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ESIRA – ENHANCING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL AREAS

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TRAINING MODULES

Deliverable: D5.2

WP5 – Community-led innovation spaces and pilot social economy initiatives



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Executive Summary

The train-the-trainers programme of the ESIRA project is a core activity that supports the effective functioning of Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) and the nurturing of social economy initiatives. It is a capacity building plan to the necessary skills of MAP facilitators and members and rural actors to foster inclusive rural development through a series of training theoretical and practical materials that address the issues faced by rural areas and the inclusion of vulnerable groups, through topics such as social innovation, the green transition, entrepreneurship and social economy, strengthening rural communities, and the challenge of depopulation. This capacitation aims to promote social innovation and social economy projects and networks involving various actors such as municipalities, regional authorities, public agencies, local action groups, NGOs, and entrepreneurs. Its main goal is to enhance the understanding of social inclusion for vulnerable groups, addressing significant social and economic inequalities in the areas of implementation.

Through a comprehensive curriculum, the training will encourage the creation and management of social economy projects tailored to the unique needs of rural areas, combining theoretical knowledge with practical skills in six themes: Introductory module of the ESIRA (Enhancing Social Innovation in Rural Areas) project; social innovation in rural areas; green transition in rural areas; entrepreneurship and innovative social economic impulse in rural areas; community empowerment in rural areas; and fighting rural depopulation.

List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full name
ALVELAL	Partnership promoting environmental, social and economic territorial development in Spain
BMC	Business Model Canvas
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CIPAV	Research Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Production Systems Foundation
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
COPE	Communities of Practice in Education
CO ₂	Carbon dioxide
D&E	Dissemination & Exploitation
DSI	Digital Social Innovation
EbA	Ecosystem-based Adaptation
EC	European Commission
EEA	European Environment Agency
EASIN	European Alien Species Information Network
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
ESIRA	Enhancing Social Innovation in Rural Areas
EU	European Union
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development



FAA	Environmental Action Fund
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
Fedegan	Colombian Federation of Cattle Ranchers
GE	Global Environment Facility
GDP	(Gross Domestic Product)
GHG	Greenhouse Gases
GVA	Gross Value Added
HETFA	HETFA Research Institute and Centre for Economic and Social Analysis
HDI	Human Development Index
INE	National Institute of Statistics in Spain
ICIA	Canary Islands Institute of Agrarian Research
IRI	Institute for Development and Innovation
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KIP	Key Impact Pathways
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale
LIFE Program	European Union Program for Environment and Climate Action
LIFE+BOSCOS	Sustainable Forest Management in Menorca in a Climate Change Context
LIFE MEDAC	Adapting the Mediterranean to Climate Change
MAP(s)	Multi-Actor Platform(s)

MAPA	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
MEDACC	Innovative Methodologies for Climate Change Adaptation in the Mediterranean Basin
MVP	Minimum Viable Products
MITECO	Ministry of Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge
MVP	Minimum Viable Products
NATMED	Nature-based Solutions on existing infrastructures for resilient Water Management in the Mediterranean
NBS	Nature-Based Solutions
NGOS	Non-Governmental Organisation
R&D	Research & Development
RDP	Rural Development Programs
RURITAGE	Heritage for Rural Regeneration
SI-DRIVE	Social Innovation: Driving Force of Social Change
SIMRA	Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound
SEO Birdlife	Spanish Society of Ornithology
TCA	True Cost Accounting
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
UBU	University of Burgos
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

WP	Work Package
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

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1. Introduction to the Train-the-Trainers Programme

Deliverable D5.2 “Training Modules” is part of the train-the-trainers programme’s materials, designed to capacity build and develop the necessary skills of ESIRA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) and rural actors to foster inclusive rural development through a series of training materials that address the issues faced by rural areas and the inclusion of vulnerable groups, through topics such as social innovation, the green transition, entrepreneurship, social economy, strengthening rural communities, and the challenge of depopulation.

Experts from the Universidad de Burgos, Fundación Oxígeno, and SODEBUR have prepared these materials. The train-the-trainer programme is a core activity for the effective functioning of MAPs and the effective nurturing of social economy initiatives. The main objective of these training materials is to develop the capacities of MAP facilitators, MAP members, and rural actors to foster social economy initiatives and networks. These networks include a diverse range of stakeholders, such as municipalities, regional authorities, public bodies, local action groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and entrepreneurs. The programme's overarching goal is to enhance the understanding of social inclusion for vulnerable groups in the areas where these projects are implemented, thereby addressing significant social and economic disparities.

Through a comprehensive curriculum, the training programme will encourage and promote the creation and management of social economy projects tailored to the unique needs of rural areas. This involves theoretical knowledge and practical skills that participants can apply in real-world contexts. The programme aims to connect various actors within the social economy by developing robust networks and facilitating collaborative efforts that lead to sustainable development outcomes.

The training modules incorporate theoretical concepts, practical guidelines, proposals, examples, best practices, and actions designed to build competencies in critical areas such as social innovation, green transition, entrepreneurship, rural repopulation, and community engagement. This knowledge is crucial for equipping MAP members and facilitators, rural actors in general, with the tools necessary to implement and manage social economy initiatives effectively in a rural context. By fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration, the programme seeks to empower participants to address the specific challenges faced by vulnerable groups in their communities.

Furthermore, the training emphasises the importance of understanding the socio-economic context in which these projects operate. Participants will explore strategies for engaging with local stakeholders, assessing community needs, and leveraging existing resources to maximise impact. Facilitators will gain insights into best practices and successful models from different rural regions.

Another key aspect of the programme is its focus on sustainability (economic, social, and environmental). The programme encourages participants to think critically about the long-term viability of social economy initiatives and the importance of creating inclusive systems that benefit all community members. The training aims to inspire facilitators to become champions of change in their respective regions by instilling a sense of shared responsibility and commitment to social equity.

Ultimately, this train-the-trainer programme aims to create a ripple effect, equipping MAP facilitators and rural actors with the skills and knowledge to effectively nurture and drive social economy initiatives and foster resilient rural economies. Through collective action and innovative thinking, the programme aims to transform the landscape of social economy projects, ensuring that vulnerable groups are not only included but also actively participate in shaping their futures.

1.1 Aims of the Train-The-Trainers Programme

In line with the goals and sense of the ESIRA project, the following general objectives are set out, which, within the framework of the present training plan, will guide the training action towards MAP members and other potential interested members:

1. To train competencies in those aspects of the training opportunities and needs recognised in the territory.
2. To promote the creation of projects linked to social, environmental and economic innovation in the local territory.
3. To determine and foresee a roadmap for training that favours the acquisition of significant learning over time.
4. To design and develop its own training materials to be made available to all interested parties.
5. Strengthen the rural community of MAPs and create networks and services.

1.2 Target of the Programme

The primary target audience for D5.2 “Training Modules” is MAP facilitators and members, as well as rural actors and partners involved in the ESIRA project. Therefore, this training plan has two types of recipients:

- **MAP facilitators and members**, who will receive specific training according to their needs to equip them for the identification, promotion and support of social economy initiatives. The train-the-trainer programme provides specialised training tailored to their unique needs and enhances their skills. This targeted approach ensures that MAP members have the necessary capacity and knowledge to contribute effectively to the project’s objectives. MAP members will also be able

to use training materials to organise training sessions and workshops based on their content.

- **The general audience and rural actors**, who will be able to access the didactic content published in open access and implement it in their own training activities. This feature enables individuals from rural communities, local stakeholders, and interested parties to access the training materials without barriers. By making these resources freely available, the initiative fosters a culture of learning and collaboration, encouraging participation and engagement from a diverse audience.

This ensures the widespread dissemination of the knowledge promoted by the ESIRA project, resulting in rural communities that are better informed and more capable of actively participating in implementing their own projects and in social economy initiatives for sustainable development. This comprehensive training strategy thus contributes to lasting improvements in individual and community capacity.

1.3 Expected Outcomes

Considering that the target audience is composed directly of the members of the project and indirectly of the general public (given its Open Access nature), the results to be achieved are aimed in both directions:

- Strengthen the knowledge and competencies of the groups that will lead rural development in the areas of social inclusion, social economy, green transition, community empowerment, demographic challenge, and sustainable entrepreneurship to ensure the sustainability of MAP once the project ends.
- Creation of an open repository of materials developed during the project that can be consulted by the whole society and can support the development of social innovation projects in rural areas in the future.

1.4 Structure of the Deliverables and Description of the Training Modules

The training materials for the train-the-trainers programme are included in deliverables D5.2 “Training Modules” and D5.3 “Training Modules Updated”.

D5.2 “Training Modules” includes an ESIRA project introduction (Module 0) and five training modules, which are:

- **Social Innovation in Rural Areas.**
- **Green Transition in Rural Areas.**
- **Entrepreneurship and Innovative Social Economy Impulse in Rural Areas.**
- **Community Strengthening in Rural Areas.**
- **Rural Depopulation and Demographic Challenge.**

They share a similar structure, and their content is developed both theoretically and practically, with examples, case studies, and best practices.

Although the table of contents depends on each discipline, each module consists of an introduction (starting from the European level), learning objectives, content specific to each subject, a section on success stories, and the bibliographical references used.

The training modules are as follows:

Module 0. Introductory module of the ESIRA Project

Aim: To learn about the ESIRA project and the role of social innovation within the project, as well as its main purpose, areas of action, methodology, partners involved and future lines of action.

Contents:

1. The role of social innovation in rural areas.
2. Project methodology.
3. Work packages and working methods.
4. Expected results and impacts.

Module 1. Social Innovation in Rural Areas

Aim: Empower rural dwellers to create innovative solutions that address specific social challenges within their communities, especially for the most vulnerable groups. It will teach participants to identify local problems and design projects that bring social value by implementing new ideas or improving existing practices.

Contents:

1. Identification and analysis of social problems; social inclusion in rural areas.
2. Introduction to social innovation and its uniqueness in the rural territory.
3. Methodologies of rural social innovation. Design of innovative actions.
4. Good practices and adaptive management in rural social innovation.
5. Evaluation methodologies of rural social innovation.
6. Resources and policies to promote rural social innovation.

Module 2. Green Transition in Rural Areas

Aim: Train rural dwellers in sustainable practices that promote environmental protection. The approach is based on how these practices can be integrated into daily life and community activities, contributing to a more sustainable rural environment. It will provide knowledge and tools for the sustainable management of natural resources and the reduction of environmental impact in their daily and community activities.

Contents:

1. Clean water, living soil, reducing waste and circulating by-products.
2. Clean energy, GHG (Greenhouse Gases) emission reduction and climate change adaptation.
3. Preservation and restoration of ecosystems and biodiversity.
4. Organic agriculture, regenerative livestock and sustainable forest management.
5. Methodologies and indicators of sustainability in the rural green transition.
6. Resources and policies to promote green transition in rural areas.

Module 3. Entrepreneurship and Innovative Social Economy Impulse in Rural Areas

Aim: To enable rural inhabitants to create and manage profitable, environmentally friendly, and socially beneficial social economy initiatives. This module will focus on developing entrepreneurial projects that integrate sustainability into their business model, taking advantage of local resources in an innovative way.

Contents:

1. Analysis of the environment: The identification of opportunities for the creation of sustainable businesses.
2. Designing the business model: Business Model Canvas and Lean Start-up Methodology.
3. Drawing up the business plan: Stages of the business plan.
4. Specific marketing for rural products and services. Ethical financial management.
5. Digitalisation, tourism, social services, culture, heritage.
6. Experiences of success and motivation. Business sustainability indicators.

Module 4. Community Empowerment in Rural Areas

Aim: Strengthen rural inhabitants' capacity to lead processes of change in their communities, promoting active and conscious participation in decision-making that affects their environment. The focus is on developing leadership, communication, and community organisation skills, as well as on building support networks and mobilising local resources. It will promote an inclusive approach that values diversity and empowers the community's capacity to self-manage and respond to its own challenges.

Contents:

1. Groups at risk of vulnerability in rural areas.
2. Community leadership techniques and strategies for citizen participation.
3. Tools, organisation and management of rural community initiatives.

4. Innovative and transversal community actions.
5. Experiences and good practices in rural community strengthening.
6. Evaluation and indicators of rural community strengthening.
7. Resources and policies to promote community strengthening in rural areas.

Module 5. Fighting Rural Depopulation

Aim: To enable rural dwellers to identify and address the challenges related to depopulation and ageing of their communities. This module aims to support participants in developing strategies and projects that promote demographic revitalisation, encouraging the attraction and retention of the population and the integration of young and new residents into the local social and economic fabric.

Contents:

1. Reality, causes and typologies of rural depopulation.
2. Identification of opportunities to attract new inhabitants.
3. Specific strategies for attracting and retaining the young and female population to rural areas.
4. Innovative initiatives to face the demographic challenge in housing, employment, social inclusion, leisure, education, health, culture and communications.
5. Indicators for the evaluation of rural demographic repopulation.
6. Experiences of rural success to promote sustainable demographic development.

The **Training Modules will be available individually** in the **“Train-the-trainers”** section of the ESIRA website.

To facilitate different modes of use, the **Training Modules** are presented in a **vertical format**, allowing them to be easily printed and used as booklets when needed.

Each training module in D5.2 is accompanied by **a set of 4 to 5 practical tools** in D5.3 that enable the essential content to be summarised in infographics and templates completed during teamwork in the Rural Labs, by checklists to monitor progress, and by the ESIRA GUIDE for supporting social economy initiatives, which will be available on the ESIRA website.

The **Training Modules** will be available in **English**. Each project partner will decide which materials to translate into their **local languages**, with the objective that, whenever possible, partners have access to the guide and infographics in their own linguistic contexts.

2. Module 0. The ESIRA Project

2.1 Introduction

[ESIRA](#) is a rural development project supported by the European Commission through the Horizon Europe program, aimed at improving the socioeconomic conditions of the rural population. The ESIRA consortium is made up of 15 organisations from 8 European countries, including universities, expert associations, and non-governmental organisations, which create a network of academic knowledge and practical experience at the local level.

ESIRA recognises that innovative social economy initiatives focused on networks, skills, and local resources can acknowledge the crucial role of citizen-led activities in meeting the needs of rural areas, especially marginalised ones. However, many policies and initiatives fail to effectively support them or engage the most vulnerable groups in the population. The main objective of ESIRA is to contribute to the implementation of innovative place-based social economy initiatives for inclusion and rural development in rural (marginalised) areas, supporting enabling frameworks, a well-connected policy architecture, and piloting innovative solutions that ultimately build more inclusive, resilient, and prosperous rural areas.

To achieve this, ESIRA carries out a work plan focused on (i) researching community-led rural innovation spaces that can connect and empower actors, strengthen social capital, and foster a sense of community, considering the great diversity of rural areas in Europe, and finally (ii) promoting and piloting social economy initiatives that enhance inclusion and living conditions for different vulnerable population groups by improving the provision of (social) services, economic diversification, and sustainable management of natural capital. This will allow (iii) the collection of information and formulation of recommendations for policymakers to better support the third sector and local communities, increasing the understanding of the needs and challenges faced by vulnerable population groups and the social economy, and (iv) promoting knowledge exchange among local actors, strengthening their capacities, and facilitating the expansion and replication of social economy initiatives across rural Europe.

The project will involve 9 regions in 7 European countries, and the exploitation and dissemination activities will be aimed at expanding those regional spaces and replicating the concept in new regions.

2.2 The Role of Social Innovation in Rural Areas

ESIRA is established with the vision that enhancing the socioeconomic position of rural communities is crucial for sustainable economic development that respects and integrates the diverse social structures and practical needs of the most vulnerable groups.

Social innovation plays a crucial role in rural development by promoting solutions that address the specific needs of communities and foster their sustainability. Unlike technological innovation, which focuses on scientific or mechanical advances, social innovation seeks to transform the way people interact with each other and with their environment, creating new models of cooperation and participation. In rural areas, where resources are often more limited and geographical distances widen social and economic gaps, social innovation emerges as a powerful tool to face these challenges, empowering local communities to find answers to their problems.

A key aspect of social innovation in the rural context is its ability to generate collaborative solutions. Through participatory projects, rural inhabitants can actively engage in creating and managing initiatives that improve their quality of life. For example, the implementation of agricultural cooperatives or time banks, where neighbours exchange services, are examples of how social innovation fosters solidarity and strengthens community relationships. These dynamics not only promote economic well-being but also strengthen the social fabric, creating enduring networks of mutual support.

The ESIRA project is overseen by an advisory board composed of experts from various fields, such as economics, sociology, rural development, and cultural heritage. This board will provide leadership and specialised guidance to ensure the successful execution of the project. Its role will involve monitoring progress, providing strategic guidance, and adapting approaches based on environmental changes. It will also connect the project team with relevant resources and networks to ensure that the ESIRA project achieves its objectives of improving the socioeconomic conditions of rural communities.

The ESIRA project is established with the aim of reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion for vulnerable groups in rural communities. Through innovative economic practices, the creation of strong social networks, and the enhancement of participatory policies, ESIRA seeks to ensure the inclusive development of rural communities, emphasising economic sustainability and the protection of cultural heritage.

It is implemented by mapping vulnerable groups in rural areas (youth, women, entrepreneurs) and launching innovative initiatives aimed at strengthening their economic and social status. Local innovative initiatives will help reduce the unemployment rate and the risk of poverty for individuals belonging to marginalised groups and increase their participation in the labour market.

Rural, mountainous, and isolated areas make up nearly 80% of the territory of the European Union and encompass 57% of the total population of Europe. These areas hold significant economic importance, reflected in the fact that they generate 46% of the total gross value added in Europe. Moreover, most natural attractions, segments of cultural heritage, and historical monuments are located in rural and mountainous areas. However, these regions face significant social challenges. Issues such as low per capita gross domestic product, high unemployment rates, low wages, and rapid population ageing pose a heavy burden on residents of rural communities.

2.2.1 The Geographical Areas Covered by the Project

The project is developed thanks to the involvement of 15 partners spread across the European territory. These partners are distributed in 8 countries, covering a total of 9 rural areas. The information about each partner is presented below.

The project focuses on implementing innovative economic initiatives and developing local social networks in rural communities to improve the social situation of vulnerable groups. The areas of action in which the project develops pilot initiatives for social innovation are explained below.

Burgos, Spain

The wood-related industry is of paramount importance in the region, as municipalities own 80% of the total area (communal forest land), making timber utilisation a traditional activity. R&D activities explore potential related to forestry, and there are public support mechanisms, such as Forest Management Plans. Cultural and natural tourism activities significantly boost the local economy. Priorities include cultural initiatives, digital literacy, new transport models, labour inclusion, natural resource conservation, and access to housing.

Image 1. Burgos.



Source: [National Geographic](#).

Trento, Italy

Trento has a significant cooperative movement that aligns social policies with labour policies and involves various stakeholders. The laws promote the social economy and corporate social responsibility. Initiatives such as the COPE (Communities of Practice in Education) project focus on the social and labour inclusion of young people who are neither studying nor working. Service cooperatives enhance inclusion in the tourism sector, while platforms like InCooperazione support the social and labour inclusion of vulnerable groups. Priorities include improving social and labour inclusion, promoting cooperative models, and supporting innovative digital tools for social welfare.

Image 2. Trento.



Source: [Wikipedia](#).



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Northern Hungary and Northern Great Plain, Hungary

The region lacks a common legal framework to support social economy enterprises, and assistance relies more on municipal funds. Important initiatives include support programs for social enterprises and rural municipal social cooperatives. Priorities include promoting artisan workshops and encouraging sustainable local agriculture.

Image 3. Northern Hungary.



Source: [ESIRA](#).

Zachodniopomorskie, Poland

The Polish Social Economy Law supports the development of the social economy. Funds from the European Social Fund and sectoral development policies promote social economy initiatives related to the labour market, social integration, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Partnerships and centres provide additional support. Priorities include improving transportation and digital connectivity, diversifying economic activities, and fostering entrepreneurship, especially among young people.

Image 4. Zachodniopomorskie, Poland.



Source: [ESIRA](#)



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Leski-bieszczadzki, Poland

National public programs and specific initiatives for the Podkarpackie region (i.e., the Podkarpackie Regional Program, European Funds for Podkarpackie, the Coordination of the Social Economy Sector in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship, the Strategic Development Program for Bieszczady) highlight social economy enterprises centred around the tourism industry, such as the Wańkowa Bieszczad ski resort or Bieszczady Sp. zoo., which manages accommodations and school cafeterias. The following themes are considered priorities: transportation and digital connectivity, natural resource management and landscape restoration, social resilience focused on women, and the inclusion of migrant individuals.

Image 5. Leski-bieszczadzki, Poland.

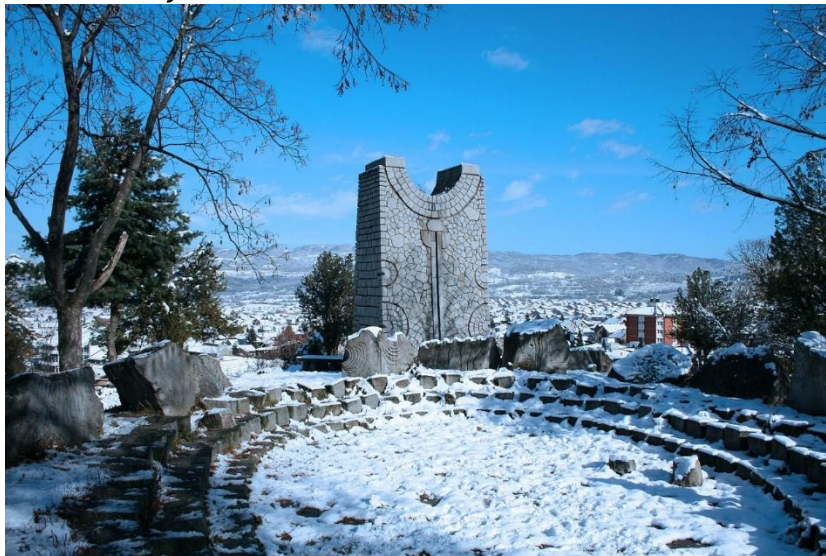


Source: [Wikimedia](#).

Jablanica & Pcinja Districts - Serbia

The rural areas of Jablanica and Pčinja face a series of social and economic challenges that require careful planning and strategic resolution. Economic inequality, lack of employment opportunities, insufficient infrastructure, and limited access to healthcare, education, and other essential resources significantly affect the local population, particularly young people, leading to emigration from rural areas. Furthermore, global social and technological trends affecting rural areas can disrupt traditional ways of life and the identity of local communities.

Image 6. Jablanica & Pcinja, Serbia.



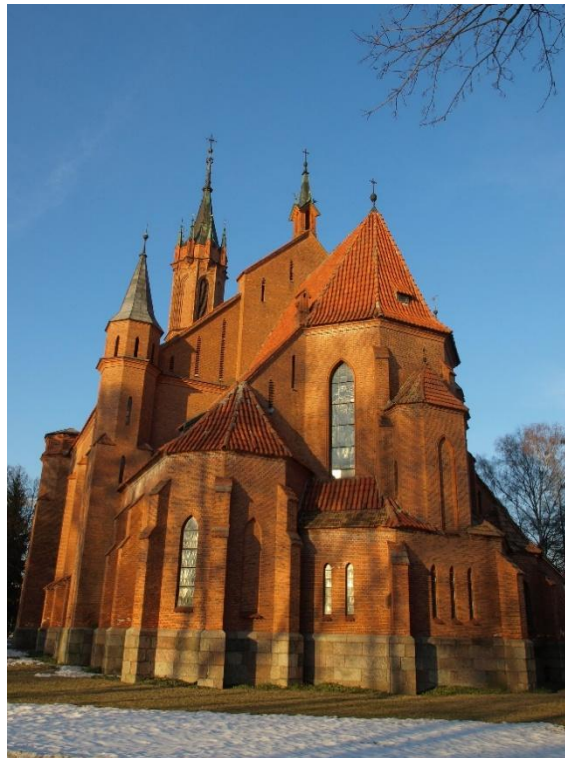
Source: [Wikipedia](#).

The regional rural development strategy for the Jablanica and Pčinja districts established three clear priorities: 1. Improve the quality and living conditions in the rural areas of the region, 2. Increase market efficiency in agriculture and forestry, and 3. Sustainable development of the rural economy. To address these challenges, social initiatives will focus on economic and cultural diversification, investment in rural infrastructure, and support for local entrepreneurs, farmers, young people, and women. It is also crucial to preserve traditional knowledge and cultural identities. Empowering local communities and facilitating their active participation in decision-making processes will be essential to ensure that their specific needs and interests are considered. Moreover, innovative initiatives will align with inclusive and sustainable rural development throughout the region.

Druskininkai - Lithuania

In addition to the national progress strategy of the State "Lithuania 2050" and the National Program for Promoting Social Inclusion and Combating Poverty, the municipality of Druskininkai addresses the inclusion of vulnerable groups through the Strategic Development Plan of the Municipality of Druskininkai for the years 2021-2029. The Druskininkai Local Action Group (Druskininku VVG) is also implementing the local development strategy for its rural areas. The following themes have been identified as local priorities: Innovative solutions for service delivery (internationalised inclusive tourism services), new digital tools (platform and apps), innovation in the inclusive business model, social resilience for mitigating labour seasonality, and diversified agriculture.

Image 7. Druskininkai, Lithuania.

