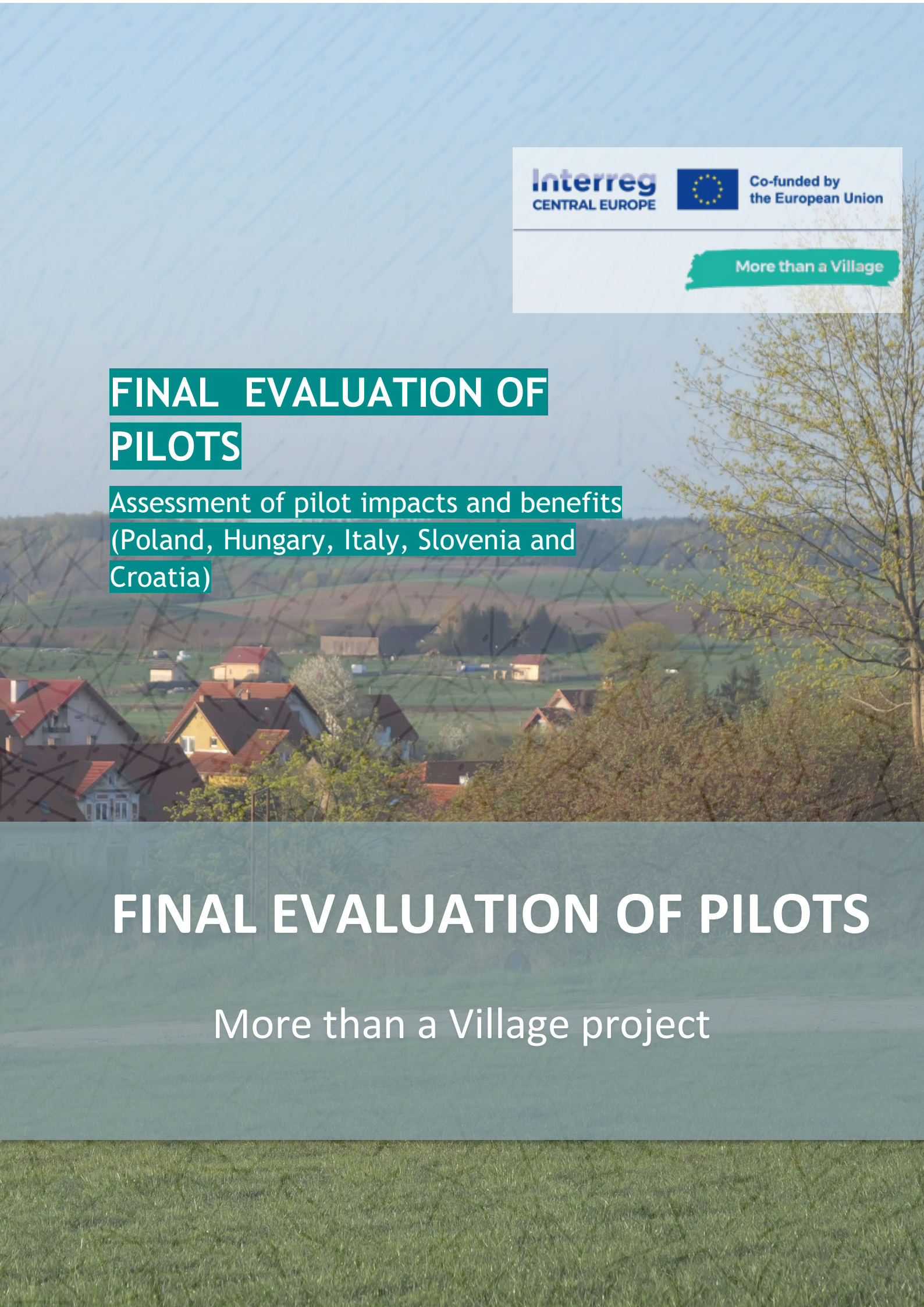

Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE

Co-funded by the European Union

More than a Village

FINAL EVALUATION OF PILOTS

Assessment of pilot impacts and benefits (Poland, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia and Croatia)

FINAL EVALUATION OF PILOTS

More than a Village project

ITC

Final version

March 2026

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Contents

1 Executive summary

This report presents the final evaluation of five smart village pilots carried out across partner regions in Poland, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia. Where the mid-term evaluation, conducted in January 2025, took stock of physical and financial progress at roughly the halfway mark, this report asks a different set of questions: what did the pilots actually achieve, what did we learn from running them, and what happens next?

