



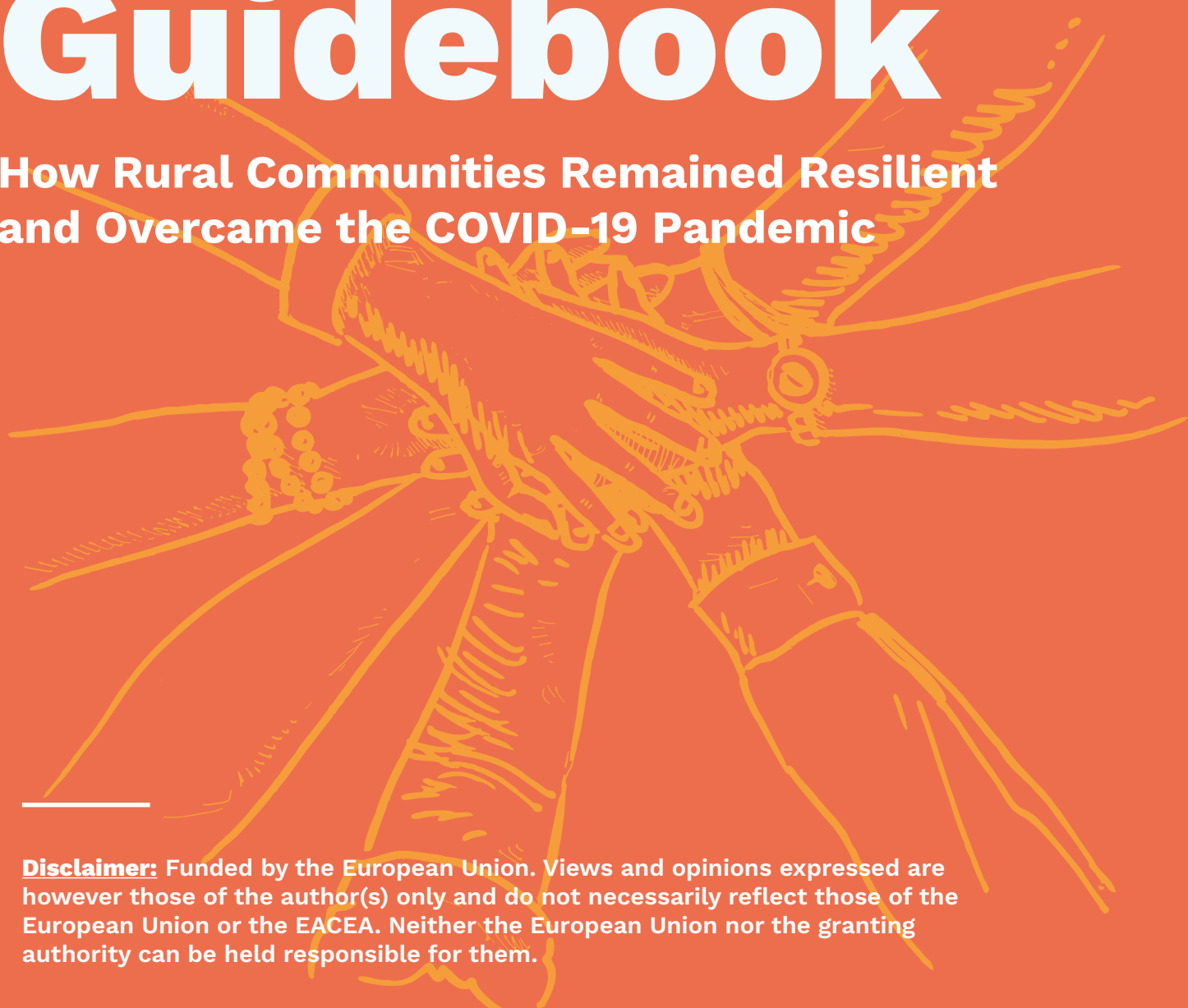
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Project “BEYOND”

Rural Communities pushing BEYOND COVID-19

The Citizens’ Guidebook

How Rural Communities Remained Resilient
and Overcame the COVID-19 Pandemic



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In Memoriam



Norbert Aufrecht

30.09.1961 † 14.01.2024

The partnership of Project “BEYOND – Rural Communities Pushing BEYOND COVID-19” dedicate this publication to the memory of Norbert Aufrecht.

On January 14th 2024, Norbert unexpectedly passed away, leaving us saddened, wondering and in shock. From 2004 up until that day, he had been serving as the Mayor of the Municipality of Heiningen, Germany. He was known for his commitment to the needs of all residents in the community. He had a lasting impact on the community as well. He left his personal mark on numerous initiatives and projects in Heiningen and in the Göppingen area. Norbert was always very close to the people, clubs and institutions.

He is remembered by all of us (including this consortium) for his openness, kindness, honesty and willingness to help people. He is sincerely missed and we express our sincere condolences to his wife Andrea, his two sons Julian and Adrian and the entire family.



