

Post-2027

Report on consultation with stakeholders and citizens

Interreg VI-A IPA Programme Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina-
Montenegro



December 2024

Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
1. Consultation of stakeholders	3
1.1 Main stakeholders consulted	3
1.2 Methods of consultation	4
1.3 Summary of the input on the key questions	5
1.4. Interesting quotes	10
2. Consultation of citizens	11
2.1 Main citizens consulted	11
2.2 Methods of consultation	12
2.3 Summary of the input on the key questions	13
2.4. Interesting quotes	18
3. Recommendation for post 2027	19

INTRODUCTION

The Interreg VI-A IPA Programme Croatia - Bosnia and Herzegovina - Montenegro Harvesting Report presents the results of a comprehensive stakeholders and citizens consultation conducted between May and October 2024 in the Programme area covering 12 counties in the Republic of Croatia, 109 municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as District Brčko and 12 municipalities in Montenegro.

As part of a broader Europe-wide initiative led by the European Commission, this consultation gathered valuable input from Interreg and Programme stakeholders across Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. The primary objective was to inform the policy debate on the future of territorial cooperation beyond the 2027 programming period, bringing forward insights from those most directly impacted by and engaged in the Programme.

The report emphasizes the unique perspectives of stakeholders and citizens, whose practical expertise and lived experiences are crucial in identifying the evolving needs of territorial cooperation. Their feedback highlights priorities, challenges, and opportunities, ensuring that the post-2027 Interreg framework is grounded in the realities of cross-border communities. By presenting these findings, the report seeks to contribute meaningfully to the European Commission's ongoing efforts to shape an effective and inclusive policy framework for the future of Interreg.

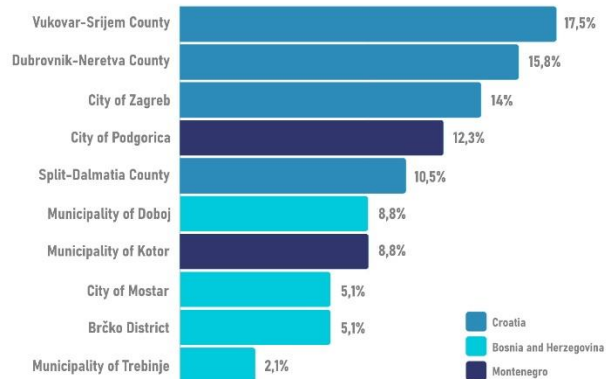
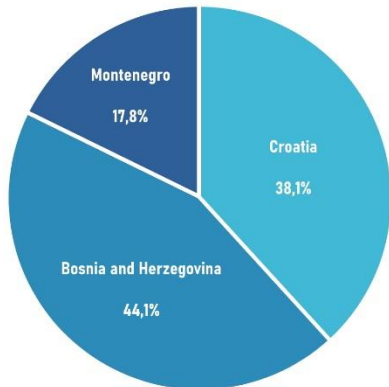
1. Consultation of stakeholders

1.1 Main stakeholders consulted

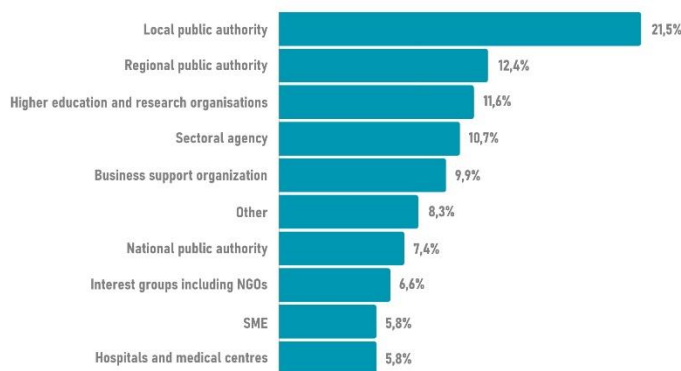
Interreg VI-A IPA Programme Croatia - Bosnia and Herzegovina - Montenegro initiated an online stakeholder consultation process in May 2024 to gather valuable input regarding post-2027 period. The consultation remained open until the 31 October 2024, providing ample time for diverse participants to contribute their perspectives.

A total of 118 responses were collected, reflecting a strong engagement from stakeholders across the three participating countries.

Analysis of the graphs showing territorial distribution indicates that the highest number of survey participants came from Bosnia and Herzegovina while the highest levels of participation was observed in units (counties/municipalities) located directly adjacent to the border.



An analysis of the data regarding the stakeholders' affiliated organizations reveals that the majority of responses were contributed by local and regional public authorities, higher education and research institutions and sectoral agencies.



1.2 Methods of consultation

The Programme facilitated stakeholder consultations through an online questionnaire, which included a mix of ten multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions. Additionally, demographic data such as participants' county of origin/region what organisation they represent were collected to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

To maximize participation, information about the survey was disseminated via email to all project partners and applicants involved in the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 programme periods. The survey was also promoted through multiple channels, including the Programme's official website (www.interreg-hr-ba-me.eu) and its social media platforms. Members of the Monitoring Committee and other Programme authorities were informed about the survey and were requested to assist in disseminating the information to ensure broader outreach and participation.

Furthermore, the consultations were highlighted at all Programme events, including the Implementation workshops and the Interreg Cooperation Day in September, as well as the Kick off ceremony for the SPF project EmBRACE held in June. During these events, stakeholders were encouraged to complete the questionnaire, and Programme representatives emphasized the significance of their input.

