



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA  
GOVERNMENT OFFICE FOR DEVELOPMENT  
AND EUROPEAN COHESION POLICY

Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway grants



Norway grants

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

# 2<sup>nd</sup> ANNUAL MEETING

## MINUTES

Ljubljana, 15 October 2020



**Date and time:** 15 October 2019, 10:00–13:00

**Location:** MS Teams/Government Office for Development and European Cohesion Policy (GODC), Kotnikova 5 (4<sup>th</sup> floor Conference Room), SI-1000 Ljubljana

**Participants:**

- **Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway**
  - Sjur Larsen
  - Anne Havnør
  
- **Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iceland**
  - Kristín Aðalbjörg Árnadóttir, Ambassador
  
- **Financial Mechanism Office (FMO)**
  - Árni Páll Árnason, Deputy Director
  - Steinar Ingi Matthiasson, Country Officer
  
- **Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway in Hungary**
  - Trine Skymoene, Ambassador
  - Timea Ruzsbackzky, EEA and Norway Grants Programme Officer
  
- **Slovenian National Focal Point (NFP) – GODC**
  - Nina Seljak, Head of NFP
  - Petra Hiršel Horvat, NFP
  - Nataša Babuder Rumpret, NFP
  - Andreja Štravs, NFP, Communication Officer
  
- **Ministry of Finance, Slovenia**
  - Robert Šircelj, Department for Management of EU Funds
  - Maks Pajek, Department for Management of EU Funds
  
- **Budget Supervision Office**
  - Jure Mekinc, Auditor
  
- **Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovenia**
  - Vanja Markočič, Department for European Countries

**Programme Operators (POs)**

- **Active Citizens Fund (ACF) – Fund Operator CNVOS**
  - Tina Divjak, Head of Advocacy

- **Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme** – Programme Operator GODC
  - Špela Dragar, Head of Financial Mechanisms Division
  - Jože Petkovšek, programme manager
  - Ksenija Goričan, contract manager
  
- **Enhancing Human Capital programme** – Programme Operator GODC
  - Silvija Jakopovič, programme manager
  - Maja Vodopivec Crkvenjaš, contract manager
  
- **Control Division ETC, IPA and IFM programmes GODC**
  - Maja Martinšek, Head of Division

### **Proposed Agenda:**

- Opening remarks and adoption of the Agenda
- Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report 2019 and its approval
- Progress of programmes and risk assessment
  - Technical Assistance
  - Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme
  - Education – Enhancing Human Capital programme
  - Active Citizens Fund
- Bilateral Cooperation
- Allocation of the reserve and other open issues
- Publicity and communication
- Conclusions and closing remarks

## 1. Opening remarks/adoption of the agenda

After giving opening remarks Nina Seljak, Head of National Focal Point (NFP) underlined that due to the COVID-19 measures the Annual Meeting could not be organised in person as initially intended and had to be held as a video conference. Ms Seljak also introduced Špela Dragar as the new Head of Financial Mechanisms Division.

The participants of the Annual Meeting were also welcomed by Sjur Larsen from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and H.E. Kristín Aðalbjörg Árnadóttir, Ambassador from the Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Mr Larsen, on behalf of the donors and FMO, welcomed back Nina Seljak as the newly recruited Head of the NFP. He noted that due to the current circumstances certain delays have occurred in Slovenia with regard to the implementation of the Norwegian and EEA FM. The donors recognise the negative impact of Covid-19 but welcomed Slovenia plan on concluding all the needed formalities and reviews soon in order to have the calls launched in December 2020 and see actual implementation start in early 2021. The donors expressed their thanks for all the hard work during these trying times and for the fruitful cooperation.

## 2. Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report 2019 and its approval

Petra Hiršel Horvat briefly presented the Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report for 2019. The Programme Agreements for Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme and Education programme were signed in December 2019. The process of developing the concept notes for both programmes, the process of consultation thereon and alignment of supplementary information for both programmes was intense and carried out in cooperation between the Financial Mechanism Office (FMO), donor programme partners and programme operators; it was successfully completed in late 2019.

At the same time the ACF signed the Programme Implementation Agreement with the FMO, launched its programme, published the first public call and held several information workshops across Slovenia.

