

**Culture &
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CREATIVE TOWNS AND REGIONS INITIATIVE: REPORT FOR SHAMKIR

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union-Eastern Partnership Culture and Creativity Programme launched the Creative Towns and Regions Initiative in 2016 to highlight the importance of culture and creativity in small and medium sized towns and regions. The Initiative introduces a practical approach for towns and regions in the Eastern Partnership countries to use the local cultural and creative potential for social and economic development.

The aim of the initiative is to raise awareness of all key stakeholders of the potential of cultural and creative sectors, to collect data on local cultural and creative resources and to propose concrete action plans for developing the cultural and creative industries potential, including development of local cultural landscape, building clusters with local businesses, increasing the quality of offer of the tourism sector and build stronger networks with similar towns and regions in other countries.

As a result of the initiative, the Programme published a document “Making the Most of Cultural and Creative Resources: The Mapping and Strategy Building Handbook for Creative Towns and Regions”¹, which is available for free download and could provide practical tools and recommendations for towns and regions to develop their local resources.

2. SHAMKIR: A SHORT OVERVIEW²

Shamkir is a model region distinctive with its up-to-date technological agricultural and industrial production enterprises, modern education facilities and intellectual upbringing. It is accepted nationwide as setting new standards always implemented in line with the international best practices.


Territory of Shamkir District is 1,600,000 sq.m., population is 210,000, urban population of Shamkir town is 42,000 inhabitants. There are 1 town, 4 townships and 61 villages in the region. North-east of the region borders with Jeyranchol plain, central part – with Ganja-Gazakh lowland, south – with the north-eastern slopes of the Lesser Caucasus mountains range.

Shamkir region has an ancient history, ruins of towns of V-VI cc. prove existence of advanced ancient urban culture here. There are many ancient cultural monuments in Shamkir region as well as medieval constructions in Arran architectural style. There are 71 architectural monuments here, one of them is of world significance, 26 are national and 44 are local monuments.

The historical Shamkur (also known as Shamkhor and Shamkir) has been known since the 5th century as a merchant and craft centre. In 652, the city was seized by Arabs. In 737, Khazars settled in Shamkir after the Arabian commander Mervan's campaign to Volga. In 752, the city was destroyed by the Sabir people, who lived nearby and rebelled against the Arabs. In 854, the

¹ <https://www.culturepartnership.eu/en/article/mapping-and-strategy-building-handbook>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%9E%C9%99mkir>



Muslim Khazars took refuge in Shamkir. Later, the city was under the reign of Ganja amirs from the Kurdish dynasty of Shaddadids. In the 12th century and in the beginning of the 13th century, Shamkir was under the Georgian reign. In 1195, the Georgian Queen Tamar's commanders destroyed the troops of Azerbaijan's Atabey Abu-Bakr, who was from Seljuk dynasty of the Ildegizids. In 1235, Shamkir was destroyed by Mongols. From the first quarter of the 16th century till the beginning of the 19th century Shamkir was governed by hereditary rulers of Azerbaijani (Qizilbash) tribe called Shamsaddinli-Zulgadar. In 1803, during the military actions against Ganja Khanate, Shamkir was taken up by Russian troops and annexed to Russia.

In 1817–1818, colony of Germans resettled from Wurttemberg was established on the site of Shamkir under the name Annenfeld. On September 3, 1826, during the Russo-Iran war, the Shah's guard consisting of 10,000 soldiers was destroyed near Annenfeld. In 1915, Assyrians from Turkey and Iran were resettled here and still lived here as of the 1930s.

Following World War I, Annenfeld was given the Russian name of Annino. In 1938, it was granted urban-type settlement and renamed Shamkhor, after the nearby railway station and the historical Shamkir. In 1944, two years after the German population was deported as part of the population transfer in the Soviet Union, it was granted town status. In 1991, the name was changed to Shamkir.

The economy of the Shamkir region is mainly agricultural. Vineyards and vine-making, livestock, poultry farming, potato, sunflower, vegetables and flowers are not only supplied to the market of the region, but also abroad. Construction materials production and electric energy production and distribution are the main non-agricultural sectors of economy. Shamkir Hydroelectric Power Plant is second large in Azerbaijan.

