



Just Transition Platform – Project fiche:

C-MINE REUSE PROJECT: TURNING A FORMER COAL MINE INTO A CREATIVE HUB

This document is part of a series presenting information and lessons learned on policy approaches at national, regional or local level supporting a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. The Just Transition Platform (JTP) assists EU Member States and regions to unlock the support in this transition. Visit the JTP website: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/just-transition-fund/just-transition-platform_en

Member State:

Belgium

Region:

Limburg Region

Sector:

Other (coal)

Total project budget (€):

The initial requalification project required investments of EUR 75 million. Funds were sourced according to a PPC model, namely a partnership between public and private developers: one third of the project was financed through private funds, two thirds came from public entities. Specifically, public funds came from the city of Genk, LISOM, EFRO, Tourism Flanders, Province of Limburg, Limburg Sterk Merck and LRM. Additionally, the city of Genk incurs EUR 3 million in net costs for maintaining the structure and offering its services.

Financing conditions (co-financing rate):

N/A

Sources of funding:**National funding:**

N/A

Regional funding:

N/A

Duration:

The Winterslag site was purchased by the city of Genk in 2001. In 2004, the development of the C-mine Masterplan started. The first business activities to open shop did so in 2005, with many following in later years. The project is ongoing.

Responsible Managing Authority/Agency:

The site collects many stakeholders and managing authorities, both from the public and private sector. An independent municipal company (headquartered in the Energy Building) runs the cultural operations and acts as liaison for the city of Genk. The LRM, VIG and Iedereen Genk initiated the co-working space and start-up incubator C-mine Crib. The C-mine Business Zone gathers many other private companies.

Summary

The region of Limburg, and the city of Genk in particular, have a rich history of coal extraction. Indeed, during the 20th century, coal represented the economic raison d'être of the area. The mining site at Winterslag interrupted operations in 1988, with dire consequences for the city. In the following decade, mobilisation started to find a new use to this vast site. This culminated in 2005 with the inauguration of C-mine, a hybrid development project mixing both public and private resources to give new life to a space with a valuable cultural heritage. The reconversion of this mine was driven by a desire to form an artistic hotspot for visitors

and professionals of the creative industry. One can differentiate the operations on campus based on the ultimate users of the services. On the one hand, citizens from Genk and abroad are welcomed to enjoy performing and visual arts installations and programmes. On the other hand, businesses can exploit their enviable location among a cluster of similarly creative firms. The proximity of these guarantees several opportunities for synergy; for example, students at the LUCA School of Arts located on the C-mine campus are often hired for internships and apprenticeships in the nearby companies.

Type of activities:

Given the high heterogeneity of the organisations that compose C-mine, summarising the activities conducted on site can be difficult. A useful organising theme is offered by the four pillars of the C-mine's mission statement. These are (i) Education – best exemplified by the LUCA School of Arts and cultural initiatives aimed at visitors. (ii) Creative economy – as part of the masterplan informing the development of the site, it was decided to focus on the creative industry. Today, the C-mine campus hosts 60+ start-ups and affirmed companies in design and media production, which account for over 330 jobs. Moreover, the campus offers appealing spaces for corporate events. (iii) Artistic creation and presentation – the campus offers a multi-disciplinary programme of performing and visual arts; it also hosts resident artists who chose the site for their activities. (iv) Creative tourism – at the heart of the project lied the desire to build on the heritage of coal mining in the region. The re-qualified mining site, with its restored warehouses and artistic installations call around one million visitors per year. It should be clear that the geographical proximity of these initiatives offers many opportunities for networking, cross-fertilisation and synergy.

Goals and approach:

C-mine is organised according to a very hybrid arrangement. The site hosts many different stakeholders, both private and public and engaged in different – although adjacent – fields. This implies that it may be difficult to pinpoint a single set of goals. For example, the Municipality of Genk will be interested in maximising citizens' outreach and engagement with C-mine's initiatives, whereas C-mine Crib's resident will be interested in expanding their businesses while relying on the unique opportunities for networking offered by the cluster.

Still, among all participants to the initiative, there exists the desire to create a vibrant creative hotspot for artistic talent, developing a community that inspires both its own members and outside visitors. The project's approach is that of re-qualifying and developing an area according to a long-term vision that is shared by all stakeholders and formalised into a master plan.

Important outputs, results or achievements:

As of today, there are 42 companies and organisations located at C-mine Business Area. Of these, a large majority is concentrated in creative industries such as game design, cinema and television, decoration or stage productions. These account for over 330 jobs in high value-added sectors. Furthermore, the C-mine Crib initiative – an innovative co-working space – managed to gather over 60 start-ups, whose proximity opens up opportunities for networking potential and even tutoring and business support to the greenest entrepreneurs.

Besides the above-mentioned figures, the requalification of Winterslag resulted in an element of pride among the citizens of Genk. Since its closure in 1988, the plant and the area surrounding it were run-down and in a status of decay. Today, C-mine is renowned for its beauty, and welcomes tourists from neighbouring regions as well as from abroad. Importantly, this was done by valorising the mine as a heritage site, thereby recognising its cultural importance in the history of the city.

This achievement was recognised by the Flemish government, which, in 2013, awarded C-mine with the Vlaamse Monumentprijs (Flemish Monument Prize).

Scalability¹ and transferability²:

Since the project refers to a restricted physical space, the issue of scalability is not relevant.

