



Interreg
Italy - Croatia

European Regional Development Fund



EUROPEAN UNION

INSIGHTS FOR IMPACT: PROGRAMME EVALUATION BRIEF

*Key messages from the ex-post evaluation of
Interreg Italy-Croatia 2014-2020*



This policy brief is one of the deliverables of the ex-post impact evaluation conducted by t33 srl and does not necessarily reflect the Programme's official views

GRAPHIC DESIGN

t33 s.r.l.

PHOTO

COVER PHOTO INNOVAMARE PROJECT
PHOTO PAGE 3 ADRIREEF PROJECT
PHOTO PAGE 11 PRIZEFISH PROJECT
PHOTO PAGE 16 SOUNDSCAPE PROJECT
PHOTO PAGE 19 ADRIAQUANET PROJECT



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2014-2020 PROGRAMME IN A NUTSHELL



TOTAL BUDGET
(million)

237 EUR

201 EUR ERDF



PROJECTS

97



BENEFICIARIES

881

PRIORITY AXES

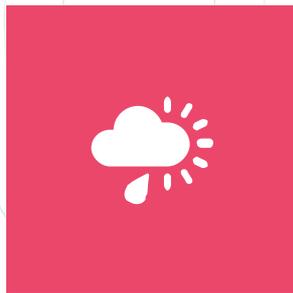
PA 1



BLUE INNOVATION

14
PROJECTS

PA 2



SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

18
PROJECTS

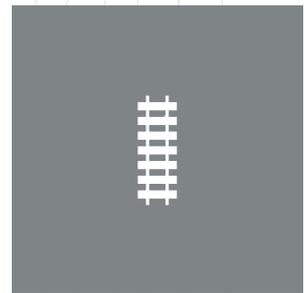
PA 3



**ENVIRONMENTAL AND
CULTURAL HERITAGE**

41
PROJECTS

PA 4



MARITIME TRANSPORT

19
PROJECTS

PA 5

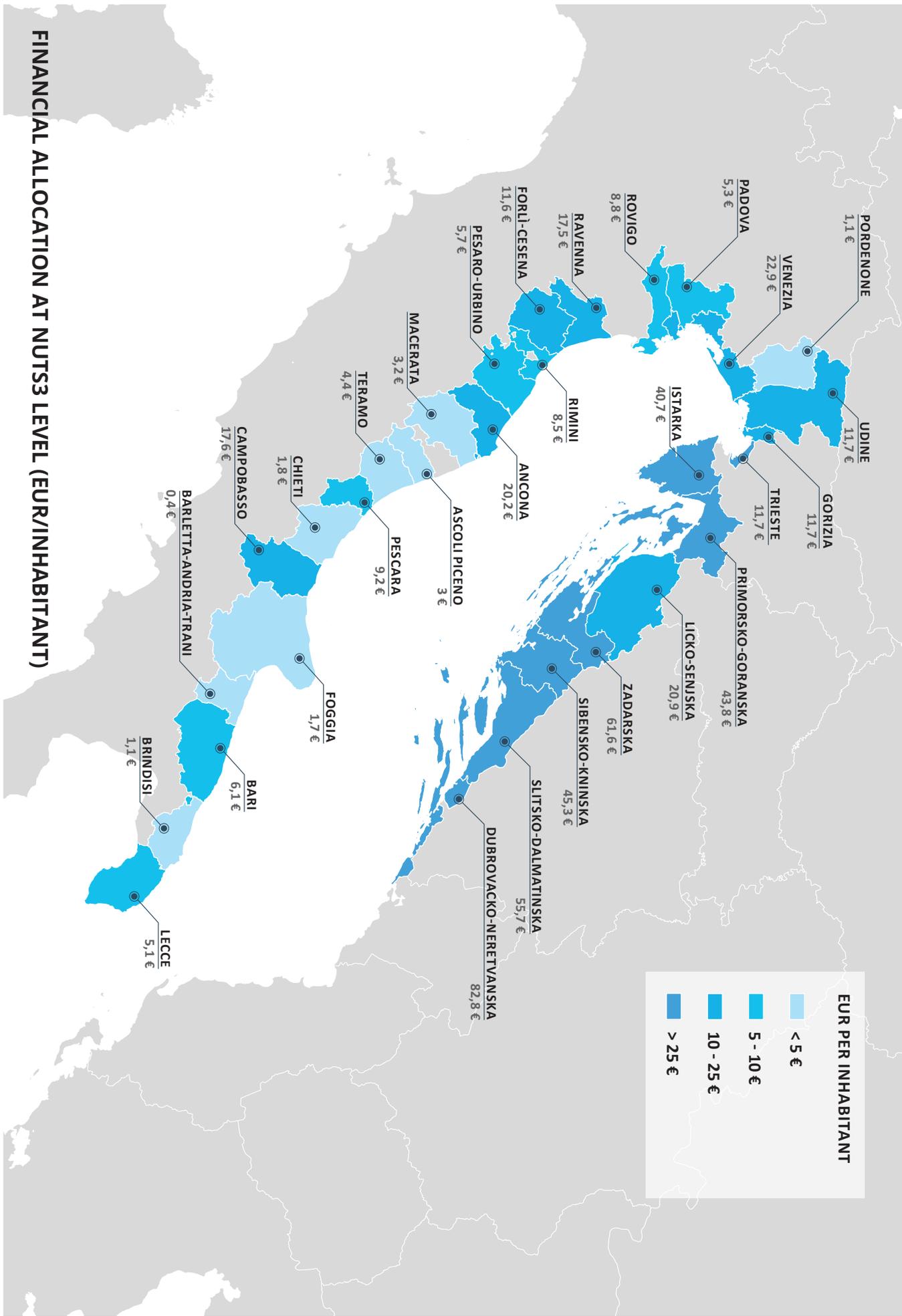
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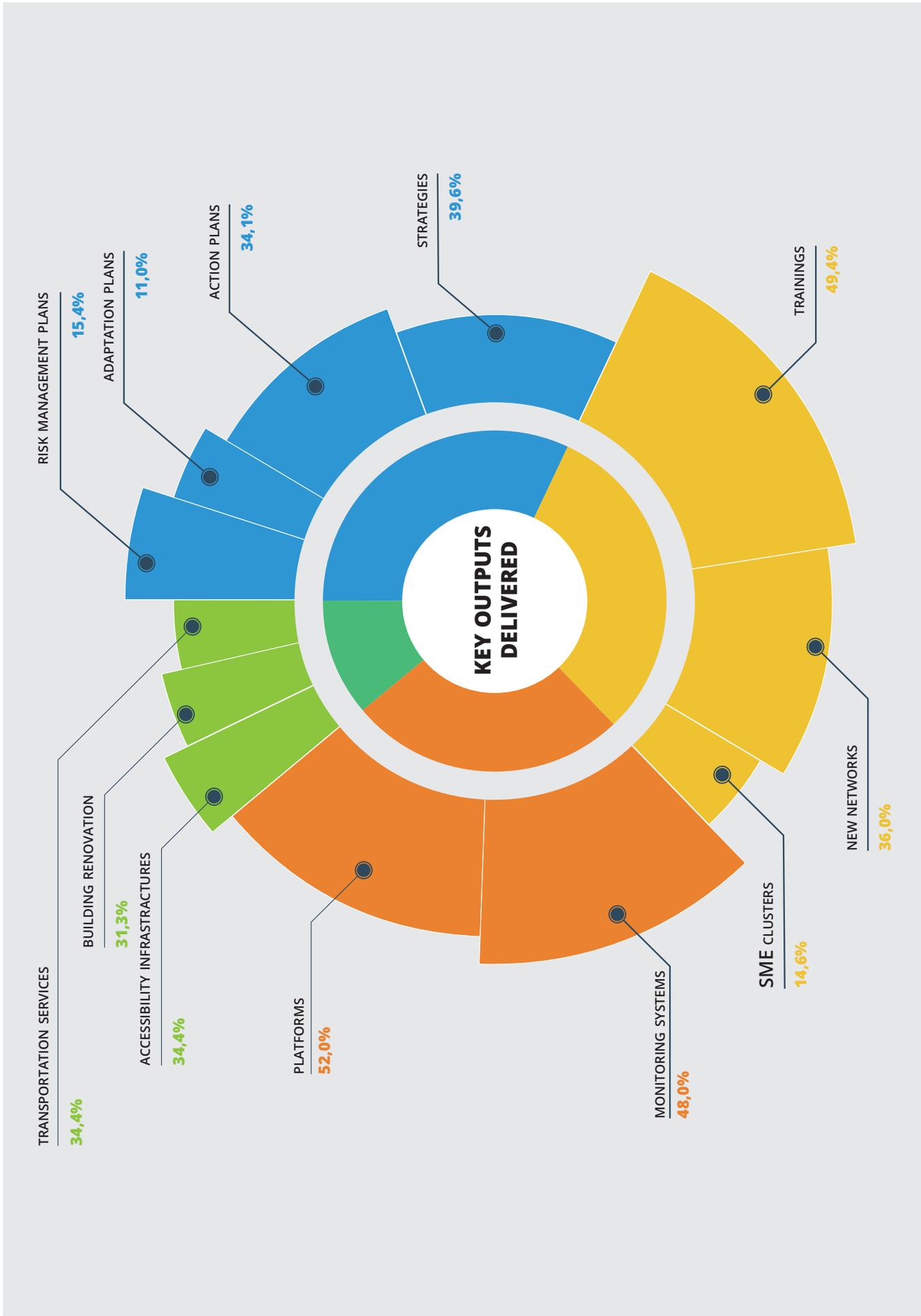
PROJECTS

