T 4.1: Assessing social sustainability: case study town of Velenje, Slovenia

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1 Introduction

The report presents the results of the social sustainability assessment of Velenje, a Slovenian case study town in the BRIGHT FUTURE project (T4.1). The assessment will be used as a prompt to identify the social and organisational innovation that can boost the transformation or 'reinvention' of industrial towns across Europe. The report includes the methodology, results, consisting of the social sustainability matrix and a summary of the key themes and findings underlying the assessment, and the concluding remarks, including some recommendations for improving the methodology.

2 Methods

The social sustainability assessment was done in accordance with the framework of social sustainability and the WP4 Method Guidance developed by Social Life. In the framework, social sustainability is understood as *"a process for creating sustainable, successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places they live and work. Social sustainability combines design of the physical realm with design of the social world – infrastructure to support social and cultural life, social amenities, systems for citizen engagement and space for people and places to evolve."* (Social Life 2012). The framework is divided into four themes and further divided to key dimensions and questions.

In the **data review** phase, we encompassed the data collected in previous work packages on the case study town, such as:

- desk-based research on how the industrial history of the case study town has the shaped local mentality, local culture and/or civil society (T3.1)

- observation of the physical 'landscape', cultural exhibitions, places of tourist and cultural consumption (T3.2)

- 33 short interviews with local people on the streets of Velenje on the general perception of everyday life in the town (T3.3)

- 19 planned semi-structured interviews about the dominant and hidden narratives with the local representatives of the public authorities, enterprises, civil society, and science and culture professionals (T3.3)

Once the data was reviewed, we carried out a gap analysis to understand which information were missing. **Filling the gaps in knowledge** was executed with:

- up-to-date administrative data on population, employment, education, ethnicity, migration, social life, crime and voter behaviour, gathered from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia. The data was mostly available at the municipal level.

- 11 additional, mostly "ad-hoc" interviews with representatives of the public authority, enterprises, civil society and educational institutions.

- a short questionnaire that was forwarded to the heads of nineteen town districts, mostly to gain a deeper insight into the theme "Voice & influence" where the highest number of knowledge gaps was identified. Four town districts responded to our inquiry.

- An analysis of local news sources and social media for current issues in the town. Additional documents, strategies and other available literature were also studied.

Workshop 1: Social sustainability

We entitled the series of workshops "*Velenje Towards a Bright Future*" to indicate the relation with the project and to additionally motivate the participants by presenting the workshops as important for the town's future. Based on the stakeholders that had already been engaged by interviews in WP3 and having in mind the main objective of WP4, we identified 25 potential participants from the public authority, local economy, civil society and academia. We hired the PiNA Association for Culture and Education as an external facilitator to help us run the workshops, as they have a lot of experience in the participatory process and are also familiar with social innovation.

The 1st workshop was held on 7th November 2018 in a small hall of Rožle Villa, a house in the main urban park of Velenje owned by the state and operated by a regional NGO that provides a neutral place and relaxing atmosphere. 17 participants, plus 5 members of the ZRC SAZU team and 2 external facilitators made up the group of the 24 people to attend the 1st workshop.

The workshop started with an introduction and an ice-breaker exercise of finding associations to the project key words, followed by presentations about the project, the social sustainability framework and the findings of our own social sustainability assessment. The participants then received sheets of paper and were encouraged to corroborate, challenge and expand our findings. After a short break, we split the participants into 4 thematic groups according to their preferences and discussed the matrix of each theme in more detail, all of which was followed by a general discussion. The workshop lasted three hours. The next day, we thanked all the participants, asked them to evaluate the workshop and to save the dates for 2nd and 3rd workshop, which will be held on 13th February and 3rd April. Their comments were analysed after the workshop and were found to be very useful for creating the final assessment.

Some photos from the 1ˢᵗ workshop.

