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## Sustainable Development Aspects in Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes: The Case of Croatia and Montenegro

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## **Sustainable Development Aspects in Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes: The Case of Croatia and Montenegro**

Dr. Marijana Sumpor<sup>1</sup>, Marga Kuzmić<sup>2</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*The cross-border area between Croatia and Montenegro has similar development preconditions: large potential for tourism development and rich natural and cultural heritage which provides strong base for cooperation. Both countries have some experience in EU funded cross-border cooperation programmes with other neighbouring countries but not with each other. The importance of the sustainable development aspect is recognised and is formally included into various national strategic documents. However, implementation is often problematic and sustainability aspects need to be examined on a more concrete level.*

*The Integrated Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) Cross-border Cooperation Programme Croatia-Montenegro 2007-2013 is the basis for our research and sustainability evaluation. As recognised in the Cross-border Cooperation (CBC) Programme, one of the main challenges of the cross-border area besides the impact of globalization on the regional economy and developing competitive economy based on knowledge etc., are also environmental challenges. Accordingly, experiences in the implementation of the IPA CBC Programme Croatia-Montenegro and the integration of sustainability aspects are presented.*

**Key words:** cross-border cooperation, EU, evaluation, sustainable development

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## Introduction

Borders are important for Croatia's development, because of its specific geographical shape and lengths of borders. According to the Statistical information (2010) of the Central Bureau for Statistics, Republic of Croatia, the total length of the land boundaries of the Republic of Croatia is 2.375 km (incl. Bosnia and Herzegovina 1.011,4 km, Hungary 355,5 km, Slovenia 667,8 km, Serbia 3.176 km, and Montenegro 22,6 km) and the total lengths of the sea coast incl. islands is 5.835 km (wherefrom 1.777 km belongs to the mainland). (See Map 1.) Additional specificities of Croatia's borders can be linked to the historical and cultural aspects impacting the traditions and habits of individual regions (e.g. the Adriatic region is influenced by Roman culture, the north-western and eastern region by the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman cultures).

**Map 1. Cross-border cooperation Programmes between Croatia and neighbouring countries**



The Integrated Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) Cross-border Cooperation Programme Croatia-Montenegro 2007-2013 is the basis for our research and sustainability evaluation. As recognised in the Cross-border Cooperation (CBC) Programme, the environment represents an important challenge in the cross-border area. The Programme's strategic orientation to sustainable development encompasses economic development, human resources development, social justice and environmental protection. The overall objective focuses on the development of the cross-border region through cooperation and networks following the guidelines and regulations provided by the European Commission (EC) through the IPA Implementing Regulation. Specific objectives focus on development of SMEs, tourism, trade,