Sopotniki
zavod za medgeneracijsko solidarnost



Cavriago
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Gemeinde Heiningen

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Città metropolitana di Torino





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I. PROJECT BACKGROUND AND THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

a. What's Project "BEYOND"?

Project "BEYOND – Rural Communities pushing BEYOND COVID-19" is co-funded by the European Union via the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (i.e. CERV Programme); call for proposals "Networks of Towns". It has been approved for a grant amounting to €148.015,00. The project started in 01/12/2022 and it will be implemented until 30/11/2024 (duration: 24 months).

The project applicant/lead partner is the Municipality of Cestica (Croatia). The project includes partners from five European Union member states. The consortium includes the following organizations and municipalities:

- Zavod Sopotniki, zavod za medgeneracijsko solidarnost (in Slovenia)
- Občina Ormož/Municipality of Ormož (Slovenia)
- Comune di Cavriago/Municipality of Cavriago (Italy)
- Comune di Usseaux/Municipality of Usseaux (Italy)
- Gemeinde Heiningen/Municipality of Heiningen (Njemačka)
- Sásd és Térsége Terület- és Humánfejlesztési Nonprofit Kft (in Hungary)



Map 1. Location of partners in EU Project „BEYOND“

The purpose of the project is to enhance citizen engagement in civil society actions and democratic processes in rural communities; specifically, to demonstrate how we can improve our communities after the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic (COVID-19 pandemic). In order to achieve this aim, the project has been organized as seven 3-day events, which bring together citizens from different backgrounds. At each event, specific themes relating to the partners' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed and debated. The partnership also gathers citizens' opinions about certain development issues and in this way new synergies between EU communities is made possible (i.e. new cooperation, new project proposals that focus on citizens' needs, etc.).





The following provides a breakdown of the events held in the project:

- Kick-off event in Cestica, Croatia: March 29-31, 2023 (Theme: Organizing volunteers and civil protection actions);
- Event 2 in Ajdovscina, Slovenia (organized by Sopotniki); June 7-9, 2023 (Theme: Promoting inter-generational solidarity and responding to the needs of the elderly);
- Event 3 in Heiningen, Germany: September 27-29, 2023 (Theme: Organizing actions that enhance social inclusion & environmental protection);
- Event 4 in Cavriago, Italy; November 11-13, 2023 (Theme: Enhancing citizen engagement in education actions and the mental well-being of families);
- Event 5 in Usseaux, Italy; May 13-15, 2024 (Theme: Engaging citizens in actions that contribute to preserving cultural and nature assets in remote areas);
- Event 6 in Sásd, Hungary (organized by “Sásd és Térsége Terület”): September 18-20, 2024 (Theme: Addressing the mental well-being of the most vulnerable during pandemic – elderly persons and persons w/disabilities);
- Final event in Ormož, Slovenia and Cestica, Croatia (organized by Ormož and Cestica): October 23-25, 2024 (Theme: Adapting community events so that they promote tourism and solidarity in the community);

*80-100 participants were present at each event.

By organizing the events, the partnership and the participants of the project have achieved the following results:

- Enhanced capacities in rural areas to prepare and participate in actions that contribute to rural communities overcoming COVID-19;
- Improved awareness among citizens in rural communities about how EU policies/values positively impact the quality of life;
- Enhanced cooperation between rural communities

By achieving these results, rural communities have become better prepared to address future challenges that impact the lives of citizens. In order to sustain the results of the project, the partnership has concluded a cooperation agreement, which details new project ideas and future initiatives that the partners will work on. These projects ensure that social inclusion, community resilience and volunteering are actively promoted in rural communities over the long-term.

b. The Citizens' Guidebook – What's the purpose?

When the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic (COVID-19 Pandemic) was declared on March 11th, 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the world was in shock. No one in European communities had ever faced such a crisis in their lifetime and no one knew what to do. Based on the information available, local, regional and national governments took unprecedented steps in order to protect citizens from the virus. Suddenly, there were local travel restrictions; in-person contact was made almost impossible, schools were forced to shift classes to online formats, mandatory facemasks were required if you were to be in contact with others, and the phrases “stay at home” and “wash your hands” became common catch phrases during the pandemic period in Europe.





The SARS-CoV-2 virus was indeed a threat, which especially impacted the most vulnerable in the community (i.e. the elderly, persons with disabilities, low-income families and households). It impacted men and women (depending on their obligations and social status) and various age groups (youth, adults, elderly) in different ways. Persons in need of social and healthcare services (and other support) were unable to get it due to the initial restrictions which focused on reducing infection resulting from in-person contact. In retrospect, it is now clear that many such restrictions failed to take into account the social issues faced by citizens before the pandemic. Overall, the pandemic threatened the very social fabric of communities. Due to the pandemic, there was a growing sense of isolation among citizens from the community. Furthermore, with the easing and then reimposition of restrictions, citizens became sceptical (especially those that had not been infected) about whether or not the threat of COVID-19 actually existed.

