



EX POST EVALUATION FOR THE CENTRAL BALTIC PROGRAMME  
2014-2020

# FINAL REPORT

14 June 2023

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the final evaluation report for the Interreg Central Baltic 2014-2020 Programme which was a cross-border cooperation programme supporting projects in Estonia, Finland (including Åland), Latvia and Sweden in 18 core and 19 additional NUTS III regions. The programme had four strategic priorities (competitive economy, sustainable use of common resources, well-connected region, and skilled and socially inclusive region).

The total funding for the Central Baltic Programme's four priority axes and technical assistance was 170.54 million euros. Of this, 132.63 million euros is EU funding and 37.91 million euros national financing. By the end of 2018, 150.98 million euros (88.51% of the budget) had been committed to the projects and to Technical Assistance. The committed funding to the projects has followed tightly the allocation of funds per priority. In the first three calls, around 90% of the programme funds (105.8 million euros) were committed to 97 projects. By April 2019, a total of 39.0 million euros had been paid out to the projects. By the end of 2018, forty projects had finished their operations.

The evaluation was conducted by an international consortium led by Consultancy for Regional Development MDI Public Ltd from Finland, with Safege Baltija AS from Latvia and Sweco Sweden from Sweden as partners. The evaluation was conducted using a theory-based evaluation approach with **contribution analysis** as an evaluation method. The evidence base for the evaluation consisted of documentary evidence, indicators, online interviews with Lead Partners of the funded projects and programme authorities over Teams, an electronic survey to project partners and four focus group interviews with stakeholders. The evaluation covers all projects (137) that have been financed from the Interreg Central Baltic 2014-2020 programme.

## Successful programme with Theory of Change largely realised through the projects

Interreg Central Baltic 2014-2020 was a successful programme in a sense that it attracted a large number of projects which furthered the programme objectives. There are no objectives set at the programme or priority level. Hence, the only way to assess the programme is to look at the Specific Objective level. At the Specific Objective level, the targets were clearly exceeded. The programme was implemented as planned, and the programme budget was spent in the way it was planned.

An assessment of the Theory of Change of the programme's Specific Objectives shows that the programme largely operated in the way that it was planned. The programme logic worked as expected in Specific objectives 3.2 and 2.1. The programme logic worked largely also for Specific Objectives 4.2, 3.1 and 2.4 as well. However, for these Specific Objectives, there is either no evidence or mixed evidence as to whether the final outcomes were realised or not. The programme logic for Specific Objectives (4.1, 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3) worked to a large extent. There were some questions regarding the intermediate outcomes, although the final outcomes worked out as expected. The most obvious challenges were witnessed by the Theory of Change for Specific Objectives 2.2 and 2.3, where the evidence of the programme impact remains unclear despite the projects being successful.

The cross-border added value has been built into the programme. Namely, the selected investment priorities which are linked to the Priorities and Specific Objectives, have clearly been chosen with Central Baltic added value in mind. The funded projects have generated cross-border added value. The most common motive for cooperation was mutual knowledge transfer, although there was some variance between the Specific Objectives. Typically, the role of the border in the project was that of a resource for joint learning. Creating structures, such as networks and new contacts, for cooperation was also an important motivation for cooperation in some projects, especially business-related projects.



## Higher education and research institutions most often Lead Partners

The 137 Interreg Central Baltic projects that this evaluation focuses on have a total of 818 partners. The number of partners varies between 2 and 25. On average, the projects have 5.9 partners with the median being 4.

More than a third of all project partners (38%) are Finnish and approximately a quarter (27%) Estonian. Swedish and Latvian project partners account for slightly less than a fifth (18%) each. More than half (54%) of the project Lead Partners are Finnish and approximately a quarter (27%) Estonian. The share of Swedish (12%) and Latvian (7%) Lead Partners is significantly lower.

Partners from all eligible regions participate in Interreg Central Baltic projects. Cooperation is especially strong between the capital regions of the participating countries (Põhja-Eesti, Helsinki-Uusimaa, Stockholm county and Riga) but also from other regions with strong universities (Southwest Finland, Harjumaa and Östgötaland county).

Local public authorities represent the largest group of partners (36%) in Interreg Central Baltic projects. Higher education and research institutions (21%), Interest groups including NGOs (14%) and business support organisations (9%) also represent important groups of project partners. The different types of partners tend, however, to adopt different roles in the projects. Even though local public authorities form the largest group of partners they are far more likely to be associated or project partners than lead partners in the project.

## Recommendations

The programme architecture stresses the Specific Objective level. As such, the overall goals for the entire programme, as well as the synergies between the Priorities and Specific Objectives are not spelled out. When drafting the programme however, it would be useful to spell out the intervention logic for the entire programme so that the synergies would be made more visible and the overall goals clearer. Furthermore, the Theory of Change for the Specific Objectives should be drafted and analysed during the programming phase. This is to ensure that the projects and the entire programme are able to influence the desired outcomes.

The Specific Objectives were clearly designed for specific target groups with each having different levels of abstraction and ambition. Some Specific Objectives were very practical, working at the local level, whereas others had a specific cross-border cooperation in focus. The differences in the Specific Objectives and the funded interventions create internal differences within the programme, as well as impacting target-setting and the indicators. In terms of the programme result indicators, closer attention to programme-level consistency in particular would be beneficial.

The programme has been successful in involving partners from all regions and in creating cross-border added value. However, the networks between the projects are generally concentrated to some regions, especially capital areas and regions with large universities. In addition, some of the project partners have been involved in several Interreg Central Baltic projects. In order to have a wider regional impact, it would be beneficial to ensure that the project network is broadened and that access is afforded to new project partners, particularly from the more rural regions covered by the programme.



## ABBREVIATIONS

JS = Joint Secretariat

MA = Managing Authority

MC = Monitoring Committee

NCP = National Contact Point

SO = Specific Objective

ToC = Theory of Change

VET = Vocational Education and Training

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND, SCOPE, AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

EU Cohesion Policy for the period 2014-2020 had two goals, namely investment for growth and jobs and territorial cooperation. Programmes contributing to the first goal are furthered through the Cohesion Fund, ESF and the ERDF. The territorial cooperation goal was advanced through Interreg programmes which were funded by the ERDF. It had a budget of 10.1 billion euros which was divided amongst 60 cross-border, 15 transnational and 4 interregional programmes. The Interreg programmes furthered eleven investment priorities (thematic objectives) which contributed to the Europe 2020 strategy. Each Interreg programme could choose which relevant thematic priorities it would further.

The Interreg Central Baltic Programme 2014-2020 was a cross-border cooperation programme. It was a continuation of the Central Baltic INTERREG IV A Programme 2007-2013. The Central Baltic Programme supported projects in Estonia, Finland (including Åland), Latvia and Sweden in 18 core and 19 additional NUTS III regions. The programme was divided into three geographically defined sub-programmes: Archipelago and Islands, Central Baltic and Southern Finland - Estonia.

### Specific objectives

The programme aimed to strengthen cooperation among regions and the solving of common challenges across borders in four strategic priorities, derived from the thematic objectives. The four strategic priorities were further divided into specific objectives (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Priorities and Specific Objectives of the Interreg Central Baltic Programme 2014-2020

P1 Competitive economy	P2 Sustainable use of common resources	P3 Well-connected region	P4 Skilled and socially inclusive region
1.1 New Central Baltic knowledge intensive companies  1.2 More entrepreneurial youth  1.3 More exports by the Central Baltic companies to new markets	2.1 Natural and cultural resources developed into sustainable tourist attractions 2.2 Sustainably planned and managed marine and coastal areas 2.3 Better urban planning in the Central Baltic region 2.4 Reduced nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins inflow into the Baltic Sea	3.1 Improved transport flows of people and goods  3.2 Improved services of existing small ports to improve local and regional mobility and contribute to tourism development	4.1 More people benefiting from stronger Central Baltic communities  4.2 More aligned vocational education and training (VET) programmes in the Central Baltic region
Horizontal: enhancing access to, and use and quality of ICT & supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy			

Furthermore, two horizontal objectives (enhancing access to and use and quality of, ICT and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors) ran through the entire programme.



## 1.2 OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The overall goal of this evaluation was to assess how the Central Baltic programme's funding contributed to the objectives of each programme priority. For each priority, the evaluation assessed whether the objectives of the priority were achieved through the projects and the effectiveness and efficiency of the Programme's selected Specific Objectives. The evaluation also sought to recognise which other factors contributed to the achievement.

The evaluation covers all projects (137) that have been financed from the Interreg Central Baltic 2014-2020 programme.

The evaluation findings and results can be used to show the results and achievements of the programme, thus providing a solid basis for communication actions. The evaluation can also be used as an inspiration for, or input to the Interreg Central Baltic 2021-2027 programme.

## 1.3 TIMELINE OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation was conducted between November 2022 and April 2023.

## 1.4 EVALUATION TEAM

The consortium conducting the evaluation consisted of MDI Public Oy (Finland), SIA Safege Baltija (Latvia) and Sweco Sverige AB (Sweden).

MDI Public Oy acted as the lead partner in the evaluation and was in charge of project management and the coordination of the evaluation. The responsible evaluator for the project was Dr Tommi Ranta, while Sari Rannanpää was the project manager. Benjamin Heikkinen, Anna Laiho, Juho Nyman and Janne Sinerma also participated in the evaluation. In addition, MDI was responsible for the analysis of Priorities 1 and 2 as well as for the data collection task in Finland. SIA Safege Baltija (Ieva Cebura, experts Alise Vitola, Krisjanis Veitners, Inga Uvarova and Sille Talvets-Unt) was responsible for the analysis of Priority 4 as well as for data collection in Latvia and Estonia. Sweco Sverige AB (experts Jonas Niki Hugosson, Anna Rudberg and Erik Wahlström) was in charge of analysis of Priority 3 and for data collection in Sweden.

## 1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report is divided into ten chapters. In the introductory chapter 1 the background, objectives, and scope of the evaluation are explained. Chapter 2 discusses the methodological approach to the evaluation, including evaluation questions, methods, and tools. Chapter 3 contains the description of the Interreg Baltic Programme, its financials, and the funded projects. Chapter 4 focuses on Priority 1 and its specific objectives, their theories of change and the evaluation findings. Chapter 5 describes and assesses Priority 2, whereas Chapter 6 focuses on priority 3 and Chapter 7 on Priority 4. In Chapter 8 the evaluation findings and conclusions are summarised and the evaluation questions for the entire programme are answered. Chapter 9 contains the evaluation recommendations, while Chapter 10 includes the annexes.



## 2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

### 2.1 EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The overall scope of the Central Baltic programme impact evaluation was focused on determining how Central Baltic programme funding had contributed to the attainment of its stated objectives and the expected assessment of the impact of its results. The evaluation questions (general evaluation questions and indicative evaluation questions proposed for each Specific Objective) provided explicit guidance for evaluators indicating the main areas of interest of the programme and its stakeholders.

The evaluation of the Specific Objectives was conducted using a theory-based evaluation approach with **contribution analysis** as an evaluation method. Contribution analysis is a widely acknowledged theory-based evaluation approach focusing on the impact evaluation of complex interventions and is distinguished from other theory-based approaches in evaluation due to its more systematic approach in arriving at credible causal claims.<sup>1</sup> Contribution analysis proposes a systematic approach in arriving at credible causal claims either confirming the postulated Theory of Change (ToC) or suggesting revisions to the ToC where results prove otherwise. Contribution analysis helps to understand the likelihood that an intervention has contributed to the outcome observed, or not. Contribution analysis is undertaken through an iterative step-by-step process which explores how the intervention has contributed and uses a broad range of evidence to test this. Figure 2 shows the various steps of contribution analysis.

Figure 2 Steps of contribution analysis



Main steps of the Contribution analysis include:

**Step 1:** Setting out the cause-effect chain for the problem to be addressed by the evaluation at the level of each SO and the Programme as a whole. Under this step the evaluators will identify attained or expected outcomes and articulate what is the expected role of the programme in achieving those (e.g., contribution claim).

**Step 2:** Develop a Theory of Change including assumptions and risks for each SO. Under this step evaluators will elaborate a detailed pathway of steps in respect of how the change was expected to happen and what the roles are of the various stakeholders under consideration. The draft Theory of Change for each SO should then be verified together with the evaluation commissioner.

<sup>1</sup> Mayne J (2001) Assessing attribution through contribution analysis: Using performance measures sensibly. The Canadian Journal of Programme Evaluation 16: 1-2.





**Step 3:** Gather the existing evidence regarding the Theory of Change. Under this step, data collection is done through document analysis, interviews, survey and focus group discussions. For each element of the Theory of Change, including assumptions and risks, evidence is gathered to understand whether the theory was valid and how strong the particular causal links were.

**Step 4:** Assemble and assess the first draft contribution story and the challenges to it. Under this step evaluators systematise the gathered evidence in the first draft contribution story. Evaluators examine the strength of the evidence, determine which parts of the ToC are still unclear, determining where evidence is still missing, whether there are any alternative explanations e.g., and what else might have caused the observed change.

**Step 5:** Seek out additional evidence and/or any alternative explanations. Under this step evaluators will search for more data to fill the gaps identified during the previous step, strengthen the weak parts and look for additional evidence. The evaluators will, during this step, involve external experts (e.g., through Focus Group Discussion) in order to access unbiased opinion from sector experts not involved in programme implementation.

**Step 6:** Revise and strengthen the contribution story and communicate it (both in written and visual form). Under this step, the Theory of Change and the programme contribution story are updated and finalised. The results are described in written and visual form, providing detailed assessment of the programme funding contribution to its objectives at the level of each SO and programme.

As a result of the Contribution Analysis approach, the Central Baltic Programme stakeholders will be able to understand which of the interventions has delivered the strongest results and impact, how exactly the programme has brought about the change and what factors have enabled or hindered this.. Or in simpler words: *What has worked, for whom and in what context.*

**Theory of Change** is a central tool of the Contribution Analysis approach to understanding the causal chain that connects the observed outcomes to the programme interventions. Here theory means the assumptions, predictions and hypotheses underlying the operation of the programme. The Theory of Change develops the intervention logic of the programme into a predictive and explanatory depiction of what should happen through the intervention. In practice, each step of the Theory of Change (strategy, delivery and benefits) is examined to see whether the theoretically predicted changes occurred as expected and whether other external factors contributed to the changes.

The evaluation is based on the Theory of Change developed during the Impact evaluation of the Interreg Central Baltic Programme published in 2019. A specific Theory of Change was formulated for each Specific Objective during the evaluation. The programme document, the programme manual and the mid-term evaluation of the Interreg Central Baltic Programme, as well as interviews with the JS project managers were used to formulate the Theory of Change for each specific objective.

Triangulation was used in the evaluation to ascertain the validity of the findings. In practice, triangulation was done by using multiple evaluation methods and data sources to arrive at valid findings, conclusions and recommendations. The aim behind using mixed methods and triangulation was to improve the relevance and reliability of the evaluation by basing its recommendations on material that has been gathered and analysed in different ways.

## 2.2 DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

**Methods for data collection for the evaluation** included desk research on the existing material (qualitative and quantitative) provided by the JS, an electronic survey and personal interviews conducted over Teams.



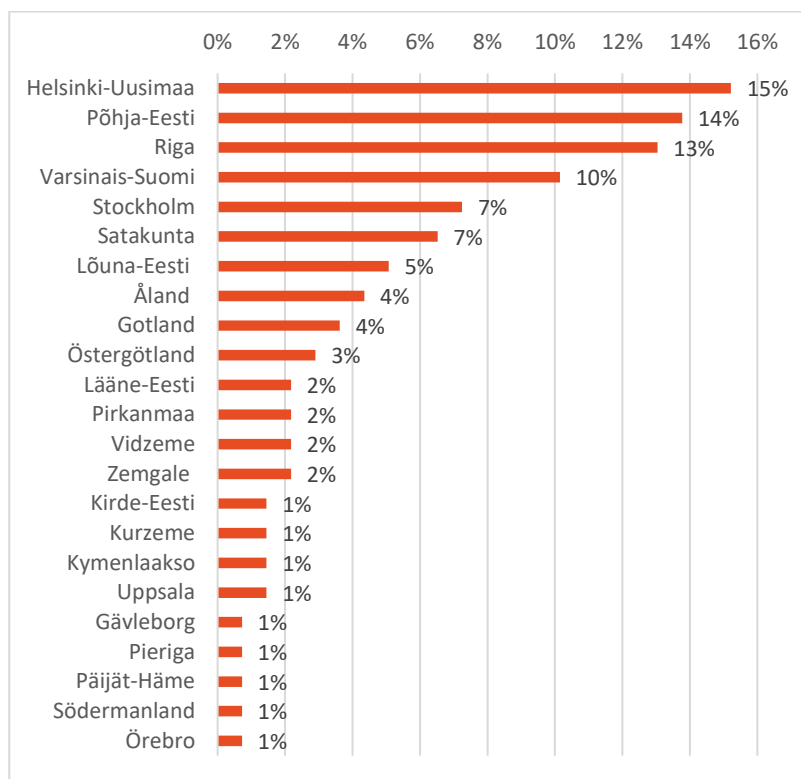
The document analysis of existing materials covered all relevant documents related to the programme, namely the programme document and the programme manual, Annual Implementation Reports, completed evaluations and statistical material related to the programme derived from the electronic system eMS and the projects (project applications, reports, payment information and reports from the eMS, as well as web sites, self-assessment materials, evaluations and materials produced in the projects).

**Interviews.** Interviews with the programme bodies and project managers/partners form an important part of the evaluation data collection process. Already at the inception phase, discussions were held with the JS about the intervention logic and Theory of Change for the Specific Objectives. The interviews conducted during the data collection phase complement the picture emerging from the document analysis about the results and effects of the programme. The interviews of the lead and project partners focused on the project achievements and the questions around the specific objective the project promotes. A total of 50 interviews with the Lead Partners were conducted. The interviews with the programme authorities (MA, Monitoring and Steering Committee members) focused on the strategic aspects of the programme, as well as the achievements of the projects in relation to the specific objectives. A total of 8 interviews with the programme authorities were undertaken.

**Electronic survey.** The electronic survey complements the findings of the document analysis and interviews. The survey provides a broader view of the implementation of the programme and projects, as well as the project results. The electronic survey was sent to all project partners. As part of the evaluation of the Interreg Central Baltic programme 2014-2020, a survey was conducted in February 2023, aimed at Lead Partners and Project Partners, with a focus on project management, results and communication. The survey link was sent to 730 functioning e-mail addresses with 139 people eventually responding to the survey, i.e., the response rate was 19%. The main results of the survey are presented below.

Figure 3 shows the shares of survey respondents by organisational location. The survey received most responses from people whose organisations are in Uusimaa, Helsinki (15%), Põhja-Eesti, Estonia (14%) and Riga, Latvia (13%).

Figure 3 Region where respondent's organisation is located

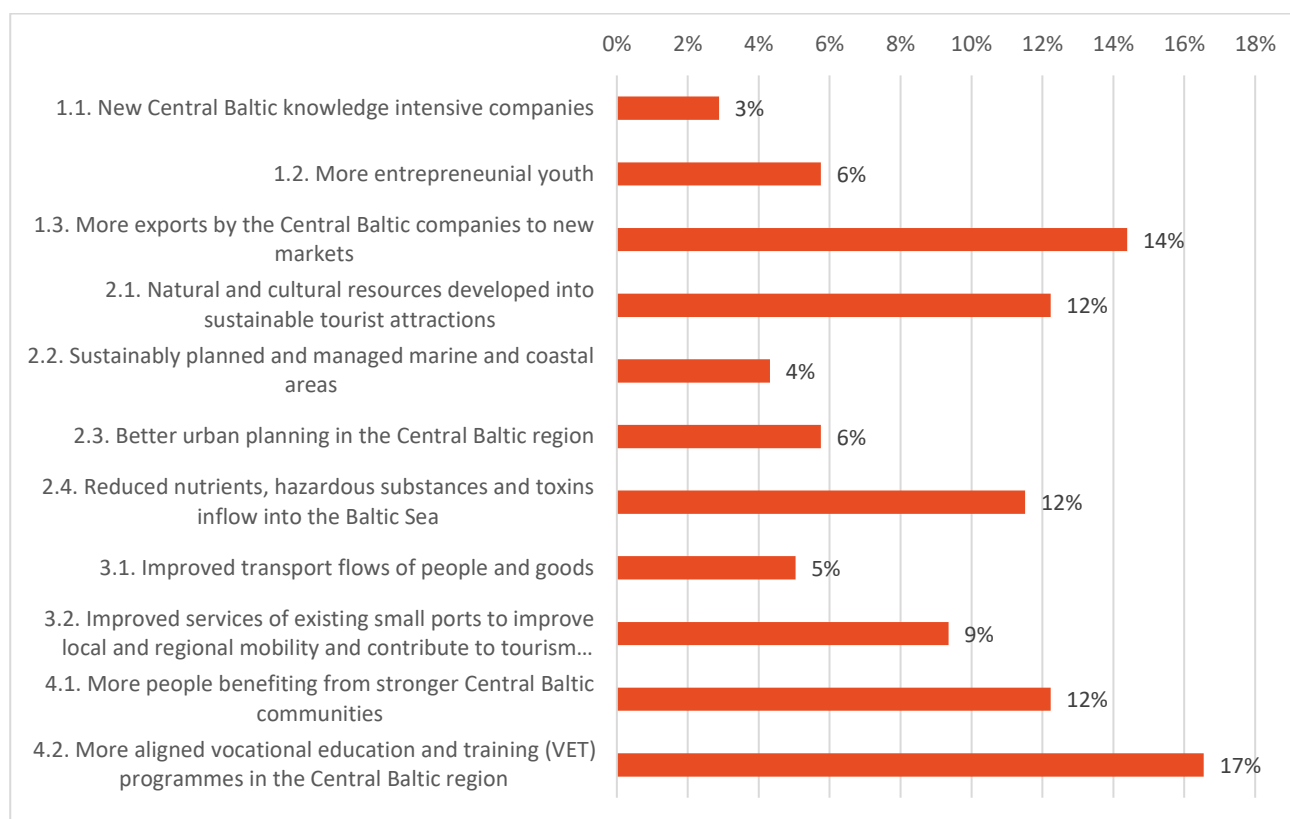


Of the 137 projects in the programme, representatives of 92 projects, i.e., 67.2%, answered the survey.

Almost two out of three (63%) of the respondents represented an organisation that had the role of project partner in the project. One out of three were from organisations that acted as lead partners and 4% were from organisations that were associated partners.

The survey received most answers from projects that belonged to SO 4.2. More aligned vocational education and training (VET) programmes in the Central Baltic region (17% of all survey respondents) and SO 1.3. More exports by Central Baltic companies to new markets (14% of all survey respondents). Graph 5 shows the shares of different Specific Objectives among the survey respondents.

Figure 4 The Specific Objective the respondent's project contributed to



The gathered evaluation results were validated in March 2023 in four online **focus groups**, one for each Priority. The focus groups will also help to strengthen and refine the contribution stories for each Specific Objective. The focus groups had, on average, 3-5 participants from the Member States. The participants represented programme authorities, regional authorities, research organisations and other stakeholders.

The analysis of the programme partners and their networks was conducted using the social network analysis software, Gephi.

## 2.3 EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The evaluation was guided by general evaluation questions for all objectives, as well as detailed evaluation questions for each Specific Objective, listed in the ToR and the Evaluation Plan. The evaluation questions, data collection methods and the target audience for data collection are outlined in table 1 and elaborated further in Annex 1.

The indicator data from the electronic system eMS was used for quantitative information on the outputs and results of the programme. The quantitative information was complemented with qualitative information gathered through desk research and the collection of evaluation evidence (survey, interviews and focus groups).

Table 1 Evaluation questions and methods used

Evaluation question	Survey Project Partners	Interviews JS	Interviews Lead Partners	Focus group SC / MC interviews	eMS	Documents
Have Specific Objectives reached their set target or are they on the way to doing so?						
What interventions would be needed in this field in the future?						
What is the impact of the programme in the measured change?						
How effective has Central Baltic funding been in creating change in this field?						
What interventions are needed in this field in the future?						
What is the impact of the programme in the measured change?						
Did cross-border cooperation bring added value to the funded intervention?						
What is the level of involvement of different kinds of partners in the implementation of the CB Projects?						
How has this priority contributed to wider policy objectives, in particular the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region?						
SO level evaluation questions						

## 2.4 FACTORS AFFECTING THE VALIDITY OF THE EVALUATION FINDINGS

The evaluation was conducted at a time when some projects had just finished and there were still a few remaining final reports to be submitted. Thus, the completeness of the information and the indicators reflects the situation pertaining as of early Spring, 2023.

The evaluators have assessed all of the available documentary analysis on the funded projects, while the interviews covered approximately 40% of the projects. The selection of interviews was done using a stratified sample so that there was sufficient coverage of interviewed projects for each SO and Member State. However, this means that there were only a few interviews per SO. The project interviews were conducted with the project managers. The electronic survey delivered to all project partners had a coverage of 67%.

As the evaluation is a theory-based evaluation, using contribution analysis, the focus here is on the intervention logic. The findings and results based on the project-based assessment at SO level have thus informed the judgements reached. As such, the findings are not based on a full set of projects, something which may have had at least some impact on the results.



### 3. DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERREG CENTRAL BALTIC PROGRAMME

The Interreg Central Baltic Programme 2014-2020 was a cross-border cooperation programme. It was a continuation of the Central Baltic INTERREG IV A Programme 2007-2013. The Central Baltic Programme supports projects in in Estonia, Finland (including Åland), Latvia and Sweden in 18 core and 19 additional NUTS III regions (see Table 2 below). The programme was divided into three geographically defined sub-programmes: Archipelago and Islands, Central Baltic and Southern Finland - Estonia.

Table 2 Regions participating in the Interreg Central Baltic Programme

Country	NUTS 3 Regions, Core area	NUTS 3 regions, Additional area
<b>Estonia</b>	Kesk-Eesti Kirde-Eesti Lääne-Eesti Põhja-Eesti	Lõuna-Eesti
<b>Finland</b>	Kymenlaakso Satakunta Uusimaa Varsinais-Suomi	Etelä-Karjala Kanta-Häme Pirkanmaa Päijät-Häme
<b>Latvia</b>	Kurzeme Pieriga Riga	Vidzeme Zemgale
<b>Sweden</b>	Gotlands län Gävleborgs län Stockholms län Södermanlands län Uppsala län Östergötlands län	Västmanlands län Örebro län

#### 3.1 PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES AND STRUCTURE

The Central Baltic programme contributed to the EU2020 goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in four thematic objectives (TO 3: enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs; TO6: preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency; TO7: promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures; and TO10: investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning). The programme also furthered the EUSBSR objectives (save the sea, connect the region and increase prosperity).

The programme aimed to strengthen cooperation among regions and solve common challenges across borders in four strategic priorities, derived from the thematic objectives:

- Competitive economy;
- Sustainable use of common resources;
- Well-connected region; and
- Skilled and socially inclusive region.





Furthermore, two horizontal objectives (enhancing access to, and use and quality of ICT and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors) ran through the entire programme.

The Central Baltic programme supported the sustainable growth of the region. The programme promoted this goal by developing and promoting the region as knowledge-based innovation economy supporting enterprises under priority 1 **Competitive economy**. The objective of this priority was to enhance the competitiveness of SMEs through the promotion of entrepreneurship, supporting the capacity of SMEs to grow markets and innovate. The objective was divided into three specific objectives:

- 1.1. New Central Baltic knowledge intensive companies
- 1.2. More entrepreneurial youth
- 1.3. More exports by Central Baltic companies to new markets

The programme aimed to improve the status of the Baltic Sea through innovative methods and technologies. The **Sustainable use of common resources** objective was designed to preserve and protect the environment and promote resource efficiency. The goals were furthered through conserving, protecting, promoting and developing natural and cultural heritage. The objective was divided into four specific objectives:

- 2.1. Natural and cultural resources developed into sustainable tourist attractions.
- 2.2. Sustainably planned and managed marine and coastal areas
- 2.3. Better urban planning in the Central Baltic region
- 2.4. Reduced nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows into the Baltic Sea

To support sustainable growth and competitiveness, it is necessary to improve accessibility to and within the Central Baltic region. To further the **Well-connected region** objective, the programme promoted sustainable transport and the removal of bottlenecks in key infrastructures. The objective was divided into two specific objectives:

- 3.1. Improved transport flows of people and goods
- 3.2. Improved services of existing small ports to improve local and regional mobility and contribute to tourism development

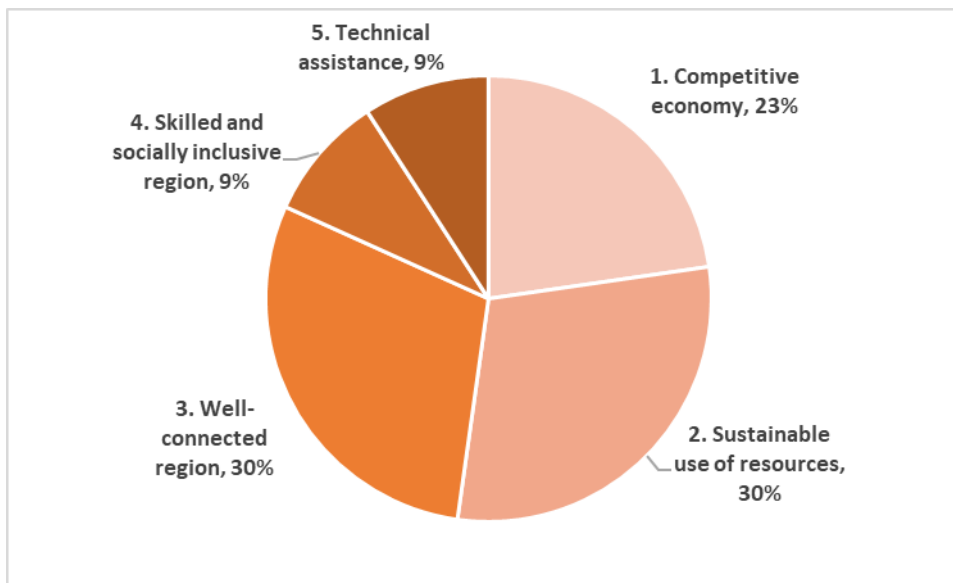
The programme aimed to achieve a more inclusive region by strengthening local communities and improving skills, knowledge and social the wellbeing of people. The **Skilled and socially inclusive region** objective was designed to invest in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning. This goal was advanced through the development and implementation of joint education, vocational training and training schemes. The objective was divided into two specific objectives:

- 4.1. More people benefiting from stronger Central Baltic communities
- 4.2. More aligned vocational education and training (VET) programmes in the Central Baltic region

### 3.2 PROGRAMME BUDGET

The total funding for the Central Baltic Programme's four priority axes and technical assistance was 170.55 million euros. Of this, 132.62 million euros is EU funding and 37.91 million euros national financing. The budget of the programme increased during the programming period as Finland and Estonia redirected ERFD reserves of ENI funds worth 10.3 million euros to the Interreg Central Baltic in 2018. The programme funding was allocated in such a way that 30% of the funding was allocated to priority 2 (sustainable use of resources) and 3 (well-connected region) respectively, whereas priority 1 (competitive economy) received 23% of the total funding and priority 4 (skilled and socially inclusive region) was allocated 9% of the programme funds. Figure 5 below illustrates the breakdown of total budget, per priority.

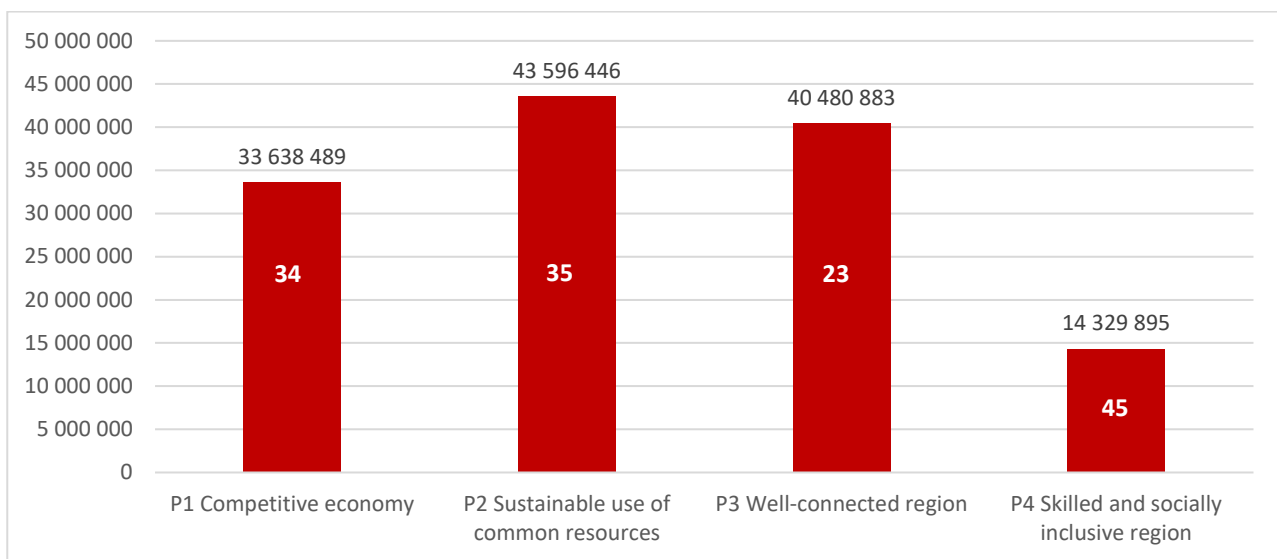
Figure 5 Breakdown of total budget by priority



The Managing Authority (MA) of the programme was the Regional Council of Southwest Finland. The Joint Secretariat (JS), responsible for the day-to-day management and implementation of the programme, is located with the Managing Authority. The Central Baltic programme had six Contact Points in Helsinki, Mariehamn, Stockholm, Norrköping, Tallinn and Riga to support the work of the JS and MA in the programme countries.

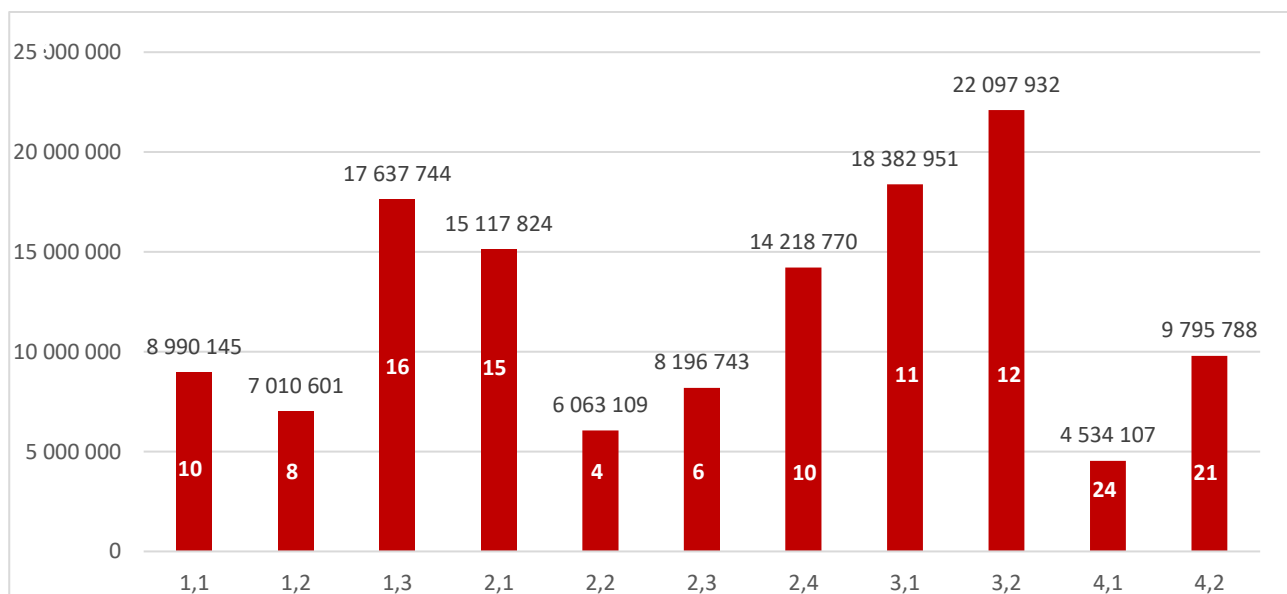
The programme completed five calls for projects during the period 2014-2021. At the end of the programme, a total of 132.0 million euros of ERDF funding was committed to 137 projects. Most of the programme funds were committed after the first two calls. The latter calls were more thematically focused, in order to attract applications towards those Specific Objects with the least approved projects. All of the projects had concluded their implementation by the end of December 2022. As figure 6 shows, a third of the funding was allocated to the 35 projects of Priority 2. Approximately 30% of the funding was allocated to the 23 projects furthering Priority 3 and about a quarter of the funding went to Priority 1 and its 34 projects. Priority 4 funded mainly small projects, altogether 45 in total. Priority 4 projects received approximately a tenth of the programme funding. Figure 6 shows the allocated budget and number of funded projects, per priority.

Figure 6 Allocated budget and number of funded projects per Priority



The funding committed to the projects has followed tightly the allocation of funds per priority. Figure 7 illustrates the allocation of funds and the number of projects. Specific objective 3.2 (improved services of small ports) has seen the largest financial commitment, followed by specific objective 3.1 (Improved transport flows of people and goods). The largest number of projects but the smallest financial commitment can be seen in terms of priority axis 4.

Figure 7 Allocated budget and number of funded projects per Specific Objective



Most of the funds had been paid out by April 2023. Some of the projects, namely, those started in 2020 which had concluded their operations by the end of 2022, are however still to submit their final reports and thus their final payment claims.

Already by the middle of the programming period it was clear that the ongoing projects had, in general, higher output targets than the programme targets. For some specific objectives, the programme targets had already been exceeded by 2018. By the end of 2022, all the programme targets had been attained. Some targets had been substantially superseded as can be seen from the table below.

Table 3 Programme targets, targets promised by the projects and the realised targets

Priority	Specific Objective / Indicator	Programme target	Target promised	2022 (cumul.)	% of prog. target reached
<i>P1 Competitive economy</i>	<i>3a Promoting entrepreneurship</i>				
	Number of enterprises supported	150	734	1299	866%
	Number of new enterprises supported	150	584	527	351%
	Number of participating young people	150	2440	2728	1818%
	<i>3d Supporting the capacity of SMEs</i>				
	Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	300	1333	2649	883%
	Number of enterprises receiving support	300	734	1299	433%
	Number of enterprises supported to introduce new-to-the-market products	60	297	420	700%
<i>P2 Sustainable use of common resources</i>	<i>6c Conserving, protecting, promoting and developing natural and cultural heritage</i>				
	Increase in expected number of visits to supported sites	120000	328600	402790	336%
	Number of jointly targeted planning and management activities	10	22	19	190%
	Number of targeted joint attractions	10	14	15	150%
	<i>6e Taking action to improve the urban environment</i>				
	Number of targeted integrated urban plans	10	31	31	310%
	<i>6f Promoting innovative technologies</i>				
<i>P3 Well-connected region</i>	<i>7c Developing and improving environmentally-friendly and low carbon transport systems</i>				
	Number of developed and improved transport corridors and nodes	50	75	61	122%
	Number of ports with improved services	140	174	172	123%
<i>P4 Skilled and socially inclusive region</i>	<i>10b Developing and implementing joint education, vocational training and training schemes</i>				
	Number of benefiting vocation educational schools	40	70	78	195%
	Number of participating people	5000	6437	9382	188%

Source: Interreg Central Baltic Managing Authority May 2023

### 3.3 PROGRAMME PARTNERS

The 137 Interreg Central Baltic projects that this evaluation covers have a total of 818 partners. The number of partners varies between 2 and 25. On average, the projects have 5.9 partners with the median being 4.

