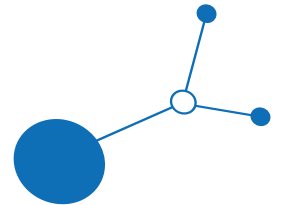


D.3.2.4 Final Refinement

of the Joint Strategy

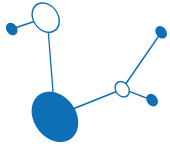


Final Version

March, 2026

Author: Isidoro De Bortoli



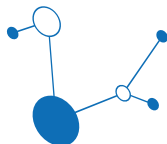


FINAL REFINEMENT OF THE JOINT STRATEGY

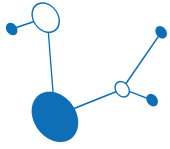
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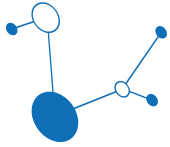
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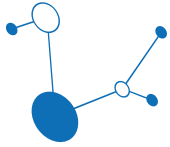
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List of acronyms and abbreviations

Acronym	name
AC	Alpine Convention
CBFA	Cross-Border Functional Area
 CBWT	 Cross-Border Working Teams
CC	Carpathian Convention
CCSP	Carpathian Civil Society Platform
CF	Carpathian Foundation
CIPRA	Commission internationale pour la protection des Alpes
CM	Central Mountains
CLSD	Community-Led Sustainable Development
CSTP	Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform
 SIG	 Istituto di Sociologia Internazionale di Gorizia
SCC	Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention



A. Summary for policymakers

Mountain regions across Central Europe are shaped by complexity: fragmented territories, limited administrative capacity, and economies often dependent on vulnerable sectors such as tourism. Yet they also possess strong local identities, rich natural resources, and a clear potential for sustainable development. The experience of the Central Mountains project shows that **real progress in these areas depends less on new policies alone and more on how governance is organised, sustained, and shared.**

A central lesson is that development works best when it is rooted in communities. Policies that actively involve local actors in decision-making, rather than simply consulting them, generate stronger ownership, greater legitimacy, and more durable results. **Participation, however, must be meaningful and inclusive**, reaching groups that are often underrepresented, such as young people, rural populations, and small local businesses. When people see that their input leads to tangible outcomes, engagement becomes a long-term asset rather than a one-off exercise.

At the same time, mountain regions do not function within administrative borders. Their challenges and opportunities are inherently cross-border, which makes cooperation essential. The project highlights that **effective governance relies on stable, multi-level structures that connect local, regional, national, and transnational actors.** What matters most is not formal coordination, but practical collaboration—joint initiatives, shared tools, and continuous exchange between stakeholders.

A persistent challenge remains the **fragility of initiatives once project funding ends.** To address this, policies must prioritise continuity from the outset: anchoring cooperation in durable structures, investing in local capacities, and ensuring access to diversified funding. Without this, even successful initiatives risk fading over time.

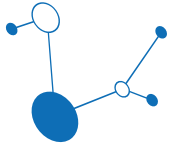
In this context, **practical tools and approaches play a key role** (Section C). Instruments such as cross-border functional areas, thematic cooperation platforms, and digital coordination tools demonstrate how strategies can be translated into concrete action. Their effectiveness lies in being adaptable, user-oriented, and closely aligned with local needs.

Sustainable tourism illustrates well the broader governance challenge. While it offers important economic opportunities, it must be carefully managed to avoid environmental degradation and social imbalance. This requires coordinated approaches that involve local communities, connect different policy sectors, and operate across borders.

Another critical dimension is participation capacity. Engaging stakeholders effectively requires time, skills, and facilitation. Policymakers have a role in supporting these processes, providing technical assistance, and creating spaces where dialogue can take place under fair and transparent conditions. This is particularly important for youth, whose involvement should be institutionalised through stable mechanisms that allow them to contribute meaningfully to decision-making.

Ultimately, the project experience points to the importance of **fostering a culture of cooperation and learning.** Exchanges between regions, replication of successful practices, and openness to different approaches are key to building resilient governance systems. At the same time, policies must remain flexible enough to adapt to local realities, recognising that diversity is a defining feature of mountain regions, not a constraint.

In conclusion, **sustainable development in mountain areas is fundamentally a governance issue.** Policies are most effective when they empower communities, enable cooperation across borders, and ensure continuity over time. When these conditions are met, strategies can move beyond intentions and deliver lasting, place-based impact.



B. Introduction

The Central Mountains project was implemented within the paradigm of community-led sustainable development (see A.1 Joint Strategy Report), with a specific focus on sustainable tourism and cross-border cooperation. The Joint Strategy Report, developed by Eurac Research in 2024, provided some theoretical background for this action, laying the groundwork upon which project activities were built. The present refinement aims at using the experience gathered in the 3 years of project work to complement this basis - building upon lessons learned, in the hope that the construction resulting from this process can inspire others to go further.

The project's activities were developed within the framework of the Joint Strategy on community-led sustainable development (CLSD), which laid the conceptual groundwork for addressing governance, sustainable tourism, and cross-border cooperation in mountain areas. The strategy defined key principles and highlighted structural challenges, providing a shared reference for action across Alpine and Carpathian regions.

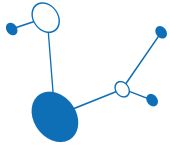
This document builds on that foundation as a refinement of the original framework. Drawing on three years of implementation, it reflects how strategic concepts were translated into concrete activities, pilot actions, and cooperation mechanisms. This process has generated practical knowledge that enables a more grounded understanding of what works in specific contexts and under which conditions.

Rather than replacing the Joint Strategy, **the refinement complements it by linking theory with practice.** It integrates lessons learned from project activities, stakeholder engagement, and pilot experiences, shifting the focus towards operational insights—particularly in relation to governance, participation, and the long-term sustainability of cooperation.

The analysis is based primarily on internal project materials, including workshops, meetings, surveys, and deliverables, supported where relevant by external references. These sources bring together perspectives from local stakeholders, civil society, public authorities, and transnational institutions, ensuring a multi-level and practice-oriented approach.

Overall, the refinement aims to support policymakers and practitioners in strengthening community-led sustainable development in mountain regions by consolidating evidence and promoting approaches that are effective, durable, and adaptable to local contexts.

Materials used to elaborate the present refinement are internal to the project and include all workshop and meeting reports, surveys, and official project deliverables. For publicly available references, see the bibliography below.



C. Updated Taxonomy: experiences of CLSD in mountain areas

Section C translates the conceptual framework of the Joint Strategy into a policy-relevant taxonomy of community-led sustainable development in mountain areas. Drawing on the implementation experience of the Central Mountains project, it consolidates evidence from pilot actions, stakeholder engagement, and transnational cooperation processes to identify key governance dimensions and operational approaches. The section provides policymakers with structured insights into how CLSD can be effectively applied across diverse territorial contexts, highlighting practical instruments, institutional arrangements, and coordination mechanisms that support sustainable and durable outcomes in mountain regions. In this way, the taxonomy provides policymakers with actionable guidance, illustrating how CLSD can be operationalised through concrete instruments and institutional setups, and why embedding these approaches in multi-level and cross-border governance systems is essential for long-term impact in mountain regions.

1. Thematic overview

This section will provide an overview of the insights gained through the project on the main elements building its approach to Community-Led Sustainable Development (CLSD), providing a practical counterpart to the theoretical approach of the Joint Strategy Report. These “building blocks” are governance, participation, sustainable tourism development, and cross-border cooperation.

The experience of the Central Mountains project confirms that community-led sustainable development in mountain areas is best understood not as a single policy approach, but as a combination of interrelated elements shaping how development is governed in practice. Building on the Joint Strategy, developed by Eurac Research in 2024, the project translates theoretical principles into concrete experience, highlighting what makes CLSD operational in complex territorial contexts.

Four key building blocks emerge: governance, participation, cross-border cooperation, and sustainable tourism development. These should be seen as interconnected dimensions of a governance model adapted to mountain regions.

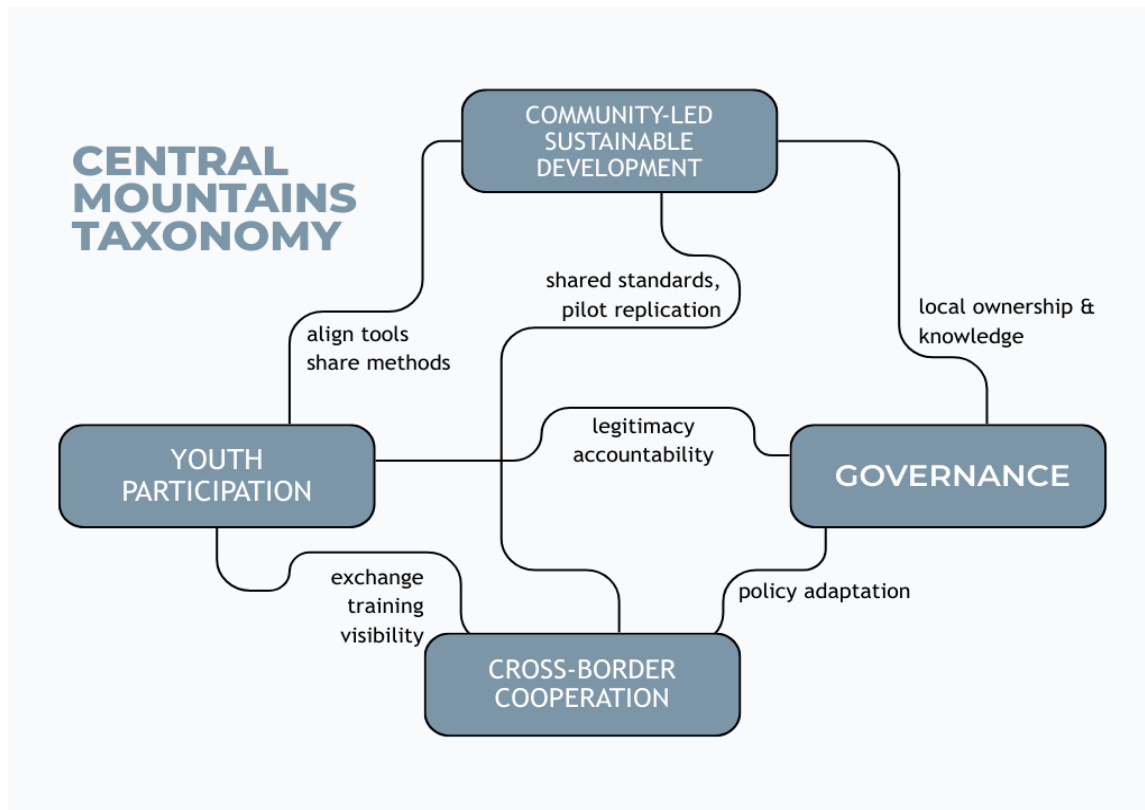
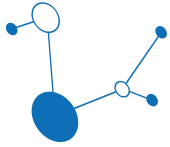
Governance provides the structural backbone. In mountain areas, it must be flexible, multi-level, and capable of operating across borders. More than formal structures, effective governance depends on relationships, how public authorities, civil society, economic actors, and communities coordinate, share responsibilities, and build trust over time.

