



Zasavje - Beyond 2027

Regional Development Narrative
and Regional Development
Priorities

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EC-ENER-JUST-TRANSITION@ec.europa.eu

European Commission

B-1049 Brussels

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Introduction

This document offers a potential regional development narrative and associated priorities for the region of Zasavje from 2028 onwards. Although events in recent years, such as the Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, demonstrate the limitations of looking too far into the future, now is an opportune time for the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and its regional partners to consider the potential direction of Zasavje's regional development beyond 2027 and lessons from other regions. While the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028 to 2034 and related EU regional development priorities and funds are still to be discussed, this document facilitates a preparatory assessment of regional development options and priorities by the RDA and its partners.

Thus, to maintain the momentum of the region's shift towards a green economy and efforts in addressing its longer-term socio-economic challenges¹, it is timely and prudent for regional actors to consider the region's strategic direction and related priorities from 2028 onwards.

Given that the detail of future EU regional priorities and funds remain unclear, this document offers a broad indicative strategic direction and priorities for the region, not a detailed strategy nor the specifics of implementation and resourcing. Accompanied by good practices from other European transition regions, this document is a useful resource for engaging with and explaining to regional, national and EU stakeholders Zasavje's transition ambitions as the new MFF takes shape alongside national resources, priorities and guidance.

While all four regional municipalities in Zasavje are on a shared journey towards a more sustainable economic model, each will have its differences. Even so, the document's primary focus is on offering an overarching regional narrative and priorities for development and transition for the entire region.

The document starts by considering what the regional and policy contexts may look like by 2028. It then explores conceptual perspectives of regional development which inform its content. Next, the document explains the methodology used to develop the draft priorities, before offering a set of aspirational statements (the narrative) and a related vision. Building on this, ten draft priorities are proposed. Subsequently, diverse case studies which have relevance for Zasavje's future development are considered and lessons

identified². Finally, two annexes are provided: the first considers the social capital of the region; and the second provides a "snapshot" on the development of the region's circular economy.

Regional Context

Despite the uncertainty of the region's actual future economic context in 2028, it is probable that current notable longer-term challenges, informed by the region's unique scale, location, history and culture, will still be present. The creation of a dynamic and sustainable regional economy will be dependent on addressing these challenges whilst unlocking the region's assets and opportunities.

In 2028 issues of **scale, critical mass and location** will still be present. Zasavje will remain one of Slovenia's smallest statistical regions by surface area with the second smallest population of Slovenia's regions, with less than 60,000 residents. In addition, its proximity to dynamic urban economies will remain both an opportunity and a challenge.

ZASAVJE'S LOCATION IN SLOVENIA



ZASAVJE'S FOUR MUNICIPALITIES



1. Zasavje has a commendable track record of utilising EU funds. The region has at end 2024 secured nearly 85% of the 75m euros of the region's Just Transition Fund allocation to date.

2. This document was informed by significant dialogue between the START team and Zasavje Regional Development Agency (RDA), a workshop with the RDA and the municipalities of Trbovlje, Zagorje ob Savi and Hrastnik in November 2024, and three field visits to the region during 2024 and 2025.

The region's economy and society, especially in the municipalities of Trbovlje, Zagorje ob Savi and Hrastnik, will still be influenced by a **legacy of coal mining and carbon intensive industries**. Although Litija will remain rural in character, its fortunes will also be influenced by the development of the wider region.

The **economic performance of Zasavje will remain a challenge** in the future. In 2019, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in Zasavje was €12,287, approximately 45% lower than the Slovenian average³. This **gap in regional wealth creation** is expected to persist in 2028. In 2023, 53% of the working population commuted daily to Ljubljana and other economic centres such as Maribor⁴, which negatively affects the region's GDP. There is no expectation of a significant reduction in this **daily outflow of workers and professionals** by 2028. Additionally, an average monthly gross salary in Zasavje-based companies in 2021 of €1,901 (approximately €130 less than the Slovenian average) and a regional unemployment rate of 4.5% in 2023 (second highest regional rate in Slovenia) imply an underperforming economy. Moreover, the economic structure of Zasavje will continue to be characterized by a **reliance on micro-enterprises**; in 2021, 85.3% of all businesses in the region were micro-enterprises. Given this data, it is fair to conclude that by 2028 Zasavje is unlikely to have an economy characterised by a high concentration of locally based, well-paid, high-productivity jobs.

Despite these economic challenges, Zasavje's residents report a higher-than-average satisfaction with their **quality of life**. The region's inhabitants consistently express above-average contentment with their living conditions, highlighting a seeming paradox between economic indicators and perceived quality of life.

Environmentally, the region's **GHG emissions are likely to remain notable**, given a third of Zasavje's gross value added currently comes from carbon-intensive industrial processes (e.g., glass, chemicals, casting and mechanical industries). Also, the high levels of commuter traffic will still be a notable contributor. Despite the last coal mine and coal power plant closing over a decade ago, the **region's transition to a green, clean economy will be incomplete**. Given the increasing number of extreme weather events across Europe, the Sava River and the region's geography will pose an increased risk of flooding and landslips.

Socially, the region will still confront the challenge of **population contraction** due to declining birth rates and high out-migration, particularly among younger

residents seeking better jobs and opportunities. These demographic and labour market dynamics will lead to an older population and an **unfavourable dependency-ratio**, and in turn an increasing demand for healthcare and social services in a more challenging fiscal environment. A higher rate of negative regional health issues compared with national standards, which is linked to past industrial activity and environmental conditions, will contribute to this demand. In 2022, the share of people aged 25 to 64 with tertiary education in the Zasavje statistical region was 33.5%, notably below the Slovenian average of 40.1% (a figure influenced by the outward migration of young people noted above). The legacy of this **educational disparity** will still be impacting on regional economic performance, as higher educational attainment is linked to better economic and employment prospects.

Despite these challenges, the region's **assets and opportunities**, relating to location, quality of life, social capital and enterprise, will remain in 2028. In addition, new assets and opportunities will be emergent, such as the [Centre for Demonstration and Training in the Field of Carbon-free Technologies](#), and the revitalisation of former industrial areas for new economic activities (e.g., the [Lakonca Craft and Industrial Zone](#) including the [City of Acrobats](#)), alongside various circular economy initiatives and improved road infrastructure.

These challenges and opportunities will also be considered later in the paper.

Policy Context

Although the regional development policy context will be different by 2028, pointers regarding its future direction and themes can be gathered from existing policies and strategies. A list of ten pointers is noted below. These were drawn from DG REGIO resources and the following national and regional documents:

[Slovenian Development Strategy 2030](#)

[Slovenia's EU Cohesion Policy Programme 2021-2027](#)

[Slovenia's Recovery and Resilience Facility plan](#)

[Slovenian Smart Specialisation Strategy](#)

[National Strategy for Coal Exit and Restructuring of Coal Regions](#)

[Regional Development Program for the Zasavje Region \(RRP 2021-2027\)](#)

[Territorial Just Transition Plan \(TJTP\) of the Zasavje Region;](#)

[Action Plan for Zasavje Coal Region in Transition \(ONPP\)](#)

3. Economic data for this report was sourced from Zasavje RDA, SURS (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia), NIJZ (National Institute of Public Health) and Finance.si.

4. This is the highest commuting rate in Slovenia. Of those commuting from Zasavje, 79% travel to Ljubljana.

Policy pointers:

- P1.** Creating a low-carbon circular economy
- P2.** Adapting to climate change and net zero via exiting fossil fuels, promoting energy efficiency and renewable energy sources, and building resilient regions via smart energy systems, storage and promoting local energy systems
- P3.** Creating quality jobs and competitive, forward-facing enterprises, particularly in relation to the European Green Deal and Green Deal Industrial Plan
- P4.** Utilising Smart Specialisation to foster innovation and competitiveness in enterprises
- P5.** Supporting investments in research, development and innovation to promote industrial and economic competitiveness and the entrepreneurial ecosystem
- P6.** Accessible education and training for general and special competences linked to forward-facing employment sectors, particularly those that are green and sustainable
- P7.** Improving sustainable transport and ICT connectivity between regions, and regional infrastructure for sustainable socio-economic development
- P8.** Enhancing environmental protection and resilience, and sustainable land and resource use
- P9.** Strengthening community and cultural assets and networks to foster resilient communities and a vibrant and attractive region for residents and visitors
- P10.** Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and discrimination.

In addition, the EU is increasingly considering the interplay of two epoch transitions: green and digital. In 2019, the European Commission presented the European Green Deal and, subsequently, the Green Deal Industrial Plan in 2023, setting out a green transition for the EU's economy and society. Simultaneously, it is promoting digital transition to enhance industrial competitiveness (EC, 2020). A range of digital innovations, such as artificial intelligence, have become major growth factors for the EU. While the EU has strong assets, indicators show that the EU is not keeping up with its international competitors.

