementation Progress

Overall Progress

Achievement of Programme objectives is monitored and measured through output and result indicators of the contracted projects.

The current analysis will focus on operational output indicators. Outputs are the direct products of Programmes, they are intended to contribute to results². Output indicators shall cover all investment priorities of a Programme (art. 27.4(b), 96.2(b) CPR). They should be derived from the intervention logic of the Programme, expressing its actions.

² Guidance Document on Monitoring and Evaluation – European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund, The Programming Period 2014-2020, March 2014 (Revision 2018)

Data collection is a task shared by the beneficiaries and the Joint Secretariat. Below, the analysis provides an overview of the output indicators, milestones, and final targets for 2023.

EU Payments

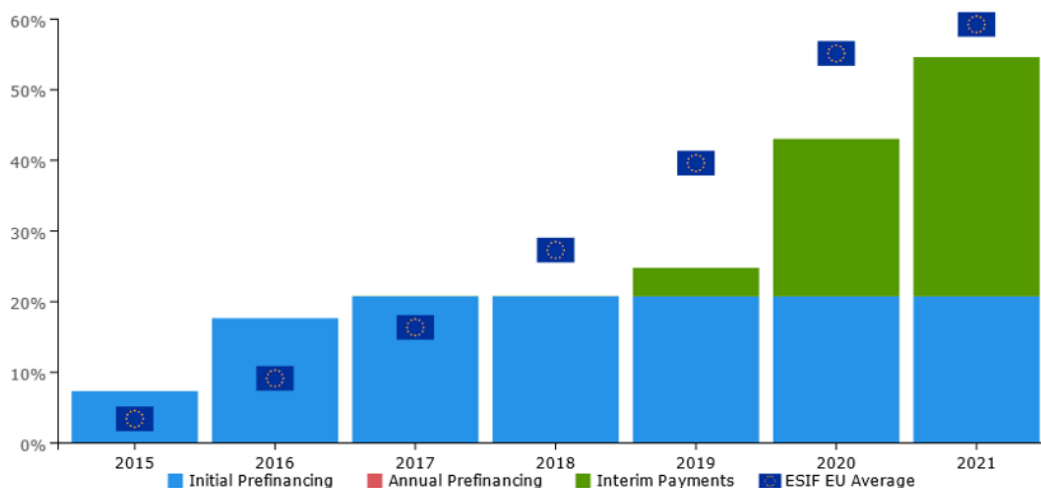
Total EU payments (cumulated) to the end of June 2021 amount to approximately **over 55%**, **while the EU average is circa 60%**. The initial prefinancing, according to Article 46(3) of Regulation (EU) No 447/2014, amounts to 8 million Euros approximately (50% of the three budgetary commitments to the Programme).

The cumulative EU payments made up to date to the Programme from Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) for the 2014-2020 period are presented in the following Figure.

The visualizations below show cumulative EU payments to the end of each year (e.g., 2020 includes all previous years' payments), with a split per payment type (initial prefinancing, Interim Payments, and ESIF EU Average). The Figures represent the amounts approved by the European Commission without considering eventual delays with the bank transfer. As it is shown in the following diagram, the **total EU payments to the Programme converge to the ESIF EU Average** as the **interim payments have increased significantly during 2020-2021**.

Figure 1: Total EU payments

ESIF 2014-2020: Total EU payments - time series cumulated to the end of each year (daily update): IPA CBC Greece - North Macedonia, EUR million



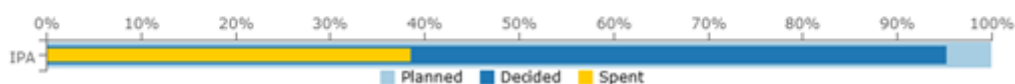
Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/Programmes/2014TC16I5CB009#>

It must be highlighted that the initial approval by the European Commission of the INTERREG IPA CBC Programme Greece – Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020” **delayed** (the Decision C (2015) 5655 published on 06.08.2015) about a year compared to other Interreg Programmes, due to delayed approval of the new IPA regulations (in 2014).

The decided budget amounts circa 95%, while the spent financing is approximately 38,5%. The following Figure shows the implementation of funding as a percentage of the total planned funds.

Figure 2: Implementation by Fund (IPA) - % of Planned financing

ESIF 2014-2020: Implementation by Fund, (Total Cost) % of Planned: IPA CBC Greece - North Macedonia



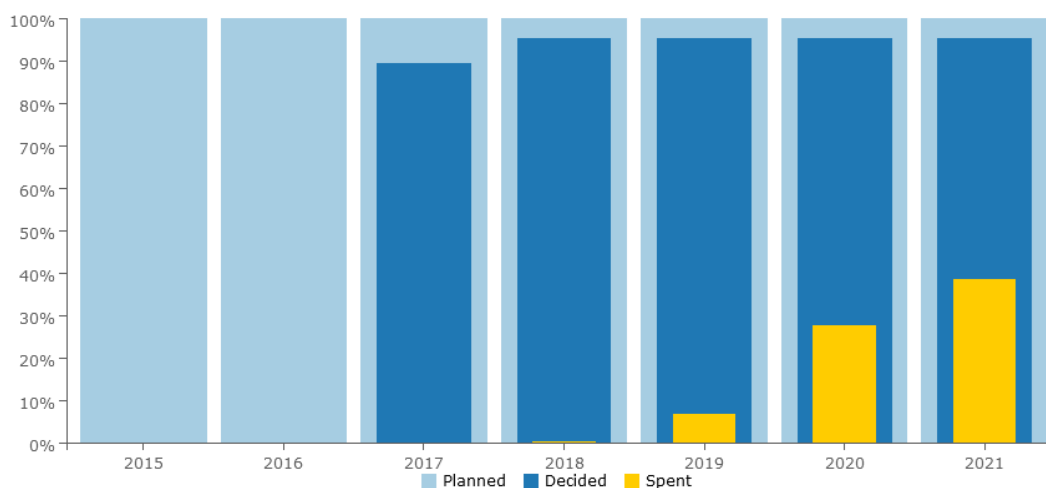
Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/Programmes/2014TC16I5CB009#>

Programme's Progress

As is shown in the following Figure the payments started during 2018 since most of the projects have been contracted during that year. In the following Figure, the Planned, Decided, and Spent financial sources are presented annually." It is clear that remarkable progress has been achieved during 2020 and the first semester of 2021.

Figure 3: Finances Implemented 2014-2021

ESIF 2014-2020: Finances: Implemented (Total Cost): IPA CBC Greece - North Macedonia



Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/Programmes/2014TC16I5CB009#>

Specifically, out of a total budget of 45,470,066 € available to the Programme, a total of 25,008,537 € (55%) of the budget has been included in the 1st Call for Project Proposals (MIS Code 2637) and the relevant Call (MIS Code 1720) of Priority Axis (PA) 3 "Technical Assistance. Additionally, in the frame of the 2nd Call for projects' proposals (MIS 3971), an amount of 6,000,000 € was planned for new projects. However, in the present report, the additional budget of the second Call's projects is not included as the 4th semester of 2021 was earmarked as the cut-off day for signing the new projects' contracts.

As it is shown in the following Tables 3 & 4, the total eligible cost of contracted operations amounts to circa 43 million Euros for the three Axes of the Programme.

Table 3: Budget Allocation per Call and per Priority Axis



Update of the 1st Implementation Evaluation and Impacts of the Cooperation Programme "INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020"

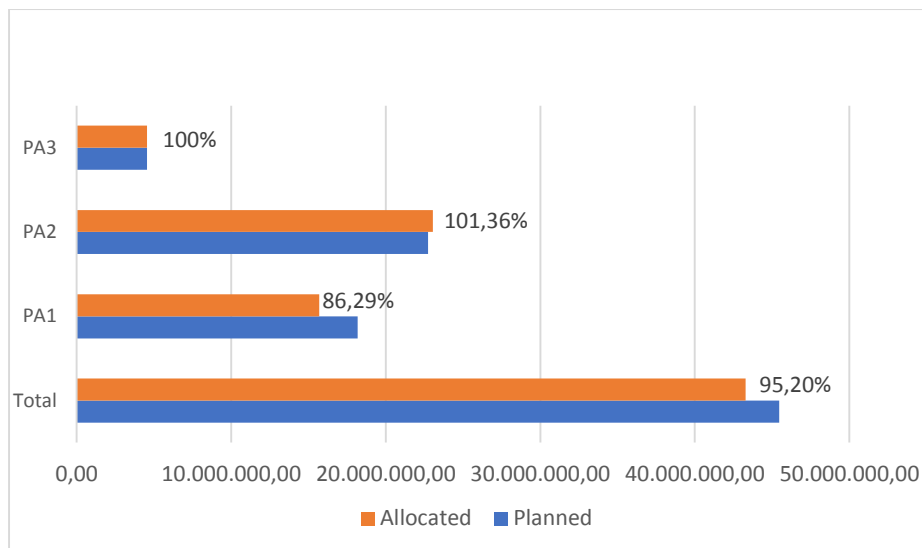
	Total	Priority Axis 1	Priority Axis 2	Priority Axis 3
	45,470,066.00	18,188,028.00	22,735,032.00	4,547,066.00
Calls				
Call: 2637	20,461,530.00	9,094,014.00	11,367,516.00	
Call: 1720	4,547,066.00			4,547,066.00
Total	25,008,537.00	9,094,014.00	11,367,516.00	4,547,066.00
Contracted projects	42	18	22	2
Total eligible cost of contracted projects	43,285,859.90	15,694,421.59	23,044,432.51	4,547,006.00
Total eligible cost of contracted projects / Budget of the Call	173.14%	172.57%	202.72%	100%

Table 4: Financial Information at Priority Axis and Programme level

Priority Axis	Total Funding	Total Eligible cost of contracted operations	Proportion of the total allocation covered with contracted operations	Public eligible cost of contracted operations	Total eligible expenditure declared by beneficiaries		Proportion of the total allocation covered by eligible expenditure	Total eligible expenditure declared by beneficiaries		Proportion of the total allocation covered by eligible expenditure	Total eligible expenditure declared by beneficiaries		Proportion of the total allocation covered by eligible expenditure	Number of contacted operations
					2017	2018		2019	2020		30.06.2021			
PA 1	18,188,028.00	15,694,421.59	86.29%	15,694,421.59	0.00	0.00	0.00%	680,992.97	3.74%	4,673,262.33	25.69%	6,927,090.09	38.09%	18
PA 2	22,735,032.00	23,044,432.31	101.36%	23,044,432.31	0.00	0.00	0.00%	1,754,401.40	7.72%	6,825,217.81	30.02%	9,165,652.13	40.32%	22
PA 3	4,547,006.00	4,547,006.00	100.00%	4,547,006.00	0.00	93,347.00	2.05%	608,547.30	13.38%	1,086,822.73	23.90%	1,341,793.41	29.51%	2
Total	45,470,066.00	43,285,859.90	95.20%	43,285,859.90	0.00	93,347.00	2.05%	3,043,941.67	6.69%	12,585,302.87	27.68%	17,434,535.41	38.34%	42

The proportion of the total allocation covered with contracted operations is in total 95.20%. Specifically, the allocation covered with contracted projects for Priority Axis 1 is 86.29%, 101.36% for Priority Axis 2, and 100% for Priority Axis 3.

Figure 4: Budget allocation per PA and in total



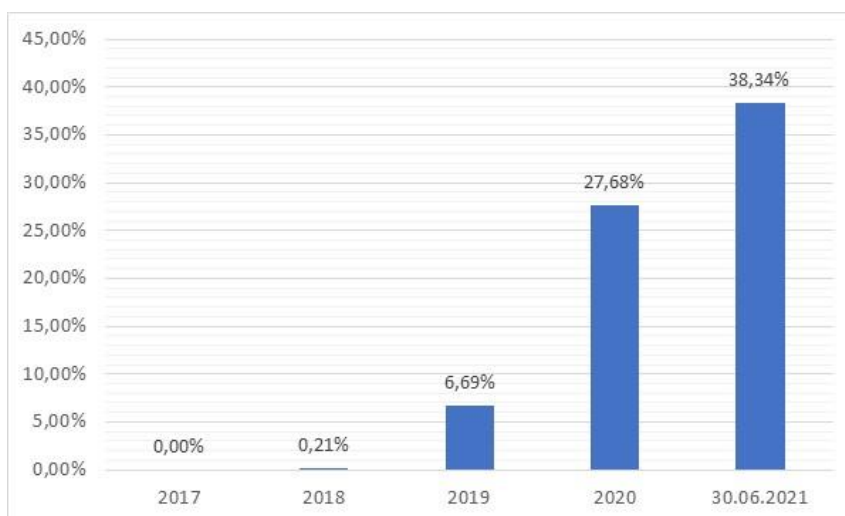
Processed data from MIS

The Priority Axis 1 includes 18 projects, Priority Axis 2 finances twenty-two (22) operations, and Priority Axis 3 (Technical Assistance) finances two (2) projects.

The projects involve eighty-two (82) Greek beneficiaries and sixty-eight (68) beneficiaries from the Republic of North Macedonia. In addition, some beneficiaries are participating in more than one project. Therefore, the total number of projects partners is two hundred and two (202).

As expected, during 2020 and the first half of 2021, the total eligible expenditure lifted significantly despite the challenges raised by the Covid-19 Pandemic. Thus, the absorption of the total funding is 38.34% by 30.06.2021, while this was 27.68% by 31.12.2020, 6.69% by the end of 2019 and 0.21% up to 31.12.2018. The figures are to be increased considerably while the new projects of the 2nd Call will start their implementation.

Figure 5: Eligible Expenditure per year



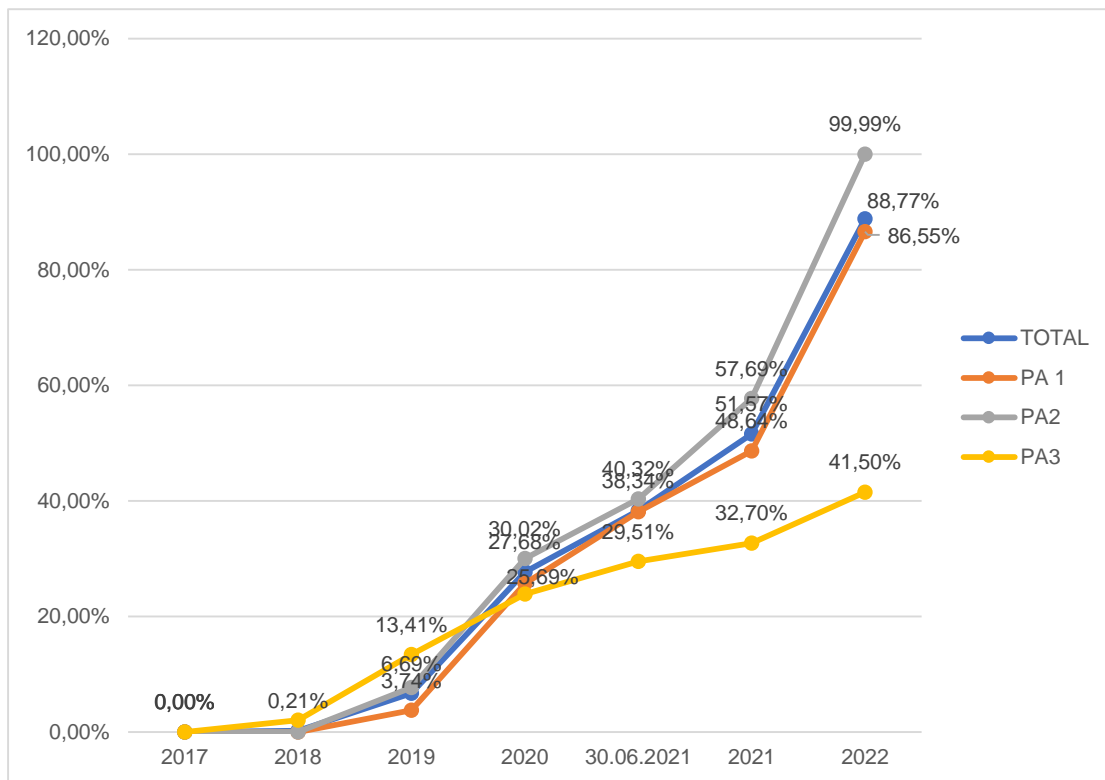
Processed data from MIS

As of 30.06.2021 the financial implementation under both Priority Axes (1 & 2) **has exceeded 25% of their 2023 target values** (see Figure 6).

Despite the delays due to the Covid-19 as referred previously, six (6) projects have concluded their implementation until 30.06.2021. A total of thirty-four (34) projects out of forty (40) implemented under the 1st Call for Project proposals are to be finished within 2021. Five (5) projects in the frame of the 1st Call of proposals are to be finished during the first semester of 2022. As a result, an extensive increase has already occurred in the expenses and the eligible expenditures. During the 1st semester of 2021, the eligible expenditures amount to approximately five (5) million Euros or 11% of the total contracted budget.

According to the beneficiaries' projection, at the end of 2021, the payments will reach circa 50%, while by 2022, these will rise to approximately 89%. Additionally, the approved projects under the 2nd Call will record expenditure towards the end of 2022 and throughout 2023. This expenditure will cover the balance of the Programme budget as it is analyzed in paragraph 9.4, "Modifications due to budget reallocation".

Figure 6: Beneficiaries' projections of eligible expenditure over the period 2021- 2022



Processed data from JS

As of now, current estimates place unused funds in the range of 2,8 million € in both Priority Axes (0.8 million € in PA 1 and 2.0 million € in PA2 respectively), which are return to the Programme and help inject additional funds into the projects of 2nd Call (see paragraph 9.4).

The global pandemic has stressed the implementation efforts of certain Project beneficiaries, particularly those which are engaged in public healthcare. The most prominent examples are hospitals, many of which had to continue implementing the projects in particularly adverse conditions due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The Cooperation Programme has suffered, due to the suspension of physical meetings and cross-border activities. The Programme has been disproportionately affected: borders with non-EU countries were essentially closed since March 2020. Exchanges were permitted from the Evzoni main border crossing only, for a limited number of people and under special permission.

Nonetheless, the Programme Authorities proactively safeguarded the smooth implementation of the projects:

- Project extensions were granted (most of the projects' implementation has been delayed by an average 4-8 months).
- Activities were revised to reflect the new state of play. As such, several meetings and exchanges took place on-line.
- A significant number of projects underwent extensive budget modifications and revisions in order to transpose physical events into online events.
- Risk management processes were put into place in order to take precautions in those cases where activities could not be substituted or delivered online.
- Particular effort was put into ensuring that Project Beneficiaries enjoyed uninterrupted cash-flows and were adequately funded, despite the limited fiscal space on both sides of the border.
- In cooperation with the Certifying Authority, the 7th and the 8th Accounting Year saw the introduction of Payment Claims that were adjusted to the actual monetary needs of the Project Beneficiaries. Therefore, more frequent payment claims took place, to ensure the uninterrupted funding of Projects.

The 2nd Call for Project Proposals

The 2nd Call (MIS 3971) for project proposals was launched in 2019 and was open until May 29, 2020. The Call was targeted to Specific Objectives 1.1, 1.3, and 2.4. It was also restricted to partnerships with competence specialization in the above-selected objectives.

It attracted forty-five (45) proposals, with a combined budget over € 33.45 million. The budget of the approved projects amounts to 8.913 million €. The main 2nd Call's Statistics are as follows:

Table 5: Financial Statistics of the 2nd Call for Project Proposals

Specific Objective	Call's Budget	Submitted proposals	Requested Total	Approved Projects	Budget of Approved Projects
Priority Axis 1	3.2 million €	39	26.32 million €	9	5.467 million €
S.O.1.1 Employment	1.8 million €	15	10.95 million €	4	2.683 million €
S.O.1.3 TOURISM	1.4 million €	24	15.37 million €	5	2.783 million €
Priority Axis 2	2.8 million €	6	7.13 million €	3	3.445 million €
S.O.2.4 Natural Disasters	2.8 million €	6	7.13 million €	3	3.445 million €
TOTAL	6.0 million €	45	33.45 million € (57,15% GR - 42,85% RoNM)	12	8,913 million €

Processed data from JS & MA

The total potential beneficiaries were one hundred fifty-eight (158) while, twenty-five (25) participated in two proposals. The potential beneficiaries from the two countries were represented equally (79 potential partners per country). The Greek potential lead beneficiaries were thirty-five against ten (10) potential lead beneficiaries from RofNM.

Table 6: Statistics of the potential beneficiaries and the leadership of the proposals of the 2nd Call

	Number of beneficiaries
Total potential beneficiaries	158 (25 participated in two proposals)
Partners from Greece	79
Partners from Republic of North Macedonia	79
Partnerships with Lead Beneficiary from Greece	35
Partnerships with Lead Beneficiary from Republic of North Macedonia	10

Processed data from JS & MA

The requested total budget exceeds 5.6 times the available 2nd call's budget.

Until 30.06.2021, no project has been contracted in the frame of the 2nd Call for proposals. The projects are to be contracted during the fourth semester of 2021.

Progress per Priority Axis

Evaluating the progress in total per Priority Axis, there are some differences in the implementation progress among them.

While the decision for the 1st Call (MIS Code 2637) included 50% of the Programme budget in both PAs and Thematic Objectives, there is an allocation of approximately 95% of the total budget of the Programme. In particular, in PA1 & PA2 and the respective Thematic Priorities, there was an overbooking of the planned budget of the 1st call, as is analyzed in the following paragraph.

The Managing Authority, in order to ensure the successful implementation of the Programme, steered to the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) of the Programme the increase of the allocated budget for two main reasons. The first one was the fact that there were many projects above the threshold (65/100) and the second reason was the delayed approval of the Programme, which led to a reduced implementation period. Therefore, the increase of the allocated budget for the 1st call's projects was decided by the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) of the Programme.

The extent of the overallocation differs between the Axes, as it is shown in the Figure 7.

Figure 7: Priority Axes performance

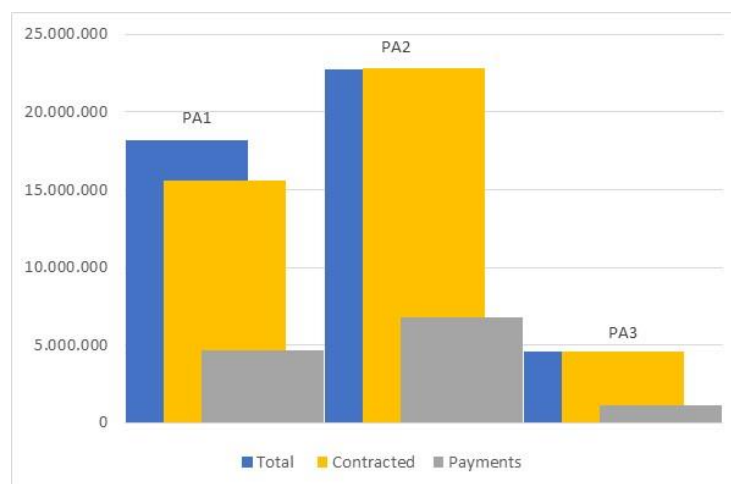
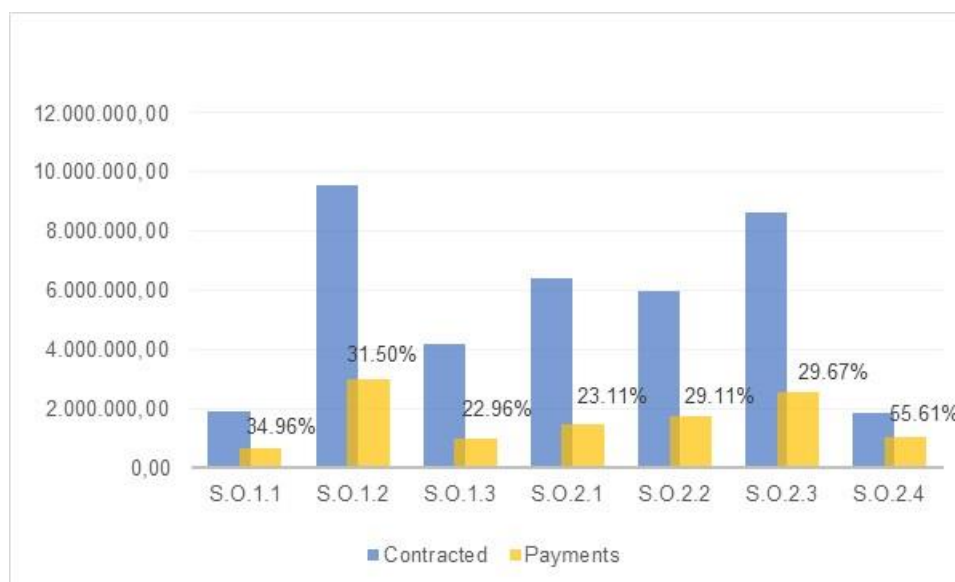


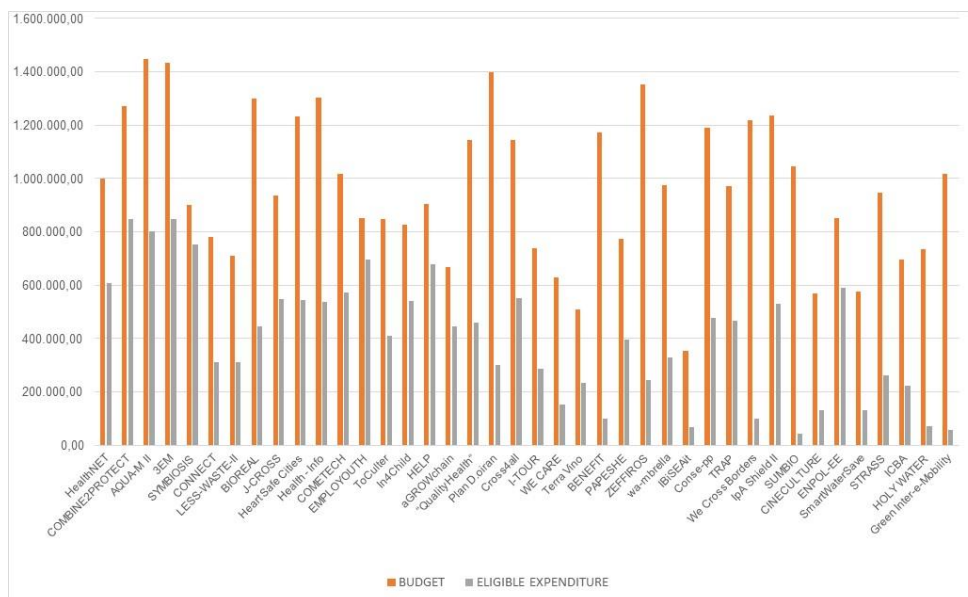
Figure 8 presents the financial performance of the Specific Objectives of the Programme. In financial terms the S.O.2.4 performs better than the other six. The payments against the contracted budget of S.O.2.4 are 55.61%, while the absorption of respective S.O.1.1, S.O.1.2, S.O.2.2, S.O.2.3 are circa 30%. The other two (S.O.1.3 and S.O.2.1) have an absorption of about 23%.

Figure 8: Contracted budget and Payments per Specific Objective



The following Figure 9 shows the progress of financial implementation of the projects of the Programme. The performance between the projects differs significantly. Many projects are negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of them have been restructured, in line with their contractual provisions, to reflect the new conditions and the reduction of their cross-border activities. Due to the suspension of physical meetings and cross-border activities, many beneficiaries were obliged to postpone the bilateral activities and this is the reason for extensions of the ending date of many projects.

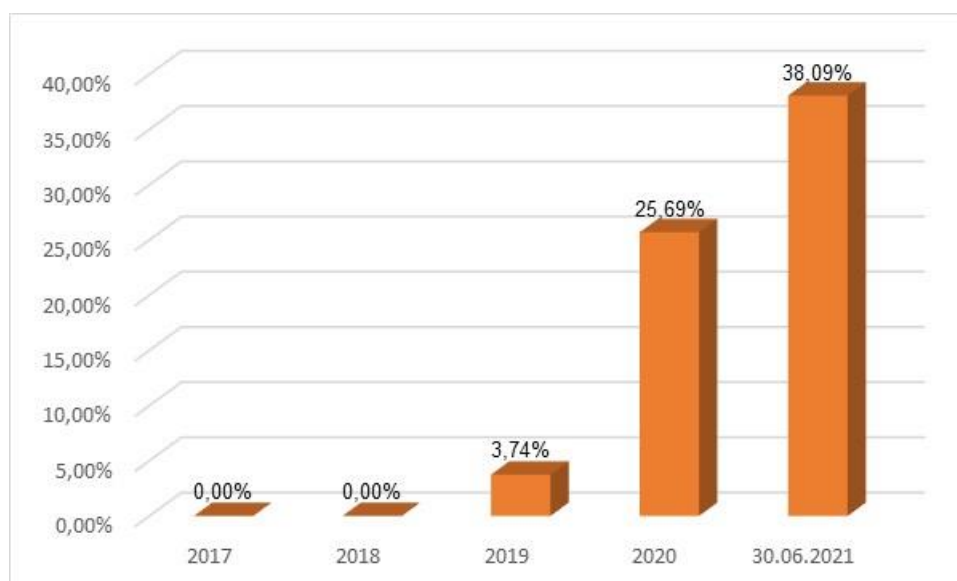
Figure 9: Contracted budget and eligible payments per project (PAs 1 & 2)



Priority Axis 1

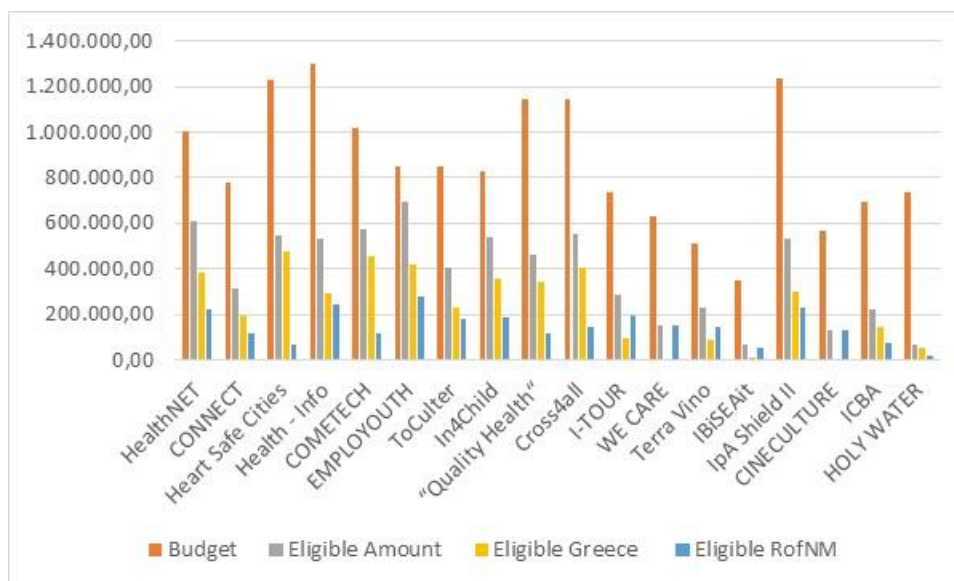
- PA1 has an overall contracted budget of 15,694,421.59€ its' proportion of the total allocation amounts to 86.29% of the overall allocated budget.
- The contracted funds are characterized as acceptable and are safe in terms of achievement of the quantitative and qualitative targets of the Programme by 2023, taking into account that are nine (9) new projects in the frame of the 2nd Call concerning the Specific Objectives 1.1 and 1.3
- The total verified expenses by 30.06.2021 of the eighteen (18) projects amounts to 6,927,090.09€ or 38.09% of the allocated budget in the PA1.
- The financial performance of Priority Axis 1 is slightly lower than this of Priority Axis 2.

Figure 10: Verified expenses per year – PA1



- Regarding the financial performance, as this is shown in the following Figure, some projects have significant progress while others have to accelerate their performance.

Figure 11: Priority Axis 1: Contracted Budget – Eligible expenditure per project and country

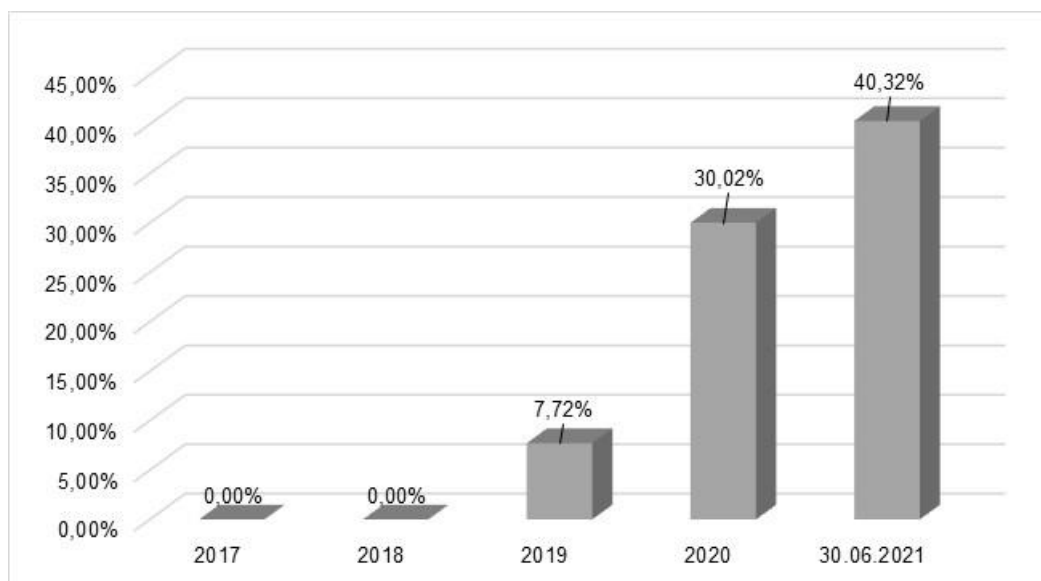


- Up to 30.06.2021, there is a significant budget modification in one (1) project (HealthNET). The left-over amount is being returned to the Programme's budget.
- The progress of the projects is considered satisfactory, taking into account the tackles that have been faced and presented in the previous section (Covid-19 pandemic crisis, significant delays in prefinancing, financing, etc.).