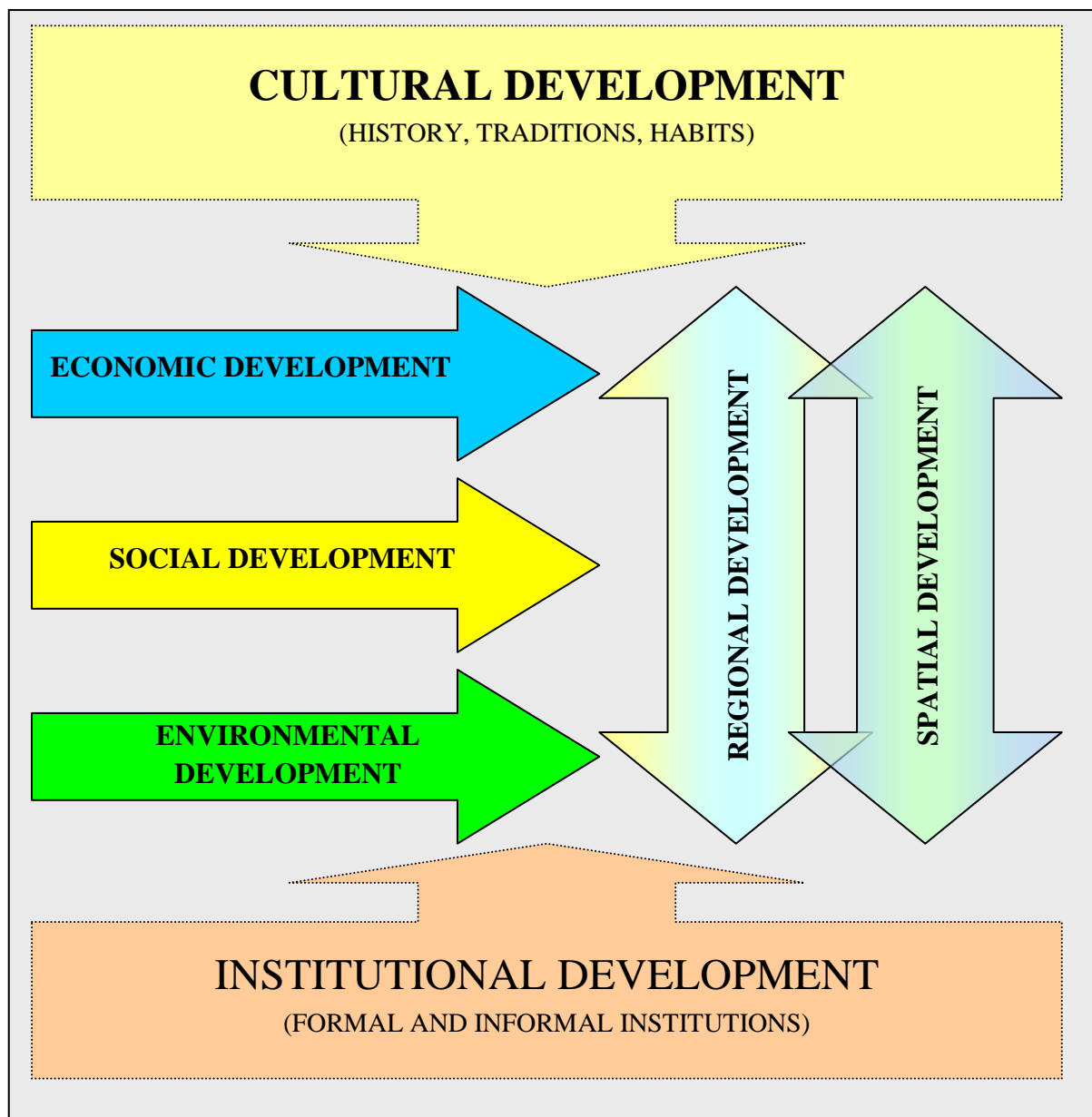
environment, culture and sport. The long-term opportunities for the programming area are: competitive regional economies based on high quality service sector in tourism; efficient protection of the environment; natural and cultural heritage; and sustainable use of nature resources; as well as high quality public and social services necessary for community development. At project level, environmental issues were only to a very limited degree included and addressed in the application package through evaluation of financial, institutional, policy level and environmental sustainability aspects.

The main aim of this paper is to evaluate sustainability aspects in Cross-border cooperation programmes. In this regard, theoretical aspects of sustainable development, territorial cohesion and cross border development, i.e. the economic, social and environmental aspects of development in border areas, will be presented. A step further is the review of policy approaches to cross-border development in Europe and key issues in CBC policy are examined. The paper focuses on practical questions related to sustainability aspects in the case of the IPA CBC Programme Croatia-Montenegro. Initial results after the first call for project proposals provide the first insights into the implementation of the Programme.

