



SOIL:OurInvisibleAlly

GUIDELINE FOR PREPARING AN INTEGRATED RURAL
DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT (IRDC) WITH A FOCUS ON SOIL



D2.1.1 – Integrated Rural Development Concept including sustainable soil management

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General information

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Project partners

Slovenian Forestry Institute (SI) • Art and Nature Foundation (DE) • Agricultural Institute of Slovenia (SI) • Salzburg Institute for Regional Planning and Housing (AT) • Climate Alliance Tyrol (AT) • National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (FR) • University of Torino (IT) • County Administration Landsberg a. Lech (DE) • Autonomous Region of Aosta Valley (IT) • Consulting for Naturland (Association for Organic Agriculture, DE) • Slovenia Forest Service (SI) • Orobie Valtellinesi Parc (IT)

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Preface

Rural areas are facing profound structural, economic, and social transformations. Demographic change, climate change, economic restructuring, digitalization, and evolving requirements for public services and quality of life present municipalities and regions with complex challenges. At the same time, rural areas possess considerable potential, particularly in the form of strong social networks, valuable cultural landscapes, regional economic cycles, and a high level of identification of the population with their region.

The Integrated Rural Development Concept is a key strategic instrument for systematically identifying these potentials, further developing them, and translating them into a coordinated, long-term development strategy. This guide is intended for municipalities, inter-municipal associations, political decision-makers, administrative staff, regional managers, as well as planning and consulting offices.

The objective of this guide is to provide a professionally sound, comprehensible, and practice-oriented overview of the purpose, content, methodology, and implementation of an IRDC. The guide is oriented toward the system of Integrated Rural Development in Germany (Bavaria) and, in particular, draws on the structure and topics of the Integrated Rural Development Concept of the Biosphere Park Lungau as a practical example.

Executive Summary

The Integrated Rural Development Concept is a strategic, cross-sectoral, and long-term planning instrument (10–20 years) for rural regions. It serves to align municipalities, politics, administration, business, and civil society toward sustainable and future-oriented regional development.

An Integrated Rural Development Concept analyzes the initial situation of a region, defines a shared vision, formulates development objectives, derives thematic fields of action, and specifies these in the form of measures and projects. In addition, it creates an organizational and substantive framework for the implementation, prioritization, and funding of regional development projects.

This guide systematically describes all phases of an Integrated Rural Development Concept – from initiation through analysis and participation to implementation, evaluation, and updating – and can serve as a direct working basis for developing an individual Integrated Rural Development Concept.

Put simply, an Integrated Rural Development Concept should consist at minimum of:

- A written document (IRDC brochure), formulated as concisely and clearly as possible, usually 40–60 pages in length, including graphics, illustrations, and visual representations
- Analysis: Assessment of the regional initial situation (structure, demographics, economy, infrastructure)
- SWOT: Evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks as a strategic foundation
- Measures & Implementation: Concrete projects with priorities, timelines, and clear responsibilities
- Financing & Funding: Cost framework, funding programs, and financing strategy
- Next Steps: Organization, monitoring, evaluation, and further development of the Integrated Rural Development Concept

Plan/Map:

- A map showing the spatial allocation of measures
- Corresponding legend

1. Introduction

1.1 Concept of the Integrated Rural Development Concept

An Integrated Rural Development Concept is a strategic development framework for rural areas, spatially focused on a region or an inter-municipal association. It follows an integrated approach in which economic, social, ecological, cultural, and spatial-structural aspects are considered jointly and coordinated with one another.

Key characteristics of an Integrated Rural Development Concept include:

- Spatial reference to a clearly defined region
- Cross-sectoral consideration of all relevant thematic fields
- Long-term orientation with a time horizon of generally 10 to 20 years
- Participatory development process involving key stakeholders and the population
- Clear implementation focus through the definition of measures and projects

In Germany, the Integrated Rural Development Concept is a central instrument of Integrated Rural Development and often forms the basis for funding measures within the framework of the Joint Task for the Improvement of Agricultural Structures and Coastal Protection, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and the LEADER programme (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale).

1.2. Why an Integrated Rural Development Concept Is Beneficial for Inter-Municipal Cooperation

The Integrated Rural Development Concept is the strategic outcome of an inter-municipal coordination process. It is not an organizational merger, but a jointly conceived development and action program that structures and aligns cooperation between several municipalities in a binding manner.

As a central planning instrument the Integrated Rural Development Concept:

- ... Serves as a framework for municipal and inter-municipal projects
- ... Formulates coordinated development goals for multiple municipalities
- ... Bundles differing interests into a shared vision
- ... Creates clarity regarding priorities and fields of action
- ... Strengthens identification with regional development objectives
- ... Replaces isolated strategies and individual decisions with a coordinated overall strategy
- ... Enables long-term and sustainable planning
- ... Defines concrete implementation projects
- ... Makes inter-municipal projects plannable and implementation-oriented
- ... Serves as a decision-making basis for funding measures.

1.3 Necessity of Integrated Rural Development

The challenges facing rural areas are complex and multifaceted. Individual measures or isolated sectoral planning approaches are not sufficient to address these challenges sustainably. Integrated rural development therefore pursues a holistic approach that links different policies and action fields. Demographic change, economic restructuring, climate change, increasing demands on public services, and evolving mobility and lifestyle patterns interact simultaneously and closely. Uncoordinated individual decisions risk intensifying conflicts of objectives, using resources inefficiently, or encouraging long-term misdevelopments.

Integrated rural development considers economic, social, ecological, and spatial aspects collectively. It enables the targeted use of regional strengths, the creation of synergies between fields of action, and the early identification of land-use conflicts. It also promotes inter-municipal cooperation, since many tasks – such as infrastructure, mobility, economic development, or climate adaptation – exceed the capacity of individual municipalities. Moreover, integrated rural development contributes significantly to ensuring equitable living conditions. Coordinated strategies help secure services of general interest, strengthen town centers, develop regional economic cycles, and maintain quality of life in the long term. It forms the professional and strategic framework for instruments such as the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC).

1.4 Distinction from Formal Planning Instruments

The IRDC must be clearly distinguished from formal spatial planning instruments such as state development plans, regional plans, and municipal land-use planning instruments.