Priority Axis 2

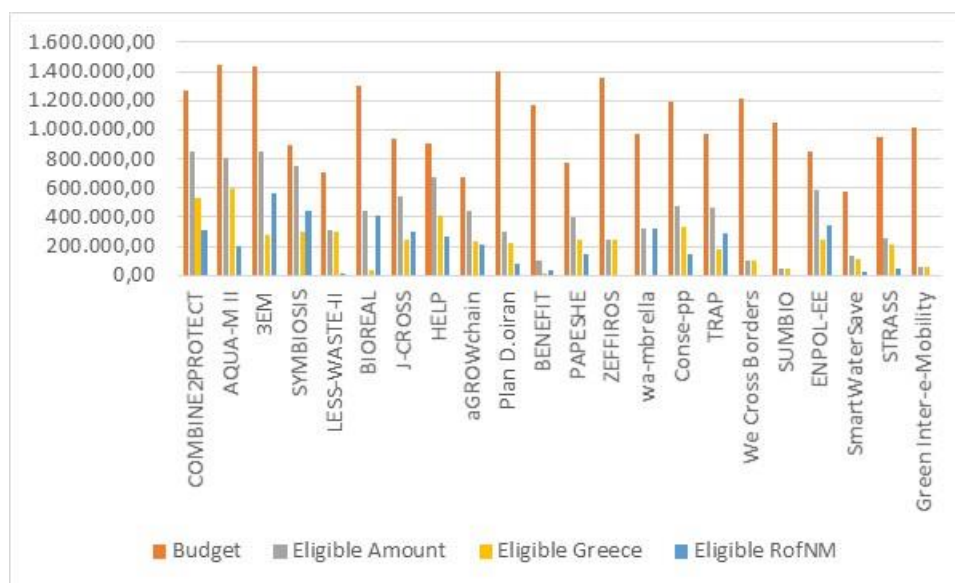
- A total of 23,044,432.31 € has been contracted in PA2 corresponding to the 101.36% of the overall allocated budget of the Axis.
- The percentage contracted is characterized as acceptable and is safe in terms of achievement of the quantitative and qualitative targets of the Programme by 2023, taking into account that new projects under the second Call will contribute PA2.
- The total eligible expenditure declared by beneficiaries by 30.06.2021 of the twenty-two (22) projects amounts to 9,165,652.13€ or 40.32% of the contracted budget. The performance in financing terms is the best among the three Axes.

Figure 12: Verified expenses per year – PA2



- Four (4) projects (3EM, Zeffiros, SUMBIO, BIOREAL) underwent modifications to their budget and partnership. The left-over amount (1,631,735.00€) of the four (4) projects is being returned to the Programme’s Budget.

Figure 13: Priority Axis 2: Contracted Budget – Eligible expenditure per project and country

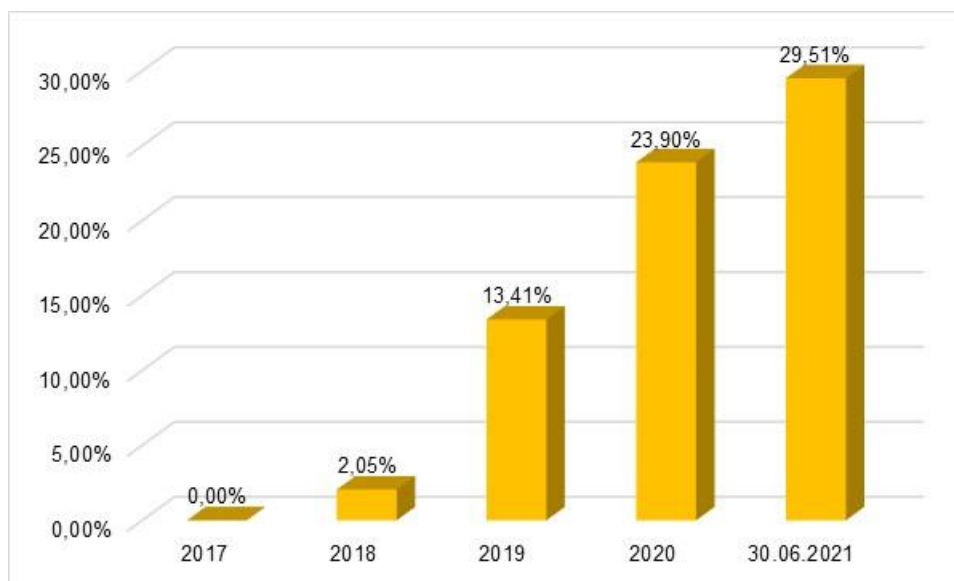


The projects’ progress is satisfactory, considering that the projects have to address obstacles as Covid 19 pandemic crisis, significant delays in financing, etc. However, as mentioned above, the Programme’s structures took the appropriate initiatives to support the needed modifications of the projects.

Priority Axis 3

- The total eligible cost of operations selected for support in PA3 is equal to the total allocated fund of the Axis.

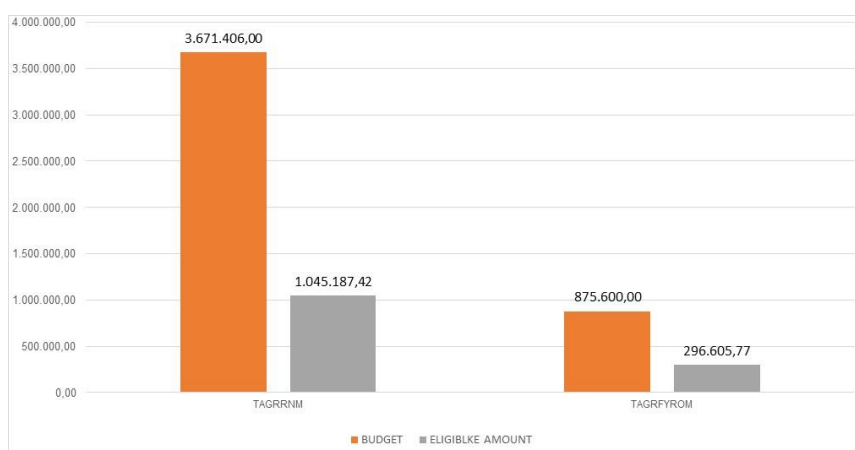
Figure 14: Verified expenses per year – PA3



Processed data from JS & MA

- The financial allocation (EUR 4,547,006) corresponds to 10% of the Programme budget. These funds will ensure that: a) the Joint Secretariat has the required capacity to adequately support the Programme Structures at all times (e.g., peak periods, during project generation, assessment of proposals, etc.). b) the promotion and awareness of the Programme reaches a satisfactory level. The Communication strategy shall be fully supported.
- The contracted amount is 4,547,006.00 € since Priority Axis 3 has contracted the total allocated budget. The total verified expenses by 30.06.2021 of the two projects amounts to 1,341,793.19 € or 29.51% proportionally of the contracted budget. Specifically:
 - The eligible amount for the project with the Acronym "TAGRRNM" by 30.06.2021 is 1,045,187.43€. The absorption rate is 28.46% of the total budget of the project (3,671,406.00€)
 - The total verified expenses for the project with the Acronym "TAGRFYROM" until 30.06.2021 is 296,605.01€ or 33.87% proportionally of the total budget of the project (875,600.00€)

Figure 15: Priority Axis 3: Contracted Budget – Eligible expenditure per project



Processed data from JS & MA

- Although during the period 2020-2021, the absorption of the available budget increased significantly, the performance is moderate, and the resources haven't been exploited as it was planned because of the following reasons:
 - Significant expenditure is not charged to the Programme (i.e. office rent and administration of both the MA and JTS are paid by the Greek National budget, the salary of the JTS Coordinator is covered by Greek national funds),
 - Several events and meetings were cancelled due to the Covid-10 pandemic. At the same time, the Programme Structures proactively held important events online.
- A reallocation of Priority Axis 3 unused funds in favor of Priority Axes 1 and 2 which will overperform just after the contracting of the projects of the 2nd call is proposed (see par. 9.4).

Progress per Thematic Priority

Regarding the financial performance of Thematic Priorities, Thematic Priority b has the best figures amongst the other three, while the TP d has the lowest achievement.

Table 7: Allocation of the budget per Thematic Priority

Priority Axis	Thematic Priority	Union Support	National counterpart	Total funding	Contracted projects	Budget of Contracted projects / Total funding
		1 st Call				
Priority Axis 1	a	4,831,193.50	852,564.00	5,683,757.50	11,426,831.22	201.04%
	d	2,898,717.00	511,539.50	3,410,256.50	4,182,385.37	122.64%
Total		7,729,910.50	1,364,103.50	9,094,014.00	15,609,216.59	171.64%
Priority Axis 2	c	5,797,433.00	1,023,077.00	6,820,510.00	12,390,321.96	181.66%
	b	3,864,055.00	682,051.00	4,547,006.00	10,436,127.55	229.52%
Total		9,661,488.00	1,705,128.00	11,367,516.00	22,826,449.51	200.80%
TOTAL		17,391,398.50	3,069,231.50	20,461,530.00	38,435,666.10	187.84%

Priority Axis 1

Thematic Priority a

- For Thematic Priority a, the financial allocation reflects the character of the envisaged soft measures and the need to improve the conditions for business development and to create a better awareness on the business opportunities offered by the region, to reduce unemployment as well as increase the level of employability of special and specific groups and create a better quality of life and enhance social inclusion.

- In Thematic Priority a of PA1 a total of 11,426,831.22 € is contracted corresponding to 100.52% of the its budget.

Thematic Priority d

- The financial allocation to Thematic Priority d reflects the expected size of actions facing the needs to improve the valorization of natural and cultural heritage and the tourism attractiveness in the region and to enhance cooperation and networking for sustainable tourism. The financial allocation to this Priority is aligned with the high interest shown by the regional stakeholders in the consultation process. All partner regions expressed their interest in this TP, the potential interest expressed in consultation meetings during programming has been significant. Stakeholders already have a certain tradition and a growing need of cooperation in the field of natural and cultural heritage development and sustainable tourism development. During the present programming period and the previous (2007-2013) as well, a wide variety of beneficiaries and approaches clearly documents the interest for cooperation in the specific field.
- In Thematic Priority d of PA1, the total contracted amount is 4,182,385.37€, corresponding to 61.32% of the overall Thematic Priority's budget though is reaching 122.63% of the budget included in the call.

Priority Axis 2

Thematic Priority c

- The financial allocation to Thematic Priority c reflects the character of the envisaged infrastructure and soft measures and the need to improve the conditions for transport development, to improve accessibility of the region with respect to the environment, and to improve biowaste management, recycling and reuse.
- In Thematic Priority c of PA2, the overall contracted budget is 12,390,321.96 € corresponding to 90.83% of the Thematic Priority's budget.

Thematic Priority b

- For Thematic Priority b, the financial allocation reflects the expected size of pilot actions addressing the needs to better protect the environment and biodiversity in the cross-border region, to support joint initiatives related to nature protection and sustainable use of common natural resources and to take action against natural disasters, climate change and risks envisaged.
- In Thematic Priority b of PA2, the overall contracted budget is 10,436,127.55 € corresponding to 114.76% of the Thematic Priority's budget.

Table 8: Implementation Progress per Priority Axis, Thematic Priority and Specific Objectives

Priority Axis (PA)	PA1			PA2				PA3
Total per PA	18,188,028.00			22,735,032.00				4,547,006.00
Thematic Priority (TP)	a		d	c		b		N/A
Specific Objectives (SO)	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	N/A
Total per TP	11,367,515.00		6,820,513.00	13,641,020.00		9,094,012.00		N/A
1 st Call Budget per PA	9,094,014.00			11,367,516.00				4,547,006.00
1 st Call Budget per TP	5,683,757.50		3,410,256.50	6,820,510.00		4,547,006		N/A
% of TP Budget	50%		50%	50%		50%		N/A
Contracted projects per PA	18			22				2
Contracted per PA	19,324,803.3			22,826,449.51				4,547,006.00
% of PA Budget	85,82%			100,40%				100%
1 st Call Contracted Projects per TP	11,426,831.22		4,182,385.37	12,390,321,96		10,436,127.55		N/A
% of TP Budget	100.52%		61.32%	90.83%		114.76%		N/A
Payment per PA	6,927,090.09			9,165,652.13				1,341,793.19
Payments per TP	5,483,477,03		1,443,613,06	4,191,631,01		4,974,021,12		N/A
Payments as % of the contracted budget	47.99%		34.52%	33.83%		47.66%		23.09%

4.2 Assessment of the implementation progress of the output indicators

The achievement of Programme Objectives, as measured through indicators, not only depends on Programme performance but also on the quality of monitoring and appropriateness of indicators.

The INTERREG IPA CBC Programme has a thorough system in place. Achievement of Programme Objectives is monitored and measured through output and result indicators. Data collection is a task of the beneficiaries monitored by the Joint Secretariat.

The Programme’s indicator system consisted of fourteen (14) output indicators.

In case of outputs, which are delivered once (e.g., fixed assets, equipment), reporting is made on fully implemented operations. Outputs may be reported in relation to partially implemented operations, if it is meaningful to do so. The following eight (8) indicators are reported based on partially implemented operations: CO32, CO34, CO36, O0101, O0103, O0104, O0204 and O0210. The basic criteria for this type of measurement are present:

- a. The monitoring system is capable of capturing outputs delivered at a particular stage of the operation lifecycle. The MIS is fed with input from the projects bi-annually.
- b. The nature of the operations allows for reporting outputs at a particular stage of their lifecycle. For example, households which will benefit from energy efficiency measures can already claim secondary benefits from auxiliary activities. Similarly, projects affecting a population can generate partial benefits in the information / impact domain.
- c. The definition of the output indicator used for reporting allows reporting outputs delivered by operations at the particular stage of operation lifecycle. For example, the projects addressing the NATURA sites will deliver their core benefits upon project completion. In doing so, they will first contribute in risk assessments, SWOT analysis, mapping of the areas. The selected indicators are suitable to capture the gradual contributions.

In the present section, the Programme’s output indicators achievement by 30.06.2021 is evaluated. The analysis focuses on operational output indicators. In particular, in this section, the focus is on the achievement of the indicators by 30.06.2021 compared to the achievement which is reported during the 1st implementation reporting period (until 31.12.2017). Moreover, it is evaluated the implementation progress of the Programme during the 2nd reporting period (01.01.2018 – 30.06.2021). The reported achievement by 30.06.2021 comparatively to the achieved progress during the 1st implementation is significantly increased as all projects of PA 1 and PA2 have started their implementation during 2018.

The progress of the output indicators per Specific Objective is presented below.

Priority Axis 1

Specific Objective 1.1

Regarding the achievement of the output indicator O0101 “Number of participants in joint local cross-border employment activities” during the 1st implementation reporting period (until 31.12.2017), this was at zero level as the implementation of the projects has started during 2018. The indicator was negatively affected by the last start of the relevant projects and the cancellation of all joint activities, due to Covid-19 pandemic. However, many activities rearranged for online delivery.

Thus, the indicator has already achieved the 100% of Programme’s target value and approximately the 45% of the projects target value, until 30.06.2021.

Table 9: Output Indicators Achievement - Specific Objective 1.1

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 31.12.2017	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021
O0101	Number of participants in joint local cross-border employment activities	Persons	350	830	0	350

Specific Objective 1.2

As far as Specific Objective 1.2 is concerned two output indicators are included.

All indicators have already achieved the Programme’s target values. Moreover, it must be highlighted that the projects’ target values are much higher than the respective Programme’s values. These high values reflect the larger than planned geographical coverage and the larger than planned number of projects (eight) which report on each indicator. The estimate is based on projections that cover the whole eligible area, including the large metropolitan area of Thessaloniki.

It is suggested the indicators’ target values be revised in the following Programme modification.

Table 10: Output Indicators Achievement - Specific Objective 1.2

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 31.12.2017	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021
CO36	Health: Population covered by improved health services	Persons	1,500	74,700	0	32,464
O0103	Population covered by improved social services	Persons	500	18,700	0	6,062

Specific Objective 1.3

Concerning Specific Objective 1 the Output Indicator O0104 “Number of enterprises participating in cross-border joint projects” has already achieved the Programme’s target value which is significantly lower than the projects ones.

Table 11: Output Indicators Achievement - Specific Objective 1.3

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target	Projects Target	Achievement Level by 31.12.2017	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021
O0104	Number of enterprises participating in cross-border joint projects	Number of enterprises	30	389	0	102

Priority Axis 2

Specific Objective 2.1

Regarding Specific Objective 2.1 two out of three output indicators refer to energy efficiency; the first is CO32 "Decrease of annual primary energy consumption of public buildings", and the second is CO34 "Estimated annual decrease of GHGQ." The two indicators have already achieved the Programme's target values. Moreover, it must be highlighted that the projects' target values are much higher than the respective Programme's values. This is due to the kind of interventions, as the relevant projects concern minor upgrades in existing buildings (e.g., change of light bulbs with led lights), which have a significant effect when undertaken on a large scale. It is suggested the indicators' target values be revised in the following Programme modification.

The projects' target value for indicator O0201, "Surface of improved cross-border road and infrastructure," is significantly lower than the target for 2023, as reported in the AIR2020. However, according to the reported values in the MIS, the projects' target value is considerably higher (1,008,324.00 m²) than the Programme's target. Therefore, attention must be paid to projects' targets (i.e., the MIS 5032932 project has set as the project's indicator target value a significant number (1,000,000.00 m²) that affects the indicator's (O0201) performance).

Table 12: Output Indicators' Achievement - Specific Objective 2.1

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 31.12.2017	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021
CO32	Decrease of annual primary energy consumption of public buildings	Kwh/year	150,000.00	1,945,434.00	0.00	2,007,774.00
CO34	Estimated annual decrease of GHG	Kilograms of CO ² equivalent/year	106.00	12,510.37	0.00	350.00
O0201	Surface of improved cross-border road and infrastructure	Square meters	1,200.00	1,008,324.00	-	N/A

Specific Objective 2.2

As far as the Specific Objective 2.2 is concerned, all targets will be met by 2023. Specifically, in all cases the project targets of output indicators are higher than the Programme's Target Values.

Regarding, the indicator O0205, three projects are contributing to this indicator. The nature of the deliverables does not allow for a partial implementation. One of the contributing projects has experienced unforeseen difficulties during 2020. The Secretariat has requested the assignment of project managers with specific technical expertise, to match the specifications of the projects.

Table 13: Output Indicators' Achievement - Specific Objective 2.2

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 31.12.2017	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021
O0204	Volume of solid wastes under improved management or recycling	Tonnes / year	1,725.00	65,325	0.00	105,532
O0205	Volume of liquid wastes under improved management or recycling	Cubic meters / year	158,775.00	1,104,200.00	N/A	N/A

Specific Objective 2.3

As far as Specific Objective 2.3 is concerned, the output indicator CO23 expected to achieve its target, although the second one, O0207, is behind the expected level.

In, the case of CO23, the projects' target, is 325,955.10 Ha, according to MIS data.

The selected projects that contribute to the output indicators (CO23 and O0207) involve infrastructure interventions and equipment installation. Therefore, the outputs and results will be realized once the projects are completed. However, according to JS's information, the projects are performing satisfactorily and is expected to overachieve the Programme's goal.

Table 14: Output Indicator's Achievement - Specific Objective 2.3

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target	Projects Target	Achievement Level by 31.12.2017	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021
CO23	surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status	Hectars	50,000.00	325,955.10	0	N/A
O0207	Surface area of rehabilitated or with improved management ecosystems	Hectars	188,000.00	124,827.00	0	N/A

Specific Objective 2.4

Regarding Specific Objective 2.4, an output indicator (O0210) has already achieved its target.

Concerning the output indicators CO20 and CO21, the selected projects contributing them include infrastructure interventions and equipment installation. Therefore, the outputs and results will be realized once the projects are completed. The projects' target value of indicator CO21 falls crucially behind the expected level. According to JS's data, the projects' outputs are far higher than their initial goals. Therefore, we expect that the Programme's target will be exceeded by 2023.

Table 15: Output Indicators Achievement S.O.2.4

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target	Projects Target	Achievement Level by 31.12.2017	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021
CO20	Population benefiting from flood protection measures	Persons	200,000.	40,000	N/A	N/A
CO21	Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures	Persons	270,000	15,000	N/A	N/A
O0210	Number of participants in prevention actions	Persons	200	2,000	0	304

4.3 Scenario analysis for 2nd call

Before the initiation of one project, it is important to examine various scenarios regarding the progress of its implementation. Scenario analysis aids decision-making and increases agility regarding future unfavorable outcomes. In light of the importance of this process, this section is devoted to the analysis of scenarios concerning the budget absorption rate of the projects of the second call.

Three scenarios will be investigated: scenario A, scenario B, and scenario C. The first case is more optimistic; it assumes that the projects will begin implementation at some point during the last months of 2021, which will result in faster budget absorption. The second case that is more realistic assumes initiation during the 1st semester of 2022. The third case that is more pessimistic assumes initiation during the second semester of 2022. This delay will result in a slower rate of absorption.

Table 16: Absorption rates by scenario and semester

	2 nd semester 2021	1 st semester 2022	2 nd semester 2022	1 st semester 2023	2 nd semester 2023	Total
Scenario A	5%	13%	17%	30%	20%	85%
Scenario B	5%	11%	14%	25%	30%	85%
Scenario C		5%	15%	20%	45%	85%

The above table depicts the absorption rates of the EU funding of the three scenarios by semester. In scenarios A and B, there is a small absorption in 2021 pertaining mainly to the advance payment of 20% that beneficiaries of North Macedonia are entitled to receive. Because projects in case A started earlier than those in case B, the former report more eligible expenses in the first and second semester of 2022 than those in case B. It should be noted that the rates in realistic scenario B were derived based on historical and projected data of the first Call about 2021.

In scenario A, the largest absorption takes place during the 1st semester of 2023 because many projects have deadlines during this semester and no major delay is assumed in this case. On

the contrary, in scenario B the largest absorption happens in the 2nd semester of 2023 owing to the existence of more hindrances.

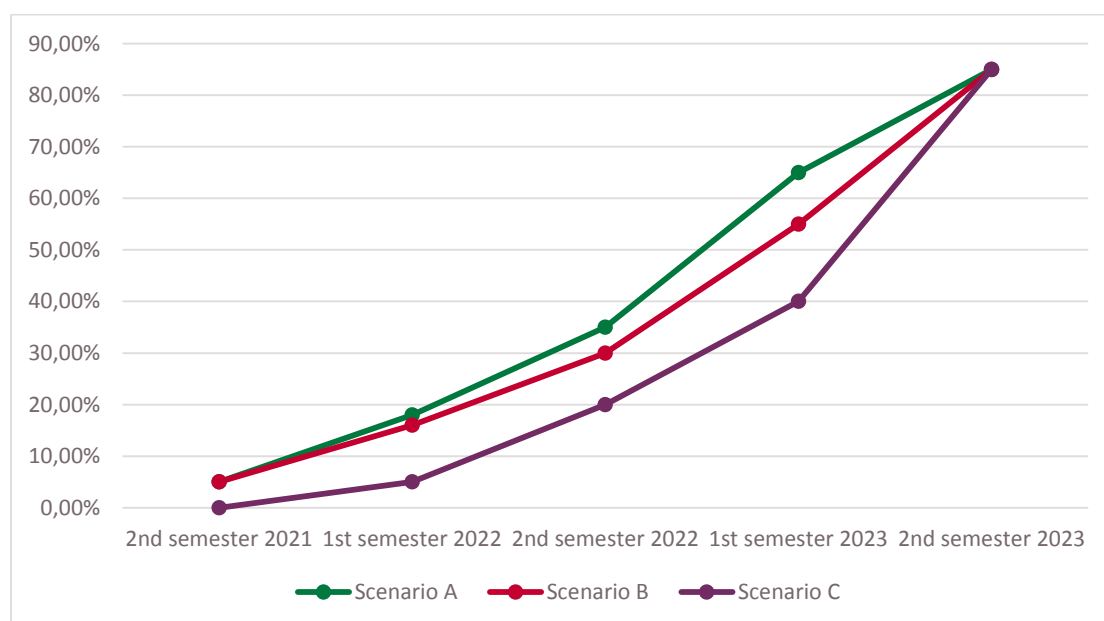
As far as scenario C is concerned, first of all, the 5% related to advance payments is provided in 2022 due to various issues (e.g. bureaucracy). The projects start in the second semester of 2022 and speed up to make up for the delay, thereby achieving a notable rate of 15%. Due to the impediments, the majority of projects take another semester to be completed. As a result, the absorption in the second semester of 2023 reaches a high level of 45%.

The projects that have completion dates in the second semester of 2023 are deemed high-risk and must be closely monitored so that any major delays are circumvented.

For all scenarios, the total is presumed to be the same. Altering the total would result in the creation of more complicated scenarios.

The next graph describes the cumulative absorption rates by semester and scenario. In doing so, it elucidates the differences between the cases.

Figure 16: Cumulative absorption rate by scenario and semester



4.4 Conclusions – Proposals – Lessons Learnt

To be noted that in October 2018 (3 years after the launch of the Programme), more than 85% of the Programme budget allocated to Priority Axes 1 and 2 has been contracted, while at the same time within the last programming period it had only started the negotiation & contracting procedure for the projects approved under the 1st Call resulting to the contracting of less than the 25% of the Programme budget only one year later (in a period of 4 years). Moreover, in the previous programming period, contracting of the 85% of the Programme budget was only achieved only two years before the Programme closure.

Following to the above, we could say that lessons learnt from the past period were taken into consideration for the improvement of the current Programme, while the Management Structure of the Programme itself (both at MA and JS level) acted in a much more effective and efficient way, taking advantage of its much more experienced and qualified human resources.

Despite the late approval the Cooperation Programme is back on track. The effectiveness of the Cooperation Programme has been greatly achieved, which is reflected in the selection of projects that serve the goals of the individual Specific Objectives as set. The effectiveness of the CP is also documented by the high degree of efficient cooperation between the authorities (JMC, MA / JS, AA, CA) but also the beneficiaries with the authorities and the minor problems during the implementation of the projects, which were partly due to delays attributed to the exogenous factor of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Specifically, the Figures for contracted projects are satisfactory for both Priorities. Similarly, all Thematic Priorities and Specific Objectives have been activated, and an overall 95.20% of the total budget is contracted.

Contracted funds in both Axes (1 & 2) amount to over 38 million Euros. The expenditure absorption rate is approximately 39% until 30.06.2021. Regarding PA3, the rate of the total allocation covered by eligible expenditure declared by beneficiaries is 29.51% by 30.06.2021.

Regarding the implementation progress of the operational output indicators based on the contracted projects, in both P.A.s, most of the indicators have achieved the Programme's target. However, six (6) output indicators (as O0201, O0205, O0207, CO20, CO21 and CO23) are to be reported once the projects are completed.

A prediction of output values shows that the achievement of their target values can be expected for the total of Specific Objectives.

A review of the quality of the current indicators and whether they are useful to informing Programme progress shows the following factors to be beneficial.

- Used lessons from past experience. The set of indicators in place for the 2014-2020 Programme drew on lessons from the 2007-2013 period. This has led to a significant improvement, using fewer, more coherent and more clearly defined indicators and leading to a significant simplification of monitoring and reporting.
- Indicators used and useful. The current sets of indicators are used to plan activities, gauge performance, and address gaps,
- However, some issues emerged which are already being borne in mind for future planning:
 - Only some aspects of activities are being captured. The indicators are very strongly oriented to specific interventions' categories, but work covers a wider range of activities (i.e. the outputs of interventions on culture are not reported and evaluated).
 - Some of the indicators are quite general. The indicators are broad, which has led to definitional issues when trying to use them to inform more detailed planning.
 - Used SMART criteria³. SMART criteria are partly met.
 - Applied proportionality. The selected indicators must have the merit of working across the priorities and presenting a more holistic, less fragmented view of development.

³ SMART criteria: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound; European Commission, "Manual Project Cycle Management", March 2004

An update of the output indicators' targets values must be planned once the projects of the 2nd Call start their implementation to tackle the discrepancies in the output indicators.

5. Evaluation Module B: Performance Framework of the Cooperation Programme

The performance framework is one of the tools to achieve the result-orientation of the Programme. A set of milestones and targets is defined for each priority in the CP, except for priorities concerning technical assistance⁴.

According to paragraph 3 of Annex II CPR, both milestones and targets have to be:

- realistic and achievable
- relevant and capturing essential information on the progress of a priority (i.e. they reflect the objectives and operations of the priority)
- consistent with the nature and character of the specific objectives of the priority (i.e. the indicators foreseen in the performance framework as well as their milestones and targets are in line with the intervention logic of the priority and it is clear how spending the amount of resources allocated to the planned outputs will contribute to the expected results
- transparent, with objectively verifiable values and the source data identified and, where possible, publicly available
- verifiable, without imposing a disproportionate administrative burden
- consistent across the IPA CBC Programme, where appropriate (i.e. there is no significant and unjustified difference in the methods applied to select indicators and fix targets and milestones for the performance frameworks of comparable priorities in the same Member State)

Three types of indicators have been set for the performance evaluation of the “**INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020**”:

- **Output Indicators**
- **Key Implementation Steps**
- **Financial Indicators**

Result indicators haven't been used in the present CP as these are to be used only where appropriate.

The **used indicators** in total are seven (7) in total:

- Three (3) are set for PA1 and
- Four (4) are set for PA2⁵

⁴ Council Regulation (EU) 1303/2013 (General Regulation) and in particular Articles 20, 21, 22, and 96 as well as Annex II of the Method for Establishing the Performance Framework

Implementing Regulation (EU) 215/2014 and especially Chapter II on Determining Milestones and Targets in the Performance Framework and Assessing their Achievement (articles 4, 5, 6, and 7)

Delegated Regulation (EU) 480/2014

European Commission Guidelines, such as the “EU Guidance Document on Monitoring and Evaluation (ERDF and Cohesion Fund) - Concepts and recommendations” (March 2014)

EU Guidelines "Guidance Document on Assessment Plans: Guidelines for Quality Management of External Evaluations" (February 2015)

⁵ Performance framework indicators are not required for PA3 Technical Assistance as referred above

Types of Indicators

- Three (3) indicators are Output Indicators (one for PA1 and two for PA2),
- Two (2) indicators are Key Implementation Steps (one per PA) and
- Two (2) indicators are Financial (one per PA).

5.1 Assessment of the Performance Framework Indicator's achievement

The following tables summarize the Performance Framework for the two relevant PAs, including for each Indicator the Milestone for 2018, the target for 2023 and the achievement level of the targets for each one by 30.06.2021.

The analysis of the Performance Framework progress is based on the MIS data. The respective Programme's Implementation Reports for all implementation years have been taken into account, including the latest Annual Implementation Report of 2020.

Overall, the Programme is expected to perform satisfactorily by 2023 in financing terms according to payments projection until 2023 (see Figure 6).

The following factors have been taken into consideration:

- an overall budget of 5.5 million Euros is to be contracted in the frame of PA 1 and 3.5 million Euros in the frame of PA2 respectively
- unused funds in the range of 0.8 million € in PA 1 and 2.1 million € in PA 2 respectively which are meant to return to the Programme
- unused funds in Priority Axis 3 could be reallocated in favor of Priorities Axes 1 and 2
- there is an overallocation of the total eligible cost of selected operations including the projects of the 2nd Call which secure possible project failures, budget reductions of the projects etc.

Regarding the Performance Indicators, it is expected that the Programme targets to be succeeded taking into account that the projects of the second Call will contribute them.

Regarding the performance indicators of **Priority Axis 1** the following are current:

- The Output Indicator for the Performance Framework is “CO36 Health: Population covered by improved health services”. Access to health and social services is identified as a major Programme challenge, especially for inhabitants of remote locations in the areas of Serres, Pella, Florina, Vardarski and Pelagoniski. The indicator is reported in relation to partially implemented operations. It sets a target of 1,500 persons for 2023. The final target value was based on Figures from similar interventions during the 2007-2013 Period: 6 concluded projects with an average of 350 people served / project (for health and social services combined). There is no applicable milestone for 2018. The achieved amount as far as 30.06.2021 is already 32,464 persons.
- The 2023 target for the Financial Indicator “F011 Eligible verified (certified) expenditure of the Axis” is 18,188,028.00 with a 2018 Milestone of 1,400,000.00€. By 31.12.2018, the verified expenses proportionally covered 25.42% of the respective milestone of 2018. Until 30.06.2021, the total achievement of F0101 is 6,927,090.09 € or proportionally 38.09% of the total funding. Regarding the 2023 target, it is expected to be achieved considering the payments' projections up to 2023 and that an overall budget of 5.47 million Euros is to be contracted until the end of 2021 (2nd Call projects) in the frame of PA 1. Unused funds up to 0.8 million Euros are meant to return to the PA1 to balance the overbooking of the operations selected to support.