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

FINANCIAL ABSORPTION

99.95%





INSIGHTS FROM THE EX-POST EVALUATION

The ex-post evaluation assessed the long-term impact of the Interreg Italy-Croatia 2014-2020 Programme, the effectiveness of funded projects (focusing on all except Standard+ projects), and the added value in fostering cross-border cooperation. These insights aim to provide essential guidance for the ongoing 2021-2027 programming period and offer recommendations for the durability and scalability of future interventions.

By addressing key challenges in the blue economy, climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, cultural and natural heritage preservation, biodiversity protection, environmental quality, and transport connectivity, the Programme has strengthened institutional partnerships and laid the foundation for sustainable regional development. Its interventions have created a robust framework for cooperation, supporting joint initiatives that have the potential to generate lasting impact.



BLUE INNOVATION

The Programme has fostered innovation within the blue economy by supporting research collaboration and the introduction of new technologies. By facilitating **knowledge exchange** and **business networking**, it has strengthened the competitiveness of marine-related industries and promoted the adoption of more sustainable practices. The creation of **new platforms and clusters** has improved connections between research institutions, enterprises, and public authorities, enhancing the conditions for long-term innovation. While these efforts have provided a strong foundation, ensuring that innovations are fully integrated into market dynamics will be essential in the future to guarantee and increase their impact. Strengthening SME engagement and aligning financial instruments with emerging technologies will help bridge the gap between research outcomes and industry adoption.

CROSS-BORDER ADDED VALUE

Cross-border cooperation has been fundamental in fostering innovation and technological advancements in maritime industries. The Adriatic Sea presents both opportunities and challenges for marine-related economic activities, making it essential for Italian and Croatian stakeholders to work together. The Programme has supported the **exchange of expertise** between research institutions, businesses, and policymakers, ensuring that knowledge generated in one country can be effectively applied in the other. By establishing **innovation hubs** and **cross-border business clusters**, the Programme has reinforced the role of the blue economy as a driver of regional competitiveness.



SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

Efforts to improve climate change monitoring and adaptation planning have enhanced regional resilience by equipping authorities with more precise data and tools. Through improved risk assessments, vulnerability mapping, and adaptation strategies, regional and local stakeholders are better prepared to address environmental challenges such as rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events. The **harmonisation of data collection** and the development of coordinated planning approaches across borders have facilitated a more comprehensive response to climate risks. **Ensuring integration of such measures into policy frameworks** and securing long-term investments in adaptation infrastructures will be crucial for maintaining climate resilience.

