

Stories of European cooperation

Interreg projects working on skills



Interact



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Introduction

With this edition of 'Stories of European cooperation' focusing on Interreg projects that enhance skills in various areas, we are celebrating the European Year of Skills. Throughout the year, all EU-funded programmes are mobilised to pay special attention to projects related to skills and youth. This publication showcases project stories coming from various cross-border and transnational Interreg programmes. Through the eyes of the writers - five young volunteers - you will learn about initiatives such as the Young Leaders Accelerator (funded by Interreg IPA Greece-Republic of North Macedonia) and you will see an example of how Italy and Croatia are tackling legal and administrative obstacles in their cross-border area. You will also read about the promotion of skills to foster more sustainable tourism in the maritime sector and to create sustainable models that focus on green and bio values.

These narratives illustrate the incredible achievements made possible with minimal financial resources. While the 2021-2027 allocation of EUR 10 billion to the four strands of Interreg programmes accounts only for 2.55% of the total EUR 392 billion allocated to the EU Cohesion Policy, the impactful outcomes of Interreg projects resonate far beyond monetary measurements. Looking at the repository of projects within the KEEP database [<https://keep.eu/>] from the past and present programming periods, the Interreg community has hundreds of skill-related projects, and more to start in the years ahead.

Interreg Europe, the programme I am representing, focuses on interregional cooperation. In our projects, we usually involve over 2,400 organisations. Over a hundred of them have directly addressed the topic of skills. For example, the NEAR [<https://www.interregeurope.eu/near>] project looks into innovative tools and skills for person-centered and community-based social models. The SKYLA [<https://www.interregeurope.eu/Skyla>] project partners work on solutions for local policymakers to better predict the skills trends on the ground and provide training opportunities addressing smart specialisation and green transition.

Looking from a broader perspective, the Interreg Europe programme as a whole is a capacity-building tool that plays a key role in enhancing the skills of people working for public organisations across the EU member states and beyond, covering now also Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Ukraine. This is also well reflected in our second pillar - the Policy Learning Platform. Public authorities can contact Interreg Europe to solve a specific challenge they face, for example, on how to manage skills related to energy transition. Then with our team of experts, we investigate solutions available in our projects or even beyond.

This is why I think it is important to invite you all, working in the programmes and projects on the skills topic, to join our Interreg Europe community, to contribute to our good practice database. If someone is looking for a solution, we will be able to identify competent institutions and find peers from other regions. We all know that it is quicker and more efficient to adapt and transfer existing solutions and to learn from others rather than reinvent the wheel.

On behalf of all the Interreg programmes and projects, let me thank the Commission for launching the Interreg Volunteer Youth (IVY) initiative and the Association of European Border Regions for running this exciting project. During these past years, over 800 volunteers were on board. This experience has empowered these young individuals, equipping them with multifaceted skills while making them true ambassadors of European cooperation. I would also like to thank Interact for mobilizing all Interreg programmes and coordinating the input to this publication.

Have a good read.



Erwin Siweris

Interreg Europe Programme Director

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Building bridges through skills: the Young Leaders Accelerator

This initiative empowers Greek and North Macedonian youngsters through skills development and collaborative guidance

By Maria-Parthena Moula

The European Year of Skills, 2023, was established aiming to equip individuals with the necessary expertise for high-quality employment while assisting businesses in tackling skill shortages within Europe.

The rationale behind this initiative lies in the significance of cultivating a workforce with sought-after skills to foster enduring, sustainable growth and enhance competitiveness. This approach also guarantees that the transitions toward environmentally friendly and digital practices are equitable and just. The methodology entails the organisation of numerous events and activities focused on skill development throughout Europe. And this is precisely what the ‘Young Leaders Accelerator’ initiative is.

Young Leaders Accelerator

As part of the ‘Be In’ project, funded by Interreg IPA Greece-Republic of North Macedonia, the Greek NGO ‘See in Action’ alongside the Public Opinion and Market Research Unit of the Research University Institute of the University of Macedonia have launched the Young Leaders Accelerator programme.

This initiative aims to empower young individuals in the professional sector, through the development of skills and tools to keep them informed about current trends and developments in the job market. In this context, academic institutions, organisations, and businesses from Greece and North Macedonia have collaborated to



guide the participants and promote cooperation by supporting the active involvement of the youth.

