

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

**“ECONOMIC STRENGTHENING FOR A SUSTAINABLE
RETURN TO KOSOVO*”**

**FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION
(IPA/2017/154545-2/7, CONTRACT NO. 2018/397-386”**

Coordinator of the Action: CARE Deutschland e.V.

Project implemented by: CARE International Balkan, Serbia office

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ACRONYMS

ASB – Arbiter-Samariter-Bund

CSO – Civil Society Organization

CRM - Commissariat for Refugees and Migration

DRC - Danish Refugee Council

IDPs – Internally Displaced Person

IPA - Instrument for Pre-Accession

IOM - International Organization for Migration

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

PMU - Project Monitoring Unit

PO – Partner Organization

RS – Republic of Serbia

TOR – Terms of Reference

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is an external evaluation of “Economic Strengthening for a Sustainable Return to Kosovo*¹” project, implemented by CARE International Balkan, Serbia Office and two co-applicants – NEXUS Vranje and the City of Vranje, financed by the European Union (IPA/2017/154545-2/7, Contract no. 2018/397-386). Lead applicant of the project was CARE Deutschland-Luxemburg e.V. Project implementation period under review was from the 11th July 2018 to 10th September 2020. The evaluation was carried out by the external evaluator in the September 2020.

Overall objective of the project was to enable IDPs and returnees from the readmission process exercise full rights, supported by enabling migration policies and processes in Republic of Serbia. This overall goal was planned to be achieved through reaching the specific objective - Support the prospect of sustainable return to Kosovo by increasing the skills and employability of IDPs and readmittants in their current place of living to provide the necessary basis for an eventual return when the political situation has altered in a way that return becomes more realistic.

The purpose of the Final evaluation was to analyse the achievement of the planned results and the impact of the named project on the level of the key stakeholders and to provide findings, conclusions, and recommendations for the future programming, as well as for development of new project proposals. In order to assess the relevance and effectiveness of the Action the evaluation was analyzed the project’s achievements after the two years of the project implementation, based on the specific objectives and results as specified in the project proposal. This evaluation is carried out at the end of the Project implementation period (September, 2020). The process of evaluation involved 33 participants, 22 of which are direct project beneficiaries (40% women). Evaluation was based on participatory approach since this approach can increase ownership of the program, evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

The context of project implementation and the fact that the project is developed and implemented in cooperation with the partner organization and based on the needs of the target group is confirmed and justified by assessment. Through providing the possibility for IDPs and readmittants to finish trainings for business development planning and vocational training and to receive in-kind grants for business start-ups the Action increased employability and self-employability of beneficiaries in their current place of living and thus contributed to better chances for a sustainable return to Kosovo*, when return become more realistic. Knowledge, skills and the employability of project beneficiaries were increased. Evaluation showed that the initially planned 15% increase in beneficiaries’ income, was surpassed followed the trainings and grant distribution. More precisely, interviews with beneficiaries showed that their current estimation of the income increase reaches 30%, with the expectation that this increase will reach more than 50% in a one-year period.

¹ *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

The capacities of the partner organization NEXUS were increased, which created an opportunity for new scopes of work, to serve as a business advisory for grant recipients.

Sustainability has been achieved to a certain extent at different levels – at the level of individuals (IDPs and readmittants) included in the project, as well as at the level of partner organization (introduction of new scope of work, capacity building etc). Long-term impact will be more evident in time.

This project was well designed, led and implemented. The results achieved until the end of the implementation of the project have been assessed as fully accomplished. The entirety of planned activities, in spite of some of them being delayed due to COVID19 pandemic, was realized until the end of the project cycle. The estimated number of beneficiaries that was to be covered with this Action was reached, while the number of beneficiaries of in-kind grants was surpassed. As was planned all project activities were based on the needs of direct beneficiaries, matching those needs to available resources, supporting and nurturing communication and cooperation between all relevant stakeholders.

Prerequisite for the project success were organizational and administrative capacities of CARE and partner organization and exemplary commitment of staff. Mutual interests of all parties to achieve better results with the project, excellent cooperation between CARE and partner organization NEXUS, and the appreciation of the needs of partner organization and project beneficiaries is the underlying characteristic of the project. It made an impact on project implementation in the way that the project was carried out in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance. CARE has a reputation of an organization with effective implementation of projects as it was the case in this project too. Due to excellent project planning and management of CARE, risk management, commitment and good work organization in both CARE and NEXUS, almost all indicators set were met as planned. CARE should continue with the practice of effective project management.

Focus groups discussions with the project beneficiaries, data analysis and interviews organized for the purpose of evaluation confirmed that CARE and partner organization successfully implemented the project in solving important problems IDPs and readmittants face.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTION

The project “Economic Strengthening for a Sustainable Return to Kosovo*” is contributing to the facilitation of access to rights for IDPs and persons returned to Republic of Serbia according to the Readmission Agreement (readmissants), supported by enabling migration policies and processes in the Republic of Serbia. Specific objective/outcome of the project is to support the prospect of sustainable return to Kosovo by increasing the skills and employability of IDPs and readmissants in their current place of living to provide the necessary basis for an eventual return when the political situation has altered in a way that return becomes more realistic.

The following project results/outputs are expected:

Output 1. Support for prospective sustainable return to Kosovo offered by the project is widely promoted to IDPs and readmissants in the target area through information-sharing campaign.

The aim of the project organised outreach campaign was to reach the widest possible number of potential beneficiaries: citizens with status of IDPs and returnees according to the Readmission Agreement with the EU, directly and through an intense campaign in local media. Apart from the involvement of the local and regional media in Pcinja District, to implement this component, the project sought cooperation with local stakeholders – local authorities, local Refugee Trustees, but also the Office for Kosovo and Metohija of the Republic of Serbia. The outreach campaign was planned and designed on the basis of the initial assessment of the status and capacity of beneficiaries.