3 Results

The social sustainability assessment resulted in a matrix with 15 key strengths and 10 key weaknesses across four themes, illustrated in the table below and explained in the following chapters. Velenje is a very socially sustainable town, as it was assigned the highest score on three-level scale in three of four themes. The scores were given based on the ratio between the number of strengths and weaknesses and a comparison to other Slovenian (industrial) cities and towns.

	Key strengths	Key weaknesses	Assessment (strong/weak/expected)
Voice & influence	• High level of trust and collaboration between the municipality, economy and civil society • Established mechanism for participation and submitting citizen suggestions • Developed forms of participation as the legacy of a collective social conscience and identity	• (Excessive) role of political affiliation in decision-making processes • Decreasing influence of the local community on the town development due to the diminished social responsibility of companies	STRONG
Amenities & social infrastructure	• Diversity and quality of educational institutions up to the university level, including adult education • Ubiquitous support for culture • Quality public space and community facilities • Support for vulnerable groups	• Development of a fragmented higher education • The transport system is based on the car instead of on walking, cycling and public transportation	STRONG
Social & cultural life	• Community cohesion, intercultural cohabitation • Core values: mutual aid, solidarity, social equality, tolerance • Strong local identity and sense of belonging • High quality of urban life (residential quality, low crime rates, sense of safety)	• Growing intolerance toward recent immigrants • Lack of integration among the Albanian community	STRONG
Adaptability & resilience	• Creativity and innovativeness of the younger population and their responsiveness to new technologies • Available space for new settlements, economic activities and green areas • Lately, foundation of new, smaller, and diverse companies • Great potential in tourism development for future economic diversification	• Bipolar and vulnerable economy: dependency on two major companies • Unclear future after the coal mine closure • Out-migration of the educated young population • 'Miners' mentality': closed society, clientelism, fear of intelligentsia	EXPECTED

3.1 Voice & influence

This theme explores the perceptions of residents over their power and control of their towns and neighbourhoods, as well as gauge levels of participation in civic life.

Key strengths

There is a relatively **strong sense of trust in municipal structures by the economy and the civil society**. The representatives of companies and the civil society feel heard, accepted and, in most cases, considered. The municipality is responsive to their proposals and acts in a participative and inclusive manner towards different social and interest groups. The town has a reputation for good internal collaboration. The social sectors are well inter-connected and managed with each fostering a vision and developing ambitious plans. There is an expressed sense of networking and community building. Citizen engagement is quite high.

The municipality has developed **numerous mechanism for collaboration and submitting citizen proposals and initiatives** that facilitate a participatory and inclusive management. The civil society submits suggestions at the municipal council sessions, which consists of representatives of the town districts, and at the individual town district sessions, which are attended by municipal representatives. This positively influences collaboration between the municipality and the town districts. The issues are solved quickly or in a reasonable timeframe. The town's small size also means the information exchange runs smoothly. The municipality and the town districts have also implemented online tools, where the citizens can submit official initiatives and suggestions for change; the citizens are also active and periodically organize into groups through online forums and social networks.

The municipality has developed **many possibilities for participation, which are based on a collective social conscience** and identity that originate from the town's foundation in the early period of socialism. At the time, collective actions mostly entailed shock work, while the town today is abounding with volunteer work, thriving societies and associations and strong unions and party organizations. Young people are among the most active volunteers. Compared to other city municipalities, the associations and societies in Velenje are more active especially in the fields of culture, niche organizations, sports and recreation and humanitarian and disabled persons organizations. The municipality offers support mechanisms to these different forms of participation by providing free spaces for societies to carry out their activities and (co)financing public works, programs and projects.

Key weaknesses

We identified **an excessive role of party affiliation in decision-making processes.** Belonging to the "correct" political affiliation (the Social Democrats Party, the legal successor to the League of Communists of Slovenia, which has had a majority in the town council since 1993) means certain interests can be implemented much quicker and more efficiently. Even though good projects tend to gain support regardless of the political background, it seems

the same people are included in the decision-making process time and time again. Another common phenomenon is employment based on political affiliation in municipal public services. All of this is further facilitated by the passive nature of the other political parties and the low level of engagement by non-partisan stakeholders.

