

## ANNEX 1 – DOCUMENTS FOR THE ELABORATION OF THE CASE STUDY MATERIAL TO BE INCLUDED IN THE E-LEARNING COURSE (IO2).

### 1.A - Case-studies by country: Bulgaria

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## Case-studies on innovative development in Peripheral Rural Areas

### Part A – INTRODUCTION TO PRA – BASELINE ASSESSMENT

*corresponding to Module 2 – e-learning course*

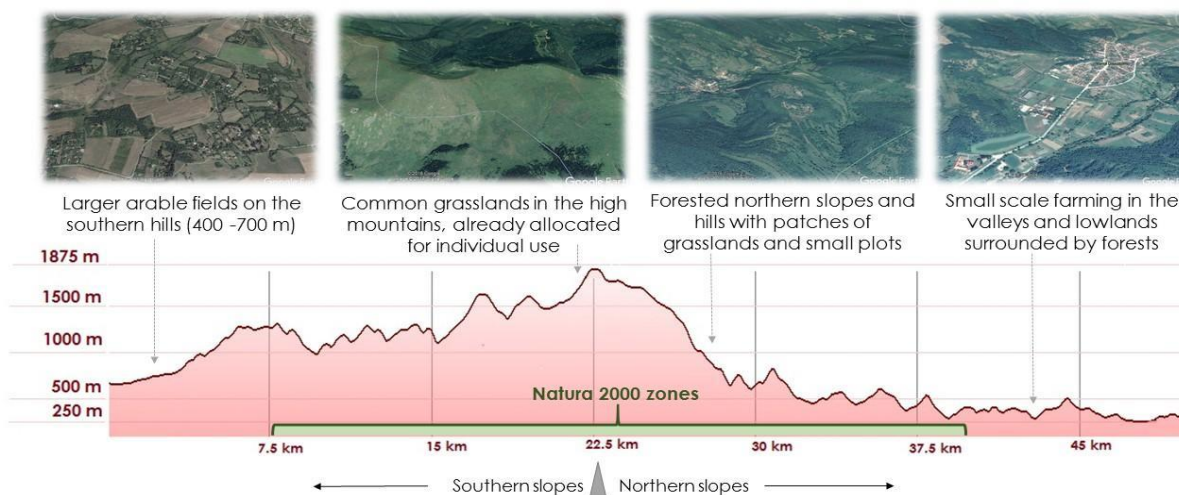
#### Introduction to the Western Stara Planina Peripheral Rural Area

##### Part 1 / INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN STARA PLANINA

- Western Stara planina (WSP) is situated in northwestern Bulgaria on the border with Serbia.
- It is predominantly a mountainous area of exceptional beauty and biodiversity richness.
- It covers 1662 km<sup>2</sup> in five municipalities (LAU1 level) from two administrative districts.
- The closest municipal center – Godech is only 50 km away from Sofia, while the most distant one is 130 km away. Nevertheless, the area is known as the poorest region in Bulgaria.
- The land use is divided almost equally between forests (48%) and agriculture (47%).



#### Western Stara Planina landscape and transect



- Small scale farming in the valleys**  
Arable fields are small due the semi-mountainous relief. Some are used for cereals, others for vegetable gardens – mostly in the proximity of settlements and in the river valleys.
- Common grasslands in the high mountains**  
Alpine pastures are widespread above the upper tree line. They are either in state or municipal ownership for common use.
- Forested slopes with patches of grasslands and small plots**  
Forestry is an important regional sector with over 50% land cover. Grasslands and small plots of land are near settlements.
- (Larger) arable fields on the southern hills**  
The relief allows the formation of larger arable fields used for growing cereals, maize, rapeseed, etc.

## Part 2 / WESTERN STARA PLANINA FEATURES AND TRENDS

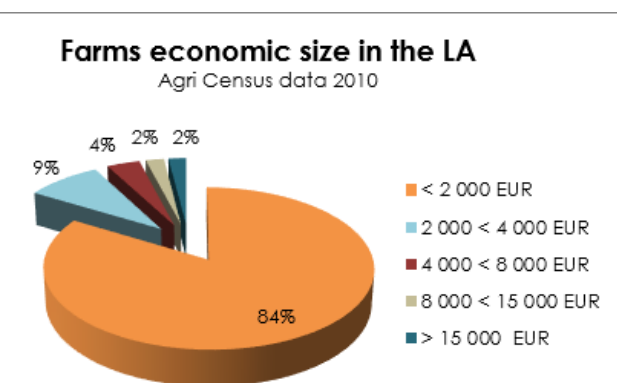
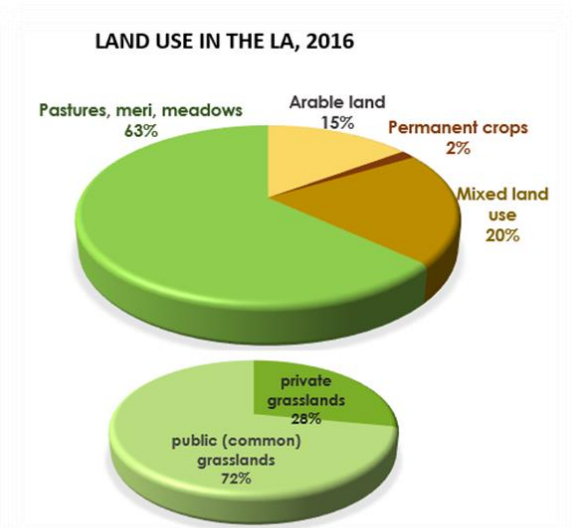
### Environmental values