While formal planning instruments are based on legal frameworks and contain legally binding provisions, the IRDC has no normative or legally binding character. It does not create direct obligations for citizens, property owners, or authorities and does not replace formal planning procedures or legally required balancing processes.

Its function is strategic and preparatory. It formulates overarching development objectives, coordinates municipal interests, and defines a common strategic direction for the region. It must not contradict existing spatial planning objectives but should concretize and operationalize them in an implementation-oriented manner.

Thus, the IRDC acts as a connecting element between strategic goal-setting, political decision-making, and subsequent formal planning and funding decisions.

1.5 Objective and Structure of the Guide

The objective of this guide is to provide municipalities and inter-municipal associations with clear, practice-oriented guidance for the preparation and implementation of an Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC). It aims to explain the IRDC instrument in an understandable manner, situate its function within the context of rural development, and clearly present the key requirements regarding content, process, and implementation. The guide is addressed to political decision-makers, administrative staff, regional managers, and commissioned planning offices and serves as a professional working basis and quality assurance tool.

The structure of the guide follows the typical sequence of an IRDC process. Beginning with fundamental explanations and framework conditions, it systematically addresses analysis, vision and objective development, fields of action, action planning, as well as implementation and evaluation. The clear structure allows both a continuous, step-by-step process and the targeted use of individual chapters, ensuring that all essential steps of integrated rural development are comprehensively and transparently represented.

2. Framework Conditions of Rural Development

The framework conditions of rural development form the fundamental starting point of an Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC). They describe the overarching social, economic, spatial, and ecological factors under which a region develops. These conditions operate independently of individual municipal decisions and significantly shape the scope of action, opportunities, and risks of regional development.

Addressing this thematic area within the IRDC is necessary to viewing regional development not in isolation, but within the context of overarching trends and structures. Only if these framework conditions are presented transparently and understood can realistic goals be formulated, priority fields of action defined, and long-term viable strategies developed. They also provide a professional justification for the need for action and increase the comprehensibility of the IRDC for political bodies, funding institutions, and the public.

2.1 Demographic Framework Conditions

Demographic framework conditions are a central component of the IRDC, as population development, age structure, and migration movements influence nearly all areas of rural development. Changes in population size and composition directly affect public services, infrastructure, housing demand, labor markets, educational services, and social facilities.

Analyzing the demographic situation within the IRDC is necessary to identify future needs at an early stage and avoid undesirable developments. It enables strategies to be aligned with realistic population forecasts and allows for the targeted development of measures for specific population groups – such as children, youth, families, or elderly people.

Furthermore, presenting demographic framework conditions provides an objective basis for political decisions and investments and supports forward-looking, sustainable, and needs-based regional development.

2.2 Climate Change and Sustainable Resource Use

Climate change and the sustainable use of natural resources are central cross-cutting issues in rural development and must therefore be systematically addressed within the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC). Climatic changes such as increasing heat waves, heavy rainfall events, heat periods, and extreme weather directly affect agriculture, forestry, water balance, settlement development, infrastructure, and quality of life. At the same time, rural regions are tasked with contributing to climate protection and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Including this thematic field in the IRDC is necessary to integrate climate mitigation and climate adaptation into strategic decisions at an early stage rather than addressing them only within individual projects. The IRDC provides the appropriate framework to coordinate measures for energy efficiency, expansion of renewable energies, economical use of land, water and raw materials, and strengthening regional cycles. Through an integrated approach, conflicts of objectives – for example between energy production, landscape protection, and settlement development – can be identified and balanced.

Moreover, sustainable resource use contributes to safeguarding natural livelihoods and regional value creation in the long term. It strengthens rural resilience to climatic and ecological risks and provides a technically sound basis for forward-looking investments, funding decisions, and political measures. This chapter therefore makes a substantial contribution to the sustainable, climate-change, resilient and intergenerational development of the region.

2.3 Soil Protection

Soil protection is a key thematic field within the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC), as soil represents a central yet limited resource for rural areas. Soils fulfill multiple ecosystem services: they are the basis for agriculture and forestry, provide habitats for plants and animals, store water and nutrients, and serve as a prerequisite or support settlement and infrastructure development. At the same time, soils are increasingly threatened by land consumption, sealing, erosion, compaction, and pollutant inputs. These developments have long-term negative impacts on the environment, climate, flood risks, and regional value creation. Addressing soil protection within the IRDC is necessary to strategically and proactively manage the use of soil resources. Through an integrated perspective, conflicts of use between settlement development, agriculture, transport, nature conservation, and energy production can be identified and minimized at an early stage. Soil protection thus provides a technical foundation for objectives such as inner development before outward expansion, land conservation, preservation of fertile soils, and sustainable land use. Furthermore, it strengthens regional resilience to climate impacts such as heavy rainfall or heat periods and supports long-term sustainable, intergenerational development of rural areas.

2.4 Funding Policy Framework

The funding policy framework is an essential component of an Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC), as many rural development measures would not be feasible, or only to a limited extent, without financial support from the EU, federal, and state levels. Funding programs define thematic priorities, set eligibility criteria, and thus significantly influence which projects can be realized. Presenting these framework conditions in the IRDC is necessary to ensure that development goals and measures are realistically planned, implementation-oriented, and financially viable.

Within the IRDC, relevant funding instruments – such as programs for integrated rural development, LEADER, EAFRD (ELER), GAK, or state-specific funding schemes – are outlined in their basic structure and linked to regional development objectives. This ensures that measures are not developed in isolation but in alignment with existing funding logics. At the same time, the IRDC serves as strategic proof for funding authorities that projects are part of a coordinated, regionally supported development concept.

Addressing funding policy frameworks also creates transparency for political decision-makers and local stakeholders. It supports the prioritization of measures, facilitates the selection of eligible projects, and strengthens the strategic management of regional development processes. This chapter therefore makes a decisive contribution to the feasibility of the IRDC and to the efficient use of public funding.

3. Organization, Stakeholders, and Participation

The thematic field “Organization, Stakeholders, and Participation” is a central component of the IRDC, as the quality and effectiveness of the entire development process depend significantly on clear structures, defined roles, and transparent cooperation. An IRDC is not merely a technical report but a politically legitimized, jointly supported development process. Therefore, it must clearly present how the process is organized, which stakeholders are involved, and how decisions are prepared and made. This chapter creates transparency regarding responsibilities, accountabilities, and participation formats and ensures that the IRDC is understood as a joint regional project. At the same time, it provides the foundation for commitment, continuity, and acceptance during the implementation phase.

