

GOOD PRACTICE BROCHURE

Instruments for territorial development

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Territorial development is central to strengthening the EU's rural areas, reducing economic disparities and tackling demographic decline. Through integrated approaches such as LEADER/CLLD, Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) and Smart Villages, actors across Europe are working to ensure that rural areas can thrive.

Such instruments can mobilise integrated, multi-sector and multi-fund interventions, fostering place-based innovation, community empowerment and resilience, and building local capacity. They help communities move beyond isolated projects and develop longer-term, integrated approaches.

This edition of the Rural Pact Good Practice Brochure spotlights six different initiatives that are improving territorial resilience, competitiveness and attractiveness, expanding employment opportunities, boosting intermunicipal cooperation, strengthening local ownership and helping small communities turn ideas into practical action.

They demonstrate how territorial development instruments and approaches can deliver more integrated, place-based and community-led interventions for improving quality of life in rural areas.

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Supporting integrated territorial development in Lower Saxony, Germany

This initiative established the first comprehensive regional development programme in Lower Saxony. The programme promotes collaboration across municipalities and sectors, while empowering different territories within the state to invest in projects tailored to local priorities.

Lower Saxony in north-west Germany is a large and diverse state home to eight million people. Its towns, cities and sparsely populated rural areas have very different challenges and potential, which means a one-size-fits-all approach to development is not suitable.

Territorial partnerships delivering EU investment

The 'Future Regions in Lower Saxony' programme was established in 2021 to address key regional challenges and contribute to sustainable development. The programme, implemented as an Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI), channels around **EUR 96 million** in European regional development and social funding (ERDF and ESF+) to **14 territorial partnerships**, which together cover the whole of the state.

These 14 territorial partnerships, known as 'future regions', typically cover four to six counties. **Each region has developed its own territorial strategy** ('future concept'), funded by the programme and approved by the state's ERDF and ESF+ managing authority, the Ministry for Economic Affairs, Transport and Construction.

Each future concept **focuses on one or two areas of action**: regional innovation capacity; a low-carbon society and the circular economy; biodiversity and functioning natural areas; the changing world of work, equal opportunities and social participation; and culture and leisure.

Future regions **develop and implement integrated projects responding to local needs** in line with their individual territorial strategies. Key features include intermunicipal cooperation and the involvement of actors from business, science and civil society – from idea to project implementation.



Image: © Wolfgang Weiser from Pexels

Full good practice description

-  • Lower Saxony Ministry for Economic Affairs, Transport and Construction
- State Chancellery of Lower Saxony
-  01/2021-ongoing
-  Around EUR 96 million
-  Funding sources:
 - European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
 - European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)
-  www.europa-fuer-niedersachsen.niedersachsen.de/startseite/regionen_und_foerderung/efre_und_esf/konzepte-der-zukunftsregionen-in-niedersachsen-225235.html
-  Insa Schwob, insa.schwob@mw.niedersachsen.de
Thomas Schleifnecker, thomas.schleifnecker@stk.niedersachsen.de

Flexibility for future regions

The programme's design gives regional and local authorities as well as stakeholders **more freedom and flexibility to address local challenges** through bottom-up approaches. Its effectiveness is supported by a clear and professional management structure for each future region, which helps turn strategies on paper into deliverable projects.

Another enabling factor is the **use of peer learning to build capacity**: the State Chancellery of Lower Saxony organises and supports capacity-building and networking events which bring together representatives from the different future regions. This also helps to manage the complexity of coordinating across governance levels and funding streams.

By early 2026, the Future Regions in Lower Saxony programme boasted almost **100 approved projects**, with most future regions seeing **improved intermunicipal cooperation** and **strong stakeholder involvement** in many territories.

Supporting rural recovery and resilience through coordinated governance and funding in Pinhal Interior, Portugal

This Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) helps rural municipalities implement a shared development strategy through coordinated governance and multiple funding sources. By aligning projects around common territorial priorities, it strengthens local capacity and supports long-term rural recovery, resilience and revitalisation.

Pinhal Interior is a low-density rural region in central Portugal with no major urban centres. Following devastating forest fires in 2017-2018, local actors recognised that recovery required more than emergency measures. Alongside rebuilding, the region also needed to address demographic decline, economic fragility, limited services and environmental risks.

Through a **participatory process**, stakeholders developed a **shared territorial strategy for long-term recovery and revitalisation**. In 2021, the Pinhal Interior ITI was established to implement part of this strategy through the Pinhal Interior 2030 **action plan**. Bringing together 24 municipalities across five intermunicipal communities, it provides a **coordinated framework for delivering projects across a functional territory**.