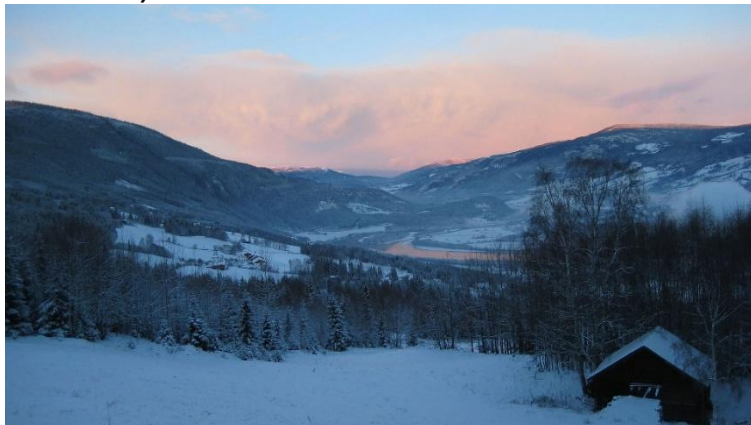


Source: [Wikimedia](#).

Innlandet - Norway

In Innlandet County, there is no specific framework created to support or develop new social economy initiatives. However, both the county and the municipalities provide support to volunteer organisations across a wide range of sectors and activities. The county government has recently approved the regional plan for social inclusion ("Regional plan for the inclusive Innlandet"). The plan aims to establish collaboration with relevant partners from the public and private sectors, as well as NGOs and the academic sector.

Image 8. Innlandet, Norway.



Source: [Wikimedia](#).



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2.3 Methodology of the Project

2.3.1 Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPS)

Multi-Actor Platforms are community-driven spaces that play a vital role in fostering social innovations and strengthening social economy initiatives. These spaces serve as incubators for ideas, providing a platform for individuals and groups to collaborate, share knowledge, and develop solutions to address social challenges. Through collective effort and participation, MAPs contribute to leveraging previous best practices and promoting effective mechanisms for self-governance and support within communities.

Based on documentary research and expert interviews, community-led spaces draw on the diverse experiences and perspectives of participants to inform policy recommendations. The collaborative approach ensures that policy interventions are grounded in the reality on the ground and are more likely to be effective and sustainable in promoting social and economic development.

Partners will conduct research and evaluate the context in which rural marginalization occurs to understand the different drivers of social exclusion in the selected regions. The ESIRA consortium will identify the main strengths and weaknesses, gaps, and potential synergies of each MAP. The design of the MAPs will explore the most suitable governance mechanisms in different geographical contexts to drive social innovation and the social economy in rural areas, empowering vulnerable population groups.

2.3.2 Functioning of the MAP

Formation and Work with the MAP

The MAPs are established once a group of interested individuals has been gathered to engage in the project.

These individuals may come from various entities, both public and private, or they may be individuals without any specific affiliation. Examples include associations, municipalities, social services, educational institutions, local businesses, and Local Action Groups. It is crucial to reach an agreement that allows various local stakeholders—especially vulnerable groups, policymakers, for-profit businesses, existing social economy organisations/initiatives, etc.—to collaborate. These can be different types of forums based on in-person meetings or remote (digital) communication. The MAP develops according to the principles of dialogue. Each MAP has its own facilitator and monitor.

Facilitator Role

The facilitator is more on the ground, closer to the group, managing the atmosphere during meetings and overseeing the rules of dialogue. The facilitation and communication work involve the following tasks:

- The facilitator is in the driver's seat of the MAP.
- Invites and enrolls MAP members.
- Creates a sense of safety and trust.
- Supports the MAP in achieving its objectives.
- Summarizes the outcomes.
- Prepares the position paper: the MAP's stance on the topic.
- Shares research insights with the MAP.

Monitor Role

The monitor is primarily responsible for tracking and evaluating the sessions, with tasks including:

- Assisting the facilitator by adding reflection, gathering necessary data, being proactive, and responding to questions, not only during the meeting but also as needed.
- Documenting progress.
- Reflecting on the functioning of the MAP.
- Informing and evaluating the work. The monitor operates somewhat in the background, closely supervising the work of the facilitator and the group.
- Monitor domain: observes, evaluates, captures, and reports on progress towards the objectives.

MAP Members

It is important that the members of the MAP maintain a good balance among different types of actors:

- Proportion of participating women (40-60%).
- Proportion of members over 65 years old (>15%).
- Proportion of members aged 30 years or older (>15%).
- Diversity of actor groups by sector: none should exceed a share of > 40%.

Participation in MAP Meetings

MAP meetings are conducted in a spirit of dialogue, adhering to a series of principles:



- Equality, a sense of safety, and a cordial, informal environment.
- Remember to sign the consents.
- Goals with MAP members to participate in the project. This is an opportunity to create networks among MAP members who may never have had the chance to meet if not for this project.
- It is a good idea to take photos and document each of the meetings for dissemination purposes.

2.4 Work Packages (WP) and Organisation

ESIRA covers a period of 48 months and is structured into 5 Work Packages (WPs). These will include, on one hand, the management of the project consortium (WP2) and the dissemination, exploitation, and communication of its results (WP6); and on the other hand, the implementation of scientific and technical activities carried out in WPs 3 to 5. Project management, led by UBU in WP2, will ensure complete coherence and alignment of the work encompassed in each WP to meet the project's objectives and will ensure that the project is managed and coordinated efficiently and effectively, including direct communication between the project consortium and the EC, as well as the identification and assessment of risks.

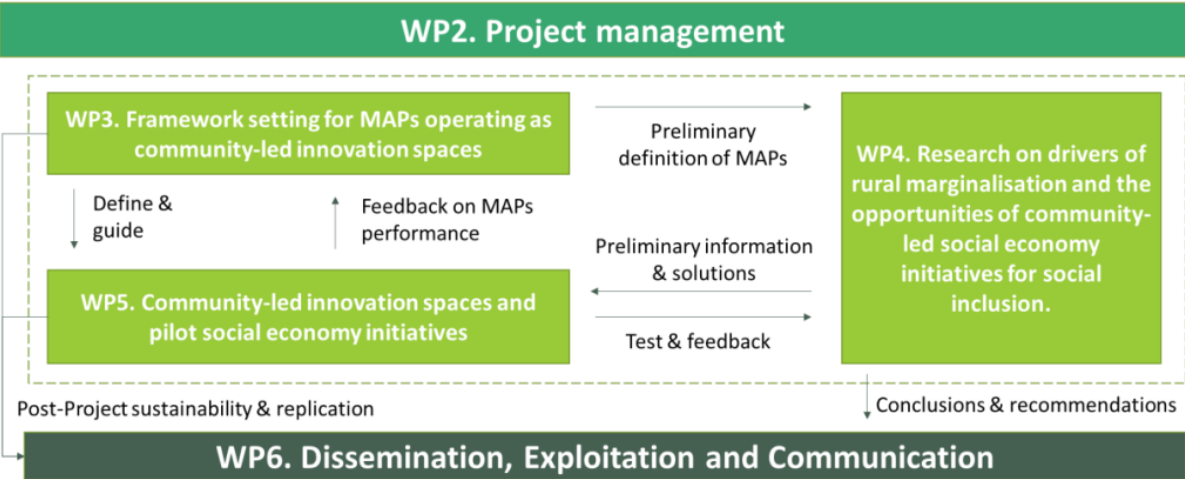
The key to ESIRA lies in the creation, testing, and optimisation of community-led innovation spaces for rural inclusion through the social economy. The common approach for stakeholder management under a multi-actor framework through the MAPs will be implemented in WP3. This WP, led by ERDN (European Rural Development Network), will provide guidance on the creation of MAPs as innovation spaces and deliver tools for the ongoing management and facilitation of the MAPs, in addition to offering a set of possible pathways for their sustainability after the project.

The theoretical research on the factors driving social exclusion, the specific needs of vulnerable population groups, and ways to advance using the social economy and participatory innovation spaces will be carried out in WP4, led by HETFFA. During the first phase of the project, HETFFA will oversee the collection and analysis of factors driving social exclusion in representative rural contexts and current policies and initiatives to address it, particularly the opportunities and challenges of the social economy and entrepreneurship as tools for rural development and social inclusion at a crossroads with the European Green Deal, the Rural Pact, and other key EU policies. In a second phase, based on feedback from the project case studies in WP5, this WP will focus on developing specific policy recommendations and adjusting the project's framework for community spaces for the social economy in rural contexts.

WP5 (UBU) is the cornerstone of the project, enabling the co-definition, testing, and direct optimisation of solutions with local actors in case studies. The project will establish the MAPs together with the actors, agreeing on local roadmaps for each case study, promoting community-based innovation ecosystems, and supporting various social economy initiatives. Close monitoring and evaluation of these activities will be key to the research and conclusions of WP4, and the work itself will generate impactful co-benefits in the case studies even during the project's implementation.

Finally, WP6 (IRI) will focus on dissemination, communication, and exploitation activities, based on the preliminary plan presented in Section 2.2. All partners will work on the proper dissemination of the main messages and results of the project to relevant audiences, from the local to the European level, ensuring post-project exploitation and maximising its results and impacts.

Image 9. Workflow between the project's work packages.



Source: ESIRA Project. Annex 1. Description of the action.

Table 1. Description of the Work Packages.

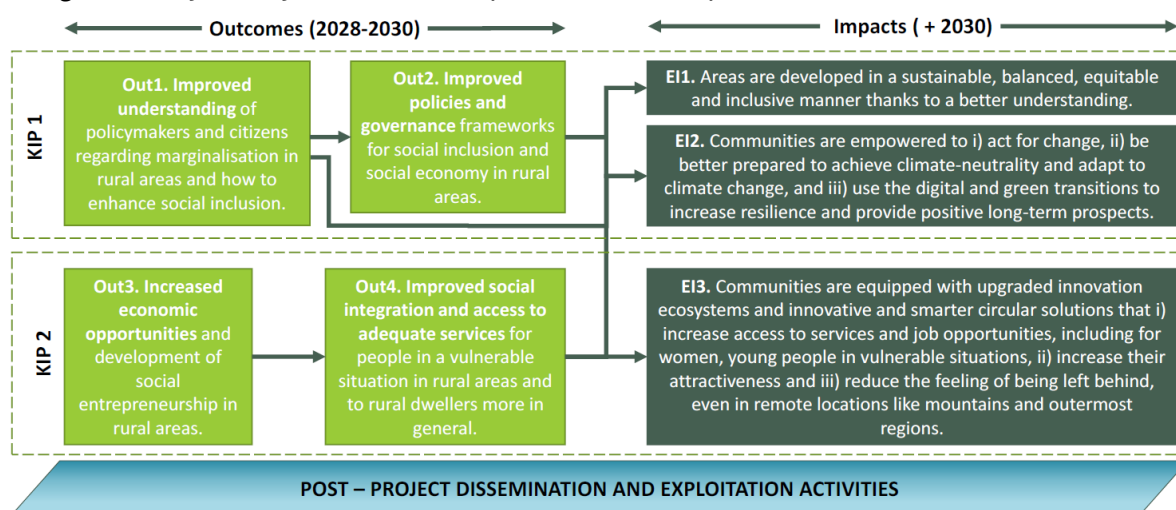
Work Package	Aims
Work Package 1 - Ethical Requirements	The objective is to ensure compliance with the 'ethical requirements' established in this work package.
Work Package 2 - Project Management	This work package is responsible for the overall management and coordination of the activities undertaken in ESIRA, including scientific, administrative, contractual, and financial aspects.
Work Package 3 - Establishing a Framework for Multi-Actor Platforms Functioning as Community Innovation Spaces.	The overall objective is to provide a common framework for the creation and operation of the MAPs within the project, to provide tools for the management and facilitation of the MAPs, and to offer a range of potential pathways for their sustainability once the project is completed.
Work Package 4 - Research on the Factors of Rural Marginalisation and the Opportunities of Community Initiatives for Social Inclusion	<p>The main objective of WP4 is to draw conclusions about the context and needs of marginalised and vulnerable population groups in rural areas, as well as the challenges and opportunities of the social economy as a means to address social inclusion. To this end, a review of the various experiences available in the literature (through documentary research, interviews, etc.) and direct feedback from WP4 support for pilot innovation actions is conducted. The specific objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To assess the drivers of social exclusion in representative rural contexts (i.e., considering the particularities of different geographical areas or population groups) and the policies and initiatives currently being implemented to combat it. • To study, in particular, the opportunities and challenges of the social economy and entrepreneurship as tools for rural development and social inclusion at a crossroads.
Work Package 5 - Community Innovation Spaces and Pilot Social Economy Initiatives.	<p>The objective of WP5 is to implement and operate the MAPs as collaborative ecosystems among different stakeholder groups, following the guidelines of WP2, where innovative social economy solutions for developing countries will be co-designed, piloted, and evaluated. The specific objectives of this WP are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To implement, evaluate, and optimise the organisational aspects of each MAP to achieve the greatest impact as an enabling space for the empowerment of urban residents and the launch of social economy initiatives. • To identify, promote, and support the establishment of social economy initiatives. • To implement and test on the ground the improvements defined in collaboration with WP4, generating direct feedback. • To monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of social economy initiatives to gain additional insights into social exclusion, the social economy, and rural areas.
Work Package 6 - Dissemination, Exploitation and Communication	The main purpose of WP6 is to plan and execute the DEC activities of the project, thus maximising the project's effect on targeted stakeholders and the post-project outcomes and impacts. The specific objectives are:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To prepare and implement the project’s dissemination and communication plan, providing partners with adequate tools to reach local stakeholders while spreading the project’s key messages to national and European audiences. • To guarantee fruitful cooperation with related projects, initiatives and relevant national and European actors. • To design the project’s exploitation and IP strategy to ensure ESIRA’s theoretical framework replication after the end of the project and to support the MAP’s post-project sustainability plans.
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2.4.1 Expected Results and Impacts

ESIRA is expected to make a difference in terms of impact, beyond the immediate scope and duration of the project. Therefore, the project has established two realistic Key Impact Pathways (KIPs) to achieve the expected outcomes specified in the subject text, as well as the broader long-term impacts, as indicated in the Destination of Cluster 6 ‘Resilient, Inclusive, Healthy, and Green Rural, Coastal, and Urban Communities.’ These pathways towards impact will be directly linked to post-project dissemination and exploitation activities. Below is a comprehensive description of each KIP, detailing the state of project outcomes upon completion (project results), the short-term effects of their adoption by the target stakeholders (outcomes), and finally, the broader long-term effects (impacts).

Image 10. Project objectives and impacts once completed.



Source: ESIRA Project. Annex 1. Description of the action.

Results (2028)

One of the main objectives of ESIRA (#05) is to raise awareness of the challenges of social inclusion and the opportunities of the social economy in rural areas, and to reinforce cooperation among initiatives to integrate social innovation solutions. By the time the project concludes (in 2028), the work achieved through objectives #01-03 will have generated new knowledge, co-created with local actors, that deepens understanding in the fields of rural social exclusion and the role of the social economy, with a special focus on the interfaces. The needs, interests, and opportunities of different rural configurations (affected by various contexts) and vulnerable population groups will be investigated, drawing conclusions on how policymakers and communities can address the issue. Even during the project's duration, partners will interact with policymakers at various levels, considering both bottom-up and top-down approaches in specific dissemination activities, and will begin to exploit the knowledge by conveying new insights and conclusions to these key actors.

Expected Results (2028-2030)

In the short term, after the project's completion, the Dissemination and Exploitation (D&E) activities will continue. These will be conducted in both passive (publicly available publications and research data) and active (continuation of R&D activities, work in the project's innovation ecosystems, etc.) manners. These actions will enable ESIRA to contribute to the interconnected expected results: "Out1. Better understanding among policymakers at different levels (European, national, regional, and local) and citizens regarding the challenges of addressing disparities and marginalisation in rural areas, the diverse needs of vulnerable individuals, and how to improve social inclusion, social resilience, and well-being," and "Out2. Improved policies and governance frameworks for social inclusion and the social economy in rural areas."

Expected Impacts (+2030)

In the long term, ESIRA, as part of a broader portfolio of European initiatives focused on rural development, will contribute to overall development and the reduction of inequalities in rural areas, as outlined in the EU's long-term vision for rural areas towards 2040. Better policies and multiscale governance frameworks, capable of adapting to local strengths and needs, will enable rural, coastal, and urban areas ("E11") to develop sustainably, equitably, and inclusively through a better understanding of:

The environmental, socioeconomic, behavioural, cultural, architectural, and demographic structures.

ESIRA will study the various external factors driving social exclusion, as well as opportunities and strengths. By co-creating social economy ideas, the project framework will consider external factors such as the area's natural and cultural capital (natural areas, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, etc.) and the social fabric of the area, leveraging local resources to generate synergies between the rural space and community needs

(such as repurposing unused buildings and infrastructures, natural spaces, traditions, and customs).

The needs and factors for change and their interconnections. According to the previously mentioned result Out1, the potential of these communities will also depend on the local inhabitants' need for change, particularly the vulnerable groups that have thus far been excluded from decision-making processes. ESIRA will focus on this aspect and the possible intersectionality and alliances among these groups, maximising their synergies. The project will promote initiatives that integrate the needs of various vulnerable groups, such as those seeking care (the elderly), job seekers (women, people with disabilities, youth, and migrants), or those requiring quality public services.

How digital, nature-based, social, and community-led innovations are deployed. As rural communities are necessary actors in the European green and digital transition, the project will seek to align as much as possible with the EU Rural Action Plan, and more specifically with the concept of "Start-up Village" and others such as CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) groups or EIP-Agri Operational Groups. ESIRA will not seek to generate completely new conceptual frameworks but rather to enhance and integrate, from a methodological perspective, how multiple rural innovation ecosystems can better incorporate vulnerable groups into their governance processes, as well as their needs and interests into their objectives, from a green and digital perspective.



3. Module 1. Social Innovation in Rural Areas

Objective

This training module is an educational resource created as part of the ESIRA train-the-trainers programme, which forms part of Deliverable 5.2. Training modules, included in WP5 – Community-led innovation spaces and pilot social economy initiatives. The main objective of the train-the-trainers programme is to capacity build and to strengthen the skills of Multi-Actor Platform (MAP) facilitators and members, and rural actors to identify, support and ensure the sustainability of social economy initiatives and develop community networks in the rural territory.

The main objective of the Training Module 1 is to provide theoretical and practical knowledge and skills to training facilitators, MAP members, and rural actors in social innovation in rural areas.

Structure

Module 1 is structured as follows. The first section focuses on the conceptualisation of social innovation for rural development, seeing how this translates into community-led initiatives. Next, it analyses social transformation and the impact on rural areas, identifying those interventions that should be designed to confront the structural factors that generate vulnerability and social exclusion in rural territories, fostering cohesion and contributing to a more resilient community fabric. The following part is oriented on the distinctive features of social innovation, whereas the third one develops two of the socio-economic and contextual factors that facilitate the implementation of innovative actions. Indeed, this section stresses how the priority lies in consolidating local and sectoral ecosystems together with the commitment to overcome social inclusion challenges. One of the main ones relies on the entrepreneur and its link with the social economy; on how it supports rural employment by combining innovation with the realities of local communities. Besides, this section shows several initiatives related to social innovation that have been carried out in rural Spanish areas, which could be readily scaled to other European regions. Closely connected to this, the following section presents the Rural Innovation Helix approach, highlighting the levers of social and relational innovation needed to safeguard and energise the tools required. Finally, the final section examines the role of social innovation in the social economy and its impact on reducing vulnerability by generating inclusive employment and services.

The content of this training module is complemented by the following materials in Deliverable 5.3 “Training Modules Updated”:

- **ESIRA Guide for supporting innovative social economy initiatives.**
- **Practical Tools 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4.**

3.1 Community-Driven Solutions: The Role of Social Innovation in Rural Development

This module explores the notion of social innovation and how it is embedded in rural areas. In itself, social innovation is understood as a process that introduces new forms of organisation, collaboration, or services that improve social well-being and strengthen community cohesion. As a starting point, the concept of innovation has gained significant relevance today, associated, on the one hand, with the expansion frameworks of the knowledge society and, on the other, with its “easy and well-received” use in academic as well as political agendas (Fernández, 2020). Social innovation has been defined as “the reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors” (Polman et al., 2017). Together, these perspectives show that social innovation is both a practical tool for addressing immediate needs and a transformative process for long-term societal change. Unlike the idea of more traditional innovation (market-driven or technological), which focuses on competitiveness and economic growth, the purpose of social innovation is to create solutions that are not only effective but also sustainable and transformative, achieving a real impact on society and on the systems that sustain it. Thus, participatory governance, collective empowerment, and the mobilisation of local assets are key factors in social innovation.

Crucially, within rural contexts, social innovation is increasingly understood as a mechanism to promote social inclusion, particularly for vulnerable groups who often face structural barriers related to remoteness, limited-service provision, demographic imbalances, or socioeconomic disadvantage. By designing participatory processes, widening access to services, and creating community-driven solutions, social innovation contributes to reducing inequalities and ensuring that marginalised populations can actively participate in—and benefit from—local development dynamics (Vercher, Herraiz, & Esparcia, 2022). In a rural context, social innovation has to be with novel social practices and organisational models, as well as collaborative processes that address unmet needs arising from demographic decline, territorial isolation, and structural inequalities. Thus, it often manifests through community-led initiatives, cooperative structures, new forms of service provision, and approaches that foster social cohesion, intergenerational collaboration, and territorial sustainability. As such, social innovation constitutes a key mechanism for enhancing rural resilience and enabling more inclusive development pathways. Therefore, this training module is designed for members of the MAPs, as well as for anyone interested in learning about different perspectives to develop innovative solutions in rural settings. By completing this module, learners will grasp how to drive social and economic transformation that supports resilience, inclusion, and sustainability in rural territories.

The aim of this training is to emphasise the relevance of rural communities developing creative, community-driven solutions to tackle the social, economic, and environmental challenges they face. Unlike traditional development approaches, social innovation emphasises collaboration, inclusivity, and sustainability, often blending local knowledge with new ideas to generate lasting impact. Rural areas are frequently overlooked in mainstream innovation narratives, yet they hold immense potential for transformative change. In essence, social innovation in rural areas is not just about solving problems; it's about reimagining rural life as vibrant, sustainable, and future-oriented.

3.2 Transformation and Social Challenges in Rural Areas

In rural territories, one of the main challenges is to fully understand the scope of the social challenges that affect their inhabitants. Over recent decades, rural areas have often been addressed by reacting to their most visible symptoms, such as depopulation, lack of opportunities, ageing populations, or youth migration to cities. However, these are merely surface-level manifestations of deeper, underlying factors that require attention from a structural and systemic perspective.

Traditional approaches have focused on developing policies and services that address immediate effects like the loss of essential services, lack of connectivity, job scarcity, or the absence of generational renewal. While some initiatives have seen isolated successes, the overall trend has been negative, as the root causes of these challenges remain unaddressed.

Social inclusion, understood according to the European Commission as the process that enables people in vulnerable situations to “participate fully in society, access resources, rights and basic services, and play an active role in economic, social and cultural life” (European Commission, 2021a), is a central pillar of the European policy framework established by the *European Pillar of Social Rights* (European Commission, 2017). However, implementing this principle in rural areas requires concrete and context-specific approaches that account for territorial disadvantages, such as limited access to public services, demographic decline, mobility constraints, and lower institutional density.

Social exclusion disproportionately affects rural areas and is driven by multiple factors, including poor access to infrastructure, the scarcity of employment opportunities suited to current realities, and an education system that has traditionally been misaligned with the needs of rural territories. This creates a divide between rural and urban areas, where young people and women find fewer opportunities to stay in or return to their hometowns. The ageing population exacerbates this situation further, as rural areas tend to have a higher proportion of older residents, generating a growing need for caregiving services that are often unavailable. At the same time, this ageing process represents a cultural challenge, as there can be resistance to adopting new forms of development, including social, relational, and technological innovation.

This exclusion manifests not only in economic or employment terms but also in limited access to basic services, reduced participation in community life, and difficulty in pursuing personal and professional projects in rural settings. Therefore, social inclusion is a fundamental axis for effectively tackling demographic, economic, and social challenges in rural environments. Within this perspective, ESIRA adopts an intervention logic that operationalises social inclusion in rural contexts through targeted actions that address service gaps, strengthen local capacities, and promote the meaningful participation of vulnerable groups in community development processes. This alignment with EU priorities ensures that the project contributes directly to the European objectives of social cohesion, inclusive development, and the reduction of inequalities in rural territories.

Despite these challenges, there are also significant opportunities for change. Rural areas offer fertile ground for projects that promote social inclusion through community participation, the use of local resources, and the adoption of new technologies that enable people to work and develop within their own environments. A shift in mindset is needed to view rural areas not as places left behind but as spaces of opportunity and untapped potential.

Overcoming the challenges faced by rural territories requires a collaborative vision and a collective intelligence approach. Solutions should not focus solely on alleviating visible symptoms but on developing strategies that address the underlying causes of social exclusion, fostering cohesion and strengthening the community fabric.

Social inclusion should not be viewed only from an economic perspective but as a way to ensure that all individuals, regardless of age, gender, or situation, can actively participate in their communities' lives. This holistic approach will not only curb depopulation but also create an environment where people feel secure, connected, and empowered to develop both personally and professionally.

It is, therefore, essential that policies and actions are designed with a territorial perspective, considering each village not as an isolated entity but as part of a broader ecosystem where connections and collaborations with other rural territories are crucial to overcoming challenges. Working in networks, sharing experiences, knowledge, and resources will be key to creating inclusive, dynamic, and resilient environments.