3.1 Role of Municipalities and Political Bodies

Presenting the role of municipalities and political bodies is necessary within the IRDC, as they are the primary sponsors of integrated rural development and ensure the political legitimacy of the entire process. Municipalities initiate the IRDC process, make fundamental decisions regarding participation in inter-municipal cooperation, and are responsible for implementing the goals and measures defined in the IRDC. Political bodies such as municipal councils, mayoral conferences, or steering committees are crucial for strategic guidance, priority setting, and decision-making.

The IRDC must therefore describe how municipalities are integrated into the process, what decision-making structures exist, and how coordination between participating municipalities is organized. This ensures commitment and transparency and demonstrates that the IRDC is based on political resolutions and shared responsibility.

3.2 Intermunicipal Cooperation

Intermunicipal cooperation is a core element of the IRDC, as many rural challenges exceed the capacity of individual municipalities and can only be effectively addressed jointly. Topics such as settlement development, mobility, economic promotion, public services, climate adaptation, or infrastructure preservation often transcend municipal boundaries.

Within the IRDC, intermunicipal cooperation is described as a strategic framework that enables pooling of resources, networking of competencies, and avoidance of duplication. Coordinated action increases efficiency, reduces costs, and expands municipal scope for action. It also strengthens regional identity and enhances political and professional standing toward funding bodies and higher planning levels..

3.3 Regional Management

Regional management is a key success factor for the preparation and, in particular, the implementation of an Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC) and must therefore be explicitly addressed within the concept. While the IRDC defines the strategic foundation and overall framework, regional management assumes the operational role in coordinating, supporting, and further developing the process. Presenting this field of action within the IRDC is necessary to clearly demonstrate how the continuous steering of the process beyond the initial drafting of the concept will be ensured.

The IRDC must outline the responsibilities assigned to regional management, such as coordination between municipalities, political bodies, administrative authorities, funding agencies, and other regional stakeholders. This includes supporting project development, assisting with funding applications, organizing coordination

and participation formats and ensuring ongoing communication within the region. In this context, regional management acts as the interface between strategic objectives and practical implementation. Addressing regional management in the IRDC creates transparency regarding responsibilities and resources and increases commitment during the implementation phase. It highlights that integrated rural development represents a long-term process requiring continuous support and professional coordination to achieve sustainable impact. This chapter, therefore constitutes an essential prerequisite for the successful implementation, continuation, and adaptation of the IRDC to changing framework conditions.

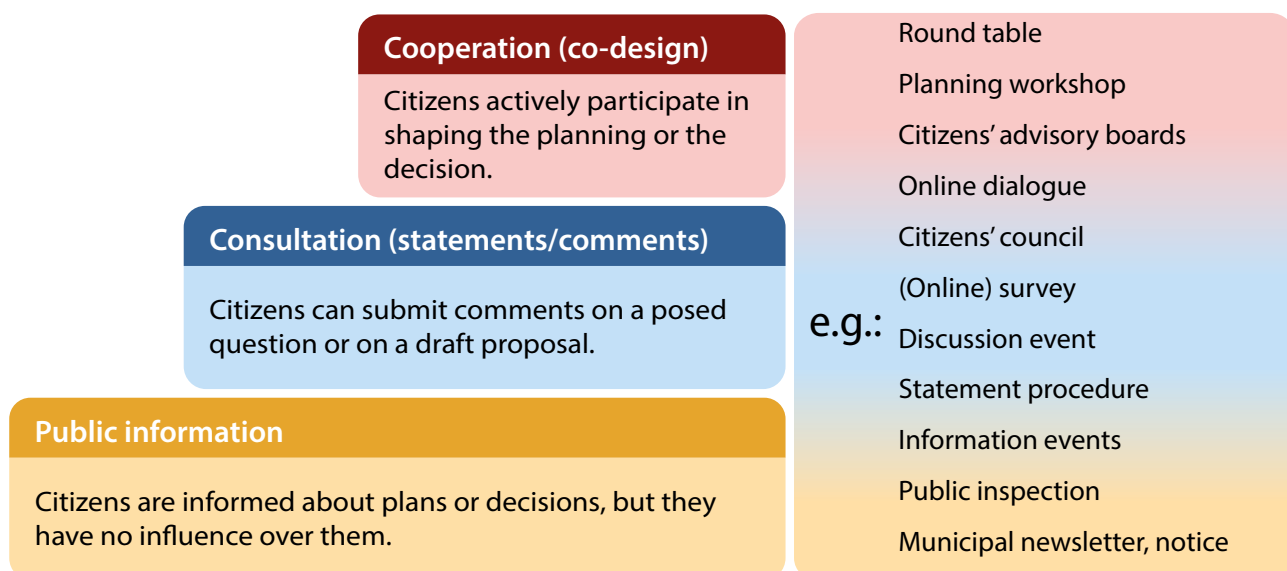
3.4 Participation of the Population

Public participation is an essential component of an Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC), as sustainable regional development can only succeed if it is supported by the people who live in the region. Rural development processes directly affect living environments, everyday structures, and the prospects of the population. Addressing this field within the IRDC is therefore necessary to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the concept, create acceptance for planned measures, and systematically integrate local knowledge into the development process.

Within the IRDC, it must be explained how the population was involved in the preparation of the concept, for example through workshops, public assemblies, working groups, or informal participation formats. The author of the IRDC must clarify which target groups were addressed, how feedback was documented and incorporated in terms of content, and how transparency throughout the process was ensured. Participation serves not only to collect opinions, but also to jointly analyze problems and develop ideas.

Furthermore, the presentation of public participation in the IRDC provides an important foundation for later implementation. It demonstrates that measures are based on real needs and promotes identification, engagement, and individual initiative within the region. This chapter therefore makes a significant contribution to anchoring the IRDC as a shared future project of the region and ensuring the long-term effectiveness of integrated rural development.

For specific subject areas, such as town center revitalization or architectural issues, more intensive participation is possible and meaningful. In the case of more strategic decisions, an online survey among experts or relevant stakeholders may be appropriate. In principle, however, care should be taken to ensure that no one is excluded and that all interested parties are given an appropriate opportunity to participate.



