

Sustainable Landscape Approaches and Solutions in Small Municipalities in Rural Landscapes of Slovakia

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Article Details: Received: 2026-02-17 | Accepted: 2026-03-17 | Available online: 2026-05-31



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This study explores the implementation of sustainable landscape approaches and nature-based solutions in small and medium-sized rural municipalities in Slovakia, which often lag behind urban areas in adopting such practices. While urban centres have seen a satisfactory number of good examples, small rural municipalities – typically with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants – face significant challenges in applying innovative, sustainable landscape strategies due to limited economic and human resources. The aim of this research was to highlight five exemplary case studies in rural Slovak municipalities, offering them as models of best practice and sources of inspiration for other rural communities. Through an initiative mapping process based on predefined topics and principles, followed by field visits, the study identifies key approaches that demonstrate how sustainable landscape solutions can be successfully implemented in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords: landscape architecture, green infrastructure, nature-based solutions, rural landscapes, small municipalities

1 Introduction

Planning and designing green infrastructure occur across various landscapes and scales (Tóth, 2022a; Chmelová & Štemberová, 2023), including rural areas and landscapes. Green infrastructure, which encompasses vegetation and woody plants, plays a vital role in enhancing the provision of ecosystem services within rural settlements (Kuczman et al., 2024). This is true both in built-up environments (Kristiánová et al., 2014) and in open agricultural landscapes (Supuka et al., 2020). Vegetation structures have a significant positive impact on mitigating urban climate change and facilitating adaptation to it (Rózová et al., 2020), while also contributing to other crucial ecosystem services (Rózová et al., 2021). Although numerous successful strategies and models for green infrastructure planning and implementation can be found in cities (Tóth et al., 2019), there is a lack of evidence regarding best practices in rural landscapes. However, recent studies indicate that significant progress has been made in addressing this issue in Slovakia in recent years (Tóth, 2022b, 2023, 2024; Tóth & Pavelka, 2024; Tóth et al., 2024a). Green infrastructure can play a crucial role

in promoting sustainable rural development (Karadeniz et al., 2020), as well as in integrating green innovations into landscape architecture (Tóth et al., 2024b). In this context, landscape architecture can be seen as an essential profession capable of effectively implementing green infrastructure and nature-based solutions in the countryside (Tóth et al., 2016), thus, its role is pivotal (Tóth & Feriancová, 2013). The transformation (Jaszczak et al., 2018; Čibík et al., 2020), renewal (Čibík et al., 2022), and even repurposing (Netsch & Gugerell, 2019) of existing open spaces, patterns, and structures within local landscapes can greatly improve the quality of open spaces and landscapes in rural municipalities. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for educating and guiding small- and medium-sized municipalities through various resources, such as brochures, platforms, manuals, and methodological guidance (Hudeková et al., 2018; Hudeková et al., 2023). It is also crucial to involve, integrate, and engage local communities in all landscape processes within rural municipalities (LeLa – Learning Landscapes, 2023). One way to achieve this is through targeted, community-based green space co-design

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projects (Slobodníková & Tóth, 2022). This paper presents the initial findings of an international research project focused on identifying, documenting, showcasing, and promoting innovative landscape practices, sustainable and nature-based solutions and approaches in rural landscapes, particularly in small municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. The paper includes an analysis and evaluation of five selected case studies from various regions of Slovakia.

2 Material and Methods

Slovakia is predominantly a rural country, with more than half of its population residing in rural areas, including villages and small towns. Over 95% of Slovakia's 2,927 municipalities are made up of villages and small towns. Agriculture and forestry together account for around 80% of the country's total land cover, with agriculture alone covering approximately 40%. As such, agriculture is a key land cover and landscape feature in Slovakia. Nearly 82% of rural municipalities have fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, while around 1,500 municipalities have fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. Small municipalities typically have limited economic and human resources for governance, meaning that innovative and contemporary projects are more commonly found in cities and larger towns. There is a need for examples of best practices and active support for local governments and mayors of small municipalities to encourage the implementation of innovative landscape practices in rural areas (Novotný et al., 2016; Dická et al., 2019).

