



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
MINISTRY OF COHESION
AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Iceland 
Liechtenstein  Norway
Norway grants  grants

EEA FINANCIAL MECHANISM 2014-2021 AND
NORWEGIAN FINANCIAL MECHANISM 2014-2021

6th ANNUAL MEETING

FINAL MINUTES

Ljubljana, 11 April 2024

Participants:

- **Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Norway**
 - Jon Erik Strømø, Head of Donors Delegation
 - Åsmund Eriksen, Adviser responsible for Slovenia
- **Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway in Hungary**
 - Trine Skymoene, Ambassador of Norway to Slovenia located in Budapest
 - Tímea Ruzsbaczký, EEA and Norway Grants Programme Officer
- **Embassy of Iceland in Vienna**
 - Helga Hauksdóttir, Ambassador of Iceland
- **Financial Mechanism Office (FMO)**
 - Katrine Steinfeld, Head of the Country and Bilateral Unit
 - Aurélien Dierckens, Country Officer Slovenia
- **Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development (MCRD)**
 - Mojca Aljančič, Director-General Cohesion Policy Directorate
- **Slovenian National Focal Point – Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development (MCRD)**
 - Jadranka Plut, Head of NFP and Head of Programme Operator
 - Nataša Babuder Rumpret, NFP Coordinator and Bilateral Fund Officer
 - Gordana Stanišič, Evaluation Officer
- **Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Slovenia – Certifying Authority and Irregularity Authority**
 - Robert Šircelj, EU Funds Management Department
- **Budget Supervision Office of the Republic of Slovenia – Audit Authority**
 - Maja Švajger, Coordinator for EEA and Norway Grants
- **Programme Operator MCRD**
 - Silvija Jakopovič, Programme Coordinator
 - Dimitrij Kuzmič, Contract Manager
 - Maja Vodopivec Crkvenjaš, Contract Manager
 - Tanja Buda, Contract Manager
 - Njenja Vičič Murgel, Contract Manager
 - Žan Sikirič, Contract Manager
- **Active Citizens Fund (ACF) in Slovenia – Fund Operator CNVOS**
 - Tina Divjak, Head of Advocacy

PROPOSED AGENDA

- Opening speeches given by Ms. Mojca Aljančič, Director-General Cohesion Policy Directorate, Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development and representatives of the Donor States H. E. Ms Trine Skymoene, Ambassador of Norway, H. E. Ms Helga Hauksdóttir, Ambassador of Iceland and Mr Jon Erik Strømø, Head of the donor delegation and approval of the agenda
- Combined Strategic and Annual Report 2023 (presentation by the Head of NFP, Ms Jadranka Plut)
- Progress of Programmes and Risk Management (presentation by the Head of PO, Ms Jadranka Plut)
- Discussion
- Report on directly managed programmes by FMO (presentation by the FMO)
- Financial aspect of the implementation (presentation by the Certifying Authority)
- Irregularities (presentation by the Irregularity Authority)
- Presentation of the 6th Annual Audit Report (presentation by the Audit Authority)
- Publicity and communication (presentation by the Head of NFP, Ms Jadranka Plut)
- Presentation of the projects (Think XR, Green Penguin)
- Conclusion and closing remarks

1. Opening speeches and approval of the agenda

Ms. Plut welcomed all participants at the 6th Annual Meeting and invited Ms. Mojca Aljančič, Director-General of the Cohesion Policy Directorate and the Representatives of the Donor Countries to deliver their opening speeches.

Ms. Aljančič expressed her satisfaction that despite many challenges that influenced the implementation of programmes all projects will be concluded by 30 April 2024. The EEA and Norway Grants, although modest in size, contribute to Slovenian strategic development objectives and support bilateral cooperation with the Donor States. Ms. Aljančič expressed hope that at this year's Annual Meeting there would be some time available for discussion on the next programming period of EEA and Norway Grants and wished the participants a successful meeting.