3.3 Social Innovation and its Uniqueness in Rural Territories

This section focuses on the key factors for revitalising rural areas that are pointed out by experts in rural social innovation, such as Del Caz (2025). From his perspective, only by broadening people's own views will they become aware of the need to break away from past habits, innovating socially. This section proposes 12 key points that are both meaningful and essential for revitalising rural territories. While explaining and developing

these factors, the authors share their own experiences to simplify, make more accessible, and clarify the aspects under discussion. There are as follows:

1. Looking from a territorial perspective, not just from each village.
2. Moving from security to adaptability.
3. Transition from a culture of distrust to one of trust.
4. Learning to relate as an ecosystem, as a community.
5. Developing soft skills and social abilities.
6. Shift from seeing problems to recognising opportunities.
7. View challenges as infinite rather than finite.
8. Overcome the fear of innovation.
9. Reignite passion and love for our territories.
10. Promoting horizontal governance and participatory ecosystems.
11. Moving from asking to giving.
12. Going from seeing the glass half-empty to filling the glass.

3.3.1 Looking from a Territorial Perspective, Not Just from Each Village

Currently, people are raised to compete, to act individually, and to be fearful. From a young age, we are pitted against our classmates and compared to our friends. We hear phrases like, “Look at Juan, how well he does in school and how well-behaved he is.” We are taught to fear and devalue creativity: “Be careful not to fall,” or “Don’t go that way; you might hurt yourself,” or “What a silly idea you’ve had.” Gradually, we learn to silence ourselves, to self-limit, not to give, and to hold back out of defensiveness or selfishness so as not to be outdone by colleagues.

We are taught that survival depends on competition and mistrust. This mindset is culturally ingrained in cities and villages alike. Communities compete for tourism, for who has the largest public pool, the best sports facility, or the most advanced coworking space. As a result, villages grow more isolated, depressed, and continue losing population.

It is time to realise that we cannot solve a challenge as large as rural exodus individually, combatively, with fear and distrust. We must generate dynamics, actions, and projects that shift from a competitive culture to one of collaboration. What happens in one village affects another nearby; positive or negative news from one municipality resonates in others. The projects one area develops can serve as inspiration for another. The demographic challenge is systemic and cannot be tackled by each village or even each region individually. We must connect our territories to work cooperatively and build trust.

Establishing participatory processes and active listening is essential for developing new initiatives that respond to local challenges. These processes are a fundamental mechanism for transitioning toward more open and horizontal governance. The question, however, is how to shape these processes. Typically, they are approached from a single perspective, that of general interest or the common good, neglecting the many other realities and stakeholders involved. As a result, participation is often limited to a small

group of the usual participants—those who have more time and a stronger sense of civic duty.

To develop policies for the common good within a framework of horizontal governance, participatory processes must consider and balance local, territorial, and private interests. This inclusive approach will allow more stakeholders to contribute to the co-creation of initiatives and solutions, involving all interest groups affected by territorial decisions. This, in turn, strengthens the community by fostering collaboration and ensuring that all stakeholders feel a part of the shared future vision. Without such a collectively designed and consensually supported future plan, villages and regions will struggle to survive and maintain their population.

3.3.2 Moving from Security to Adaptability

The term "comfort zone" refers to a mental, psychological, and behavioural state in which we impose limits on ourselves or accept a certain lifestyle and relationships to avoid pressure, risk, fear, or anxiety. It is a space where we feel safe, though it may not be healthy.

How do we overcome the fear of leaving our comfort zone when we have been conditioned to prioritise security?

Many believe that a happy, prosperous life that balances personal and professional goals requires stable employment, typically found in large companies or government jobs.

We try to live in certainty, yet life itself is filled with uncertainty and change. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, accidents, illness, and even technological advancements remind us daily that we live in an increasingly unpredictable society. Visionary thinkers like Cañigueral (2021), who reflect on the future of work, emphasise that traditional jobs won't disappear, but planning our lives solely around traditional work is increasingly unrealistic.

Technological advancements are changing how we interact and work at an accelerating pace, with new professions—such as drone pilots, cybersecurity experts, and AI specialists—emerging that we could not have imagined a few years ago. Simultaneously, other professions are fading. These changes used to take generations, but now occur within our lifetimes. Therefore, resilience, continuous learning, and adaptability are essential for understanding our future.

This same author also offers this insight: **“There are many possible futures: some more probable, others more desirable, but all are possible. Futures do not occur on their own; they are built through the decisions we make or fail to make”** (Cañigueral, 2021).

The future of our villages depends on the decisions we make today. One critical factor is how we approach the relationship between work and personal life. I invite you to reflect on a proverb attributed to Confucius: “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to

work a day in your life.” Work is often associated with exchanging time for money, sacrificing personal life for the illusion of financial stability and material prosperity.

3.3.3 Transition from a Culture of Distrust to One of Trust

I lived for over 20 years in a village that had 93 inhabitants when I arrived, but today it has 242. It was my village for many years until life, along with our decisions, led me to close that chapter and open a new one in another village that aligned with my values. I wanted to move from living in a village to being a part of it.

Shortly after becoming fathers of two, my partner and I decided to complete our family by adopting a medium-sized, lively, and adventurous dog named May. One spring morning, just like any other, May was in the garden sniffing around and watching people walk by. Suddenly, she began crying out in pain. My mother, who was inside the house taking care of the children at the time, ran out and found the dog at the doorstep, covered in blood and whimpering. A neighbour from a house higher up the hill had shot her with two pellets. The reason behind his actions is known only to him—whether he was drunk, in a state of confusion, or simply lost control for a moment. The incident went to court, and for a long time, I held deep resentment toward this man. Fortunately, May recovered and lived happily for 17 years. Over time, this man expressed regret for his actions and apologised on several occasions, and I have accepted his apologies.

This event brought to light the long-standing grudges that often plague rural communities—feuds over boundary lines moved by our grandparents or disputes over paths that weren't theirs. These deeply rooted grievances foster distrust among neighbours and toward outsiders. Today, that man, now elderly, is someone I maintain a relationship with. His capacity for regret and my ability to forgive allowed our relationship to transform from one of distrust and animosity to one of trust. In fact, he was one of the first to join the community energy initiative we started in the village.

Through willingness, forgiveness, and empathy, we can change old patterns, release past grudges, and evolve toward collaborative environments. This is essential for cultivating healthy relationships, and creating spaces of trust is fundamental to building solid, meaningful connections that help a community work together toward a common goal.

Building trust takes time and effort, but it is essential for maintaining meaningful and lasting relationships. By demonstrating honesty, respect, and empathy, you will create an environment of mutual trust that benefits everyone involved.

3.3.4 Learn to Relate as an Ecosystem, as a Community

We have all heard of the concept of the "butterfly effect," first introduced by physicist Edward Lorenz (1963) and inspired by an ancient Chinese proverb: "The flapping of a butterfly's wings can be felt across the world." Lorenz mathematically explained how small actions can have far-reaching effects.

In one way or another, everything is interconnected, and no action is isolated. Every decision has consequences—positive or negative—for others and for the system. If we break down the word "ecosystem" into its two components— "eco" (home) and "system"— we better understand the need for balance and coexistence to ensure a future for both the planet and humanity.

In 1935, British ecologist A.G. Tansley introduced the concept of ecosystems, considering the complex interactions between organisms within a community and the energy and material flows that traverse them. He defined an ecosystem as a biological system formed by a community of living organisms and the physical environment in which they interact.

Other sources define ecosystems as "a social, professional, or educational environment in which a group of people evolves," or "a complex set of elements belonging to a specific field."

We cannot separate parts from the whole, just as we cannot separate human behaviour from that of other living organisms or from the physical environment in which we all interact. Although this may seem obvious, we have lost sight of it, consciously or unconsciously, in our over-industrialised cities and environments, where life is understood solely through the lens of human social, professional, and economic relationships. This one-dimensional perspective creates an unsustainable ecological imbalance. Studies, like those from the Global Footprint Network, warn that year after year, we exceed the Earth's capacity to regenerate natural resources by more than 75%. These alarming figures should make us question and become aware of how we are coexisting within our global and local ecosystems—a biological system that includes human communities and the physical environment.

Similarly, we cannot talk about urban environments without discussing rural ones, and vice versa. Urban life cannot be isolated from the realities, challenges, and difficulties of rural areas. Mega-cities with millions of inhabitants have proven to be both environmentally unsustainable—acting as black holes for resource absorption—and socially, as they harbour the greatest social inequalities, wage gaps, and social isolation.

If we truly want to transition toward an economic and political model that places people and the planet at the centre, the shift must begin in rural areas, with territorial balance and new, equitable relationships between urban and rural settings.

The first step is to stop thinking in isolation and recognise that we live in a connected world, where every action has consequences for others and for the planet.

As Gandhi said, “The Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone’s needs, but not everyone’s greed,” and “Live simply so that others may simply live.”

The second step is to recognise that we live in a community; no one lives in isolation. We are always in contact with something or someone, whether another person, a living being, or the environment. If we want to develop our rural territories, we must know and recognise the local communities, respect and foster coexistence, and seek balance. No one should impose a vision of development on a region without involving the receiving community. Likewise, a village cannot close itself off from new residents. A newcomer’s willingness to listen and the local community’s openness to welcome them are crucial to building a strong and resilient community.

We are part of a common unit, a community. Our limitations, barriers, and fears—acquired over the years through our experiences, education, or culture—hinder us from fully understanding that we are part of this common unit, whether it’s our family, our village, our region, or our planet.

To develop a region, it is essential to work together as one, not in isolation, each with their own self-interest, disregarding the whole. Ultimately, this lack of community vision leads to failure and self-destruction. To evolve, we must move forward collectively; we cannot do it alone. Balance is crucial to evolution.

When participatory processes are typically undertaken, they focus on the general interest or common good, often ignoring private or individual interests. Just as individual actions affect the collective, collective actions also impact individuals. This imbalance often results in low citizen participation, with the same people repeatedly involved—those who act as spokespersons for the majority. Participatory processes must strike a balance between collective and individual interests in order to work for the common good while addressing private interests that also influence the evolution toward a healthy ecosystem.

3.3.5 Developing Soft Skills, Social Abilities

In recent times, soft skills have become increasingly valued by organisations when hiring employees. We live in a constantly evolving world where technological advancements demand that we adapt to new business realities and forms of interaction.

Soft skills are those that we demonstrate when interacting with others. They are not only about technical knowledge but also involve applying a combination of social skills, communication abilities, and relational aptitudes.

To generate participatory processes and evolve as a community, these skills facilitate interaction with others, creating a more pleasant atmosphere for co-creation and an

organisational climate of understanding and cooperation, thereby enhancing collective intelligence.

There are various soft skills (Alex, 2010), but we want to highlight five that we consider essential for shifting the developmental dynamics in our rural territories:

- **Communication Skills:** One of the most important skills is fluid communication, including the ability to listen, empathise, and communicate effectively. The success of participatory processes depends largely on this skill. Knowing how to clearly express one's opinion, how to build on others' contributions, and how to achieve better results through collaboration are valuable elements within a community.
- **Teamwork:** The ability to work on projects and tasks while valuing team input and participation is a key asset in creating rural communities. Facilitating leadership and moving away from competition between members to foster collaboration is highly valued, and these elements are crucial for achieving session objectives and launching new initiatives.
- **Acceptance of Criticism:** Having the capacity to accept criticism without taking negative or defeatist attitudes, and using feedback to improve based on self-awareness, is one of the most challenging skills to develop but is highly valuable for individual and group improvement.
- **Consensus-Based Decision Making:** Communities need people who are proactive, capable of addressing problems, uniting diverse views, and finding solutions that are accepted by the majority in the shortest time possible.
- **Positive Attitude:** In the rural world, there tends to be pessimism and discouragement, partly stemming from decades of adverse experiences. In some cases, when I begin a co-creation session, I say that in the rural world, we've already cried enough; it's time to change and adopt a more positive attitude. Developing a positive attitude is key to fostering a constructive work environment where contributions generate value and build upon others' ideas.

3.3.6 Shift from Seeing Problems to Recognising Opportunities

A problem is simply an opportunity that has not yet been seized. There are two ways to face the challenges we encounter in rural areas: one is through complaint and victimisation, which is one of the least productive and most useless approaches, and the other is by viewing problems as opportunities to find new paths and ways to take control of our future.

We tend to focus on the disadvantages or setbacks of a given situation. However, we can change our perspective and focus on the advantages. Any new situation presents an opportunity, but no one ever said that it would be easy or effortless to extract positive results from a difficult situation.

Nelson Mandela, the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, found solace during his 27 years of imprisonment in a poem that inspired him. This poem, *Invictus*, written by English poet William Ernest Henley (1849–1903), became a guiding light in Mandela's darkest moments. Henley wrote *Invictus* at the age of 27, while hospitalised in a critical condition.

It was not just a poetic exercise but an expression of his attitude towards life's difficulties. Henley had suffered from tuberculosis as a child, spent a year bedridden, and lost a leg to the disease. Yet, he refused to succumb to despair, continuing to pursue his dreams. His resilience even inspired his friend Robert Louis Stevenson to create the unforgettable character of Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*.

The poem *Invictus* reads:

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

This spirit of resilience and empowerment is vital for transforming our approach to the problems facing rural territories. Instead of being overwhelmed by challenges, we can choose to see them as opportunities to innovate and build a new future.

3.3.7 View Challenges as Infinite Rather Than Finite

An English author and speaker specialising in leadership, Simon Sinek, explores this idea in his book *The Infinite Game* (Sinek, 2019). He poses the question: "Have you ever wondered why some businesses endure while others fade away? My experience has taught me that those companies that last play the Infinite Game. On the other hand, companies that fail often operate with a different, more common mindset—the Finite Game."

If we apply Sinek's idea to rural territories, we uncover a new, albeit complex, way of approaching challenges. It requires a shift from finite thinking, which we are used to, to infinite thinking.

As Sinek explains, humans tend to prioritise immediate, short-term results over greater rewards that may come later. We make the mistake of seeking quick solutions to any problem that arises without considering the future consequences.

This same finite mindset is prevalent in rural areas, where people respond reactively to short-term challenges such as loneliness, mobility, depopulation, housing, and connectivity, rather than adopting an infinite mindset that offers a different perspective on these concrete issues. Sinek reminds us that major advancements in science and medicine didn't happen overnight. Instead, they required long-term effort and collaboration from hundreds of people working toward a common goal.

We would never have explored space with a finite mindset, focused on short-term results. The great demographic challenges, such as rural depopulation, demand leaders who facilitate processes, pursue collaboration, and possess a clear and ambitious vision of systemic change for the common good, leaders with an infinite perspective.

Finite games, such as board games or sports like soccer or basketball, have clear rules, penalties, a set number of players, and a defined objective. Leaders with a finite and hierarchical attitude focus on short-term results and on gaining immediate strength and success, which leads to temporary benefits and leaves them ill-equipped to face future challenges. On the other hand, leaders with an infinite, collaborative, and facilitative mindset invest their energy in ensuring that the common purpose endures for generations.

Many political and business leaders view the demographic challenge as a finite game. However, this challenge is inherently infinite—there are no defined participants, nor a clear objective. It is impossible to declare a winner in such a game, and the goal is for everyone to remain in the game. Our decisions and actions must involve all participants and strike a balance between the general interests, individual interests, and, of course, the planet.

3.3.8 Overcome the Fear of Innovation

Inertia refers to the tendency to maintain the status quo in political, social, economic, or ideological situations—essentially, “If it's not broken, don't fix it.” Inertia stems from fear, and it can occur in any aspect of life, within organisations, political representatives, and a large portion of society. In the rural world, in particular, we often encounter lives without expectations, lacking motivation for progress, and rooted in a resigned acceptance of the familiar—a comfort zone that people are afraid to leave because of uncertainty, fear of negative consequences, or fear of failure and criticism.

At the end of the 19th century, in 1894, people were greatly concerned about the arrival of horseless carriages, or the first automobiles. The idea that humans would solely control driving was seen as dangerous, even disastrous. Regulations were implemented to prevent the free use of these vehicles—absurd laws that carriage drivers supported out of fear of losing their jobs. One such law, known as the “Red Flag Law,” required a person to walk 60 meters in front of the car with a red flag to warn pedestrians, riders, and horse-drawn carriages of the approaching motorised vehicle. This made horse-drawn carriages

faster than cars, and this law slowed the innovation of transportation for years, if not decades. In 1903, London became the first city to raise the speed limit for motor vehicles from 6 km/h to 30 km/h, rendering the “Red Flag Law” obsolete. With the repeal of this law, the car gained the utility it deserved, and the rest is history. Today, we are witnessing a similar reluctance to embrace driverless cars.

This example illustrates how, throughout history, we repeat behaviour patterns that slow or even block the development or evolution of a territory. Can you think of a village, a person, or a political representative where fear is paralysing progress and improvements in the region?

Technological evolution is accelerating rapidly. It took over 400 years from the invention of the printing press in the 15th century to the advent of the telegraph and telephone. From the telephone to the computer, it took 60 years, and 30 years later came the internet. In the 21st century, technological breakthroughs are constant—smartphones, artificial intelligence, remote work, and much more are yet to come in the coming years. There is talk of a revolution in the workforce, as humans are phased out of factory assembly lines and values such as creativity, resilience, proactivity, and the ability to learn become critical for employment.

Laws that slow innovation or prohibit something that drives social progress cannot stand—they eventually fall. In 1894, fearful politicians, influenced by public opinion, the media, and pressure from the horse-drawn carriage industry, made decisions and passed laws that delayed a future that would improve people’s quality of life and bring prosperity to territories by shortening the distances between populations. We need entrepreneurial, visionary political leaders with the foresight to understand the infinite game of the rural world and see innovation as the means to create opportunities and a future.

Innovation and technology, in themselves, are neither good nor bad. It is how we use them that determines our evolution. A knife can help us eat or be used as a weapon.

We must embrace innovation in rural areas without fear, seeing it as more than just technology. I find the definition of innovation offered by the COTEC Foundation both accurate and inspiring: “Innovation is any change (not only technological) based on knowledge (not only scientific) that adds value (not only economic)”.

3.3.9 Reignite Passion and Love for Our Territories

When you arrive in a village to help guide them through a process of active listening, participation, and finding ways to reactivate the territory, and the largest business owner in the area, with a company employing 35 workers, says to you: “There’s no future here. I’ve told my children that as soon as they can, they should leave and study elsewhere.” What can be done? How do we change these deep-seated attitudes rooted in distrust, inertia, negativity, pessimism, and even rejection of the outside world or new possibilities?

We try to solve the demographic challenge through action, by imposing solutions. We react to problems and seek practical, technical solutions, but we don't address one of the key elements needed to build a new rural future: a change in attitude. People need to believe in their villages. They love them but have lost hope and no longer see the value in what they have.

Attitude makes a difference when facing territorial challenges. In Gabriel García Márquez's 1961 novel, *No One Writes to the Colonel*, the divide between the urban and rural worlds is clearly depicted through dialogue like this:

"Illusions can't be eaten," said the woman.

"They can't be eaten, but they nourish," replied the Colonel.

Juan Rafael Lorca, in his book *Illusion: The Motor of Life* (Lorca Gutiérrez, 2017), writes: "Illusion is like a bubble in sparkling water. It tickles the mind, giving rise to life itself. Without illusion, life is like stagnant water—it exists but is inert. It only moves when the wind or some other external force propels it. A life without the thrill of illusion becomes a lifeless entity, a little more dead every day. Without illusion, a person's aspirations are reduced to fulfilling basic physiological needs—eating, drinking, sleeping, and so on. Some call it a living death; others say it's simply vegetating. Either way, living without illusion is not truly living."

How, then, do we reignite our love for our territory? How do we restore faith in our villages?

Every village and region need a common purpose—a project that builds ties of complicity between the private sector, public entities, and citizens. Having hope means feeling proud of something that unites you with others and with your territory: its history, heritage, culture, traditions, and landscape. Just as individuals need a driving force—a purpose that goes beyond mere survival (children, family, hobbies, sports)—villages need a collective goal that inspires, motivates, and forms the foundation for the future of that region.

Some villages in Spain have maintained a clear identity for generations. For example, Arnedo, in La Rioja (Spain), is known for its footwear industry, and its territory has developed around this sector. As a result, the population is not suffering from depopulation. In fact, year after year, it continues to grow in a controlled, organic way. Since 2000, its population has increased by 19.5%, reaching 15,201 inhabitants by 2023. Other villages have lost their identity, succumbed to pessimism, and allowed themselves to be defeated. Take Pradoluengo, in Burgos (Spain), for example—a village that has gradually and alarmingly lost population since the early 21st century, with barely more than 1,000 inhabitants today. Pradoluengo has a history of more than 500 years in the textile industry and was famous in the late 20th century for its socks. At one time, one in every four socks sold in Spain came from that village. However, globalisation in the

textile industry hit the village like a meteorite, and today, fewer than six textile companies remain, down from over 20 at the turn of the century.

We had the opportunity to support Pradoluengo in a co-creation process to rediscover its purpose. After several participatory sessions, the idea emerged to create a Centre for Sustainable Textile Fibre Research, focusing on circular economy concepts and aligned with the growth of sustainable fashion. Companies like Eco Alf, a national and international leader in sustainable fashion, have supported the idea of such a centre. The village has found the opportunity to believe again, to reignite hope, and to repurpose idle buildings and infrastructure to make this centre a reality. It is now up to the village's political leaders, businesses, associations, and citizens to embrace this shared project and turn it into a reality, giving the municipality a new direction.

3.3.10 Promoting Horizontal Governance and Participatory Ecosystems

To address the strategic challenges of our territories, we need to shift from hierarchical structures toward participatory and horizontal governance models. This requires fostering a more active citizenship in public matters and promoting more open and transparent administrations, driven by values of participation and shared responsibility for continuous improvement. Building shared, open co-creation processes—developed through participatory workshops to define scope, needs, goals, criteria, and context—will be key. There doesn't need to be a predefined model, and all stakeholders should be involved in the process.

The transition to a more open and horizontal governance model begins with active listening to the territory and applying new governance trends. This fosters reflection on a paradigm shift, where institutions move from dictating orders to facilitating processes and conversations and embracing the capacity to learn. We must move away from rigid hierarchical structures and toward collaborative ecosystems.

It's crucial to rebuild the trust that institutions have lost. To do so, we must create territories that commit to social innovation, the power of co-creation, and the courage to face the fear of making mistakes and act. It is essential to understand our surroundings, facilitate effective conversations to promote creativity, know our history and culture, and innovate to build a future together, ensuring that no one is left behind.

The development of a successful participatory ecosystem depends on occupying new spaces that were previously unaddressed in the territory and recognising and enhancing the projects that already exist. By doing so, we can merge and balance the particular interests of different groups with the general or common interests of the region. This will help create spaces for dialogue with new participants and bring actors into the participatory processes who may not have previously seen it as a path to both regional development and personal or professional growth.

3.3.11 Moving from Asking to Giving

The European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) recognize associations as key actors in the social economy, especially in social services, culture, education, and local development (European Commission, 2021b). We imagine that you've been involved in an association at some point, whether for professional or personal reasons. You've likely heard comments like: "It's a burden to be on the board; I won't run for it," "It's always the same few people doing the work," or "They must have an ulterior motive for being on the association's board."

Often, the approach to associations, especially in professional settings, is self-serving. People ask, "What can I get from this association?" or they treat it with a client-like mentality: "I pay an annual fee, so they need to provide me with services." Generally, the focus is on business, contacts, contracts—all of which are perfectly legitimate. But what happens if everyone takes this approach, with a self-centred, individualistic attitude?

Many people living in rural communities, involved in associations, or residing in a village breathe this clientelist culture of "asking" while being minimally proactive and quick to criticise. "People don't visit because they haven't fixed the road," or "They need to change the streetlights," or "The trash bins are empty, and people still leave their trash outside."

It's much easier to criticise and destroy than to come up with solutions and implement them. Have you ever walked past an overflowing trash bin and criticised it, but continued on your way? Or did you take the time to pick up the trash and place it in the bin?

Destructive critics are often people who are frustrated, stuck in pain, and caught in a spiral of pessimism. The doers, on the other hand, tend to be positive, eager to learn, proactive, and committed to making things happen. They are often too busy to criticise others because they are acting.

Contributing your best to your community, association, or village will help you grow individually, and the projects you engage in will grow with you. The New Ruralty requires people who are committed to their territories, who want to see their surroundings flourish, improve their neighbours' quality of life, and witness the prosperity of local businesses—because they understand that this, in turn, benefits the entire community, including themselves.

Instead of asking, "What can I get from this association, group, or community?" We invite you to ask, "What can I contribute to help advance the purpose of this association?" You'll see that an altruistic and giving attitude will be rewarded many times over.

3.3.12 Going from Seeing the Glass Half-empty to Filling the Glass

We've all heard about the theory of the half-full or half-empty glass. Optimists tend to see the glass as half-full, offering a positive alternative perspective of reality, often downplaying adversities. Pessimists, on the other hand, see the glass as half-empty, taking a negative stance on the same situation. These opposing views make it seem like we have only two choices in how we view the world.

But what if, instead of analysing and getting stuck in a debate over the glass, we took action and simply filled it up? By acting, we shift the conversation from paralysis to resolution. Even if the result is not perfect, it's still a step forward. We live in a society paralysed by the fear of failure, and this constant analysis prevents us from advancing, changing outdated habits, and finding solutions to the challenges we face in our territories.

We have the option of remaining passive, critical spectators, waiting for others to make things happen. Or we can take responsibility for our future and make things happen ourselves, learning from our mistakes along the way.

There is no doubt that applying these key concepts in rural territories is complex, given the negative inertia that has taken root in many villages over the years, leading to increasingly depressed and frustrated communities. The first step is recognising the need to listen, understand, and consider rural communities in both public and private agendas. A systemic and mindset shift is necessary—one that moves from victimhood to empowerment, from pessimism to optimism, from devaluation to appreciation, from waiting to acting, from crying to laughing, from suspicion to trust, from immobility to action, from fear of expressing emotions to assertiveness, and from competition to collaboration.