- The Key Implementation Step for Priority Axis 1 is the “K0101 Number of Contracted Projects”. The indicator adequately captures the progress of the Priority. Thirteen (13) projects were the milestone for 2018 and no target for 2023. The contracted projects by 31.12.2018 were 16 (achievement 123.00% of the 2018 milestone). Respectively the contracted projects up to the end of June 2021 are 18.

Table 17: Performance Framework Indicators of Priority Axis 1

ID	Ind Type	Indicator	Measurement Unit	2023		Milestone 2018	Achievement Level by 31.12.2018		Achievement Level by 30.06.2021		2023 Projection
				Programme's Target	Projects Target						
CO36	O	Health: Population covered by improved health services	Persons	1,500	340,000	0	0	0 %	32,464	>100%	>100%
FO11	F	Eligible verified (certified) Expenditure of the Axis	Euro	18,188,028.00		1,400,000.00	355,875.13	25.42%	6,927,090.09	38.09%	>100%
K0101	I	Contracted Projects	Number of Projects	N/A		13	16	123.00%	18	N/A	N/A

For Priority Axis 2

The Output Indicators for the Performance Framework are:

- The selected indicator O0207 “Surface area of rehabilitated or with improved management ecosystem” captures the importance of the Programme’s rich ecosystem and biodiversity. At the same time, it reflects the fragility of the respective areas
 - The indicator has a Programme’s target of 188,000 ha. The final target was estimated based on a number of variables and relevant experience, namely: the average size of ‘protected areas’ within the Programme area, the average cost of similar interventions (and hence the average cost per hectare intervention) and the indicative financial allocation of the respective Specific Objective to the Programme.
 - The projects’ target is equal to 124,827 ha for 2023. The milestone for 2018 is 0 ha. Although the projects’ target is lower than the Programme’s one, the projects’ output, according to JS information, is estimated significantly higher than the initial goal by the end of June 2021 (the achieved output value until 30.06.2021 is 340,211.00 ha).
- The selected indicator “O0210 Number of participants in prevention actions” focus on the beneficiaries’ capacity and readiness is in line with the relevant goal of the IPA to strengthen the capacity and ownership of Programme stakeholders.
 - The indicator’s Programme target is 200 persons for 2023. The final target value was based on the expectation of 4 relevant projects, with an average number of 50 active participants / project: In the scope of the Performance Framework, the indicator is a suitable complement to the previous one (O027). The set milestone for 2018 is zero (0) person. The achieved amount so far reported by 30.06.2021 is already 1,304 persons while by 2018 was 0.
- The Financial Indicator is “F0102 Eligible verified (certified) Expenditures of the Axis” with a 2018 Milestone of 2,000,000€ and a 2023 target of 22,735,032€. The approved expenditures of the Axis by 31.12.2018 were 542,994.58€ or proportionally 27.15% of 2018 milestone. By 30.06.2021, the approved expenses were 9,165,652.13€ (or proportionally 40.32% of the PA2 total budget). Regarding the 2023 target, it is expected that it will be achieved considering the following:
 - the overbooking of the contracted budget (1st call’s projects)
 - the payments’ projections up to 2023
 - an overall budget of 3.45 million Euros will be contracted by the end of the year 2021 (2nd call’s projects)
 - unused funds in the range of 2.9 million Euros are to return to PA2 to balance the overbooking of the operations selected to support (of both calls).
- The Key Implementation Step for Priority Axis 2 is the “K0102 Contracted Projects,” with 16 projects as a target for 2018 and no target for 2023. The total number of contracted projects by the end of 2018 was 21 (131.25%) and by 2020 was 22.

Table 18: Performance Framework Indicators of Priority Axis 2

ID	Ind Type	Indicator	Measurement Unit	2023		Milestone 2018	Achievement Level by 31.12.2018		Achievement Level by 30.06.2021		2023 Projection
				Programme's Target	Project's Target						
O0207	o	Surface area of rehabilitated or with improved management ecosystems	Hectars	188,000.00	124,827	0.00	0.00	0%	N/A	N/A	>100%
O0210	o	Number of participants in prevention actions	Persons	200	2,000	0	0	0%	1,304	652.00%	>100%
F0102	F	Eligible verified (certified) Expenditure of the Axis	Euro	22,735,032.00		2,000,000	542,994.58	27.15%	9,165,652.13	40.32%	>100%
K0102	I	Contracted Projects	Number of Projects	N/A		16	21	131.25%	22	-	N/A

5.2 Assessment of target achievements

Based on the above analysis, the progress of the Performance Framework can be considered positive.

At a Performance Framework level, there are no essential discrepancies between the PAs. Both PAs perform satisfactorily as far as Key Implementation Steps are concerned, and the overall achievement level in Financial and Output Indicators is considered to perform for 2023 satisfactorily. Regarding the progress in Key Implementation Steps for 2018 this is greater than that was planned.

Prudence is advised about the achievement level of the financial indicators, as is explained in more detail in the above section 6.1.1.

Priority Axis 1

The projections, as these are presented in the previous section for PA1 are positive as far as the Performance Framework is concerned.

Even though the achievement level for Financial Indicator is 25.42% of the set milestone for 2018 and 38,09% by 30.06.2021 regarding the total budget, it is considered that these should perform satisfactorily, taking into account that nine (9) projects are expected to be contracted until the end of the second semester 2021. Additionally, a possible reallocation of Priority 3 funds in favor of PA1 will boost its performance.

Priority Axis 2

As in the case of PA1, the overall performance of PA2 is considered satisfactory.

This is especially true when one considers the projected achievement for 2022 as shown in the Figure 6 and the fact there is an overbooking in the total eligible cost of operations selected for support in the frame of PA2. Regarding the financial indicator of PA2 it performs slightly better (40,32%) than the respective indicator of PA1 (38,09%).

It is expected as the three new projects of the second Call enter the implementation pipeline will contribute to the performance of the Axis as well as a possible reallocation of Priority Axis 3 funds.

5.2.1 Conclusions – Proposals – Lessons Learnt

Regarding the Performance Framework its' progress is satisfactory. Programme implementation is on track and the level of verified expenses is satisfactory until the end of June 2021 although the pandemic has stressed the implementation efforts of beneficiaries.

The Key Implementation Steps and the output indicators show that the Programme set a base for a successful implementation. The new projects under the second Call will ensure the achievement of the Programme's targets.

The significant delays that occurred during previous years in the verified expenses have been overcome thanks to measures that have been taken by JS and MA in order to accelerate the expenses verification procedures.

Regarding the verified payments of the Interreg IPA – CBC Programme 'Greece- Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020' 38.09%, 40.32% and 29.51% of the contracted budget are verified for PA1, PA2 and PA3 respectively. A reallocation of funds of Priority Axis 3 in order to support Priority Axes 1 and 2 is suggested to ensure the Programme's successful implementation.

While the majority of the projects of the 1st Call are intended to be finished within the present year (2021) it is suggested that the beneficiaries will be motivated and supported to accelerate the procedures for payment and expenditure verification.

6. Evaluation Module C: Programme's Efficiency

The Evaluation of the "Efficiency of the Cooperation Programme" focuses on the assessment of the progress of implementation of the Programme in terms of efficiency per Priority Axis, Thematic Priority and Specific Objective. It is also evaluated whether the progress is considered consistent or not up to 30.06.2021.

Taking into account the economic aspects of the implementation progress of the Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" the main issue according to the Evaluation Plan and the Tender's Terms of Reference is whether the available budget is sufficient to implement the Programme's interventions and whether there any problems identified.

Taking the above into account the current Evaluation Unit include the following aspects:

- Efficiency evaluation
- Sufficiency of the available budget for the implementation of CP's interventions
- Identification of possible problems, especially with regards to budget overallocation, efficiency and differentiation of the unit cost of the interventions' implementation in relation to the forecasted costs during the Programme's planning

6.1 Evaluation of the Programme's Implementation in terms of efficiency

Efficiency evaluation aims at analyzing the physical progress made towards achieving the Programme's objectives. The measurement consists of monitoring the progress of physical object implementation in relation to the initially planned physical objectives, at the level of Specific Objective, Thematic Priority, Priority Axis and the entire Programme.

Within this context, it should generally be borne in mind that differences between the SOs in their current achievement of outputs and results does not mean that some SOs are performing better than others. Such variations can mainly be explained by the variable numbers of projects implemented under each SO, by different dates of approval and start of projects and also by a different duration of the implementation of the projects' plans of activity (i.e., implementation time is different even between projects from the same call).

In order to estimate the efficiency, the efficiency indicator is used, which expresses the progress of the physical implementation of the Programme at each individual level and is estimated by **the quotient** of the **implemented physical object** at the time of controlling the **originally planned physical object**, based on below numerical relationship:

$$\text{Efficiency Indicator} = \frac{\text{Implemented Physical Object}}{\text{Planned Physical Object}}$$

The analysis in the following section is done based mainly on the Annual Implementation Reports and the available MIS data.

Priority Axis 1

Regarding the efficiency of the Priority Axis 1 and Thematic Priorities a & d there is sufficient budget for the targets as these have been set out. More specifically, the output indicators Programme's target values have already been achieved by 30.06.2021 as the projects' targets are much higher than the Programme's ones. In the following section the achievements of each indicator per Thematic Priority are presented.

Thematic Priority a

Regarding the output indicators, in all cases there is a discrepancy between the Programme and the projects indicator's target, as it is shown in the following Table.

In the case of the output indicators CO36 "Health: Population covered by improved health services" and "O0103 "Population covered by improved social services" the projects' targets are higher than the Programme's ones, and they have already achieved their goals. Furthermore, according to AIR2020, the high projection reflects the relatively large number of approved projects (eight) contributing to the indicator. The estimation is based on projections that capture the whole Programme and cover the large urban area of Thessaloniki. Initially, interventions were planned only for rural cross-border areas.

The Indicator O0101 "Number of participants in joint local cross-border employment activities" as far as 30.06.2021 has already achieved its Programme's target while the project's outcomes are approximately two times over the Programme's indicator. The projects' activities have been affected negatively by the cancellation of all joint activities in 2020 – 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and many activities were rearranged for online delivery. Although, by 30.06.2021 the indicator has already succeeded in its' goal.

Table 19: Thematic Priority a - Specific Objectives 1.1 & 1.2

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme's Target	Project's Target	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021 %	Number of Contracted Projects that contribute to Output indicator
Thematic Priority a: Specific Objectives 1.1 & 1.2							
CO36	Health : Population covered by improved health services	Persons	1,500	74,700	32,464	>>100%	8
O0101	Number of participants in joint local cross-border employment activities	Persons	350	830	350	100%	2
O0103	Population covered by improved social services	Persons	500	18,700	6,002	>>100%	8

Thematic Priority d

There is a discrepancy between the Programme's indicator's target and the project's target.

The projects' target of the output indicator O0104 "Number of enterprises participating in cross-border joint projects" is much higher (389 enterprises) than the Programme's target (30 enterprises). The achievement level by 30.06.2021 is over 100% (102 enterprises). According to AIR2020, the indicator was meant to measure the participation of individual entities. The high

forecast reflects the engagement of clusters and incubators, which are expected to capture multiple individual entities.

Table 20: Thematic Priority d - Specific Objective 1.3

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021 %	Number of Contracted Projects contributing to the indicator
Thematic Priority d: Specific Objective 1.3							
O0104	Number of enterprises participating in cross-border joint projects	Number of enterprises	30	389	102	>100%	6

Priority Axis 2

Thematic Priority c

All projects targets are much higher than the Programme's target values. The higher values seem to be an overestimation of the projects' contribution or a Programme's underestimation, resulting in an even higher gap between the two targets.

The achievement level of the output indicators CO32 "Decrease of annual primary energy consumption of public buildings", CO34 "Estimated annual decrease of GHG" and O0204 "Volume of solid wastes under improved management or recycling" by 30.06.2020 is over 100%.

In the cases of the output indicators O0201 "Surface of improved cross-border road and infrastructure" and O0205 "Volume of liquid wastes under improved management or recycling" the kind of their interventions and the respective deliverables does not allow for a partial implementation. As a result, the efficiency can't be evaluated quantitatively. However, in qualitative terms and according to JS information the projects perform satisfactorily and they are to achieve their goals and the Programme's targets as well.

Table 21: Thematic Priority c - Specific Objectives 2.1 & 2.2

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021 %	Number of Contracted Projects contributing to the indicator
Thematic Priority c: Specific Objectives 2.1 & 2.2							
CO32	Decrease of annual primary energy consumption of public buildings	Kwh/year	150,000.00	1,945,434.00	2,007,774.00	>>100%	2
CO34	Estimated annual	Kilograms of CO2	106.00	12,510.37	350.00	>100%	5

Update of the 1st Implementation Evaluation and Impacts of the Cooperation Programme "INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020"

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021 %	Number of Contracted Projects contributing to the indicator
	decrease of GHG	equivalent /year					
O0201	Surface of improved cross-border road and infrastructure	Square meters	1,200.00	1,008,324.00	N/A	N/A	4
O0204	Volume of solid wastes under improved management or recycling	Tonnes / year	1,725.00	65,325.00	105,532.00	>>100%	6
O0205	Volume of liquid wastes under improved management or recycling	Cubic meters / year	158,775.00	1,104,200.00	N/A	N/A	3

Thematic Priority b

Regarding the output indicators CO20 "Population benefiting from flood protection measures", CO21 "Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures", CO23 "Surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status" and O0207 "Surface area of rehabilitated or with improved management ecosystems" the projects, that contribute them, require infrastructure interventions. Therefore, the outputs will be realized once the projects are completed. As a result, the achievement level can't be evaluated. Although the projections are positive and the targets will be achieved (see par. 6.1.1).

The indicator O0210 "Number of participants in prevention actions" has reached a physical implementation level of over 650%.

Table 22: Thematic Priority b - Specific Objectives 2.3 & 2.4

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021 %	Number of Contracted Projects contributing to the indicator
Thematic Priority b: Specific Objectives 2.3 & 2.4							
CO20	Population benefiting from flood protection measures	Persons	200,000.00	40,000.00	N/A	N/A	2
CO21	Population benefiting from forest fire	Persons	270,000.00	15,000.00	N/A	N/A	2

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Programme Target Value	Projects Target Value	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021	Achievement Level by 30.06.2021 %	Number of Contracted Projects contributing to the indicator
	protection measures						
CO23	Surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status	Hectars	50,000.00	325,955.00	N/A	N/A	7
O0207	Surface area of rehabilitated or with improved management ecosystems	Hectars	188,000.00	124,827.00	N/A	N/A	7
O0210	Number of participants in prevention actions	Persons	200.00	2,000.00	1,304	>>100%	2

6.2 Budget's Sufficiency

The methodology for the analysis of the budget's sufficiency is the following. Based on the percentage of the Contracted Budget (% CB), up to 30.06.2021, to the total funding and the percentage of the Achievement of Output indicators (% OA), an estimation can be made on whether the budget is sufficient to reach the Programme's targets set for the output indicators.

If % CB is the % of (contracted budget)/(total funding) per Thematic Priority

$$\%CB = \frac{\text{contracted budget}}{\text{total funding}}$$

and % OA is the % of (projects' target output indicator)/(Programme's target for the output indicator)

$$\%OA = \frac{\text{projects' target output indicator}}{\text{Programme's target output indicator}}$$

Then if %CB=%OA, the amount planned to achieve a specific output indicator is equal to the one contracted to achieve it.

If %CB > %OA, the amount planned to achieve an output indicator is less than the one contracted and if %CB<%OA the amount planned to achieve an output indicator is greater than the amount contracted to achieve it.

In other words, if %CB <=%OA, then **overachievement** of the current target is possible and the **budget is sufficient**.

On the contrary, when **%CB > %OA underachievement** and **insufficiency of budget** is expected.

Based on the above and taking into account the available data the following can be said for the efficiency of budget.

Priority Axis 1

Thematic Priority a

The %CB of the Thematic Priority a is calculated as follows:

$$\%CB = \frac{\text{contracted budget}}{\text{total funding}}$$

$$\Rightarrow$$

$$\%CB = \frac{11,426,831.22\text{€}}{11,367,515.00\text{€}} = 100.52\%$$

In the following Table, we examine the sufficiency of the total funding of Thematic Priority d to achieve the Programme's targets output indicators: CO36 "Health: Population covered by improved health services", O0101 "Number of participants in joint local cross-border employment activities" and O0103 "Population covered by improved social services".

Table 23: Budget's Sufficiency – Thematic Priority a

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Output Indicator Programmes' Target (A)	Output Indicator Projects' Target (B)	Contracted Budget / Total funding CB %	Achievement of output Indicators OA% (=B/A)	Budget's sufficiency
Thematic Priority a							
CO36	Health: Population covered by improved health services	Persons	1,500	74,700	100.52%	>>100%	Sufficient
O0101	Number of participants in joint local cross-border employment activities	Persons	350	830	237.14%	>100%	Sufficient
O0103	Population covered by improved social services	Persons	500	18,700	100.52%	>>100%	Sufficient

According to the findings of the above table, the total funding of Thematic Priority a is **sufficient** to achieve the three (CO36, O0101 & O0103) respective Programme's targets set for output indicators.

Thematic Priority d

The %CB of the Thematic Priority d is calculated as follows:

$$\%CB = \frac{\text{contracted budget}}{\text{total funding}}$$

$$\Rightarrow$$

$$\%CB = \frac{4,182,385.37\text{€}}{6,820,513.00\text{€}} = 61.32\%$$

The sufficiency of the total funding of Thematic Priority d to reach the Programme's target set for the output indicator O0104 "Number of enterprises participating in cross-border joint projects", is presented in the following Table:

Table 24: Budget's Sufficiency – Thematic Priority d

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Output Indicator Programmes' Target (A)	Output Indicator Projects' Target (B)	Contracted Budget / Total funding CB %	Achievement of output Indicators OA% (=B/A)	Budget's sufficiency
Thematic Priority d							
O0104	Number of enterprises participating in cross-border joint projects	Number of enterprises	30	389	61.32%	>>100%	Sufficient

As shown in the above Table, there is a **sufficient budget** for the output indicator O0104 to achieve its target.

As reported in the AIR2020, the target must be adjusted in collaboration with the beneficiaries.

Priority Axis 2

Thematic Priority c

The %CB of the Thematic Priority c is calculated as follows:

$$\%CB = \frac{\text{contracted budget}}{\text{total funding}}$$

$$\Rightarrow$$

$$\%CB = \frac{12,390,321.96\text{€}}{13,500,000\text{€}} = 90.83\%$$

13,641,020.00€

The sufficiency of the available budget of Thematic Priority c to achieve the Programme's targets set for the output indicators CO32, CO34, O0201, O0204, and O0205 is assessed in the following Table.

Table 25: Budget's Sufficiency - Thematic Priority c

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Output Indicator Programmes' Target (A)	Output Indicator Projects' Target (B)	Contracted Budget / Total funding CB %	Achievement of output Indicators OA% (=B/A)	Budget's sufficiency
Thematic Priority c							
CO32	Decrease of annual primary energy consumption of public buildings	Kwh/year	150,000.00	1,945,434.00	90.83%	>>100%	Sufficient
CO34	Estimated annual decrease of GHG	Kilograms of CO ₂ equivalent /year	106.00	12,510.37	90.83%	>>100%	Sufficient
O0201	Surface of improved cross-border road and infrastructure	Square meters	1,200.00	1,008,324.00	90.83%	>>100%	Sufficient
O0204	Volume of solid wastes under improved management or recycling	Tonnes / year	1,725.00	65,325.00	90.83%	>>100%	Sufficient
O0205	Volume of liquid wastes under improved management or recycling	Cubic meters / year	158,775.00	1,104,200.00	90.83%	>>100%	Sufficient

Thematic Priority c has improved its picture during the first semester of 2021. All indicators reach an efficiency achievement higher than 100% with just 90% of the available budget.

Thematic Priority b

The %CB of the Thematic Priority b is calculated as follows:

$$\%CB = \frac{\text{contracted budget}}{\text{total funding}}$$

=>

$$\%CB = \frac{10,436,127.55\text{€}}{9,094,012.00\text{€}} = 114.76\%$$

In the following table, we assess the sufficiency of the total funding of Thematic Priority b to achieve the Programme's targets output indicators: CO20 "Population benefiting from flood protection measures", CO21 "Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures", CO23 "Surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status", O0207 "Surface area of rehabilitated or with improved management ecosystems" and O0210 "Number of participants in prevention actions".

Table 26: Budget's Sufficiency - Thematic Priority b

ID	Indicator	Measurement Unit	Output Indicator Programme's Target (A)	Output Indicator Projects' Target (B)	Contracted Budget / Total funding CB %	Achievement of output Indicators OA% (=B/A)	Budget's sufficiency
Thematic Priority b							
CO20	Population benefiting from flood protection measures	Persons	200,000	40,000	114.76%	<100%	Insufficient
CO21	Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures	Persons	270,000.	15,000	114.76%	<100%	Insufficient
CO23	surface area of habitats supported in order to attain a better conservation status	Hectars	50,000.00	325,955.10	114.76%	>>100%	Sufficient
O0207	Surface area of rehabilitated or with improved management ecosystems	Hectars	188,000.00	124,827.00	114.76%	<100%	Insufficient
O0210	Number of participants in prevention actions	Persons	200	2,000	114.76%	>>100%	Sufficient

Thematic Priority b has a mixed picture in terms of budget's efficiency.

Particularly, in the cases of the indicators CO23 "Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status" and O0210 "Number of participants in prevention actions" reaches the budget is sufficient to reach the Programme's goals.

In the case of the indicators O0207 "Surface area of rehabilitated or with improved management ecosystems", CO20 "Population benefiting from flood protection measures" and CO21 "Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures", their achievement level is less than 100%, while the allocation of the budget is over 100%. Fortunately, the real picture is expected to be improved significantly in the case of the indicators CO20 and CO21 with the contribution of the new projects of the 2nd call. As for the indicator O0207, the relevant projects overperform

and their output is higher than the Programme's goal. Consequently, we can say that the budget is sufficient in the case of Thematic Priority b.

6.3 Conclusions – Proposals – Lessons Learnt

According to the analysis above, some issues should be highlighted as far as efficiency and outputs indicators' performance is concerned.

- There is an essential improvement in the Programme's Efficiency during the first semester of 2021.
- The total of Priority Axis 1 output indicators has already achieved the Programme's targets and the available funds are sufficient to succeed the goals.
- Priority Axis 2 has a positive picture in total too. Three out of five output indicators of Thematic Priority c overachieved with regards to the contracted budget. Two indicators can't be evaluated as these will be realized once the relevant projects are completed. Although, their projections are very optimistic according to their progress up to 30.06.2021. It is expected that the Programme's goal will be achieved with the dedicated budget. Regarding Thematic Priority b, four out of five output indicators have targets lower than the Programme's values. Additionally, the nature of the deliverables of the projects that contribute to the four indicators mentioned does not allow for a partial implementation. However, the real picture will be improved significantly, as the projects of the 2nd Call will contribute to Programme's target and take into account that many projects overperform, surpassing their targets. Consequently, we can say that the budget is sufficient in the case of Thematic Priority b.
- There should be a closer analysis of the contribution of the projects to the output indicators.
- In case there are substantial discrepancies between project contributions with emphasis to the projects of the 2nd call, measures should be taken to revise and/or communicate the methodology for indicators; estimation to the beneficiaries.
- The new projects of the second Call should start their implementation as soon as possible in order MA and JS could assess their contribution to the Programme's targets.

7. Evaluation Module D: Consistency of the intervention logic within the Cooperation Programme Strategy

7.1 Consistency of Programme Intervention logic and the Specific Objectives of the CP

In previous periods, the traditional framework was unclear on the distinction between inputs, outputs, results and outcomes. In the period 2014-2020, it has been substituted by a logical framework that underpins the intervention logic of each chosen priority of the Cooperation Programme. The aforementioned thematic concentration and result orientation are both reflected in the Programme intervention logic.

The Programme intervention logic can be defined as the theoretical framework that structures and visualizes the entire logical and sequential process from defining the Specific Objectives, Thematic Priorities and Priority Axes until the results that should ultimately be achieved.

Priority Axes are the building blocks of the Programme. Each Priority Axis includes one or more Thematic Priorities. The Specific Objective is the expression of what each Thematic Priority aims to achieve. The change sought by the Specific Objective is expressed in one result indicator.

More specifically, for each priority, the following logic should be assumed⁶:

- To start with, a problem (need) to be addressed by joint action is identified -> Selection of thematic objectives, investment priorities and corresponding specific objectives;
- This informs the definition of the intended result (policy objective reflecting the change in the socio-economic situation) to be modified by interventions. For this, result indicators (appropriate variables that represent the intended result) are selected and defined by baseline and target;
- Different factors can drive the change - the Programme selects factors to be direct products of interventions (outputs) and explain how these contribute to results.

This is then completed by the definition of actions to be supported that will deliver the outputs and lead to the attainment of the specific objectives and results. Corresponding categories of intervention have been listed and output indicators chosen.

The Evaluation Module D "Consistency of the intervention logic within the Cooperation Programme Strategy" focuses on the following:

- Assess the extent of the relevance between the intervention logic and the Specific Objectives of the CP
- Identify any potential changes related to the allocation of existing resources among the investment priorities, based on the specialization of the CP.
- Analyse and assess the current general macro-economic, social and environmental context - that could affect the intervention logic of the CP. Point out any new needs -

⁶ "Monitoring and Evaluation of European Cohesion Policy—European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund-Concepts and Recommendations", Guidance document, European Commission Directorate –General Regional Policy: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2014/working/wd_2014_en.pdf

particularly deriving from external environment that could be addressed through the CP.

7.2 Current situation analysis

In next paragraphs are presented the main changes in the external environment that affects the needs and strategic priorities that have been set in the Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece-Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020".

Demographic Changes in the Programme Area

The total population of the Programme area is 2,307,033 people, of those 1,585,378 inhabitants (66.61%) live in Greece, and 770,295 (33.39%) live in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The population in the Greek eligible area has decreased the past four years (2016-2020) by 0.66%. The population in the regional unit of Thessaloniki was reduced by 0.37%, along with the other Greek cross-border regions.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the population decreased 0.72% during the past four years (2016-2020). The next table also shows the total population change in absolute numbers. The total change is calculated as the sum of net migration and natural change.

Table 27: Demographic Balance and Crude Rates by NUTS III Regions

Region	Total Population (2020)	Net migration plus statistical adjustment (2016-2020)	Natural change of population (2016-2020)	Total population change (2016-2020)
Thessaloniki	1,104,023	2,824	-6,886	-4,062
Kilkis	80,430	1,847	-2,179	-332
Pella	136,549	722	-2,756	-2,034
Serres	166,583	2,705	-5,364	-2,659
Florina	49,153	-129	-914	-1,043
Total for Cross-Border Regions (GR)	1,536,738	7,969	-18,099	-10,130
Greece	10,718,565	61,378	-111,006	-49,628
Vardarski	151,490	-500	-579	-1,079
Jugozapaden (Southwest)	219,172	-188	-369	-557
Jugoistocen (Southeast)	172,801	-236	-480	-716
Pelagoniski	226,832	-227	-2,934	-3,161
Total for Cross-Border Regions (MK)	770,295	-1,151	-4,362	-5,513
North Macedonia	2,076,255	112	2,441	2,553

Processed data from EUROSTAT

Even though the cross-border regions of Greece and North Macedonia had similar percentage changes in population in the last four years (0.66% and 0.72%), the factors that governed those changes exhibited differences.

Table 28: Sea and land arrivals (2016-2020)

Previous years	Sea arrivals	Land arrivals
2020	9,714	5,982
2019	59,726	14,887
2018	32,494	18,014
2017	29,718	6,592
2016	173,450	3,784

Source: UNHCR

In particular, the net migration for Greek regions was positive, indicating that immigration inflows surpassed the emigration outflows, whereas for the regions of North Macedonia it was negative. Greece had a positive net migration the last four years because it was the center of several waves of refugees and migrants, and the indicator accounted for some of those people. Since 2015-2016, the flows have been mitigated, as seen in the next table. The enhanced travel restrictions imposed during 2020 in response to the pandemic limited the number of new sea and land arrivals.

Table 29: Migration flows in Greece (2015-2019)

Year	Immigrants	Emigrants	Net Migration
2015	64,446	109,351	(44,905)
2016	116,867	106,535	10,332
2017	112,247	103,327	8,920
2018	119,489	103,049	16,440
2019	129,459	95,020	34,439

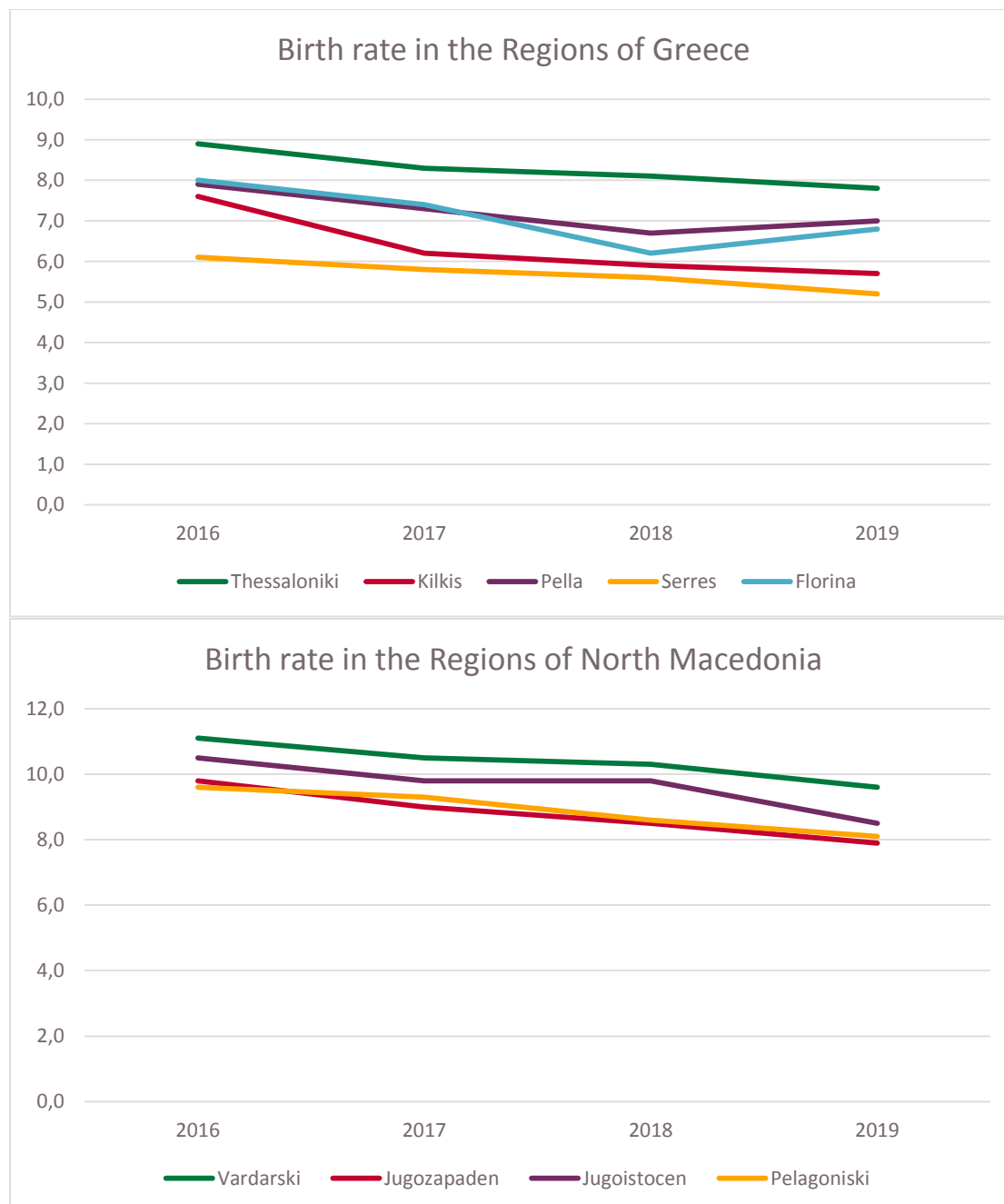
Processed data from ELSTAT

The regions of North Macedonia displayed negative migration flows, indicating emigration from those places, but the magnitude was not significant (around 1,000 from a population of over 770,000). In addition, the country as a whole had a positive migration indicator. In the case of Greece, the large immigration flows managed to offset the large emigration of the citizens. As shown in the table, the indicator was negative for 2015 and then became positive for the next years. From 2012 to 2018, around 100,000 inhabitants left the country annually, raising concerns over the ongoing phenomenon of "brain drain" that strips the regions from valuable human capital. A positive observation is that the number of emigrants fell below 100,000 in 2019, after many years.