## **1. Theoretical Aspects of Sustainability, Territorial Cohesion and Cross-border Development**

Social and economic cohesion is not implemented in an amorphous unspecified space, it happens in a concrete locality with concrete people with concrete needs. Giancarlo Canzanelli emphasised also that development does not take place in a spatial vacuum devoid of any geographical attachments or context (cited in Pike at al., 2006). Therefore, territorial cohesion represents the natural third pillar of cohesion policy to enable the evolution of sustainable development policy throughout Europe and its neighbours. Presented below in Graph 1 is a proposal for a Development Policy Coordination Framework, integrating key development policy aspects of the EU cohesion policy on all levels of governance. Conceptually, European cohesion policy is built on three pillars of economic, social and territorial cohesion. The concept of sustainable development does also refer to three integral elements or dimensions of development, namely the economic, social and environmental. In this respect, these two concepts do not have to be viewed as competitive, as they clearly overlap as most explanations of territorial cohesion are based on the concept of sustainable development and the need for policy coordination implying integrated policy approaches.

**Graph 1. Development Policy Coordination Framework**



Source: Sumpor and Đokić (2011), Sumpor (2007).

In addition to the ideas presented in the graphical presentation, Berger and Steurer (2009) also emphasise the importance of inter-institutional governance in the context of integrating sustainable development aspects into policy, especially the vertical and horizontal relations between various departments. According to the authors, it is not sufficient to add environmental policy, but to integrate it into all other policy fields. In this sense, environmental issues and sustainable development issues are respected during the programming of cross-border cooperation programmes as well as in the respective projects.

In the European policy context, an important step forward has been made with regard to outcomes of communication between the representatives of the academic and policy society. The notion of territorial cohesion entered the most important development documents on EU level, enabling the transfer of these policies into national legislative and development policy frameworks. In the Community strategic guidelines on Cohesion, the Council of the European Union explicitly referred to the importance of the territorial dimension of cohesion policy and the possibility for all areas to contribute to growth and jobs. In addition, investment needs of urban and rural areas should be taken into account in order to promote balanced development, sustainable communities and social inclusion. The importance of the European territorial cooperation objective is also emphasised and its role in ensuring balanced and sustainable development of the territory of the Community. Transfer of this objective into national, regional and local frameworks is crucial and shall enable the transfer of these ideas to mainstream national and regional cohesion programmes. (CEU 2006, art. 12 and 13) Today, almost five years after the publication of this document, it can be stated that in Croatia important institutional and developmental impacts can be recognised. In particular, this is reflected in the ability of local and regional actors to understand the importance of strategic planning as one of the main condition for project financing from EU sources, which has contributed to the existence of numerous integrated strategic development documents. These trends need to be viewed differentiated across localities and regions as the level of understanding the importance and existence of strategic documents is not explicit. Evolution in institutional cultures takes time and cannot be externally imposed through legal acts or funding conditions.

In 2008, the European Commission introduced its position on Territorial cohesion in its Green Paper (CEC, 2008). It is stated that Territorial cohesion is about ensuring the harmonious development of all these places (emphasizing the rich territorial diversity of the EU) and about making sure that their citizens are able to make the most of inherent features of these territories. As such, it is a means of transforming diversity into an asset that contributes to sustainable development of the entire EU. Also, it is stated that the concept of territorial cohesion builds bridges between economic effectiveness, social cohesion and ecological balance, putting sustainable development at the heart of policy design. Here it needs to be stressed once more, that sustainable development as a concept does not refer only to ecological development, but to overall, integrated and balanced development of all aspects (economic, social and environmental including spatial and ecological dimensions). With

regard to actions within territorial cohesion policy, in the Green paper concentration (overcoming differences in density), connection (overcoming distance) and cooperation (overcoming division) are emphasized, in particular with regard to geographical regions that pose particular challenges to territorial cohesion (incl. border, rural, islands, and mountainous areas). With regard to “cooperation” within territorial cohesion, cross-border cooperation receives its right importance within the framework of territorial cohesion. Here cooperation is necessary on various territorial and administrative levels as well as among various sectors.