Observe or act, hear or listen, want or do, problems or opportunities, defeatism or optimism, competition or collaboration, subtracting or adding. The future of our villages in the coming years will depend on our attitudes and the actions we decide to take.

We are in a critical moment where the rural world is finally gaining the recognition it deserves in both public and private agendas. This is the time for rural territories, for organisations and people who work for, from, and with our villages to truly unite. Now is the time to come together, to paddle in the same direction, to highlight opportunities, and to showcase what is already being done to transform the reality of many regions across the country.

We invite you to dream big, to help build the train of the New Rurality, and to design the new tracks of relationships and collaboration on which it will run. Let's set the foundation through examples, through projects, and through relational innovation—more collaborative innovation that strengthens collective intelligence. This will help reverse the exodus to large cities, retain and attract talent to our villages, combat loneliness, tackle

housing and mobility issues, bridge the digital divide, promote regenerative agriculture, and more. Addressing the demographic challenge and achieving territorial balance is essential, necessary, and urgent if we want to live in a just, dignified, and sustainable society that respects our planet.

3.4 Rural Innovation Paths. Designing Innovative Actions, Attending the Local Ecosystem and Activation Areas

For years, we have developed a methodology at the Rural Citizen Project called the Rural Innovation Matrix (explained in the next section). This approach, born of deep reflection, analysis, and field experience, has become a roadmap for addressing the demographic challenge and has been implemented in numerous rural areas in Spain. Some have successfully adapted their policies to this new, more collaborative, inclusive, and holistic approach, while others are still struggling to overcome entrenched bureaucratic habits and break free from hierarchical leadership styles that stifle innovation.

It is not necessary to establish a Territorial Innovation Centre to apply the transformative potential of the Rural Innovation Matrix methodology. The Matrix offers the capacity to accelerate change and shift deep-rooted habits in rural territories. This approach brings new ways of acting on a region with a systemic outlook, but it requires time to transform realities, create a new vision, and establish collaborative habits as common processes.

We cannot continue developing policies based on reactive and isolated actions in response to the challenges facing rural areas, as we have been doing for over 50 years. The results speak for themselves: while we have dealt with the symptoms with varying degrees of success—generational renewal, ageing populations, depopulation, mobility, connectivity, etc.—these are just the visible aspects of the problem. Policies and services have been developed that directly address these symptoms, but they do not tackle the root causes. Some have had short-term success, but the overall trend continues to worsen, as rural populations shrink in favour of large cities.

The underlying causes less visible than the symptoms and not as "easy" to address. We must generate strategies and actions that lead to real change in every sphere connected to rural territories and respond to the demographic challenge. For instance, we cannot address the causes of the sociodemographic problem with the prevailing individualistic and competitive model. We must work to change the paradigm and the way we view rural areas. We need tools rooted in social and relational innovation to tackle the causes holistically and collaboratively with all stakeholders involved in the challenge.

New approaches are needed to reactivate our territories through collaboration, collective intelligence, and social innovation. These should foster more intuitive ecosystems that share knowledge, build relationships and contacts beyond territorial boundaries, and create real opportunities to meet the needs of rural areas.

As this training module is developing, we encourage participants to feel free to question the methodology, modifying and adapting it, in order to incorporate the improvements that best suit your municipality, region, or territory. Of course, certain foundational principles must be present throughout the process to achieve systemic change and mindset shifts: prioritising collaboration over competition, adopting facilitator leadership instead of hierarchical leadership, embracing collective intelligence through social innovation, revaluing our territories, balancing private interests with the common good, considering short-, medium-, and long-term perspectives, shifting from individualism to community life, generating environments of trust, and replacing pessimism, defeatism, and negativity with a framework of real opportunities that foster optimism and belief in the possibility of change.

The reactivation of rural territories cannot be designed behind the backs of the citizens. The situation we are facing in European rural areas requires a new understanding and a fresh impetus to change habits and provide a development framework based on opportunities, community intelligence, and collaboration.

We need social and relational innovation tools that allow us to listen to the citizens, involve them actively in the territory, measure development, facilitate knowledge exchange, promote economic activity, and encourage the creation of innovative initiatives in our rural environments.

The Rural Innovation Matrix responds to these needs by creating collaborative ecosystems to develop new initiatives, boost existing projects, change ingrained habits, generate hope and trust in the territory, and address local challenges through a new rurality.

To implement this methodology, we must keep in mind several key specific objectives to successfully deploy the Rural Innovation Matrix:

- Energise the rural socio-economic fabric
- Showcase and value rural talent
- Identify challenges to co-create projects that provide solutions
- Improve the quality of life for people living in rural environments
- Retain and attract young people committed to the territory
- Seek territorial balance through a new rural-urban relationship

We begin from these objectives to start building the local ecosystem, an entity led by people with a clear vocation for facilitating processes. This ecosystem should serve as a voice, activator, unifier, and opportunity creator within the territory. Its foundation must be rooted in collaboration and group intelligence to share experiences and scalable projects that create synergies and exchange knowledge. Over time, this will transform the ecosystemic vision into the construction of a community united by a common purpose.

In many territories, there are already actions and initiatives that are successfully addressing the demographic challenge, but they remain isolated. We need to make these visible, create spaces for sharing and enrichment, and help these initiatives grow along with the development of the territories. To achieve this, we need to build a collaborative community and recognise a series of factors that will help us relate to each other using a common language that allows us to measure and improve both locally and globally. On one hand, there is a need for strengthening local and sectoral ecosystems together with the effort of addressing different challenges regarding social inclusion.

Creating the Local Ecosystem

To foster harmonious and fluid collaboration between territories as a source of rural innovation, we must design strong local and sectoral ecosystems within a national framework. This will enable communication between these different ecosystems to enhance connections, relationship nodes, and collective intelligence.

The development of stable and continuously growing ecosystems must keep several key points in mind:

- Dynamic Communities: Communities born from the local ecosystem are dynamic, capable of adapting to the circumstances of each territory.
- Service to the Common Purpose: The organisations leading the process are continuously guided by a sense of service to the common purpose, shifting from hierarchical leadership to facilitative leadership.
- Open Ecosystems: The local ecosystem is open and encourages the participation of all local stakeholders to co-create public, private, or mixed initiatives.
- Culture of Continuous Improvement: The ecosystem leaders must cultivate a culture of continuous improvement by regularly addressing questions such as: "How do we strengthen connections?", "How do we co-create initiatives and opportunities?", and "How do we involve and motivate local actors?"

Successfully launching an ecosystem depends on occupying new spaces that have not been previously covered in the territory, recognising local entities and their roles, and enhancing existing projects. This will help merge and balance the particular interests of various groups with the general or common good of the region.

3.5 Activation Areas for improving the quality of life in rural areas

In one way or another, all rural territories face a set of common challenges regarding social inclusion. We can group these challenges into seven **activation areas** essential for improving the quality of life for people living in rural environments, each of which is a driver of territorial activation. I have intentionally defined each of these areas with an action verb to emphasise the need for individual and collective proactivity in addressing challenges from the perspective of local community action:

3.5.1 Connect

We consider basic services such as electricity, water, heating, and sanitation essential for the habitability of any population. Today, we must also regard internet connectivity as essential. Without mobile coverage or fibre-optic access, it is impossible to develop a modern profession in a rural environment. While satellite internet allows for connection from virtually any location, it is not enough—the bandwidth and lag in videoconferences do not allow for the same level of functionality as fibre. Ensuring connectivity is an essential task for local, provincial, regional, and national governments.

There cannot be regions or towns left without connectivity; we cannot divide society into first- or second-class citizens based on where they live.

The **Connect** area goes beyond just internet access and covers several critical lines of action, including:

- **Mobility:** This includes not just public transport or private vehicles but also innovative approaches such as shared mobility between rural populations, shifting the focus from ownership to use. You can find examples of projects addressing these needs in the “Examples of Projects Linked to New Rurality” section.
- **Renewable Energies:** In some localities, I have encountered banners and signs reading “Green energy, yes, but not at any cost.” Near my home, large-scale photovoltaic farms are planned, intending to occupy vast expanses of fertile land. Large corporations, backed by regional governments, are solely focused on maximising economic gain at the expense of sustainable development, whether through photovoltaic installations today or control over the agri-food sector tomorrow.

Renewable energy offers a tremendous opportunity for rural environments and for protecting our planet. The benefits of renewable energies over fossil fuels are clear, and their advantages are undeniable. However, what is missing is a serious, strategic plan to use this energy transition to boost regional policies and empower citizens. Globalisation has demonstrated the fragility of local economies when subjected to global markets, as seen during the crisis in the grain supply caused by the war in Ukraine or the Suez Canal blockage, which halted factory production due to supply chain disruptions. These events illustrate the vulnerability of the current system and the weakness of local economies.

We are at a turning point, with a chance to move beyond discussions of food sovereignty—which is essential—and also talk about **energy sovereignty**: consuming energy where it is produced, electricity from local sources, and reducing dependency on large energy corporations. Today, energy self-sufficiency is achievable. There are many examples regarding biomass-powered self-sufficiency projects which show the potential for energy sovereignty. To ensure these success stories aren't isolated cases, we need brave political leaders who understand that the future of our country and economic stability depends on reclaiming control over essential resources like food and energy.

Large energy companies, especially in the fossil fuel sector, have a tremendous opportunity to transition from being extractors and exploiters of territories to becoming key actors in the revitalisation of rural areas. The European Union's "Fit for 55" goal¹ reminds us that transitioning to cleaner energy forms is essential for achieving climate neutrality. By 2050, most of the energy consumed in the EU must come from renewable sources. This transition is forcing fossil fuel companies to shift toward renewable energies like biomethane and biogas. I recently received calls from two major companies facing this reality. They wanted to discuss how to approach rural environments, recognising that their historical disregard for local territories, focused solely on economic profit, has caused significant ecological harm. Now, with the production of biogas relying on livestock manure, agricultural and forestry waste, these companies must enter into dialogue and agreements with local territories. The health of the local agricultural and livestock economy directly affects these large companies. It is time to leave past conflicts behind and understand that we must reach agreements to enhance local economies, create more local jobs, and revitalize our villages.

Profit at any cost is no longer acceptable. Large corporations must understand that maintaining profitability now requires generating positive social and environmental impacts throughout the production process and the company's value chain. Companies that fail to adapt will eventually disappear.

3.5.2 Health Care

Health services are crucial for ensuring that rural communities have access to quality healthcare, thereby improving residents' quality of life and attracting more residents and professionals.

We are aware of the precariousness of healthcare services in many rural towns. It is obviously unfeasible to have local access to healthcare facilities in every village or primary care in all remote hamlets through physical health centres. However, innovative policies

¹ The European Union's "Fit for 55" goal is a comprehensive legislative package designed to achieve the EU's goal of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels.

can promote **telemedicine** as an opportunity to provide care and consultations to people living in more isolated areas. Mobile health services equipped with medical personnel could regularly visit remote regions, and policies could be implemented to ensure that essential services and hospitals are within 30 minutes' access.

Community participation in the co-design of healthcare services is a growing form of social innovation, particularly relevant in rural contexts. By combining local knowledge, lived experience, and external facilitation, communities generate context-sensitive solutions that adapt existing ideas to local realities. This process not only enhances the relevance and sustainability of healthcare services but also strengthens social ties and local capacities. To unlock its full potential, regional actors must foster collaborative networks and support innovation systems that enable successful initiatives to scale and inspire broader transformation (Farmer et al., 2018).

The intersection between social innovation, social economy, and care, as well as other social services and public services in rural areas, provides fertile ground for generating sustainable responses to the challenges arising from the crisis of the welfare state, which has widened the gaps of exclusion, especially in rural areas with fragile demographic structures. In this context, the social economy emerges as an alternative capable of strengthening care provision through principles of reciprocity, democracy, and community self-organization. Recent literature emphasizes that activating the local fabric is key to promoting open social innovation processes, favoring collaborative entrepreneurship and coordination between communities, administrations, and companies (Shin, 2016). Applied to the care sector, this approach allows for the development of endogenous models, adapted to the territory, that combine social capital, inter-institutional cooperation, and creative solutions to meet growing needs. Thus, rural areas become strategic spaces for testing hybrid welfare models, where the social economy acts as a service provider and catalyst for social innovation oriented towards the common good.

Many other services fall under the **Connect** area, but we have focused on the examples above to illustrate how to address these challenges from a new perspective. Other services such as leisure, banking, trades, roads, commerce, and so on, are equally fundamental, and when combined with supportive policies and collaboration between the public and private sectors, they can help revitalise rural areas and improve the quality of life for their inhabitants.

3.5.3 Start up

Private and public investment in rural areas, the promotion of new, more sustainable business models that balance social, environmental, and economic goals, the creation of new services, support for regenerative agriculture or extensive livestock farming, and the encouragement of small sustainable industries are all key to reactivating rural areas. Building businesses with purpose or positive social impact, alongside differentiated tax

policies for rural areas or new financing models like crowdfunding or match funding, can provide the entrepreneurial and economic development boost that our villages need.

Thus, entrepreneurship and social economy go hand in hand in rural areas. Social enterprises and cooperatives use entrepreneurial skills to create jobs, provide services, and strengthen community ties. By combining innovation with social goals, they generate sustainable opportunities that improve local well-being while reinvesting benefits back into the community. Besides, social economy initiatives open diverse job opportunities in rural areas by connecting local needs with innovative solutions. For instance, cooperatives in agriculture and food production create stable employment, while social enterprises in tourism, crafts, and cultural heritage generate new income streams. On the other hand, community-based services such as elderly care, childcare, and renewable energy projects (amongst others) also provide meaningful jobs that strengthen social inclusion. These opportunities not only reduce rural depopulation but also empower residents to build sustainable livelihoods rooted in their territories.

However, a critical challenge within the **Entrepreneur** area that has far-reaching implications for our future and food sovereignty is generational renewal. This challenge requires urgent commitment from both the public and private sectors, as it becomes an increasingly pressing priority. This aspect can be clearly observed in the agricultural sector.

In addition to the declining number of farmers and ranchers in Europe, the agricultural sector is ageing, land ownership is being lost, and there is a lack of professionals willing to take over these operations.

The scarce percentage of young people working in the primary sector contributes to the acceleration of rural depopulation, exacerbates social imbalances in rural territories, accelerates the loss of services, stifles entrepreneurial activity in agriculture and other sectors, and, most worryingly, leads to the loss of land ownership. Land is a national resource, and if we lose it, we lose our sovereignty and become dependent on external forces.

But there are grounds for changing direction as the social economy helps bring new generations into farming by lowering barriers and creating community support. To achieve this, we need public institutions at all levels, businesses, organisations, and civil society to unite in creating projects and programs that facilitate generational renewal with a focus on innovation and the generation of value (social, environmental, and economic). These efforts should support access to land, training, labour equality, financial assistance, the use of technology, and entrepreneurship in new types or systems of regenerative and high-quality agriculture, alongside small agro-industrial enterprises, to stimulate young people's interest in rural areas and secure a future for a key sector of our economy.

According to data collected at the Spanish level, young farmers and ranchers have better training, invest more in their businesses, make them more profitable, and generate more jobs. This means they have the capacity to lead the structural changes required in the primary sector and to invigorate rural areas, creating new opportunities. Therefore, it is essential to facilitate their entry and continuity in agriculture through an ambitious strategy that adopts a comprehensive, collaborative approach with a gender perspective.

Food sovereignty can only be achieved alongside energy sovereignty. Renewable energy plants require large areas and access points to the grid for their deployment, often leading to the installation of solar panels on agricultural land, which replaces crops with photovoltaic systems and raises land rents to levels that are unmanageable for new farmers. Just as we are promoting local (KMO – Kilometre 0) food initiatives, we must also enhance local (KMO) energy initiatives: we need to encourage the use of energy where it is produced and support rural-scale industry in our towns.

Simultaneously, the industrial sector must address the challenges of generational renewal in other sectors that are disappearing from our communities. Retaining and attracting populations also requires ensuring the transfer of knowledge in craftsmanship and traditional trades—cultural and intangible heritage that is at risk of extinction and which we cannot afford to lose. This generational renewal must be reimagined, incorporating innovation into every trade and every artisan, being creative in our solutions and proposals.

Besides, we are experiencing a climate and territorial emergency that requires urgent and innovative measures to address the challenges we face. We must highlight successful generational renewal initiatives, support projects that are scalable or replicable in other regions, and make visible all those farms, trades, and artisans who wish to pass on their businesses but do not know how.

There is much work to be done. The first step is to obtain the most accurate and up-to-date assessment of our current situation: to identify what, how much, and why, so that we can begin designing and implementing strategies that address challenges at their root causes in a systemic manner.

3.5.4 Education

When we think about education in the rural context, we often focus on the significant challenge of maintaining schools and keeping classrooms open in our towns, which is essential for families and children in the area; this is a vital indicator of population growth and future prospects. We must protect formal and compulsory education close to our communities; something as fundamental and obligatory as education cannot become a burden for families residing in rural areas. This right transcends considerations of whether a school in a small village is profitable.

Vocational training and universities are taking hesitant steps to bring higher education closer to rural areas; understanding that, today, one can practically pursue any profession with an internet connection, should accelerate the process of making education accessible to young people and others across our country, preventing the outflow of youth to cities in search of degree programs. A blended learning approach combining online and in-person education can also help tailor education to the realities of rural life.

However, we cannot stop here when discussing this area. We need to adopt a broader perspective on the concept and address it systemically to place education at the centre of our actions.

We live in an increasingly uncertain, rapidly changing, and interconnected society, where the ability to adapt and learn to live with uncertainty is an essential element for progress and well-being. We must transition from a culture rooted in immobility and security to a culture of change, learning to adapt to the circumstances of each moment.

When discussing education, we must understand that our limiting beliefs and the social skills typically learned within our families or communities serve as barriers to the systematic change and reimagining needed in rural areas. We must explore programs and training focused on soft skills, such as active listening, conflict resolution, and empathy, among others. We should create new learning models based on experimentation and learning from mistakes. Understanding that motivation, self-belief, confidence, and enthusiasm also require educational mechanisms to help us change negative inertia and destructive energies is crucial.

Lastly, in the realm of education, we must not overlook technology. First and foremost, we should view technology as a tool, not an end in itself. If it contributes to achieving a goal, a project, facilitates a process, or enhances service delivery, it is useful. However, when we treat apps, the internet of things (IoT), and artificial intelligence (AI) as the holy grail for solving our problems, we lose sight of the perspective and utility of an ever-evolving tool. In fact, the pace of technological evolution is accelerating, and even computer engineers have mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the rapid development, experiencing, for the first time, a sense of lagging behind progress. Therefore, we must regard technology for what it is—a tool—and understand that the ability to adapt to new developments and learn how to use them will enhance our work and improve our quality of life.

We must see education as a driver of cultural, relational, technical, and community changes that accompany us throughout our lives.

3.5.5 Living in Rural Areas

When considering life in a rural village, the foremost issue that often arises is the lack of housing available for purchase or rent. However, the housing shortage in rural areas is not

primarily due to an absence of homes, as one might initially think. In fact, to address the housing problem, there continues to be a focus on constructing new houses rather than rehabilitating those that are deteriorating. This reactive and simplistic approach has led to villages with historic centres in ruins, surrounded by empty houses, while new developments of individual chalets arise, further promoting an individualistic and competitive culture.

The housing issue is fundamentally a problem of distrust and cultural factors, rather than one of bricks and mortar. When we frame this challenge as a social issue, three main reasons emerge that must be addressed through social and relational innovation:

- **Distrust:** Many property owners harbour scepticism due to rumours and negative past experiences with tenants or buyers, leading to hesitation in renting or selling. There is also a fear that their properties may be damaged or not adequately cared for.
- **Cultural Factors:** The emotional or familial attachment to a home can significantly hinder the sale or rental of properties that carry a long sentimental history. This deeply rooted cultural custom of retaining properties within the family influences the willingness to utilise vacant homes, even when no family members reside there regularly.
- **Inheritance Issues:** Numerous rural properties remain abandoned due to the presence of multiple heirs, many of whom do not have relationships with one another, each owning a small portion of the property. This results in divergent interests regarding the property—some may wish to sell, but cannot agree on a selling price, while others may prefer to rent or simply preserve the property as an investment or for sentimental reasons. Decision-making becomes complicated as consensus is often perceived as unattainable, especially in the presence of past disputes among inheriting family members.

To reverse this situation, it is crucial to foster trust between property owners and tenants, as well as to promote cultural changes that facilitate the efficient use of vacant homes and encourage agreements among heirs to address the deterioration of many historic centres. How can we achieve this? I propose several lines of action to facilitate the process:

- **Guarantee Programs:** Establish programs that provide property owners with guarantees regarding the maintenance and care of their properties.
- **Education and Awareness:** Inform communities about the economic and social benefits of utilising vacant homes.
- **Tax Incentives:** Offer tax incentives for those who choose to rent or sell their vacant properties, along with assistance for the conservation, maintenance, or repair of these homes for subsequent rental.

- **Mediation and Agreements:** Employ mediators to help facilitate agreements among heirs.
- **Impartial Legal Support:** The division of an inheritance often involves lengthy and costly legal and administrative procedures. Providing advice that combines legal implications with agreement management can help reach favourable outcomes.
- **Community Purchases:** Encourage community or collective purchasing to simplify transactions.
- **New Housing Models:** Concepts such as use agreements, beyond mere buying or renting, are emerging in both urban and rural settings. Co-living and co-housing are community-based housing models that allow individuals to live collaboratively with others who share common interests.

Understanding these cultural and distrust-related aspects is essential for developing effective strategies that promote the revitalisation of rural areas through better use of available housing.

In addition to these housing strategies, we must also consider the concept of coexistence in the realm of "Living." This pertains to the relationships between the inhabitants of a region, where the principles of a care-based society can help develop a model aligned with the territory that contributes to the revitalisation and sustainability of rural communities.

At its core, the care-based society prioritises the needs and well-being of individuals through support networks and community services. In our context, a care-oriented approach can enhance social services by strengthening healthcare, education, and social support. Additionally, community empowerment becomes more visible through the promotion of solidarity and cooperation among residents. A network of care fosters local employment by creating jobs related to caregiving, such as elderly care and early childhood education, and allows us to extend care to various sectors within the community, including the environment, agriculture, commerce, and leisure.

Another line of development within this area involves planning rural life by addressing how to reduce access distances to six key social functions: housing, work, supply, self-care, learning, and rest. This involves understanding rural development through the lens of daily life in villages. Those living in rural areas recognise that the advantages and disadvantages of residing in a city versus a village are distinct. A common error made by new residents is to bring their urban habits, expectations, and customs into rural settings. It is evident that expectations for services and the benefits of living in a rural environment differ from those in urban areas; however, there is common ground in seeking to improve quality of life by planning services that minimise access distances to these six basic social functions.

While it is impossible to have everything at our doorstep, we can be creative in how we reduce distances by identifying local resources, utilising spaces more efficiently and multidisciplinary, leveraging technology and the Internet of Things in cases where physical access to services is particularly challenging, and transforming public spaces into hubs for meeting, collaboration, and community life.

3.5.6 Participate

In the section "Social Innovation and its Uniqueness in Rural Territories," where we discuss Key 12, we explain how to foster horizontal governance and participatory ecosystems. We present essential proposals for enhancing active citizenship in public matters and creating a more open and transparent administration, grounded in shared values of participatory culture and co-responsibility for continuous improvement. Ultimately, this involves promoting a participatory and collaborative culture in both rural and urban societies to create public value and achieve territorial balance through skill development for collaboration and fostering new urban-rural relationships among equals.

3.5.7 Value

Many of you may have encountered sentiments when visiting a village, especially when speaking with older residents, such as "The village is dying," "There are no children left; the youth are leaving," "Everything is very far away," "There are no opportunities here," "Nothing ever happens; it's always the same," or "There's nothing to do in the village." These expressions are recurrent throughout rural areas; decades of ongoing neglect by governments and depopulation have generated a negative and hopeless image that is difficult to change. However, if we do not confront this issue, developing a New Rurality will be extremely challenging.

We must rediscover our territory, recognize the value of our land, heritage, culture, nature, language, traditions, and gastronomy. This emotional connection is the driving force that fosters a sense of belonging to a region and community, empowering us to pursue our aspirations.