Participation is essential to making governance work. The project shows that involving local actors improves both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of policies. However, participation must be meaningful and inclusive, with clear links to decision-making; otherwise, it risks remaining symbolic.

Cross-border cooperation is another defining feature of CLSD in mountain regions, where functional territories extend beyond national boundaries. The project highlights that cooperation is most effective when it is continuous and operational, supported by stable structures that enable exchange, learning, and joint action.

Finally, sustainable tourism initiatives illustrate how these elements come together in practice. As a key economic sector, it requires integrated governance approaches that balance environmental, social, and economic objectives, while involving local communities and coordinating across borders.

Overall, CLSD emerges as a governance model tailored to mountain areas, based on connecting actors, levels, and sectors into coherent and adaptive processes.



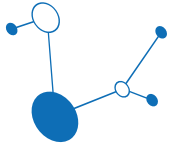
1.1. Community-led sustainable development & Governance

In the Joint Strategy, community-led sustainable development (CLSD) is framed as an approach that places local communities at the centre of planning, decision-making and implementation of sustainable development processes, recognising that local actors possess contextual knowledge that is essential for addressing the specific social, environmental and economic challenges of mountain areas. CLSD is presented as a way to translate global sustainability objectives, including the SDGs, into concrete local action, particularly where aggregated institutions and indicators fail to capture mountain-specific needs.

From a governance perspective, the Joint Strategy highlights that mountain territories require **adaptive, multi-level governance systems**, capable of operating across administrative borders and integrating actors from public administration, civil society, economic sectors and citizens. Governance is understood as the process through which collective decisions are made, structured by rules, roles and relationships, and not solely as a formal institutional arrangement. **Participation, transparency and long-term institutional continuity** are identified as key conditions for effective community-led approaches, especially in cross-border contexts where fragmentation and limited administrative capacity are common.

The Joint Strategy also points out recurring weaknesses of past cooperation efforts, notably the **fragility** of structures after project funding ends and the difficulty of maintaining stakeholder engagement over time. These observations form the basis for testing governance models that can outlast project cycles and strengthen local ownership, ensuring the sustainability of project results.

This section will focus on the insights that emerged during the project about the interaction between CLSD and governance. Specifically, it will examine the views of partners and stakeholders on CLSD, collected



during project events, and two pilot actions focusing on the **improvement of governance structures through local ownership** and the involvement of civil society.

1.1.1. Why community-led sustainable development? Insights from partners and stakeholders

As outlined in the original Joint Strategy, a key component community-led sustainable development is participation. In this regard, one key aspect to point out is the perceived link between participatory approaches and governance quality, confirmed by Stakeholder and partner feedback collected through surveys during Central Mountains events.

When asked why they involve citizens in their activities, respondents consistently prioritised empowerment, acceptance of measures, long-term support and feedback, while compliance with funding requirements was mentioned less prominently.

Figure (1)
Why do you involve citizens in your activities?

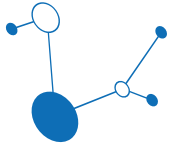


Source: CSTP workshop survey

Figure 1 - Reasons for involving citizens in governance processes (Mentimeter results, Brasov workshop)

The prominence of citizen empowerment and long-term support reflects a **shared understanding** among partners and stakeholders **that community-led approaches contribute to ownership and legitimacy**, rather than merely servicing procedural or administrative needs.

Stakeholders also identified **participation gaps** in existing governance and decision-making processes, particularly for groups at risk of being underrepresented. Survey answers highlighted rural and remote



populations, young people, elderly residents, and small local economic actors as especially vulnerable to being overlooked.

Such inputs support the Joint Strategy's emphasis on adaptive governance frameworks that can overcome geographic peripherality and socio-economic inequalities in mountain regions.

Survey questions addressed to partners and members of the Alpine and Carpathian Convention, focused on how governance at the transnational and convention level better support community-led sustainable development can, revealed more. Respondents prioritised **integrating community priorities into formal policies**, providing **technical assistance and capacity building**, and **improving coordination** across governance levels over more top-down regulatory approaches. Moreover, according to respondents, a participatory governance model at the Convention level can increase ownership, transparency and trust among stakeholders, as well as enhance the quality and effectiveness of Convention implementation by integrating diverse expertise, local knowledge, and cross-sectoral perspectives into regional cooperation processes.

These results underline a preference for **enabling roles of institutions**, rather than directive ones, in strengthening CLSD.

1.1.2. **Alpine Pearls: restructuring its EGTC organization**

The Alpine Pearls EGTC is one of the project's pilot cases most relevant for the CLSD framework. The pilot and solution therefrom developed deal with **renewing governance within an existing transnational municipal structure focusing on sustainable tourism** to enable long-term, community-oriented cooperation. It is thereby a practical example of transnational CLSD.

The Alpine Pearls pilot addressed a **territorial governance gap**: member municipalities—often small, rural and cross-border—faced limited internal ownership, uneven participation and high dependence on outsourced management, constraining their capacity to engage effectively in European cooperation.

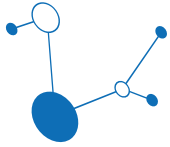
The pilot tested a **renewed, internally coordinated governance model**, transitioning responsibilities from external providers to the EGTC itself. This included restructuring leadership roles (with the President consolidating the role of Director, as foreseen in the Statute), redistributing tasks among internal staff, and reducing reliance on outsourced services. These changes were codesigned through participatory workshops, internal board discussions, stakeholder interviews and activities of the Alpine Pearls Academy.

The solution defines a **replicable governance methodology**, structured in phases: assessing governance needs, codesigning a governance framework, creating operational instruments (guidelines, digital coordination tools, training formats, project pipelines), and piloting and institutionalising the model. Central to this approach is the development of **Local Action Plans (LAPs)**, allowing each municipality to define its priorities while aligning with EGTC-level objectives and broader EU frameworks.

Community-led principles are embedded through:

- participatory planning with municipalities,
- capacity-building via the Alpine Pearls Academy,
- activation of local core teams,
- and the inclusion of youth and local economic actors through tailored tools.

The Alpine Pearls pilot demonstrates how **EGTC governance can be restructured to enhance local ownership**, strengthen participation, and ensure continuity beyond project duration, responding directly to governance weaknesses identified in the original Joint Strategy and stakeholder inputs.



1.1.3. The Carpathian Civil Society Platform: harnessing the potential of CSOs

The Carpathian Civil Society Platform (CCSP) pilot case and solution represent a complementary governance approach centred on **civil society organisations (CSOs)**. Within the project's outputs, the CCSP pilot and solution documents the transformation of a loose transnational CSO network into a **more structured and self-propelling platform**, grounded in participatory governance and local ownership.

The governance model of the CCSP was built through:

- a **needs assessment survey** involving 83 organisations,
- regular **transnational platform meetings**,
- decentralised **local focal points and “hublets”** in each subregion,
- a **digital platform** supporting continuous communication,
- and the establishment of a **Council** as a formal governing body.

Complementary instruments such as the Social Innovation Award, local workshops, and small grant schemes support active engagement and reinforce bottom-up participation. Governance risks—such as declining engagement, funding constraints and weak horizontal networks—are explicitly acknowledged within the solution and addressed through mitigation measures including thematic working groups, diversification of funding sources and continuous capacity-building activities.

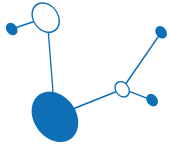
From a CLSD perspective, the CCSP illustrates how **community-led governance can be organised beyond public administration**, enabling CSOs to codesign cooperation structures, practice ownership, and embed civil society participation into cross-border governance processes. Survey inputs stressing the need to institutionalise participation and support funding access for participatory processes directly align with the CCSP governance approach.

1.2. Cross-Border and Transnational Cooperation

The Joint Strategy identifies cross-border cooperation as a central condition for sustainable development in mountain areas, where functional geographies often extend beyond administrative and national borders. It highlights that cooperation frameworks must simultaneously address structural fragmentation, disparities in administrative capacity, and the lack of continuity between project cycles. The Strategy stresses that **cooperation should be approached as a long-term governance process**, rather than as a series of isolated projects, and that effective cross-border work depends on shared strategic direction, coordination mechanisms, and institutional anchoring across governance levels (local, regional, national, transnational).

Furthermore, the Joint Strategy underlines that cross-border cooperation is most effective when it is thematic and operational, focusing on **concrete policy fields** (e.g. sustainable tourism, mobility, environmental management) while being supported by overarching governance frameworks capable of ensuring alignment and continuity.

This section will explore how the project attempted to make a concrete contribution towards a model of transnational cooperation that aims at long-term sustainability and works on concrete topics. Subsequently, a summary is provided of the most relevant feedback collected from partners and stakeholders on the future of transnational cooperation between the Alpine and Carpathian regions.



1.2.1. Solutions: Transnational structures for long-term cooperation in mountain areas of Central Europe

Improving cross-border cooperation was a key feature of one project output consisting of 3 solutions developed based on pilot actions: the three Transnational structures for long-term cooperation in mountain areas of Central Europe. Acting on different levels, they tackled cooperation among local administrations (Alpine Pearls EGTC, see section 1.1 for a discussion of the CLSD dimension), among Civil Society Organisations (Carpathian Civil Society Platform, see section 1.1 for a discussion of the CLSD dimension) and finally among regional and national actors (Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform, see section 1.3 for a discussion of the Sustainable Tourism dimension).

The **Alpine Pearls** pilot under D.3.2.2 demonstrates a transnational municipal cooperation structure that was internally restructured to enhance member participation, ownership and strategic autonomy. The EGTC's governance renewal addressed uneven engagement and high dependence on external service providers by consolidating responsibilities internally and introducing participatory instruments such as Local Action Plans, the Alpine Pearls Academy, and a shared digital coordination platform.

This positions Alpine Pearls within cross-border cooperation as a **vehicle for municipal learning and operational alignment**

The **Carpathian Civil Society Platform (CCSP)**, on the other hand, represents a civil-society-driven cross-border cooperation structure, operating alongside formal governmental frameworks. The CCSP combines horizontal networking, decentralised focal points, small-scale funding instruments and a transnational Council to support sustained cooperation among CSOs.

Survey results indicate strong agreement that participation of CSOs is crucial for sustainable cross-border governance, and that platforms such as the CCSP have significant potential for replication, particularly within Carpathian regions.

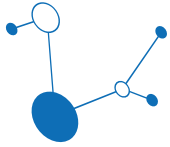
This confirms the CCSP's role as a **complementary cross-border structure**, especially suited to contexts where public administration capacity is limited and civil society plays a key operational role.

Finally, the Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP) addresses cross-border cooperation within the specific policy field of sustainable tourism. The Platform was created to implement the Carpathian Convention Protocol on Sustainable Tourism.

