

The Hilvarenbeek Smart Village supports collective initiatives in the Netherlands

SUMMARY

Hilvarenbeek is a rural municipality in the Kempen region in the south of the Netherlands. To address several societal, economical and environmental issues such as transitioning to sustainable agriculture, a service organisation called Tussenheid/Hilvarenbeek Smart Village (HSV) was created in 2014. It brings together residents, the government and various organisations aiming to address these challenges. HSV focuses on sustainable local development and supports bottom-up community initiatives through connectors and platforms with local experts. This approach has led to several successful projects, including repurposing a church into a school, providing horse-riding for disabled children, improving local bus transport, upgrading schools and sports centres, and promoting local digital communities and education programmes related to regional development. These initiatives are largely driven by dedicated residents who share their knowledge and experience with new projects.



CONTEXT

HSV operates in a rural area located to the south of the city of Tilburg which can be characterised as having a mix of tourism, commuting, agriculture and light industry. Residents have inherited a rich cultural tradition of self-reliance, shaped by centuries of enduring harsh conditions. Like many other rural regions, this area is confronted with several challenges, including an ageing population, the impacts of climate change, the transition to sustainable agriculture, and the consequences of high-tech activities. In response to these challenges, the local community has shown a strong commitment to initiating bottom-up, cooperative projects aimed at enhancing living conditions. However, individuals looking to kick-start such projects often face various hurdles, including the fragmentation of services across public and private entities and inconsistencies in legislation and regulations.

These obstacles complicate effective navigation of the system, resulting in missed opportunities and untapped potential due to insufficient support. In response to these challenges, HSV places strong emphasis on a holistic, **community-driven approach** that actively involves local residents. Rather than merely addressing problems, its policy aims to empower the Hilvarenbeek community to take an active role in shaping its own development. HSV therefore serves as a **bridge between initiatives and available expertise**. The process involves citizen-led initiatives addressing various local issues collectively.

OBJECTIVES

To establish and facilitate a collaborative network that unites various public and private stakeholders, including experts, to work together in the execution of community-driven initiatives designed to address societal-economical-environmental challenges in the rural Hilvarenbeek area.

Themes: Democracy and participation, smart and start-up villages

Country: The Netherlands

Organisations: Tussenheid/Hilvarenbeek Smart Village (HSV), civil society organisation

Start & end date: 01/2014 - Ongoing

Budget: 100 000 EUR annually

Funding sources: EU funding through the LEADER programme, grants from the provincial public authority, contributions from a regional bank and other private funding, as well as own resources (volunteers of the organisation)

Website: www.tussenheid.nl

Contact: Drs. Wiet van Meel, info@pontifax.nl ;
Drs. Ruud Groenendijk MSc RI, ruudgroenendijk@kabelfoon.nl



ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

HSV provides support for collective bottom-up initiatives, acting as an enabler rather than taking control. Its assistance includes **developing ideas, exploring funding opportunities and securing policy support** for residents who want to implement local projects. This approach is grounded in leveraging the strengths of the local community, not as a response to problems but as a means to systematically enhance the vitality and capabilities of the Hilvarenbeek community, enabling it to shape its own development. The development advisors involved are locally based and deeply committed to addressing local challenges. These advisors possess a range of expertise, skills and experience spanning spatial planning, community building, public and business administration, legal affairs, project management, organisational development and fundraising, among others. HSV acts as a connector, making sure bottom-up initiatives receive the right support to flourish. HSV's approach to addressing the evolving trends and transition of the rural area aligns with the Brundtland principles of sustainable development: **economic (profit), spatial (planet) and societal (people)**. Each project or initiative is unique in its characteristics, milestones and key contributors. However, they all share a common focus on benefiting the community, with tailor-made involvement from private and public institutions. HSV has effectively supported numerous initiatives across various domains. A few illustrative examples include transforming a declining local pub into a community centre, reinforcing efforts to revitalize a village neighbourhood by upgrading a community centre, empowering the board of a youth music centre, and supporting an initiative for communal housing for elderly individuals.



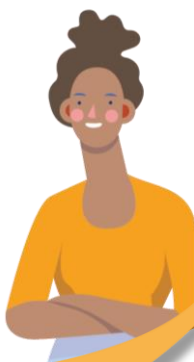
RESULTS

The initiative led by HSV has yielded remarkable outcomes, including the repurposing of a church into a school, the provision of horse riding opportunities for disabled children, enhancements in local bus transportation, upgrades to schools and sports centres, the promotion of local digital communities, and the establishment of educational programmes focused on special local spatial, economical and societal initiatives. Beyond these tangible achievements, the initiative has injected a deeper sense of local self-confidence, self-reliance and social cohesion, fostering a robust community spirit. The direct beneficiaries of these efforts number in the hundreds, yet the indirect influence goes throughout the entire community, **benefiting approximately 15 000 residents**. Projects have made a substantial contribution to the transition and rejuvenation of the rural area, concurrently increasing municipal government awareness and commitment. Notably, the approach garnered European recognition through the European Parliament (EP) programme 'Let the Stars Shine', attracting a delegation from the EP and EU-commission to visit the village and witness the positive impact of these endeavours.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

What sets this initiative apart is its unwavering commitment to a bottom-up approach, choosing to support self-initiated efforts rather than take control. One of the main challenges is the scepticism of established institutions to support new projects. Where beneficial, HSV guides the way to funding opportunities sometimes allowing for a modest remuneration for deployed experts. The Brundtland approach ensures sustainability. A key lesson learned is the importance of **transparent communication about tangible results to the public**. Equally important is maintaining open lines of communication between supported initiatives and the lasting commitment of development advisors. This requires a dedicated board of directors and a well-organised management structure.



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info@rural-pact.eu



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