3.6 Best Practices and Adaptive Management in Rural Innovation

To wrap up this section, we focus on initiatives in Spanish rural territories that can serve as inspiration, offering tested solutions and projects transforming their surroundings. Being aware of this fact, we consider their inclusion in this module to be of interest, given their potential replicability in other rural regions of Europe. The following initiatives have already been implemented and are organised regarding the six main activation areas developed in previous section:

Regarding **connect** issues, the main projects are as follows:

- **Kudea Go!** Positive Mobility: <https://kudeaservicios.com/kudea-go/>

- **Guifi.net.** Commons-based telecommunications network: <https://guifi.net/es/node/37161>
- **Biela y Tierra.** New narratives for food sovereignty: <https://bielaytierra.com/>
- **Proyecto Arraigo.** Positive revolution in the rural world: <https://www.proyectoarraigo.es/>
- **Red CIT.** Network of Territorial Innovation Centres: <https://redcit.es/cit/>

Secondly, projects oriented to improve **access to housing** are especially important for improving community well-being:

- **Re-viviendo.** Village houses can be brought back to life thanks to social innovation that applies research, mediation, novel legal formulas and other creative, sustainable and tailored solutions: <https://re-viviendo.es/>
- **Ágil-mente.** Cognitive stimulation and global wellness online for older adults: <https://www.instagram.com/agil.mente.global>
- **Ancyco.** National Association of Coliving and Coworking: <https://www.redcoliving.es/>
- **Rooral.** Where work meets life, connection, and growth: <https://www.rooral.co/>
- **Aldealista.** Application for a Vibrant Rural Spain: <https://aldealista.com/>

Third, there are some examples of **education** and social innovation in rural areas:

- **Nittua.** Platform for social change: <https://www.nittua.eu/>
- **Allande Stars.** Mobile scientific outreach initiative: <https://allandestars.com/>
- **Vivid.** Rural Innovation Laboratory: <https://www.vividrural.com/>

Fourth, the following **entrepreneurship** experiences stand out for their fresh approach and the creative ways of financing they have adopted:

- **Olatz Huertas.** Conscious leadership: <https://olatzhuerta.com/>
- **Como una Cabra.** Female entrepreneurship in rural settings: <https://www.cabrasenred.es/>
- **Fundación Roberto Rivas.** Development of rural communities to improve people's well-being, with respect for the environment: <https://www.fundacionrobertorivas.org/>
- **Nanoma.** Crowdfunding advisory services: <https://nanoma.es/>

- **Pueblos Remotos.** Revitalizing rural environments by empowering local entrepreneurs and promoting conscious tourism: <https://www.pueblosremotos.com/>

When it comes to new ways of **creating community** and encouraging innovation ecosystems, the following projects are especially relevant:

- **Rumbo Rural.** We generate ecosystems by creating alliances that drive positive impact projects in the rural world: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/ruralrumbo/?originalSubdomain=es>
- **Tajea LAB.** Rural innovation: <https://www.tajealab.com/> **Ruralízate.** Territorial innovation projects: <https://ruralizate.com/>
- **Comunidades de Impacto.** We create new connections, opportunities, and wealth based on the needs of the territories: <https://comunidadesdeimpacto.com/>
- **Rural Citizen.** Driving a new rural reality: <https://www.ruralcitizen.org/>

Value

- **Nomad Studio.** Creating community culture through art for more sustainable social development: <https://www.nomadstudio.art/>
- **La Gran Kedada Rural.** Gathering around Rural Innovation for discovery, inspiration, training, music, culture, leisure, innovation, and traditions: <https://lagrankedadarural.org/>
- **Sustraiak.** Regeneration of agroecosystems: <https://sustraiak.coop/>
- **Isabel Sánchez Tejado.** Transforming territories into sustainable tourist destinations: <https://www.isabelsancheztejado.com/>
- **El Huertanico.** Keeping the traditions of our land alive: <https://elhuertanico.com/>

3.7 Levers of Social Innovation in Rural Areas

For systematic development and a change in rural imagery, which is necessary for the revitalisation of our rural territories, we need levers of social and relational innovation that safeguard and activate the necessary social tools in the process. The levers for the creation of the Rural Innovation Matrix are inspired by the Public Innovation Hexagon model (Oliván, 2020).

These levers will help us speed up processes and create and improve the local ecosystem:

1. Generate trust.
2. Generate unusual connections.
3. Reduce distances.
4. Work based on prototypes.
5. A project for everyone.
6. Technology as a tool.

3.7.1 Generate Trust

We have already referred to the importance of creating environments of trust and inclusiveness for the proper functioning of the local ecosystem. If we focus on facilitating leadership from the public sector, we need to open institutions to the ecosystem:

- Generate transparency in processes. Transparency is not about having all the information about tenders or official publications on a website. Most of these documents are written in complex, legalistic, and bureaucratic language, far from the citizenry. Being transparent means using languages that are closer to the audiences we are addressing; providing information clearly and concisely, ensuring that diverse social groups can understand and access it. In this sense, transparency is inseparable from social inclusion, as clear and accessible communication reduces barriers and allows all citizens to participate meaningfully in public life
- Seek feedback from every participatory process and ensure that they result in actions, not documents that often end up in desk drawers.
- Generate proactive listening for process improvement, as well as orderly communication of progress and results.
- Institutions are often reluctant to share information out of fear of complaints or the media. If the information is truthful and the processes have been participatory and clear, there is no need to fear sharing the information, being open, or sharing the results so that other regions or towns can replicate the process. Those who have something to hide are doing so because they believe the process was not clean or because there have been certain benefits that serve particular interests over the project's purpose.

- Usually, intermediate achievements obtained during the development of a project are not given the importance they deserve. Celebrating even small successes has a positive effect on the community where action is taking place, in addition to motivating continued progress toward the region's objectives and challenges.

3.7.2 Generate Unusual Connections

To increase the success of projects and the participation of stakeholders, we must promote interdisciplinarity and have the creative ability to mix disciplines, territories, and sectors that initially do not seem connected. When we generate co-creation and project prototyping processes to address a challenge, in most cases, we think of the recurring stakeholders and organisations, those that, whether due to regional considerations or project sectorization, intervene or are affected by the initiative, for example, town councils, local associations, local businesses, and Local Action Groups. This unconscious self-limitation restricts the project's development potential.

Among the first steps when we want to design or launch a project, we must think of non-recurring organisations, those we usually do not consider, either because they are not in the region or because we believe they cannot contribute anything due to being from a completely different sector or topic. The experiences of other regions or municipalities can help us shorten implementation times, avoid mistakes, or learn how to overcome obstacles, as they have gone through the process and can show us the way. Organisations different from those we usually think of or that are recurring in processes bring us an external, fresh, and unbiased perspective that helps improve project design and see other points of view we may not have considered. To boost this lever, we recommend:

- Promoting collaboration and cooperation in project development.
- Connecting with the real demands and needs of regional stakeholders.
- Creating facilitating leadership as opposed to authoritarian leadership.
- Encouraging interdisciplinary teams to implement projects.
- Expanding networks of collaborators from seemingly unrelated sectors and territories.
- Creating spaces for conversation, relaxed environments, and relationship-building bonds.
- Working transversally on challenges, both internally within the institution or with project leaders, and externally between organisations.

3.7.3 Reduce Distances

Workflows and relationships are filled with subjective noise that hinders processes and acts as a thief of time, effort, and motivation. Facilitating leaders who want to implement the Rural Innovation Matrix must be attentive to finding ways and tools that reduce distances, align positions, and speed up processes. Administrative bureaucracy is often

one of the barriers we encounter when trying to implement a collaborative project in a region. Institutions are slowed down by the bureaucratic burden they must bear and the numerous procedures that must be navigated. Obviously, we need national and regional governments to review administrative procedures to simplify them; it cannot be that small municipalities, like small towns, are required to bear the same administrative burden as cities or larger institutions. In the meantime, we must find mechanisms and processes that help us streamline project design and execution within the current legal framework. Likewise, reaching agreements is sometimes an impossible mission due to historical resentments between neighbours, towns, or organisations; entrenched situations due to issues such as "your grandfather let the mare loose and ruined my garden" or "when the last path was made, such-and-such neighbour didn't show up, and now we're not going to let him benefit from this project; better no one benefits."

Thus, we find a series of social, cultural, racial, sexual, age, cultural, or religious barriers that we usually do not consider, and these are walls that, if we do not tear down and level, can paralyze or eternally slow down the project. I encourage you to be attentive to these barriers, to detect them, and to:

- Create shortcuts between entities. Focus on the common purpose that unites wills and focus on the challenges of the region.
- Train the ability to reduce the time between ideas and the creation of projects that address the challenges.
- Replicate and adapt solutions from other regions.
- Reduce emotional and cultural distances.
- Be creative in simplifying bureaucracy.
- Take advantage of time, focus efforts.
- Generate productive conversations. Avoid the drift of sterile conversations into pessimism, obstacles, negative criticism, judging people, and diverting attention away from the project's goals.
- Transform the narrative from problems to opportunities.
- Foster spaces of trust.
- Create intensive co-creation sessions to build strong relationship bonds.

3.7.4 Work Based on Prototypes

Participatory processes or co-creation of solutions to address a local challenge generate positive energy, motivation, and enthusiasm that initiate the shift in imagery toward an abundance mindset and opportunities over initial defeatism and pessimism. Often, once these processes are completed, they are reflected in reports and result documents that end up on a desk or archived in a library, leading to increased distrust and greater resistance to change. From the moment we begin a territory revitalisation process, we must remember that things must happen; we cannot stay in participation and theorizing;

we must launch beta prototypes of the project we want to develop as soon as possible, learn from mistakes, and understand that learning as the initiative progresses is part of the process. Do not be afraid to pilot it in collaboration with other organisations; only in this way will we build stronger relationships between stakeholders. Examples and small achievements are motivational factors and fuel for continued progress on the project. Paralysis by analysis is simply the fear of making mistakes, of messing up; life is learning both personally and professionally, and it inevitably involves learning from mistakes to avoid repeating them or to improve for future implementations.

Making things happen is often one of the most difficult exercises, which is why it is key for facilitating leadership to seek collaboration between the public and private sectors to inspire other groups and regions to take up initiatives that help the territory in its social, environmental, and economic development. To achieve this, we must consider:

- Identifying the facilitating leaders of the project.
- Learning to live with failure or error, we must understand that it is part of the learning and prototyping process.
- Designing the minimum viable product/service for the project at the lowest possible cost and launching it.
- Simplifying the project, being clear about the target audience, the first users of the solution.
- Searching and working from already created and tested platforms and designs.
- Ability to experiment. Not clinging to initial ideas but knowing how to transform them through collective intelligence.
- Promoting design from a visual perspective. Moving away from pages and pages of theoretical arguments and processes.
- Less is more; there is no need for lengthy explanations, reduce to the essentials, work by concepts.
- Launching the initiative as soon as possible, improving as the project evolves.
- Learning to adapt to changes and navigate uncertainty.

3.7.5 A Project for Everyone

Patching or trying to heal wounds individually in each town is what we have been doing since the 1970s to address the demographic challenge, and the results are clear. We must diagnose the causes and design global solutions as a community. This reminds me of a friend's problem.

For years, he had been suffering from skin problems on his arms and hands, and during the worst flare-ups, his fingers would crack, causing wounds. He spent years visiting dermatologists, who recommended ointments, creams, and medicines to relieve the symptoms. For a while, he would feel better, but the skin problem would return after a few months. They blamed it on dry skin, the weather change, humidity, stress, etc. Until one

day, for other reasons, he had to see a doctor, and they diagnosed him with an autoimmune disease affecting his liver. As soon as he started treatment for the disease, the skin problems disappeared, and he never had wounds on his hands again. The region that continues to look at challenges individually and competitively between towns, that does not adopt a strategic approach as a whole, thinking as a community, that believes that what happens in the town next door does not affect them, is condemned to disappear, to extinction. Not only due to the demographic challenge but also because people live with an imaginary of scarcity and pessimism, with no desire to do anything, and those who do end up leaving the town.

Strategic work focused on community, on collaboration, on collective intelligence, on creating trust relationships, is the best medicine for addressing challenges like depopulation, pessimism, lack of employment, and discouragement in the rural environment.

We must be able to:

- Identify all project stakeholders.
- Identify local leadership.
- Promote a culture of collaboration and caring for the common good.
- Foster a sense of belonging and pride in the region.
- Create collaboration and co-creation spaces.
- Think beyond local and global goals.

3.7.6 Technology as a Tool

The belief that "technology will save us" is naïve and overly simplistic. Technology is just one tool among many when it comes to solving challenges in rural areas. Technology can help improve agricultural productivity, provide access to information, and enhance health services. However, technology alone will not solve the challenges faced by rural areas. Effective rural development requires policies that promote equitable access to technology, education, and community participation. We must use technology as part of a comprehensive strategy for rural development that integrates local knowledge and sustainable practices.

At the same time, we need to be aware of the limitations of technology. Just because technology is available does not mean it will automatically be adopted by rural communities. In fact, there are significant barriers to technology adoption, such as lack of infrastructure, limited digital literacy, and unequal access to resources. To ensure technology plays a constructive role in rural development, we must address the digital divide and develop policies that support equal access to technology for all members of the community. Technology is not a panacea, but it can be a powerful tool when used in conjunction with other development strategies. It is important to provide continuous

training and adaptation for communities to effectively adopt and integrate new technologies into their daily lives.

3.8 The Rural Innovation Matrix

Taking into account the different mechanisms that act as levers for social innovation, this section briefly describes their close interconnection through the Rural Innovation Matrix. This tool is a relational, social innovation instrument aimed at revitalising rural territories through the activation of community and the creation of collaborative ecosystems. The matrix's ultimate goal is to revitalise rural territories using the collective intelligence of communities, enhancing the local social fabric, and facilitating the creation and development of new projects.

The Rural Innovation Matrix was designed to solve several key problems. There are as follows

1. To restore the local social and economic fabric.
2. To highlight and develop local talent and foster local entrepreneurship.
3. To identify key actors in the region and align strategies and actions to co-create solutions that address territorial challenges.
4. To improve the quality of life for residents.
5. To retain and attract young people to the region, those who commit to the development and future of the territory.
6. To promote regional balance through new forms of collaboration between the public and private sectors.

The Rural Innovation Matrix is a navigation chart that combines two essential axes:

The seven Areas of Activation (the "WHAT"). These are the key areas of rural life to be addressed, defined with verbs that call for action: Connect, Access to Health Care, Start up, Educate, Live, Participate and Value.

The six Levers of Social Innovation (the "HOW"). These are the relational methodologies for addressing the challenges in each area, such as Building Trust, Empowering Collective Intelligence, Bridging Gaps, Taking Action (implementing rapid actions and learning from them), creating a common vision for the future, and understanding technology as a tool rather than an end in itself.

The Matrix focuses actions across areas and defines how we will act to foster collaboration, participation and facilitative leadership.

The activity with this matrix is based on cross-referencing the information to see at a glance the relationship between the two, with the aim of assessing the impact of the 'Drivers of Social Innovation' on the 'Areas of Activation'.

Participants must fill in the empty cells of the matrix, assigning a description at each intersection describing how the driver would manifest itself in the area, and analysing how each of the drivers manifests itself in each area.

Image 11. The Rural Innovation Matrix.

Activation areas	Levers of social innovation					
	Generate trust	Generate unusual connections	Reduce distances	Work based on prototypes	A project for everyone	Technology as a tool
Connect						
Care						
Start up						
Educate						
Living						
Participate						
Value						

Source: Adapted from Del Caz (2025)

The methodology of the Rural Innovation Matrix is rooted in the ecosystem and leadership through facilitation. The matrix provides a framework for understanding the social dynamics of a territory, activating a collaborative ecosystem, and enabling the development of new initiatives and the revitalisation of existing projects. To implement the matrix effectively, it is essential to establish a sequence of priority actions for the activation of the six levers mentioned in the previous chapter. By integrating the six levers of social innovation into the matrix, we can systematically develop the territory. To activate the relational innovation methodology, we must ask ourselves the following questions:

- How do we generate trust?
- How do we create unusual connections?
- How do we reduce distances?
- How do we implement a prototype quickly?
- How can technology help us streamline processes?
- How can we ensure that the project is inclusive for everyone?

To implement the Rural Innovation Matrix, it is essential to break free from the limiting beliefs that hold us back. These limiting beliefs often stem from our education, upbringing, and culture, and they create a mindset of fear and restriction that hinders progress. To unleash our creativity and ability to collaborate, we must free ourselves from these limiting beliefs and embrace the fact that there are no limits to what we can

achieve. When we let go of these mental constraints, we can create transformative solutions for rural areas that are innovative, inclusive, and sustainable.

3.9 Social Innovation, Social Economy and Vulnerability

Social innovation within the social economy offers concrete solutions to situations of vulnerability by creating inclusive models that prioritise people over profit. Cooperatives, social enterprises, and community initiatives design new ways to provide services, generate jobs, and strengthen local networks. By focusing on participation and solidarity, these approaches reduce social exclusion and empower vulnerable groups, turning challenges into opportunities for resilience and sustainable development. Regarding rural areas in Europe, social innovation and the social economy offer a complementary and particularly effective framework for addressing the structural scarcity of public services. Many rural territories face demographic decline, limited administrative capacity and fragmented service provision, conditions that weaken the traditional welfare model and intensify gaps in access to social services. In this context, the social economy provides organisational forms grounded in reciprocity, democratic governance and community participation, enabling locally rooted solutions that do not depend exclusively on state intervention or market profitability. At the same time, social innovation introduces new methods of problem-solving—collaboration, co-creation and experimentation—that allow communities, public authorities and local firms to jointly design services adapted to territorial realities.

This combination is especially relevant in rural areas because it mobilises endogenous resources: local knowledge, social capital, volunteerism and trust-based networks. These assets facilitate the development of flexible models of service provision—such as community-based care, mobility services, youth programmes or social inclusion initiatives—that respond to needs unmet by conventional public systems. Research shows that open forms of social innovation strengthen collaborative entrepreneurship and expand the capacity of rural communities to address welfare gaps by integrating diverse actors and fostering shared responsibility. Thus, the alliance between social innovation and the social economy contributes to building resilient welfare ecosystems in rural Europe, capable of mitigating service shortages and promoting inclusive, sustainable development.

The main sectors where social innovation and the social economy commonly intervene to address service gaps in rural Europe include:

- 1. Long-term care and health services.** Community-based care, home assistance, telehealth, preventive health programmes and support for older adults.
- 2. Social inclusion and community development.** Initiatives targeting vulnerable groups, youth engagement, migrant integration and programmes to strengthen community cohesion.

3. Education and lifelong learning. Early childhood services, adult education, digital skills training and non-formal learning initiatives adapted to rural contexts.

4. Mobility and transport solutions. Demand-responsive transport, shared mobility schemes and community transport services to reduce isolation.

5. Employment and local economic development. Social enterprises generating rural jobs, circular economy projects and support for local entrepreneurship.

6. Housing and community infrastructure. Cooperative housing models, renovation of abandoned buildings for social use and shared community facilities.

7. Culture and leisure services. Cultural revitalisation, heritage-based projects and intergenerational activities that strengthen identity and well-being.

These sectors concentrate the strongest potential for combining social innovation with social economy practices to compensate for the limited presence of public services and to reinforce rural welfare ecosystems.

Social innovation combined with social-economy organisations creates favourable conditions for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups in rural Europe because it enables demand-driven, locally adapted and governance-oriented responses where market and conventional public provision fail. Social-economy entities (cooperatives, mutuals, associations) operate under principles of reciprocity, democratic control and non-profit orientation, which allow them to prioritise accessibility and social objectives over profitability—critical where low population density and weak markets make private provision unviable. At the same time, social innovation brings tools of co-creation, participatory design and experimental governance that help identify unmet needs, design inclusive services and scale effective local practices.

Mechanisms through which this combination promotes inclusion include: (1) participatory needs assessment and co-production that centre the voices of older people, migrants, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups; (2) organisational models that cross-subsidise services and sustain non-commercial activities; (3) mobilisation of social capital and local volunteering to reduce isolation and build support networks; and (4) creation of adapted employment and training pathways within social enterprises that facilitate labour market insertion. These mechanisms are documented both in theoretical work on social innovation and social economy and in empirical EU research mapping hundreds of cases and governance experiments.

EU Horizon and H2020 research and demonstration projects provide concrete examples and evidence for these claims. The **SIMRA** project (Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas) analysed how community-led innovations and new governance arrangements enhance service provision in marginal rural contexts. **SI-DRIVE** (Social Innovation: Driving Force of Social Change) mapped and comparatively analysed over a thousand social-

innovation cases worldwide, showing the importance of institutional support and actor networks for scaling inclusive practices. Other H2020 initiatives (e.g., RURITAGE on heritage-led regeneration) illustrate how place-based, socially oriented interventions can combine economic, cultural and care-related objectives to strengthen territorial inclusion. These projects both evidence and operationalise the complementarities between social innovation and the social economy for inclusion in rural settings.

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4. Module 2. Green Transition in Rural Areas

Objective

This training module is an educational resource created as part of the ESIRA train-the-trainers programme, which forms part of Deliverable 5.2. Training modules, included in WP5 – Community-led innovation spaces and pilot social economy initiatives. The main objective of the train-the-trainers programme is to capacity build and to strengthen the skills of Multi-Actor Platform (MAP) facilitators and rural actors to identify, support and ensure the sustainability of social economy initiatives and develop community networks in the rural territory.

The main objective of the Training Module 2 is to provide theoretical and practical knowledge and skills to training facilitators and rural actors in the areas of green transition in rural areas.

Structure

The module is structured around six interconnected thematic areas that together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and advancing the green transition in rural contexts. It begins by addressing clean water, living soil, and waste reduction and circularising by-products, highlighting the sustainable management of natural resources and circular economy approaches. It then focuses on clean energy, the reduction of GHG emissions, and climate change adaptation, examining strategies to mitigate environmental impacts while strengthening rural resilience. The third component, preservation and restoration of ecosystems and biodiversity, emphasises the protection of natural capital as a foundation for long-term sustainability. This is complemented by a dedicated section on organic agriculture, regenerative livestock, and sustainable forest management, which explores environmentally sound production systems tailored to rural territories. The module further incorporates methodologies and sustainability indicators in the rural green transition, equipping stakeholders involved with tools to assess, monitor, and guide sustainable change. Finally, it concludes with resources and policies to promote the green transition in rural areas, providing an overview of institutional frameworks, funding opportunities, and policy instruments that support the implementation of green and inclusive rural development pathways.

The content of this training module is complemented by the following materials in Deliverable 5.3 “Training Modules Updated”:

- **ESIRA Guide for supporting innovative social economy initiatives.**
- **Practical Tools 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3.**



4.1 Clean Water, Living Soil, Waste Reduction & Circularising By-Products

4.1.1 Challenges

In Spain's rural areas, ensuring environmental sustainability presents a critical challenge with several interrelated obstacles. Key pillars of this sustainability include access to clean water, conservation of fertile and living soils, waste reduction, and circularising by-products—all essential for productive agriculture and biodiversity that can provide associated ecosystem services. However, these areas face numerous challenges driven by both local and global factors.

On a local scale within the Spanish context, some pressing issues include the degradation of natural resources (due to agricultural overexploitation, water depletion, soil erosion, and loss of soil fertility), rural depopulation, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to education and technology. In these rural areas, sustainability is crucial due to the high dependence on the natural environment for agricultural and livestock activities. The main challenges relate to managing resources such as water and soil, as well as the need to reduce waste and make better use of by-products.

On a global scale, climate change presents a significant risk, increasing the vulnerability of agricultural production, threatening food security, and generating economic crises in rural communities that depend on the climate for their livelihoods. Spain is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Ruiz and Cantos, 2023; Allan et al., 2023).

Access to Clean Water

One of the main problems in rural areas is the quality and availability of water. Intensive agricultural activities, which include the excessive use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers that produce nitrate as waste, have contaminated water bodies, leading to eutrophication and the deterioration of underground aquifers in Spain (MITECO, EU 1991). Additionally, the overexploitation of aquifers in many rural areas of Spain exacerbates the situation in regions where rainfall is scarce. Climate change has intensified this issue, which is expected to worsen, with more frequent and prolonged droughts reducing access to freshwater for rural populations (EEA, 2009). An additional complication is that rural areas often lack adequate infrastructure to treat and distribute water efficiently, increasing the risk of scarcity and contamination. Furthermore, inefficient irrigation methods in agriculture, such as flood irrigation, lead to water wastage, worsening the problem (Canatário-Duarte et al., 2024).

Living Soils:

The preservation of healthy and fertile soils is another critical challenge. Intensive monoculture practices and inadequate crop rotation have led to soil degradation and biodiversity loss, reducing the capacity to retain water and nutrients. Erosion and soil

compaction are common phenomena in agricultural areas of Europe, including Spain, where inefficient land management exacerbates the situation (Ferreira et al., 2022; García-Ruiz, 2010). The lack of policies that promote sustainable agricultural practices, such as agroecology, worsens this problem (Van Eynde et al., 2024).

Waste Reduction:

In rural areas, the management of both organic and inorganic waste presents significant challenges. Agricultural waste, such as greenhouse plastics and animal by-products, is often managed inadequately, contributing to soil and water contamination. In many rural areas, recycling and waste treatment systems are insufficient or non-existent, leading to the accumulation of waste in local landfills (Puig et al., 2011). The lack of infrastructure and awareness regarding recycling makes sustainable waste management a difficult goal to achieve, and generally, these rural areas have poor waste management compared to urban areas.

Circularisation of By-products:

The concept of a circular economy, which involves reusing by-products and waste in other production processes, is still in its infancy in many rural areas of Europe (Cueto & Escudero-Castillo, 2020). Although there are initiatives aimed at reusing agricultural waste to generate bioenergy or natural fertilisers, the infrastructure and technical knowledge necessary to implement these systems on a large scale are not yet common (Ojeda López de Uralde, 2024). Additionally, the distance between rural areas and urban centres complicates the creation of efficient networks for circularising by-products, limiting their economic viability (Cerantola, 2016).

In summary, rural areas in Spain face a series of complex challenges in ensuring clean water, healthy soils, reducing waste, and promoting the circularization of by-products. These challenges are interconnected and multifactorial, requiring a comprehensive approach that combines effective public policies, technological advances, environmental education, and increased investment in sustainable infrastructure and social innovation. Only with a holistic and collaborative approach among governments, farmers, and communities can these challenges be overcome and the rural environment preserved to move toward a more ecologically and socially resilient rural future (Adam, 2023).

4.1.2 Opportunities:

Spanish rural areas face environmental, social, and economic challenges that can be addressed through innovative, sustainable, and collaborative strategies, particularly within the framework of the circular economy and sustainability. The challenges to be faced are significant and have been detailed in the previous section. However, in recent years, considerable progress has been made in developing opportunities through social innovation, regenerative agriculture, soil and water restoration and conservation actions,

the circular economy, and the circularization of agricultural by-products, among others, to create a sustainable local rural economy. Below are some opportunities in various sectors related to clean water management, soil conservation and regeneration, waste reduction, and the circularization of by-products.