All cross-border regions in both countries presented population reductions due to natural change. For North Macedonia, the natural change was almost four times the net migration and for Greece, the sole contributor to the negative population change. The following line charts illustrate that both countries experienced falling birth rates in the last years. Kilkis was the region

with the lowest birth rate in 2019 and Vardar the region with the highest. The crude birth rate is the number of resident live births divided by the total population for the area and multiplied by 1,000. It should be noted that for 2020, the month of January was used, and thus the previous data paint the picture of the pre-pandemic era.

Figure 17: Birth rates in Greece and North Macedonia (2016-2019)



Processed data from EUROSTAT

Socioeconomic changes

During the period 2016 – 2018, the per capita GDP in the Republic of North Macedonia eligible regions increased by 10.20% in Vardar to 5,400 €, by 13.89% in Southwest to 4,100 €, by 3.57% in Southeast to 5,800 € and by 15.22% in Pelagonia to 3,703 €. It should be noted that three out of four regions achieved double-digit growth during the two-year period (2016-2018).

The majority of Greek regions also reported GDP per capita growth, albeit generally lower compared to the regions on the other side of the border. In particular, Pella achieved 5.26% growth, followed by Thessaloniki with 5.15% and Serres with 4.04%. On the other hand, Kilkis and Florina suffered GDP per capita declines of 2.61% and 3.93% respectively. The differences between the per capita GDP of the neighboring regions tend to become smaller as the time goes by, but the gap remains substantial. The per capita GDP of those regions is much lower than the average per capita GDP of the EU of 27 countries (30,200 €).

Table 30: GDP and GDP per capita

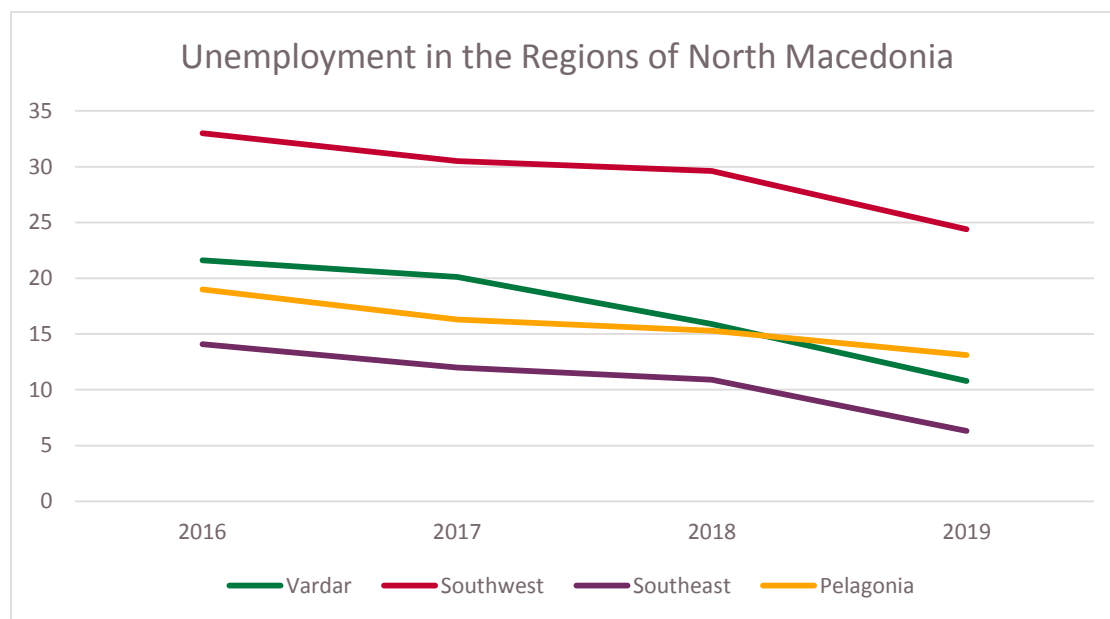
Region	GDP 2018 (million euro)	% Change GDP (2016-2018)	Euro per inhabitant 2018	% Change GDP per Capita (2016-2018)
Greece	179,727.30	3.15%	16,700	3.09%
Thessaloniki	15,774.10	4.29%	14,300	5.15%
Kilkis	901.38	-2.83%	11,200	-2.61%
Pella	1,645.90	3.88%	12,000	5.26%
Serres	1,720.24	2.07%	10,300	4.04%
Florina	851.01	-4.92%	17,100	-3.93%
North Macedonia	10,743.98	11.26%	5,200	10.64%
Vardarski	823.59	9.87%	5,400	10.20%
Jugozapaden	895.83	13.05%	4,100	13.89%
Jugoistocen	1,006.39	4.48%	5,800	3.57%
Pelagoniski	1,202.34	13.84%	5,300	15.22%

Processed data from EUROSTAT

One of the main concerns regarding the two countries both on total active population and on youth is the high unemployment, which is one of the primary reasons young and skilled staff migrate out of the country and the eligible area. According to the offices of the two countries, in 2019 the unemployment rates in the eligible regions of the Republic of North Macedonia were 10.8% in Vardar, 24.4% in Southwest, 13.1% in Pelagonia and 6.3% in Southeast. The Greek regions exhibited more similarity with Thessaloniki reporting unemployment of 19.3%, Kilkis 21.7%, Pella 21%, Serres 18.9% and Florina 21.5%.

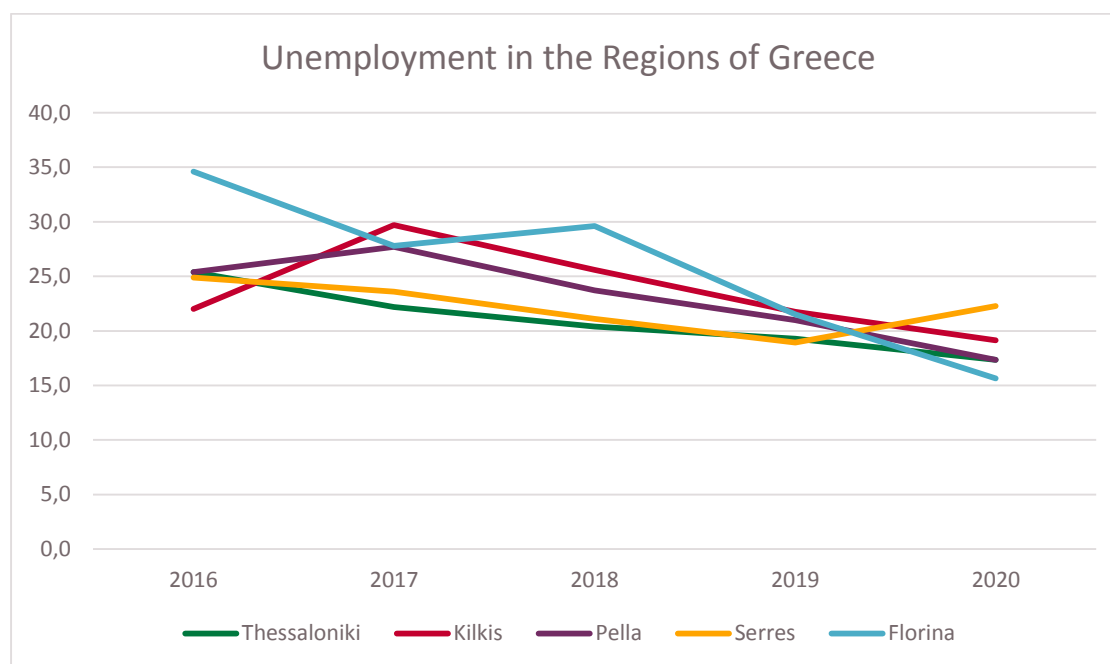
During the period 2016-2019, unemployment was on a downward trend in the eligible area. The regions of North Macedonia displayed the most notable reductions with areas such as Vardar halving the unemployment. For the year 2020, there are not full data for both countries. In addition, subsidies that were provided during 2020 to offset the effects of the pandemic may have altered the accurate picture of unemployment.

Figure 18: Unemployment in North Macedonia



Processed data from MAKSTAT

Figure 19: Unemployment in Greece



Processed data from ELSTAT

Tourism, Pandemic and Recovery

Data from the statistical authorities of the two counties reveal increases in the number of tourists visiting the cross-border area during the period 2016-2019. In North Macedonia, the Southwest, the Southeast and Patagonia showed significant increases in the number of foreign tourists while only Vardar presented a small drop. The Southwestern region accounted for the majority of tourists and displayed the highest growth (47.15%). In Greece, all regions reported substantial strengthening of the tourism sector. Thessaloniki attracted the majority of tourists in

2019 (680,581) and Pella achieved the highest growth (84%). It is well documented that the development and expansion of the tourism sector in the cross-border area can play a significant role in the enlargement of the labor market and in the increase of job vacancies for North Macedonia as well as Greece.

The Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020 led to major decreases in the number of arrivals of foreign tourists. As a result, the revenues from tourism fell abruptly. North Macedonia has published data about 2020 where it is apparent the significant economic disruption. Vardar reported an 88.27% reduction in the number of foreign tourists, Southwest a 91.09%, Southeast a 76.67% and Pelagonia an 85.20%. The statistical authority of Greece has not published data about 2020 yet, but the level of decrease is expected to be similar to that of North Macedonia.

In response to the pandemic, the EU created the Recovery and Resilience Facility (the Facility) which will make €672.5 billion in loans and grants available to support reforms and investments undertaken by Member States. The aim is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions. Greece will receive enhanced support from the facility because it was one of the member states that were hardest hit by the pandemic. This support will create opportunities for recovery and growth in the tourism sector in the next years.

As far as the economic support of North Macedonia is concerned, until the end of May 2020, 73.2 million euro were committed in grant and in-kind support predominantly for socio-economic response, but also for immediate health response. The EU was responsible for the majority of support (\$72.6/€67.2 million). In addition, the IMF, the World Bank and EU have provided sizable favorable conditions loans of over \$346/€294 million to support the liquidity of the budget and help reduce risks and costs to the country associated with borrowing on the uncertain international markets. The support that North Macedonia received as well as the support that is expected to receive will relieve the tourism sector from the effects of the pandemic and will help drive the recovery. How fast the recovery will be is still unknown. It will depend on many factors, such as the course of the pandemic.

Table 31: Number of foreign tourists in North Macedonia

Region	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Vardar	17,689	18,112	17,416	16,219	1,903
Southwest	170,987	204,465	238,615	251,668	22,431
Southeast	52,185	58,628	55,202	70,773	16,514
Pelagonia	21,343	25,475	32,009	30,665	4,537

Processed data from MAKSTAT

Table 32: Number of foreign tourists in Greece

Region	2016	2017	2018	2019
Thessaloniki	547,178	607,401	651,276	680,581

Kilkis	4,167	3,472	5,099	4,893
Pella	3,409	4,649	8,188	6,275
Serres	17,513	20,691	21,670	23,567
Florina	1,360	1,625	1,894	2,074

Processed data from ELSTAT

Health Sector

The pandemic was the most salient challenge of the health sector of the cross-border regions in the last years, straining resources and putting extreme pressure on the medical personnel. The authorities of both countries provided a swift initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, delaying the spread of the virus and preventing the collapse of the health care system. However, the less strict measures during the summer led to large increases in infections that culminated in the winter of 2020, severely stretching the capacities of the health systems of the two countries.

North Macedonia aligned with EU's Covid-19 related support mechanisms by becoming a member of the Joint Procurement Agreement and an observer in the EU Health Security Committee. The country provided the JRC data collection system with data on Covid-19 and nominated a correspondent to the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. Furthermore, North Macedonia utilized funding from the EU to strengthen the capacity of the healthcare system by increasing the number of medical and protective equipment. Last but not least, a new national strategy for anti-microbial resistance control was adopted for 2019-2023.

In response to the pandemic, Greece strengthened the preparedness of the healthcare system by making 6,000 new recruitments, including medical, nursing, paramedical and other staff. Alongside workforce capacity, the physical infrastructure was expanded too. Until October 2020, 941 intensive care beds were operational, of which 272 dedicated to the treatment of coronavirus patients, with a target to reach the EU average of 1.200 by the end of the year. In addition, health centers were activated for the purpose of receiving patients with coronavirus symptoms.

7.3 Review of the result indicators' progress / Achievement of the targets set for the result indicators in 2023

The overall objective is pursued through a set of Specific Objectives which are, strongly interdependent and complementary.

In the present chapter we verify the extent of the Specific Objectives that are currently contributing to the overall Programme's strategy. Additionally, we examine the state of progress of the result indicators as these are the main variables. We evaluate the performance of projects with respect to reaching their own final target values for results.

Result indicators are an expression of the objective of an investment priority. In other words, result indicators express the change sought by a Specific Objective on the whole Cooperation Programme area. Thus, they are programme-specific and meet certain quality criteria, as expressed in the CPR regulation (annex IV):

- a) Responsive to policy: closely linked to the policy interventions supported;
- b) Normative: having a clear and accepted normative interpretation;
- c) Robust: reliable, statistically validated;
- d) Timely collection of data: available when needed, with room built in for debate and for revision when needed and justified.

Each result indicator requires a baseline value and a target value for 2023.

The Tables below provide an overview of the state of progress of the result indicators of the Programme. The Tables are based mainly on the information presented in the AIR 2020 and MIS data.

As the following tables reveal, the progress towards the achievements of the targeted results varies across the PAs. The performance of the forty (40) projects (PA1 & PA2) in reaching their self-determined result target values is fairly variable across the ten (10) result indicators and also at the level of the seven (7) SOs. Out of the ten (10) result indicators the following seven (7) are reported based on partially implemented operations: R0101, R0102, R0103, R0104, R0204, R0205, R0206.

In the case of PA 1, we can observe signs of good progress in the direction of the targeted objectives. However, it should be noted that many projects had set very high targets for some indicators in their application forms. Conversely, for PA 2, we observe that many result indicators haven't reported any progress. This is due to the nature of the physical object of the projects, which involves infrastructure interventions and the installation of equipment. As a consequence, the indicators will be measured once the projects are completed.

Priority Axis 1

Result indicators for PA1 in total have a positive picture.

As far as S.O.1.1 and S.O.1.2 is concerned, the Programme is projected to perform satisfactorily based on the available data. The current contracted projects cover over 100% of the 2023 Programmes' targets.

Regarding S.O.1.3 it is also projected to reach the Programme's targets set for 2023.

The following table summarizes the contracted projects contribution to the result indicators of Priority Axis 1.

Table 33: Achievement of the result indicators - S.O.1.1, S.O.1.2 & S.O.1.3

S.O	ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline Value	Programme 's Target Value	Programme's Target net Value	Projects' Target Value	Achievement Total until 30.06.2021
S.O.1.1	R0101	Highly educated in employment including self - employment 6 months upon leaving the project intervention	Persons	47	52	7	270	26
S.O. 1.2	R0102	Population having access to health services	Persons	1,808,707	1,826,794	18,087	356,718	534,241
	R0103	Population having access to social services	Persons	1,260.163	1,272,765	12,602	87,700	223,840
S.O.1.3	R0104	Jobs created in the tourism sector	Persons	3,250	3,285	35	104	20

Priority Axis 2

As far as PA2 is concerned, three (3) out of six (6) Result indicators have already reached in full the Programme's target values. The other three indicators will be measured once the projects that contribute to their achievement are completed. Nevertheless, all three indicators are expected to be reached based on the projected result as reported in the respective progress reports and the AIR 2020.

Finally, it must be highlighted that the six (6) projects that contribute to the indicator R0204 cover a wide geographical area. On the contrary, the baseline and the target were set too low as it was envisaged that only a limited part of the Programme area would be captured. The Programme's target must be reconsidered.

Table 34: Achievement of the result indicators - S.O.2.1, S.O.2.2, S.O.2.3 & S.O.2.4

S.O	ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline Value	Programme 's Target Value	Programme's Target net Value	Projects' Target Value	Achievement Total until 30.06.2021
S.O.2.1	R0201	Reduced travel time	Minutes	10,81 min/10 Km	10% improvement over 2015 value	-	-	<i>the indicator will be measured once the 2 projects are completed</i>

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S.O	ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline Value	Programme 's Target Value	Programme's Target net Value	Projects' Target Value	Achievement Total until 30.06.2021
	R0202	Average border crossing travelling time	Minutes	101	20% improvement over 2015 value	-	-	<i>the indicator will be measured once the 3 projects are completed</i>
	R0203	Energy efficiency awareness barometer	Value in a scale of 100	61.77	20% improvement over 2015 value	-	-	<i>the indicator will be measured once the 5 projects are completed</i>
S.O.2.2	R0204	Population served by improved waste management or recycling	Persons	17,885	25.097	7,212	456,756	358,839
S.O.2.3	R0205	Surface area of ecosystems or habitats with improved protection and conservation status	Hectars	1,369,578.00	1,557,578.00	188,000.00	317,888.00	479,317.00
S.O.2.4	R0206	Population benefiting from risk hazards prevention and natural disaster management measures	Persons	1.150.000	1.620.200	470,000	1,130,000	1,130,000

7.4 Relevance between the needs and the intervention Logic of the Programme

7.4.1 Intervention Logic

The intervention logic outlined in the Programme for each Priority Axis is driven by the Specific Objectives established, and based on the analysis of development needs and by the expected results. The intervention logic creates logical links between all of the following elements:

- 1) The analysis of development needs and the strategy set out in the Programme, including:
 - development needs or challenges identified (including both sectoral and territorial development needs);
 - the strategic approach to maximize impact and effectiveness -identification of the funding priorities;
 - the selection of thematic priorities to be supported.
- 2) The outcomes of past experience analysis were combined with the results of the consultation, the On-going-evaluation of the IPA CBC Programme for the Period 2007-2013 and compared with the list of CBC Thematic Priorities.

Finally, the Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" was built on four IPA Thematic Priorities identified during the programming process as most relevant for the eligible cross-border area, the Thematic Priorities a, d, c, b.

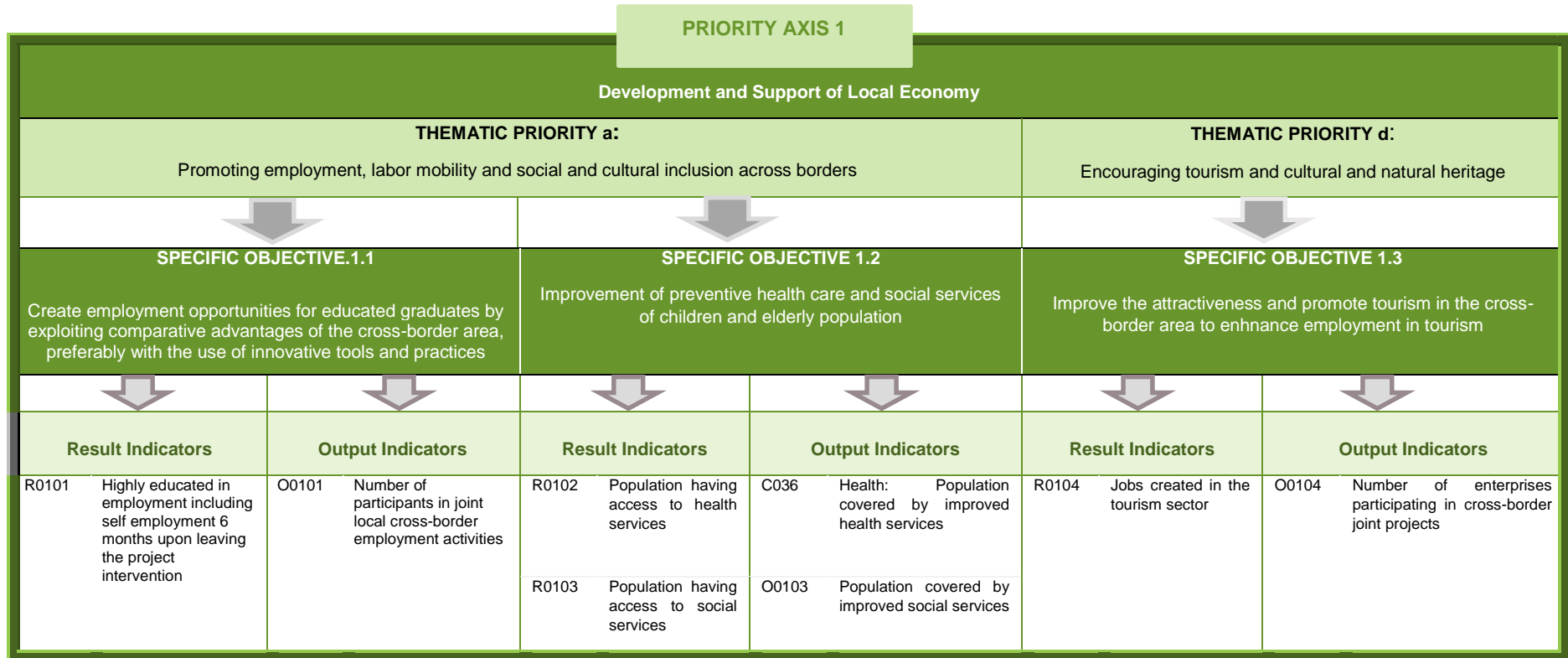
By combining the Thematic Priorities the overall strategy statement of the Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece-Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" is: "**to enhance territorial cohesion by improving living standards and employment opportunities holding respect to the environment and by using the natural resources for tourism**".

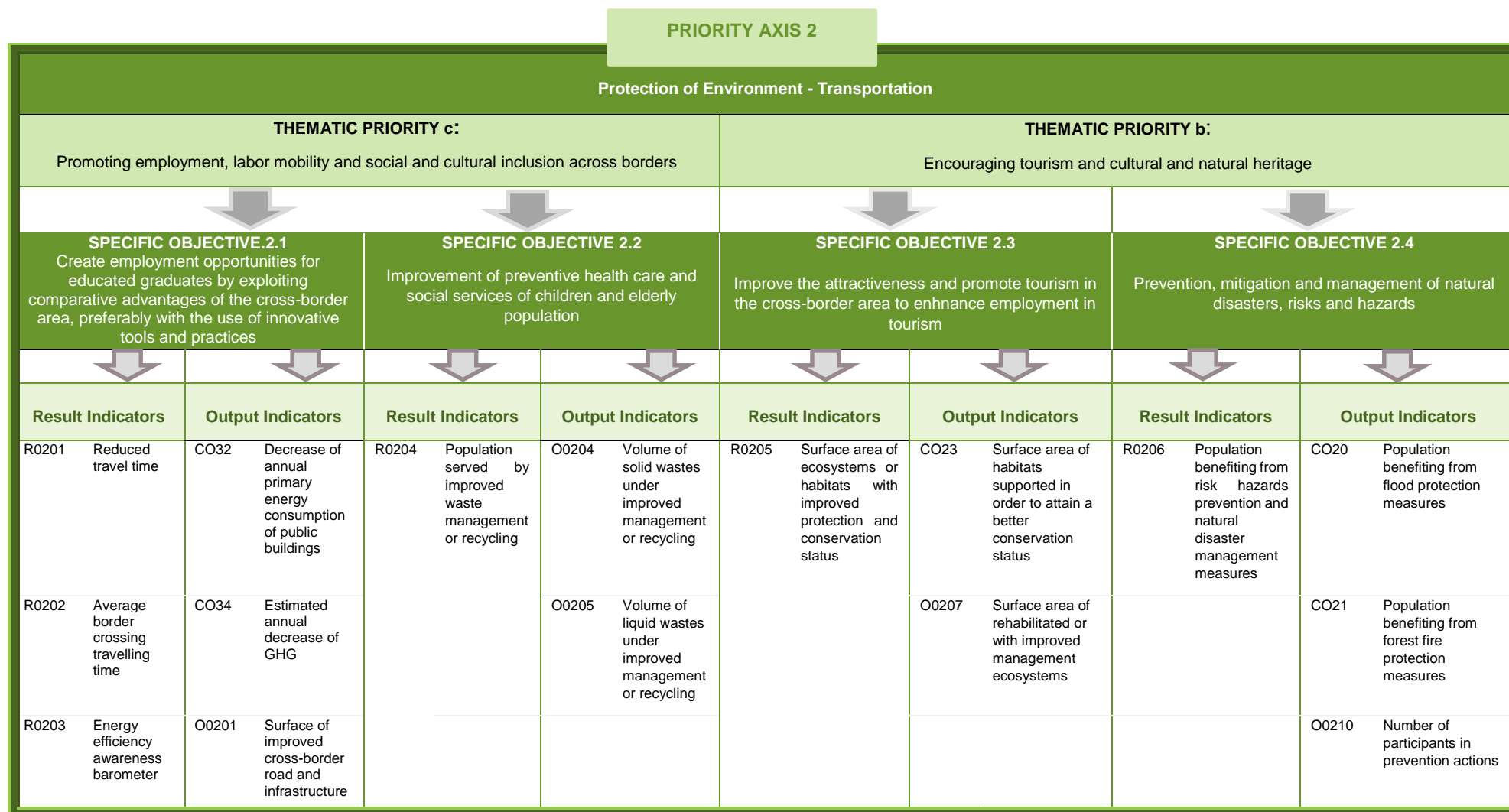
The selected Thematic Priorities have been structured into two priority axes, (excluding technical assistance) and seven Specific Objectives which reflect the needs and challenges as identified in the consultation phase of the Programme area.

The selected projects serve the Thematic Priorities and Specific Objectives of the Programme. Each project, as it is selected under specific criteria, supports the Program's intervention logic through its actions and the respective outputs and results.

A visualization of the full Programme intervention logic is provided hereafter.

Table 35: Intervention Logic of the Programme





7.4.2 Relevance Matrix

The following relevance matrix is evaluating the relevance between the identified needs in the intervention logic of the Programme with the Thematic Priorities / Specific Objectives of the Cooperation Programme “INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020”. The identified needs in the revised Programme have been updated by the current analysis of the general macro-economic, social and environmental context.

The vertical axis details the needs mentioned above, while the horizontal axis summarizes the intervention logic (Priority Axes, Thematic Priorities, Specific Objectives).

The color of the cells corresponds to the relevance level of the intervention regarding the particular need. In particular, the green color suggests a positive effect, while red cells represent a negative effect. The intensity of the color corresponds to the intensity of expected impact in the specific need. The white color suggests no effect.

The relevance matrix clearly shows that the intervention logic is still valid and relevant.

The Specific Objectives address identified needs and work complementary to other needs, thus providing the necessary background for synergies. In addition, the intervention logic addresses new conditions, such as the refugee and migrant flows in recent years in the cross-border area. Specifically, Priority Axis 1 and its respective Specific Objectives S.O.1.1 “Create employment opportunities for educated graduates by exploiting comparative advantages of the cross-border area, preferably with the use of innovative tools and practices” and especially S.O.1.2 “Improvement of preventive health care and social services of children and elderly population” allow supportive interventions to cover the refugee’s and migrants’ flows needs.

Table 36: Relevance Matrix

	PA 1: Development and Support of Local Economy			PA 2: Protection of Environment - Transportation			
	TP a: Promoting employment, labor mobility and social and cultural inclusion across borders	TP d: Encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage	TP c: Promoting sustainable transport and improving public infrastructures	TP b: Protecting the environment and promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management			
Needs / Sector ⁷	S.O.1.1 Create employment opportunities for educated graduates by exploiting comparative advantages of the cross-border area, preferably with the use of innovative tools and practices	S.O.1.2 Improvement of preventive health care and social services of children and elderly population	S.O. 1.3 Improve the attractiveness and promote tourism in the cross-border area to enhance employment in tourism	S.O 2.1 Upgrade public infrastructure to improve road travel time, safe border crossing and promote energy efficiency towards green transport	S.O. 2.2 Sustainable management and recycling of bio-wastes	S.O.2.3 Sustainable management of protected areas, ecosystems and biodiversity	S.O. 2.4 Prevention, mitigation and management of natural disasters, risks and hazards
Employment Sector							
Decrease extremely high levels of unemployment							
Restrain demographic deficit, and fill the demographic gap with emphasis on young people and specially the ones with a higher education							
Support current businesses and keep job positions							
Social Development							
Fight against social exclusion							
Cover Basic Needs of the poor including food, clothing, and access to health services							
Provision of care to vulnerable groups							

⁷ http://www.ipa-cbc-programme.eu/gallery/Files/news/programme/08.10.2019/Revised-Prog_08102019.pdf

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	PA 1: Development and Support of Local Economy			PA 2: Protection of Environment - Transportation			
	TP a: Promoting employment, labor mobility and social and cultural inclusion across borders	TP d: Encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage		TP c: Promoting sustainable transport and improving public infrastructures		TP b: Protecting the environment and promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management	
Needs / Sector ⁷	S.O.1.1 Create employment opportunities for educated graduates by exploiting comparative advantages of the cross-border area, preferably with the use of innovative tools and practices	S.O.1.2 Improvement of preventive health care and social services of children and elderly population	S.O. 1.3 Improve the attractiveness and promote tourism in the cross-border area to enhance employment in tourism	S.O 2.1 Upgrade public infrastructure to improve road travel time, safe border crossing and promote energy efficiency towards green transport	S.O. 2.2 Sustainable management and recycling of bio-wastes	S.O.2.3 Sustainable management of protected areas, ecosystems and biodiversity	S.O. 2.4 Prevention, mitigation and management of natural disasters, risks and hazards
Refugee and migratory flows							
Covid – 19 Pandemic							
Environment							
Mitigate the danger from natural disasters (wildfires and floods)							
Halt the overexploitation and degradation of natural resources							
Halt the environmental pollution and reduce the impacts of human activities on environment							
Safeguard local biodiversity and wildlife habitats							
Mitigate impacts and threats of climate change							
Tourism and Cultural Heritage							
Protection and usage of cultural and natural heritage							
Upgrade of touristic products and services							
Horizontal and vertical networking among sectors that upgrade the touristic							

Update of the 1st Implementation Evaluation and Impacts of the Cooperation Programme “INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020”.

	PA 1: Development and Support of Local Economy			PA 2: Protection of Environment - Transportation			
	TP a: Promoting employment, labor mobility and social and cultural inclusion across borders	TP d: Encouraging tourism and cultural and natural heritage	TP c: Promoting sustainable transport and improving public infrastructures	TP b: Protecting the environment and promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, risk prevention and management			
Needs / Sector⁷	S.O.1.1 Create employment opportunities for educated graduates by exploiting comparative advantages of the cross-border area, preferably with the use of innovative tools and practices	S.O.1.2 Improvement of preventive health care and social services of children and elderly population	S.O. 1.3 Improve the attractiveness and promote tourism in the cross-border area to enhance employment in tourism	S.O 2.1 Upgrade public infrastructure to improve road travel time, safe border crossing and promote energy efficiency towards green transport	S.O. 2.2 Sustainable management and recycling of bio-wastes	S.O.2.3 Sustainable management of protected areas, ecosystems and biodiversity	S.O. 2.4 Prevention, mitigation and management of natural disasters, risks and hazards
product (local products, gastronomy, cultural events)							
Involve stakeholders and population to the development of the touristic sector to create employment opportunities							
Create a joint touristic brand for the CBC area							
Transport and Mobility							
Improve road services							
Protect natural environment from the negative impacts of transportation							
Improve the services provided at the border zones and the border checkpoints							
Reduce road accidents							

7.5 Conclusions - Proposals

Previous analysis shows that the intervention logic is still relevant, based on the current macroeconomic, social and environmental status of the intervention area and the appropriate legal and policy developments.

The structure of the intervention logic is appropriate to mitigate the last years new needs the increased flows of refugee, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, one Specific Objective, the S.O.1.2: “Improvement of preventive health care and social services of children and elderly population”, could address these needs through its projects.

Further, the intervention logic allows for multiple synergies between the specific objectives as it is shown in the previous table “Relevance matrix”.

8. Evaluation Module E: Revision of the Cooperation Programme

In the present session the need for revision and modifications is analyzed and presented as far as intervention logic, the budget reallocation and the performance framework are concerned.

8.1 Analysis of Programme's revision need

The revision of Programmes is stipulated in the REG EU 1303/2013, though specific provisions.

Any revision of a Programme should be justified accordingly and take into account any impacts that such revision might have in the achievement of the EU priorities for smart and sustainable development as well as the specific objectives of the projects. *"In duly justified cases, such as a significant change in the economic, environmental and labour market conditions in a Member State or region, and in addition to amendments resulting from changes in allocations for a given priority, that Member State may propose the revision of milestones and targets in accordance with Article 30"⁸.*

According to Article 24 REG EU 1303/2013, *"The country/multi-country strategy papers and any revision thereof as well as Programmes, shall be public documents, where applicable, and shall be made available to the general public and civil society"*.

Requests for amendments of the Programme submitted by a Member State shall be duly justified and shall in particular set out the expected impact of the changes to the Programme on achieving the Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and the specific objectives defined in the Programme, taking account of this Regulation and the Fund-specific rules, the horizontal principles referred to in Articles 5, 7 and 8, as well as of the Partnership Agreement. They shall be accompanied by the revised Programme⁹.

Programmes' revisions should be advanced in cases where the monitoring scheme of output and result indicators is not considered to sufficiently represent the intervention logic, and/or the baselines, milestones, and targets are not sufficient.