Ensuring a coherent approach to regional development, one that addresses the economic, social, and environmental challenges posed by the twin transition, while leveraging opportunities for sustainable development and competitiveness, is critical.

Conceptual Perspectives

Six factors are commonly accepted as being fundamental determinants of regional development and competitiveness (Fai, Tomlinson & Barzotto, 2024). These are:

- financial capital (funding)
- human capital (demography and skills)
- institutional capital (local leadership and capability)
- intangible capital (innovation and ideas)
- physical capital (infrastructure, resources, and location)
- social capital (community networks and culture)

When such factors coexist and interact in a region, they foster enterprise, competitiveness and productivity growth. In regional studies, they are regarded as being central to strong regional ecosystems (Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020). Therefore, policy analysts and academics recognise the need for their consideration and inclusion when identifying paths of development for a region (e.g., Barca et al., 2012; Lee & Brown, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). In turn, a key question is how to configure and mobilise these factors to optimise regional development, through effective policy prioritisation, resourcing and funding, and partnership working (both vertical and horizontal).

In addition to these six determinants, the creation and maintenance of competitive industries and enterprises are also recognised as vital drivers of regional success (e.g., Martin and Sunley, 2016; Boschma et al, 2017). In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the need for regional industries and enterprises to be green and sustainable (EC, 2019).

The table below identifies four common mechanisms for the creation and development of regional industries, none of which are mutually exclusive within a geography and all of which can interact in a complementary fashion.

Mechanisms of regional industrial renewal	Associated characteristics
Indigenous creation	Emergence of new industries and related technologies from within a region that have few or no immediate predecessors e.g., ICT
Transplantation	Importation of new industries, organisations and technologies from outside a region e.g., a new manufacturing facility or research and higher education facilities
Diversification	Processes, knowledge and technologies of an existing industry are redeployed to provide the basis of new but related industry e.g., utilities and green transition
Upgrading	Revitalisation and enhancement of industries via ongoing innovation i.e., introduction of new products, services, technologies and processes e.g., circular economy

A key catalyst for regional industrial development (and enterprise development) is innovation. In recent years EU innovation policy at the regional level has been increasingly linked to a mechanism known as Smart Specialisation (Abbot and Fitjar, 2024). It has three policy dimensions ("pillars"):

1. Localisation – Smart specialisation is a place-based approach that builds on the assets and resources available in a region
2. Prioritisation – Smart Specialisation identifies and concentrates resources on a limited set of areas, the so-called S3s (Smart Specialisation Strategies) investment priorities
3. Participation – S3s require quadruple helix actors (public sector, research, private sector and civil society) to engage throughout the strategy-cycle. Local actors need to support the definition, monitoring and implementation of S3 investment priorities.

Policy analysts and academics have noted that the success of S3s can be dependent on the institutional and research resources of a region (the greater these resources, the higher the likelihood of success). Also, S3s need to consider their interplay with disruptive external technologies, inward investment and technology transfer for regional development.

Below the collective level of industry, enterprise creation and growth are viewed as key mechanisms of regional development. Most regional policy analysts and academics agree that entrepreneurial culture and dynamism are key drivers of regional development. However, it is not just the quantity of firms that is important but also their quality.

Thus, high growth firms (HGFs) are seen as important to successful regional development, given their potential to contribute to productivity and employment growth (Coad et al., 2014). In Europe, HGFs are responsible for 50% of job growth, even though they represent only a small share of the total number of businesses (Coad et al., 2022). Moreover, HGFs usually have positive spillovers on non-HGFs (Du & Vanino, 2021). Generally, HGFs tend to be younger, more internationalised, more innovative and distributed across countries and sectors (e.g., HGFs are not restricted to urban areas and can be found in rural areas). Some specific firm characteristics, such as rapid job creation and export growth, as well as recruiting and training skilled and qualified personnel, can help in identifying businesses that have a higher likelihood of becoming HGFs (Lopez Garcia & Puente, 2012). Higher shares of HGFs seem to be found in regions with a higher degree of digitalisation, compared with national averages, and which have a supportive institutional and regulatory environment with good regional government (Amoroso et al, 2024).

Recently, the creation of co-working space has been seen as another potentially important catalyst for enterprise development and broader place-based development, especially for smaller towns and rural areas (Fai, Tomlinson & Barzotto, 2024). Co-working Spaces can facilitate networking, collaboration, co-learning and knowledge-sharing, and community-building, thereby creating scale, agglomeration and spillovers in often dispersed local economies.

Finally, policy analysts and academics are increasingly considering the interplay of green and digital transitions in the EU. Although, the EU has increasingly acknowledged the importance of linking the two agendas, research has noted that conceptual and operational coherence between these two macro policy goals is partial (Xinchu Gao, 2024).

Methodology to identify potential narrative and priorities

The methodology for developing an indicative narrative and priorities for regional development in Zasavje has four elements:

1. Consideration of the six determinants of regional development and their notable characteristics in Zasavje
2. Consideration of the operation of the mechanisms to create competitive industries and enterprises in Zasavje
3. Based on the first two elements, a potential narrative of development and related vision are offered
4. Informed by the above, potential regional development priorities, mapped against the policy pointers noted on page 6, are offered

Determinants and mechanisms of regional change

Of the six factors that are recognised as key to regional development and competitiveness four can be described as the foundational determinants of regional change and two can be described as resource determinants for enabling regional change:

Foundational determinants of regional change

• **Human capital** (demography and skills)

Three inter-related aspects of Zasavje's demographic dynamics are notable: out-migration of young people; aging of the population; and a worsening dependency ratio. In terms of its labour market, the high level of daily commuting and the relatively low level of educational attainment are noteworthy. In short, the pool of human capital is "drying up". Project Preplet⁵ (Zasavje Learning Hub) represents an innovative initiative to introduce a new teaching model for all primary and secondary schools that may improve the region's pool of human capital should out-migration be reduced.

5. Project Preplet is a consortium of primary and secondary schools aimed at enhancing high-quality, accessible learning. The project focuses on the development of entrepreneurial competencies, digital skills, and the digital transformation of education, while also promoting circular economy principles and training for green jobs, as part of the transition to a low-carbon society and economy. A new centre will enable modern teaching approaches, foster business and community links, and support the development of new programs to equip young people with essential future facing knowledge and skills. Preplet integrates education, digital transformation, and sustainable development, creating conditions for high-quality learning and employment.

• **Intangible capital** (innovation and ideas)

Slovenia's innovation performance is 91% of the EU average. Given its economy and absence of a university, Zasavje's performance is likely to be below the national average. Even so, the creation of a national centre for carbon-free technologies, novel educational initiatives, including DDTlab, and innovative firms, such as DEWESoft, represent key sources of innovation. Also, the region can build on its social innovation to counter this deficit (see also Social capital below).

• **Physical capital** (infrastructure, resources and location)

Zasavje's geography is advantageous and disadvantageous. Benefits of its proximity to urban markets are offset by a significant labour outflow. The terrain is good for tourism but not transport connectivity (despite a key railway line traversing the region) or industrial development (although degraded areas are being converted to business zones e.g., the Lakonca Craft and Industrial Zone and the Hrastnik Craft and Industrial Zone). Regional house and apartment prices are among the lowest in Slovenia, but a lack of smaller and medium sized apartments for younger people and smaller families represent a mismatch between supply and demand that can exacerbate out-migration and hinder in-migration. The potential for RES deployment is under exploited, even if the region has one the largest solar farms in Slovenia, near the former Trbovlje Power Station⁶, and is the location of Slovenia's first co-operative solar project in Hrastnik.

• **Social capital** (community networks and culture)

Zasavje has a rich network of sporting, social and cultural bodies and NGOs, and its respective communities have a strong sense of solidarity / common experience and pride, underpinned by its notable historical mining and industrial heritage. The level of social capital, and related social innovation, compares favourably with other EU regions in transition, encouraging trust, participation and knowledge sharing at a collective level. Despite economic challenges, the region has maintained a high level of social cohesion, reflected in various forms of collaboration, volunteerism, and intergenerational connectivity (see Annex 1 for further details).

6. The Trbovlje Power Station chimney, built in 1976, is the tallest flue-gas stack in Europe and the site has a range of development opportunities.

Resource determinants for regional change

- **Institutional capital** (local leadership and capability)

Zasavje has an active RDA that has developed notable capacity, including a Just Transition Centre, with an associated Circular Economy Academy, to facilitate transition in the region. There are also a clear multi-stakeholder governance structure and arrangements for regional development that engage and co-ordinate broader public capacities i.e., Council of the Region, Development Council of the Region and Regional Development Network.