Innovation in Clean Water Management:

- **Efficient Irrigation Technologies:** Encouraging the use of innovative technologies such as smart drip irrigation and rainwater harvesting, particularly in semi-arid areas, can optimise water use and reduce consumption in agriculture (Prado & Cuenca, 2020).
- **Wastewater Recovery:** Promoting local wastewater treatment plants and naturalised artificial wetlands that can be reused in agriculture and other rural applications (Delgadillo, 2010; Lopez et al., 2012). This approach can be managed through local authorities or community and cooperative initiatives, such as creating cooperatives to manage rainwater collection and reuse systems, leveraging local knowledge networks and new technologies.
- **Habitat Restoration Actions:** Promoting watershed restoration projects and implementing agroforestry systems to enhance water retention in soils and prevent erosion upstream in areas most vulnerable to water erosion (Iglesias et al., 2024).
- **Water Purification Innovation:** Developing decentralized technologies for water purification (natural filters, reverse osmosis technologies, phytodepuration) in rural areas with limited access to drinking water. Nature-based solutions offer a feasible alternative or combined solution to traditional grey infrastructure for water treatment (NATMED, 2024).

Soil Conservation and Regeneration:

- **Regenerative Agriculture:** Promoting the adoption of regenerative agricultural practices such as the use of compost, biochar, cover crops, and reduced tillage to conserve and improve soil health (FAO, 2023).
- **Regeneration of Eroded Soils:** Implementing ecological restoration projects such as reforestation, recovery of grasslands, and wetlands can strengthen the ability of rural soils to retain nutrients and water, thereby increasing their long-term productivity (Gann et al., 2019). This is particularly important for regenerating the ecosystems of the Iberian Peninsula (Mola et al., 2018).
- **Training and Education in Sustainable Techniques:** Encouraging training programs for farmers and livestock producers in soil management techniques that improve fertility, prevent erosion, and promote soil biodiversity. For instance, creating "living soil schools" where farmers share successful practices and collaboratively develop new techniques to enhance soil health, fostering a network of learning and knowledge exchange (González, 2021; Sans, 2021).

Waste Reduction:

- **Community Composting:** Fostering the establishment of community composting projects to utilise organic waste generated in rural areas (such as agricultural and livestock waste), converting it into natural fertiliser for crops. For example, in vineyard or olive-growing areas, pruning waste can be composted (Red Española de Compostaje, 2015).
- **Reusing Agro-industrial Waste:** Developing initiatives that transform agricultural by-products into value-added resources, such as producing bioplastics, biofuels, or animal feed from organic waste.
- **Zero Waste Rural Initiatives:** Implementing waste management systems that minimise the use of non-biodegradable materials (plastics) and promote the use of reusable and compostable materials in agriculture and livestock. This can be achieved through simple, low-cost technologies compatible with local practices, such as composting, biogas production, and processed animal forage in community centres for the production of fertilisers, energy, and other products (Omar, Hala & El-Haggar, Salah, 2017). It's essential to promote workshops and educational materials to raise awareness among the population and sensitise them towards reducing plastic and petroleum-derived products.
- **Cooperatives for Agricultural Plastic Recycling:** Creating local cooperatives to manage the collection and recycling of agricultural plastics (greenhouses, irrigation systems), transforming these wastes into new useful products. This offers job creation opportunities through rural recycling and reuse centres, where agricultural waste is collected, sorted, and processed.

Circularisation of By-products in Agriculture and Livestock:

- **Circular Economy in Livestock:** Promoting the use of manure as natural fertilisers for crops and the generation of biogas as a renewable energy source from livestock waste. Cooperation and knowledge exchange between local agricultural and livestock cooperatives can be encouraged.
- **Circular Agro-industry:** Encouraging the use of agricultural by-products to create secondary value-added products, such as obtaining essential oils, perfumes, bioplastics from fruit peels, and olive waste, as well as using cover crops in vineyards as aromatic plants.
- **Integration of Crops and Livestock:** Promoting agroforestry and silvopasture, where the waste from one activity (such as tree pruning or crop residues) is reused in livestock or other production systems, optimising resources. Fostering local meeting spaces through the creation of rural forums and spaces where all stakeholders can share their experiences will be beneficial in promoting the establishment of circular economy clusters that maximise the use of local resources.

- **Transforming Waste into Energy:** Developing small-scale biomass plants that can generate clean energy from agricultural and forest waste, supporting the energy self-sufficiency of rural communities (Veinat Grimalt, 2013).

4.1.3 Success Stories

[Strengthening Governance for Ecosystem-based Adaptation in the Shared Sumpul River Sub-basin](#)

Location: El Salvador-Honduras.

Image 12. Construction of hillside ditches in mixed agroforestry systems.



Source: @IUCN Paul Aragón.

This project applies key concepts of nature-based solutions through the IUCN standard. The solution proposes various actions to improve water provision, soil health, and climate change adaptation. Key activities include enhancing agroforestry systems (such as crop diversification, soil conservation practices, and protection of water sources), improving training and governance, and strengthening the binational committee. For long-term sustainability of nature-based solutions, the project promoted local community training, improved coordination among key stakeholders, and developed technical support for the participating municipalities (Iglesias et al., 2024).

[Life+ AgriAdapt Project.](#)

Location: Navarra, Cataluña, Castilla-La Mancha (Spain),

Image 13. Use of goose for biological pest control and reduction of herbicide use in fruit crops as a soil conservation-friendly practice.



Source: ©AgriadaptEU.

The Life+ AgriAdapt Project was an initiative co-funded by the LIFE program of the European Union (2016–2020) and developed by various environmental organisations from Germany, France, Spain, and Estonia. Its main objective was to assess the impacts of climate change on European agriculture and promote sustainable and resilient adaptation measures in agricultural operations that encourage long-term resource efficiency. The project's primary goal was to adapt agricultural practices to the effects of climate change, focusing on sustainable water and soil management.

One of the key components of the project was to promote adaptation practices, which generated a positive impact on improving water use efficiency in crops and protecting soil from erosion and degradation. Customized adaptation measures were proposed based on the type of operation and its specific conditions. For example, work was done on rainfed and irrigated crops, promoting techniques such as direct seeding, the use of cover crops, and efficient irrigation methods, such as drip irrigation, to optimise water use and reduce soil erosion.

[Vercochar Project.](#)

Location: Islas Canarias (Spain)

Image 14. Production of biochar for the improvement of degraded agricultural soils.



Source: ©ICIA Government of the Canary Islands.

The project aimed to investigate the benefits of using biochar in agricultural soils, as this material can improve soil structure, increase water and nutrient retention, reduce the need for chemical fertilizers, and promote carbon sequestration for climate change mitigation. The project encouraged the conversion of agricultural and forestry waste into biochar, thus fostering a circular economy by reusing waste rather than discarding or burning it.

The main impacts of the project included improved soil fertility and efficiency in the use of water and nutrients. It promoted increased carbon capture and storage in agricultural soils, reduced the environmental impact of agricultural activities by decreasing reliance on chemical fertilisers, and highlighted the use of agricultural waste as a valuable resource rather than a pollutant.

4.2 Clean Energy, Reduction of GHG Emissions and Climate Change Adaptation

In 2022, 39% of the electricity in the European Union was generated from renewable energies, and in May, wind and solar energy surpassed fossil fuels for the first time in electricity generation in the EU. Legislative targets were agreed upon for a minimum percentage of 42.5% of renewable energy in the EU by 2030, with the ambition to reach 45%. Energy efficiency targets were also increased to reduce final energy consumption by 11.7% by 2030 (European Commission, 2023).

Net greenhouse gas emissions in the EU decreased by around 3% in 2022, achieving a reduction of 32.5% compared to 1990 levels (European Commission, 2023). Under the European Climate Regulation, EU countries must reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. The goal is to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050 (European Council, 2024).

Recent scientific reports show unprecedented changes in the global climate. Global warming is causing increasingly severe, and in some cases irreversible, changes in ocean currents and precipitation and wind patterns across all regions of the world. Rising temperatures and extreme weather events result in enormous costs for the EU economy and affect countries' ability to produce food (European Council, 2024).

According to a report by the European Commission, Spain is expected to experience a temperature increase of 4°C during the period 2070-2100 (with a greater increase in summer and less in winter) and a 25% decrease in precipitation. Spain will be one of the countries most affected by climate change (Caja Rural Burgos Foundation, 2023).

4.2.1 Challenges

The key challenges facing rural Spain in its path toward effective penetration of renewable energy are: the disparity of energy infrastructure between urban and rural areas; lack of access to affordable financing; population dispersion, which can increase implementation costs and hinder the creation of efficient energy networks; the need for integration with agriculture; the lack of adaptation in policies and regulations to the specific realities of rural areas; the need for education and awareness; and the need for technical training to enable the maintenance of renewable energy systems (Martínez Calleiros, J., 2024).

The agri-food sector in Spain is the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases within the diffuse sector, behind the transport sector. In 2014, its emissions accounted for 25% of total diffuse emissions. Nearly half of the sector's emissions are generated by the use of fertilizers and soil management, while the other half is caused by livestock (enteric fermentation and manure management) (MAPA, 2023).

Climate change stands as one of the greatest challenges directly affecting rural Spain. In various regions of Spain, water resource scarcity, droughts, incessant temperature changes causing hailstorms, etc., wreak havoc on traditional crops, marking the urgent need for adaptive strategies (Caja Rural Burgos Foundation, 2023).

In agriculture, the search for seed varieties that adapt to new climatic conditions becomes essential. Promoting Research and Development (R&D) in this sector is also crucial as a tool to face climate change. On the other hand, livestock farmers face the challenge of introducing heat-resistant species and adjusting livestock diets to maintain health and productivity amid changing climatic conditions (Caja Rural Burgos Foundation, 2023).

4.2.2 Opportunities:

Implementing clean energy technologies, such as solar panels or wind turbines, may require an initial investment but reduces operational costs for farms and local businesses, facilitating a revitalized rural economy (Redacción S.A., 2024).

Communities that adopt renewable energies increase their self-sufficiency. This means fewer service interruptions and greater energy independence (Redacción S.A., 2024).

The agricultural sector has the unique ability to produce emissions, but it can also act as a CO₂ sink through the capacity of soils and woody crops to capture CO₂ (MAPA, 2023).

Actions that can be taken to reduce emissions in the agri-food sector include (MAPA, 2023):

In agricultural soils: Appropriate use of fertilisation (soil analysis, doses adapted to crop needs, complementarity of organic and inorganic fertilisers); optimisation of fertiliser use (both organic and inorganic); crop rotation to optimise resource use (fertilisers, etc.); use of legumes; and management techniques that prevent losses of organic carbon from soils.

In livestock: Proper management of manure and slurry (alternative methods: anaerobic digestion - centralized and in small rural digesters -, slurry treatment and correct application to the soil - injection vs. broadcast spreading -) and enteric fermentation (diet modification to reduce methane emissions).

Utilising renewable energies to replace fossil fuels: replacing diesel boilers with biomass boilers and solar irrigation.

Reducing fuel consumption through improved combustion of agricultural machinery.

Eliminating the burning of agricultural waste: utilising it as biomass in boilers and incorporating it into the soil.

In the digital age, new technologies are emerging as invaluable allies in the fight against climate change. The ability to monitor real-time water conditions of crops and optimize

available resources becomes crucial to directing operations toward sustainability (Caja Rural Burgos Foundation, 2023).

4.2.3 Success Stories

[SAP005: Enhanced climate resilience of rural communities in central and north Benin through the implementation of ecosystem-based adaptation \(EbA\) in forest and agricultural landscapes](#)

Location: África

Most of the rapidly growing population of Benin lives in rural areas, where agriculture sustains around 70 per cent of people's livelihoods and provides about 80 per cent of export income to the economy. This strong dependence on agriculture is heavily impacted by environmental degradation and climate change.

The aim of the project is to halt the negative cycle of climate change, declining agricultural yields, and the degradation of natural resources in central and northern Benin to increase the resilience of local communities, using an ecosystem-based adaptation (EbA) approach. The EbA integrates climate-resilient agricultural techniques with the tailored restoration of degraded forest ecosystems. Therefore, the project addresses the current and future impacts of climate change through three components focused on restoring degraded forest ecosystems, increasing agricultural productivity, and improving the technical and institutional capacity of governments and communities. The project has a duration of 15 years.



[Energy Community, Castilfrío de la Sierra \(Soria, Spain\)](#) (Albendea, 2023).

Location: Castilla y León (Spain)

Image 15. Social Center of Castilfrío de la Sierra



Source: @Albendea, G.L.

The Hacendera Solar Association of Castilfrío de la Sierra (Soria) has been active since 2018. It was the first rural energy community in Spain, initiated as a pilot project before the first laws regulating this activity were established. Today, it continues to grow thanks to the participation of local residents and public and private entities.

Castilfrío de la Sierra is a small village in Soria with fewer than 40 inhabitants (38 inhabitants in 2023, according to INE), a real example of the so-called "empty Spain," characterised by its sometimes cobbled, sometimes asphalted streets and large houses built in the Merino architectural style.

The Hacendera Solar Association, its official name, emerged in 2018 as a pilot project of the G100 – New Rurality initiative, created by the coworking organisation El Hueco, also based in Soria. This organisation seeks ways to promote entrepreneurship and social innovation in rural areas, contributing to sustainable development and addressing the challenge of depopulation.

This collaborative effort led to the installation of two photovoltaic solar plants on the rooftops of two municipal buildings (the social centre and the old laundry, now the water elevating station) and three private homes during the pandemic. The plants have capacities of 7.36 and 5.5 kilowatts peak for self-consumption. This was made possible

with the support of the local city council and other organisations such as Red Eléctrica-Redeia, Caja Rural de Soria, and the Megara Energía cooperative, also located in this Castilian-Leonese province.

The project had an initial cost of 30,000 euros, plus 1,500 euros annually for maintenance, which are being covered by the savings generated by the installation itself.

These plants provide electricity not only to the public buildings where the panels are installed but also to the town hall, the medical clinic, and a renovated home. This includes the energy consumed for water pumping in the town and for the slow charging point for electric vehicles installed at the social centre. For the surplus energy fed into the grid, they have opted for the simplified compensation modality to further reduce electricity bills.

The project has not only helped awaken the commitment of some residents of Castilfrío de la Sierra but also facilitated other types of actions, such as the rehabilitation of houses. In other words, the aim is to combat depopulation by offering a much cheaper and more competitive living space and to promote citizen participation among the residents who are most interested.

[The Beefmetalist project develops an application to calculate the methane emissions from fattening calves in Cataluña](#)

Location: Cataluña (Spain)

Image 16. Cattle.



Source: © Revista Frisona Española

One of the challenges currently faced by the cattle sector is the need to reduce emissions of gases such as methane, which significantly contribute to the greenhouse effect. Being able to easily calculate the amount of methane emitted by the animals in the Catalan fattening cattle system could be very useful for evaluating the effectiveness of measures that may be taken to reduce it.

To this end, the Beefmetalist demonstrative project has been developed, which involves creating an application aimed at farmers that functions as a methane calculator. This application is being designed using the data collected and the utilization of laser methane detectors to help industry professionals better estimate their animals' emissions.

To achieve this, researchers from the Ruminant Production program at IRTA must first gather data from farms through surveys, which will be used in the methane prediction equations. They will then compare these data with those obtained from the laser detectors installed in a representative farm in the sector. Finally, all this information will be used to create an application that allows farmers to estimate the ruminal methane emissions from their calves.

Through this tool, an inventory of ruminal methane emissions in Catalonia can also be created. This information may be very useful for evaluating the effectiveness of different actions that can be taken to reduce emissions, such as changes in livestock management or in the feeding of calves.

4.3 Preservation and Restoration of Ecosystems and Biodiversity

The preservation and restoration of ecosystems and biodiversity in Spain face various challenges that require an integrated and coordinated approach among different sectors of society, as well as the adoption of science-based strategies and international collaboration (Naumann et al., 2023). Spain is particularly vulnerable to climate change, desertification, soil degradation, habitat fragmentation, and the presence of invasive species (Sanz et al., 2022). Additionally, there are other significant challenges such as the overexploitation of natural resources, biodiversity loss, water management, wildfires, and a lack of environmental education and public awareness. Furthermore, there is insufficient public and private funding to address the social, economic, and ecological challenges arising from the loss of ecosystem services and biodiversity.

4.3.1 Challenges

Climate Change:

Climate change is undoubtedly one of the primary challenges in conserving biodiversity and restoring ecosystems, both in Spain and globally. This phenomenon is profoundly altering ecosystems, questioning their resilience, disrupting natural balances, and putting numerous species and habitats at risk. Heatwaves, desertification, and changes in precipitation patterns are severely impacting biodiversity. Mediterranean ecosystems,

rich in biodiversity, are experiencing an increase in the frequency and severity of droughts, which reduce water availability and disrupt biological cycles (Valladares et al., 2005).

Desertification and Soil Degradation:

A large part of Spanish territory, especially in the southeast regions, suffers from desertification processes due to deforestation, poor agricultural practices, and climate change. Soil degradation and desertification are two phenomena that are very difficult to reverse, severely affecting biodiversity and agricultural productivity. Therefore, it is necessary to implement conservation measures in areas that are already experiencing some degree of degradation (Jofre et al., 2003). Restoring degraded soils requires investments in improved water management, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, and actions that enhance vegetation cover. This also includes concrete actions to prevent erosion, pollution, and the loss of fertile soil (Manso et al., 2008).

Habitat Fragmentation:

The construction of rural infrastructure, such as roads and communication routes, has fragmented many ecosystems, hindering the migration and reproduction of species. This generates profound ecological consequences, including problems associated with the loss of genetic diversity, a reduction in the total area available for wildlife, leading to population declines and, in some cases, local extinctions of species. Fragmented ecosystems cannot maintain the same species richness as contiguous ecosystems, resulting in biodiversity loss (Delgado Huertos, 2024). Connecting fragmented habitats through restoration efforts, for example, enhancing or creating ecological corridors and wildlife crossings, is essential to preserve biodiversity and ecosystem service provision. Large herbivores like deer and predators like wolves are the most affected, being particularly vulnerable as their hunting or migration areas are severely limited (Vidal Rettich, 2021).

Invasive Species:

Spain has been affected by various invasive exotic species that compete with native species, alter ecosystems, and cause significant economic and ecological damage (EASIN, JRC). Although there has been considerable progress in raising environmental awareness regarding the issue of cultivating and importing invasive species, there are still limitations in strengthening control and prevention mechanisms through stricter policies and public awareness (Polce et al., 2023). Ecosystem restoration plans should promote the use of native species that are better adapted to the environment and contribute to maintaining biodiversity (Orellana, 2023).

Overexploitation of Natural Resources:



The impacts of human activities, such as agriculture and livestock farming, have endangered many species and ecosystems, especially in rural areas (Oñate et al., 2023). The intensification of agriculture, monocultures, pesticide and fertiliser pollution, and overgrazing are some of the negative impacts generated by these two activities in rural areas. There are multiple challenges to be addressed when it comes to regulating and managing natural resources more sustainably through more sustainable agriculture and livestock farming practices to prevent overexploitation and promote the recovery of damaged ecosystems. While agriculture and livestock farming are fundamental activities for human survival, their impact on ecosystems and biodiversity is profound. However, through the implementation of sustainable agricultural practices, habitat restoration, and the creation of conservation policies, it is possible to reduce these impacts and find a balance between agricultural production and biodiversity protection (Hernández San Juan, 2021).

Loss of Biodiversity and Habitat Quality:

The loss of biodiversity, both in terms of species and the loss derived from the decline in ecosystem quality, is a growing challenge in Spain. Protecting endangered species through conservation programs, protected areas, and habitat restoration is crucial to reversing biodiversity loss. Additionally, the resilience of ecosystems and the restoration of key ecosystems must be promoted to prepare them for the uncertain conditions of climate change, hotter summers, and harsher winters, promoting climate refuges for flora and fauna (Gann et al., 2019).

Increasing Wildfires:

Wildfires, exacerbated by climate change and rural abandonment, are a recurring threat to Spain's forests and ecosystems. The high-risk fire period is no longer limited to summer alone but extends from early spring to autumn, necessitating improvements in fire prevention policies, increased public and private investment, and the promotion of sustainable forest management (Úbeda et al., 2021). At the same time, restoring burned areas by applying principles of ecological restoration (avoiding forest monocultures) is a priority to halt habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and rural depopulation (Cortina, 2013).

Lack of Environmental Education and Awareness:

The lack of environmental awareness and public participation in certain rural sectors hinders the implementation of conservation, restoration, and sustainable water management policies, among others. Promoting greater environmental education, both in the educational system and through public campaigns, represents a significant challenge but is vital for changing behaviours and fostering participation in biodiversity protection (Álvarez and Gutiérrez, 2019).

4.3.2 Opportunities

Spain has multiple opportunities to preserve and restore its ecosystems and biodiversity, thanks to its extensive network of protected areas, the support of European funds and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the new European Nature Restoration Law that entails the obligation to develop national restoration plans, the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices, and successful species reintroduction programs. The country is in a privileged position to integrate advanced environmental policies with local community collaboration and investment in environmental education, creating incubators for nature-based solutions and ecotourism. If effectively managed, these initiatives can ensure the long-term protection of ecosystems, mitigate rural exodus, recover biodiversity, and generate economic and social benefits for future generations (MITECO).

Protected Area Network:

Spain boasts a wide Network of Protected Natural Spaces, which includes national parks, biosphere reserves, Natura 2000 areas, and natural parks. These areas play a key role in biodiversity conservation as they protect critical habitats for many species, generating dispersal nuclei to other areas in worse conservation states (Becerra and Bravo, 2008). It is important to advance the conservation and expansion of these spaces while restoring degraded neighbouring habitats through the participation of rural populations and the creation of sustainable activities compatible with the conservation of these ecosystems (Martínez and Romero, 2003).

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and European Funds:

The efficient use of these funds can promote a shift towards more environmentally-friendly agriculture, encouraging cropping systems that are compatible with ecosystem conservation, reducing pollution, and degrading water and soil. These policies promote the preservation of rural habitats, reducing the use of chemical products, and protecting threatened species (Segrelles, 2020).

New European Nature Restoration Law:

The new European Nature Restoration Law represents a key opportunity for biodiversity conservation and restoration in Spain. This law, approved by the European Parliament, aims to reverse biodiversity loss and restore degraded ecosystems, marking a significant shift towards more sustainable and ambitious policies across the European Union (de Sadeleer et al., 2023). The Regulation requires member states to adopt and implement measures to jointly restore at least 20% of the EU's terrestrial and marine areas by 2030 (Europea, 2022). Nature restoration not only focuses on biodiversity but also on improving water and soil quality, which is essential for sustainable agriculture and ecosystem health. This also entails a greater capacity to mitigate floods and manage water resources more efficiently. Rural communities, especially in depopulated regions, could benefit from

new jobs related to restoration and conservation while promoting ecotourism as a sustainable income source (SERE, 2024).

Sustainable Agriculture, Livestock, and Tourism:

Given that Spain is a world-renowned tourist destination, sustainable tourism has the potential to represent a significant opportunity for funding biodiversity conservation and raising awareness among the rural population (de España, 2007). Promoting ecotourism in protected areas and rural regions can create local jobs and provide resources for ecosystem preservation (Duque, 2022). Similarly, sustainable agriculture and livestock farming, encouraging regenerative practices and organic farming techniques, can improve soil health, increase biodiversity, and reduce the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers while recovering water quality. The combination of agriculture with sustainable forest management, such as agroforestry systems like *dehesa*, which combines grazing with tree and shrub conservation, offers a sustainable model that favours both productivity and ecosystem conservation (Ferrer, 2017; Rodríguez-Estévez et al., 2023).

Species Reintroduction Programs:

These species reintroduction programs have shown considerable success in Spain, such as the case of the Iberian lynx (Espunyes, 2011) and the bearded vulture (LIFE 20 NAT/ES/001363; Margalida).

4.3.3 Success stories

[Water Resource Management Project in the Shullcas Subbasin, Peru.](#)

Location: Peru.

Image 17. Recovered bofedales, Peru.



Source@IUCN

This project, which implemented Nature-Based Solutions (NbS), focused on various environmental actions aimed at the sustainable management of water and the conservation of natural ecosystems, such as wetlands, to ensure the supply of water to vulnerable populations. A practical case is applied in the Shullcas River basin in Junín, Peru, which faces threats such as the deglaciation of the Huaytapallana snow-capped mountain, water scarcity, pollution, and the degradation of wetlands and grasslands. These issues, exacerbated by climate change and intensive agricultural practices, jeopardize the livelihoods of rural populations and the water supply to urban areas. The solution proposes revegetation, recovery of grasslands and high-altitude wetlands (bofedales), and the promotion of sustainable practices in agriculture and livestock farming. The project includes training communities to implement mechanisms for payment for ecosystem services to ensure long-term sustainability.

Live olive groves

Location: Andalucía (Spain)

Image 18. Olive groves LIFE project Olivares Vivos+.



Source: @LIFEolivaresvivos+.

Olivares Vivos is a LIFE project that promotes a sustainable olive grove model that enhances biodiversity, contributes to the fight against climate change, and increases the profitability of producers, while positioning olive oil as an organic and high-quality product. This successful project, coordinated by SEO/BirdLife and concluded in 2020, aimed to transform olive cultivation into a more sustainable production model focused on biodiversity conservation and the recovery of ecosystems in olive groves. It was primarily developed in Spain, in areas where olive oil production is a key economic activity.