Revisions should also consider the specific provision of each fund, the horizontal principles and any other relevant provision on a thematic level.

Programmes' revisions may include modifications:

- in the intervention logic and the Programme's Investment Strategy;
- in the Performance Framework and the Performance Framework Indicators/or Key Implementation Step (KIS);
- in the structure of the Programme by adding new interventions codes

For any revision of Programmes, issues that should be taken under consideration include the low decision and the low contracted level of funds, as well as the low payments of funds. Additionally, Programme's revision should be advanced in cases where the monitoring scheme of output and result indicators is not considered to sufficiently represent the intervention logic, and/or the baselines, milestones, and targets are problematic.

⁸ Par. 5, ANNEX II, Method for establishing the Performance Framework, REG EU 1303/2013

⁹ Article 30, REG EU 1303/2013

8.2 Modifications to the Programme Intervention Logic

Based on the analysis presented in the Evaluation Unit D, the Intervention Logic of the Programme is still relevant and valid.

The most significant changes that have occurred in the social environmental status, (migration) and in health (Covid - 19 pandemic) do not justify modifications in the intervention logic of the project.

It must be highlighted that this is due to the comprehensive and complementary character of the intervention logic that addresses multiple needs simultaneously. Specifically, the crisis caused by last years' mass migration flows and the Covid -19 pandemic since 2020. These might have been mitigated to an extent by the Programme's interventions/projects under PA1 and the relevant Specific Objective 1.2, aiming to "improve preventive health care and social services of children and elderly population mainly in the rural cross-border areas".

Considering the characteristics of the Programme as the needs of the external macroeconomic and social environment, that are mentioned above, there is no need for modification in the intervention logic.

8.3 Modifications to the Performance Framework

In case of modifications in the Performance Framework, the new proposed framework should take into account that the indicators and/or key implementation stages would correspond to at least 50% of the resources and should include an overall revision of the methodology of the performance framework. Moreover, the rationale for such changes should be based on the Reg. EU 1303/2013 stipulating that such changes are acceptable in the case of important changes in the economic, labour market, environmental conditions or other assumptions that have been taken in the programming document. Additionally, such changes should also consider commitments concerning climate change and sustainable urban development.

The current analysis and evaluation do not justify changes in the Performance Framework. The selection of output indicators, key implementation stages, and financial indicators represents satisfactory Programme intervention logic and grasps its performance level.

Similarly, there is no need for changes in the assumptions, milestones, and targets. Exception to the above are mainly the output indicators of Priority Axis 2 for which further consultation with the members of the JS and the analysis of recent data should be taken into account. Concerning the former, the original assumptions and the methodology for the output indicator should be further elaborated. As for the later, the consultation with the relevant stakeholders must be set just after the contracting of the new projects of the second call.

8.4 Modifications due to budget reallocation

Based on the financial indicators of the performance framework and taking into account the projected achievement of output indicators, a modification for budget reallocation could be an option for the Programme.

Such a modification is also supported by the fact that there will be unused funds in Priority Axis 3. The reallocation of Priority 3 funds in favor of Priority Axes 1 and 2 which will overperform just after the contracting of the projects of the 2nd call.

Specifically, regarding PA1, the total eligible cost of operations selected for support amounts to 15.7 million € or proportionally 86.29% of the total funding (18.188 million €). Additionally, the

combined budget of approved projects of the 2nd Call for project proposals, under S.O.1.1 and S.O.1.3, is 5.467 million €.

Respectively, as regards PA2, the total eligible cost of operations selected for support amounts to 23.04 million € or proportionally 101.36% of the available funds, by 30.06.2021. Additionally, the combined budget of approved projects of the 2nd Call for project proposals, under S.O.2.3, is 3.445 million €.

As it is shown in the table that follows, both Priority Axis will show an overbooking of approximately 16%.

Table 37: Total funding per Priority Axis

Priority Axis	Total funding	Contracted projects 1 st Call	% total funding covered	Selected Projects 2 nd Call	Total Projects' budget	% total funding covered
Priority Axis 1	18,188,028	15,694,421.59	86.29%	5,467,116.79	21,161,538.38	116.35
Priority Axis 2	22,735,032	23,044,432.51	101.36%	3,445,471.90	26,489,904.41	116.51
Priority Axis 3	4,547,006	4,547,006.00	100%	-	4,547,006.00	100%

Additionally, taking into account that the MA is cooperating with the respective authorities from Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia towards a targeted third Call concerning the "Prespas Land Crossing Point" with an indicative budget of 700,000€, the final overallocation of PA2 will exceed the 16%.

The overbooking will serve as a buffer for the underspending of projects. It will also cover the excess capacity of the Technical Assistance Priority (PA3).

8.5 Conclusions - Proposals

The evaluation of the Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" has taken a number of aspects and levels into account.

The analysis presented in the sections above dealt with the effectiveness of the Programme, the progress of the performance framework, the efficiency of the interventions, the relevance of the intervention logic before concluding in the current section about possible modifications and revisions of the Programme.

The overall analysis showed that the Programme has been founded in a solid planning document that assessed the challenges and opportunities that the intervention area is facing.

Furthermore, considering the progress of the Programme at all different levels, as well as the current status of the economic, social, and environmental parameters, there is no justified need for revision and modifications of the Programme at this stage while new projects are in a contracting phase, except the budget reallocation as referred in the previous paragraph.

Finally, a closer look on the overestimation or underestimation of the unitary costs for some of the SOs should take place.

9. Evaluation Module F: Update of Communication Strategy

9.1 Presentation of the actions implemented up to 30.06.2021

From the launch of the Programme up to 30.06.2021, a series of communication activities were implemented aiming initially to the information of the potential beneficiaries and the various stakeholders in the cross-border area about the Programme in general and the released calls.

The first implementation stage of the Communication Strategy has been fully implemented, while the second implementation stage is still ongoing. The Programme has in parallel entered the third implementation stage in which the results and the benefits achieved are disseminated.

At the same time, special activities were designed and implemented targeting to the wide public.

Also, in terms of human resources involved in the implementation and the monitoring of the Communication Strategy, as well the planning and organisation of the communication activities, there is a Programme Officer fully in charge (Communication Officer) for the planning, coordination and monitoring of the Programme’s communication activities as well as for the projects’ communication activities.

Nevertheless, all the members of the JS support and participate in the communication activities. At the same time, following to the necessary procedures, specific tasks such as printing, translation services, hall renting etc. are being outsourced.

Corporate identity

The Programme adopted the Joint Branding initiative of Interreg Programmes under one single brand name and logo.

The Programme’s logo and visual identity is aligned to the one commonly applied throughout EU and this initiative was also extended to the projects as well, as all the approved projects were requested to follow the same branding instructions, thus creating a homogenised visual identity, combining the logo of the Programme with their acronym.

The first version of the two options logo was the following:



The Programme identity including designs and mock-ups for various communication materials was finalised in December 2015 and was updated in 2018, where the 2nd version of the projects’ logos was adopted. The revised Communication Strategy was adopted by 1st JMC on November 18, 2015.

Just after the “Prespa Agreement” between Greece and Republic of North Macedonia” which entered into force in 2019, a new Programme’s Logo has been designed along with new templates and printed material.

Interreg - IPA CBC 
Greece - Republic of North Macedonia

Interreg - IPA CBC 
  CCI 2014 TC 16 I5CB 009

Information and Publicity Guide for Potential and Final Beneficiaries

Aiming not only to homogenise the projects' visual identities, but also to ensure the compliance of the projects' communication strategy and objectives with the Programme's ones, a detailed guidebook was developed since the very beginning of the programming period (December 2015).

A second updated version of the "Information & Publicity Guide" was in force as of September 11, 2018. A third version and the last one was set in force on November 18th, 2019. In this version technical adjustments, regarding the constitutional name and adjectival references of the IPA beneficiary country, are included.

The content of the guidebook covers all the aspects of the planning and implementation of the Information and Publicity activities of the projects, starting from the development of the project communication strategy and plan and also covering very practical issues such as marking objects.

Programme Website

Starting from 2014, the Programme's website was enriched with a section dedicated to the Programming period (2014-2020), which included the regulatory framework, relevant publications, news and Calls regarding the Interreg IPA CBC "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" Programme.

The website address <http://www.ipa-cbc-Programme.eu> is dedicated solely to the Programme and attracts a strong interest. The Programme website is fully operational since November 16, 2017 with a brand new modern and very operational interface easily accessible and readable both from PCs and mobile devices, while it is also conformed to the "WCAG, 2.0, Level AA" standards, in order to meet the accessibility needs of persons with disabilities. In terms of content, the website is organised in specific sessions facilitating the easy access of anyone interested in Programme and Project News and Events, as well and Programme's and projects' related material (library session). The homepage promoting Programme's territories with the use of meaningful and powerful photos "attracts" the site's visitors and users to explore the Programme and its eligible area.

The total number of pages viewed in first semester of 2021 was 24,600 while in 2020 was 66,765 (17.36% annual increase compared to 2019), see table below. The users first semester of 2021 were 6,353 and in 2020 were 11,944 (1.79% increase compared to 2019). The new users during the period 01.01.2021-30.06.2021 were 5,983 while in 2020 counted to 11,513 (0.34% increase compared to 2019), out of which 2,291 were returning visitors (19.9%). The returning visitors for the first semester of 2021 amount to 891 users or 14.1% of the new users.

Table 38: Website Analytics Information

	2018	2019	2019/2018	2020	2020/2019	01.01.2021-30.06.2021
Pageviews	49,967	56,889	113.85%	66,765	117.36%	24,600
Users		11,733	-	11,944	101.79%	6,353
New Users	7,819	11,474	146.75%	11,513	100.34%	5,983
Returning visitors	1,745	1,910	109.45%	2,291	119.95%	891

Programme's Social Media Accounts and EU Databases

The Managing Authority runs a very active Twitter account with frequent tweets for all Programme's and Projects' activities, while there is also a LinkedIn account.

The Programme's followers' base grew on social media. The focus has been put on **Twitter** (305 followers) and **LinkedIn** (795 connections). The Programme is also channeling messages through the Managing Authority's Twitter account (834 followers).

The Programme is adequately presented in KEEP <https://keep.eu/> and interreg.eu databases.

Events

The events of the Programme are presented in the following table.

Table 39: Communication Events

Event Category	Events
Events targeting stakeholders, potential beneficiaries, project partners	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presentation of the Programme in the joint event LAUNCHING THE PROGRAMMING PERIOD 2014-2020 THE CHALLENGE OF SYNERGIES at Thessaloniki (22 & 23.06.2015) 2. Launching event of the Programme at Veles (19.11.2015) 3. Information day event at Serres (27.01.2016) 4. Information day event at Bitola (09.02.2016) 5. Training seminar for project beneficiaries at Bitola, 95 participants (17.05.2018) 6. Training seminar for project beneficiaries at Strumica, 78 participants (05.06.2018) 7. Training seminar for project beneficiaries at Thessaloniki, 122 participants (08.06.2018) 8. Training seminar for project beneficiaries at Florina, 60 participants (13.06.2018), 9. Two seminars on MIS addressed to all beneficiaries (including the National Authorities as TA Beneficiaries) and all First level Controller took place in Thessaloniki on 27.11.2018 and Athens on 30.10.2018 (in total 300 participants) 10. Training seminar on financial management for IPA beneficiaries. Organized by the NA during Dec. 2018 in Ohrid, Bitola, Kavadarci, and Gevgelija. In total, more than 160 IPA beneficiaries participated in the seminars. 11. Organisation of a seminar targeted only to communication managers of all 40 funded projects in July 2019. 11. 1st Info Day/ Partner Search Forum for the 2nd Call for Project Proposals at Bitola (06.02.2020,) 12. 2nd Info Day / Partner Search Forum at Thessaloniki (20.02.2020). <i>The two events were in total attended by 203 potential applicants</i>
Events targeting the general public	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participation of the Programme in the ECDAY 2015 campaign for the collection and the donation of drugs and medical supplies to support refugees 2. Organisation in cooperation with the Balkan Med Programme of a Gliding seminar and air-show event at Edessa in the occasion of EC Day 2017 (30.09.2017) 3. European Cooperation Day 2018. The Programme organized a bike tour by the lake in Municipality of Dojran on October 12, 2018, under the slogan "Let's Get the Wheels Turning!". The event was attended by 150 local people. 4. Three projects (HEALTH – INFO, TRAP and ENPOL-EE) have been selected by DG REGIO to be included in the respective database of exemplary projects in late 2019 5. Active participation of our Programme in a live debate organized by Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation on EU cohesion policy. Project EMPLOYOUTH presented as best practice in the category of Brain Drain, 2019 6. Celebration of EC DAY- Basic Life Support (BLS) live hands-on demonstration for the community, delivered by certified instructors, 2019

Event Category	Events
Participation in exhibitions / other events	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CBC Communication Network - Annual Meeting 2015 Edinburgh, UK (24 - 25.03.2015) 2. Open Days 2015 -13th European Week of Regions and Cities, Brussels, Belgium (12 -15.10.2015) 3. Participation in the International Fair of Thessaloniki, autumn 2016 with a stand organized by the Managing Authority of European Territorial Cooperation Programmes 4. Participation in the International Fair of Thessaloniki, autumn 2017 with a stand organized by the Managing Authority of European Territorial Cooperation Programme 5. Interreg communication network meeting - Romania (40 participants), February 2018 6. Interreg Project Communication Camp - France (25 participants). November 2018 7. Participation in the 83rd International Fair of Thessaloniki, with a stand organized by the Managing Authority of European Territorial Cooperation Programmes (300,000 visitors), 2018 8. Participation in the 84th International Fair of Thessaloniki (300,000 visitors), 2019 9. Four Programme - funded projects (ENPOL-EE, TRAP, HEART SAFE CITIES, In4Child) are presented in the INFOREGIO database as exemplary projects, 2020 10. The project LESS WASTE II was presented as best practice (production of promo-videos) by the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation in the framework of its Radio Agora project. The videos are found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcth94cv3Uk&t=286s and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJnq0QoRtD4, 2020 11. The JS staff actively participated in seminars held by INTERACT, 2020

Publications

The following documents were published and uploaded on the Programme's website:

1. Guide for registering in the electronic Public Investment Programme (for Greeks only) (May 31, 2018)
2. Information and Publicity Guide version 2 (Sep. 11, 2018)
3. IPA Procurement Manual (Nov 12, 2018)
4. Project Implementation Manual updated version (Nov 18, 2018)
5. Publication of a 3-d brochure; The Programme in Full Swing. Four years On – Key facts and Figures 2015-2019 (http://www.ipa-cbc-Programme.eu/article/202_Brochure: The-Programme-in-Full-Swing)
6. A report on basic facts and Figures of the 2nd Call is published at <http://www.ipa-cbc-Programme.eu/gallery/Files/news/Programme/23.06.2020/Call-Facts-%26-Figures-Published.pdf>
7. Publication of 7 e-newsletters by the Ministry of Local Self Government (National Authority)
8. Publication of new Manuals for the electronic submission of Progress Reports in MIS (Jan. 2020)

9. Publication of “Project Closure Manual and Project Final Report (March 19, 2021)
http://www.ipa-cbc-programme.eu/com/17_Documents-for-Project-implementation

9.2 Survey

9.2.1 Introduction

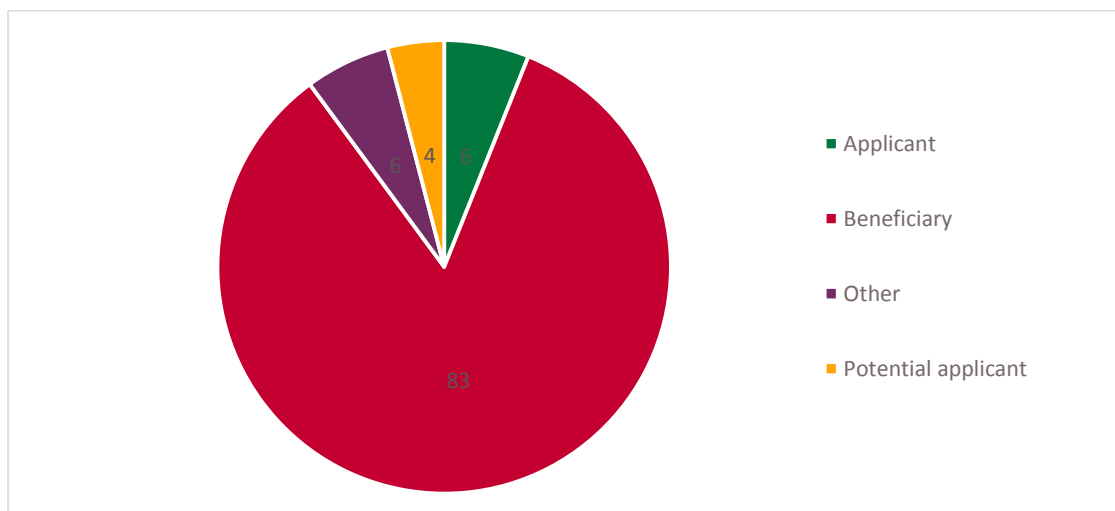
As part of studying the efficiency of the communication strategy in accordance with the quantitative and qualitative targets set by the Cooperation Programme, we conducted a survey to gather valuable feedback which served as the foundation of our analysis. The survey was conducted by means of an online questionnaire and was open for responses for one week during October 2021. With the assistance of the Joint Secretariat, the questionnaire was distributed via online channels to the audience including but not limited to beneficiaries, applicants, and potential applicants. In total, 99 individuals completed the online survey in a space of a week. In the context of evaluating the communication strategy, the aim of this part of the report is to present the results of the survey and discuss the main findings.

The questionnaire included fifteen questions, exclusive of demographics questions, out of which thirteen were closed-ended and two were open-ended. It should also be noted that most of the questions were compulsory, and thus most of the subsequent numbers in the graphs sum up to 99, with the exception of questions that allowed multiple answers. Because the figure is very close to 100, the numbers in the graphs, with a small rounding, can be considered as percentages. Last but not least, the survey had a field where respondents could submit their full names, but it was optional. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the respondents (31) mentioned their names in the questionnaire.

9.2.2 Demographics

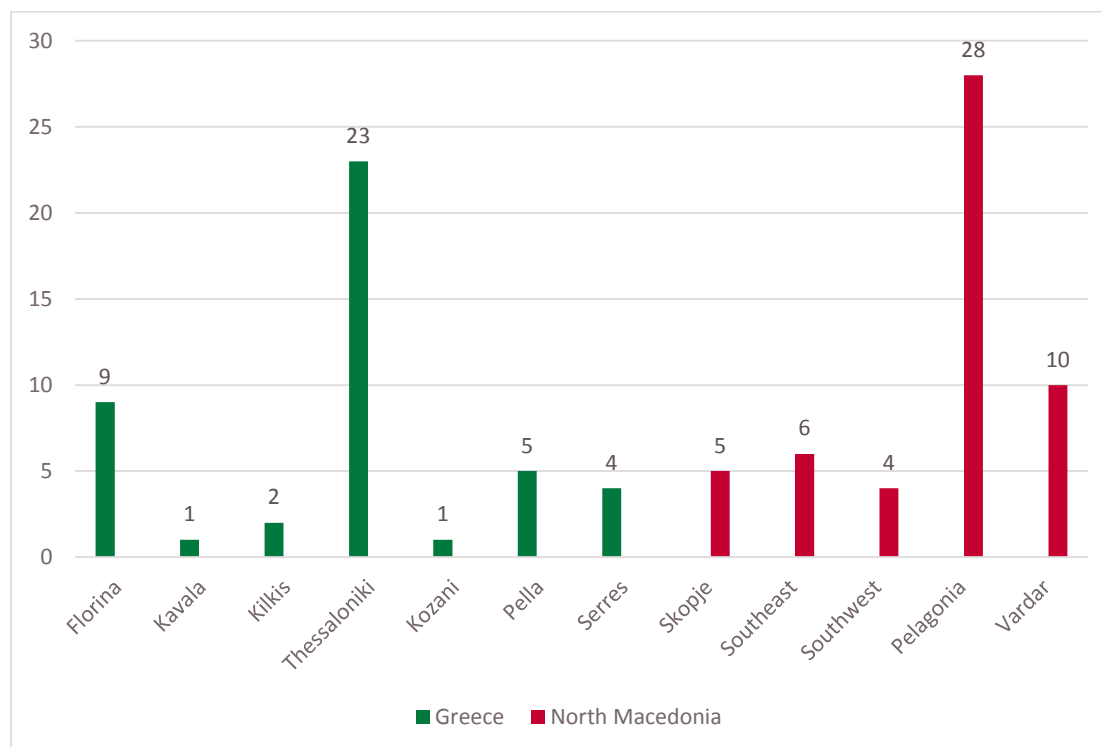
As can be seen from the graph, the beneficiaries account for the majority of answers (83) in the survey and, as such, it can be stated that the responses in the questions mainly express their point of view—something that should be kept in mind while reading the results. Applicants (6) and potential applicants (4) have added a level of diversity to the pool of respondents. Since the survey did not circumscribe the pool of respondents, various individuals such as members of the JMC or simply persons interested in IPA Programmes could express their view. The category “Other” takes into account all those individuals.

Figure 20: Responses by type of respondent



An important observation based on the next graph is that more or less all the eligible regions of the Programme are represented. Other regions such as Skopje also provided feedback and are present in the graph. In terms of countries, both Greece (45) and North Macedonia (53) are well represented with the latter a bit more—the numbers do not add up to 99 because one observation provided a vague location. In North Macedonia, the region with the highest number of responses is Pelagonia followed by the Vardar whilst in Greece, is Thessaloniki followed by Florina. The next section describes in detail the responses and questions.

Figure 21: Responses by Country and Region



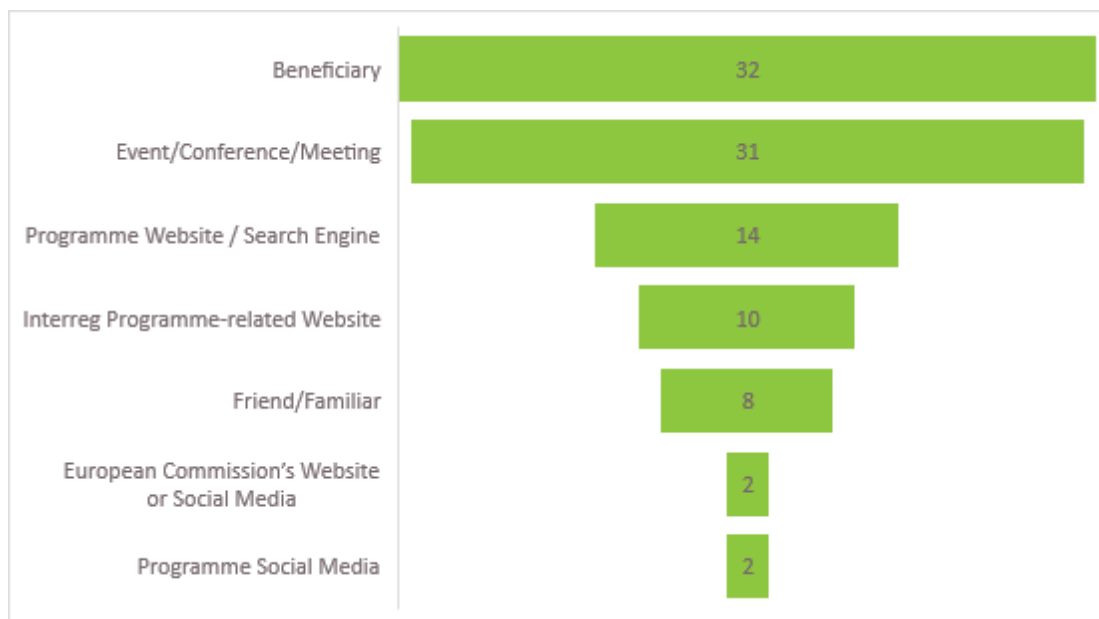
9.2.3 Questions

1. How did you first learn about the Programme?

With the expectation of revealing the most effective means of communication, the above question was asked, which was also the first question of the questionnaire.

In the following chart, two dominant communication channels can be identified: Beneficiaries and Events/ Conferences. If we combine the categories of beneficiaries and friends/familiars, a new category with 40 responses (or 40% of the sample respectively) is generated. In other words, “word of mouth” marketing seems to have played an important role in the communication campaign of the program. Another category with a strong presence in the graph is that of websites. On the contrary, social media constitute the least prominent category in the chart.

Figure 22: How did you first learn about the Programme?



2. Which are the fields in the context of which you have heard about the "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia" Programme? You can select multiple options.

The respondents have heard about the Programme in a variety of fields. Based on the number of responses, the chart can be divided into 3 segments that are detailed below.

- 1) High correlation with the Programme
 - Cross-border area development
 - Environment/ Energy
 - Infrastructure
 - Tourism
- 2) Medium correlation with the Programme
 - Education/ Research
 - Health & Social Issues
 - Entrepreneurship
 - Culture
- 3) Low correlation with the Programme
 - Social Care
 - Surface water management
 - Flood risk management
 - Climate change
 - Competitiveness
 - Other

It should be noted that the third segment includes more specific fields such as surface water management. This might be one of the reasons its fields are less mentioned.

Figure 23: Which are the fields in the context of which you have heard about the "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia" Programme?

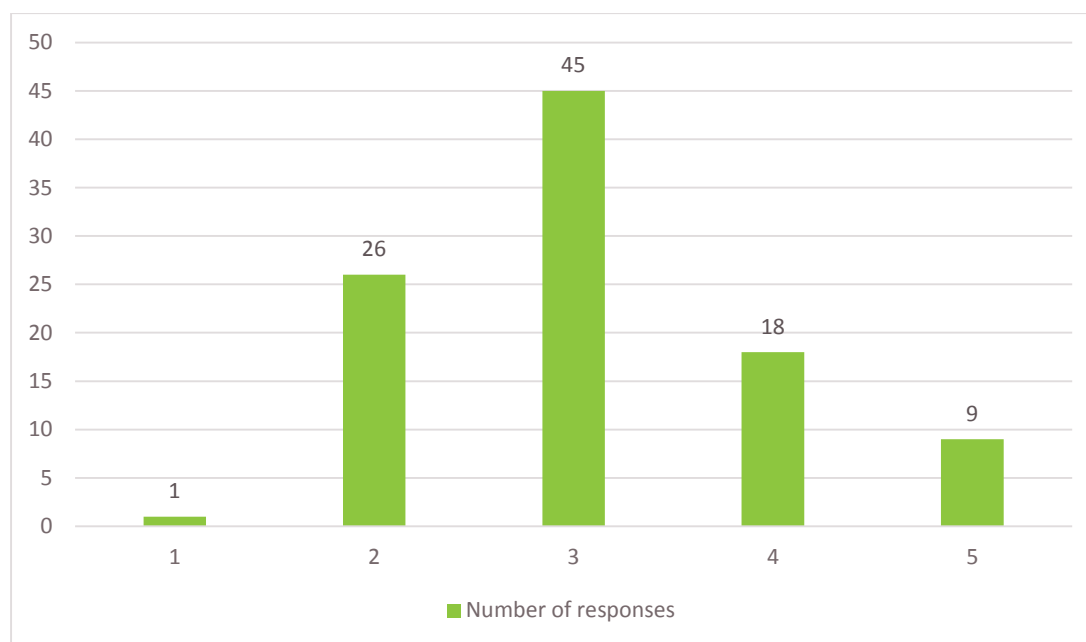


3. How much would you say people in your region/community/city know about the Programme?

The respondents were asked to rate the level of knowledge in their community about the Programme on a scale of 1 to 5. They assigned a rating of 1 if they believed their community was not at all aware of the Programme and a rating of 5 if they believed their community knew the Program very well.

The majority selected the middle option, as can be seen from the bar chart, indicating the existence of average knowledge. The rest were mainly separated between option two (26%) and options 4 and 5 (27%). The fact that option 1 was selected only once is a positive indicator. The shape of the graph signals significant room for improvement which will happen when the ratings in the right size increase and outstrip the left. Lastly, it should be underlined the subjectivity of this question as individuals had to express views about whole communities.

Figure 24: How much would you say people in your region/community/city know about the Programme?



4. Overall, do you feel that the Programme has an impact on your region and if so in what ways? You can select multiple options.

The fourth question requested from the respondents to evaluate the impact of the Programme on their regions.

According to the table, which summarizes the answers to this question, the increased cross-border cooperation with 86 votes significantly transcends all the other options. The improved quality of life comes second with 58 and the rest lie significantly below this number. If we take into account only the options that were available in the questionnaire, tourism has the least number of selections. Perhaps COVID-19 negatively affected the views of the responders. The next three answers were not among the default options and were added by the respondents.

Figure 25: Overall, do you feel that the Programme has an impact on your region and if so in what ways?

Increase cross-border cooperation	86
Improve quality of life	58
Build trust	38
Enhance entrepreneurship and innovation	35
Improve understanding of EU policies	35
Attract more tourism	25
floods, landslides and fires management	1
support local development	1
Protect environment, improve water management	1
This particular Programme does not have impact on my region	1

5. To what extent the communication activities implemented by the Programme are efficient in the following?

In this question, the respondents had to evaluate six communication activities in terms of efficiency. The five available options from worst to best were the following:

- Very inefficient
- Somewhat inefficient
- Neutral
- Somewhat efficient
- Very efficient

The tree map below illustrates the ratings of all the communication activities—they are easily discernible by the presence of different colours.

By comparing the rectangles, we can find for every rating category the activity with the most selections. The result of this analysis can be seen below.

- Demonstrating the role of the European Union and the way in which Community resources are spent with transparency
 - Very efficient (35)
- Promoting the Programme and its results to the general public and all interested parties
 - Somewhat efficient (43)
- Helping the generation of the project idea
 - Neutral (28)
- Highlighting the horizontal priorities (sustainability of the development; equal opportunities and non-discrimination; respect of competition rules) set up at EU Level.
 - Somewhat inefficient (10)
- Demonstrating the role of the European Union and the way in which Community resources are spent with transparency
 - Very inefficient (4)

If we assume a scale from 1 to 5 in terms of efficiency and calculate the weighted average for every activity, we get the following results.

- Promoting the Programme and its results to the general public and all interested parties 3.88
- Helping the generation of the project idea 3.73
- Supporting the creation of an appropriate partnership 3.94
- Communicating/capitalizing the project outcomes/results 3.91
- Demonstrating the role of the European Union and the way in which Community resources are spent with transparency 3.92
- Highlighting the horizontal priorities (sustainability of the development; equal opportunities and non-discrimination; respect of competition rules) set up at the EU Level. 3.80

Based on the above, three activities have high weighted averages of 3.94, 3.92, and 3.91; one has a medium average of 3.88 and two have relatively lower averages of 3.80 and 3.73. It should be noted that all the averages have high values and the differences are not big.

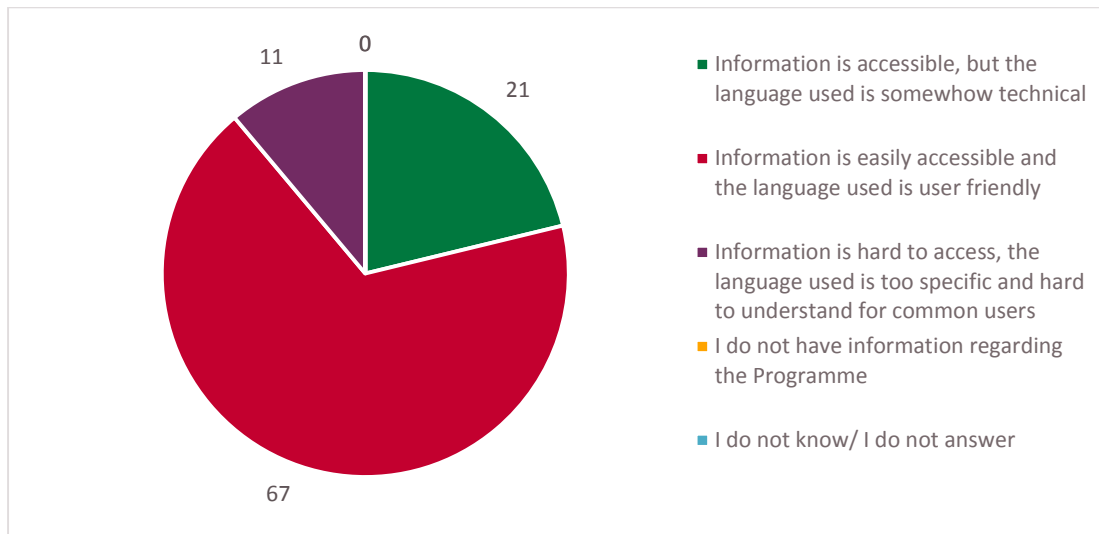
Figure 26: To what extent the communication activities implemented by the Programme are efficient in the following?



6. How do you appreciate the level of accessibility to the information concerning the Interreg IPA CBC “Greece - Republic of North Macedonia” Programme?

The majority of respondents (67) assessed positively the level of accessibility to the information concerning the Programme as well as the language of this information. 21 respondents said that although the information is accessible, the language used is somehow technical whilst 11 rated negatively both accessibility to information and language indicating that information is hard to access and the language used is too specific to understand for common users.