Source: Robert Krasser / SIR

4. Analysis of the Initial Situation

The analysis of the initial situation is a core element of the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC), as it forms the professional and factual basis for all subsequent content. In this chapter, the current state of the region is systematically recorded, described, and evaluated. Including this analysis in the IRDC is necessary to base development goals, fields of action, and measures not on assumptions or individual interests, but on reliable data, comprehensible findings, and a shared understanding of the regional situation.

As part of the analysis, the author of the IRDC must examine relevant subject areas such as population, economy, labor market, settlement structure, infrastructure, mobility, agriculture, tourism, environment, and climate. It is important to consolidate existing data from statistics, sectoral planning, and regional surveys and to view them from an intermunicipal, regional perspective. The aim is to make structural interrelationships, spatial interconnections, as well as the strengths and problem areas of the region visible, without limiting the analysis to a purely municipality-specific perspective.

The analysis of the initial situation also promotes transparency and traceability. It explains why certain topics are prioritized and where there is a specific need for action. At the same time, it creates a shared knowledge base for political decision-makers, administrative bodies, regional stakeholders, and the population. This chapter thus ensures that the IRDC is professionally sound, realistically oriented, and sustainable in the long term, and it forms the indispensable foundation for targeted and integrated rural development.

4.1 Natural and Geographical Foundations

Natural and geographical foundations are an indispensable component of the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC), as they represent the physical basis of all spatial, economic, and social developments in a region. Landscape structure, topography, climate, geology, soils, water bodies, and protected areas significantly influence the possibilities for use, development limits, and potentials of a region. Addressing this topic within the IRDC is necessary to make spatial decisions on a sound professional basis and to avoid long-term misdevelopment.

Within this chapter, the author of the IRDC must present the natural characteristics that shape the region and explain how these influence settlement development, agriculture, forestry, tourism, mobility, and infrastructure. Particular attention must be paid to sensitive areas, hazard-prone areas, climatic characteristics, as well as landscape and ecological qualities. The analysis should not be purely descriptive, but should also highlight the significance of these conditions for future development strategies.

Presenting the natural and geographical foundations in the IRDC also creates transparency regarding the natural limits and opportunities of development. It provides the professional basis for the sustainable use of landscapes and resources, supports the balancing of usage demands and protection interests, and contributes to preserving regional identity and landscape quality in the long term. This chapter thus makes an essential contribution to integrated, environmentally compatible, and location-appropriate regional development.

4.2 Population and Social Infrastructure

The topic “Population and Social Infrastructure” is a central component of the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC), as the quality of life and future viability of a region directly depend on the needs and

structures of its population. Population development, age structure, household types, and migration movements significantly influence the demand for social, health-related, educational, and cultural services. Addressing these aspects within the IRDC is necessary to enable needs-based and sustainable long-term planning of social infrastructure.

In the IRDC, the author must describe the current population structure and outline expected future developments. On this basis, social infrastructure services such as childcare, schools, elderly care and healthcare services, social services, cultural institutions, and meeting places are to be analyzed. The aim is to identify service gaps, over- or under-supply, as well as spatial imbalances within the region. An intermunicipal perspective is particularly important, as many social institutions are used across municipal boundaries and can often only be secured through cooperation.

Including this topic in the IRDC creates a professional foundation for measures to safeguard public services of general interest, strengthen social cohesion, and adapt services to changing population structures. It supports political decision-making, prioritization, and investment planning and contributes to promoting equitable living conditions within the region. This chapter therefore makes a significant contribution to the social sustainability and attractiveness of rural areas.

4.3 Economy and Labor Market

The chapter “Economy and Labor Market” is a central component of the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC), as the economic development of a region significantly determines its future viability, attractiveness, and social stability. A sustainable economic structure and a functioning labor market are fundamental prerequisites for employment, income, municipal revenues, and the maintenance of infrastructure and public services. Addressing this topic within the IRDC is therefore necessary to strategically guide economic development and secure long-term prospects for the region.

In the IRDC, the author must outline the composition of the regional economic structure and identify the sectors, businesses, and forms of employment that characterize the region. These include agriculture, crafts, trade, industry, services, tourism, and new forms of employment such as home office or small-scale, knowledge-based activities. In addition, labor market aspects such as employment figures, commuting patterns, demand for skilled workers, training opportunities, and demographic influences on the labor market are to be analyzed. An intermunicipal perspective is indispensable, as economic interdependencies and labor markets do not stop at municipal boundaries.

Including this topic in the IRDC enables the targeted expansion of regional strengths, the identification of structural weaknesses, and the early derivation of needs for action. It forms the basis for measures to secure and create jobs, strengthen regional value chains, and promote sustainable economic models. At the same time, this chapter supports political decision-making and the targeted use of funding instruments, thereby contributing significantly to the long-term economic and social stability of the rural region.

5. Possible Fields of Action in the IRDC

The fields of action form the thematic structure of the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC) and organize development goals, measures, and projects into coherent subject areas. They are derived directly from the initial SWOT analysis, and the mission statement, and specify the thematic areas the region intends to prioritise. Addressing the fields of action in the IRDC is necessary in order to define clear priorities, bundle measures, and create synergies between different activities.

In the IRDC, the author must explain for each field of action why it is a priority, which development goals are associated with it, which measures and projects it includes, who is responsible for its implementation, and within what timeframe implementation is to take place. Fields of action are not isolated silos; they overlap in content and must be considered in interaction. Their formulation should be both professionally sound and politically communicable.

Areas of intervention within integrated rural development

Village and inner-area development

Soil, agriculture & landscape

Economy, commercial development & energy

Mobility and essential public services

Cooperation in municipal affairs

Social affairs and cultural life

Tourism, recreation and cultural development

Climate, energy and environmental protection

Source: Robert Krasser / SIR

5.1 Village and inner-area development

Local and inner development is one of the central fields of action within an Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC). It aims to strengthen existing settlement structures, revitalize town and village centres, and counteract urban sprawl. In the context of demographic change, rising infrastructure costs, and increasing land scarcity, the principle “inner before outer development” is of particular importance.