Another weakness is **a decreasing influence of the local community on the town development due to the diminished social responsibility of companies.** During socialism, the social responsibility of large employers (especially the coal mine) was very high. The company managers were locals and worked closely with the political decision-makers, so the local community had a significant influence on the development of the environment, the infrastructure and the educational and social programs. The introduction of managers who did not stem from the local environment (The Šoštanj Thermal Power Plant), the sales of companies to foreigners (Gorenje) and the intrusion of neoliberal social-economic ethics has gradually decreased the social responsibility of the companies, especially in terms of the environmental rehabilitation and nurturing education. Consequently, the local community has less influence, which poses a threat to the achieved high quality of life in the town.

3.2 Amenities & social infrastructure

This theme takes into account the physical infrastructure, social infrastructure & services in the case study towns. We seek to understand not only which assets are present within the areas we are studying but how residents perceive their quality and their relevance to local life.

Key strengths

The first strength is **diversity and quality of educational institutions up to the university level, including adult education**, especially considering the relatively small size of the town. Kindergartens and primary schools provide a comprehensive education and instil a strong sense of local identity. Many secondary schools have established dormitories and cafeterias, so the students are encouraged to study in this environment and later search for employment here as well. A distinct educational orientation is energy, which coincides with the local energy producing activity and the contemporary trends of using this knowledge to produce green energy. The only shortcoming of the education system is that most of the school programmes are too technically oriented.

The Municipality of Velenje also supports other forms of education. One of the more important ones is the regional Saša Incubator, which was launched in 2007. It supports start-ups and creates favourable conditions for entrepreneurship. It also organizes informal training courses (e.g. for immigrants) and soft forms of education. Another important asset is its top-ranking in adult education, headed by the Velenje Adult Education Centre. They are constantly creating new educational programs and workshops and manage numerous national and international projects. They especially encourage a healthy lifestyle, environmental awareness and intergenerational solidarity.

The town is well-known for its **ubiquitous support for culture.** There are 281 active societies and associations in Velenje; about half of them are sports, recreation or cultural societies. The municipality readily supports their activities; one of the most notable examples of this is the well-established system of free municipal space rentals for any kind of society. In addition, the town is well-known for associations and societies that reflect its history, multiculturality and community. Some examples: two Serbian, a Bosnian and a Croatian Society, Brigadiers' Association, a society for the homeless, and a society for reviving and promoting the ruined village of Škale.

Community collaboration is also evident at the numerous cultural events, often organized by the locals themselves. Most of the museum and exhibition gatherings and cultural events are held in the most spacious Museum of Velenje, the Coal Mining Museum and the Velenje Cultural Centre. The latter also houses the Velenje Festival, which connects, organizes and facilitates cultural events in the town. The library also puts on many activities, as well as the adult education centre, the music school, the main gallery and others. Many events are held outside in prominent public spaces.

Velenje fosters a rich youth culture, managed by the youth centre. Some of their diverse activities are manifested in the annual Kunigunda Youth Culture Festival. The town also organizes and hosts the largest children's festival in Slovenia, the week-long Pippi Longstocking Festival. Another notable youth-oriented program is the "Summer on the Roller Rink" program for children from less privileged backgrounds.

Despite the wide array of cultural events, some drawbacks were voiced by the workshop participants. It is believed that not all local authors have the same opportunities and that some are favoured by the municipality. There is a lack of top-quality cultural events in the town.

Velenje was designed as a "town in a park" or "garden city", resulting in **a large share of the public space of a high quality**. It boasts many squares, promenades, playgrounds, sports and recreation areas (e.g. Red Hall, Velenje City Stadium, ski jump hill), some even featuring elements for movement-impaired children, and a large Sun Park with plenty of walking paths. Works will soon be underway on a large multi-purpose event space along the Velenje Lake as the answer to the increasingly popular Velenje Beach and the many events along the lake.