Under the Fund for Bilateral Relations the first meeting of the Joint Committee for Bilateral Fund (JCBF) took place in April 2019, the Bilateral Fund Work Plan was adopted and the first bilateral activities started with the implementation.

The Description of the National level Management and Control system was approved by the FMO in December 2019.

Publicity and communication activities at the national level that took place in 2019 covered the establishment of the communication network, attending events, approval of the Communication Strategy, webpage and social media activities. At the programme level factsheets for both programmes were prepared and activities on the dedicated website and social media were implemented.

During the preparations of the implementation of the EEA and Norway Grants a number of challenges were faced, including the preparation of the necessary national legislation

(National Decree on the implementation of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 in Slovenia), administrative burden and establishment and adaptation of the information system eMS. There were some technical issues with the submission of the report in GrACE (the part of ACF). But in close cooperation with the FMO this matter was successfully resolved.

Mr Larsen thanked Ms Hiršel Horvat for the presentation and for submitting the Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report in due time by saying it is very well written and reflects the actual state of play. Mr Larsen encouraged the Slovenian entities to seek ways to reduce the administrative burden; the donor states are open for suggestions. If something can be done in this direction it will be welcomed.

The donors asked for information regarding the draft national decree on the implementation of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 in Slovenia, how important it is for the implementation of the financial mechanisms in Slovenia and what the state of affairs is.

The donor states are content with the Management and Control System.

The donor states call upon all beneficiary states to submit the forecast as accurately as possible. All states add additional funds to be on the safe side. But when it is summed up for all programmes and all beneficiary states it represents a challenge for the donor states.

Ms Hiršel Horvat thanked Mr Larsen for the feedback on the Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report and confirmed the recommendation regarding the forecast will be taken into due account. She informed that the national decree on the implementation of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 in Slovenia needs to be adopted before the publication of the public call and stated Slovenia is in the last phase before the decree is submitted for Government consideration in the coming weeks.

Ms Seljak added that due to the national co-financing, the national decree on the implementation of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 needs to comply with national budget legislation. The content has already been aligned with the ministries and the decree will be submitted for Government consideration.

The FMO representative informed that the Strategic Reports are now being submitted in Grace for the first time and the FMO is reviewing the procedure of submitting them taking note of the different complaints/comments made by NFPs.

**Conclusion: *Combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report for 2019 is approved and will be published on the dedicated website ([www.norwaygrants.si/](http://www.norwaygrants.si/) [www.eeagrants.si/](http://www.eeagrants.si/)).***

### **3. Progress of programmes and risk assessment**

Ms Seljak stressed that Slovenian authorities have, due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, adapted the work processes in the second quarter of 2020 within the NFP and the POs. The necessary reorganisation allowed the NFP and the POs to continue carrying out the activities for the implementation of the EEA and Norway grants as effectively and efficiently as possible.

The NFP maintained regular communication with the FMO and of course with other partners from all national entities and donor partners, however, certain limitations and delays have occurred as a result of working during the pandemic and the challenging conditions it causes.

Ms Seljak also pointed out that the NFP and the POs faced several challenges due to the change of the Government in March and several replacements of ministers in GODC in the last year which contributed to delays on all their work on the implementation of the Grants and preparation for calls.

### **Technical Assistance (Petra Hiršel Horvat)**

Ms Hiršel Horvat briefly presented the development in 2020 regarding Technical Assistance. Funds absorption was low due to the pandemic outbreak which resulted in the fact that no activities and events were carried out.

NFP has carried out minor changes to budget headings. In line with Article 2.6 of the TA agreement this change fell within what is permitted without prior approval of the donors, consequently NFP has just recently informed the country officer about this.

In April 2020 an audit of Technical Assistance expenditure (2 IFR) was carried out by Audit Authority - Budget Supervision Office. No irregularities were found.

The NFP has worked on preparing and establishing/adapting the information system eMS for the reporting of expenditures of all involved institutions in TA implementation. It was quite a challenge to adapt the system but the NFP believes that the reporting of expenditures is being performed very well.

Due to the current health situation a lot of activities foreseen to be covered by Technical Assistance will be modified and certain flexibility will be necessary on both sides to adjust and to use the dedicated funds as effectively as possible.