- **Financial capital** (funding)

Zasavje has successfully utilised EU funding (e.g., Just Transition Fund) and there are notable examples of firms investing in new technologies, products and processes. However, in general, public finances are vulnerable to decreasing income due to population contraction and relatively low levels of wealth creation, and sustainable public budgets may become a more pressing issue⁷. Moreover, the absence of industrial sites and property for investors makes the area less attractive for external private sector investment compared to other Slovenian regions.

7. Municipal financing in Slovenia is primarily based on per capita funding (povprečnina), other state transfers, local revenue generation and EU funds. Per capita funding, which represents the main source of municipal financing, is allocated annually based on a fixed amount per resident. Smaller municipalities often benefit from special financial equalisation to ensure the provision of essential services. In addition to population size, factors such as the total area of the municipality, settlement dispersion, economic development, and specific needs (e.g., border or mountainous areas) influence financing. EU funding plays a crucial role for development projects, particularly in the areas of sustainable development, digitalization, and infrastructure. This financing system ensures a proportional distribution of resources. Debates frequently arise regarding the adequacy and fairness of the funding model, particularly in terms of addressing the actual needs of municipalities.

Mechanisms to create competitive industries and enterprises

Of the mechanisms noted previously for creating new industries and enterprises, their operation and importance are notable in Zasavje. Some examples are provided below.

- **Indigenous creation**

Entrepreneurial support initiatives, such as Katapult and Kompreshaus and the Rudnik, Kisovec and Lakonca industrial and craft centres encourage the emergence of new enterprises and, in turn, industries. In addition, these local initiatives are supplemented by the PONI national entrepreneurial support programme⁸.

- **Transplantation**

The creation of a national centre for carbon-free technologies and the creation of new business zones facilitate transplantation into the region.

- **Diversification**

The regional focus on the circular economy (see Annex 2, Snapshot Report on Zasavje's Circular Economy) provides opportunities for diversification e.g., green tourism linked with the Medija Spa redevelopment; while recent energy investments enable green energy production (e.g., HSE).

- **Upgrading**

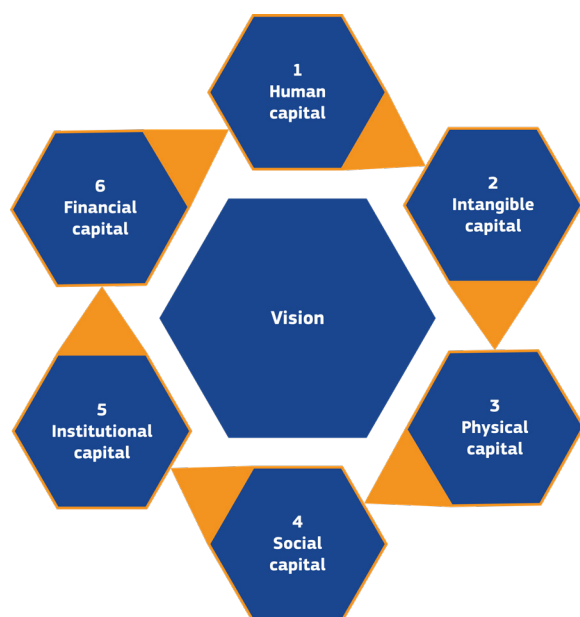
Projects to upgrade existing regional industries are evident e.g., on-site hydrogen production at glass and lime production facilities and establishment of two hydrogen production units in related industrial zones.

- Additionally, the region has internationally significant high growth firms (e.g., DEWESoft) and notable co-working spaces (e.g., Katapult). It also has long established innovative companies (e.g., Steklarna Hrastnik).

8. PONI (Podjetno nad izzive / Entrepreneurship overcoming challenges) is a programme that provides participants with a four-month employment contract, allowing them to fully commit to developing their business idea. During this period, participants receive training and mentorship, equipping them with the skills and competencies to successfully launch and manage their business. The programme addresses areas such as business planning, finance, marketing and law.

Zasavje beyond 2027: the narrative and vision statement

The draft regional narrative relates to a set of aspirational statements developed during the consultation and research process regarding the *six **determinants** of change and five **mechanisms** to create competitive industries and enterprises.*



Determinants (D) and related aspirational statements

- D1. Human capital:** Zasavje halts out-migration of those of a working age and halves commuting by 2034
- D2. Intangible capital:** Investments in research, innovation and advanced education by both the public and private sectors bring Zasavje in line with national innovation performance by 2034 and reverses the region's "brain drain"
- D3. Physical capital:** Zasavje reaches a 40%⁹ share of renewables in energy end-use by 2034 and has industrial zones, co-working spaces and incubators, and cultural and touristic (leisure and business tourism) infrastructure compliant with a low-carbon circular economy, utilising brownfield sites and legacy assets where possible. There is a notable increase in the housing supply for young people and young families
- D4. Social capital:** Knowledge sharing and networking increases openness to change and community resilience and inclusion, and leads to

increased enterprise, including social enterprises, and enhanced community activities and services¹⁰

D5. Institutional capital: Zasavje has multi-stakeholder and governance arrangements that ensure optimal co-ordination between private, public and civil actors and facilitate economies of scale in the provision of public services, public investments and public projects at the regional level, and enhance influence and dialogue at the national and EU levels

D6. Financial capital: Zasavje benefits from EU and national funding in the MFF period from 2028 - 2034 and the region becomes a more attractive place for private sector investment (local investment and inward investment), while improved demographic and economic performance grow the fiscal base of the region

Mechanisms (M) and related aspirational statements

- M1. Indigenous creation:** Zasavje has an enhanced entrepreneurial culture, reflected in a higher level of start-ups; and it is noted for a broader range of high growth firms
- M2. Transplantation:** Inward investment contributes to the diversification of the regional economy, in areas such as carbon free technologies, ICT, renewable energy and tourism, facilitated by locational branding / marketing and offers
- M3. Diversification:** Zasavje has numerous enterprises that have diversified into green and digital products and services, including a step-change in the generation of green electricity
- M4. Upgrading:** the region's traditional industries, such as glass, chemicals and casting, have introduced green products, services, technologies and processes and embraced the shift to a circular economy
- M5. Co-working Spaces:** the region is noted at the EU level for its innovative co-working spaces that have led to significant increases in higher paid employment, innovation, productivity, digital utilisation and knowledge spillovers

These aspirational statements lead to a supporting vision statement, as noted below:

"By 2034, Zasavje will have a sustainable demographic structure, a competitive, sustainable economy that has harnessed the benefits of green and digital transitions to maintain and create sustainable well-paid employment, and it has developed and utilised its regional social capital to create vibrant, sustainable communities."

9. Currently the NECP notes a 27% share of renewables in energy end-use by 2030 for Slovenia.

10. N.B. Social capital, apropos social infrastructure, and physical capital overlap e.g., housing, facilities for social services.

Indicative priorities

Based on this vision and related aspirational statements, ten indicative priorities are proposed:

1. **Creating a regional economy that generates quality jobs and positive demographic development through the creation, diversification and upgrading of enterprises and industries**
Related policy pointers – P3, P5, P9, P10
2. **Reskilling and upskilling the regional labour force for a low-carbon, circular and competitive regional economy, and the retention and creation of quality jobs accompanied with high levels of economic participation**
Related policy pointers – P1, P3, P6, P10
3. **Foster innovation and R&D in regional firms and other economic actors through the creation and development of supporting infrastructure, networks and provision**
Related policy pointers – P3, P4, P5, P6
4. **Promoting regional renewable energy sources, energy efficiency and energy resilience and addressing energy poverty**
Related policy pointers – P1, P2, P3, P8
5. **Developing economic sites and infrastructure which promote regional enterprise creation, diversification, upgrading and transplantation compliant with a low-carbon circular economy, repurposing brownfield sites and legacy assets where possible**
Related policy pointers – P1, P3, P5, P8
6. **Improving physical and digital connectivity that supports positive economic and demographic development compliant with a low-carbon circular economy**
Related policy pointers – P1, P3, P7, P8
7. **Addressing climate and environmental resilience, and environmental restoration**
Related policy pointers – P1, P2, P8, P9
8. **Building cultural and social assets, innovation and networks to foster a vibrant, attractive and sustainable region for residents and tourists**
Related policy pointers – P6, P8, P9, P10

9. Addressing social discrimination, poverty and discrimination

Related policy pointers – P3, P6, P9, P10

10. Improving the supply of affordable housing for young people and young families

Related policy pointers – P8, P9, P10

Case studies: European policy and practice relevant to Zasavje

As the region of Zasavje plans its economic development beyond 2027, it can draw on the experience of other European regions in addressing their development challenges and unlocking their development opportunities. Such cases can offer relevant ideas, lessons and inspiration for future policy and practice in the region.