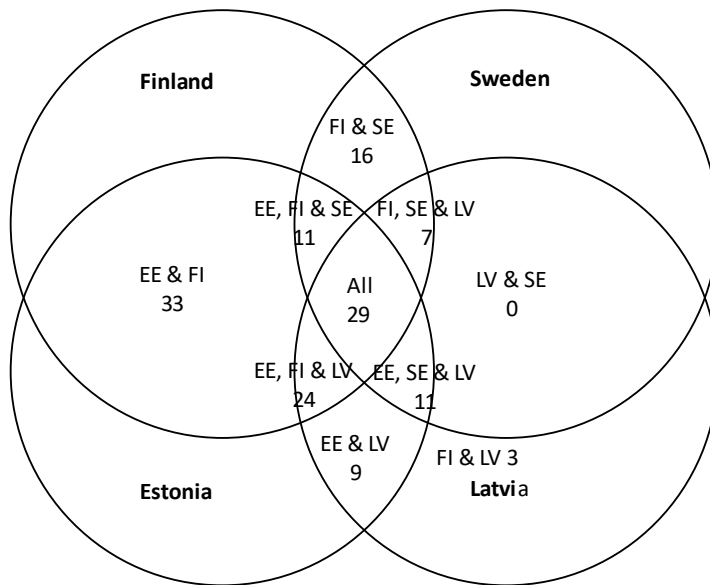
Of all the project partners, 38% are Finnish, 27% Estonian, 18% Swedish and 18% Latvian. The Lead Partner is more often Finnish (54%) or Estonian (27%) than Swedish (12%) or Latvian (7%). In addition, there are three lead partners from the Åland Islands. The distribution of Project Partners is however much more even across the four countries (18 - 32%), with the highest number of project partners being Finnish. It was already stated in the ICB-evaluation, implemented in 2019, that the programme could benefit from a more even distribution of lead partners and project partners and in particular that the Latvian and Swedish partners should be encouraged to take part in the projects and even to lead them. Despite this, the current situation however remains rather similar, although Latvia's share as a lead partner has increased slightly (about 4%). Over such a short period of time it is unlikely that a significant change will have occurred, but in the context of new programming period it will be necessary to keep this matter on the agenda.

*Table 4 Partners in Interreg Central Baltic projects by country*

	Lead Partner	Project Partner	Associated Partner	Grand Total
Estonia	37	150	30	217
Finland	75	170	62	307
Latvia	10	122	18	150
Sweden	16	95	33	144
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>818</b>

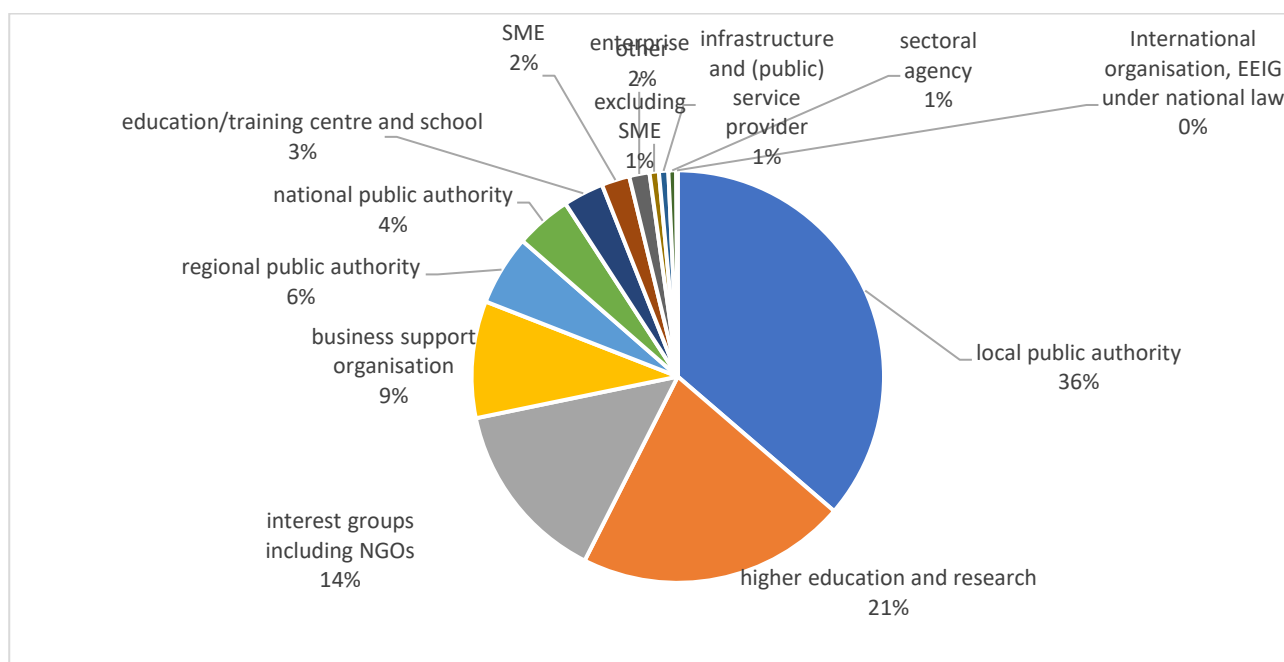
The figure 8 shows the number of projects jointly implemented by different member countries. There were altogether 29 projects, in which had participants from all of the programme countries. 73 projects had participants from three programme countries. Finland and Estonia have implemented the most joint projects (33). The second largest number of joint projects have been implemented together by Estonia, Finland and Latvia (24). Latvia and Sweden or Estonia and Sweden, on the other hand, had no joint projects at all. Also, only three projects between Finland and Latvia have been implemented.

*Figure 8 Mutual Interreg Central Baltic programs by country*



Local public authorities represent the largest group of partners (36%) in Interreg Central Baltic projects. Higher education and research institutions (21%), Interest groups including NGOs (14%) and business support organisations (9%) are also representative of important groups of project partners, as Figure 9 below illustrates.

Figure 9 Types of partners in Interreg Central Baltic projects



The different types of partners tend, however, to adopt different roles in the projects. Even though local public authorities form the largest group of partners, they are far more likely to be associated or project partners than lead partners in the project. Indeed, when looking at table 5, it is clear that higher education and research institutions are the Lead Partners in a third of the Interreg Central Baltic projects. Interest groups, including NGOs, lead approximately a fifth of the projects while local public authorities do so in approximately 15% of the projects and business support organisations in 12%. There have also been no substantial changes in the types of partners since the 2019 mid-term evaluation.

Table 5 Types of partners in Interreg Central Baltic projects

	Lead Partner	Project Partner	Associated Partner	Grand Total
Business support organisation	17	58		75
Education/training centre and school	4	22		26
Enterprise, excluding SME	1	5		6
Higher education and research	45	128		173
Infrastructure and (public) service provider		6		6
Interest groups including NGOs	30	87		117
International organisation, EEIG under national law		1		1
Local public authority	21	133	143	297
National public authority	12	24		36
Other	2	11		13
Regional public authority	5	40		45
Sectoral agency	1	4		5
SME		18		18
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>818</b>

Local public authorities and higher education and research institutions are the most numerous as project partners, but local public authorities are generally only associated partners in the projects.





Turku University of Applied Sciences has the largest number of projects, where it acts as a Lead Partner (9). The Satakunta University of Applied Sciences leads six projects while the University of Turku leads four projects. Other Lead Partners lead 1-3 projects.

The involvement of the different types of partners varies according to Specific Objective as the Specific Objectives had different, often clearly and rather narrowly specified, target groups.

## 4. PRIORITY 1

The budget for Priority Axis 1 was 39.4 million euros. This constituted 23.1% of the ERDF budget for the Interreg Central Baltic programme. A total of 33.7 million euros was committed to 34 Priority Axis 1 projects.

Priority 1 aims at developing and promoting the Central Baltic region as a competitive, knowledge-based innovative economy.

Priority 1 has three Specific Objectives; 1.1 New Central Baltic knowledge intensive companies, 1.2 More entrepreneurial youth and 1.3 More exports by Central Baltic companies to new markets. The ICB programme aimed at finding a balance between economic and environmental interests supporting the sustainable growth of the region. The programme tried to achieve this goal by developing and promoting the Central Baltic region as a knowledge-based innovative economy, by supporting the creation of new companies and by promoting SME internationalisation. The focus was on business development, encouraging the younger generation to engage in entrepreneurial activities and the creation of links between generations of entrepreneurs. Priority 1 (Competitive economy) has three specific objectives which are described in greater detail in following chapters.

### 4.1 Specific Objective 1.1

Specific objective 1.1. (New Central Baltic knowledge intensive companies) aims to exploit the opportunities afforded by the emergence of the “green, “silver” and “blue” economies. Measures are targeted in particular to knowledge intensive enterprises. Another aim is to target challenges related to the sustainability of those businesses operating in rural areas and archipelago communities or engaged in seasonal activities. The aim is also to promote the creation of new joint Central Baltic enterprises and greater cooperation between new enterprises in the Central Baltic region. In this respect however it is accepted that all targeted teams and businesses will not necessarily become joint or cooperating. The main approach of the specific object is to implement development projects via different kinds of business development organisations.

The main target groups of the projects are potential entrepreneurs and newly established enterprises contributing to the green, low-carbon, blue and silver economies. In addition, technology start-ups and university or vocational school students also represent significant target groups. The direct beneficiaries are business development organisations, business incubators, business associations and national, regional and local authorities.

SO 1.1 has one result indicator, the number of joint or cooperating knowledge intensive enterprises and two output indicators, the number of new enterprises supported and the number of enterprises receiving support.

### THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

A Theory of Change describes how a desired objective is expected to be realised in a particular context. It aims to show how a set of actions or activities is expected to lead up to a desired change. The picture below shows the Theory of change for SO 1.1. It also includes a colour coding representing this evaluation’s estimation regarding the level of change achieved, based on the available evidence. We will describe this further below.

The contribution claim for SO 1.1 is as follows: IF the Central Baltic programme supports projects that aim at cross-border networking and capacity building of newly established enterprises AND the companies are



interested in participating in the project activities AND the companies are interested in sharing their business ideas, THEN the exchange of ideas leads to cooperation between the participants AND cross-border start-ups are created. The theory of change is depicted in figure 10.

The main outputs are the different kinds of business development services that aim to create the desired changes and impacts. With the help of the services, new cross-border joint knowledge intensive companies are created and cooperation between companies intensifies, with new business directions founded.

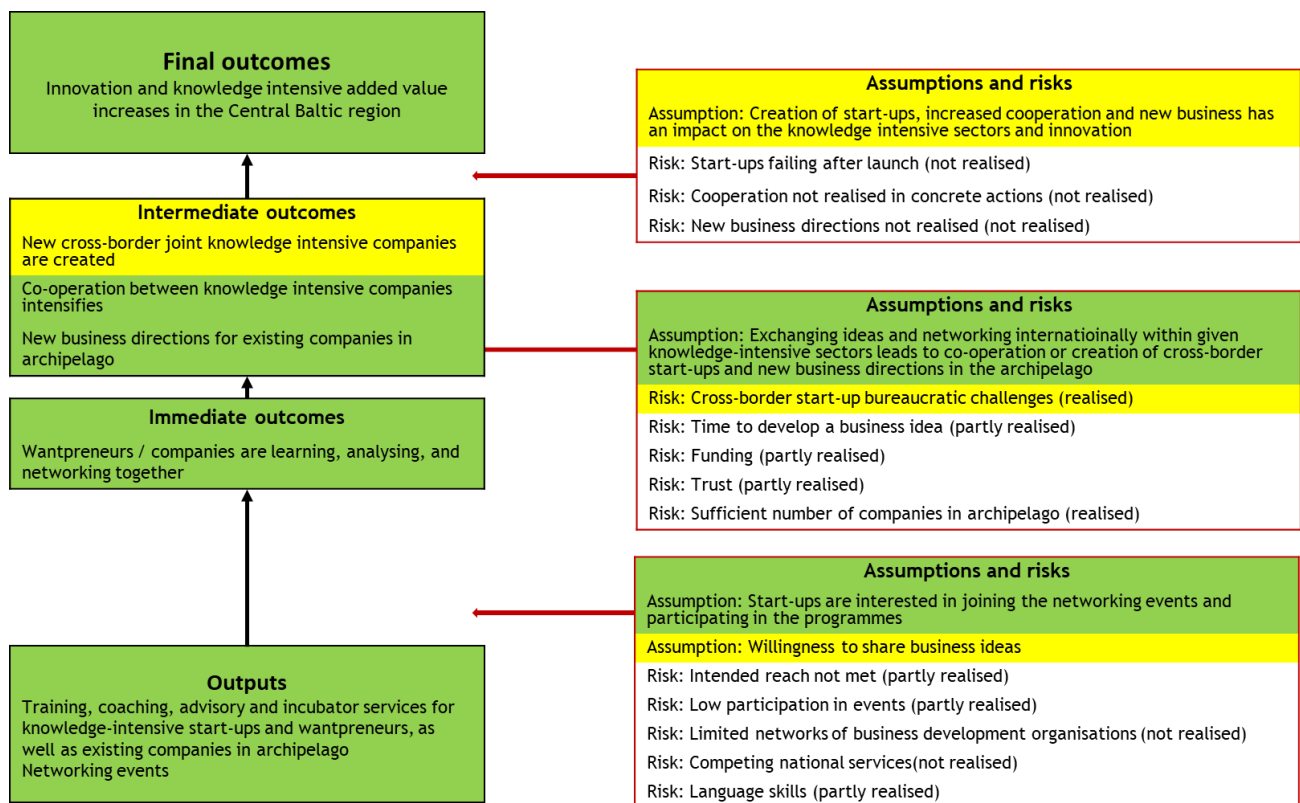
For the immediate outcomes, learning and networking, to be realised, the start-ups must be interested in joining the networking events and participating in the programme activities. Companies must also be willing to share their business ideas. The risks are related to intended reach not being met, low participation in events, limited networks, competing national services and a lack of language skills.

In terms of immediate outcomes, the ‘wantrepreneurs’ / companies are learning, analysing and networking together. The assumption is that, exchanging ideas and networking internationally within given knowledge-intensive sectors leads to co-operation, the creation of cross-border start-ups and new business directions in the archipelago. The identified risks are e.g., cross-border start-up bureaucratic challenges, time required to develop a business idea and a sufficient number of companies in the archipelago.

In terms of intermediate outcomes, new cross-border joint knowledge intensive companies are created, cooperation between knowledge intensive companies intensifies and new business directions emerge for existing companies in the archipelago. The assumption here is that the creation of start-ups, increased cooperation and new business has an impact on the knowledge intensive sectors. The identified risks are start-ups failing after launch, cooperation not realised in concrete actions and new business directions not realised.

The final outcome is that the creation of start-ups, increased cooperation and new business has an impact on the knowledge intensive sectors.

Figure 10 Theory of Change for SO 1.1.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for expected change or an assumption being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving expected change or that an assumption was not realised

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

### The funded projects had versatile activities

Ten projects have been funded under this specific objective during the programme period and altogether circa 9 million euros of ERDF funding has been allocated to this specific objective. These projects reported that a total of 335 existing enterprises and 545 new enterprises had been supported via different kinds of business support activities. The main target groups of the projects were start-up companies, people with business ideas and ‘wantpreneurs.’ In addition, students and existing SMEs in the archipelago have also been involved in some projects. Projects have aimed at creating new startups and companies, specifically encouraging entrepreneurship with many different kinds of activities. Project activities have, for example, included business incubation or acceleration programmes, hackathons, bootcamps, coaching, matchmaking and meetings with investors. In several projects the same programme (activities) has been run several times for different groups of participants. The cross-border aspect has also been integrated in different actions in many ways. The projects have added interests towards entrepreneurship and also contributing to the development of business ideas and the establishment of new start-ups.



## Start-ups have been interested in participating in the programme's projects

A considerable number of companies have been supported in the projects while many people with business ideas and 'wantrepreneurs' have also participated in the projects. As such, it has been mostly successful in attracting participants, though challenges were also evident. Many events were built around face-to-face interaction. In some projects, Covid-19 significantly complicated implementation and made it more difficult for the participants to engage and interact with each other. In many cases, the measures were successfully implemented remotely, but things did not always go smoothly. The lack of interaction hampered several otherwise successful remote events. On the other hand, in some projects getting the companies involved was surprisingly easy and the companies participated with an open mind and realised that there is value in cooperation.

There was little evidence of risk relating to the lack of language skills having caused problems in project participation. It was however mentioned that in some cases, lacking language skills could hinder interaction and the formation of cross-border teams. Rather than language skills however, cultural differences seem to represent an issue that requires further attention. On the other hand, it may have been more difficult to maintain participant interest in the projects when there were no face-to-face meetings as planned. Project participants were generally found easily enough but some challenges emerged at the level of project partners. The greatest problems emerged in relation to attaining the goals in relation to the cross-border aspect of the created teams and companies and over the level of companies' jointness. The evaluation did not reveal whether the projects would have competed with nationally provided services. Instead, several teams and companies also participated in other programmes or business services after the project.

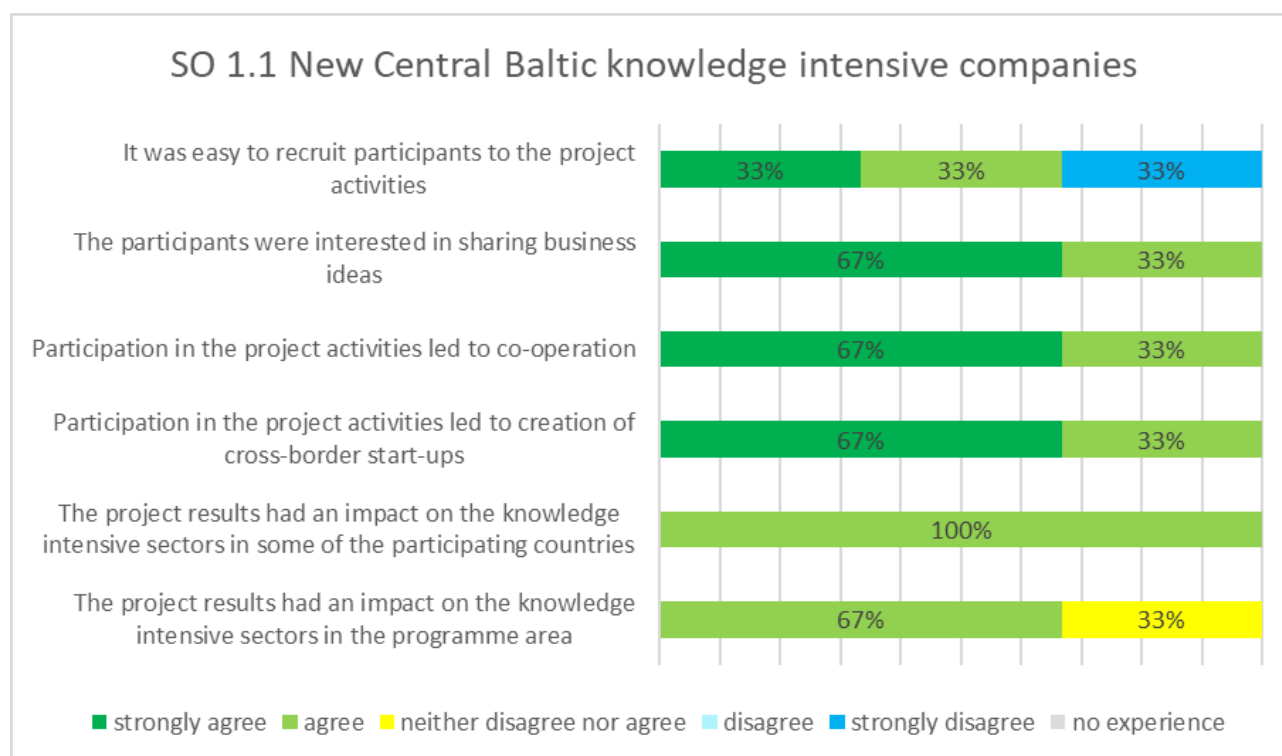
The willingness to share business ideas varied between projects and project participants. In some projects the participants got along well, but in practice it was difficult to get new members from other countries to connect with existing teams. It was also reported that in some cases the participants stuck with their initial project teams and did not want to take in any outsiders. There was little evidence of the lack of language skills having caused problems.

*"It was a false assumption that the developers of different ideas would give up their own idea if someone else has a better one. It did not work that way. The participants wanted to persistently push their own idea forward." –Interviewed project manager*

It should also be noted here that those startups and teams who applied to some programmes have understood that if they do not share their ideas, it is difficult to get help or advice and thus to develop their business idea further. The willingness to share business ideas has varied from project by project and from case by case. For example, in the projects that responded to the survey, the sharing of business ideas had mostly worked well.

Three people from three projects that belonged to Specific Objective 1.1 answered the evaluation survey. The projects were CB 4 GameCamps, New Nordic Lift Off and NOCCA. At least two of the three respondents agreed with all statements related to project activities and impact. All of the respondents agreed, two out of three strongly, that the participants were interested in sharing business ideas, that participation in the project activities led to cooperation and that participation in project activities led to the creation of cross-border start-ups. All respondents also agreed that the project results had an impact on the knowledge intensive sectors in some of the participating countries. One of the three respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that it was easy to recruit participants to engage in project activities.

Figure 11 Evaluation of statements related to project activities and impact of SO 1.1 projects



### Exchanging ideas and networking internationally have led to successful cooperation

There is clear evidence that the project activities have helped participants and companies in terms of learning, analysing and networking together. Project activities have offered a large number of participants, firstly, the opportunity to develop their own or a joint business idea from an early idea into a functioning company. This path includes opportunities to find the best talent for the team, receive training and sparring and the opportunity to network at numerous events. In several projects, the measures have not been organised once, but the created programmes have had several rounds. This has enabled larger numbers of participants to become involved and created an opportunity for the implementers to develop the activity in a more long-term manner.

The projects achieved successful interaction and good cooperation. In many cases, the emergence of cooperation is facilitated by face-to-face interaction, something which undoubtedly suffered due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In many cases, cooperation was started during the project, but it only concretised in the longer term. It takes time to establish sustainable and lasting business connections. It is also a long process to establish trust and working contracts and results. No regular follow-up process has however been put in place after the project.

In many cases, doing international joint work was not really a prerequisite for creating cooperation or new startups, but it did bring a critical mass of participants together, bringing versatile views to the projects thus offering valuable opportunities for business development. Creating cross-border start-ups was identified as a challenging goal. Moreover, in many cases there is clearly a long distance between developing an initial idea and developing it into a cross-border joint company. The creation of cross-border start-ups has also faced some bureaucratic challenges while attracting funding may take time, creating a bottleneck in terms of allowing a business idea to be put into practice at full scale.



Only one special purpose project was clearly targeted at companies in the archipelago. In this project, the main focus was on micro-enterprises, moreover, they were not exclusively or even particularly strongly focused on knowledge-intensive sectors. The business models developed in the project also varied. In the project, e.g., new partnerships were created between the participating companies, new markets and internationalisation were sought. Archipelago regions' entrepreneurship has its own distinguishing features, e.g., in terms of industries, size and seasonality. Entrepreneurs must be convinced of the usefulness of the project and the measures must be adapted to suit them.

### **The creation of cross-border start-ups was a challenging goal**

Creating new cross-border joint knowledge intensive companies has clearly been a challenging goal. However, a significant number of new companies have been created. Some of the newly established companies have also been in line with the programme's stated goals. However, the companies have not always been joint or cross-border in nature. It has also been recognised that the official creation of companies during the project may not take place. The actual companies may only be founded at a later stage and the teams may also apply for other acceleration programmes. In the case of start-ups, the availability of financing also plays a key role in terms of business continuity.

Cooperation between knowledge intensive companies has however intensified in several ways. For example, bootcamps, acceleration programmes, different kinds of events and matchmaking have all been used in successful ways. Projects aimed at creating startup companies have also promoted cooperation between companies after their initial establishment. There have also been several knowledge-intensive sectors whose companies' cooperation has been further developed. For example, ICT, cleantech, healthtech and creative industries and the gaming industry have each been the focus sectors of these projects.

Only one project targeted the creation of new business directions for existing companies in the archipelago. This project, in itself, has been successful, but on a larger scale, entrepreneurship in the archipelago cannot be developed by means of only one project.

### **The projects have increased knowledge intensive added value but larger scale changes to the knowledge-intensive sectors remain unclear**

According to the programme document, knowledge intensive enterprises are the ones with a potential to grow and internationalise, aiming to achieve higher value added than the regional average level of the industry sector they belong to. Several of the project ideas were knowledge-intensive and ideas were also actively steered in this direction.

One point of view that has emerged is that knowledge-intensive companies usually require much higher investments than other those in other sectors. In addition, first round investment to knowledge-intensive companies is typically associated with high-risk levels. From the point of view of investors, a big investment in one portfolio is a less attractive option than a more even spread.

There was no concrete evidence that start-ups created in the programmes' projects would have failed after launch more often than other start-ups. In terms of start-up entrepreneurship, it is inevitable that some companies are successful while others are not. In the same way, in some cases cooperation is deep and meaningful while in others it is shallow and ends quickly. The success of entrepreneurship or the success of cooperation is also influenced by many things outside the projects. It is essential that there were no regular factors in the projects that would negatively restrict success, but instead that they served as an important platform for the development of business activities and joint work.





As the final outcome of the creation of start-ups, increased cooperation and new business clearly has an impact on the knowledge intensive sectors. Based on the evaluation results, it is clear that the measures associated with the projects, as well as the results and effects achieved in the projects, have created innovations and increased knowledge intensive added value in the Central Baltic region. In several cases, however, the extent to which it was possible to influence knowledge-intensive fields on a larger scale remained unclear. However, for example, the projects that responded to the survey saw the impact on knowledge-intensive fields in a rather positive light. The extent to which the sectors have been affected is however more open to interpretation.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The ten funded projects of specific object 1.1. have been quite versatile in their activities. The projects have made possible the development of countless business ideas and companies and enabled the establishment of numerous new start-ups. The projects have offered participants and companies the opportunity to learn, analyse and network together. The projects have also generated interest in entrepreneurship. Many project measures were based on face-to-face interaction, but they were implemented quite successfully despite the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants were successfully involved in the projects, although difficulties did emerge in some cases. The project participants received clear benefits from the projects in terms of business ideas and development. New ideas and business models were sparred and developed, with peer learning here also proving important.

The willingness to share business ideas was mixed. Sometimes participants wanted to stick to their own ideas while in other cases, the power of joint development was better understood. In the projects the lesson was however generally learned that it takes time to establish business connections, trust, working contracts and finally to get results.

Creating cross-border start-ups was identified as a challenging goal. In many cases it remains a long distance from developing an initial idea into the creation of a cross-border joint company. Attracting investments into knowledge-intensive sectors also proved difficult in some cases. However, a significant number of new companies have been created though these companies have not always been joint or cross-border in nature. During the evaluation it also emerged that companies may be founded at a later stage and that the teams may continue developing their business ideas in the context of other programmes.

The measures, results and effects of the projects appear however to be mostly positive. There have been no major problems or failures in the projects. The changes in the operating environment at the end of the programme period have however proved challenging in terms of goal attainment. Despite this, the projects have attained their goals in many respects. Innovations, development, new companies and cooperation have been achieved. In many cases, the activities are also oriented towards the targeted knowledge intensive sectors. However, evaluation did not provide clear evidence of what kinds of changes have been made to the knowledge-intensive sectors on a larger scale. Nevertheless, it is clear that the effects have been achieved both locally and at the level of the programme area in the form of new companies and joint ventures.

### Summary of the evaluation questions

In this section, we summarise the answers given to the evaluation questions.

*Are the joint companies really joint? Describe the aspect of “jointness”*

Creating new cross-border companies have proven to be quite a challenging task. The nature of companies 'jointness' was in some cases very difficult to define.. In the context of the projects, it might be possible to discover where the established company was registered, but it was difficult to find out how, for example, ownership was divided. Some of the project teams did not register companies at all during the acceleration programmes. Cross-border action also turned out very difficult during the starting phase of startups. The people involved needed to work together to form the idea and make it happen. Basic issues such as distance are not easy things to solve at this stage. Placing new team members into existing teams also turned out to be quite challenging.

*Are the joint companies economically sustainable?*

Little evidence exists concerning the economic sustainability of these joint companies. One reason for this is probably that there is little active follow-up after the projects conclude. Cooperation between companies and in particular its financial aspects are also not necessarily information that companies are happy to share. There were however some success stories here. One point of view that emerged was that combining young companies together, in a cross-border context, may be rather challenging if the ultimate goal is to encourage sustainable, valid and economically profitable business cooperation. Instead, combining a mature company with a younger one may have more potential because of the accumulated experience and resources of the mature partner.

*Are there additional new joint companies to emerge after the project activities have ended?*

There was some evidence that new companies may emerge after the projects themselves have concluded. One observed pattern was that after the project measures were taken, investors were still sought and the company was only founded as a final step. Another point of view was that it is not always necessary to establish a new company. It is in the same way possible to have a business deal or business cooperation between two companies - each in their own country without establishing a joint venture as a legal vehicle.

*What additional relevant results were achieved by the projects?*

One important perspective on the results is that of the project implementers. Already while the projects were underway, new development methods were being developed and conceptualised in the implementing organisations. Various publications and research pieces have also been produced on the subject of the projects. New collaborations have also arisen between implementing organisations, e.g., in the form of educational institution cooperation and new project applications. The lessons learned from the projects have also been used in teaching at universities and the know-how created in the projects has been documented for open use.

*What were the main challenges to emerge in terms of the joint new business development processes?*

It takes time to establish sustainable and lasting business connections. It is a long process to build trust, work out contracts and get results. Not everything has to happen during the project, but the initial force created by the project is clearly an important factor in fostering cooperation. In addition, sufficient mass is required to even discover one good idea. Another challenge that emerged related to the ongoing practices between cooperating companies, such as how the costs and profits of joint operations were to be shared.



*Are the participating organisations interested in continuing with new joint-development business processes?*

During the evaluation, it emerged that some of the project participants have continued after the end of the project together with other acceleration programmes or business incubators. This may have been due to e.g., the further development required by the idea, the search for funding or the development of the business model.

*Did the “new joint company creation” logic work in your sector/business area?*

Establishing cross-border companies has been identified as a very challenging goal. Several challenges have been identified in both the creation and verification of cross-border companies, such as taxation and registration issues. The notion of ‘internationality’ can also be understood in many ways. The teams themselves can be international, or the owner alone can be international. In the same way, internationality can come through customers or partnerships.

## 4.2 Specific Objective 1.2

The Specific Objective 1.2 is directed towards entrepreneurialism, youth and students and internationalisation. In essence, the Specific Objective 1.2 aims to make the Baltic Sea region more competitive and thus more prosperous in the future by promoting entrepreneurialism among the younger generation.

The programme supports joint activities which support youth entrepreneurship and attract young people to engage in cross-border and international activities within all programme regions. The joint activities aim at motivating young people to establish student companies and create international teams which can serve as a basis for future business partnerships within the Central Baltic region. The programme supports activities such as awareness raising, training, coaching, internships, advisory services, the networking of teams of pupils/students, experienced entrepreneurs and investors and the capacity building of teams and pupil/student companies, as well as designing and creating e-platforms and e-tools.

The project beneficiaries are business development organisations, youth organisations, youth entrepreneurship development organisations, education institutions as well as national, regional and local authorities. The project outcomes are measured with the result indicator ‘number of established joint student companies’ and output indicator ‘number of participating young people.’

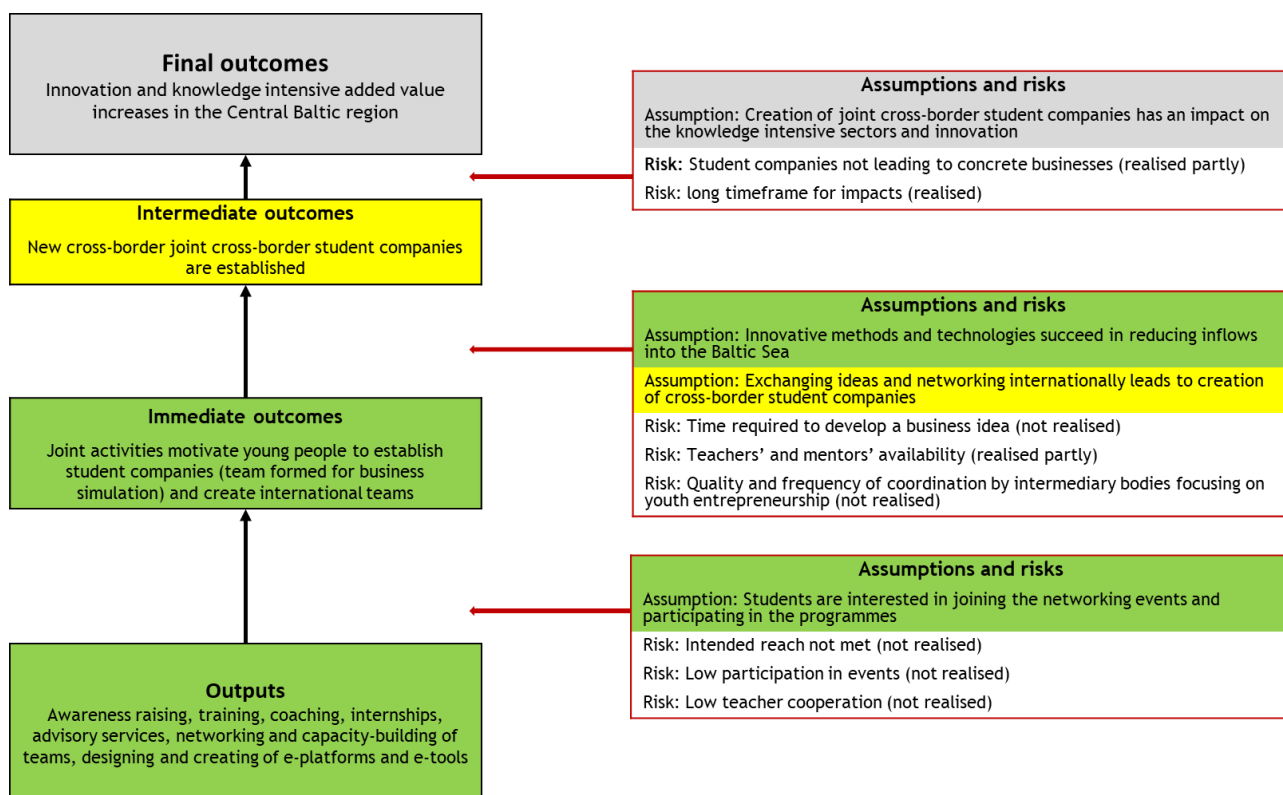
### THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

The contribution claim for SO 1.2 is as follows: IF the Central Baltic programme supports projects that aim at cross-border networking and the entrepreneurship capacity building of students, AND the students are interested in participating in the project activities, THEN the exchange of ideas leads to cooperation between the students AND cross-border student companies are created. The theory of change is depicted in Figure 12.

The activities of the Specific Objective are directed to educate and to inspire young people and students to establish student companies, create international groups, to promote cross-border cooperation and generate future partnerships across the Baltic Sea region. Furthermore, even though the end result of the cooperation does not end in international student companies, cooperation is still seen as highly beneficial

for young people and students to gain experience about establishing businesses, international cooperation and entrepreneurial skills.

Figure 12 Theory of Change for SO 1.2.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption or risk was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption or risk being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption or risk was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

The Interreg Central Baltic programme financed 8 projects under SO 1.2. The projects received, on average, approximately 0.9 million euros of ERDF funding. The smallest projects received approximately 300 000 euros, whereas the two largest projects received almost 1.3 million euros of ERDF funding each. The target group associated with the funded projects was the youth of the region, students and youngsters with an entrepreneurial spirit or, more generally, young students with an interest in cross-border or international activities. Most of the projects had a general target group, but some had more specific target groups. For instance, BE the future and GirlPower focused their activities on 15-18-year-old girls and SENSationalSTEM had youth with special educational needs as its target group.

The project's initial purposes were to promote entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills among the youth and students who are interested in the topic. Another objective of the funded projects was to promote cross-border cooperation between students and youngsters within the programming area. Some projects,



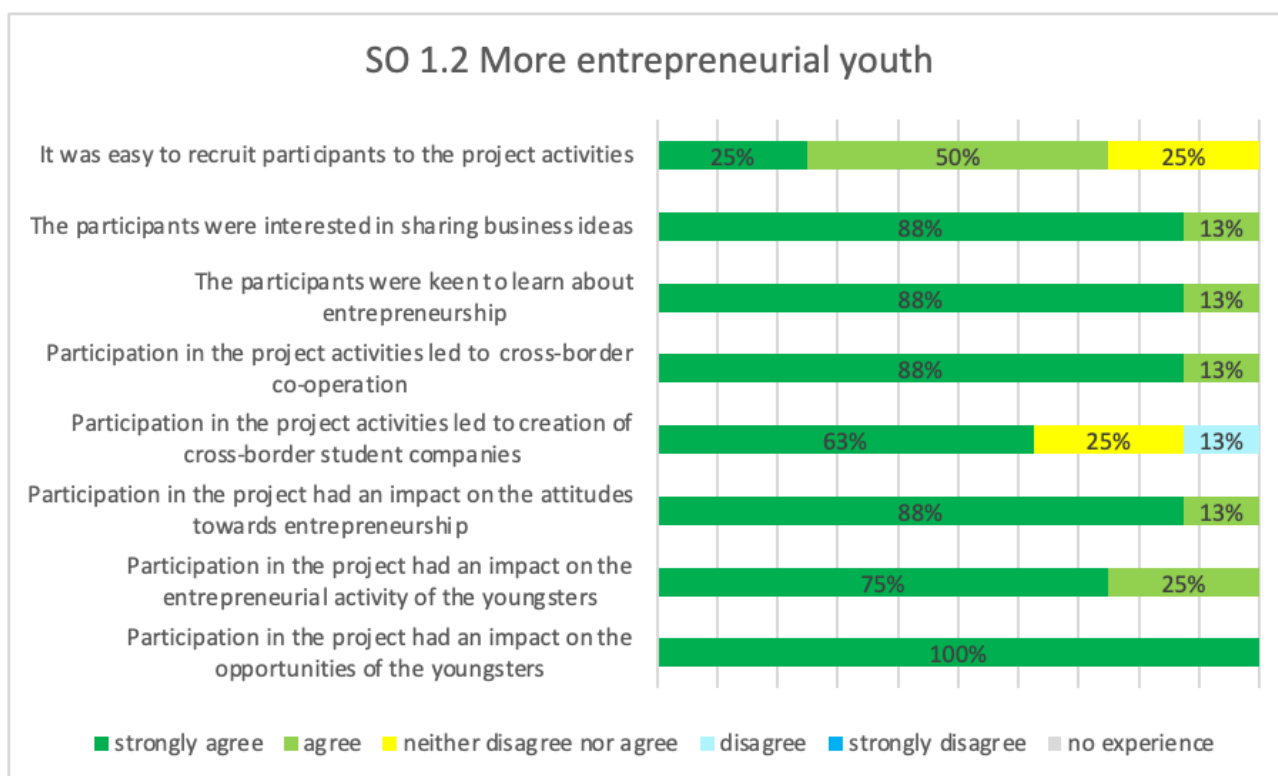
such as CBEwB, Teaming UP, GirlPower and BE the future focused on general entrepreneurial education, whereas other projects followed different approaches. For instance, RIBS combined media literacy with entrepreneurship, SENSationalSTEM focused on entrepreneurship based on science, technology and engineering. DigiYouth worked with digital products, services and solutions, while ChangeMakers was based on entrepreneurship education and environmental challenges. The project activities included various methods and processes, such as the creation of curricula, entrepreneurship and media courses, different entrepreneurial competitions, creating international student business teams, networking events and workshops, mentoring, developing methodologies, youth exchanges and raising the level of entrepreneurial spirit among the students.

