Baia Mare:
Community in Action
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BAIA MARE: COMMUNITY IN ACTION

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The ecological transformation and recovery of five contaminated areas in Baia Mare, along with the significant environmental behavioral shift from citizens, wouldn't have been possible without the SPIRE Local Action Network and the co-design participatory process developed and implemented in the city two years ago.

The SPIRE social lens builds upon a strategic multi-stakeholder framework that aims to transform the current urban social dynamics into a new model, based on three primary actions:

(1) Citizen engagement as a high priority for the SPIRE project and partners since the focus of the participatory approach is in the spirit of the project.

(2) Real co-creation processes as the tool to ensure consistency between citizens and future ecological (and experimental) public spaces.

(3) Active participation of the local community as a critical milestone to ensure the success of the re-naturalization of the five selected pilot sites through "Plantathlons" and the use of the innovative iLEU digital reward system.

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Collecting Data and Engaging Citizens

In November 2019, the SPIRE team began the citizen engagement process with an overview of citizens' and stakeholders' perceptions about the state-of-play of the *economy, labor market, sociocultural life, environment* and *public space* dimensions in Baia Mare through surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus group meetings.

Questionnaires were circulated among the neighborhood directly targeted by SPIRE. For instance, within the *environment and public space dimension*, we can see in Figure 2 how citizens perceive the threats to personal health posed by soil and water contamination. However, concerning the fear of contracting a pollution-related illness, around 20.5% of respondents agree or strongly agree, while approximately 43% strongly disagree or disagree.

The strategy approach had to be shifted from in-person to online questionnaires and workshops due to the COVID-19 situation. In July 2020, a public survey was launched to assess the level of awareness and openness among citizens concerning the critical ecosystem services that will be co-developed and implemented in Baia Mare: *phytoremediation and biomass upcycling; dynamic land-use management and participatory planning;* and *local value systems and blockchain support services.*

Answers were accepted on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. The results set the baseline for the citizenry's levels of awareness and openness towards SPIRE's topics, activities, and objectives:

The survey unveiled relatively high awareness and openness towards most of the project's core topics and proposed actions. It also found a general lack of knowledge concerning the upcycling and potential reuses of plant biomass.

Citizens' awareness of environmental issues varied, even though a positive trend towards sustainable and "green" attitudes and behaviors was observed . The environmental issue was revealed to be of significant concern for the population. A willingness to adopt nature-based solutions and enact behavioral change geared towards improving the local environmental situation was demonstrated. Despite some initial skepticism towards co-creation and participatory activities, a window of opportunity for a transition towards a *new green deal* has been identified in Baia Mare.

Co-creating and Shared Decision Making

From October 2020 through October 2021, a co-creation process was launched in the city, mainly relying on digital activities due to the pandemic – encompassing communication and dissemination

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actions and consultation, and collaborative workshops with the different communities . The co-creation process incorporated three main stages:

Co-creation Stage 1: Preliminary assessment of the transformation potential including three general objectives:
1. Raising awareness of the ecological and environmental challenges that Baia Mare is facing.
2. Assessing community needs and necessities concerning green infrastructure, public space, and facilities/opportunities for locals to spend time in nature.
3. Brainstorming on initial transformation ideas and potential facilities and functions for the pilot sites.

The SPIRE team developed an online questionnaire focused on needs identification, problem solving, creativity and ideas needed for the ecological transformation of the five public spaces located in different neighborhoods. It gathered inspiring answers and proposals.

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Questionnaire 1 results. ***Source: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1r610zlQtPqSgW7ChwBNrTTA-0CVZFQNDRYTLu4lecAA/viewanalytics***

An overwhelming majority of survey respondents in Baia Mare think that the role of green spaces and vegetation in fighting against air pollution is very important in the city and that we need more green spaces. Urban elements such as pedestrian routes, relaxation areas, unconventional and creative playgrounds, chess areas and local cultural events areas were considered necessary in all the sites (using an increasing scale from 1 to 5, most of the citizens voted between 3 and 5) .

