

Upper Nitra, Slovakia: an exemplary approach towards just transition

A phase out from fossil fuels is inevitable in all countries where the EBRD operates for reasons of economics and climate change. This can be done haphazardly, as was the case of industrial decline in the nineties, which left behind ghost towns and thousands of frustrated people who had to adapt without warning. But we should learn from this experience and use the opportunity for those regions dependent on extraction to follow a more thought-through transition to a new and just future for people who live there.

Such a future cannot be planned by the government or coal companies, but rather should be the vision of the people whose livelihoods are at stake. The role of the authorities and development banks should be to listen and support such discussions, and then follow through with investments to realise this vision.

In Slovakia this approach is underway, and the experience offers lessons for other regions, governments and international financial institutions.

Leading from the region

In December 2017, the Slovakian region of Trenčín was selected as one of the pilot regions of the newly-formed Platform for Coal Regions in Transition, an initiative of the European Commission to support coal regions as they transition away from fossil fuels.

In January 2018, Katarína Macháčková, mayor of Prievidza, a town in the center of the coal mining and burning region, initiated a participatory process that was supposed to result in an action plan for the post-coal development of Upper Nitra, the sub-region of Trenčín where mining is concentrated.

Those involved in preparing the action plan took part in four separate working groups: economy, transport, social infrastructure and tourism. Anyone interested was able to access the working groups by simply sending an email to an address widely publicised by local media.

By the end of January, around 60 applicants registered, mostly citizens of the region including entrepreneurs, representatives of municipalities and civil society. In March and April 2018, about 20 meetings of the working groups took place and an analysis of the situation in the region and its development potential was carried out.

HBP, the main coal company in Slovakia and owner of the local mines, refused to participate in the process despite being invited. It argued that decisions about the future of coal in the region were too important to be taken at the local level.

While this action plan offered local communities channels to decide on their own future, Slovak authorities had other ideas in mind. In February 2018, regional authorities in Trenčín announced the start of what could only be understood as a parallel process of creating an action plan for Slovakia's coal mining region. This time, however, the process was not inclusive.

For more information

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This initiative of the Slovak government had the approval of the Commission, as it was launched during a meeting in Trenčín with the Commission and representatives of the government present. The closed meeting excluded parliamentarians, NGOs and other interested parties, with the private sector represented only by HBP and another company operating in the fossil fuels sector.

Following this meeting, in March, the Trenčín regional authorities launched a call for proposals for projects to be supported via the platform, with a deadline of April 30. Many of the projects submitted were never discussed in a broader forum but merely sent directly to the Trenčín authorities. In early May, the Trenčín regional government announced that 80 projects were sent in by the deadline and that these would be assessed by mid-May. The aim of this process was to present 'quick wins' to the Commission.

Yet civil society and local communities from Trenčín understood fairly quickly what was going on and that the two parallel processes do not make sense: these would lead to the exclusion of local voices. People from Upper Nitra pressured both the Commission and Slovak authorities to streamline the processes and guarantee inclusiveness.

Participatory Action Plan

At the same time, the national government shifted gears, responding to civic pressure. In April 2018, Slovak government officials present in Prievidza confirmed that the action plan for Upper Nitra prepared at the initiative of the mayor of Prievidza would become a national strategy. This was an important recognition by the highest level of government in Slovakia of a bottom-up participative process to determine the future of the region.

As a result of this public pressure, Slovakia asked the Commission to support the process of writing an action plan, the only process that locals and civil society deemed legitimate.

By July 2019, the national government should approve the Action Plan, which was created with the broad participation of local citizens, entrepreneurs and civil society.

In this Action Plan, locals call for a 'more attractive and self-sufficient region where the economy will develop in symbiosis with a clean environment and good economic connections to other economic centers'.

The example of Upper Nitra shows that citizens in Europe's coal regions not only understand the inevitability of the transition away from fossil fuels but also are committed to being actively involved in shaping an alternative future for their communities. While the central Slovak government and the regional authorities in Trenčín initially did not care much for local voices, public pressure was effective in making them listen to the desires of citizens from the region. The European Commission, which initially prioritised speed over quality in the process, reacted as well to the public pressure and eventually supported the bottom-up process initiated by the mayor of Prievidza.

The action plan for Upper Nitra is now recognised and supported by the government, which in the meantime announced an end to subsidies for coal-based electricity by 2023. The action plan contains not only a vision for the region but also a number of ideas for projects which, if supported, would contribute to realising this vision. The projects are directly proposed by the people of the region, and this is the place where resources from the future 2020 Multiannual Financial Framework and also the European development banks need to be channelled in order to support a genuine just transition.

Upper Nitra is truly a pilot region for just transition in Europe, not simply because it is a region moving away from coal, but especially because its citizens are motivated to shape the transition.