Eight people from six projects belonging to Specific Objective 1.2 answered the electronic survey (CBEwB, ChangeMakers, DigiYouth, RIBS, SENSationalSTEM and Teaming UP). At least 63% agreed with all statements related to project activities and impact.

**Participation in the programme has raised young people's interest towards entrepreneurship and has created more opportunities for them.**

All respondents strongly agreed that participation in the project had had an impact on the opportunities afforded to the youngsters involved. Everyone also agreed that the participants were interested in sharing business ideas, the participants were keen to learn about entrepreneurship, participation in the project activities led to cross-border cooperation, participation in the project had an impact on attitudes towards entrepreneurship and participation in the project had an impact on the entrepreneurial activity of the youngsters. 13% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that participation in project activities had led to the creation of cross-border student companies.

Figure 13 Evaluation of statements related to project activities and impact of SO 1.2 projects



It seems that despite the global Covid-19 pandemic, the students were quite interested in joining and participating in the networking events and programmes. This is somewhat surprising, given that substantial changes occurred in the projects due to the pandemic. For example, most of the student exchange and foreign excursion activities were completely stopped and face-to-face meetings, such as lectures and workshops were transferred to e-platforms. Despite this, the youngsters and students were still interested in participating and the number of dropouts remained quite moderate. Many interviewees highlighted the fact that, despite the challenging circumstances, the projects reached and some even exceeded the target number of participating young people.

**The final benefits of the Specific Objective 1.2 for the programming area could be detected in the following years.**

It seems that exchanging ideas and networking internationally does lead to better cooperation since it deepens understanding of different cultures and helps young students to get to know each other better. In the future, the already existing contacts between these young people will lower the threshold in term of contacting each other in future. It also seems that exchanging ideas and networking internationally has generated a lot of positive feedback from the youngsters who participated in the projects. It was described as being extremely ambitious and hard to fulfil in terms of the project objectives to create real, cross-border student companies. Practice companies were generated during the projects, but real, properly functioning cross-border student companies were scarce, this was due to the existence of several difficult obstacles. One of the main reasons was existing legislation in different countries, for example, in Latvia the project had to start an external association to which all company sales were directed. Another obstacle was obviously Covid-19 since it significantly restricted international travel and thus decreased, to some extent, the motivation levels of the young people involved.



It is moreover impossible to assume that the creation of joint cross-border student companies has had any real impact on the knowledge intensive sectors and on innovation more generally, since there were only a small number of real and functioning joint cross-border student companies created during the project. However, the creation of practice joint cross border student companies may potentially have an impact on knowledge intensive sectors or innovation, since young people and students have gained experience on how to create and manage businesses and on entrepreneurship more generally.

### **The participation of the young people has differed between the projects.**

The outcome of the targets and the initial results can be regarded as rather mixed. In some projects the original target values were notably exceeded while, on the other hand, in other projects the original targets were not reached fully. However, the eight projects in this Specific Objective reached and got participating some 2449 young people and/or students in total. (Note however that some of the projects are yet to submit their final reports). Naturally, one of the main reasons for the rather mixed levels of participation of young people has been Covid-19 and its comprehensive impact on the implementation of every project.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The aim of the Specific Objective 1.2 is to support entrepreneurialism and internationalisation among young people and students within the Baltic Sea region. In addition, the Specific Objective is also designed to inspire young people and students to establish cross-border companies, to create international groups and to enhance future partnerships across the programming area.

The activities regarding the Specific Objective included, for example, the creation of curricula, entrepreneurship and media courses, different entrepreneurial competitions, international student business teams, networking events and workshops, mentoring, developing methodologies, youth exchanges and raising the level of entrepreneurial spirit among participating students and youth.

Regarding the evaluation question: ***What was the impact on participating young people?*** The impact on participating young people is that the youngsters became more interested in cross-border cooperation and internationalisation, they have a better understanding of starting businesses, they have better language skills, are better equipped with various skills such as public speaking, have more confidence in themselves and have a better understanding of different cultures and operating environments.

As an answer to the evaluation question: ***What was good, what did not work?*** The collaboration between the project partners worked really well. In addition, the general interest of young students regarding the topic was clear to see as were the skills and knowledge gained in relation to the project. The young people involved are clearly now more interested in entrepreneurship, more involved in the process and have much higher skills in both entrepreneurship and international cooperation. Without doubt the biggest challenges in the projects regarding the Specific Objective 1.2 was the Covid-19 pandemic as the original project implementations changed drastically in its wake. Particularly challenging here were that the excursions and workshops which were to be held at live meetings had to be changed to meetings on virtual platforms. This led to significant challenges in terms of student motivation to continue. Another challenge in some projects was the emergence of problems relating to the recruiting of mentors for the project.

Regarding the assumptions presented in relation to the theory of change, it seems that regarding the global Covid-19 pandemic the students were quite interested in joining and participating in the networking events and programmes. In addition, it seems that exchanging ideas and networking internationally does lead to better cooperation since it clearly does deepen the understanding of different cultures and in particular helps young students get to know each other better. In the future, the already existing contacts between





these young people will undoubtedly lower the threshold to contact each other again. It is however extremely difficult to believe that the creation of joint cross-border student companies has had an impact on knowledge intensive fields, since most of the joint cross-border student companies were basically training companies, so the real impact in these fields is somewhat ambiguous. With regard to the evaluation question: *Is there a more positive attitude towards entrepreneurship among youngsters who participated in project activities?* It seems that the attitudes of young people are a lot more positive than was previously the case among the participants. This is because youngsters have more understanding regarding entrepreneurship, they understand more comprehensively how the system works, they also have a much better understanding of different cultures and are better equipped to participate in international cooperation.

### 4.3 Specific Objective 1.3

In the context of specific objective 1.3, measures have been taken to support small and medium-sized companies in Central Baltic area to enter into new international markets with a focus on innovation, product development and internationalisation. A cluster-based approach is used here to create the desired impacts. There has been an effort to network existing clusters with other clusters in the region and thus to form stronger meta-clusters. This enables the development of cross-regional cooperation for the project implementers and companies of the Central Baltic region, as well as better visibility and additional strength for internationalisation when the mass of companies is larger. Meta-clusters are formed in order to enable the SMEs to enter new markets with developed new or adapted products and services.

The main target groups in this specific objective are SMEs cooperating through established clusters with the potential to enter new markets, clusters reflecting the strengths of the Central Baltic economies (forestry, tourism, local-food, ship building, maritime), municipal, regional and national tourist boards and associations of tourism companies. The actions that are supported in specific objective 1.3 are the development and adaptation of services and products to new markets, branding, awareness building and the marketing of services and products in new markets, process and human resource development, market analysis and feasibility studies.

### THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

The main development need, to which the special goal is connected, is related to the need to improve the opportunities of small and medium-sized companies to internationalise and to develop related cooperation. The aim is to improve the cooperation of the Central Baltic area's clusters and different organisations, enable the creation of new products and services and promote exports to the target market.

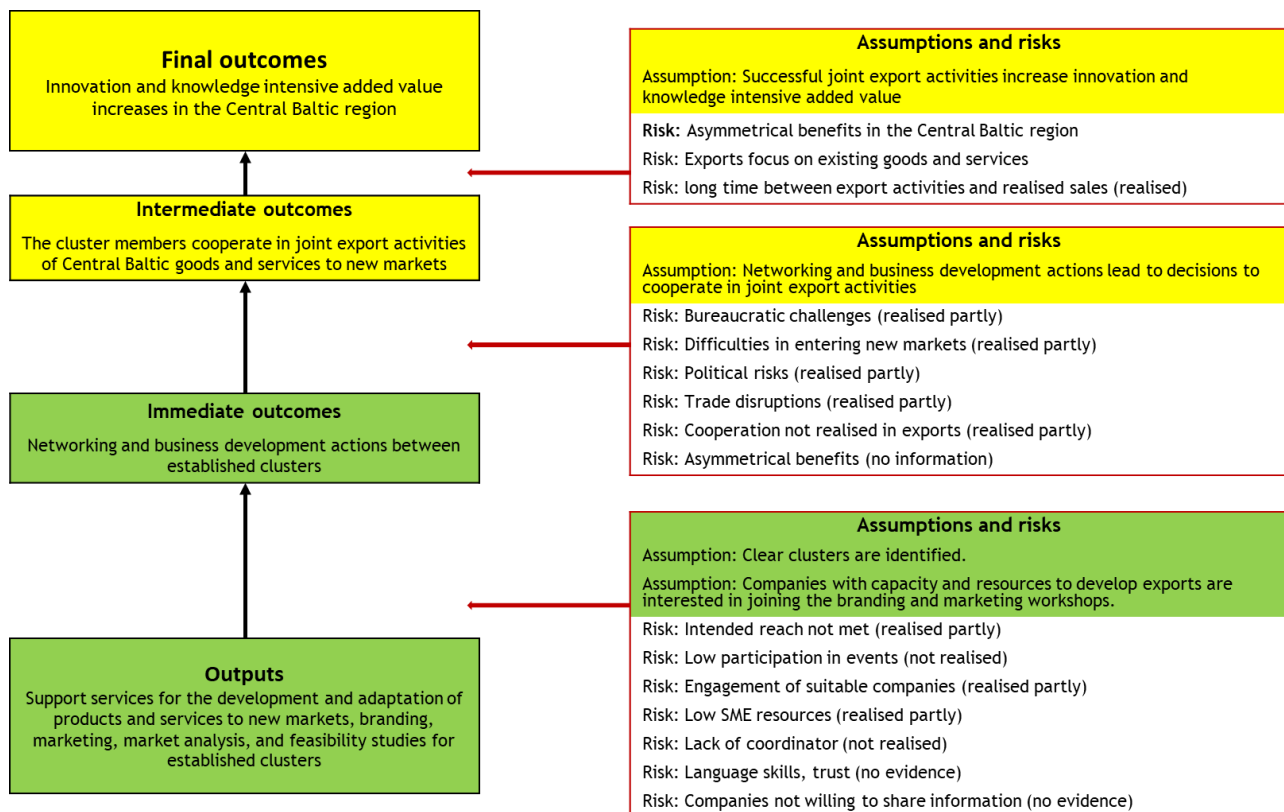
The theory of change is depicted in figure 14. The main outputs are the support services that aim to create the desired changes and impacts. With the help of the services, new products and services are created, existing ones enhanced and the ability to cooperate and co-create between key stakeholders improved. For immediate outcomes to follow, clusters need to be identified and companies with the capacity and resources to develop exports need to be interested in taking part in the services. Identified risks here include that an insufficient number of capable companies are reached and thus that the number of participants in the services is too low to be efficiently sustained.

In terms of immediate outcomes, network and business development actions between established clusters will be undertaken. In this context, a crucial factor for the overall goal is that networking and business development will lead to joint cooperation in export activities. Identified risks here relate to bureaucracy, difficulties in breaking into international markets, political risks and so on.

As intermediate outcomes, cluster members begin to operate in joint export activities in respect of Central Baltic goods and services. The aim here is to increase exports to open up new international markets. As an assumption, successful joint export activities start to increase innovation and knowledge intensive added value. The identified risks are the emergence of asymmetrical benefits in the Central Baltic region, an inability to create new products and services, the long timespan for activities and sales to begin realising their potential and no follow-up actions to export activities.

As an outcome and wider impact innovation, knowledge intensive added value increases in the Central Baltic region.

Figure 14 Theory of Change for SO 1.3.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption or risk was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption or risk being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption or risk was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

In relation to the theory of change, some of the things it contains have been successful while others have faced significant challenges. In the next chapter, the operations, results and impacts of the specific objective have been reviewed in greater detail and from the perspective of the theory of change framework.



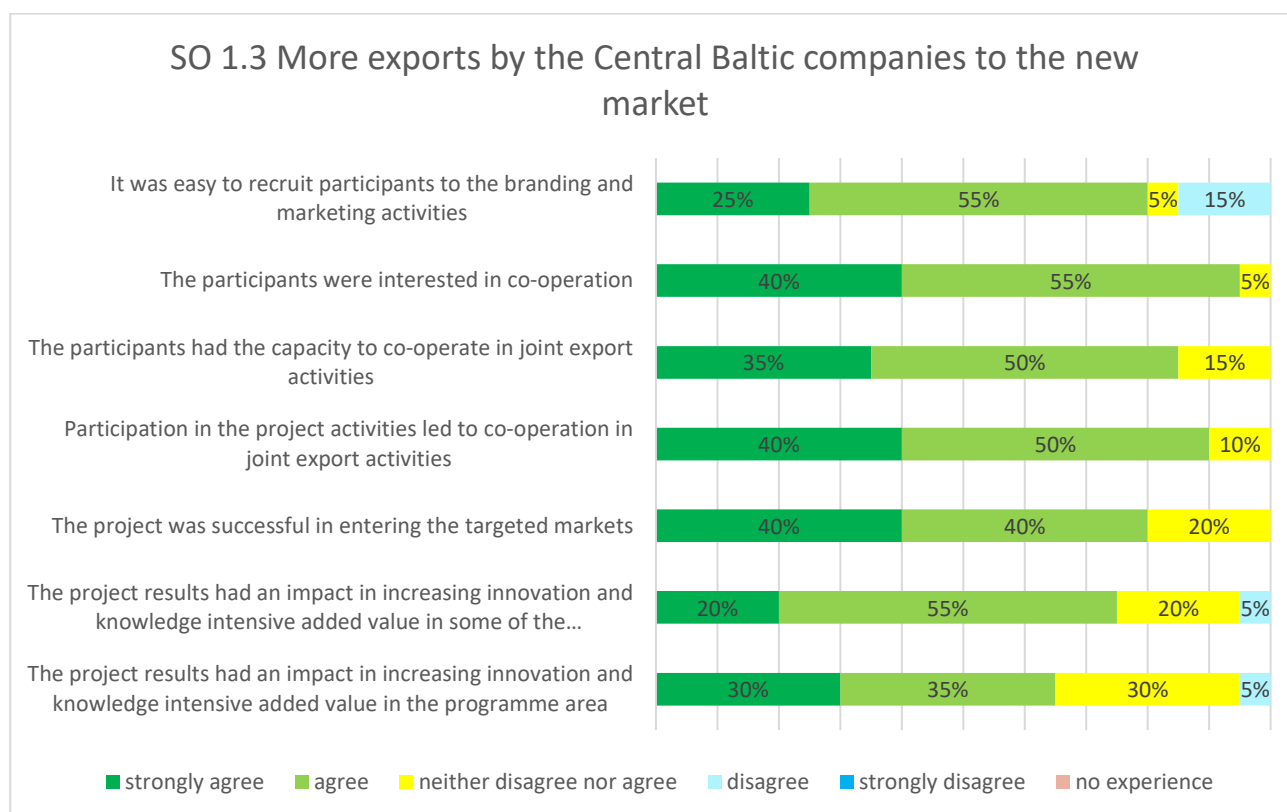
**A significant amount of funding has been allocated and a wide range of measures have been implemented to reach the goals of the specific objective**

During the period 2015-2022 altogether 16 projects were implemented under the specific objective 1.3. Altogether, circa 17.5 million euros of ERDF funding has been targeted to this specific objective and circa 15 million euros granted for the projects. The projects have had different themes. Projects have aimed at creating commercially targeted open innovation and business platforms, increasing cooperation between companies to create export products and services, improving marketing measures in different business sectors to target markets, promoting networking to international markets and producing information on foreign markets. Concrete measures in the projects have included networking events, accelerator and coaching events, facilitating co-creation sessions, support for product development, market analysis, producing marketing materials, creating and upgrading information sharing platforms, creating marketing plans, marketing events in target countries and so on. The lead partner has, in most of the projects, been either from Finland (6 projects) or from Estonia (6 projects). Swedish and Latvian organisations also acted as lead partners. The projects have involved active cross-border cooperation with companies, universities and public actors and with various actors in the target export countries.

20 people from 12 projects that belonged to Specific Objective 1.3 answered the electronic survey (4Smart Growth, Baltic Explorers, BreedExpo, CAITO, CB HealthAccess, eMesai, FINEEX Music, IHMEC, LEF network to China, NNFA, SME Aisle and SME2GO). At least two out of three respondents agreed with all statements related to project activities and impact.

95% of the respondents agreed, 40% strongly, with the statement that the participants were interested in cooperation. Nine out of ten agreed, four out of ten strongly, with the statement that participation in the project activities led to cooperation in joint export activities. The statement that the smallest number of respondents, 65%, agreed with was that the project results had an impact in terms of increasing innovation and knowledge intensive added value in the programme area. The statement that the largest number of respondents, 15%, disagreed with was that it was easy to recruit participants to participate in the branding and marketing activities.

Figure 15 Evaluation of statements related to project activities and impact of SO 1.3 projects



**The development of the operating environment and bureaucracy in the target countries has created challenges in terms of the actions related to the specific objective.**

The key organisations in terms of the projects have been identified and they have been committed to the development activities. Cross-border cooperation has been conducted between key universities and developer organisations and companies. The participation level of companies in the project activities has also been quite high. Well over 3 000 companies are reported to have participated in the projects. Based on this, it can be said that company interest to participate in the projects has been reasonably wide. As such, this has enabled the projects to have an influence on many companies. This pool of companies has also created a suitable platform for potential impacts to emerge. In some projects, the challenge has been to find suitable target companies and to get them involved to a significant level in the project.

The clearest challenge in this specific objective has however been the Covid-19 pandemic. Several events and visits to the target markets had to be either cancelled or postponed. As such, it was not possible to implement all of the measures as originally planned. The projects were however able to react to the changing situation by trying to influence the goals of the specific objective with various compensatory actions (digital channels).

A major challenge in respect of the development activities of SME's is their inability to target enough own resources to development and export activities. This has also been a problem for some projects in relation to the specific objective 1.3. On the other hand, there are also projects where companies have been highly committed to this type of development work. These companies have invested their own resources in development work particularly where this development work has a higher priority for these companies strategically.



Networking and cooperation worked reasonably well with several joint export activities being executed. A process-like operating concept has been important, where market research is first carried out and information is produced and only after that, export promotion activities are undertaken as planned. A clear role assignment between actors regarding the responsibilities of different parts of the process has also proved to be an important factor explaining the successes. Systematic and regular contact practices have also played an important role here.

Challenges have also occurred in relation to bureaucracy in target export countries in respect of some projects. Bureaucracy has, in particular, made it difficult to implement export development measures. In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in the global political situation and especially the war in Ukraine have proven to be a challenge in terms of the creation of impacts.

At the time of the evaluation, it can however be stated that the conditions have been created with the measures of the specific objective for an increase in innovation levels and knowledge intensive added value. The impact logic was appropriate in relation to the goals of the specific objective, though there were challenges (mentioned above) in its implementation.

### **A wide range of results have been achieved in the projects - though the goals of the projects were only partially attained**

Regarding the evaluation question “*Describe additional results (other than achieved sales)?*” it can be stated that various results and effects have been achieved in the projects. Observed results include, for example, export projects and pilots, the creation and strengthening of cooperation with operators in the target market, sales deals for international markets, new information about the target market, digital platforms for sharing information and gathering and refining business ideas aimed at export. Some of the projects have also reported new export sales in target countries after the companies’ participation in the projects has ended.

Variation has clearly occurred between projects as to whether all their goals were attained, or not. In some of the projects, the goals were attained or even exceeded, while in others, due in the main to various challenges, not all goals were successfully attained. Regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the results of the projects were more modest than what could have been achieved, if the pandemic had not occurred. In addition, personnel changes and e.g., the challenges experienced in the target countries, created obstacles to the achievement of the project goals.

In specific objective 1.3 there were over 3 300 enterprises reported to have participated in the projects receiving non-financial support. The number of enterprises supported to introduce new-to-the-market products was over 330 while the number of enterprises receiving support was almost 1 000. In all indicators, the target levels have been clearly exceeded. These numbers in relation to different indicators can contain the same enterprises, but the results can be regarded as high in any case.

### **The ability to internationalise and engage in export growth has been improved**

Regarding the evaluation question “*What is the potential to follow up on the achieved sales, established channels of export, potential FDI deals?*” it can be stated that, overall, with the conducted measures in the special objective 1.3., the ability of target companies to export has been improved and target markets have been opened up for these target companies. Through the measures, it has already been possible to increase exports from some companies while other companies have developed new business opportunities for the future. The larger potential effects in terms of exports will probably only be realised later. Regarding the effects, they arise in many parts after the end of the projects and the programme. It should however be



noted that their emergence is dependent on many other factors (i.e., market and economic development and other developments within companies) than the effects of the project. Since there has been no comprehensive monitoring of the development of the companies in the target group after the projects, it is not possible to say comprehensively whether the projects have resulted in longer-term export-related benefits for the target companies. However, there is information about individual successes in this regard.

For research and education organisations and organisations responsible for business development, an important aspect here has been that they have gained a deeper understanding of the development needs in respect of SME's. The long-term cooperation between these organisations has also been strengthened, the generation of synergies improved and the ability to support the internationalisation of SMEs has also been improved. More information has also been obtained about international target markets and what works and what does not in terms of export promotion and internationalisation. Strengthening connections with international target market organisations has also been seen as very important. Some follow-up projects have also been implemented.

As an answer to the evaluation question “*Did the project’s approach (strategy, activities) work in terms of entering the targeted markets?*” it can be stated that various methods have been used in the projects to generate effects. Their functionality has however varied somewhat from project to project. A generally useful approach here has been to first carry out market research and generate information about the market’s potential with different industries in mind. After this, the target companies and operators have then been prepared and sparred in relation to the export opportunities of the target market. Finally, export promotion activities (e.g., export promotion trips and networking events) have been effective, where key parties in the target market are met face-to-face. In some projects, it has been necessary to change the operational logic of the project, or to invest only in certain activities, when, for example, the Covid-19 pandemic has prevented the implementation of certain actions.

Regarding the evaluation question “*What were the main challenges and obstacles to cooperation and joint entry to new markets?*” it can be stated that the main challenges for the projects related to the restrictions caused by the pandemic, changes in the global political situation, the different operational cultures and bureaucracy in target countries, the weak commitment of SMEs to projects and also personnel changes in the projects and the various challenges associated with cooperation in general. The challenges in project cooperation here mainly related to the variance in operating methods and operating cultures of different organisations (both between project implementers and also with target market organisations and project implementers). In general, it remains quite demanding to break into foreign target markets as a foreign operator. However, these challenges have not affected all projects and the implementation of several projects has gone well.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The added value of the measures taken in the specific objective 1.3 can be viewed in terms of a few different aspects. Project funding has enabled actions especially for the SME's that would not have been implemented without this funding. Smaller companies have limited resources and projects have enabled them, in cooperation, to build better prospects for internationalisation and export activities. Many of the target markets are located a long distance away and in different operating cultures. Individual companies need help and the joint strength provided by cooperation to enter these markets. Companies often do not want to invest in internationalisation or to take the associated risks. These companies need both financial resources as well as external expertise, to enable them to develop internationally. New contacts, new information on foreign markets and an improved understanding of the companies’ own ability to internationalise are important issues here. The research and development organisations have been able to implement measures internationally, develop their operations and cooperation initiatives, as well as obtain



information about the market and target companies, something which would have been challenging to do without the implemented projects. The projects have also enabled cross-border networking both in the Central Baltic area among several different actors and also in the target markets with key organisations.

The actions of the specific objective have brought together the resources of the Central Baltic region more comprehensively and gained greater power and visibility for export promotion activities in a more uniform manner.

## 5. PRIORITY 2

Priority 2 aimed at contributing to the promotion and development of natural and cultural heritage, improving the urban environment and revitalising cities, as well as promoting innovative technologies to improve environmental protection and resource efficiency.

The planned budget for Priority Axis 2 was 50.32 million euros. This constituted 29.5% of the ERDF budget of the Interreg Central Baltic programme. A total of 43.6 million euros was committed to 35 Priority Axis 2 projects.

Priority 2 has four specific objectives, namely, 2.1 Natural and cultural resources developed into sustainable tourist attractions, 2.2 Sustainably planned and managed marine and coastal areas, 2.3. Better urban planning in the Central Baltic region and 2.4. Reduced nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows into the Baltic Sea.

### 5.1 Specific Objective 2.1

SO 2.1. addressed challenges related to the tourism and natural and cultural heritage sectors, namely, the challenges related to tourism development and the challenge of preserving nature and developing it as a resource for sustainable economic development.

SO 2.1. aimed to develop cultural and natural resources into joint tourist attractions and products in order to improve the attractiveness of the living and visiting environment. These joint natural resources could include, *inter alia*, joint physical and natural environment resources, ecosystem-based joint natural heritage, Baltic Sea landscapes-based joint natural heritage, or the joint natural heritage of the Archipelago and islands nature. The cultural heritage resources could include, for instance, Central Baltic common history-based cultural resources, joint Central Baltic urban cultural resources, Central Baltic common music-, literature- and art-based cultural resources, joint Central Baltic sources of livelihood-based cultural resources, or Central Baltic leisure and sports-related cultural resources.

SO 2.1. was implemented via development projects that identified and specified the potential use of natural and cultural resources; designing attractions and packaging tourist services, investments into natural and cultural resources to create joint Central Baltic tourist attractions and marketing activities such as awareness-raising, marketing events, visits, fairs and media advertising.

The main target groups were visitors and local people, companies operating in the tourism sector, regional and local organisations benefiting from developed attractions. The direct beneficiaries of the projects were organisations responsible for the maintenance and development of natural and cultural heritage, tourism development organisations and local and regional authorities.





The SO has one result indicator: the number of more sustainable joint natural and cultural heritage-based tourist attractions.

### THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

The contribution claim for SO 2.1 is as follows: IF the Central Baltic programme will support development projects that aim at developing cultural and natural resources into joint tourist attractions and products AND these projects will offer support for the joint design and marketing of attractions and the packaging of tourist services, investments into natural and cultural resources, AND the tourism development and natural and cultural heritage organisations participate in joint activities and receive investments, THEN sustainable joint natural and cultural heritage based tourist attractions are created, AND Central Baltic natural and cultural heritage is conserved, protected, promoted and developed.

The Central Baltic programme provides support for the identification and specification of the potential use of natural and cultural resources, designing attractions and packaging tourist services, investments in natural and cultural resources to create joint Central Baltic tourist attractions and marketing activities, such as awareness raising, marketing events, visits, fairs and media advertising.

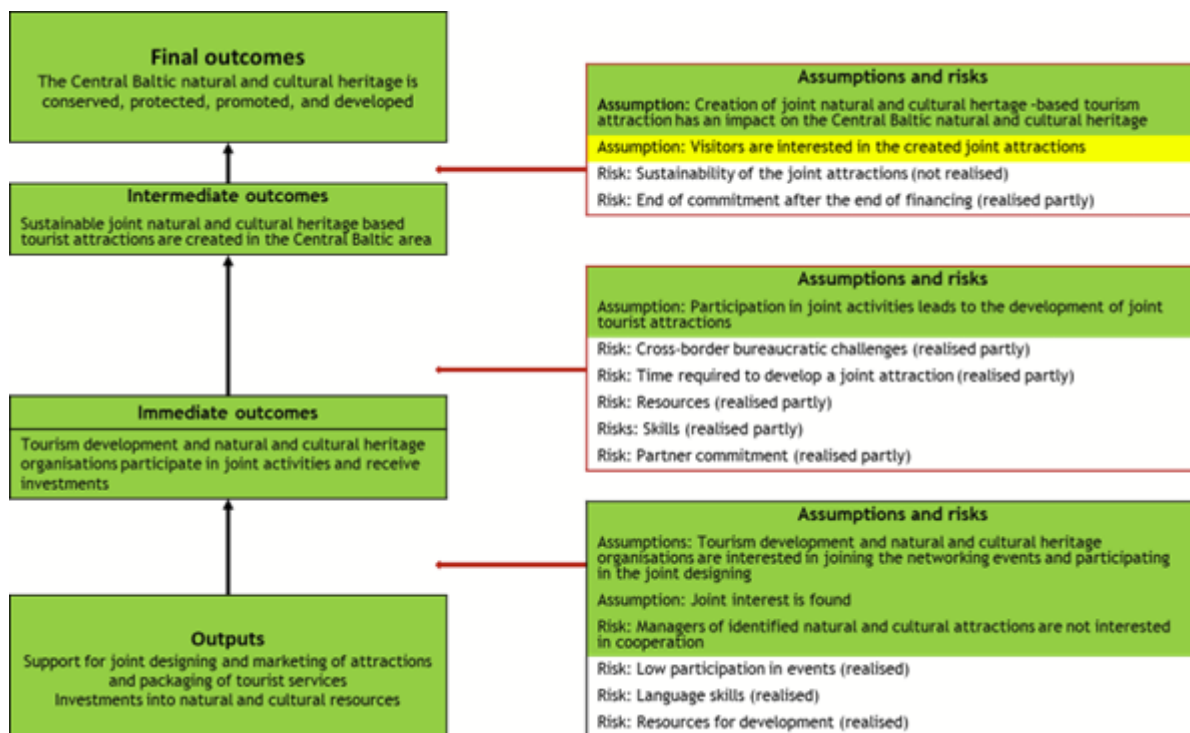
There are certain assumptions that need to hold true for project outputs transformation into the **immediate outcome**: tourism development and natural and cultural heritage organisations are interested in joining the networking events and participating in joint design and the finding the joint interest. It is **assumed** that the beneficiaries take part in project activities and networking, seminars and events reach relevant actors and that they find the joint interest.

Programme support for joint activities for tourism development and natural and cultural heritage organisations and investments is expected to contribute to the situation where the tourism sustainable joint natural and cultural heritage-based tourist attractions are created (**intermediate outcome**). These changes are conditional upon the **assumptions** that the participation of the organisations in joint activities leads to the development of joint tourist attractions and that the attractions are interesting for the visitors.

Through working in this way, the programme expects to positively contribute to the **final outcomes**: conserving, protecting, promoting and developing the natural and cultural heritage of the Central Baltic region. The key assumptions enabling these changes to occur presume that the creation of joint natural and cultural heritage-based tourism attraction has an impact on the Central Baltic's natural and cultural heritage. The Theory of Change is presented in Figure 16 below.



Figure 16 Theory of Change SO 2.1.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption or risk was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption or risk being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption or risk was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

The assessment of the projects shows that the Theory of Change for the SO 2.1 is largely validated, that is, the programme logic was successful to a large extent. Namely, the programme provided support for the joint design and marketing of attractions and investments into natural and cultural resources. Joint interest was found and the relevant actors were interested in cooperating and participating in the events and in the joint design activities. Despite the challenges emerging in some projects (low participation in events, language skills and the actors' scarce resources allocated to development, the joint activities and the investments were realised which then led to the development of joint tourist attractions. These attractions have had an impact on the Central Baltic natural and cultural heritage, although there is some mixed evidence as to the visitors' impact in the created attractions and the long-term sustainability of the attractions after the end of project financing.

### The programme has developed joint Central Baltic natural and cultural resources into attractions

The Interreg Central Baltic programme financed 15 projects under SO 2.1. The projects received, on average, approximately 1 million euros of ERDF funding. The smallest projects received approximately half a million euros, whereas the largest project received almost 1.8 million euros of ERDF funding. The projects



created a total of 15 joint attractions which is more than the number of joint attractions aimed at in the programme level.

The projects developed joint tourist attractions based on ecosystems (bird watching, forest hiking and nature in urban areas), landscape-based joint natural heritage (lakes, islands), common history-based cultural resources (e.g., pilgrimage route, Hanseatic League, historic towns, historic sites), and livelihood-based cultural resources (underwater cultural heritage, rural lifestyle). The evidence related to the evaluation question ***Do the created attractions well represent joint Central Baltic natural and cultural resources?*** shows that the projects represent a wide range of joint Central Baltic natural and cultural resources, such as nature, shared history and cultural heritage and the Baltic Sea as a bridging factor for water and archipelago -related projects. However, no projects focused on joint Central Baltic urban cultural resources or Central Baltic common music-, literature- and art-based cultural resources. In terms of fulfilling a good representation of the joint natural and cultural resources however, it can be said that the central aspects defined in the programme are well covered by the funded projects.

The projects developed routes (St Olav's Way, Forest Trail, NATTOURS), activities (Baltic Wings, Smart Zoos, LiviHeri), smart solutions (URBAN ECO ISLANDS, NatAc), compiled information materials based on history and the area properties (BALTACAR, LightsOn!, HANSA), or focused on destination development, branding and marketing (Archipelago Access, Rural Lifestyle, Lakesperience, LiviHeri). Some of the projects included investments (St Olav's Waterway, NatAc, Baltic Wings, Forest Trail, DefenseArch, URBAN ECO ISLANDS, Archipelago Access, NATTOURS, SmartZoos), whereas others developed digital solutions (Smart Zoos, NATTOURS, Archipelago Access). Most of the projects focused on already existing attractions. Furthermore, a significant number of the projects improved accessibility to the attractions, even if that was not their main objective.

#### **The concept and basis of 'jointness' of the tourist attraction varied in the projects**

In terms of the evaluation question: What ***are the main characteristics which make the created attractions joint?*** It can be said that the jointness of the tourist attraction was central to project development in most cases, though in some cases, the jointness was only realised in parallel work linked to one concept, activity (e.g. birdwatching), or location (e.g. lakes, islands, countryside). Some projects focused on the creation of joint attractions along a route (St. Olav's Waterway, Forest Trail), whereas others created activities and services in different locations (HANSA, LiviHeri, NATTOURS, Defence Arch, URBAN ECO ISLANDS, Lakesperience, BALTACAR, Baltic Wings, NatAc, Smart Zoos). Given that the programme defined the background for the joint natural or cultural heritage, the selected projects were based on some idea of jointness or commonness. For many projects, this jointness can be characterised as a physical connection or a route. In a lot of the projects, the jointness actually focused on the development of products and services for a given target group. Furthermore, the digital tools (apps or web pages) developed in some projects supported the jointness through providing information about each of the joint attractions.

17 people from 11 projects that belonged to Specific Objective 2.1 answered: BALTACAR, Baltic Wings, DefenceArch, HANSA, Lakesperience, LiviHeri, NATTOURS, NatureBizz, SmartZoos and St Olav Waterway responded to the electronic survey sent out by the evaluators. Around three quarters (76%) of the respondents believed the project was successful in creating a joint attraction, whereas an eighth (12%) were neutral and an eighth (12%) disagreed. The survey respondents were strongly of the opinion that the created attractions represent joint Central Baltic natural or cultural resources and that the created attraction maintains, promotes, or developed Central Baltic natural or cultural heritage (94% of the respondents agreed with both of these claims).



Overall, it can be said that those projects which had a clear joint theme applied to similar locations succeeded well in creating joint tourist attractions. It seems that finding partners with shared interests was relatively easy (59% of the survey respondents agreed), as well as defining the shared development needs and focus for the project (71% of the survey respondents agreed).

As an answer to the evaluation question: To which *target groups(s) and target market(s) is the attraction focusing?* It can be said that the target groups varied across the different projects, depending on the attraction. The target groups were typically people interested in nature tourism and urban nature tourism, but there were also projects for specific target groups such as families, people with mobility or sensory challenges and birdwatchers.

With regard to the evaluation question: Is there *a marketing strategy and marketing plan in place or being implemented to attract visitors to the attraction?* it can be said that there is mixed evidence here. Most of the projects had a clearly defined and implemented joint marketing plan, but some projects reported that the marketing was left to local organisations. Slightly more than half of the survey respondents believed the marketing of the joint attraction was successful (58%), whereas almost a fifth (18%) of the respondents disagreed with the claim.

### **Reaching and assessing the targeted number of visitors proved challenging in some cases**

The projects reported several types of challenges in relation to project implementation. Most highlighted problems related to investments. Namely, the planning and permits for investments was time-consuming, particularly in locations with protected areas. Moreover, the process was complex and required the approval of several different authorities. Furthermore, as the time between planning and implementing the investments was long (often several years), the original investment budgets were insufficient due to price increases. In addition, challenges in respect of procurement were reported by several projects. Another issue that emerged as a challenge in a few projects was the commitment of the project partners to the project and the changes in personnel experienced. A couple of projects mentioned that finding the right project partners and finding common ground in the project activities and project focus were challenging at first, especially if there were differing starting points for development in different countries. The pandemic also forced changes to the implementation of some projects as some activities had to be postponed, others had to be changed to virtual activities and the project meetings were all conducted online. Naturally, the visitor numbers also suffered from the pandemic, although some projects benefitted from the increase in domestic tourists undertaking outdoors activities (e.g. Forest Trail). Some of the projects also mentioned challenges in relation to calculating actual visitor numbers.

In terms of outputs, the projects typically reported that the joint attraction had been created, but only seven out of fifteen projects had reached their visitor targets. Some stated that the target set had been too ambitious, whereas others found it challenging to verify the number of visitors while some had also clearly been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Of those who had reached their visitor targets, some projects (URBAN ECO ISLANDS, NatAc, Forest Trail, and Lakesperience) had clearly exceeded the targets. As an answer to the evaluation question *Is the targeted number of visitors realistic and achievable?* It can be said that the numbers are realistic and achievable over a longer period of time for most of the attractions, though, clearly, some projects did set overly optimistic visitor targets for the project period.

### **The long-term sustainability of the attraction depends on a continuation plan and local revenues**

The evidence related to the evaluation question *Is the tourist attraction sustainable as the attraction?* shows that most of the created attractions, especially those with physical infrastructure or in which concrete services or trails were created, have a high probability of remaining sustainable as an attraction.



Their sustainability also depends on whether the project managed to create revenue for local entrepreneurs and whether there is an organisation that will continue the work after the end of the project. The survey respondents were strongly of the opinion that the attraction is sustainable as an attraction in the medium to long term (94% of the respondents agreed with the claim).

Some of the projects had significant spill-over effects, namely St Olav's Waterway and Forest Trail. The St Olav's project has encouraged international and local projects funded from other sources (Development of a Cultural History World Heritage Site funded by the Interreg V-A Sweden-Norway, and a feasibility study on the St. Olav's way in the Savonlinna region and St. Olav's historical route in Ulvila which were funded from the Mainland Finland Rural Development Programme). The Forest Trail project, on the other hand, resulted in the Development of Forest Trails in Latvia and Lithuania and the expansion of the Baltic Coastal Hiking route in Lithuania which was funded from the Interreg Latvia-Lithuania programme.