All five pilots completed their planned activities. Most KPI targets were met or exceeded. Across the project as a whole, the pilots engaged over 700 direct stakeholders, reached more than 5,500 citizens through events and communication channels, and produced a set of concrete outputs: a functioning Smart Village Hub in rural Poland, a Silver Economy digital platform in Hungary, a co-working innovation space in northern Italy, a digital food surplus marketplace in Slovenia, and an agri-food web platform with integrated weather monitoring in Croatia.

Several lessons stand out across all five contexts. Community ownership matters more than technology. Digital platforms need sustained human support to reach adoption, as the platform alone is never enough. Local heroes, specific individuals who drive things forward through the inevitable friction of implementation, are not a nice-to-have but a necessity. And rural communities change at their own pace, which rarely aligns neatly with EU project timelines.

The report closes with a transferability and replication potential to other regions of the Central Europe or even wider.

2 Introduction

The More Than a Village project implements five smart village pilots across Central Europe with the aim of testing innovative models for rural development that combine digital tools, community engagement, and local economic activation. Activity 2.5 of Work Package 2 covers the monitoring and evaluation of these pilot actions across two evaluation cycles: a mid-term review and a final evaluation.

The present document is the Final Evaluation Report (D2.5.4). Its purpose, as defined in the project Application Form, is to assess the impacts and benefits of the pilots, draw lessons learned, discuss sustainability and transferability, and provide conclusions from the testing of different models of smart villages. This evaluation does not revisit physical and financial progress in detail, which was the scope of the mid-term evaluation (D2.5.3), but focuses squarely on what was achieved, what was learned, and what can be carried forward.

The table below provides a summary overview of the five pilots evaluated in this report. Each pilot was designed and implemented by a dedicated project partner in their respective region, responding to locally defined rural development priorities.

Partner / Region	Location	Pilot Name	Approach	Key Outputs
LAGSW – Poland	South Warmia	**Smart Village Hub**	Grassroots community support hub for SMEs, NGOs and residents	Physical hub + workshops + Smart Village concept
HBCG – Hungary	Hajdú-Bihar County	**Silver Economy Hub**	Digital maturity survey + training + online Senior Point platform	Digital platform + training materials + generational approach
ANCIL – Italy	Liguria / Alta Valpolcevera	**Smart Tourism Village**	Co-working space (ValpolceveraLab) + interactive promotional video	Physical co-working space + digital content production
ITC – Slovenia	Pomurje	**FLW Innovation System**	Surplus food marketplace + FLW booklet +	Digital marketplace + knowledge product + stakeholder network

Partner / Region	Location	Pilot Name	Approach	Key Outputs
			awareness campaigns	
Buzet – Croatia	Istria	**Digital Agri-Food Platform**	Web agri-food platform for local farms + 4 agrometeorological stations	Digital platform + IoT infrastructure + market visibility

Together, the five pilots represent a deliberate diversity of approaches to smart village development: from physical hubs and co-working spaces to digital platforms and IoT environmental monitoring. This diversity is a deliberate asset of the project, enabling comparative conclusions about which models are most effective under which conditions.

3 Assessment of Pilot Impacts and Benefits

3.1 LAGSW – Smart Village Hub, South Warmia, Poland

Pilot Context and Objectives

The Local Action Group South Warmia (LAGSW) piloted the Smart Village Hub (SVH) model in the village of Marcinkowo, responding to the structural challenges of rural south Warmia: depopulation, an ageing population, youth migration, and digital and economic exclusion. The SVH was designed as a physical and conceptual place to support SMEs, NGOs, and residents in developing Smart Village initiatives from the ground up.