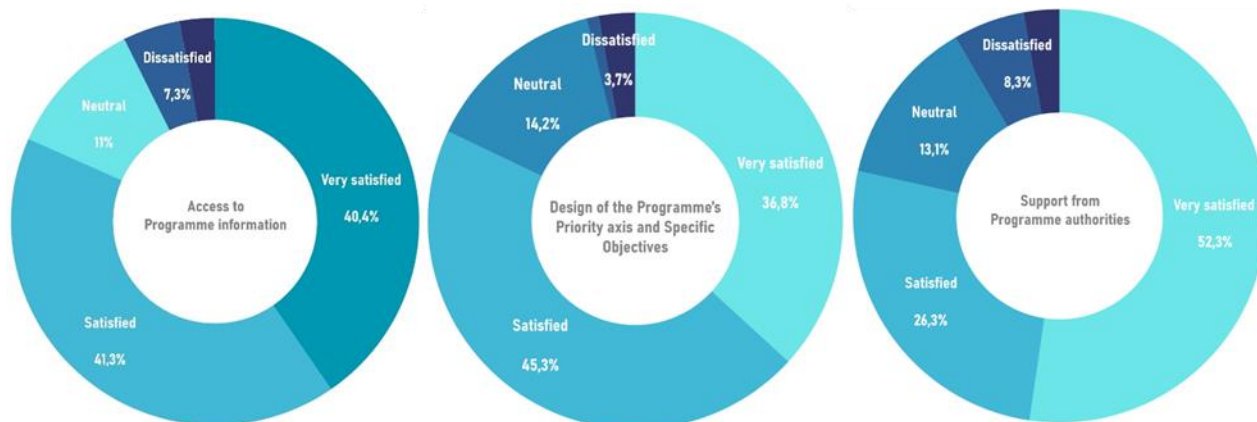
The consultation sought to gather stakeholders' perspectives on the specific objectives supported by the Programme in the 2021–2027 period, their experiences with project implementation, and their recommendations for future improvements. This feedback is intended to inform and enhance the Programme's ongoing development and impact.

1.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

Here is a summary of the responses from stakeholders to questions, covering topics such as the satisfaction with Programme, potentials, advantages, and barriers to cross-border cooperation, as well as suggestions on what the Programme should focus on in the post-2027 period.

1. If you have experience with the Interreg programme: How satisfied are you with the following areas of the INTERREG VI-A IPA Programme Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Montenegro 2021 – 2027 (1 = not satisfied at all, 5 = very satisfied)

The most respondents are (very)satisfied with the Programme's priorities and specific objectives, information they receive about the Programme, support provided by Programme bodies, content of the Programme's website and social media accounts, introduction of the SCO method, as well as the eligibility of costs. The graphs illustrate satisfaction in some of these areas.



2. Do you consider it an advantage or a disadvantage to live in the border region?

Over half of the respondents (55%) believe that living in a cross-border area has only advantages. The main reasons for this view include **cultural diversity**, **greater employment opportunities**, and **potential for innovation**. Around 28% of stakeholders think that living in a cross-border area has both advantages and disadvantages, while 6.8% believe it has only disadvantages. The main reasons cited are **administrative and legal barriers**, **poor transport infrastructure and border crossings**. About 10% of those surveyed stated that they either don't live in a border region or believe that living there has neither advantages nor disadvantages.

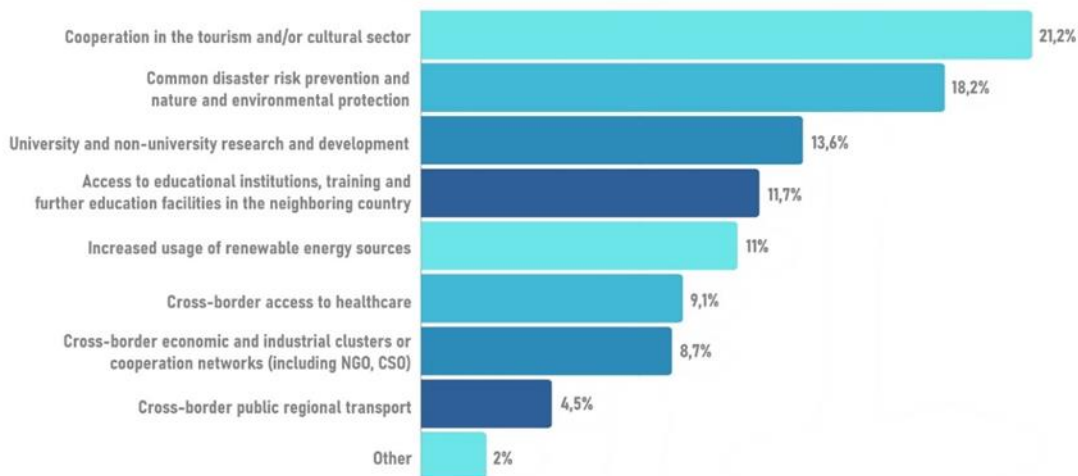
3. Where do you see the greatest potential for territorial cooperation in your region?

Half of the respondents identified the **environment and nature conservation** as a potential area for cooperation, with 20% of them believing it should be the primary priority. The idea is that cross-border collaboration in areas such as pollution reduction, biodiversity protection, and the management of natural resources could contribute to the protection of shared ecosystems.