There are a music school, Central Library System with 72 branches, 1 cultural centre, 28 culture houses, 5 town clubs, 24 village clubs in Shamkir region. Recently, a number of splendid parks and entertainment centres have been constructed or rehabilitated.

At a newly constructed premises of the Heydar Aliyev Center, along with memorial exhibition devoted to the national leader, a concert hall, conference rooms, a cinema, a library and other facilities are available here. There is the National Flag museum that exhibits flags of historical states and khanates and tells the story of modern National Flag of Azerbaijan; and also the newly renovated History and Land-lore Museum and Chanlibel Folk Art museum located in the region. “Zeka” (Mind) Youth intellectual development and creativity centre offers foreign languages, computer skills and drawing courses; a designated fully-equipped large TV pavilion, a modern art gallery, a library with books in different foreign languages are operational.

3. CREATIVE TOWNS AND REGIONS INITIATIVE IN SHAMKIR

Shamkir local administration has provided the following justification for its aspiration for being designated as a pilot town within the Creative Towns and Regions Initiative:

- > The region has ancient history, rich and diverse cultural resources, qualified and industrious human capacity, that's why achieving positive changes in cultural development have been targeted as an actual agenda.
- > The district's objectives are to better use available resources and opportunities, help local people express their cultural identity, and in the meantime to feel themselves connected to the world culture, turn Shamkir into a region attracting the visitors with its vibrant and colourful culture.
- > Currently, the nationwide objective is to shift from government subsidies to independent and responsible self-financed initiatives. Support to local creative production, bringing into motion the tourism attraction factors (ancient archaeological excavation sites, historical German settlement, eco-tourism capacity, production of well-known wines and brandy) by enhancing them with cultural content, nurturing of the elements of digital culture based on vast local intellectual potential can benefit from analysis and implementation of best practices across Europe as well as from comparison and exchange of experience accumulated in Eastern Partnership member countries, their cities and regions.

3.1. Project Team and Stakeholders

Project Core Team

- > **Lia Ghilardi** (UK), Senior Expert for Creative Towns and Regions Initiative
- > **Jahangir Selimkhanov** (Azerbaijan), Junior Expert in Azerbaijan for Creative Towns and Regions Initiative
- > **Ragnar Siil** (Estonia), Key Expert of EU-EaP Culture and Creativity Programme
- > **Sevinj Aghazada** (Azerbaijan), Country Coordinator for EU-EaP Culture and Creativity Programme
- > **Hojjat Asadullayev** (Azerbaijan), Project Coordinator in Shamkir

Participants of the Research included representatives of:

- > Shamkir District's Executive Administration
- > Regional Department of Culture and Tourism for Shamkir, Dashkesan, Gedabek and Göygöl districts
- > Heydar Aliyev Cultural Centre in Shamkir

- > Shamkir Distirict Palace of Culture
- > Zeka Centre for Intellectual Advancement of Youth
- > Shamkir Central Library
- > Shamkir Museum of Local History and Land-lore
- > Shamkir City Music School
- > Carpet-making factory of “Azerkhalcha” State Company in Shamkir
- > Baku-Oxford School in Shamkir
- > German Heritage Centre in Shamkir
- > Archaeological Site “Shamkir Medieval City”
- > Shamkir Tourism Information Centre
- > Shamkir Technical Lyceum
- > Kindergarten “Kids Academy”
- > Representatives of the community of ashyqs - folk musicians-poets, local visual artists, musicians, amateur theatre group’s leaders

3.2. Project Schedule

January 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shamkir has submitted application to the call
February 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shamkir and 5 more towns and regions from EaP countries have been selected as pilots
March 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk study of the strategies, documents online resources
March 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit to the region - public launch of the project, open lecture at Shamkir District Culture Palace, meetings with main stakeholders
May 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networking of 6 partner towns at Creative Regions Forum in Chishinau, Moldova
June 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field trip, visiting the venues, interviews and discussions
June 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of the collected materials, development of the recommendations
August-September 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of poster presentations and the artistic programme for the final event, getting financial support this activity from the MCT-AZ
October 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentaiton of the final report and methodology in Shamkir, holding the two-day final event with the workshop by Key Expert Ragnar Siil