Output 2. IDPs and readmissants who prospectively wish to return to Kosovo have raised their capacity for self-employment, for a better chance of a sustainable return.

To contribute to better chances for a sustainable return to Kosovo, the Action worked on increasing employability and self-employability of beneficiaries, by organising trainings for business development planning for a number of participants, providing in-kind grants for business start-ups to most successful candidates and organising vocational trainings for beneficiaries – owners and potential employees of the business start-ups.

Output 3. A number of project beneficiaries are capacitated to generate incomes and develop business opportunities in the current residence and in event of potential return to Kosovo, supported by the project business advisory services.

Complementing the information sharing around the project opportunities, which was done within the output campaign of the Output 1 and the support to employability provided within the Output 2, the project also provided business advisory, and business mentoring services for the beneficiaries. The project worked on strengthening capacities for income generation of those beneficiaries who had expressed interest to return to Kosovo in the future, once the basic conditions for sustainable return are met.

Target groups of the project:

Direct beneficiaries: Staff of NEXUS, Municipal authorities of Vranje, 8.000 IDPs/readmissants from Pcinja District reached by the info campaign, 26 receiving vocational and other trainings, 90

project grantees for business start-up scheme, 100 recipients of business advisory/mentoring services and those benefiting from go-and-see visits.

Final beneficiaries: population of IDPs/readmissants in Pcinja Region (around 16.000). Around 500 family members of the beneficiaries who received project advisory/trainings/grants. City of Vranje and municipalities of Pcinja District: Vladicin Han, Surdulica, Bosilegrad, Trgoviste, Bujanovac and Presevo, benefitting from the introduced advisory service for the issues of return to Kosovo. Municipalities in Kosovo enriching diversity while also strengthening economic base by businesses that would be supported through the project.

Methodology of the Action

Approach: Methodology for the implementation of the Action is based on working practices of both CARE and its long-time partner NEXUS, as a rights-based, consultative, participatory, demand-driven and a holistic approach. All project activities were planned to be executed throughout close collaboration of the two main partners, based on the needs of direct beneficiaries, and with available resources for the activities. The Action and achievement of its goals rely heavily on the development of supporting and nurturing the relationships with and among number of stakeholders, and performing attentive monitoring of the effects of the Action. Involvement of various stakeholders who could support the project-initiated processes is seen as very important: achievement of Project Output 1 greatly involves representatives of the local authorities - the City of Vranje, and representatives of the local authorities of other six municipalities of Pcinja district. The project also implies cooperation with institutions in charge of the return on the national level: Serbian Office for Kosovo and Metohija and Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, as well as other stakeholders, primarily UNHCR and other (I)NGOs who deal with issues of migrations.

Communication: The Action utilizes the so-called ‘being close to beneficiaries’ principle, which includes close communication and cooperation with target groups in all project components and that of CARE, NEXUS and the City of Vranje. In this respect, the project outreach campaign also included direct information sharing to beneficiaries, through info-sessions, public presentations/discussions around the project opportunities for return that are expected to be organised. It is expected that, within planning and implementing of the capacity building and the support for business start-up, the project would tailor the support to best suit individual needs, bearing in mind the requirements of the labour market.

Resources: The project strives to use local expertise within all its components and engage in the largest extent possible external experts from Vranje and Pcinja district (south Serbia area). The extensive project cooperation with local authorities of Pcinja District envisaged by the Action, was expected to strongly contribute to the local ownership over the project results. Trainings were conceived as combinations of workshops and online or direct mentoring and further coaching by the external business experts, introducing as many elements of self-learning as possible.

Gender component: Following the long-term CARE’s commitment and CARE policies, the project design strongly emphasized gender equality prospective in all its components, with particular attention to motivating women and young people to apply for the project support and shedding a light on the project opportunities for women and youth. Gender balanced approach was also embedded into selection criteria for financial support to third parties.

The Action draws heavily from the multiple experiences of CARE in the region with projects similar in nature, as well as from the long-term previous engagement of NEXUS in those programs aiming at supporting the uprooted populations, targeting their education, status and prospects. The Action was relying on already established NEXUS' continuous collaboration with local governments of the Pcinja district, primarily with the City of Vranje. The City of Vranje was not heavily involved in the return processes in the previous period, however its representatives possess a great knowledge about the uprooted populations on their territory.

4. PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of the evaluation was to analyse the achievement of the planned results and the impact of the named project on the level of the key stakeholders (target groups, communities at large and local authorities in targeted cities and partner organizations) and to provide findings, conclusions, and recommendations for the future programming, as well as for development of new project proposals. In order to assess the relevance and effectiveness of the Action the evaluation was analyzed the project's achievements after the two years of the project implementation, based on the specific objectives and results as specified in the project proposal.

The results of the evaluation will be used for reporting to the Donor, improvement of the future programming, as well as for recommendations for development of new project proposals.

Based on the announced TOR², the overall objectives of the final evaluation are defined as follows:

1. To assess the project's performance against the standard criteria for evaluation: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, monitoring and learning, mode of delivery, staffing structure, quality of partnership relationships, technical assistance provided.
2. A qualitative and quantitative review of the project achievements against the indicators set in the project logical framework.
3. To identify lessons learned and recommendations to improve future programming.

Areas of enquiry were:

- Project Aim and Objectives Fulfilment;
- Project relevance in the context;
- Efficiency, effectiveness and impact (change over time from existing problems);
- Project sustainability;
- Participation of target groups and their perception of the project issues;
- Systems and structure - office, programme, what works well / what are the problems (communication, division of tasks, clear lines of responsibility);
- Monitoring of project activities;
- Support service and consultancy by CARE - staffing structure, quality of partnership relationships, technical assistance provided;
- Communication and cooperation between partner organization and CARE;
- Visibility and Media coverage.