Faludi (2009) discussed in its paper possibilities for the future of territorial cohesion within Cohesion policy and proposed that the Commission could put territorial cohesion forward as a new rationale for sustaining cohesion policy and as a platform for improving, by means of integrated territorial strategies, upon its famous programmatic approach. Indeed, squaring the complex, multi-dimensional and sometimes conflicting objectives of EU and national sector policies with each other would represent a great leap forward. In addition, he emphasized that all reactions to the Green Paper (on Territorial Cohesion) stress the point that coordination of EU policies is a first requirement, maybe the most important one.

## **2. Cross-border Cooperation Policy in Croatia**

The Croatian Ministry of Regional Development, Forestry and Water Management (MRDFWM) is responsible for cross-border cooperation (CBC) policy. Its importance is demonstrated through the inclusion of the CBC issue in the National Regional Development Strategy and accompanying legal acts (2010). On EU level, the aim of that policy is to improve the economic and social cohesion and to reduce disparities among EU regions. Following that goal, the EU also supports cross-border cooperation within its borders, as well as within the Candidate Countries. Cross-border cooperation aims at minimizing the adverse effects of borders on the social and economic situation of border areas. Though cross-border and transnational cooperation in the EU was initiated in 1990 as a separate Community Initiative (INTERREG) financed from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), in the current financial perspective (2007-2013), it became one of the three main EU Cohesion Policy Objectives, recognizable namely as part of the “territorial cohesion” objective.

During the programming period 2000 – 2006, INTERREG III (A– cross-border cooperation, B– transnational cooperation, C– interregional cooperation) aimed at enhancing economic and social cohesion in the EU by promoting balanced development of European territory

through cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation. A specific new emphasis was put on cooperation on the external borders of the EU, i.e. with the Candidate Countries. In the programming period 2007 – 2013, Territorial cooperation belongs to EU Cohesion Policy Objective 3<sup>3</sup>, supporting three main types of cooperation: development of economic and social cross-border activities; establishment and development of transnational cooperation, including bilateral cooperation between maritime regions; increasing the efficiency of regional policy through interregional promotion and cooperation, the networking and exchange of experiences between regional and local authorities.

Croatia's initial steps in EU cross-border programmes date back to 2004 by participating in the New Neighbourhood Programme Slovenia-Hungary-Croatia and Adriatic New Neighbourhood Programme. While the Member States with which Croatia cooperated under these programmes (Hungary, Slovenia, and Italy) used Structural Funds (i.e. the European Regional Development Fund - ERDF) for their participation, Croatia used the financial resources provided through the pre-accession programmes, i.e. CARDS and Phare. Croatia also participated in one transnational programme, the New Neighbourhood Programme CADSES. The fact of different sources of funding required significant additional administrative and legal efforts for the organisation of the programme and project implementation in the neighbouring countries. These initial experiences as well as lessons learned were described in a previous work by Dokic, Sumpor and Puljiz (2006).

For the period 2007-2013, a single Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) for financing the programmes between EU member countries, candidate countries and potential candidate countries was introduced. Importantly, this instrument is also being used by the member countries that participate in CBC programmes with non-member countries of the IPA programme area. Within the IPA Cross-border Cooperation Framework, Croatia has elaborated operational programmes with all neighbouring countries. This is also an important time for the Croatian administration responsible for EU programme implementation, as transfer of cooperation experiences with member countries to potential candidates for EU membership is expected. Under IPA 2007-2013, Croatia participates in 8 cross-border cooperation programmes. All programmes are elaborated in accordance with the EU programming methodology, following standard steps in strategic planning starting with a

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<sup>3</sup> EU Cohesion policy objectives are: 1) Convergence, 2) Regional Competitiveness and Employment, 3) European Territorial Cooperation.

situational analysis, incl. SWOT, followed by the formulation of strategic objectives, priorities and measures, and definition of implementation procedures and structures. Programmes are implemented through grant schemes and publication of calls for project proposals with predefined financial allocations.