Connections, fundraising, and conflict resolution

How does this programme for youngsters work? Basically, through workshops and training sessions. Participants from universities in Greece and North Macedonia have participated in the virtual session 'New friends, new pathways'. Representatives from organisations and businesses in both countries came together to deliberate on pivotal matters such as project management, fundraising, and conflict resolution.

The 'See in Action' team introduced their scope of work, paving the way for participants to present themselves, articulate their academic and professional aspirations, and outline their business or start-up ideas. Each participant took the virtual floor, providing an opportunity for mutual introduction, creating an online space that

facilitated participants in forging connections, sharing their plans, and engaging in discussions. During the second in-person session, 'Turning ideas into reality' (in Thessaloniki), youngsters had the chance to attend panels with invited guest speakers to enrich the debate.

What are the benefits in the end? Over the course of the two-day event, young attendants participated in a series of five workshops exploring various facets of skill development and market exploration. These workshops covered key areas such as soft skills and CV building, research methods and exploration of the labour market, project management and fundraising, equality in the workplace, and the Greek start-up ecosystem.

Opportunities for youngsters: SMEs and start-ups

On the second day, we orchestrated an Open Day featuring kiosks set up by small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and stakeholders, offering participants insights into potential avenues for



The workshop 'Charting the Greek startup ecosystem', by professor Ioanna Sapfo Pepelasis.

increased labour market participation. This event also showcased compelling examples of cross-border cooperation, fostering a holistic understanding of collaborative possibilities.

This event provided a platform for participants to share their programme experiences, express viewpoints, and offer constructive feedback. The audience, comprising academics, journalists focusing on youth-related topics, and other key stakeholders could interact with each other in a relaxed and informal atmosphere.



Impact in numbers

- **20 young people** have participated in the Accelerator, including both online and on-site participation
- **10 experts**, provided their experience and expertise to the sessions
- **8 SMEs and CSOs** became a part of the programme during the Open Day and provided their insights regarding the job market and soft/technical skillset
- **3 volunteers** supported the sessions
- **6/20 delved more into regional cooperation** between Greece and North Macedonia, by participating in a youth festival in Valadovo, North Macedonia upon the need for enhancing the Greek-North Macedonian Cooperation in the youth sector

TESTIMONIAL



Dragana Zanova - Participant at the Young Leaders Accelerator initiative

1. Why did you participate at the Young Leaders Accelerator programme?

As the CEO and co-founder of an NGO called 'MindsMatter', I decided to apply for this programme to help me develop my leadership skills that I easily implement now in running and managing my NGO.

2. How do you evaluate the quality of the activities based on your personal experience?

I can say high quality time spent, most importantly we exchanged experiences by story-telling in both countries Greece and North Macedonia, and tried to connect our differences.

3. How did it help you enhance your personal skills?

By definition, 'personal development skills' are qualities and abilities that help you grow both personally and professionally. Understanding and improving these skills is a process also known as self-development or personal growth. This programme introduced us to all of the above, by listening to stories from great successful people who have been at the event, and also by the interactions with them, I had the chance to share my thoughts and creative.

4. How are you going to use the new skills you acquired during the programme?

Definitely for developing my NGO in a professional field. By adding new methods for young people and trying to inspire them to never stop learning, as I was inspired by the lectures at the event.

More information:

<https://seeinaction.org/young-leaders-accelerator/>
<http://interreg.gr/en/>



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synergy, solutions, sustainability



SFERA project: reducing social and demographic disparities in rural areas

The Italy-Croatia rural border regions are tackling territorial challenges, such as legal and administrative obstacles

By Antonella Notarangelo

First of all, let me introduce myself. I'm Antonella and I'm a volunteer with the Interreg Volunteers Youth (IVY) programme. I am currently involved in the SFERA project of the Interreg Italy-Croatia programme which sees the participation of two partners: the Italian entity CNA Bari (where I'm collaborating) and the Croatian local action group called Lag Lika.

The starting point: territorial challenges found

Through a careful analysis of the territory, it was found that several rural areas suffer from social and demographic problems. A significant disparity exists between small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in urban and rural settings, resulting in an underutilized avenue for potential growth.

Rural areas are depopulated due to people relocating to urban areas, so the few businesses that remain face many more challenges than their counterparts in the urban areas. Rural SMEs have traditionally lagged behind their urban counterparts in terms of innovation and growth potential. However, with digitisation driving the knowledge-based economy, the geographic location of SMEs is becoming less relevant, opening the door to new opportunities and markets.