The project supported its process of transition to a governance logic based on thematic Cross-Border Working Teams (CBWT), structured around agreed thematic pillars (e.g. sustainability in mountain destinations, long-distance trails, ecotourism, local gastronomy; more on this in the section about sustainable tourism below).

The Cross-Border Working Teams (CBWTs) constitute the CSTP's operational delivery mechanism, structured along four thematic pillars and embedded within a multi-level governance architecture linking the CSTP Coordination Committee, the National Tourism Task Forces (NTTFs), and local stakeholders. Each CBWT operates under a formal mandate, with designated coordinators, jointly defined work programmes, and established reporting cycles to CSTP and Convention bodies, ensuring procedural alignment and accountability.

Implementation follows a standardised workflow covering endorsement, expert nomination, joint planning, implementation, monitoring, and scaling, designed to ensure replicability and coherence across contexts. The Carpathian Euroregion acts as an informal coordination backbone, while the Carpathia Brand supports strategic visibility and territorial consistency. A phased rollout (2025-2027) foresees the establishment, piloting, and full institutional anchoring of the CBWTs within the Carpathian Convention framework, enabling long-term sustainability and scalability across Carpathian countries.

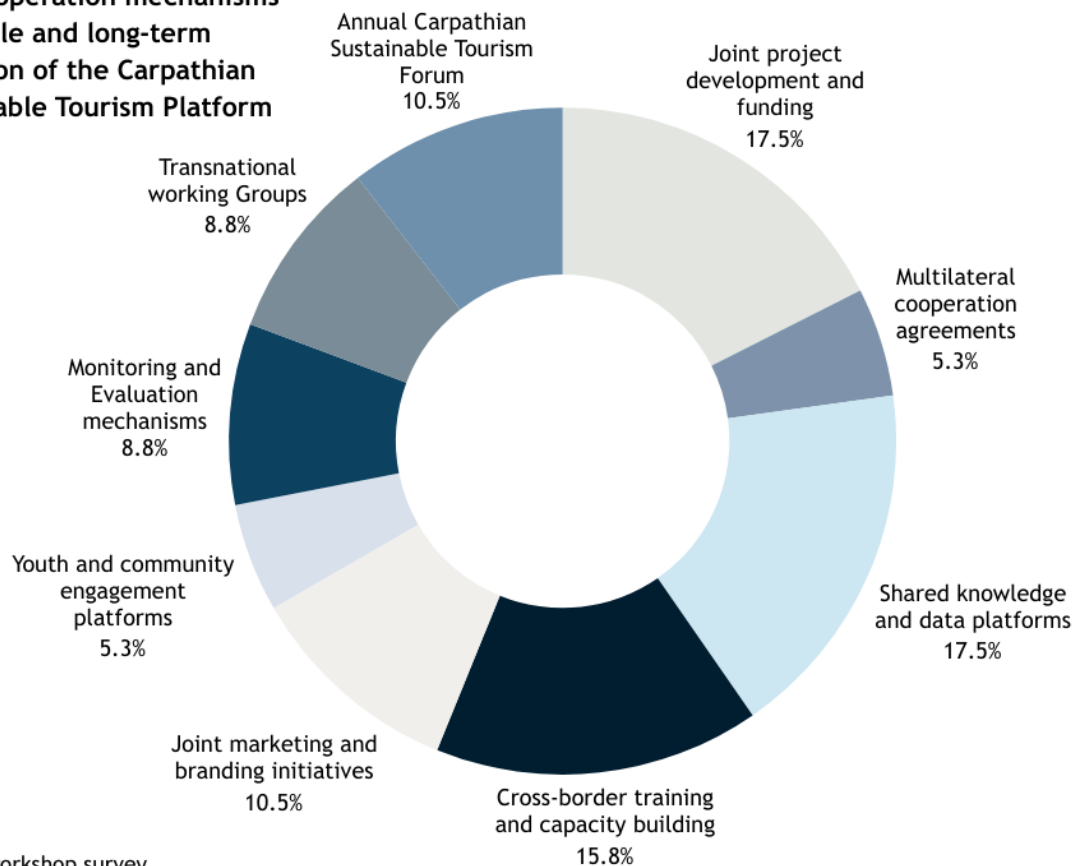


According to project stakeholders, the most suitable mechanisms for ensuring stable and long-term operation of the CSTP are

- joint project development and funding,
- shared knowledge and data platforms,
- cross-border training and capacity building,
- joint marketing and branding initiatives,
- an Annual Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Forum.

Figure (2)

**Best cooperation mechanisms
for stable and long-term
operation of the Carpathian
Sustainable Tourism Platform**



Source: CSTP workshop survey

Figure 2 - Best cooperation Mechanisms for stable and long-term operation of the Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (Mentimeter results, Brasov survey)

This highlights that stakeholders view sustainable tourism governance primarily as a **practical cooperation challenge**, rather than a regulatory one.

Survey data also highlights that the strongest perceived benefit of the CBWT mechanism lies in:

- strengthened thematic cooperation,
- deeper collaboration between institutions and stakeholders, and
- better alignment of national and Carpathian-wide strategies.

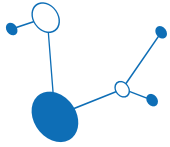
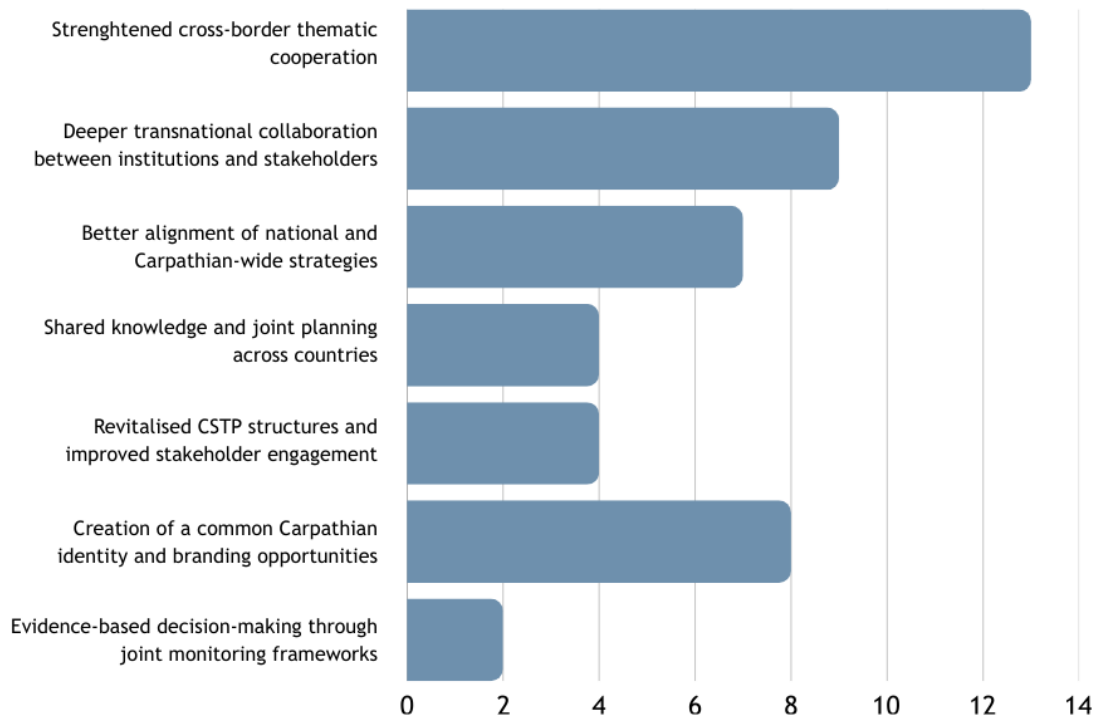


Figure (3)
Perceived benefits of CBWT mechanisms



Source: CCIC workshop survey

Figure 3 - Perceived Benefits of Cross-Border Working Teams (Mentimeter results, CCIC session)

These results align with the CSTP's documented emphasis on **operational cooperation, stakeholder consultations and joint action planning**, rather than on institutional centralisation. Respondents also identified replication in other Carpathian regions through expanded Cross-Border Working Teams as the project solution with the highest uptake potential, indicating strong interest in territorial scaling of tested cooperation mechanisms.

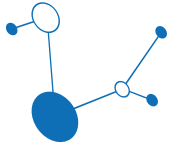
In conclusion, the three solutions attempt to kickstart cross-border and transnational cooperation processes that are designed to be self-propelling and long-lasting on different but complementary levels.

1.2.2. Solutions: Cross-Border Functional Areas (CBFAs)

Yet another project output is the *Toolbox for Cross-Border Functional Areas: from strategy to planning and operation*.

Cross-Border Functional Areas (CBFAs), represent a territorial approach to cross-border cooperation, aimed at overcoming administrative fragmentation by organising cooperation around functional socio-economic areas. The CBFA model provides structured guidance on governance architecture, legal options, financing and monitoring, explicitly targeting the sustainability gap identified in previous cooperation experiences.

The project's work on CBFA provides a **replicable roadmap** from idea to operation in **five steps**:



- (1) **stakeholder engagement and analysis**;
- (2) **participatory strategy development** that balances environmental, social and economic goals;
- (3) **operational and financial model design**;
- (4) **legal framework establishment** suited to national/EU contexts (with EGTC examined as a target legal vehicle);
- (5) **capacity building and knowledge exchange** to stabilise the cooperation.

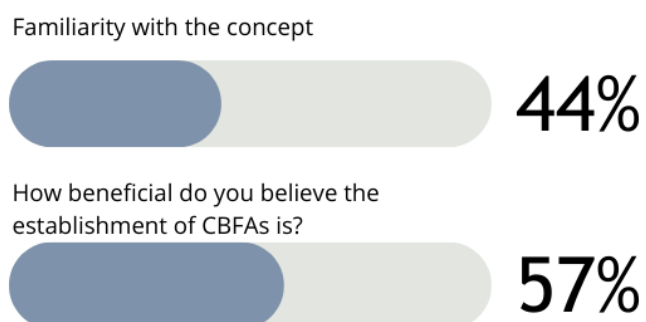
This is complemented by a suggested **governance architecture** (Board, Steering Committee/Council, Thematic Working Groups and a small Secretariat), **financing mix** (EU/national funds, territorial instruments, PPPs, own resources) and a **results-based monitoring & evaluation** scheme to track outputs, outcomes and long-term impacts. Together, these elements are intended to **outlast project cycles** and keep collaboration focused on tangible, place-based outcomes such as ecotourism destinations, trail systems, local gastronomy networks, and sustainability standards in mountain destinations.