² Annex 1 – Terms of Reference

5. METHODOLOGY OF THE EVALUATION

The main methodology for collecting data was focus group discussions with project beneficiaries in target region, semi-structured interviews and desktop research and analysis. Evaluation was based on participatory approach since this approach can increase ownership of the program, evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

The process of evaluation involved 33 participants, 22 of which are direct project beneficiaries (40% women)³. This evaluation is carried out at the end of the Project implementation period (September, 2020).

Data Collection and Analysis⁴

Examination of project documents⁵ (provided by CARE and partner organization NEXUS) - Relevant background documents and reports were reviewed and analysed as part of the preliminary research during evaluation, in order to build upon existing information, findings and evidence available (project documents, Interim report, bi-monthly reports, database of the beneficiaries, monitoring and evaluation plan, Mid-term evaluation report, photos of project activities, data on media coverage such as media presentations, etc.).

Meetings and interviews with project staff – Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the two on-line meetings with CARE and NEXUS project staff.

Focus group discussions - Two focus groups were organized with 12 participants, grant beneficiaries from Pcinja region (6 women and 6 men)⁶. Focus group participants were selected from databases of partner organization according to activities in which they were involved. In this way, the project activities related to business trainings and in-kind grants were analysed through direct discussion with participants and their own assessment of the effects of activities.

Interviews and phone calls with project staff, project beneficiaries and representatives of the relevant local and national institution - Exchange of numerous e-mails and phone calls was conducted in order to gather project documentation, set the time frame for evaluation, agree meetings etc. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three project staff members, ten project beneficiaries and 7 national and local institution representatives.

Analysis of project staff feedback of the preliminary evaluation findings presented - Preliminary evaluation findings were presented to CARE and NEXUS on workshop on the final phase of the evaluation⁷. Workshop took place on September 16, 2020 at the NEXUS Vranje premises. Project staff feedback was analysed and incorporated in the Final Report.

³ Annex 2 – List of persons consulted and interviewed

⁴ Annex 3 – Evaluation plan and time frame

⁵ Annex 4 – List of reviewed project documentation

⁶ Annex 5 – List of focus group participants

⁷ Annex 6 – List of workshop participants

6. FINDINGS

Support the prospect of sustainable return to Kosovo by increasing the skills and employability of IDPs and returnees from the readmission process (readmissants) in their current place of living to provide the necessary basis for an eventual return when the political situation has altered in a way that return becomes more realistic was the specific objective of the Action.

The following findings of the Final evaluation are described under the outputs and planned activities sections. What follows is a review of the project achievements against the indicators set in the project logical framework.

Output 1. Support for prospective sustainable return to Kosovo offered by the project is widely promoted to IDPs and readmissants in the target area through information-sharing campaign.

A 1.1 Assessment of current economic status and capacity of IDPs and readmissants in Pcinja region, their attitudes towards the return to Kosovo.

A 1.2 Workshops with representatives of local authorities and media of Pcinja District, presentation of project assessment findings.

A 1.3 Production of information-sharing materials for the project outreach campaign.

A 1.4 Organisation of the outreach campaign - announcing information on support for the return to Kosovo offered by the project.

A 1.5 Networking with other stakeholders supporting IDPs /readmissants.

Initial Assessment of current economic status and capacity of IDPs and readmissants in Pcinja region, was carried out by ENECA, an external consultant, in the beginning of the project implementation (September 2018). The main purpose was to obtain relevant information around economic status of IDPs and readmissants, their attitudes towards the process of return to Kosovo, needs and capacities of potential beneficiaries, and to review the current state strategies on the issue of return to Kosovo and existing programs and stakeholders involved. The assessment report is comprehensive, detailed and well documented and it has fulfilled its goal, as confirmed during the Mid-term as well as this Final evaluation. It contains a description of various challenges that IDPs and readmissants face, as well a review of relevant research and programs and it has served the project team as a basis and a tool for planning.

Project assessment findings were presented at 5 half-day workshops with the representatives of local authorities - local municipal governments, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, Red Cross of Serbia representatives, and members of various local CSOs and media, in the City of Vranje (February 22, 2019) and the municipalities of Pcinja District: in Surdulica and Vladicin Han (March 11, 2019), in Bujanovac (March 12) and in Trgoviste (March 20). On workshops participants were invited to discuss the situation of potential beneficiaries and possibilities for their sustainable return to Kosovo, obstacles, opportunities and trends. The opportunities offered by this

project were discussed as well. Workshops were led by a partner organization NEXUS project team.

With the aim of informing potential beneficiaries about the project, an outreach campaign has been implemented, in several ways: announcing information through media, information sessions with potential project beneficiaries, developing video and audio content – programs, as well as through written articles offered by the project. The Public call for participation in the project on support for the return to Kosovo has been reopened several times. First Public Call for participation for the Project lasted from February 18 until April 1, 2019 and extended until Jun 13, 2019. Second Call lasted from Jun 14 until to July 1, 2019. Intense campaign was organized in local media such as RTV Vranje, RTV Leskovac, RTV Fokus, RTV Bujanovac, RTV Ritam, TV Vranjska plus, TV Info Vranje, TV KODAL Bosilegrad, Radio Vladicin Han, TV Zona Nis. Project information were also announced through web site Vranje News, official portal of City of Vranje, NEXUS and CARE International. According to published information through media and its wide region coverage we could reasonably assume that planned number of 8000 IDPs/readmissants from Pcinja District were reached by the info campaign. Even though the media campaign was comprehensive and it had fulfilled its primary goal, which was a timely delivery of information about the Project to 200 potential beneficiaries, an additional effort was made by a partner organization NEXUS, with the aim to further confirm and inform in more detail, which led to enhanced motivation, or motivation that was at a satisfactory level, of participants to take part in the Project. NEXUS team provided over 500 information to beneficiaries over the telephone, e-mail and in direct conversations with participants in NEXUS premises. Due to situation media in Serbia finds itself, distrust of citizens toward media is evident, including the distrust expressed by the target group towards information delivered through traditional media, which was confirmed during the evaluation through interviews and focus groups with beneficiaries, therefore, we consider informing potential beneficiaries in more detail by a NEXUS project team that enjoys great trust in the community to be of great importance for reaching this planned indicator.