Within the IRDC, the current settlement structure of the region must be presented: vacancies, building gaps, brownfield sites, buildings in need of renovation, unused farmsteads, and inner areas with development potentials must be systematically recorded and spatially located. An inter municipal perspective is essential, as residential and commercial development often influence each other across municipal boundaries.

Central objectives of local and inner development may include:

- Reducing soil consumption and limiting new development areas
- Revitalizing and reusing vacant buildings

- Strengthening central supply areas
- Enhancing public spaces and village squares
- Safeguarding buildings that shape the townscape
- Promoting age-appropriate and barrier-free housing

Possible measures include municipal vacancy registers, advisory services for property owners, funding programs for building renovation, concept-based allocation of central plots, or intermunicipal coordination of settlement development.

Local and inner development makes an important contribution to the economic viability of municipal infrastructure, the strengthening of social meeting points, and the preservation of regional building culture. At the same time, it reduces traffic volumes and CO₂ emissions and thus supports the region's climate goals.

5.2 Forestry, Soil, Agriculture & Landscape

Agriculture and forestry are fundamental pillars of rural areas and shape the landscape, economy, identity, and ecology of a region in many ways. They secure jobs, preserve cultural landscapes, contribute to climate protection, and form the basis of regional value chains. At the same time, both sectors face profound challenges: structural change in agriculture, concentration processes in the food industry, decline in agricultural holdings, increasing environmental and climate protection requirements, and growing pressure on forest areas due to pests, drought, and storm damage. Addressing this topic within the IRDC is necessary to acknowledge the importance of these sectors for regional development and to actively integrate them into a future-oriented development strategy.

In the IRDC, the author must describe the agricultural structural conditions in the region, identify prevailing farm types and management systems, and assess the economic significance of agriculture and forestry for the region. Both conventional and organic farming systems are to be considered and evaluated with regard to their potentials and constraints. In addition, the forestry structure must be analyzed, particularly ownership structures, protection and commercial forests, and climate-related risks to forest stands.

Special attention must be given to regional cycles and value chains. Direct and regional marketing, processing companies, gastronomy, and food crafts offer significant potential to strengthen regional value creation while improving the supply of high-quality regional products to the population. Promoting such cycles contributes to the economic stability of agricultural enterprises, strengthens regional identity, and reduces transport-related and climate emissions.

Including this topic in the IRDC creates a strategic foundation for understanding agriculture and forestry not as a mere backdrop, but as active shaping forces in rural development. Measures to support regionally adapted management systems, networking between producers, processors, and consumers, and ensuring sustainable forest management can thus be systematically derived, prioritized, and promoted. This chapter therefore makes an essential contribution to the economic, ecological, and cultural sustainability of the region.

5.3 Economy, Commercial Development & Energy

The field of action "Economy, Commercial Development & Energy" bundles all measures aimed at safeguarding and further developing regional value creation. The objective is to preserve jobs and create new economic prospects, strengthen the region's competitiveness, and at the same time integrate sustainable

energy and climate strategies.

Within the IRDC, the existing economic structure must be analyzed in detail: sectoral distribution, company sizes, demand for skilled labor, commuting interdependencies, innovation potential, and available commercial areas. Particular attention must be paid to the quality and occupancy of existing commercial zones. The designation of new areas must be carefully weighed against the objective of land conservation.

Typical objectives in this field of action include::

- Securing and developing regional jobs
- Strengthening crafts, small and medium-sized enterprises, and regional production
- Promoting business start-ups and succession planning
- Intermunicipal coordination of commercial land development
- Expanding digital infrastructure as a location factor
- Utilizing regional energy potentials

The connection between economic development and the energy transition is a strategic key area. Rural regions often possess considerable potential for renewable energy—such as photovoltaic systems, wind power, biomass, or hydropower. However, these potentials must be carefully balanced with landscape protection, acceptance issues, and grid infrastructure requirements.

The IRDC should therefore not only identify land potentials but also develop strategies for regional value creation through energy projects, for example through citizen energy cooperatives, municipal participation models, or regional energy concepts. The aim is to combine economic development and climate protection and to make the region resilient to external energy price and market developments.

5.4 Mobility and essential public services

Mobility and infrastructure are fundamental prerequisites for the functionality and quality of life of rural areas. They enable access to jobs, schools, healthcare, and supply facilities, secure economic interconnections, and are decisive for the attractiveness of a location. At the same time, mobility provision in rural areas faces significant challenges: low population density, dispersed settlement structures, and limited municipal resources make it difficult to establish and operate economically viable public transport services. Addressing this topic within the IRDC is therefore necessary to identify mobility needs, make service deficits transparent, and develop integrated solutions.

In the IRDC, the author must comprehensively describe and evaluate the existing transport network. This includes analyzing the road network, including supra-local connections, internal development, and the condition of municipal roads. Particular importance is attached to the presentation of public transport: route networks, service frequency, accessibility of stops, and the quality and reliability of connections to supra-regional transport axes must be assessed. In addition, pedestrian and cycling connections and their integration with public transport must be analyzed.

Beyond physical transport infrastructure, technical infrastructure must also be examined in detail in the IRDC. Broadband provision and digital connectivity are now indispensable for rural areas—both for private households and for businesses, administration, educational institutions, and healthcare services. Gaps in broadband coverage and differences in network quality within the region must be presented in a differentiated manner. Furthermore, supply infrastructures such as water supply, wastewater disposal, energy supply, and waste management must be analyzed in their current condition and with regards to future needs for action.

An intermunicipal perspective is particularly relevant in this field of action, as mobility and infrastructure must be planned and operated across municipal boundaries in order to ensure economically viable and needs-based solutions. Including this chapter in the IRDC creates the foundation for coordinated mobility development, prioritization of infrastructure investments, and innovative mobility services such as public buses, car-sharing platforms, or demand-responsive bus systems. It thus contributes significantly to securing equitable living conditions and to the future-oriented development of rural areas.

5.5 Social Affairs, Cultural Life, and Cooperation in Municipal Contexts

Social and cultural life is a central factor in rural areas, significantly shaping quality of life, identity, and social cohesion. While economic and infrastructural aspects often take centre stage, the social fabric forms the essential foundation of a functioning and sustainable region. Within the IRDC, it is necessary to analyse and describe which social structures, associations, initiatives, cultural institutions, and voluntary networks shape the region and how viable these structures are in the long term. These include, for example, sports and music clubs, volunteer fire brigades, church groups, youth organizations, senior networks, cultural initiatives, and informal neighbourhood structures. Particular attention should be given to demographic change, the recruitment of young volunteers, and integration services for newcomers.