Disaster preparedness and emergency response capacity have been strengthened through investments in risk assessment, response coordination, and infrastructure development. By enhancing early warning systems and response protocols, the Programme has contributed to improving regional safety and reduced vulnerabilities to natural and man-made disasters. Cross-border coordination in emergency preparedness has helped establish a **more efficient and collaborative approach** to risk management. The continued expansion of **joint training initiatives** and **stronger alignment** of emergency response policies will further increase the effectiveness of disaster mitigation strategies.

CROSS-BORDER ADDED VALUE

In the field of **climate adaptation**, the Programme has facilitated a harmonised approach to climate risk assessment, allowing Italian and Croatian regions to jointly develop strategies to mitigate the effects of extreme weather, rising sea levels, and coastal erosion. Shared data systems and vulnerability mapping have improved the capacity of regional authorities to plan and implement climate adaptation measures in a coordinated manner. The cross-border aspect has been particularly valuable in standardising methodologies for climate monitoring.

In **disaster preparedness**, joint risk management planning, shared emergency response protocols, and the establishment of cross-border training centres have improved regional resilience. The Programme has facilitated the alignment of emergency preparedness strategies, ensuring that response teams on both sides of the border are trained to work together effectively.



ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

The promotion of cultural and natural heritage as a driver of sustainable development has in part contributed to improving accessibility to **cultural and natural assets**. Digital solutions have enhanced tourism experiences and supported efforts to extend tourism seasonality. By increasing access to lesser-known sites and integrating sustainable tourism practices, the Programme has **encouraged more balanced visitor flows** and reduced pressure on high-density locations. Strengthening cross-border collaboration in tourism development, promoting shared branding initiatives, and fostering stronger links between heritage sites and local economies will help to increase the potential of cultural assets in fostering sustainable growth.

Biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration have been supported through collaborative conservation measures and advanced environmental monitoring. Efforts to strengthen the management of marine and coastal habitats have contributed to improving capacity for preserving biodiversity and responding to environmental threats. By promoting sustainable resource use and enhancing coordination between stakeholders, the Programme has contributed to **more effective conservation strategies**. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of these efforts will require continued **integration of conservation policies into broader governance frameworks** and securing stable financial resources to support ongoing monitoring and restoration activities.

The Programme's focus on improving environmental quality in marine and coastal areas has led to the implementation of **monitoring systems**, pollution control measures, and waste management solutions. These initiatives have strengthened local capacities to address pollution challenges and protect marine ecosystems. The integration of environmental monitoring tools into policy frameworks has provided decision-makers with valuable data for managing coastal and marine resources more effectively. Ensuring **sustained enforcement of pollution control measures** and fostering public-private cooperation in environmental stewardship will be critical for maintaining improvements in marine and coastal quality.

CROSS-BORDER ADDED VALUE

In **cultural and natural heritage preservation**, the Programme has encouraged a more integrated approach to cultural heritage management, fostering collaboration between cultural institutions, municipalities, and regional development agencies.

For **biodiversity protection** and **environmental quality**, coordinated conservation efforts have ensured that biodiversity protection measures are not implemented in isolation but rather as part of a broader regional strategy. The cross-border component has also facilitated the adoption of common methodologies for data collection, making it easier to track progress and assess the effectiveness of conservation actions.



MARITIME TRANSPORT

The Programme's focus on improving maritime and coastal transport services has contributed to a more **sustainable** and **efficient connectivity** between Italy and Croatia. Efforts to promote multimodal transport solutions have aimed at optimising the integration of different transport modes, improving **accessibility for passengers and goods**, and reducing environmental impacts. Investments in green port technologies have helped to improve environmental sustainability. The Programme has also supported the implementation of digital solutions to enhance efficiency in maritime logistics and passenger services.