Info sessions with beneficiaries, as part of the campaign, were held during March 2019. Total number of 77 potential beneficiaries participated in these sessions (in Vranje 33, in Surdulica 14, in Vladicin Han 13, in Bujanovac 10, in Trgoviste 7). We would assess info sessions as well planned and beneficial, being that results from focus groups and interviews with beneficiaries during the evaluation, confirm that a certain number of directly informed beneficiaries through info sessions, further spread the information about the opportunities the Project offers in their immediate surroundings. Beneficiaries who participated in info sessions, and who were later interviewed during the evaluation, assessed them as being easy to understand, clear, detailed and motivating.

For the purposes of design and production of promotional material for the Project (posters, banners, video material etc.) CARE engaged outside associates- designers. Material was developed in cooperation with the partner organization NEXUS in accordance with EU and CARE Visibility Guidelines. Promotional material was distributed to beneficiaries during info sessions, as well as through media, portals and web pages, and it was made accessible through putting it on bulletin boards and in other visible spots in premises of institutions beneficiaries often visit (City of Vranje, Local Trustees of Commissariat for Refugees and Migration etc.).

Video material representing success stories of Project participants, including broader achievements of the Project, as well as donors and partner organization, was recorded in the final stage of the Project and made accessible to public on CARE web page, and it was presented at the

Final project event on September the 8th 2020 in City of Vranje, attended by representatives of relevant institutions of the City of Vranje. Video material was of good quality and represents the donor, implementation partners and, above all, the goal achieved by the Project – improvement of the socioeconomic position of beneficiaries, which was reflected in success stories of beneficiaries, and further confirmed during the evaluation in direct conversations with beneficiaries. Even though the activities related to beneficiaries starting a business were justifiably delayed due to COVID 19 pandemic, the video material successfully reflected the satisfaction of beneficiaries and the influence that the Project had on their future lives, and effectively presented donors and partner organizations. It would certainly be beneficial that this kind of promotional activities are implemented in earlier phases of the Project so it can contribute to a greater visibility of all those who participate in it, as well as to be a motivational tool that will prevent potential drop-out in some of the project phases.

Networking and cooperation with State and local stakeholders (Office for Kosovo and Metohija, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, UNHCR, IOM, DRC, Red Cross, PRAXIS, City of Vranje, Municipalities Vladicin Han, Surdulica, Bosilegrad, Trgoviste, Bujanovac, Presevo, City of Nis, Office for legal assistants and support to IDPs in Serbia, etc.) was established in the initial phase of the Project implementation by CARE and NEXUS project team. During the project implementation a number of meetings were held with the aim of exchanging information and experiences related to current programs and projects, in order to provide as adequate as possible support to beneficiaries within this Project, and to avoid overlap in the field. We consider this networking aspects as very significant, especially when having in mind the fact that there are no adequately updated databases of IDP and returnees on the grounds of the Readmission Agreement (confirmed in Assessment by ENECA), as well as of already provided services and assistance, this is the only way of getting relevant and updated information about the current circumstances of the target group, which was confirmed during interviews with members of the project team. Even though the Memorandum of Cooperation wasn't officially signed with the City of Vranje until the end of the Project, the project team assured us that this didn't affect the level of support by the City of Vranje officials, since during the implementation their involvement was of the extent and in the capacity that was previously agreed upon. The participation of the City of Vranje in project activities was also confirmed during evaluation, in interviews with two of the representatives of the City of Vranje, that seemed familiar with the Project and expressed that they view it as significant for the improvement of the position of IDPs and readmissants in Pcinja region.

Results of the evaluation confirm that Output 1 had been achieved in entirety, both quantitatively and qualitatively. As planned, 9 campaign events and numerous media announcements were implemented; 200 potential beneficiaries of grants and vocational trainings expressed interest in learning about the project possibilities and 113 (100%) applications received project support. As mentioned above, all planned activities were fully implemented by the end of project.

Output 2. IDPs and readmissants who prospectively wish to return to Kosovo have raised their capacity for self-employment, for a better chance of a sustainable return.

A 2.1 Revision and updating of the return-related selection criteria for beneficiaries.

A 2.2 Application process for project participation in the target region. Selection of beneficiaries for the project support.

A 2.3 Organisation of trainings in business plans development for 109 interested beneficiaries.

A 2.4 Solicitation for business plans, selection of 90 beneficiaries for the grants scheme.

A 2.5 Organisation of vocational trainings for 26 selected beneficiaries.

A 2.6 In-kind grants scheme organised for 90 beneficiaries financing their business start-ups.

List of the return-related selection criteria for beneficiaries was revised and updated after cross-checking it with the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, Commissariat for Refuges and Migration and Project Monitoring Unit (PMU) in the period September-November 2018. Due to late presentation of selection criteria by PMU (November 30, 2018) activities such as public call for final beneficiaries originally planned for the end of 2018 actually took place at the beginning of 2019 which also influenced the application process and selection of beneficiaries for the project support. Two calls for applications were launched - for the capacity building program and vocational trainings, and the in-kind grants for the business start-up.

As mentioned, first call was active from February 18th till June 13th 2019 and covered Pcinja district. Second call was active from June 14th until July 1st 2019 and was extended to Niski and Jablanicki district as interest among beneficiaries in Pcinja region was lower as expected. Total number of 113 applications for in-kind grants and 28 for vocational trainings was received.

