

Exchange of best practices and knowledge sharing

From March 26 to 31, the Hungarian Coal Commission Secretariat welcomed two delegations to its Heves and Borsod Abauj Zemplen coal regions as part of the exchangeEU programme.

First, the Secretariat welcomed a representative from the Regional Development Agency of Zasavje, Slovenia for a reverse job-shadowing exchange to gain insight on specific approaches to using just transition funds for economic diversification and regional development projects. Secondly, delegations from Western Macedonia, Greece, and the Upper Nitra Region, Slovakia travelled to Hungary to discuss strategies in establishing energy communities, re-skilling and upskilling workers, and stakeholder engagement.

All regions came together to share best practices, develop new ideas and discuss tangible projects and potential cooperation opportunities.

Results in a nutshell

Implementing just transition projects

Zasavje shared their experiences in implementing just transition projects supported by Just Transition Funds. Two lighthouse projects were presented: the newly created Just Transition Center and the soon-to-be built Zasavje Center for Development, Demonstration, and Training for Carbon-Free Technologies. The latter will be located on a former mining site and function as a training and job creator centre for the region. Zasavje also highlighted the regions 'Common Strategy' on transnational, national, regional, and local policies improvements.

Energy community projects

Western Macedonia presented lessons learned from the approximately 1,406 energy communities already established in their region. Delegates emphasized the importance of designing clear criteria for the size and type of participants in for energy communities to ensure participants energy needs are satisfied first, as opposed to establishing the communities to merely sell energy to the grid.

Further inspiration stemmed from a site-visit to the Social Solar Power Plant at Tiszabő established by Magyar Máltai Szeretetszolgálat & E.ON. The Hungarian village of Tiszabő, a low-income, rural Roma village, uses energy from the nearby solar plant to keep houses warm. As about a quarter of the village's families are given free heating through the winter season. The plant serves as a model for further projects throughout Hungary. Under the "Felzárkózó Települések" (Upgrading Towns and Villages) program, social solar power plants are planned to be built in 300 disadvantaged locations across the country.

Re- and up-skilling programmes

During a visit to the Heves Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber president presented a plan of how to use JTF funding for a programme aiming to offer coal workers career guidance, trainings, employment support, and individual and group counselling. A similar project designed by the City of Prievidza and local stakeholders was highlighted by the Upper Nitra delegation. Due to the programme's promising results, the Slovak government is expected to extend it for 2 more years to support coal workers through the closure of the Upper Nitra coal mine in 2023.

Youth engagement initiatives

All delegations emphasized the importance of including younger generations in the transition process. Best practice examples showcasing current efforts in engaging with young people on just transition matters were highlighted through the Western Macedonians EU Teens4Greens projects as well as the Slovakian company 'Pronea' which works to educate students on entrepreneurship and developing their region through their own ideas and projects. Following this exchange of good practice approaches, exchange delegation members met with current students at the Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, where the Hungarian Coal Commission Secretariat is located. Students and exchange members engaged in a workshop to discuss strategies and approaches for better engaging youth in just transition processes.

Future opportunities for collaboration

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Both exchanges laid the foundation for fruitful future collaboration between the regions: participants are planning to intensify collaboration on potential just transition projects. Slovakia and Western Macedonia intend to share case studies on energy community models. Northern Hungary expressed interest in participating in a learning visit to Western Macedonia to gain more insights on hydrogen and renewable energy projects as well as stakeholder engagement strategies. The two jurisdictions are also planning to submit a Horizon Europe proposal on how to overcome energy poverty through social inclusion.