All of the partners in this project considered the COVID-19 pandemic to be a serious threat to their communities' existence. Despite gaining support from national and regional governments to combat the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary for local governments, especially in rural areas, to develop their own measures and actions so that life could actually continue on and eventually return to normal. This partnership believed that some necessary elements to overcome the pandemic included active citizenship, volunteering, teamwork and mutual understanding. The partners also did not wait for higher authorities to come in and save them. Instead, they developed grassroot-actions that engaged citizens, addressed those most in need, and that contributed to building solidarity among citizens.

With this guidebook, each partner will showcase its experiences and best practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing this, we intend to give you (the reader) a clear picture of how to be engaged, work with others in the community, and build community identity in times of crisis. We hope that our experiences help your community to build solidarity and remain resilient in such crises.





II. BEST PRACTICES IN CROATIA – THE MUNICIPALITY OF CESTICA



Map 2. Location of Cestica

The **Municipality of Cestica** is a small community with 5,500 inhabitants located in hills of Zagorje in Varaždin County, Croatia, along the Slovenian border. It is known for its fresh produce, locally produced wine, and rolling hills. Like many rural communities, Cestica relies on connections (among its members, with other towns and with public services) in order to sustain quality living standards. Without such connections, small towns like Cestica are at risk of economic and social stagnation.

When the COVID-19 Pandemic hit in March 2020, all inhabitants were affected; however, the biggest concern was how to ensure that the most vulnerable members of the community could get the food, supplies and support they need daily. There are four elderly care facilities in Cestica, and there are almost 1000 inhabitants over 65 years of age that are in constant need of personal support. In addition to this, there are 30 families with persons with disabilities in community, which require access to public services in order to be included in the community and live in dignity. The Municipality coordinated closely with the Red Cross Society of Varaždin, civil society organizations (“Hiperaktivni” which is focusing on youth & “Life and Joy” which focuses on supporting children with disabilities), other municipalities and public bodies in order to address the challenges presented by the pandemic.

At first (2020), the actions were small. For instance, the Red Cross would provide citizens waiting at the border crossings water and disinfectant, set up sections for testing citizens for COVID-19, and updated public healthcare guidelines so that citizens could take the proper precautions. The Elderly Home “Novi Život/New life” implemented strict health and safety measures to ensure that their residents were safe and able to live in dignity. The staff even stayed longer hours to ensure that on holidays the residents could socialize via online tools and at least celebrate holidays with fellow residents and staff. Volunteers from associations (e.g. Hiperaktivni) organized deliveries of food/supplies to families in vulnerable groups. However, as it became clearer day by day that the pandemic was not going to be resolved in the short-term, larger and more comprehensive actions supporting members of the community were needed.





Pictures 1-3. From left to right - photo 1: young volunteers from the Association “Hiperaktivni” collecting food and supplies for families in need during the pandemic; photos 2-3: staff at Elderly Home “Novi život” attending to the daily needs of residents at the height of the pandemic and residents doing their best to overcome the pandemic by celebrating Masquerade

One project led by the Municipality that contributed greatly to addressing the needs of elderly and persons with disabilities was the ESF co-funded project “Zaželi: Employment Programme for Women in the Municipality of Cestica,” which actually started before the pandemic. The project addressed two issues in the community. First, elderly & disabled persons in the community needed personal support in order to be included in the community and live in dignity. Secondly, the project focused on unemployed women in the community as they lacked access to employment opportunities in their career field. By adjusting the project to the realities of COVID-19, six women were employed and trained as home assistants for persons with disabilities. They provided support to 24 elderly persons that were disabled and in need of personal assistance.

The support provided to these persons by the assistants included the purchasing and delivery of medication, preparing meals, cleaning homes, assisting them to pay bills, helping them to put on their clothes, etc.



Picture 4. Participants in the ESF project “Zaželi” along with the Mayor of Cestica Mr. Mirko Korotaj



Picture 5-7. Home assistants for persons with disabilities in ESF Project “Zaželi” delivering food and supplies to citizens in remote areas in Cestica





The Red Cross Society of the City of Varaždin (GDCK Varaždin) implemented projects to address the challenges of the pandemic. The project “Help for socially vulnerable households during the duration of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Croatia” resulted in 648 food packages being delivered to 614 families (households with persons from vulnerable groups) in Varaždin County (including Cestica). Throughout May 2020, +600 households (representing vulnerable groups) received three hot meals daily via the pilot “Delivery of daily hot meals to elderly people with impaired social or health status.” In later phases of the pandemic (2021), volunteers in the community under the leadership of the Red Cross and the Municipality of Cestica participated in efforts to vaccinate citizens and end the pandemic.