### **Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme (Jože Petkovšek)**

Mr Petkovšek reported on the current state in terms of the implementation of the Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme in 2020.

The NFP approved the Description of the management and control system of the PO in September 2020 and informed the FMO of the approval.

The majority of work was dedicated to the preparation of the public call. The draft text of the public call and the supporting documents are now being aligned with the relevant ministries. The public call is planned to be published in December 2020.

A lot of work was also done with regard to the adaption of the electronic monitoring system (eMS).

There are some bilateral challenges in terms of online matchmaking for potential project promoters and donor project partners, and an online launch event for the programme public call.

The donors noted that despite the delays, everything seems to be set for a successful implementation of the programmes but underlined the wish and expectation of donors to have the call launched as soon as possible. They encouraged close contact with the FMO and the DPPs about the implementation and its continuation for Slovenia to benefit the most from their collaboration.

The donors commented on the bilateral aspect within the Grants, being aware that it is more difficult in these challenging times to find a partner. They underlined that the POs should have a close contact with the FMO regarding this last issue.

The FMO representative added that the new FMO programme officer for the programme Climate Change Mitigation and adaptation will be in office soon. Meanwhile another FMO officer has taken over the responsibilities.

### **Education – Enhancing Human Capital programme (Silvija Jakopovič)**

Ms Jakopovič reported on the current state in terms of the implementation of the Education programme in 2020 (the update document provided to FMO in early October 2020). With the signing of the Programme Agreement in 2019 the programming phase was finished and in 2020 PO moved to programme implementation stage.

In September 2020, the NFP approved the Description of the management and control system of the PO, and informed the FMO of the approval.

PO has also adapted the information monitoring system, namely the electronic Monitoring System (eMS), for the management and administration of projects and programme management costs. Programme management costs are already managed and controlled in eMS in accordance with the programme DMSC. Also, some audits related to the management costs were carried out by the Audit Authority.

The majority of the implemented activities of the PO for the Education programme during the reporting period were dedicated to the preparation of the call text and on proposals in terms of its supporting documents, combined under the guide for project promoters, proposal of quality assessment criteria, state aid notification draft, etc. PO discussed the proposed text of the public call with the relevant ministries who are to align and agree on the proposed text with the Donor Programme Partner.

The pre-defined project Children's house/Barnahus under the Education programme was approved by the FMO, and the pre-eligibility condition was introduced in the programme agreement. The condition was lifted by FMO in late March. However, certain activities on the project promoter side have been delayed due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The pre-defined project is currently being reviewed by the PO (in line with Article 6.5.3 of the Regulation).

The irrevocable and unexpected resignation of CMEPIUS (Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and European Educational and Training Programmes), acting as the Fund operator for the Small grant scheme (SGS) made a significant change to the Education programme. The PO for the Education programme and the NFP therefore proposed that the Small grant scheme is not implemented within the Education programme.

Following consultation with the FMO and DPPs (online meeting), the NFP and the PO for the Education programme decided that the most suitable solution is to reallocate the funds from the SGS to the new pre-defined project.

On 1 October 2020 a meeting with Ministry of Education, Science and Sport was held. PO discussed the possibility of financing a new project under the Education programme and the possible content of such a project. PO pointed out the expectation that such a project should be implemented in cooperation with a bilateral partner from donor states. A template for drafting a short project proposal was sent to the Ministry.

The bilateral dimension under the programme was strengthened by conducting an online meeting with the DPP, the FMO and other POs. The meeting resulted in a few good ideas regarding bilateral cooperation and matchmaking in times of COVID-19.

During the preparations for implementation of the programme certain challenges and risks have been identified. Another challenge is the bilateral aspect at programme and project level, as finding project partners from Norway is difficult due to the pandemic when only an online matchmaking meeting will be possible. The capacity and interest of the potential Norwegian partners is also a concern.

Mr Larsen welcomed the close cooperation of the POs with the FMO and DPPs. As to the eMS, he hopes it will not prove too time-consuming and that it is compatible with GrACE. He asked the POs to give the timeline for the open call publication. Regarding the pre-defined project Children's House/Barnahus, the donors welcomed that an agreement was reached to launch the project as soon as possible and asked for the timeline as well.

