

European Economic Area (EEA) Financial Mechanism 2014 – 2021

in Greece

Minutes of the 7th Annual Meeting - 2024

In accordance with the EEA Grants Regulation 2014-2021, art.2.7, the 7th Annual Meeting - 2024 on the implementation of the EEA FM 2014-2021 in Greece was held on 13 November 2024 in Athens, at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center. The meeting was co-chaired by Mr. Lars Andersen, Deputy Director General, Department for European Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Head of the Donor's delegation and Ms Vassiliki Pantelopoulou, Secretary General of Regional Development Corporate Agreement (ESPA), Hellenic Ministry of Economy and Finance, Head of Greece's delegation.

The agenda of the meeting is cited in Annex I. The presentations of the meeting are available at www.eeagrants.gr

Main outcomes and outstanding points

Strategic Report: The Strategic Report (SR) 2024 was presented by Ms. Ioanna Tzika, Head of the NFP. During the period covered by this Strategic Report 2023-2024, Greece maintained positive domestic dynamics and political stability, whereas the need to address disparities and structural lags in the economy remains. The Government did not experience major reshuffles, but adjustments to jurisdictions of sectoral ministries related to the Good Governance and Roma programmes, in effect since summer 2023, affected to some degree the implementation of the respective programmes. The presentation included also the overall developments and achievements of the programmes by the completion of their eligibility period. For the Bilateral Fund, it was announced that Greece is willing to back up the selection of the positively evaluated initiatives that remain pending due to the exhaustion of the Open Call budget with national resources. The presentation concluded with the developments of the Technical Assistance and the planning for the next steps until the completion of the EEA FM 2014-2021 period in 2025.

The Donors acknowledged the efforts and the progress of the implementation of the Grants in Greece, and approved the Strategic report. As a follow up the SR will be published at www.eeagrants.gr

Status of Programmes

The Programme Operators had brief presentations of the programmes. All presentations focused mainly on highlighting the key achievements of the programmes as well as on the challenges and the lessons learned.

Programmes managed by Greek national authorities

Roma Inclusion & Empowerment:

The programme "Social Inclusion and Empowerment of the Roma", consisting of multiple complementary and mutually reinforcing actions, was implemented mainly in the Regions of Attica, Central Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia-Thrace, Western Greece and their neighboring regions. The absorption rate (excluding Management Costs) amounted to approximately 70.58%, while the expenditures per component of the Program were presented in detail. Overall, the Program achieved its objectives, with the exception of the relocation action of the Peleka settlement in Katerini, which was included in the initial design of the programme.

In the context of the programme, 25 experts of the Task Force with innovative approaches contributed to bridging the gap between the Roma communities, the public services and the general population. The Municipality of Katerini completed soft actions aiming at the social integration of the residents of the Peleka settlement. Additionally, through the successfully implemented small grant schemes there were directly benefitted 1290 Roma women, and 70 Roma children who participated to 3 summer camps in 2023. Challenges included the COVID-19 pandemic, administrative restructuring, bureaucratic delays & strict legislative framework, short actual implementation time, the complexity of the programme and in part the participation of three different sources of funding, some weak beneficiaries.

Key lessons were identified, such as the need for tailor-made approaches, the importance of creating strong local partnerships, the importance of early and comprehensive planning, with active participation and consultation with stakeholders, the contribution of focusing on the sustainability of a project with the involvement of institutional bodies and the usefulness of regular feedback and adaptation of programmes to better meet the needs of the community. For the sustainability of the results, new lines of funding were announced for the Task Force, the Roma organizations and the children's camps.

Donor countries acknowledged the good effort of the actions and results implemented and welcomed the announcement for the continuation of the programme's actions with other funding. They also stressed the missed opportunity for the development of the relocation settlement for the Katerini local community.

The presentation was made by Ms Marina Platanaki

Environment-Water Management:

The Water Management programme had a total grant of €5.2 million, with eligible expenditures amounting to €6.5 million. The program supported 12 projects, including installing five new telemetry systems aimed at leakage reduction, three research projects, and constructing three new desalination units. Additionally, there was a Small Grant Scheme to promote best practices in water management. Key achievements included an estimated additional water production capacity of 1,021 m³ per day and an annual water savings of approximately 3,052,336 m³. The program has successfully raised awareness through campaigns, reaching over 89,000 citizens, and has involved cooperation with donor project partners from Norway.