Pictures 8-9 from left to right: GDCK Varaždin Volunteers delivering supplies, Photo 10: GDCK Varaždin Volunteers at vaccination sites

The contributions of volunteers and the willingness of residents to help their fellow citizens ultimately contributed to Cestica overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. Without teamwork, cooperation and determination, the impacts of the pandemic would have been far greater and actions would not have been effective. Although the pandemic led to hardship for all its residents (mental stress, social isolation, economic difficulties), Cestica has seen that by having an inclusive approach to development where the needs of the most vulnerable are taken into account, sense of belonging and pride in the community are enhanced.

III. BEST PRACTICES IN SLOVENIA – ZAVOD SOPOTNIKI AND THE MUNICIPALITIES OF ORMOŽ AND AJDOVŠČINA



Map 3: Location of Ormož and Ajdovščina





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The project includes two Slovenian partners: Zavod za medgeneracijsko solidarnost “Sopotniki” and the Municipality of Ormož. The project is also being supported by the Municipality of Ajdovščina.

Sopotniki is a non-profit that aims to enhance intergenerational solidarity and help elderly persons get involved in active social life. It operates in the Slovenian municipalities of Hrpelje - Kozina, Divača, Sežana, Sevnica, Brežice, Krško, Kočevje, Postojna, Pivka, Ajdovščina, Ankaran, Litija, Šmartno pri Litiji, Cerknica, Idrija, Zagorje ob Savi and Ilirska Bistrica. The main activity of Sopotniki is a free-of-charge transport service for elderly persons. It enables them to attend cultural events, visit friends, go to the doctor, go shopping etc. Without this service these persons are at risk of isolation as they live in small remote villages and almost never leave their homes. The volunteer drivers at Sopotniki adapt their work and studies in a such way so the service is available 6 days a week.

During the pandemic, Sopotniki adapted its operations to address the urgent and evolving needs of the elderly, who were particularly vulnerable during this crisis. Recognizing the increased isolation and the need for essential supplies and medical services, the organization established specialized “COVID Units” to coordinate and execute critical activities. These units were tasked with delivering medicines, essential supplies, and hot meals directly to the homes of elderly individuals. Additionally, they facilitated the transport of COVID-19 test samples to laboratories, contributing to the broader public health effort. These services were executed under stringent safety protocols to protect both service providers and recipients. Regular mobility services were also maintained in a limited mode, providing necessary transportation for doctor appointments and grocery shopping without ride-sharing.

The project had a profound impact on the quality of life for the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic. By providing essential services, Sopotniki addressed the significant challenges faced by the elderly, who were disproportionately affected by the lockdown and social distancing measures. The delivery of medicines, supplies, and meals ensured that the basic needs of the elderly were met without them having to expose themselves to potential infection risks. The safe shopping service allowed them to maintain their independence while adhering to public health and safety guidelines. Moreover, the safe transport of COVID-19 test samples contributed to the broader public health efforts in controlling the pandemic. Regular mobility services, although limited, ensured that elderly individuals continued to have access to necessary medical appointments and grocery shopping, preventing the deterioration of their health and well-being. These initiatives not only addressed physical needs but also provided psychological comfort, reducing feelings of isolation and helplessness among the elderly population.

By taking this approach to helping citizens during the pandemic, Sopotniki overcame challenges and maintained its mission as a non-profit. By adapting to the situation, collaborating with local authorities, public healthcare bodies and other non-profits, providing comprehensive training to volunteers, and following safety guidelines, volunteers were able to ensure that Sopotniki’s users (elderly persons) were engaged in the community, able to see family, and could access public services.

