

(Small) BluAct steps for better blue economy

BluAct Second Wave URBACT III: 1st June 2021 – 31st December 2022

Marine ecosystems are one of the most vital systems on our planet. But it is alarming to learn that around 40% of the world's oceans are affected by human activities such as pollution, overfishing and the loss of coastal ecosystems.

The European Union recognises the importance of the seas and oceans and the opportunities that marine ecosystems offer, and is therefore focusing on a blue economy based on more sustainable and inclusive development of coasts and seas, with environmental care as one of the key concerns. In fact, Blue Growth - a long-term strategy to support the sustainable development of the marine and maritime sectors - recognises that the seas and oceans are the levers of the European economy with great potential for innovation and growth. The strategy aims to promote smart, sustainable and integrated growth and job opportunities in Europe's maritime economy.

Although a coastal state, Slovenia has a coastline of only 47 km. Established sectors in the Slovenian Blue Economy employs around 8.252 people and generates over €313 million in GVA. The Blue Economy represents 0.8% share of the national economy and 0.9% of employment. Slovenia's Blue Economy is dominated by Coastal tourism in terms of employment and Port activities in terms of GVA. Coastal tourism generated 47.4% of the blue jobs and 32.3% of the GVA, while Port activities, contributed 30% to blue jobs and 48.7% to GVA.

The Blue Economy in Slovenia is modest compared to some other European countries (between 0.5% and 1.0%), which makes it all the more important to educate society (young people) about the role, potentials and opportunities that established sectors and emerging sectors of Blue Economy offers. The link between the sea and entrepreneurship is weak, and the aim was to encourage an approach »respect the sea - connect with the sea« and to promote environmentally friendly exploration and exploitation of marine resources and the development of sustainable innovative ideas, products, services and technologies that will be part of the circular economy.

By joining the project BluAct Second Wave of the programme URBACT III and transferring good practice from Piraeus (an awarded entrepreneurship competition that offers incubation services to local businesses boosting innovation and job creation) in the local environment, with a view to adapting the scale as well as the target group for the competition itself, Regional Development Centre (RDC) Koper wanted to take a step towards kick-starting the blue economy. With the project and the competition, we wanted to introduce young people (students), with the help of their professors and as part of their study programmes/courses, to blue economy and to one of the career options, the entrepreneurial opportunity in the blue economy, that they have after graduation. Through the competition, we wanted to encourage young people to think about entrepreneurship in relation to the sea by introducing them to the blue economy and to create a link between young people, the world of entrepreneurship and the sea, which would help to kick-start the blue economy and possibly reduce the brain drain in the future. The project also served as a platform for young people to get involved in the blue economy. The long-term goal is to create job opportunities for young people in the blue economy sectors and to contribute to the development of the city and the region. At the same time, through the project, the competition and the creation of the ULG, we also wanted to strengthen the link between educational institutions and entrepreneurial support institutions.

To this end, RDC Koper has partnered with the Faculty of Management and its annual festINNO event, which includes the INNOchallenge competition. This year's Sustainable INNOchallenge competition was coloured a little bluer and greener. The best blue-green business idea was sought among students. An idea for blue growth, an idea with the environment in mind (environmentally friendly). The main starting question for developing the idea was "How can we reduce the negative impact of human activities on the quality of the environment (on the quality of the oceans and seas)". The challenge was very general and it was based on the fact that about 40% of the world's oceans are affected by human activities such as pollution, overfishing and the loss of coastal ecosystems.

The first step was the creation of a Transfer Roadmap, a roadmap for the transfer of good practice. The document included an overview of the characteristics and situation in the city of Koper and in the wider region, Coastal-Karst region, the challenges in the field of the (blue) economy and society and environment, the objectives to be achieved through the project and the transfer of good practice, the methodology to be used for the transfer of practice and the project plan with the activities identified in steps and their timing.

The next and all subsequent steps were the actual implementation of the transfer of good practice. The first step was to establish a URBACT Local Group (ULG) with members from four representative groups. A ULG was set up, composed of representatives from the public sector, the private sector, academia and society. The main task of the group was to follow up the competition for the best entrepreneurial idea and to transfer good practice to the local environment. The members also followed the content of the individual Transnational Network meetings. During the lifetime of the project, 8 ULG meetings have been held.

The second step was to establish cooperation with the Faculty of Management and the Faculty of Tourism Studies and their professors. Before the students started developing their business ideas, they were introduced to the URBACT programme, the BluAct Second Wave project, the blue economy in Europe and Slovenia, and the upcoming Sustainable INNOchallenge business idea competition by RDC Koper. From October 2021 to May 2022, 7 lectures/workshops were held by RDC Koper. After familiarising themselves with the content, the students (of different semesters and courses) then started to develop their business idea. They developed their ideas in groups in specific entrepreneurship courses (the start dates of the courses and the duration of the courses varied), which they attended as part of their study programme. The professors then evaluated the ideas and selected the best ones to go through to the next round. 15 ideas made it to the next round. These were then peer-reviewed by a jury made up of three representatives from the Faculty of Management, a representative from RDC Koper and a representative from Adval (a ULG member). From the 15 ideas, the jury selected 5 final ideas, which were presented by the groups at the FestINNO event on 25 May 2022. Beforehand, the members of the finalist groups were informed about their appearance at the event by their professors. Professors helped them to prepare to present their proposals to the audience.

At the Demo Day, five groups presented their business idea and the audience voted for the best one. As the event was held online due to uncertain conditions (COVID-19), the audience voted for the best idea using an online voting tool. More than 100 people attended the Demo Day. The audience was most convinced by the idea Greener, the idea of setting up a company that would provide training for entrepreneurs on reducing packaging waste, making changes in the work process in this respect, and organising entrepreneurial competitions on waste reduction. Second place was shared between two business ideas. The first idea proposed the creation of 3D models of coral reefs made of environmentally friendly materials, which would be placed on the seabed in a location between Koper and Izola. The artificial models would be covered with real corals, which would then develop on their own and contribute to biodiversity. It was planned that the artificial coral reef could also serve as a tourist attraction for diving enthusiasts and a location for a diving school. Another idea was to set up a sustainable tourism agency, Blue Adventure, which would offer clients the opportunity to participate in sustainable activities such as cleaning up the coast and towns. Participants would take their rubbish bags to the agency and receive a reward of a boat/sailing boat ride in the Slovenian sea. The Agency would hand over the waste to the communal services and thus receive part of the funds for its activities.

In addition to the prize money, in the form of vouchers and a total value of EUR 1,000.00, donated by the sponsor, the members of the winning teams were also given the opportunity to participate in a mentoring programme on entrepreneurship, which was carried out in September by RDC Koper with the help of an external contractor.

In June 2022, RDC Koper hosted a two-day Transnational Network meeting, and in October it co-organised the first underwater clean-up in Strunjan Landscape Park.

In November and December, RDC Koper has continued to promote the BluAct Second Wave project and entrepreneurship within the blue economy in the form of four workshops aimed at (young) (future) entrepreneurs or anyone interested.

The transfer of good practice from Piraeus to our local environment has been successful. We have set up a local support group, held a competition for the best business idea among students, and introduced to them the blue economy and the potential for entrepreneurial opportunities within the blue sectors. In addition, we successfully delivered a mentoring programme.

As an organisation, RDC Koper will continue to encourage the development of the blue sectors and the entrepreneurial ideas that drive the blue economy through a variety of activities when the opportunity arises.