- The extensive character of agriculture in general and livestock breeding in particular, the low population density, the mountain relief and the proximity to the border with Serbia (which had a special access regime limiting economic activities in the past) have influenced positively the biodiversity in WSP.
- The designation of seven Natura 2000 sites underline WSP high nature value and conservation importance.
- The territory hosts many rare flora and fauna species included in the Red Data Book of Bulgaria and protected by international red lists and conventions.



### Agricultural values

- The utilized agricultural area (UAA) is dominated by pastures and meadows many of which are public. Historically, they were used as common grasslands but the introduction of the CAP Pillar I payments led to changes in their use. The rules of the allocation of municipal pastures changed frequently but the current rules give priority to local livestock farmers.
- In 2016, the majority of farms were small both in size and economic units, below the threshold for CAP support of 1 ha.
- More than half of the farms are in livestock grazing and mixed farming systems.
- Arable land production systems replicate the farming model promoted by the CAP Pillar I payments – cereals and industrial crops.
- Sheep grazing is the typical farming system, which suffered significant decline in the years prior to EU accession.
- Overall, the numbers of all types of livestock are increasing after the accession to the EU due to the introduction of coupled support schemes in 2014 and the revision of the rules for the allocation of municipal grasslands in 2015.
- The local sheep breeds are Repliana and Karakachan sheep, whose numbers are increasing due to the agri-environmental payments for rare breeds.



### Socio-economical values

- The area is known for the ethnic cultures and traditional festivals, crafts (carpets) and cuisine. A lot of these traditions are related to the farming systems practised in the past – sheep grazing in the mountainous pastures, wool used to produce the carpets and local herbs and flowers used to colour the wool.
- This combined with the exceptional natural values and landscapes is an excellent prerequisite for sustainable tourism development but it is in its infancy.
- The four small towns are the development “hubs” of the territory. Today’s production, processing and service facilities are located there. The villages are dependent on farming (a majority of semi-subsistence farms) and social payments (pensions or unemployment support).



- The employment structure reveals that the processing industry and the service sector provide most of the private sector jobs (respectively 38% and 22%), the public sector – 35% and farming – only 5%.

### Institutional framework

- Municipalities** (Eurostat LAU 1 level). The peripheral rural area covers five municipalities. Their municipal mayors and the members of the municipal councils (elected in four-year terms) bear the main responsibilities for the governance of the municipalities. For example, the allocation of common land for individual and common use is administered by the municipal administration and voted by the municipal council.
- Agriculture administrations.** The Ministry of Agriculture has administrative offices both at regional (NUTS 3) and municipal (LAU 1) levels. Farmers submit their applications for subsidies at the municipal agriculture offices. Very often the municipal agriculture offices are the most important and reliable source of information for farmers.
- Environmental administration.** The Ministry of Environment and Water has 16 regional offices / inspections. In WSP, there are two regional inspectorates responsible for the territory – in Sofia and in Montana. The regional environmental inspectorates are responsible for compliance control of activities with Natura 2000 zones or protected areas, permissions for collection of wild herbs, etc.
- Local cultural centers (chitalishte).** Well established cultural heritage institutions working in almost every settlement. The most active ones organise cultural fairs promoting various local crafts and traditions.
- Local action groups (LAGs).** There are two LAGs in WSP – LAG Berkovitsa-Godech and LAG Zapadna Stara Planina – Kopren-Midzhur, implementing the community led local development strategies.
- Veterinary and food safety administration.** A specialized administration under the Ministry of Agriculture with a regional office in Montana. Responsible for the registration and controls on livestock farms, as well as processing units on farms.



### Part 3 / WESTERN STARA PLANINA Weakness, Issues and Challenges

#### Agricultural

- Land restitution process in the 1990s resulted in high land fragmentation, followed by massive land abandonment, the effects of which is still present. Many arable lands naturally turned into grasslands. The drastic reduction of livestock led to grasslands abandonment, especially of the alpine and remote grasslands. Municipal lands increased by the so called “residual land”- land that was not claimed hence not restituted to its owners.
- Farms are mainly subsistence and semi-subsistence. The average farm size increases slowly (0.3 ha in 2003, 0.8 ha in 2010). In the period to 2020, many of these farms disappeared.
- The closure the local dairy during the EU accession had a detrimental effect on many small livestock farms as they had no local market for the milk. By 2006, most of the small herds were sold or slaughtered.
- Poor access to information and advice on CAP and environmental aspects of farming.
- Cooperation is recognised as potential but still most of the actions are individual.
- Limited investments both in on-farm processing units and tourist infrastructure.