Trainings in business plan development were organized for 109 participants (out of 113 invited) and carried out by external consultant ENECA, regarding to project documentation and reports. First training took place in City of Vranje from May 30th-31st, 2019 for 29 participants, second was organized in Vladicin Han on June 11-12, 2019 for 23 participants; the third and fourth in the City of Vranje on July 4-5 and July 11-12, 2019 for 57 participants in total. Trainings covered the topics such as: development of business plans, importance of marketing, sales and competition prospective etc. All interviewed beneficiaries during the final evaluation assessment (22) emphasized good quality of trainings, experience and motivation of trainers and importance of knowledge they gained through training. Evaluation confirmed that this activity was relevant, designed well and efficiently implemented, as well as that it answered to the needs of individual beneficiaries of the Project.

The Selection Committee initially selected 81 applicants (out of 103) for awarding the grants, but by the end of the project the team decided to extend the grants coverage to 98 beneficiaries whose applications were found to be suitable. This was possible to implement by increasing the budget line for grants, and decreasing the one for vocational trainings due to lower interest of participants for vocational trainings than expected. Distribution of grants was greatly influenced by unforeseen circumstances caused by the COVID 19 pandemic and by the procurement procedures that required additional time and engagement, which resulted in distribution being realized later than planned. In spite of these unforeseen circumstances, the project team managed to distribute 98 in-kind grants until the end of project implementation deadline (September 2020). During evaluation, all 22 beneficiaries interviewed expressed satisfaction with the quality of delivered goods. Results of focus group discussions point to a conclusion that grants substantially improved the quality of life of beneficiaries, and lives of their families, by enabling them to start a business or to expand the existing one, by enhancing the family income, by creating the conditions to include other family members in a family business, by sustaining and enhancing the existing businesses. Equally significant was the influence of grants on beneficiaries' psychological well-being - beneficiaries

reported an increase in self-confidence and a more optimistic view of the future. Even though they would all like to return to Kosovo*, they view current circumstances as unfavourable and the support received through the Project as an opportunity to improve their socioeconomic position in their current place of residence and as a favourable circumstance for their return to Kosovo* in the future. Project team reported that in spite of all previously mentioned circumstances, 8 beneficiaries still decided to return and this return was realized till the end of the project cycle.

Supplementing the conclusion is the personal story of grant beneficiaries who were interviewed during the evaluation process.

“I have a full house, and nobody is employed. I can’t get back to Kosovo, I was a police officer. I have been growing vegetables but only enough to feed ourselves, now I will be able to produce paprika and tomato and sell it. We are overwhelmingly happy!” (Mladen D.)

“Help came at the last minute. The old machine has been worn-out, and I didn’t have the money to replace it. Thanks to this grant I will stay afloat, I’m so pleased!” (Sasa G.)

“I’m from around Gnjilane, our house was burnt back there, so I have no place to return to. I am a seamstress and now I have learned to write a business plan and I got a sewing machine. I finally have something to plan with. I’m ecstatic, ecstatic!” (Vesna Dj.)

“I had livestock over there, meadow where they can feed, an orchard... the main house and stables were brought down... until now I didn’t have anything in my hands, but now... Uhh, I will produce potato for selling! Thank you, thank you, I have never believed I will get this, I didn’t believe...” (Dragan M.)

Evaluation showed that the initially planned 15% increase in beneficiaries’ income, was surpassed followed the trainings and grant distribution. More precisely, interviews with beneficiaries showed that their current estimation of the income increase reaches 30%, with the expectation that this increase will reach more than 50% in a one-year period.

Vocational trainings were attended by 25 out of 26 beneficiaries, which were confirmed through reviewing project documentation and in direct conversations with participants. Trainings were adjusted to preferences and skills of beneficiaries (some of them have already had previous knowledge that needed to be upgraded). Self-employment trainings – seamstry, carpentry, hair specialist, beautician etc.- were attended by 12 beneficiaries. 6 beneficiaries completed trainings in IT skills and computer programming, 4 completed trainings for professional driving, training for instalment and maintenance of heating and air conditioning devices was completed by 2 beneficiaries, while the training for professional waiters was completed by 1 beneficiary. 15 out of 25 vocational trainings participants also received grants for starting new business or upgrading the existing one. Beneficiaries assessed these trainings as very beneficial, in terms of gaining knowledge and skills that they can use in their future work.

In accordance with what has been stated so far, the results of evaluation confirm that the Project has contributed to increased capacities of beneficiaries for self-employment and sustainability in the market, that it has significantly contributed to the increase in income of families included, that it has significantly influenced the improvement of the socioeconomic position of beneficiaries in their current place of residence, and consequently increased their prospects for a sustainable return to Kosovo.*

Output 3. A number of project beneficiaries are capacitated to generate incomes and develop business opportunities in the current residence and in event of potential return to Kosovo, supported by the project business advisory services

A 3.1 Capacity building for Nexus to serve as a business advisory service for grant recipients.

A 3.2. Provision of business advisory services for grant recipients.

A 3.3. Provision of business mentoring services for grant recipients.

A 3.4. Organisation of transportation for 8 in-kind grant beneficiaries and their businesses to Kosovo.

The implementation of project activities related to Output 3 wasn't possible as planned due to the COVID19 pandemic during the period March-May of 2020 and then during July. However, most of the planned activities were implemented until the end of the project cycle.

Capacities of a partner organization NEXUS were built which created a possibility for a new scope of work - to serve as a business advisory service for grant recipients. Two-days training for capacity building of partner organization NEXUS on legal and regulatory framework for starting and running the business was designed and implemented by ENECA (external consultant). Training was conducted on 9-10 July 2020 in the premises of NEXUS Vranje. The main topics of the training were: process of establishment of legal entities in the RS, business registration forms, financing sources, business start-up step by step etc. NEXUS team assessed the training as significant, emphasising how important is this new field of work they engaged in within this project for their future work and the sustainability of their organization.

