

The Project Landscape in Focus – Tools for Small Municipalities for Sustainable Landscape: An International Initiative for Enhancing Landscape Management in Small and Medium-Sized Municipalities

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The Landscape in Focus project, an EU-funded collaboration of landscape architects from the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, and Slovakia, supports small municipalities (up to 5,000 inhabitants) in sustainable landscape management. These municipalities play a vital role in preserving and enhancing landscape values but often lack the necessary resources and expertise to address the complex challenges they face today. The project showcases best practices through case studies, promotes public awareness, and identifies replicable models based on conceptual planning, both in built-up areas as well as in open landscape, community involvement, aesthetic and functional design, and nature-based solutions. Standardized case studies were adapted for online dissemination and usability. By emphasizing shared solutions and local participation, the project provides actionable strategies to empower municipalities in addressing contemporary landscape challenges and advancing sustainable management.

Keywords: rural landscape, small and medium-sized municipalities, conceptual planning, local community

The Landscape in Focus Project

The Landscape in Focus project is an interdisciplinary, EU-funded initiative involving landscape architects from the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, and Slovakia. It targets small and medium-sized municipalities ($\leq 5,000$ inhabitants), recognizing their crucial role in landscape management. In the Czech Republic, around 90% of municipalities are classified as 'rural' – that is, with up to 2,000 inhabitants – and these cover more than 70% of the country's area (Obecní noviny, 2006; Český statistický úřad (ČSÚ), 2024). Similar patterns can be observed in other Central and Eastern European countries.

Rural municipalities are key custodians of cultural heritage and crucial to maintaining the character and ecological resilience of their surroundings. Their close relationship with the open landscape necessitates strategic planning to safeguard and enhance cultural, architectural, and ecological values. However, these municipalities increasingly face environmental threats

such as droughts, flooding, erosion, biodiversity loss, and pollution, alongside socio-cultural challenges like heritage degradation, weakening local identity, and population decline.

Limited expertise, financial constraints, and administrative capacity further hinder sustainable, climate-resilient landscape management. Overcoming these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates environmental sustainability with socio-cultural preservation while addressing the diverse needs of local communities.

Effective planning must be participatory and context-sensitive to ensure that development aligns with real community needs, fosters high-quality public spaces, and enhances the broader landscape (Rýpar et. al., 2017).

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Objectives

The project addresses these challenges through knowledge exchange, capacity building, and public engagement.

1. Showcasing Best Practices:

- Develops and disseminates case studies highlighting exemplary landscape planning.
- Focuses on sustainability, community engagement, and preservation of cultural and ecological values.

2. Capacity Building:

- Provides training through an online Step-by-Step Guide covering key landscape-related topics such as:
 - Integrating sustainable practices into planning and governance.
 - Addressing environmental challenges including biodiversity loss and climate change adaptation practices.
 - Enhancing liveability, permeability, and recreational functions.
 - Rural aesthetics, cultural landscapes, and architectural quality.
 - Strengthening local communities and partnerships.
 - Addressing rural depopulation.

3. Public Awareness and Advocacy:

- Promotes awareness of the critical role of landscapes in environmental resilience and cultural identity.
- Encourages local leaders to prioritize sustainable management and integrate long-term landscape strategies within municipal decision-making processes.

Methodology for Selecting Case Studies

A structured methodology ensured the selection of municipalities with replicable landscape management models.

I. Defining “Small Municipality”

Initial needs analysis identified municipalities with ≤2,000 inhabitants as “small,” later expanded to ≤5,000 to accommodate differences across partner countries. The primary criterion was the demonstration of best practices.

II. Selection Criteria

Municipalities were assessed based on:

- Sustainability – Long-term viability of solutions.
- Conceptual Approach – Strategic landscape planning.
- Community Involvement – Local inhabitants and stakeholders’ engagement.

- Architectural Quality – Aesthetic and functional rural design.
- Health and Well-being – Enhancing residents’ quality of life.

III. Case Study Standardization

To ensure consistency, a standardized template was developed, and municipalities were selected via:

- Online research.
- Consultations with municipal support organizations.
- Landscape architecture competition reviews.
- On-site verification (or remote assessment where necessary).
- Each case study includes detailed descriptions, images, and stakeholder input and is available in both national languages and English.

IV. Online Adaptation

To enhance accessibility, case studies were structured for web presentation with:

- Clear headings and keyword tagging.
- Searchable topics on the project website.
- User-friendly layouts for clarity and engagement.

The web platform will undergo pilot testing by experts and municipal stakeholders to ensure usability and effectiveness as an educational tool.

Conclusion

The Landscape in Focus project provides a replicable framework for addressing landscape management challenges in small municipalities. By integrating conceptual and collaborative planning with shared and nature-based solutions, municipalities can safeguard their cultural heritage, enhance environmental sustainability, and foster community resilience. Through knowledge dissemination and capacity building, the project promotes scalable strategies adaptable across Europe.

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