The great potential for territorial cooperation is also seen in **research and development (R&D)**. Respondents believe that collaboration in this area can lead to joint solutions for common regional challenges such as climate change and public health. The second most recognized area of potential is **entrepreneurial cooperation**, with respondents emphasizing that collaboration between businesses across borders can lead to the creation of new markets, business networks, and opportunities for shared investments.

4. What currently works very well in cross-border cooperation and should be maintained or further strengthened?

The most stakeholders identified **cooperation in the tourism and/or cultural sector** as successful area in cross-border cooperation. Another large group believes that **common disaster risk prevention and nature and environmental protection** also works very well. A smaller, but still significant portion of stakeholders believe that increased **use of renewable energy sources** is functioning well in cross-border cooperation but should be further strengthened. A more detailed overview is in the graph.

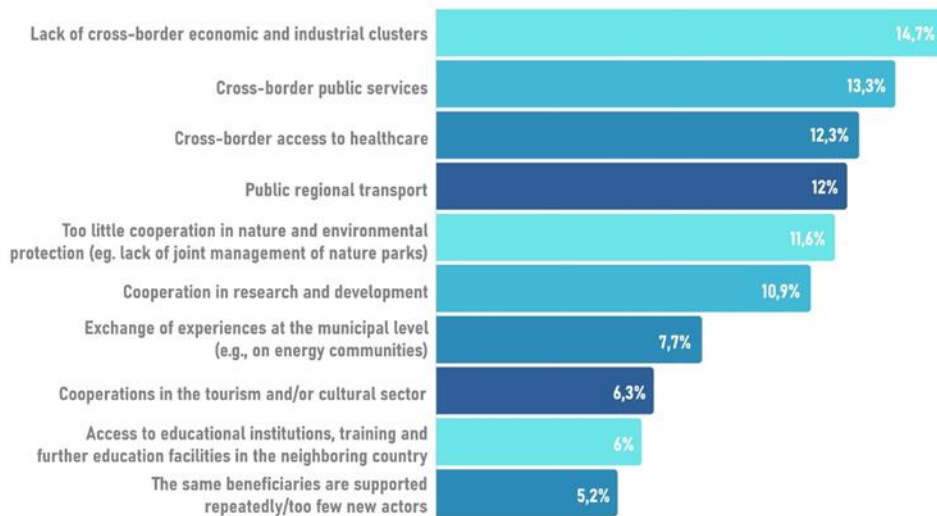


5. What currently does not work well in cross-border cooperation and should be improved?

The primary challenge in cross-border cooperation is the **underperformance of economic and industrial clusters**, hindered by poor coordination, fragmented resources, and inadequate shared infrastructure, limiting integrated value chain development.

While cooperation in **research and development (R&D) cooperation** is generally seen as a major opportunity it also faces barriers, including non-standardized procedures, limited funding, and misaligned research priorities across borders.

Additionally, the **lack of new project partners**/recurring support for the same beneficiaries highlights the need for greater inclusivity and broader participation in cross-border projects.

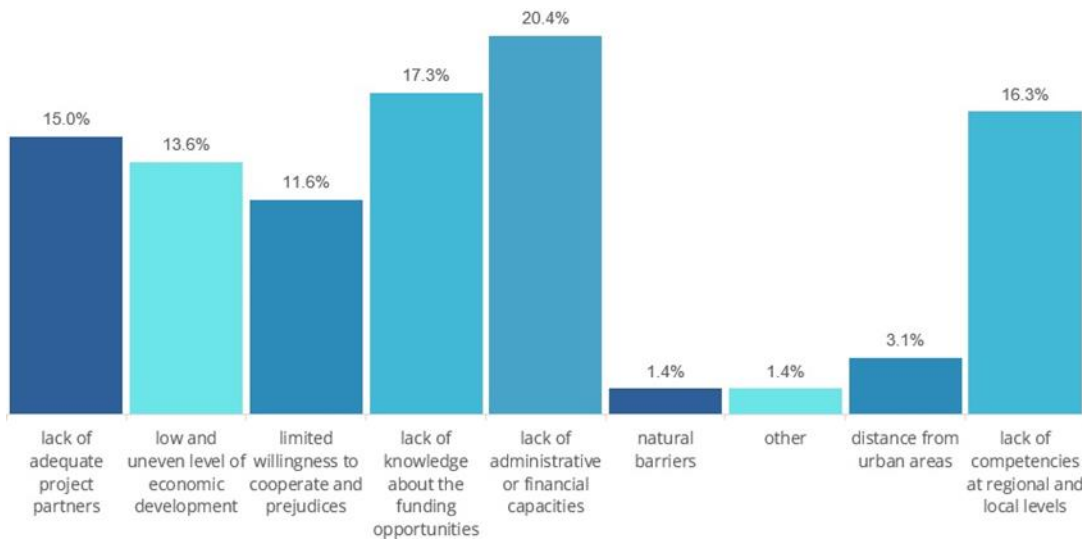


6. In your view, what are the biggest barriers to cross-border cooperation in your region?

The most significant barriers to cross-border cooperation is **lack of administrative or financial capacities, knowledge about funding opportunities and competences at regional and local level**. Local communities also often lack the infrastructure, financial resources, and human capital required to take full advantage of cooperation opportunities.

As a result, cooperation can be skewed toward more developed ones, leaving behind those with greater needs but fewer resources.