To make CBFA immediately usable by mountain stakeholders, the partnership codified three **applied tools**:

- **Strategy & operational model for selected CBFAs in the Carpathians**, positioning CBFAs as “laboratories” that connect macroregional ambitions with local communities and deliver coordinated action in tourism and wider development fields.
- **CBFA joint branding (CZ-PL)**, which tested a **house-of-brands platform** to strengthen public-private cooperation among regional producers and service providers, link schools and SMEs, and raise the visibility and quality of authentic mountain products that feed sustainable tourism circuits.
- **CBFA goes digital**, a **cross-border app** designed to coordinate calendars, opportunities and stakeholder networking among municipalities, DMOs, SMEs and NGOs—supporting day-to-day CBFA management and the promotion of sustainable tourism offers.

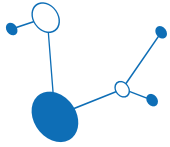
Survey results show that while familiarity with the CBFA concept remains low, perceptions of its potential benefits are higher, suggesting that the model is understood as promising but not yet widely embedded.

Figure (4)
CBFAs: familiarity and
perceived benefits



Source: CCIC workshop survey

Figure 4 - Familiarity with and perceived benefits of Cross-Border Functional Areas (Mentimeter results, CCIC session)



1.2.3. Working transnationally for sustainable development

The Central Mountains project explicitly tested working transnationally through and with existing international frameworks, notably the Alpine Convention and the Carpathian Convention, using them as spaces for dialogue between project partners, policymakers, and transnational stakeholders.

The best example of this work is the workshop held in December 2025 in Vienna, aimed at presenting the project results to Convention representatives and collecting their feedback. However, along the course of its three years, the project partners also participated in presentations and workshops at Convention events, such as the Carpathian Convention Implementation Committee. These occasions were also used to collect feedback and spread awareness about the project.

Survey results show that partners and Convention members perceive **knowledge exchange, best-practice sharing, capacity building and pilot projects** as the most relevant forms of Alpine-Carpathian cooperation, while joint policy development ranked considerably lower.

Figure (5)
**Types of cooperation to be prioritised
between Alpine and Carpathian regions**

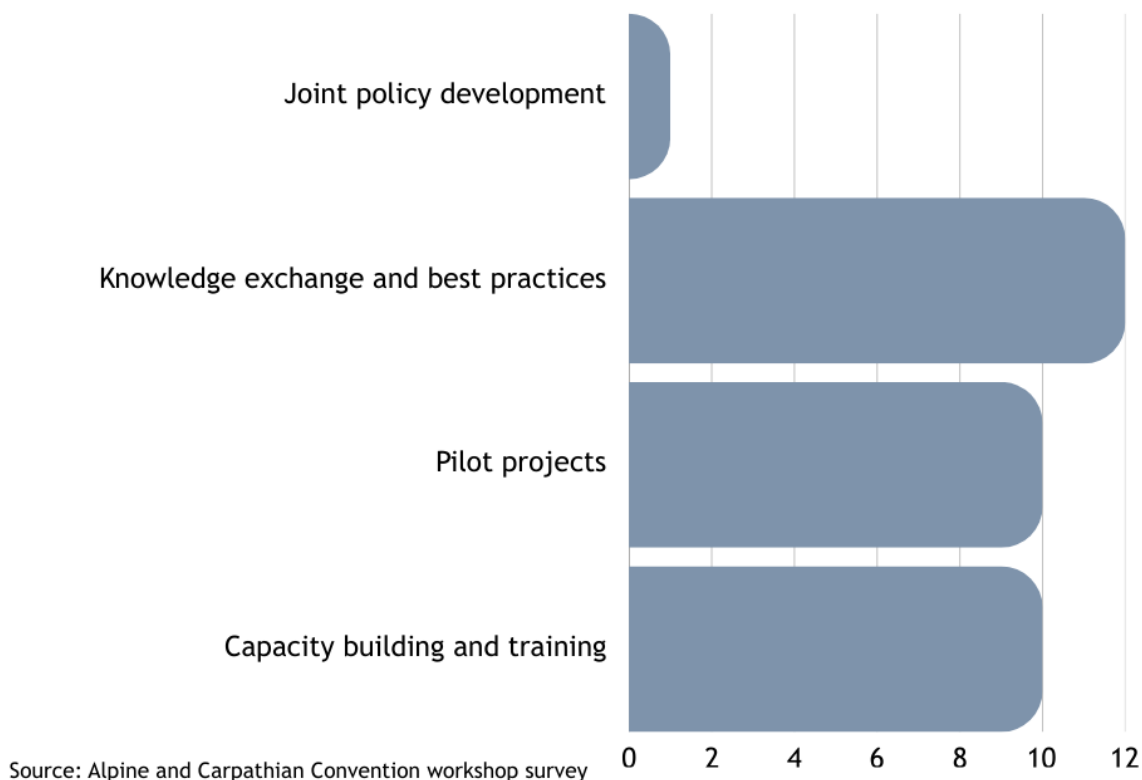
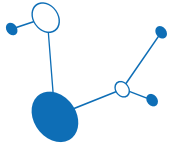


Figure 5 - Types of cooperation prioritised between Alpine and Carpathian regions
(Mentimeter results, Alpine and Carpathian Convention workshop)

This confirms a preference for **practice-oriented cooperation** formats over abstract coordination, consistent with the Joint Strategy's emphasis on operational collaboration.

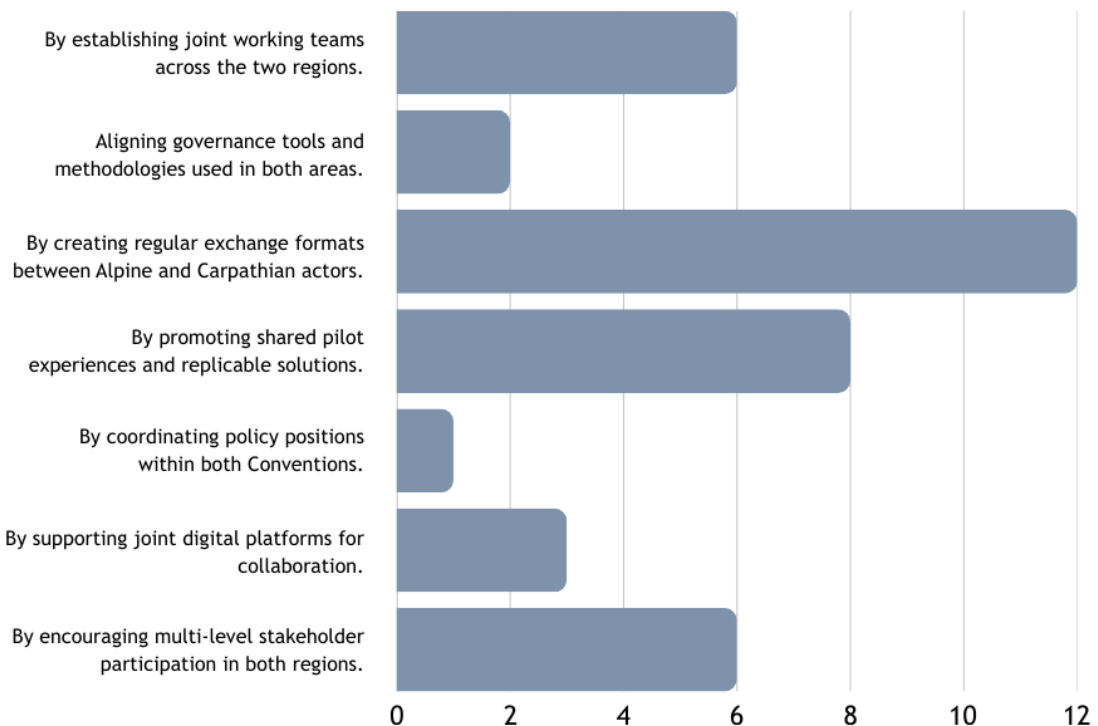


When asked how cross-border mountain governance between the Alps and Carpathians could be reinforced, respondents most frequently selected:

- creation of regular exchange formats between actors,
- promotion of shared pilot experiences and replicable solutions,
- establishment of joint working teams, and
- encouragement of multi-level stakeholder participation.

Figure (6)

How to reinforce cross-border mountain governance between Alps and Carpathians



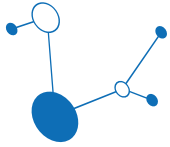
Source: Alpine and Carpathian Convention workshop survey

*Figure 6 - How to reinforce cross-border mountain governance between the Alps and Carpathians
(Mentimeter results, Alpine and Carpathian Convention workshop)*

These responses indicate that cross-border cooperation is perceived primarily as a matter of **organising interaction and learning**, rather than of harmonising legal frameworks alone.

1.3. Sustainable Tourism Development

Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) is recognised as a key lever for economic viability in mountain regions, while also representing a major source of pressure on fragile ecosystems and local communities. The strategy frames sustainable tourism as an approach that must balance environmental protection, socio-cultural integrity and economic benefits for local communities, rather than maximising visitor numbers



or short-term revenues. It highlights that in mountain areas, tourism often dominates local economies, increasing vulnerability to seasonality, climate change, and external market shocks.

The Joint Strategy emphasises the need for place-based and community-led approaches to tourism development, ensuring that residents are involved in planning and decision-making and that tourism contributes to long-term territorial resilience. It also stresses that sustainable tourism cannot be governed effectively through isolated sectoral actions, but requires cross-sectoral and cross-border coordination, particularly where destinations, ecosystems, mobility flows and tourist markets extend beyond administrative boundaries.

Within this framework, sustainable tourism is linked to broader policy objectives such as sustainable communities, reduced inequalities, climate adaptation and partnerships for sustainable development, and is identified as a field where transnational cooperation can create added value through shared standards, joint learning and coordinated governance.

In the project's work, sustainable tourism development was the key topic for the CSTP pilot and solution. Stakeholders' and partners' views on the topic were collected via surveys. The following sections highlight the main findings on the topic.

1.3.1. The Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP) as a transnational response to sustainable tourism development.

The **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)**, as highlighted in section 1.2, represents one of the project's key structural responses to the challenges identified in the Joint Strategy. Indeed, the CSTP is conceived as a **framework for crossborder cooperation among Carpathian countries** aimed at supporting sustainable tourism through **shared priorities, coordinated working structures and participatory processes**.

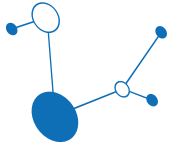
The CSTP was structured around **four thematic pillars**:

- **Sustainability in mountain resorts and destinations,**
- **Ecotourism destinations,**
- **Long-distance trails,**
- **Local gastronomy and food systems.**

These pillars were selected to address both **environmental sustainability** (e.g., low-impact tourism, biodiversity protection) and local economic development (e.g., diversification, local value chains, year-round tourism). The pillars were **set out in the CSTP Working Groups and validated through prior consultations and the interregional meeting in Braşov (9–10 July 2025)**, where the proposed themes were **tested with stakeholders** and then **assessed country-by-country (RO/PL/SK)** against the **legislative framework, stakeholder landscape, existing initiatives, and a maturity check**; during the same meeting, a participant survey was used to prioritise the themes and inform the setup of **Cross-Border Working Teams (CBWT)** for implementation.