Key Activities and Outputs

The pilot successfully developed a Smart Village concept for the Marcinkowo locality through a series of participatory workshops co-facilitated with academic partners from the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. The SVH was established as a functioning support space offering regular consultancy sessions held on fixed afternoons to accommodate working residents, covering business development, access to funding, digitalisation, tourism, and energy cooperatives. The consultancy sessions attracted participation from 17 SMEs and 12 NGOs.

Impacts and Benefits

The most significant impact of the SVH pilot is the creation of a permanent institutional infrastructure for rural innovation support in an area that previously lacked such a resource. By anchoring the hub in LAG South Warmia the pilot has created a durable mechanism for connecting rural residents with knowledge, expertise and funding opportunities. The academic partnership with the University of Warmia and Mazury brought methodological rigour and credibility to the workshop process, resulting in a locally owned Smart Village concept that can guide development decisions in Marcinkowo for years to come.

The pilot also generated a replicable methodology: the structured process of community diagnosis, co-design workshops, concept development, and service

delivery is documented and ready for application in neighbouring villages. The involvement of diverse stakeholder categories, from public administrations to youth and women's organisations, ensured that the resulting concept reflects a genuinely multi-perspective vision of rural development.

3.2 HBCG – Silver Economy Hub, Hajdú-Bihar County, Hungary

Pilot Context and Objectives

Hajdú-Bihar County Government (HBCG) piloted an innovative approach to smart rural development, focusing on the often underutilised economic potential of older residents (50+). Three rural municipalities of deliberately different sizes were selected as test sites: Bojt (approximately 500 inhabitants), Ebes (approximately 4,600 inhabitants), and Nádudvar (approximately 9,200 inhabitants), enabling comparative insights across different community scales.

Key Activities and Outputs

The pilot proceeded in a structured sequence: a comprehensive digital maturity survey assessed the needs and capacities of both residents and local businesses, providing the evidence base for subsequent activities. Tailored digital skills training programmes were developed and delivered in all three municipalities, with a specific focus on adults aged 50 and above and on agri-food sector actors. Two training materials were produced, one for general senior digital needs and one specific to agri-food actors. A total of 60 participants attended training sessions, double the original target of 30. The Senior Point online platform was launched on 30 June 2025 as a digital hub connecting actors, sharing resources, and promoting silver economy initiatives.

Impacts and Benefits

The HBCG pilot delivers impact on two interconnected levels: individual capacity building and systemic ecosystem development. At the individual

level, older residents and agri-food entrepreneurs gained practical digital skills directly relevant to their daily lives and economic activities, with 320 citizens reached overall. At the systemic level, the pilot has established for the first time a dedicated platform and institutional framework for silver economy development in the county, creating infrastructure that can connect supply and demand for the economic contributions of older residents.

The intergenerational dimension of the pilot, engaging young people in developing and delivering training content is a particularly innovative feature with positive community cohesion effects. HBCG has expressed a clear commitment to continuing as a hub for digital transition support in rural communities beyond the project.

3.3 ANCIL – Smart Tourism Village, Alta Valpolcevera, Italy

Pilot Context and Objectives

ANCI Liguria focused its pilot on the Alta Valpolcevera area near Genoa, a territory with significant natural and cultural tourism assets but limited digital infrastructure for their promotion. The pilot pursued two complementary lines: establishing a physical co-working and innovation space (ValpolceveraLab) within the Campomorone Library, and producing an interactive promotional video to support smart tourism and local economic promotion.

Key Activities and Outputs

ValpolceveraLab was successfully equipped with PCs, Wi-Fi, and a video projector, and opened as a multifunctional space serving three distinct user groups: residents seeking to learn and co-work, young people for research and project development, and tourists seeking local information and itinerary planning. A rich programme of events was organised, including meetings with social workers, local businesses, and cross-project partners including the Marittimo CAMBIOVIA project and CO-EFFECT. An interactive promotional video was produced featuring local businesses and territorial testimonials,

with 10 companies included in the video. The co-working space was used by approximately 200 citizens.