Finally, **limited willingness to cooperate and prejudices** were mentioned by 11.6 % of respondents. Overcoming these issues requires an effort to build trust, foster understanding, and ensure that all parties see the benefits of cooperation.



7. Are there projects that you would like to implement as Interreg projects but currently cannot? If yes, why?

Among the stakeholders surveyed, 84.6% reported having projects they want to implement but cannot at present. Over half the responses refer to **limited Programme budgets** in specific areas as a key reason. While this issue alone doesn't necessarily prevent projects from being implemented under the Interreg framework, the **infrequent calls for proposals**—in this but the other Interreg programmes as well—are also a significant contributing factor.

8. What would be the greatest improvement/innovation you would like to see in future Interreg?

There is a strong demand for **more infrastructure projects** (21%) in future Interreg programme, particularly in areas like environmental sustainability, healthcare, and green energy. Broader eligibility for such projects would help regions address critical issues and boost long-term resilience.

The most frequent suggestion (29%) was **to simplify application and reporting procedures**. That would make it easier for organizations (especially smaller ones) to participate in projects, enabling faster implementation and greater flexibility in addressing unforeseen challenges.

Another common request was for **more new project partners and beneficiaries**. Stakeholders called for a more inclusive approach which would expand cooperation and allow for more locally relevant initiatives.

9. In your view, is there a need for infrastructure projects?

In total, 87.2% of stakeholders believe there is a need for infrastructure projects. A summary of the reasons is provided in the table below:

Reasons why infrastructure projects are needed	%
To support investments in environmental protection and reducing greenhouse gas emissions	25.5
To support investments in healthcare	24.6
To support a transition to a circular and resource-efficient economy	20.5
To support investment in culture and sustainable tourism	17.7
To support climate change adaptation and risk management	11.7

The remaining 12.8% of respondents believe that infrastructure should be eligible to a lesser extent and that the current infrastructure level is sufficient.

10. What should be done to facilitate working with your project partners across borders?

Better coordination with higher authorities is necessary, according to 23% of respondents. **Decisions should be made faster** and **stronger competences** at the regional level are needed in the opinion of 18% of those surveyed. On the other hand, an equal number of respondents believe that cooperation with their counterparts is running smoothly.

11. What would be the cross-border cooperation project of your dreams in the Interreg IPA HR-BA-ME Programme area?

Among the responses to this question, the following were highlighted:

- ↳ Comprehensive joint support to establish a modern European educational system that can respond to climate and digital challenges
- ↳ A dedicated fund for youth initiatives to be coordinated by a consortium in a cross-border area
- ↳ A joint hospital to reduce transportation to the nearest one
- ↳ Common procedures to ensure the safety of our territories from natural disasters
- ↳ Nature protection - digitalization of monitoring for wastewater and air pollution
- ↳ Construction and establishment of the first center for energy, climate and nature protection in the cross-border area
- ↳ Cross-border development centers and incubators, centers of competence and excellence
- ↳ Building a family leisure and recreational sport park in my city

Regardless of whether they fall under the domain of cohesion policy and Interreg, the dream projects show what is most important to people in regional/local communities, namely areas they can most easily identify with (education, health, nature protection).

1.4. Interesting quotes

„This is one of the rare programmes with significant and crucial results and outputs that have improved lives of citizens in communities.“ – City administration, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

„Introducing small scale projects would enable newcomer organisations with little or no experience and lower capacities to enter the programme.“ – Cultural institution, Croatia

„It would be beneficial if there will be more calls for research-oriented projects as well.“ – University, Montenegro

„Through this programme, it is necessary to strongly promote (through demo and infrastructure projects) the EU goals in the areas of the green and digital agenda. We believe that participation of partners from all three countries should not be favored unless it is a real partnership.“ – NGO, Bosnia and Herzegovina

„Infrastructure is important and necessary in cross-border cooperation, therefore more focus should be given to the opportunity to build and develop with a focus on growing

economic capacities. Creating innovation hubs and business incubators that support startups and entrepreneurial ventures can drive economic growth. These hubs can offer mentoring, funding, and access to research and development facilities.” – Development Agency, Croatia

„Please, implement recreational sport projects. It is important for the population, their wellbeing, physical and mental health.” –City administration, Bosnia and Herzegovina

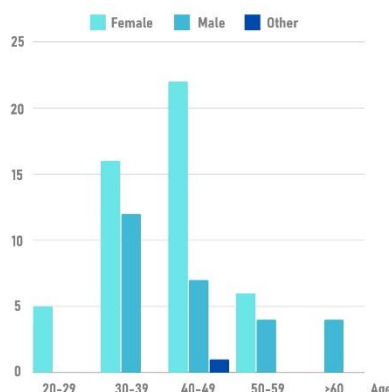
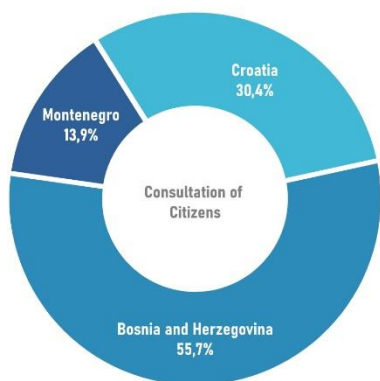
2. Consultation of citizens