3.3. Mapping of Shamkir's Cultural Resources

Shamkir has a rich historical and cultural heritage, which requires in addition to safeguarding and studying more dynamic solutions in order to use the full potential of town's and region's resources. In the recent years Shamkir region has experienced quite substantial investment and witnessed development in many sectors including economic growth, social welfare, sustainable development, as well as building up culture, sports, tourism and leisure facilities and spaces. Despite this evidently positive fact, the resources in cultural sphere are lacking efficiency in their proper use, and the following shortcomings need to be addressed both on local level as well as on the national level:

- > Rather substantial capital investments in buildings, facilities, equipment are not adequately supported by funding provided for the training of professional staff and independent cultural activists nor for running the cultural activities.
- > Cultural management is not linked with promotion of self-financing (marked by the concept of 'creative industries') or self-governance (area covered by the notion of 'community/grass-root initiatives').
- > Existing cultural establishments and initiatives are quite loosely connected with each other, as well as with sectors beyond core 'culture' (like education, social work and charitable activities, tourism).

Historical Monuments and Intangible Heritage

As noted before, the city and its environment contain evidences of cultural and historical heritage belonging to various periods and cultures. The folk culture includes strong tradition of story-telling, carpet-making and other crafts.

Challenges:	Opportunities:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- some archaeological sites of world and national significance are in the process of on-going excavations, hence lack of good quality transport communication and facilities for visitors;- ashq tradition of story-telling, poetry and music performance is not well articulated in the cultural offer;- traces of German heritage (urban planning, lifestyle, knowledge related with wine-making and agriculture) are not reinforced enough and remain as memories gradually fading away.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- growing understanding of necessity to build specific cultural brand of the town and the region, which make the territory distinctive and creates interest among potential visitors;- there are designated cultural workers, as well as cultural activists who are passionate about collecting and safeguarding the local heritage.

Public Activities

Along with different festivities, celebrations, and commemoration ceremonies which are held countrywide, Shamkir has a positive experience of positioning itself as a hosting location for a premium-level international chess tournament. The latest re-developments in urban space, especially creation of several parks and gardens, are leading to changes in behaviour of the citizens toward spending more time in public.

Challenges:	Opportunities:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - traditional preconceptions about gathering beyond your family and close community, and mingling in with strangers (especially in regard of women); - shortage in innovative, engaging, participatory forms of cultural activities; - lack of necessary know-how of latest international experience in cultural developments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - young generation now is more adjusted to international trends thanks to Internet and also have more opportunities for traveling; - good quality facilities and venues creates necessary preconditions for launching festivals, idea fairs, meetings and cultural activities across the town. One positive example of this kind is a recent initiative of the regional culture department to start an open stage for amateur musicians and poets in a park in Shamkir.

Cultural Venues and Facilities

In the past few years the town has got significant investment into various concert and exhibition halls, traveling stage facilities, sound, light, video and TV recording and editing equipment, which however are not accompanied with intensive programming and management of these resources.

Challenges:	Opportunities:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - local cultural workers were accustomed to get all goods and services for granted, and were never urged to think about efficient and proper use, and are not attempting to use potential of networking and bottom-top initiatives; - cuts in funding do not lead to search of alternative sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - some of venues might be hired out to regional, national and even international conventions and gatherings, some could serve as a training base for universities in Ganja, Baku and other cities of Azerbaijan; - local talent should be attracted to creating crafts and design studios,

including low-budget cultural projects, crowdfunding, international co-operation, more market-oriented and income-generating activities.	music theatre shows on a traveling stage; - well-equipped TV studio might turn into test ground for new film production.
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Educational Institutions