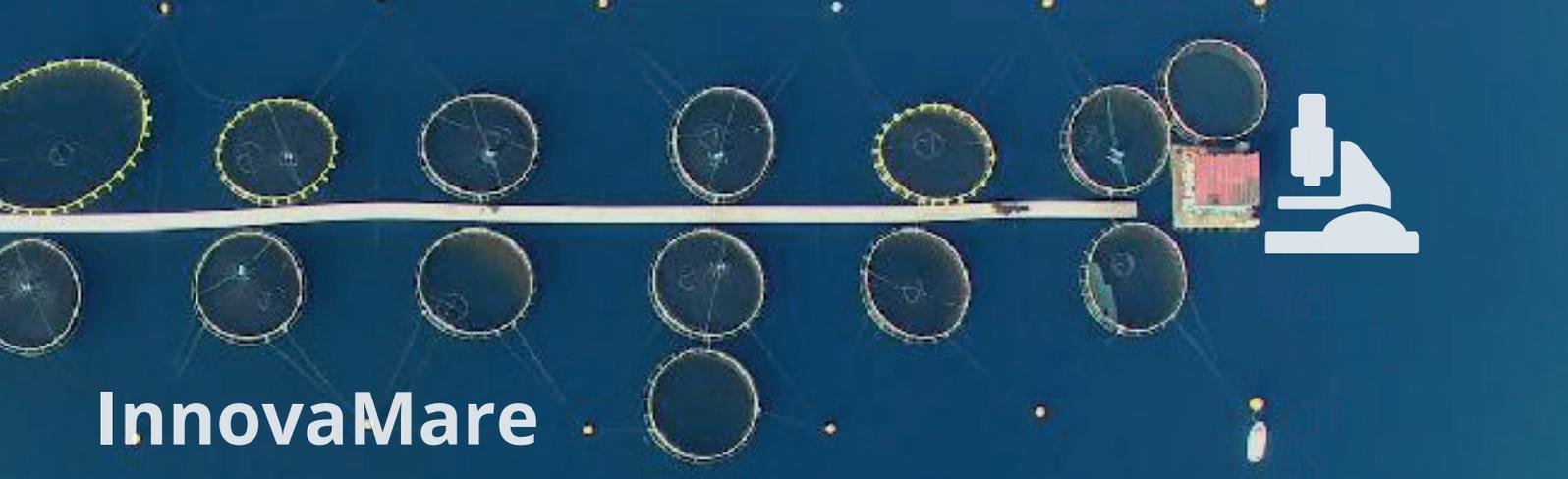
One of the key challenges in maritime transport has been the complexity of regulatory frameworks governing cross-border connectivity. Differences in customs regulations, safety protocols, and administrative procedures have posed **challenges to establishing new ferry routes** and improving passenger mobility between the two countries. Despite these challenges, the Programme has demonstrated the potential of sustainable cross-border maritime transport to serve as an important element of sustainable regional development, laying the foundation for further progress in the current 2021-2027 period.

CROSS-BORDER ADDED VALUE

In **maritime transport**, Italian and Croatian port authorities, transport operators, and policymakers have been able to explore solutions for improving multimodal transport connectivity. The potential for seamless maritime transport between the two countries is significant, but regulatory differences have at times hindered progress.



SUCCESS STORIES



InnovaMare

TITLE	BUDGET	TIMEFRAME
InnovaMare <i>Blue enhancement action for technology transfer</i> TYPE OF PROJECT: STRATEGIC	MEUR 5,6	START-END DATE 01/07/2020 – 30/06/2023 DURATION 36 months
LEAD PARTNER		
InnovaMare - CROATIAN CHAMBER OF ECONOMY		
PRIORITY AXIS		
P.A. 1 - Blue Innovation		
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE		
S.O. 1.1 - Enhance the framework conditions for innovation in the relevant sectors of the blue economy within the cooperation area		

The InnovaMare project has established a lasting impact on marine technology and sustainability in the Adriatic Sea. It created an innovative ecosystem by integrating businesses, research centers, universities, and public institutions, fostering sustainable marine resource management.

A key achievement is the Digital Innovation Hub, which provides services for marine monitoring, smart buoys, and underwater drones, enhancing real-time environmental tracking and regulatory enforcement. To ensure long-term sustainability, the project led to the creation of InnovaMare Technologies, a private entity supporting the Hub with services like vessel tracking and marine surveillance.

By transitioning from a project-based initiative to a self-sustaining business, InnovaMare strengthened the regional market for marine technology solutions and positioned stakeholders for continued success. Its integration into the European innovation ecosystem secures funding opportunities and fosters ongoing collaboration. The project also enhanced cross-border cooperation between Italy and Croatia, demonstrating the value of shared expertise in addressing marine challenges.