In consultation with Zasavje RDA, eight case studies were selected for development. These cases have been drawn from other European regions undergoing transition and diversification. The selected eight cases are listed in the table below and their relevance to the determinants and mechanisms cited in this paper for the development of Zasavje are noted. A synthesis of the key “takeaways” from the case studies for Zasavje is noted after the table.

Each selected case study provides an explanation of the case's relevance to Zasavje, a short description of the case, a summary of outcomes / benefits and relevant lessons.

Name and location of case	Description	Associated Determinants & Mechanisms
1. Be here, Scotland	Attracting people to remoter areas	D1, D2, D4, M1
2. COMPTEN, Spain	Renewable energy for the whole community	D3, D4, M3
3. Crichton Campus, Scotland	Attracting higher education and advanced training functions to a small town	D1, D2, D3, D4, D6, M2, M4

Name and location of case	Description	Associated Determinants & Mechanisms
4. Limburg, Belgium	Co-ordinating development across municipalities	D5, D6
5. Ludgate Hub, Ireland	Creating co-working space in a small town	D1, D2, D3, D4, M1, M5
6. Sisak Moslavina digital hub, Croatia	Creating a digital games development centre in a small town	D2, D3, D6, M1, M3, M4, M5
7. Terhills, Belgium	Developing a post-industrial (coal mining) area for tourism	D3, D6, M3, M4
8. Vistula Cultural Brand, Poland	Creating a rural, regional brand and programme of offers for tourists	D2, D5, M3, M4

Selected “Takeaways” from the Case studies

- Although Zasavje’s population is declining, the trend can be reversed by co-ordinated action of government actors in the region, with the RDA potentially taking a lead role
- The presence of Slovenia’s first co-operative solar project in the region (Hrastnik) is commendable, but there is opportunity to scale-up energy transition across the region’s communities e.g., via the roll-out of further solar projects
- Attracting “satellite” higher education and advanced learning / training facilities could be a game changing opportunity to counter a current absence of such regional facilities
- Given the limited development sites in the region, there needs to be a clear long-term regional plan on how green and brown field sites can be developed in a complementary and differentiated manner to avoid unnecessary competition and displacement
- Further development of serviced and specialised co-working spaces, could lead to significant job creation and retention in the region and improve community and demographic resilience
- Zasavje’s policies and actions to support industrial diversification need to be joined up and scaled up over the long-term, thereby further linking hard capital investments with softer revenue interventions, including education, reskilling and enterprise support
- Tourism is a potential new development axis of scale for Zasavje and the region’s industrial legacy need not be a barrier, but rather an asset and catalyst for external investment
- Given Zasavje’s national profile, its disparate tourist attractions – places, culture, events and traditions, and produce – should be packaged together as a set of offers and promoted in the context of an overall regional brand

Be here – Attracting people to remoter areas	
Location	Highlands and Islands, Scotland (UK)
Relevance	• An online marketing and information campaign led by an RDA to promote in-migration to a region historically associated with out-migration • The campaign aims to attract human capital, particularly younger people, to encourage diversification in the regional economy and community resilience • The campaign also aims to change external perceptions of the region, thereby encouraging greater inward investment and tourism
Associated determinants and mechanisms	D1, D2, D4 M1
Description	Highlands and Island Enterprise (HIE), the RDA for Northern Scotland, has four clear goals in the context of the national journey to net zero emissions by 2045. These goals relate to: reversing historic population decline in this largely rural and relatively remote region; supporting the conditions for growth and a green transition; building successful, resilient enterprises; and enabling strong, capable and resourceful communities. Critical to this mission is attracting human capital, especially younger persons, from the rest of the UK and internationally to counter natural demographic change (less births than deaths) and outward migration of young people. To attract mobile human capital, HIE has launched Be here, an online marketing and information campaign to promote in-migration of young entrepreneurs, workers and students, thereby bringing new skills, knowledge and creativity to the region. The campaign is complementary to a broader national campaign for promoting in-migration to Scotland. The Be here campaign is built around numerous stories and case studies about people who have moved to the Highlands and Islands and realised their business ambitions (e.g., one new company has made the local renewable energy supply chain more circular) and there are personal video testimonials about the region's quality of life and professional and economic benefits of living in the area. In addition, the website signposts users to start-up and business support advice, immigration advice and services, and guidance and information for potential students. In addition, Be here materials and positive messages about the region are available to local business and organisations to encourage them to independently market the region as a great place to live and work.
Outcomes	• Following over a century of population decline, the region has, for a decade now, seen a return to population growth although differences still exist between larger towns and peripheral communities. • In recent years, the population increase in the Highlands & Islands has been due to net in-migration; and, indeed, natural demographic change without such mitigating migration would have led to a decrease in population in almost all areas of the region. • There has been a positive reassessment of the region, as place to live and work, in the national and international media. • These positive changes to the region's demography and profile are reflected in regional house prices (a 5.5% increase between 2023 and 2024) and the area having an employment rate higher than the rest of Scotland (December 2023).

Be here – Attracting people to remoter areas

Lessons	• Historic demographic decline, even in regions more peripheral than Zasavje, can be reversed through active measures, such as marketing and information campaigns, to encourage in-migration, as part of a wider strategy and set of measures for regional development. • The attraction of human capital can support regional economic diversification and business and community development. • An RDA can be a vital regional actor in promoting a new image / identity for its region and targeting key groups outside the region, such as entrepreneurs, skilled workers and investors.
Further information	• https://www.hie.co.uk/our-region/behere/ • https://www.scotland.org/inspiration/top-five-reasons-you-should-live-and-work-in-scotlands-highlands-and-islands • https://www.scotland.org/move-to-scotland/migration-service

COMPTEM – Renewable energy for the whole community

Location	Crevillent (Valencia region), Spain
Relevance	• Development of a renewable energy community (REC) combining public and private sector involvement at a municipal level (circa 30 000 habitants).
Associated determinants and mechanisms	D3, D4 M3
Description	Launched in 2019, COMPTEM (Community for Municipal Energy Transition) is an initiative of Enercoop Group (a subsidiary of Crevillent Electric Cooperative, which was founded in 1925) supported by Generalitat Valenciana and the Institute for Energy Saving and Diversification (IDAE). The initiative seeks to address the challenge of energy transition from a local level through promoting a new energy model that is fair, democratic, decentralised, clean, renewable and digital, while positioning Crevillent as a leading local energy community in Europe. The COMPTEM renewable energy community (REC) aims to promote self-consumption through collective photovoltaic installations on both (private) residential buildings and, with the collaboration of the City Council, on public buildings as well as on previously unused public plots of land. This broad approach means even those persons who do not have their own space for solar panels can participate in the initiative, thus helping to democratise access to renewable energy. Investment and project implementation – which includes lithium-ion energy storage and charging plants for electric mobility – is provided by Enercoop, with residents that permit use of their roof space receiving a reduction of their electricity bill. Access to new capacity is allocated through a lottery among the cooperative members. Other key features of the initiative include: • Awareness-raising activities to inform citizens not only about the benefits of the project in terms of reduced energy bills, but also about the importance of local renewable energy production to combat climate change. • Digitisation campaign, including launching a mobile app that allows citizens to monitor their energy consumption in real time, see peak usage and receive recommendations on how to optimise their electricity tariff. • Public communication through installing digital information panels in public places that provide real-time information on the community's renewable energy production and consumption.

COMPTEN – Renewable energy for the whole community

Outcomes	- Over 1 million euros of investment (2021-23) in self-consumption facilities, co-financed by the Generalitat Valenciana, through the Valencian Institute of Business Competitiveness (IVACE). - In the period 2021-2023, 7 photovoltaic solar installations for collective self-consumption came into operation and a further 3 to be added in the coming year. This will bring the overall operating capacity to around 1 MW, with an energy production capacity of 1,250 MWh/year, enough to supply more than 1,000 families. The intention is that by 2030 the operating capacity will gradually increase to cover the entire municipality of Crevillent (circa 30 000 inhabitants). - Initial savings on electricity bills are estimated at 10 to 15%, which could rise to 25% when the initial investment is amortized.
Lessons	- The long history of the local energy cooperative Enercoop means citizens are used to the idea of electricity production and distribution as a community activity, thus raising social acceptance of a renewable energy community. - The project benefitted from strong political will on the part of both Enercoop and the municipal administration to achieve 100 per cent renewable energy production in Crevillent's electricity mix by 2050, for which COMPTEN is seen as a key component. - Supporting activities (awareness-raising, digitalisation, communication) have been important for informing, educating and engaging citizens, thereby creating a greater sense of control and involvement in the transition to renewable energy.
Further information	- The Just Transition and Renewable Energy Communities in the Sulcis-Iglesiente - START technical assistance summary (forthcoming) Enercoop will turn Crevillent into a pioneering local energy community in Europe – Enercoop webpage

Crichton Campus - Attracting higher education and advanced training functions to a small town

Location	Dumfries, Scotland (UK)
Relevance	- Creating higher education facilities in a small rural town by attracting and co-locating educational institutions. - Providing advanced learning and training for residents and attracting people - students, researchers, teachers etc. - to an area that suffers from out-migration. - Offering courses and research relevant to the local economy - Using local social capital to create a charitable trust to develop the campus.

