



# Caiac SMile

Promoting social inclusion through adaptive sports.

## EAFRD-funded projects

**Location:** Satu Mare County, Romania  
**Programming period:** 2014-2020  
**Priority:** P6 - Social inclusion and local development  
**Focus Area:** Local development  
**Measures:** M19 - LEADER CLLD

<b>Funding:</b>	Total budget	119 784 (EUR)
	EAFRD	106 991.06 (EUR)
	National/Regional	12 792.94 (EUR)
	Private/Own funds	0 (EUR)

**Timeframe:** 2019 to 2023  
**Project promoter:** Caiac SMile Sports Club Association  
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## Summary

The Sport Club Caiac SMile association aimed to add value to the community in the Someş-Codru Local Action Group (LAG) area in Romania by establishing a new and innovative service for young people with disabilities. In partnership with an accredited provider of social services, the Noe Partium Association, the project promotes the development of independent life skills, counselling and support for vulnerable young people and their families. The novelty of the project consists of the implementation of an innovative therapy and an activity programme called 'Kayak - nautical sports activity for all'.

A new centre was equipped and is now fully operational in line with the requirements of the target groups (young people from care institutions and foster care, both vulnerable and ordinary families). It successfully implements activities that facilitate social inclusion into society by building skills, confidence and improving the quality of participants' life by mitigating the risk of social exclusion.



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## Project results

### The main results include:

- A fully operational centre established.
- In 2022, over 60 children with different visual impairments learned how to kayak.
- Young people in care institutions participated in interactive and inclusive sports activities in a safe environment, thereby improving their skills, attitudes and confidence levels, helping their social inclusion.
- The programme has been expanded and operates on five lakes in Romania.
- Additionally, camps hosted over 80 refugee children from Ukraine.
- The project promoted equal opportunities, thereby developing new skills, improving social well-being and mental health.

The Day Centre shared its experiences through presentations to professional associations across Romania. The project can be replicated in other regions and with other sports.

The collaborative, new and innovative project helped transform disabilities into abilities through accessibility, infrastructure, social inclusion and adaptive sports.



## Key lessons and recommendations

- Fostering the successful social inclusion of people with disabilities and disadvantaged young people requires bespoke support, infrastructure, changed mindsets and an increased openness of local administrations to adapt to the different needs of the target group. This includes an improved awareness of the need for integration, a full commitment to equal opportunities and accessibility for all, and to see beyond appearance and assumed limitations.
- The need to make sports accessible includes the need to make transport infrastructure accessible too, so that people can reach sports venues.
- The activities dedicated to vulnerable young people would not have been possible without the implementation of the project.



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## Context

The Caiac SMile Sports Club Association identified the opportunity and need to establish a day centre, within the area Someş-Codru, Romania, which provides water sports activities run by and for children and young people from vulnerable families who are exposed to the risk of social exclusion and discrimination. The target group of the project refers to children in care, young people with disabilities and youth from vulnerable families.

In many cases, communities perceive people with disabilities as incapable individuals. This unjustified perception contributes to them developing extremely low levels of confidence and self-esteem. Studies have shown that sport is a key element in increasing self-development, self-esteem and confidence. In particular, water sports and aquatic therapy offer a unique set of qualities to develop fitness, technical and social skills. However, access to

sports facilities is usually very difficult for people with disabilities or disadvantaged young people with special needs and their risk of social exclusion is high.

Based on all of this and aware that no accessible facilities of this nature existed in the area, the association felt that it was vitally important to establish a day centre that was dedicated to vulnerable young people, where they could learn and practise adaptive water sports and thereby enhance their overall development, skills, confidence and quality of life.

## Objectives

The project aims to support vulnerable young people (up to 18 years of age) at risk of social exclusion with innovative services to boost their confidence, self-esteem and opportunities for social inclusion through sport. The project applied an innovative therapy focusing on adaptive sports such as kayaking and skiing.