Within an international research project, best practices have been mapped, visited, and documented. The most iconic and inspiring innovative landscape practices identified in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants include, among others: the implementation of blue-green infrastructure and nature-based solutions for stormwater management (Vlčany, south-west Slovakia); the transformation of an abandoned granary in an agricultural cooperative into an innovative and inclusive ecological centre (Moravské Lieskové, north-west Slovakia); proactive nature protection and the enhancement of the riverfront through high-quality wooden architecture (Zálesie, west Slovakia); innovative, low-impact housing development based on permaculture and forest pedagogy principles (Mlynica, north Slovakia); and the conservation of historical and agricultural heritage through the preservation of traditional cherry orchards (Brdárka, central Slovakia).

2.1 Materials

This study analyses and evaluates a diverse range of small rural municipalities with populations of less than 5,000 inhabitants. For this paper, we have selected five of the most inspiring examples of best practices, ensuring a geographically balanced representation, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Essential information on the five selected case studies of best practices in small rural municipalities in Slovakia

Case study	MORAVSKÉ LIESKOVÉ: E.K.O. Centre Žito v Sypke	ZÁLESIE: Riverfront with a Wooden Promenade	VLČANY: Park Squares with Stormwater Retention Measures	BRDÁRKA: Cherry orchards and Permaculture Design	MLYNICA: Krásne Sady – Low-Impact Development and Forest Pedagogy
Geographic location	N-W Slovakia	W Slovakia	S-W Slovakia	Central Slovakia	N-E Slovakia
Self-Governing Region	Trenčín	Bratislava	Nitra	Košice	Prešov
District	Nové Mesto nad Váhom	Senec	Šaľa	Rožňava	Poprad
Municipality	Moravské Lieskové	Zálesie	Vlčany	Brdárka	Mlynica
Number of inhabitants	2,518	2,280	3,136	60	506
Overall administrative territory (km ²)	36.42	5.87	39.76	6.13	10.60
Population density (inhab.km ⁻²)	69.14	388.42	78.87	9.79	98.71

2.2 Methods

In this study, five case studies from small rural municipalities across different regions of Slovakia were analysed and evaluated, applying the Erasmus+ LIF-T Landscape in Focus Project Methodology. The focus was placed on five key themes:

1. Water and Soil.
2. Nature, Biodiversity, and the Environment.
3. Aesthetics and Culture.
4. Public (Open) Space.
5. Mobility.

Each case study was further assessed based on five key principles:

1. Sustainability.
2. Conceptuality.
3. Inclusivity.
4. Architectural Quality.
5. Health and Wellbeing.

The results of this evaluation were organised into five main areas:

1. General Characteristics and Description.
2. Issues Addressed.
3. Approaches and Solutions.
4. Actors and Stakeholders.
5. Challenges and Opportunities.

3 Results and Discussion

The following paragraphs present the evaluation of five case studies showcasing best practices in selected small rural municipalities in Slovakia:

1. Moravské Lieskové.
2. Zálesie.
3. Vlčany.
4. Brdárka.
5. Mlynica.

3.1 *Moravské Lieskové: Nature-Based Solutions and a Repurposed Granary in an Agricultural Cooperative*

Moravské Lieskové is a 'kopanice' dispersed settlement in the White Carpathians, characterised by scattered farms across a hilly landscape. This settlement type reflects the region's agricultural heritage and traditional lifestyle. Agricultural cooperatives, historically central to Slovak agriculture, are now often abandoned in rural areas. A notable example of revitalising such spaces is the transformation of an old granary from a former cooperative into the E.K.O. Centre, a hub for the ŽiTo v SÝPKE civic association. The project has created an interactive space for education, relaxation, and play, featuring a two-hectare certified nature garden that

promotes biodiversity and sustainable practices. The garden includes a rainwater retention system with an irrigation pond and wetland, along with therapeutic, herb, and edible gardens that serve as venues for community events. This centre exemplifies how sustainable practices can engage the community, attract visitors, and support sustainable tourism development.