Collaboration in the field of rural entrepreneurship

The SFERA project involves two regions: the Puglia Region in Italy, and the Lika-Senj County in Croatia. These areas present a mix of challenges and opportunities for rural entrepreneurship.



Puglia, located in southern Italy, primarily relies on a rural economy with a focus on agriculture and food processing. The region is diversifying into tourism, renewable energy, and creative industries. Despite a high rate of self-employment and a strong entrepreneurial culture, small enterprises in rural areas face difficulties accessing finance and business development support. Moreover, Puglia emphasizes the use of digital technologies and social innovation for rural development.

On the other hand, Lika-Senj County, in central Croatia, experiences a decline in population and economy. While agriculture and forestry are traditional sectors, the region shows potential in tourism, renewable energy, and niche manufacturing. Lika-Senj County has a lower rate of self-employment and lacks an entrepreneurial culture, particularly among the youth, combined with inadequate infrastructure and support services for rural entrepreneurs.

Nevertheless, there are emerging examples of successful rural entrepreneurship in the county, such as niche food production, artisanal crafts, and nature-based tourism. Additionally, there is

potential for the growth of social entrepreneurship and community-led initiatives to revitalize the local economy.

The solution: SFERA objectives

The SFERA project focuses its attention on promoting an integrated governance model that fosters stronger cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders, including local authorities, SMEs, and business support organisations. With the idea of creating a more competitive rural environment, the project aims to enhance the framework conditions, create a supportive environment, and thus increase innovation and potential growth in rural SMEs, thereby promoting economic development and social cohesion.





The CNA Bari team.

Taking a cross-border approach to rural development can bring additional benefits not only to project partners but also to target groups and the programme area as a whole. Public authorities and policymakers can gain a more profound knowledge of the territories involved, thanks to the studies conducted in the first part of the project.

This knowledge can inform policy and decision-making processes, leading to more effective and tailored interventions in designing and implementing governance models for the development of rural entrepreneurship. SMEs themselves can benefit from training and mentorship schemes provided by the project, which can enhance their skills and competencies, as well as their innovation and growth potential.



INTERVIEW: Grazia Petrosino, project coordinator at CNA Bari

Question: In what ways do you believe this initiative contributes to the improvement of the community?

Grazia Petrosino: Rural areas have untapped development potential, so by intervening in regulation and providing training/information to the economic entities located there, efforts will be made to facilitate such growth.

How will the durability of the project results be guaranteed? Will specific measures and methods be implemented?

As a trade association, we could transfer SFERA project to businesses and interact with the relevant institutions to adopt measures supporting the development of areas that will show significant growth in the coming years, especially with a focus on experiential tourism

My IVY experience

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to dedicate my time to volunteering for European projects. Being involved in initiatives that aim to promote collaboration and progress at a continental level is a privilege that I greatly appreciate because this not only provides me with the chance to contribute to the common good but also allows me to grow personally and professionally through meaningful experiences.

The European Commission, with its commitment to diversity, innovation, and solidarity, creates a stimulating environment in which I can apply my skills and share my perspectives. The feeling of

being part of concrete action that seeks to improve the lives of people across Europe is extremely gratifying.

The IVY programme also gave me the opportunity to participate in the Interreg Annual Event, in which I was a speaker during the workshop 'Unlock Interreg's potential to promote skills'. Here, I had the chance to exchange ideas and information about the different situations in European regions, discovering similarities with the regions of the round table participants, and asking them how they tackle the issues present in their territory.

Impact

The SFERA project is set to create the contours of rural entrepreneurship through a multi-faceted approach that spans governance, networking, multimedia, and in-depth research.

Expected results are:

- Elaboration of the SFERA Governance Model.
- A Cross-Border Business Network.
- Engagement of a minimum of 30 rural SMEs to position them at the forefront of activities to catalyse innovation and entrepreneurial spirit in often-overlooked regions.
- 6 podcasts and 2 promo videos to captivate audiences and communicate the goals of the project.
- A comprehensive research which will yield a profound understanding of the current entrepreneurial terrain in the rural landscapes of Puglia Region and Lika-Senj County.
- A white paper on rural entrepreneurship will encapsulate key insights, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in rural entrepreneurship.
- A series of impactful events, including the Cross-Border Forum, a policy-maker training, thematic workshops, and open days, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange.