As sustainability was included in the specific objective description, each of the projects had to include elements promoting sustainability. With regard to the evaluation question ***Is the tourist attraction sustainable environmentally?*** it can be concluded that sustainability was taken up in each project and the projects are sustainable environmentally if the number of visitors remains at sustainable levels.

Some of the projects focused on outdoors activities, such as bird watching, hiking, bicycle tourism or urban nature walks. In these projects, the sustainability of the environment was protected by building boardwalks or given route suggestions to keep the visitors out of the vulnerable areas and by building tourism infrastructure (compostable toilets and waste management). Some others had sustainability as a starting point, e.g. promoting urban nature tourism promotes the use of public transport and shortens travelled distances while the promotion of homestays in rural areas promotes sustainability.

Digital solutions were developed in some projects (Smart Zoos, NATTOURS, Archipelago Access). However, other projects focused more on sustainable tourism, but utilised social media and websites in the marketing and communication and electronic learning environment in the product development training for entrepreneurs. Most of the projects included electronic maps, flyers and brochures.

## 5.2 Specific Objective 2.2

SO 2.2 targets joint challenges and issues related to maritime spatial planning of exclusive economic zones of territorial waters and integrated coastal zone management.

SO 2.2. aimed at fostering cooperation, mediating and finding a balance between different sectors that have different interests using marine and coastal resources, e.g. agriculture and nature conservation, tourism and coastal protection, shipping and fisheries.

SO 2.2. was implemented through projects which improve the planning activities. The supported actions included information collection, surveys, supporting and carrying out participatory processes preceding official planning process, experience exchange events, seminars, conferences and visits focusing on the implementation of management practices which follow the official planning processes, manuals, guidelines, agreements, E-platforms and solutions supporting participatory processes, planning processes and management.

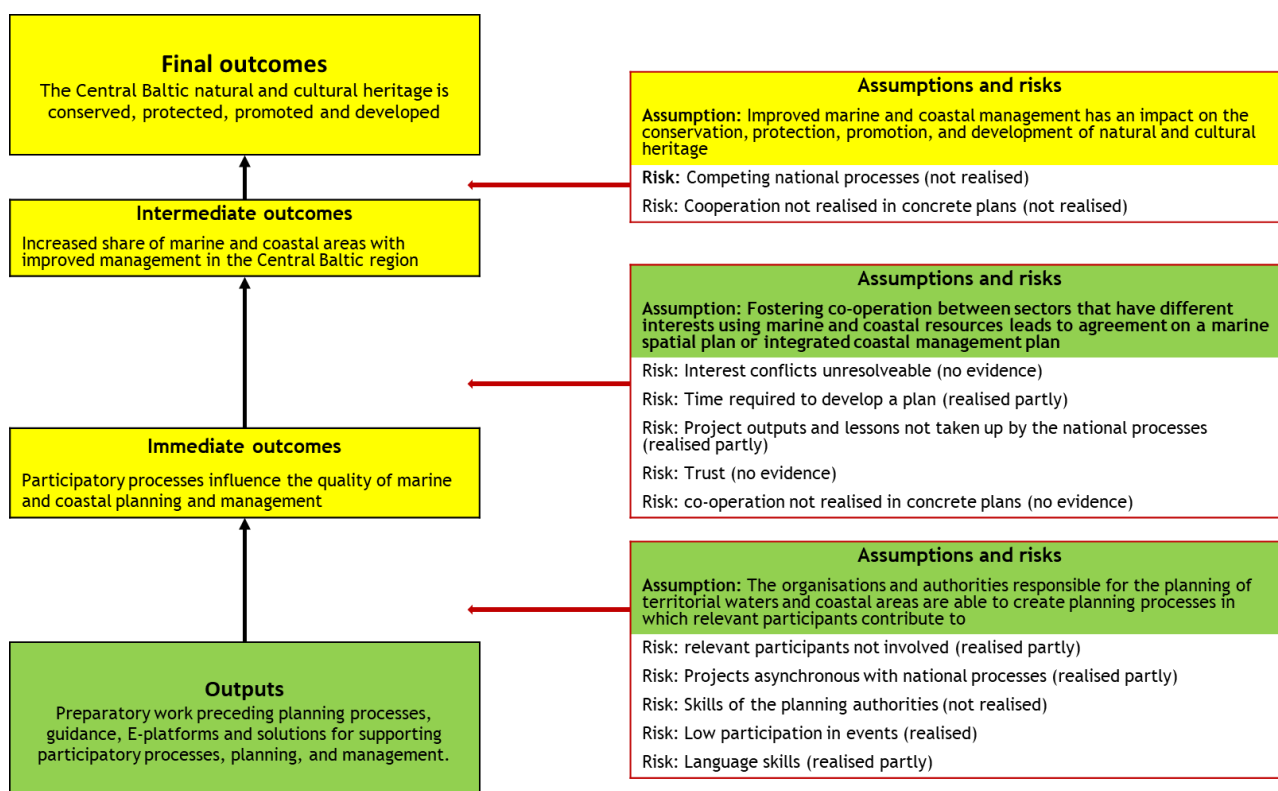
The main target groups were the inhabitants, visitors and companies interested in developing sea and coastal area resources. The targeted beneficiaries were organisations and authorities on the national and/or regional level responsible for the planning of territorial waters, exclusive economic zones of territorial waters and coastal areas; organisations with competence to contribute to improved planning and

management, such as authorities from specific sectors using marine and coastal resources, including environmental protection organisations. The result indicator was the share of marine and coastal areas with improved management, while the output indicator was the number of jointly targeted planning and management activities.

## THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

The contribution claim for SO 2.2 is as follows: IF the Central Baltic programme supports projects that aim at improving the maritime spatial planning of territorial waters and integrated coastal zone management, AND these projects engage relevant participants in a participatory manner, AND the funded projects are able to influence the marine and coastal planning and management processes, THEN cooperation between sectors that have different interests in using marine and coastal resources leads to an agreement on a marine spatial plan or an integrated coastal management plan, AND the natural and cultural heritage of the Central Baltic region is conserved, protected, promoted and developed. The Theory of Change is presented in figure 17 below.

Figure 17 Theory of Change SO 2.2.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption or risk was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption or risk being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption or risk was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.



The Central Baltic programme provides support for marine and coastal planning through information collection and surveys, supporting and carrying out participatory processes, experience exchange events, seminars, conferences and visits on the implementation of management practices which follow the official planning processes, manuals, guidelines, agreements, E-platforms and solutions for supporting participatory processes, planning processes and management.

If certain assumptions hold true, these outputs will lead to the immediate outcome of the participatory processes improving the quality of planning. As a result, the intermediate outcome will be an increased share of marine and coastal areas under improvement management in the Central Baltic region.

The assessment of the projects shows that the Theory of Change for the SO 2.2 is only partly validated, that is, the programme logic was not fully successful. Namely, the supported projects did produce research, solutions, information and learning opportunities for participatory processes. However, not all relevant participants were involved in the projects which were also at times asynchronous with the national maritime spatial planning or integrated coastal management planning processes. Even though the responsible authorities were able to design a planning process that relevant participants could contribute to, there is mixed evidence as to whether the participatory processes influence the quality of the marine and coastal planning and management as the project outputs and lessons were not always taken up by the national processes. Even if the immediate outcome, the increased share of marine and coastal areas with improved management in the Central Baltic region, was reached, this cannot, in the main, be attributed to the impact of the financed projects.

The main challenges in the Theory of Change for SO 2.2 relate to the fact that while the programme funded projects were designed to support the national processes, the outcomes were produced by these same national processes. That is to say, the programme could only have had an indirect effect on the outcomes. Those are, in fact, controlled by the national authorities, who can either use the outputs and the lessons of the projects or not. Thus, the project effects are mainly seen at the output level in the ToC.

### **Each of the four projects met their targets**

The Interreg Central Baltic programme financed 4 projects under Specific Objective 2.2. The projects each had slightly different approaches to supporting the planning processes. Namely, one project integrated extensive multidisciplinary human-ecological data into GIS analyses (SustainBaltic), another developed the marine spatial planning capacity (Plan4Blue), a third created a framework that integrates marine ecosystems with environmental accounting (MAREA), while the fourth piloted new tools to improve the transparency and inclusiveness of the planning process (Coast4US). The projects received, on average, 1.4 million euros of ERDF funding. The smallest project received approximately 940 000 euros, whereas the largest project was allocated around 2 million euros of ERDF funding. The projects have reached their targets, meaning that a total of 19 jointly targeted planning and management activities were conducted in the projects. This was more than the target 10 set at the programme level.

The funded projects displayed a variable level of geographic coverage. Estonia was included in all four projects, Finland in three, Latvia in two and Sweden and Åland in only one. Two out of the four projects were implemented only between Finland and Estonia. It is notable that Finland and Sweden were not included in any of the projects together. When analysing the project partners at NUTS level, it can be seen that project partners from 17 (out of the 19 possible) NUTS regions took part in the SO 2.2 projects. Yet, the partners were generally from the capital regions. The geographical coverage also varied in depth, depending on the focus of the projects. The pilot areas which some projects had, gained significantly from the in-depth studies and new methods developed on the basis of their regional data. With regard to the evaluation question, *Has the geographical coverage of the coastal and marine areas of the projects been*

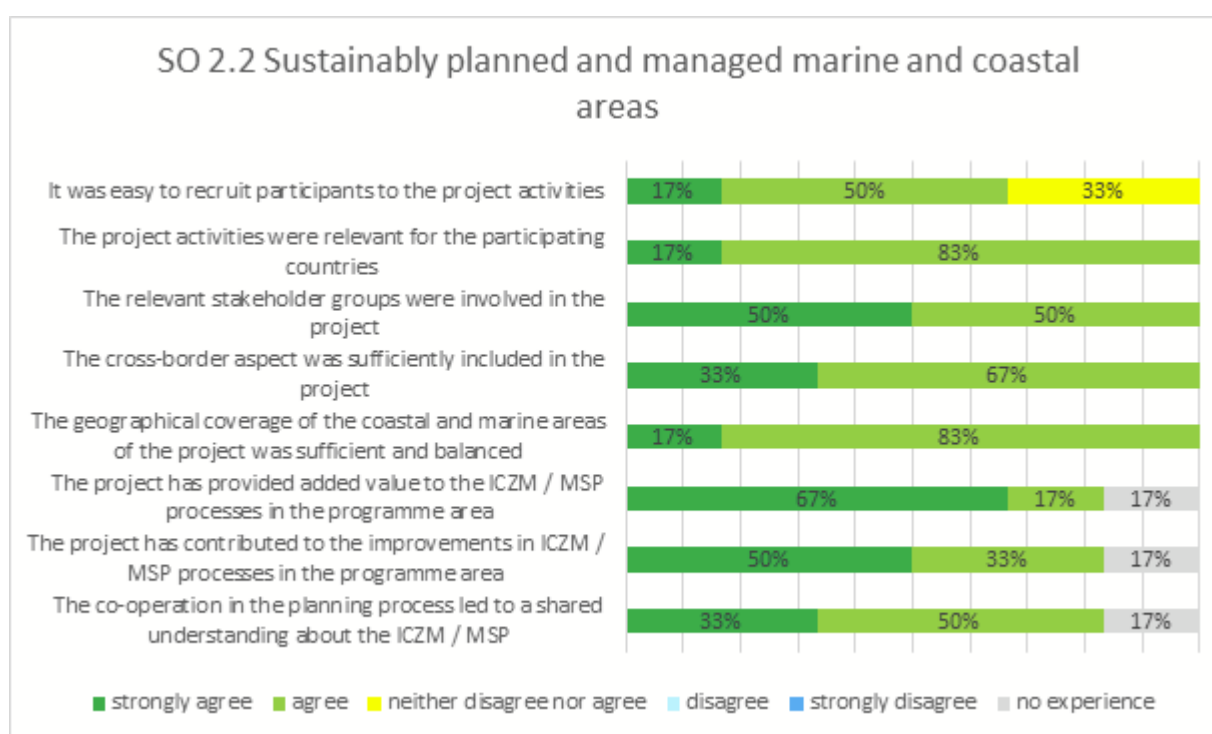


*sufficient and balanced?* it can be concluded that the geographical balance has been sufficient, but it could have been more balanced e.g., by having projects where both Finland and Sweden were included.

### The projects produced analyses and information and developed tools and methods

The projects supported by the programme have contributed to improved marine and coastal management in several ways. For instance, the projects have conducted spatial analyses, mapped and prepared for planning processes, supported the planning processes and developed tools for integrating information into the planning processes. The survey to project partners confirms that the project activities were relevant to the participating countries and that the relevant stakeholder groups were involved in the project. Out of the six responses from the project partners in the four projects supporting SO 2.2, all agreed with these statements. Five out of six respondents (83%) found the projects added value to the planning processes and contributed to improvements in the planning processes.

Figure 18 Responses to statements related to project activities and impact of SO 2.2 (N=6)



Those planners who participated in the project activities gave positive feedback on the issue of the project's impact on planning processes. The projects produced some additional materials relevant to the planning processes, some of which have been used in other regional and local level planning processes. However, some projects reported that their outputs have not been used directly in the planning processes. The added value to the planning processes was, in particular, related to the creation of new kinds of information which would not have been possible without the processes. Furthermore, the projects had a lot of interactive elements which effectively entailed closer cooperation between the planning authorities and the stakeholders.

The project partners had different mandates relating to the planning processes, something which clearly affected their role and opportunities to influence the planning processes. In addition, in some projects it took a while for the project partners to agree a shared understanding of the project goals. It should also be noted here that project expectations were generally high but variable across the various participating countries. The planning processes in the different countries proceeded at different speeds and in different ways, so the project support for the processes varied, as did the project's closeness to the official planning

processes. However, the evidence relating to the evaluation question: *Have the project interventions been relevant, considering also the planning and management tasks carried out by the responsible authorities in the countries?* varies. Some of the projects have produced materials and information that has been included in the national maritime spatial or integrated coastal zone management processes, some have not. The relevance seems to stem from the national context: if the planning process was already initialised before the projects were running or producing outcomes, the relevance of the projects was lower.

The main challenges reported in the projects related to identifying and reaching relevant target groups and the partnerships running the projects. The challenges here related to reaching businesses and identifying the relevant stakeholders early enough during the life of the project. It was however noted that when the authorities involved in planning also participated themselves in the project activities, the cooperation and working with target groups was much more fruitful. Overall, in answer to the evaluation question: *Have all relevant stakeholder groups been involved in the planning and management processes?* It can be said that the relevant stakeholder groups have been sufficiently involved.

Cross-border cooperation was an integral element of the projects. However, since the planning processes are done nationally, the most important aspects that the cross-border cooperation brought to the planning processes were capacity building, the discussion of shared challenges and the sharing best practices. Regarding the evaluation question, *Has the cross-border cooperation aspect been sufficiently included in the projects?* it can be concluded that the cross-border cooperation was sufficiently included in the projects.

#### **Sustainability of the projects is in the hands of the authorities responsible for planning**

The sustainability of the project results depends, ultimately, on the target groups and the planning authorities, not on the projects themselves. If the materials and the lessons learned are taken onboard in further planning processes, the project advances are sustainable. However, if there are frequent changes of staff or if the produced materials and working methods are not utilised, the project results are not sustainable. As such, it is not possible to give a conclusive answer to the evaluation question, *Are the achieved improvements in integrated ICZM or MSP planning processes sustainable?*

The programme has had a positive impact on marine and coastal planning processes through supporting projects that have produced materials and helped to improve the participatory processes. Cross-border cooperation brought added value to the projects, but as the planning processes occur within national mandates and the processes were asynchronous, the projects were able to benefit the planning processes in different countries in different ways. Overall, the programme has achieved satisfactory results in respect of its specific objective. However, the programme can only contribute to a certain extent to the improved marine and coastal zone management, something which is the responsibility of the national authorities. As such, the programme intervention logic was probably a little over ambitious here in assuming that the support actions related to the planning processes would improve the outcomes significantly. With regard to the evaluation question, *What added value have the projects given to ICZM or MSP processes?* it can be concluded that the added value of the projects has been the generation of new information, new methods and tools, capacity-building, sharing of experiences and taking the discussions around marine spatial planning to the local level. These would not have happened without the projects which utilised skills from different project partners around the Central Baltic area.





### 5.3 Specific Objective 2.3

SO 2.3 targets the challenges and opportunities related to improving the urban space via joint urban planning activities for especially large urban areas.

SO 2.3. aimed at improving the integrated urban management practices which include activities preceding the official planning processes and activities following the official planning process. The SO also included the regeneration of brownfield areas.

SO 2.3. is implemented through projects which improve the planning activities. The actions supported include information collection, surveys (evaluations, geological studies, feasibility studies etc.), experience exchange seminars, trainings, guidelines, preparatory activities of environment impact assessments, concepts and primary designs for brownfield regeneration and pilot investments, as well as the dissemination of - and putting into use - acquired good practices.

The main target groups were the inhabitants, visitors and developers of the urban and suburban areas of the Central Baltic Region. The targeted beneficiaries were authorities on the local, regional and national levels responsible for spatial planning in the Central Baltic urban areas and the surrounding local governments. The result indicator is the share of urban areas covered with integrated urban management while the output indicator is the number of targeted integrated urban plans.

#### THEORY OF CHANGE

The contribution claim for SO 2.3 is as follows: IF the Central Baltic programme supports projects that aim at improving urban planning processes, AND these projects engage relevant participants, AND the projects are implemented in a participatory manner, THEN cooperation between relevant participants leads to an agreement on an urban management plan AND the natural and cultural heritage of the Central Baltic region is conserved, protected, promoted and developed.

Building on the context above, the expected key drivers of Central Baltic programme intervention are projects which support participatory urban planning in the Central Baltic region which lead to improvements in the quality of urban planning and management.

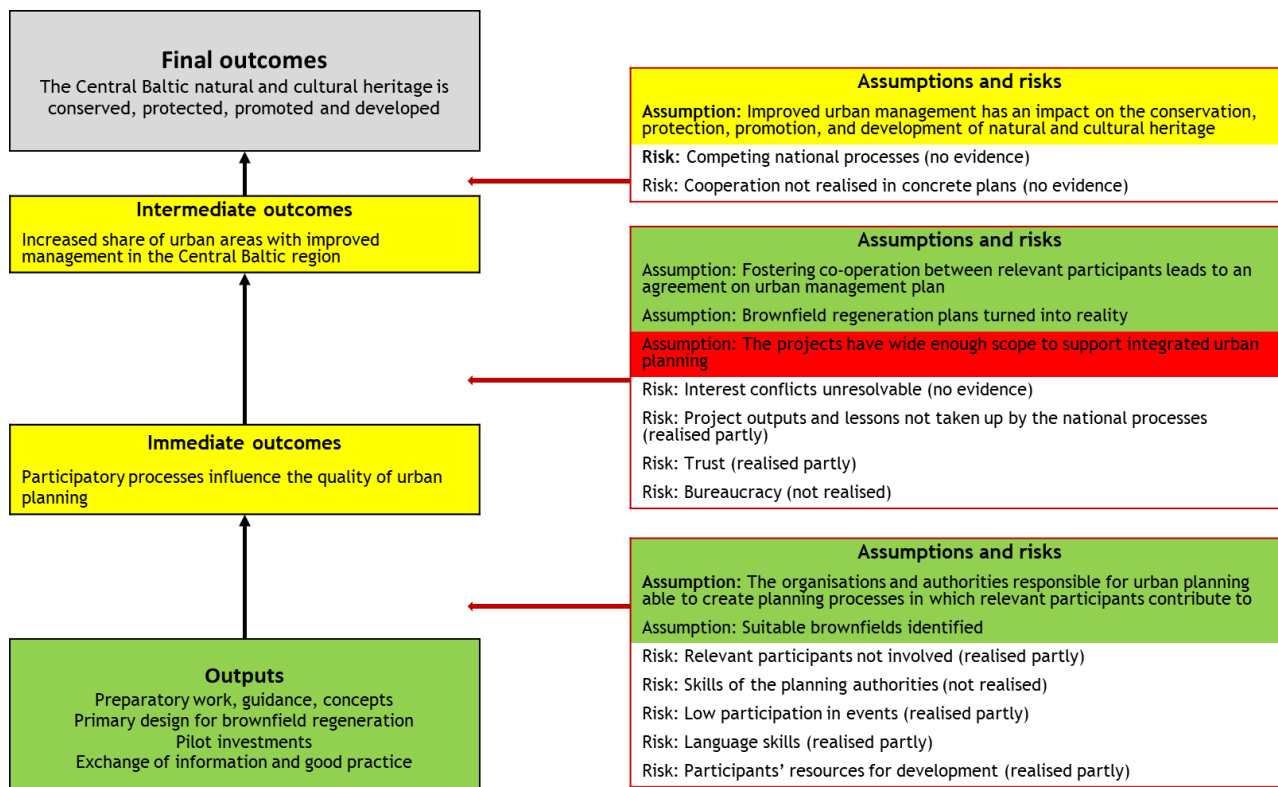
The Central Baltic programme provides support for urban planning through information collection, surveys (evaluations, geological studies, feasibility studies etc.), experience exchange seminars, trainings, guidelines, preparatory activities of environmental impact assessments, concepts and primary designs for brownfield regeneration, pilot investments and the dissemination of and the putting into use of acquired good practices.

There are certain assumptions that need to hold true for project outputs transformation into the **immediate outcome**: Participatory processes improve the quality of planning. It is **assumed** that the organisations and authorities responsible for urban planning are able to create a planning process in which the relevant participants can contribute.

Programme support for projects which improve the planning activities is expected to contribute to the situation where the share of urban areas under improvement management is increased in the Central Baltic region (**intermediate outcome**). These changes are conditional upon the **assumption** that fostering co-operation between participants leads to agreement on an urban management plan and that the projects have wide enough scope to support integrated urban planning while cooperation between participants leads to agreement on an urban management plan.

Through working in this way, the programme expects to positively contribute to the **final outcomes**: conserving, protecting, promoting and developing the Central Baltic's natural and cultural heritage. Key assumptions for these changes to occur presume that improved urban management has an impact on the conservation, protection, promotion and development of natural and cultural heritage. The Theory of Change is presented in Figure 19 below.

Figure 19 Theory of Change SO 2.3.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption or risk was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for expected change or an assumption or risk being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption or risk was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

The assessment of the projects shows that the Theory of Change for the SO 2.3 is largely validated. Namely, the supported projects did produce research, solutions, information and learning opportunities for participatory processes. However, not all relevant participants were involved in the projects. Low participation in project events and the low participant resources for development challenged some projects. Even though the responsible authorities were able to design a planning process that relevant participants could contribute to, the evidence is mixed as to whether the participatory processes influenced the quality of urban planning as the project outputs and lessons were not always taken up by the national processes. The evidence is also mixed as to whether the immediate outcome, the increased share of urban areas with improved management in the Central Baltic region, was reached as the projects covered only small areas, not larger areas under integrated urban management plans as originally intended in the programme.



The main challenges in the Theory of Change for the SO 2.3 are related to the fact that the programme funded projects that support urban planning in a piecemeal, non-integrated manner and that the outcomes are produced by means of national and local processes. That is, the programme could only have an indirect effect on the outcomes which are, in fact, controlled by the local authorities, who can either use the outputs and the lessons of the projects, or not. Thus, the project effects are mainly seen at the output level of the ToC. In effect, the objectives for the SO were wider than the scope of the projects.

### **Six projects focused on different aspects of urban planning**

The Interreg Central Baltic programme financed six projects under Specific Objective 2.3. The projects worked on different aspects of urban planning, namely campus development plans (Live Baltic Campus), stormwater planning processes (iWater), brownfield regeneration (Baltic Urban Lab), green infrastructure (B.Green) and participatory urban planning (HEAT and Augmented Urbans). On average, the projects received 1.2 million euros of ERDF support. The smallest project received approximately 580 000 euros, while the largest project was given almost 1.7 million euros of ERDF support.

The projects had different approaches and target groups related to urban planning. Whereas Live Baltic Campus created integrated campus development plans through pilots and engaged municipal governments, students and other stakeholders, the iWater project produced a toolbox for stormwater management solutions and collaborated with practitioners, students, academics, municipal governments and other stakeholders. Other projects worked to develop capacity levels and different ways to engage stakeholders through participatory methods, either as the project's main objective or as a side effect.

The projects utilised different planning styles and stakeholders in the Interreg Central Baltic area. Whereas in Finland and Sweden, the main stakeholders were municipalities, in the Baltic states the national level ministries are central in urban planning. Additionally, whereas Helsinki, for instance, has an established stakeholder and citizen engagement system in urban planning, stakeholder collaboration is a more novel concept in Tallinn. The projects did bring different ideas to the table in terms of addressing the evaluation question, *“How is integrated urban planning understood in participating partner cities?”* Namely, one focused on intra-city collaboration by stressing the need for different departments to work together on a single plan, while others stressed systems thinking, the planning of wider areas or projects in a city, or the issue of stakeholder collaboration. Overall, it seemed that in Helsinki and Stockholm masterplans for urban development already exist which guide lower-level development.

### *Participatory approaches stressed in the projects*

In general, the funded projects took a participatory approach and were able to attract the target group to be a part of the urban planning process. The projects also broadly documented their approaches and disseminated them to the wider target audiences so that they had a chance of being included ongoing urban planning processes outside the participating cities. In terms of brownfield regeneration, the Baltic Urban Lab project identified suitable brownfield sites for development and created and tested the new integrated planning and partnership models for brownfield regeneration in Norrköping, Tallinn, Turku and Riga as well as making it available to all cities in the region to help them in terms of the revitalisation of urban spaces.

The answers to the evaluation questions, *“What specifically has been changed/improved in participating urban areas planning processes? What added value have the projects given to urban planning processes?”* are interlinked. The projects did not detail any specific changes in the urban planning processes but they did stress the importance of the information and practices developed within them. In addition to compiling and spreading information, the projects have benefitted the participating cities by introducing or providing new tools for urban planners (e.g., the 3D tool and stormwater management planning) and providing a



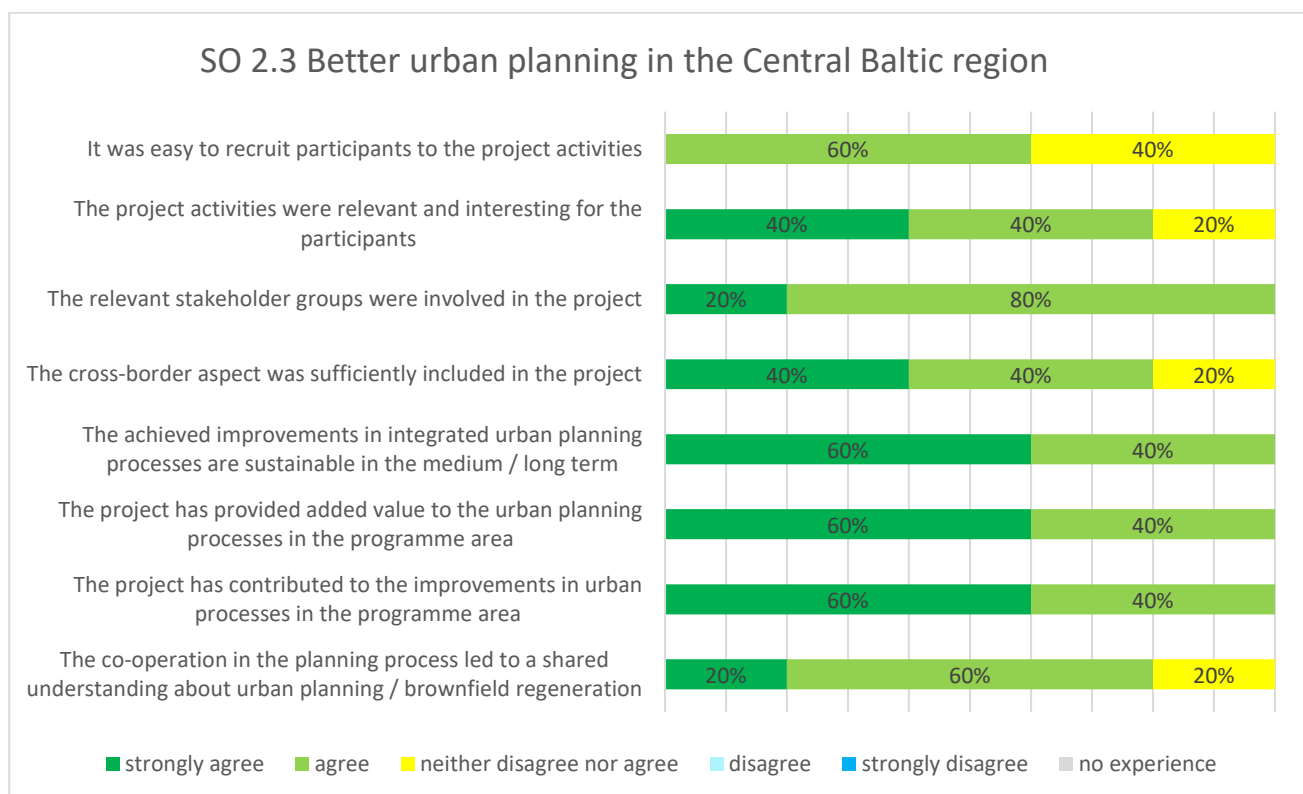
better understanding of how different kinds of expertise can be used in urban planning. Furthermore, the projects have shown urban planners the importance of citizen participation. The greatest added value of the projects was seen to be related to the experience of planning and practicing participatory planning, as well as the promotion of understanding around the different contexts and needs for urban planning.

Out of the six funded projects, four have either reached or exceeded their targets, whereas one project did not fully reach its target. One of the projects had not submitted its final report by April 2023. The total number of targeted urban development plans produced by the projects is 31 which was more than the 10 set as the programme target.

Five people from four projects belonging to Specific Objective 2.3 answered the survey to project partners (Augmented Urbans, B.Green, HEAT and iWater). No respondents disagreed with the statements related to project activities and impact and at least 60% agreed with all statements.

All respondents agreed, 60% of them strongly, that the attained improvements in integrated urban planning processes are sustainable in the medium / long term, the project has provided added value to the urban planning processes in the programme area and the project has contributed to the improvements in urban processes in the programme area. Every respondent also agreed, one out of five strongly, with the statement that the relevant stakeholder groups were involved with the project. The smallest number, 60% agreed with the statement that it was easy to recruit participants to the project activities.

Figure 20 Evaluation of statements related to project activities and impact of SO 2.3 projects (N=5)



With regard to the evaluation question, “What have been the best methods to involve relevant stakeholders?” the projects reported different methods. First of all, recognising and identifying different target groups and age groups and their needs in term of urban space is fundamental. The projects engaged people through pop up events, citizen surveys, digital tools, design sprints and physical meetings.



The projects reported some challenges, particularly relating to permits, the internal processes of the cities involved and delays at the start of the project. The pandemic delayed some project activities and forced some live meetings and workshops to be conducted online. Some of the projects stated that the urban planners would have liked to participate more in the project, but they were very busy with their own jobs, others noted that the local authorities had very limited resources, especially when it comes to travelling, to participate in an external project event. Low foreign language skills also hindered the participation and interest of some local authorities in the project events. Some challenges with procurement process were also reported.

## 5.4 Specific Objective 2.4

SO 2.4. addresses challenges in relation to nutrient, hazardous substances and toxin inflows into the Baltic Sea

SO 2.4. aims to support activities which lead to the development and implementation of innovative methods and technologies within the Central Baltic region. Such methods and technologies should also have the potential to be used in other regions and countries.

SO 2.4 is implemented via development projects that design or adapt methods or develop and implement methods and technologies to reduce nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows. Furthermore, the projects can include pilot investments to reduce nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows or information collection and surveys.

The main target groups are people living in the Central Baltic region and those visiting the region. The beneficiaries of the projects are organisations and authorities responsible for environmental protection, especially for water treatment and organisations capable of contributing to the reduction of nutrient, hazardous substances and toxin inflows, as well as research institutions with an expertise in this area.

### THEORY OF CHANGE

The contribution claim for SO 2.4 is the following: IF the Central Baltic programme will support development projects that aim at reducing the inflows of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins into the Baltic Sea AND the organisations responsible for the environment or which are capable of contributing to the reduction of inflows implement projects, AND the projects produce innovative methods and technologies that succeed in reducing the inflows, THEN the inflows of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins are reduced, AND Central Baltic natural heritage is conserved and protected.

Building on the context above, the expected key drivers of Central Baltic programme are projects which lead to development and implementation of innovative methods and technologies leading to the reduction of inflows of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins.

The Central Baltic programme provides support for the design of adaptation methods, the development of implementation methods and technologies to reduce nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows, pilot investments to reduce nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows and information collection and surveys.

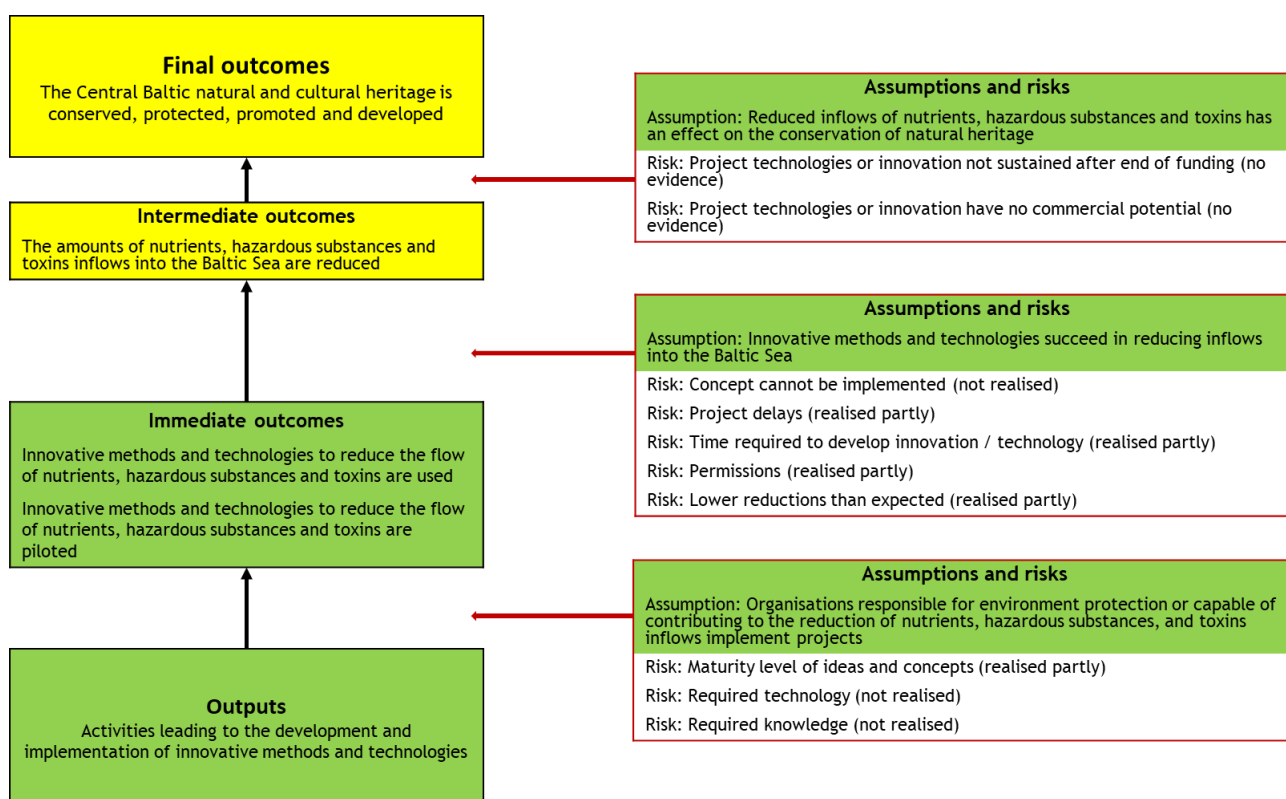
There are certain assumptions that need to hold true for the project outputs transformation into the **immediate outcome**: innovative methods and technologies to reduce the flow of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins are piloted and used. It is **assumed** that the organisations responsible for the

environment or those that are capable of contributing to the reduction of inflows implement projects are interested in implementing projects.

Programme support for innovative methods and technologies is expected to contribute to the situation where the amounts of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows into the Baltic Sea are reduced (**intermediate outcome**). These changes are conditional upon the **assumption** that the innovative methods and technologies succeed in reducing the inflows into the Baltic Sea.

Through working in this way, the programme expects to positively contribute to the **final outcomes**: namely, conserving and protecting the natural heritage of the Central Baltic region. The key assumptions for these changes to occur presume that the reduced inflows of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins has an impact on the Central Baltic's natural heritage. The Theory of Change is presented in Figure 21 below.

Figure 21 Theory of Change SO 2.4.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption or risk was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption or risk being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption or risk was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

The assessment of the projects shows that the Theory of Change for the SO 2.4 is largely validated. Namely, the supported projects did lead to the development and implementation of innovative methods and technologies. However, there were some issues with the maturity level of ideas and concepts which did not affect the piloting or use of the innovative methods and technologies to reduce the flow of nutrients,





hazardous substances and toxins. Even though some projects experienced delays and took a longer than expected time to develop the method or technology, faced challenges with permissions, or encountered lower reductions than anticipated, the methods and technologies used do, overall, have the capacity to reduce inflows into the Baltic Sea. Evidence is however mixed as to whether the amounts of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows into the Baltic Sea have been reduced as some of the projects were more theoretical in nature while a number of the pilots did not work. Furthermore, assessing the real impact of the developed methods and technologies is challenging. Nevertheless, even the smallest reductions will influence the conservation of natural heritage.

## FINDINGS

The Interreg Central Baltic programme financed 10 projects under Specific Objective 2.4. The projects worked on different types of solutions and innovations for reducing nutrient and hazardous substances inflows into the Baltic Sea. The projects aimed at reducing the nutrient leakage from agriculture (NUTRINFLOW and GREENAGRI), reducing plastic waste (BLASTIC), reducing the nutrient leakage from urban rivers (HEAWATER) and storm waters (CLEAN STORM WATER), reducing the leakage of hazardous substances into water (WATERCHAIN, INSURE), finding solutions for sewage-based biogas (Sustainable Biogas) and developing a nutrient trading mechanism (NUTRITRADE). The projects received, on average, 1.4 million euros of ERDF funding. The smallest project received approximately 700 000 euros while the largest project was allocated almost 2 million euros of ERDF funding.

### Some projects developed methods which were subsequently taken into wider use

The projects employed different methods to reduce the amounts of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins seeping into the Baltic Sea. For instance, in the NutriTrade project, 1 500 hectares of clay fields were treated with gypsum in the catchment area of the Savijoki River, in South-Western Finland, whereas the NUTRINFLOW project implemented drainage management solutions in the Aile and Jodīte streams in Jelgava (Latvia) while the Waterchain project tested phosphorus precipitation devices and filters in Lieto (Finland), near Ogre in Latvia. GreenAgri, on the other hand, worked directly with farmers to promote nutrient recycling. In terms of the evaluation questions, “*Are the achieved reductions sustainable? Are the solutions and methods worked out transferable to other regions?*” it can be said that the reductions are sustainable if they managed to be taken into practical use by the relevant stakeholders. For instance, the gypsum treatment has been taken into use in Finland while the GreenAgri practices were developed and taken into use at the farm level. Furthermore, it was noted that the management fishing of bream and roach which was piloted in one of the projects, still continues as a market-based activity, in which the catch of the management fishing is used as the raw material for fish patties for human consumption. Some other projects, however, were more research-based. Moreover, some pilots have been standardised and included in the water management plans. As such, the research has to be either commercialised or taken up by the authorities for the reductions to be realised and then become sustainable. Some of the projects stated that the project results can be taken up internationally and that the results are highly transferable. The gypsum treatment and the management fishing were mentioned as possible transferable pilots, as well as the crowd funding platform for the financing of the pilots.