#### Environmental

- The drastic decrease of grazing animals led to severe scrub encroachment on grasslands. Even more, some grasslands were permanently transformed into forests. This led to the closure of the mosaic landscape and thus the loss of specific and conservation important habitats was alarming.
- The grasslands with moderate share of scrubs are not eligible for CAP Pillar I support. This ‘incentivates’ some users to clear them with heavy machinery which is detrimental to both plant and animal species.
- Many of the land owners of the formerly abandoned arable land re-converted it to arable, including in Natura 2000 zones, again with negative consequences for biodiversity and landscape.

#### Socio-economic

- The PRA is part of the poorest NUTS II region in the EU.
- Depopulation is ongoing since 1980s. The settlements are 73 but more than half of them have less than 100 people. The population density is 21.5 people/km<sup>2</sup> (31.5 for rural areas and 65.5 for the country).
- The share of unemployed is between 15% and 35% which is among the highest in the country. The side effect of it is that people lose their working habits and come to rely on social payments. Overall outmigration of working age population.
- The roads are mountainous with many turns and steep slopes, so the access to the area is unfavourable, especially during winter.



## Part 4 / PRA Strengths and Opportunities

### Policy

- National programs and policies give priority to financing projects in the territory of northwestern Bulgaria, where the PRA is situated.
- The implementation of various policy measures for rural development (areas with natural constraints, agri-environment-climate for High Nature Value farming and rare breeds, Natura 2000 compensatory payments, etc.) have an essential role for the agricultural sector and the improvement of services and life in rural areas.



- There are a number of already implemented investment projects in the PRA for modernization of farms, introduction of new technologies and production processes, training of farmers, creation and modernization of processing capacities.
- Starting aid for setting up young farmers and small farms is available. Such support is particularly important for the local communities in mountainous regions where there are no opportunities for credit and financial investments in agricultural activities.

### Agricultural / economic

- Some of the dairy farms are currently transforming to suckler cows due to the increased legal and food safety and hygiene requirements. This leads to new type of products (beef) from the PRA.
- Direct sales legislation was introduced in 2010. It made selling of primary and processed products of animal origin from the farm and at farmers' markets legal (again).
- Farmers' markets are organised in the recent years and farmers from the PRA use the opportunity – eg. participate in the weekly farmers' market in Sofia.
- Regional / municipal brands are being discussed and piloted.
- Small and medium dairy livestock breeders begin to form associations to defend their interests.





### Environmental

- Some of the most innovative HNV farming initiatives have developed in this area. The conservation importance of the region attracted the focused efforts of multiple environmental NGOs. Their approach was/is on promoting sustainable economic development that would keep farmers farming.
- This was positively welcomed by some local farmers who had spent some years working abroad (in various sectors) and came back to the area to start farming. In their communication with the « traditional » local farmers, the new comers acted as agents of change.



### Socio-economic

- The geographical location (near Sofia), the natural features (especially the mineral springs in Varshets and Godech) and cultural heritage are prerequisites for development of various forms of tourism - rural, cave, biking, spa, hunting, cultural, religious and others.
- The proximity to Sofia attracts people who want to live in a rural area and eventually develop a business there, either related to farming or tourism or other.



- The development of tourism activities and the increasing demand for quality food products is a niche for the future development of the PRA. There are already some initiatives of local brands and direct sale to final customers and restaurants in the area. Even if small scale still, they provide perspectives for the future.
- Four municipalities in the PRA have local action groups (LAGs) and have developed strategies for community led local development.



## Part 5 / WESTERN STARA PLANINA Current and Future challenges

- ❖ *“What would take place in my peripheral rural areas without innovation specifically addressing sustainable development?”*
- ❖ *“With what consequences on environmental, economic (agricultural), and societal (institutional)?”*

The main challenge for the development of the region relates to:

- Depopulation and outmigration of working age population
- Lack of reliable and experienced labour force, eg. shepherds/herders
- Ageing of farmers and no continuation between generations
- Overall low interest in agricultural activities - the work load is too high and most of the HNV farming operations require manual work.
- A high share of unemployed people (15%-35%) indicating a problem with employment opportunities.

However, the problem in the region is deeper than that. Many people in working age got used to the (low) social security payments and are unwilling to get a job that demands them working. For example, livestock farmers in the region complain that despite the relative high salaries they offer for shepherds/herders they still have problems hiring reliable people. This forces them to keep flock/herd sizes that they can care of with their family labour only.

Other barriers identified by the local partners include:

- ✓ Poor infrastructure and services.
- ✓ Poor quality of rural life - the overall situation in the region and its image as the most underdeveloped region in the EU.
- ✓ Insufficient information to farmers.
- ✓ Limited cooperation and support between farmers and administration.
- ✓ Insufficient studies from (collaboration with) research/education institutes on the production techniques, economy, environmental protection on the farm.