Issues Addressed: In Slovakia, a professional, conceptual approach to local governance challenges is rare, leading to the rise of civic initiatives that drive innovative environmental projects. These initiatives often involve experts from various fields – architecture, culture, and environmental sciences – and focus on collaboration with local governments. One such initiative, ŽiTo v SÝPKE, co-founded by Viktor Kakaš in 2018, aims to foster cultural and environmental awareness and promote community life in the Považie Region. The association's primary goal is to connect people with nature and encourage sustainable practices. The name "ŽiTo v SÝPKE" is a wordplay, meaning both "rye" and "live it," reflecting the project's ethos.

Approaches and Solutions: The association repurposed an old granary into a community and cultural centre, incorporating nature-based solutions and water retention measures in the former orchard, see Fig. 1. The centre promotes sustainable agriculture, including permaculture, and features a nature garden for environmental education. A therapeutic garden with raised beds supports people with disabilities. Inclusivity, biodiversity, and community engagement are central to the centre's mission. The centre also serves as a gallery and venue for workshops, educational programmes, and public events. Its cohesive visual identity, with distinct architectural elements and artistic play structures, enhances its appeal and community engagement.

Actors and Stakeholders: The association worked with a private landowner who provided the land for the project. Local residents have been actively involved from the start, and the initiative collaborates with educational institutions, environmental organisations (such as Ovocný strom o.z. – Fruit Tree Civic Association), volunteers, the Trenčín Self-Governing Region, and the general public. Visitors attending workshops and events also contribute to shaping the centre's activities, reinforcing its mission to promote environmental education and community involvement.

Challenges and Opportunities: Securing funding for large projects like the eco-centre is challenging and resource-intensive. Local government support is crucial for providing legitimacy and resources for such initiatives. Strengthening collaboration between bottom-up initiatives and municipal authorities



Figure 1 Stormwater retention measures at the reconstructed granary building in ŽiTo v Sýpke, Moravské Lieskové

is essential for achieving long-term synergies and sustainable outcomes.

3.2 Zálesie: A Distinctive Wooden Water Promenade in a Natura 2000 Area

Zálesie has grown in population due to its proximity to the capital. The village's unique charm lies in its natural beauty, with the Little Danube River surrounded by agricultural fields typical of the Danube Lowland. The local initiative Naše Zálesíčko (Our Zálesíčko), founded in 2013, recognised the area's untapped potential and worked to improve the Little Danube River's environment (Natura 2000 site) while enhancing cultural, recreational, and environmental activities. A former landfill was transformed into a unique picnic area, featuring wooden furniture, a small lighthouse lookout, and the "Korzo" wooden pier promenade. This project won the national Architecture Prize CE ZA AR in 2020 and the BIG SEE Architecture Prize in 2021. Other initiatives include a footbridge over the Biela voda stream, a floating pontoon for safe river transit, a fruit tree alley along a bike route, floodplain biotope revitalisation, and nature trails with wooden piers for observation.

Issues Addressed: With a growing population, Zálesie needed cultural, recreational, and environmental

improvements. The Naše Zálesíčko civic association was established to make the village more attractive for residents and visitors. Despite lacking cultural or historical monuments, the association recognised the potential of an abandoned riverbank, hidden beneath 300 tons of waste, and sought to develop the Natura 2000 area and improve accessibility for sustainable mobility.