After the town's rapid expansion from the 1950s onward and the prevailing construction trend of apartment buildings, the idea and desire for urban gardening arose. In 1978, part of the area along the Velenje Lake (called Kunta Kinte) was divided into plots and gardening sheds were permitted. Some new gardening areas have been spreading in new locations lately as the municipality has designated 13 areas and issued a document on urban gardening.

Some inhabitants voiced their opinion about the diminishing quality of public spaces. The municipality has not developed a long-term development strategy for the renewing,

construction, or reclassifying of public spaces. It also does not have a development strategy for its green surfaces (what will be planted where and when). The changes in land use of some surfaces, construction and road surface expansion have led to the decrease of the number of green areas and pedestrian surfaces.

The town's history and emphasized collective conscience have created a firm pattern of collaboration and reciprocal help. The town's multicultural character and widespread volunteering have made **services accessible to all social groups, especially vulnerable ones**. Public and non-governmental organizations offer a host of services and social protection programs, additionally co-financed by the Municipality of Velenje. The results of this social awareness are clearly reflected in the Strategy of Social Protection Development in the City Municipality of Velenje 2014–2020. Velenje is the first municipality in the country to have created such an extensive strategy with action measures for vulnerable groups of all generations.

Velenje has introduced the option of a single emergency monetary help package, free legal, energy and entrepreneurial expert counselling, free lunch at the town's public soup kitchen. They have established a homeless shelter, a foundation and a safe house for women and children who have been victims of violence. The town has also established a committee that assigns financial aid to economically vulnerable individuals and families. They run the City Fund project, which enables people to pay bills without any additional fees. Socially disadvantaged individuals can apply for subsidised rent and the unemployed can receive training at the Velenje Reuse Centre.

The kindergartens try to adapt to the children of immigrants, to help them get accustomed to the new environment, language and habits. They have implemented a youth policy strategy, managed by the Velenje Youth Centre. Pupils who are unable to reside at home for any reason can rent a free room in a residential community. Children and adolescents from socially disadvantaged families can spend time in the afternoon youth centre. Handicapped children and adults are well taken care of. Such a diversity of projects and programs in the field have qualified it for different certificates, such as: Velenje: Age-Friendly City, Disabled People-Friendly Municipality, UNICEF City.

Key weaknesses

The higher education system in Velenje is very fragmented. There are three higher education institutions in Velenje offering various technical courses on energy and environmental protection. A more pronounced development of higher education would be very beneficial to job retention and creating new employment possibilities, knowledge transfer and youth retention in Velenje. The Environmental Protection College is currently awaiting faculty accreditation. On the other hand, some people believe that having more higher education institutions is not rational, because this decreases the quality of the study program.

The transport system faces two fundamental problems. The first is the poor infrastructure and accessibility to the rest of the country and beyond (as of yet unconstructed freeway, dysfunctional rail connection), which is said to negatively affect the development of the local and regional economy. The other problem is **the local transport system, which is based on the automobile** (modal split: car: 61%, public transport: 10%, cycling: 9%, walking: 20%). There have been expansions to automobile surfaces to the detriment of pedestrian and cyclist surfaces, making walking and cycling appear less attractive. Public transport needs further developing; bus stops are not adapted to handicapped people. The cycling paths are quite fragmented and have some very dangerous sections. In order to tackle all the transport issues, the municipality created the Sustainability Urban Mobility Plan in 2017. In addition, the authorities are trying to balance transportation by introducing free local public transport (Lokalc), operational since 2008, and the Bicy bike sharing system, which has been renting bicycles and cycling gear for an affordable price since 2012. The municipality has also created the Velenje Cycling Policy with an aim to improve cycling infrastructure.

3.3 Social & cultural life

This theme focuses on the quality and breadth of the social relationships within an area, as well as residents' perceptions around security and wellbeing.