### Further information:



HNV-Link Baseline Assessment for Western Stara Planina was developed by the Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP) in 2017  
<https://www.step-bg.bg>



HNV-Link project sub-page on Western Stara Planina at:  
<http://www.hnmlink.eu/learning-areas/western-stara-planina-region/>

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Case-Study on innovative development in Peripheral Rural Areas  
**Part B – BUILDING A COMMON VISION FOR THE PERIPHERAL RURAL AREA: THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF SOLUTIONS AND INNOVATIONS FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRA**  
*corresponding to Module 3 of the e-learning course*

**Title: Building a common vision for Western Stara Planina, Bulgaria**



**Content:** This Part corresponds to Module 3 and will contribute to understand the process by which a peripheral rural area moves from a finding (the territorial diagnosis) to a vision (for its sustainable development) through a participatory approach and how this “visioning” drives to common reflection on own territorial challenges, difficulties to overcome and gaps to bridge, and on taking knowledge of the solutions and innovations needed.

A participatory approach is key for drafting a realistic, feasible, and engaged road map for the territory and for driving the PRA to an effective sustainable development. This is the starting point of the process (stakeholders, means deployed, engagements made, etc.) and a key factor for the visioning process. At the end, the visioning process should contribute to a global common reflection on the implementation of innovative and sustainable solutions. It is about Identifying / characterising own innovations (strengths) and identifying innovative and sustainable solutions.

## Part 1 / Mapping the Participatory Process

Western Stara Planina hosts some of the most innovative HNV farming initiatives in Bulgaria. This is mainly due to the conservation importance of the region that attracted the focused efforts of multiple nature conservation NGOs in the last two decades. Their approach is on promoting sustainable economic development that would keep farmers farming and, thus, maintaining the high nature values. This approach was welcomed by several local farmers who settled in the region after working abroad, and have acted as agents of change with “traditional” local farmers.

The Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP) started working with different stakeholders in Western Stara Planina (WSP) since its foundation in 2014. By that time many of the projects implemented earlier have ended, and it seems unlikely that they would receive new funding for farmer-focused conservation initiatives.

STEP has implemented several projects for sustainable management and use of high nature value (HNV) grasslands in WSP between 2014 and 2016. Together with its local partners, STEP has formed a partnership group of farmers, local authorities, NGOs, advisors, members of the community, and other existing initiatives. This established a discussion platform where the opinions of different stakeholder groups can be shared and explained. STEP experts are convinced that pragmatic and mutually beneficial solutions can be achieved only with the participation of all members of the community; and that finding the key to good decisions requires time and efforts of many different layers of the society.

The HNV Link participatory process in WSP was a natural continuation of the relations and the trust gained between the organisation and the local stakeholders and partners (Table 1). The process started by identification of the key stakeholder's groups from HNV farming perspective, and assessment of their motivation, expectations and potential contribution to the project objectives and activities.

*Table 1. Mapping of HNVF-relevant stakeholder groups in Western Stara Planina*

|                      | Internal  | External   |
|----------------------|---|--|
| <b>Private</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farmers – livestock breeders (cattle, sheep, goats,[horses])</li> <li>• Local SMEs – processing agricultural products – dairies, winery, jams from forest fruits</li> <li>• Tourism – accommodations, attractions</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dairies sourcing milk from the region</li> <li>• Tourism service providers – SPA, nature, biking, hiking, etc.</li> <li>• Forestry processing</li> </ul>                              |
| <b>Public</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Municipal administrations</li> <li>• Local and regional agriculture authorities</li> <li>• Regional veterinary service</li> <li>• Local cultural centers (chitalishte)</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ministry of agriculture, food and forestry offices</li> <li>• National Agriculture Advisory Service (NAAS) + district offices</li> <li>• Ministry of Environment and Water</li> </ul> |
| <b>Civil society</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NGO “Local initiative for Varshets”</li> <li>• Local action groups</li> <li>• Association of livestock breeders</li> <li>• Association Food from the Mountain</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP)</li> <li>• Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB)</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Facilitators</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NGO “Local initiative for Varshets”</li> <li>• LAG members</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP)</li> </ul>  |

## Part 2 / Implementation and Assessment of the Participatory Process

The first round of face-to-face meetings in the framework of HNV Link project was in October 2016, when the identified key stakeholders were visited and the project objectives and activities were explained. These meetings were also used for increasing the awareness on the importance of HNV farming for the whole society.

The next step was to assess stakeholder's expectations for which STEP developed a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire and some additional questions were sent in advance to some stakeholders (that used emails), who also supported the organization of the meetings and establishing new contacts in the region. In February 2017, STEP carried out 48 interviews in WSP.

These meetings helped to identify the main challenges faced by HNV farming and the whole region, to discover the past that explains the current development, to learn from the local initiatives and good and bad practices, to collect recent information and data about HNV farming innovations.

Furthermore, STEP experts took active part in the meetings of the two Local Action Groups in WSP where the HNV Link project was presented and discussed.

The LA innovation workshop gathered 35 representatives of the local and regional agricultural offices, advisory services, municipal authorities, NGOs, farmer's associations, farmers, food processors.

STEP team presented the findings of the baseline assessment and then they discussed together the challenges in the region. The participants identified the needs in the region and agreed on a long-term vision for the conservation and the development of the high nature value farming in Western Stara Planina as a precondition for an integrated socio-economic development and nature conservation of the area.

