

SLOVENIAN LEADER IN THE EUROPEAN YEAR OF YOUTH

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food marked the European Year of Youth by holding an online event to connect young people from rural areas, youth organisations and Local Action Groups (LAGs), while keeping a close eye on all projects aimed at young people.

The online event *Youth LEADER* took place in May. Young people were invited to participate in the drafting of local development strategies (LDS) for the next programming period and thus demonstrate their needs regarding the development of the local area, and to participate in LEADER projects at a later stage, as **these projects provide an opportunity and a chance for young people in rural areas**.

The event also featured a [presentation](#) of the LEADER approach – a tool to promote joint local development following the "**bottom-up approach**". There are 37 LAGs operating in Slovenia during this programming period, covering the entire country. In the programme period 2014–2020, the LEADER approach is being implemented as part of the joint instrument Community-Led Local Development – CLLD. A total of EUR 110.4 million from 3 European funds (EAFRD, ERDF, EMFF) has been allocated for the implementation of the LEADER/CLLD approach. By August 2022, **more than 730 projects were approved and around 70 jobs created under the LEADER approach alone as part of the sub-measure Support for Implementing Operations under the Community-led Local Development Strategy**.

The event provided an opportunity to share some examples of good practice in cooperation between LAGs and young people. Three smaller Slovenian LAGs operating in border areas and areas distant from major centres presented themselves. The representative of A.L.P. Peca, which is a lead partner of [LAG Meža Valley](#), presented the LAG operation entitled [Rural Youth and International Rural Games in the Meža Valley](#), which was carried out by all four municipalities in cooperation with the Rural Youth Society of the Meža Valley. **The cooperation started when young people approached the municipalities** with a request to help them implement the project. And as the working group works well, they quickly found common ground. The operation was carried out in two phases and, in addition to the main event in the second phase, also enabled the organisation of two sports events and four training sessions.

The presentation was joined by a **representative of the Rural Youth Society of the Meža Valley**, who explained what they, as an association, had gained from their cooperation with the LAG. The representative believes that **the involvement of young people is necessary for several reasons, mainly to help them learn what LEADER is**, how to manage projects and how to become even more involved in the local community and to offer them an opportunity to highlight the kind of countryside and farming they want to create. Finally, she appealed to all the LAG representatives that they should **not be afraid of working with young people**, as youth bring a wealth of knowledge and ideas. The Slovenian Rural Youth Association is currently working intensively on the Rural UP project to increase cooperation between young people and the LAG in such a way that it invites representatives of LAGs to their events and meetings, providing them with the opportunity to present their activities, work and proposals for cooperation.

The representative of the Kozjansko Development Agency as the lead partner of [LAG From Pohorje to Bohor](#) presented their development agency, whose organisational units consist of the Šentjur Youth Centre and the Business Incubator. **Young people have been identified as a vulnerable group in the LAG strategy**. The LAG operates as an open partnership and makes great efforts to involve young people in all activities, most often in project activities that promote healthy lifestyles and active leisure time. There is also a strong emphasis on intergenerational networking. The representative expressed

her wish that, **in the next programming period, young people would be closely involved in the drafting of the local development strategy (LDS)** and help with their ideas and visions, which are often broad and insightful, in order to jointly create an LDS that will enable young people to participate in projects.

Two projects of the [Eksena Association for Tolerant Relations](#) were presented from the area of [LAG From Pohorje to Bohor](#), namely: Let's be eco-friendly and Fairy Eksena's Day Centre, and the project entitled Stepping Back to Go Forward, developed by the Šentjur Youth Centre. **The Let's be eco-friendly project focuses on children and young people.** Its primary purpose is to preserve nature through information, awareness raising, and promoting a positive and active attitude towards nature. The key activities of the project were various workshops, video learning content, a professional publication, an e-newsletter, and a puppet show. The second project presented was **Fairy Eksena's Day Centre**, which is an upgrade of *The Magic Land of Fairy Eksena* project. It is an **intergenerational day centre that provides vulnerable groups with an environment and means to spend leisure time** and have fun, while developing psychosensory and psychomotor abilities, imagination and social skills. The centre organised nine eco-workshops. The workshop in which the children made eco-toys, which they then happily used, was very well received. The project aimed to establish **additional infrastructure for early childhood education and to set up leisure activities (three outdoor learning environments) for children, young people, families and older people** in the LAG area. The project also contributed to learning about agriculture and healthy food production, and achieved an increase in local food self-sufficiency. They have developed a number of experiential learning programmes that they wish to continue in the future.