Social and cultural activities—such as festivals, traditions, and community initiatives—not only strengthen community spirit but also contribute significantly to regional identity and external attractiveness. Cultural identity should therefore be understood as an important intangible location factor.

Key objectives in this field of action may include:

- Safeguarding and strengthening voluntary engagement
- Creating meeting spaces
- Integrating new population groups
- Expanding cultural events and regional identity

Especially in regions experiencing population decline or aging, stabilizing social infrastructures is of particular importance. Multi-purpose buildings, community centres, or multifunctional meeting points can bundle social services and create synergies. Moreover, cultural identity must be understood as an intangible location factor. Regional festivals, music, craft traditions, or historic buildings shape the self-image of the population and at the same time enhance external attractiveness. Addressing this field of action within the IRDC ensures that rural development is not conceived solely in technical or economic terms, but as a holistic process that places people at its centre. A vibrant social and cultural environment is an essential prerequisite for long-term settlement prospects, in-migration, and regional stability.

5.6 Tourism, recreation and cultural development

Tourism, leisure, and culture are important economic pillars in many rural regions and central elements of regional identity. They support value creation, secure jobs in hospitality, the cultural and creative industries, and leisure facilities, and significantly contribute to a region's attractiveness for residents and guests. At the same time, rural tourism faces changing travel patterns, increasing quality requirements, growing digitalization pressures, and rising competition. Addressing this topic within the IRDC is necessary to systematically assess existing potentials and anchor tourism and cultural development as integral components of a sustainable regional strategy.

Within the IRDC, the author must comprehensively present the tourism baseline of the region. This includes

analyzing existing accommodation and catering establishments, overnight stay figures and guest structures, the available tourism route network, and special attractions and unique selling points of the region. Existing leisure offerings and their use must also be analyzed: sports and leisure facilities, local recreation areas, cycling and hiking trails, nature tourism, and seasonal offers. Day tourism must also be considered, particularly in nature-oriented rural regions where it can generate significant economic impulses.

The cultural dimension must be elaborated as an independent potential within the IRDC. Cultural heritage, customs, regional traditions, local festivals, historic townscapes and cultural landscapes, as well as active cultural associations and initiatives contribute to the identity formation of the population and at the same time enhance location attractiveness. Cultural institutions such as museums, cultural centers, libraries, or community spaces secure social life, promote participation, and strengthen cohesion.

An intermunicipal perspective is particularly important in this field of action, as tourism infrastructure and cultural offerings often extend beyond municipal boundaries and can only be effectively developed, marketed, and maintained in cooperation. Including this chapter in the IRDC creates the foundation for measures to qualitatively develop tourism, cultural stakeholders networks, and strengthen regional identity as a location factor. It thus makes an essential contribution to the economic and social vitality of rural areas.

5.7 Climate, energy and environmental protection

The field of climate, energy, and environment is of outstanding importance in rural development, as rural areas are both directly affected by the consequences of climate change and capable of making significant contributions to climate protection and the energy transition. Rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, more frequent extreme weather events, and impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity pose concrete adaptation challenges for rural municipalities. At the same time, rural regions possess particular potential for generating renewable energy and establishing climate-resilient structures due to their natural resources, land availability, and landscape characteristics. Addressing this field within the IRDC is necessary to anchor climate protection and climate adaptation not as secondary tasks, but as integral components of the regional development strategy.

Within the IRDC, the author must systematically present the region's energy baseline. This includes analyzing regional energy consumption by sector, the existing energy supply infrastructure, and the current state of renewable energy expansion—especially photovoltaics, wind power, biomass, and hydropower. Potential areas and preconditions for renewable energy use must be identified and assessed with regard to possible conflicts with landscape protection, nature conservation, and settlement development. In addition, opportunities to increase energy efficiency in municipalities, businesses, and private households must be outlined. Concerning climate change, it must be explained which specific climatic changes the region is exposed to and which sectors—such as agriculture and forestry, water management, natural hazards, settlement development, or tourism—are particularly affected. Climate adaptation measures, for example the renaturation of water bodies, the creation of cooling green structures, the development of adapted forest management strategies, or flood protection, must be addressed as strategic cross-cutting tasks.

The presentation of the environmental status must also include the condition and development of biotopes, biodiversity, and protected areas, as well as burdens caused by land sealing, noise emissions, pollutant inputs into soils and water bodies, or light pollution. Including this comprehensive field of action in the IRDC creates a well-founded basis for measures that link climate protection, the energy transition, biodiversity conservation, and climate adaptation and align them with specific regional conditions. It thus makes a decisive contribution to a resilient, environmentally compatible, and future-oriented development of the region.

6. SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis is a central evaluation instrument within the Integrated Rural Development Concept (IRDC) and serves to systematically structure and strategically classify the results of the baseline analysis. By juxtaposing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, a comprehensive picture of the current situation and future development possibilities of the region is created. Addressing the SWOT analysis within the IRDC is necessary to transform a purely descriptive analysis into a the foundation of strategical decision-making .

Within the SWOT analysis, the author of the IRDC must contrast internal regional factors—such as existing potentials, resources, structures, and deficits—with external influencing factors such as societal trends, economic developments, demographic change, or climate policy frameworks. The aim is to make interrelationships and interactions visible and to identify where regional strengths can be specifically utilized, weaknesses reduced, opportunities seized, and risks minimized. An intermunicipal and regional perspective is particularly important in order to overcome municipality-specific individual interests.

The SWOT analysis forms the central bridge between analysis and strategy in the IRDC. It provides the professional justification for defining the mission statement, development goals, and fields of action and ensures that these are derived in a comprehensible and data-based manner rather than arbitrarily. Furthermore, the transparent presentation of SWOT results increases the comprehensibility and acceptance of the IRDC among political bodies, funding authorities, and the population and significantly contributes to the strategic quality and implementation orientation of the concept.

7. Implementation

Implementation represents the decisive phase in which the strategic concept is translated into concrete actions. A high-quality IRDC presents its added value only when the defined goals, fields of action, and measures are actually realized. Addressing implementation and governance within the IRDC is therefore necessary in order to define clear structures, responsibilities, and processes from the outset that ensure systematic, continuous, and impact-oriented implementation.