**Table 1. Implementation of CBC programmes in which Croatia participates (April 2011)\***

IPA CBC Operational Programmes	Total contracted amount in Euro	Total No. of Projects	Total No. of Partners
Adriatic	13.160.112,50	27	37
Hungary – Croatia	6.093.359,53	42	74
Slovenia – Croatia	5.164.237,28	21	58
<b>Subtotal with EU member countries</b>	<b>24.417.709,31</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>169</b>
Croatia - Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.664.778,38	13	13
<b>Croatia – Montenegro</b>	<b>716.631,11</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
Croatia – Serbia	1.439.930,01	11	11
<b>Subtotal with non-EU member countries</b> <i>i.e. Western Balkan (potential EU candidates)</i>	<b>3.821.339,50</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>29</b>
Mediterranean (MED)	111.576,47	2	2
South Eastern European Space (SEE)	575.494,27	6	6
<b>Subtotal within Transnational cooperation programmes</b>	<b>687.070,74</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>28.926.119,55</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>206</b>

Source: Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Regional Development, Forestry and Water Management

\* Results refer to 1. Calls for proposals within each CBC Operational Programme

It is evident from the data in Table 1 that the most active programmes and corresponding number of projects is contracted with neighbouring EU members (84,4%). This development can be related to the fact that experiences in CBC among Croatian partners on all governance levels with EU neighbours, i.e. Slovenian, Hungarian and Italian partners already existed.<sup>4</sup>

When looking at the objectives and priorities in operational programmes for cross-border cooperation, in which the Republic of Croatia participates, all of them are built on the idea of sustainability and integrated development. All of them include social, economic and environmental aspects. Participatory development approaches are inherent in the obligatory requirement that project proposals need to be developed by at least two cross-border partners. The mentioned sectors in the programmes are often regarded to as the vertical elements of the programmes within which the objectives and priorities and measures are formulated.

<sup>4</sup> Besides all mentioned CBC programmes, in which Croatia is involved, only the ones with Slovenia and Hungary were subject to the Cross-programme Evaluation in Central and South-Eastern Europe. (Interact, 2010)

Proposed projects have to comply also with EU policies referring to social inclusion, gender equality, environmental aspects, accessibility, information and communication technology, which are most commonly integrated in the programmes as the horizontal policy axes. Project proposals have to comply with these objectives and policies in order to be considered for financing. The programmes provide in that sense a top-down development framework for the respective border areas with a clear indication of funding opportunities. The implementation of the programme is accomplished by projects developed by the targeted institutions (usually local and regional authorities, non-profit organisations) and funded through the respective operational programme grant schemes. In this way, bottom-up development is fostered and capacity building of the lowest levels of governance is enabled. There is hardly any local authority in Croatia that did not thought of applying for EU grants.

All over Croatia the project cycle management and logical framework approach is being taught and promoted. Regional levels (i.e. counties) have established and accredited regional development agencies and coordinators that support this process and coordinate the submission of project proposals for the various grant schemes. Cross-border cooperation grants schemes represented the first opportunities for the local and regional institutions to participate in EU funded programmes and learn about the complexity of administering such projects. As visibility and communication strategies are obligatory, these grant schemes and projects funded through them can be considered as very useful vehicles for promoting the EU as an important development partner. In this sense, these developments and experiences can be taken as examples for the national levels in promoting the partnership with the EU. Obviously, most benefits are generated in those areas that have developed significant competences in using these schemes in funding their development ideas and needs. In Croatia, these regions are also the most vibrant (statistically just behind the most developed capital city of Zagreb) and economically advanced. These regions (Varaždin County, Međimurje County and Istria) are bordering with the EU member states – Slovenia, Hungary and Italy (Adriatic Sea). Partners from these regions and localities are regularly invited to various conferences and seminars to present their experiences and are also active as lead partners with other less experienced partners in joint project development. In this way, transfer of know-how and experiences is regularly promoted through the operational programmes and fully used by various partners in the various programming areas (with EU and non-EU members).