The WSP vision and the project activities were presented at the Godech municipal fest (21.07.2017) and the European Rural Parliament gathering in Vernhorst, the Netherlands (20.10.2017).

*Table 2. People involved in the participatory process leading to the HNV Vision for Western Stara Planina*

| Activity                           | No of Participants | Date      |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| Bilateral meetings                 | 10                 | Oct 2016  |
| Interviews with local stakeholders | 48                 | Feb 2017  |
| LAG meeting in G.Damianovo         | 20                 | Feb 2017  |
| Local workshop on innovations      | 40                 | June 2017 |
| Godech municipal fest              | 40                 | Jul 2017  |
| ERP Market of Initiatives          | 30                 | Oct 2017  |



*Chiprovtsi, 16.02.2017*



*Jelezna village, 16.02.2017*



*LAG meeting in Georgi Damianovo, 13.02.2017*



*WSP innovation seminar, 02.06.2017*



*Godech municipal fest, 21.07.2017*



*European Rural Parliament 20.10.2017*



**❖ Which risks / difficulties have the actors encountered and how those have been overcome**

- Some local actors (new to the partnership) expressed their concern if HNV-Link was just another project and if STEP team would be engaged in the region long-term. However, given that some team members have been active in the region even before STEP registration, this concern was easily mitigated. Western Stara Planina is the focus region for STEP, so the experts engage in the region and support local stakeholders beyond specific project funding.
- The availability of livestock farmers for meetings and gatherings is rather complicated. Several meetings were re-scheduled or cancelled due to unexpected problems with the animals that farmers had to address. STEP recognised the critically important role of livestock farmers for the maintenance and future of HNV farming areas and tried to visit those farmers at their facilities.
- Local agriculture offices are the administrations where farmers submit their CAP subsidy claims. In some cases, there were tensions between the administration and farmers. Initially, the administration representatives were unwilling to participate in the discussions. However, with time, they realised that the initiative was not a “name-and-shame” game but an open and facilitated discussion searching for solutions. STEP was proud that those people became active and committed participants till the end of HNV-Link and beyond.
- Tensions between livestock breeders from the region and owners of horses (external to the region) who rented municipal grasslands with priority over local people. When HNV-Link project started this was an ongoing problem. STEP team was already engaged in finding solutions. STEP had organised a meeting with local breeders and invited representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, which resulted in a change of national legislation. This had also contributed to increase the trust in STEP commitment in the region and its people.

**❖ Assessment on the participatory process and main conclusions**

STEP is still an external organization to the region, which is recognised as a trusted facilitator and supporter to the region. Being an external organisation means that STEP can keep its independence from local processes. At the same time, STEP is well known by the HNV stakeholders and joins in unbiased when need be. Furthermore, STEP expertise in agriculture and rural development policies and processes at national level makes it extremely useful to local people.

The partnership created between STEP and one of the local stakeholder - NGO “Local initiative for Varshets” resulted in a new project proposal. It aimed to enlarge the network and to bring in partners from the Serbian part of Stara Planina. The proposal was not successful in raising funding but it is an indication of the type of initiatives that followed.

The established partnership and trust between local stakeholders and STEP was very important at the start of the process. Equally important is that the trust and reliability between the partners were strengthened during the process, while the partnership enlarged and accommodated new members.

## Part 3 / Creating the vision of Western Stara Planina

### ❖ The challenges facing HNV farming in Western Stara Planina

- The HNV system, especially cattle and sheep grazing are to a large extent dependant of national and EU supporting schemes and access to municipal (common) grasslands.
- The drastic decrease of the livestock after 1989 led to abandonment of the HNV grasslands, which resulted in scrub encroachment, transformation into forests and closure of the mosaic landscape. As a consequence, many of the grasslands (especially HNV ones) are not included in the UAA – LPIS layer “Land in good agriculture conditions” and thus, not eligible for CAP Pillar 1 support.
- The majority of the farms are small both in size and/or economic units - below the threshold for CAP support of 1 ha, thus the access to municipal land is crucial.
- Aging and decreasing population, resulting in limited working force (especially for shepherding) are a constant problem for HNV farms, where mechanization is limited by the mountainous relief.
- National regulations for direct sales and coupled support schemes are welcomed tools but still need to be adapted to the regional conditions of the WSP.

### ❖ Western Stara Planina Vision for High Nature Value Farming

#### **Agricultural modernization taking into account natural and cultural heritage in the region:**

- ✓ Farming activities and production methods reflect the specificities of Western Stara Planina: pastoralism, maintenance of the landscape and nature values, protection of natural sites and protected areas, as well as HNV farmland outside the protected areas.
- ✓ All farmers have access to grasslands near their farms, meaning long-term contracts for municipal pastures; forests and grasslands routes and watering places are restored.
- ✓ Farmers (medium-size, family farms) are well informed, open to novelties providing better biodiversity conservation, using appropriate equipment, applying new technologies.
- ✓ Cooperation and interaction between all stakeholders to increase social cohesion, re-discovery of local traditions and events that lead to joint initiatives for promoting and marketing local products: local brand, direct marketing and direct contact with consumers, better promotion and services linked to tourism development.
- ✓ Stable and understandable legal framework and flexible administration both at local and regional, and national level.

