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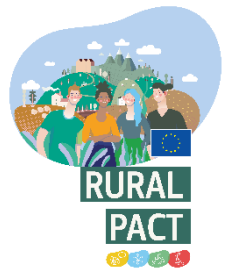


Connected



Prosperous

Silicon Vilstal fosters social innovation in rural areas of Lower Bavaria, Germany



SUMMARY

Silicon Vilstal is a non-profit innovation platform in Lower Bavaria, which emerged as a bottom-up initiative in 2016. Over the course of five years, it became a sustainable organisation boosting social innovation in rural Bavaria through several local, regional, national and EU initiatives. The organisation's primary focus is on connecting individuals and fostering social innovation and digital prospects. Its activities include networking events and capacity-building initiatives such as 'idea workshops' and coaching programmes tailored for start-ups. This innovative approach facilitates access to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education for children residing in rural areas lacking physical spaces for creative workshops. The organisation's work has received multiple awards, being the first German organisation acknowledged by the European Commission as a social economy cluster and one of the top 10 entrepreneurship initiatives in Germany at the European Business Development Prize in 2018.



Theme(s): Research and innovation, Smart and start-up villages, Digital technologies, Entrepreneurship

Country: Germany

Organisation(s): Silicon Vilstal

Start & end date: 2016 - ongoing

Budget: EUR 250 000 in 2023

Funding sources:

- Euroclusters for Europe's recovery, Single Market programme, call SMP-COSME-2021-CLUSTER-01;
- Social Tides programme, funded by Google;
- National funding from: Deutsche Stiftung für Engagement und Ehrenamt, national public foundation; Federal Ministry of Economics (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft), through the funding programme Innovationsprogramm Geschäftsmodelle und Pionierlösungen; TÜV SÜD Stiftung, private foundation;
- Regional funding from the Bavarian ministry of economics;
- Network of volunteers

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CONTEXT

Silicon Vilstal (SV) originated in the rural landscape of Lower Bavaria. It occupies a strategic position halfway between Strasbourg and Vienna, despite a perceived remoteness of the rural area. Like many other rural areas in Europe, it harboured substantial untapped potential for innovation. Rural regions are frequently depicted as less capable, but the founders of SV aimed to challenge this narrative and demonstrate that rural landscapes can evolve into vibrant ecosystems for social innovation.

In their pursuit, SV's founders successfully identified and harnessed different funding opportunities traditionally associated with urban areas, including initiatives such as the New European Bauhaus, and demonstrated their effective implementation in rural settings.



OBJECTIVES

The organisation aims to foster social innovation and make digital opportunities tangible for rural regions. Its medium-term goal is to turn the region of Lower Bavaria into a 'living laboratory' of good practice social innovation on a European scale.





ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

Origin

- > The organisation's social innovation journey began with the Experience Festival in 2016, which served as a lively catalyst for mobilising rural volunteers, skills, networking and innovative ideas;
- > Over time, the festival evolved into an annual event intertwining with other projects.

Expansion

- > In 2017, the festival transformed the rural area into a living lab by inviting start-ups to engage with rural residents and capitalising on the possibilities for companies to test their ideas in a real-world setting;
- > By 2019, SV had adopted a sustainable project management approach with a new legal framework;
- > Growing from around 300 attendees in 2016, the SV festival attracted over 5 000 participants in 2023.

Annual activity formats

SV organises various activities for individuals of all ages, beyond the Experience Festival, including:

- > Idea workshops providing creative STEM activities through local resources and learning software;
- > 'Farmer seeks start-up' programme offering free accommodation and workspace for testing with local firms;
- > Creative Space managing temporary projects with artists and creatives to enrich the festival experience.

Partnerships and collaborations

- > SV is a consortium partner of SOCIALTECH4EU, a 2-year project funded by the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency;
- > In September 2023, SV organised a **Social Impact Hackathon** as part of this project, bringing together a hundred people from start-ups and the creative sector to focus on the improvement of social start-ups' ideas.



RESULTS

The organisation's main achievements are **increased awareness of the possibilities of social innovation in rural areas** and the **creation of a network** of actors from local, regional, national and EU levels who cooperate to achieve a tangible social impact for rural development.

- > The SV Experience Festival stands out as Germany's largest rural innovation event, with around 15 000 participants between 2016 and 2023.
- > The STEM workshop for kids is organised monthly and benefits an average of 25 students per workshop.
- > SV is one of the first members of the Social Entrepreneurship Network Germany (SEND e.V.), the national association of social economy organisations. SV is also the first German partner of the New European Bauhaus programme.
- > In 2024, the organisation launched its 'virtual makerspace' app on iOS and Android, providing STEM formats virtually, acting as a digital bridge between children's drawings and the production machines of local enterprises.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

SV owes much of its growth and success to an extensive societal network of institutions, municipalities, companies and individuals. The blend of rural actors and initiatives from across Germany contribute to its innovative character.

A genuine laboratory providing companies with the opportunity to test products or services – ranging from STEM education to digital innovations – with a social impact in an authentic environment, SV has demonstrated that innovation does not always require extensive infrastructure.

SV's journey began on a modest scale, leveraging the abundant resources and skills of rural residents. It evolved into a project-based organisation, emphasising a lightweight and agile approach that prioritises concrete, goal-oriented projects over hefty investments in infrastructure.