Through environmentally friendly agricultural practices, the project seeks to restore and protect biodiversity in olive groves. This includes proper soil management, the introduction of native flora, and the creation of habitats for wildlife. A biodiversity certification was promoted, as the olive groves participating in the project were able to obtain certification that guarantees their commitment to environmental conservation and biodiversity. This helps producers access markets that value sustainability. The project, which has a continuation through another LIFE project, Olivares Vivos+, has generated scientific data primarily on biodiversity and the impact of sustainable agricultural practices, which have proven valuable for reinforcing the importance of conserving agricultural ecosystems.

[Mosaico Project, firebreak landscapes.](#)

Location: Castilla y León (Spain)

Image 19. Mosaic of traditional landscape, Sierra de Gata (Extremadura).

Firebreak landscapes. Purpose of WWF España y& ANP|WWF Portugalto adapt the Iberian territory to the fire.



Source: ©WWF. Hernández, L. & cols. (2021).

The Mosaic Project in the Sierra de Gata, an initiative covering areas of Castilla y León and Extremadura, seeks the sustainable management of rural landscapes with the main objective of preventing forest fires. However, it also has a positive impact on biodiversity and local development. The main objectives of the project are the prevention of forest fires through the creation of a "mosaic" landscape, where different land uses alternate, acting as a natural firebreak. Additionally, it aims to recover and diversify the rural landscape by promoting sustainable agricultural, livestock, and forestry activities that generate a local economy based on the conservation of the natural environment.

The activities it promotes include the encouragement of extensive agriculture and livestock farming, selective revegetation of key areas such as biological corridors and strategic zones, while also promoting agroecological practices and controlled grazing to reduce the risk of fires. The project aims to generate a series of benefits for biodiversity, such as increasing diversity through a more heterogeneous mosaic landscape that is more diverse and favourable to local flora and fauna species, which in turn contributes to fire prevention. Furthermore, maintaining the traditional landscape enhances the resilience of ecosystems against climate change. In summary, the Mosaic Project

combines fire prevention and landscape restoration with the recovery of biodiversity and the creation of sustainable opportunities for rural communities.

4.4 Organic Agriculture, Regenerative Livestock and Sustainable Forest Management

Currently, in Spain, almost half of the territory is dedicated to agricultural practices, covering more than 23 million hectares, of which nearly 17 million are arable land. Of this area, 76% is dedicated to rainfed crops, while 24% is used for irrigated farming. Regarding the livestock sector, Spain has over 25 million heads of pork and more than 16 million sheep (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food [MAPA], 2023).

According to EUROSTAT data from 2014, the Gross Value Added (GVA) of the agricultural sector amounted to 24,050 million euros, with the GVA of the agricultural and fishing sector contributing approximately 2.5% to GDP (MAPA, 2023). These figures demonstrate the importance of the primary sector in the economy, not only in rural areas but also at the national level, while emphasising that the agricultural and livestock sectors are irreplaceable in ensuring food security.

On the other hand, in Spain, forested land represents more than half of its land area. The latest consolidated figures from the Spanish Forest Map (MFE) and publications from the National Forest Inventory (IFN) indicate that just over 28 million hectares are forest areas that meet the legal condition of forests (55.8% of the total territory). Within this area, over 18.7 million hectares are wooded, representing 66% of forested land and nearly 37% of the total land area (MITECO, 2022).

Compared to Europe, Spain ranks second in terms of forest area (only preceded by Sweden) and third in terms of wooded area (after Sweden and Finland) (MITECO, 2022).

Organic production, also known as biological or ecological farming, is a management and production system that combines the best environmental practices with a high level of biodiversity and the preservation of natural resources, as well as the application of strict animal welfare standards, with the aim of producing according to certain consumers' preferences for products obtained from natural substances and processes (MAPA, 2024). For the EU, organic agriculture is considered to be based on a sustainable system that respects the environment and animal welfare, but also includes all other stages of the food supply chain (raw material supply, processing, storage, transport, distribution, and retail services) (European Parliament, 2024).

Over the last three decades, organic food and agriculture have grown year after year throughout the EU and continue to do so. The EU organic market is very dynamic, with growth rates varying from country to country. Policies can positively impact this growth, both in production and consumption (European Organic Farming Federation [IFOAM], 2024).

In 2022, the total area of agricultural land in the EU dedicated to organic production reached 16.9 million hectares. Compared to 2021, the number of organic producers in the EU increased by 10.8% to 419,112. However, the EU retail organic market did not keep pace with the significant growth in production, decreasing by 3% from 2021 data, resulting in 45.1 billion euros—still the second largest market after the United States and followed by China (IFOAM, 2024).

Between 2014 and 2022, European farmers received about 12 billion euros in support for organic farming practices under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

In May 2020, the European Commission's "From Farm to Fork" Strategy mentions organic agriculture as a key sector for achieving the food ambitions of the European Green Deal. The strategy states, "The organic food market will continue to grow, and it is necessary to continue promoting organic farming." As part of this strategy, the Commission published the 2021-2027 Action Plan for Organic Farming, aimed at boosting both organic demand and supply (IFOAM, 2024).

Spain is one of the leading producers in terms of area in the EU and globally (MAPA, 2024). According to MAPA's 2022 organic production statistics, the useful agricultural area for organic production in Spain was 2,675,331 hectares in 2022 (10.95% of the total useful agricultural area) (the highest since 1991). In terms of certified organic livestock production in Spain in 2022, there were 45,018 (MAPA, 2022).

4.4.1 Challenges

Rural areas in Spain face a series of complex challenges to ensure clean water, living soils, reduce waste, and promote the circular economy of by-products (Adam, 2023), in addition to intrinsic issues such as depopulation, lack of services, scarcity of development opportunities, loss of generational turnover, profitability issues, and the need for modernization and digitalization in the primary sector, along with a sense of abandonment by administrations (Funcas, 2020).

Compliance with legislative requirements and adaptation to a new climatic reality are imperatives for the primary sector (Caja Rural Burgos Foundation, 2023).

In relation to the forestry sector, Spain's biogeographical situation and geomorphology make its territory sensitive to erosion processes and hydrological risks, and particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. Climate change, coupled with the abandonment of many forest areas, has highlighted vulnerabilities that threaten forest conservation by weakening trees, making them more susceptible to pests, diseases, and forest fires (MITECO, 2022).

Forest fires continue to be the main element of degradation of forest ecosystems and one of the main environmental problems in Spain, which is expected to be exacerbated by

biomass accumulation and the effects of climate change, especially due to rising temperatures, more frequent, intense, and prolonged droughts, and heat waves that increase the risk of ignition and fire spread (MITECO, 2022).

National and EU policies for the organic sector have gaps. CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) funds were used to increase the area cultivated organically without sufficiently considering the environmental and market objectives set by EU organic farming policy (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

It is crucial to link the European Commission's goal of increasing the area of useful agricultural land dedicated to organic farming in the EU to 25% by 2030 to the reform of the CAP, the Biodiversity Strategy, and other agri-food policies to create a more positive environment in which farmers and food companies feel secure in making significant investment decisions to meet consumer demand for products made with care for people, animals, and the planet (IFOAM, 2024).

4.4.2 Opportunities:

Organic agriculture, as a production method aimed at obtaining food using natural substances and processes, tends to have a limited environmental impact compared to traditional agriculture, as it promotes responsible use of energy and natural resources, maintenance of biodiversity, conservation of regional ecological balances, improvement of soil fertility, and maintenance of water quality (European Commission, 2024a).

Regenerative agricultural systems aim to improve natural conditions while ensuring the demand for water and food for people, generating benefits such as increased climate resilience of ecosystems, enhanced conservation of biodiversity and natural resources, and greater productivity (FAO, 2020).

The European Green Deal is the EU's strategy for sustainable and inclusive growth, aimed at boosting the economy, improving health and quality of life for people, and caring for nature. In July 2023, the Commission adopted a package of measures for the sustainable use of key natural resources, which will also strengthen the resilience of European agriculture and food systems (European Commission, 2024b).

The Commission considers organic agriculture a key tool for increasing the sustainability of agriculture, and it has set a goal for 25% of EU agricultural land to be dedicated to organic farming by 2030, representing a significant leap from the 10.95% in 2022 (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

The growing demand for sustainable products from environmentally conscious consumers has propelled organic agriculture and regenerative livestock farming as viable options for the sector's survival (Caja Rural Burgos Foundation, 2023).

The forestry sector offers the following opportunities: it allows for the decarbonisation of the economy; it is an economic activity that supports the fight against demographic

challenges in rural areas and promotes circular bioeconomy; construction with wood and the use of its derived products has a positive ecological footprint compared to other materials that demand significant energy and resources in their various production, use, and valorisation phases; it presents financing possibilities through payment for environmental services, and there is a growing social demand favourable to nature conservation (MITECO, 2022).

4.4.3 Success stories

Colombian Livestock farming

Location: Colombia

This project is implemented in 87 municipalities of Colombia, located in 5 regions, and arises as a partnership between the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the government of the United Kingdom, the Colombian Federation of Cattle Ranchers (Fedegan), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Centre for Research in Sustainable Agricultural Production Systems Foundation (CIPAV), and the Environmental Action Fund (FA), under the supervision of the World Bank. Its objectives are to ensure that livestock farming contributes to the recovery and sustainable use of biodiversity while maintaining the profitability of the farms. More specifically, it aims to:

- Promote the adoption of environmentally friendly Colombian livestock production through pastoral systems in the project areas.
- Improve the management of natural resources.
- Increase the provision of environmental services (biodiversity, land/soils, carbon capture, and water).
- Increase productivity on the participating farms.

The project consists of incorporating pastoral systems alongside the conservation of forests and other existing natural systems, transforming farms into more productive and environmentally responsible areas. Various pastoral models exist, aimed at minimising the use of agrochemicals and improving ecosystems. A total of 18,283 hectares have been conserved, and 38,390 hectares have been sustainably used.

Agricultural Sustainability: Exploring Carbon Farming with AIVelAI

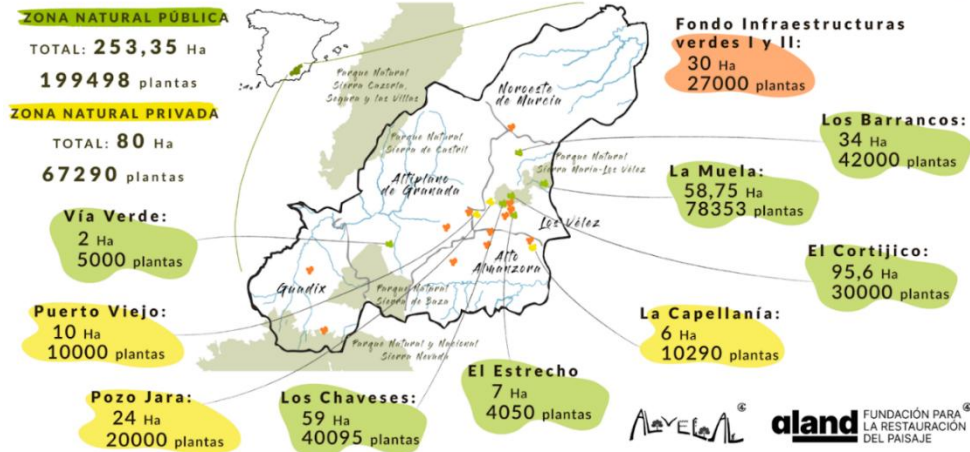
Location: Altiplano of Granada (Spain)

AIVelAI (<https://alvelal.es/>) is an association aimed at regenerating the landscape of the Altiplano de Granada (Spain) through ecosystem restoration, regenerative agriculture, and economic revitalisation, including aspects such as research, training, and awareness-raising. It has an ecosystem restoration plan that includes various actions; among them is the utilisation of farms belonging to producers who implement ecological and

regenerative farming techniques, in addition to fostering cooperation among various competent administrations and private sector companies that generate jobs in the development and resource provision for its execution.

Image 20. Infographics of cumulative data on restoration of natural areas (2017-2022).

ACTUACIONES EN ZONA NATURAL -ALVELAL (2017-2022)



Source: ©Asociación AIVeIAI.

Regarding regenerative agriculture specifically, AIVeIAI advises, supports, energizes, and monitors the implementation of regenerative and ecological agricultural practices, accompanying farmers in the transition to a new model, assisting them in seeking funding, promoting their products, providing a network of contacts, a shared machinery bank, etc. This is a growing community that is revitalizing the rural environment of southeastern Spain, with an interesting impact, as seen in the documentary "Cabeza, Corazón y Manos," awarded at the Green Festival in 2021 (<https://www.headheartandhands.site/>).

Image 21. Visit to the El Pajaretillo Farm in San José del Valle (Cádiz, Spain).

Covering 475 hectares, where holistic management of livestock and agriculture is applied. July 2024.



Source: © Asociación AIVeIAI.

[Sustainable forest management in Menorca in a context of climate change \(LIFE BOSCOS-MENORCA\)](#)

Location: Menorca (Spain)

In January 2009, the Insular Council of Menorca launched the LIFE+BOSCOS project: “Sustainable Forest Management in Menorca in a Climate Change Context.” Lasting 5 years, the main objective of the project has been to contribute to the adaptation of Mediterranean forest ecosystems to the negative impacts of climate change through sustainable forest management.

Challenges:

Mediterranean islands are particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change. All models agree that an increase in water stress and its associated risks for this region—drought, pests, fires, as well as those related to changes in ecological conditions (species extinction, mutualism, desynchronization, alteration of biodiversity, phenological changes)—is expected. Insularity is also a factor that will increase the vulnerability associated with these effects.

In addition to changes related to the acceleration of climate change, socio-economic factors (livestock crisis, increase in recreational activities, energy crisis, economic crisis) create a scenario of significant transformation in the forest structure of the island, which may affect the adaptive response capacity of forest communities and put at risk ecosystem services, regulation, and cultural functions.

Adaptation Measure Objectives:

- General Objective: Contribute to the adaptation of Mediterranean forest ecosystems in Menorca to the negative impacts of climate change through sustainable forest management.
- Partial Objectives:
 - Demonstrate the feasibility of reducing the vulnerability of forest systems to climate change through forest management actions carried out on private farms.
 - Design forest management guidelines at the island level, with governance and participation criteria that enable the adaptation of forest ecosystems to climate change scenarios.
 - Train landowners, managers, and other social agents linked to forests on aspects related to sustainable forest management and good forestry practices.
 - Raise public awareness about the values of forests, the impacts of climate change, and the role of sustainable forest management in this context.

Solutions:

- Information and analysis of the effects of climate change on Mediterranean forest areas.
- Definition of forest management guidelines at the island level.
- Development of pilot forest management plans for agricultural operations.
- Pilot testing of forest management plans on farms.
- Environmental assessment of the implementation of forest management guidelines.
- Evaluation of the profitability of actions.
- Analysis of the non-implementation of guidelines.
- Training for managers.
- Information for the general public.
- Dissemination of results.

Image 22. Demonstration Day of Good Forestry Practices in Menorca. July 2015.



Source: © Life + BOSCOS Project.



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4.5 Methodologies and Sustainability Indicators in Rural Green Transition

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2012), a green economy is “one that improves human well-being and reduces inequalities over the long term, while avoiding significant environmental risks and ecological degradation for future generations” (ENRD – European Network for Rural Development, 2017). The rural green transition refers to the transformation of economic and social activities in rural areas towards more sustainable and resilient practices that minimise environmental impact and promote community well-being (OpenIA, 2023).

To carry out this transition, it is essential to implement methodologies and use indicators that allow for measuring progress and evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives. Below are some key methodologies and indicators in this area (OpenIA, 2023).

4.5.1 Methodologies (OpenIA, 2023)

- **Life Cycle Assessment:** Assessment of the environmental impact of products or processes from raw material extraction to final disposal.
- **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** Economic evaluation that compares the costs and benefits of sustainability measures implemented in the rural environment.
- **Participatory Approach:** Involves the community in identifying problems, setting priorities, and evaluating solutions. This ensures that initiatives reflect local needs and values.
- **Development of Sustainability Indicators:** Identification and development of relevant indicators that measure economic, social, and environmental aspects to evaluate the sustainability of practices and policies in the rural area.
- **Technology Adaptation:** Implementation of sustainable technologies that are adapted to the rural context, such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture techniques, or efficient water management.
- **Regenerative Agriculture and Agroecology:** Promoting agricultural practices that regenerate soils, increase biodiversity, and improve the health of rural ecosystems.

4.5.2 Sustainability Indicators (OpenIA, 2023):

Environmental Indicators:

- **Carbon Footprint:** An indicator that quantifies greenhouse gas emissions associated with production activities.
- **Water Quality:** Analysis of pollution and sustainable use of water resources.
- **Biodiversity Index:** Monitoring of species and habitat diversity in the rural area. According to the recently approved Law for Nature Restoration, the biodiversity of agroecosystems can be measured with the following indicators: the butterfly

index of grasslands; the proportion of agricultural land with highly diverse landscape features; and organic carbon reserves in mineral soils of agricultural land (European Parliament, 2024).

- **Ecological Footprint:** Calculated as the amount of land needed for each person to exist. Values of the ecological footprint per person above 1.71 global hectares indicate unsustainable consumption, exceeding the planet's capacity to provide renewable resources sustainably (García, 2018).

Social Indicators:

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** Measurement of well-being in terms of health, education, and living standards. HDI values above 0.7 indicate high human development, meaning satisfactory levels of income, health, and education for the population of a country (García, 2018).
- **Community Participation and Satisfaction:** Degree of community involvement in decision-making and positive impact on the quality of life of residents. Notable participatory approaches for sustainable agriculture include: "Farmer-to-Farmer Movement," Participatory Rural Appraisal, On-Farm Participatory Research, Sociocultural Animation, and Socio-praxis (López García, 2014).
- **Gender Equity:** Analysis of women's participation and empowerment in the rural economy.
- **Access to Natural Resources:** Proportion of the rural population with sustainable access to water, land, and other resources.

Economic Indicators:

- **Per Capita Income:** Income per inhabitant in rural areas.
- **Green Employment:** Number of jobs created in sustainable and low-impact activities (inventories, employment per unit of product or service, input-output analysis, and social accounting matrices, etc.) (Harsdorff & Phillips, 2013).
- **Income Diversification and Economic Resilience:** Measure of the economic capacity of rural families to generate income through various activities and adapt to changes.
- **Economic Profitability:** Return on investment (ROI) in sustainable projects.

Governance Indicators:

- **Transparency and Accountability:** Evaluation of public management and citizen participation in environmental decisions.
- **Sustainability Policies:** Existence and effectiveness of policies and programs aimed at promoting sustainability in the rural area (Harsdorff & Phillips, 2013; López, 2014; OpenIA, 2023; European Parliament, 2024).

The green transition in rural areas presents both significant challenges and opportunities:

Challenges (OpenIA, 2023):

- **Dependence on Non-Renewable Resources:** Many rural communities rely on traditional agricultural practices and the exploitation of unsustainable resources, which can hinder the transition.
- **Access to Technology:** Lack of access to modern and sustainable technologies limits farmers' ability to adopt greener practices.
- **Financing:** Securing investments for sustainable projects can be challenging, especially in communities with limited resources.
- **Cultural Resistance:** Changes in traditional practices may face resistance from farmers.
- **Education and Training:** The need for training in sustainable practices is fundamental.

Opportunities (OpenIA, 2023):

- **Agricultural Innovation:** The green transition can drive the development of new technologies and more sustainable agricultural methods, such as precision agriculture and agroecology.
- **Income Diversification:** Implementing sustainable practices can open new market opportunities, such as organic food production or renewable energies.
- **Natural Resource Conservation:** Adopting sustainable practices can contribute to soil, water, and biodiversity conservation, improving ecosystem resilience.
- **Public Policies:** Increasingly, governments are implementing policies that promote sustainability, which can provide financial and technical support to rural communities.
- **Community Strengthening:** Collaboration among farmers, cooperatives, and local organisations can strengthen social cohesion and promote a sense of community in pursuing common goals.
- **Sustainable Tourism:** Rural areas can leverage their natural and cultural environment to develop sustainable tourism, generating income and employment.
- The green transition in rural areas is, therefore, a complex path but full of potential. Addressing challenges with appropriate strategies can open the door to a more sustainable and prosperous future for rural communities.

4.5.3 Success stories

[Autonomous Adaptation to Droughts in an Agro-Silvo-Pastoral System in Alentejo in Alentejo](#)

Location: Alentejo (Portugal)

Guided by the ethics of agroecology, a Portuguese farm is implementing a food production model based on respect for nature, aligned with sustainable development goals, and capable of protecting water resources in a drought-prone area.

Herdade do Freixo do Meio is a multifunctional landscape located in the Alentejo region of southern Portugal. It hosts a certified organic farm, a historical archaeological area, and a protected natural area covering 584 hectares. The region is characterized by multifunctional and dynamic agro-silvo-pastoral systems of cork oaks and holm oaks. The farm managers implement concepts of agroforestry, agroecology, regenerative agriculture, holistic management, permaculture, and food sovereignty. This farm employs about 30 people and primarily produces sweet acorns, vegetables, fruits, wine, olive oil, cork, and herbs. It also houses animals such as sheep, cows, pigs, and chickens. This farm has been implementing various sustainable agriculture techniques while maintaining economic viability. It is particularly committed to raising awareness about sustainable agriculture and has autonomously implemented adaptation measures to cope with a changing climate, especially needed due to the increasing intensity and frequency of drought episodes. It has also been recognized as a Private Protected Area, belonging to the Portuguese Network of Protected Areas.

Montado do Freixo do Meio promotes a space for cooperation, inclusion, personal development, work, and community building. It seeks to create a community that harmoniously integrates the ecosystem to which it belongs, one that is autonomous, resilient, peaceful, and ecumenical. The objective of the various initiatives carried out by the agricultural enterprise is to improve the relationship between human actions and resources: water, soil, biodiversity, energy, science, and culture.

Image 23. Agro-Silvo-Pastoral System Alentejo.



Source: © Herdade do Freixo do Meio.

[MEDACC: Innovative Methodologies for Climate Change Adaptation in the Mediterranean Basin](#)



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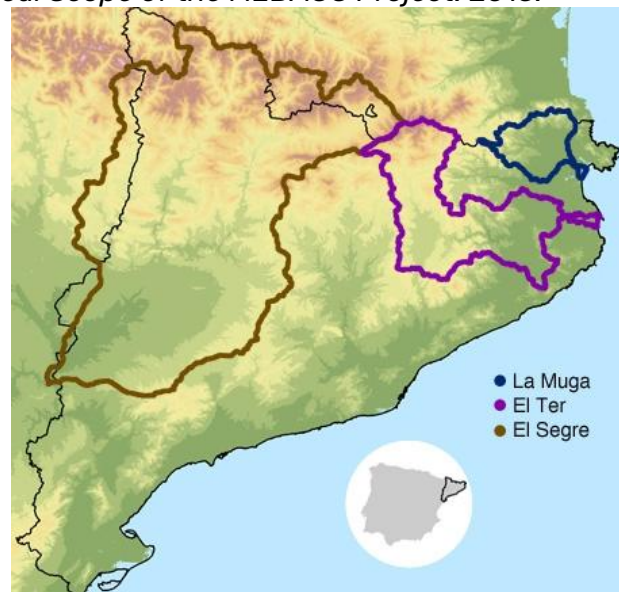
Location: Cataluña (Spain)

The LIFE MEDACC project develops innovative solutions for climate change adaptation in Mediterranean agroforestry and urban systems. Implemented in the Catalan watersheds of the Muga, Ter, and Segre rivers, it evaluates how adaptation measures reduce vulnerability while considering economic and environmental costs. The applicability to the Mediterranean region as a whole is a key focus.

The objective of the LIFE MEDACC project is to develop innovative solutions aimed at adapting our agroforestry and urban systems to the impacts of climate change in the Mediterranean area. A series of adaptation measures have been implemented in the fields of agriculture, forestry management, and water management. The project's results help quantify how adaptation can reduce the vulnerability of natural systems and human activities to climate change and assess the economic and environmental costs associated with the implementation (or non-implementation) of these adaptation measures.

The project is carried out in three representative watersheds of Catalonia: The Muga, Ter, and Segre. The goal is to ensure that the results and methodology are applicable for designing similar experiences throughout the Mediterranean area.

Image 24. Geographical Scope of the MEDACC Project. 2013.



Source: © MEDACC project.

[Phytodepuration System for Wastewater Treatment in a Rural Environment in Errigoiti. Nature-Based Solutions in Euskadi. 20 Success Cases for Adapting to Climate Change Using NBS.](#)

Location: Basque Country (Spain)

The Errekalde neighbourhood, a rural area of dispersed farmhouses in Errigoiti, had a problem with the management of wastewater and sewage. The septic tank in the neighbourhood, buried in a sloped area and not connected to the municipal sewage system, was deteriorating due to land subsidence, which had caused several cracks in the septic tank. In light of this situation, the Errigoiti Town Hall decided to address the problem through a combination of different Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) and the application of circularity criteria.

In the civil works portion of the intervention, bioengineering techniques were used for land stabilisation, and the cracked septic tank was repurposed to establish a phytodepuration system and mechanical-biological filtration of the wastewater and sewage from the neighbourhood. As a result of the intervention, the generated effluent is discharged into a nearby stream, meeting all legal parameters for discharges into public hydraulic domain.

4.6 Resources and Policies to Promote the Green Transition in Rural Areas

In Spain, rural areas occupy 85% of the territory—428,010.9 ha out of the 50,599,000 that the country has—but their inhabitants represent only 16.5% of the total population. However, these individuals coexist in key ecosystems to address the current ecological emergency and often sustain essential activities in the territory to confront this crisis (Nuche, 2021).

