

Case Study

How can an eco-certified destination support farming communities?

(Romania)



Improving farmers' wellbeing through social innovation



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101000797.



FARMWELL!

Transylvanian Highlands project

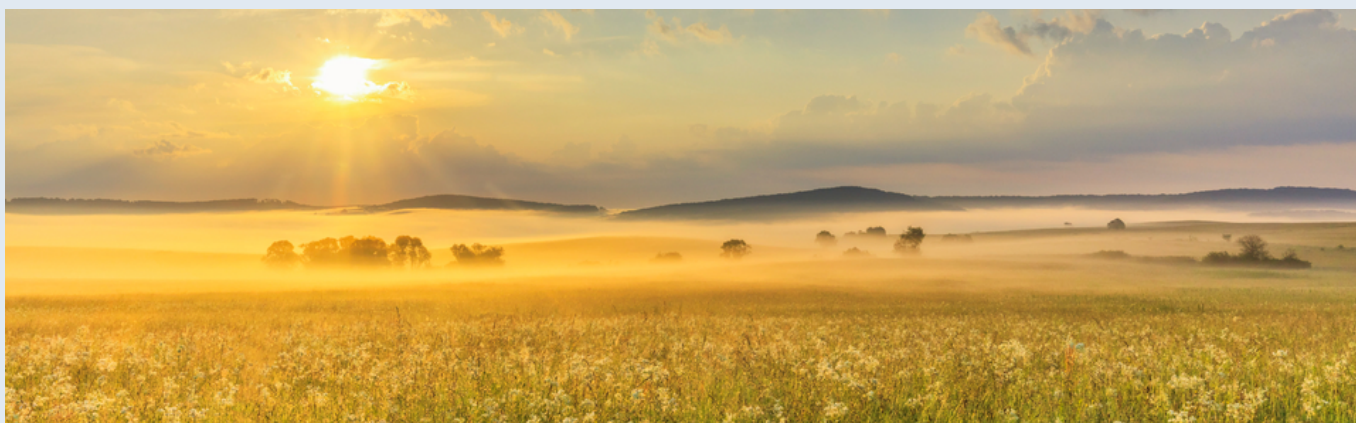
Many of the social challenges of the farming communities reside in economic challenges in Romania. The story of **Transylvanian Highlands project** unfolds as a tale of **sustainable community development**, where the **value of land** and the **interconnectedness of small farmers** with their landscape create a unique **cultural and natural heritage**. Born out of a national project in 2012, Transylvanian Highlands aimed to preserve this heritage by raising awareness among farmers, fostering community engagement, and promoting economic activities beyond traditional agriculture. Through initiatives like creating tourist paths and gastronomic routes, the project did not only showcased the beauty of the region but also empowered farmers to recognise their worth and contribute to their communities. The FARMWELL project has highlighted the value of this social innovation in creating local social impact and community cohesion.

What are the **key activities of the Transylvania Highlands project** that helped to improve economic and social wellbeing in the area?

How the diversity of actions implemented **helped to overcome key challenges over a long-term process?**

How FARMWELL brought this **social innovation closer to farmers**, also engaging the Women Neighbourhood Association in Saschiz?

How can such initiatives be **better supported through LEADER** and other grass-roots programmes?



GET INSPIRED!

Read the **longer version** of the FARMWELL case study [here!](#)

Watch the 'Easy as a pie' short documentary [here!](#)

Check out **other exciting social innovation** cases [here!](#)



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The story of Transylvanian Highlands

Land is the most important asset for a farmer, especially for the smaller ones. The result of working and taking care of the land generates an asset that everybody can enjoy – **the landscape!** Of course, there are some landscapes that are not a result of human interaction, but for most of the Southern part of Transylvania (Romania) the landscapes are a result of land use in seasonal cycles and communally usage of pasture and woodlands.



Landscape, credit photo Jeno Major

Transylvanian Highlands is a unique area in Europe with a valuable natural and cultural heritage that must be protected. This is why in 2012, after a national funded project studying the Natura2000 sites in southern Transylvania, Transylvanian Highlands brand idea came to life. The initiative is the result of a 3-year work of some important actors in the area, partners who continue to give value to this area through the projects they implement and their support for community development.

Transylvanian Highlands covers a predominately rural area, where the main economic activities are defined by agriculture (growing vegetables, livestock breeders) and are performed mainly by small farmers. The most important activity done by Transylvanian Highlands was raising awareness and educating farmers about the natural beauties covering the land they were using. Every little action followed a logical path. They invested in people first. They helped them to understand that it is crucial to take care of the landscape, they need to get involved in the community and develop other (economic) activities that will benefit them and bring more people to their sparsely populated communities. They created active and sustainable rural communities.

'...houses were located near the flat valley bottoms, while arable fields were scattered around the village, and along the valley. Pastures and hay meadows were located on the slopes, and forests dominated the hilltops.' [1]

Transylvanian Highlands created several touristic paths that include getting to know the people in the area, experiencing life on a farm, enjoying nature, bike trails, gastronomic experiences and many more events that bring together small producers and artisans from the area.