Traditions of public enlightenment (Ahmed Javad), strong accent on intellectual development of youth (Bilik Centre and Library at Heydar Aliyev Centre, Zeka Youth Centre, Chess School), high standard of education at the Baku-Oxford School in Shamkir

Challenges:	Opportunities:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - good initiatives by advanced teachers and schools are not streamlined into aggregated new quality of education standards; - arts education provided in privileged schools and kindergartens (with high study fees) is of a better quality and variety, however it is not necessarily the matter of the amount paid by the parents, but rather by the methods applied and imagination triggered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - positive experience which is gained by particular teachers and schools might be better circulated through facilitating informal networks, as well as organising knowledge-transfer sessions and get together meetings; - school curricula could be more oriented towards creativity and arts and provide more opportunities for meeting with artists and culture workers, and involving teachers and pupils into on-going cultural activities.

Tourism Potential

The town and district currently are somehow aside from main tourist routes, and many potentially attractive features (varied cultural heritage, natural landscapes, spirit of new developments) remain untapped.

Challenges:	Opportunities:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - currently available tourism offer is not competitive with established tourist destinations in the country; - the lack of synergy between state, corporate and independent establishments and initiatives leads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - geographically advantageous position on the highway between Baku and Tbilisi, and close proximity to medium-sized city of Ganja with strong cultural potential could make Shamkir a small and



<p>to a rather dispersed effect of many undertakings;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - dependence on heavy funding creates feeling of disappointment in the financially less favourable periods, therefore cultural workers should be trained in risk management and leadership in order to harness imagination and solidarity among local people. 	<p>compact ‘cultural haven’ destination in case a fairly sensible cluster/package of cultural, touristic and hospitality enterprises, activities and events is set up here;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - positive image of Shamkir as a place of strikingly new developments spread outside the region is already working for attracting many people to visit the place; - in case unique (in terms of concept and content) cultural events are launched in Shamkir, it is a big estimation that visitors from Ganja, Baku and also from Georgia could decide to attend them.
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The process of mapping the resources in Shamkir is already bringing up the positive effect. For example, it was suggested that the Knowledge Centre in Shamkir requests the Knowledge Foundation in Baku assistance in purchasing the international productions of science & technology related documentaries intended for children and youth and make a series of screenings with invitation of researchers for discussion talks related to a topic of the presented film. As for now, this inquiry has been positively accepted at the foundation and they advised to make a grant application. In the meantime, a business consultant and science promotion enthusiast (born and raised in Baku, but currently living in Milan) eagerly agreed to attract her contacts with Science Centres across Europe for getting to the recommended lists of the films.

4. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING SHAMKIR’S POTENTIAL


4.1. Vision 2025

Shamkir is a city with distinctive, dynamic and appealing cultural profile clearly identified both by inhabitants and from outside, where culture is a substantial vehicle for urban regeneration and local pride. Shamkir has a balanced perception of local culture - as safeguarded memory, as a way of expressing aspirations and needs of individuals and groups, as a fascinating way to shape the future.

The use of terms ‘strategy’ and ‘strategic’ is conventional in this particular context, which has to be taken into consideration:

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- > Recent reform in the regional cultural governance in the country has led to the consolidation of the management units. Double subordination of these units (to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and simultaneously, to the Executive Authority of the respective district) was creating quite ambiguous situation, when the ministry could not extend enough authority on the use of the local budget for culture as it had been distributed to the local authorities. It was also a challenge to handle with nearly 70 units, so since last year the management structure has been optimized, and currently there are 14 regional offices which get the budget from the ministry and therefore are not under the direct supervision of the state executive authorities. The Culture and Tourism Department based in Shamkir is curating three more neighbouring districts.
 - > Thinking and acting strategically is not yet adopted as a working principle on the regional or local level in the country, therefore people are not encouraged to take a lead in defining their plans other than executing the tasks (set from above) well enough.
 - > Strategic planning is much more responsible and laborious process that could be conducted within the current project, hence we have chosen more practice oriented, evidence-based approach – by pointing to the available resources and giving possible scenarios of future development. In some cases, the suggested solutions are debate-provoking, unconventional and at first sight looking nearly impossible, however this method of ‘touching the dream’ helps to awaken the vision and harnessing the imagination and creative energy of many people.