The projects produced a significant amount of new research and numerous information materials. As such, they were visible and most of them aimed also at raising awareness and discussion about the solutions to the challenges faced by the Baltic Sea in this context. The project materials and results have been widely disseminated amongst the stakeholders and have subsequently been taken up in research. One project manager noted that the information collected in the project was used in the preparation of the Helcom Baltic Sea Action Plan.



## Most projects were successful in reducing inflows, but exact amounts are challenging to measure

Seven out of the ten projects reached, some even superseded, their project targets. Two projects did not meet their targets while one further project still had not submitted its final report by April 2023. In total, the project outputs totalled 113 targeted sources of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins. In terms of reducing nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins, some of the projects established concrete targets right at the beginning of the project whereas others were more experimental in nature. Some projects reported successful pilots though one project stated that the result was that none of the ideas were yet mature enough for wider implementation. NutriTrade reported a reduction of 6 tonnes of phosphorus through a crowd funding campaign and 28 tonnes through other actions. The main challenge encountered in terms of calculating project success with the number of targeted sources of nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins is that it only counts the actions and completely disregards the sizes of the sources or the different types of flows and their magnitudes. In terms of the evaluation questions, *“Is information available on baseline situations for targeted sources? Are methodologies in place to measure the changes in the inflows of the nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins?”* it can be said that there is very little information on the baseline situations for targeted sources. Some projects benefitted from having baseline situation mapped out, whereas others did not. Most of the projects did not provide information on methodologies to measure the changes in the inflows. However, the BLASTIC project did develop a riverine litter monitoring method and created an overview of available methods to monitor marine plastic litter.

15 people from 9 projects that belonged to Specific Objective 2.4 answered the electronic survey (BLASTIC, GreenAgri, HEAWATER, INSURE, NUTRINFLOW, NutriTrade, SEABASED, Sustainable biogas and WATERCHAIN). All respondent agreed, two out of three strongly, that participation in the project activities led to cooperation. Three out of four agreed that it was easy to recruit participants to the project activities.

The challenges reported by the projects were linked in particular to the project partnership issue, namely, changes in personnel or project partners and the time it takes to learn common ways of working and to establish a shared understanding of the project objectives and activities. The experimental nature of the pilot projects also caused some issues as challenges emerged in the implementation of the pilots due to technical or weather-related issues - or in relation to the budgets for the experimental work. A couple of projects also reported the existence of different rules and regulations in the participating countries as having caused problems in the project. Regarding the answer to the evaluation question, *“What were the main challenges in working cross-border to achieve reductions in inflows?”* it can be said that the projects experienced typical project and cross-border project challenges. The only specificities regarding nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins were related to different definitions, rules and regulations in the participating countries.



## 6. PRIORITY 3

Priority 3 aims at promoting sustainable regional and local mobility through developing and improving environmentally friendly transport systems, corridors and nodes.

The budget for Priority Axis 3 is 49.3 million euros. This constituted 28.9% of the ERDF budget of the Interreg Central Baltic programme. A total of 36 million euros was committed to 23 Priority Axis 3 projects.

To support sustainable growth and competitiveness in the region, the Interreg Central Baltic programme aims to improve accessibility to and within the Central Baltic region. Through the **Well-connected region** objective, the programme promotes sustainable transport and the removal of bottlenecks in key transport infrastructures. The objective is divided into two specific objectives:

- 3.1. Improved transport flows of people and goods
- 3.2. Improved services of existing small ports to improve local and regional mobility and contribute to tourism development

### 6.1 Specific Objective 3.1

This specific objective aims to identify and target the challenges related to the integration of different transport modes to reduce time in the transportation of both passengers and cargo, as well as reducing CO2 emissions. Actions within this objective also serve to identify and target challenges related to the improvement of the various transport corridors within the Central Baltic region in the north-south and east-west directions.

Transport corridors have been recognised as infrastructure and logistics networks for passengers and cargo movement. The specific objective focuses on established transport corridors which have the potential to be further improved (i.e., extended, made more efficient) and new transport corridors which display a significant potential.

The main target groups for this SO are people and visitors using improved transport corridors and nodes as well as transport and logistics companies across the Central Baltic region. The targeted beneficiaries are organisations and authorities on the national, regional, and local level responsible for planning and developing transport solutions, public agencies and authorities at the local, regional and national level and port authorities.

The SO has two result indicators: Travel time of passengers and transport flows of goods. The output indicator is the number of developed and improved transport corridors and nodes. Eleven projects have been financed within the SO.

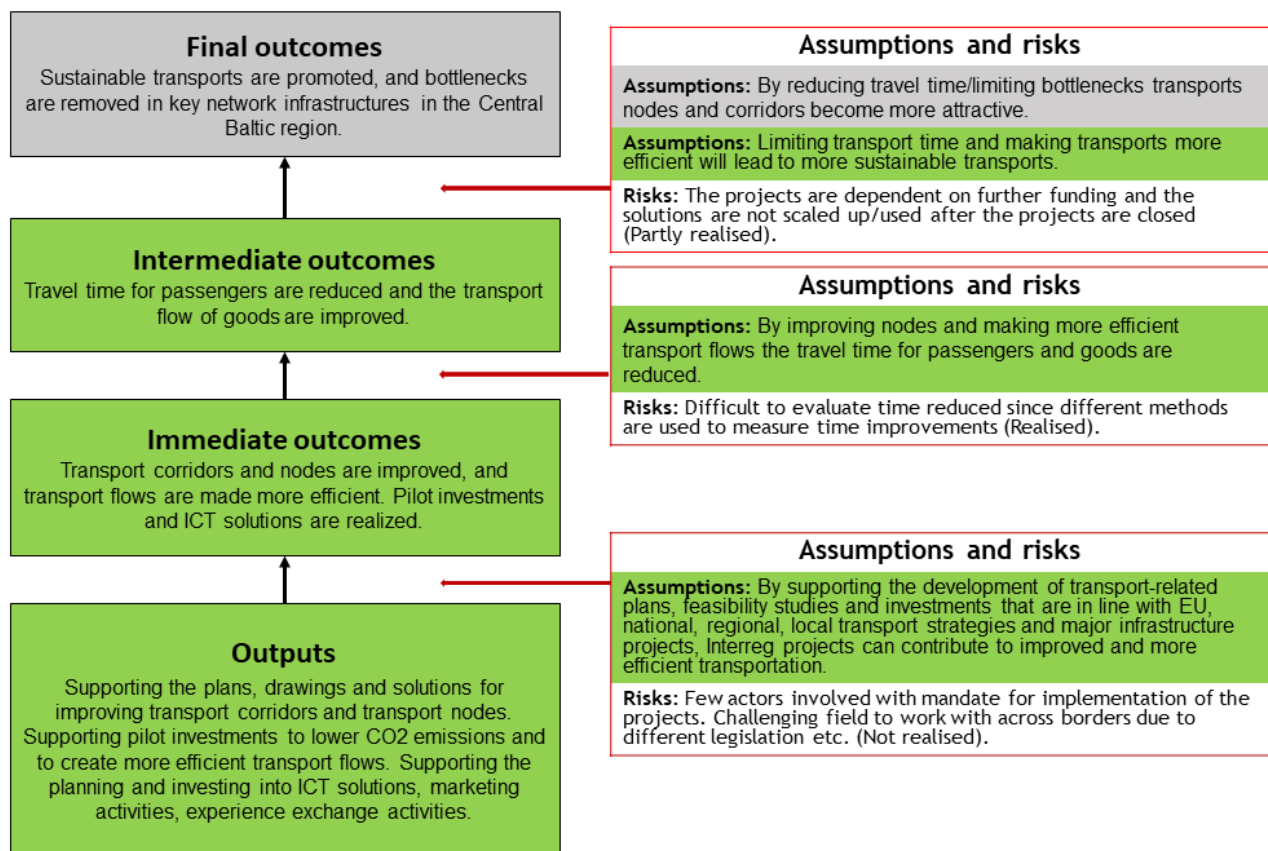
#### THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

The contribution claim for SO 3.1 is as follows: IF the Central Baltic programme supports projects that directly aim at targeting the challenges related to the integration of different transport modes, AND these projects will support plans, solutions and investments relevant to the challenges today, THEN the travel time of passengers and transport flows of goods will improve, AND sustainable transport will be promoted, and bottlenecks removed in key network infrastructures in the Central Baltic region.

The Central Baltic programme intervention for SO 3.1 is expected to focus on targeting established transport corridors that have the potential for further improvement, as well as new transport corridors that display

significant potential. This approach aims to improve accessibility both within and across the Central Baltic region.

Figure 22 Theory of Change for SO 3.1.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or an assumption or risk was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption or risk being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption or risk was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

The Central Baltic programme aims to provide support for plans, drawings and solutions that improve the efficiency of transport corridors and nodes. Additionally, the programme intends to support pilot investments that promote lower CO2 emissions and more efficient transport flows, as well as investments in ICT solutions to enhance the efficiency of transport corridors and nodes. The programme also supports marketing activities for the already developed and improved transport corridors, as well as experience exchange activities for the implementation of new methods and approaches.

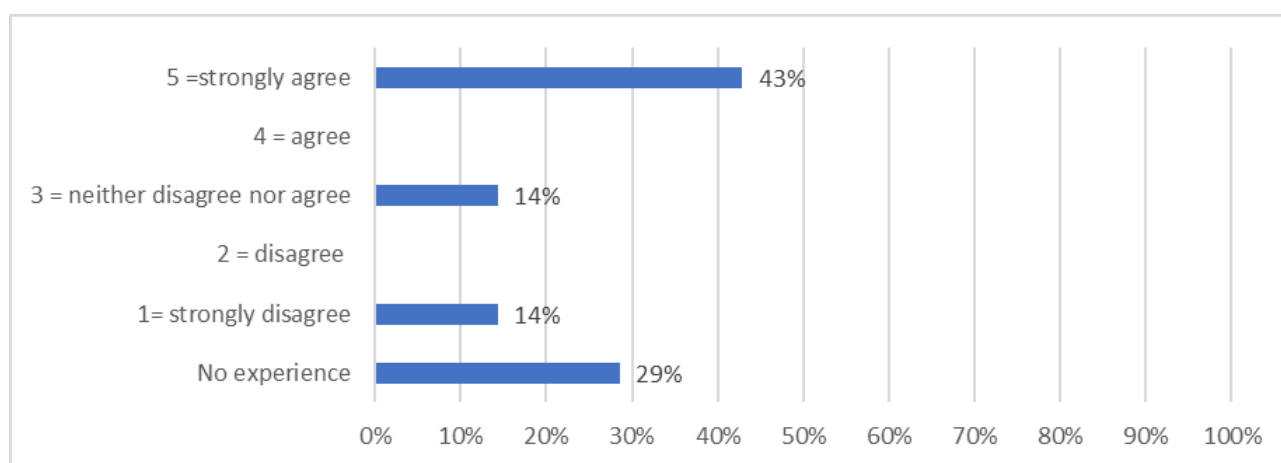
If certain assumptions hold true, these outputs will lead to the immediate outcomes of improved transport corridors and nodes and thus to more efficient transport flows. Interreg projects can contribute to these outcomes by supporting the development of transport-related plans, feasibility studies and investments that align with EU, national, regional and local transport strategies, as well as major infrastructure projects. In

addition, these projects can contribute to pilot investments and ICT solutions. As a result, the intermediate outcome will be reduced travel times for both passengers and goods.

**The programme has contributed to reduced travel and transport times, but it is difficult to estimate by how much**

The evaluation shows that the programme has supported projects aimed at improving transport corridors and nodes, on both land and sea. The projects supported by the programme have contributed to more efficient transport flows within the Central Baltic region in several ways. For instance, some projects have developed technical tools that enable ports and ferries to plan their routes more precisely and obtain real-time data which are among several factors that affect the efficiency of flows. Others have aimed to develop more intelligent traffic systems, such as improving traffic lights and traffic safety which can also lead to improved travel times for passengers and goods, as well as the reduction of traffic risks. However, the survey responses presented in Figure 23 below show that not all projects have resulted in improved travel times. One project partner "strongly disagrees" with the statement while two other partners register "no experience" in this regard.

Figure 23 Survey answers - "The project improved travel times for passengers". (N=7)



One factor that may have influenced the survey responses is the methodology in place for measuring the improvements in travel times and the movement of goods. Not all projects have measured how their results affect travel times, but the projects that have done so have reported good results. For instance, the SMART E67 project calculated that the average driving time on E67 route sections has decreased by 0.7 percent, resulting in time savings of 192,000 hours per year.

Some projects have used other methods to ensure that improvements have been made. For example, one project conducted interviews with users of an application created in the project and those users reported that the application had been useful in making ferry travel more efficient. There has also been one project aimed at reducing travel times for passengers using public transport, such as the E-TICKETING project which aimed to integrate the different ticketing systems for several countries and thereby reduce the time required to buy multiple tickets.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the projects have been successful in reducing travel times for both passengers and goods. Improved and more efficient ferry and/or port management can result in reduced travel times for both passengers and goods. The same applies in terms of making road traffic more efficient.



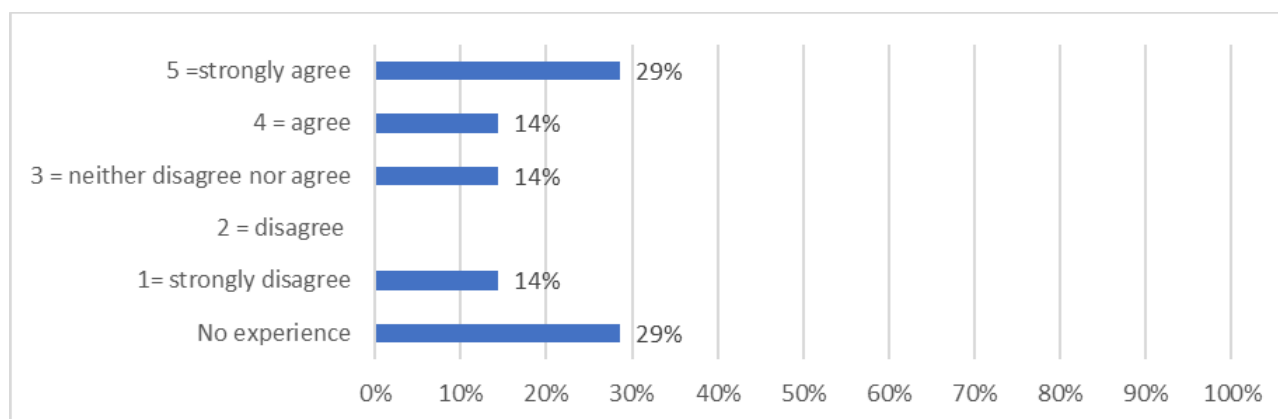
## By making transport flows more efficient and supporting public transportation, the programme has contributed to reduced CO2 emissions

By reducing travel time and eliminating bottlenecks, transport nodes and corridors become more attractive. Furthermore, reducing travel time can lead to more sustainable transport. By working towards these goals, the Central Baltic programme aims to contribute positively to the final outcomes of promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures in the Central Baltic region.

As noted, the improvement of transport corridors and nodes through the Central Baltic programme has contributed to more efficient flows of passengers and goods, as well as to the removal of bottlenecks which has resulted in a reduction in CO2 emissions. This is due to lowered fuel consumption resulting from the increased efficiency of flows and the increased attractiveness of public transport which may further contribute to reducing CO2 emissions. For instance, one project has developed tools to improve the real-time data of ferry schedules and port availability, allowing operators to adjust their speed and reduce fuel consumption. This, in turn, not only reduces costs and lowers CO2 emissions but also increases traffic safety at sea.

It is important to note however that measuring the exact impact of the programme on CO2 emissions can be challenging due to various factors such as competition from other transportation corridors and nodes. However, the programme's focus on improving the efficiency of transport flows and reducing bottlenecks can indirectly contribute to lowering CO2 emissions. While the survey responses may vary, as shown below in Figure 24, the evidence suggests that the programme's efforts to promote more sustainable transport have had a positive impact.

Figure 24 Survey answers - "The improvements led to reduction in CO2 emissions" (N = 7)



## Cross-border cooperation has been both challenging and rewarding, enabling more sustainable solutions

The evidence related to the evaluation question *are the achieved improvements in transport corridors and nodes sustainable?* is however rather mixed. During the projects, several challenges emerged in respect of cross-border cooperation in general due to the pandemic which hindered several projects by delaying activities and making it difficult to gain physical access to ports and ferries as well as having meetings. In turn, this made it difficult to demonstrate technical tools and/or interview relevant persons which may have been critical factors in the projects' progression. The lack of demonstration opportunities may also have been a hinderance to the sustainability of the improvements made.

Other problems, both during and after the closing of the projects, that may have affected the long-term sustainability of outcomes include cultural, communications and IT related challenges. For example, some



project partners report challenges related to there being personnel with different competences in different countries. There are also differences in what mandate different project partners have in each country. However, interviews show that most of these challenges have been effectively managed by having a flexible structure in the projects. Several interviewees also report that the programme has made it possible to strengthen connections between partners in different countries, something which is described as an important factor in rendering the outcomes sustainable in the long-term and enabling future development.

*“Previously, communication with partners was more general and formal. Thanks to this project, cooperation, communication, the exchange of experience on technical specifications and requirements has improved. We can be proud of how we established and strengthened contacts with the northern partners. The participation of the Finnish partner, who participated with the transfer of his experience, was very important. The implementation of the project has both strengthened cooperation and encouraged further and wider cooperation.”*

#### **Lack of sufficient IT related infrastructure may affect sustainability negatively**

Some projects reported a lack of sufficient infrastructure or competence to make the developed technical tools or other IT related solutions sustainable in the long run, even if they have contributed to shorter transport times. For example, the project manager of “EfficientFlow” reported that the cloud service that was central to one of the developed tools could not be used when the project was closed due to it not being owned by a European company. Some projects also report that they encountered unexpected difficulties in being able to connect their tools to national IT services. This will likely affect the long-term sustainability of project outcomes negatively.

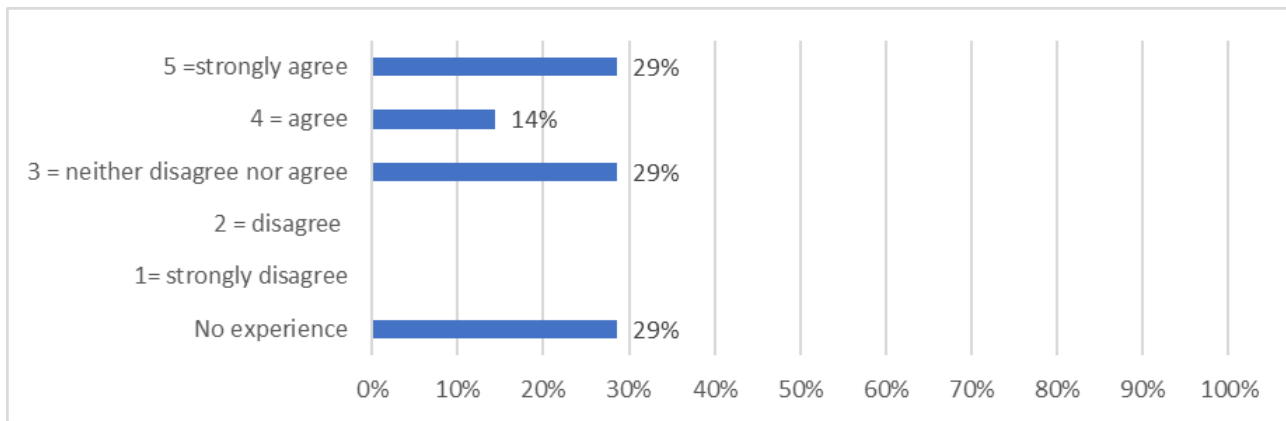
The evaluation question, ***What are the improvements on end-user experience in using improved transport corridors and nodes*** is also related to the development of IT solutions supported by the programme, as several projects have aimed at developing tools for end-users. The end-user experience is not applicable in all projects, but in the project EfficientFlow, data has been collected on user experience via surveys and interviews. The results show that the developed tools were much appreciated and usable.

*“A success factor linked to the technology was that it was developed with a focus on ease of use and simplicity which contributed to it being used by more people and appreciated more.”*

However, some of the developed technical tools and systems rely on them being used by several ports, ferries or lorries to be able to reduce travel time. Meanwhile, most of the projects have focused on testing technical tools on limited amounts of ports. Interviewees report that one challenge moving forward could be to scale the solutions to a suitable size or ensure that they are sustainable after the project is closed.

The level of uncertainty regarding the long-term sustainability of project outcomes is also highlighted in the survey answers, see Figure 25. Whilst three projects agree or strongly agree, four projects either answered “neither disagree nor agree” or “no experience.”

*Figure 25 Survey answers - “The achieved improvements in transport corridors and nodes are sustainable in the medium/long term” (N = 7)*



### More efficient flows of passengers and goods may improve the competitiveness of the region, but the final outcomes of the specific objective are unclear

The benefits of improving the efficiency of transportation flows extend beyond simply reducing travel times. They also make the region more competitive and attractive for businesses. An efficient road, sea and rail network is crucial for the regional economy, highlighting the importance of economic benefits in sophisticated hub and infrastructure solutions. The evidence suggests that cross-border cooperation has also been beneficial for small harbour entrepreneurs, who have learned and received ideas from each other to enhance their businesses. The improvements made to transport nodes and corridors may also increase the attractiveness of the region for tourism.

Nevertheless, the extent to which the specific objective projects have contributed to making transport nodes and corridors more attractive in practice, as well as removing bottlenecks in the region, remains unclear. On the one hand, it can be concluded that improvements have been made to transport flows, primarily by making transport corridors more efficient through the development of new technical tools and IT solutions. While on the other, the sustainability of some of these solutions is questionable while their long-term effects on traffic flows are still unknown. For example, the Baltic Loop project's improvements related to bottlenecks rely heavily on measures taken by the relevant authorities to address the identified bottlenecks. However, it is unclear whether these actions have been (or ever will be) taken, making it difficult to determine whether bottlenecks have been effectively removed or not. Thus, there is insufficient information to fully analyse the extent to which bottlenecks have been removed and transport nodes and corridors have become more attractive.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In sum, while the projects have developed technical tools and IT solutions to improve efficiency, concerns remain regarding the sustainability of some of these solutions, as well as over issues related to infrastructure and competence. The impact of the programme is also dependent on competition from other transportation corridors and nodes which makes it difficult to measure the exact reduction in CO2 emissions. In addition, it is unclear how much the programme has contributed to the removal of bottlenecks in the region, as there is a lack of information on the actions taken by the relevant authorities. Overall, the programme has made a significant contribution to the specific objective, but further measurement and evaluation are required to fully assess the impact of the projects.

The programme has had a positive impact in terms of improving transport nodes and corridors, leading to shortened travel times for passengers and goods, the potential reduction in CO2 emissions and increased traffic safety. However, the actual extent of these impacts is difficult to measure due to a lack of data on transport times and emissions. Additionally, the sustainability of the improvements varies across the



projects, with some relying heavily on IT solutions that may require continued management and development. Cross-border cooperation has strengthened the projects, but it remains unclear how much the programme has contributed to the sustainable transport goal or to the removal of bottlenecks in key transport corridors. Overall, the programme has however achieved satisfactory results in respect of its specific objective.

### Summary of the evaluation questions

In this section, we summarise the evaluation questions addressed in the text above.

#### ***Identify the improvements in travel times of the passengers.***

By developing new digital and IT solutions to support transport and logistics management, the projects have been able to improve the flow of goods and passengers along existing corridors. For instance, the solutions produced have enabled ports and ferries to plan their routes more precisely and to reduce the risk of delays, thus reducing travel times. However, not all projects have measured the time reduced, making it difficult to evaluate the total sum of improvements in travel times for passengers.

#### ***Identify the improvements in the times for flows of goods.***

As with the improvements in relation to the flow of passengers, due to the lack and/or different methods of measuring time reductions, it is difficult to evaluate the level of improvements related to this evaluation question. However, it is noted in some projects that they have focused more on improving times for the flow of goods rather than for passengers, as ferries for passengers often have specified timetables. With the development of different digital tools and IT solutions, this has been achieved but it is unclear how sustainable the solutions are.

#### ***Identify whether the improvement of transport corridors and nodes have led to lower CO2 emissions.***

The improvement of transport corridors and nodes in the context of the Central Baltic programme has contributed to the more efficient flow of passengers and goods, as well as to the removal of bottlenecks, resulting in a reduction in CO2 emissions. This reduction is due to the reduced level of fuel consumption resulting from the increased efficiency of flows and the increased attractiveness of public transport which, in itself, may further contribute to reducing CO2 emissions. For instance, one project has developed tools to improve the real-time data of ferry schedules and port availability, allowing operators to adjust their speed and reduce fuel consumption, something which will save costs and reduce CO2-emissions. However, the projects have not sought to measure how the utilised solutions affect emissions.

#### ***Are the methodologies in place for measuring the improvements in travel times and in the movement of the goods?***

Not all projects have measured how their results affect travel times, but the projects that have done so have reported good results. For instance, the SMART E67 project calculated that the average driving time on E67 route sections has decreased by 0.7 percent, resulting in time savings of 192,000 hours per year. Other projects have conducted interviews with users of an application, who deem that the travel time has reduced with the help of projects financed via Interreg Central Baltic. However, these projects have not used the same methodology to measure time improvements.

#### ***Are the achieved improvements in transport corridors and nodes sustainable?***





The sustainability of the achieved improvements in transport corridors and nodes clearly varies. For example, one project reported that the lack of a sufficient cloud service had the result that one of the developed tools could not be used after the project was closed. Some projects also report that they encountered unexpected difficulties in being able to connect their tools to national IT services. This will likely affect the long-term sustainability of project outcomes negatively. Projects also report that their solutions rely on being used by several ports, ferries or lorries to function properly and must therefore be used by a critical mass.

***Identify end-user experience where applicable in using improved transport corridors and nodes.***

The evaluation shows that several projects have aimed at developing tools for end-users. The end-user experience is not applicable in all projects, but in one of the projects, data has been collected on user experience via surveys and interviews. The results show that the developed tools were much appreciated and usable.

***What were the main challenges to improving cross-border transport nodes and corridors?***

The evaluation shows that there were several challenges in the work to improve cross-border transport nodes and corridors. During the projects, several challenges emerged regarding cross-border cooperation in general due to the pandemic which clearly hindered several projects by delaying activities and making it difficult to gain physical access to ports and ferries as well as having meetings. In turn, this made it difficult to demonstrate technical tools and/or interview relevant persons, thus potentially affecting the projects' sustainability. Other challenges include cultural, communications and IT related challenges. For example, some project partners report challenges related to there being personnel with different competences in different countries. However, interviews show that most of these challenges were effectively managed by having a flexible structure in the projects and that cross-border cooperation was a must-have for the projects to be successful.

## 6.2 Specific Objective 3.2

This specific objective aims to contribute to the improvement of the services of the small ports' network to improve local and regional mobility as well as tourism development.

Small ports have been defined as ports located on the coast of the Baltic Sea serving local people and visitors. Additionally, as parts of larger marina areas these small ports have been seen as potential beneficiaries. The main target groups are inhabitants using small ports for commuting and leisure. The target group is visitors to the Central Baltic small ports and companies offering services to the users of these small ports.

Targeted beneficiaries include organisations and authorities responsible for the development and maintenance of small ports, regional and local governments, non-governmental organisations and private companies operating in, or providing services for, small ports.

Twelve projects were financed within specific objective 3.2. The indicator for the specific objective is the number of ports with improved services.

### THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

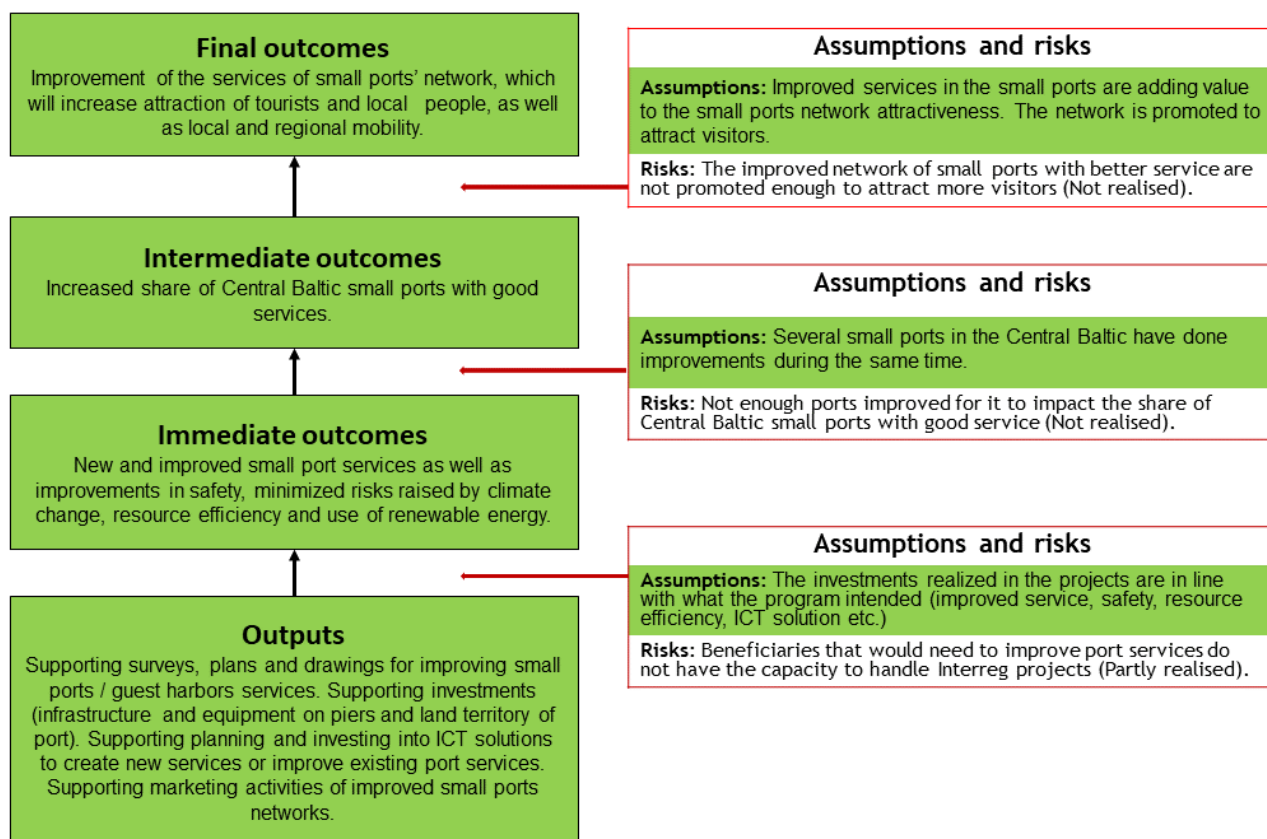
The graphic below shows the Theory of Change for 3.2. It also includes a colour coding representing this evaluation's estimation regarding the level of change achieved, based on the available evidence. We will describe this further below.



The contribution claim for 3.2 is as follows: IF the Central Baltic programme will support projects that directly aim at targeting small ports with a potential to improve their services, AND these projects will identify the best ways to do so, AND then improve them through plans and drawings, investments in infrastructure and equipment as well as through ICT solutions, THEN the share of Central Baltic small ports with good service levels will increase, AND improve the services of the small ports' network which will increase the level of attraction of tourists and local people to the Baltic Sea coast.

Building on the context outlined above, the expected key drivers of the Central Baltic programme intervention for 3.2 are to target small ports which display the potential to be further improved. In so doing, the assumption is that local and regional mobility will improve and that tourism will increase.

Figure 26 Theory of Change for SO 3.2.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming that a change occurred or an assumption or risk was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption or risk being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption or risk was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

The Central Baltic programme intends to provide support to identify the best ways to improve port services. The programme also supports plans to improve port services, as well as safety (incl. minimising the risk of storm surges or other risks raised by climate change) and investments in infrastructure and equipment on piers and the land territory of the port. Furthermore, the programme supports planning and investments in



ICT solutions in order to create new services or to improve existing port Services. The programme additionally also supports the marketing activities of the improved small ports networks (output).

There are certain assumptions that need to hold true for the programme outputs to be transformed into the desired **immediate outcome**: *New and improved port services as well as improvements in safety, minimised risks raised by climate change, resource efficiency and the use of renewable energy*. The assumption here is that the investments undertaken in the projects are in line with what the programme intended, that is, pertaining to small infrastructure investments in improved service, safety, resource efficiency, ICT solution etc.

### **The investments have been in line with what the programme intended**

There is evidence to support the assumption that investments in the projects are in line with the intentions of the programme. This is in relation to our evaluation question: ***What public services of the small ports have been improved?*** The projects have made different types of improvements in services in the small ports. Several projects have improved safety, for instance through investments in first aid kits, sea rescue services, wave breakers or safety measures around the pier areas. Some projects have improved their port services (e.g. information and booking services, Wi-Fi), as well as their port amenities such as toilets, showers, electric boat chargers or saunas. Some projects have made investments in more basic infrastructure, for instance in sewage systems, clean water, waste management solutions or increased disabled access. Some of the projects have improved energy efficiency through, for example, solar panels or led lighting. Therefore, drawing on the available evidence, we assess that the project investments are in line with the intentions of the programme.

Most of the investments made relate to physical improvements. However, there are some examples of innovative solutions and technologies which have the potential for wider use. This addresses our evaluation question: ***Which improvements of the small ports' service are related to innovative solutions and technologies and which have the potential for wider use?*** For example, one project created a model for the development of small ports which is available on the project website. It is a comprehensive business model that other ports can also utilise for their own development. Another project created self-service machines that visitors to the ports can use to pay for services even when port staff are not there. The devices remain active and their design could be used more broadly in other ports. A third project developed an app informing boaters about the different small ports with enhanced services in the Baltic Sea. The physical improvements made related to electric charging points for boats, while solar panels and other energy efficient solutions are also described as innovative solutions and technologies which have the potential for wider use.

### **Some challenges have emerged regarding the investments**

Challenges have emerged relating to the gap between output and immediate outcome. This has mainly been connected to the procurement process of the investments and that the beneficiaries that would need to improve port services do not always have the capacity to handle the investments (and the investment process):

*"In general, there is a challenge here related to investments in the small ports' projects. Namely, there is a long period between project application and implementation. Also, the small ports are operated seasonally by small companies, so there is a tight time window to get the investments ready for the season. The entrepreneurs do not necessarily have the requisite skills for planning an investment project budget (e.g. tenders before the project start)."*

*“In general, the small ports face challenges with procurement and the planning of investments. If these are not done properly at the planning phase, there are disappointments and a lot of double work.”*

One of the projects described substantial delays in terms of planned investments (and even the cancelling of certain investments) leading to a reduced willingness to work with business and service development among the port’s entrepreneurs.

There are however projects that did not face the same issues regarding procurement. In the Smart Marina project every partner had an external procurement assistant, or an expert planned in their budget. The project describes this as a success factor in the planning of the project. Furthermore, they also describe the committed engagement of the port owners/operators in the project:

*“Port owners and operators were active and interested in improving harbour infrastructures in the best possible way”*

Even though challenges emerged regarding the investments, we do not believe that it has affected the projects to any great extent. Therefore, we assess, given the evidence available, that the investments undertaken in the projects are in line with what the programme intended.

#### **An increased share of Central Baltic small ports with good service levels since investments were made by several ports over the same time period**

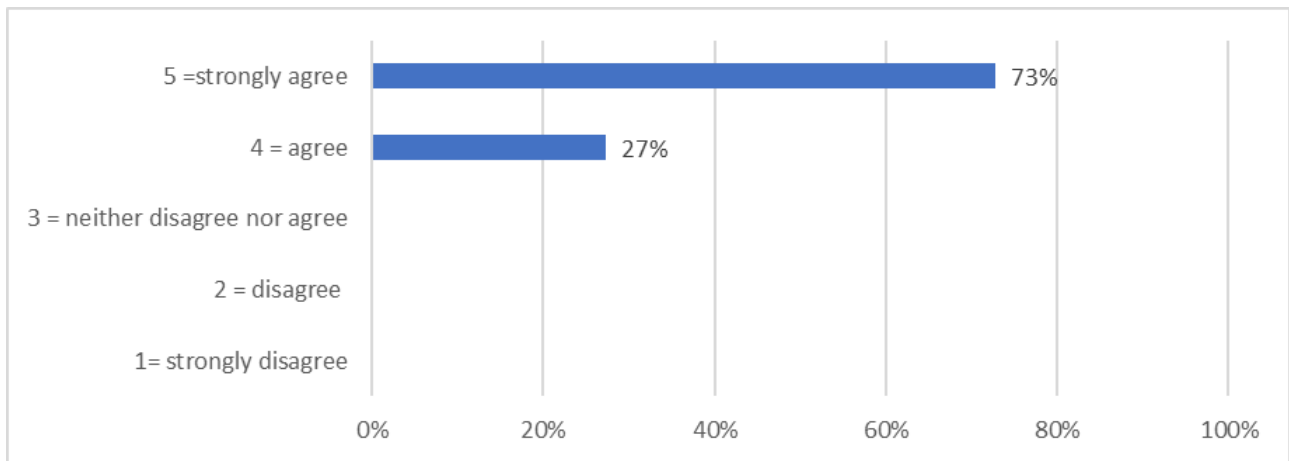
New and improved port services, as well as improvements in safety, minimised the risks raised by climate change, resource efficiency and use of renewable energy (**immediate outcome**) will lead to an increasing number of Central Baltic small ports with good service levels (**Intermediate outcome**) if *several* small ports in the Central Baltic have made improvements at the same time. The evidence shows that this has been the case, the programme has improved 141 small ports, meaning that the share of Central Baltic small ports with good services has increased.

#### **Improved services are adding value to the small ports’ network attractiveness and contribute to tourism development**

An increased share of small ports with good services in the Central Baltic region will improve the small ports’ network services, thereby increasing the attractiveness of the Baltic Sea coast to both tourists and locals. This is the intended final outcome which assumes that improved services in small ports will add value to the small ports’ network and that the network will be promoted to increase its visibility and attractiveness. This answers the evaluation question: ***Are the improved services adding value in terms of the small ports network attractiveness?***

In the survey, the respondents answered the question whether the improved services add value to the small ports’ network attractiveness. The answers are presented in the figure below.