Within the IRDC, the author must specify which measures are to be implemented in what sequence and within what timeframe. A prioritization of measures according to urgency, impact potential, feasibility, and funding eligibility is required to create a realistic and focused implementation plan. Flagship projects that make a particularly strong contribution to achieving development goals or have a high signaling effect for the region must be highlighted separately and described in detail with regard to their implementation structure.

Steering the implementation process requires clear governance structures: it must be defined who makes decisions, who acts operationally, who coordinates, and who reports on progress. Regional management plays a central role as a coordinating body between municipalities, political committees, project sponsors, and funding agencies. Regular coordination formats, reporting obligations, and decision-making procedures must be defined within the IRDC in order to ensure commitment and transparency during the implementation phase.

Furthermore, the IRDC must outline how individual measures are to be financed. An overview of relevant funding programs, possible municipal contributions, private co-financing, and other funding sources forms the basis for realistic resource planning. Aligning measures strategically with funding policy priorities is particularly important to maximize funding opportunities and make efficient use of public funds.

7.1 Governance and Organizational Structure

The governance and organizational structure of an IRDC describes the institutional framework within which the development process is steered, coordinated, and further developed. It defines which bodies and stakeholders have which tasks and decision-making powers, how cooperation between municipalities, administration, political committees, regional management, and other actors is organized, and how decisions are prepared, adopted, and communicated. Addressing this topic within the IRDC is necessary because a strategic development concept can only be implemented effectively and sustainably if it is based on a stable, clearly defined, and politically supported organizational structure.

Within the IRDC, the governance structure must be presented in its overall architecture. Typically, it comprises several levels: a political steering level—such as a conference of mayors or an intermunicipal steering committee—makes fundamental decisions and sets the strategic direction. An operational coordination level, usually the regional management, assumes ongoing process management, project support, and communication tasks. Thematic working groups or advisory boards contribute subject-specific expertise from administration, business, civil society, and sectoral planning and accompany the development and implementation of measures in specific fields of action.

The tasks and responsibilities of all participants must be precisely described in the IRDC. Unclear competences, lack of commitment, or undefined decision-making processes are common causes of stagnating implementation of strategic concepts. Therefore, the IRDC must not only describe who is involved, but also how cooperation is concretely organized, how conflicts are resolved, and how new stakeholders can be integrated into the process. A formally adopted set of rules of procedure or an intermunicipal cooperation agreement can further strengthen the binding nature of the organizational structure.

7.2 Financing and Funding Instruments

Financing the measures and projects envisaged in the IRDC that may prerequisite for the concept's feasibility. Without a realistic and well-conceived financing strategy, there is a risk that the IRDC may be convincing as a strategic document may remain ineffective in practice. Addressing financing and funding instruments within the IRDC is therefore necessary in order not only to justify measures in terms of content, but also to transparently and reliably demonstrate their feasibility.

Within the IRDC, the author must provide a systematic overview of relevant financing sources. These include, in particular, European funding programs such as the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), national programs within the framework of the Joint Task for the Improvement of Agricultural Structures and Coastal Protection (GAK), state-level funding schemes, and the LEADER program for bottom-up-oriented rural development. In addition, topic-specific funding programs—such as those for climate protection, digital infrastructure, village renewal, social infrastructure, or economic promotion—must be considered and assigned to the respective fields of action and measures.

For each prioritized measure, the IRDC should provide an initial, realistic assessment of possible funding instruments, funding rates, and required own contributions by participating municipalities. It must be taken into account that funding programs regularly change in terms of calls, conditions, and thematic priorities; therefore, the IRDC must maintain strategic flexibility in order to be able to respond to funding opportunities. Regional management plays a key role in continuously monitoring funding programs, advising project sponsors, and supporting the preparation of funding applications. Strategically anchoring measures within the IRDC also offers the advantage that project sponsors can demonstrate to funding authorities that their projects are part of a coordinated and regionally supported development concept—a quality feature that can significantly improve the eligibility and likelihood of funding approval.

7.3 Communication and Public Relations

Communication and public relations are decisive for the successful implementation of the IRDC. A development concept can only have an impact if it is known, understandable, and broadly supported. Communication creates transparency, trust, and engagement and prevents the IRDC from remaining a merely administrative document.

The IRDC must therefore include a target-group-oriented communication strategy addressing political actors, administration, business, civil society, and the general population. Press work, digital media, events, and multipliers are to be used in a targeted manner.

Communication accompanies the process continuously, informs about progress, and makes successes visible. At the same time, it enables dialogue and feedback. Responsibilities—usually assigned to the regional management—as well as adequate resources must be clearly defined.

Note on Public Participation:

Active public participation within the framework of an IRDC is not always easy to organize or make attractive, as it generally involves several municipalities. Experience shows that many citizens are more likely to participate in concrete projects and issues that directly affect them. Therefore, the appropriate participation procedure should be selected according to the participation pyramid.

7.4 Monitoring and Update

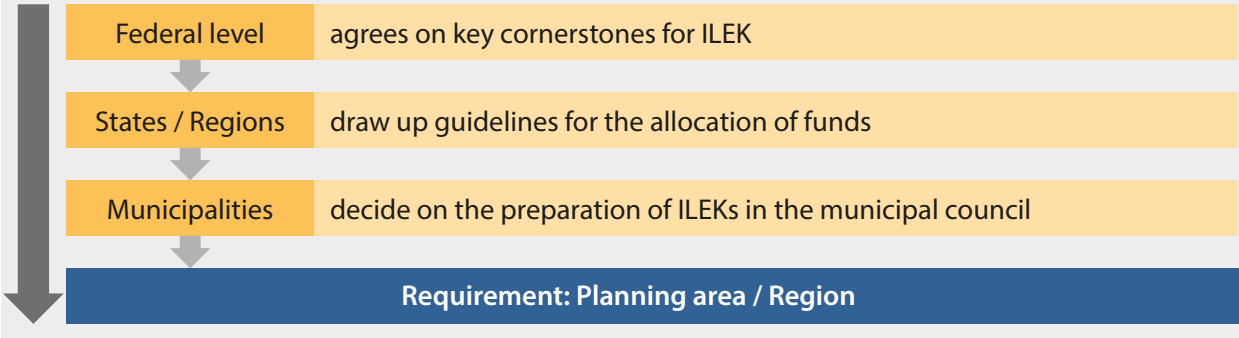
An IRDC is designed as a dynamic, learning instrument and not as a static planning document that remains unchanged after completion. Regional development processes take place within a changing environment: demographic developments, economic conditions, climatic changes, political priorities, and societal needs can change considerably over the years. To allow the IRDC to maintain its steering function in the long term, systematic mechanisms for observing, evaluating, and adapting the development process are required. Addressing monitoring, evaluation, and updating within the IRDC is therefore not optional, but a necessary basis for the long-term effectiveness of the concept.