Business advisory services for 90 grant recipients were provided by ENECA. Training program for aftercare support to the beneficiaries of the project was implemented with the main aim to enhance entrepreneurial skills by covering the following topics: business development, digital marketing and business communication. In order to minimize risk of COVID 19, ENECA team, in consultation with CARE and NEXUS, has decided to deliver trainings using Zoom internet platform. For this purpose, ENECA team prepared, processed and recorded video training materials and distributed it to all 90 grant beneficiaries. For the total of three trainings, an overall number of 16,5 hours of video material has been recorded and now available for use by beneficiaries at any time in accordance with their individual pace. Topics covered in trainings are described in detail in the Final report of ENECA, while beneficiaries involved in the evaluation assessed the training as very beneficial, with the special emphasis on the possibility to use the recorded material when they might need it in the future. ENECA has also implemented specialized trainings for 19 (out of 22) beneficiaries from the agricultural field (beekeeping, vegetable, fruit and greenhouse production). This training was conducted on September 2 and 3, 2020 for 19

participants present. Two-day training consisted of a theoretical part and a field visit to relevant and representative agriculture households. For the implementation of this training ENECA engaged 2 experts - an agronomist and a veterinarian. Program mentoring and mentoring support were also provided online, due to recommendations regarding COVID19, instead of being provided through visits to beneficiaries, with the following schedule: September 2, 2020 (business development), September 3, 2020 (digital marketing), September 4, 2020 (business communication).

Another activity related to Output 3, Organization of transportation for 8 in-kind grant beneficiaries and their business to Kosovo, has been implemented in its entirety, which was confirmed during the evaluation by the CARE/NEXUS project team.

As mentioned, the implementation of project activities related to Output 3 wasn't possible as planned due to the COVID19 pandemic. Provision of business mentoring services to grant recipients has been affected the most. For a number of beneficiaries this service wasn't available in planned capacity since they received grants at the end of July and during August and didn't start their businesses yet. Participants of focus groups, as well as those interviewed, emphasized that this kind of support is greatly needed. In spite of the unforeseen circumstances to which mentoring and advisory services had to be adjusted to, they were nevertheless realized until the end of the project cycle, but their real effects couldn't have been assessed within this evaluation. However, having in mind that the NEXUS team had provided several different services on a daily basis (more than 700) to 180 beneficiaries, it can be concluded that they will continue to provide this kind of services after the termination of this project, especially when taking into account the needs for further assistance expressed by beneficiaries and the evident dedication of the NEXUS team, as well as the trust it enjoys in the local community and by the members of the target group. In this regard, it would be beneficial if CARE and NEXUS team members could find a way, capacities and funds to enable the provision of mentoring support to continue after the termination of the Project. This would contribute to longer-lasting effects of the Project.

Key findings

Relevance of the Action. The Action has been assessed as fully relevant to the context in which it was implemented and based on assessments of needs of IDPs and readmittants in the target areas. There are around 210.000 IDPs in Serbia. The number of Serbian citizens to be returned (readmittants) from EU countries is estimated at 150,000 and they are mainly Roma citizens (above 80%), many of them originating from Kosovo. As described within this projects' proposal, poor economic status of the target group is one of the major obstacles for a durable solution to their problems – the unemployment rate among IDPs (around 33%) and especially returnees (82%)⁸ is much lower than with majority populations (19%)⁹. Poverty, low capacity for employment, lack of education, especially among the displaced Roma, and proper advisory on administrative and legal issues, narrows their options and also hinders their eventual return to places of origin. The programs supporting return are being implemented for a number of years, however, relatively low number of actual sustainable returns is achieved. Beneficiaries of the

⁸ IOM Returnees Needs Assessment Survey 2010

⁹ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

project were the main focus of the project. Through providing the possibility for IDPs and readmittants to finish trainings for business development planning and vocational trainings and to receive in-kind grants for business start-ups the Action increased employability and self-employability of beneficiaries in their current place of living and thus contributed to better chances for a sustainable return to Kosovo, when return become more realistic.

Effectiveness. Having that all three Outputs have been fully realized, the project implementation has been assessed as effective and successful. The results achieved until the end of the implementation of the project have been assessed as fully accomplished. The entirety of planned activities, in spite of some of them being delayed due to political situation in Kosovo and COVID19 pandemic, was realized until the end of the project cycle (September 2020). The estimated number of beneficiaries that was to be covered with this Action was reached, while the number of beneficiaries of in-kind grants was surpassed (instead of 90 beneficiaries of in-kind grants, as previously planned, grants were received by 98 beneficiaries).

Efficiency. Based on the review of documentation and interviews held with representatives of relevant institutions, project team members and beneficiaries, it has been concluded that CARE and NEXUS have used the available resources, in terms of funds, staff and time, responsibly, thoughtfully and economically. All relevant issues, problems and obstacles (changes in the political situation in Kosovo*, decrease in motivation to return among the target group members, COVID19 pandemic etc.), that appeared during the implementation, have been discussed among team members, as well as with the representatives of the donors, PMU and relevant stakeholders at the local and at the national level. As was planned all project activities were based on the needs of direct beneficiaries, matching those needs to available resources, supporting and nurturing communication and cooperation between all relevant stakeholders. With this kind of approach, an excellent risk management and approved changes made by the project team, the Project was successfully completed and the final assessment from this evaluation is that a high level of efficiency has been reached.

Assessment of the Management systems and structure. The project has been implemented by CARE International Serbia and partner organization NEXUS Vranje, in cooperation with the co-applicant the City of Vranje. CARE was the main partner responsible for: overall project management ensuring that activities are in line with the project goals, supervision of the implementation of activities, day-to-day management of the project and final decision on all financial issues, including the entire sub-granting scheme and preside over all selection processes. NEXUS was responsible for: the day-to-day implementation of the project activities in the field, for the direct work with beneficiaries and other local stakeholders in achieving all 3 expected results. External project associates had an active role in different activities such as trainings, mentoring, design of promotional material and assessment.