Key strengths

Velenje is a multicultural town, which is the result of economic development, based on large-scale industry and mining, also enforced by the political administration. The available job opportunities greatly outnumbered the local population, so many young people from other republics of Yugoslavia were encouraged to move to Velenje. Consequently, the ethnic structure of the present-day Velenje is very diverse. Bosnians, Serbians, Croatians and Albanians are among the largest non-Slovenian ethnic groups, representing around one quarter of the town's population (Population Census 2002). The fact that people of different origins and backgrounds have learned to work and live together and cooperate, resulted in **a cohesive community with successful intercultural cohabitation**. People are generally not bothered by the ethnic origin of their neighbour and most immigrants feel that they are Slovenians and equal citizens, despite some have a dual identity. Intercultural cohabitation and social integration are also supported by the educational programme, organised by both governmental and non-governmental institutions. For example, Velenje Adult Education Centre offers integration courses to immigrants.

Both perceived and objective quality of urban life in Velenje are very high. The public spaces around the city are clean and very well-maintained and the city offers an abundance of spaces for recreation and socialisation. Social infrastructure is very well-developed, as well as the range and cost of the cultural programme. The cost of living is low. Apartments in apartment buildings are known to be of a relatively high quality compared to other, older mining towns: spacious, bright and with high ceilings, large windows and facilities, such as

inexpensive hot water heated by the excess heat coming from the thermal power plant for central heating and washing. Velenje is among the safest municipalities in Slovenia and the crime rate is below the national average (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia 2017), also the sense of safety among citizens is very high (Kolenc 2016). The citizens of Velenje are generally relatively satisfied with living in Velenje (Strategic Development Document … 2008).

The locals are proud to be citizens of Velenje. Therefore, the **sense of belonging and local identity are very strong**. However, citizens are aware that the stereotypical image of Velenje might not be very positive (dirty, industry-oriented city, lots of migrants) among other Slovenians. The local authorities and citizens therefore strive to present the city in a positive way to outsiders.

The main values that we identified among the citizens of Velenje are positive and include **solidarity, social equality, mutual aid, comradery and tolerance**. They are believed to derive from the specific relationships that were established among miners in shafts. They can be marked as socialist values, also supported by socialist regime, and are also manifested in social practices in many different ways. A very common volunteer work in Velenje, for example, is believed to be the heritage of a collective consciousness that existed in socialist times. However, there is the danger that those principles and values on which the town was founded and developed are fading due to the increasing stressing of individualism, competitiveness, decentralized authority, as well as a shrinking public administration and deregulation and privatization of the economy.

Key weaknesses

One of the key weaknesses we identified was the **growing intolerance towards immigrants** who arrived in Velenje for the construction of one of the thermal power plant blocks (2011–2014) using low-cost labour coming mainly from Albania and Poland. The attitude among citizens of Velenje towards new migrants has worsened as people started to feel the presence of new groups of people in the city (their population is unknown, it is estimated to be a few percents), strengthened also by the recent wave of xenophobia and intolerance during the European migrant crisis. The negative attitude spread among the population after in 2016 a news report came out in the media that the local health-care centre needed to employ an Albanian-speaking nurse who could translate the statements of the ill Albanian women. This annoyed some people because of their inability to speak the local language and not putting any effort into learning it. The negative perceptions against the immigrants were further generated by members of the Velenje.com online platform. In 2016 and 2017, there was also a strong opposition toward establishing a facility for asylum seekers. During the summer 2018, several Nazi-themed posters appeared in public places across town. Representatives of other non-Slovenian ethnic groups state that they feel welcome in Velenje but they are often subject to workplace discrimination (although they think of

themselves as being partially Slovenians). Some also identified xenophobia from among the immigrants who arrived in Velenje in previous decades towards newer immigrants from the same ethnic groups.