## ❖ The local stakeholders agreed about the priorities for HNV farming in WSP

### Social and institutional

- ✓ Targeted and thematic workshops with participation of all stakeholders are needed for knowledge transfer and constructive dialogue between different actors for adaptation of the existing legislation to the regional needs of the HNV farmers and promotion of innovative solutions.
- ✓ Promote cooperation between farmers and processors – EIP operational group
- ✓ Raise public awareness and changing the current perception for the HNV farmers and their life
- ✓ Mobile advisory teams for HNV farmers (maybe a common initiative with NAAS)

### Regulatory framework

- ✓ Adaptation of the rules of Pillar 1 support schemes to the regional needs of the HNV farmers eligibility rules for HNV farmers, support targeted to the real farmers, criteria tailored to the needs of HNV farmers: duration of the contracts for the use of municipal grasslands, criteria for the coupled support schemes, etc.
- ✓ Direct sales legislation for meat and plant products

### Products and markets

- ✓ Promotion of the grass-fed livestock breeding products
- ✓ Training on diversification of products by using the natural resources of the area (herbs, bacteria, etc.)

### Farm techniques and management

- ✓ Demonstration of HNV farming practices, including promotion of rotational grazing and electric fences for sheep and goats
- ✓ Training of HNV farmers in food processing technologies.

### Sources of information:



STEP Innovation Seminar National report 2017  
STEP Participatory Approach in HNV-Link 2018

Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP)  
<https://www.step-bg.bg>



HNV-Link project sub-page on Western Stara Planina at:  
<http://www.hnmlink.eu/learning-areas/western-stara-planina-region/>

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Case-studies on innovative sustainable development in Peripheral Rural Areas  
**Part D – INNOVATION EXCHANGE, TRANSFER AND DISSEMINATION**  
*corresponding to Module 5 of the e-learning course*

**Peripheral Rural Area: Western Stara Planina, Bulgaria**  
**INNOVATION EXCHANGE, TRANSFER AND DISSEMINATION**



**Content:**

*After reflection on the innovation needs and the vulnerabilities of the area, the PRA engaged in an active process of progressing the sustainable development of the PRA. This is done through the implementation of innovative sustainable solutions for preserving and enhancing HNV farming systems and the economy of the PRA.*

*Therefore, Part D will provide students with information on communication and dissemination examples carried out during the HNV-link project, highlighting the most efficient actions and focusing on specific end-users.*

*Besides, as a part of the communication/dissemination/transfer activities, Part D will also focus on the Cross-Visits and peer-exchanges carried out during HNV-Link project.*

## Part 1 / Engaging Communication and Dissemination Actions for a sustainable development of the PRA

The collaboration with local and some national stakeholders enabled STEP to develop a very specific communication and dissemination plan (Table 1) for the period following the baselines assessment, vision formulation and the identification of the existing and needed HNV-relevant innovations.

The overall objective was to enable the future development of HNV farming in Western Stara Planina by sharing and by learning from others social, marketing, technological and regulatory innovations.

The local partnership group identified three priorities:

- ✓ Cooperation and collaboration at local and national level ;
- ✓ Training and exchange of experience at national, local and EU level ;
- ✓ Promotion of products from HNV grazing systems.

**Table 1. Action plan for the dissemination and communication activities in WSP under HNV-Link**

| Specific objective   | Action   | Level          |
|--|--|----------------|
| To enable the cooperation on national and local level for innovative actions in favor of HNV farming practices | Participation in the WG for RD measure 16. Cooperation and enable participation of HNV operational groups  | National       |
|  | Meeting with LAG Berkovitz –Godech and discuss the possibilities for creation of HNVF Operational group  | Local          |
|  | Explore the possibilities for transnational projects and exchange visits for HNVF stakeholders   | National/Local |
|  | Participate in local and traditional festivals and open days   | Local          |
| Organization of workshops and cross-visits of the relevant HNVF stakeholder                                    | Study visit / training in food-processing technologies   |                |
|  | Cross visit to Sweden  | International  |
|  | Cross visit to Romania   | International  |
|  | Cross visit to Greece  | International  |
|  | Regional workshop  | Local          |
| Attract farmers and consumers in favor of HNV farming  | Produce factsheets of the most relevant HNVF innovations from other partners and publish them on STEP website  | National       |
|  | Create a working group with UNWE and NAAS experts to discuss the needs of advisors and farmers about HNV innovations and agree on the communication format | National       |
|  | Develop the necessary tool-kits for advisors and farmers   | National       |
|  | Interact with NAAS Horizon 2020 projects for promotion of the benefits of the HNV farming both for farmers and consumers                                   | National       |

❖ Dissemination of HNV Link innovations and recommendations at different national/international workshops and meetings:

1. Roundtable “Farming in the future – trends and challenges”, organized by the Agriculture University and Members of the European Parliament, Plovdiv, 18 April 2017
2. Roundtable “Environmental education – the bridge towards sustainable development of local communities”, organized by the cultural center (chitalishte) in Kurtovo Konare, 27 April 2017
3. Workshop “Regulations on the table: support the traditional production”, Skopje, 31 May 2018
4. Workshop//CAP at a Crossroads: Unity in Sustainability Makes Strength, 4 June 2018, Sofia
5. Thematic round table of the sheep breeders association, Sliven, 15 June 2018
6. International conference „European agriculture add value of the food chain: dynamics and innovations”, 22-24 October 2018, Sofia
7. Training, organized by Life project “Habitats Free from Invasive Alien Plants”, Sopot, 14-15 January 2019



Plovdiv, 18 April 2017



Skopje, North Macedonia, 31 May 2018

❖ Production of HNV Link innovations fact sheets and videos:

Four BG innovations and 16 innovations of other HNV-Link partners were presented in factsheets and videos. The content and format were agreed with experts from the National Agriculture Advisory System (NAAS) and PhD students from the University of National and World Economy (UNWE).

**LNBLU FARM: AN HNV FARM NEAR THE SKY**

**LOCATION:** Plovdiv region, Plovdiv district, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

**KEY SYSTEM:** Organic production of high quality meat and wool

**SCALE OF OPERATION:** 1000 head of sheep

**KEY TO SUCCESS:** High quality meat and wool production, organic production, high quality feed, high quality management

**TEMPORAL:** Created in 2014 (first year)

**STORY IN A NUTSHELL:** LNBLU is a high quality meat and wool production system. It is based on organic production and high quality feed. The farm is located near the sky, which is why it is called LNBLU.

**RDP NATURA 2000 MEASURE FOR AGRICULTURAL LAND**

**LOCATION:** Plovdiv region, Plovdiv district, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

**KEY SYSTEM:** Organic production of high quality meat and wool

**SCALE OF OPERATION:** 1000 head of sheep

**KEY TO SUCCESS:** High quality meat and wool production, organic production, high quality feed, high quality management

**TEMPORAL:** Created in 2014 (first year)

**STORY IN A NUTSHELL:** RDP Natura 2000 measure for agricultural land is a support measure for organic production of high quality meat and wool. It is based on organic production and high quality feed.

**FARMERS ASSOCIATION "FOOD FROM THE MOUNTAIN"**

**LOCATION:** Plovdiv region, Plovdiv district, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

**KEY SYSTEM:** Organic production of high quality meat and wool

**SCALE OF OPERATION:** 1000 head of sheep

**KEY TO SUCCESS:** High quality meat and wool production, organic production, high quality feed, high quality management

**TEMPORAL:** Created in 2014 (first year)

**STORY IN A NUTSHELL:** Farmers Association "Food from the Mountain" is a support measure for organic production of high quality meat and wool. It is based on organic production and high quality feed.

**MOBILE ADVISORY TEAMS FOR HNV FARMERS**

**LOCATION:** Plovdiv region, Plovdiv district, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

**KEY SYSTEM:** Organic production of high quality meat and wool

**SCALE OF OPERATION:** 1000 head of sheep

**KEY TO SUCCESS:** High quality meat and wool production, organic production, high quality feed, high quality management

**TEMPORAL:** Created in 2014 (first year)

**STORY IN A NUTSHELL:** Mobile advisory teams for HNV farmers are a support measure for organic production of high quality meat and wool. They provide technical and advisory support to HNV farmers.



## Part 2 / Focus on Cross-Visits

Cross visits in HNV-Link provided many opportunities for experience exchange about HNV-relevant innovations and peer learning. The HNV innovation examples from HNV-Link partner countries were quite inspirational, so the decision which ones to visit was very difficult. Furthermore, STEP team wanted to offer the cross visit opportunity to as many local stakeholders as possible. The practicalities, framed by the available budget, seemed to ensure the optimal win-win decision.

STEP team organized three cross visits for WSP partners (Table 2) and hosted one cross visit from Romanian colleagues. Different local partners participated in the different cross visits with the idea that they would exchange impressions and ideas at the regional workshop.

**Table 2. Participants and innovations interests in the cross visits organised by STEP for partners from Western Stara Planina**