Approaches and Solutions: Naše Zálesíčko promotes a harmonious relationship between people, nature, and the protected area. The initiative has improved public space, social life, and the environment in Zálesie since 2013. The wooden promenade respects the river's dominance, creating space for nature observation, relaxation, and cultural events such as Záleská divadelná púť (theatre pilgrimage), Sculpture on Promenade, Jazz on Promenade, and Poetry in Nature, see Fig. 2. Other projects include sustainable mobility initiatives, such as a footbridge linking two villages via an educational trail, and a bus stop with a green roof. The association collaborated on a cycling infrastructure plan and planted a 130-tree fruit alley along a future cycle trail. To restore the Little Danube's aquatic habitats, 50 trees were planted in the floodplain forest, and a gazebo was built for outdoor education. The municipality now boasts



Figure 2 A distinctive wooden promenade along the river, promoting local identity, tourism, and recreation in Zálesie
Source: Naše Zálesie

improved architectural quality and identity, thanks to the initiative's professional approach.

Actors and Stakeholders: Naše Zálesičko spearheads many projects, with input from experts in architecture, water management, and nature conservation. Projects were implemented in collaboration with AŽ PROJEKT architecture studio, state organisations (Slovak Water Management Company, State Nature Conservancy), local representatives (former mayor Marian Perger), and the Bratislava Self-Governing Region. Local donor Kúšik Family provided funding, and many projects were carried out by volunteers alongside local businesses.

Challenges and Opportunities: Despite challenges like removing 300 tons of illegal waste and limited resources, Zálesie has considerable growth opportunities through cultural development, partnerships, and civic engagement. While the association has successfully raised nearly 1 million EUR for village improvements, the new municipal leadership's reduced support for Naše Zálesičko poses a significant challenge for the area's future development.

3.3 Vlčany: A Forward-Thinking Village Mastering Water Management and Public Space

The two park squares in Vlčany integrate contemporary landscape architecture with blue-green infrastructure

and nature-based stormwater retention measures while preserving the village's rural character. One square is located at the church, while the other is at the municipal office. The historical church was carefully incorporated into the design, and a new market square was created around the artesian well beneath tree canopies. The walkway to the municipal office is lined with a blossoming alley, and the square features perennial plantings that stylise a meandering river. Both squares include water retention measures, such as rain gardens and permeable surfaces. The village takes a thoughtful, conceptual approach to its local landscapes, continuously working to improve public open spaces and green areas.

Issues Addressed: Vlčany, located in the Danube Lowland along the river Váh, is surrounded by agricultural landscapes. The main issues addressed are the underutilised public open spaces and water management. Historically, the village centre lacked defined functions and design. Water management has also been a long-standing challenge, with traditional drainage ditches only partially preserved. The main issue now is sustainably managing stormwater and excess water, particularly from the artesian well, as it was previously wasted during dry summers.

Approaches and Solutions: Vlčany addresses local landscape issues in a conceptual and ongoing manner,

with public open spaces playing a central role. The village has implemented various development projects in collaboration with architects and landscape professionals. New street trees are regularly planted, and local water bodies, including the river Váh and artesian well, are carefully maintained. The village has revitalised its centre, including the two park squares, using public funds for water retention measures, see Fig. 3. Impermeable surfaces were replaced with permeable ones, and stormwater retention systems, such as rain gardens, bioswales, and underground reservoirs, were introduced. These systems not only retain stormwater but also capture excess water from the artesian well, which is reused to irrigate public green spaces during dry periods.

Actors and Stakeholders: Key drivers of change in Vlčany include Mayor János Restár and local council member František Ondrusek. Other local change-makers, such as veterinarian Peter Pál, have also contributed to the landscape by supporting bird nesting. The success of the village's green space initiatives has earned national (Park of the Year 2024) and international recognition (Cross-Border Hungarian Settlement of the Year 2023, Entente Florale Europe 2024), enhancing the village's public image and fostering a sense of community pride. Various local organisations and civic associations are also actively involved in community development.

Challenges and Opportunities: The primary challenge for landscape development in Vlčany is the lack of public funding. However, the municipality consistently applies for grants, resulting in high-quality outcomes. A further challenge is the complicated land ownership in agricultural areas, which limits the scope of landscape projects to the built-up area. Opportunities for further development include revitalising additional public green spaces, particularly along the Váh oxbow waterfront within the village.