Crichton Campus - Attracting higher education and advanced training functions to a small town	
Associated determinants and mechanisms	
	D1, D2, D3, D4, D6, M2, M4
Description	The Crichton Campus is home to a unique, multi-institution academic campus offering a range of flexible full and part-time tertiary education opportunities. The campus offers courses and research relevant to the local economy, including carbon management, environmental sustainability, health and social care, ICT and tourism. The varied study options and small town / rural location attracts local, national and international students, researchers and academics to the town of Dumfries (30,000 residents). The University of Glasgow, the University of the West of Scotland (UWS), The Open University in Scotland (OU), Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and Dumfries and Galloway College all have a presence on or close to the campus. It is estimated that these institutions have close operational links with over 120 private, public and Third Sector organisations. The different academic institutions work in partnership to develop their collective offering via the Crichton Campus Leadership Group, which also includes The Crichton Trust, Dumfries and Galloway Council and The Crichton Foundation. The Foundation is a charitable organisation that broadens local access to tertiary education and supports development of the Crichton Campus. The Foundation encourages local people, businesses and organisations to engage with the campus. In 2023, the Crichton Campus Leadership Group launched a new statement of ambition based on four priority areas: Sustaining and growing equitable and accessible learning opportunities; Student experience; Increasing research capacity and knowledge exchange; and Business innovation and collaboration.
Outcomes	• The campus supports over 120 full-time jobs and generates over EUR 20 million per annum of spend in the local economy. • Circa 400 higher education students and 50 research staff are located on the campus. • The campus has generated in-migration, including a significant proportion of international students and researchers, to an area associated with out-migration and prevented locals having to leave the area to access higher education.
Lessons	• A rural / small town setting need not be a deterrent to attracting tertiary education functions to a locality; it can be an advantage if framed in the context of quality of life and environment. • Co-locating several organisations can create a critical mass of educational and research provision and opportunities, and support economies of scale. • Building and leveraging partnerships and local networks based on existing social capital can be a catalyst for transformational change.
Further information	• https://www.crichton.co.uk/about/ • https://www.crichtonfoundation.org/ • https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/ses/studyindumfries/

Limburg – Coordinating development across former mining municipalities

Location	Limburg, Belgium
Relevance	• Local (municipal) collaboration and coordination that overcomes individual and conflicting interests to promote diversified development opportunities that benefit the region as a whole. • Utilisation of mining buildings and infrastructure in ways that respect their heritage while transforming them into modern workplaces, cultural and leisure sites.
Associated determinants and mechanisms	D5, D6
Description	Coal mining in Limburg province started in 1917 with, at its peak, 46 000 workers employed in the region's 7 coal mines. However, faced by declining profitability, the first closure came in 1966 and was completed by 1992. Although the regional Flemish government made substantial finance available for phase-out, mine closure and compensation to workers, neither the mining company nor the government had a plan to do anything creative with the mine buildings and a complete demolition was soon started. However, with sustained activism by local associations and special efforts by public officials, in 1992 and 1993, some 45 industrial buildings and installations across the 7 sites were given protected heritage status, and subsequently around 20 more buildings (some with previous civic use) were given this status. Despite the protection of the mining heritage, in the absence of a proactive spatial policy, it was not easy to devise plans for redevelopment. However, during the mid-1990s, through the Mining Region Platform (a strategic collaboration initiative between the municipalities of the region, formed to tackle common challenges such as spatial planning and redevelopment) an informal coordination and consensus arose regarding the main themes for the re-use of each coal mine. This diversified approach was partially precipitated by the closure of the Ford Motor Company plant in Genk in 2014 (which had been opened after mine closures began in the 1960s) that promoted a desire to move away from a monocultural industrial structure and to favour bottom-up and innovative development initiatives. These include: • Thor Park (Waterschei coalmine) including Energyville: business, technology and science park; • C-Mine (Winterslag coalmine): culture and creative industries • LABIOMISTA (Zwartberg coalmine): art and biodiversity • Greenville (Houthalen coalmine) incubator for cleantech and circular economy • Heusden-Zolder (Zolder coalmine) heritage, culture, education and SME • Terhills (Eisden coalmine): nature, leisure/recreation, and retail development • be-MINE (Beringen coalmine): leisure and heritage Although each site has its own theme/vision, there remains an ambition to create a physical connection between the sites, based on the now derelict railway that earlier served the coalmines. Essentially, this is an old idea of connecting the region internally around a central new narrative, with the symbolic redevelopment of COALTRACK (Kolenspoor) as a binding factor for rejuvenation of the region.

Limburg – Coordinating development across former mining municipalities

Outcomes	• Creation of unique landmark developments that respect and leverage mining heritage to transform economic, social, and environmental conditions.
Lessons	• Giving multiple sites a specific theme or a vision can help to reduce complexity and competition amongst municipalities and locations and accelerates ideas and public engagement in the implementation process. • Co-operation and co-ordination across municipalities – who often have individual and conflicting interests – can provide better development opportunities for the region as a whole. • For most of the sites the role of the municipality (especially in the person of the Mayor as ‘leader’) was decisive, together with building partnerships of interested external ‘partners’ (e.g., NGOs, creatives & activist; governmental agencies and knowledge institutions; and private entrepreneurs).
Further information	• Co-ordination and partnership to promote revitalisation of multiple former coal mining sites Insights from Limburg, Belgium – START Report • Genk’s ongoing transition – Coal Regions in Transition Initiative Case Study

Ludgate Hub – Co-working space in a small town

Location	Skibbereen, Ireland	
Relevance	• Repurposing of disused commercial building to support the attraction and retention of economic activity, and for delivering community benefits. • Supporting rural regeneration through digitalisation and knowledge development (e.g., education, training, and mentoring services). • Local leadership and “bottom up” local involvement through early stage and ongoing community engagement.	
Associated determinants and mechanisms		D1, D2, D3, D4 M1, M5
Description	Set up by a steering group made up of local entrepreneurs, digital ambassadors (volunteers) and local business owners / enterprises, Ludgate Hub is a co-working space for both individual young professionals and larger enterprises, offering affordable hot desk space for 75 workers, private offices, and meeting rooms. Operating from a rehabilitated bakery building (formerly a cinema) in the periphery of Cork, the Hub benefits from being in one of the first Irish rural towns with high-speed internet connectivity and 100% fibre-to-the-building broadband network. It provides a middle ground between office and home working, allowing independent workers and employees to live and work remotely with no impediments to connectivity and with the equipment necessary to operate effectively. In addition, the Hub offers opportunities for networking, mentoring, and events that have attracted both temporary and full-time members. The Hub is also a resource for the local community, aiming to support rural regeneration through digitalisation, closing the digital divide between rural and urban areas, and supporting transition to a Climate Neutral Society. Initiatives supported by the Hub include, for example, digital literacy and STEM education for all age groups, information and community capacity development for home energy retrofitting, mentoring businesses in the pre-start-up and start-up phase, e-strategy and solutions for local retailers, assistance to employment seekers including women wishing to return to the workforce.	