Even if some of the needed interventions (as in public space facilities) cannot be fully

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accommodated by the SPIRE pilot sites' transformation process due to its technical, ecological, and experimental character, the results of the co-design exercises are nevertheless valuable for the municipality. Besides provisions for pilot sites, a positive impact of the process is that the community expressed their needs and developed new knowledge and awareness about the environmental situation in their neighborhoods.

Co-creation Stage 2 : Co-designing the zoning and planting plans for SPIRE pilot sites

Following the first community workshop, Co-creation Stage 2 took place, aiming to co-elaborate the requirements and design ideas for the creation of technical designs (zoning plan and planting/vegetation plan). The general objectives of Stage 2 were:
1. Involving communities in the decision-making process for the pilot site's ecological transformation.
2. Gathering input for site planting requirements: access, zones, ambience, character (through a second questionnaire).
3. Co-elaborate a preliminary design sketch for the pilot sites.

Blackboard exercises and dynamics were developed to find common ground and shared proposals. The final designs were co-produced with the local communities, and a set of solutions was elaborated: path and alley structures, the location of functional areas, planting areas with indications regarding the planting distance (to be followed when possible), and public spaces and urban furniture. The final results of Co-creation Stage 2 were communicated and disseminated through the SPIRE official Facebook page and were used for the elaboration of the final technical designs for the pilot sites.

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Final technical design of one of the pilot sites – Romplumb. Source: SPIRE- Technical Report D6.1.3 Final technical designs for pilot sites

Co-creation Stage 3: Co-designing micro-interventions to be co-implemented.

Co-creation Stage 3 built on the results of the previous two stages and filled in the gaps in the co-creation process, that occurred due to pandemic conditions. The general objectives of this stage were:

1. Sensory and spatial assessment/understanding of each pilot site: a necessary activity in order to

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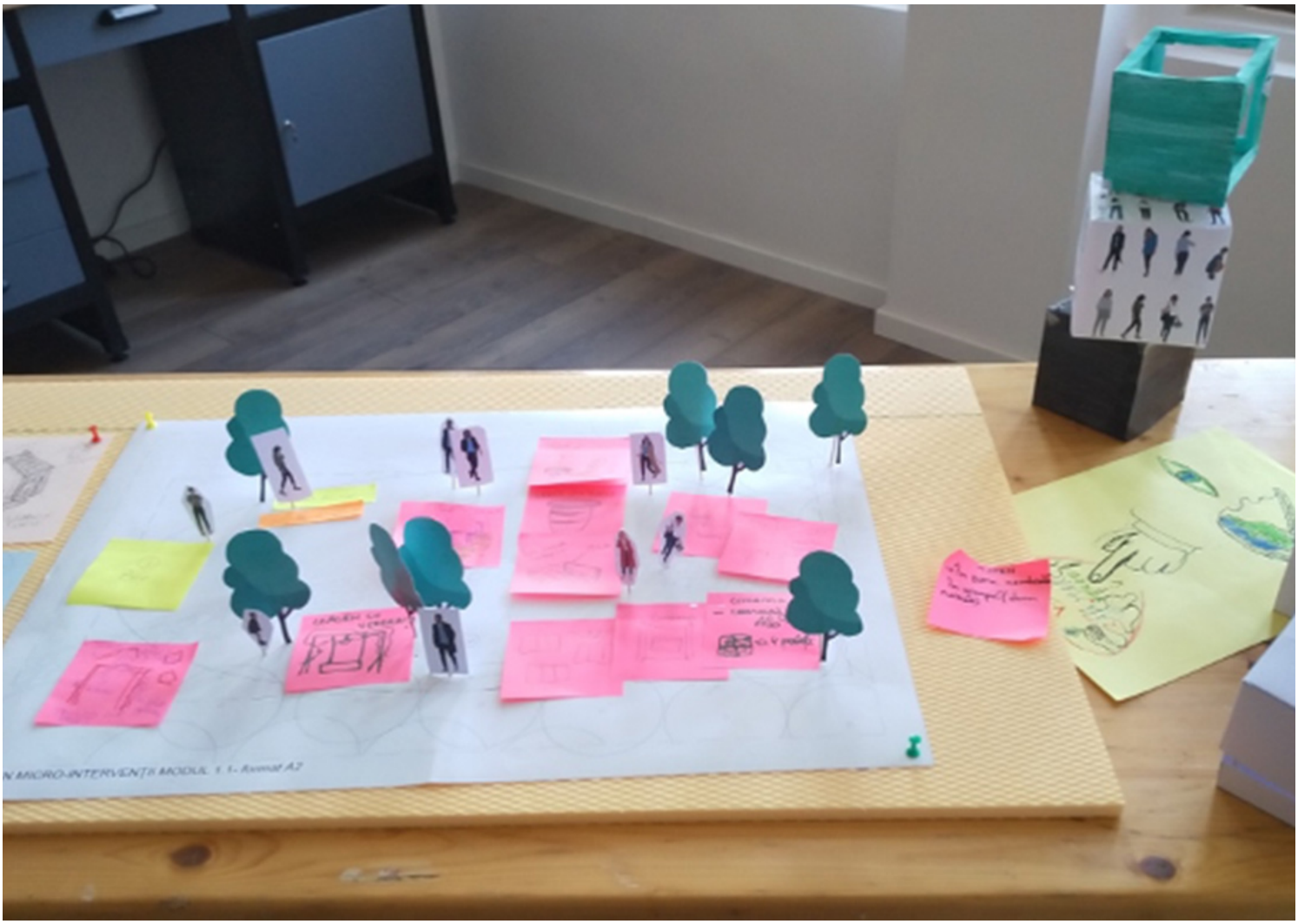
help the participants to develop feasible, effective, and creative solutions.
2. Co-designed solutions of micro-interventions: (1) assessing the types of interventions; (2) understanding the technical aspects of the interventions; (3) providing a custom, community-developed solution, that is both ecological and easy to implement.