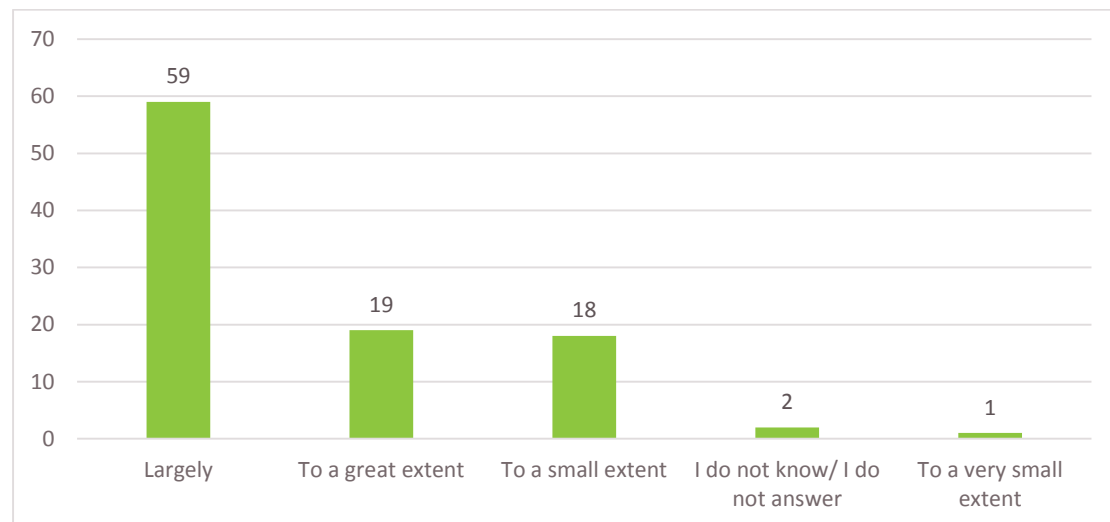
Figure 27: How do you appreciate the level of accessibility to the information concerning the Interreg IPA CBC “Greece - Republic of North Macedonia” Programme?



7. To what extent do you consider that the information about the Programme, provided through the information and promotion activities, support the (potential) beneficiaries to define and ultimately implement projects with high impact?

Among the people surveyed, 59 said that the information about the Programme largely supports the (potential) beneficiaries to define and ultimately implement projects with high impact; and 19 said that it does that to a great extent. Hence, the lion’s share of respondents maintained a positive view about the power of the available information.

Figure 28: To what extent do you consider that the information about the Programme, provided through the information and promotion activities, support the (potential) beneficiaries to define and ultimately implement projects with high impact?



8. How would you rate the effectiveness of the following communication channels used by the Programme “Greece - Republic of North Macedonia”?

In this question, the respondents had to evaluate 5 communication channels in respect of effectiveness. The five available options from worst to best were the following:

- Very ineffective
- Somewhat ineffective
- Neutral
- Somewhat effective
- Very effective

In the same way as in question 5, a tree map is used to depict the results.

By comparing the rectangles, we can find for every rating category the communication channel with the most selections. The result of this analysis can be seen below.

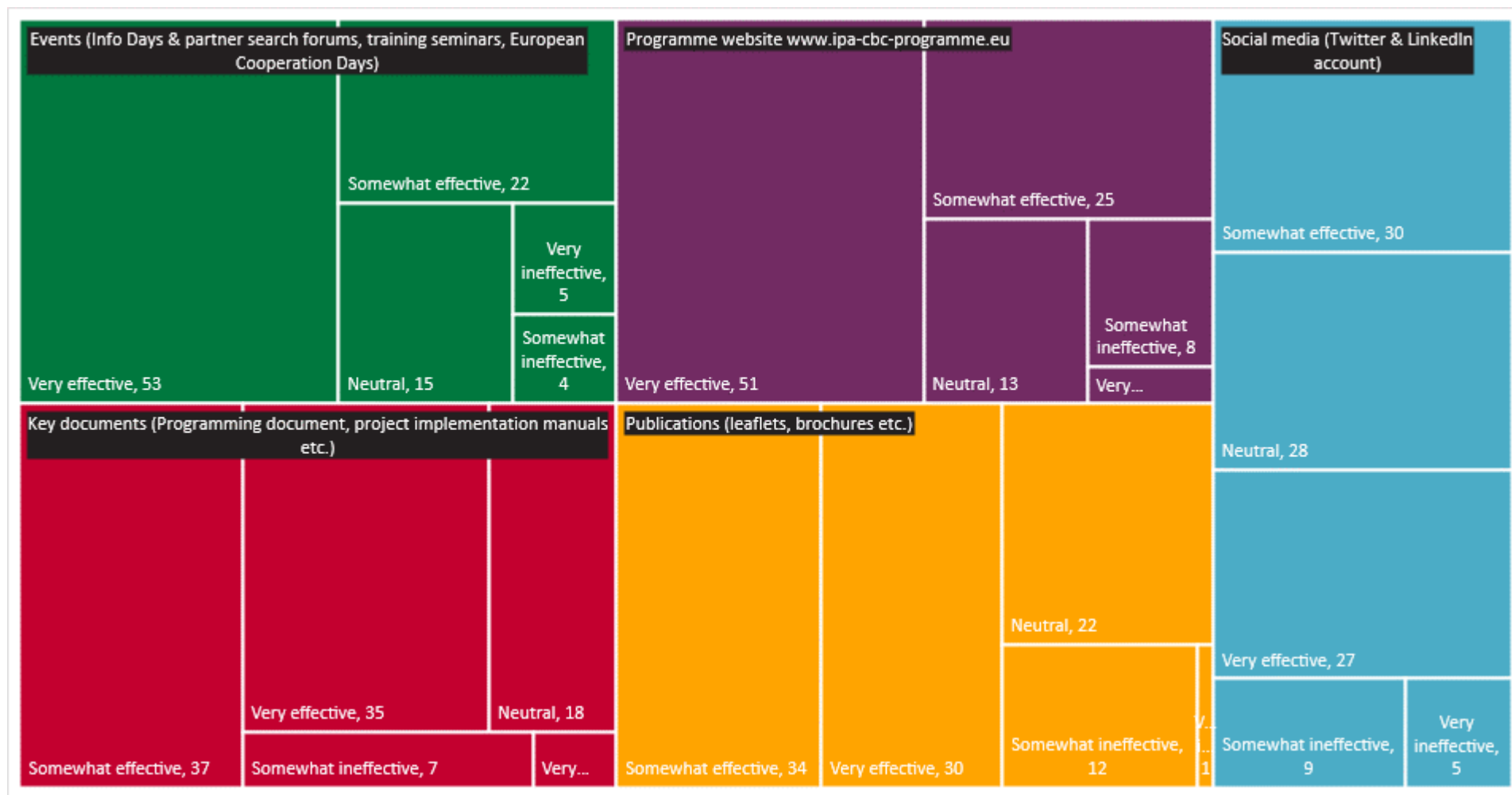
- Events (Info Days & partner search forums, training seminars, European Cooperation Days)
 - Very effective (53)
- Key documents (Programming document, project implementation manuals etc.)
 - Somewhat effective (37)
- Social media (Twitter & LinkedIn account)
 - Neutral (28)
- Publications (leaflets, brochures etc.)
 - Somewhat ineffective (12)
- Social media (Twitter & LinkedIn account)
 - Very ineffective (5)

If we assume a scale from 1 to 5 in terms of effectiveness and calculate the weighted average for every communication channel, we get the following results.

- Key documents (Programming document, project implementation manuals etc.) 3.97
- Publications (leaflets, brochures etc.) 3.81
- Programme website www.ipa-cbc-programme.eu 4.16
- Events (Info Days & partner search forums, training , European Cooperation Days) 4.15
- Social media (Twitter & LinkedIn account) 3.65

Based on the above, Programme website and events have the highest weighted average and social media has the lowest weighted average.

Figure 29: How would you rate the effectiveness of the following communication channels used by the Programme “Greece - Republic of North Macedonia”?

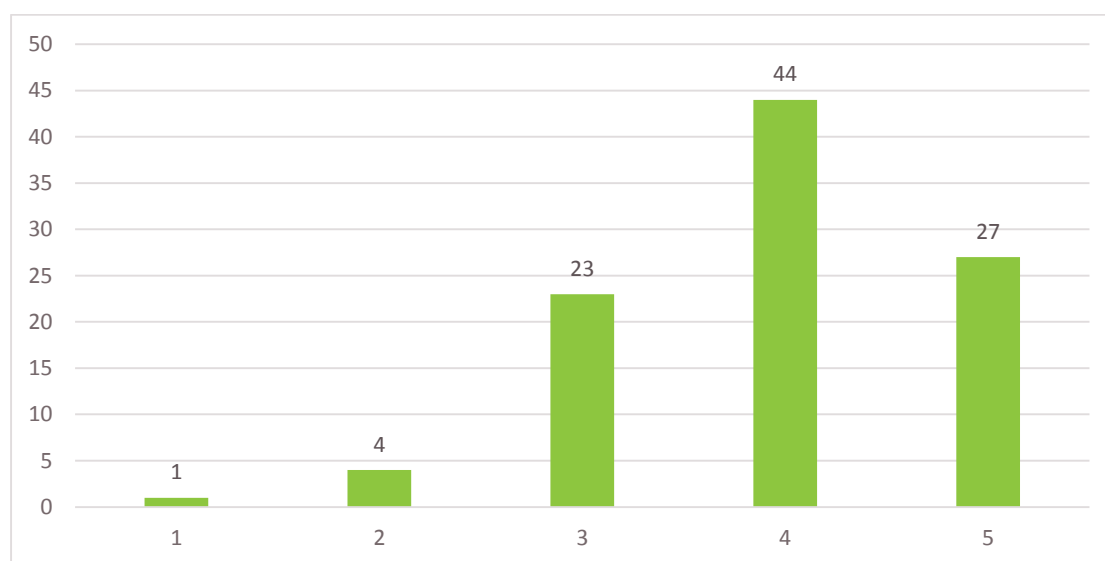


9. How would you rate the effectiveness of the communication strategy overall?

After answering various questions concerning the communication strategy, the respondents provided an overall evaluation of its effectiveness.

A large number of respondents praised the effectiveness of the communication strategy by awarding high grades. To be more precise, 71 respondents gave ratings of 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 denoting low effectiveness and 5 high. The positive feedback is depicted in the graph which has a conspicuous negative skewness. Last but not least, if we calculate the weighted average rating, the result is 3.93.

Figure 30: How would you rate the effectiveness of the communication strategy overall?



10. Is there an area where more information is needed?

The participants in the survey were asked to specify possible areas where more information is needed. The question was optional and was not answered by everyone. Among those who answered the question, a variety of responses was recorded. A sample of those responses can be found at the end.

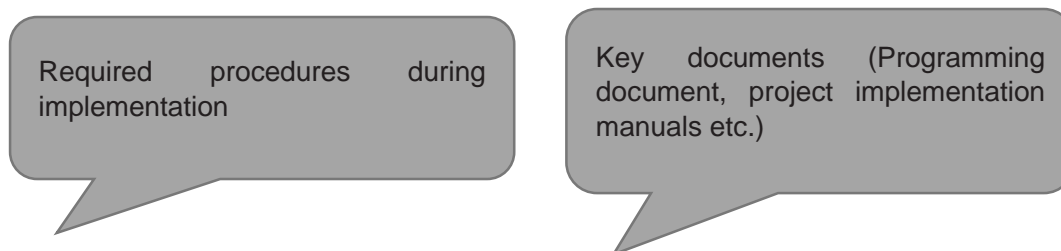
The dissemination of the results is an area that was highlighted in some responses. Some survey participants pointed out that more information is needed about the presentation of results to the general public. Others cited the lack of information about required procedures during implementation and some others mentioned the need for more comprehensive key documents. Partnership creation was also an area that was mentioned.

A contingent of respondents offered more general suggestions. One response pointed out that common projects or projects with a common target could come in contact, co-operate, compare and capitalize their results. Another response suggested better dissemination of the information so as to reach a broader audience and not only the experts of every sector.

Select quotes:

Presentation of results achieved by all projects to the general public from the targeted region

Practical implications/added value to the communities

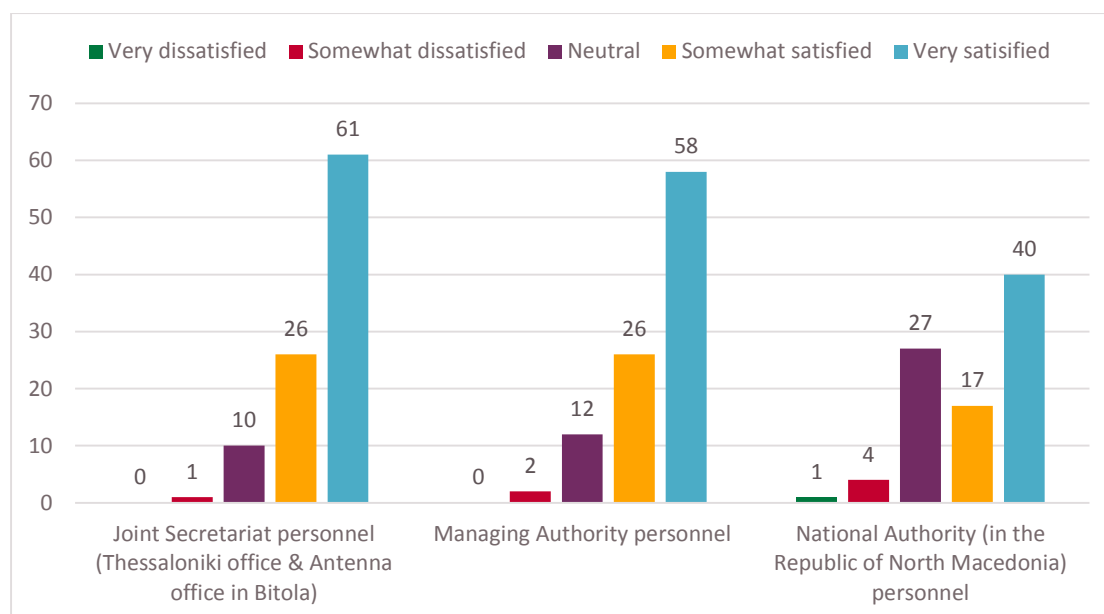


11. How satisfied are you with the level of responsiveness of the Programme?

In this question, the participants rated the responsiveness of the Joint Secretariat personnel, the Managing Authority personnel, and the National Authority (in the Republic of North Macedonia) personnel. This question was optional which means that responses may not add up to 99.

As can be seen from the graph, the ratings of the Joint Secretariat personnel and the Managing Authority personnel are similar and depict high levels of satisfaction regarding responsiveness. On the other hand, the ratings of the National Authority personnel, although still positive, depict lower levels of satisfaction regarding responsiveness compared to the other two.

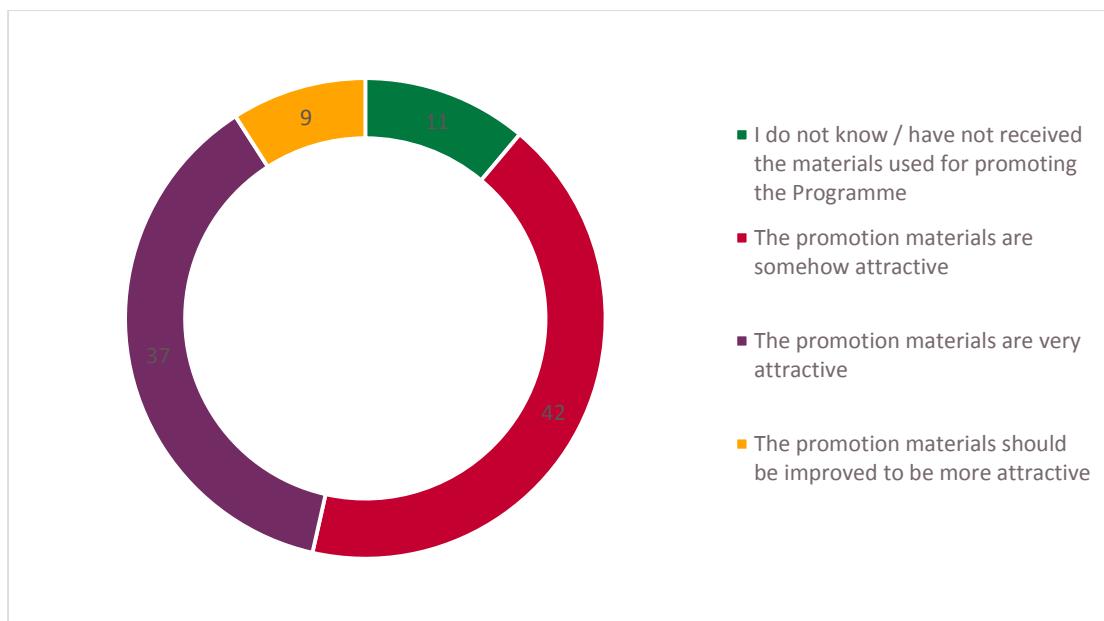
Figure 31: How satisfied are you with the level of responsiveness of the Programme?



12. How do you appreciate the level of attractiveness of the promotion materials (notebooks, USBs, pens, gadgets etc.) for promoting the Interreg IPA CBC "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia" Programme?

Of those who were surveyed, 37 expressed the opinion that the promotion materials are very attractive and 42 that they are somehow attractive. In other words, 80% of the respondents expressed satisfaction regarding the appearance of the promotion material. A minority said that there is room for improvement.

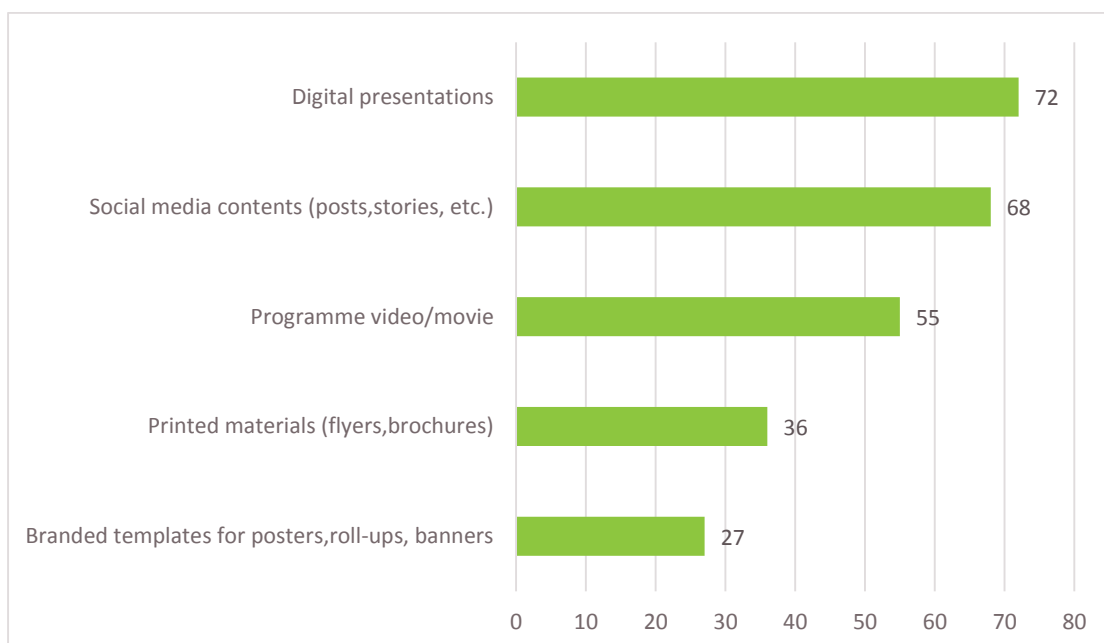
Figure 32: How do you appreciate the level of attractiveness of the promotion materials (notebooks, USBs, pens, gadgets etc.) for promoting the Interreg IPA CBC "Greece - Republic of North Macedonia" Programme?



13. In terms of communication, what contents, materials or tools do you think should be provided to communicate better about the Programme (for example: what it is, what it does, who can apply, etc.)? You can select multiple options.

According to the majority of respondents, digital presentations and social media content should be provided to communicate better about the Programme. Furthermore, a substantial contingent of respondents mentioned video and movies.

Figure 33: In terms of communication, what contents, materials or tools do you think should be provided to communicate better about the Programme (for example: what it is, what it does, who can apply, etc.)?



14. Which of the following media do you think the Programme should use to get more people to know its work and the work of its projects? You can select multiple options.

The word cloud as well as the table illustrates the media that were more frequently selected by the respondents.

As can be seen, Facebook is the media believed by the lion's share of respondents (80) to have the greatest potential in increasing awareness about the work of the projects. Programme official website, Events/ information sessions, and Instagram are communication channels that are ranked high with over 50% of the respondents believing in their potential. Every other option gained the support of less than 50% of the respondents.

Figure 34: Which of the following media do you think the Programme should use to get more people to know its work and the work of its projects?

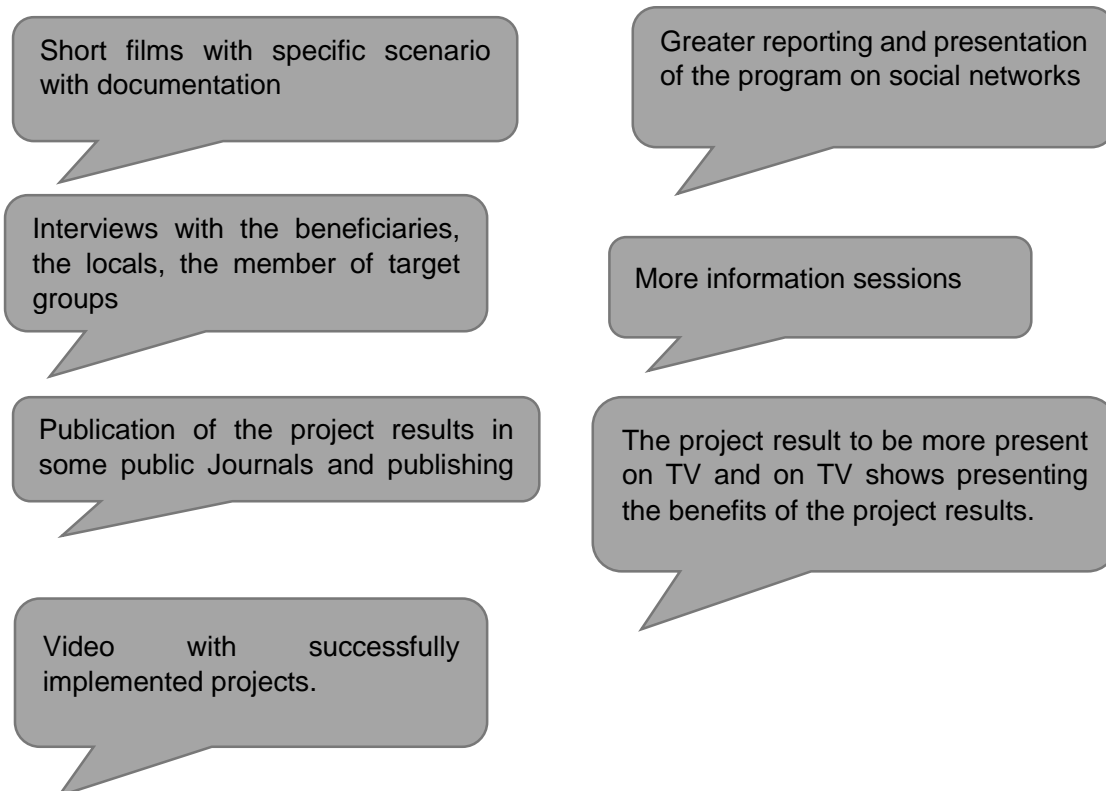


Facebook	80
Programme official website	59
Events/ information sessions	55
Instagram	52
TV	45
Youtube	36
LinkedIn	34
Twitter	33
Press	28
Posters/flyers in strategic places	20
Radio	16

15. Do you have any suggestions to improve the performance of the communication strategy?

At the end of the survey, participants were able to submit suggestions for improving the performance of the communication strategy. An assortment of recommendations was submitted. Among others, it was recommended to create videos about the previously implemented project, conduct interviews with beneficiaries, increase the number of information sessions, and strengthen their presence in social media, TV and journals. Some of the recommendations can be found below.

Select quotes:



9.2.4 General findings

- Most of the respondents first learned about the Programme from events and word of mouth. Social media were the least effective.
- Many respondents had heard about the Programme in the context of cross-border area development, environment/ energy, tourism, and infrastructure.
- Generally, participants believed the public had an average level of awareness about the Programme.
- The majority believed the Programme has made an impact in increasing cross-border cooperation and quality of life. Tourism was mentioned less.
- The efficiency of various communication activities was positively evaluated (weighted averages were close to 4/5).
- The language and accessibility of information were highly rated.
- The impactfulness of information was acknowledged by the majority.
- The effectiveness of various communication channels was positively evaluated (close to 4/5). Social media had the smallest average rating (3.65/5).
- The overall rating of the communication strategy was high (average rating 3.93/5).
- The participants were very satisfied with the responsiveness of the personnel of the Joint Secretariat and the Managing authority but somewhat less satisfied with the responsiveness of the personnel of the national authority of North Macedonia.
- The promotion materials were deemed attractive.
- Digital presentations and social media posts were suggested by the majority for improving communication.
- Facebook was the most frequently suggested channel for increasing awareness.

9.3 Assessment of the publicity effectiveness for the Programme area

9.3.1 Assessment of the communication activities effectiveness with regards to the Programme's performance

Up to 30.06.2021, in total 29 events have been organized (5 events were organised in 2015, 3 in 2016, 3 in 2017, 11 in 2018, 5 in 2019 and 3 in 2020) where more than 3.000 people participated. It must be noticed that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Programme did not organise any event for the festivities of European Cooperation Day 2020. Instead, 1200 items of 2-layered cloth face masks with the Programme logo were produced and distributed in the frame of European Cooperation Day 2020.

To be noted four events were organized that targeted potential beneficiaries and stakeholders in order to inform them about the 1st and 2nd Call for Proposals, its content and processes and terms of submission, while twelve more were dedicated to project beneficiaries aiming to the effective and efficient management and implementation of the projects.

In addition, the e-presence of the Programme as a whole is very satisfying taking into consideration also the very frequent updates of the Programme website as well as the frequent tweets in the Programme's Twitter account (305 followers) and the account in LinkedIn (751 connections). It must be mentioned that the Programme is also channelling messages through Managing Authority's Twitter account (834 followers).

Especially as far as the website is concerned, according to the google analytics, there is a very satisfactory use of it in terms of numbers of visitors especially coming from the two Programme Countries, the sessions per user, the average time spent in the website per visit etc. as it presented above.

9.3.2 Assessment of the communication activities effectiveness with regards to the beneficiaries

The great number of the projects submitted under the two calls and the fact that very few of them did not pass the 1st phase of evaluations proves that the information campaigns prior to the submission of the project proposals (events, website information, FAQs etc.) were effective enough.

Furthermore, the feedback received from the survey regarding the effectiveness of the communication activities was positive.

Moreover, the implementation of the Programme's Communication Strategy serves absolutely the achievement of its Specific Objectives targeting the beneficiaries' awareness and the implementation transparency.

9.4 Conclusion - Proposals

9.4.1 Conclusions

Overall, up to 30.06.2021, the Programme's Communication Strategy implementation serves absolutely the achievement of its specific objectives. More precisely, the general objective of awareness is being achieved through the organization and / or implementation of particular communication activities such as:

- Open, innovative, inspirational events dedicated to the European Cooperation Day in different locations every year targeting the general public and focusing particularly on young people (pupils, students, etc.)
- Promotion of the projects’ events under the website session “Project events”
- Promotion of Programme’s and projects’ activities through the Programme’s social media accounts
- Design and print various communication materials, including reusable bags, USB cards, pens, notebooks, etc.

Respectively, the general objective of transparency is being achieved through a multidimensional approach and, more precisely, with regards to the Call Announcements, it includes

- The organization of open info days widely promoted & availability of all the relative presentations online
- The continuous update of the Calls application packages and related FAQs in sets

with regards to the Projects’ Tender Procedure

- specific sessions and presentations within the beneficiaries’ training seminars with regards to the EU & national procurement procedures were organized
- publication of beneficiaries’ tenders under the website session “Project news” is highly encouraged

From the point of the implementation progress of the Communication Strategy, the first phase was successfully completed, while the second one is still going and the third one entered in an implementation stage as the results and the outputs achieved are disseminated.

Finally, since the very beginning of the Programme, there is a balanced geographical allocation of the communication activities on both sides of the borders and in all the eligible areas, while special communication actions facilitate and support the provision of the Programme information in special groups (e.g., website that is WCAG 2.0 compliant in AA level, accessible events’ halls, etc.)

9.4.2 Proposals

- Given diverse target groups and expectations, the Programme’s strategy must **employ a wide range of different communication tools** that appears meaningful and should be kept.
- It is suggested among others, the **Digital and Social-Media to be employed more effectively**. Digital and Social media communication is an important communication tool for reaching a wider audience or targeting existing audiences to raise awareness, increase the impact or disseminate the project results and other activities. This has been emphasized by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made face-to-face events impossible for some while. Although the CP is very active in the field of digital and social media communication, it is a field that will need further development and emphasis in the years to come. This is simply due to changing framework conditions, emerging technologies, and user expectations.

- In the light of the results of the survey, it is recommended that **Facebook** and **digital presentations** be utilized more.
- Since more and more and more projects will reach their end in the next period, added support and guidance should be given about the **dissemination of the results**.
- **Involve key players**
 - Invite them to more events so that they can develop a sense of ownership
 - Important that they are directly involved e.g., in projects, etc.
- **Explicitly target key players**
 - Keep them informed in short, simple messages (KISS)
 - Targeted presentations/conferences
 - Organize info and dissemination sessions

10. Impact Assessment

The regulation for the 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds requires that Interreg Programmes should carry out impact evaluations to assess how the ERDF funding contributed to the objectives of each priority of the Programme.

According to the approved Evaluation Plan of the Cooperation Programme the main goal of the planned impact evaluation is to assess the effects of the Programme implementation to the cross-border regional development and to analyse the mechanisms producing the impact. The challenges of the impact evaluation clearly lie in distinguishing the effects of Programme implementation from the contribution of other external factors (such as other EU co-financed programmes, socioeconomic changes, political changes, etc.).

The impact evaluation covers the Programme Priority Axes 1 to 2 and their Specific Objectives by considering the guiding principles of theory-based impact evaluation approach since most Interreg Programmes are using the theory-based impact evaluation against the counterfactual impact evaluation, considering the available budget, data and capacity.

10.1 Methods for Impact Evaluations

There are two conceptually distinct types of evaluation possible: theory-based impacts evaluations and counterfactual impacts evaluations.

10.1.1 Theory based impact evaluations

Theory based impact evaluations are based on establishing the theory behind an intervention (the theory of change) and assessing whether it has been implemented according to that theory in order to judge the contribution of the intervention to the observed effects. The theory-based impact evaluations deals with 'why it works', 'did things work as expected to produce the desired change'. "Methods primarily devoted to understanding why an intervention produces intended and unintended effects, for whom and in which context. The goal is to answer the "why it works?" question by identifying the theory of change behind the Programme and assessing its success by comparing theory with actual implementation."

To be able to undertake a theory-based impact evaluation in general the following steps (these can differ according to the specific approach taken):

- a. What theory of change is underlying the priority/programme? What are the problems/development opportunities behind the objectives?
- b. Which changes were foreseen (direct, indirect, other impacts)?
- c. Identify and quantify the actual occurred impacts (direct, indirect, other impacts)?
- d. Draft a narrative on the expected and achieved changes and if the programme worked as expected to produce the desired change?

10.1.2 Counterfactual impact evaluations

Counterfactual impact evaluations focus on the set of questions which are devoted to quantifying "whether a given intervention produces the desired effects on some pre-established dimension of interest. The overarching goal is to answer a "does it make a difference" question by identifying and estimating causal effects through counterfactual methods."

The core element of a counterfactual impact evaluation is to compare two groups/areas to see what has been the change in the group/area with the intervention and in the group/area without the intervention. "The challenge for quantifying effects is finding a credible approximation to what would have occurred in the absence of the intervention and to compare it with what actually happened."

There are the following ways to assess the counterfactual:

- Using the outcome observed for non-beneficiaries.
- Using the outcome observed for beneficiaries before they are exposed to the intervention.

The evaluator faces the challenge "to avoid giving a casual interpretation to differences that are due to other factors, not the intervention. It is necessary to identify the possible sources of bias arising in each specific situation and indicate which methods can overcome these biases, under which assumption. This is the essence of the counterfactual impact evaluation."

Impact evaluations of both types will first of all explore if and how the public intervention under scrutiny made a difference for the beneficiaries. However, a good evaluation should also relate its findings (e.g. the impact on beneficiaries) to the policy monitoring that looks at the entirety of potential beneficiaries. That is why it was a perceived need of a region, a sector or a group of people that triggered the intervention in the first place. So, after an appropriate duration, authorities should ask if the problem identified in the beginning has been fixed. Was the effect of the intervention big enough to matter? In other words, was the intervention useful?