The donors also noted that since the Ministry of Justice in Slovenia is involved in a similar project as the Children's house PDP with the Council of Europe this cause a need for further information and setting of the pre-eligibility condition. This underlines the need for good communication flow and transparency between us.

The donors regret the withdrawal of FO CMEPIUS and consequent cancellation of the SGS on mobility. However, they note with interest Slovenia's plans to allocate the funds originally foreseen for the SGS to a new PDP on digital learning under the Education Programme. Knowledge and experience from the donor states should be of much interest and they underline the importance the original bilateral ambitions are incorporated in the new PDP.

Lastly, the donors encouraged the PO and NFP to work hard towards completing the ongoing and needed preparatory work for launching the call under the programme in December as currently planned.

### **Audit Authority (Jure Mekinc)**

Ms Seljak said that several audits have been carried out by the Audit Authority within the programmes in 2020. The Audit Authority has recently also issued the opinion that the management and control systems of the programmes Education and Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme comply with the requirements of the Regulations, that they are adequate and proportionate to effectively achieve the objectives of the programmes and that they comply with the generally accepted accounting principles.



Mr Mekinc, representative of the Audit Authority pointed out that in September they issued the opinion on the management and control systems of the programmes Education and Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme. He especially underlined that the national decree should be adopted as soon as possible. Mr Mekinc also pointed out the 100% administrative verifications within both programmes (Control unit should adopt methodology) and the double role of the PO in the selection procedure. They recommend a guard, which would prevent the double role of PO – contract manager, who would already cooperate in the previous phase in the role of the PO as the member of the Selection Committee. He also presented the findings within the audits of expenditures at the Education programme and Climate change mitigation and adaptation programme.

Mr Larsen thanked the representative of the Audit Authority for the presentation. Their work is deemed very important for the donors.

The donor states call upon all beneficiary states to submit the forecast as accurately as possible and underlined that no additional buffer layers should be added to the forecasting and explained that accurate forecasting is needed for the donor's state budgeting.

The donors reminded on the continued need for vigilance towards irregularities and underlined donors' zero-tolerance policy to corruption and fraud, and we need to actively work together to prevent irregularities and deal efficiently with those that arise.

Ms Seljak replied that the work in eMS is time consuming and that it is being checked which data will be needed in GrACE. But it is believed that this system will make work easier.

Regarding the timeline for the public call Mr Petkovšek and Ms Jakopovič said publication is planned to take place in December 2020. Ms Jakopovič added that the pre-defined project Children's House/Barnahus was approved by the Donors, certain delays have also occurred on the Project promoter side. Regarding the new PDP, the PO will send the information to the FMO as soon as they will receive the content from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

### **Active Citizens Fund** (Tina Divjak)

Ms Divjak reported on the current state in terms of the implementation of the ACF in Slovenia. Implementation of the ACF is in line with the set timeline, no major delays have occurred. So far two modification of the Programme Implementation Agreement had to be made.

A call for proposals for medium and large project with EUR 1.5 million available was published in October 2019. The first stage finished in February 2020 and the second in June 2020. 163 applications were submitted, 20 projects were selected for funding and 52.3% of them have a project partner from a donor state. The remaining funds in the amount of EUR 60.568,85 were reallocated to the Call for micro projects (quick response).

The call for micro or "rapid response" projects is an ongoing call. The main objective is to support organisations when urgent advocacy, legal, communicational or other form of immediate reaction is needed either to tackle challenges (e.g. pressures on civic space and

incidences of hate speech) or seize up the advocacy/campaigning opportunities. So far 11 projects have received support.

The call for organisational (institutional) support is being prepared.

The donors thanked Ms Divjak for a comprehensive overview of the ACF programme and welcomed the excellent news on being on time with the implementation of the ACF. Supporting civil society is a priority for the donors. In light of that and the efficient implementation of the ACF programme in Slovenia some allocation of the reserve should be considered for the programme.