The CSTP framework explicitly links tourism development to **local actors and institutions**, including destination management organisations, protected areas, municipalities, SMEs and civil society organisations.

As explained above, from a governance perspective, the CSTP relies on **Cross-Border Working Teams**, regular exchanges and thematic cooperation formats rather than on a centralised authority. Effective CSTP implementation depends on **clear cooperation mechanisms**, stable coordination capacity, and alignment with national and transnational policy frameworks, particularly within the Carpathian Convention.



1.3.2. Insights from the Braşov survey: how stakeholders define and prioritise sustainable tourism

The survey conducted in Braşov provides important evidence on how stakeholders involved in the project understand **sustainable tourism development in practice**.

When asked to define sustainability in mountain resorts and destinations, respondents prioritised a **balanced perspective**, combining environmental and social dimensions with economic considerations. High importance was attributed to:

- **Balancing tourism growth with environmental protection,**
- **Using natural resources responsibly,**
- **Involving residents in planning and decision-making,**
- **Ensuring long-term economic benefits for local communities.**

Figure (7)

How would you define the sustainability in mountain resorts and destinations?

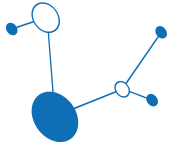


Source: CSTP workshop survey

Figure 7 - How would you define the sustainability in mountain resorts and destinations?

(Mentimeter results, Brasov workshop)

This confirms the Joint Strategy's premise that sustainability in tourism is not limited to environmental performance but also depends on **governance quality and community involvement**.



1.3.3. A challenge of governance and cooperation

Taken together, the original Joint Strategy, CSTP implementation experience, stakeholder survey results from Braşov and local workshop discussions converge on a common understanding: **sustainable tourism development in mountain areas is primarily a governance and cooperation challenge.**

The Central Mountains project demonstrates that progress in sustainable tourism depends on:

- **shared transnational frameworks** (such as CSTP),
- **locally grounded participation and ownership,**
- **operational cooperation mechanisms** (projects, platforms, training), and
- **territorial governance models** capable of addressing cross-border functional realities.

These insights confirm the relevance of sustainable tourism development as a **crosscutting strategic priority**, closely linked to community-led development, cross-border cooperation and long-term territorial resilience.

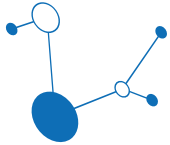
1.4. Youth Engagement and Participation

Across the Central Mountains project area, youth engagement is treated as a **democratic and governance priority**, not an add-on: young people need non-symbolic roles, access to information through channels they actually use, and opportunities to co-decide on issues that affect their territories. Prior project work consistently found **low awareness of participation structures**, a need for **bridging actors** between youth and institutions, and the importance of **safe, respectful spaces** for dialogue and learning—especially in cross-border, multi-lingual contexts. These points are echoed in evidence compiled in the project's *Alpine-Carpathian Toolbox for active involvement of citizens and youth in decision-making*, as well as in the outcomes of project events and workshops, and in project surveys conducted with stakeholders and institutions. This section outlines the main findings regarding project results and partner/stakeholder consultations.

1.4.1. The project's action and results

Across the three years, youth engagement in Central Mountains took the form of targeted workshops and cross-border exchanges: in Romania, events such as “Youth 4 Community” (21 Nov 2025, Sighetu Marmăţiei) and “Youngsters and Authority Public Café” (26 Sep 2025, Sighetu Marmăţiei) brought highschool students and youth into structured dialogue with local and country-level representatives on education, mobility, youth services and civic participation, producing proposals and strengthening cooperation between young people and public institutions; in parallel, a Carpathian Summer Camp in Eger on youth participation gathered youth leaders and CSOs from several countries to compare experiences, identify obstacles (e.g., information gaps, symbolic involvement) and outline practical next steps for non-symbolic involvement.

Methodologically, these activities were complemented by the *Alpine-Carpathian Toolbox for active involvement of citizens and youth in decision-making*, which provides **tested participation methods and facilitation tips**. The Toolbox was developed from project workshops and pilots across Alpine and Carpathian contexts and edited into a practical, reusable format. It brings together **step-by-step guidance** for planning, running and following up participation processes (from scoping and stakeholder mapping to feedback and evaluation). It is complemented by **method cards** for formats such as consultations, workshops and surveys, and **youth-specific designs** including **simulation/roleplay exercises, co-creation and testing groups in schools and universities**. Last but not least, it outlines the use of **youth focal points** to keep dialogue continuous and **facilitation checklists** (e.g., pre-briefs with teachers/mentors, accessible materials,



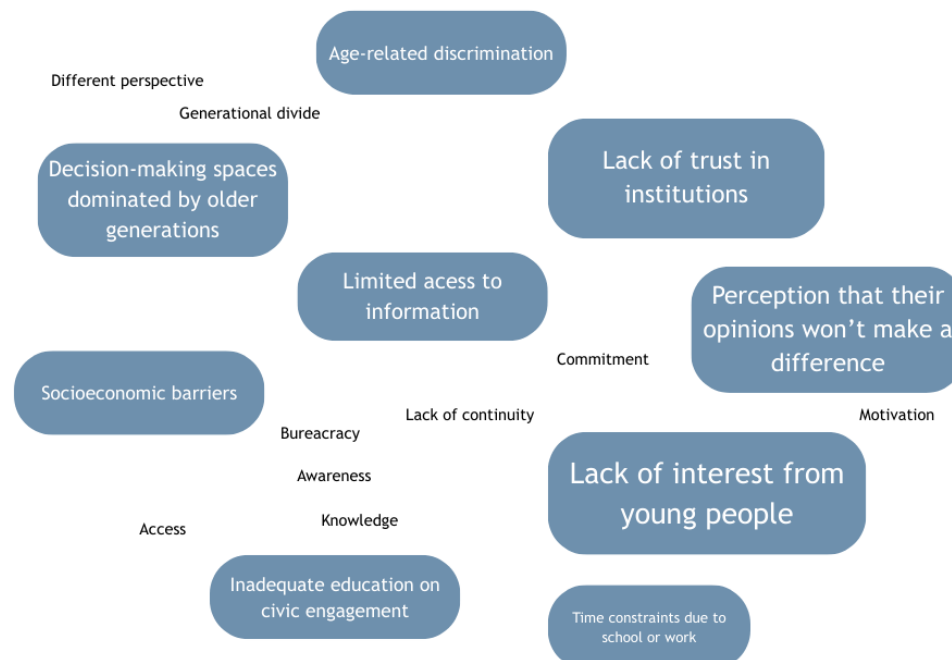
consent and safeguarding, and short feedback loops so contributions visibly influence outcomes). The principal insights on **youth participation** emphasise avoiding tokenism by giving **real roles in agenda-setting and co-decision-making**, communicating through **channels and mediators youth already trust** (schools, youth workers, local associations), and ensuring **continuity** via standing fora or small decision spaces (e.g., microbudgets) so that participation outlives single events. Overall, the Toolbox functions as a **ready-to-apply kit** that translates the project's experience into concrete processes, templates and tips that local organisers can adopt without external support.

1.4.2 “Old dinosaurs” and the future: obstacles and benefits of engaging youth

Across the project's surveys, the picture that emerges is coherent: **the hardest barriers are cultural and structural, not a lack of goodwill**. Respondents repeatedly pointed to entrenched **mindsets**—summed up by phrases like “**old dinosaurs**/boomer mentality,” low *willingness* and weak *awareness*—alongside doubts about *relevance* and *motivation*, capturing a perceived generational gap inside institutions and communities. At the same time, they highlighted **administrative and procedural hurdles** (spaces dominated by older generations, fragmented or top-down processes) and **confidence deficits** (*lack of trust in institutions* and the recurring *perception that opinions won't make a difference*), with **information gaps** and **limited access to civic education** compounding the problem for younger people who do not see a path from participation to decision-making (survey at the CCIC session; survey in Braşov).

On the **solutions'** side, partners converged on practical levers that shift youth involvement from symbolic

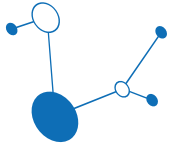
Figure (8)
What is the biggest obstacle to involving young people?



Source: CSTEP workshop survey, Braşov workshop survey, Vienna workshop survey

Figure 8 – What is the biggest obstacle to involving young people? (Braşov workshop)

to non-symbolic: **codesigned workshops and forums** where young people help set agendas; **participatory budgeting or microbudgets** for youth-led ideas; **regular youth hearings/standing fora** with defined roles; and **training and cross-border capacity building** to build skills and normalise youth presence in governance venues.



Benefits, when these conditions are met, are described as immediate and durable: **greater acceptance of measures, better and earlier feedback, empowerment and shared ownership**, and ultimately **long-term support for institutions and policies**. Finally, respondents were explicit that **institutions and transnational frameworks** have concrete responsibilities: **integrate participation structures into governance, institutionalise youth involvement** (seats/quotas, focal points), **provide technical support and access to funding**, and **maintain regular cross-border exchanges and joint working teams** so that learning and replication do not end with a project cycle.

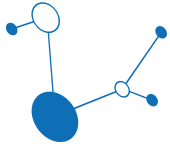
As one respondent underlined, the project showed that youth participation is most effective when young people are engaged not only as beneficiaries, but as co-creators of ideas, strategies, and communication tools. The project experience also highlighted that providing structured spaces for dialogue, mentoring, and cross-border exchange empowers youth to bring fresh perspectives, digital skills, and long-term vision into regional governance processes.

Across pilots and events, engagement with youth intensified when linked to practical outcomes and classroom or territorial projects (e.g., co-creation tasks, school materials, micro-grants, summer camps). Surveyed partners report that continuity, clear roles, and fit-for-purpose channels (schools, youth organisations) were decisive, aligning with the Joint Strategy's call to institutionalise participation rather than delivering one-off consultations.