Ms. Skymoene, Ambassador of Norway pointed out that this was her last Annual Meeting in Slovenia. Even though the start of her involvement in the implementation of the EEA and Norway Grants in Slovenia was marked by the COVID-19 Pandemic and followed by several other factors. One of the potential risks to successful implementation was the limited capacity of the National Focal Point she is satisfied that all projects will be finalised without delays. She expressed her gratitude for excellent cooperation in previous years and expectation that this will continue also in the future.

Ms. Hauksdóttir, Ambassador of Iceland located in Vienna, responsible for Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia said that she had previous experience with the EEA and Norway Grants, but this was her first Annual Meeting in Slovenia. She said that for Iceland, the EEA Grants continue to be an important way of bringing Iceland and Slovenia closer together and provide an excellent platform for bilateral cooperation between Iceland and Slovenia Ms. Hauksdóttir expressed gratitude for valuable cooperation in previous years as well and wished we continue this path.

Mr. Strømø, Head of the donor delegation pointed out that he was satisfied that we reached the final stage of programme implementation. He mentioned the floods that happened last year that could have had a devastating impact on the completion of projects, but fortunately, this

did not materialize. Mr. Strømø underlined the importance of transparent communication among all involved institutions and hoped to continue the cooperation in the same spirit as in the past. He briefly mentioned the preliminary agreement with the European Commission on a new funding period for the Grants. While waiting for next steps, he expressed eagerness to discuss lessons learnt.

After opening remarks, Ms. Plut introduced the agenda and proposed the agenda to be approved.

Conclusion 1:

The participants of the Annual Meeting adopted the agenda.

2. Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report 2023 Progress of programmes and risk management

Ms. Plut started her presentation of the Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report for 2023 with a description of the general country context and the most important factors that affected the implementation of the EEA and Norway Grants in Slovenia in 2023. At the beginning of 2023, the Government Office for Development and Cohesion Policy was transformed into the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development. This change in organisational setup did not affect human resources at the National Focal Point (NFP) and the Programme Operator (PO). To ensure the smooth implementation of programmes in their most critical stage, additional staff was employed at the NFP and PO. The implementation of investment projects was also affected by the Ukrainian crisis and disruptions in supply chains as well as by severe flooding in August 2023. However, based on the latest information all projects will be finished by the set deadline, i.e., 30 April 2024.

Ms. Plut also mentioned the most important lessons learned, among which are the importance of building partnerships, flexibility and adaptability, clear communication, capacity building and monitoring and evaluation.

Mr. Strømø thanked the NFP for submitting the Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report for 2023 on time. The report is well-written and includes all relevant information about the progress made in 2023. He stated that the donors appreciate that the examples of good practices and projects are included in the report. Mr. Strømø was glad that despite the late development of the programmes the objectives will be reached by the deadline. He pointed out that the Climate Programme contributed to the green transition and inquired about the possibility of including this priority area also in future programmes. Mr. Strømø also mentioned that time is a critical factor that affects implementation. This will most probably be a general challenge also in the next financing period of the EEA and Norway Grants.

Conclusion 2:

The Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report for 2023 is approved and will be published on the dedicated website (www.norwaygrants.si/ www.eeagrants.si).

Ms. Plut continued with the presentation of the progress of programmes.

The Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Programme aims to address the challenges posed by climate change through various projects focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing resilience to climate impacts. The whole programme budget was committed to 17 projects: 16 projects under the Call for Proposals and one pre-defined project (INFO-GEOTHERMAL). Three projects are being implemented under Outcome 1: Increased Renewable Energy Production. Projects' focus is mostly on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing the use of renewable resources, and maintaining a clean and pristine environment. One project (INFO-GEOTHERMAL) is a pre-defined project. Five projects

selected under Outcome 2: Enhanced Sustainable Mobility Management focus mostly on establishing regional mobility centres, creating mobility plans, increasing travel using sustainable forms of mobility and training experts for planning and managing sustainable mobility on the regional and inter-municipal level.

Six projects selected under Outcome 3: Increased Application of Circular Economy Principles focus mostly on reusing discarded materials for developing new products and applying circular economy principles in the processes of public administration and industry. Three projects selected under Outcome 4: Improved Management of Ecosystems Under Climate Change Pressure focus on improving ecosystems by restoring natural habitats and introducing new management models.