10.2 Impact Evaluation Questions

Impact evaluation should seek to systematically and organisationally assess the operation of the Programme and evaluate the impact of its implementation on the eligible (geographical) area and specific interventions (fields) and on the broader economic, social and, environmental implementation framework.

To this end, it should be explored:

- The actual impact/contribution of interventions to the results is indicated by the relevant result indicators.
- Whether and how much the results would have changed if these interventions had not been implemented.

In order to systematically analyze and assess the impact, it is necessary to separate the effects which are purely due to Programme interventions from those caused by other factors.

The present impact evaluation is based on a theory-based approach as it mentioned above. Specifically, conclusions related to the impact are mainly based on assumptions, since the current Programme at the time of the evaluation did not have a critical mass of finished projects.

According to MIS data six (6) projects have concluded until 30.06.2021, two (2) projects of PA1 and four (4) projects of PA2 respectively as presented in the following Table.

Table 40: Completed Projects

ACRONYM	PROJECT MIS	PRIORITY AXIS	THEMATIC PRIORITY	SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE	SUBSIDY CONTRACT SIGNATURE	END DATE
EMPLOYOUTH	5031335	1	a	1.1	April 2, 2018	March 31, 2021
CINECULTURE	5033012	1	d	1.3	September 10, 2018	June 30, 2021
PAPESHE	5032716	2	b	2.3	July 30, 2018	May 1, 2021
SYMBIOSIS	5030837	2	c	2.2	May 9, 2018	March 8, 2021
aGROWTHchain	5031850	2	c	2.2	May 29, 2018	May 28, 2021
ENPOL-EE	5033032	2	c	2.1	May 25, 2018	April 24, 2021

Six (6) projects are to be finished during 2022 and twenty-eight (28) projects regarding the 1st Call for projects proposals are to be concluded by the end of 2021, most of them have programmed the closure of their implementation on December 2021. Additionally, twelve (12) projects of the 2nd Call are to be implemented during 2022 - 2023.

Table 41: Ending Date of the Projects

Projects	End date			
	Until 30.06.2021	Until 31.12.2021	Until 31.12.2022	Until 31.12.2023
1 st Call	6 projects	28 projects	6 projects	
2 nd Call				12 projects

According to the Terms of Reference, the following questions are to be answered in the impact evaluation course. Specifically, it should be assessed whether the actions contributed to:

- job creation, job mobility, SMEs networking, and entrepreneurship promotion
- improve the conditions for the provision of health and social services to children and adults
- in promoting tourism to increase jobs and related entrepreneurship
- in the protection and conservation of natural resources and biodiversity
- enhance operational capacity to natural disasters management
- improve the cohesion of the cross-border area with respect to the environment
- reducing the pollutants' pressures against the environment

Impact assessment data inputs should be secured mainly through:

1. **Monitoring of the progress of the result indicators at different stages of Programme implementation and the comparison with the baseline values.** This will enable a clear and impartial perception on progress made and on results achieved by the Programme compared to the initial situation.
2. **Reported indicators by the projects' beneficiaries in the MIS.** This will enable to assess the critical mass required to facilitate changes.
3. **Deliverables and outputs** from the project implementation uploaded in the MIS can constitute a very comprehensive information source.
4. **Case study analyses** of targeted projects, to enable the identification of crucial underlying factors enabling the observed changes.
5. **Quantitative and qualitative assessment** of the broader socioeconomic environment of the cross-border area through data from Eurostat and other verified statistical data providers and specific studies. This will enable to differ

the impacts of the Programme interventions from the broader trends in the cross-border area.

As already mentioned, up to 30.06.2021, most of the 1st call’s projects are in the implementation phase. Approximately 10% of the total number of the projects have been concluded. While the 2nd call’s projects have not started yet, it is too early to attempt the evaluation as the results have not emerged, bearing in mind that impacts of the projects are only measurable at a **very late stage of implementation**.

In the current preliminary impact assessment, “**The progress of the result indicators at different stages of Programme implementation in comparison with the baseline values**” (point 1, see above) and the “**Reported indicators by the projects’ beneficiaries in the MIS**” (point 2, see above) will be analyzed.

10.2.1 Impact Evaluation Questions – Priority Axis 1

Specific Objective 1.1: Create employment opportunities for educated graduates by exploiting comparative advantages of the cross-border area, preferably with the use of innovative tools and practices.

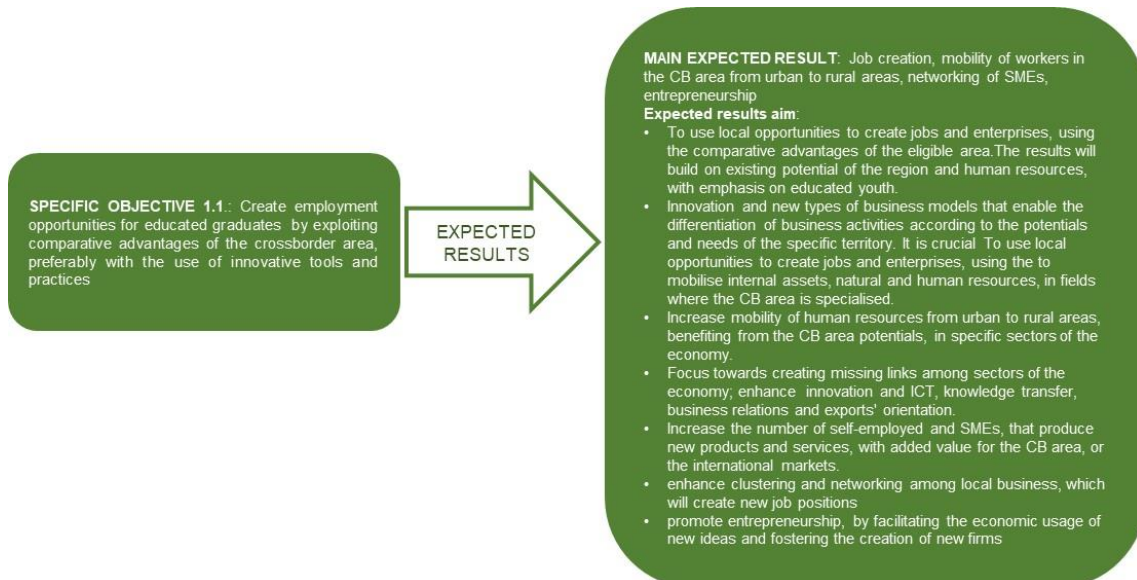
Evaluation question:

To what extent has the Programme contributed to the job creation, job mobility, SMEs networking, and entrepreneurship promotion?

In order to attempt to answer the question, we analyze the expected results of the projects of Specific Objective 1.1 and the relevant result indicators.

As to be expected, projects in PA 1 pursue that goal to create employment opportunities. The analysis of the projects that are funded by the Programme shows that **the projects contribute to the job creation for educated graduates, the SMEs’ and the partners’ networking, the training and mentoring for start-uppers and young entrepreneurs.**

Figure 35: Expected results of Specific Objective 1.1



Source: INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE-REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020

All three (3) projects under the 1st Call in Specific Objective 1.1. contribute to the main expected result **"Job creation, mobility of workers in the CB area from urban to rural areas, networking of SMEs, entrepreneurship"**. The measures and approaches taken differ among the projects. The Programme's expected results are served by the projects of the 1st Call for proposals since these include activities as follows:

Project MIS 5031335 "Creating Employment opportunities of young graduates on the CB area (EMPLOYOUTH)". Main objective: to build on the human capital through actions as **networking and establishing synergies between the Academic Institutions and the business community**, providing **training and mentoring** to potential entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial teams and, **operating the pre-incubator** for thirty (30) graduates/ potential entrepreneurs of the cross-border area.

Project MIS 5032886 "Increase innovative Business in Sea, Environment and Agriculture and IT (iBiSEAIT)". Main objective: to **create employment opportunities** by exploiting comparative advantages of the cross-border area as the **sea, agriculture and the environment preferably with the use of ICT technologies**. In the frame of the project, **three incubators are to be created** in the area. **Training and mentoring activities** are planned for entrepreneurs in order to support the **establishment of new enterprises and the reinforcement of the existing ones**.

Project MIS 5045521 "Intelligent Cross-Border Accelerator for Innovative ICT – enabled start-ups (ICBA)". Main objective: **set-up of an intelligent Cross-Border Accelerator for ICT-enabled start-ups, training and mentoring** are to be offered to the beneficiaries/ potential scientists and entrepreneurs. The joint effort under the project will result in a valuable **exchange of experience and know-how** between the involved partners and stakeholders of the two countries.

The results of the SO1.1 are reported through the **result indicator R0101** "employment of highly educated people including self-employment 6 months upon leaving the project/intervention". As it is shown in the following table the Programme has already achieved its target.

Table 42: Specific Objective 1.1 – Achievement of result indicator R0101

ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline value (1)	Programme's Target (2)	Target Net Value (3)= (2)-(1)	1 st Call Project's target	2 nd Call Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021
R0101	Highly educated in employment, including self employment 6 months upon leaving the project/intervention	Persons	47	52	5	270	40	26
						Total Projects' Target		
						310		

One (1) out of three (3) projects of the 1st call, the project EMPLOYOUTH, is concluded and has overachieved its target and the Programme's target as well.

Table 43: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0101

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target (persons)	Achievement 30.06.2021 (persons)	Implementation phase	End date
1st call	5031335	EMPLOYOUTH	20	26	Implemented	31.03.2021
	5032886	iBiSEAIT	50	0	In progress	30.11.2021
	5045521	iCBA	200	0	In progress	11.10.2021

2nd call	5060295	Be In	10	-	To be contracted	2023
	5060352	FASHION EMPLOYMENT HUB	10	-	To be contracted	2023
	5060650	I-Start	10	-	To be contracted	2023
	5067139	RENAISSANCE	10	-	To be contracted	2023
TOTAL			310	26		

According to the "Indicators' calculation methodology" of the IPA CBC "Greece – Republic of North Macedonia" and precisely the "Assumptions – Survey's Methodology" regarding the result indicator R0101, it is recommended, *"Six months after the conclusion of every project, there will be a survey, based on the report of the final beneficiaries, in order to define the number of the new employees as a result of the intervention"*.

Conclusions

- The Programme has overachieved its target to create employment opportunities by exploiting comparative advantages and innovative tools and practices. The projects of SO1.1 build on the human capital, establish synergies and networks between the Academic Institutions and the business community, and support the exchange of experiences and know-how between the involved partners and stakeholders of the two countries.
- The target of result indicator R0101 has already been exceeded, although the projects of the 1st Call are in a progress phase
- All three (3) projects of the Specific Objective 1.1 support the employment of educated graduates.
- According to the "Assumptions – Survey's Methodology"¹⁰ regarding the result indicator R0101, it is recommended, *"Six months after the conclusion of every project, there will be a survey, based on the report of the final beneficiaries, in order to define the number of the new employees as a result of the intervention"*.

Specific Objective 1.2: Improvement of preventive health care and social services of children and elderly population.

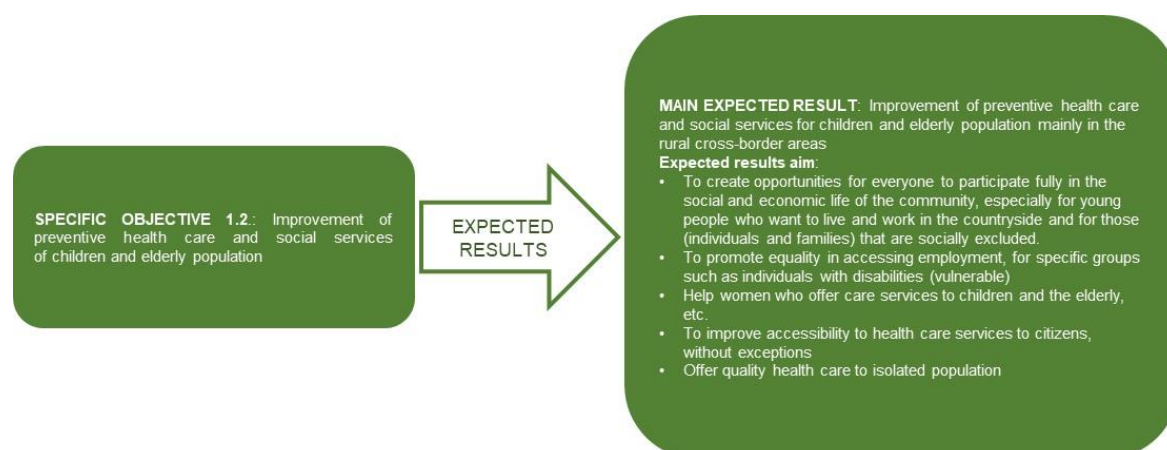
Evaluation question:

To what extent has the Programme contributed to the increased number of children and elderly population having access to health and social services?

The analysis of the projects and the result indicators of SO 1.2 comes to the conclusion that the Programme has contributed to achieve its results as these are described in the following Figure.

Figure 36: Expected results of Specific Objective 1.2

¹⁰ Working Paper "Indicators calculation methodology" of the IPA CBC "Greece – Republic of North Macedonia"



Source: INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE-REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020

The analysis of the funded projects further indicates that all nine (9) projects in Specific Objective 1.2 pursue its goal. Examples of projects stimulating the improvement accessibility to preventive health care and social services are:

MIS 5030719 "Primary Healthcare Network (HealthNET)". Main objective: to provide **healthcare services** to the targeted **rural population** on a regular basis with an emphasis on **prevention and early diagnosis**.

MIS 5031026 "Cross Border Heart Safe Cities" (Heart Safe Cities). Main objective: to effectively manage **out-of-hospital cardiac arrest incidents**, as well as incidents requiring **first aid provision**, in the city environment.

MIS 5031234 "Unified information system for exchanging information between primary health units in the cross-border area for emergency health cases" (Health – Info): Main objective: the development of a **unified informative system** that collects the necessary data in order to **support the strategic planning of health care** providers in both sides of the CB area..

MIS 5031322 "Continuity of care in MEtabolic diseases through modern TEChnology" (COMETECH). Main objective: to develop **four e-health units** equipped by hi-technology medical devices and supported by an advanced software and support a collaboration between research teams from two countries of scientists from different scientific fields and closer **cooperation among the two national health care systems** so as to **develop a common strategy for prevention**, early diagnosis and treatment of Obesity, Diabetes Melitus (DM) and CardioVascular Disease (CVD).

MIS 5031670 "Psycho-social and Health Interventions for the wellbeing of vulnerable populations" (in4Child). Main objective: to enhance the access of **children of vulnerable populations to psycho-social and health services**, while at the same time providing **educational interventions targeted both at children and parents**.

MIS 5032669 "Improving Quality and Accessibility of Health Care and Social Services Centers in Cross-Border Regions (Quality Health). Main objective: the **improvement of the level of Health and Social Care system** in public sector, for people in the cross-border area related to health and social welfare issues.

MIS 5032681 "Cross-Border initiative for integrated health and social services promoting safe ageing, early prevention and independent living for all (Cross4all). Main objective: the establishment of **inclusive health and social services**, free of accessibility barriers, with

particular focus on improving the management and CB use of the health and medical data of disadvantaged and high-risk citizens.

MIS 5032703 "Health care for children with Cardio and Respiratory sensitivity in the Cross Border area" (WE CARE). Main objective: the promotion of health and well-being of all children in the cross-border area, through implementation of a screening program for children with focus in vulnerable populations for the prevention and detection of asthma and congenital heart diseases.

MIS 5032937 "Joint actions for the protection and improvement of public health in the cross-border area" (IpA Shield II). Main objective: the improvement of the effectiveness of the primary and preventive health care services in the cross-border area by upgrading the existing medical services and equipment and setting up new, emphasizing to the prevention of Diabetes.

Regarding the progress of the result indicators R0102 and R0103, it is clear that they have achieved their targets.

Table 44: Specific Objective 1.2 – Achievement of result indicators R0102 & R0103

ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline value (1)	Programme's Target (2)	Target Net Value (3)= (2)-(1)	1 st Call Project's target	2 nd Call Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021
R0102	Population having access to health services	Persons	1,808,707	1,826,794	18,087	356,718	-	534,241
R0103	Population having access to social services	Persons	1,260,163	1,272,765	12,602	87,700	-	223,840

Although the nine (9) projects are in an implementation phase, and most will be finished by the end of 2021. The result indicators R0102 and R0103 have exceeded their target as it is shown in the following tables.

Table 45: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0102

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target (persons)	Achievement 30.06.2021 (persons)	Implementation phase	End date
1st call	5030719	HealthNET	3,000	3,000	In progress	31.12.2021
	5031026	Heart Safe Cities	133,312	120,728	In progress	31.10.2021
	5031234	HEALTH-INFO	20,000	34,000	In progress	18.10.2021
	5031322	COMETECH	20,000	15,000	In progress	30.09.2021
	5031670	In4Child	2,500	0	In progress	30.09.2021
	5032669	Quality Health	25,000	120,000	In progress	31.12.2021
	5032681	Cross4all	28,200	140,490	In progress	31.12.2021
	5032703	WE CARE	1,000	0	In progress	31.12.2021
	5032937	IpA Shield II	126,706	101,023	In progress	20.12.2021
	TOTAL		356,718	531,241		

Table 46: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0103

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target (persons)	Achievement 30.06.2021 (persons)	Implementation phase	End date
1st call	5030719	HealthNET	3,000	3,000	In progress	31.12.2021
	5031026	Heart Safe Cities	1,500	1,350	In progress	31.12.2021
	5031234	HEALTH-INFO	20,000	34,000	In progress	18.10.2021
	5031322	COMETECH	20,000	15,000	In progress	30.09.2021
	5031670	In4Child	3,000	0	In progress	30.09.2021
	5032669	Quality Health	15,000	30,000	In progress	31.12.2021
	5032681	Cross4all	28,200	140,490	In progress	31.12.2021
	TOTAL		87,700	220,840		

Conclusions

- The projects have clearly contributed to improving accessibility to health care and social services to children and the elderly population without exceptions.
- The target for the two result indicators has already been exceeded, although the projects of the 1st Call are in a progress phase.
- All nine (9) projects in the Specific Objective 1.2 explicitly pursue the goal to improve health care services for children, the elderly population, and vulnerable people.
- Seven (7) projects out of nine (9) serve the expected result to improve the health care and social services offered to children and the population of the cross-border area.

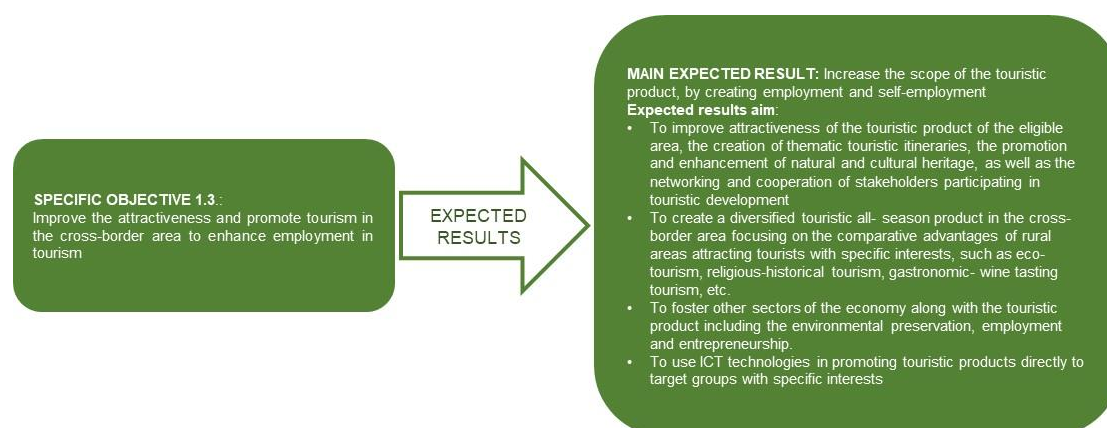
Specific Objective 1.3: Improve the attractiveness and promote tourism in the cross-border area to enhance employment in tourism

Evaluation question:

To what extent has the Programme contributed to the promotion of tourism and the enhancement of employment and entrepreneurship in tourism?

The analysis of the relevant projects and result indicator concludes that the Programme has clearly contributed to the enhancement of the tourism sector.

Figure 37: Expected results of Specific Objective 1.3



Source: INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE-REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020

The assessment of the Programme and its actions further indicates that all six (6) projects in Specific Objective 1.3 pursue their goal. They have a direct positive impact in the touristic sector as well as in the employment in the cross-border area. As shown from the following brief presentation of projects' main objective, it is clear that **the tourism development in the cross-border area of Prespa is achieved by promoting local cultural heritage and environmental resources of the regions.**

MIS 5030886 "Museums Connecting Cultures Connecting People" (CONNECT). Main objective: to enable museums of the CB area to network around a triangle of 3 museums (Alphabet museum of Bitola, Olympic Museum of Thessaloniki and Folklore museum of Stavros) creating an innovative multi-disciplinary cooperation platform, in order to **promote intercultural dialogue, knowledge transfer, and access to culture.**

MIS 5031337 "ToCulter - Promote tourism and Culture through the water" (ToCulter). Main objective: to create a **cooperation network** of stakeholders and businesses exploiting the **cultural and natural heritage and the traditional local products for tourism promotion.**

Project IS 5032687 "Increasing Tourism Opportunities through Utilization of Resources" (I-TOUR). Main objective: to improve the **overall development** of the cross-border regions Pelagonija, Florina and Thessaloniki by enhanced and **sustainable utilization of their tourism potentials.**

MIS 5032707 "Oenotouristic cross-border capacity building: A transition from promoting wine production to oenotourism experience" (Terra Vino). Main objective: to facilitate **new jobs creation** through capacity building to support **oenotourism development and promotion of tourism** in the cross-border area.

MIS 5033012 "Interactive and virtual presentation of cultural heritage και cinema" (CINECULTURE). Main objective: the **valorization of the cultural heritage** for the **development of tourism** in the cross-border area, while the focal point is on both the **local cultural heritage with architecture and monuments** and on the **cinema history** of the cross-border area.

MIS 5041683 (HOLYWATER). Main objective: the **tourism development** in the cross-border area of Prespa through the **promotion of cultural and environmental resources.**

There is only one (1) result indicator, highly relevant for the given question, as it indicates how the enhancement of the tourism shift to creation of new jobs since the start of the Programme. Regarding the progress of the result indicator R0104 shows a positive development.

Table 47 : Specific Objective 1.3 – Achievement of result indicator RO104

ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline value (1)	Programme's Target (2)	Target Net Value (3)= (2)-(1)	1 st Call Project's target	2 nd Call Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021
R0104	Jobs created in the tourism sector	Persons	3,250	3,285	35	104	46	20
						Total Projects * Target		
						150		

In view of this performance and given the fact that the projects' targets far exceed the defined goal of the Programme, it can be assumed that the Programme is one factor that has contributed to this positive development of jobs creation in the touristic sector.

Table 48: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0104

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target (persons)	Achievement 30.06.2021 (persons)	Implementation phase	End date
1st call	5030886	CONNECT	50	0	In progress	2 nd semester 2021
	5031337	ToCulter	10	3	In progress	02.07.2021
	5032687	I-TOUR	25	13	In progress	09.11.2021
	5032707	TERRA VINO	5	4	In progress	09.10.2021
	5033012	CINECULTURE	12	0	Concluded	30.06.2021
	5048163	Holy Water	2	0	In progress	31.12.2021
2nd call	5066793	wine-up	10	-	To be contracted	2023
	5066796	NETOURAL	10	-	To be contracted	2023
	5056562	ALTER TRIP	10	-	To be contracted	2023
	5067291	advenTOUR	10	-	To be contracted	2023
	5066792	EuroP@St & future	6	-	To be contracted	2023
	TOTAL			150	20	

Conclusions

- The Programme has clearly contributed to increasing regional capacity to improve the attractiveness and promote tourism in the cross-border area and increase the scope of the touristic product by creating employment and self-employment.
- The projects in SO1.3 contribute with individual focuses on creating a diversified touristic all-season product focusing on the comparative advantages of rural eligible areas as cultural and natural heritage and the traditional local products.
- The relevant result indicator, which is directly connected to the funded projects, shows a positive development.
- Some negative effects on the environment (increase of traffic, air pollution etc) will be produced due to increased tourism.

10.2.2 Impact Evaluation Questions – Priority Axis 2

Priority Axis 2: Protection of Environment - Transportation

Specific Objective 2.1: Upgrade public infrastructure to improve road travel time, safe border crossing and promote energy efficiency towards green transport.

Evaluation question:

To what extent has the Programme contributed to reducing travel time and promoting energy efficiency towards green transport?

To answer the question, the SO 2.1's projects and relevant result indicators were analyzed.

In the first scanning process of all projects of SO 2.1, it became evident that most projects contribute directly to the upgrade of mobility and the improvement of public infrastructure as well as to the reduction of travel time and safe border crossing.

Figure 38: Expected results of Specific Objective 2.1



Source: INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE-REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020

Additionally, there is a number of projects that contribute to energy efficiency actions for upgrading public infrastructure's energy performance, as well as to increase energy awareness of the wider society on benefits from of energy efficiency actions.

To gain more in-depth knowledge about the results and the impact of the Programme on expected result and impact a brief description of the projects' aim is given below:

MIS 5030794 "Evaluating energy efficiency measurements" (3EM). Main objective: the **implementation of energy efficiency measures** in the **public buildings** (kindergarten, schools, and municipality building) run by the local government units in the border region between the two countries.

MIS 5032713 (BENEFIT) "Improving energy efficiency: Demonstration in public buildings". Main objective: to **strengthen the capacities of public authorities** in the cross-border area towards **energy-efficiency** planning for upgrading public buildings' energy performance, as well as to **increase energy awareness** of the wider society on benefits from EE. Furthermore, the energy upgrades will lead to growth, **jobs creation and new innovative markets**.

MIS 5032932 "Border Infrastructure Development" (We Cross Borders). Main objective: to **improve the customs' services and safety** in the borders area of the two countries. Through the border infrastructure development, **the transit** of goods and people from the Customs Offices of Evzoni and Bogorodica will **be safer and faster**.

MIS 5033032 "Energy Efficiency in the cross-border area as an indicative factor for environmental policy" (ENPOL-EE). Main objective: the implementation of a series of actions that will **promote the significance of energy efficiency** in the **both public and private space** as an indicative factor of environmental policy for local authorities of the cross-border area.

MIS 5033067 "Safe Cross-Border Transportation of Hazardous Materials: Orphan Radioactive Sources" (STRASS). Main objective: to implement several ways of **detection, localization and identification of radioactive materials in cargos and vehicles crossing the borders** using a combination of measurements and simulations with different equipment.

MIS 5048466 "Integration of Green Transport in Cities" (Green Inter-e-Mobility). Main objective: to design and apply an **energy-efficient, regional intelligent transportation system with innovative solar-energy charging-stations for e-vehicles.**

Regarding the three (3) result indicators, R0201, R0202, and R0203, according to the AIR2020, are to be reported once the projects are completed. Due to the nature of the projects, the deliverables cannot be counted on partially implemented projects.

Table 49: Specific Objective 2.1 – Achievement of result indicators R0201, R0202, R0203

ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline value (1)	Programme's Target (2)	Target Net Value (3)= (2)-(1)	1 st Call Project's target	2 nd Call Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021
R0201	Reduced travel time	Minutes	10.81 min/10 Km	10% improvement over 2015 value	10.81 min/10 km qualitative	356,718	-	N/A
R0202	Average border crossing traveling time	Minutes	101	20% improvement over 2015 value	101	87,700	-	N/A
R0203	Energy efficiency awareness barometer	Value in a scale of 100	61.77	20% improvement over 2015 value		20%	-	N/A

Regarding the result indicator R0201, two (2) projects, which are under implementation, contribute to its achievement.

Table 50: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0201

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target (minutes)	Achievement 30.06.2021 (minutes)	Implementation phase	End date
1 st call	5032932	WE CROSS BORDERS	15.00	0.00	In progress	31.03.2022
	5033067	STRASS	10.00	0.00	In progress	31.08.2021
	TOTAL		25.00	0.00		

As for the "Average border crossing traveling time" (R0202), there are three (3) projects in a progress phase that contribute to its achievement. Two (2) projects out of three (3) contribute simultaneously to R0201 and R0202, aiming to safe cross-border transport of goods and people.

Table 51: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0202

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target (minutes)	Achievement 30.06.2021 (minutes)	Implementation phase	End date
1 st call	5032932	WE CROSS BORDERS	30.00	0.00	In progress	31.03.2022
	5033067	STRASS	40.00	0.00	In progress	31.08.2021
	5048466	Green Inter-e-Mobility	30.00	0.00	In progress	31.12.2021
TOTAL			100.00	0.00		

The aforementioned projects not only have these new and/or improved green transport solutions under development but a great deal of effort is planned to communicate the solutions and thus make relevant stakeholders aware.

As regards the indicator R0203, five (5) projects, under implementation, give emphasis to actions for energy awareness of the broader society on benefits of energy efficiency measures. Two projects report relative progress of 50 and 60 in a scale of 100, respectively.

Table 52: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0203

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target (Value in a scale of 100)	Achievement 30.06.2021 (Value in a scale of 100)	Implementation phase	End date
1st call	5030794	3EM	50.00	50.00	In progress	22.07.2021
	5032713	BENEFIT	38.00	0.00	In progress	09.10.2021
	5032932	WE CROSS BORDERS	50.00	0.00	In progress	31.03.2022
	5033032	ENPOL-EE	60.00	60.00	Concluded	24.04.2021
	5048466	Green Inter-e-Mobility	80.00	0.00	In progress	31.12.2021
	TOTAL					

Conclusions

- The analysis comes to the conclusion that the Programme has clearly demonstrated the take up and application of green transport solutions.
- Regarding the three (3) result indicators, R0201, R0202, and R0203, according to the AIR2020, are to be reported once the projects are completed. Due to the nature of the projects, the deliverables cannot be counted on partially implemented projects.
- Three (3) projects in the SO 2.1 explicitly pursue the goal of demonstrating green transport solutions' take-up and application.
- Five (5) projects contribute to the result indicator R0203 "Energy efficiency awareness barometer".
- Although some valuable projects contribute to energy efficiency actions for upgrading public infrastructure's energy performance, as well as to increase energy awareness of the wider society on benefits from energy efficiency actions, there is no relative result indicator to incorporate the impact of these actions. Their impact is reflected only through the result indicator R0203.

Specific Objective 2.2: Sustainable management and recycling of bio-wastes.

Evaluation question:

To what extent has the Programme contributed to improve waste's threats and pressures on the environment?

As in several previous sections, when answering this question, the focus lies on the projects' contribution to the sustainable management and protection of the environment through actions such as recycling biowaste.

Figure 39: Expected results of Specific Objective 2.2



Source: INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE-REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020

In the first scanning process of all six (6) projects of SO 2.2, it became evident that all contribute to the expected results of the Specific Objective. To gain more in-depth knowledge about the increase in cross-border area capacity to reduce waste threats and pressures on the environment, a brief presentation of the projects' main objectives follows:

Project MIS 5030837 "SYMBIOTIC NETWORKS OF BIO-WASTE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT" (SYMBIOSIS): Main objective: **to set up an integrated, sustainable, bio-waste management and trading scheme** between the partner regions

Project MIS 5030891 (LESS-WASTE-II): Main objective: to **promote waste prevention** through a more sustainable and efficient management of **bio-degradable wastes** in the cross-border area and by **targeting organic waste** from rural and urban households, food waste from individual households and restaurants, and, green waste.

Project MIS 5030941 "New environmental bio-reality" (BIOREAL). Main objective: **To improve the solid waste and wastewater management**, with special focus to **the promotion of recycling and biological wastes** separation at source and treatment. Development of tools, infrastructures and equipment for **effective waste management**, will contribute to **improved living standards** and **environmental conditions**, **better use of natural resources**, **increased attractiveness of the area for visitors** and **improved employment opportunities** in **environmental and touristic services**.

Project MIS 5031850 "Agrowaste supply chains for sustainable growth" (aGROWchain). Main objective: to **develop a supply chain** that will deliver **green waste** such as straw, bank canes and trees pruning, to selected users **in order to use the biomass as fuel**.

Project MIS 5032743 "Zero-waste energy-efficient agricultural communities in the Greece-Republic of North Macedonia cross-border area" (ZEFFIROS). Main objective: to implement the first, one-of-a-kind, **two small-scale bio-gas energy production pilot installations** in the two Programme areas, **for energy production** via Anaerobic Digestion and **compost production**.

Project MIS 5032938 "Sustainable management and treatment of Bio-wastes by using Bio-fuels production methods" (SUMBIO). Main objective: to **develop a small thermal unit** that by using **bio-waste materials** (any kind of waste that does not contain plastic or hazardous materials) will **extract energy in the form of gas named syngas**.

In view of this performance and given the fact that the projects clearly contribute to the defined target, it can be assumed that the Programme is one factor that has contributed to the positive development of the cross-border area.

Regarding the result indicators, there is one result indicator that is highly relevant for the given question at hand, as this indicates about the population is served by improved waste management or actions on recycling and reuse of organic biowastes. The indicator already shows an overachievement while all projects, except one, are in a progress phase.