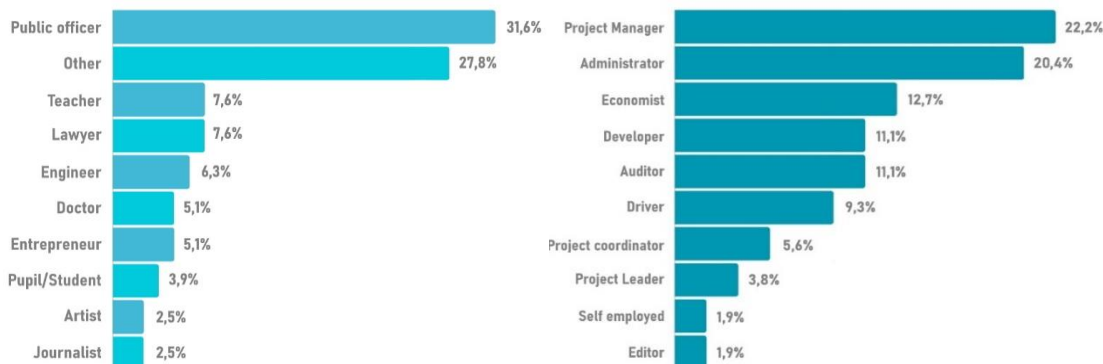
2.1 Main citizens consulted

Efforts to promote the survey extended to multiple channels, including the Programme’s official website (www.interreg-hr-ba-me.eu) and social media platforms.

Additionally, citizens were engaged during the Interreg Cooperation Day held in Herceg Novi on 18 September. The survey was highlighted during two key events: a demonstration showcasing the local fire department's emergency response readiness, where the general public was in attendance and encouraged to participate, and an organized bike ride through Herceg Novi, specifically designed for secondary school students to include younger voices and gather their perspectives.

During consultation of citizens a total of 79 responses were collected. The graphs show the respondents' territorial background, gender and age structure, as well as professional activity.





2.2 Methods of consultation

The Programme facilitated citizen consultations through an online questionnaire, which included a mix of six multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions. Additionally, demographic data such as participants' age, gender, and occupation were collected to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

The survey was also promoted through multiple channels, including the Programme's official website (www.interreg-hr-ba-me.eu) and social media platforms.

Furthermore, the consultations were highlighted at all Programme events including the Interreg Cooperation Day held in Herceg Novi. The survey was actively promoted to citizens during two key events: a demonstration showcasing the local fire department's emergency response readiness and an organized bike ride through Herceg Novi specifically designed for secondary school students.

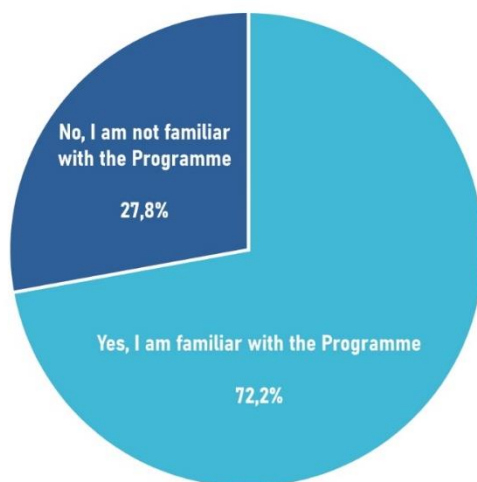
During the fire department exercise efforts were made to encourage general public participation in the survey to gather a broad range of perspectives. The bike ride aimed to actively engage younger participants, emphasizing the importance of including their perspectives in the initiative. To specifically capture the viewpoints of younger individuals, the survey was also presented directly to the students at the secondary school in Herceg Novi. This approach provided an opportunity to consult students and incorporate their insights, acknowledging the value of their contributions in shaping the post-2027 programme.

Attendees at both events were informed about the survey, its significance was highlighted, and they were encouraged to participate and share their opinions to contribute to shaping the post-2027 programme.