The Education Programme focuses on improving educational opportunities and outcomes for students across Slovenia through initiatives aimed at enhancing teaching quality, promoting digital literacy, and fostering inclusive education practices. Within the Education Programme, the funds were committed to 22 projects selected under the Call and 2 pre-defined projects (project BLEND-VET and project Children's House / Barnahus).

Ms. Plut pointed out that the bilateral component of the Climate and Education Programme is well represented on the programme and project level. All projects within both programmes will be finished by 30 April 2023.

As concerns the Climate Programme, Mr. Strømø expressed his satisfaction with the involvement of partners from all donor countries. Since some very interesting projects are being implemented under the Climate Programme, he inquired if some projects with good results and important impacts could be further developed and implemented in the future.

As concerns the Education Programme, Mr. Strømø pointed out the successful implementation and results of the Children's House/Barnahus Project.

Ms. Plut also presented the progress and challenges within the Fund for Bilateral Relations. In 2023, 6 bilateral initiatives have been finalized (Study Visit on Regional Innovation Ecosystems, Integration Assistance for Displaced Persons from Ukraine, Supporting Green Start-Ups, Women, Peace, and Security, Expert Event on Modalities of Financing for Development, Consultations on Modalities of Financing for Development). In 2024, three bilateral initiatives will be carried out (Cooperation Between National Libraries of Slovenia and Norway, Challenging the Future with Local Strengths and Towards Mental Well-being of Youth).

Mr. Strømø was glad about the outcomes of bilateral cooperation within the Fund for Bilateral Relations, but he also mentioned that it is understandable that the focus is on the implementation of the programmes. Mr Strømø reminded that the Bilateral Fund will be key until April 2025 and stressed the importance of realism within the time remaining.

Conclusion 3:

The participants of the Annual Meeting were informed about the progress of the programmes.

3. Report on directly managed programmes by FMO

Ms. Divjak, CNVOS / Fund Operator, presented the implementation of the Active Citizens Fund (ACF) worth 3,8 million EUR. With the additional allocation of funds, 2 additional calls for proposals were made possible. Within additional call, 16 additional projects were selected, which will be finalized by 30 April 2024. Within the quick response call, 15 projects were approved. Ms. Divjak mentioned that the Fund Operator successfully cooperates also within the Regional Programme, particularly in activities related to elections. She pointed out that the

ACF had a very important impact on the non-governmental sector and that all stakeholders involved in the implementation of ACF made visible progress in terms of capacity building. Ms. Divjak pointed out the success of ACF with one of the indicators: 32.000 people were involved in ACF/civic activities, while the initial target was 3.000 people.

Ms. Steinfeld, Head of the Country and Bilateral Unit at FMO, added that cooperation with the Fund Operator, which proved to be very competent and with strong ties to civil society, was very good.

Mr. Strømø congratulated the Fund Operator on a well-run programme and said that the donors will continue to support the civil society in all Beneficiary Countries.

Ms. Steinfeld continued with the presentation of the Social Dialogue – Decent Work Programme. Slovenian entities are involved in two projects (Decent Work for All and Strong Social Dialogue to Facilitate Adaptation to Change), which are all in the completion phase. Within the Fund for Youth Employment, seven projects include Slovenian entities, two of which are in the role of lead partner. One project is already closed. Within the Fund for Regional Cooperation, five Slovenian entities cooperate in four projects.

Conclusion 4:

The participants of the Annual Meeting were informed about the progress of the directly managed programmes by the FMO.

4. Financial aspect of the implementation

Mr. Šircelj presented the financial aspect of the implementation of programmes managed through the national budget. By the end of 2023, approximately 50% of funds (10,5 million EUR) were disbursed. Since the implementation of programmes and projects approaches the final date of eligibility, this number has increased rapidly and currently stands at 16 million EUR.

Mr. Strømø pointed out problems with the planning of funds. At the beginning of implementation, payment forecasts were usually too high, but now, at the end, they are too low. He underlined once again that realistic planning is of utmost importance for the smooth implementation of programmes and projects.