The Šentjur Youth Centre presented the [Stepping Back to Go Forward project](#), briefly referred to as *Time Machine*. It is a **mix of activities for young and older people** and fosters intergenerational cooperation. The project promoted entrepreneurship among young people (and created an escape room product). For one year, they ran youth workshops on learning how to think in order to prepare for independent living, upcycling workshops and intergenerational events such as Rent-a-Grandma or Rent-a-Grandpa, swapping things, learning about older people's stories, etc.

Work with young people was also presented by [LAG For Community-Initiative-Lineage](#). The representative of the lead partner, ICRA d.o.o., explained that the Idrija Youth Centre had been invited to participate in the LAG as early as at the beginning of the programming period. They also involve various other associations with representatives of young people. She was eager to highlight that **young people can be involved, not only through projects, but also as members of the LAG**, explaining that membership is not a condition for applying for projects. It is encouraging that there are many young people on the committees and that most of the members are under 50 years of age. She considers the cooperation with young people to have been very constructive and that their impact on the content of projects is significant. She also stressed that it was important **to hear the voice of young people, to include the content they seek to implement in larger projects**, where they cushion themselves against financial risks.

The representative of the [Idrija Youth Centre](#) continued to present other projects of the LAG For Community-Initiative-Lineage, namely: *Mobile Youth Centre, Zmanjšaj! (Reduce!), i-DEnDI, PIRH II*. The Idrija Youth Centre was the lead partner in two projects — the project **Reduce!**, which aimed to solve the problems of modern society in the field of environmental pollution and the *Mobile Youth Centre* project. **The Mobile Youth Centre project was the biggest contributor to their organisation, in terms of expanding its programme activities.** It involves a team with its own van and equipment, which travels to surrounding villages to carry out street youth work, reaching out to young people in rural areas.

The team participated in two other projects — the *i-DEnDI* project aimed at bringing heritage closer to young people, and the *PIRH II* project, through which they built urban playgrounds promoting residential cultural heritage. The representative **expressed satisfaction with the projects, in particular in terms of enriching the programme**, as an employment opportunity for young people who had carried out the projects and gained a lot of experience in the process. When cooperating, they believe it is important to have a stable team with a good idea, premises and equipment to operate, well-organised employees.

In the final part, the participants were given the opportunity to discuss and ask questions. The discussion highlighted the increasing number of young people involved, mostly as partners in a project. However, it is up to the local action groups to create as much animation as possible, because once the environment recognises these resources, interest increases.

The projects presented are not the only ones targeting the younger population. For example, during the holidays, the LAG Administrative Unit Ormož carried out its **"Youth Mentorship"** programme. This is an operation aimed at encouraging young people's active participation in society, with a particular focus on young pupils and students who want to gain experience through practical on-the-job training under the guidance of a mentor during the summer holidays. LAG For Community-Initiative-Lineage has launched **Startup! Idrija — Cerčno**, which is a response to the low level of entrepreneurial engagement in the municipalities of Idrija and Cerčno. The project envisages, among other things, the creation of a start-up community, networking between experienced businessmen and young entrepreneurs, the promotion and development of an innovation environment and networking with similar initiatives. The project is co-financed by the ERDF.

Furthermore, the Lenart Firefighting Association, which is part of LAG Ovtar Slovenske gorice, organised a **firefighting youth** camp as part of the operation "GVZ-1—A Vehicle for All". As part of the project Stories about Giants from Posavje ("Ajdovske zgodbe iz Posavja"), the members of LAG Posavje organised a **cave bear hunt for the youngest children**. Within the framework of LAG The Heart of Slovenia, Lesarius, a 7-sense museum of old woodworking crafts with a workshop and **playroom for children**, and a **forest play gym (the motor skill development forest pathway) for children**, which is part of the Adventure Park GEOSS, have been created. The Adventure Park Cukarca (LAG STIK), part of which is a **forest adventure trail with a climbing wall**, co-financed by the EAFRD, is aimed at both the young and the young at heart. KRES Institute (a member of the LAG Loka's Mountains) is running the LIVE LIFE LIVELY ("ŽIVI ŽIVO") project (Life Skills for Growing Up) for four young people and offers a **preventive education programme for digital competences**.

These are just a few of the projects we have highlighted to shed light on the efforts made by the LAGs to implement activities aimed at young people. The aim in the coming period is to encourage young people to become actively involved in the decision-making structures, the LAGs bodies, and to satisfy their needs in rural areas also through LEADER projects.

The contents are the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, which is also the managing authority designated for the implementation of the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.