Given the above factors, we came to a decision to build the public discussion of the proposals for the development of the cultural potential of Shamkir around the exact cases rather than speculating with abstract notions - thus the idea about visualization through the poster presentations of 15 project proposals, and initiating public debate with a process of bidding of the proposed projects. Moreover, the process of collecting the votes in this opinion poll is also visualized by the metaphor of blooming trees – the flat ‘tree-shaped’ contours exposed in a public space will be gradually filled in with voting blanks in the form of leaves and flowers. In such a way, the procedure of community participation in discussing the cultural strategy gets translated into bold and inspiring language of images and ‘tangible’ concepts. The final event (which was held in Shamkir end of October) was planned not only as a conference with talks and presentations, but also as a series of cultural events which gave local inhabitants a taste of the projects which are put into discussion. For example, the suggestion about starting a photography festival was supported with a photography exhibition which the local photographers were preparing under the curatorship by a Baku-based photography artists with wide international reputation. Another idea - to launch regular Days of Music in former Lutheran churches in Shamkir and Göygöl - will be ‘embodied’ in the concert of Renaissance and baroque music performed by musicians from Shamkir, Ganja and Baku.




On our inquiry, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan was convinced to allocate special budget for the proposed series of events related with final presentation of the finding of the Creative Towns and Regions Initiative. The programme includes two exhibitions presenting the results of respective workshops, launch of a street art object – murals created collaboratively with local children, two concerts and poster presentation of the project proposals with voting process initiated among the local population.

4.2. 14 Potential Ideas for Development

1. **New Educationists.** Ahmed Javad, an outstanding Azerbaijani poet, author of the lyrics to the National Anthem of the Republic of Azerbaijan, was native of Shamkir region, and is mostly known by the fact that he among those intellectuals who has been persecuted by Stalinist regime in 1937. This prominent public figure is commemorated with a sculptural monument in Shamkir and some local poetry events are organized in his memory. A resource for further cultural activities however might be also the story of Ahmed Javad's strong devotion to the ideals of common enlightenment (there are famous stories about endeavours in the sphere of school education he and his wife Shukriyya were making in the region). As an example, an annual event on the topic "Leadership and initiative-taking in teaching today" could be started in order to encourage and celebrate modest heroes who teach children with sincere devotion and inventiveness.
2. **City Photography Festival.** The city has a substantial creative and organisational potential for holding a festival on national scale, and in perspective with strong international component. A few local photographers are adjusted to international photography networks, send their images to international magazines and agencies. Exhibition spaces are to be settled in various cultural venues, as well as on the buildings facades, electronic billboards and parks.
3. **Annenfeld – a German township.** The core of the modern Shamkir constitutes the quarters around 5 main streets constructed by German immigrants settled there since 1817. This urban setting has been restored and point of special interest represents a Lutheran church, which has been turned into a concert hall with organ. An independent centre for German Cultural Heritage is active in Shamkir. There is potential for turning a few houses in the historical "German" part of the town into a living space for intercultural exchange and understanding, so that volunteers from Germany could literally live here for some period one after another, reviving the experience of their ancestor who lived peacefully within an 'alien' cultural surrounding for many generations.