Impacts and Benefits

The ValpolceveraLab model demonstrates how a very modest equipment investment can create significant community value by repurposing existing public infrastructure, in this case, the public library, as a multi-function innovation hub. The pilot has introduced the concept of an innovation hub into a territory where it was previously absent and generated genuine curiosity and interest among local economic actors, particularly around the potential of digital tools for tourism promotion.

The promotional video produced has strong potential as a lasting territorial asset, provided it is distributed through sufficiently broad channels. ANCI Liguria is actively pursuing wider promotion through regional channels linked to the City of Genoa. The lesson about identifying passionate territorial testimonials — people who communicate their love for the place — is a transferable insight for rural tourism promotion more broadly.

3.4 ITC – Food Loss and Waste Innovation System, Pomurje, Slovenia

Pilot Context and Objectives

ITC anchored its pilot in the Pomurje region of northeastern Slovenia, to address food loss and waste (FLW) in regional agri-food supply chains. Slovenia generated approximately 164,800 tonnes of food waste in 2023, of which 37% was still edible a significant systemic problem with economic, environmental and social dimensions. The pilot was built around the Green Point living lab and short food supply chain as the primary operational context.

Key Activities and Outputs

The pilot implemented three interconnected activities. A digital Marketplace of Surplus Food was developed and deployed, enabling producers, processors, retailers, and social organisations to match supply and demand for surplus or

near-expiry food in real time. Alongside the platform, awareness-raising and capacity-building activities were organised at multiple events, engaging over 50 organisations and reaching more than 4,700 citizens. A Booklet on Food Loss and Waste in Slovenia was produced, documenting key data, legal frameworks, best practices, and funding opportunities; this knowledge product is publicly available and serves as a replicable template for other Central European regions. All six KPIs were met or exceeded, with only the HORECA engagement target (KPI02) falling short due to a definitional issue regarding pre-pilot interviews.

Impacts and Benefits

The ITC pilot delivers impact at multiple levels of the agri-food system. At the operational level, the Marketplace provides a practical tool for reducing food waste in the supply chain by enabling the redistribution rather than disposal of surplus food. At the knowledge level, the FLW Booklet serves as a lasting reference resource for policy makers, practitioners, and innovators working on food systems sustainability in Slovenia and the wider region. At the systemic level, the pilot has contributed to policy dialogue through ITC's engagement with the Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry and Food, which is a follow-up to a recommendation from the mid-term review, and has potential influence on national FLW reduction strategies.

The pilot's embeddedness in the Green Point living lab and ITC's broader digital innovation ecosystem provide strong conditions for continued development and integration with other ITC-managed data and innovation infrastructure.

3.5 Buzet - Digital Agri-Food Platform & Agrometeorological Stations, Istria, Croatia

Pilot Context and Objectives

The City of Buzet, known as the 'City of Truffles', implemented a two-component pilot combining a web agri-food platform for local farms and SMEs with the installation of four agrometeorological stations across the Buzet territory. The pilot responded to the fragmented, digitally disconnected state

of local agriculture in a territory with distinctive products such as truffles, olive oil, wine, local cheeses and significant untapped market potential.

Key Activities and Outputs

Following a detailed survey of local farmer needs and a public procurement process, the web platform was developed through close collaboration between the City, local producers, and the selected supplier. Content for over 15 agricultural producers and 15 SMEs was uploaded, and more than 200 citizens engaged with the platform's services. Four agrometeorological stations were installed at selected locations across the Buzet area in August 2025 and connected to the platform in September, providing real-time local weather data to support agricultural decision-making. All five KPIs were fully achieved.

Impacts and Benefits

The Buzet pilot delivers two distinct but complementary types of impact. The digital platform impact is primarily economic and promotional: local producers gain visibility and market access through a digital channel tailored to their specific products, reducing dependence on traditional distribution channels and strengthening direct producer-consumer relationships. The agrometeorological station's impact is primarily technical and agronomic: farmers gain access to precise, localised weather data that enables a transition from reactive to proactive crop management, reducing resource waste and supporting more sustainable production practices.