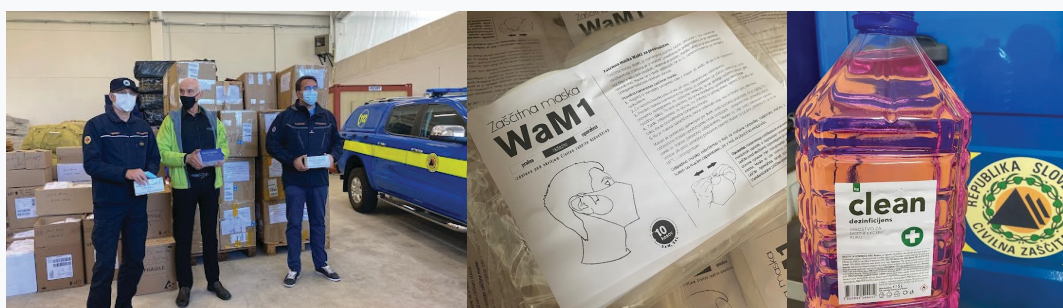




Photos 11-12: Sopotniki volunteers in action during the pandemic

In addition to non-profits, municipalities played an important role in ensuring that Slovenian citizens remained resilient. In the **Municipality of Ajdovščina** (an area that has a population of about 20,000 inhabitants and is located near the Italian border), confronting the virus at the beginning of 2020 was met with shock by all citizens regardless of background. Everyone had to adapt to the new situation very quickly. Initially, Ajdovščina’s deep relationships and solidarity with other EU communities resulted in support from abroad. Ajdovščina’s first face masks were secured from their Italian counterparts. As the pandemic continued on, it became harder to secure protective materials; therefore, the Ajdovščina Civil Protection Department took the initiative and joined forces with local entrepreneurs to create their own protective products (supply kits, protective gear, etc.). The Civil Protection Department emerged itself in producing washable and reuseable masks under the brand name **WaM1** (Wajdušna Metropola 1, n.d.t: Ajdovščina Metropoli 1), which were distributed to citizens in the community. Apart from masks, the department established an alcohol distillery for its own disinfectant product/sanitizer, which has been recognized by the Republic of Slovenia.

By taking immediate action to address the shortcomings in combating the coronavirus, the Municipality of Ajdovščina was able to support local citizens in overcoming the negative effects of the pandemic. The efforts of the Municipality and Civil Protection Department have been recognized by local citizens, who remain very grateful for the consideration local authorities displayed during this difficult time.



Pictures 13-15: The Ajdovščina Civil Protection Department and samples of the face masks and sanitizer created during the pandemic.

The Municipality of Ormož was also confronted by the pandemic and it had to act. Ormož is a community with 11,886 residents located on the Slovenian-Croatian border, which is well-known for its wine production, agriculture and as a tourist destination.





Like other communities, at first the town and its citizens were blindsided as they had never encountered anything similar before; but citizens came forward and volunteered in order to ensure that Ormož could endure the situation and remain resilient. This included actions such as citizens delivering supplies to persons in need (e.g. persons in elderly homes, families with persons with disabilities) and assisting persons to connect with family within the community. One important element that was essential at the start of the pandemic were facemasks, which were in short supply. In order to ensure that at least cloth masks were available, volunteers at the Centre for Senior Citizens Ormož, Healthcare centre Ormož and other organizations made washable/textile protective masks for the socially vulnerable and the elderly. For the sewing of these masks, the Municipality of Ormož procured textiles for production. In total, volunteers sewed 2,025 protective masks, for which they used 107m of fabric and 172 pieces of elastic. Representatives of the local communities distributed masks to those most in need (socially disadvantaged persons and the elderly in their localities).

On top of this, volunteer actions in the community (annual actions held prior to the pandemic) needed to be adapted to the ‘new normal.’ For many, the pandemic represented a huge burden that was difficult to endure, and it would have been easy to simply cancel actions/ events and hope for better times. In Ormož, it became clear that actions needed to be taken in order to ensure that previous events could at least continue in a new format. Some of the changes included incorporating the health and safety guidelines into actions, avoiding close contact with fellow volunteers, encouraging actions in an outdoor environment, etc. Such changes were applied to the volunteer event “OČISTIMO DESTINACIJO JERUZALEM SLOVENIJA 2021/We clean Jeruzalem Slovenia 2021”. This is an annual event that brings together citizens from Ormož to clean litter/waste from the roadways and nearby forests. By taking matters into their own hands and making the necessary changes, the event could take place as planned in 2021; thus, contributing to enhancing environmental protection in the municipality.



Slike 16-17 (from left to right): Examples of the masks produced by volunteers in Ormož, a promotional poster for the volunteer action „We clean Jeruzalem Slovenia“, and a photo from the 2021 version of the event.

These are just a few examples of how Ormož overcame the pandemic. After the pandemic ended in 2023, municipal officials have prioritized learning from the experiences during this difficult period and developing actions that take the lessons-learned into account. One issue that Ormož found very difficult to overcome during the pandemic was providing elderly persons physical access to the community (especially basic services and supplies).





The PROSTOFER programme in 2023 is an important milestone for the municipality and serves as a direct response to this issue. With it, Ormož and other municipalities aim to improve the mobility of the elderly in the local community and thereby increase their social inclusion. By renting an electric vehicle and having volunteers drive persons in need to their destinations, the Municipality of Ormož has provided the possibility of free transportation for elderly citizens. To clarify, the persons in-need are those who cannot manage essential tasks on their own, who are disabled and others who cannot drive alone. Often they have no relatives, have low monthly incomes and poor connections with public transport. Thus, the volunteers providing free transportation allow the users to visit a doctor, pharmacy, or stores. In the municipality of Ormož, 16 volunteer drivers are included in the service and are ready to help. In 2023, 122 transports were carried out. By implementing this project, Ormož has been able to build its resilience and ensure that all citizens can live in dignity. Lastly, Ormož has gone to great lengths to recognize the contributions of volunteers and promote others to follow their actions. In 2024, Ormož gained the title of “Volunteer-Friendly Municipality,” which was granted by the Slovenska mreža prostovoljnih organizacij/Slovenian network of voluntary organizations.