Monitoring refers to the continuous observation and documentation of implementation progress. Within the IRDC, a monitoring system must be defined that specifies which indicators are collected, at what intervals, who is responsible for data collection and processing, and how results are communicated. Indicators should make achievement of goals within the individual fields of action measurable or at least assessable. They may be quantitative in nature—such as the number of implemented projects, acquired funding, or population development—or capture qualitative aspects such as changes in regional perception or intermunicipal cooperation.

Evaluation goes beyond monitoring and periodically assesses whether implemented measures have achieved their intended effects, whether selected strategies and fields of action remain appropriate, and whether new challenges require adjustments to the IRDC. The IRDC must specify when and in what format evaluations are to be conducted, who participates in them, and how the results are integrated into political decision-making processes. External evaluation can strengthen credibility and independence and may help uncover blind spots in the self-perception of regional actors.

Updating the IRDC is the logical next step following evaluation. It revises the concept based on acquired insights, adapts goals and measures to changing framework conditions, and thereby ensures its long-term relevance. Regular updating—usually every five to seven years—ensures that the IRDC does not become outdated, but remains anchored as a living steering instrument within the regional development process. This final chapter thus provides the framework for sustainable, continuously evolving, and impact-oriented integrated rural development.

Framework Conditions / Requirements



Preparation of the ILEK

Steering group
Regional association, mayors, members of the tourism associations, representatives of local trade and commercial enterprises, coordinators, economic experts, architects, spatial/urban planners, regional or LEADER management, etc.

Possible Topics	Approaches / Goals	Possible Tools
Regional development:	Strengthen the central places	Cooperation plan
Settlement development:	Prioritize inner development	Settlement structure plan
Building culture:	Preserve village/townscape quality	Heritage conservation plan
Mobility:	Expand pedestrian and cycling infrastructure	Mobility plan
Housing:	Create housing within towns/villages	Residential development plan
Economy:	Increase regional value creation	Economic structure plan
Retail:	Ensure local supply	Local supply plan
Tourism:	Strengthen quality tourism	Tourism development plan
Nature:	Secure recreational areas	Green space plan
Soil quality:	Secure fertile soils in the long term	Soil protection plan
Public services of general interest:	Secure basic services	Public services plan
Agriculture:	Preserve the cultural landscape	Agricultural structure plan

Duration: 1-2 years

Results

ILEK – Integrated Rural Development Concept		
Implementation strategy	Concrete list of measures	Implementation plan
Regional declaration Priority fields for action	Project collection Flagship / impulse projects	Financing and funding plan Timeline

Source: Robert Krasser / SIR

8. Checkliste IRDC

Basis

- Region delineated
- Political resolution adopted
- Steering group established

Analysis

- Demography
- Economy & labor market
- Social infrastructure

Strategy

- SWOT analysis conducted
- Mission statement formulated
- Development goals defined
- Fields of action prioritized

Measures

- Concrete projects defined
- Priorities & timetable established
- Responsibilities clarified
- Cost framework estimated
- Financing & funding programs reviewed

Implementation & Governance

- Participation & communication ensured
- Communication strategy developed
- Monitoring & evaluation provided

Documentation

- Compact IRDC brochure (approx. 40–60 pages)
- Action plan with spatial allocation + legend
- Annex & funding overview
- Responsibilities defined

9. Bibliography and References

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- Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK), ÖREK Recommendation “Strengthening Town and City Centers in Austria” (Vienna).
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10. Glossary

ILEK (Integriertes ländliches Entwicklungskonzept)

German term for the Integrated Rural Development Concept.

IDEC (Integrated Rural Development Concept)

English equivalent of ILEK. A long-term, strategic planning instrument (typically 10–20 years) used to guide coordinated and sustainable development in rural regions across multiple municipalities.

SWOT Analysis

A strategic planning tool used to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within a region or project.

GAK (Joint Task for the Improvement of Agricultural Structures and Coastal Protection) A German funding program supporting rural development, agriculture, and infrastructure improvements.

ELER / EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development)

An EU funding instrument that supports rural development, agriculture, and environmental measures.

LEADER Programme

An EU initiative that promotes bottom-up, community-led local development in rural areas.

Soil Compaction

The compression of soil that reduces its ability to absorb water and support plant growth.

Land Consumption

The conversion of natural or agricultural land into settlement and infrastructure areas.

Inner Development

The focus on developing and reusing existing built-up areas instead of expanding into new land.

Imprint

About the SOIL:OurInvisibleAlly project

The project aims at ensuring the long-term vitality of Alpine soils, and thus the ongoing provision of soil ecosystem services, by fostering soil literacy and bridging the gap between pre-existing knowledge about sustainable soil management measures and their implementation. In this process, pilot sites showcasing best practice examples will also be highlighted. Additionally, the project places a strong focus on artistic expression and (scientific-) cultural events as powerful awareness raising tools that can help build curiosity and affinity towards the topic of soil.

Project partners

Slovenian Forestry Institute (SI) • Art and Nature Foundation (DE) • Agricultural Institute of Slovenia (SI) • Salzburg Institute for Regional Planning and Housing (AT) • Climate Alliance Tyrol (AT) • National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (FR) • University of Torino (IT) • County Administration Landsberg a. Lech (DE) • Autonomous Region of Aosta Valley (IT) • Consulting for Naturland (Association for Organic Agriculture, DE) • Slovenia Forest Service (SI) • Orobie Valtellinesi Parc (IT)

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Project Website 

www.alpine-space.eu/project/soilourinvisibleally



LinkedIn



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