Table 53: Specific Objective 2.2 – Achievement of result indicators R0204

ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline value (1)	Programme's Target (2)	Target Net Value (3)= (2)-(1)	1 st Call Project's target	2 nd Call Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021
R0204	Population served by improved waste management or recycling	Persons	17,885	25,097	7,212	455,756	-	358,839

Table 54: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0204

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021	Implementation phase	End date
1 st call	5030837	SYMBIOSIS	58,400	78,911	In progress	31.12.2021
	5030891	LESS-WASTE-II	68,856		In progress	31.10.2021
	5030941	BIOREAL	200,000	270,366	In progress	31.01.2022
	5031850	aGROWchain	2,600	9,592	Concluded	28.05.2021
	5032743	ZEFFIROS	125,000		In progress	16.12.2021
	5032938	SUMBIO	900		In progress	02.01.2022
	TOTAL		455,756	358,869		

Conclusions

- The Programme has clearly contributed to reducing the waste's threats and pressures on the environment and consequently to improved living standards and environmental conditions, better use of natural resources, increased attractiveness of the area for visitors, and enhanced employment opportunities in ecological and touristic services.
- The target for the result indicator has already been exceeded by the end of June 2021.
- All six (6) projects in the SO 2.2 explicitly pursue the goal to demonstrate the take-up and application of sustainable management and recycling of bio-wastes by adopting relevant actions.

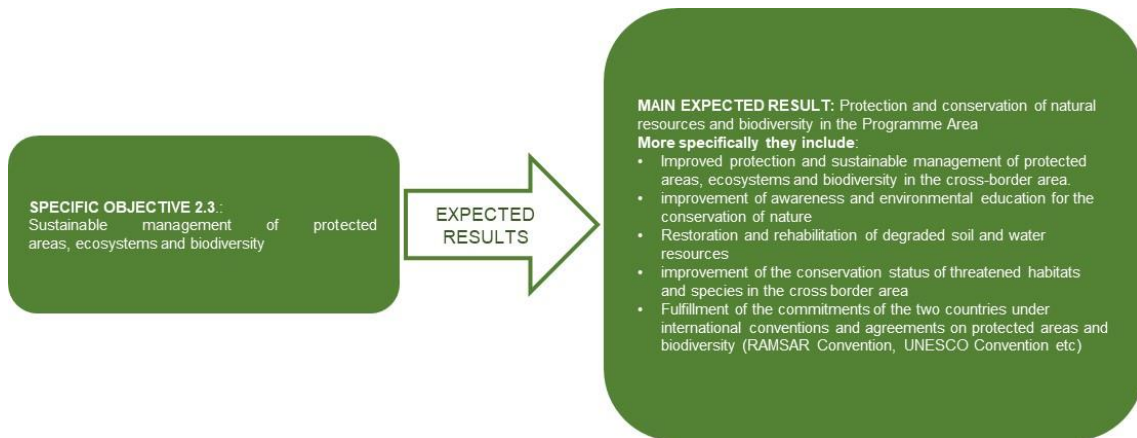
Specific Objective 2.3: Sustainable management of protected areas, ecosystems and biodiversity

Evaluation question:

To what extent has the Programme contributed to the protection and conservation of natural resources and biodiversity?

The question was on the one hand answered by reviewing the related result indicator that shows the "Surface area of ecosystems or habitats with improved protection and conservation status".

Figure 40: Expected results of Specific Objective 2.3



Source: INTERRE IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE-REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020

Additionally, the projects in S.O.2.3 were analyzed regarding the implementation of their actions that actually demonstrate their impact on the protection and conservation of natural resources and biodiversity in the Programme area.

Six (6) projects contribute to the expected results. The projects' main objectives are presented below which is a concrete example for the Programme's contribution to sustainable management of the environment in the cross-border area.

Project MIS 5030750 "Common plans for biodiversity conservation and sustainable targets for the development of a bilateral network of protected areas" (COMBINE2PROTECT). Main objective: to provide the most appropriate instruments to **foster the capacity for biodiversity conservation** and disseminate them to a wide range of users to ensure a **sustainable, increased number of species, protected ecosystems, and improved conservation tools.**

Project MIS 5030774 "Sustainable management of cross-border water resources" (AQUA-M II). Main objective: the effective and continuous **monitoring of the water quality management of Axios River** through the application of joint monitoring and management systems and the strengthening of cooperation among responsible stakeholders and authorities

Project MIS 5032673 "Integrated sustainable management system of Doirani Lake ecosystem" (Plan D.oiran). Main objective: the **protection and the development of the ecosystem, the biodiversity, and the natural resources of lake Doiran** through a permanent, sustainable management plan and specific measures.

Project MIS 5032716 (PAPESHE). Main objective: to **save, protect and valorize existing populations of the Pelagonia sheep breed** in the cross-border area, which are currently in danger of extinction, through coordinated synergies in both countries.

Project MIS 5032852 - Protection of the water resources by reducing the human environmental footprint (wa-umbrella). Main objective: the creation of a wide umbrella of actions for **protecting water and water sources** in cross-border area.

Project MIS 5032912 "Transboundary Air Pollution Health Index Development and Implementation" (TRAP). Main objective: the creation of an ICT application **integrating air quality monitoring with health impact indexes** in CB area.

The analysis shows that all goals are effectively addressed by successfully implemented projects of the Programme, especially the goal to improve sustainable management of protected areas, ecosystems and biodiversity.

Regarding the progress of the result indicator R0205, it shows a positive development.

Table 55: Specific Objective 2.3 – Achievement of result indicators R0205

ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline value (1)	Programme's Target (2)	Target Net Value (3)= (2)-(1)	1 st Call Project's target	2 nd Call Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021
R0205	Surface area of ecosystems or habitats with improved protection and conservation status	Hectars	1,369,578.00	1,557,578.00	188,000.00	317,882.00	-	479,317.00

Table 56: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0205

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021	Implementation phase	End date
1 st call	5030750	COMBINE2PROTECT	291,082.00	457,267.00	In progress	01.11.2021
	5030774	AQUA-M II	250.00	200.00	In progress	01.11.2021
	5032673	Plan D.oiran	4,000.00	0.00	In progress	31.08.2021
	5032716	PAPESHE	1,500.00	1,500.00	Concluded	01.05.2021
	5032852	wa- mbrella	1,050.00	350.00	In progress	02.02.2022
	5032912	TRAP	20,000.00	20,000.00	In progress	30.04.2022
	TOTAL		317,882.00	479,317.00		

Conclusions

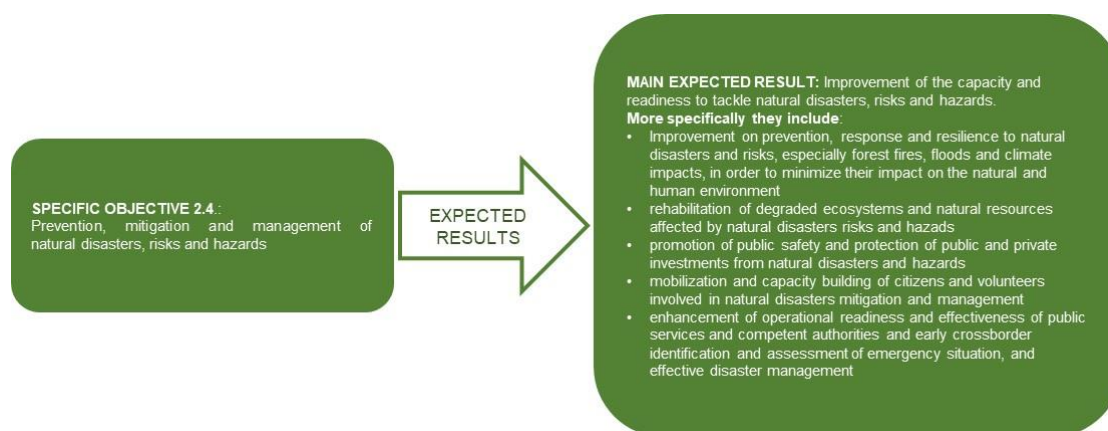
- The analysis that was carried out concludes, that the projects have designed and implemented different kinds of interventions for the long-term sustainable management of the cross-border ecosystems.
- The target for the result indicator has already been exceeded by the end of June 2021.
- All six (6) projects in the S.O.2.3 explicitly pursue the goal to demonstrate the take-up and application of the protection and the development of the ecosystem, the biodiversity, and the natural resources of the Programme area.

Specific Objective 2.4: Prevention, mitigation and management of natural disasters, risks and hazards

Evaluation question: What change can be observed in the level of preparedness to manage risks of transnational dimension?

To analyze whether the projects actions have an increased impact on improvement of the capacity and readiness to tackle natural disasters, risks and hazards the project applications and reports of the projects of S.O.2.4 were scanned.

Figure 41: Expected results of Specific Objective 2.4



Source: INTERRE IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE-REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020

Two (2) projects directly address the main Programme's expected result and closely tackle the related challenges and expectations.

The projects as presented below are concrete examples for actions that demonstrate methods and techniques dealing with natural disasters and risks:

Project J-CROSS (MIS 5031015). Main objective: to tackle the challenge to **minimize increasing -by climate change- frequency and severity of risks** in both regions by jointly planned, developed and implemented effective actions. The overall project objective is to elaborate **joint cross border action plan** that will lead to **joint risk assessment, joint prioritization of risks** and financing of counter measures, **joint exercises and training activities**.

Project MIS 5031757 "Integrated Operations Center for Providing Humanitarian Assistance" (HELP). Main objective: to improve the **strategic and operational efficiency of public administration and public services in managing natural disasters** within the wider Greece-FYROM cross-border area (CBA), through the provision of an integrated solution for the technical support and management of post-disaster humanitarian "on-site" relief operations and logistics.

As regards to result indicator R0206 "Population benefiting from risk hazards prevention and natural disaster management measures" this has already achieved the Programme's target.

Table 57: Specific Objective 2.4 – Achievement of result indicators R0206

ID	Description	Measurement Unit	Baseline value (1)	Programme's Target (2)	Target Net Value (3)= (2)-(1)	1 st Call Project's target	2 nd Call Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021
R0206	Population benefiting from risk hazards prevention and natural disaster management measures	Persons	1,150,000	1,620,000	470,200	1,130,000	540,000	1,130,000
						Total Projects' Target		
						1,670,000		

In total two (2) projects, under progress, of the 1st Call for proposals contribute to R0206. Additionally, three (3) new projects in the frame of the 2nd Call, will start their implementation during 2021 and include actions with a wide relative impact.

Table 58: Projects' contribution to result Indicator R0206

	Project's MIS	Acronym	Project's target	Achievement 30.06.2021	Implementation phase	End date
1st call	5031015	J-CROSS	130.000	130.000	In progress	03.07.2021
	5031757	HELP	1.000.000	1.000.000	In progress	31.11.2021
2nd call	5066794	eFIDAR	160.000		To be contracted	2023
	5066828	SOLVE	270.000		To be contracted	2023
	5067208	PREVEN-T	110.000		To be contracted	2023
TOTAL			1,670,00	1,130,00		

Conclusions

- The Programme has clearly contributed to demonstrating methods and techniques to deal with environmental risks.
- The target for the relevant result indicator R0206 has already been exceeded: by the end of June 2021. The result will be overachieved as there will be included in S.O.2.4 three (3) new projects under the 2nd call.
- The two (2) projects in S.O.2.4 include complementary actions facing the environmental risks and hazards such as joint cross border action plan that will lead to joint risk assessment, joint prioritization of risks strategic and operational efficiency of public administration and public services in managing natural disasters.

10.3 Contribution to EU 2020 Strategy

The EU 2020 strategy is one of the basic policies and strategies for the Cooperation Programme "INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020". "Europe 2020" is the EU's ten – year growth and jobs strategy launched in 2010. It aims to create conditions within the EU to boost economic growth:

- **Smart growth:** through more effective investments in education, research and innovation
- **Sustainable growth:** thanks to a decisive move towards a low-carbon economy
- **Inclusive growth:** with a strong emphasis on job creation and poverty reduction.

Smart growth is especially supported through activities to strengthen the knowledge economy through more and/or better training, innovation and research, and better use of research outputs. Innovation as well as building up knowledge are topics addressed in two Priority Axes of the Programme. Among others the CP supports the smart growth by: **promoting innovation at all levels, promoting resource-efficiency, by using the comparative advantages offered by the rich and diverse cultural and natural resources** for promoting economic development (tourism), and by **supporting integration and efficient use of CB transport systems**. The evaluation findings confirm that these activities are implemented successfully. It can thus be assumed that the Programme **contributes to smart growth** in the cooperation area.

Sustainable growth is also a topic at the core of the CP. In PA 2, the funded projects are

targeted towards improved risk management, efficient use of natural resources, and ecosystem management. PA 2, with a **focus on green transport and mobility**, is also clearly targeting **sustainability**. Additionally, the PA 2 is focused on **eco-innovation** and is therefore also directly supporting a **more sustainable growth** in the cooperation area and **protecting and restoring biodiversity and the sustainability of eco-systems**. Many projects of PA2 are successfully carried out and contribute directly or indirectly to the Europe 2020 sustainability targets of **reducing Greenhouse Gas emissions and resource use**. For example, new uses of **renewable and environmentally friendly technologies, approaches to change behavior**, and increased awareness of opportunities to save energy are implemented. In PA1, the funded actions are targeted towards **preserving cultural and natural heritage**. Therefore, the evaluation finds a **significant contribution of the Cooperation Programme to the objective of sustainable growth in the region**.

Inclusive growth is also addressed by the Programme. The evaluation shows that the Programme also contributes to this EU 2020 objective. Especially in PA 1 some projects directly address social challenges in the cooperation area. New services and better solutions are developed for **promoting employment, “access for all”, to health and social care and social inclusion**. It can thus be stated that the Programme **contributes to a more inclusive growth in the cross-border area**.

Conclusions:

The Cooperation Programme “INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME GREECE - REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA 2014-2020” is consequently aligned with the three EU 2020 objectives.

Smart growth is supported through activities in two Priority Axes.

Sustainable growth is also strongly supported by the Programme. Especially the PA 2 is targeted to a more sustainable cross-border area with different thematic focuses. Many projects contribute directly or indirectly to the Europe 2020 sustainability targets of reducing Greenhouse Gas emissions and resource use. The funded actions of PA1 are targeted towards **preserving cultural and natural heritage**

The Cooperation Programme also contributes with some projects to the objective of **inclusive growth**. Social challenges are especially addressed by projects in the PA 1.

10.4 Conclusions – Proposals

The present impact evaluation is based on a theory-based approach. Specifically, conclusions related to the impact are mainly based on assumptions, since the current Programme at the time of the evaluation did not have a critical mass of finished projects. Most of the projects in the frame of the 1st Call are still in the main phase of their implementation (10% of the projects have been concluded).

In the current preliminary impact assessment “The progress of the result indicators at different stages of Programme implementation in comparison with the baseline values” and the “Reported indicators by the projects’ beneficiaries in the MIS” have been analyzed.

Taking into account that the examined projects have not yet finalized their implementation, it can be concluded that current performance levels and thus also the projects’ final contributions to all SOs will considerably increase further. For example, three result indicators R0201, R0202, and R0203 are to be reported once the projects are completed. Due to the nature of the projects, the deliverables cannot be counted on partially implemented projects.

In every case the forty (40) examined projects have a considerable impact on policy change at local/regional or national levels. However, it is still difficult to conceive the overall impact in the region and the broader area.

It is worth to mention that projects will indeed contribute to the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth priorities of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

The sum of indirect contributions of the Programme will also help reducing territorial disparities between regions in Europe and thereby support the EU’s territorial cohesion objective. Moreover, the improved policies will trigger a sequence of effects of different kinds, which then lead to positive changes in the socio-economic situation or environmental conditions of the territories covered by project partners.

These positive short or medium-term changes will then also positively support other development goals. On the other side some negative effects may also be produced, as in the case of increased tourism that can result into increase of traffic, pollution etc.

11. Significant delays and Contribution factors

The Managing Authority and the Programme Structures had to face and overcome some significant delays, which affected the Programme's performance.

A negative point in terms of the effectiveness was the **delays that occurred during the initial approval** by the European Commission of the INTERREG IPA CBC Programme Greece – Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020" compared to other Interreg Programmes due to the delayed approval of IPA regulations. Although the First Call for project proposals was launched in a period less than four months from the approval of the Programme by the EC with a budget more than three times higher compared to the respective one of the 1st Call of the previous programming period (launched quite two years after the approval of the Programme by the EC).

However, the period between the publication of the evaluation results of the 1st Call for project proposals and the signing of the 1st Subsidy Contract is the longest one compared with those of the previous programming period. This remarkable delay was due to two critical issues:

- **Need to align with the differences between the EU external rules (PRAG)** applicable in IPA Programmes and the EU & national procurement rules applicable to the Member States. Since the Greek partner beneficiaries receive pre-financing through the Public Investment Programme (public funding), the alignment of the PRAG and National & EU rules should be done before the contracting of the projects. A coordination effort, extremely time-consuming, has been carried out by the Managing Authority and the Commission Services to align the difference between the EU external rules (PRAG) and the rules applicable to the Member States. In addition, the Managing Authority published an IPA procurement manual, which was very well received by the project beneficiaries.
- Long negotiation period with the projects because of **the large number of projects** in one single Call (40) and the numerous project beneficiaries (184). To be noted, that in the previous programming period, the total number of projects contracted under the two first calls of proposals was 38, in a period of two years, while the total number of 179 partner beneficiaries was only achieved after the contracting of the projects approved under the 3rd Call for proposals only one year before the closure of the previous Programme. Nevertheless, during the current programming period, negotiation procedures for contracting include also IPA partner beneficiaries (a task performed by the EU Delegation in previous programming period, since IPA partners were signing separated contracts/ grant agreements).

It's worth to be mentioned that in October 2018 (3 years after the launch of the Programme), more than 85% of the Programme's budget allocated to Priority Axes 1 and 2 has been contracted, while at the same time within the last programming period it had only started the negotiation & contracting procedure for the projects approved under the 1st Call resulting to the contracting of less than the 25% of the Programme budget only one year later (in a period of 4 years). Moreover, in the previous programming period, the contracting of 85% of the Programme budget was only achieved only two years before the Programme closure.

Despite the late approval, the Cooperation Programme is back on track. The **effectiveness of the Cooperation Program has significantly been achieved**, which is reflected in the selection of projects that serve the goals of the individual Specific Objectives asset. Specifically, the Figures for contracted projects are satisfactory for both Priorities. Similarly, all Thematic

Priorities and Specific Objectives have been activated, and an overall 95.20% of the total budget is contracted by 30.06.2021.

A significant delay concerned **the lag in the development of the Greek integrated MIS** due to several challenges the setting up of an integrated MIS was prone to within the Programme Structures and beyond. However, these have successfully been tackled, and the system has been functional since 2018. The MA worked in close cooperation with the special Services of MIS in order to finalize the electronic system.

Verified expenses lag from the actual expenses of the Programme and its projects due to the **complicated nature of the procedure for verification**. The advancements that have been done in this respect with the simplification of the procedure after the electronic platform has been operationalized have minimized the lag time for the verification of the expenses. A **specific timeline** for the verifications of expenditure has been adopted. A noteworthy improvement is the integration of FLC verifications into the MIS.

Another significant delay that has to be overcome was **the delays in pre-financing** and the **financing of activities in the Republic of North Macedonia**. During the previous Programming period, under centralized management by the Delegation of the EU, IPA project beneficiaries were eligible to receive the biggest share of the EU contribution upon signature of their grant contracts. This wasn't available under the current Programme modalities (an advance payment of 20% beneficiaries of North Macedonia were entitled to receive). The limited fiscal space in the partner country in conjunction with the lack of Beneficiaries' own resources necessitated the adoption of a formula for the financing of project activities. The Managing Authority had proactively reserved the pool of funds from the Programme's pre-financing. A series of detailed rules and procedures adopted by a large number of Programme Bodies in both countries. Finally, the Managing Authority and Certifying Authority issued a guidance, which regulated the flow of funds and is a guarantee against bottlenecks in the smooth financing of project activities.

The Programme's Structures **have identified the causes of delayed certification of expenditure** in the financing of activities in the Republic of North Macedonia. Measures have been taken **to facilitate the projects implementation and payments of incurred expenses of IPA partners**. The Secretariat has identified lengthy bureaucratic procedures that caused bottlenecks in the funding of projects. More specifically, the transfer of EU funds from Greek municipalities, acting as Lead Partners, was delayed due to internal rules of the Lead Partners organizations. The Joint Secretariat intervened to speed up the procedures and release the red tape involved. In doing so, the Secretariat cooperated with the Certifying Authority to reach a consensus on the procedures.

Additionally, in order to support and accelerate the procedures in the Republic of North Macedonia, it was decided to establish the new structure, "**Monitoring and Control Officer (MCO)**". MCO offers supporting services to the National operating structure and Antenna officer based in Bitola. The MCO plays an important role, particularly in providing assistance to Finance and Control Officer and Irregularity Officer during the supervision of FLC controllers on the project site visits. He supports the National structure on a day-to-day basis for collecting and processing the reference data to generate various reports on management verification and national co-financing payments to IPA beneficiaries. Also, the MCO coordinates the work established under the service contract between the service provider and the designated team of the National Structure regarding the activities for developing the Information module.

The effectiveness of the CP is also documented by the high degree of efficient cooperation between the authorities (JMC, MA / JS, AA, CA) but also the beneficiaries with the authorities

and the minor problems during the implementation of the projects, which were partly due to delays attributed to the exogenous factor of the Covid-19 pandemic. The **Covid-19 pandemic has marked the years 2020-2021**. All Cooperation Programmes have suffered from the suspension of physical meetings and cross-border activities. **IPA Programmes have been disproportionately affected**: Borders with non-EU countries were essentially closed since March. Exchanges were permitted from the Evzoni main border crossing only, for a limited number of people and with special permission. As a result, most of the projects' implementation has been delayed by an average of 4-8 months. Nonetheless, the **Programme Authorities proactively safeguarded the smooth implementation of the projects**:

- Project extensions were granted.
- Activities were revised to reflect the new state of play. As such, several meetings and exchanges took place online.
- A significant number of projects underwent extensive budget modifications and revisions in order to transpose physical events into online events.
- Risk management processes were put into place in order to take precautions in those cases where activities could not be substituted or delivered online.
- Despite the limited fiscal space on both sides of the border, particular effort was put to ensure that Project Beneficiaries enjoyed uninterrupted cash-flows and were adequately funded.
- In cooperation with the Certifying Authority, the 7th Accounting Year saw the introduction of Payment Claims adjusted to the Project Beneficiaries' actual monetary needs. Therefore, more frequent payment claims took place to ensure the uninterrupted funding of Projects.

In order to support the smooth implementation of the Programme, MA and Programme Structures, have taken into consideration lessons learned from the past. The Management Structures of the Programme itself (both at MA and JS level) acted in a much more effective and efficient way, taking advantage of its much more experienced and qualified human resources. Therefore, a series of training and support seminars for project beneficiaries and their staff has been organized in both countries (see par. 10.1, Table 39). The Programme Authorities opted to capitalize on the excellent cooperation and relationships between beneficiaries, documented during the previous Programming Period. As such, extended project partnerships were favored. In addition, the Secretariat assumed the negotiation and contracting procedures of IPA partner beneficiaries. This responsibility was performed by the EU Delegation during the previous programming period. The inherent coordination difficulties in dealing with large partnerships delayed the project implementation.

Nonetheless, the Programme Structures capitalized on the lessons learned and revised its internal procedures to cope with the elevated workload and specific issues raised. Therefore, it is well-positioned to address the demands of the Calls successfully. At the same time, the project beneficiaries enhanced their capacities by their direct involvement in more demanding projects.

As it is presented above, it is evident that **MA and the Programme Structures cooperate** from the very beginning of the Programme's implementation **with the Greek Authorities** (i.e., Certifying Authority) and the relevant **Authorities of North Macedonia** to be more productive and address all the obstacles that cause bottlenecks in the funding and delays in the implementation of the projects.

12. Key conclusions - Recommendations - Lessons Learnt

12.1 Key conclusions

Summarizing the findings of the analysis that was presented in previous sections, the following conclusions are drawn per Evaluation Module / Question:

Evaluation Module A: Programme Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the Cooperation Programme has been greatly achieved, despite the late approval of the Programme. This is reflected in the selection of projects that serve the goals of the individual Specific Objectives as set. The effectiveness of the CP is also documented by the high degree of efficient cooperation between the authorities (JMC, MA / JS, AA, CA) but also the beneficiaries with the authorities and the minor problems during the implementation of the projects, which were partly due to delays attributed to the exogenous factor of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Specifically, the Figures for contracted projects are satisfactory for both Priorities. Similarly, all Thematic Priorities and Specific Objectives have been activated, and an overall 95.20% of the total budget is contracted. The total EU payments to the Programme converge to the ESIF EU Average as the interim payments have increased significantly during 2020-2021. As of 30.06.2021 the financial implementation under both Priority Axes (1 & 2) has exceeded 25% of their 2023 target values. According to projections of expenditure for the next years based on the current projects under implementation it is expected to achieve the financial targets for both Priorities. To this end, the projects of the 2nd Call will cover the balance of the Programme's budget.

Regarding the implementation progress of the operational output indicators based on the contracted projects, in both P.A.s, most of the indicators have achieved the Programme's target. A prediction of output values shows that the achievement of their target values can be expected for the total of Specific Objectives.

Evaluation Module B: Performance Framework of the Cooperation Programme

Regarding the Performance Framework, its' progress is satisfactory. Programme implementation is on track, and the level of verified expenses is satisfactory until the end of June 2021, although the pandemic has stressed the implementation efforts of beneficiaries.

The Key Implementation Steps and the output indicators show that the Programme set a base for a successful implementation. The new projects under the 2nd Call will ensure the achievement of the Programme's targets.

The significant delays that occurred during previous years in the verified expenses have been overcome thanks to measures that have been taken by MA and JS in order to accelerate the expenses verification procedures.

Evaluation Module C: Programme's Efficiency

There is an essential improvement in the Programme's Efficiency during the first semester of 2021 as the approved expenditure has been increased by 10% compared to 30.12.2020. In total, 38.34% of the total funding has been verified as eligible expenses.

The total of Priority Axis 1 output indicators has already achieved the Programme's targets, and the available funds are sufficient to succeed the goals.

Priority Axis 2 has a positive picture in total too. The real picture of Priority Axis 2 will be improved significantly, as the projects of the 2nd Call will contribute to Programme's target and take into account that many projects overperform, surpassing their targets.

In total, the available sources are sufficient to succeed the goals of the two Axes taking into consideration the suggested reallocation of the Priority Axis 3 unused funds in favor of the two Axes of the Programme.

Evaluation Module D: Consistency of the intervention logic within the Cooperation Programme Strategy

The analysis shows that the intervention logic is still relevant, based on the current macroeconomic, social and environmental status of the intervention area and the appropriate legal and policy developments. The structure of the intervention logic is appropriate to mitigate the last years new needs the increased flows of refugee, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the intervention logic allows for multiple synergies between the Specific Objectives.

Evaluation Module E: Revision of the Cooperation Programme

The overall analysis showed that the Programme has been founded in a solid planning document that assessed the challenges and opportunities that the intervention area is facing.

Furthermore, considering the progress of the Programme in all different levels, as well as the current status of the economic, social and environmental parameters, there is no justified need for revision and modifications of the Programme at this stage while new projects are in a contracting phase, except the budget reallocation. Such a modification is also supported by the fact that there are unused funds in Priority Axis 3, which will be reallocated in two Priority Axes which will overperform just after the contracting of the projects of the 2nd call. Finally, a closer look on the overestimation or underestimation of the unitary costs for some of the SOs should take place.

Evaluation Module F: Update of the Communication Strategy

Overall, up to 30.06.2021, the Programme's Communication Strategy implementation serves absolutely the achievement of its specific objective. Respectively, the general objective of transparency is being achieved through a multidimensional approach. From the point of the implementation progress of the Communication Strategy, the first phase was successfully completed, while the second one is still going and the third one entered in an implementation stage as the results and the outputs achieved are disseminated.

Finally, since the very beginning of the Programme, there is a balanced geographical allocation of the communication activities on both sides of the borders and in all the eligible areas, while special communication actions facilitate and support the provision of the Programme information in special groups (e.g., website that is WCAG 2.0 compliant in AA level, accessible events' halls, etc.).

The overall rating of the communication strategy was high by the beneficiaries, as this depicted in the conducted survey.

Impact Assessment

Conclusions related to the impact are mainly based on assumptions, since the current Programme at the time of the evaluation did not have a critical mass of finished projects. Most of the projects in the frame of the 1st Call are still in the main phase of their implementation (10% of the projects have been concluded).

Taking into account that the examined projects have not yet finalized their implementation, it can be concluded that current performance levels and thus also the projects' final contributions to all SOs will considerably increase further. In every case the forty (40) examined projects have a considerable impact on policy change at local/regional or national levels. However, it is still difficult to conceive the overall impact in the region and the broader area.

It is worth mentioning that projects will indeed contribute to the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth priorities of the Europe 2020 Strategy. The sum of indirect contributions of the Programme will also help reducing territorial disparities between regions in Europe and thereby support the EU's territorial cohesion objective. Moreover, the improved policies will trigger a sequence of effects of different kinds, which leading to positive changes in the socio-economic situation or environmental conditions of the territories covered by project partners. These positive short or medium-term changes will also positively support other development targets. On the other hand, some adverse effects may also be produced, as in the case of increased tourism that can result in the rise of traffic, environmental pollution, etc.

12.2 Recommendations – Lessons Learnt

Considering the analysis and the evaluation findings of the IPA CBC Programme, the following recommendations and lessons learnt are concluded:

- An update of the budget allocation should be made right after the contracting of the 2nd Call projects to check against the potential achievement of financial targets and the need for the launch of an additional Call for i.e strategic project.
- Emphasis should be put on the new projects approved in 2021 that will have a limited implementation duration and on a small number of projects, that are in progress and phasing implementation failures.
- The existing indicators lists must be used and, if appropriate, they must be modified to fit the Programme context. It must be ensured that all categories of interventions are tracked and reported.
- It is crucial to secure that systematic data collection is realistic for each indicator and can be traced. It is appropriate to set a methodological framework for determining the values declared in the MIS, in order to allow their objective control by the primary control, during the administrative and on-the-spot verifications during the approval of progress reports but also during the Programme evaluation process.
- Systematical support is recommended to be given to the beneficiaries. Very supportive actions could be communication on a regular basis and provision of training courses

through material that will be provided by the website, the Programme's social media, or the info-days. The training could be enriched with webinars, which will then be available via Youtube for beneficiaries and other stakeholders. It is recommended that future training programmes/seminars be more practice-based. Attention must be paid to less experienced stakeholders.

- Given the fact that many projects will reach their end in the following period, increased focus should be given to the dissemination of the results. To ensure a prosperous new Programme, the strategic communication and positioning should be strengthened throughout the Programme period. This involves target communication towards key decision makers as well as clear communication in relation to main policy agendas and developments.
- In future digital and social media communication will become even more active and require a stronger emphasis and resources. This concerns both the strengthening of social media communication, as well as interactive platforms where the communication among community members is facilitated.
- The new programming period should facilitate capitalization on the 2014-2020 experience. Aside to some gaps or inconsistencies concerning the targets of the indicators that have to be improved, the current monitoring and management approach thus also be used in the period 2021-2027.
- In the new Programme 2021-2027, the organizations that are directly responsible for the planning and implementing the strategies and policies must be involved in the life-cycle of the Programme and as project partners.
- Regarding the indicators of new Programme 2021-2027, attention must be paid in their use. It is recommended to be ensured the continuity where possible with the most frequently used indicators in previous Programme 2014-2020. It is proposed to use more common indicators included in the specific regulations rather than Programme-specific to measure and evaluate the interventions in order to avoid the time-consuming complicated methodologies of defining the indicators, indication of the method of calculation, source, timing, possible links with other indicators etc.
- The new Programme for 2021-2027 should carefully assess the new indicator target values in the course of the programming process (based on the current experiences and by taking into account the future Programme available budget) and also ensure that future projects' own definition of target values is realistic.
- In the 2021-2027 Programme, complementarities to other instruments and EU policies (i.e. HORIZON, COSME, Digital Europe Programme, Life Programme, EU Biodiversity Strategy, European Green Deal) must be exploited.

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Cooperation Programme (1st version and its revisions) which defines the priorities as well as the programming and EU funds required to achieve these priorities

Communication Plan which provides the strategic framework and basis for the Programme communication activities

Evaluation Plan (2016) sets out the evaluation strategy for the entire implementation period of the Programme, taking into account lessons learned from evaluations made in previous programming periods and the budgetary framework.

Ex-Ante Evaluation of the Programme

Strategic Environmental Assessment which highlights the potential positive environmental impacts of the Programme and for assessing the environmental effects of certain interventions and for integrating environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption process. The potential impacts are referring to environmental purposes and sustainable development

The Annual Reports which summarize key information on the implementation of the cooperation Programme for the year concerned, including financial instruments with relation to the financial and indicator data.

1st Evaluation of the Implementation and Impacts of the Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2014-2020" - Final Report

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