The combination of a market-facing digital platform with technical environmental monitoring infrastructure makes the Buzet model one of the most complete examples of IoT-integrated smart village development in the project. The long-term value of the meteorological data archive as a climate change adaptation resource adds a further dimension of impact that extends well beyond the immediate project timeframe.

3.6 Cross-Cutting Impact Analysis

Across the five pilots, several common impact patterns emerge. All pilots have generated tangible community assets, such as physical spaces, digital tools, knowledge, and institutional frameworks, that did not exist before the project. All pilots have succeeded in engaging diverse stakeholder groups beyond initial targets in at least some categories, indicating that the multi-actor approach embedded in the project design is effective in practice.

The most consistent impact type across pilots is capacity building: in all five regions, residents, entrepreneurs, and organisations have gained new knowledge, skills, or tools that change the way they approach rural development challenges. Digital tools (marketplace, web platform, Senior Point) have been the most resource-intensive to develop but also carry the highest scaling potential. Physical spaces (SVH, ValpolceveraLab) demonstrate how relatively modest investments in accessible community infrastructure can generate sustained engagement and multiplier effects.

On the other hand we are also able to identify the common factor to all pilots, which is adoption time: communities need longer than a single project cycle to internalise new tools and spaces into their routines. This is a structural challenge for time-bounded EU-funded projects and a key lesson for future programming.

3.7 KPI Achievement Overview

In aggregate, the project has met or exceeded the majority of targets, with only two KPIs falling short of the planned value, all for explainable reasons documented in the respective pilot reports. The overview of the KPI's is provided in the document D2.5.2 – Final report from action plans.

Of the 21 KPIs tracked across all five pilots, 19 were met or exceeded at the final reporting stage. Two KPIs (ANCIL citizen usage and ITC HORECA engagement) fell short of targets for reasons that do not undermine the overall pilot effectiveness: in the case of ANCIL, the concept requires continued awareness-building and the co-working space is operational and growing; in the case of ITC, the 120-organisation target was based on pre-project interviews that could not be retrospectively counted under project

rules. Overall, KPI performance across the project is strong and demonstrates that the pilot actions were delivered on their intended scope.

4 Lessons learned

4.1 Lessons from Individual Pilots

Pilot / Region	Key Lessons Learned
LAGSW – Poland	A partnership with academic institutions brings both methodological quality and community credibility. The process of co-designing the Smart Village concept with university facilitation produced results that are more robust and locally legitimate than top-down planning would achieve. Workshop hours must be adapted to participant realities: afternoon sessions consistently attracted better participation than morning sessions among working residents and professionals. Prior local knowledge and a 'local vision' walk by workshop leaders significantly improves the quality of facilitated community processes.
HBCG – Hungary	A sound evidence base built on the initial digital maturity survey is essential for designing interventions that respond to actual rather than assumed needs. The survey data shaped the entire subsequent pilot design and was the primary reason for strong KPI achievement. Intergenerational programme design (engaging youth to train seniors) creates community cohesion benefits that extend beyond the skills transfer goal itself. Initial digital platforms may need to evolve into physical spaces as community demand grows; planning for this evolution from the start is advisable.
ANCIL – Italy	New community innovation spaces require sustained promotion and awareness-raising before they reach usage levels. The first year of ValpolceveraLab is best understood as an awareness and legitimation phase rather than a full operational phase, which is why targets for usage in year one should be set accordingly. Promotional video testimonials are significantly more effective when sourced from individuals with a genuine passion for and knowledge of the territory. Co-location with an existing public institution (the library) both reduces costs and provides immediate community legitimacy.