A short on-line survey was conducted during April 2011 throughout Croatia, where 21 regional authorities, 21 development agencies and 8 joint technical secretariats (for each CBC programme) were contacted. A total of 65 fully completed survey forms were received, including several responses coming from same institutions. Besides general questions such as type of organisation, participation and role in particular CBC programmes, the main questions referred to institutional and developmental aspects of their participation in the CBC programmes. Specific questions targeted cooperation experiences with partners during and after the implementation of programmes, assessment of the quality of their participation, gained benefits in terms of raised administrative capacities, and modes of institutional improvements as a result of new methodological approaches in project planning and implementation. Additional questions referred to the question, if the CBC programmes have enabled the implementation of projects and activities, which otherwise would not have been implemented; and if these projects were in line with sustainable development principles. Though in the programmes the sustainable development principle was emphasised as well as by stressing the compatibility of the projects with horizontal EU policies, 84,1% of respondents confirmed that their projects have positive impacts on economic, social and environmental development. (Sumpor and Đokić, 2011)

### **3. Cross-border Programme Croatia-Montenegro 2007-2013**

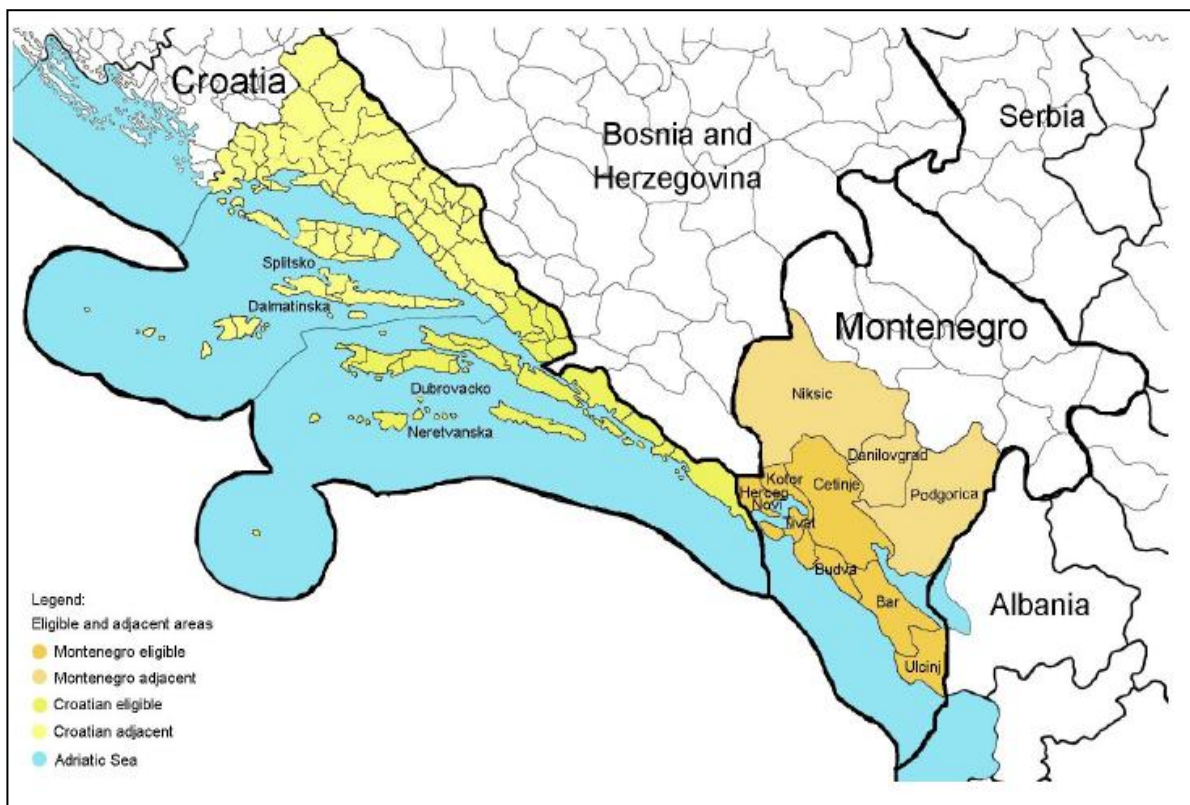
#### **3.1 About the Programme and sustainability aspects**