### **Horizontal funds and Social Dialogue – Decent Work programme (Árni Páll Árnason)**

Mr Árnason briefed the participants about the implementation of the horizontal funds and the Social Dialog – Decent Work programme. Under the Fund for Youth Employment five projects involving Slovenian institutions are being implemented, namely *SOCIALNEET* (University of Primorska acting as project partner), *the eNEET Rural* (Styrian Technology Park acting as project partner), *IPS4NEETs* (Public University of Ptuj acting as a lead partner), *Social Innovators* (Association for Culture and Education PiNA acting as a lead partner) and *Direction Employment* (Public University of Velenje acting as a project partner). Under the Fund for Regional Cooperation four projects involving Slovenian entities were selected.

Under the Social Dialogue – Decent Work one project was selected for funding, namely *Decent work for all* implemented by the Employment Service of Slovenia.

**Conclusion: *The representatives of the programmes presented the progress made and the challenges faced within the programmes in the period from 1 January 2020 to 30 September 2020.***

## **4. Bilateral Cooperation (Nataša Babuder Rumpret)**

At the 1<sup>st</sup> JCBF meeting held in April 2019, four bilateral initiatives were approved, namely i/ organisation of bi-annual consultations and expert events on the topic of women, peace and security (20 years of the UN SC Resolution 1325); ii/ organisation of a conference on adaptation to extreme weather and climate events; iii/ consultations and expert events on modalities of funding for development; and iv/ research on equal opportunities in national diplomacies. Project promoter for all four bilateral initiatives is Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia.

All the approved bilateral initiatives included in the Bilateral Fund Work Plan were supposed to be carried out by 2022. However, due to measures taken to fight the COVID-19 epidemic some bilateral activities will have to be postponed or carried out in a different format (e.g. online videoconferences). At the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs certain changes had to be made to the Work Plan and submitted to JCBF for approval by written procedure (launched on 2 September 2020). NFP received comments from the Norwegian Embassy in Hungary which were taken into consideration where appropriate. Since all other members of

the Joint Committee for Bilateral Fund had no comments to the modified Work Plan of the Fund for Bilateral Relations, the updated workplan is considered approved. The members of the Joint Committee for Bilateral Fund were informed about the approval of the modified work plan.

Consequently, the implementation agreements between the NFP and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia also have to be amended. The procedure is under way. The implementation agreement related to the bilateral initiative No. 4 Research on equal opportunities in national diplomacies has already been amended. The implementation of this bilateral initiative, which is being implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iceland, started earlier than foreseen. In July 2019, the deputy coordinator of equal opportunities of men and women at the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs held the first discussions with Icelandic partners in order to harmonise the modalities of the research (e.g. main goals, methodology, indicators, time frame, financial resources, etc.). The purpose of the visit in Reykjavik was also to identify common challenges of both countries in the area of equal opportunities in diplomacies and to compare and share good practices. This bilateral initiative is expected to be finished by the end of 2020.

Within the Bilateral Fund a total of EUR 100,000 has been earmarked for bilateral activities of the Education programme. By 1 October 2020 study visits to Norwegian institutions in Oslo and Stavanger that deal with young drop-outs and other vulnerable groups of young people that have difficulties in entering labour market and a preparatory visit to the University College Kristiania in Norway have been carried out.

A total of EUR 100,000 has been earmarked also for bilateral activities of the Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Programme. By 1 October 2020 no bilateral activities related to this programme have been carried out.

The donors emphasised their aim for making bilateral cooperation strategic and focused as discussed in the first JCBF meeting in April 2019. Therefore, given the size and the objectives of the Bilateral Fund, they fully support the approach to focus on a few strategic pre-defined initiatives in areas of genuine bilateral interest.

The donors understand the negative impact of the pandemic causing delays on the planned activities and needs to amend the workplan. Mr Larsen encouraged the organisation of an online second meeting of the JCBF to review the state of play, the progress made and consider the best way forward.

**Conclusion: *National Focal Point presented the progress and challenges regarding the bilateral cooperation in the period from 1 January 2020 to 30 September 2020.***

## **5. Allocation of the reserve and other open issues**

The reserve funds are available within both financial mechanisms: the total amount of the reserve within the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021 is EUR 912,500 and the total amount of the reserve within the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2014-2021 is EUR 897,000.

During the process of finding the most appropriate solution for allocation of the reserve several limitations have been considered.

First, there are time limitations related to the deadline for the allocation of the reserve and, on the other hand, time limitations for the implementation of programmes and projects.