Along with the definitive technical designs for the pilot sites, several final in-situ interventions were proposed (like urban furniture, birdhouses, or places for nature observations). The purpose of the last stage of the different workshops is to co-implement the co-designed interventions and stimulate emotional engagement, creating connections between the participants and the sites.



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Third exercise results (urban furniture). Source: SPIRE- Technical Report D6.1.2 Report on co-design workshops with the SPIRE Local Action Network

Participating Actively and Implementing Solutions

The five contaminated sites (Romplumb, Ferneziu, Colonia Topitorilor, Urbis, and Craica) being reclaimed in Baia Mare under the SPIRE project will become strategic components in the local green infrastructure system – mitigating soil pollution and also providing biomass for upcycling in local value chains . They will be integrated into the future healthy natural and semi-natural network within the BM 2050 Master Plan. To achieve this, it is essential that the local communities not only participate actively and adopt the proposals, but that they feel a strong sense of ownership.

On the one hand, several Plantathlons have been carried out in the city beginning in spring 2021, supporting citizen-led actions and enhancing the community's involvement in the preparation, seeding and planting for each of the pilot sites.

Returning the pilot sites to the local community as a safe and attractive outdoor space is the first step in building a shared future for the city's metropolitan area. Sustainable pedestrian walkways are proposed for inhabitants and visitors on phytoremediation sites.

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Plantathlon activities Spring 2021. Source: Baia Mare

On the other hand, a reward system called the "immaterial local environmental utility" (iLEU) has already been implemented. It promotes environmental, health, and climate awareness through a behavioral shift at individual and organizational levels.

Baia Mare citizens are invited to use this digital token and become iLEU users through a series of sponsored actions: cycling to work, walking to work, participation in the SPIRE HUB events, or prizes for winners at Planthatlon events and competitions organized by SPIRE HUB, among others. The

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Spire Hub, in Casa Schreiber, a renovated historic building, is used as the operations headquarters for training and other activities.

Moving from theory to practice has not been easy for participatory processes in general, considering that we are immersed in the COVID-19 situation across Europe. Defining collaborative policy-making for green infrastructure and an environmental behavior shift refers first to activities directed at raising awareness and promoting advocacy. These first steps are followed by co-decision, co-production, and co-implementation processes.

The SPIRE project in Baia Mare has already created and disseminated knowledge of how to implement participatory approaches involving citizens, local government, and other stakeholders. It has demonstrated the ability of these strategies to influence and legitimate long-term transformative policy processes.

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