3.4 *Brdárka: A Historic Gemer Village with Vast Cherry Orchards*

Brdárka is a picturesque village nestled in the cultural landscape of the Gemer Region, renowned for its vast cherry orchards, which are the village's defining feature. Over the past few decades, Brdárka has experienced a population decline. However, a group of permaculture enthusiasts and activists has revitalised the village by actively participating in local governance and development. The village uniquely blends traditional housing and architecture with its surrounding landscape. Environmental restoration and architectural preservation are ongoing, with a focus on collaboration with experts and local residents. Brdárka is an inspiring Slovak example of preserving local identity, culture, and visual quality.



Figure 3 The revitalised main square of the village, incorporating nature-based stormwater measures and green elements, in Vlčany

Issues Addressed: Despite its natural beauty and tourism potential, Brdárka faces several challenges. The village is struggling with declining biodiversity, caused by the abandonment of traditional farming methods that once maintained ecological balance. Climate change exacerbates the problem, increasing the risk of erosion and degrading soil quality. The village's old orchards require significant time and effort to restore and maintain. Additionally, there is a lack of local employment opportunities, which leads to the outmigration of young people. Brdárka also suffers from insufficient financial resources to preserve and restore cultural heritage, including historical buildings and traditional crafts. However, with the right support, Brdárka has the potential to become a model for sustainable development, ecological farming, and cultural heritage protection.

Approaches and Solutions: Thanks to the arrival of new residents from the NGO Alter Nativa, Brdárka now focuses on preserving its unique character and fostering sustainable development. The village is committed to restoring its cherry orchards, supporting ecological farming, and enhancing biodiversity. Historical architecture is also being sensitively renovated, with priority given to cultural monuments, such as mudbrick houses and the local church. These efforts enhance the village's cultural identity and charm, making it an attractive destination for visitors.

Actors and Stakeholders: The local community regularly organises traditional events, such as fairs, fruit tastings,

concerts, and workshops, which foster social cohesion and attract tourists. Volunteer actions, such as maintaining public spaces, orchards, and restoring original buildings using traditional methods, strengthen community bonds. Infrastructure development, including eco-tourism and improved transport, is funded through local resources, grants, and regional support. Brdárka serves as an example for other small and shrinking/degrowing villages looking to connect traditions, ecological care, and alternative lifestyles.

Challenges and Opportunities: The driving force behind Brdárka's development is the close-knit community, primarily composed of members from Alter Nativa. Local residents, non-governmental organisations, and experts collaborate to protect the village's natural and cultural heritage. Volunteers play a key role in restoring orchards, preserving crafts, and organising cultural events that foster community spirit, see Fig. 4. Brdárka also benefits from a network of ecological and permaculture initiatives, which bring fresh ideas, interest from ecological communities, and additional financial resources.

Challenges and Opportunities: Brdárka's biggest challenges include limited financial resources for large-scale restoration projects and complex land ownership issues. However, the village has significant potential for eco-tourism and educational projects centred on traditional crafts, landscape management, and permaculture. With its unique environment and engaged residents, Brdárka has the opportunity to become



Figure 4 Conservation of traditional cherry orchards and enhancing its local identity through cultural events in Brdárka
Source: Alter Nativa

a model of sustainable development for other small Slovak villages.

3.5 *Krásne Sady Mlynica: Ecological Rural Development through Low Impact Development*

Krásne Sady Mlynica is a unique sustainable development in Slovakia, designed around climate-positive principles. Situated near Poprad at the foothills of the High Tatras, this project integrates contemporary low-impact housing with nature conservation, biodiversity, and strong community ties. Landscape revitalisation efforts focus on preserving woodlands, planting traditional trees, creating water features, and implementing permaculture solutions. Collaboration with experts and the active involvement of residents fosters a sense of community and attracts individuals interested in sustainable living. Krásne Sady serves as an inspiring model of how modern living can coexist harmoniously with nature.