Challenges faced included managing a tight timeframe, ensuring compatibility of technical specifications, and addressing unexpected delays. Innovations in the program feature the use of telemetry and smart flowmeters, state-of-the-art desalination units utilizing renewable energy, and effective communication strategies through infographics. Overall, the program emphasizes proactive management and frequent communication with project owners to mitigate risks and enhance outcomes in water management.

Donor countries appreciated the programme for its consistent progress throughout the programming period and the fulfillment of all the objectives. Feedback was positive, with no critical remarks noted.

The presentation was made by Mr. Kostas Giannaris

Renewable Energy, Energy Efficiency:

The results of the 13 emblematic Projects of the programme in municipalities, universities and other public bodies were presented, with focus on their significant contributions to the development of local economies, the familiarization of residents with sustainable development practices, the improvement of quality of life and the reduction of social and economic inequalities. The programme brought tangible and measurable energy, environmental and economic benefits, while also promoting the use of innovative technologies, such as hydrogen and smart metering. The results show that the programme indicators have been overachieved. Additionally, the programme implemented actions to strengthen bilateral relations with Norway and Iceland in the green energy field. The results of the communication actions were also presented. The Gr-Energy has so far successfully passed 4 secondary audits by the EDEL and a resource absorption rate of more than 95% was achieved for 2nd consecutive programming period, set the basis for a proposal of CRES for a Programme in the new programming period.

The donor countries appreciated the programme for its consistent progress throughout the programming period and the fulfillment of all the objectives. They finally expressed the importance for EEA Grants of green energy initiatives such as Energy Saving and RES applications in buildings and facilities.

The presentation was made by Mr. Kostantinos Patlitzianas

Good Governance Accountable Institutions Transparency:

The Good Governance programme completed the implementation of the 3 predefined projects with remarkable results. The project for the Digital services in public administration contributed to the substantial improvement of the accessibility of all citizens to the public services accessible by delivering a new unified system in 1.100 Citizens' Service Centres (KEPs). The project resulted to:

- 7 million requests served through e-KEP and EU-GO
- 3000 KEP employees participated in 19 training programs
- in a 1000-member online sustainable community of practice

The project for the transparency and integrity in Public Administration, implemented by the National Transparency Authority delivered the mapping and new institutional proposals and standards on transparency, in collaboration with the OECD and training of civil servants to manage conflicts of interest. The results in numbers reported:

- 16 online tangible training courses enhance public officials' skills in detecting and managing conflict of interest phenomena, encouraging responsible public administration and accountability
- 3 in-depth studies by the OECD, aiming to integrate international best practices on conflict of interest with institutional proposals and improve the National Strategic Integrity Framework
- 3,100 civil servants participated in measuring the perception of implementation and impact of the integrity policies applied in the Greek public administration for the first time

The Greek Ombudsman project contributed to strengthening social justice and protection of rights throughout Greece by operating an office in Thessaloniki, collaborations with local agencies and strengthening its capacity with the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). In the most important results are reported:

- 193 local visits strengthened the Ombudsman's cooperation with local communities and institutions, bringing the protection of rights closer to citizens.
- 22 workshops and 10 seminars with 1,000+ citizens and executives, allowed participants to become aware of transparency and good practices in public administration. The promotion campaign in all media multiplied the citizens awareness on the role of GO in all areas of jurisdiction and competence
- The training of executives on current rights issues with the EU FRA, the digital upgrade of the Ombudsman, the application (app) on smart mobile devices and the new infrastructure.

The Donors expressed their appreciation for the efforts and results of the programme.

The presentation was made by Mr. Ilias Kastitis

Asylum and Migration:

The presentation focused to the progress and achievements of the programme and especially to the four main areas: a) strengthening the management of asylum requests through the improvement of services such as the Appeals Authority and the Asylum Service, b) the creation of new structures such as the Autonomous Asylum Units, c) the improvement of strategic emergency planning through collaborations with NGOs and public bodies. Reference was also made to the strengthening of services for vulnerable groups, such as the 1107 line for unaccompanied minors, the National Emergency Response Mechanism and the strengthening of reception capacity with new hospitality structures. Despite the challenges that the programme faced such as the pandemic, the variation of the flows through the years, the administrative changes and so on, the absorption reached 74% of the programme budget.

The presentation was made by Mr. Christos Litsas.