This has generated recognition for the people in the communities and made them realise how important is what they are doing. It made them realise they can increase their household income level by continuing to do agriculture, that they should stay in their communities (not migrate to cities or abroad) because they are valued and needed and that they should continue to seek information that helps build their capacities and resilience as rural communities.

1 Sustainable Landscapes in Central Romania – A Social-Ecological Study On The Future Of Southern Transylvania, Jacqueline Loos, David J. Abson, Ine Dorresteijn, Jan Hanspach, Tibor Hartel, Andra Ioana Horcea-Milcu, Friederike Mikulcak, Joern Fischer

Transylvanian Highlands started as an initiative that underwent a long **process** of establishing functional **partnerships** (active and engaged) which created a meaningful **impact** in the territories and contributed to creating, maintaining, and promoting the local identity and the natural, cultural and social values of the area with an impact on the **wellbeing of farmers communities**.

The story of FARMWELL with Transylvanian Highlands

The FARMWELL project methodology called for a mapping report of the main challenges that the small farmers in Romania have when talking about wellbeing. In the national mapping report we described that many of the social challenges of the farming communities reside in economic challenges. The simple reality is that rural Romania – although richly endowed with natural resources – continues to be plagued by poverty and a huge gap in living / social standards between rural and urban areas.

Read the mapping report on the wellbeing of Romanian farmers and the challenges of the FARMWELL project!



The Romanian partnership of FARMWELL, Highclere Consulting (representing research and policy) and the Local Action Group Ținutul Bârsei (representing small farmer communities) worked together to look at the small farmer communities overlapping the LAG territory. LAG territory covers 14 localities, 12 of which are in Brașov county and 2 in Covasna. Based on LAG knowledge of most active stakeholders in the territory and on the initial attempt of contact, only 4 responded openly to the idea of being involved in the FARMWELL project: Bod, Poiana Mărului, Șinca Veche and Vulcan.



Map of Transylvania Highlands territory, graphics Diana Bobeș

² LAG Ținutul Bârsei territory: Brașov county - Hărman, Sânpetru, Bod, Hălchiu, Feldioara, Crizbav, Dumbrăvița, Cristian, Vulcan, Șinca, Poiana Mărului and Ghimbav; Covasna country - Hăgig and Vâlcele

We had an **initial assessment of their challenges** during the first Practice Group meeting that aimed to closely engage farmers in identifying the most relevant challenges. The main challenges identified were out-migration (especially women), low-household income, low education level - impacting directly the wellbeing of small farmers and of their communities.

We looked for solutions responding to the above-mentioned challenges in the counties nearby Braşov. The immediate inspiring innovations we found were:

- Women Neighbourhood Association in Saschiz – women focused on rebuilding the social fabric of their rural community.
- Transylvanian Highlands project - a project covering 44 administrative units in three counties, promoting the cultural, natural and gastronomic values of the farming communities.
- EduBuzz – a private initiative supporting children in farming communities to prevent them from dropping school.

During the second practice group meeting we invited both the people from **our focus area** and **the innovations** identified to create connexions and explore how FARMWELL can support (locally) the exchange between the innovations and the small farmer's communities. The meeting was focused on introducing initiatives of farming communities that succeeded to be in control of their own growth and progress, that are based on working partnerships, or which they brought opportunities for increasing the income and build on a strong identity.

The farmers and the stakeholder resonated with the women initiative in Saschiz and the Transylvanian Highlands project and it was commonly agreed that we will explore both innovations more in the Piloting actions.



The pilot actions of FARMWELL aimed to bring social innovations closer to farmers. Full-time and part-time farmers from **Bod and Vulcan** visited Saschiz commune for two days to learn more about the innovations, enjoy and experience the local values, network and connect with the stories and initiatives run by the Women Neighbourhood Association, mayor of Saschiz and the Dealurile Târnavelor Local Action Group (LAG) that Saschiz is part of. Among others, the participants had the opportunity to meet the manager of the Transylvanian Highlands Project, and to learn how such a project can contribute to mobilising the farming community by promoting the cultural and natural values of the village, bringing knowledge and information to strengthen the local identity and encourage small businesses to start (biking, pottery, food preservatives, tea house).

Transylvanian Highlands started back in 2013 as partnership between well-embedded organisations in Southern Transylvania that understood the needs and opportunities of the area and had just the right knowledge to bring added value. The partnerships understood **the importance of actively supporting communities of small farmers** and had the vision, knowledge and access to skilled animators/facilitators and other specialists to engage a broad range of local organisations in their work, as well as individual volunteers who had the willingness to commit to supporting their community.



Biertan fortress, credit photo Sorin Onișor

The type of support provided to the rural communities should be made available for grass-roots initiatives in other communities and could a) be provided – among others - by LEADER Local Action Groups, and b) be extended to address a much wider range of social issues related to well-being and quality of life. Social innovation has most commonly been associated in the past with LEADER and – in principle - remains a key building block of innovation support within 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plans, including in Romania.



FIND OUT MORE!

Check out the full case study: [here!](#)

Watch the 'Easy as a pie' short documentary [here!](#)

Check out the FARMWELL Toolkit for more information & inspiration [here!](#)

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