2.3 Summary of the input on the key questions

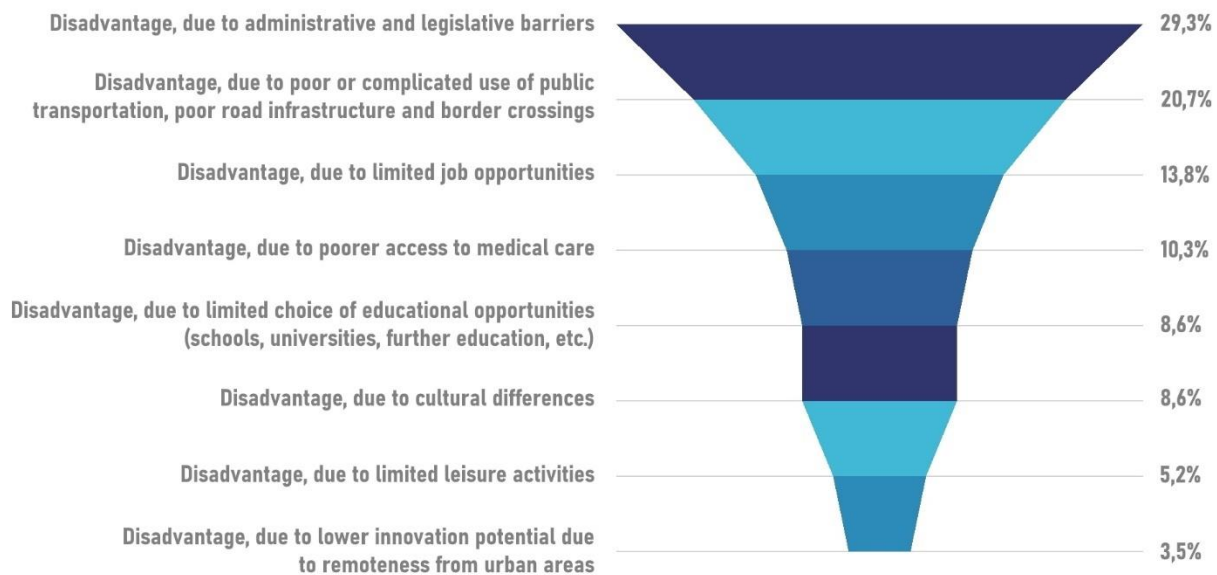
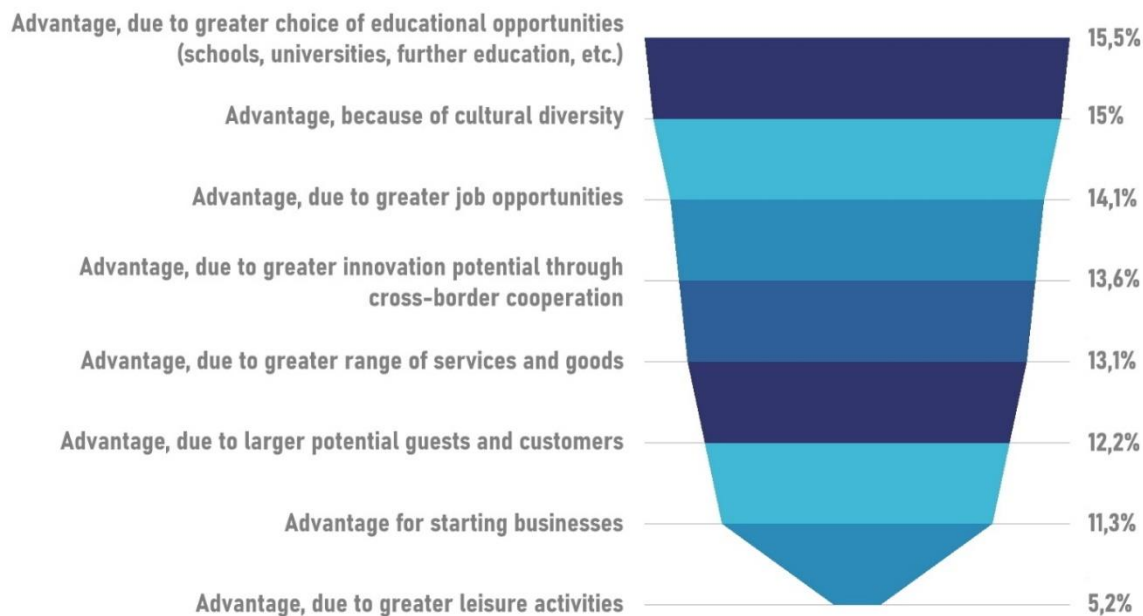
In the consultations with citizens, questions, among other things, covered the benefits of cross-border cooperation, areas where cooperation is needed, and the difficulties associated with it. This chapter contains summaries of the responses.

1. Are you familiar with Interreg VI-A IPA HR-BA-ME Programme 2021 – 2027?

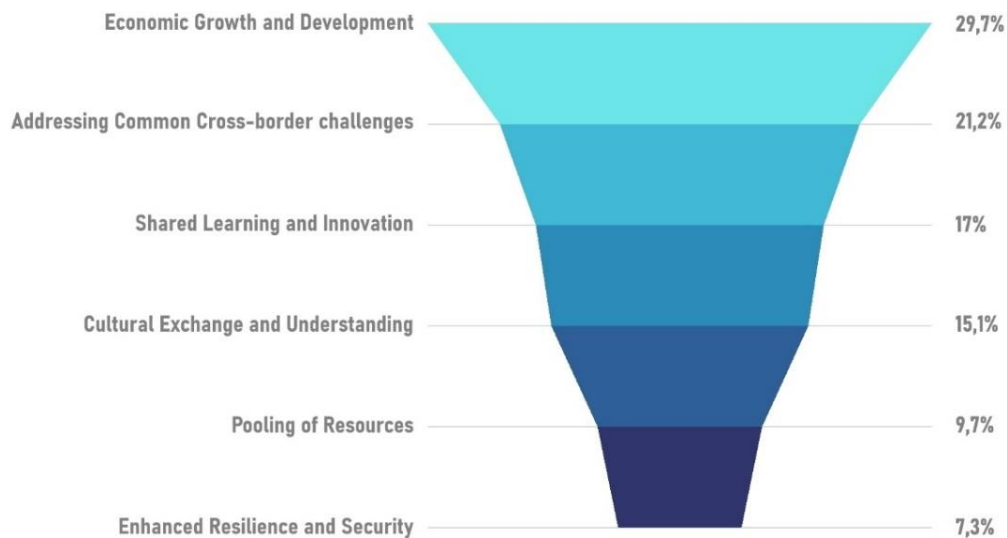


2. Do you consider it an advantage or a disadvantage to live in the border region?

Among all respondents, 59% consider living in a border region nothing but an advantage, with **better access to educational opportunities** being the main reason. This is followed by **cultural diversity** and **greater job opportunities**. Simultaneously, 10% of citizens view living in a border region only as a disadvantage, primarily due to **administrative and legal barriers**, which was also the most common response from stakeholders. The remaining respondents either don't live in a border region or believe that living there has both advantages and disadvantages, or neither.