Ludgate Hub – Co-working space in a small town

Outcomes	• Attraction of highly skilled remote workers and business start-ups. • 800 jobs created over the long term in the wider economy. • € 4 million contribution to the local economy, including boosting tourism.
Lessons	• Key success factors include a robust organising board, access to capital (95% of projects are privately funded through donations or corporate sponsorships), and building community support and engagement, including engaging the younger generation to show them that they have a future in rural communities. • Identifying a niche market position and selling points are important to differentiate from competing locations, especially when packaging rural areas to attract people from urban areas. • Providing a diversity of business-related services (e.g., co-working spaces, digital support to smaller businesses, start-up incubation) but also promoting initiatives of benefit to the wider community.
Further information	• Ludgate Hub Website • Ludgate Hub – a co-working space in rural Ireland, OECD case study • Ludgate Hub, Connectedhubs profile • The Ludgate Hub, ENRD case study

Sisak-Moslavina hub - Creating a digital games development centre in a small town

Location	Sisak Moslavina, Croatia
Relevance	• The Sisak-Moslavina region has a GDP per capita significantly lower than the national average (nearly half) and has high levels of unemployment. • The main town of the region is 60km from the capital (a proximity similar to that of Zasavje from Ljubljana) making commuting a viable option for residents. • The area is dependent on carbon intensive industries (e.g., metallurgy, refining and petrochemicals) and is aiming to diversify its economy, utilising the JTF. • The digital games initiative, established by the RDA and local government, is nationally significant and displays innovative links with pre-school and school education, vocational training / reskilling and now tertiary education.
Associated determinants and mechanisms	D1, D2, D3, D6, M1, M3, M4, M5

Sisak-Moslavina hub - Creating a digital games development centre in a small town

Description	The digital games initiative was launched in 2016 and has been progressively developed around six activities: • free English courses in local kindergartens in recognition of the importance of the language in new media and digital games; • videogame programming and graphics workshops in primary and secondary schools; • establishing the “PISMO” incubator (1200 m2 of space in two buildings with equipment for videogames development); • financial support for supporting video game start-ups (up to EUR 20,000, per startup); • 6-month-long courses in the “PISMO” incubator for unemployed residents, in cooperation with Croatian employment service; • and a four-year programme for high school students for developing videogames and becoming “videogame technicians”. In 2020, the development of a new, larger games industry centre was identified by the Croatian Government as a nationally strategic project and was subsequently included in the TJTP. The new games centre will comprise of the following: a higher education faculty with training and research facilities; student dormitory; sports facilities; a business accelerator and incubator; associated energy, communications and transport infrastructure.
Outcomes	• A nationally and internationally recognised centre of excellence in a new industry for the region, one that will promote regional competitiveness, positive spill-over effects in the local economy and a new image for the region in Croatia, the EU and globally (see link below regarding interface with China). • Local young people are aware of and engaged in the new industry and receive related education and training, thereby developing a pipeline of human capital for this emergent industry and wider ICT utilisation and innovation in the region. • The “PISMO” incubator has created 85 start-ups relating to digital games, associated technologies and wider innovation e.g., the development of smart eyewear to convert sound into text for people with hearing impairments • 320 local unemployed persons have retrained and acquired new skills.
Lessons	• A carbon intensive local economy can foster diversification into an unrelated, less carbon dependent industry. • Policy needs to be joined up and scaled up over the long-term, thereby linking hard capital investments with softer revenue interventions, including education, reskilling and enterprise support. • Policy can be intergenerational in nature focusing on different stages of the development and supply of human capital, including pre-school, school and post school education, and vocational training. • Higher education facilities for teaching and research can be created in a region where there is no precedent, but it needs support at the national and local levels.

Sisak-Moslavina hub - Creating a digital games development centre in a small town

Further information

- https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/Croatia/pismo-croatia-s-sisak-moslavina-county-positions-itself-as-a-hub-of-gaming-expertise
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- <https://www.iurc.eu/2023/05/29/becoming-the-gaming-industry-hub-sisak-moslavina-county-and-chongqing-establish-cooperation-for-the-digital-economy/>

Terhills – tourism and leisure development of former mining site

Location

Limburg, Belgium

Relevance

- Rehabilitation of former mining and quarrying site and repurposing of buildings and physical infrastructure.
- Creation of a diversified and differentiated tourism offer combining nature, leisure/recreation, and retail development.
- Mobilisation of public funds (for rehabilitation and basis infrastructure) to leverage private project finance for new economic activities.

Associated determinants and mechanisms

D3, D6

M3, M4

Description

Situated on the edge of Belgium's only National Park, Terhills covers an area of approximately 365 hectares, encompassing the former Eisden mine (closed in 1987), power station (closed in 1996) and gravel quarrying site. Terhills NV, a subsidiary of the Limburg Investment Company LRM (a financial investment company wholly owned by the Flemish regional government), made a EUR 75 million investment to transform the area and started reconverting the mining site into a tourism hotspot, with 100 hectares re-zoned as a nature reserve, and another 119 hectares opened for nature recreation. Although shaped by its past as an industrial mining and gravel digging site, Terhills markets itself as an environment now characterised by lush fauna and flora, huge watercourses and unique sites, providing a wide range of recreational activities based on eco-friendly project development.

Initial development in the area included [Maasmechelen Village](#), a luxury outlet shopping village situated adjacent to the Eisden mine site, and cinema complex (Euroscop), both opened in 2001. Subsequent attention shifted also to Eisden's three spoil tips and the former gravel mining site, with the luxury [Terhills Hotel](#) - occupying the former main building of the Eisden mine - opening in 2015, alongside development of the [Terhills Conference](#) meeting complex, the open-air event square Terhills Events, the [Terhills Cablepark](#), and the main gateway to the Hoge Kempen National Park. September 2019 saw the opening of the [Elaisa](#) luxury wellness centre, followed in May 2021 by the premium holiday park '[Terhills Resort by Center Parcs](#)', that also aims for energy self-sustainability.

The development of Terhills has also benefitted from public funding for non-return related investments, including around € 3 million for infrastructure in a shuttle service, event zone, and bicycle paths (100% subsidized by LSM¹¹) and € 6.5 million for the building of a bicycle bridge as a special attraction '[Cycling between the slagheaps](#)' (100 % subsidized by the Province of Limburg & LSM)

11. Limburg Sterk Merk (LSM) is a foundation and investment fund that invests in not for profit (non-return) projects in education, care, tourism, nature, culture etc that contribute to the balanced development of the province of Limburg. It is funded through dividends paid out by LRM.

Terhills – tourism and leisure development of former mining site

Outcomes	• Terhills has acted as a catalyst for employment and economic growth in the region. • Total investment at the Terhills site is estimated at around €160 million. • The number of created workplaces / jobs is around 400 (resort, hotel, and cable park), with an estimated 400 extra indirect jobs. • A strong increase of the number of visitors / tourists to the region (about 1 million extra visitors) plus the associated economic impact from visitor spending.
Lessons	• Successful development of the site was built on a master plan for reconversion of the site, with a long-term perspective and staged implementation. • Achieving economic and accompanying social and environmental benefits was facilitated by channelling public financial support through a company (LRM) with a mandate to stimulate economic growth by investing in strategic projects
Further information	• Terhills website • LRM website

Vistula Cultural Brand - Creating a rural regional brand and related offers for tourists

Location	Kujawsko-Pomorskie region, Poland
Relevance	• A project to promote the profile of a region through joined up marketing and the development of a suite of related tourist offers. • The region was not traditionally associated with tourism and most visitor trips to the region were no more than a day in duration. • By grouping and curating disparate tourism attractions / assets into offers, the area is now more easily marketed to tourists who are more likely to spend more time and money in the area.
Associated determinants and mechanisms	D2, D5 M3, M4

Vistula Cultural Brand - Creating a rural regional brand and related offers for tourists

Description	The Valley of the Lower Vistula in the Polish region of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie has a unique potential due to its rural setting, cultural diversity (including a distinct folklore relating to the Mennonites), a range of local food products and a variety of cultural and gastronomic events. A comparative analysis undertaken a decade ago found that such potential was not reflected in the tourist products being offered. Additionally, regional and national tourist operators and promoters did not perceive the area as a notable tourism destination with compelling or joined up offers. In response, a project co-funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Regional Development (EAFRD) set out to promote cultural and food attractions in the area. The project resulted in a package of researched offers for tourists, a new cultural and food brand and a more business-like approach to marketing the area to potential tourists. The project built on a participatory approach, where over 100 actors took part in workshops, study-trips and activities aimed at sharing knowledge, improving skills and developing new approaches in the local tourism industry. Extensive analysis was also undertaken to identify local tourism opportunities that matched with national and international tourism demand and the development of a brand that linked with the area's authentic identity. The project resulted in the launch of a new tourism network promoting cultural and food tourism in the Vistula valley and the creation of six tourist offers: a two-day visit built around sampling local food and culture; a two-day visit built around hiking in the Lower Vistula river area; a one-day trip to discover regional food; a one-day excursion by foot or bike to explore Mennonite culture; an agro-tourist accommodation offer; and a one-day excursion to explore the area's forests and natural heritage.
Outcomes	• The area is now perceived as a visitor destination and residents are more aware of the area's tourism assets and potential. • Visitors stay longer - overnight visits are now more common • The area is now associated with quality and authenticity in terms of culture, food and landscape. • Other complementary visitor activities have emerged, such as cycling and heritage. • The local tourism industry is now more networked and collaborative.
Lessons	• Disparate tourist attractions – places, culture, events and traditions, and produce – need packaged together and promoted in the context of an overall regional brand. • Such attractions need interpreted through and matched with national and international demand. • By developing and marketing compelling, joined up offers tourists will stay for longer and spend more, especially regarding accommodation and food. • Building and leveraging partnerships and local networks based on existing social capital can be a catalyst for change.
Further information	• https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/good-practice/creating-vistula-valley-cultural-and-culinary-brand_en#section--resources:tab_id=overview • https://visitbydgoszcz.pl/en/discover/bydgoszcz-surroundings/3892-road-trip-lower-vistula-valley#:~:text=The%20cultural%20heritage%20of%20the,Taste%20Festival%E2%80%9D%2C%20an%20annual%20event

Concluding Remarks

In 2028, Zasavje will face many of the same economic, environmental and social challenges that it currently does, and will still be in the process of unlocking its opportunities and building on its assets. Moreover, the region will be increasingly faced with the need to adapt its carbon and energy intensive industries to a more sustainable and circular model. However, this paper has illustrated that the region has notable strengths, many of which are under exploited.