This particular Programme is not accompanied by a strategic environmental assessment, which was for example elaborated for the CBC programmes between Croatia and EU member states. However, all CBC programmes with the neighbouring Western Balkan Countries have added horizontal themes including sustainable development and environmental protection that have to be respected during Programme implementation. One confusing factor in this process for uninformed project applicants for example represents the need to explain sustainability of the project results (i.e. institutional and financial), which does not entirely correspond to sustainable development aspects that are meant under horizontal themes or priorities.

In the description of the CBC Programme Croatia-Montenegro it is stated that “the main challenges of the cross-border area are the impact of globalization on regional economy, the introduction of new quality and legal standards as a part of EU accession process, the need to

develop competitive economy based on knowledge and new technologies without which regions and business sector are not competitive against bigger markets, *environmental challenges* and challenges in relation to *reestablishment of social, cultural and economical connections* between two countries which were destroyed because of war in the nineties. This programme addresses the need to re-establish and strengthen cross-border connections with the aim of promoting good neighbourly relations and the *sustainable economic and social development* of the border areas.”

**Map 2. Cross-border Cooperation area Croatia-Montenegro**



*The vision of the programme has been defined as follows:*

“Cross-border area between Croatia and Montenegro is recognized as a region for high quality of life and one of the most successful European tourist destinations because of its unique and preserved natural resources, cultural and historical heritage and high quality of services, as well as a region in which socio-economic partners are empowered to achieve and manage the optimal development potential of the area.”

The overall objective of the Programme is:

➤ **Improved quality of life in cross border area between Croatia and Montenegro**

This objective will be achieved through the implementation of actions under the following set of programme priorities and measures:

<b>Priority 1</b> <b>Creation of favourable environmental and socio-economic conditions in the programme area by improvement of the co-operation in the jointly selected sectors and good neighbourly relations in the eligible area</b>	<b>Priority 2</b> <b>Technical Assistance</b>
<b>Measure 1.1:</b> Joint actions for environment, nature and cultural heritage protection	<b>Measure 2.1:</b> Programme Administration and Implementation
<b>Measure 1.2:</b> Joint tourism and cultural space	<b>Measure 2.2:</b> Programme Information, Publicity and Evaluation
<b>Measure 1.3:</b> Small cross-border community development projects	
<b>Horizontal Themes:</b> Cross-Border Capacity Building Equal opportunities Gender equality and gender mainstreaming Sustainable development and environment protection	

From the sustainability evaluation perspective, the vision, overall objective and priority statements above represent an integrated sustainable development approach. On measure level, the separation of sectoral aspects is clearly emphasised. In the process of project elaboration, it is requested to focus on one measure in the elaboration of the project proposal. Also, horizontal themes have to be respected by each project applicant when designing the project as well as in the implementation of the activities. This means that again the integrative element of sustainable development and environmental protection is preconditioned by the programme. In this way, the implementation of projects respecting these aspects will ensure that the overall CBC programme implementation will be sustainable as well.

### 3.2 About the projects and key sustainability aspects

The programme is being implemented through calls for project proposals, which was open between August and November 2009. It was launched by the Ministry of Regional Development, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Croatia and the Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro in cooperation with the Ministry for European Integration of Montenegro. The total funds available under this Call were 1.62 million Euros - 720 thousand Euros for Croatia and 900 thousand Euros for Montenegro. According to the

information published on the official programme website, within this Call 24 project proposals were submitted, out of which five projects are grant awarded. Total value of all selected projects is 1,861,510.49 €, out of which 1,503,160.59 € are EU grants.