*Figure 27 Survey answers “The improved services add value for the small ports’ network attractiveness.” (N=11)*

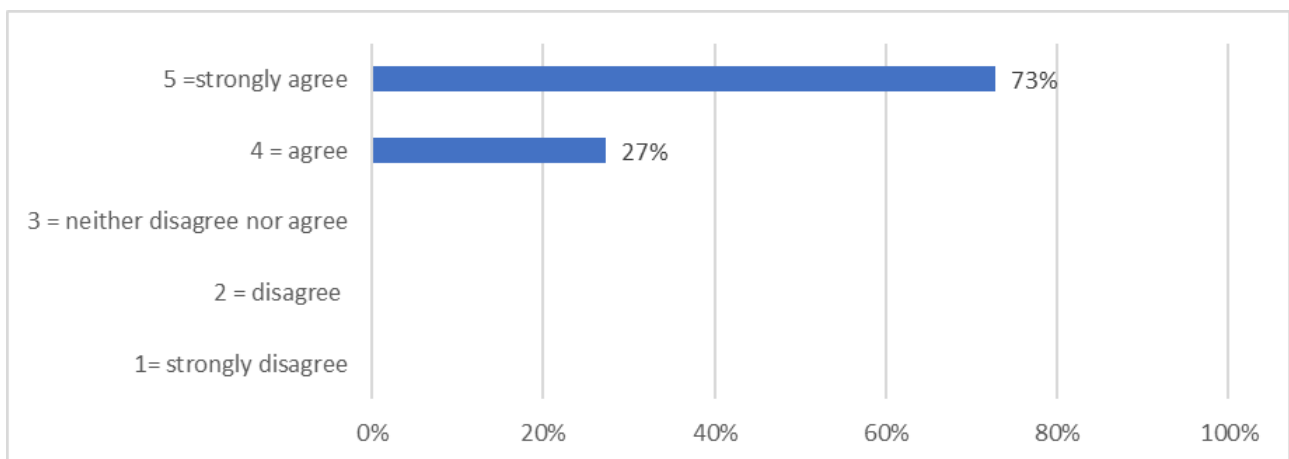


Roughly 7 out of 10 respondents answered that they strongly agree that the improved services produced in the context of the project add value in terms of the small ports' network attractiveness. The evidence provided by the interviews shows that the improved services not only make it easier to use the ports, but they also increase the ports' attractive to both boaters and other customer groups. The investments undertaken have therefore benefitted the small ports network by increasing the number of these small ports with good services. According to a survey produced by one of the projects, the safety and basic services of these ports are the most important things for boaters when deciding where to dock. These types of improvements are reflective of the core issues addressed by the funded projects.

Improved information about nearby ports also promotes the attractiveness of the port network. For example, one of the projects developed an app that shows the network of the small ports with improvements, including basic and more detailed information about the ports and how to approach them by water. This is a good example on how improvements in different ports, taken together, can increase the attractiveness of the region. When boaters can easily find ports with increased service levels, word spreads quickly, creating a ripple effect which adds to the region's attractiveness, even if all ports in the region have not been improved. There is evidence from the interviews with port owners that the numbers of visitors has increased to these small ports.

In the survey, the respondents answered the question whether the improved service levels in small ports contributed to tourism development. All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (figure below).

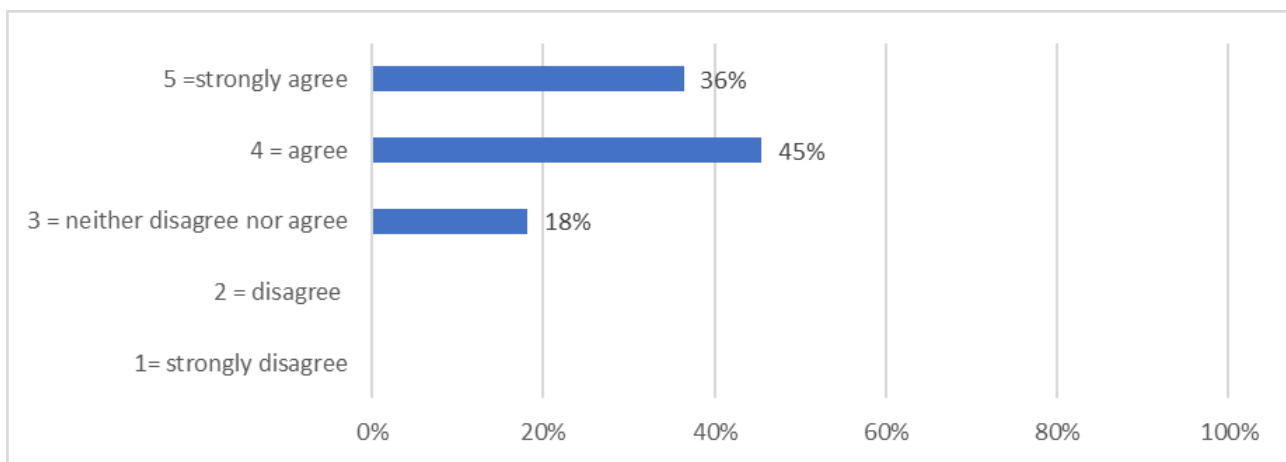
Figure 28 Survey answers "The improved services in small ports contributes to tourism development." (N=11)



This specific objective was also intended to contribute to local and regional mobility. Mobility is defined as the ability to move freely or be easily moved. However, we suggest that the main objective has been to generally improve tourism to and within the Baltic Sea Region. The projects have not improved mobility itself along the Baltic Sea, but rather improved the experience of traveling around with your own boat. This may contribute to an increase in local and regional mobility, but mainly through increased tourism.

In the survey, the respondents answered the question whether improved service levels in small ports contributes to local and regional mobility. Four out of five respondents either agreed or strongly agreed while one out of five neither disagreed nor agreed (figure below).

Figure 29 Survey answers “The improved services in small ports contribute to local and regional mobility”. (N=11)

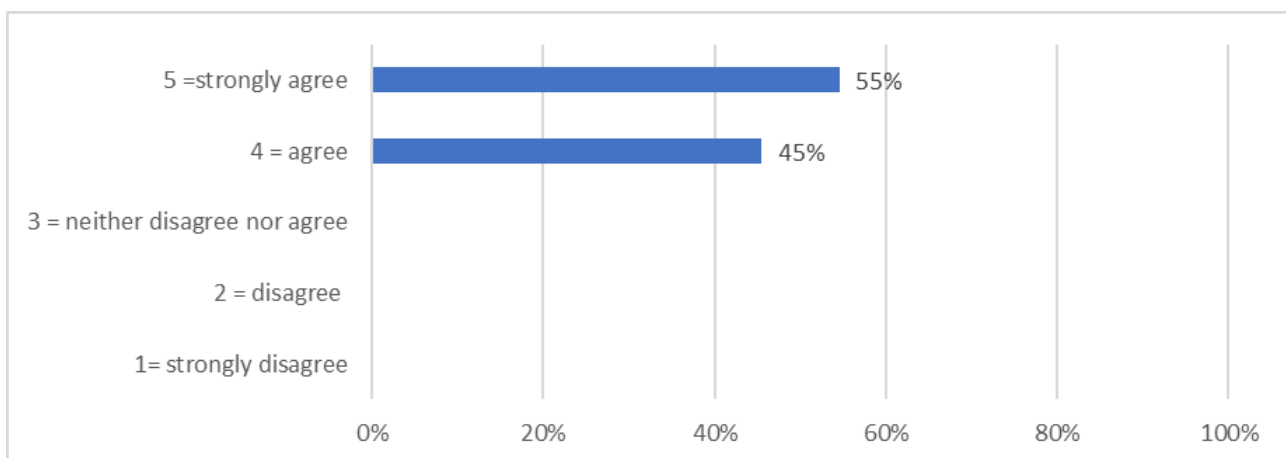


### ***Improvements have also benefitted local people***

The improvements in the port areas have also provided indirect impacts for the local inhabitants. This addresses the evaluation question ***What are the improvements for local people?***

In the survey, the respondents answered the question whether improved service levels have also benefitted local people. All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (figure below).

Figure 30 Survey answers “The improved services have also benefitted local people”. (N=11)



The evidence from the interviews shows that the locals benefit from the increase in maritime tourist inflows because it creates opportunities for local businesses in e.g. catering, tourism services, car rental and diving.



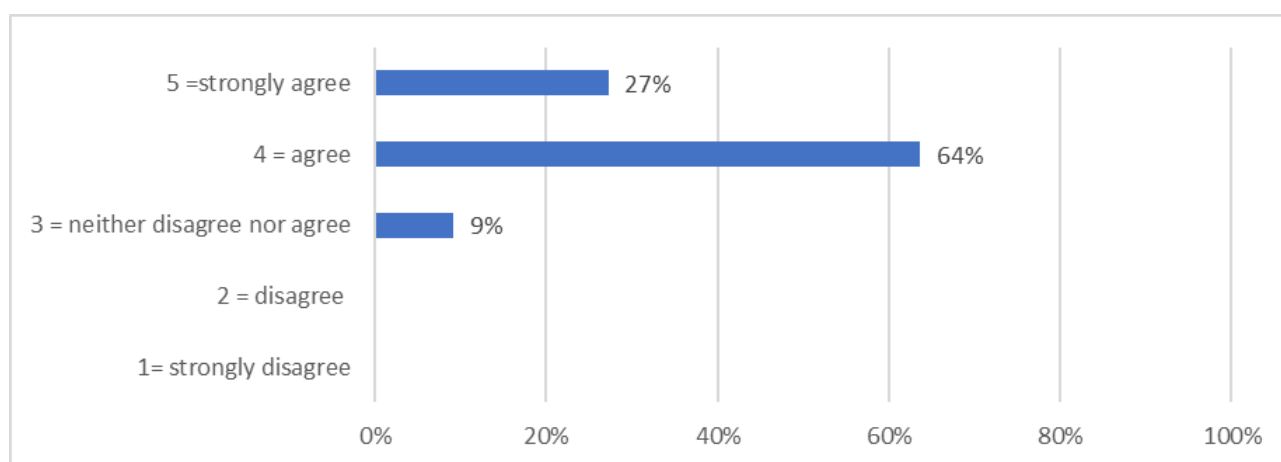
In addition to these opportunities, they also benefit from other improvements, for example, cleaner water and improved waste management in the ports. Locals also benefit from the improvements in the way that they can utilise the port buildings, sauna etc. In one project voluntary rescuers were trained and events on sea safety were organised for different groups of local people. This has enhanced the sea safety awareness of the local people participating in the activities.

### ***Spill-over effects mainly in terms of economic and environmental effects***

There are several spill-over effects related to improved service levels in the small ports. This is related to the evaluation question, ***Are there additional spill-over effects related to the improved services in the small ports?***

In the survey, the respondents answered the question whether there are additional spill-over effects related to the improved services in the small ports. About 9 out of 10 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, with 1 in ten neither disagreeing nor agreeing.

*Figure 31 Survey answers “There are additional spill-over effects related to the improved services in the small ports.” (N=11)*

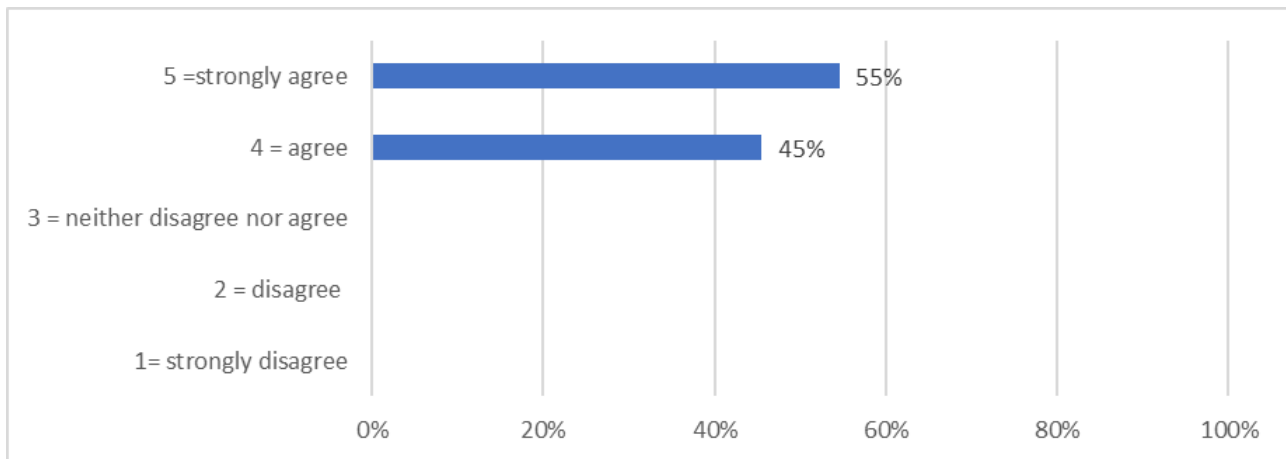


The spill-over effects that are mentioned in the interviews are both economically and environmentally related. For example, new businesses have been established in the areas around the ports and the tourist season has been prolonged. Furthermore, the small ports' level of responsibility has increased through better knowledge and concerns over environmental protection while investments in modern sewage pumping stations has reduced the amount of sewage being pumped into the Baltic Sea.

### ***Most of the improvements in the small ports' services are sustainable and not dependent on further project funding***

In the survey, the respondents answered the question whether the improvements in the small ports' services are sustainable in the medium-to-long term after the end of the project (and its funding). All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (figure below).

*Figure 32 Survey answers “The improvements of the small ports' services are sustainable in the medium / long term after the end of the funding”. (N=11)*



In general, the investments made are of the type that are not dependent on further project funding, such as new showers, toilets, electric chargers, safety equipment and sewage systems. These types of investments are sustainable since they are not associated with further and/or recurring costs. However, there are some project-related investments that are associated with further costs. For example, this relates to investments in knowledge, apps, or certification. The long-term sustainability of these types of investments is dependent on knowledge transfer, ownership (and continuous updates) and thus on further/continuing investment.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the available evidence within the framework of this evaluation, the programme activities in SO 3.2 have, in general, contributed to the desired change. There is evidence showing that the projects have made investments in small ports within the Baltic Sea to improve port services as well as improvements in safety, minimised the risks raised by climate change, resource efficiency and the use of renewable energy. This has increased the share of Central Baltic small ports with good service levels. Furthermore, there is evidence showing that the improvements are adding value to the small ports' network attractiveness which has contributed to an increase in visitors.

We suggest that the main objective has been to improve tourism to and within the Baltic Sea Region rather than a focus on local and regional mobility. The projects have not improved mobility in itself, but rather improved the **experience** of traveling around with your own boat. This partly contributes to an increase in local and regional mobility, but mainly through increased tourism.

The evidence available also shows the improvements have created indirect impacts for the residents in different ways as well as positively contributing to local economies and the environment.

### Summary of the evaluation questions

In this section, we summarise the evaluation questions that have been answered in the section above.

#### *What public services of the small ports have been improved?*

There has been several different types of improvements. There have been improvements in:  
 Safety (first aid kits, sea rescue services, wave breakers and safety measures for the pier areas.)  
 Services (e.g. information and booking services, Wi-Fi, toilets, showers, electric boat chargers or saunas).  
 Infrastructure (e.g. sewage system, clean water, waste management solutions or increased disabled access)





Energy efficiency (e.g. solar panels, LED lighting.)

***Do the improved service levels add value in terms of the small ports' network attractiveness?***

The evaluation shows that improved services do add value in terms of the small ports' network attractiveness and that they do contribute to tourism development. The investments made have benefitted the small ports network by increasing the share of small ports with good service levels. According to a survey produced by one of the projects, the safety and basic services of these ports are the most important things for boaters when deciding where to dock. These types of improvements are reflective of the core issues addressed by the funded projects. Improved information about nearby ports also promotes the attractiveness of the port network as a whole.

***What are improvements for local people?***

The evaluation also shows that the locals benefit from the increase in maritime tourist inflows because it creates opportunities for local businesses in e.g. catering, tourism services, car rental and diving. In addition to these opportunities, they also benefit from other improvements, for example cleaner water and improved waste management in the ports. Locals also benefit from the improvements in the way that they can utilise the port buildings, sauna etc.

***Are the small ports' services improvements sustainable?***

In general, the improvements in the small ports' service levels are sustainable and not dependent on further project funding. Most of the funding has been used for investments in new showers, toilets, electric chargers, safety equipment and sewage systems. These types of investments are sustainable since they are not associated with further and/or recurring costs. However, there are some project-related investments that are associated with further costs. For example, this relates to investments in knowledge, apps, or certification. The long-term sustainability of these types of investments is therefore dependent on knowledge transfer, ownership (and continuous updates) and further/continuing investment.

***Are there additional spill-over effects related to the improved services in the small ports?***

There are several spill-over effects related to improved service levels in the small ports. The spill-over effects that are mentioned are both economically and environmentally related. For example, new businesses have been established in areas close to the ports and the tourist season has been prolonged. Furthermore, the small ports' level of responsibility has increased through better knowledge and concerns over environmental protection while investments in modern sewage pumping stations has reduced the amount of sewage being pumped into the Baltic Sea.

***Identify those small ports' service improvements related to innovative solutions and technologies which have the potential for wider use.***

Most of the investments undertaken are for physical improvements. However, there are some examples of innovative solutions and technologies which do have the potential for wider use. For example, one project created a model which can be used to develop small ports. The model is available on the project website. It is a comprehensive business model that other ports can also utilise for their own development. Another project created self-service machines that visitors to the ports can use to pay for services even when port staff are not there. The devices remain active and their design could be used more broadly in other ports. A third project developed an app informing boaters about the various small ports with increased service levels in the Baltic Sea. The physical improvements made such as those related to electric charging point



for boats, solar panels and other energy efficient solutions can also be described as innovative solutions and technologies which have the potential for wider use.

## 7. PRIORITY 4

The programme Priority 4 aims to achieve a more inclusive region by strengthening local communities and improving skills, knowledge and the social wellbeing of people, particularly of the youth and the elderly. Enhancing the competitiveness of vocational education and training and creating liaisons with the labour market are regarded as the best ways to reach this aim.

Priority 4 has two Specific Objectives; 4.1 More people benefiting from stronger Central Baltic communities and 4.2 More aligned vocational education and training programmes in the Central Baltic region.

### *More people benefiting from stronger Central Baltic communities*

This specific objective targets a wide range of practical community and local level social problems. It will do so through joint educational and/or training activities. Community and local level problems and challenges can, for example, be related to health, minorities, safety, gender, elderly and low involvement in entrepreneurship. The activities supported are seen as instruments to strengthen communities via “people to people” projects. Projects within this specific objective are implemented by means of a simplified small project approach.

### *More aligned vocational education and training programmes in the Central Baltic region*

This specific objective aims to contribute to the development and further integration of the Central Baltic labour market. The development of skills and better matching of work opportunities with skills can have a significant impact on reducing social exclusion. Central Baltic joint actions are justified by linking them to the specific needs of enterprises operating within the Central Baltic region.

The planned budget for Priority Axis 4 was 16.2 million euros. This constituted 9.5% of the ERDF budget of the Interreg Central Baltic programme. A total of 14.3 million euros was committed to 45 Priority Axis 4 projects.

### 7.1 Specific Objective 4.1

SO 4.1. addresses a wide range of practical community and local level social problems, including challenges related to participating in and accessing the labour market, health and disability, addictions, minorities and immigrants.

This SO aims to strengthen social inclusion in the Central Baltic region through strengthening communities, reducing differences between different social groups and improving mutual understanding, trust, empathy and resilient social ties. The SO is implemented via ‘people to people’ projects (simplified small projects) by identifying and mapping problems, training and development programmes, seminars and experience exchange events, network development and also designing and creating ICT solutions to contribute to problem solving.

The main target group (targeted communities) of the SO are people under risk of social exclusion in the Central Baltic region. The targeted beneficiaries are regional and local authorities and community-based non-governmental organisations with statutory responsibility to deal with community development.

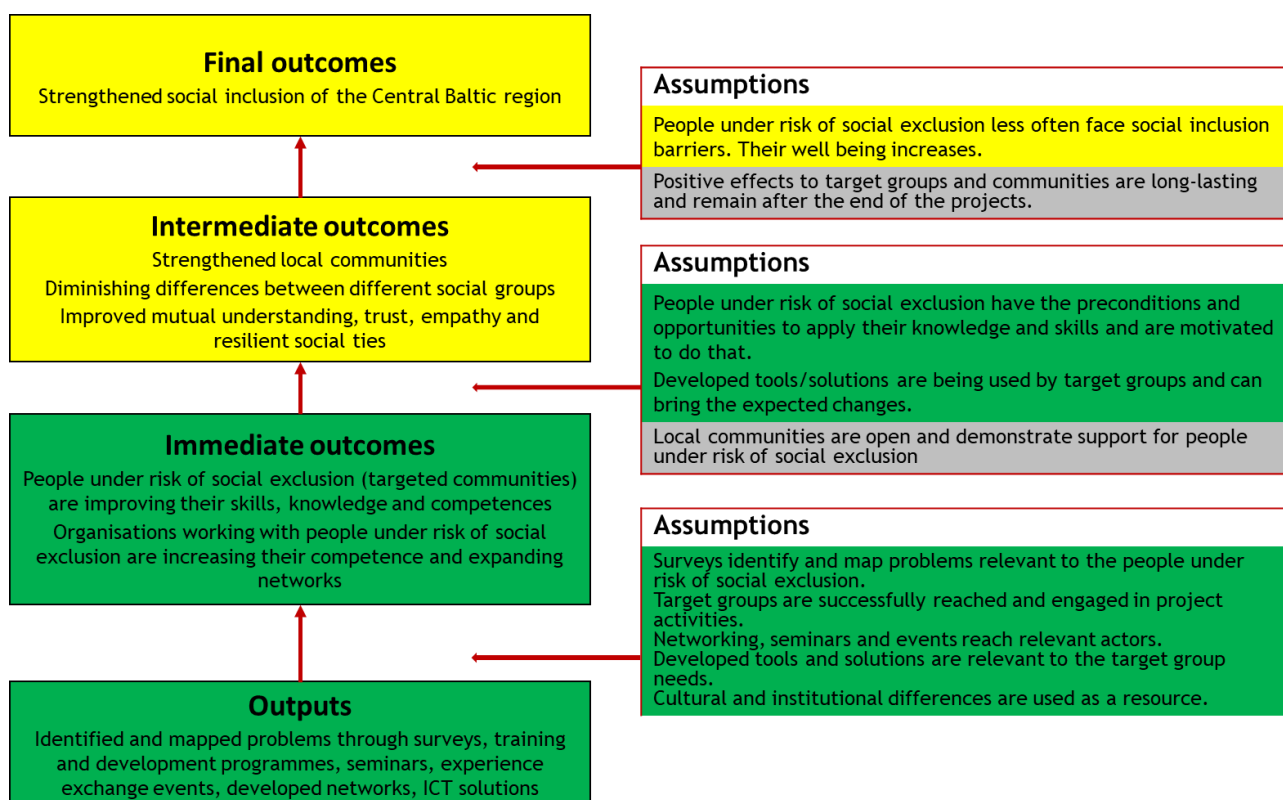
The SO has one result indicator: communities with improvements. The output indicator is the number of participating people. 24 projects have been financed within the SO.

## THEORY OF CHANGE AND FINDINGS

A Theory of Change describes how a desired objective is expected to be realised in a particular context. It aims to show how a set of actions or activities is expected to lead to a desired change. The picture below shows the Theory of Change for SO 4.1. It also includes a colour coding representing this evaluation's estimation regarding the level of change achieved, based on the available evidence. We will describe this further below.

The contribution claim for SO 4.1 is as follows: IF the Central Baltic programme will support 'people to people' projects that directly aim at reducing social exclusion, AND these projects will offer solutions and tools relevant to the challenges of the target groups, AND the target group will engage by improving their knowledge, skills and competences AND the organisations working with the target group will increase their competence and expand their networks, THEN communities will become stronger, differences between different social groups will decrease, common understanding, trust and empathy will improve and resilient social ties will be formed, AND communities in the Central Baltic region will become more socially inclusive.

Figure 33 Theory of Change SO 4.1.



**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming that a change occurred or an assumption was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.



The Central Baltic programme provides support for the identification and mapping of problems through surveys, training and development programmes, seminars, experience exchange events, network development as well as through the design and creation of ICT solutions.

If certain assumptions hold true, these outputs will lead to immediate outcomes: people under risk of social exclusion (targeted communities) are improving their skills, knowledge and social wellbeing and organisations working with people under the risk of social exclusion are increasing their competence and expanding networks. As a result, the intermediate outcome will be the strengthening of local communities, a reduction in the differences between social groups and an improvement in mutual understanding, trust, empathy and the forming of resilient social ties. The final outcome of the SO is strengthened social inclusion in the Central Baltic region.

### **The projects covered a wide range of topics and target groups**

The evidence related to the evaluation question, *how were the baseline situations described for the participating communities?* shows that the projects addressed various challenges, including social and economic exclusion, unemployment, difficulties with labour market entry, loneliness, low motivation and self-confidence, inadequate health information, lack of advice, peer support and encouragement and stigma concerning mental health problems.

The projects covered a wide range of topics and target groups. One project often covered several domains, e.g. migrant youth, unemployed minority women or seniors in remote rural areas. In total, 9 projects addressed migrants, refugees or minorities. Numerous projects focused on the unemployed (6 projects), seniors (3 projects), youth (4 projects), people with special needs (3 projects), people living in remote rural areas (3 projects), women (3 projects), children (2 projects), and men (2 projects). Other target groups covered by the projects included freelance artists and persons with deviant sexual behaviours.

The problem descriptions were created according to the specific target group in order to justify the need for an intervention. Many projects had foreseen the need for a detailed analysis of the target group's needs in the initial phases of the project.

The evidence related to the evaluation question, *how were the targeted improvements described for the participating communities?* shows that the targeted improvements depend on the specific target group addressed by the project. Intended achievements by the projects were described in general terms: increased social inclusion, improved health and wellbeing of the target group; increased access to the labour market, employability and involvement in entrepreneurship; increased independence and empowerment of the target group; enhanced capacity of professionals working with the target groups; establishment of new networks and stronger ties between stakeholders.

For example, one respondent notes that they aimed to activate remote rural communities to cooperate, offer community services and organise events; to promote local life and establish some income flow through the community services offered.

Another respondent explains that the project aimed at activating inactive men aged 45-75, especially those who risk social exclusion.

*“[It was assumed that] by improving their skills and knowledge that are useful in both private life and on the labour market, their wellbeing and social inclusion will increase. All actions were carried out on the local level in order to build stronger local communities. An important goal*

*here was also to activate men, e.g. to hold talks and establish clubs, for the activities of which they take responsibility.”*

### **The tools and solutions developed by the projects meet the needs of the target groups**

The evidence related to the evaluation question, *what kinds of tools/solutions were developed and used to improve the situation of the community?* shows that a great variety of tools and solutions were developed by the projects. Many projects developed training, counselling and mentoring programmes (e.g. Let us be active!, PRIME, RETHINK, Active Age, CROSS, DSB) and new models and concepts for supporting the target groups (Act Local, TheatreEx., YOUTH-SPORT-VOL, Garden ARC, MUCH MORE, ActiveMoms, MOL). Several projects developed web-services and IT tools (e.g. Let us be active!, YOUTH-SPORT-VOL, EmpowerKids, ActiveMoms), handbooks, guidelines and informative materials (e.g. SIPPE, PIM, WoHealth, MOL). Media campaigns (e.g. PAD, YOUTH-SPORT-VOL, DSB) and peer support networks (e.g. FEM, WoHealth, MOL) were developed.

The problems and needs of the target groups were mapped with the target groups also being able to influence the choice of activities. If necessary, projects were adjusted to better reflect the needs of the target groups. People under risk of social exclusion actively took part in project activities. Networking events, seminars and events reached relevant actors, including public actors, non-governmental organisations and target group representatives. The developed tools and solutions are relevant to the target group needs and have been tested by them.

Interviewees were asked which tools or solutions worked best in terms of achieving the targeted improvements. One such respondent, from a project addressing the social and economic exclusion of young people with a history of mental illness, explains which tools worked best in the project:

*“Mentorship - it could exist for many different target groups in different ways. It becomes like a complement to a family. You may have a family with addiction, or you are kicked out at 13 and placed in a foster home. Then having another adult that you can talk to and get some tips about everyday things is valuable. It is priceless to some.*

*I also believe in case management. They coordinate all actors with whom the person needs to have contact.”*

A respondent from a project aiming to integrate migrants with a refugee background explains that farming activities were a successful form of working together and involving the community and immigrants. Efforts are also being made to activate migrants to participate in the activities of local NGOs in other ways.

Another respondent shares that workshops, brochures and materials in simple language were tools that worked best in achieving the desired improvements.

### **People with social inclusion challenges have improved their skills, knowledge and competences**

There is clear evidence that people under risk of social exclusion (targeted communities) have improved their skills, knowledge and competences by taking part in project activities, e.g. training, mentoring and counselling.

Project reports provide detailed information on the benefits that the target groups have gained. Project partners claim that participants have gained new knowledge and practical skills, increased their self-esteem and self-confidence, have become more socially active, gained new friends and expanded support networks,



found employment, became volunteers, started apprenticeships, or created their own groups and organisations.

A project focused on the integration of long-term unemployed persons and NEETs reports that:

*“All participants in the project have achieved a better social situation. Several have got jobs and many have engaged in different ways in society. The participants have increased their self-esteem, have become more social and made contact with other people to a greater extent than before. The participants are less isolated today than before the start of the project.”*

A project addressing the social exclusion of young people living in disadvantaged or remote communities describes the benefits that the target group gained as follows:

*“The participants have learned multicultural communication, self-guidance, project innovation skills and enhanced their self-confidence. Collaborative learning and planning together with the participants and project personnel has been fruitful and created opportunities for participation and the strengthening of agency. Contacts remain after the completion of the project.”*

One respondent interviewed from a project aiming to integrate migrants with a refugee background outlines the impact on the target group:

*“The wellbeing, acceptance, societal knowledge, handcraft, language and job creation skills of the participating immigrants with refugee backgrounds have improved.”*

A respondent interviewed from a project addressing the social and economic exclusion of young people with a history of mental illness points out that:

*“[The project] created hope for the participants. Became a springboard into life. The participants are doing well now. They have succeeded in various labour market efforts. [The project] created a boost and hope.”*

Furthermore, in some projects target groups from different countries interacted with each other, thus gaining experience in intercultural communication, expanding their social networks internationally, and receiving encouragement to get involved in similar activities again (e.g. CoMe Strong, Active Age and TheatreEx).

### **People with social inclusion challenges have been deeply involved in the project activities**

Regarding the evaluation question, ***to what extent have people with social inclusion challenges been directly involved in activities organised by funded projects?*** evidence confirms that the target groups have been deeply involved in the activities funded by the projects. Many projects started with a needs analysis of the target groups, where the target group members were invited to express their opinion and thus could influence the choice of activities. The target groups took part in training, counselling and other support measures. They were also involved in designing and testing materials and tools developed by the projects.

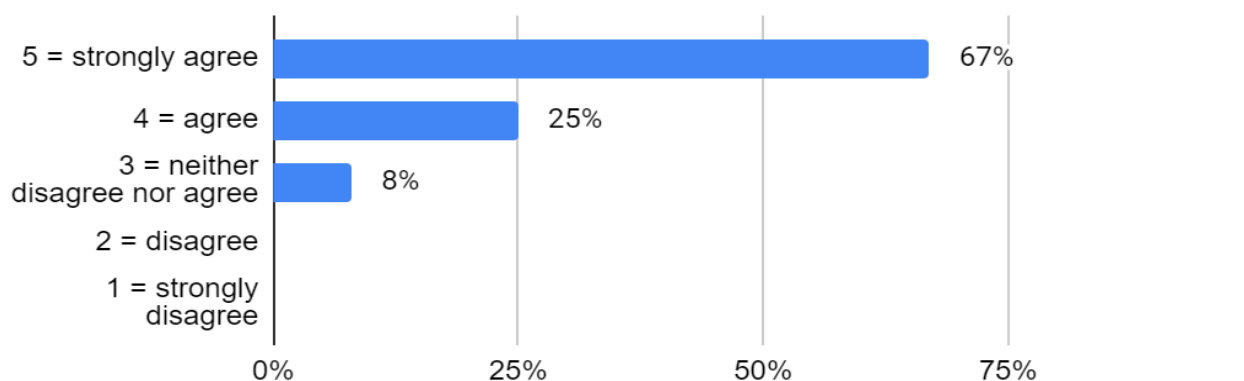




Moreover, in several projects the target group participants were encouraged to organise events themselves (e.g. SIPPE, CoMe Strong, Act Local, MAMYFU). In some projects, peer support networks were created by involving target group members (e.g. WoHealth, FEM, MOL).

92% of respondents agreed that people with social inclusion challenges have been directly involved in project activities.

Figure 34 Survey answers - "People with social inclusion challenges have been directly involved in project activities". (N=12)

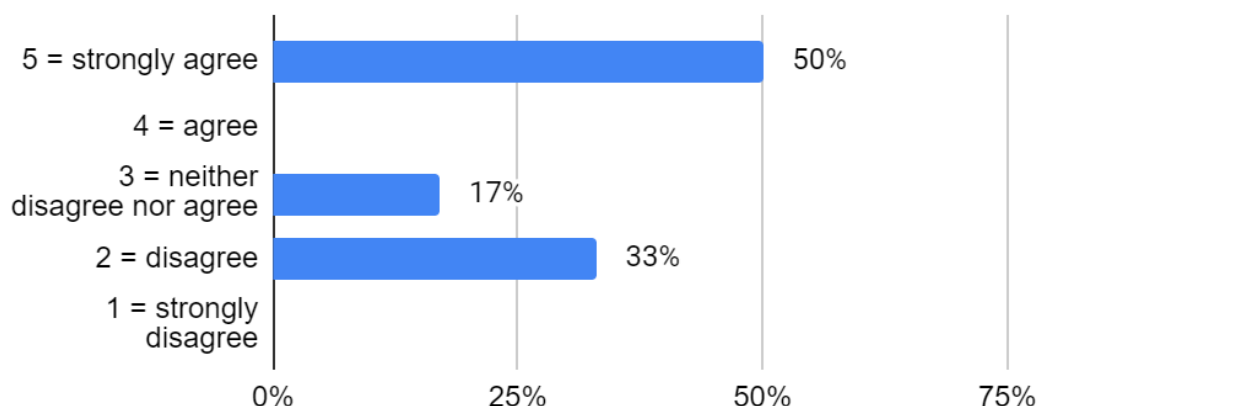


#### Attracting the target group was often challenging, but efficient solutions were found

Many projects initially had difficulties in reaching and engaging the target groups. The reasons for this include the initial social inactivity of the target groups, language barriers and low usage of social media and the internet.

Half of the respondents to the survey agreed while one out of three disagreed with the statement that it was easy to recruit participants to the project activities.

Figure 35 Survey answers - "It was easy to recruit participants to the project activities". (N=12)



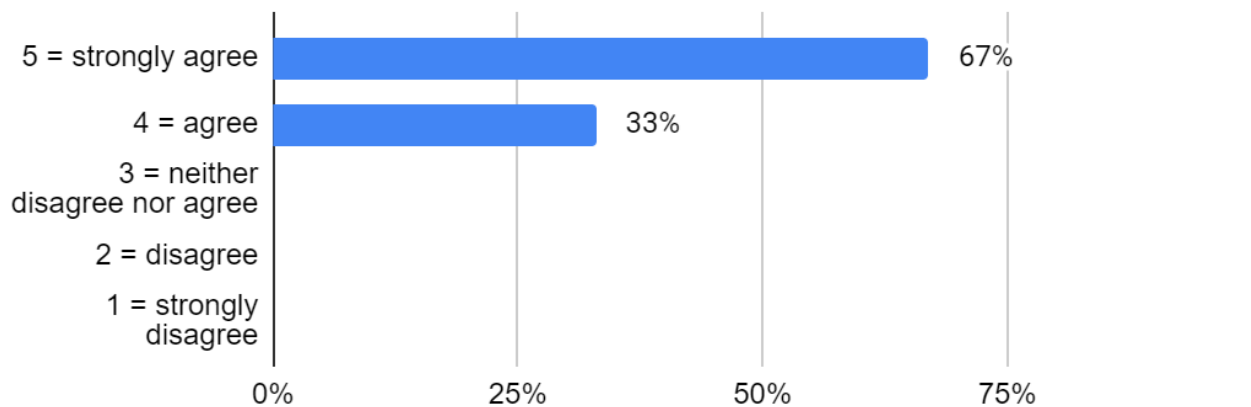
However, project staff found ways to successfully attract participants and the total number of people involved in the project activities far exceeded the initial targets, e.g. by involving organisations already working with the target groups, by reaching target groups via newspapers and telephone and by using the snowball method, where participants were reached through their friends and acquaintances already



involved in the activities. In some cases, the target group was broadened to include more participants in project activities.

All respondents to the survey agreed, two out of three strongly, with the statement that the project had reached the intended target group.

Figure 36 Survey answers - “The project reached the intended target group”. (N=12)



For example, a respondent from a project promoting the social inclusion of visually impaired young people explains how they adjusted their approach in order to reach their target group:

*“Multiple channels were used to reach the primary target group, visually impaired young people. Since visual impairment can affect the ability to access information, we had to use creativity in reaching the target group. It is hard to say which channels were ultimately the most effective, but it was definitely useful to get in touch with the networks close to young people, such as teachers or regional workers in both countries. Audio advertisements used in Finland also raised the interest of some of the young people. Printed media that was used in Finland was also surprisingly effective and resulted in contacts and questions from the networks close to these young people.”*

Two projects did not reach their intended number of participants. Nevertheless, even in these projects, the project objectives were achieved.

### **The programme has contributed to the capacity of organisations supporting the target groups**

Not only the target groups, but also organisations working with them, have increased their knowledge, skills and competence and expanded their local and cross-border networks. Project partners benefited from the exchange and transfer of knowledge; they learned different approaches and tools and could jointly develop and test new solutions. Many projects acknowledged the fact that they had benefitted from peer learning, as the support systems of the target groups are more developed in some programme countries than in others (e.g. regarding people with special needs and migrant integration).

For example, a project focused on the integration of middle-aged men with past addiction problems contributed to the capacity of health and social care professionals working with the target group that is difficult to reach. The partners organised several training sessions for professionals who wished to try out new methods in their work with their clients. In total, over 50 professionals were reached in these project training sessions. The project then compiled their most relevant learning experiences in the form of a



toolbox to be further utilised by other professionals. In addition, the pros and cons of different participatory methods tested in the peer-groups were presented in the form of a SWOT analysis.

### **Implementation of the projects has been both challenging and rewarding**

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged the implementation of numerous projects significantly. Much of the envisaged activity was moved online, some activities could not however be implemented by virtual means and thus, unfortunately, were cancelled. Some projects were modified or were extended to reach the objectives.

In several cases, partners had to address differences regarding the needs of the target groups in project countries (perhaps due to the insufficient nature of feasibility studies in the development phase of the project), which they had not fully acknowledged during the planning phase of the projects. A typical example here relates to the prevailing social services systems which are significantly different in the various programme countries.

Project partners from countries with more developed systems of social services (e.g. Sweden) did however express the opinion that the projects gave them a good opportunity to learn from different approaches in such countries as Latvia or Estonia, where various social services are provided by the non-governmental instead of the public sector.

Finally, several projects also reported that unplanned staff changes and cultural differences left an impact on the successful implementation of activities. Partners and project participants had to learn how to successfully collaborate on a cross-border scale.

At the same time, the programme has been very valuable in terms of internationalisation. Organisations have formed new partnerships and cooperation networks which go beyond the project partner organisations. New cross-border contacts gained during the projects were also used for future collaboration, e.g., the partners of the WoHealth and ActLocal projects are working on new initiatives and the Finnish and Estonian groups from the CoMe Strong project are planning a joint meeting for the summer of 2024.