PROJECT SITE: <https://programming14-20.italy-croatia.eu/web/innovamare>



FIRESPELL

TITLE	BUDGET	TIMEFRAME
<p>FIRESPELL <i>Fostering Improved Reaction of crossborder Emergency Services and Prevention Increasing safety Level</i></p> <p>TYPE OF PROJECT: STRATEGIC</p>	<p>MEUR 19,4</p>	<p>START-END DATE 01/04/2020 – 30/06/2023</p> <p>DURATION 39 months</p>
LEAD PARTNER		
FIRESPELL - PUBLIC INSTITUTION RERA S.D. FOR COORDINATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF SPLIT DALMATIA COUNTY		
PRIORITY AXIS		
P.A. 2 – Safety and Resilience		
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE		
S.O. 2.2 – Increase the safety of the Programme area from natural and man-made disaster		

The FIRESPELL project has significantly improved emergency response capacity in the Adriatic region, enhancing civil protection coordination between Italy and Croatia. It established advanced training centers, upgraded firefighting, oil spill response, and seismic monitoring systems, and developed a joint cross-border emergency management system.

A key achievement is the creation of harmonized emergency guidelines and policy papers, including the Green Paper and White Paper, which provide strategic recommendations for cross-border disaster response. While full adoption by authorities remains uncertain, these frameworks lay the foundation for stronger regional coordination.

The project’s long-term impact is ensured through the continued operation of training centers and maintenance of modern emergency equipment, supported by regional and national funding. Additionally, FIRESPELL fostered cross-border cooperation, strengthening partnerships that will sustain its outcomes. Follow-up initiatives under the Interreg Italy-Croatia 2021-2027 framework are building on its methodologies, focusing on resilience, water management, and digital civil protection plans, ensuring its lasting contribution to disaster preparedness and regional safety.

PROJECT SITE: <https://programming14-20.italy-croatia.eu/web/firespill>



SASPAS

TITLE	BUDGET	TIMEFRAME
<p>SASPAS <i>Safe Anchoring and Seagrass Protection in the Adriatic Sea</i></p> <p>TYPE OF PROJECT: STANDARD</p>	<p>MEUR 1,8</p>	<p>START-END DATE 01/01/2019 – 30/06/2022</p> <p>DURATION 42 months</p>
LEAD PARTNER		
MUNICIPALITY OF MONFALCONE		
PRIORITY AXIS		
P.A .3 - Environment and Cultural Heritage		
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE		
S.O. 3.2 – Contribute to protect and restore biodiversity		

The SASPAS project made a lasting impact on Adriatic biodiversity conservation by protecting and restoring *Posidonia oceanica* seagrass meadows. Key achievements include installing eco-friendly anchoring systems, piloting seagrass transplants, and conducting monitoring campaigns in Italy and Croatia.

A major success was fostering cross-border cooperation among municipalities, universities, and NGOs to develop unified conservation strategies. The project also contributed to policy advancements, influencing maritime domain management laws and integrating conservation principles into national tourism strategies. To ensure long-term impact, SASPAS launched the ‘Be a Posidonia Keeper’ campaign, raising awareness among boaters, marinas, and the public about eco-friendly anchoring and habitat protection. Its legacy continues through follow-up initiatives like BIOPRESSAdria, which expand conservation efforts.

SASPAS highlights the need for a large-scale, coordinated approach to coastal conservation, demonstrating that shared expertise and strategic collaboration are essential for preserving marine habitats in the Mediterranean.