More information:

<https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/sfera/news-events>



Antonella Notarangelo

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- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** solidarity, integration, harmonisation



Better skills for a more sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean

The Best Med project: a new integrated and sustainable touristic planning aiming at the mitigation of seasonality

By Raphael Guyonnet Lequeux

With the increasing number of tourists in the Mediterranean, 58 million in 1970, 314 million in 2014 and probably 500 million in 2030, environmental preservation has become a major issue for political decision-makers. On this occasion, it has become crucial to strengthen cooperation between the various regional players in order to control tourist flows and cultural routes. In fact, tourist flows have a significant impact on the environment, with a general increase of 40% in plastic pollution every summer (tourist season in the Mediterranean).

The Best Med project, funded by Interreg MED, has therefore decided to take part in the joint effort deployed within the European Union over the last few years to make tourism more responsible and sustainable to face up to the Mediterranean's environmental challenges.

Enhancing skills and Mediterranean governance

Approved in 2019, Best Med is being implemented in eight Mediterranean countries (Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Greece, and Montenegro) with the general objective of enhancing the skills and Mediterranean Governance, being the main challenges to fight against seasonality and lack of effective cooperation among main tourism actors, including active citizen participation on the policies design.

In other words, the project decided to highlight the importance of cultural heritage to support local sustainable development, in particular, through tourism products and fight seasonality through the redistribution of tourist flows. The countries working together are creating a model



The Best Med project kick-off meeting.

that can improve the green governance of their territories with cooperation and reuse of the Cultural Routes indicators.

The MED Sustainable & Cultural Path Model

Overall, the project aims to have a new integrated and sustainable tourism plan aiming at the mitigation of seasonality in the Mediterranean area. It will follow a strategy of previous approaches and outputs, testing an updated toolkit of data and indicators, contributing to the design of a new Green model (MED Sustainable & Cultural Path), focusing on the integration of tourism planning into wider development strategies, together with mobilising key players both at local and specifically at transnational level, creating synergies across MED countries and promoting the awareness of the MED area.

The main challenge of this tool is to tackle seasonality and lack of effective cooperation

among main tourism actors, including the citizen's active participation in policy design but also training of the stakeholders in the use of an updated toolkit of data and indicators.

Better governance of cultural routes

Through the MED Sustainable & Cultural Path Model, the partners contribute to better governance of routes and paths, achieving greater levels of cooperation between regional authorities, the managers of cultural routes/paths and the private and public stakeholders in the territory.

Those cultural routes are significant for the environment. Created in 1987 by the Council of Europe with the Declaration of Santiago de Compostela, the 45 cultural routes provide a wealth of leisure and educational activities for all citizens across Europe and beyond and are key resources for responsible tourism and sustainable development.

However, many stakeholders are still unaware of those cultural routes and are not trained to meet the requirements of this certification of excellence. In this context, the Best Med project

organised eight training courses for stakeholders from several localities of the project partners to improve governance of the touristic territories between all the sectors concerned by tourism.



Training course organised by the Lazio region.

INTERVIEW - Erica Peroni: Former technical area expert in the Direction of Tourism (Lazio Region)

Question: What has the training course brought to the participants, namely regarding cultural routes?

Erica Peroni: The objective of the training was to involve local actors, in this case not only those involved in governance, but also all those who revolved around the path, the catering operators, reception... In part, the course aimed at presenting this model to try to give everyone a working shared method. Partly, the training made familiar the European objectives linked to cultural routes and paths.

What kind of skills has this training given to participants?

Before the training course, they had little knowledge of cultural routes. With this training course they have gained cultural skills and knowledge in a way that when tourists

come, they anticipate who they are and what they are looking for; consequently, they know how to present the walk better and how to align the concepts related to the routes with the real tourism demands.

Please, tell us the results of this training.

This course has connected various actors and people involved in cultural routes. For example, it has had an impact on the 'DMO Francigena del Sud' which is a public-private organisation that must promote tourism in certain areas; it was created a few weeks before the training course and lacked certain knowledge. This training has integrated this organisation into the network and has given real methodological support. Overall, the course has provided around 200 participants (tourism stakeholders) with skills that enable them to better manage tourism in the area.