The projects are based on the partnerships formed by eligible (public and non-profit) institutions from Croatia and Montenegro. Four of them are related to the measure Joint tourism and cultural space, while the one project is related to the measure Small cross-border community development projects. All successful project proposals had to comply with the strict selection criteria presented in the CBC Programme and accompanying documents. The project planning procedure follows the standard project cycle management methodology and a logframe matrix is requested in the project application documentation. As partners, target groups and beneficiaries have to be clearly identified and stated, a thorough stakeholder analysis and participatory processes are a precondition for good quality project planning and implementation. Besides the focussed elaboration of the intentions of the project, the planned project activities have to clearly reflect the indicated compliance with objectives, priorities and horizontal themes in the application form.

*List of selected project in the First call for proposals (August 2009):*

- ⇒ **Joint promotion and increased level of safety of Nautical Tourism in Dubrovnik – Neretva County and Montenegrin Coast**, Partners: Hydro-Meteorological Institute of Montenegro, Podgorica and Hydrographic Institute of the Republic of Croatia, Split
- ⇒ **Business Cooperation and Skills Improvement for the Development of Outdoor Tourism**, Partners: The Centre for Sustainable Tourism Initiatives, Podgorica and Croatian Mountain Rescue Service
- ⇒ **Traditional olive industry as a part of the cross-border tourism offer**, Partners: SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, Podgorica and Croatia Centre for Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Zagreb
- ⇒ **Dubrovnik and Kotor – Cities and Books**, Partners: Cultural Centre Nikola Đurković – City Library of Kotor and Dubrovnik Libraries
- ⇒ **Nature for the future**, Partners: Public Enterprise National Parks of Montenegro, Podgorica and Regional Development Agency Dunea, Dubrovnik

One project has a clear focus on the environment, namely the Nature for the future project. While all, except the library project, have a recognisable environmental aspect integrated within the sustainable development framework. As the tourism industry is the key industry on which the current cross-border cooperation in the targeted area is focussed, it can be stressed that successful and sustainable tourism development is strongly dependent on a healthy environment in the targeted area.

## Conclusions

Since the projects are still in the implementation phase, ex-post conclusions on the success and the real implementation of actions based on the sustainability aspects of the projects or programme can not be presented yet. On the other hand, some answers to key questions related to the integration of sustainable development aspects in cross-border cooperation programmes and projects might be indicated:

⇒ *What is the structural impact of the proposed actions and do they lead to improved legislation, codes of conduct, and methods?*

Based on the previous experiences in implementing cross-border cooperation projects with the neighbouring EU member countries – Italy, Hungary and Slovenia, it can be stated that the very demanding administrative procedures, the partnership principle, ethical and transparency principles do to a large extend positively influence governance on all levels of government. This has also been concluded in the analysis of governance structures for cross-border cooperation between Slovenia-Hungary-Croatia, presented by Đokić, Puljiz and Sumpor (2006).

⇒ *Is there an environmental impact?*

Besides the projects directly dealing with environmental issues which should have a priori a positive impact on the environment, in most of the projects that focus more on socio-economic measures the respect for the environment was stressed or at least a neutral impact on the environment was indicated.

⇒ *To which extent is guidance on sustainability issues provided and what is needed for improved implementation?*

All cross-border cooperation programmes in EU candidate and potential candidate countries are supported by technical assistance projects, so preparatory meetings and trainings for potential applicants are frequently organised prior to calls for project proposals. However, due to lack of either time or even expert knowledge, sustainable development and environmental protection issues could receive more attention and even additional targeted training events.

⇒ *How are participatory approaches during project planning and implementation used?*

The concept of cross-border cooperation programmes is based on the partnership principle and a precondition or basic eligibility criteria for receiving a grant for project implementation. Therefore, participatory approaches can be seen as an integral part of such cross-border cooperation initiatives. However, in reality very often the more experienced partner organises the project planning process, sometimes more or less participatory and commonly under significant time pressure. On the other hand, successful project applications have a clear presentation of target groups and beneficiaries, which is an indication of practical application of participatory approaches in the implementation of the cross-border cooperation projects.

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