**The programme's contribution to community level changes however remains unclear, as time and continuous effort is required to promote change**

It is reasonable to conclude that the programme has contributed to social inclusion in the Central Baltic region through strengthening communities, reducing differences between different social groups and improving mutual understanding, trust, empathy and resilient social ties.

However, in most cases, compelling evidence on the impact at a community level is lacking, as projects focused on specific target groups (e.g., migrants, unemployed, seniors, people with special needs). Nevertheless, several projects have described improvements for the community in their reports, including PAD, Active Age, FEM, Empower Kids, ARC, CoMe Strong and MAMYFU.

92% of respondents agreed with the statement that the projects have produced improvements in the communities. Furthermore, 92% of respondents agreed while 8% disagreed with the statement that the projects have lowered social inclusion barriers for people under risk of social exclusion.



Figure 37 Survey answers - “The project produced improvements in the communities”. (N=12)

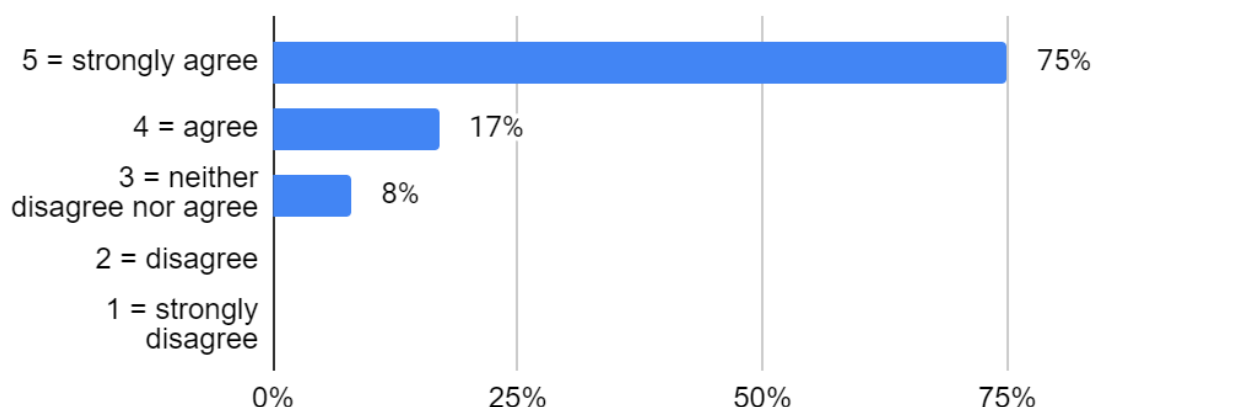
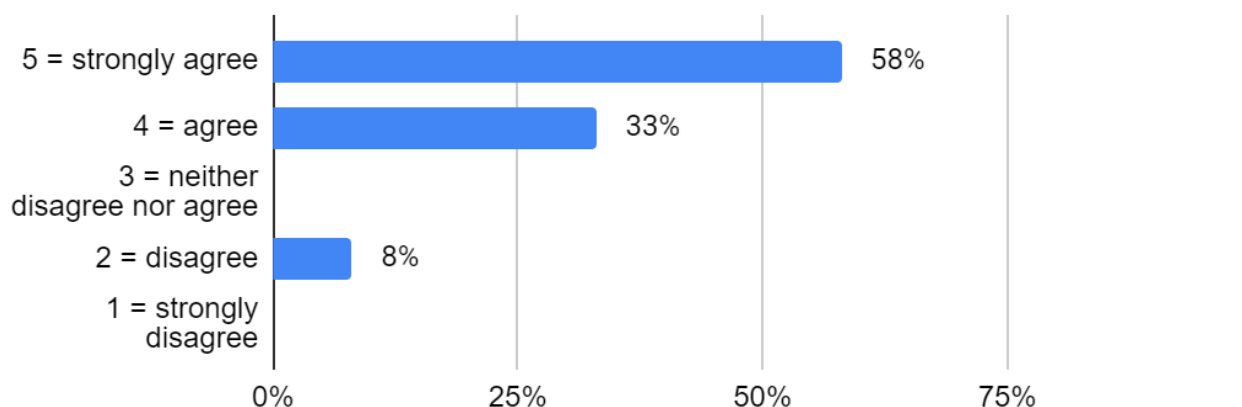


Figure 38 Survey answers - “The project lowered social inclusion barriers for the target groups”. (N=12)



At the same time, it remains unclear to what extent the specific objective projects have contributed to the final outcome: social inclusion in the Central Baltic. The focus group participants were clearly of the view that social changes need time and continuous effort. Therefore, the programme needs to continue similar activities into the next programme cycle.

The evidence related to the evaluation question, **what was the improvement for the community?** has been provided by interviews with project representatives. The respondent from a project addressing the social exclusion risk of men aged 45-75 notes that the participants have noted that their own wellbeing increased, their mood improved while their loneliness decreased significantly. They have made new friends, learned new things and they now feel that they are important community members (Estonians) and that they have something meaningful to do (Finnish men). Even if the goal of strengthening the community did not seem so important to them at the beginning, some men started voluntary work in the elderly houses and felt that this contribution was important to them.

According to the respondent from a project focusing on the creation of new employment opportunities in rural areas, there were expectations, during the project implementation, that some communities will offer part-time job opportunities to local people, but because of Covid-19, this proved to be impossible. The revenues of the communities were too low for salaries to be paid and thus the involved persons contributed as volunteers. Still, according to the respondent, most of the communities have the potential to offer part-time jobs to 1-2 persons.



In addition, some projects implemented awareness activities to lower the inclusion barriers of the target group. The respondent interviewed from a project addressing integration challenges in respect of migrants with a refugee background explains that they raised awareness about refugee stories and helped them to expand their networks.

*“The participants noted that their circle of friends had grown during the project. The support provided by the community and its importance was acknowledged. Migrant stories were disseminated via documentary films about the project. 435 local people, 225 representatives of the local public sector and 122 NGOs and other interested groups in Finland and Sweden have improved their understanding of refugees, their backgrounds, challenges and personal assets via participating in project activities and events, via social media and the final seminar.”*

In total, 29 communities have been reached by the projects (the target for the result indicator ‘communities with improvements’ was 30). At the same time, it is important to recognise that the result indicator ‘communities with improvements’ shows how many communities were successfully approached by the projects but the indicator does not measure improvements within the communities.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There is clear evidence that the projects have helped a wide variety of target groups to improve their skills, knowledge and competences. Organisations working with people at risk of social exclusion have increased their competence and expanded local and cross-border networks.

It is also reasonable to conclude that the programme has contributed to social inclusion in the Central Baltic Region through the strengthening of communities, reducing differences between social groups and improving mutual understanding, trust, empathy and resilient social ties. However, compelling evidence on the impact at a community level is lacking, as projects focused on *improving* the situation of particular target groups (people at risk of social exclusion), not the community as a whole. Furthermore, social change needs time and continuous effort. Overall, the programme has achieved good results in respect of its specific objective.

## 7.2 Specific Objective 4.2

### THEORY OF CHANGE

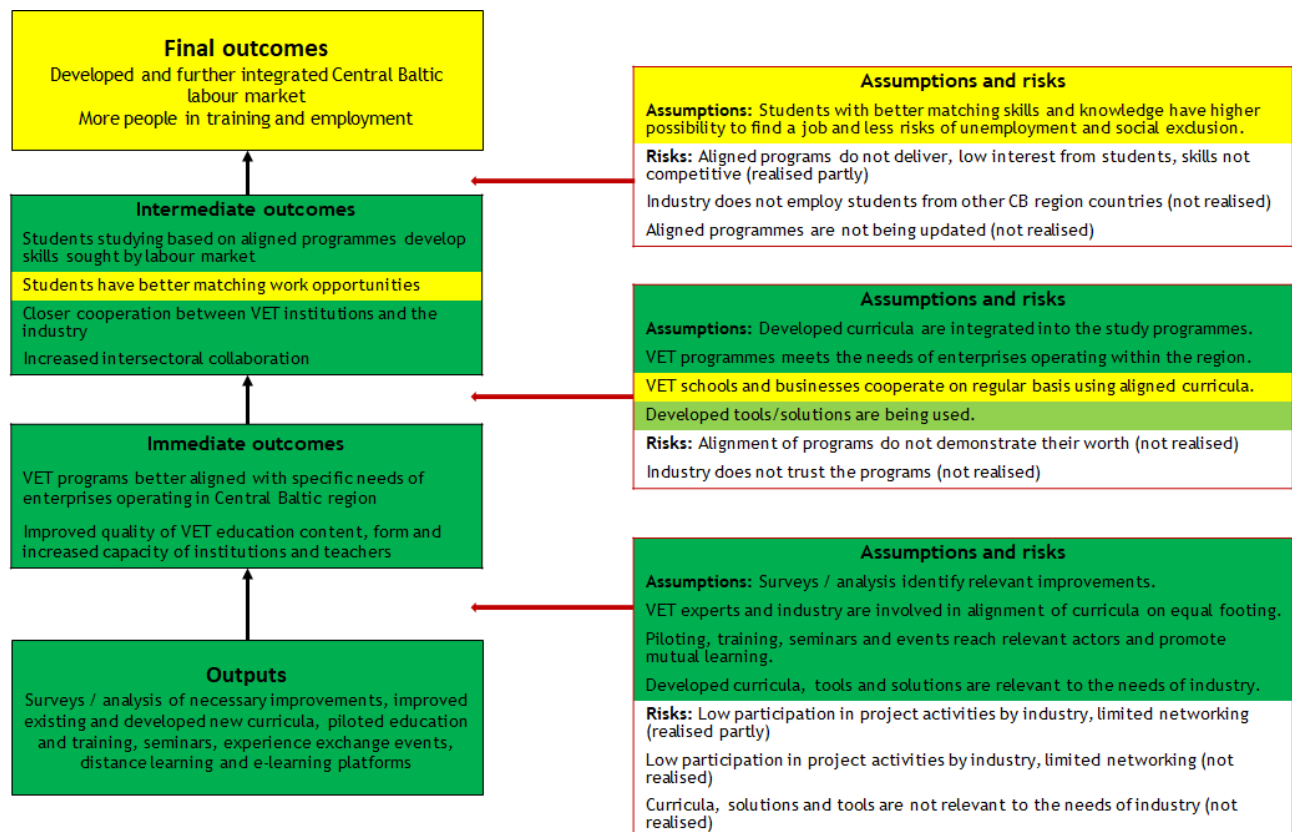
SO 4.2. aims at the further integration of the Central Baltic labour market through the development of aligned vocational education programmes. The education programmes are meant to be based on the specific needs of the enterprises operating within the region. Programme support is targeted at surveying and analysing these needs and where the main bottlenecks to further labour market integration exist. Based on these findings, the programme supports the identification of the required improvements to curricula and teaching, training methods and the management methods of vocational schools, as well as activities to develop new education programmes, improve existing programmes and pilot training. By developing skills that are better matched with labour market requirements, the specific objective can also help to reduce social exclusion and contribute to a better-integrated labour market.

Based on the intervention described above, the evaluation team proposed the following SO 4.2 **contribution claim**: “IF the Central Baltic programme will support the thorough analysis of labour market and industry needs and existing bottlenecks of vocational education and training (VET) programmes in the CB region, AND support VET programmes to develop or improve in cooperation with industry, taking into account their needs, AND students of these aligned programmes will acquire better matching skills and knowledge, THEN

students will have better opportunities to find a job in the CB region and face a lower risk of unemployment and social exclusion, AND the Central Baltic labour market will become more developed and further integrated.” The validity of this contribution claim is assessed during the evaluation and possible corrections will be made based on the evidence found.

Figure 39 presents the Theory of Change (ToC) with a summarised assessment of the evidence proving the programme contribution story. The evaluation *findings* are presented further in the text for each level of the programme intervention together with an assessment of assumptions and risks.

Figure 39 SO 4.2 Theory of Change



#### Strength of evidence assessment:

**GREEN** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified confirming a change occurred or that an assumption was fully realised;

**YELLOW** - indicates that both supporting and refuting evidence was identified for the expected change or an assumption being realised;

**RED** - indicates that supporting evidence was identified disproving the expected change or that an assumption was not realised;

**GRAY** - indicates that no or very little evidence was identified.

## FINDINGS

### The programme has delivered the expected outcomes

There is strong evidence that the programme has delivered the expected outcomes. The twenty-one projects funded under this Specific Objective have been very active in analysing the existing vocational education and training (VET) programmes and their content, surveying the needs of the enterprises and identifying the necessary skills and competencies in respect of the future labour market. Based on these findings the project partners developed new content for the education programmes, organised various modules and courses, elaborated guidelines and manuals for teachers, provided teacher training, tested and piloted the new content with students and validated it *with* industry stakeholders. Most projects elaborated the new content in a digital or e-course format, making it available for distance learning on various e-learning platforms.

The process was led by the main project beneficiaries - public and private vocational education and training institutions. Projects were generally led by public higher education and research institutions (14) or public education/training centres or schools (4). Two projects were led by the national public authority and one by an NGO. The involved partners were mostly universities of applied sciences, i.e. universities that deliver professional degree programmes and national, regional and local authorities responsible for developing vocational education and training, as well as organisations representing employers and employees. By January 2023 the projects had involved 73 vocational education schools that benefited from the programme intervention, thus largely exceeding the initial programme target (40).

The expected key drivers of the CB programme intervention are the networks of VET professionals and the industry more generally. These are the people who are expected to cooperate during the development and piloting of the new VET programmes which *themselves* are based on an analysis of the region's economic activities and bottlenecks in order to further labour market integration. The specific needs of the enterprises operating within the Central Baltic region are to be integrated throughout this process.

Reports provided under the programme and interviews carried out with the beneficiaries provide the necessary evidence that the **assumptions** in respect of the transformation of project outputs into the immediate outcome hold true. The VET experts and industry representatives were involved on a mostly equal footing throughout analysis, joint development, piloting and testing of the new educational content. The most popular form of involvement was surveys and discussions with industry representatives. In a few cases, the process was dominated by representatives from the VET institutions with the additional participation of some external experts. According to the beneficiaries, research activities provided the basis for selecting relevant topics and designing qualitative course content.

The widest variety of relevant actors (including representatives of industry, students and teachers) was reached during the piloting, training, seminars and events. According to the results of the survey, 83% of programme beneficiaries believe that the developed programmes are aligned with the specific needs of enterprises while 95% believe that the programmes are relevant from the point of view of the economic structure and the labour market. In the project partners' view, the whole process resulted in the creation of relevant educational content and improved quality due to the industry's involvement.

Reports provided under the programme and interviews carried out with the beneficiaries indicate several **additional process effects**. Bringing together different stakeholders created unique opportunities for meeting and learning. This was true both for various external stakeholders as well as for teachers. The VET schools and teachers acquired new knowledge from each other and from industry, identifying new ideas and





initiatives to help widen the scope of the educational content. One project beneficiary described it like this:

*"One of the most interesting and valuable achievements was to bring together maritime and nursing education providers to learn from each other."*

The potential risks *identified* by the evaluators, namely, "relevant improvements in the programmes are not identified" and "developed programmes, solutions and tools are not relevant to the needs of the industry" did not materialise based on the evidence found. However, the reports provided in the context of the programme and the interviews carried out highlighted several other risks. E.g. several projects experienced challenges related to different understandings of the main concepts and terminology differences as well as language and cultural differences. In some cases, discussions among the partners and the conceptualisation of the main topic took significant time and required lengthy discussion to reach an agreed conclusion:

*"Probably the greatest achievement was the conceptualisation. This was a completely new subject. It took over half a year to understand what green entrepreneurship even means. Another challenge was how green entrepreneurship is understood in different countries. It is an extremely broad topic."*

Despite the overall positive experience, in a few cases the beneficiaries faced difficulties in reaching out to stakeholders and target *groups*. E.g., specialists and VET teachers in the ICT field were rather occupied and remained hard to reach. In another case, the project beneficiaries from the academic education institutions could not get appropriate representation from industry. In yet another case, it took much longer than expected to identify an appropriate cooperation partner.

### **VET programmes are better aligned with the specific needs of enterprises**

There is ample evidence that the programme has delivered the expected immediate outcome - **VET programmes are better aligned with the specific needs of enterprises operating in the Central Baltic region**. There is also clear evidence that the projects have developed and aligned VET education programmes, jointly developed study modules, learning materials, teaching manuals, online courses and materials. According to the programme implementation report, in total, 58 vocational education and training (VET) programmes were aligned almost fully and the set target of the programme has been almost achieved (60). In the project partners' view, the number could be even higher as the whole programme was not always aligned, sometimes just a part of it e.g., a specific module or package.

An important detail here is that the alignment process involved not only the creation of new content, but that this content had to be integrated into the existing curricula or VET programmes at each individual VET institution and harmonised across the whole partnership. Programme documentation and interviews indicate the existence of sufficient positive evidence to suggest that the new content was integrated into the programmes of the participating universities and the VET schools. Alignment of the new content across the partnering organisations and schools was however more challenging. Positive cases were noted where the new content was organised as a joint online course available for students from all institutions, or where a joint external platform was used (e.g. maritime simulator centres were connected to the European Maritime Simulator Network thus enabling cross-border seafarers' training to take place). In cases where the partnering organisations (mostly universities) were using different learning platforms and technologies, their experience was less positive thus limiting the cross-integration of the programmes.

The acquired evidence suggests that most of the **assumptions** have been fulfilled in terms of the immediate outcomes being transformed into intermediate outcomes. The available evidence confirms the integration of the developed content into the study programmes and into the new curricula. Developed tools and solutions are made available not only for the students of the VET institutions but also for industry professionals. E.g. in one case it is planned to use the facilities of the partner institutions (simulators) for periodical staff training of the industry players. In another case, the industry organisations in Estonia used the modules to educate their member organisations. This confirms the assumption that aligned VET programmes are in line with the needs of enterprises operating within the region.

Some evidence was identified to suggest that cooperation between the VET schools and businesses is taking place on a regular basis using aligned curricula. In most cases, regular cooperation exists among the VET schools in the context of project partnerships. Cooperation with businesses occurs on a case-by-case basis where services are provided to the industry, e.g. customised training or the provision of study materials.

The evaluation found mixed evidence regarding the **occurrence of risks** that might have influenced the reaching of the intermediate outcomes. The potential risks identified by the evaluators, such as the "lack of trust from the industry in the new programs" and the "limited worth of the alignment process for the industry" did not materialise, based on the evidence found. Individual cases indicated potential risks related to sustainability of developed study modules, materials and tools, in particular those that are available online via various platforms that require regular update.

#### **Aligned curricula help students to develop the skills sought in the labour market**

There is a mixed evidence that the programme has attained its expected **intermediate outcomes**:

- Students studying based on aligned curricula develop skills sought in the labour market; and
- Students have better-matching work opportunities.

There is clear evidence confirming that students participating in the process of testing and piloting the new education programmes and content have improved their professional skills, increased teamwork skills and developed a more practice-oriented and entrepreneurial attitude. In the teachers' view, such learning techniques as real-life scenarios, practical problem solutions, simulation cases and materials have resulted in better learning outcomes. In the students' view, working on real cases has given them a more positive attitude in respect of their capabilities and their self-esteem.

Less evidence was however identified to confirm that students did indeed have access to better-matching work opportunities. According to the interviews and programme reports, the project partners from the VET institutions have primarily focussed on the alignment of the new content and, as such, have thus far not tried to collect data on student employability. The university representative noted in this regard that:

*"In theory they have, in practice I can't measure whether this is the case, I don't know. They will probably be employed regardless. Logistics is an area where you can get a job quite easily."*

Little evidence has been acquired thus far to suggest that the identified **assumptions** have been fulfilled for the intermediate outcomes in terms of transforming them into the final outcomes. As already noted, the focus of the projects was on the development of new content, alignment with the needs of enterprises and integration within the VET institutions and project network. Project partners do not possess information confirming or otherwise whether there is a greater likelihood for students with better matching skills and knowledge to find a job. In several cases, beneficiaries indicated that participation in the programme had reduced the risk of a mismatch in terms of the competencies of graduates thus providing students with



inspiration and assurance in terms of their own career choices. In one project the students who worked on real company cases were subsequently employed by these companies. No evidence was found supporting the initially identified risks.

### Effects on the further integrated labour market are unclear

There is limited evidence to suggest that the programme has attained its expected **final outcomes**:

- Developed and further integrated Central Baltic labour market; and
- More people in training and employment.

Programme reporting and interviews with the beneficiaries indicate a few examples where project intervention has had a positive influence in terms of the development and further integration of the labour market. For instance, partner efforts to harmonise and modernise railway education through jointly developed regional specialisation modules under the EDU-RAIL project have helped to reduce the fragmentation of railway engineering, transport and logistics VET programmes thus contributing to a more integrated approach to workforce training in the sector. Under the project EDU-SMEs students working in teams on cross-border assignments provided SMEs with support for international expansion by giving them direct access to local expertise in their target markets. According to the project partners, thanks to the cross-border assignment approach, students developed a more practice-oriented and entrepreneurial attitude towards international business while SMEs increased their export capacity.

There are several examples where participation in the alignment process and pilot training has positively influenced current professionals already working in the industry. As described by one beneficiary:

*"The impact was big also for current professionals working on Cruise vessels and cargo ships who took part in Project pilot training. This kind of training had a big impact on the need to recognise one's own skills and the need for training or learning more generally."*

In another case, tourism industry professionals enrolled in the course and used study materials for their professional growth. No evidence has yet however been identified confirming an increase in the level of demand for the newly aligned programmes and content from students.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There is clear evidence that the Central Baltic programme support through the analysis of the labour market, industry needs, existing bottlenecks in respect of VET programmes and joint activities in the development and improvement of VET programmes in cooperation with industry have resulted in better-aligned VET educational programmes and content that should enable students to acquire better matching skills and knowledge.

It is reasonable to conclude that the programme has contributed to the strengthening of the capacity of VET educational institutions and improved their cooperation with other VET institutions and with industry more generally. However, in most cases, compelling evidence of programme intervention's further effects on students' possibilities to find a job in the CB region and the level of programme contribution to the Central Baltic labour market's further integration is lacking, or has not yet materialised.



In what follows, answers are provided to the evaluation questions specified for SO 4.2.

*To what extent have the set targets been reached?*

According to the reports, all projects have attained their objectives with most of the projects also reaching their indicator targets. At the programme level, the output target was 40 vocational education schools benefitting from the programme intervention. According to the information from the eMS system, by February 2023, the number of benefitting schools significantly exceeded this (73 schools). The programme has therefore been efficient in delivering the desired outputs at almost double the scale.

The target for the result indicator, 'Share of aligned vocational education and training (VET) programmes in the Central Baltic region' is 60 (with 30 as a baseline). According to the latest available programme implementation report (2022), the achieved result is 68, thus superseding the intended result. The progress of the result indicator shows how many developed programmes have been considered as aligned by the programme as the total number of developed programmes, modules and learning materials is much higher.

According to the interview results, all projects have met their objectives to the full extent. Some projects have even exceeded their targets as additional courses have been elaborated since the scope of the programme was widened in response to stakeholder ideas and proposals. Survey results demonstrate similar confidence, where 96% of the respondents agree (30%) and strongly agree (66%) that the result targets of the project have been reached.

*Are the curricula really aligned? Describe the aspects of the "alignment"*

Evidence generated from analysis of project reports and interviews shows that there are various important aspects of the alignment that should be reviewed separately. Programme goals focus on the alignment of the VET programme content with the specific needs of enterprises in Central Baltic region. The projects have implemented many activities that involved clarification of the needs of enterprises usually by surveying or interviewing industry representatives or doing analysis of the existing VET programme content, mapping of skills and capabilities, or entering into discussions with entrepreneurs and VET institutions etc. The outcomes of this process have resulted in new or improved VET programmes, study courses, learning modules, e-courses, multidisciplinary service platforms and specific packages etc. In terms of content, all of these different outcomes contain elements of alignment.

Another important aspect here is the scope of the alignment. Formulation of the result indicator, 'Share of aligned vocational education and training (VET) programmes in the Central Baltic region' indicates that only those alignment efforts are counted that cover a certain scope and volume - i.e. the 'programme.' In practice, there are various degrees and forms of alignment. For instance, under the SAFHY project, two different degrees were harmonised, namely, learning modules for cleaning and health. In the DeDiWe project, a multidisciplinary e-services platform was developed in the social and health sector. In the ACUCARE project two online learning modules were developed creating multi-professional cooperation in child protection. On the other hand, a number of projects aligned only some parts of their programmes and thus have not reached the necessary scope to be counted as fully aligned programmes.

Additional difficulties emerged around the use of the term 'curriculum'. The field of education in some countries and sectors is highly regulated and centralised, where the curriculum is determined at the national level by the responsible institutions. The opportunities for certain educational institutions to enact changes to a national-level curriculum are therefore significantly limited, especially in areas where there are many providers of educational content (e.g. health, business, etc.). As such, some projects have aligned smaller



training modules and courses and integrated those into the existing programmes, without changes to the national curriculum. As indicated by one project partner:

*"In Finland and in Estonia, vocational education is regulated at the national level. The curriculum for vocational education is decided there. What could be done is educational unit specific strategies. However, there is not much that can be done in unifying curricula. The National Board of Education should be involved in unifying curricula. However, in my understanding some unification development has occurred in terms of the practical realities of learning on the job."*

In summary, in terms of content, the projects have done a great job of aligning their programmes and learning content with industry needs. From the point of view of results monitoring, not all outcomes have reached the scale accepted by the programme but, despite this, should not be considered a less significant contribution to the programme goals.

*Are the aligned curricula relevant from the point of view of the economic structure and labour market needs of the participating countries/regions?*

According to the results of the survey, 95% of respondents believed that the programmes are relevant from the point of view of the economic structure and labour market. These results represent the project partner perspective, reflecting the supply part of the labour market. However, the demand perspective, e.g., the industry view, should also be considered, to assess the relevance of the aligned programmes to the economic structure and labour market needs.

There is insufficient evidence to show that the enterprises from the participating countries and regions are specifically interested in graduates that have studied using the aligned VET programmes. It has also been reported that educational institutions do not collect data on students' subsequent employment. However, we can judge the industry's attitude towards the offer of VET institutions by the way in which companies value the aligned content and how industry representatives use it for their own capacity development (for more detail on this point, see the next question below).

The relevance of aligned programmes to the economic structure and labour market is influenced by the scale and sector specificity of projects and their partnerships. Most clearly, relevance is seen at the sectoral level, where a number of projects have addressed important gaps or looked for new integrated solutions, e.g. harmonising learning modules for cleaning and health (SAFHY), creating multi-professional cooperation in child protection (ACUCARE) etc. High relevance in terms of the needs of the labour market is seen in projects where the content of very specific, niche training is aligned, e.g., in connecting maritime simulator centres across the Baltic Sea (CoMET). Relevance at the territorial level is more clearly seen for programmes aligned in cooperation with schools operating in more remote areas, e.g., in Åland islands and Saaremaa island (EPIG).

*Are the aligned curricula in use or will they be?*

Numerous pieces of evidence were identified confirming the use of aligned curricula. Aligned curricula and their elements are being used primarily by the VET institutions that have developed new programmes. For example, SAFHY project partners use the materials when teaching their students; while teaching and study materials, elaborated by EDU-RAIL are in use in the partner universities. The intensity of use depends on the specific needs of each partner:

*“In Finland, the whole course could be implemented in the curriculum. In Sweden, to my knowledge, they implemented only package 2 which was the coffee room. In Latvia, my understanding is that they implemented only package 3 which was the simulation practices.”*

There is evidence that the aligned programmes and their elements are being also used by industry representatives who participated in the alignment process. For instance, two industry organisations in Estonia use the modules developed by the Unilog project in their VET education for their member organisations. During the implementation of the BOOSTED project, many tourism industry professionals enrolled in the course and found the study material extremely useful.

The availability of the aligned content online largely contributes to the use of the curricula. Some projects have made the aligned content available online in reaction to the COVID situation and/or the target group's needs. For example, the NatureBizz project, in response to the target groups' needs, made available the aligned Handbook on the project webpage instead of the Moodle platform.

*Where relevant, what feedback has been received from students who studied, or are currently studying, based on the aligned curricula?*

According to the project partners, students were very positive about their involvement in the alignment process and in the solving of practical cases and challenges. One of the respondents expressed the following:

*“The alignment process was well connected to the practice, they appreciated that they got real cases to work with. They have been very pleased to be involved in developing the course.”*

Respondents also highlighted the fact that the projects gave students their first international experience and allowed them to meet other students from different programmes with whom they may work together in future.

*“In real life, different professionals work together onboard ships and it is valuable to learn to communicate and collaborate already during the studies. “*

Students appreciated the interactivity of the aligned content and the possibility to study online.

*“The students always say that the theoretical part of the course is boring. However, the coffee room and the simulation practices generated a lot of positive feedback.”*

Overall, the positive views expressed during the interviews were also supported by the results of the survey where, in total, 95% agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback from students was positive.

*What were the additional relevant results achieved by the projects?*

Programme reporting and interviews with the beneficiaries indicate two additional immediate programme outcomes:

- improved quality of VET education content and form;
- increased capacity of institutions and teachers.

Participation in the VET programme alignment process has had a positive effect on the overall quality of the study content and delivery forms. In the project partners' view, the differences in partners' teaching traditions and their national operating environments considerably broadened the universal applicability of





the content as new tools, methods and functionality were introduced. Participation in the alignment process increased the capacity of partnering schools and had a positive impact on teacher capacity in acquiring new knowledge and skills both in terms of the content and teaching and course development in the e-environment.

Programme reporting and interviews with the beneficiaries also highlight two additional intermediate programme outcomes:

- Closer cooperation between VET institutions and industry; and
- Increased intersectoral collaboration.

The evaluation process identified numerous pieces of evidence that together suggest that participation in the projects has positively influenced cooperation between VET institutions and industry. From the VET institution perspective, research activities and discussions with industry representatives have helped to identify former weak spots and future cooperation opportunities. At the individual level, participation in the project has become a continuing education feature for teachers and has given them a wider network and contacts with industry.

On a broader scale, project implementation has contributed to improved cooperation at the sectoral level by bringing together various sector players. In a number of cases experience exchange, cooperation and networking have resulted in new cooperation ideas and potential cooperation projects. In the project partners' view, discussions and programme alignment process have increased awareness among stakeholders on the importance of intersectoral collaboration and facilitated cooperation between various stakeholders who would not otherwise have met.

*"The main achievement is increased awareness in Estonia and Finland of the importance of inter-professional collaboration and integrated services as a core starting point when training future child and family welfare professionals."*

*What were the main challenges encountered in the curricula alignment processes?*

In the respondents' view, the main challenges related to the curricula alignment processes were the different regulations and normative processes for registering changes in the education programmes in the various countries involved. Difficulties around the internal processes of higher education institutions (universities), specifically their bureaucratic nature, were also highlighted as a delaying factor that was overcome by active personal leadership and lobbying.

*"This is a highly person-driven process which means that the responsible person has to lobby and sell this idea to his or her own educational organisation and say that this kind of course could be used for education."*

During the alignment process, project partners faced various technical challenges created by the existence of the different educational platforms and technologies used at different universities as well as by a lack of knowledge and skills in developing learning content in an online environment.





Although the respondents noted that cooperation worked well in the project some also noted that a certain amount of time was necessary in order to reach a consensus on the main concepts and their interpretation where language differences also played a role.

*“The first challenge was to understand the phenomenon as only with enough understanding of the subject, can you formulate a “vocational education plan”, what the structure of the plan looks like and how to implement such a plan.”*

## 8. EVALUATION FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

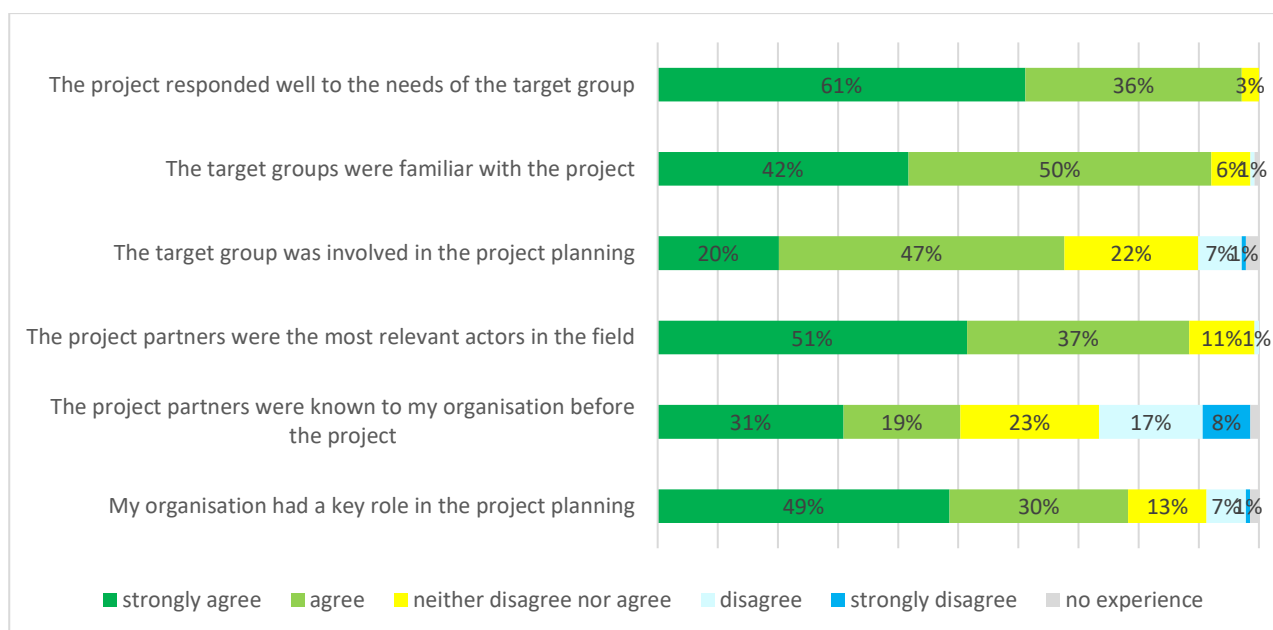
The Interreg Central Baltic 2014-2020 programme aimed at strengthening cooperation among the participating regions. The main objective was furthered through actions related to the competitive economy, the sustainable use of common resources and better connecting the region, as well as through improving skills and social inclusion in the region.

### 8.1 Conclusions and answers to The programme-level evaluation questions

Interreg Central Baltic 2014-2020 was a successful programme in the sense that the programme attracted a large number of projects, all of which furthered the programme's objectives. All of the programme targets were clearly exceeded. The programme was implemented as planned and the programme budget was spent in the way it was planned.

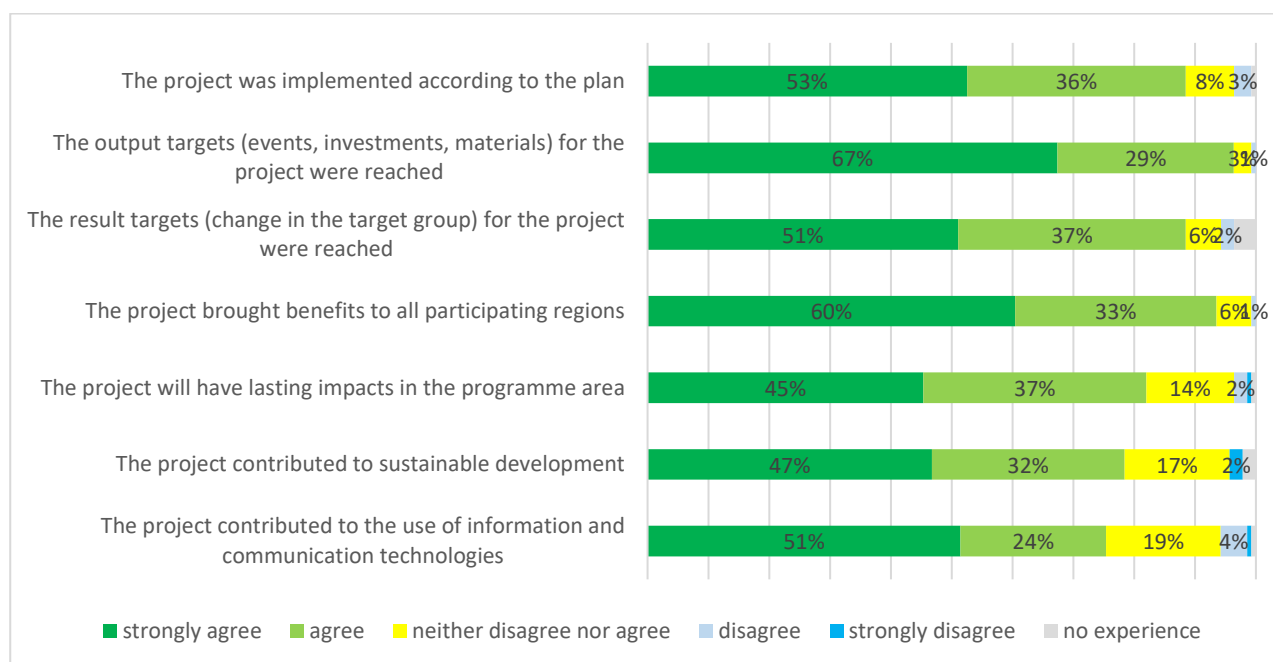
The project partners had relatively positive views on the projects' relevance and the partnership. When asked to evaluate statements related to the project organisation, partners and target groups, at least half of the respondents agreed with all statements. 97% agreed, 61% strongly, with the statement that the project responded well to the needs of the target group. 92% agreed, 42% strongly, that the target groups were familiar with the project. Only half of the respondents agreed, while one out of four disagreed, with the statement that the project partners were known to their organisation before the project.

Figure 40 Evaluation of statements related to the project organisation, partners and target groups



In terms of outcomes, the project partners were overwhelmingly positive about the success of the projects. As Figure 41 below shows, at least three out of four respondents agreed with all statements related to the project outcomes. 96% agreed, two out of three strongly, with the statement that the output targets (events, investments, materials) for the project were reached and 94% agreed, 60% strongly, with the statement that the project brought benefits to all participating regions. Agreement was weakest but still substantial at three out of four respondents, with only 5% disagreeing, over the question of whether the project contributed to the use of information and communication technologies.

Figure 41 Evaluation of statements related to project outcomes



An assessment of the Theory of Change of the programme's Specific Objectives shows that the programme largely operated in the way intended, The programme logic worked, especially in respect of Specific objectives 3.2 and 2.1, where the Theory of Change worked as expected. The programme logic also worked largely as expected for Specific Objectives 4.2, 3.1 and 2.4. However, for the latter group there is either no evidence or only mixed evidence as to whether the final outcomes were realised or not. The programme logic for Specific Objectives 4.1, 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 worked to a large extent. There were some questions regarding the intermediate outcomes, although the final outcomes worked out as expected. The most challenges were experienced in respect of the Theory of Change for Specific Objectives 2.2 and 2.3. These two Specific Objectives financed projects which supported planning projects in maritime spatial and integrated coastal zone management planning as well as in urban planning. Even though the planning processes have advanced in the Member States, the evidence of the programme's impact remains unclear.