The Granada Charter on Sustainable Tourism

The Best Med project has joined the following principles and recommendations stated in the so-called Granada Charter:

- ① **Sustainability and ecosystem-based management principles shall be the basis of any tourism management model.** Incorporating sustainability principles into the planning and management of cultural routes and other physical or thematic paths in Mediterranean destinations, enable the balanced development of cultural and economic activities along the route, while protecting the natural resources of its surrounding environment.
 - **Policy recommendation:** support the implementation of Best Med S&C Path model as a much-needed tool to measure the full spectrum of impacts (whether positive or negative) that routes, pilgrimage ways and other types of paths generate in Mediterranean regions.
- ② **Cultural Routes are at the heart of cultural tourism development in Europe** and represent a source of innovation, creativity, small- business creation, cultural tourism products and services development especially in rural areas and less-known destinations.
 - **Policy recommendation:** promote the development of Cultural Routes to favour the connection between coastal and hinterland destinations, and to redistribute tourist flows to less crowded destinations (therefore fighting over-tourism in coastal areas) or sparsely populated areas, while making tourism a lot less dependent on seasonal factors in the Mediterranean region.
- ③ **The adoption of a participatory approach and cooperation between different stakeholders is crucial** for sustainability monitoring and for an efficient governance of tourism at regional and transnational levels.
 - **Policy recommendation:** involve multiple actors from different governance levels, including public and private entities, research organisations, and the civil society, but also other relevant contributors external to the tourism community, such as environment experts and academia.
- ④ **Monitoring is key to achieving a sustainable management of cultural routes.** By monitoring sustainability in an integrated and inter-operational way, route managers and regional policymakers can take evidence-based decisions to manage routes and assess the social, economic and environmental

impacts, both positive and negative, related to them. The Best Med S&C Path Model includes a five step-by-step implementation framework to ensure the results stemming from monitoring sustainability are in fact used to improve tourism management.

- **Policy recommendation:** Evaluate the sustainability of each cultural route or path by using a set of criteria that describe the desirable situation that routes should comply with and according to which the gaps and necessary improvements will be defined. These criteria shall cover and fall under the pillars of sustainability (sustainable management; economic sustainability; socio-cultural sustainability; environmental sustainability).

⑤ **It is necessary to connect the existing tourism observatories and entities and increase the sharing, harmonization and interoperability of data in all the Mediterranean area.** The use of Big Data will provide relevant information to tourism companies for the development of new products, services or business models, while it will enable policymakers and authorities to create value out of these data and improve sustainable tourism management.

- **Policy recommendation:** Boost the development of the Mediterranean Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (NSTO) to be implemented in the framework of the Best Med project; promote standard for tourism data collection in all the Mediterranean area; and improve the skill level of human resources to properly manage measurement and data collection.

⑥ **There is a growing need to increase the capacity building and human resources skills of the tourism industry** to face the challenges (covid situation, global crisis, etc), and meet the demands of the sector and the society (green and digital transition objectives).

- **Policy recommendation:** Provide capacity building and skills training to tourism professionals, companies and key stakeholders involved in governance, including cultural routes/paths staff. These trainings should address themes such as sustainability monitoring, data collection and analysis, as well as participatory and cooperative approaches and integrated cultural heritage management.



Cultural route itinerary of the South Francigena within the Lazio region.

More information:
<https://best-med.interreg-med.eu/>



Raphael Guyonnet Lequeux

- Age: 24
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- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:
necessity, transition, hope



Promoting skills in the maritime sector: the EJOB project

This initiative stimulates the growth of the blue and green cross-border labour market with a focus on the on-board yachting field

By Théo Briand

The sea economy is not only linked to fisheries. The Mediterranean Sea enjoys magnificent landscapes, and tourism plays a major role in the economies of the countries concerned. Every summer, luxury yachts flock to the various marinas in the Mediterranean, constituting a major source of employment. For this reason, the ‘Excellence Job on Board’ project (EJOB), funded by the Interreg Italy-France Maritime programme, aims to strengthen employment opportunities in the field of professions linked to pleasure boating.

Launched in 2019, the main objective of EJOB is to stimulate the cross-border labour market in blue and green growth sectors, with a particular focus on the on-board yachting sector. To achieve this, three key occupations were identified by the project partners (Provincia di Lucca, the Higher Technical Institute for Yachting (ISYL) and the Lycée Paul Augier): on-board chef, on-board

steward, and on-board machinist, to meet the employment needs of this sector. Partners from the Côte d’Azur, a leader in yacht services, and Tuscany, the world’s leading superyacht builder.

Promoting skills and students’ mobility

The underlying idea is to promote student mobility, by encouraging cultural and professional exchanges between young people and companies in the nautical sector, while developing skills and helping young Italian and French students already studying in establishments linked to the naval and tourism sectors to discover these professions. The 100 students taking part in the project have been able to take part in a total of 9 training modules, each focusing on a specific subject designed to develop the skills needed in this demanding professional environment.