### Specifically, the project aimed to:

- Prevent and mitigate the risk of social exclusion through sports while facilitating the social inclusion of young people with special needs into society.
- Improve the quality of life of vulnerable young people and their families by overcoming social and mental barriers.
- Reach out and offer recovery for children from various backgrounds (from foster care, institutionalised care homes and from both vulnerable and ordinary families) to promote well-being and mental health.

## Activities

The project promoters built an accessible and fully operational day centre. This included the purchase of furniture, ICT facilities, specific equipment for water sports and solar panels for hot water generation.

The project built a network of support organisations, coaches, volunteers and donors. This included relevant government departments (such as for social assistance and child protection), support groups and target group associations to participate and reach the young people and their families.

Project staff and volunteers were brought together and organised for the joint design and implementation of project activities that focused on equal opportunities and social integration, developing new skills and improving well-being and mental health.





The project team developed relevant counselling and support services focusing on learning life skills to boost confidence and foster independence and social well-being, equipping people for life outside social care institutions. Specialised staff and external consultants assisted in this process and the activities.

Sports activities, including kayak-nautical sport sessions, were implemented on various lakes in the region.

## Main results

The project created a fully operational day centre accommodating 67 young people. In 2022, over 60 children with different visual impairments learned how to kayak. Additionally, camps hosted over 80 refugee children from Ukraine over a period of three months.

Young people under the care of public social services from several counties participated in interactive kayaking, skiing and climbing activities in a safe environment alongside other young people from different backgrounds. Since 2023, the centre has been running courses under the 'Towards normality in adapted kayaks' programme on five lakes in Romania.

Importantly, young participants who are in the process of leaving institutional care have improved their skills, attitudes and confidence levels, which will help their social inclusion. The activities dedicated to this target group would not have been possible without the implementation of the project.

The day centre was able to expand its offer of programmes and creates a joyful, open and safe environment founded on equal opportunities for developing new skills and improving social well-being and mental health.

New skills and understanding were also attained by staff and volunteers.

The day centre shared its experiences through presentations to professional associations across Romania. The project can be replicated in other regions and with other sports. In the 2023 season, the practice of independent adaptive sports and social skills was transferred to



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more than 50 people with disabilities and over ten ski instructors in ten ski resorts.

The collaborative, new and innovative project helped transform disabilities into abilities through accessibility, infrastructure, social integration and adaptive sports.

## Key lessons and recommendations

Fostering successful social inclusion of people with disabilities and disadvantaged young people requires bespoke support, infrastructure, changed mindsets and an increased openness of local administrations to adapt to the different needs of the target group. This includes an improved awareness of the need for integration, a full commitment to equal opportunities and accessibility for all, and to see beyond appearance and assumed limitations.

Working as a team to explore ways to make change happen brings considerable satisfaction both professionally and personally.

The need to make sports accessible includes the need to make transport infrastructure accessible too so that people can reach sports venues.

Social projects are projects with many challenges but also with many rewards - both on the providing and receiving side. There is a substantial need to get involved in this kind of project.

The activities dedicated to vulnerable young people would not have been possible without the implementation of the project.

***"It's a new world that includes new methods, strategies and opening up to those who need our help. Confidence and self-esteem are the main factors helping us overcome any obstacles, changing our state of mind, which is what we strengthen the most here at the Kayak Smile Day Centre. 'Thank you'.... 'It was the most beautiful day of my life'... 'I can't believe I can do this...' and... many, many tears among the smiles - these words drive us to continue with our mission, that of changing mindsets, developing a community where everyone fits and has a purpose."***

I. G. Stancovici, Caiac SMile sports club

### Additional information:

CAIAC SMile website: [www.caiacsmile.ro](http://www.caiacsmile.ro)

Facebook: <https://m.facebook.com/pages/category/Community/Skiing-with-disabilities-2036912283276690/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/caiacsmile>