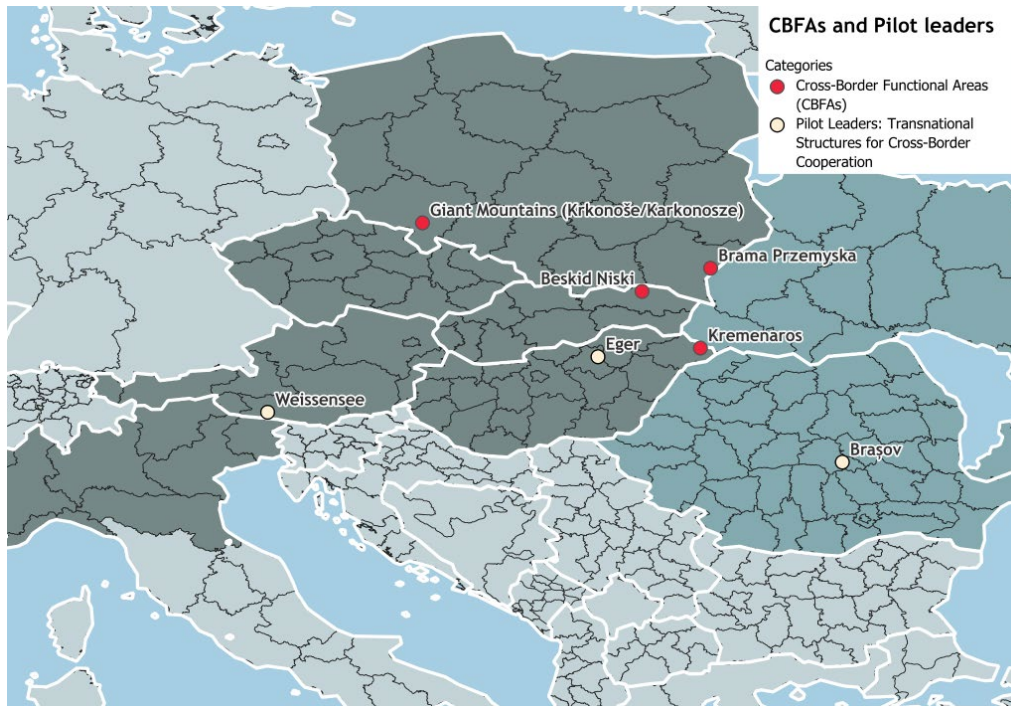
Reading across the surveys and the tested methods in CM, the message is consistent: **when youth are offered real roles, accessible information, and continuity, participation becomes a driver of better governance**—not just a project activity.

2. Geographic overview

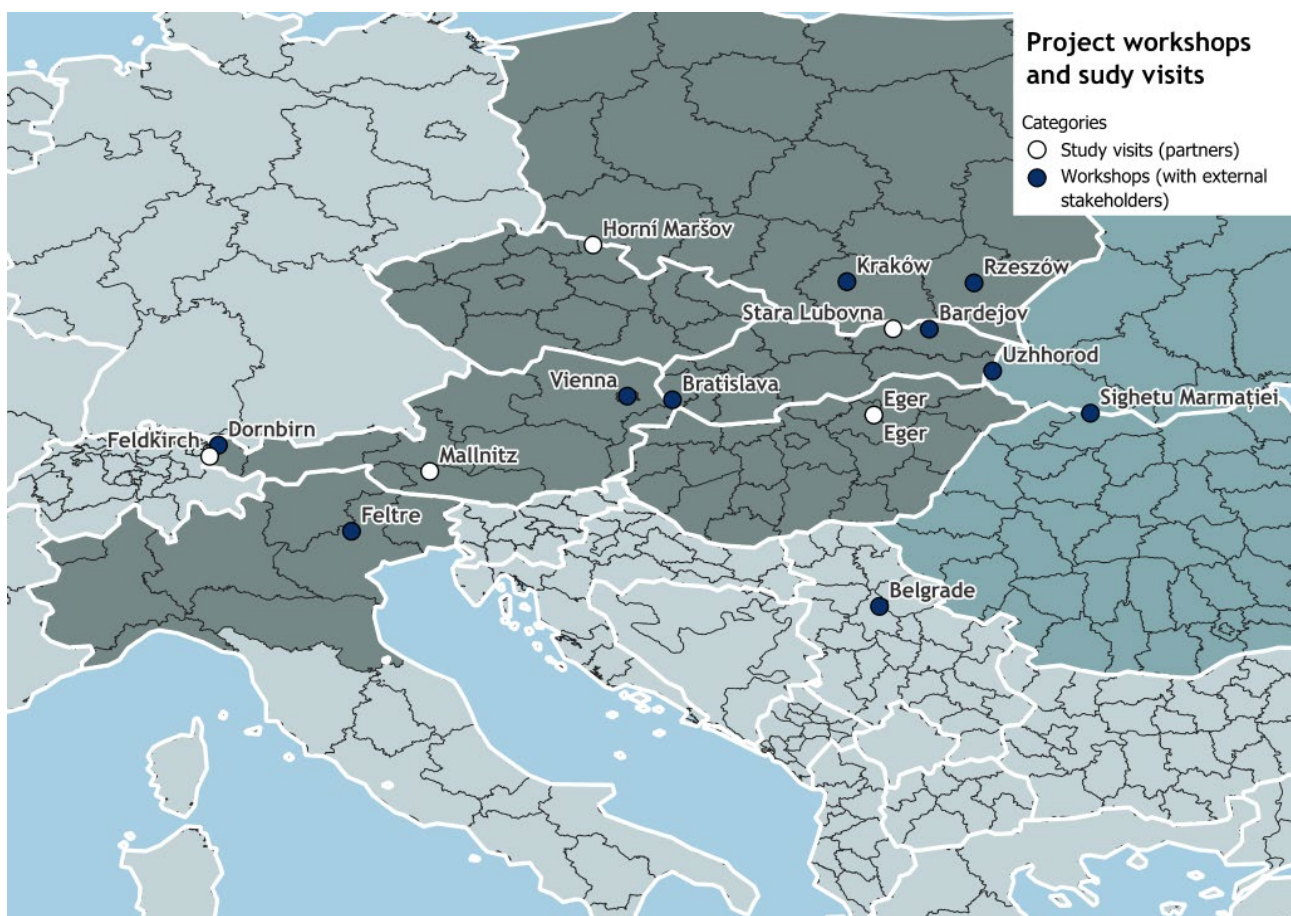
This section will provide an overview of activities carried out in each distinct geographical area where the project operated, and how they interact with the local context and institutions.



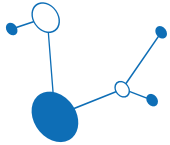
Central Mountains



Map 1 - Cross-Border Functional Areas and Pilot Leaders



Map 2 - Project workshops and study visits



2.1. Alps

The project work in the Alpine area focused on the Alpine Pearls EGTC governance renewal and youth participation methodologies, tackling the topics of participatory governance and local ownership. The project also involved the Alpine Convention in policy dialogues on governance mechanisms (Vienna, 16.12.2025).

The **internal renewal of the Alpine Pearls EGTC** to strengthen member ownership and day to day coordination involved the Board and members, who undertook a series of workshops and interviews to streamline roles (with responsibilities shifted inhouse), launched a **digital coordination platform** to manage joint work, activated the **Alpine Pearls Academy** for capacity-building, and rolled out **Local Action Plans** to connect network-level priorities with municipal action. These steps were accompanied by **policy dialogue with the Alpine Convention** and dissemination at the Vienna workshop. Analytical discussion of what this change means for governance and CLSD appears in **section 1.1**.

2.2. Carpathians

Within the Carpathian region, the project worked on many levels of governance: local administration, civil society, regional and national policymakers, as well as with the Carpathian Convention.

As outlined in the previous section, project activities in the Carpathians combined

- (i) **sustainable tourism cooperation under the CSTP**,
- (ii) **civil society networking through the CCSP**, and
- (iii) **territorial cooperation via CBFAs** supported by a digital tool—each aligned to a practice-oriented, multilevel approach (see § 1.2-§ 1.3 for the policy/gov framing).

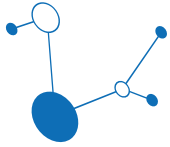
Under the **CSTP**, partners prepared a work plan and validated a **four pillar** cooperation structure implemented by **Cross Border Working Teams (CBWTs)**; the setup and operating method (mandates, nominations, joint planning, monitoring and reporting to CSTP/Convention bodies) were confirmed through national consultations and consolidated at the **interregional meeting in Braşov (9–10 July 2025)**, which also ran country by country reviews (RO/PL/SK) of legislation, stakeholder landscapes and initiative maturity to inform next steps.

In parallel, the **Carpathian Civil Society Platform (CCSP)** broadened participation beyond public administration by convening regular platform meetings, establishing a Council, running local “hublet” workshops and a youth/CSO **summer camp**, and piloting a **microgrant** line and a **Social Innovation Award** to seed cooperation.

Complementing these, the **CBFA track** advanced strategy and operational models for selected areas in the Carpathians (Kremenaros and Beskid Niski for example) and prepared a **digital application** to support everyday coordination among municipalities, DMOs, tourism operators and SMEs.

2.3. Sudetes

In the Sudetes, the project carried out one focused activity: **CBFA joint branding** on the CZ-PL border to strengthen cooperation among rural SMEs and regional product producers and to support tourism services. The work tested a “House of Brands” approach (umbrella cooperation across existing regional brands), accompanied by knowledge exchange and education for coordinators/producers (e.g., brand audits, storytelling, social media basics), school oriented materials, and cross promotion actions—feeding a concise joint branding report and practical guidance captured in the CBFA toolbox. Analytical discussion of the CBFA instrument appears in § 1.2.



2.4. Lessons learned

At the beginning of the project, the partners were asked to identify the main lessons that the experience of Alpine institutions and organizations could teach, and conversely, what these organizations could learn from the Carpathian ones. For what concerns learnings of the Carpathians from the Alps, the main results were:

- **Institutional architecture & multilevel governance:** How longstanding bodies (e.g., the Alpine Convention) and **cross border intermunicipal cooperation** are used in practice, including the diversity of governance formats from transnational to interregional levels.
- **Participatory culture in practice:** The **effective operation of direct democracy tools** within local participatory processes and the benefits of **non-hierarchical institutional/organisational settings** that foster genuine partnership among stakeholders.
- **Territorial branding & tourism management:** How **territorial brands** are managed and how **tourism development strategies** connect natural and cultural heritage—together with the experience of avoiding/mitigating “monoculture” effects of tourism.
- **Balancing growth and conservation over time:** Using **strategic planning** to hold a long-term equilibrium between **economic development** and **environmental protection**, and understanding the **process that led the Alps to its macroregional status** within the EU.

Vice versa, lessons that the Alpine partners could learn from the Carpathians were identified as:

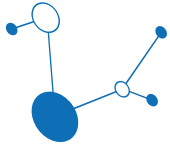
- **Wilderness governance & coexistence:** Practical experience in **managing wilderness**, notably the **coexistence with large carnivores**.
- **Operating amid high institutional diversity:** How to **navigate strong political differentiation** across local, regional and national levels—shaped by countries’ **different stages of EU integration**—and still make cross-border cooperation work.
- **Rooted conservation approaches:** The value of the **historical and cultural legacies** of communities and the **integration of traditional ecological knowledge and local communities** in nature preservation models.

The same question was asked of partners at the end of the project, this time addressing lessons learned rather than lessons to be learned. Insights shared by partners were the following:

- Cultural differences played a big role, yet precisely because of this, the work done and partnerships established are of greater importance.
- Despite big cultural, administrative and historical differences, the two regions indeed face similar challenges, in particular related to governance, depopulation, mobility and sustainable tourism.
- The Alps show a higher level of cooperation and more developed structures, so a precious lesson for the Carpathians was learning about the organizational culture of cross-border and inter-regional cooperation.