Training modules

- Specificities and constraints of on-board jobs
- Hygiene on board
- Specificities and constraints of cooking on board
- Intercultural welcome and customer expectations
- Yachting territories
- Stewards/hostesses on board
- Welcoming tourists
- Social legislation and recruitment
- Language skills

The training modules, the fruit of close collaboration between the participating schools and the Higher Technical Institute for Yachting (ISYL), have been designed to meet the specific needs of the market for the profiles of the steward and cook on board. These modules include learning maritime vocabulary in English, Italian and French, cultural and economic aspects of the yachting sector in Italy and France, as well as international culinary skills for the cook profile.

However, as Covid obliged, the exchanges between France and Italy could not take place as planned, and to overcome this situation, a virtual visit to a shipyard and a yacht moored in the port of Viareggio was organised.

The EJOB project is much more than just a training initiative. It has been a gateway to new opportunities, enhancing the skills of young people by guiding them towards future employment opportunities in an important sector for the coastal regions of Italy and France.



Launch conference of the EJOB project with the participating various schools of Viareggio.

TESTIMONIAL

Denis Férault - headmaster of Lycée Paul Augier

As a partner in the EJOB project, the Lycée Jeanne et Paul Augier in Nice has taken part in this innovative experiment in student exchanges, in the particular world of pleasure boating. Mr Férault, headmaster of the Lycée Paul Augier, is proud to announce that his school welcomes almost 1,500 students every year under various types of education: initial training, apprenticeship, or professional training. In France, the high school has become a reference for training in the tourism, hotel and catering professions, a particularly important sector on the Côte d'Azur..

Regarding the project, what has been the benefit to the Lycée Paul Augier of teaming up with Italian partners?

The Italian partners have enabled us to be in direct contact with partners in the yachting world. This has made it possible for us to extend our range of courses with the creation of new training modules related to yachting.

Do you know how many of your students usually choose maritime and yachting related professions?

Previously, it was almost impossible for them to access these professions without the

recognition of the maritime world. This new training programme has changed all that.

What do you think the students have gained from this experience?

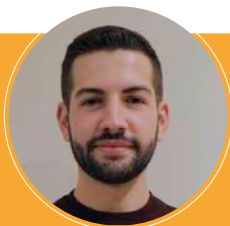
All the students who have taken part in these modules enjoyed discovering the many possibilities offered in this field. Some of them were even employed directly after the training.

Has this been the first international exchange in which the Lycée Paul Augier took part? Do you intend to repeat this type of exchange?

Yes, this has been the first exchange in this format, with each partner creating its own training modules. I'm pleased to say that we have already submitted a new application with our Italian partners, which has just been accepted.

More information:

<https://interreg-maritime.eu/fr/web/ejob>



Théo Briand

- Age: 26
- Nationality: French
- Region where you are deployed: Tuscany (Italy)
- Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you: equality, development, friendship.



Business models on green and bio values in the Alpine region

The project Forest EcoValue recommends sustainable models in areas such as energy, food and recreation

By Marine Vez

Forests of the Alpine region are facing serious threats from abandonment, climate change, and territorial degradation, causing a decline in natural resources and in the essential services that forests provide. This, in turn, leads to high maintenance costs, making it difficult for both public and private owners to sustainably manage them.

The project Forest EcoValue comes to the rescue by proposing sustainable business models that focus on circular, green, and bio value chains in areas such as energy, construction, chemistry/pharmaceuticals, food, and recreation. By bringing together the efforts of the public and private sectors, along with the participation of citizens, Forest EcoValue aims to create market frameworks and payment systems for the forest ecosystem services. Through these sustainable business models, this initiative can generate green businesses and job opportunities, thus boosting the economy in the entire region.

Enhancing skills development in businesses related to forestry

Funded by the Interreg Alpine Space programme, this project began in 2022 with a twofold purpose. First, mapping and engagement of forest owners, actors, and stakeholders present and active in the five pilot areas (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia) will be carried out to guide analysis and studies on market potential and possible payment schemes in the field of forest-based value chains. Second, results and outcomes will be delivered as recommendations in an informative way to influence relevant policymaking in the area, in order to foster the implementation of sustainable economic solutions for forestry activities, including market models and possible payment schemes for forest ecosystem services.