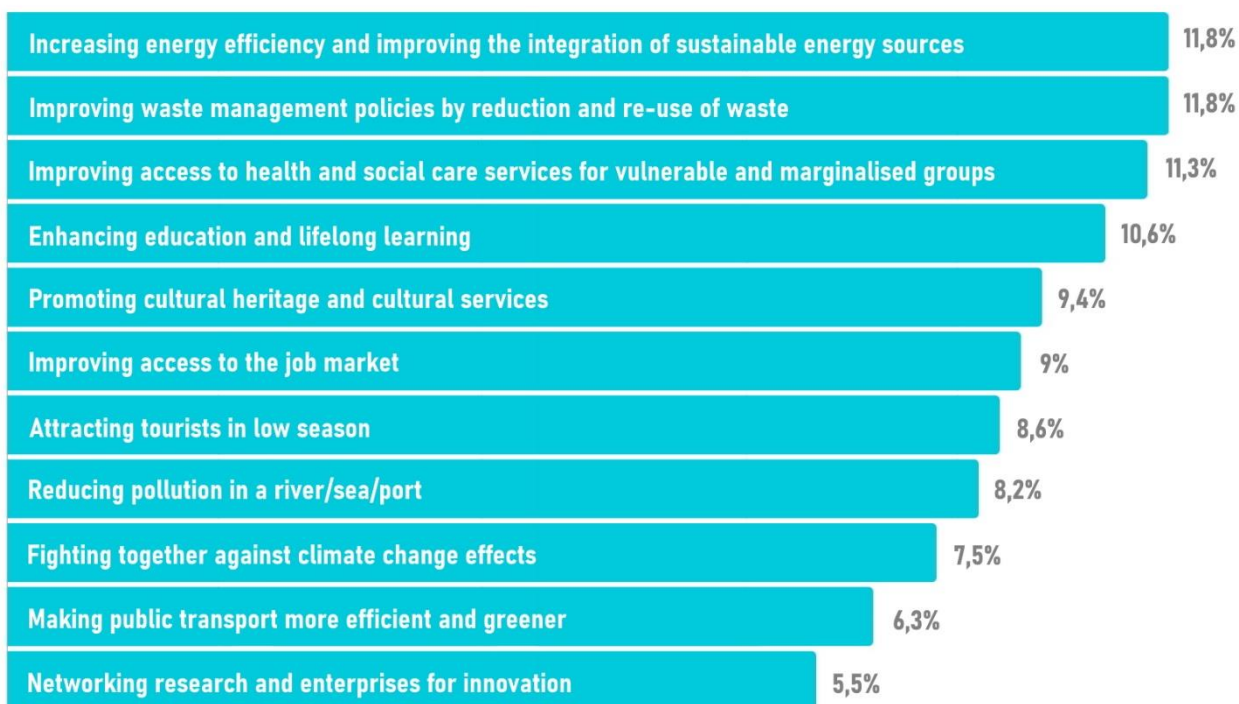
3. In your opinion, what are the main benefits of cross-border cooperation?



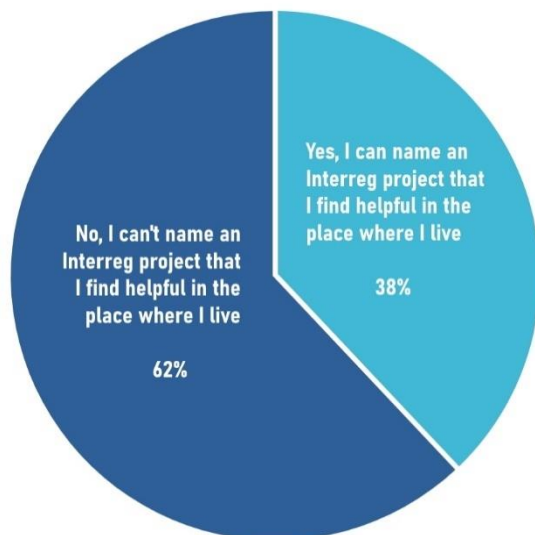
According to the responders, the main benefits of cross-border cooperation include **fostering economic growth and development, addressing common cross-border challenges, shared learning and innovation** and **facilitating cultural exchange**, according to the responders. Tackling cross-border challenges such as environmental issues, public health, or infrastructure needs becomes more effective when countries collaborate, as solutions can be implemented on a larger scale. Another key advantage is **pooling resources**, which allows for more efficient use of funding, expertise, and infrastructure in the region.

4. In your opinion, what are the main topics where cooperation is needed in the place you live?

The responses to this question are predominantly focused on **environmental issues**, including improving energy efficiency, waste management, reducing pollution, addressing climate change, and promoting greener public transport. These concerns reflect a growing push for sustainable practices. Additionally, a significant number of responses highlight the need to **improve healthcare and social services**, emphasizing the importance of cross-border cooperation in enhancing public well-being and ensuring effective access to essential services. A detailed diversification of answers is shown in the graph.