FMO managed programmes:

Business Innovation:

The presentation of the programme focused to the results achieved and the lessons learned, as follows:

Results:

- Project Portfolio includes 28 R&D projects, 9 investment projects, and 17 capacity-building projects
- Out of 54 projects, 53 have been completed (1 still under implementation)
- Approximately €15.3 million out of the €18.95 million contracted has been disbursed (expect to reach 97% absorption rate)
- Most projects were implemented by SMEs, primarily in regions like Athens, Thessaloniki, and Western Greece
- Bilateral cooperation has been a key aspect, with 22 projects (41%) involving Norwegian entities
- Most targets for output and outcome indicators will be reached (incl. profitability indicators, new jobs created, and new solutions developed), with the exception of some green indicators and indicators for large enterprises

Lessons Learned

- Simplify the Results Framework
- Abolish segregation in Focus Areas and Individual Project Scheme and Small Grants Scheme
- Incorporate a startup scheme
- Allow legal entities from the Donor States to apply as applicants in some cases

- Launch a bilateral Call and a soft measures call very early on to stimulate bilateral cooperation
- Increase the duration of the first open calls to allow more time for communication and the identification of suitable bilateral partners
- Introduce informal networking opportunities and joint meetings between Project Promoters throughout the Programme duration

Donor countries appreciated the programme implementation and results. Feedback was positive, with no critical remarks noted.

The presentation was made by Ms. Anne Lise Rognlidalen

Local Development and Poverty Reduction & Asylum and Migration:

The presentation outlines the progress and activities of two main programs under the EEA Grants: Local Development and Poverty Reduction (Programme I) and Asylum and Migration (Programme II). Programme I focuses on poverty reduction through projects enhancing social inclusion and employment opportunities in Athens. Programme II addresses issues related to migrants and asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minors, legal aid, voluntary returns, and refugee inclusion in schools. Both programs faced challenges such as COVID-19 restrictions, decreased migrant inflows, and regional war conflicts.

The programs emphasize capacity building, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable project implementation. Key initiatives include partnerships like "Classrooms Against Bullying" to combat discrimination in schools. Bilateral cooperation with Norway included knowledge exchange on accommodation for unaccompanied minors and monitoring quality in reception centers.

Communication and transparency were pivotal, with a successful closing event in September 2023 featuring over 130 attendees and media coverage and featuring the Council of Europe as the primary speaker. Financial performance, adaptability to challenges, and strategic planning for future funding cycles were highlighted. Recommendations included "pay-as-you-perform" models and maintaining shorter gaps between funding periods. Persistent barriers include language and access to banking for beneficiaries. Also noting 98.7% absorption of funds for the Asylum Programme. Overall, the presentation showcased collaborative efforts to address social and migration issues with impactful results.

The Donors highlighted the success of the two programs and noted the changing environment. They found helpful the recommendations going forward and recognized the impact of the programs during the implementation.

The presentation was made by Mr Epaminondas Farmakis

Civil Society – Active Citizen Fund:

Following the second allocation of additional funding in 2023, the budget of ACF Greece was increased to €15 million, of which around 97% has been absorbed. All 128 projects ended in April, and the final bilateral and regional activities will be concluded during November. The programme met or exceeded most targets, with 152,000 direct beneficiaries and 4,358,000 people reached through awareness raising activities. Important legacies include: Increased organisational capacity of project promoters; Strengthened CSO networks (12 networks funded, with a total membership of over 320 organisations); CSOs enabled to be agents of change; the contribution of civil society to the Greek economy calculated for the first time; bilateral relations increased through 49 bilateral initiatives.

The programme's closing event, which took place on 22nd October, included the screening of the documentary 'Time for Change', a photo exhibition, and storytelling of project promoters and beneficiaries. Almost 300 participants attended, and the event received 21 media mentions. Lessons learned for future programmes include: a recommendation for a longer implementation period, a 100% funding rate for CSOs, the increased use of organisational grants and the simplification/

streamlining of reporting requirements. The Donors congratulated ACF Greece for exceeding their high expectations for the programme.

The presentation was made by Ms Jennifer Clarke

Status of Bilateral Fund

The NFP presented in brief the progress made and the challenges of the implementation of the Bilateral Fund ahead of the end of the eligibility period on 30 April 2025. The highlights of the presentation included the developments in the reporting period about a) the budget increase by 1.821.000 euros, b) 16 new initiatives selected, c) 30 initiatives in total of which 12 have completed, d) 65% of the total new budget paid to initiative promoters and e) 18 initiatives streamlined to complete in April 2025. With reference to the announcement of the Strategic report that Greece will backup with national resources the selection of the positively evaluated initiatives that remain pending, the presentation explained further the topic and the respective procedures.