Field visit of the French Living Lab, including the Thonon water catchment and a presentation on water/forest contracts (May 2023). ©Forest EcoValue.

In-depth analyses are conducted in different areas of potential markets and expertise and in relation to different ecosystem services, green chemistry (notably involving the expertise of the Lombardy Green Chemistry Association), wood-related and forest management activities (notably involving the Styrian Wood Cluster, the Slovenia Forest Service, and the French National Forest Office), forestry-related economics (particularly involving the University of Graz and the Lombardy Foundation for the Environment), and forestry-related policies, among others. All of this leads to enhanced skills development and requires further production of data in local institutions, education and research centres, as well as businesses related to forestry.

Collaboration in the Alpine region... and beyond!

The project Forest EcoValue focuses on Alpine forests to gather and process data, yet its relation to national and transnational institutions sets the stage for further expanding solutions to

forest topographies beyond the Alpine Arc. As partner territories are running local pilot actions in five Living Labs through a transnational approach, solutions and outcomes shall be applicable to diverse regions and adjusted to local needs and challenges. In the long run, this would promote not only developing commercial and analytical skills, but also craftsmanship that is appropriate and suitable to local resources and facilities, resulting in economic benefits and diversification.

As the project is just a year old, it is currently in the methodological preparation phase (planning of pilot activities, mapping of stakeholders, and capitalisation from existing studies and data). The Project Steering Group meets at least once every month to discuss the project's technical achievements and to agree on the next steps. Every six months, plenary meetings are organised in person, involving all project partners. In this phase, joint preliminary meetings to set up contacts with key stakeholders in the five Living Labs are attended in small groups.



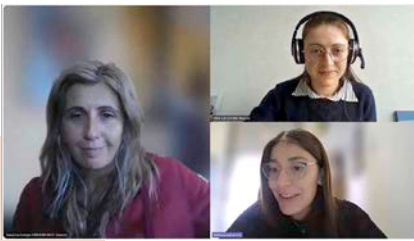
Field visit and hiking expedition in the Slovenian Living Lab, located in the Trzic Municipality. ©Forest EcoValue.



Kick-off meeting of the Forest EcoValue project in Turin (29-30 November 2022). ©Forest EcoValue.

Summary

- The project will be tested through a pilot action consisting of a network of 5 Living Labs in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia.
- It focuses on a subset of ecosystem services from the following categories:
 - Provisioning (biomass, raw materials, chemicals)
 - Regulation & maintenance (biodiversity, natural risk reduction, CO2 absorption)
 - Cultural dimension (recreation, habitat experience, health)
- For the selected subset of forest ecosystem services, the project:
 - Maps and analyses the delivery capacity of forests.
 - Identifies and estimates economic potential, defines business models, and creates market frameworks.
 - Tests the models and tools in the Living Labs, involving local stakeholders.
 - Promotes a consultation on the need for innovative policies to support forest maintenance, forest ecosystem services markets, and green value chains.
 - Provides transferable methodologies, tools, models, and policy proposals.
 - Implements training and capacity-building activities.



INTERVIEW - Susanna Longo, project coordinator

Question: What would you say is key in this project?

Susanna Longo: The real active involvement of the stakeholders. To give you an idea, we include private and public forest owners of the regions involved as much as possible. They might not be partners as such, but they are observers and have a say during the development and implementation phase. In other words, each territory is interacting with its local stakeholders to explore what their needs and expectations are, what their background is, how they perceive our project, if they can act as a facilitators in the process that we will have to go through, etc.

How will you promote this project to raise awareness?

By next year, we will have some public events in each territory of the Living Labs: Austria, Italy, France, Slovenia, and Germany. In addition, we will also have policy forums to involve political stakeholders as well as capacity-building workshops. Young people are key so we will develop training material for schools.

Tell me more about the latter. To what extent are skills developed among the

local population, more precisely among youngsters?

It's an important objective to us. We will have local training workshops in the pilot sites and we will also have a summer school and online summer school dedicated to the entire Alpine region. The purpose is to share methodological approaches and guidelines, also enabling other actors, other players, and other countries to use what we have developed within this project.

How do you connect the data analysis (the theoretical part) to the local businesses and population?

The purpose of our studies and analysis is applicative and not theoretical, so in fact, the difficult part of the work is to move from the theoretical level into the practical, testing and implementation level. This is a big effort in this project and this is how we want to ensure the connection between the methodologies and the real world. How? For instance, through the five Living Labs in each country's pilot area. These will include a participatory process involving local stakeholders. The ultimate purpose is to lay the foundations to develop markets and business models for forest ecosystem services.