The implementation of the project started on July 11, 2018, as it was planned. The orientation and planning workshop/meeting was organized at the beginning of project implementation, to make the detailed implementation plan, with a time table and clear lines of responsibility for the project team members. Numerous regular meetings of the project team members have contributed to the activities being realized in accordance with the implementation plan, and problems solved highly efficiently in accordance with the needs of the beneficiaries. Almost an everyday communication, regular meetings of the project team, high commitment and excellent project planning and management contributed to the fact that the project implementation has produced results as planned.

Communication and cooperation between partner organization and CARE. All the interviewed project team members emphasized excellent internal cooperation and high level of commitment of all of the project team members. They also emphasized that the readiness of CARE to support and develop activities consistent with the needs of the beneficiaries, greatly contributed to good functioning of the field work.

CARE has a reputation of an organization with effective implementation of projects as it was the case in this project too. Due to excellent project planning and management of CARE, risk management, commitment and good work organization in both CARE and NEXUS, almost all indicators set were met as planned. CARE should continue with the practice of effective project management.

Sustainability has been achieved to a certain extent at different levels – at the level of individuals (IDPs and readmittants) included in the project, as well as at the level of partner organization (introduction of new scopes of work, capacity building etc). Knowledge, skills and the employability of project beneficiaries were increased. By starting a new business or upgrading the existing one with the help of in-kind grants, beneficiaries enhanced their quality of life as well as the quality of life of their families, and increased their family income. The capacities of the partner organization NEXUS were increased, which created an opportunity for new scopes of work, to serve as a business advisory for grant recipients. It is very important to continue to support project beneficiaries in order to sustain the effects of this project. Long-term impact will become more evident over time. However, focus groups and interviews organized for the purpose of evaluation confirmed that CARE and the partner organization successfully implemented the project in solving important problems IDPs and readmittants face.

Monitoring. While CARE was responsible for coordination and monitoring of all project activities, NEXUS was in charge of monitoring the success of the project activities in the field and regularly collecting information for the monitoring and evaluation project documentation. NEXUS used a tool that monitored progress toward activities and results. Following the completion of the first year of the project implementation, a Midterm evaluation was done, which contributed to an improved implementation of project activities until the end of the project cycle. It can be concluded that system, established within this project, enabled adequate monitoring of results and a learning process, and it is assessed after this evaluation as a very positive and efficient.

Added value. Mutual interests of all parties to achieve better results with the project, excellent cooperation between CARE and PO, and the appreciation of the needs of PO and project beneficiaries is the underlying characteristic of the project. It made an impact on project implementation in the way that the project was carried out in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance which was particularly important to the CSO in Serbia, since they do not always have such a treatment and support from donor organizations. CARE is well known in the region as the organization that nurtures participatory work approach, both in cooperation with partner organizations and in approach to beneficiaries. CARE should continue with the good practice in communication and transparent, flexible and participatory approach to cooperating with partner organizations and should promote this approach widely.

7. CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that the project “Economic Strengthening for a Sustainable Return to Kosovo*” is fully relevant to the context in which it was implemented and based on actual needs of IDPs and readmittants in the target areas. Empowering 113 IDPs and readmittants through their inclusion in the educational and (self-) employment activities, meetings with the representatives of relevant institutions, capacity building of partner organization NEXUS, numerous media presentations, resulted in the fact that a great number of IDPs and readmittants and their family members are strengthened and motivated to improve their socio-economic livelihood.

Beneficiaries of the project were the main focus of the project. Through providing the possibility for IDPs and readmittants to finish trainings for business development planning and vocational trainings and to receive in-kind grants for business start-ups Action increased employability and self-employability of beneficiaries in their current place of living and das contribute to better chances for a sustainable return to Kosovo, when return be more realistic. Knowledge, skills and the employability of project beneficiaries were increased. By starting a new business or upgrading the existing one with the help of in-kind grants, beneficiaries enhanced their quality of life as well as the quality of life of their families, and increased their family income. Evaluation showed that the initially planned 15% increase in beneficiaries’ income, was surpassed followed the trainings and grant distribution. More precisely, interviews with beneficiaries showed that their current estimation of the income increase reaches 30%, with the expectation that this increase will reach more than 50% in a one-year period.

The capacities of the partner organization NEXUS were increased, which created an opportunity for new scopes of work, to serve as a business advisory for grant recipients. NEXUS team emphasised how important is this new field of work they engaged in within this project for their future work and the sustainability of their organization.

This project was well designed, led and implemented. Having that all three Outputs have been fully realized, the project implementation has been assessed as effective and successful. The results achieved until the end of the implementation of the project have been assessed as fully accomplished. The entirety of planned activities, in spite of some of them being delayed due to COVID19 pandemic, was realized until the end of the project cycle (September 2020). The estimated number of beneficiaries that was to be covered with this Action was reached, while the number of beneficiaries of in-kind grants was surpassed (instead of 90 beneficiaries of in-kind grants as previously planned, grants were received by 98 beneficiaries). As was planned all project activities were based on the needs of direct beneficiaries, matching those needs to available resources, supporting and nurturing communication and cooperation between all relevant stakeholders. With this kind of approach, an excellent risk management and changes made by the project team, the Project was successfully completed and the assessment from this Final evaluation is that a high level of efficiency has been reached.

Prerequisite for the project success were organizational and administrative capacities of CARE and partner organization and exemplary commitment of staff. High commitment of project staff was particularly recognized and appreciated by direct beneficiaries. Mutual interests of all parties

to achieve better results with the project, excellent cooperation between CARE and partner organization NEXUS, and the appreciation of the needs of partner organization and project beneficiaries is the underlying characteristic of the project. It made an impact on project implementation in the way that the project was carried out in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance.

The context of project implementation and the fact that the project is developed and implemented in cooperation with the partner organization and based on the needs of the target group is confirmed and justified by assessment. Sustainability has been achieved to a certain extent at different levels – at the level of individuals (IDPs and readmissants) included in the project, as well as at the level of partner organization (introduction of new scope of work, capacity building etc). It is very important to continue to support project beneficiaries in order to provide effects of this project sustainable. Long-term impact will be more evident in time. However, focus groups and interviews organized for the purpose of evaluation confirmed that CARE and partner organization successfully implemented the project in solving important problems IDPs and readmissants face.