Second, there are two different financial sources and each programme receives support from both. Each financial source is linked to a certain programme outcome. In order to link the contribution of each financial source to the achievement of a certain result indicator the most practical solution is to allocate the reserve of the EEA Financial Mechanism to the programme outcome that is financed with EEA Grants and to allocate the reserve of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism to the programme outcome that is financed with Norway Grants.

Since the Climate programme covers areas requiring more funding and due to the fact that projects expected to be selected under the open call will be larger, NFP proposes to allocate the entire reserve from both financial mechanisms to the Climate programme:

i/ EUR 912,500 from EEA Financial Mechanism to the outcome “Enhanced sustainable mobility management” financed under EEA Grants and

ii/ EUR 897,000 from Norwegian Financial Mechanism to the outcome “Increased application of circular economy principles” financed under Norway Grants.

In order to meet our goal and publish the open call in December 2020 the allocation of the reserve should be finalised before December 2020.

Regarding the allocation of the reserve the procedure of modifying the MoUs (if needed) and the procedure of programme modification (amendment of programme agreements) should be clearly defined.

The donors pointed out that all the formalities to be completed for the allocation of the reserve will most likely not be finalised by 31 December 2020. The donors underlined that the mid-term review and allocation of the reserve should not cause a delay in the publication of the open calls for both programmes planned in December 2020. It is important that Slovenia officially submits its proposal for the allocation of the reserve by the end of this year, following the template provided by the FMO in January 2020. The decision about the reallocation of the reserve will be taken at the beginning of 2021. The donors underlined that it is important the reserve is allocated to programmes that have a realistic potential of absorbing more funding and are being implemented in an efficient way. The donors strongly suggested considering allocating parts of the reserve to Active Citizens Fund and potentially to the Bilateral Fund. They also pointed out that different financial sources should not be a problem and advised flexibility in this respect. Regarding the next steps related to modifying the MoUs and programmes modification, the FMO will provide answers at a later stage (depending of the outcome of the allocation of the reserve both the MoUs and the PAs need to be amended).

Ms Seljak pointed out that, according to the Agreement between the European Union, Iceland, the Principality of Liechtenstein and the Kingdom of Norway on an EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021, 10% of the total of the country specific allocations shall be set aside

for a fund for civil society. The total allocation to Slovenia from the EEA and Norway Financial Mechanisms is EUR 37.700.000 (17.800.000 EUR NOR FM). Since the total allocation of the EEA Grants for Slovenia is EUR 19.9 million and the total amount currently allocated for Active Citizens Fund stands at EUR 3 million this means that already 50% more funds have been set aside for civil society than required. The donors replied that the figure and agreement referred to is only the minimum support to be given to the ACF programme, the civil society funds are a high priority of the donors.

**Conclusion: *National Focal Point presented the Slovenia draft proposal for the allocation of the reserve. Slovenia will officially submit its proposal for the allocation of the reserve by the end of 2020.***

Regarding other open issues, Ms Seljak underlined evaluation of project applications by independent experts (quality assessment). Each project that meets the administrative and eligibility criteria should be scored by (at least) two impartial experts appointed by the PO. Given the lessons learned and problems which Slovenia as a small country faced during the implementation of the previous financial mechanism (several public procurement procedures for selection of external evaluators fell through, limited number of experts who frequently co-operate in the role of project promoters), and in line with Article 7.3 (k) of the Regulations on the implementation of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 (*disclosure of any consultant involved in the preparation of the project application*) and taking into consideration the limited timeframe for the implementation of the projects, Slovenia proposes that quality assessment is performed by the independent internal staff of GODC (not the PO or NFP staff) and by the external experts who have the appropriate expertise and knowledge of a particular field.

In line with the FMO letter (of 20 April 2020) and the current economic and health situation, NFP proposes that the grant rate changes to 100% for all Projects Promoters (not just for NGOs).

Mr Larsen expressed understanding for the difficulty in finding a sufficient number of independent, external evaluators, a challenge encountered also in other smaller, beneficiary states. It was, however, a matter of principle.