Pilot / Region	Key Lessons Learned
ITC – Slovenia	Digital marketplace adoption depends on sustained training and promotional investment alongside the technology development; building the platform alone is not sufficient. The integration of multiple communication channels, like social media, public events, and partner networks, significantly multiplies citizen reach beyond direct engagement targets. The FLW Booklet demonstrates that knowledge products, when well-designed and freely distributed, can extend a pilot's impact and visibility far beyond the direct stakeholder network.
Buzet – Croatia	Combining a market-facing platform with real technical infrastructure (agrometeorological stations) significantly increases the credibility and utility of the digital tool for farmers. Public procurement for relatively straightforward ICT and equipment procurement does not require excessive lead time when the procurement scope is well-specified in advance. Farmer needs assessment through questionnaires prior to platform design is essential for ensuring the platform addresses real rather than assumed user requirements.

4.2 Cross-Cutting Lessons

Community ownership is the most critical success factor

Across all five pilots, the most successful outcomes are associated with activities where local communities: residents, businesses, NGOs were active co-designers rather than passive recipients. Pilots that invested heavily in participatory design processes (LAGSW, HBCG) show higher engagement, better-adapted outputs, and stronger prospects for sustainability. This is consistent with the smart village concept as defined at the EU level, which places community-led development at its core.

Technology is a means, not an end

None of the five pilots succeeded purely on the basis of technology. Digital platforms (Buzet, ITC, HBCG) required significant investment in awareness, training, and stakeholder engagement to generate adoption. Physical spaces (LAGSW, ANCIL) required ongoing programming and community involvement

to remain relevant. The lesson is that any smart village intervention combining digital tools with community capacity building will consistently outperform purely technological approaches.

Local heroes are indispensable

In each pilot, the presence of specific motivated individuals a local leader, an academic partner, an engaged municipal official was a decisive factor in overcoming obstacles and maintaining momentum. The LAGSW academic partnership and personal engagement of a president, the HBCG senior network leaders, the ANCIL library stakeholders, the ITC Green Point team, and the Buzet municipal coordinator all exemplify this pattern. Project design should explicitly plan for the identification and support of local champions as a core activity.

Adoption takes longer than project timelines allow

Multiple pilots report that new tools and spaces were still in the early stages of community adoption at the end of the project period. Digital platforms and physical innovation spaces typically require 18 to 24 months of active promotion before they reach stable usage levels. This is a structural tension between EU project timelines and the organic pace of community change that future project designers should address through the design of bridging activities and continuation mechanisms.

Multi-level stakeholder engagement multiplies impact

Pilots that engaged stakeholders across multiple levels, from individual citizens to national policy makers, achieved broader and more durable impact. ITC's engagement with the national Ministry is a strong example, as is HBCG's university partnership. Single-level approaches (focusing only on local residents or businesses) consistently show a more limited impact.

5 Sustainability

5.1 Sustainability of Individual Pilot Actions

LAGSW – Smart Village Hub, Poland

The SVH has strong sustainability prospects. LAG South Warmia is an organisation with a statutory mandate and funding streams (the LEADER programme, national rural development funds) that are independent of the More Than a Village project. The organisation has explicitly committed to continuing SVH services and expanding them to neighbouring villages as part of its statutory activities. The SVH consultancy methodology is documented and tested, reducing the cost of replication. The risk is primarily workload-related for a small organisation, which may limit the pace of expansion.

HBCG – Silver Economy Hub, Hungary

The Senior Point platform launched on 30 June 2025 and is designed to operate and develop beyond the project. HBCG has identified the platform's continued development including possible expansion to a physical Silver Economy Hub in the future as a strategic priority for the county. The intergenerational training model can be replicated using existing institutional resources. Sustainability is somewhat dependent on continued county government commitment and resourcing, which is an inherent risk given public funding constraints.

ANCIL – Smart Tourism Village, Italy

ValpolceveraLab's sustainability depends on continued support from the Campomorone Library and municipal partners, and on maintaining a programme of activities that keeps the space visible and attractive. ANCI Liguria is pursuing connections through other funded projects (Marittimo CAMBIOVIA, CO-EFFECT) that could provide continued activity programming. The promotional video is a durable asset that continues to generate value as long as it is actively distributed. The risk is that without continued investment in programming and promotion, the space could fall into underuse.