CARE has a reputation of an organization with effective implementation of projects as it was the case in this project. Due to excellent project planning and management of CARE, risk management, commitment and good work organization in both CARE and NEXUS, almost all indicators set were met as planned. CARE should continue with the practice of effective project management.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

CARE and partner organization efficiently implemented the project for supporting IDPs and readmittants in income generation in their current place of living based on the target group needs assessment. Some of the recommendations that follow regard to improvement of sustainability of effects that have been achieved through the project so far and others regard to the improvement of future programming.

Recommendation for improvement of effects that have been achieved so far

- *To provide additional support to grant beneficiaries/entrepreneurs*

If possible, or more precisely, if CARE and/or NEXUS have the capacities or succeed in attaining additional funds, it would be of great importance to provide support in the form of mentoring grant beneficiaries in the course of the next six months. Based on information gathered from participants during interviews and focus groups, there is a clearly perceived need for the provision of mentoring support (in terms of information, legal support, expert support...) as well as additional trainings, that would help beneficiaries, especially in the first year of their work as the one that carries most risk, to better understand the market and its principles of functioning, to anticipate changes and to manage risks. Furthermore, there is a need for additional education in marketing, as well as attaining funds for this type of activities. In this regard, we would recommend activities aimed at networking of beneficiaries, establishing a business club, for example, through which beneficiaries would be able to exchange ideas, experiences, know-how, with the mentoring support and expert guidance. In order to sustain these small businesses, it is necessary, during the Project planning process, to include a minimum of 9 months of mentoring support following grant approval.

- *To record and publish success stories/beneficiaries' feedback*

It would be beneficial and effective to record feedback and beneficiaries' success stories, especially if the project is implemented through phases, as well as to publish these on social networks (FB, Instagram), web pages and portals. This kind of communication with the wider community at one hand has a motivating effect for future beneficiaries from the target population and, at the other hand, provides an opportunity to familiarize the local community with socioeconomic circumstances of beneficiaries, influences prejudices and consequently improves the position of marginalized target groups.

Recommendations for future programming

- *To improve information campaigns*

It would be beneficial to start with information campaigns at the very beginning of project implementation. Based on information gathered from beneficiaries so far, most of the interviewees had received information regarding the Project through friends, relatives etc. Those beneficiaries who were informed about the Project through traditional media, shouldn't be ignored, but it should be mentioned that they were quite suspicious of this information until they were confirmed (by representatives of NEXUS, and by the Refugee Trustees). In regard to this, we would recommend that future information and outreach campaigns are planned so as to include more info sessions, to

set up information stands in target locations and include similar activities that would provide opportunity for direct contact for informing potential beneficiaries. It would also be beneficial to include former beneficiaries in these campaigns.

- *To improve project visibility*

It would be beneficial to increase reporting about project results, using primarily one's own resources (social networks-FB, Instagram) and portals, or web pages. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to plan to include associates that will be in charge of visibility, from the first stages of programming (to plan and budget for them), best those who are journalists or PR experts that will prepare texts and news reports.

- *To improve organization visibility- CARE- social networks*

Active presence of CARE on social networks is necessary (FB, Instagram) especially since this is the main form of communication and informing among the younger population. In future programming, a person in charge of maintaining a social network presence and enhancing visibility, should be budgeted.

- *To include local community*

Project activities should be planned in a way to, whenever feasible, enable the active involvement of local community (as beneficiaries, consultants, employees etc.). This will improve the position of main target group beneficiaries in their local community (especially when it comes to IDP's, Roma, readmissants), decrease the sensations of "positive discrimination" among local community members, create positive connections through business cooperation etc.

- *To include activities, in initial phases of project implementation, that would enable exchange of experiences with other CSO's, whose work is organized around the same topic as the topic of the Project*

In the initial stages of project implementation, it would be beneficial to establish contact with domestic as well as international CSOs, who deal with similar issues and/or are in the process of planning/implementing similar projects. Round tables/forums, with the aim of exchanging information and experiences, can be organized, that might eventually lead to networking. In this way, overlap between similar projects in same locations will be avoided, which is significant when having in mind the lack of sufficiently updated databases within governing institutions (especially when it comes to IDPs and returnees in accordance with Readmission Agreement). Additionally, this will enable providing a more rounded and comprehensive support, in synergy with other CSOs (e.g. one would provide accommodation/residential support, the other would provide grants for starting a business...).

- *To start with implementation of business training in the earliest possible phases of the Project*

Beneficiaries should be provided with trainings as soon as possible, so these activities should be planned for the earliest phases of the Project. In this way, motivated beneficiaries will be supported to start their businesses and will be provided with mentoring support for a longer period of time.

- *Grant scheme*

Grant scheme should be improved in a way that a part of grant is planned for activities that come after starting the business (marketing activities, positioning themselves in the market, accounting

services, expert support in certain segments etc.). Beneficiaries involved in interviews, as well as those who participated in focus groups, are unanimous in their view that this kind of support would enable the sustainability of their businesses in the market, especially in the first year of starting the business.

- *To improve communication between beneficiaries*

It would be very beneficial for beneficiaries themselves as well as for the sustainability of the Project to include activities such as establishing a business club, organizing and moderating forums, meetings, study visits, socializing etc. In this way, apart from exchanging experiences and information, motivating each other for starting a business, the opportunities for networking and business cooperation would be open for beneficiaries, which would substantially influence the sustainability of the project.

9. LIST OF ANNEXES

Annex 1 – Terms of Reference

Annex 2 – List of persons consulted and interviewed

Annex 3 – Evaluation plan and time frame

Annex 4 – List of reviewed project documentation

Annex 5 – List of focus group participants

Annex 6 – List of workshop participants