Another key weakness is **a lack of integration among the Albanian community**. We identified two different groups of Albanian immigrants: while Albanians who arrived in Velenje during socialist times are well-integrated into the society, speak Slovenian in the local dialect, run businesses and are very entrepreneurial, the Albanians who arrived recently are less willing to integrate; they live in Velenje, but migrate to countries like Switzerland, Austria and Germany for work. The only way of reaching the Albanians is through the Albanian cultural society and through personal contacts. Due to the more conservative culture of Albanian groups that arrived in Slovenia in recent years, Albanian women are discouraged from socializing with strangers; they mainly stay at home and socialize with other women of the same ethnic origin. They have very little contact with members of other ethnic groups and when they leave home (e.g. for shopping), they never go alone, but travel in groups. The level of socialisation is higher among those Albanian women whose husbands are financially weaker and who depend more on their parents' and their own income. A young representative of the Albanian society who participated in our workshop confirmed the notion that Albanians do not put any effort into integrating. He thinks there are enough extra curriculum courses available to Albanian pupils at primary school, but they simply do not wish to attend them.

3.4 Adaptability & resilience

This theme relates to both the physical environment for a community to grow, as well as the economic and social aspects which will enable it to adapt to changing circumstances and develop in the long-term.

Key strengths

The town expresses **creativity and innovativeness** in numerous results: its many Red Dot design awards for Gorenje products, the Gorenje Academy, developing technology for the rehabilitation of industrial polluted sites by two former subsidiaries of the local coal mine—Esotech and Erico (now Eurofins)—, establishing the Environmental Protection College and the newest addition of an educational and developmental platform by two young entrepreneurs called The Pattern City.

Lately, Velenje has been building a reputation for launching **new, smaller and diverse companies**. In comparison with other small business centres in the region and the country, the SAŠA Incubator in Velenje has been a success story. After its foundation in 2007 and restructuring in 2014, when the Municipality of Velenje increased its share to 60%, the company moved to new premises. There, the start-up companies plenty a lot of co-working space and rent offices at a reasonable price. Together with the educational and other support programs, this was also an important boost for the start-ups. In 2017, 23 new jobs

were created within the companies of the SAŠA Incubator. However, it is important to stress that the story of the SAŠA Incubator is only a small part of the traditionally vibrant culture of entrepreneurs and the business mentality in Velenje. Many successful small enterprises have already been established here in the past.

In recent years, the town has discovered a **great potential in tourism development** in the Velenje Lake, which formed after the ground sank due to mining, as well as in its castle, museums, modernistic townscape, industrial heritage and the heritage of socialism. The municipal development and tourism marketing strategy (2017–2021) focuses on cultural tourism by upgrading the existing and forming new products, like the Velenje Mining Stories, Stories of Socialism in Velenje and High-tech Velenje. The expectations of Velenje becoming an important tourist destination is, of course, unrealistic, as is their plan to build a hotel on the water, but nevertheless, tourism is an important strength for the town's future economic diversification.

Velenje has **enough available space for new settlements, economic activities and green areas**. It is one of the few municipalities in Slovenia that has adopted all the necessary planning documents for the future residential and economic spatial development and has enough available plots to achieve this. For example, there are available plots for 100 individual units and 200 plots for immediate possible residential development. The authorities have also taken into account 200–300 flats in the town centre for their future residential development scenario, which are currently mostly inhabited by older, single inhabitants. The town's spatial plan enables an expansion by 10,000 inhabitants or 1/3 of its current size (actually, 5,000 inhabitants and an additional 5,000 as a "theoretical reserve"). The town also has enough plots for economic development. Velenje is a town with an abundance of green spaces, but there is a question of what purpose will they serve in the future.

Key weaknesses

One of Velenje's weaknesses is its **potentially vulnerable economy due to the dependency on two major companies**: Gorenje (home appliance manufacturer) and the Velenje Coal Mine, providing more than a half of jobs in the town. Today, Velenje is still not diversifying and restructuring its economy fast enough. In the past, local small and medium-sized enterprises were not supported enough, causing many of them to move away. The municipality should be more active in supporting local businesses and inviting other Slovenian small and medium enterprises, as well as foreign investors from other similar business branches similar to Gorenje. They should be attracted by the available premises or development plots for their activity at very affordable prices. The sale of Gorenje to Chinese Hisense and new investments into the company prove to be insufficient in the future, since this is the continuation of the same business paradigm in the same economic branch. Before the acquisition by Chinese Hisense, the more renowned upmarket Japanese producer

Panasonic intended to buy Gorenje, but there is no publicly available information about why Panasonic pulled out of the deal.