Mr. Šircelj added that the project may face different obstacles in the implementation phase and suggested that FMO calculate those risks in the payment forecasts.

5. Irregularities

Mr. Šircelj presented the established workflow for submitting the Quarterly Reports (and Immediate Reports) on irregularities. He said that the Irregularity Authority is proud that most of the potential irregularities were prevented.

Within the Education Programme, there were 5 irregularities of insignificant amounts detected but not reported according to Article 12.5 of the Regulations. Within the Climate Programme, there were 2 irregularities of this type. He pointed out that this is already the third financing period of the EEA and Norway Grants, therefore the quality of control as well as the experience of project partners have increased which is reflected in a lower number of irregularities detected.

Mr Strømø reminded of the importance of following this closely, especially as projects close. The Grants' zero tolerance to corruption is important in this regard, and he thanked the Irregularity Authority in advance for its work and vigilance.

6. Presentation of the 6th Annual Audit Report

Ms. Švajger presented the 6th Audit report in the reference period of 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023. In this period the Audit Authority prepared Version 4 of the Audit Strategy, in which the sampling method is described in more detail and the thresholds for the audit coverage aligned with the Sampling Guidance. The Audit Authority (AA) also examined the updated version 4 of the Description of the Management and Control System (MCS). Based on the desk analysis, the AA considers that the MCS in place is compliant with the regulations and the changes within the National Focal Point (the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development) do not have a substantial impact on the functioning of the MCS. The Follow-up system audits at the NFP, PO, CA and IA were planned in the Audit strategy and the Annual Audit Plan for 2023 but were not carried out as there were no open recommendations. The AA's overall assessment of the system based on the system audits carried out in the previous audit period falls within Category 2: Systems works, but some improvements are needed.

The AA also performed audits of 7 projects. All programmes and 4 different types of costs were considered in sampling conditions. Based on these audits, 11 findings and recommendations were issued. At the moment there are no open recommendations. The total amount of ineligible expenditure detected was 7,071.27 EUR. No suspicion of fraud was detected and reported. The Audit Authority expressed an unqualified opinion for the reference period. The Audit Plan for 2024 is to audit 10 projects by the end of 2024. The authority mentioned that a new colleague might join the team in June 2024 or some of the tasks being outsourced.

Mr. Strømø noted that the Audit Authority detected no irregularities. He underlined the importance of audit work in this critical stage of implementation.

7. Publicity and communication

Ms. Plut presented the main activities in publicity and communication in 2023. The main activities included updating relevant information on the webpage and publishing news in Slovenian and English language. She stated that the Facebook page was hacked and it was quite challenging to get new followers. Ms. Plut pointed out that the BlendVET project is a part of the international #Ourstories Campaign. The total number of page views was 75,946 and the total number of unique visitors was 42,863. There were 115 posts published on Facebook and 89 posts on Instagram. In 2023, the EEA and Norway Grants were mentioned in over 270 articles in various local, regional, and national media. She also explained that a public survey has been conducted, which showed that 58% of the respondents were not familiar with the Grants while 71% did not recognize any displayed logo of the EEA and Norway Grants.

Ms. Strømø emphasized that the existing logo of the EEA and Norway Grants will continue to be used in the 2021-2028 financial period.

7. Presentation of projects (Think XR, Green Penguin)

Two projects were presented by Project Promoters as follows:

- Presentation of the project *Green Penguin*
- Presentation of the project *Think XR*

Conclusions and closing remarks

Ms. Plut thanked everyone for a very productive discussion.

Mr. Strømø expressed his satisfaction that the NFP and the PO teams were reinforced to support the final stage of programme implementation. He was also pleased with the fact that there is a lot of effort focusing on publicity, which helps to increase the visibility of the EEA and Norway Grants. At the end, he expressed his gratitude for the well-organised Annual Meeting.

In line with the Regulations, the NFP will publish the minutes of the meeting on the dedicated website (www.norwaygrants.si/www.eeagrants.si).