Pictures 18-19 (from left to right): The volunteer drivers in Ormož included in PROSTOFER and Mayor Danijel Vrbnjak interacting with users of the services.

IV. BEST PRACTICES IN ITALY – THE MUNICIPALITY OF CAVRIAGO AND THE MUNICIPALITY OF USSEAUX



Map 4. Cavriago and Usseaux, Italy

Project BEYOND includes two rural communities in Italy: The Municipality of Cavriago in the Region of Emilia-Romagna and the Municipality of Usseaux in the Region of Piemonte.





Although both of the communities are rural-based and face some similar challenges (e.g. ensuring citizens gain access to public services), they differ greatly in terms of population and geography. This in turn means that their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic varied in order to address citizens' challenges.

Cavriago has a population of 10,000 inhabitants, and is located in the low-lying Enza River Basin. It is located near major centres such as Parma, Reggio Emilia, and Modena. Over the years, Cavriago has strengthened the community by renovating and building schools, supporting civil society organizations in providing social and psychological support to the citizens and have working closely with regional authorities to ensure that they there are clinics, daycare services, employment services and other public services available locally.

The pandemic had an especially negative impact on pupils and students in primary and secondary education. Students (children and youth under the age of 18) were forced to stay home and the only way they could participate in schooling was via online classes. Throughout Europe, this approach was being used as it seemed to be the only viable way to conduct education due to the health and safety risks posed by the Pandemic. As restrictions lifted, parents, teachers and other community leaders wanted to understand what had changed in young people's lives during the pandemic. Adolescents and young adults wanted to emphasize the urgency of addressing the issue of distress among youth that emerged during the pandemic, with a particular focus on the issue of social withdrawal, school dropout and sports dropout. Therefore, Cavriago in cooperation with local schools and civil society organizations launched the project "DAD Generation – Didactics at a Distance". The project was based on a participatory process that would result toward the creation of an Educating Community Pact: an agreement between the Municipality, Schools, other public & private entities, and individual young and adult citizens (those who contribute into the local education system) to prevent and counter the social, mental and economic issues (affecting girls, boys & adolescents) with particular reference to the legacy of the pandemic. The activities included 6 focus groups, 10 interviews with young people, 5 workshops on mental health themes (60 participants attended), 1 hackathon (25 participants) and a theatre show (71 participants) which were designed to engaged young people and have them express their viewpoints connected to the impact of the pandemic. As a result of the project, Cavriago was able to develop 5 new projects that address the needs of young people in the community. DAD also contributed to re-activating youth in the community as it encouraged them to explore opportunities to volunteer and help other citizens. Lastly, it shed light on the major situations facing youth in the post-pandemic era allowing Cavriago to teak appropriate actions.



Pictures 20-23 (connected to the project "DAD Generation": from left to right – the launch assembly, outdoor workshop and the hackathon.





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In addition to issues impacting youth, Caviago had to change other initiatives in order to meet the needs of citizens. Before the pandemic, Caviago had been leading “Educare: A Question of Community” which served as an open forum for citizens (educators, local authorities, representatives of civil society, volunteers, etc.) to propose new ideas, share their perspectives and discuss solutions connected to community issues. By adjusting the format of Educare to an online format during the pandemic, Caviago was able to continue to gain citizens’ inputs and adjust annual events to the new realities of COVID-19. Some of the results include adapting the annual community festival to the conditions of the pandemic, laboratories for children to explore being a clown and theatre, improved access to social services for young people, and the formation of a women’s support group (focusing on overcoming abuse and building self-esteem) led by local psychologists. Caviago recognizes that with a citizen-centred approach to development, issues can be solved in a manner that reflects the needs of various groups and that have long-term benefits.



Photos 24-25 connected to Educare (from left to right): A local assembly bringing citizens together under Educare (pre-pandemic); and a typical poster used to engage citizens to come to meetings and share their opinions.

The **Municipality of Usseaux** is a small community with 174 inhabitants nestled in the Italian Alps at an altitude of 1,416 m above sea level. Despite the town being a part of Metropolitan Region of Torino, the town is far removed from necessary public services. The City of Torino is 79 km away from the town, and in good weather conditions it takes at least an hour and a half to get there. Infrastructure and geography have played a major role in shaping Usseaux’s local identity, as it is less connected to major centres in Italy. There are only a couple of routes leading to the town, which are narrow and sometimes have only one lane. In the winter and spring due to harsh weather conditions, the town can suddenly become inaccessible. Due to these circumstances, the citizens of Usseaux have formed a tightly knit community. Self-reliance and keeping inhabitants connected have become key principles to development in Usseaux. Citizens share resources, help each other, and volunteer in order to make Usseaux more resilient and able to overcome crises.

One of the key features of Usseaux’s active governance that has helped the town to remain resilient is the “**Mansia**”. The Mansia is a person that, in addition to the mayor and municipal councillors, is considered the one to come to in order to solve everyday problems facing citizens (e.g. if a fire hydrant is broken or if a street light is vandalized, citizens would come to the Mansia first).