Issues Addressed: The area faces significant pressures from human activity and climate change. Intensive agriculture, landscape fragmentation, and biodiversity loss have affected the region, while prolonged droughts and heavy rains have underscored the need for ecosystem restoration. Nearby areas also suffer from a lack of natural water features and increased soil erosion risks. Revitalisation is further complicated by fragmented land ownership and limited local awareness of ecological solutions.

Approaches and Solutions: Krásne Sady Mlynica is an experimental development focused on ecological practices. Its primary goal is to create a harmonious environment that balances ecological principles with modern housing needs. Landscape restoration is integrated into the development plan, with the municipality of Mlynica helping to create a comprehensive zoning plan that includes sustainable land-use regulations, building restrictions, and recommendations aligned with ecovillage principles. The project follows permaculture principles, starting with planting traditional tree species, preserving native vegetation, and creating biostrips, willow wetlands, and small water bodies. Water retention measures have significantly improved the local climate, increasing biodiversity, enhancing water systems, and protecting soil. This makes Krásne Sady an exemplary model of climate-positive design. Infrastructure supporting community development and education is also a key focus. The project promotes community activities such as permaculture workshops, seasonal celebrations, and environmental education events. An ecological manual for residents outlines guidelines for plot development, construction materials, resource autonomy, tree planting, water retention, and partial food self-sufficiency.

Actors and Stakeholders: Krásne Sady Mlynica brings together local residents and the civic association



Figure 5 Water retention measures and permaculture gardens in rural landscapes at Krásne Sady, Mlynica

“Krásne Sady,” which leads nature conservation and community development efforts. Local associations and volunteers are crucial in landscape revitalisation and event organisation, working alongside ecological experts to drive innovation and secure funding through grants. The project combines housing needs with respect for the surrounding landscape, creating a model for sustainable development.

Challenges and Opportunities: Challenges include maintaining the rigorous standards set by the ecological manual. While the project has made progress, additional funding is needed to enhance infrastructure, public spaces, and further ecological development. Balancing the environmental benefits with increased land consumption is another challenge. However, the project presents opportunities for cultural and ecological initiatives that could attract resources and strengthen community ties. Greater collaboration between the municipality, landowners, and experts could accelerate planning, delivering long-term benefits to the region.

4 Conclusions

The five case studies presented here showcase exemplary landscape practices, approaches, and solutions, offering valuable inspiration and models for other small rural municipalities with populations under 5,000. The experiences and processes within these communities can be effectively generalised and replicated, with landscape architects playing a key role through democratic landscape solutions. ŽiTo v SYPKE fosters environmental sustainability, cultural engagement, and community development. Its ECO centre and garden provide year-round education on biodiversity, edible plants, and stormwater management. The “Naše Zálesičko” project revitalised the Little Danube riverbank, creating the “Korzo Zálesie” promenade, which now hosts educational, cultural, and recreational activities, attracting tourists and expanding recreational opportunities. Strong civic engagement and collaboration between residents and local government are essential for municipal development. Vlčany’s success in national and international awards demonstrates that small villages can implement modern solutions while preserving their rural character. Brdárka, known for its cultural preservation and sustainable farming, attracts eco-conscious residents, ensuring growth and heritage protection. Krásne Sady Mlynica’s permaculture-based planning enhances biodiversity and draws new residents, supporting sustainable development. These models can inspire other regions, contributing to economic stability and promoting sustainable landscape practices. The outcomes of this study will be featured in

an awareness-raising brochure and interactive platform, primarily aimed at small rural municipalities.

Acknowledgments

Results presented in this paper are outputs of the international project Erasmus+ 2023-1-CZ01-KA220-ADU-000164978 LANDSCAPE IN FOCUS – Tools for Small Municipalities for Sustainable Landscape and national projects VEGA 1/0775/26 and VEGA 1/0535/24.

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