Coordinating action through integrated governance and funding

The **action plan translates strategic priorities into projects** covering demographic revitalisation and social innovation, economic development, tourism, and environmental management, forestry and spatial planning.

The ITI mobilises European regional development (ERDF) and social (ESF+) funding. As these funds cannot cover all territorial priorities, the ITI is **designed to align with complementary programmes**, including rural development (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development's LEADER/CLLD), the Recovery and Resilience Facility and Horizon Europe. This allows different parts of the territorial strategy to be financed through the most suitable instruments.

Implementation is coordinated by the Pinhal Interior Territorial Development Agency. An executive commission representing the five intermunicipal communities oversees delivery, while a general board of municipalities provides strategic direction.



Image: © Bernardo Conde

Full good practice description

-  Pinhal Interior Territorial Development Agency
-  12/2021-ongoing
-  EUR 45 million
-  Funding sources:
 - European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
 - European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)
 - European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), including LEADER/CLLD
 - Recovery and Resilience Facility
 - Horizon Europe
-  www.pinhall-interior.pt
-  Luís Matias, luís.matias@pinhal-interior.pt

Local Action Groups also coordinate with the agency during implementation, with some initiatives jointly supported through LEADER and the ITI.

Building capacity through coordinated territorial delivery

A key strength of the initiative lies in its **multi-level governance model**. A **dedicated coordinating body** helps smaller municipalities overcome limited technical capacity, while clearly defined governance roles keep strategy and implementation aligned.

Another enabling factor is the **functional territory approach**, allowing municipalities to address shared challenges collectively rather than through isolated projects. **Planning complementarities between funding instruments** also ensures that priorities extending beyond the ITI can still be delivered through other programmes.

By early 2026, the action plan included 20 projects representing around EUR 200 million in planned investment, with more than EUR 20 million requested for additional initiatives. Covering resilience, cohesion, competitiveness and attractiveness, the portfolio includes integrated initiatives such as proximity service models and networks of thematic villages, illustrating how coordinated territorial governance can support long-term rural revitalisation.

A social enterprise boosts job opportunities and social inclusion in rural Lithuania

This LEADER-supported initiative expanded opportunities for paid work in a remote Lithuanian village with limited transport and few local employers. It helped reduce social exclusion by engaging people facing barriers to employment in accessible work.

In the remote Lithuanian village of Tulpiakiemis, limited public transport and low car ownership restrict access to jobs and essential services. The community faces an ageing population, youth outmigration, few local employers and social isolation, while many residents lack the skills or transport needed to access employment.

Bringing work closer to people

An **employment centre** was established, with workspaces in modular containers, to help **provide jobs locally**. Within these workspaces, people from **socially vulnerable groups** carry out manual tasks that cannot be automated, including assembling calendars, magazines and SIM cards, sewing and packing. With demand for these services growing, the facility needed to expand.

Between February and August 2020, a LEADER project combined with national and private funding expanded the employment centre. This included installing additional modular containers with workstations, a break room, sanitary facilities and storage space. At the same time, the social enterprise Užimtumo namai **secured more orders from businesses** for manual tasks carried out at the centre.

Creating flexible jobs for locals

The employment centre is designed to offer **flexible and accessible work opportunities, with locals participating according to their availability**. Užimtumo namai **engages workers under business licences**, as the number of people working each day varies and earnings depend on the volume of orders and the amount of work carried out per person.

People facing barriers to employment were prioritised, particularly those with limited transport options or people returning to the labour market. This included older residents, low-income households, women with caring responsibilities, people with limited skills or work experience, and the long-term unemployed.



Image: © vikau from Getty Images

Full good practice description

- VšĮ 'Užimtumo namai' (social enterprise)
- Ukmergė Region Local Action Group
- Ukmergė district municipal administration
- 02/2020-08/2020
- EUR 42 817
- Funding sources:
 - European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (LEADER)
 - National public funding
 - Private contribution
- www.ukmergesvvg.lt/projektai/2016-2023-m-igvyvendinti-projektai/igvyvendinti-leader-19-2-5/pareiskejas-vsi-uzimtumo-namai/
- Gintė Ivanauskienė, administracija@ukmergesvvg.lt

The expansion created **two full-time jobs** and provided **employment opportunities for 11 socially vulnerable residents**, taking the total number of people working at the employment centre to more than 20. The initiative also **received national recognition** in 2021, winning first place in the 'Well-being Creators' category of the **Future Village Creators Awards** organised by the Lithuanian Rural Network.