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Cavriago
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Gemeinde Heiningen

Comune di Usseaux
Città metropolitana di Torino





They are the first person that citizens turn to for help with daily challenges. They organize resources and volunteers to address concrete problems, and act as a link between the mayor and councillors with the inhabitant. This community role has been in existence for millennia (since the Gallo-Roman period). Over time, the role has evolved in order to meet the community's needs in the 21st century. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens in Usseaux were cut off from other communities due to the lockdown, social distancing requirements and travel restrictions put in place. This put enormous strain on the community as it prevented citizens from accessing public services or from even going to get groceries. The Mansia played a big role in ensuring that Usseaux remained resilient in these difficult times. Thanks to the Mansia, FFP2 masks for citizens were secured, groceries and medicine were delivered to citizens in vulnerable positions (e.g. 62 citizens over the age of 65), volunteer teams were organized to check in on citizens in need, and the Mansia served as a relay for communications between citizens and local government. As the restrictions eased after the first year of the pandemic, this citizen governance model also played a role in ensuring that the town's regular events such as the mini-Olympics, town festivals, the re-opening of the Canton Mill, etc. could happen smoothly.

Usseaux's response to the pandemic showed that volunteering, sharing and cooperation in the community ensure that citizens overcome major crises. In times such as the pandemic, Usseaux also considers that close connections to the citizens are needed in order to ensure the health and safety of all inhabitants. By taking such measures in crisis situations, bonds among citizens are reinforced and the community will come out stronger than before; willing and able to confront new challenges in the future.



Photos 26-27: Usseaux in the winter. When the pandemic hit in March 2020, Usseaux was difficult to access due to weather conditions. By having the role of “Mansia” in the community (someone who could help), Usseaux was able to overcome the worst impacts of the pandemic.





V. BEST PRACTICES IN GERMANY – THE MUNICIPALITY OF HEININGEN



Map 5. Heiningen, Germany

The **Municipality of Heiningen** is a diverse and vibrant community located in Baden-Württemberg in the District of Göppingen. Heiningen has approximately 5,200 inhabitants and is located near lush forests and picturesque rivers. Within the community, +25% of inhabitants are over 65 years of age and there are others in vulnerable positions (migrants, persons with disabilities, etc.) in need of assistance and support. Due to these conditions, it has been a priority for the municipality to create an environment where everyone feels welcomed and respected.

Like in other rural communities in Europe, the impacts of the COVID-19 were severe in Heiningen. Inhabitants were in lock-down, schools and kindergartens were closed and many persons with disabilities and the elderly were unable to take care of themselves. Citizens were cut off and isolated, and that was putting the most vulnerable at considerable risk because they could not travel and access goods & services (including healthcare).

After it became apparent that the pandemic was not going to suddenly disappear, the municipal government coordinated with civil society organizations, elderly homes, schools and other stakeholders to new services that would reconnect citizens and ensure their well-being. It was identified that the main problem was that citizens were not connected. It was obvious that there needed to be some type of support or assistance provided, but it was clear exactly what was needed. Therefore, the Municipality along with volunteers and citizens in the community developed the web platform “**Heiningen Hilft/Heiningen Helps.**” Selfless citizens and volunteers developed this web platform using their own resources. After registering on the platform, citizens could request assistance (e.g. transport to the doctor’s office, delivery of medicine, technical assistance and repairs in the home, etc.) from others on the platform, and those who were willing could express their commitment to step in. By getting the message out about the project via various social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.), thousands of citizens in the region were able to access the project and use of it.

As a result of the project, vulnerable groups that would not have had access to public institutions and general goods and services were able to connect with fellow citizens and get help. They remained included in the community and their lives were respected with dignity.





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101091100— BEYOND (Rural Communities Pushing BEYOND COVID-19)

Photos 28-30 from the project “Heiningen Hilft”. The first pictures on the left show the web portal and how it was displayed. The picture on the right is an example of a poster used to make citizens aware of the project and its benefits in the community.

This approach shows that by reaching out to citizens, including their inputs in actions and promoting volunteering and active citizenship, rural communities can remain resilient in even the most stressing situations and crises. In times such as COVID-19, citizens must come together and by facilitating that change by listening and working with citizens, volunteering can pay off and towns can overcome any challenge.

VI. BEST PRACTICES IN HUNGARY - THE MUNICIPALITY OF SÁSD IN COOPERATION WITH THE NON-PROFIT “SÁSD ÉS TÉRSÉGE TERÜLET”



Map 6: Sásd, Hungary

The Municipality of Sásd is located about 32 km away from the Cities of Pecs and Kaposvár. It has a population of 2,900 inhabitants and has been known in Hungary (especially in the Baranya region) as an important centre for agriculture, trade and transport. As in many small towns in Europe, Sásd prides itself as a tightly-knit community where citizens rely on each other in order to progress as well as overcome even the most difficult of circumstances.