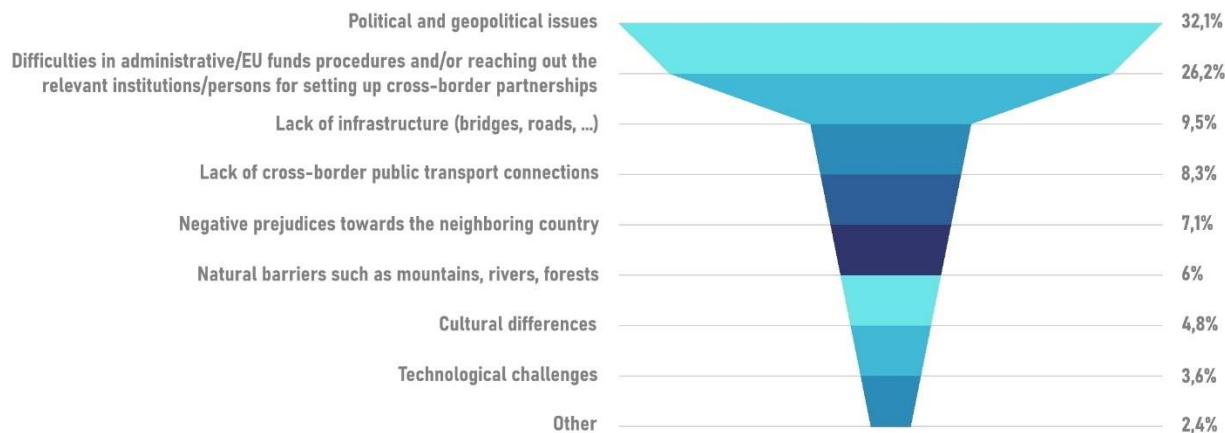


5. Can you name an Interreg project that you find helpful in the place where you live?



6. What are the most significant difficulties associated with cross-border cooperation in your daily life?

Over a third of the respondents identified **(geo)political issues**, along with challenges related to **administrative procedures and EU regulations**, as the primary obstacles hindering cross-border cooperation in everyday life. In addition to these issues, citizens pointed to the **lack of infrastructure and transport connections** as another major challenge that affects cross-border collaboration. The chart provides a more detailed breakdown, offering insights into how these various challenges are perceived across different segments of the population.



7. What would be the cross-border cooperation project of your dreams in the Interreg IPA HR-BA-ME Programme area?

As with the stakeholders, citizens' responses are centered around everyday challenges with which they can easily identify. Health services, social care and environmental protection needs prevail. Some of these projects include:

- ↳ adaptation of facilities of health institutions/a joint hospital to have less transport to get to the nearest one/center for palliative care
- ↳ education, health improvement, better waste management
- ↳ common waste separation and collection points, where plastic, glass, and paper are gathered from the surrounding area, and companies in need of these materials can purchase the recycled resources for their use
- ↳ any project in agriculture, because the future is in food production and increasing the competitiveness of domestic production
- ↳ better roads and faster transport communication which would help with jams at the border
- ↳ joint tourist promotion programmes and itineraries
- ↳ a bridge over the river

2.4. Interesting quotes

„I think we have to work on joint Programme for protection beautiful nature, sea and harbours from different pollution and garbage disposal mostly from the coast. This region has many potential in sustainability development“.

„If the project won't be sustainable (more than 10 years), than it's useless“.

„(It should be) less administrative procedures when planning the project and during its implementation“ .

„Croatia and its neighboring countries – such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia – are home to a large number of micro-companies and small businesses. These entities often face challenges in accessing grants and funding for investments and business development, particularly through cross-border projects. They are frequently unable to meet the documentation requirements in standard grant applications, as they are not legally obligated to have such documentation. As a result, calls for funding should be designed with minimal documentation requirements and simpler implementation rules. From experience working with these businesses, it's clear that they are eager to engage

in projects, partnerships, and collaborations, but they require initiatives that align with their financial and human resource capacities”.

3. Recommendation for post 2027

Based on the research of stakeholder and citizen perspectives on the future of the Programme after 2027, here are the key recommendations summarized in line with the toolkit suggestions:

a) Topics to Be Covered

- 📌 Environmental Sustainability: focus on pollution reduction, biodiversity protection, green energy, and waste management with digitalized monitoring.
- 📌 Health and Social Services: support cross-border hospitals, health infrastructure, and accessible care centers.
- 📌 Economic Cooperation: enhance clusters, innovation hubs, and cross-border business incubators.
- 📌 Culture and Education: support cultural exchange and modern educational initiatives for digital and climate resilience.
- 📌 Infrastructure: improve transport connectivity and cross-border facilities.

b) Geography of the Programme

The consultation process did not yield specific initiatives for changing the Programme's territory, but it did recommend the following in geographical terms:

- 📌 Inclusive Coverage: involve more diverse stakeholders, focusing on underserved areas with development gaps.
- 📌 Cross-Border Integration: enhance connectivity between major hubs and rural areas.

c) Implementation of the Programme

- 📌 Simplify Processes: reduce administrative burdens for easier participation of smaller organizations.
- 📌 Increase Call Frequency: offer more flexible funding opportunities.
- 📌 Broaden Participation: encourage new partners and beneficiaries.
- 📌 Build Capacity: provide training and support for local authorities to overcome administrative challenges.
- 📌 Ensure Sustainability: design long-term impact projects with clear monitoring frameworks to track results.