Concerning transferability, however, C-mine – but most importantly Limburg's experience with the reconversion of mining sites – could represent a valid model for other transitioning regions. Most Member States have set goals to phase coal by 2050, most of them already within the next decade. This implies that many dismissed plants will require a reconversion strategy, as negligence of these spaces usually leads to decay even in surrounding areas. The model of C-mine – based on long-term planning and a sharing of the financial burden between public and private investors – could be an effective such strategy. Importantly, whether to devote an entire area to a single industry (the creative sector in the case of C-mine) will depend on the specific capabilities available in the territory. While the creation of clusters arranged according to a similar theme can lead to above average returns in terms of innovation and value added, there will be a need to carefully consider the distribution of skills in the local population and ensure the highest possible employment gain.

¹ Scalability entails that a policy approach can be adapted to a bigger scale than just the local context.

² Transferability entails that a policy approach can be applicable to a similar setting and replicated.

Key success factors and lessons learnt:

The positive experience of C-mine highlighted several key success factors. (1) A keen and holistic understanding of the issue of reconversion (potential for repurposing, architecture and infrastructure type, social factors, etc.) encompassed not only the Winterslag plant, but also the other mines in Genk's Municipality and the wider area of Limburg. (2) The repurposing followed a masterplan with a long-term vision, which laid out the key requirement for which C-mine was to be dedicated to cultural activities and the creative industry. (3) The options for repurposing were scrutinised carefully, especially with reference to the other two mining sites in Genk, which were devoted to different purposes to avoid overlaps. (4) The considerable budget was skilfully collected by mixing public and private contributions, which also offered a new channel for interaction among stakeholders. Arguably, the Flemish government was so receptive to the provision of funding due to the considerable collective work made by the Limburg region on the topic of reconversion (as explained in the Central framework section). In terms of lessons learnt, the C-mine's experience and that of other related projects highlights the Municipality's commitment to move away from a mono-industrial (sole reliance on the coal industry) to a diversified economy.

Key challenges:

Concerning C-mine specifically, it has been argued that spaces for the confrontation among stakeholders could be improved. This also due, incidentally, to the mere size of the site, which prevents daily interactions between organisations that are placed far apart. But most importantly, it must be noted that the region still faces re-employment challenges (not only due to the coal phase-out, but also due to the closure of a Ford Motor Company plant that operated in the region up until 2014). While the C-mine offers a vibrant fabric of businesses in the creative industry, this sector cannot sustain the same type of employment (i.e. many employees with low-to-no qualifications) that was guaranteed by the coal and later by the auto industry. Efforts toward re-skilling and up-skilling are still needed to reintegrate troubled jobseekers.

Tools for supporting economic diversification and reskilling/upskilling via projects:

- encouraging knowledge exchange and cooperation between larger and smaller firms;
- scaling business innovation networks and support clusters;
- strengthening entrepreneurial networks;
- exploiting opportunities for creative and sustainable tourism.

Central framework conditions³:



The European Commission has been involved with the reconversion of areas hit by coal decline since the early 1990s, largely through the RECHAR programmes, which sponsored investments in infrastructure to repurpose dismissed coal mines and to revitalise the local economies affected. The same commitment is enshrined in the Platform for Coal Regions in Transition, a multi-stakeholder, bottom-up collaboration for the exchange of good practices and delivery of technical assistance in support of reconversion projects. Belgium, and in particular the region of Limburg, is an active participant to this initiative. Indeed, Limburg's experience represents a model to follow. Winterslag, later C-mine, must be viewed in relation to other six large mining sites that underwent requalification in the Limburg region. These projects were favoured by the institution of a Regional Platform (1994–2000) that worked as a forum for the interaction between municipalities, confrontation on mutual challenges and engagement of local communities. This entity was responsible for the drafting of the 'multi-site master plan', which introduced the successful paradigm for which each site should be devoted to a specific central theme, avoiding overlap and promoting the targeting of resources.

Outlook:

The site of C-mine covers a large area of 5 000 m². Not all of it has yet been developed. There still is potential (and space) for further requalification. The stakeholders are currently drafting a second master plan that will guide C-mine into the next decade and envisions future opportunities for development. For example, a building that will host a new art organisation is under construction, and ideas for residential areas fitting innovative living paradigms (e.g. cooperative living) are being explored. Considering a closer time horizon, applications for workspaces at the C-mine Crib or at the C-mine Business Zone flow in steadily, thus we should see the campus' recognition as a pivotal creative hub increase.

³ Framework conditions encompass the institutional, informational and socio-economic factors that determine a given environment (contextual information), e.g. market conditions, access to finance, tax regulation, infrastructure and support.

Other comments:

To grasp the full picture of coal mine repurposing in the Municipality of Genk, it is important to consider the parallel experience of two other mining sites that underwent a requalification similar to that of C-mine. The first one is the Waterschei mine, now called Thor Park, which has been transformed into an industrial park hosting

companies and organisations in the field of clean energy. The second one is the Zwartberg mine, which has been repurposed into yet another business park hosting local SMEs, a prominent art studio and a research park on biodiversity (known as La Biomista).

Partners & contacts:

Municipality of Genk, Limburgse Reconversie Maatschappij (LRM), Vereniging Industrielen Genk (VIG), Iedereen Genk and several private companies (a comprehensive list can be found [here](#)).

Website/Social media:

<https://www.c-mine.be/en>

<https://c-minecrib.be/en/>

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