Building on local demand and partnerships

The initiative shows that **even small investments can unlock social impact**, with a modest LEADER-supported set-up delivering tangible outcomes in a remote area. It demonstrates the **effectiveness of organising work locally** in areas where transport is limited and commuting is difficult.

Adapting working hours and participation to residents' availability helped **involve people with different daily constraints**, while **cooperation with private companies** was important to **ensure a continuous flow of tasks** for workers.

As the volume of work increased, Užimtumo namai relocated operations to Ukmergė, organising transport for workers, including people with disabilities, from surrounding rural areas.

Community-led forestry project promotes social inclusion and mental well-being in rural Czechia

This initiative combined job training programmes and forest-based activities to tackle unemployment and mental health challenges in Brdy-Vltava. Through a multi-funded Community-led Local Development (CLLD) approach, it fostered resilience, social inclusion and environmental awareness.

Despite its proximity to Prague, the Brdy-Vltava region faces significant challenges linked to employment and mental health. Long-term unemployment among disadvantaged groups is worsened by low education levels, social barriers and lack of qualifications. Meanwhile, stress, difficulties with concentration and limited access to leisure activities contribute to declining mental health among young people.

To address these issues, the 'Community Well-being' project was launched, led by Brdy-Vltava Local Action Group (LAG). It provided **tailored employment programmes** and **forest-based activities** fostering resilience, social inclusion and environmental awareness, with funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

Tackling multiple territorial challenges through CLLD

The project started with a **community-based needs analysis**, organised by the LAG in collaboration with local stakeholders, which identified limited job opportunities. In response, the initiative provided job training programmes for unemployed adults in the area, including **work placements in the local forestry and gardening sectors**.

Participants in the job training received a regular **employment contract with the LAG** for six months, with the possibility of extending it for up to one year. During this period, they received **training in specialised equipment** and **could obtain a driving license**. In addition, they were offered **psychological coaching and consultations with a social worker**, helping them address personal challenges, such as debt management.

In parallel, parents participating in job training benefited from leisure activities for their children, along with other young people. This included **forest-based sessions combining education and mental health support**. Forest pedagogy activities blended theoretical and practical elements such as climate change education and tree planting.



Image: © Brdy-Vltava o.p.s. Local Action Group

Full good practice description

- Brdy-Vltava o.p.s. Local Action Group
- Municipality of Malá Hraštice
- 01/2023-12/2025
- EUR 260 416
- Funding sources:
 - ESF, 2014-2020 programming period
 - EAFRD, 2014-2020 programming period
 - Municipalities and local schools in the Brdy-Vltava region
- www.brdy-vltava.cz
- Markéta Dvořáková, dvorakova@brdy-vltava.cz

Local collaboration enabling implementation

By the end of 2024, the initiative had **supported 17 unemployed adults** and **engaged over 1 500 children and young adults** through educational activities and mental health-focused leisure sessions in forests. The project partnered with 12 municipalities to co-fund employment activities, which ensured financial sustainability.

It also established **long-term partnerships with 21 local schools and kindergartens**, and completed construction of a **new forest education and therapy centre** in Malá Hraštice, securing the project's long-term impact.

Several factors contributed to the initiative's success. Combining employment and education with environmental initiatives was effective in addressing social and ecological challenges – an **approach replicable in other rural regions**. Plus, strong collaboration with municipalities and schools ensured financial sustainability and community buy-in.

The project highlights the value of close stakeholder collaboration and tailored programmes to address diverse community needs. It illustrates how a **multi-funded CLLD approach can address multiple territorial challenges simultaneously** within a single integrated local development initiative.

Building local capacity for Smart Villages through LEADER in rural Romania

This LEADER-supported initiative helps rural communities translate the Smart Village concept into locally owned strategies. By combining participation, capacity building and staged support, it strengthens local governance and helps communes identify priorities and guide future territorial development.

In Romania, Smart Villages are often understood mainly as digital technology initiatives, while their broader community-led dimension can be harder to explain and organise. Administrative frameworks also tend to favour physical investments over participation, cooperation and social innovation.

To address this, the Someş Transilvan Local Action Group (LAG) developed a **practical methodology** helping rural communes **use Smart Villages as a community-led planning process**. Covering 12 communes in north-west Romania, it provides a structured pathway for communities to **build local ownership, identify priorities and prepare strategies** for future development.

From Living Lab to practical methodology

The approach was first **tested through a Living Lab** in Bonţida, involving Babeş-Bolyai University, community development professionals and students. The pilot explained the Smart Village concept, clarified expectations around participation and tested whether local actors were willing and able to take ownership.