Commendably, the region is currently demonstrating an ability to respond to change through organisations that are forward facing, clarity in planning and partnership working, and the effective use of EU funding. Such institutional strengths will still be present in 2028.

Furthermore, recent investments in Zasavje and the experiences of the selected case study regions demonstrate that positive regional change and reinvention is achievable. Regions need not be prisoners of their past.

Therefore, this document offers an indicative vision, narrative and associated priorities that can act as a catalyst for informed discussion amongst Zasavje's stakeholders about the region's strategic direction and goals and related priorities beyond 2027. The document can also be a useful resource for engaging with and explaining to national and EU stakeholders Zasavje's ambitions as the new MFF takes shape alongside national priorities and guidance.

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Annex 1: Social Capital of the Zasavje Region

The notable social capital of the Zasavje region is built on strong interpersonal relationships, solidarity, and a well-connected local community, shaped by its historical mining and industrial heritage. Despite economic challenges, the region has maintained a high level of social cohesion, reflected in various forms of collaboration, volunteerism, and intergenerational connectivity.

Key Characteristics of Zasavje's Social Capital:

1. Strong Community Bonds:
 - The mining community tradition has established a culture of mutual support and solidarity.
 - Numerous associations, volunteer organisations, and initiatives actively connect residents and contribute to community development.
2. Intergenerational Connectivity:
 - The transmission of knowledge, values, and experience between generations, particularly in local crafts, traditions and culture.
 - Older residents actively engage in mentoring and advising younger generations in entrepreneurship, crafts, and social activities.
3. High Level of Social Inclusion:
 - Community life is strongly supported by various local initiatives that promote the inclusion of vulnerable groups.
 - A well-developed network of NGOs and civil initiatives operates in social, environmental, and cultural fields.
4. Crisis Response and Cooperation:
 - The people of Zasavje are known for their quick mobilisation and self-organisation in times of crisis, as seen in environmental disasters (such as floods and adverse economic impacts / shifts).
 - Businesses, schools, and NGOs frequently collaborate on community projects to improve quality of life.
5. Local Identity and Cultural Capital:
 - Strong pride in the industrial heritage and cultural traditions, which unites residents and reinforces a sense of belonging.
 - A vibrant calendar of cultural, sports and social events contributes to community bonding.

Challenges and Opportunities for Strengthening Social Capital

Although social capital in Zasavje is strong, the region faces challenges related to demographic change, youth migration and economic restructuring. Opportunities for strengthening social capital include:

- enhancing cooperation between educational institutions, businesses, and civil society to improve connectivity and knowledge transfer;
- encouraging social entrepreneurship and community-driven initiatives to foster greater economic and social inclusion;
- digitalisation and the development of smart communities, enabling increased participation and connectivity among residents.

Conclusion

The social capital of the Zasavje region remains one of its key strengths for resilience and sustainable development. Strong community ties, solidarity, and a willingness to collaborate allow the region to successfully adapt and evolve despite challenges. Further investment in education, social innovation, and intergenerational cooperation will be crucial in preserving and strengthening Zasavje's social capital in the future.

Annex 2: Snapshot Report on Zasavje's Circular Economy

Introduction

This Snapshot Report on the Development of Zasavje's Circular Economy (Snapshot Report) is produced as part of the technical assistance support to the Zasavje Regional Development Agency (Zasavje RDA) through the Secretariat Technical Assistance for Regions in Transition (START) facility. This report is prepared by ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability European Secretariat - that is a member of the consortium responsible for managing the EU Coal Regions in Transition Secretariat.

The Snapshot Report is developed through the results from the following Zasavje Region circular and just transformation targeted events:

- Zasavje Region Field Visit (13.11.2024).
- Zasavje Just Transition Regional Conference (14.11.2024).
- START exchange supporting the development of the circular economy in Zasavje Region (05.-07.03.2025).

START provided support to the Zasavje RDA to develop a narrative and priorities for the region's diversification and transition from 2028 onwards. This further includes giving advice and guidance regarding the region's circular economy ambitions and plans.

The main goal of the START exchange was to interact with local stakeholders in the Zasavje Region and discuss key challenges and opportunities for the circular transition of Zasavje. The following were the central questions addressed in the discussion:

- How to use circular business zones as a driver for the economic and social development of the region?
- What are the main obstacles and how to overcome them?
- How to connect local communities, municipalities, and the economy to successfully implement a circular transition?
- How to include local companies in the circular economy and develop new business models?

This report highlights the key insights gained from the exchange visit, focusing on the current Zasavje regional circular economy priorities and initiatives, practices and activities, future focus areas and actions, as well as potential challenges and opportunities.

Current priorities and initiatives

Low-carbon circular economy (Goal 8) is one out of 12 Slovenia's development goals defined in the core development framework of the Republic of Slovenia – the [Slovenian Development Strategy 2030](#). The transition towards a low-carbon circular economy is a priority development orientation for the entire economy and has strong links with the following national strategic orientations (SO):

- **SO-1:** Inclusive, healthy, safe, and responsible society.
- **SO-2:** Highly productive economy that creates added value for all.
- **SO-3:** Learning for and through life.
- **SO-4:** Well-preserved natural environment.

These nationally determined goals constitute a basis for designing the priority tasks and measures to be implemented by Slovenian government, regional development stakeholders, local communities and other stakeholders.

The [Territorial Just Transition Plan of the Zasavje Region](#) highlights the need for restructuring and diversification of the regional economy through the implementation of the following fostering initiatives (FI):

- **FI-01:** Providing adequate support for the transformation of the Zasavje Region's economy towards low-carbon and circular business models.
- **FI-02:** Creation of a supportive and empowering environment for the sustainable development of the Zasavje Region.

In the area of human resources development, several areas have been identified in the Zasavje Region that will need to be supported to successfully complete the green transformation. Among the key ones, are the following support domains (SD):

- **SD-01:** Improvement of the local education system, enriching and strengthening the key competences of learners (especially digital competences, entrepreneurial competences, transition to a low-carbon circular economy competence, etc.).
- **SD-02:** Transfer of solutions developed in the field of key competences in educational institutions and development of innovative learning environments, e.g., information and communication technology-enabled learning environments in the school environment.
- **SD-03:** Integration of the school environment in other development areas (e.g., demonstration centres, robotics, artificial intelligence, transition to a low-carbon circular economy, etc.).

The need for investment in the circular economy has also been recognised by stakeholders in the Zasavje Region, in terms of promoting pilot and other projects in this area, raising awareness and introducing the circular economy as a business model.

Current practices and activities

Zasavje Just Transition Centre (Zasavje JTC) is a central organisation working on localization of Slovenia's low-carbon circular economy development goals in the Zasavje Region. It operates as an information and stakeholder engagement centre in the restructuring of the Zasavje, and the main support structure for the implementation of just transition activities in the region. Zasavje JTC pays particular attention on aligning national goals with local priorities, capacities, and challenges, as well as using local data and resources.

Here are some examples of the current Zasavje JTC practices and activities:

Just Transition Academy

The Zasavje JTC, in cooperation with the Savinja-Šaleška Region, has established the [Just Transition Academy](#). The Academy is a common platform for acquiring knowledge that is key to a just transition. Participants can acquire new knowledge in the fields of development and innovation, as well as the circular, green and high-tech economy in training courses, seminars, and other events. The Academy also carries out studies, analyses, consultancy, and other support activities for a successful transition.