The donors pointed out that this flexibility (the grant rate changes to 100%) was meant just for NGOs. Ms Jakopovič added that in accordance with the Regulations the setting of the maximum project grant rate is under the responsibility of the Programme Operator (except for project promoters referred to in Article 6.4.3 of the Regulations, i.e. NGOs and social partners).

**Conclusions: *National Focal Point has presented the open issues (evaluation of projects applications by independent experts and grant rate change) and will submit its proposals to the FMO in writing.***

## **6. Publicity and communication (Andreja Štravs)**

Ms Štravs outlined the main activities regarding publicity and communication in 2020. Amid COVID-19 pandemic developments and considering the implementation phase of the

Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme and Education - Enhancing Human Capital programme the majority of the 2020 information and communication activities took place online. Various news pieces and notifications were published on the dedicated website and social media. Also, the notifications and the public call announcements from other programmes and horizontal funds or the FMO were shared with the public through our communication channels.

Two social media campaigns were prepared and carried out. The first highlighted five projects implemented under the Fund for Youth Employment, which involved Slovenian entities, and a project implemented under the Social Dialogue - Decent Work programme. Slovenian institutions were successful under the Fund for Regional Cooperation which means we will also promote these projects. The second social media campaign "About the EEA and Norway Grants" is still being implemented and provides basic information about the Grants in weekly posts.

In August and September, the website was reviewed and modified in order to be compliant with the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act.

The next steps with regard to publicity and communication are the publication of public calls and their promotion, preparation of factsheets, website and social networks activities, planning and implementation of the opening event.

COVID-19 has had and is still having a vast impact on communication and publicity, making it necessary to consider transforming the existing and creating new methods of communication. A special challenge pertains to ensuring visibility and reaching target groups, especially the general public. As a result, the communication strategy might need to be adjusted and amended.

Due to COVID-19, the following activities are impacted like the opening event which was planned to take place in 2020 and should coincide with the publication of the public calls for Education and Climate Change programmes which is foreseen for December 2020. However, given the preventive measures in place, the organisation of a major opening event, as initially foreseen, is unfortunately not possible. Later organisation as a standalone event is, however, questionable. NFP considered alternatives and its proposal is to join the opening event and the workshop for potential project promoters adding a promotional video with an address from the NFP, perhaps the FMO, as an opening to this workshop. The video would also be promoted on the dedicated website and social media. NFP would appreciate the donors approval of addressing the issue with flexibility light of the obligation of the NFP to organise an opening event.

Another challenge relating to the organisation of events is the distribution of promotional materials. If there are no physical events there is no opportunity to distribute the material. Therefore, our idea is to buy practical items that are needed now, such as protective masks and disinfectants, equipped with the logos of the EEA and Norway Grants, which could be distributed for example among educational institutions.

As it is extremely difficult to predict how long the COVID-19 situation will be as severe as it is now, NFP is also concerned about the use of funds dedicated for information and communication.

In light of all the mentioned challenges, NFP suggested the FMO organises an online communication workshop on the transformation of communication in light of the COVID-19 situation or that the FMO includes this issue in the upcoming annual communication workshop in order to give communication officers guidance on new ways of communication, new ideas, possibilities and opportunities.

The donors commented that the Communication Strategy most certainly needs to be updated and amended in light of the new circumstances. The new COVID-19 situation urges us to be flexible; NFP can go ahead with its opening event proposal. It is also welcome to promote projects from horizontal funds.

The FMO representative said the proposals will be passed to the FMO Communication Unit.

## **8. Conclusions and closing remarks**

For the next Annual Meeting Ms Seljak proposed to prepare plan A (meeting in person) and plan B (online meeting). Regardless of which plan is realised, the proposal is to keep the dynamics from previous years and organise the next Annual Meeting in spring.

In line with the Regulations, NFP will prepare a draft of the minutes and publish the final version on the dedicated website ([www.norwaygrants.si/www.eeagrants.si](http://www.norwaygrants.si/www.eeagrants.si)).

Ms Seljak thanked everyone for the very productive Annual Meeting.

Mr Larsen expressed his gratitude for the well-organised Annual Meeting pointing out that the FMO is available should NFP and POs need any help. He pointed out that the FMO is looking forward to observe the progress made with all the programmes and expressed his wish to visit Slovenia for the next Annual Meeting.