

## Playground that Grows: transforming a schoolyard into a regenerative play and learning park in Croatia

### SUMMARY

'Playground that Grows' (hr. 'Igralište koje raste') is a community-led project in the village of Kolarec, Croatia, which has transformed a local schoolyard into a multifunctional, regenerative educational park. The project aims to foster ecological literacy, intergenerational cooperation, and community resilience through a participatory design process. The park is built using recycled materials and includes microclimate sensors and educational trails.



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### CONTEXT

Kolarec is a village with 134 inhabitants in Croatia. It faces challenges common to many rural such as depopulation, social isolation and limited infrastructure particularly affecting young families and children. The local group 'KORAK' is regenerating 2 800 m<sup>2</sup> of the primary schoolyard into a multifunctional park providing children and families with safe play and learning spaces, fostering social interaction, reconnecting residents with nature and creating a shared community hub.



### OBJECTIVES

- > Improve quality of life and community resilience in Kolarec by developing an inclusive, educational and ecologically sustainable outdoor space;
- > Innovate rural education and increase environmental literacy through a regenerative park model that expands outdoor learning beyond traditional classrooms;
- > Strengthen community ties through participatory design involving children, families and local craftsmen in co-creation processes;
- > Promote inclusion by creating sensory and quiet zones that ensure accessible, high-quality play and learning for children with diverse needs.

**Themes:** Sports, culture and leisure, Nature and environment, Health and care, Education and training

**Country:** Croatia

**Organisations:**

> KORAK NGO (hr. Kreativne Opcije za Ruralne Aktivnosti i Klimu), non-governmental / civil society organisation

In partnership with

> Primary school Sidonije Rubido Erdody Gornja Rijeka, academic institution

> Municipality of Gornja Rijeka, public authority

**Start & end date:** 11/2025 - 06/2026

**Budget:** EUR 18 127

**Funding sources:**

> Private fund (Zaklada Adris open call for grants 2025)

> In-kind contributions from community and private sector

> Public sector: Gornja Rijeka Municipality

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## ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

The project in Kolarec has been implemented over eight months through a structured, participatory approach. Key actors include the KORAK association (project management and coordination), Sidonija Rubido Erdody Primary School (landowner and partner), Municipality Gornja Rijeka (partner), Armano Linta expert team (regenerative design) and local community volunteers (ideas and construction). The primary beneficiaries are **rural children who gain an inclusive 'living classroom'**, while the **wider community benefits from a revitalised, intergenerational public space**.

During the preparatory phase, the KORAK NGO formed a **multidisciplinary team** of school staff, designers and regenerative architects to **establish the project framework**. On this basis, the children, parents and community members **co-designed** the park's four zones, selecting natural and DIY elements and shifting from passive users to co-creators. **Experts were then involved** to develop architectural blueprints and QR-code educational content integrating local microclimate data.

The next stage is where volunteers and local craftsmen prepared the terrain, planting heritage fruit trees, repurposing local wood, and installing bases for a weather station and 10 QR learning points. The final phase completes the playground construction and sensory elements, culminating in a community-wide festival to officially launch the park.

This participatory process **builds local capacity and ownership**, combining regenerative design, ecological education and intergenerational engagement to create a resilient, inclusive and interactive public space.



## RESULTS

The 'Playground that Grows' project has resulted in a **community-driven blueprint for a four-zone regenerative park**, including a motor-skills playground, a wilderness area, a sensory space and a heritage garden and orchard. These zones have been co-designed by residents, school staff and regenerative design experts.

The project has **engaged over 30 local children and 20 adults**, which is more than a third of all village residents, including parents, teachers and local craftsmen, all actively contributing to shaping and building the space. Activities include terrain preparation, planting heritage species and installing bases for smart weather sensors and more than 10 QR-code educational points.

In the short term, the project **transforms an underutilised schoolyard into a vibrant, intergenerational hub**, mobilising the community and demonstrating how small villages can drive high-quality, nature-positive innovation. In the medium term, the 'living classroom' will be **integrated into the school curriculum**, fostering ongoing climate and ecological literacy.



## SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

The project's success is rooted in its **participatory design**: by involving parents, local craftsmen and children in co-creation, the project builds a strong **sense of ownership and community spirit**.

The project is the first in the region to **combine regenerative architecture with digital tools** such as QR-code education points and microclimate sensors in a rural setting. It draws on local heritage and materials, including old logs and indigenous plant varieties, demonstrating that innovation is not limited to urban centres.

Main lessons learned are that quality local infrastructure matters. Investing in attractive, functional spaces can help counter rural depopulation and retain young families. Simplicity ensures sustainability with low-maintenance, recycled, and nature-based solutions are more viable long-term. Institutional integration is crucial with embedding the project into school activities ongoing care, relevance and community engagement are secured.

The approach is **replicable and scalable**, providing a clear, documented framework for other schools and rural communities to transform small green spaces into interactive learning hubs.



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