PROJECT SITE: <https://programming14-20.italy-croatia.eu/web/saspas>

SUSPORT

TITLE	BUDGET	TIMEFRAME
SUSPORT <i>SUSustainable PORTS</i> TYPE OF PROJECT: STRATEGIC	MEUR 7,1	START-END DATE 01/07/2020 – 30/06/2023 DURATION 36 months
LEAD PARTNER		
SUSPORT - PORT NETWORK AUTHORITY OF THE EASTERN ADRIATIC SEA		
PRIORITY AXIS		
P.A. 4 – Maritime transport		
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE		
S.O. 3.2 – Improve the quality, safety and environmental sustainability of marine and coastal transport services and nodes by promoting multimodality in the Programme area		

The SUSPORT project significantly enhanced environmental sustainability and energy efficiency in Italian and Croatian ports, fostering long-term cross-border governance in port sustainability. Bringing together 17 partners, it facilitated policy harmonization, pilot actions, and institutional cooperation. A major achievement was the reduction of 16,750 t CO2 eq/year, cutting 3% of total emissions in the involved ports. Key contributions came from cold ironing projects in Trieste and Ancona, alongside port lighting upgrades, electric vehicles, photovoltaic systems, and energy-efficient buildings. SUSPORT aligns with the Adriatic-Ionian Green/Smart Port Hubs Concept, integrating Adriatic and Ionian ports into a sustainable, intelligent network within the TEN-T Corridors. Its legacy includes ongoing emission reduction efforts, cross-border collaboration, and a structured approach to green port development, ensuring long-term impact on regional sustainability.

PROJECT SITE: <https://programming14-20.italy-croatia.eu/web/susport>



LESSONS LEARNT AND RECCOMENDATIONS

LESSONS LEARNT

The Programme's **strong focus on the Adriatic Sea** significantly enhances its capacity to generate meaningful impact, an approach that should be continued in the 2021-2027 period and beyond.

The Programme's capitalisation efforts, which began as a foundation of the 2014-2020 Programme with the Standard+ projects, are now also being expanded to the Mediterranean level through the **cross-border coordination mechanism**. Placing greater emphasis on capitalisation at the macro-regional level could be a potential direction for the 2021-2027 period.

Projects across all Specific Objectives provided cross-border added value by fostering knowledge exchange and collaboration, as well as developing common solutions for issues and sectors which impact both countries, such as climate change, natural hazards, and the blue economy.

The implementation of **environmental monitoring activities** in the Adriatic Sea demonstrates clear cross-border added value. However, there is a risk associated with the limited number of specialised actors participating in partnerships.

One notable outcome from 2014-2020 is the role of **partnerships as drivers of continuity** and impact in all thematic areas, facilitating the transition into the 2021-2027 period. This confirms the strategic importance of consolidating and further supporting partnerships with proven capacity for cooperation.

EVALUATORS' MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensuring continued coordination among Interreg programmes overlapping in the EUSAIR area (e.g. through the multi-programme coordination mechanism and beyond) to strengthen the programme's long-term impact and contribution to EUSAIR, by enabling better alignment of priorities and long-term sustainability of results.

Financial sustainability should be reinforced by leveraging complementary funding sources to maintain and expand successful initiatives. **Strengthening cross-border governance structures** will help align regulatory frameworks and facilitate smoother cooperation.

Promoting **closer synergies with macro-regional strategies** will further amplify the impact of cross-border cooperation, reinforcing the long-term sustainability of programme results.

Defining a clearer role for policy makers in the uptake of plans and strategies to achieve long-lasting change: a greater and more precise involvement of policymakers at local, regional and national level should be planned to avoid that action plans and strategies developed by projects have a higher chance of being adopted into long-term policies.

To increase the durability and impact of the programme's achievements, **long-term policy integration should be prioritised** to ensure that outputs such as adaptation plans, conservation strategies, and multimodal transport solutions are embedded into national and regional frameworks.

Expanding business sector involvement will enhance the commercialisation of innovations and the integration of new technologies into market applications.



IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS

Facilitated private sector involvement

Provide incentives for businesses to adopt and invest in project outcomes

Enhanced institutional capacity

Invest in training for public authorities to better manage and sustain project results

Engagement of local and regional authorities

Strengthen their role in the long-term sustainability of projects

MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

Integration of project results into policy

Identify successful projects and embed their strategies into national, regional or local policies

Increased funding alignment

Ensure coordination of EU and national funding to sustain and scale up impactful projects

Monitoring and evaluation

Establish mechanisms to track the effectiveness of adopted project strategies

LONG-TERM ACTIONS

Institutionalisation of knowledge exchange

Create permanent platforms for sharing best practices and policy learning



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