It also broadened **planning discussions beyond traditional municipal priorities** to include community cohesion, entrepreneurship, tourism, education, communication, skills, traditions and mobility. Building on this experience, the LAG created a **strategy development pathway** for communes across its territory.

Interested communities apply through a pre-selection process and **present their vision** during a 'Vision 2035' pitching event. Selected communes **establish local strategy committees** and receive workshops, personalised counselling and small grants.

They also carry out **needs analyses and consultations**, involve community development and digital experts, and organise study visits to other communities. Youth involvement and balanced representation of young people and women are encouraged within local committees.



Image: © SCStock from Getty Images



Full good practice description

-  Asociația GAL Someş Transilvan (Local Action Group)
-  11/2024-ongoing
-  EUR 70 580
-  Funding source:
 - European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development via LEADER/CLLD
-  www.galsomestransilvan.ro
-  Laura Incze, contact@galsomestransilvan.ro

Building ownership for implementation

Participation is embedded throughout the process. Community members **co-create the strategy**, municipalities provide an **institutional anchor through formal approval**, and the LAG coordinates the methodology, ensures transparency and supports implementation across the territory.

Several enabling conditions contribute to the initiative's effectiveness. **Piloting the methodology** before wider roll-out allowed the approach to be refined in practice. **Transparent selection procedures** help identify committed communities, while **staged funding** links support to the completion and approval of Smart Village strategies.

The initiative has produced a tested and transferable methodology, broadened local planning discussions and established a **practical pathway for locally owned Smart Village strategies**. By strengthening participation, cooperation and strategic planning, it demonstrates how LEADER can support community-led territorial development beyond investment projects alone.

Smart Villages in practice: turning community priorities into local action in Pękowice, Poland

This community-led Smart Village model combines participatory planning, local leadership and flexible funding to support continuous rural development. By embedding consultation, implementation and learning into an ongoing process, it strengthens local ownership and helps small communities turn ideas into practical action.

Pękowice is a small rural settlement near Kraków, Poland, with around 630 inhabitants. Like many villages, it has limited local services and depends on neighbouring communities for much of its infrastructure. Although active local organisations already existed, the challenge for this small village was to lead its own development, mobilise residents and implement local priorities without a dedicated budget or extensive administrative capacity.

Since 2021, the Socjometr Foundation has supported Pękowice in applying the **Smart Village concept as a practical framework for community-led development**. Rather than treating Smart Villages as a one-off planning exercise, the initiative views them as a continuous process **combining strategic planning, implementation and regular community engagement**.

Turning community priorities into local action

The process is **led by the village leader and residents**, with the **Socjometr Foundation providing the methodology, tools and guidance**. It follows a recurring cycle beginning with **consultations and surveys to identify local needs**, followed by meetings, workshops and working groups where residents define priorities and design initiatives.

The **resulting initiatives** include community and cultural events, workshops for residents and local organisations, environmental actions such as tree planting, clean-up campaigns and ecological restoration, improvements to recreational facilities, and digital tools, including an online system for managing access to shared village infrastructure.

Activities are guided by two principles: they **bring together residents of different generations**, and, wherever possible, **funding is sought not only for Pękowice**, but also for projects benefiting neighbouring communities.

The digital infrastructure introduced through the initiative also generates a **self-sustaining income stream**. Payments for shared facilities are processed through a village app, with



Image: © Socjometr Foundation

Full good practice description

-  Socjometr Foundation
-  01/2021-ongoing
-  Variable – no single dedicated funding stream, projects financed individually
-  Funding sources:
 - National programmes (e.g. NIW-CRSO NOWEFIO)
 - Regional and environmental funds
 - Private contributions
 - Local municipality budget
-  www.socjometr.pl/obszary-dzialan/inteligentne-wsie
-  Adam Dąbrowski, a.dabrowski@socjometr.pl

revenues ring-fenced for local priorities, nearly tripling the village's discretionary budget.

Flexible funding and local ownership enabling implementation

A key feature of the initiative is that it **does not rely on a single funding programme**. Instead, projects are financed progressively through national programmes, regional and environmental funds, private contributions and the municipal budget, allowing the village to act whenever opportunities arise.

Its effectiveness lies in **combining committed local leadership with external methodological support**. Residents remain at the centre of decision-making and implementation, while the foundation facilitates the process rather than directing it. This has strengthened local ownership and embedded the Smart Village model in local decision-making.

By June 2026, the model had also supported the **development of 40 Smart Village concepts** across Poland and the training of dozens of practitioners.

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