Since the Just Transition is intended for all residents of the region, the same applies to the Just Transition Academy. It is intended for businesspeople to design effective and well-considered projects and be successful in tenders for obtaining European funds. It is intended for employees to acquire knowledge for the jobs of the future. It is intended for young people to make it easier to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Just Transition.

It is intended for all residents of Zasavje, because without them, a just transition cannot be successful. Therefore, all interested stakeholders are invited to follow the activities of the Just Transition Academy, participate in training courses and events, and thus become part of the just and circular transformation of the Zasavje [\[More information\]](#).

Circular Economy Academy Zasavje

In 2024 the Zasavje JTC in collaboration with the organisation Circular Change – Institute for Circular Economy implemented the forward-thinking program – the [Circular Economy Academy Zasavje](#). The programme aimed to strengthen capacities and introduce circular economy principles into the region's economic sectors. Activities involved stakeholders from all sectors of the region. The academy's results included concrete proposals for circular projects and development initiatives in the Zasavje Region [\[More information\]](#).

To raise awareness of the importance of the circular economy and support sustainable solutions for the future development of the Zasavje Region, the Zasavje Just Transition Centre in collaboration with the Circular Change Institute has developed a comprehensive and informative brochure: "[Zasavje Circular Academy – How to Become the European Lighthouse of Change](#)".

On 31 March 2025, the Zasavje JTC published on its website an official call "[Invitation to participate in the Zasavje 2.0 Circular Academy](#)". The Circular Academy of Zasavje 2.0 represents an upgrade of the first implementation of the academy in 2024.

Zasavje JTC implements the Circular Academy of Zasavje 2.0 as part of the Zasavje Just Transition initiative.

The academy will feature targeted support activities aimed at upgrading content, connecting stakeholders, and accelerating the implementation of project proposals. The academy will include the following key events (KE):

- **KE-01:** A study visit to Scotland (June 9-12, 2025) where participants will see selected examples of good practices in the field of circular economy, industrial symbiosis and circular spatial planning. The visit will be carried out in cooperation with organisations such as Zero Waste Scotland and other relevant partners whose practices are consistent with the development guidelines in Zasavje.
- **KE-02:** A dissemination event and working meeting, scheduled to take place during the week of June 16-20, 2025, at the premises of the Zasavje RDA, with the aim of reviewing the results of the study visit, analysing the possibilities of transferring practices, and integrating concrete solutions into the local context.
- **KE-03:** A mentoring and advisory programme, which will include expert advice and guided mentoring processes to support individual projects and actors in implementing the principles of the circular economy in practice [\[More information\]](#).

Circular Economy Workshops for Children

In November 2024, as a parallel event to the [Zasavje Just Transition Regional Conference](#), the Friends of Youth Association in Trbovlje organized recycling workshops for children, where they learned about circular economy principles and the importance of reusing materials through creative activities [\[More information\]](#).

Future priorities and initiatives

Future priorities of the transition of Zasavje Region to a low-carbon, circular, and resource-efficient economy are formulated in collaboration with key regional stakeholders and included in the Regional Development Program for the Zasavje Region 2021-2027, as follows:

Strategic Objective 2: Green and Low-Carbon Zasavje.



Specific Objective 2.3: To promote environmentally friendly approaches (circular economy, self-supply, use of renewable energy sources).



Action 8.2.2: To promote a circular economy.



Activity: To promote pilot projects in the field of circular economy.

Activity: To raise awareness of the principles of the circular economy among the region's population and introduce the circular economy as a business model in organisations.

Zasavje Region circular economy development portfolio includes the following key initiatives and projects:

Future challenges and opportunities

Ongoing and recent projects sites visit, meetings with the Zasavje Region municipalities, discussion with the business and science sector actors, as well as the outcomes from the structured workshop clearly indicate the high level of commitment, enthusiasm, and hard work of the Zasavje Region's stakeholders towards resilient and sustainable economic future.

There is evidence of various types, statuses, and scales of existing and planned processes and activities aimed at promoting a just and circular economy in Zasavje Region. To increase efficiency and the contribution to the Zasavje Region just and circular transition overall process of each individual project or initiative, it would be beneficial to ensure their overall alignment, synchronisation, and strategic coordination. The key elements of the Zasavje Region's just and circular development strategic coordination are presented in Figure 1.

Project Title	Project Description
Business Zone Rudnik Hrastnik	The project aims to create favourable conditions for the growth of existing businesses, the establishment of new enterprises, and the attraction of investors. This aligns with the broader goals of transitioning to a low-carbon circular economy, reducing unemployment, and enhancing the competitiveness of the local economy [More information]
Business Incubator "Kompreshaus" Hrastnik	The project involves renovating a former mining compressor station into a business incubator. The aim is to create a space for the development of new technologies and entrepreneurial ideas that are key to a green transition [More information]
Centre for Development, Demonstration, and Training in Zero-Carbon Technologies (Centre DUBT)	The project's goal is to establish a centre with state-of-the-art research infrastructure for the development of battery and hydrogen technologies at the new research unit of the National Institute of Chemistry in Zasavje [More information]
Construction of the Economic Business Zone Kisovec II	The purpose of the project is to encourage entrepreneurship, especially by facilitating the economic utilisation of new ideas, establishing new businesses, and increasing the added value of existing companies [More information]
Lakonca Craft-Industrial Zone	The project supports the transition to a sustainable and low-carbon economy, contributing to regional restructuring and revitalisation. The craft-industrial zone will enable the growth of high value-added businesses, enhance regional competitiveness, and create new job opportunities [More information]

 Strategic coordination			
Strategic alignment with strategies and plans	Strategic mapping of the projects and initiatives	Strategic governance: roles and responsibilities	Strategic stakeholder engagement
Strategic communication	Strategic resource management	Strategic risk management and mitigation	Strategic performance monitoring and reporting
Strategic change management	Strategic planning and coordination	Strategic knowledge management	Strategic continuous improvement

FIG.1 KNOWLEDGE MOSAIC “ZASAVJE REGION JUST AND CIRCULAR DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC COORDINATION”

Discussions with the key stakeholders and the representatives of the local municipalities, companies, and institutions operating in Zasavje Region led to the conclusion that the Zasavje Region just and circular transition process is facing numerous challenges (please see Figure 2).

 Development challenges			
Insufficient transport connection in the region	Gap between supply and demand in the labour market	Local public service and infrastructure capacity	Legislative and administrative barriers and challenges
Need for the data collection and monitoring practice	Need for the strategic facilitation and coordination	Public awareness, understanding, and behaviour	Production and consumption patterns (incl., the end-of-use stage)
Need for the multi-level collaboration and support	Need to ensure business and community coexistence	Need to develop regional attractiveness and competitiveness	Funding needs and smart allocation of resources

FIG.2 KNOWLEDGE MOSAIC “ZASAVJE REGION JUST AND CIRCULAR DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES”

During the START exchange visit to the Zasavje Region, one of the main focal points of the meetings and discussions with the local municipalities, companies, and institutions operating in the Central Sava Valley was the identification of the existing beneficial preconditions and understanding how they can be leveraged or transformed into future development opportunities.

The key existing beneficial preconditions are the following:

- 1. Proactive, creative, and enthusiastic individuals** – residents (including children, young people, families, seniors, vulnerable groups), entrepreneurs, representatives of non-governmental organisations, and other interested stakeholders – are central to the Zasavje Region's Just and Circular Transition. Their ongoing involvement and empowerment are essential for the effective development and implementation of

collaborative cross-sector projects that align with Zasavje's just and circular transition objectives. Enhancing and building upon existing partnerships with these stakeholders would be highly advantageous.

- 2. Industrial traditions, heritage, and culture as a source of the Just and Circular Transition** – Zasavje Region has many years of practical experiences, technical skills, specialised knowledge, and qualifications in the industrial sector (i.e., mining, manufacturing, and construction). It would be beneficial to build on the past diverse industrial and engineering practices and knowledge, transforming them to more sustainable and advanced industries that have the largest potential for circular innovations.

The key future development opportunities of the Zasavje Region are presented in Figure 3.

 Development opportunities			
Collaboration between the education sector and development areas	Collaboration between the municipalities and companies	Development of the industrial symbioses in the business areas	Circular economy awareness raising activities and events
Supply chain engagement and material flow management	Applying circular public procurement principles	Policy dialogue and collaboration with the national-level institutions	To implement living labs and pilot projects to test new ideas
Improving transport connectivity of the region	Bringing people together and building communities	Integrating circular economy principles in tourism	Developing monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework

FIG.3 KNOWLEDGE MOSAIC “ZASAVJE REGION JUST AND CIRCULAR DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES”

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Initiative for coal regions in transition

The Initiative for coal regions in transition is led by the European Commission.

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