ITC – FLW Innovation System, Slovenia

The FLW Marketplace is embedded in ITC's Green Point living lab and ITC's broader digital innovation infrastructure, providing institutional continuity. The FLW Booklet is a freely available public resource whose value does not diminish over time. ITC's connections to DATA4FOOD, VERNE, and EDIH AGRIFOOD provide multiple pathways for continued development of the marketplace technology and governance model. Policy engagement with the Ministry for Agriculture creates potential for the pilot model to inform national strategy. Sustainability prospects are strong, contingent on continued ITC institutional capacity.

Buzet – Digital Agri-Food Platform, Croatia

The platform's sustainability depends on continued maintenance investment from the City of Buzet and ongoing engagement of the agricultural community. The agrometeorological stations provide continuous data collection at minimal operating cost once installed, building a growing archive of climate and agricultural data with increasing long-term value. The City of Buzet has plans to continue updating the platform and to consider e-commerce integration, which would significantly increase its utility and stickiness for users. Risks include municipal budget constraints and the challenge of maintaining farmer engagement beyond the initial project promotion period.

5.2 Cross-Cutting Sustainability Factors

Analysing sustainability across the five pilots, several factors consistently improve the likelihood of results persisting beyond the project lifetime:

Institutional anchoring: pilots embedded in organisations with independent mandates and funding (LAGSW, ITC) show stronger sustainability prospects than those dependent on a single project budget line

Community demand: pilots that addressed clearly articulated and validated community needs (demonstrated through needs surveys, co-design processes) have generated a demand-side pull that helps sustain activity beyond project-driven supply

Low ongoing maintenance cost: physical spaces (LAGSW SVH, ANCIL ValpolceveraLab) and digital platforms (Buzet, ITC) with modest operational costs are more sustainable than high-maintenance technical systems

Integration with other funded activities: pilots connected to other EU-funded projects (ITC's connections to DATA4FOOD, VERNE; ANCIL's connections to CAMBIOVIA and CO-EFFECT; HBCG's university partnerships) have built-in mechanisms for continued engagement and development

Visible and growing user communities: platforms and spaces where the user community continues to grow organically after launch (as observed in Buzet and HBCG) are more likely to generate the social proof and institutional interest needed for continued public investment

6 Transferability and Replication Potential

6.1 Transferability of Individual Pilot Models

Pilot Model	Transferability Assessment
LAGSW – Smart Village Hub	High transferability. The SVH model is essentially a service delivery and community facilitation methodology that requires primarily human capital (a skilled facilitator organisation, academic partners) and modest physical infrastructure (an accessible community space). It does not depend on specific technologies or significant capital investment. The documented methodology and the Marcinkowo Smart Village concept provide a replicable template. Most directly applicable to rural areas with an active LAG or similar civil society organisation.
HBCG – Silver Economy Hub	High transferability, particularly in Central and Eastern European regions with similarly ageing rural populations. The survey-first approach (baseline digital maturity assessment) is universally applicable and provides the evidence base for locally adapted interventions. The intergenerational training model is innovative and directly replicable. The Senior Point platform can serve as a technical model for similar online hubs in other regions, with content customisation. Requires a regional anchor institution committed to the silver economy agenda.
ANCIL – Smart Tourism Village	Medium-high transferability. The ValpolceveraLab model - a co-working space within a public building serving multiple user groups simultaneously, is directly applicable to other small rural and peri-urban territories with public library or community centre infrastructure. The promotional video approach is broadly applicable. Key transferability conditions: a public building with community access, a motivated local coordinator, and integration with existing tourism promotion channels. The specific Apennine tourism context is not required; the model applies wherever local territorial identity needs digital amplification.
ITC – FLW Innovation System	High transferability for the knowledge product (FLW Booklet), medium transferability for the digital marketplace. The Booklet's modular structure data overview, legal framework, best practices, funding landscape provides a template adaptable to any Central European country context. The marketplace platform requires more significant technical and operational