“This [the Alps’ high level of cooperation] certainly sets a good example for cross-border areas in the Carpathians on how to overcome the negative effects of borders and promote unity in the region. It was great to see how a lot of institutions are working in the same direction [...]” (Partner survey)

- In the Alps, as underlined in the Strategy’s analysis, slow and sustainable tourism is more developed than in the Carpathians. Therefore, experiencing and getting to know such Alpine realities proved a great inspiration for the Carpathian partners.



"[...] perhaps the biggest lesson was that tourism can also be "slow" and that authentic traditions need to be actively protected." (Partner survey)

- On the contrary, the Carpathian experience showed the importance of social cohesion and local identity.

"[...] the Carpathian experience highlighted the value of strong community ties and bottom-up initiatives, often developed with limited resources but high local commitment". (Partner survey)

As one partner concluded:

"Overall, the exchange reinforced the importance of adapting common principles to local realities rather than applying uniform solutions." (Partner Survey)

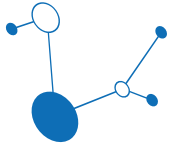
Finally, the project strengthened exchange between the Alpine and Carpathian Conventions, providing a valuable opportunity to share experiences and best practices on institutional operations, including the design and implementation of compliance mechanisms. This exchange not only strengthened mutual understanding but also offered insights that could inform the ongoing development and enhancement of governance frameworks and operational procedures in the Carpathian context.

D. Building on lessons learned: The project's internal process

This chapter builds upon Chapter B of the Joint Strategy Report analysing the trends emerging from past projects on governance in the mountain areas of Central Europe. The strategy reviews **59 Alpine-Carpathian projects** and identifies five recurring ways governance is strengthened (new transboundary bodies; upgrading existing frameworks; local coordination with citizen involvement; mixed coordination-participation networks; and projects dedicated solely to participation). It flags **gaps in genuine bottom-up participation, post-project fragility of cooperation, language barriers (esp. in the Carpathians), the Ukraine war's disruptive context (but also solidarity), limited youth involvement, and unclear uptake of the CBFA concept.**

Chapter B of the Strategy consequently also describes the project's call to action and approach to stakeholder engagement, which were designed coherently with this analysis. The section calls for **continuity and capitalization of results, earlier stakeholder involvement (from drafting), and moving from centralized approaches to localized, stepwise, community-owned action.** The strategy maps **more than 80 key stakeholders** and proposes engaging them through a structured lens of **responsibility, influence, and proximity**, pairing this with targeted actions: **national committees for active participation, platforms for thematic exchange (e.g., CCSP/CSTP), and alignment with Alpine/Carpathian Conventions for legitimacy.** It stresses **process ownership, transparency, and sustained dialogue** (including digital tools), links **resources and facilitation** to participation quality, and ties success to **concrete actions, long-term continuity, and access to diverse funding.**

The current section reopens the topic by outlining the concrete experience of Central Mountains in terms of internal process. It provides an overview of the project's effort to develop governance solutions and initiatives. More specifically, the chapter tackles the its functioning in terms of cooperation within the



partnership and stakeholder engagement, as well as risks and challenges encountered and the current implementation status.

3. Developing solutions

The partnership's cooperation formats directly target the Joint Strategy-identified gaps-post-project fragility, thin bottom-up participation, and language/coordination barriers, by embedding consultation loops, user-centred tools, and policy-anchoring with AC/CC from the start. Moreover, the partnership operationalised the Joint Strategy's triad of **responsibility-influence-proximity** via **national/regional events, hybrid meetings, and digital platforms**, ensuring that **SMEs, CSOs, DMOs, public bodies, and youth** shaped content and uptake.

This chapter will outline the process that led the partnership to the development of transnational solutions in terms of internal cooperation and stakeholder engagement. Across the pilot activities and solutions development partners learned to **start codesign early, prototype in the open, and use targeted engagement** in place of one-size-fits-all surveys—especially in mountain areas where **context and capacity vary sharply**. We also confirmed that **policy-level anchoring** (AC/CC) and **neutral facilitation** (networks/EGTCs) increase continuity and scale. These practices shaped the stakeholder involvement as well as the solution development **methodology**.

3.1. Cooperation within the partnership

Cooperation within the partnership moved from coordination to **coproduction**, aligning with the Joint Strategy and producing **practical, policy-aware outputs** that partners and stakeholders can continue to use beyond the project cycle.

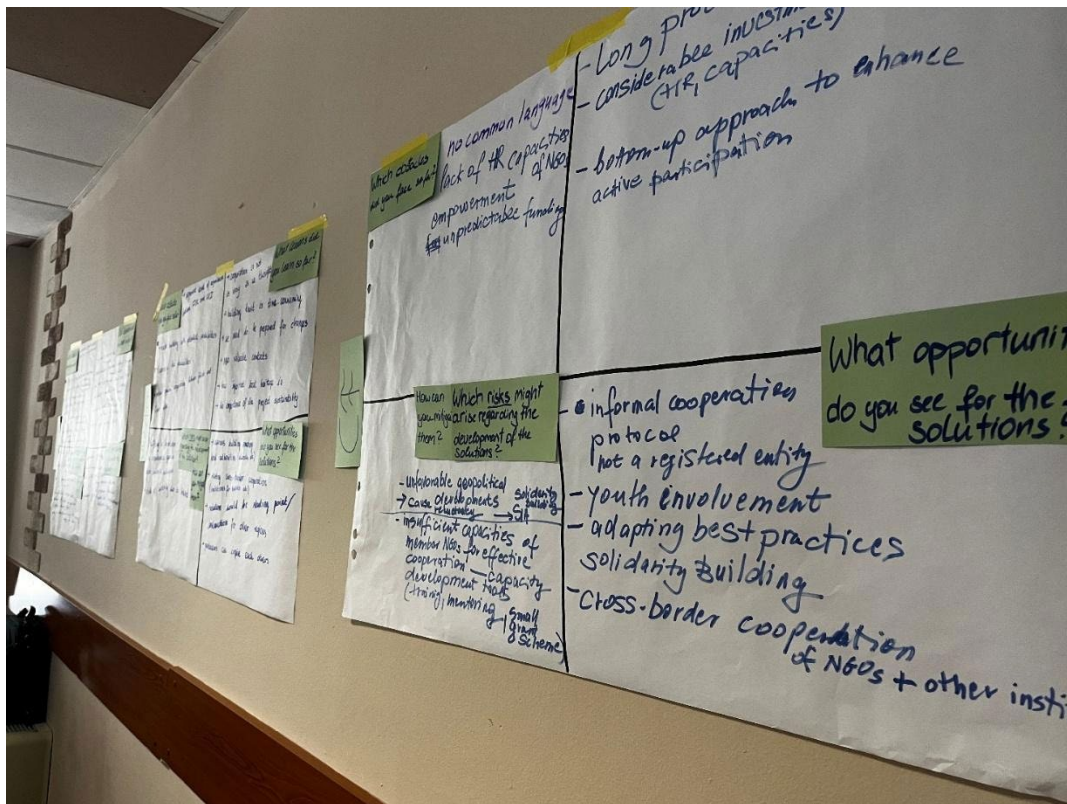
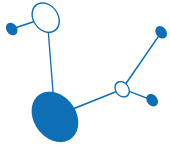
Over 2023-2026 the partnership operationalised the Joint Strategy's calls for

- (i) learning from past EU projects,
- (ii) structured stakeholder engagement, and
- (iii) an Alpine-Carpathian outlook geared to practical uptake, by combining **cocreation workshops and study trips**. This section distils how those formats functioned in practice and what they delivered for the final stage of the project.

3.1.1. Cocreation as the default working mode

To design the three joint solutions under WP3, the partnership followed a co-creative approach coordinated by CIPRA, with contributions from EURAC and ISIG. Rather than adhering strictly to the original timeline in the Application Form, two workshops were intentionally brought forward—one held in person during the Hungary partner meeting, and a second one conducted online. This adjustment helped avoid overlap with the finalisation of pilot activities and ensured that pilot results could be translated into practical, reusable guidance.

Through these collaborative sessions, partners agreed on a common structure for each solution, covering key elements such as the introduction, target groups, methods and tools, potential obstacles and ways to address them, as well as practical tips and recommendations. Roles within the process were also clearly defined, distinguishing between solution leaders and pilot leads. Importantly, the approach embedded systematic consultation with the Alpine and Carpathian Conventions, ensuring that the resulting solutions are aligned with policy frameworks and have strong potential for uptake.



Partner meeting in Hungary, 5-6 March 2025

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The workshops also generated a practical “**toolbox checklist**” (clarity, usability, visuals, transferability), captured partner feedback via Padlets, and aligned the timeline (drafting in spring/summer 2025; consolidation and design in early autumn) to ensure solutions would be ready for the roadshow and closing events.

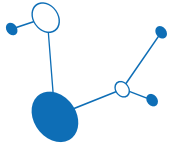
3.1.2. Peer learning in the field

For the partnership to work, it is fundamental to enable meaningful exchange and joint learning. Within the Central Mountains project, this was accomplished through joint study trips hosted by some of the partners.

Study trips proved to be a key instrument for translating the Joint Strategy into practice, enabling partners to move beyond theoretical exchange and engage in direct, experience-based learning. By observing concrete governance models, cooperation mechanisms, and local initiatives in real contexts, participants were able to better understand how community-led approaches function operationally in mountain regions.

They played a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding across Alpine and Carpathian contexts, highlighting both differences in institutional frameworks and common challenges. This exchange reinforced one of the core principles of the strategy: that effective solutions emerge from adapting shared concepts to local realities, rather than applying uniform models.

Through direct interaction with local stakeholders, municipalities, and practitioners, study trips also strengthened trust and relationships within the partnership. This contributed to a shift from coordination



to co-production, supporting the joint development of solutions that are grounded in real needs and practical feasibility.

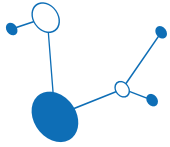
Importantly, study visits provided a space for testing and validating governance approaches in practice. They allowed partners to reflect on successful models, such as cross-border cooperation structures, participatory governance mechanisms, and sustainable tourism practices, and assess their transferability to other mountain contexts.



Partner meeting in Czech Republic, 21-22 October 2023

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A good example early in the project was the study visit to the Czech Republic. Hosted by ARZ, the partners examined how **regional brands and public-private cooperation** sustain mountain economies and heritage through visits to: an **environmental education centre** housed in a restored historic building (heritage reuse, ecolabels, place-based learning); a **local brewery meeting municipal leadership** to discuss business-municipality cooperation in a hightourism border village; a **small craft glass workshop**; an **artisanal enterprise safeguarding an UNESCO-listed blown glass bead tradition**; a **diversified family farm** combining cattle breeding, a **biogas plant**, agritourism and **local product retail**; a **canopy treetop trail** illustrating protected area interpretation; and a **family-run roastery/confectionery** that leverages local identity in its offer. Many operators held **regional product certification**, illustrating how **territorial brands, clustered SMEs and municipalities** can translate cultural and natural assets into **sustainable tourism offers** with strong local identity.