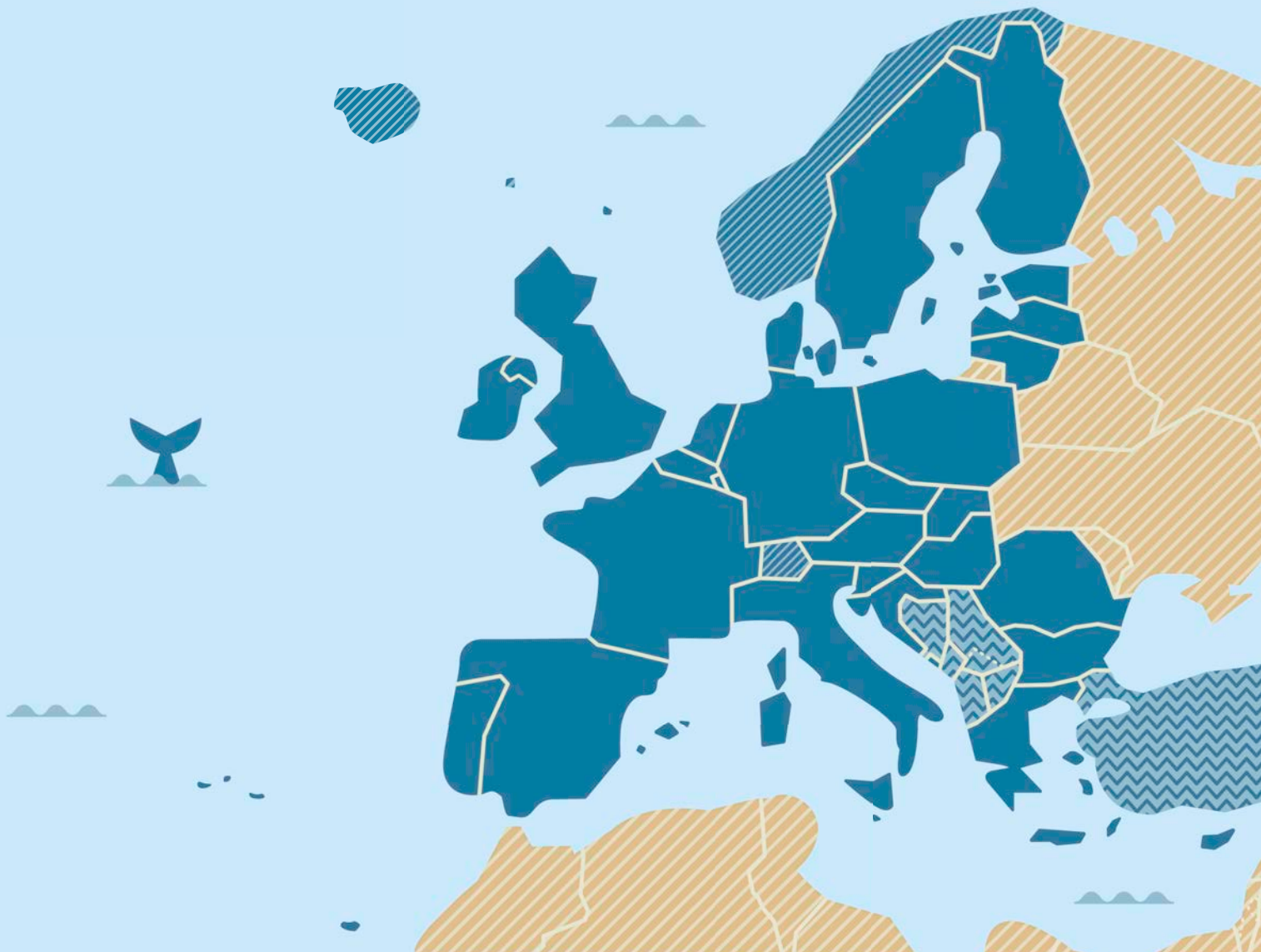
More information:

<https://www.alpine-space.eu/project/forest-ecovalue>



Marine Vez

- **Age:** 23
- **Nationality:** French
- **Region where you are deployed:** Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur (France)
- **Write three words that define 'European cooperation' for you:** cohesion, growth, employment.



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