Pilot Model	Transferability Assessment
	investment to replicate, but the core concept of a digital surplus food exchange is applicable wherever short food supply chains and regional agri-food actors are present. ITC has explicitly designed the Booklet as a replicable template.
Buzet – Digital Agri-Food Platform	Medium transferability. The platform and station combination is technically straightforward to replicate and requires primarily procurement capacity and stakeholder engagement. However, the specific conditions of Buzet strong local agricultural identity, distinctive products, engaged municipal government facilitate successful implementation and may not be universally present. Rural municipalities with strong agricultural sectors and motivated local government represent the ideal replication context. The agrometeorological component is particularly transferable as a standalone IoT intervention.

6.2 Conditions for Successful Replication

Across the five pilot models, the following conditions consistently support successful replication:

- A local anchor organisation with institutional continuity and community trust, not necessarily large, but embedded and credible in the local context
- A community needs assessment process prior to intervention design, whether through formal surveys (HBCG) or participatory diagnosis workshops (LAGSW)
- A local hero: an individual with the motivation, authority, and community relationships to drive the process forward through inevitable obstacles
- Realistic adoption timelines that account for the organic pace of community change, particularly relevant for digital tools and new physical spaces
- Integration with existing regional development strategies and funding frameworks, to provide the continuation pathway beyond the initial project investment

6.3 Recommendations for Replication

For policy makers and project designers seeking to replicate these models in other regions, the following specific recommendations are offered:

- SVH model: prioritise LAG organisations or similar rural civil society bodies as implementing partners; the model does not work without a credible local organisation; include a mandatory academic partnership for quality of facilitation
- Silver Economy Hub: begin with the digital maturity survey as a non-negotiable first step; adapt training content based on survey results rather than assumptions; plan the physical hub as a follow-on phase 2 activity
- Smart Tourism Village: do not invest in new buildings, rather use existing public infrastructure; involve the territorial promotional agency from the start to ensure video distribution at scale
- FLW Innovation System: combine the marketplace technology with intensive training and promotion activities from day one; produce the knowledge booklet in the first half of the project so it can inform and amplify subsequent stakeholder engagement
- Digital Agri-Food Platform: conduct farmer needs surveys before procuring the platform to ensure relevance; install the meteorological stations before platform launch so data integration is available from the outset

7 Conclusions

Running five genuinely different smart village models in parallel across five countries, five regional contexts, five distinct rural development challenges is not something EU-funded programmes do often. Most projects test one model in multiple locations. More Than a Village did something rarer, and the comparative evidence it generates is among its most valuable contributions to the field.

The overarching finding is straightforward: smart village development works, but only when it starts from genuine community needs, runs through trusted local institutions, and is designed with honest expectations about how change happens in rural areas. There is no single right model. A physical facilitation hub is the right answer in South Warmia; IoT-integrated digital agriculture is the right answer in Buzet. What connects them is not the tool but the conditions: local ownership, multi-actor engagement, and the patience to begin from where a community actually is. The five pilots range from grassroots capacity building at one end to data-driven precision agriculture at the other, with community-digital hybrids filling the space between. None is purely digital or purely physical; none focuses only on economic outcomes or only on community cohesion. That overlap is not a design compromise, it is what effective rural development looks like.

Across the differences, five conditions appear in every pilot that produced lasting results: a participatory process that surfaces what communities want rather than what project templates assume; engagement across multiple stakeholder categories; the combination of digital tools with in-person activity; an institutional home with a mandate beyond the project itself; and knowledge products designed from the start to be reused by others. Where these conditions were present, impact was durable. Where they were absent or partial, results were thinner.

For policy makers, the clearest implication is the need for continuation mechanisms. Smart village pilots most commonly fail not during implementation but in the transition out of it, when project funding ends before community change has fully embedded. For practitioners and future project partners, the project leaves behind concrete results: five documented, field-tested models with honest accounts of what worked and clear guidance on replication. That knowledge is only useful if it travels.

Getting it into the networks where rural development decisions are made is the most important thing the consortium can still do within the WP3 activities in the next few months.