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4. **Days of Music in the Organ Hall.** The venue is not used currently to full extend, so it is worth to think about chamber music days, a short festival in this hall, which is unique for a vast region. It might be combined with another church turned into music hall in Göygöl (former name – Helenendorf). There should be some unique element by which even modest by scale event could be attracting for visitors from far and close – either by thematic programming, or inviting each time some prominent musician as guest intendant etc.
 5. **Youth Centre of Debut Films and Innovative TV projects.** The central nucleus of the Zeka” Centre for Intellectual Enhancement of Youth building is the spacious TV studio with all necessary equipment for shooting high-quality TV programs. This potential is primarily used for producing just one show - intellectual game “Parlaq Zeka” and rest of the time has no proper use. An array of various proposals could be applied here, if the resources and respective creative teams are attracted. For example, the pavilion could be hired for shooting films, or given to young film-makers for their debut works (and consequently, a festival with debut or student films might be arranged). It might be also proposed to link this well-equipped studio with University of Culture & Arts in Baku, to establish here a training base for experimental film and TV productions.
 6. **Modern Painting Museum.** A rare collection of Azerbaijanian painting from 1960-ies to 1990-ies donated to this centre is currently decorating the walls in the foyer and corridors of the “Zeka” Centre, however it deserves a special museum institution with proper programming of temporary exhibitions, interpretation, education activities, and created conditions for disclosing the curatorial skills and interest to art history.
 7. **Book Miniature Centre.** In the entrance room of the History and Land-lore Museum one wall is decorated with giant murals by a local artist in the visual language of medieval book miniature. To let this resource work with more impact, it could be proposed to make the first hall a gallery of miniature art, where three other walls of this space are given to works by Azerbaijanian and international artists using the technique and imagery of miniature art and short courses of miniature painting could be held there.
 8. **Animated monuments.** Archaeological sites of international and national significance from ancient and medieval periods are properly safeguarded and studied, however their potential for education, creativity and tourism is not elaborated well. School visits introducing the students to basics of archaeological excavations and research, organizing theatrical and music performances in the vicinity of these stunning heritage sites are the must.
 9. **Public Art interventions.** There some nicely and neatly done parks and green areas are available in the town, and as I was told, local people are acquiring a new habit of spending more free time by socializing in the public spaces. In some areas participation of amateurs from among locals could be advised, for example, the Ferris wheel and roller coaster overlooking



Heydar Aliyev Centre, some walls in the town might be painted by (or according to design developed by) youth under guidance of a painter or designer.

10. **Bringing together the arts and food culture.** More authentic ‘slow food’ eateries and concept cafes should be encouraged, and live music brought into the cafes and restaurants. Examples of possible ‘interventions’ - ashlyq music which is a traditional intangible heritage, a sort of local pride is not regularly represented in the public space, so it might have sense to arrange at least short performances on a definite hour every day in one of the teahouses of the town. Another instant proposal – to open a German bakery with real or fake German family name to revive the heritage spirit.
11. **Permanent showcasing of the local talent.** The spacious building of the Regional Culture House in Shamkir might be turned into platform for presenting activities in local cultural houses across the region (short concerts, photo exhibitions, handicrafts, community art works)
12. **Cinema Club of Science Films.** A Knowledge Centre established by the Heydar Aliyev Centre, so far organizes ad hoc lectures and simple language courses. It was proposed to bring to Shamkir a series of international popular films on various scientific discoveries and disciplines with subtitles in Azerbaijani language and arrange the screenings in the cinema within the Centre. Moderators from among the local teachers may guide discussions after the screenings and, a chance allowing, the scholars dealing with research topic covered by a film, could be invited.
13. **Experimental studios of design and handicrafts.** The State Carpet-making Company “Azerkhalcha” has recently opened its large manufacturing plant in Shamkir (which has yet no attribution to local creative force, just making) and the plans to initiate a ceramic workshop-factory are heard about. Nevertheless, the process might be taken into more cutting-edge artistic/designer path, if properly engineered and mentored. This means also, creating favourable conditions for artists and craftsmen to retain them in Shamkir or letting them to relocate there (a native of Shamkir glass artist, graduate of St. Petersburg Stieglitz Academy of Applied Art might settle back in his hometown if a workshop with oven for glass-making were offered to him).
14. A Complex Development project of a creative space under a working title **“Hummel Wine Factory”**. A large waste-ground with remnant of an industrial buildings in the downtown of the city might be turned into the place which will be visited both by locals and tourists. Many of the projects described above, might be concentrated in one space – painting museum, glass, ceramics workshops, jewellers and clothing designers’ shops, photography studio with a small gallery, conceptual cafes, children’s creativity zone and many more undertakings could be worked out in collaboration with a wide circle of interested organisations, businesses and groups.

NOTE

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