Partner meeting in Austria, 17-18 September 2025

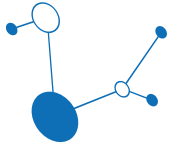
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Another good example of this is the **study trip in Vorarlberg and Liechtenstein (16-18 Sept 2025)** hosted by CIPRA. The study trip deepened common understanding of Alpine governance and transboundary management. The partners explored how observer organisations work with the Alpine Convention to mainstream cooperation in day-to-day regional practice; a session with convention representatives and a governance briefing set the frame for implementation-oriented learning. They then analysed two operational models: a **cross-border tourism coordination agency** serving a four-country lake region (governance/financing, product development and destination alignment), and a **trinational agglomeration programme** that uses **spatial planning and mobility cooperation** across dozens of municipalities to manage commuter flows and shared infrastructure. Finally, a field visit to a **UNESCO biosphere park** illustrated **placebased branding and participatory governance** as drivers of local ownership. These takeaways were used to benchmark CM's own solutions and validate the Joint Strategy's emphasis on multilevel, practice-oriented cooperation. What made it work? What made it stumble?

In conclusion, according to the partners themselves, the well-working mechanisms within the partnership were open, trust-based exchange, complementary expertise, and clear coordination.

Challenges included different administrative systems, varying capacities, cultural and language barriers—addressed through flexible timelines and additional coordination.

“The partnership enabled strong knowledge exchange, mutual trust, complementary expertise and joint development of strategic tools and methodologies. Regular communication and collaborative activities fostered a shared vision for sustainable mountain development.” (PP11)



3.2. Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement in Central Mountains was designed to translate the Joint Strategy's guidance on learning from past cooperation, building a "stakeholder galaxy" with clear roles and turning Alpine-Carpathian outlooks into actionable practice, into concrete, repeatable processes embedded in pilot delivery and solution design.

Across pilots, engagement pursued four objectives:

1. co-create governance tools and processes with end-users;
2. validate products through iterative testing;
3. institutionalise participation where possible;
4. generate evidence for uptake and monitoring.

These objectives were operationalised through the WP2 Stakeholder Engagement Framework and the Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) approach developed by ISIG, which anchored engagement in context analysis, stakeholder clustering and Engagement Action Plans, and evaluated results against efficacy, coherence, impact and sustainability criteria.

The partnership engaged local, regional, and cross-border public institutions; DMOs and tourism/mobility actors; SMEs and producers; CSOs/NGOs; education and research organisations; and youth and schools. M&E evidence shows that institutions and DMOs were involved relatively evenly across periods, whereas schools, research bodies and NGOs were engaged more intensively in later stages as pilots moved from design to validation and networking.

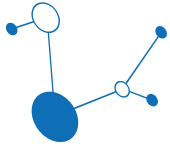
Partner survey inputs corroborate this breadth and point to public-private cooperation, civil-society platforms, and municipal networks as critical interlocutors for legitimacy and continuity, with several partners highlighting trust-building roles for neutral facilitators (e.g., networks/EGTCs).

The organization of stakeholder engagement was based on project phase as well as overarching principles. Early periods of the project prioritised analytical tasks and surveys; mid-periods focused on user-centred workshops, testing and drafting; end-periods consolidated stakeholder networking and validation. The most-used formats across pilots were workshops/seminars/meetings, while surveys/questionnaires were concentrated at the beginning to frame needs and baselines. The main design features of the engagement activities were:

- Co-creation & prototyping: partners used live testing (e.g., of the CBFA digital app) to harvest user experience and functionality feedback, including terminology, multilingual support, mobile usability and target-group filters—then fed an improvement log into the development roadmap.
- Iterative validation: interactive solution-definition workshops set a common structure for the three solution booklets and embedded feedback loops with target groups and the Alpine/Carpathian Conventions to support policy uptake.

Survey responses highlight that the key benefit of stakeholder engagement lies in fostering ownership and acceptance of decisions, particularly when stakeholders actively shape the agenda. Participation is primarily driven by tangible incentives, such as improved coordination in mobility and tourism, increased market visibility, and access to funding opportunities. The findings also underscore the importance of neutral conveners and practical, targeted formats, which are seen as more effective than generic large-scale surveys in mountain contexts.

Examples of project-organised workshops that held a key role in engaging stakeholders were the **Brasov CSTP meeting** (see also section 1.3 Sustainable Tourism Development), the **Eger summer camp** (see also section 1.4 Youth Engagement and Participation), and the Vienna workshop with the Alpine and Carpathian



Convention (see section 1.2 Cross-Border Cooperation). In all these occasions, Joint Strategy contents were presented and feedback collected, to shape the current Refinement.



Eger Summer Camp, 04-07 July 2025

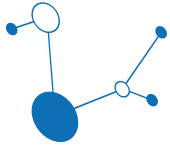
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Furthermore, project partners also participated in gatherings such as the Forum Carpaticum, as well as the Carpathian Convention Implementation Committee meeting of December 2025 in Bratislava, where many relevant stakeholders gathered.

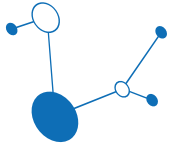
As for risk management, the partnership applied a structured Failure Mode and Effects Analysis-based risk methodology to stakeholder engagement, monitoring coordination, operational, engagement and context risks and adapting mitigation accordingly. An example of identified risks was for CSTP governance institutional disparities and administrative bottlenecks, which were mitigated through measures such as flexible coordination roles and scope adjustments, with the Carpathian Euroregion identified as the coordination backbone.

The work provided by ISIG's framework linked engagement to outputs (e.g., governance bodies and planning documents; operational processes; digital/educational/dissemination tools) and outcomes (impacts on cross-border structures and processes; local networks; upscaling/alignment). It also issued ex-post recommendations, including indicators on post-project coordination meeting frequency, number of formalised partnerships, and shares of working-team members reporting increased cross-border collaboration, to track durability beyond the project cycle.

Lessons for future engagement from the project can be identified as:



- Starting co-design early; prototype in the open. Early workshops and iterative testing improved usability and shortened feedback cycles, directly addressing the Joint Strategy's concerns about post-project fragility and weak bottom-up tracks.
- Connecting participation to concrete benefits. Where engagement led to visible outcomes (tools, plans, access, branding, funding), partners reported higher ownership and sustained involvement.
- Institutionalising participation. Enduring roles (platform councils, working teams, LAP routines) and Convention linkages reduced reliance on ad-hoc events and supported uptake.
- Tailoring formats to mountain contexts. Smaller, context-specific sessions and neutral facilitation outperformed generic mass formats, especially under capacity constraints.

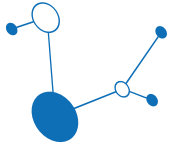


4. Risks and challenges for the Strategy

Across the consultation phases, respondents identified a cluster of systemic risks that could undermine implementation. **Political instability and shifting institutional priorities** emerged as the most frequently cited threats, followed by a lack of **long-term institutional commitment**, limited institutional and administrative capacity, and **insufficient political will** to sustain cross-border coordination. **Resource constraints** were also highlighted, including limited financial and human resources, low stakeholder and community participation, top-down decision-making associated with weak local ownership, and conflicting interests or barriers to cooperation. At the enabling conditions level, respondents further noted regulatory divergence and **limited data sharing and digital integration**. Collectively, these findings point to a dual exposure: vulnerability to contextual (political and geopolitical) shocks, and to governance and procedural fragilities, including deficits in capacity, commitment, and participation.

Partners' input corroborates this picture for the strategy phase: the most frequently cited risks include **limited local administrative capacity** (particularly in small municipalities), **funding uncertainty**, **bureaucratic formalism**, and **leadership turnover**, as well as passivity or weak ownership among target groups and stakeholder fatigue when participation is not followed by visible results. Additional concerns include **insufficient cross-sector coordination**, the risk that the strategy remains unread or unfunded, and demographic decline in rural areas, which erodes the local base for implementation. In sum, **delivery is most vulnerable where capacity and continuity are limited**, and where ownership and incentives are not embedded early and visibly in the rollout.

In summary, the risk picture that emerged from consultations is consistent with the Joint Strategy's earlier diagnosis: delivery in mountain cross-border settings is most exposed where **political priorities are volatile**, **long-term institutional commitment is weak**, and **capacity and participation** are thin conditions the Strategy had already flagged when calling for durable, multilevel governance and -stakeholder-centred approaches. The partner survey reinforces this by highlighting **limited local administrative capacity**, **funding uncertainty**, **bureaucratic formalism and leadership turnover**, and the risk that a strategy remains **unread or unfunded** unless coupled with incentives and visible outcomes.



E. Final recommendations

Building on the Joint Strategy and the experience gathered through the Central Mountains project, this section sets out final recommendations to strengthen community-led sustainable development (CLSD) in mountain areas. The aim is to support policymakers and practitioners in turning strategic principles into practical and lasting governance approaches.

A priority is to move from experimentation to mainstreaming community-led governance. The project shows that policies are more effective when communities are actively involved in decision-making, not just consulted. This implies institutionalising participatory processes, ensuring inclusiveness, and linking participation to tangible outcomes, especially by engaging groups often left aside, such as youth, rural populations, and small local actors.

This goes hand in hand with the need to reinforce multi-level and cross-border governance. Mountain regions require coordinated systems that connect actors across administrative levels and national boundaries. Existing structures, such as EGTCs, civil society platforms, and Convention frameworks, should be strengthened as long-term anchors of cooperation. At the same time, emphasis should be placed on practical collaboration through joint initiatives, working groups, and shared tools.

Ensuring continuity beyond project cycles remains a critical challenge. Too often, cooperation weakens once funding ends. To address this, initiatives need to be embedded in stable structures, supported by strengthened local capacities and diversified funding. Strategies should clearly outline how actions will continue over time, avoiding the risk of remaining purely conceptual.

The project also underlines **the value of practical and transferable tools**. Instruments such as Cross-Border Functional Areas (CBFAs), thematic platforms, and digital tools have proven effective in translating strategies into action. Their further development and adaptation can support implementation across different territorial contexts.

In the field of sustainable tourism, policies should adopt **integrated, place-based approaches**. Tourism must balance environmental protection, economic development, and community well-being, while ensuring the active involvement of local actors. Given the cross-border nature of mountain ecosystems and destinations, coordinated governance is essential.

Another key area is **capacity building and facilitation**. Participation requires skills, resources, and trust. Policymakers should therefore invest in training, technical support, and facilitation mechanisms that enable meaningful stakeholder engagement. Neutral actors, such as networks and platforms, can help sustain dialogue and cooperation.

Finally, **youth engagement** should be institutionalised as a core governance component. The project shows that youth participation is most effective when it is continuous and linked to real decision-making. This calls for stable mechanisms, such as youth councils, participatory tools, and dedicated forums, and for recognising young people as active contributors to policy development.

Overall, these recommendations highlight the need for a governance model that is participatory, multi-level, and strongly oriented towards implementation. By linking local ownership with coordinated cooperation and practical, usable tools, policymakers can foster more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable development pathways in mountain regions.