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The COVID-19 Pandemic presented enormous challenges for the town, especially to Sásd's most vulnerable citizens. Due to the restrictions on movement, social distancing, mandatory wearing of face masks (even outdoors), it became hard for all institutions in the region to do their regular work. The closing of schools was an especially harsh reality for citizens coming from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e. those caring for persons with disabilities, those living in poverty, etc.). Education is essential in ensuring that citizens gain the capacities, competencies and self-confidence to engage in the community, be independent, and live in dignity. Online approaches that were used at the beginning of pandemic proved ineffective as pupils, parents and teachers were unfamiliar with how to properly apply such tools to education. Another barrier related to the costs of online education. There were numerous households that could not afford high-speed internet. Therefore, pupils from such households could not access online lessons.

To address this situation, the **Centre for Family and Child Welfare of Sásd** organized **individual in-person tutoring** so that pupils could gain additional educational support. Each session was organized over 40 to 50-minute periods, where tutors and pupils used masks, glove, disinfectants, etc. and respected the healthcare guidelines in Hungary. These tutoring sessions ensured individual development, care and connections with the community. The final aspect that is important to note in this initiative is that the tutors worked voluntary after their working hours and official tasks as teachers. It was noted by all those involved in the tutoring that the additional face-to-face contact in a one-on-one setting resulted in improved understanding of curriculum, fewer pupils lagging behind in their studies, and intellectual development of pupils. Due to the positive impacts, the Centre has continued to support the approach even now in the post-pandemic era.

Apart from actions taken by public institutions, the citizens of Sásd (through local Town Association for Citizens) worked together and launched their own actions to ensure that the town remained resilient in this difficult period. These were small actions, but they had significant meaning for the citizens and helped to lighten the burdens citizens faced during the pandemic. Citizens would regularly volunteer (led in teams) to clean up playgrounds (repairing and painting equipment, removing litter, etc.), place urban decorations connected to holidays and the seasons, planting flowers in the town, organizing an advent fair, etc. Every little step taken by citizens helped. These actions contributed to building and maintaining community identity. By having citizens work in this way, the community overcame even the worst moments of the pandemic. Active citizenship, teamwork and adaptability to the ever-changing circumstances during the pandemic ensured the best results and outcomes for citizens.



Photos 31-33: The Local Town Association of Citizens. The logo and an example of the work conducted by volunteers during the Advent festival. The last picture on the right shows a volunteer fixing a municipal rubbish bin.





VII. OUR FINAL MESSAGE

As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic wans and life in rural communities gradually returns to normal, the memory of what citizens experienced has also begun to fade. In some ways, this is a positive aspect because it means that citizens are returning to their routines and able to function as they always have; however, in some ways this could be considered negative as it means we may forget what we have learnt in this difficult period. The entire partnership of Project BEYOND realizes that in the near future there will be crises (e.g. natural disasters, new pandemics, etc.) impacting the very fabric of our communities. The experiences from the pandemic (the positives and negatives) need to be remembered so that we do not repeat mistakes.

In each country covered in this project, the partnership relied on the goodwill of citizens in the community to overcome the crisis, and to end this document we would like to highlight the following lessons-learnt while tackling the impacts of COVID-19:

1) Rural communities need to be prepared to take actions on their own: Each community learnt that in order to overcome crisis, they cannot solely rely on the national governments (or even the EU) to solve their problems. They need to be innovative, pragmatic and determined to do what is right in accordance with the local situation. Each of the towns in this guide developed their own approaches to handling COVID-19, and as a result citizens were able to overcome the worst moments of the pandemic;

2) Citizen contributions in crises result in community resilience: Volunteers from the community were an essential element in all countries in ensuring that towns could move beyond COVID-19. Communities need to embrace the goodwill of citizens who ultimately want to make sure their neighbours, especially those in vulnerable situations, can live in dignity and overcome crises. Volunteering creates a sense of identity and purpose in the community and this proved to be very true during the pandemic.

3) Social inclusion = vibrant communities: The pandemic showed us all that the social impacts of the crisis impacted people in varying ways. Elderly populations and persons with disabilities were especially impacted due to being isolated under the health and safety measures. A growing number of studies globally are showing that the lack of access to in-person teaching during the pandemic has put many youth (boys and girls) at risk of developing mental illnesses. The lack of access to healthcare during the pandemic impact young mothers, women in pregnancy, persons in need of operations and those in need of regular medical treatment. The list goes on. Ultimately it shows us that crisis responses need to consider the needs of all community members and devise measures that address the needs of specific groups. By taking such an approach in addressing future crises, rural communities will be more resilient, more able to adjust to extraordinary situations and be better prepared to move forward.

We hope that this document has provided you, the reader, with valuable information and best practice examples that you can use to build community resilience, promote volunteering and engage in active citizenship.