| Cross visit to:                 | Dalsland, Sweden  | Thessaly, Greece  | Tarnava mare, Romania   |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>Participants:</b>            | 1 farmer (fluent in English)<br>Joined the UK team cross visit to Sweden                        | 15 stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 5 farmers,</li> <li>● 3 from municipal agricultural offices (Varshets, Godech, Chiprovtsi),</li> <li>● 2 from Godech municipality,</li> <li>● 1 from NGO “Local initiative for Varshets”,</li> <li>● 4 STEP experts.</li> </ul>   | 12 stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 3 farmers,</li> <li>● 1 owner of a small food processing unit,</li> <li>● 1 regional advisory office;</li> <li>● 1 LAG,</li> <li>● 1 researcher,</li> <li>● 1 local municipality,</li> <li>● 1 Food from the Mountain</li> <li>● 3 STEP experts</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Dates:</b>                   | 6 – 10 June 2018  | 12 – 15 June 2018   | 24 – 27 June 2018   |
| <b>Innovations of interest:</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mobile abattoir in the Dalsland Innovations</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Terra Thessalia Territorial cluster;</li> <li>● Terra Thessalia Participatory Guarantee System (PGS);</li> <li>● GPS-Tracking for monitoring and certification of extensive livestock-farming;</li> <li>● Tzoumerka National Park;</li> <li>● visit to livestock holdings in order to exchange ideas.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The overall efforts of Adept foundation in Tarnava Mare to sustain the future of the HNV farming;</li> <li>● SES Fruleco community food processing enterprise and marketing scheme;</li> <li>● Green Infrastructure Sheepfold Model;</li> <li>● Farmers association and milk collection unit;</li> <li>● Angofa farm and nature school.</li> </ul> |

## ❖ Impressions, reflections and lessons from the cross visits as formulated by the participants

### [1] Reflections from the cross visit to Dalsland, Sweden

The most interesting innovations that can be useful for Western Stara Planina were the following:

- ✓ The role and the activities of the HNVF advisors - the momentum they create to push all other participants to action;
- ✓ The level of automation and mechanization in the sector – inevitable for the most of our farms; (especially the automated farm for 120 dairy cows)
- ✓ The negative example of where we can get with our abundant HNV areas if we don't pay attention;
- ✓ The negative example of overgrazing – the local farms were totally not prepared for a little draught period;
- ✓ The “togetherness” of the neighboring farms;
- ✓ The payment for the solid electric fences by the state;
- ✓ The “automated pasture door”;
- ✓ The sexed semen could be used for both sexes – breed the best dairy cows with female dairy semen (for reproducing) and the worst – with beef male semen for slaughtering;
- ✓ From our British colleagues – bracken bruising;
- ✓ The diversification – mixing of farming and tourism, especially our hosts were remarkably good at it;
- ✓ The overall attitude of the farmers – they do not complain and they do not have problems with the CAP support payments;
- ✓ The use of all side-products, especially sheep furs.



## [2] Reflections from the cross visit to Thessaly, Greece

- ✓ All participants in the cross visit appreciated very much the practical value of the field trips and the possibility to meet Greek farmers with similar activities.
- ✓ The majority of the participants (63%) think that the most interesting and useful visit for them was the calves fattening farm. They were very impressed by the cleanness and the hygiene of the farm. The young farmer shared his knowledge and experience with enthusiasm and answered to all the questions regarding the food and the nutrition of the calves. One of the interesting things in the farm is also the optimization and the combination of livestock breeding and plant growing.
- ✓ A very interesting approach/innovation that was discussed between the BG participants is the way the diaspora is used for marketing and adding values to the products from the region. Since Western Stara Planina Learning area is also suffering from migration and depopulation of the area it was discussed that the approach of creating a certifying a local brand from the region could be interesting for the WSP diaspora in the big cities in Bulgaria.
- ✓ The participants think that the HNV innovation that can be replicated in Bulgaria is the GPS tracking and monitoring system for sheep and goats. However, some of the farmers expressed concerns that if everyone can see where the flock are grazing – this may increase the thefts of the animals.
- ✓ The cooperation between farmers, processors, municipality and other relevant stakeholders and the local community in Terra Tessalia Cluster is also a very important HNVF innovation example. However, many efforts are needed to achieve this and our experience shows that without a long-term project this cannot happen on the territory of WSP.





### [3] Reflections from the cross visit to Tarnava mare, Romania

- ✓ The majority of the Bulgarian participants in the cross visit (78%) think that the most interesting innovation was the community enterprise for fruits and vegetable processing as well as the trading of the products under a common label and certificate. We need to discuss with our regional and national authorities (Food safety agency) and to change the existing legislation if we want to replicate the community enterprise for processing of fruits and vegetables in Western Stara Planina. The other issue is securing funding for the enterprise, which can be done under different donor's programmes in the area.
- ✓ The existing partnership and cooperation between farmers, and between Adept and the farmers is a good practice that takes time to happen but is worth the efforts.
- ✓ Another interesting HNV innovation is the Green infrastructure sheepfold. The solar panels improve the living conditions of the shepherds and help them to meet the food safety requirements. 22% of the participants find this as the most interesting innovation that may be replicated in Bulgaria.
- ✓ The livestock association in Viscri is also an interesting innovation example. However, this was tried in Bulgaria, but was not very successful, because Bulgarian legal acts do not allow for a NGO/non-profit organization to be a registered agricultural producer eligible to EU funds.



**Further information / Sources:**

WSP Action Plan HNV-Link, STEP 2017  
Cross visit reports in HNV-Link, STEP 2018



Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP)  
<https://www.step-bg.bg>



HNV-Link project sub-page on Western Stara Planina at:  
<http://www.hnmlink.eu/learning-areas/western-stara-planina-region/>

Reflections on the cross visits on YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1YVZENHsnaslseNp-e-R2g/>

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