*What level of involvement did different types of partners have in the implementation of Central Baltic projects?*

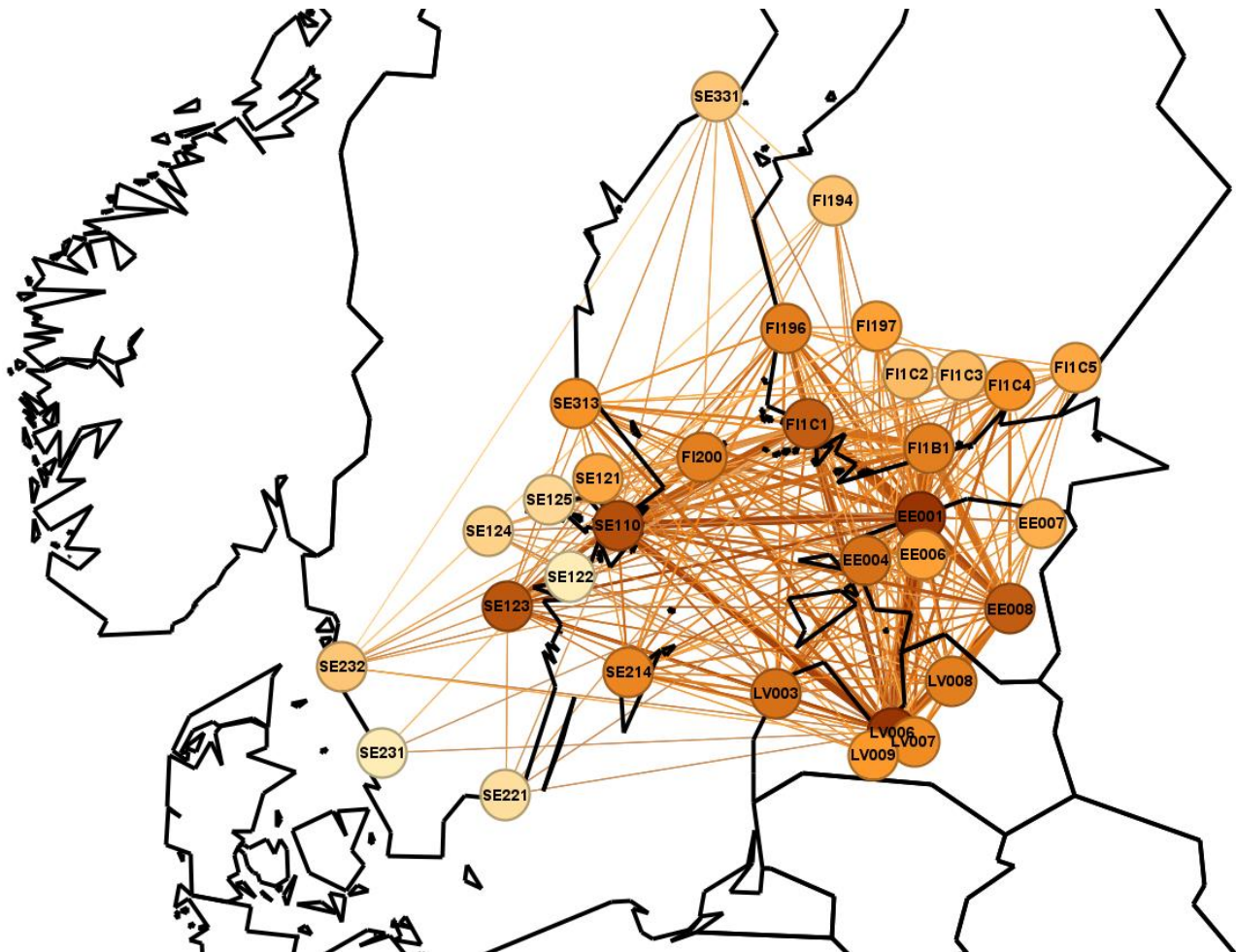
The 137 Interreg Central Baltic projects that this evaluation focuses on had a total of 818 partners. On average, the projects had six partners with the median being four.

Of all the project partners, 38% were Finnish, 27% Estonian, 18% Swedish and 18% Latvian. The Lead Partner was more often Finnish (54%) or Estonian (27%) than Swedish (12%) or Latvian (7%). In addition, there are three lead partners from the Åland Islands. The distribution of Project Partners is however much more even across the four countries (18 - 32%), with the highest number of project partners being Finnish.

Partners from all eligible regions participated in Interreg Central Baltic projects. Cooperation is especially strong between the capital regions of the participating countries (Põhja-Eesti, Helsinki-Uusimaa, Stockholm county, and Riga) but also from other regions with strong universities (Southwest Finland, Harjumaa and Östgötaland county).

The involvement of the regions in the Interreg Central Baltic programme<sup>2</sup> was analysed using Social Network Analysis software Gephi. The regions participating most in the projects are<sup>3</sup> Põhja-Eesti EE001, Riga LV006, Stockholm County SE110, Southwest Finland FI1C1, Lõuna-Eesti EE008, Östergötaland County SE123, and Helsinki-Uusimaa FI1B1. The darkness of the connecting lines illustrates the importance of connections in Figure 42 below and the darkness of the node shows the number of connections the region has in the different projects in which it participates. Partners from all eligible regions participate in the Interreg Central Baltic projects, with the core areas having more connections to each other than the adjacent areas.

Figure 42 Social Network Analysis of project participation amongst the Central Baltic regions



Local public authorities represent the largest group of partners (36%) in Interreg Central Baltic projects. Higher education and research institutions (21%), Interest groups including NGOs (14%) and business support organisations (9%) also represent important groups of project partners. The different types of partners tend, however, to adopt different roles in the projects. Even though local public authorities form the largest group of partners, they are far more likely to be associate or project partners than lead partners in the project.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of the analysis, each project was coded based on the regions of the partners participating in the projects. All partners (Lead, Project, and Associate) were coded equally. As the coding referred to the involvement of regions in the projects, one or several partners from one region in a project were coded the same. The data was analysed using the Gephi programme for Social Network Analysis and the results are illustrated using its geospatial layer.

<sup>3</sup> These regions have the highest degree centrality values, i.e. the number of ties

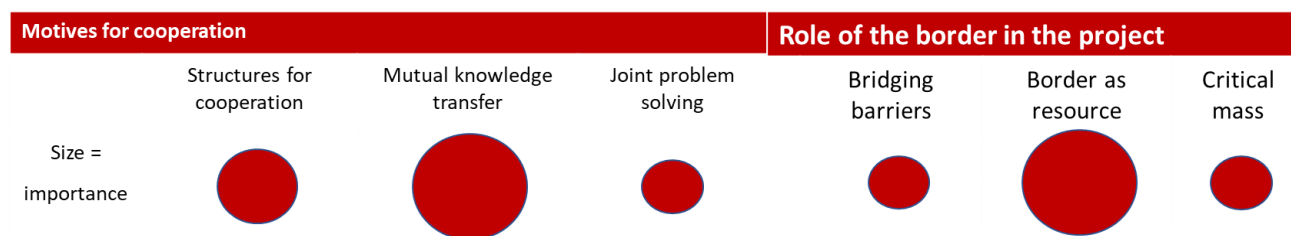
### *Did cross-border cooperation bring added value to the funded interventions?*

The Interreg Central Baltic programme is a very compact and concentrated programme. The selected investment priorities, linked to the Priorities and Specific Objectives, have clearly been chosen with reference to their perceived 'added value' to the Central Baltic.

Cross-border added value has been conceptualised as the additional benefit to regional or local development arising from implementing the project across borders, rather than nationally or regionally. Nordregio has identified four main types of added value in respect of cross-border added value, namely, solutions to common problems, learning opportunities, critical mass and building structure for further cooperation and territorial cohesion. Hallin et al<sup>4</sup> however produced a more fine-grained distinction of the sources of cross-border added value and it is this that will be used here. Namely, they distinguished between the motives for cooperation and the role of the border in the project. The motives for cooperation varied between structures for cooperation (networks or new contacts), mutual knowledge (learning from each other, local added value) and learning together (common added value). The role of the border, on the other hand, was presented as bridging barriers (lowering the border), the border as a resource (joint learning) or critical mass (the potential to work across borders as a prerequisite for creating results).

An analysis of the projects' view on their cross-border added value (shown in more detail below in the section summarising the findings per Priority) shows that the most common motive for cooperation was mutual knowledge transfer and typically the role of the border in the project was that of a resource for joint learning. Creating structures, such as networks and new contacts, for cooperation was also an important motivation for cooperation in some projects, especially business-related projects. Other aspects relating to cross-border added value were also identified in the projects (see figure below).

*Figure 43 Sources of cross-border added value in the Interreg Central Baltic Programme*



The sources of cross-border added value are highly contextual in terms of the existing networks of the project partnership, the focus of the project, the ownership of the problem being solved, as well as the demands for cross-border added value specified in the programme. Even though it would be ideal to focus on joint problem solving, it is also important to engage in cooperation structures and mutual learning as these are typical for younger networks and new topics. Thus, the expectations should be graded - for an existing partnership, cooperation should be deeper and thus cross-border added value should focus on joint problem solving. For newer partnerships and topics, on the other hand, the establishing networks and learning from each other are equally important. If the programme only focuses on joint problem solving, the project selection risks excluding new entrants and thus lowers the regional development effects of the programme.

<sup>4</sup> Kontigo (2012), Mid-term evaluation of the Interreg Nord 2014-2020 programme



### *How did the priorities contribute to wider policy objectives, in particular to the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)?*

The EU 2020 goals are furthered throughout the programme's implementation, with the chain starting from the project outputs and results, continuing through the Priority Axes and further on to the EU 2020 level.

The Interreg Central Baltic programme supports and contributes to the delivery of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The Interreg Central Baltic Specific Objectives contribute to the EUSBSR Policy Actions and hence to the EUSBSR priorities 'Save the sea', 'Connect the region' and 'Increase prosperity', as well as the horizontal actions 'Spatial Planning', 'Capacity' and 'Climate'.

Most of the Interreg Central Baltic Specific Objectives, including all of the Priority axis 1 SOs, are directly connected to the EUSBSR goal 'Increase prosperity'. Some of the Priority axis 2 SOs are directly connected to the horizontal action 'Spatial Planning'. SO 2.3 is directly connected to the 'Connect the region' priority while SO 2.4 has a direct connection to the 'Save the sea' priority. Most Interreg Central Baltic SOs have an indirect connection to the EUSBSR's horizontal actions 'Capacity' and 'Climate.' Given the close connections between the Interreg Central Baltic Specific Objectives and the EUSBSR Policy Areas and Horizontal Actions, it is clear that all the Interreg Central Baltic projects support the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Some of the Interreg Central Baltic projects also earned EUSBSR Flagship status (e.g. NUTRINFLOW contributes to PA 'Bioeconomy' under the umbrella project Baltic FLOW. BLASTICS, on the other hand, contributes to PA 'Hazards,' NutriTrade to PA 'Nutri' and iWater to horizontal actions.)

#### *Horizontal objective: Enhancing access to, and use and quality of, ICT*

The programme has contributed to enhancing access to, and the use and quality of, ICT in various ways. Firstly, in Priority 1, IT was one of the supported sectors and hence the core of several projects. In addition, the programme funded some IT platforms and tools in Priority 2 and 3 projects. The use of ICT was also used in project practices and communication. The Covid-19 pandemic increased the use of digital tools in project implementation and reduced travelling significantly.

In the survey, respondents answered questions as to whether the project contributed to the use of information and communication technologies as well as to sustainable development. Most of the respondents strongly agree or agree (79% on the question related to sustainable development and 75% on the question related to ICT). However, one fifth neither disagree nor agree and a small percentage disagree that the project contributed to the use of information and communication technologies. One in twenty respondents strongly disagrees that the project contributed to sustainable development.

#### *Horizontal objective: Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors*

The programme has contributed to supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy through funding projects relating to green technology and sustainability, especially under Priorities 3, 1 and 2. The shift towards a low-carbon economy represents the core idea of several projects with these projects engaging project partners and companies working in the field. The projects under SO 3.1 had a specific focus on the reduction of CO2 emissions in transport, whereas the SO 3.2 projects funded practical improvements in energy efficiency, renewable energy and waste management in small ports. The sustainable tourism projects funded under SO 2.1 included sustainable modes of transport, as well as the improvement of sustainability through, for instance, waste management and the protection of nature.



## 8.2 Conclusions and answers to the priority-level evaluation questions

In the following section, the summary and conclusions for the findings of each Priority are provided and the priority-level Evaluation Questions are answered.

### 8.2.1 Summary and conclusion: Priority 1

The Priority aimed at developing and promoting the Central Baltic region as a competitive, knowledge-based innovative economy. The Priority was divided into three specific objectives:

- 1.1 New Central Baltic knowledge intensive companies
- 1.2 More entrepreneurial youth
- 1.3 More exports by Central Baltic companies to new markets.

The programme focused on developing and promoting the Central Baltic region as a knowledge-based innovative economy by supporting the creation of new companies, supporting youth entrepreneurship and by promoting SME internationalisation. When examining the Theories of Change for the Specific Objectives, it was clear that the programme had set a high level of ambition. Namely, the markets for start-ups, entrepreneurship training and export promotion are already rather crowded with domestic actors. Thus, the programme had to find its specific niche, namely cross-border cooperation. Yet, the internationalisation of start-ups, cross-border cluster cooperation for export promotion and cross-border youth entrepreneurship training are not simple to realise.

*Have Specific Objectives reached their set targets or are they on the way to doing so? How effective has Central Baltic funding been in creating change in this field? What future interventions will be required in this field?*

The programme was nevertheless successful in attaining the Priority objectives. All the set targets were superseded even though not all projects reached the targets they set for themselves. Some of the financed projects also reported the creation of joint companies, although this turned out to be a rather challenging objective under SO 1.1. In addition, there were successful exports by clusters under projects financed from SO 1.2, even though the realisation of the deals sometimes occurred only after the end of the project.

As the evaluation was conducted using qualitative methods, it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of the funding in creating the change.

In future, cross-border export promotion should be continued and strengthened. In order to benefit from the Central Baltic area's strengths, cross-border start-up support should include investor networks, as well as clear sectoral projects combining the strengths of all the Central Baltic countries. Furthermore, cross-border start-up support should take a stronger role in gender equality and also fund specific female entrepreneurship projects.

***Did cross-border cooperation bring added value to the funded interventions?***

The intervention logics of the Specific Objectives under Priority 1 were such that it would not have been possible to attain the project outcomes without extensive cross-border cooperation. The design of the Specific Objectives was such that the programme intended to focus on those areas where no other funding mechanism operates. As such, cross-border cooperation represented both a challenge and a unique opportunity.



When assessing the motives for cooperation based on interviews and the final reports, a varied picture emerges between the three Specific Objectives. Whereas most of the projects under SO 1.1 and SO 1.2 stated that their motive for cooperation was building structures for cooperation or mutual knowledge transfer, SO 1.3 projects also included joint problem solving. The role of the border in the projects was similar for SO 1.1 and SO 1.2 projects, namely bridging barriers and viewing the border as a resource. For SO 1.3 projects, on the other hand, the border played the role of a resource or a source for critical mass. The differences are understandable when considering the different starting points and objectives of the projects. Namely, for the joint exports to distant markets under SO 1.3, it is only natural that the obstacles are common and that a critical mass is required for success. For SO 1.1 and SO 1.2, where cross-border cooperation was a novel approach, the structures for cooperation and mutual knowledge transfer are logical prerequisites during the initial stages of cooperation.

Figure 44 Sources of cross-border added value: Priority 1

	Motives for cooperation			Role of the border in the project		
	Structures for cooperation	Mutual knowledge transfer	Joint problem solving	Bridging barriers	Border as resource	Critical mass
SO 1.1	●	●		●	●	
SO 1.2	●	●		●	●	
SO 1.3	●	●	●		●	●

An interesting if unintended consequence of the cross-border start-up cooperation was however that the Finnish and Estonian angel investor networks started cooperating. This result is significant for future cooperation in the start-up field in the Central Baltic area.


#### **Horizontal objective enhancing access to, and use and quality of, ICT and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors**

The projects financed under Priority 1 included a significant amount of ICT use and development. Given that the focus of SO 1.1 was on knowledge-intensive sectors, some of the projects operated within the ICT sector. Some projects under SO 1.2 focused on digitalisation as a basis for youth entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the projects utilised, and some even developed, digital platforms. The Covid-19 pandemic forced many projects to transfer their activities online which had the effect of furthering the horizontal goal of enhancing the access, quality and use of ICT within the participating organisations.

The shift towards a low-carbon economy was visible mostly in the projects. For instance, SO 1.1 projects included hackathons related to the low carbon and circular economy topics, as did some of the business ideas within SO 1.2. Additionally, one of the projects under SO 1.2 focused on youth entrepreneurship related to environmental challenges. SO 1.3 included projects and companies from the Cleantech or Greentech sectors and resulted in e.g. solar panel technology exports.

### 8.2.2 Summary and conclusion: Priority 2

Priority 2 aimed at contributing to the promotion and development of natural and cultural heritage, improving the urban environment and revitalising cities, as well as promoting innovative technologies to improve environmental protection and resource efficiency. Priority 2 was divided into four Specific Objectives:

- 
- 2.1 Natural and cultural resources developed into sustainable tourist attractions
  - 2.2 Sustainably planned and managed marine and coastal areas
  - 2.3. Better urban planning in the Central Baltic region
  - 2.4. Reduced nutrient, hazardous substances and toxin inflows into the Baltic Sea

The programme has made progress towards the promotion and development of natural and cultural heritage, but there is some variance between the Specific Objectives, depending on the success and design of their intervention logic. Namely, the projects under SO 2.1 succeeded well in developing natural and cultural resources into sustainable tourist attractions. The projects financed under Specific Objective 2.4 were, in general, successful in reducing nutrient, hazardous substances and toxin inflows into the Baltic Sea. Yet, it is not possible to assess the significance of these reductions as reporting is limited to sources of inflows only. Furthermore, some of the projects were more theoretical in nature, whereas others achieved practical reductions. Specific Objectives 2.2 and 2.3 had ambitious objectives which were not fully realisable in the context of the projects. That is to say, the projects supported planning activities (maritime spatial planning, integrated coastal zone management planning and integrated urban planning), which are the responsibility of national or local actors. Thus, the projects could only have an indirect impact on these planning processes and thus on the promotion and development of natural and cultural heritage.

*Have Specific Objectives reached their set target or are they on the way to doing so?*

*What future interventions are required in this field? How effective has Central Baltic funding been in creating change in this field?*















All the Specific Objectives under Priority 2 have reached and even exceeded their targets. That being said, not all the projects reached their own targets, but overall, the projects attained the programme targets and the sum of the project targets. The chosen evaluation method is not however viable in respect of assessing the effectiveness of the funding.

There is a clear need for projects designed to improve the state of the Baltic Sea. These innovative projects should be continued and further work should also build on the successes of the funded projects. The projects relating to tourist attractions (SO 2.1) have brought significant advances in terms of cross-border tourism development, though some projects engaged in parallel activities rather than working on a common challenge. For these types of projects, it is important to define the aspect of jointness credibly prior to applying for funding - and plan the sustainability of the projects early on. In addition, the projects could be more effectively used to develop, or 'place market', a single destination, the Central Baltic Area.

*Did cross-border cooperation bring added value to the funded interventions?*

For each of the Specific Objectives under Priority 2, the main motive for cooperation was mutual knowledge transfer with the role of the border most often being viewed as a resource. The SO 2.1 projects had the most varied sources of cross-border added value. Those projects which had a clear common objective, such as a trail, were motivated by joint problem solving and they used the border to create a critical mass in the project. The Specific Objectives focusing on planning activities (SO 2.2 and SO 2.3) were motivated by, and benefitted from, learning from each other's practices. The projects focusing on improving the state of the Baltic Sea, on the other hand, engaged in cooperation to learn from each other and to solve a joint problem. In these projects, the border was thus used either as a resource for joint learning or in terms of a critical mass as a prerequisite for creating results.

Figure 45 Sources of cross-border added value: Priority 2

	Motives for cooperation			Role of the border in the project		
	Structures for cooperation	Mutual knowledge transfer	Joint problem solving	Bridging barriers	Border as resource	Critical mass
SO 2.1						
SO 2.2						
SO 2.3						
SO 2.4						

**Horizontal objective enhancing access to, and use and quality of, ICT and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors**

The projects financed under Priority 2 included a varying amount of ICT use and development. SO 2.2 and 2.3 included introducing digital tools for the planning processes, whereas the SO 2.1 projects typically included digital marketing, the digitalisation of routes, or the development of a digital portal for containing project information. The Covid-19 pandemic forced many projects to transfer their activities online thus, inadvertently furthering the horizontal goal of enhancing the access, quality and use of ICT within the participating organisations.

The shift towards a low-carbon economy was visible in the projects. Some of the SO 2.1 projects focused on sustainable modes of transport in tourism (e.g. hiking or cycling), whereas SO 2.2 contained low-carbon aspects in terms of ecosystem planning and scenario work. SO 2.4 projects included tools and knowledge related to reduced emissions. Most of the projects reported that the use of digital communications tools reduced the need to travel significantly.

### 8.2.3 Summary and conclusion: Priority 3

This priority aimed to improve the accessibility of, and within, the Central Baltic region. The overall objective was divided into the two specific objectives:

- 3.1. Improved transport flows of people and goods
- 3.2. Improved services provided by existing small ports in order to improve local and regional mobility and contribute to tourism development

Examination of the Theory of Change shows that the Specific Objective 3.2 worked as expected, whereas there were some uncertainties related to the final outcomes of Specific Objective 3.1, although this also largely worked as expected.

*Have Specific Objectives attained their set targets or are they on the way to doing so?*

*What future interventions are required in this field? How effective has Central Baltic funding been in creating change in this field?*

Overall, the Specific Objectives in this priority have been successful in reaching their targets. For both Specific Objectives under Priority 3, the programme targets were exceeded. The projects have improved accessibility to and within the Central Baltic region in different ways; both through the improved level of services in the small ports, but also by facilitating better flows of goods and people.

The programme has also influenced the attractiveness of the region as a favourable living and visiting environment. For SO 3.1, by improving the flows and good and people, the programme contributes to a more attractive region, both in terms of living as well as visiting. It also has the potential to become a more attractive region for business establishments. SO 3.2 has contributed to the attractiveness of the small port's network in the Baltic Sea, thus contributing to an increase in visitors. Furthermore, the improvements in the small ports have also benefitted local people.

In addition, the programme has clearly contributed to sustainable development. By reducing travel times making transport flows more efficient, the activities in SO 3.1 have contributed to the reduction in CO2 emissions. But this relies on more efficient flows reducing emissions rather than making the transport corridors too attractive in the sense that they facilitate traffic *increases*, thus increasing fuel consumption. Regarding the programme contribution to reduced CO2 emissions, it is also worth noting the mixed picture in terms of the project partners in respect of their answers to the survey in SO 3.1. Only half answered that their projects have reduced emissions. This indicates that any future programme dealing with this theme should make its priorities clearer. Projects in SO 3.2 invested in energy efficiency, solar panels, sewage management and improved recycling facilities. However, seen from a wider perspective, more visitors by petrol powered boats might be a less desired outcome in terms of sustainable development in the region.

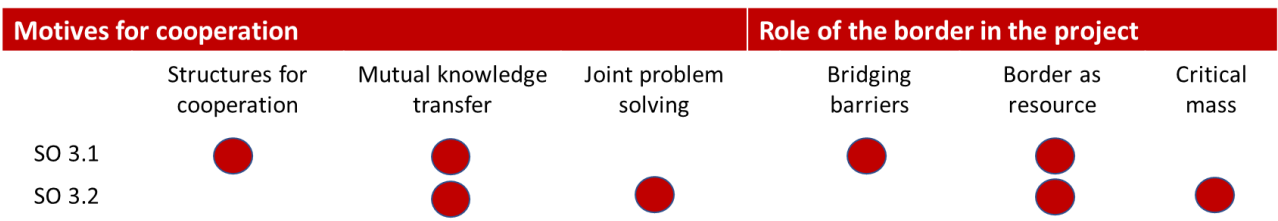
Measurement of the change of transport and travel times in SO 3.1 was clearly lacking. Many of the projects proposed that their solutions and improvements in terms of transport corridors could make the flows of goods and people more efficient but did not study the effects in detail. This makes it difficult to evaluate how much exactly the SO has contributed to the objective, even if our best guess is that there is *some* contribution. The few projects that did undertake to include measurements produced good results and this, to some extent, confirms this assumption.

***Did cross-border cooperation bring added value to the funded interventions?***

Cross-border cooperation has benefitted the development of small ports, transport nodes and corridors as well as those project partners that share similar challenges. Cross-border cooperation has provided opportunities for the exchange of knowledge, thus contributing to new ideas on different solutions. Cross-border collaboration has also enabled the sharing of different competences.

The motives for cooperation in respect of Specific Objective 3.1 projects were predominantly to create structures for cooperation and to gain from mutual knowledge transfer. Given that these were transport projects, it is logical that the role of the border in the project was typically either one of bridging barriers or of seeing the border as a resource for joint learning. The projects under Specific Objective 3.2 were somewhat different. The motives for cooperation here were mainly mutual knowledge transfer or joint problem solving, whereas the role of the border in the project was either as a resource for joint learning or a source for critical mass.

*Figure 46 Sources of cross-border added value: Priority 3*





The projects interviewed underline the fact that cross-border cooperation is crucial in this context, since transport networks and the movement of people, goods and services depends on crossing and moving between national borders efficiently.

The improvements made in terms of the small ports are generally also both scalable and transferable, meaning that similar concepts or developments can be used across the countries involved. This made it possible to develop technical tools that were suitable for a broader variety of systems, enabling the scaling of systems to take place.

Most of the projects that were interviewed referenced a few challenges in respect of cross-border cooperation. Such challenges often related to cultural differences, the pandemic and its specific challenges and to the existence of different levels of competence between the involved parties. Most of these challenges were largely however successfully addressed by the projects themselves.

The primary long-term benefit of cooperation is the lasting contacts that are established between project partners across borders, something which can continue even after the project has ended. These contacts can also help facilitate future joint projects.

**Horizontal objective *enhancing access to, and use and quality of, ICT and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors***

Specific Objective 3.1 has contributed to sustainable development and to the quality of ICT by developing new IT solutions to improve transport nodes and corridors and by making the flows of goods and people more efficient. By enabling more consistent speeds on roads and at sea, reducing traffic risks and giving access to real time data on, for example, where ferries are located, less stops are required, fuel consumption can be lowered and transport flows are disrupted less.

The overall picture is that the specific objective has contributed to the targets set regarding the quality of ICT rather than providing support for sustainable development, as more interviewees highlight their development regarding IT solutions rather than for SD. Moreover, attempts to measure by how much CO2 emissions have been reduced have not been undertaken.

Specific Objective 3.2 has made a positive contribution to both the access to, and use of, the quality of ICT as well as a contribution to sustainable development. Every project may not have contributed to both intentions. But on an aggregate level, the programme has contributed to both. For example, some projects have supported investments in digital booking systems and smartcard-controlled electricity or new IT systems while others have contributed to energy efficiency, investments in solar panels, sewage management and improved recycling facilities. The overall picture is that the projects in Specific Objective 3.2 have contributed to sustainable development more than to the use of information and communication technologies.

#### 8.2.4 Summary and conclusion: Priority 4

The programme's Priority 4 aims to achieve a more inclusive region by strengthening local communities and improving skills, knowledge and the social wellbeing of people, especially of the youth and the elderly. Enhancing the competitiveness of vocational education and training and creating liaisons with the labour market are regarded as essential ways to reach this aim.

Priority 4 has two Specific Objectives:

- 4.1 More people benefiting from stronger Central Baltic communities
- 4.2 More aligned vocational education and training programmes in the Central Baltic region.

*Have Specific Objectives attained their set targets or are they on the way to doing so? What future interventions are required in this field? How effective has Central Baltic funding been in creating change in this field?*

Specific Objectives 4.1 and 4.2 reached and exceeded the targets set for them at the programme level. Regarding Specific Objective 4.1 which focused on social inclusion there is clear evidence that projects have helped a wide variety of target groups to improve their skills, knowledge and competences. Furthermore, organisations working with people at risk of social exclusion have increased their competence and expanded local and cross-border networks. However, as regards those projects focused on improving the situation of particular target groups (people at risk of social exclusion), not the community as a whole, compelling evidence on the impact at a community level is lacking. Furthermore, social change needs time and continuous effort so not all changes are yet visible. Specific Objective 4.2, on the other hand, focused on developing new content for vocational education programmes. By January 2023, the projects had involved 73 vocational education schools each of which had benefited from the programme intervention, thus largely exceeding the initial programme target (40).

#### ***Did cross-border cooperation bring added value to the funded interventions?***

Cooperation under Priority 4 focused on communities and skills, things which are typically the focus of national development efforts and policies. For many project partners, this was the first time they had participated in cross-border activities. Nevertheless, the main motivation for cooperation was mutual knowledge transfer and learning from each other. With this in mind it is only logical that the projects reported the role of the border in the project to be a resource that provides opportunities for joint learning.

*Figure 47 Sources of cross-border added value: Priority 4*

Motives for cooperation				Role of the border in the project		
	Structures for cooperation	Mutual knowledge transfer	Joint problem solving	Bridging barriers	Border as resource	Critical mass
SO 4.1		<div></div>			<div></div>	
SO 4.2		<div></div>			<div></div>	

#### ***Horizontal objective enhancing access to, and use and quality of, ICT and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors***

The projects under Priority 2 contributed to enhancing access to and the use and quality of ICT to some extent. As these were community or vocational education projects, the main focus was not on ICT. However, the project practices supported the use of IT (online meetings, use of digital tools, electronic materials, or simulations). Some projects also contained specific content on the development of ICT tools.

In terms of supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy, these are visible in both project practices (reduced travelling, paperless office) and as a project focus (e.g. local food or VET modules on lowering emissions).

## 9. EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The Interreg Central Baltic 2014-2020 programme had a very straightforward intervention logic, whereby the Specific Objectives were built on the EU thematic objectives. As such, the programme was built from the bottom up, meaning that the overall programme and priority-level goals were not spelled out clearly. In addition, the programme logic did not account for synergies between the Specific Objectives, although in practice there were some. Furthermore, some of the Priorities (notably Priority 2) consisted of very different types of activities, whose total impact is challenging to conceptualise and measure.

**Recommendation:** The overall goals should be set at the programme level and the programming should focus on the available instruments furthering each goal. The intervention logic for the entire programme should be drafted to identify the causal paths and possible synergies within the programme.

**Recommendation:** The programme Priorities should form as cohesive wholes as possible. This would support the monitoring and evaluation of the Priority-level achievements.

**Recommendation:** Thematic calls could be considered in order to sharpen the thematic focus of the projects and to facilitate the creation of synergies between projects. Furthermore, having more projects under one theme would enhance the impacts of the programme under the given theme. In general, increased cooperation and synergies between the projects as well as building on the previous projects would add value to the projects and to the programme more generally. In this way, the programme's effect would be greater than merely the sum of the results of its individual projects.

The examination of the Theory of Change pointed out different levels of ambition in terms of the Specific Objectives. Furthermore, it showed that the change expected in some of the Specific Objectives was effectively out of reach of the projects. This was the case for Specific Objectives 2.2 and 2.3 which focused on supporting planning measures, something which are ultimately the responsibility of national or local authorities.

**Recommendation:** The intervention logic and a deeper Theory of Change model should be elaborated for each Specific Objective in order to ensure that the projects and the programme are able to influence the expected outcome

**Recommendation:** The abstraction and ambition levels (target setting) of the Specific Objectives should be reviewed to ascertain the consistency of the programme. In addition, the indicators measuring success should also be reviewed. Particularly in respect of the programme result indicators, closer attention to programme-level consistency would be beneficial.

The programme has been successful in involving partners from all regions and in creating cross-border added value. However, the networks between the projects are overly concentrated to some regions, particularly to capital areas and regions with major universities. Some of the project partners have clearly also been involved in several Interreg Central Baltic projects.

**Recommendation:** The project selection process should ensure that the widening of the project network takes place thus promoting access to new project partners, particularly from the more rural regions included in the programme.



## 10. ANNEXES

### 10.1 ANNEX 1: EVALUATION QUESTIONS PER PRIORITY

Table 6 Evaluation questions, data collection method and target audience for G01: Competitive economy

General objective 1: Competitive economy		
Focus of the evaluation	Method	Target audience
<b>SO 1.1 “New Central Baltic knowledge intensive companies” questions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the joint companies really joint? Describe the aspect of “jointness”</li> <li>Are the joint companies economically sustainable?</li> <li>Are there additional new joint companies to emerge after the project activities have ended?</li> <li>What additional relevant results were achieved by the projects?</li> <li>What were the main challenges in the joint new business development processes?</li> <li>Are the organisations who participated in the projects interested in continuing with the joint new business development processes?</li> <li>Did the “new joint company creation” logic work in your sector/business area?</li> </ul>	Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)  Interviews  Electronic survey  validation: Focus Group	Lead partners Project partners  CB joint companies
<b>SO 1.2 “More entrepreneurial youth” questions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What was the impact on participating young people?</li> <li>What was good, what did not work?</li> <li>Is there a more positive attitude towards entrepreneurship among youngsters who participated in project activities?</li> </ul>	Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)  Interviews  Electronic survey  validation: Focus Group	Lead partners Project partners  JA organisations CB joint companies
<b>SO 1.3 “More exports by Central Baltic companies to new markets” evaluation questions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describe other results (in addition to achieved sales)?</li> <li>What is the potential to follow up on the achieved sales, established channels of export, potential FDI deals?</li> <li>Did the project’s approach (strategy, activities) work in terms of helping to enter the targeted markets?</li> <li>What were the main challenges and obstacles for the cooperation and joint entry to the new markets?</li> </ul>	Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)  Interviews  Electronic survey  validation: Focus Group	Lead partners, project partners

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Table 7 Evaluation questions, data collection method and target audience for GO2: Sustainable use of common resources

General objective 2: Sustainable use of common resources		
Focus of the evaluation	Method	Target audience
<p><b>SO 2.1 “Natural and cultural resources developed into sustainable tourist attractions” questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do the created attractions well represent joint Central Baltic natural and cultural resources?</li> <li>What are the main characteristics which make the created attractions joint?</li> <li>To which target groups(s) and target market(s) is the attraction focusing?</li> </ul> <p>Is there a marketing strategy and marketing plan in place or in implementation to attract visitors to the attraction?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is achieving the targeted number of visitors realistic?</li> <li>Is the tourist attraction sustainable environmentally?</li> <li>Is the tourist attraction sustainable?</li> </ul>	<p>Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Electronic survey</p> <p>validation: Focus Group</p>	<p>Lead partners Project partners</p> <p>Regional / national tourist boards</p>
<p><b>SO 2.2 “Sustainably planned and managed marine and coastal areas” questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have the project interventions been relevant, considering the planning and management tasks carried out by the responsible authorities in the countries?</li> <li>Has the cross-border cooperation aspect been sufficiently included in the projects?</li> <li>Has the geographical coverage of the coastal and marine areas of the projects been sufficient and balanced?</li> <li>What added value have the projects given to ICZM or MSP processes?</li> <li>Are the achieved improvements in integrated urban planning processes sustainable?</li> <li>Have all relevant stakeholder groups been involved in the planning and management processes?</li> </ul>	<p>Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Electronic survey</p> <p>validation: Focus Group</p>	<p>Lead partners Project partners</p> <p>Ministries responsible for marine and coastal planning</p>
<p><b>SO 2.3 “Better urban planning in the Central Baltic region” evaluation questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is integrated urban planning understood in participating partner cities?</li> <li>What specifically has been changed/improved in participating urban areas planning processes?</li> <li>What added value have the projects given to urban planning processes?</li> <li>Are the achieved improvements in integrated urban planning processes sustainable?</li> </ul>	<p>Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Electronic survey</p>	<p>Lead partners, project partners</p> <p>Authorities responsible for urban planning</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What were the best methods to involve relevant stakeholders?</li> <li>What were the main challenges related to integrated urban planning processes?</li> </ul>	validation: Focus Group	
<b>SO 2.4 “Reduced nutrients, hazardous substances and toxin inflows into the Baltic Sea” evaluation questions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is information available on baseline situations for targeted sources?</li> <li>Are methodologies in place to measure the changes in the inflows of the nutrients, hazardous substances and toxins?</li> <li>Are the achieved reductions sustainable?</li> <li>Are the solutions and methods worked out transferable to other regions?</li> <li>What were the main challenges in working cross-border to achieve reductions in inflows?</li> </ul>	Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, national reports on water and marine management, HELCOM reports)  Interviews  Electronic survey  validation: Focus Group	Lead partners, project partners  Ministry of Environment in Member States

Table 8 Evaluation questions, data collection method and target audience for GO3: Well-connected region

General objective 3: Well-connected region		
Focus of the evaluation	Method	Target audience
<b>SO 3.1 “Improved transport flows of people and goods” questions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the improvements in travel times of the passengers.</li> <li>Identify the improvements in the times for the flows of goods.</li> <li>Identify whether the improvement of transport corridors and nodes has led to lower CO2 emissions.</li> <li>Are the methodologies in place for measuring the improvements in travel times and in the movement of goods?</li> <li>Are the achieved improvements in transport corridors and nodes sustainable?</li> <li>Identify end-user experience where applicable in using improved transport corridors and nodes.</li> <li>What were the main challenges in improving cross-border transport nodes and corridors?</li> </ul>	Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)  Interviews  Electronic survey  validation: Focus Group	Lead partners Project partners  Authorities (cross-border and cross-sector, regional)
<b>SO 3.2 “Improved services of existing small ports to improve local and regional mobility and contribute to tourism development” questions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What public services of the small ports have been improved?</li> <li>Are the improved services adding value for the small ports network attractiveness?</li> <li>What are improvements for local people?</li> <li>Are the small ports’ services improvements sustainable?</li> </ul>	Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)  Interviews / Focus group	Lead partners Project partners  Regional authorities

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are there additional spill-over effects related to the improved services in the small ports?</li> <li>Identify small ports' service improvements related to innovative solutions and technologies which have the potential for wider use.</li> </ul>	Electronic survey  validation: Focus Group	
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Table 9 Evaluation questions, data collection method and target audience for GO4: Skilled and socially inclusive region

General objective 4: Skilled and socially inclusive region		
Focus of the evaluation	Method	Target audience
<b>SO 4.1 “More people benefiting from stronger Central Baltic communities” questions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What was the improvement for the community?</li> <li>How were the baseline situations described for the participating communities?</li> <li>How were the targeted improvements described for the participating communities?</li> <li>To what extent have people with social inclusion challenges been directly involved in activities organised by funded projects?</li> <li>What kinds of tools/solutions were developed and used to improve the situation of the community?</li> </ul>	Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)  Interviews  Electronic survey  validation: Focus Group	Lead partners Project partners NGO umbrella organisations and experts
<b>SO 4.2 “More aligned vocational education and training (VET) programmes in the Central Baltic region” questions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the curricula really aligned? Describe the aspects of the “alignment”</li> <li>Are the aligned curricula relevant from the point of view of the economic structure and labour markets of the participating countries/regions?</li> <li>Are the aligned curricula in use or will they be?</li> <li>Where relevant, what is the feedback from students who studied or are currently studying based on the aligned curricula?</li> <li>What were the additional relevant results achieved by the projects?</li> <li>What were the main challenges in the curricula alignment processes?</li> </ul>	Document analysis (incl. project reports, mid-term evaluation reports, JS questionnaire, project reports and self-assessment)  Interviews  Electronic survey  validation: Focus Group	Lead partners Project partners Organisations and experts involved in the development of VET