There is **an omnipresent sense of an unclear future after the closure of the coal mine**. The local authorities and the inhabitants are aware that the coal mine will close down its operations in the next 20–30 years, and yet, very little is being done to restructure jobs. There is still some faith in possible new technological procedures that will enable the extraction of the remnants of the coal for energy, so that the coal mine might somehow continue its operations. Another challenge is that the coal mine owns a lot of dependent economically unsustainable companies. One of them is HTZ—the largest employer of disabled persons in Slovenia and the fourth largest recipient of state aid in 2017 with EUR 7.1 million. Until now, only two former subsidiaries of the coal mine (Esotech and Eurofins) have been able to successfully diversify their business operations and become independent from the coal mine. Business incubators may be a good solution for young entrepreneurs, but this is certainly not the case for the older employees of the coal mine.

Another key weakness and a threat is **an out-migration of the educated young population**, potentially leading to excessive aging population. The existing structure of industry in Velenje requires a low-educated workforce that is willing to work for minimum wage. The students from Velenje who study in other towns, therefore often do not return to their hometown after graduating, since there are no jobs available for their higher qualifications. Young educated workers from Velenje will choose to return to their hometown and others will immigrate to Velenje only in case of different economic environment with R&D, technological parks and pattern cities.

If circulating human resources between the coal mine and local politics has proven to be positive for the development of the town so far, the continuation of this kind of **'miners' mentality'** and its closed society, clientelism, nepotism, corruption, fear of intelligentsia, lack of ambition and feelings of resignation could pose a big threat to the town in the future. The historical dependency on one or two major employers that held not only economic, but also political power, continues to this day. This mentality is particularly exacerbated in these kinds of smaller towns, where the pool of professionals is somewhat limited and where a small group of people (business managers, politicians, public officials) act in an excluding manner and circulate around different executive positions. This is a negative expression of the so-called miners' mentality, which does have some positive connotations, such as solidarity.

4 Concluding remarks

The social sustainability assessment seemed to be a very useful and appropriate starting point for identifying social and institutional innovation and it was also well-accepted by the workshop participants. Dividing such a diverse area into four themes seems reasonable and

we were able to assess almost all of the elements, although we found the translation of the elements into Slovenian a bit challenging in some cases. In this conclusion, we would like to propose minor amendments and improvements to the social sustainability framework (as a suggestion).

Firstly, we noticed an overlap of certain elements, which confused us a bit at the beginning stage. For example, we think that one of the key questions under "Adaptability and resilience" ("Are the residents able to shape the town's future?") should be modified, because it is very similar to the questions in the theme "Voice & influence", indicating the influence they have on the town' development.

Secondly, the matrix is missing the support for the cultural scene, which should probably be placed under "Amenities & social infrastructure", since (enabling) possibilities for leisure can be very important for achieving a high quality of urban life and attracting residents to work and live in any town.

Thirdly, we wondered about the appropriateness of titling the theme "Social and cultural life", as it is very much focused on social life and community relations, while none of the elements in the matrix asked about the cultural life in particular—unless there are differences in our mutual understanding about what exactly this term encompasses (we understand it as a cultural scene/events).

Finally, we would propose to make the assessment procedure more objective, quantitative and comparable: each element within respective theme could be assessed on numeric rating scale, e.g. 5-point scale, where 1 means poor and 5 means excellent. In addition, the elements could be ranked based on their perceived importance (by researchers or by workshop participants). The overall assessment of each theme should then be done by summing all the scores which would make the assessment less subjective. Such a detailed assessment would provide even more accurate and solid background for further actions and also ease the comparison between the case study towns.