The Donors acknowledged the progress made and stressed the importance of financing the initiatives on a timely manner, so that implementation is completed with the best possible results in the strict timeframe remaining. As regards the issue of further selections of initiatives, it was noted that these will be examined by the Joint Committee for the Bilateral Fund.

The presentation was made by Ms. Eleni Kontaxaki

Open discussion

The session of the open discussion included remarks and feedback from the National Focal Point and the Programme Operators regarding the experience from the implementation of the 2014-2021 in Greece with special focus to achievements, challenges, good practices and lessons learned.

As regards to the new period 2021-2028, the National Focal Point informed the participants that it has communicated with the sectoral General Secretariats of the government about the new period, its framework so far and the Blue Book and it is collecting proposals at the national level. The NFP plans to conclude with its initial proposal for the Greek portfolio and submit it to the Donors in the next couple of months.

The discussion was moderated by Ms. Eleni Kontaxaki

Communication

As we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the EEA Grants, the National Focal Point brought the milestone to life through vibrant events, creative online campaigns, and imaginative content—ranging from artistic installations to a stunning photography exhibition. It felt like the perfect opportunity, during this final Annual Meeting of the funding period, to shine a spotlight on the people at the heart of this success story.

We invited the communication representatives from the Programme Operators—the core team representing five public institutions—to take the stage and share their experiences. Their voices, passion, and dedication have been instrumental in building a true community within the Grants' communication ecosystem.

The presentation began with an introduction by Dr. Elli Vazou, setting the tone for a meaningful reflection on this collective journey.

Then joined the Comms representatives of the programmes, who shared their personal stories and experiences as follows:

Roma: Dr. Angeliki Christopoulou

Energy: Vassiliki Polizoi

Water management: Dr. Dimitra Koumparou

Good Governance: Ilias Kastritis

Asylum & Migration: Stamatia Pliatsikoudi

The presentation was made by Ms Elli Vazou

The Donors acknowledged the results and improvement of the communication efforts but pointed out that a closer cooperation with the Norwegian Embassy on communication activities is expected as foreseen in the Regulations (Annex 3).

Conclusions - Next steps and actions for the year ahead

The Icelandic representative echoed the remarks made by the head of delegation and appreciated the results and achievements of the completed programmes.

In conclusion of the meeting discussions and in line with the regulatory provisions, the NFP agrees that it will take all necessary action towards the following:

- To cooperate and coordinate closely with Programme Operators for the closure procedures and the submission of the FPRs.
- To submit the results of the evaluation of Environment and Energy programmes before submitting the respective FPRs.
- To coordinate actions and focus to the successful implementation of the Bilateral Fund in the remaining period of eligibility.
- To continue and emphasize on all necessary organizational issues and actions for deployment of the Technical Assistance.
- To continue the efforts of efficient communication, cooperation and coordination of all involved partners of the implementation of the Grants in Greece.
- To continue to cooperate closely with the FMO and the Embassy/Donors on the efficient implementation of the EEA Grants in Greece including communication activities (Annex 3).
- To coordinate all the necessary procedures for the final closure of the EEFM 2021-2028.
- To coordinate with national stakeholders, conclude and submit the proposal of Greece for the next EEFM 2029-2034.

ANNEX I-AGENDA

EEA Grants 2014 – 2021

Agenda of the 7th Annual Meeting

Wednesday, 13 November 2024

Venue: Lighthouse- Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, 364 Syggrou Avenue, Kallithea

Co-Chairs:

Head of the Donor's delegation: Mr Lars Andersen, Deputy Director General Department for European Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Head of Greece's delegation: Ms Vassiliki Pantelopoulou, Secretary General of Regional Development Corporate Agreement (ESPA)

09:00-09:20	Opening by the National Focal Point and the Donor States
09:20-09:35	Draft Strategic Report
09:35-10:35	Completion of Programmes and Results Programmes managed by Greece Programmes managed by the FMO
10:35-10:45	Short break
10:45-11:15	Open discussion on the overall achievements and contributions of the EEA Grants in Greece, key lessons learned and possible priorities for the new Financial Mechanism
11:15-11:30	Bilateral cooperation – Eleni Kontaxaki
11:30-11:40	Management and Control System, Irregularities and Complaints
11:40-11:50	Communication – Eleni Vazou
11:50-12:00	Conclusions and closing remarks, followed by a light lunch