The green transition in rural areas not only contributes to environmental sustainability but can also strengthen the local economy and improve the quality of life for communities. It is essential to develop integrated policies and provide adequate resources to facilitate this transition, promoting community participation and the use of sustainable technologies (OpenIA, 2023).

4.6.1 Challenges

The ecological crisis includes two major global challenges that we must face: the climate emergency and biodiversity loss (Nuche, 2021). We are witnessing a global loss of biodiversity so significant that the scientific community compares it to the previous five mass extinctions in Earth's history, dubbing it the sixth extinction. The difference with this extinction from previous ones is its cause: human impact (Nuche, 2021).

The challenge facing society, in general, and rural areas, in particular, is to achieve a low-carbon economy. One of the primary reasons for undertaking this transition is to strengthen contributions to climate change mitigation, an issue in which all sectors have a role to play (European Network for Rural Development, 2017).

The low-carbon economy involves developing economic activities with minimal greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to the biosphere. It is one where companies, people, and the environment thrive through carbon management and administration, more efficient fuel use, carbon storage in soils and biomass, and the use of low-carbon technologies to generate products, services, and energy. However, it is important to note that the term "low-carbon" refers not only to carbon dioxide (CO₂) but also to the reduction of emissions of all greenhouse gases (GHG), such as nitrous oxides or methane (European Network for Rural Development, 2017).

Therefore, in the rural world, we must focus on the urgent need to address demographic challenges, climate emergency, and nature deterioration, as well as the current crisis in the agricultural sector (rising production costs, low food prices, and lack of public policy support) (Econoticias.com, 2022).

Regarding the agri-food system, a basic activity in rural areas, its value is undeniable. It provides food, sustains the economy, and shapes cultural identity. However, the hidden environmental, social, and health costs associated with it must also be considered (FAO, 2023).

4.6.2 Opportunities:

Local and indigenous communities play a key role in maintaining biodiversity (Nuche, 2021).

Unlike other sectors, those that use land provide an opportunity to offer a positive carbon balance through carbon capture and conservation in soils and biomass (European Network for Rural Development, 2017).

The natural ecosystems of rural Spain, such as forests, pastures, or wetlands, can become our great allies as CO₂ sinks if we protect them (Nuche, 2021).

Promoting green jobs is considered one of the pathways to achieve the success of the United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The greening of the rural economy is a primary aspect to promote decent and sustainable job opportunities, improve labour productivity and resources, and foster poverty eradication and social inclusion (ILO, 2019).

True Cost Accounting (TCA) allows estimating the hidden costs generated by market inefficiencies, institutions, and policies. It provides decision-makers with the objective data necessary to correct hidden environmental, social, and health costs and improve agri-food systems (FAO, 2023).

The rural environment, which houses most ecosystems, plays a key role in supplying essential environmental goods and services, which are the benefits that people obtain from nature, such as food, clean water, and air, among others. Ecosystems, in addition to

helping mitigate climate change, provide many other environmental services to society (Nuche, 2021).

Improving resource use efficiency and generating renewable energy offers excellent opportunities for the rural world (European Network for Rural Development, 2017).

Rural Development Programs (RDP) can assist rural businesses in conducting low-carbon activities through measures such as advice and training, development of agricultural enterprises, afforestation and forest management, and promoting investment (European Network for Rural Development, 2017).

The EU Nature Restoration Law, part of the European Green Deal and agreed upon with the Member States, aims to regenerate degraded ecosystems in their territories, contribute to achieving the EU's climate and biodiversity goals, and improve food security. In this sense, it is a good opportunity for rural areas to enhance the biodiversity of agroecosystems (European Parliament, 2024).

In Spain, the Plan of Measures to Tackle Demographic Challenge, particularly its Axis 1 for promoting ecological transition, is a significant opportunity to achieve the following objectives (Ministry for Economic Transition and Demographic Challenge, 2024):

- Promoting an energy transition adapted to local communities, fostering the development of innovative and sustainable initiatives.
- Promoting bioeconomy for economic diversification based on biodiversity and environmental quality.
- Guiding environmental protection to design more resilient and sustainable local communities.
- Ensuring a Just Transition in the territory that contributes to combating depopulation, especially in small municipalities included in Just Transition agreements.

4.6.3 Success stories

[Subsidised drought insurance for farmers in Austria](#)

Location: Austria

The subsidised public-private drought insurance system adopted by the Austrian government combines indemnity-based insurance with climate index-based products. Its goal is to prepare farmers to cope with extreme events, reduce their reliance on subsidies, and therefore promote their well-being and mental health, while enabling better financial planning through public-private partnerships.

Agriculture is highly sensitive to extreme weather phenomena, such as droughts, floods, storms, hail, and heat. Drought, in particular, poses a significant challenge for farmers and governments due to its potential negative impact on crop yields. Climate change amplifies

the frequency and severity of droughts, increasing the risk of agricultural losses. In Austria, recent drought-induced crop losses and impacts on agricultural production led the government to adopt a subsidised drought insurance system for farmers. This system replaces the traditional approach of providing ad hoc compensation to farmers for economic damages caused by droughts.

The public-private insurance system combines indemnity and index-based products for drought-related agricultural damages to:

Provide fairer and quicker coverage of damages to farmers, which should lead to farmers relying less on public subsidies, experiencing fewer mental health issues due to economic concerns, and being more sustainably prepared to cope with extreme events.

Create a risk management and financing instrument that allows the government to work with a programmable annual budget (as opposed to crisis management with unforeseen and ad hoc compensations) based on a combination of public funds, contributions from the private sector, and payments to individual farmers.

Image 25. Crops affected by agricultural and meteorological droughts.



Source: © Osman Kartal, Climate Change PIX/EEA.

[A modern dairy farm that efficiently uses resources in Dâmbovița County: GREEN ECONOMY. OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL EUROPE](#)

Location: Romania.

Of the 2,000 dairy producers in Dâmbovița County, only seven are considered modern industrial farmers. The nature of these small-scale farms, focused on subsistence or semi-subsistence, means that the management of manure and the composting processes used represent a problem for the region. Ammonia emissions cause pollution that affects nearby populations. Recognising the importance of integrating environmental, economic, and social activities within a green economy framework, the project aimed to achieve results in several related areas. A new dairy farm was created with facilities for the production of cheese and other dairy products. At the same time, a

renewable energy production unit (biogas) was integrated into the farm's development to process both the waste generated by the dairy production process (manure, waste milk, etc.) and to produce energy (about 250 kW) to support the operation of the farm and the processing plant. Traditional physical labour on the farm was reduced through automation processes in production, including manure management and forage supply. In turn, other less physically demanding jobs were created in milk processing and the operation of the new facilities. This generated job opportunities for a broader range of local residents.

Reforestation with Native Species through Land Stewardship Mechanisms in Bakio. Nature-Based Solutions in the Basque Country. 20 Success Cases for Adapting to Climate Change through NBS.

Location: Basque Country (Spain)

The climate change adaptation plan for the municipality of Bakio establishes the need to adapt the territory and its productive management to the new expected climate scenarios as one of its intervention axes. In the forestry sector, it proposes identifying the risks and vulnerabilities of Bakio's forests and promoting the adaptation of their management in response to the expected increase in temperatures and decrease in precipitation. In this context, the Bakio City Council promotes the recovery of municipal forest land, historically dedicated to forestry plantations, and its reforestation with native tree and shrub species. This initiative aims to restore the ecological functionality of the forest, minimise soil erosion processes, and enhance carbon absorption by both plant biomass and soil. To carry out this intervention, the Bakio City Council signs a land stewardship agreement with a stewardship entity (in this case, Lurgaia Fundazioa), which provides technical advice on restoration and forestry facilitation, ensuring the sustainable use of the lands under stewardship at all times. The reforestation was carried out over 5.7 hectares divided into two plots previously harvested for eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*) forestry.

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5. Module 3. Entrepreneurship and Innovative Social Economy Impulse in Rural Areas

Objective

This training module is an educational resource created as part of the ESIRA train-the-trainers programme, which forms part of Deliverable 5.2. Training modules, included in WP5 – Community-led innovation spaces and pilot social economy initiatives. The main objective of the train-the-trainers programme is to capacity build and to strengthen the skills of Multi-Actor Platform (MAP) facilitators and rural actors to identify, support and ensure the sustainability of social economy initiatives and develop community networks in the rural territory.

The main objective of the Training Module 3 is to provide theoretical and practical knowledge and skills to training facilitators and rural actors in the areas of entrepreneurship and innovative social economy.

Structure

The module is organised in a progressive and practice-oriented structure that guides learners from foundational concepts to applied tools for action in rural contexts. It begins by outlining the learning objectives and introducing the key concepts of rural entrepreneurship, social innovation, and the social economy, positioning them as essential drivers for the promotion of local initiatives. The module then explores social innovation as a catalyst for rural development, followed by an analysis of the opportunities and challenges of rural entrepreneurship within the social economy framework. Learners are subsequently equipped with analytical tools through a section on environmental analysis to identify sustainable business opportunities. Building on this, the module addresses the structure of Business Model Design as a means to validate and refine initiatives efficiently, and details the steps for developing a business plan using the Business Model Canvas. Further sections focus on strategies to promote rural products and services, taking into account specific marketing keys for rural markets, as well as the principles and application of ethical financial management. The module also highlights new opportunities for rural entrepreneurship arising from digitalisation, introduces methods to manage and measure corporate sustainability indicators, and explores ways to strengthen motivation for sustainable entrepreneurship. Finally, the module concludes with a summary and a compilation of success stories, offering practical inspiration and real-world examples to reinforce learning outcomes.

The content of this training module is complemented by the following materials in Deliverable 5.3 “Training Modules Updated”:

- **ESIRA Guide to supporting innovative social economy initiatives.**
- **Practical Tools 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5.**

5.1 Innovative Social Economy Initiatives in the ESIRA Project

The module “Entrepreneurship and Innovative Social Economy Impulse in Rural Areas” is designed to provide comprehensive theoretical and practical support for those interested in rural entrepreneurship as a driver of sustainable development, rural resilience, and responses to societal challenges. It also targets those who wish to contribute through innovative social economy initiatives (e.g., rural entrepreneurs, training facilitators, rural multi-actor platforms, social enterprises, community leaders, associations, NGOs, students), in which people and social and/or environmental purposes take precedence over profit, aiming for collective or general interest through participatory approaches.

This module explores the concepts of rural entrepreneurship, social innovation, and the social economy; offers tools for the rural environment analysis, identifying business opportunities that leverage local resources and address the specific needs of these communities; introduces the Business Model Canvas as a tool for designing sustainable business models; and presents the Lean Start-up methodology to train potential entrepreneurs to validate their business ideas in an agile and efficient manner.

The ESIRA project aims to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion for vulnerable groups in rural communities. Through innovative economic practices, the creation of strong social networks, and the enhancement of participatory policies, ESIRA seeks to foster inclusive development in rural communities based on social innovation and the social economy. The project emphasises reducing social exclusion among the most vulnerable groups and implementing participatory initiatives led by the rural community itself. To achieve this aim, the ESIRA project highlights social innovation as a driving force for transforming rural environments, enabling the development of new solutions that integrate technology, digitalisation, and innovative social-economy business models that respond to local needs. This approach not only enhances communities’ economic well-being but also strengthens their ability to address social issues innovatively. This module aims to provide both a theoretical and practical foundation for understanding how social innovation and social-oriented entrepreneurship can not only generate economic development but also improve social cohesion and contribute to environmental sustainability in these regions.

Additionally, the module explores specific marketing strategies for rural products and services, focusing on effectively communicating the added value they offer: sustainability, authenticity, and positive social impact. New opportunities provided by digitalisation, sustainable tourism, and the enhancement of cultural heritage are also examined, driving comprehensive and inclusive economic development in rural areas. Through examples of success and the analysis of key indicators, the module seeks to inspire and provide tools for social economy rural entrepreneurs to turn their ideas into

viable projects, contributing to the triple objective of economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental protection.

In conclusion, **rural entrepreneurship can also serve as a mechanism for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups in rural areas by adopting sustainable business models** that empower these groups to become productive partners, transform their needs into demand, integrate different stakeholders as co-owners and co-managers such as community-led approach, adjust differential pricing for low-income groups, or provide essential services or products free of charge.

5.2 Learning Objectives

This module aims to train rural actors in the creation and implementation of business models for social economy initiatives, seeking not only economic viability but also environmental responsibility and social benefit in rural areas. The learning objectives are designed to equip participants with the necessary skills to identify opportunities, design innovative and sustainable social-economy business models, and manage their projects ethically and efficiently.

The objectives of this module focus on developing entrepreneurial skills that integrate sustainability at every stage of the process, from identifying opportunities in the rural environment to implementing digitalisation and marketing strategies tailored to rural products and services. Businesses based on social economy and social innovation follow the same phases as traditional innovation: ideation, prototype creation and testing, execution and implementation, and transfer of successful projects. Additionally, this module addresses examples of sustainable business models that empower vulnerable groups to become productive partners, transform their needs into demand, integrate different stakeholders as co-owners and co-managers, adjust differential pricing for low-income groups, or provide essential services or products free of charge. These objectives can be summarised as follow:

5.2.1 Identifying Opportunities for Sustainable Businesses

The first objective is for participants to learn to analyse their rural environment to identify societal needs and challenges that can be turned into business opportunities aligned with sustainability principles. This includes recognising the available local resources and understanding market trends that favour ecological or socially responsible products and services.

Through this objective, participants will build capacity to evaluate the potential of different sectors, such as organic agriculture, health and care, sustainable tourism culture, or renewable energy, and to develop a business vision that leverages these resources innovatively and responsibly.

5.2.2 Designing Innovative and Sustainable Business Models

The second objective focuses on teaching rural actors to design a solid business model using tools such as the Business Model Canvas and the Lean Start-up methodology. These methodologies will enable them to validate their business ideas and social economy initiatives quickly and efficiently, minimising risks and adapting to real market needs.

Rural actors will develop the skills needed to structure their value proposition, identify their customer segments and relationships, optimise the use of local resources, identify key activities and collaborators, and define income and expense structures, ensuring that their business models are flexible, innovative, and deeply aligned with sustainability principles.

5.2.3 Developing a Comprehensive Business Plan

A key objective is for rural actors to master the stages required to develop a comprehensive business plan that covers all operational, financial, and strategic aspects of their project. This includes everything from resource planning and financial projections to setting clear goals and KPIs (Key Performance Indicators).

The business plan will serve as a roadmap guiding entrepreneurs in implementing their initiatives, ensuring that every decision is oriented towards economic viability and positive social and environmental impact, including the inclusion of the most vulnerable groups.

5.2.4 Developing Marketing Strategies for Rural Products

Marketing is an essential component of business success, and in the rural context, it presents unique challenges and opportunities. This learning objective aims to equip participants with the skills to design marketing strategies tailored to rural products and services, using both digital and traditional channels to reach a broader target audience and vulnerable groups that are more difficult to reach with conventional marketing strategies.

5.2.5 Ethical Financial Management

This learning objective aims to help rural actors understand the importance of ethical financial management for the success of sustainable entrepreneurship projects in rural environments. They will learn to implement financial management that not only maximises financial gains but also aligns with sustainability, social justice, and transparency principles. Additionally, it will highlight how ethical management can ensure efficient and responsible use of resources, generating a positive impact on the local community and environment.

5.2.6 Integrating Digitalisation and Heritage in Rural Businesses

Digitalisation is a key factor in enhancing the competitiveness of rural businesses. This objective seeks to equip rural actors with the skills to use digital tools to optimise operations, expand their market, and improve process efficiency. It will also explore how tourism, social services, culture, and heritage can be integrated into business models to generate added value.

Rural actors will learn how to leverage technology to connect with a global audience while preserving and promoting local culture and heritage as a fundamental part of their value proposition, avoiding digital exclusion of the most vulnerable population or those without access to technology.

5.2.7 Inspiration through Success Cases & Business Sustainability

The final objective is to motivate rural actors by exposing them to successful cases of sustainable entrepreneurship and social economy initiatives in rural areas. This learning, based on real examples, will help them understand how others have overcome similar challenges and successfully integrated sustainability, the social economy, and vulnerable groups into their projects.

They will study business sustainability indicators to measure and manage the environmental and social impacts of their initiatives, ensuring that the businesses they start are not only profitable but also responsible and sustainable in the long term.

5.3 Rural entrepreneurship, social innovation and social economy in rural areas

5.3.1 Rural entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a crucial driver of economic growth in rural areas (Asmit et al., 2024) and a vital solution to the social, economic, and environmental challenges these regions face. Rural areas have been recognised as a **core part of EU identity and economic potential** (European Commission, 2024). Rural, mountainous, and isolated areas in Europe make up almost 80% of the EU's territory and encompass 57% of the total population. These regions are of significant economic importance, accounting for 46% of Europe's total gross value added. Furthermore, most natural sites, cultural heritage segments, and historical monuments are located in rural and mountainous areas. However, these regions face significant social challenges, including low GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita, high unemployment rates, low wages, depopulation, and a rapidly ageing population, all of which place a heavy burden on residents in rural communities. Among those problems, depopulation is a primary challenge affecting life in rural areas. These regions have suffered a steady decline in population due to a lack of economic opportunities and migration to urban areas in search of better living conditions.

Without young people to maintain economic activity, these regions risk disappearing, losing their traditions and cultural identity in the process.

This disadvantaged situation discourages private investment in rural entrepreneurship because obtaining a financial return is difficult. However, a new vision of rural entrepreneurship as a place-based, social-oriented and collaborative process holds the potential to make rural areas more resilient to these problems (Hudson, 2010; Williams, 2007). Therefore, new types of entrepreneurs and organisations are needed to seek new solutions to these challenges from the perspective of social innovation. Social economy-based organisations have been pioneers in the search for solutions to these challenges, so social economy includes organisations that aim to benefit either their members or the community in which they operate.

Rural entrepreneurs act as agents of change in supporting rural resilience and enhancing community (Steiner & Atterton, 2015), by creating direct and indirect job opportunities. In the rural context, it is essential to understand the connection between entrepreneurial activity and the spatial context in which it occurs, going beyond the rural location of the action and defining rural entrepreneurship as engagement with its rural environment, as this gives it unique characteristics (Korsgaard et al., 2015).

Social structures and local embeddedness in rural communities suggest that rural entrepreneurs are less focused on monetary incentives and individual profitability and more concerned with social and community interests (Granovetter, 1985). They have a significant connection with all stakeholders in the rural community, resulting in more sustainable value creation for all (Marcos & González-Masip, 2025). This sustainability orientation of rural entrepreneurs is particularly valuable for identifying opportunities to create sustainable economic, environmental and social value.

In this sense, rural entrepreneurship and social economy have the potential to offer a viable solution to rural areas' development by facing social problems and creating new job opportunities that attract young people and improve local quality of life. Additionally, social economy initiatives encourage current residents to stay, strengthening community spirit and local roots. Initiatives like community cooperatives, associations, and social enterprises are key to combating depopulation, fostering social cohesion, and promoting sustainable economic development. These cooperatives allow resources to be shared, costs to be reduced, and mutual support systems to be created, while social enterprises work directly to solve specific community issues, ranging from access to basic services to the creation of new local products. Furthermore, the participation of young people in these projects not only revitalises the economy but also drives innovation and the adoption of new technologies, thereby making productive activities in rural settings more efficient.

5.3.2 Social Innovation as a Driver of Rural Development

The challenges in rural areas mentioned above, such as depopulation, a lack of economic opportunities, and an ageing population, require innovative approaches. Social innovation has been the latest addition to the family of innovations, alongside material and product innovation, innovation in production processes, marketing, and organisational innovation in the economic sphere, among others. Innovation reflects the capacity to create and implement new ideas that are likely to deliver value.

Social innovation has been defined as “the reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors” (Polman et al., 2017). This definition, developed as part of the SIMRA project (Social Innovation in Marginalised Areas), implies:

- A reconfiguration of social practices (e.g., relationships, collaborations, networks, institutions, governance structures) in response to societal challenges.
- The reconfiguration takes place in new geographical settings or contexts.
- The reconfiguration involves members of civil society as active participants.
- The new social practices engage voluntary civil society actors as a result of the social innovation.

These social innovation characteristics highlight its ability to create new possibilities for addressing challenges and social, environmental, and economic problems in rural areas, benefiting a range of social actors, not necessarily disadvantaged groups.

Social innovation could lead to organisational innovation, such as the implementation of a new organisational method, not only in the private sector but also in the public sector and hybrid public-private bodies, and to institutional innovation.

For all these reasons, social innovation offers key elements for developing projects that improve the inclusion of vulnerable groups and promote environmental protection through sustainable practices, thereby benefiting the rest of the rural community. For instance, social agriculture not only produces food but also integrates people at risk of exclusion, offering them employment and development opportunities. For a product, service, activity, or project to be considered socially innovative, it must share the following characteristics: it must be oriented towards the common good in response to societal challenges, include a participatory or collaborative process, and involve an effective transformation of social behaviours and practices.

Social innovation facilitates collaboration among actors such as NGOs, public institutions, and local entrepreneurs, driving initiatives with both economic and social impact, making it a complementary tool in the social economy.

The ultimate goal of social innovation is to create social value for all in terms of well-being, quality of life, social inclusion, solidarity, citizen participation, environmental quality,

healthcare, education, and to generate positive change in response to unmet social needs. Table 2 summarises the main features of the social innovation.

Table 2. The main features of the social innovation.

Dimension	Key aspects of social innovation
Main features	Novelty and effectiveness: Introduce new or significantly improved solutions (products, services, processes) that prove more effective, sustainable or appropriate than existing alternatives
	Community involvement: Solutions are co-created with actors directly affected, ensuring relevance, ownership and contextual fit
	Cross-sectoral collaboration: Rely on multi-sectoral partnerships (public sector, private actors, civil society) to develop, test and implement solutions
	Procedural dimension: Progresses through iterative phases of experimentation, prototyping, piloting and collaborative refinement, moving from concept to tangible impact
Aim	Addresses a social need: respond to unmet social needs and improve individual and community well-being, generating social value for society
	Sustainability: Ensure long-term viability by embedding innovations in local systems and strengthening financial and organizational durability
Impact	Measurable outcomes: Achieve measurable improvements in social conditions, practices or services
	Empowerment: Strengthen community agency, by building local capabilities and improving access to resources for beneficiaries and communities
	Stimulate collective action: Reshape social and power relations, foster more inclusive and resilient communities

Source: Sforzi et al. (2025)

In this context, technology has become an essential ingredient in a very high percentage of social innovations, and therefore, there is a close relationship between technology and sustainable development. **Technology and digitalisation are tools that empower social innovation to create more efficient and scalable solutions to social problems** (Herrero de Egaña, 2021). In settings with limited infrastructure, digitalisation and technology adoption become essential tools for driving development.

Access to advanced technologies and new forms of business organisation can transform rural areas, promoting modernisation and enhancing residents' quality of life. Additionally, the implementation of technological solutions allows for the optimisation of productive processes in sectors such as agriculture and tourism, increasing efficiency and reducing operational costs. Digitalisation also facilitates the creation of online platforms for the marketing of local products, connecting rural producers with wider markets and thereby improving their economic opportunities. By empowering communities through

digitalisation and the creation of support networks, inclusive and sustainable rural development can be fostered, addressing both economic and social needs. Collaboration among local actors, such as governments, NGOs, and private companies, is essential to maximise the impact of these initiatives and ensure their long-term sustainability.

Digitalisation is one of the keys to overcoming the barriers that have historically isolated rural areas. Access to digital technologies allows rural entrepreneurs to reach new markets and improve their competitiveness, opening up opportunities for local products and services to reach a much broader audience.

Digitalisation also supports the formation of online communities where rural entrepreneurs can share knowledge, access training, and generate collaborations that strengthen their initiatives. Additionally, technology applied to sectors such as agriculture or eco-tourism improves efficiency and sustainability, promoting resilience in rural economies. For example, in agriculture, the use of sensors and data analysis tools optimises the use of resources such as water and fertilisers, reducing costs and minimising environmental impact. In the tourism sector, digital platforms help connect potential visitors with authentic rural experiences, driving sustainable tourism and encouraging the conservation of natural and cultural heritage. The implementation of these technologies not only improves efficiency but also increases rural communities' capacity to adapt to economic and environmental changes.

On the other hand, the digital divide is the gap that exists for people who are not familiar with or capable of using internet technology. The population at risk of digital exclusion includes people with disabilities, older people and generations who were not born or did not grow up in the digital age, so-called digitally illiterate people who, due to their economic and cultural situation, have not had the opportunity or motivation to learn about and acquire knowledge related to technology, people at risk of poverty, people living in remote areas without internet access, etc.

“Digital social innovation (DSI) involves the use of digital technologies in the development and implementation of innovative products, services, processes and business models that seek to improve the well-being and agency of socially disadvantaged groups or address social problems related to marginality, inequality and social exclusion” (Qureshi, Pan & Zheng, 2021), being an emerging phenomenon that leverages digital technologies to address societal challenges (Buck et al., 2025).

Social innovation also contributes to the co-creation and design of new sustainable business models that prioritise both people's well-being and environmental sustainability. These models aim not only to generate profitability but also to address specific social and environmental problems, adding value to rural communities.

Social entrepreneurship and social economy enterprises in rural areas have demonstrated that it is possible to create economically viable models that also generate positive social impact, strengthening community bonds and promoting efficient resource use. These

business models also encourage community participation and foster a sense of belonging, which is essential for social cohesion and sustainable development.

Social innovation can be applied through methodologies such as the Business Model Canvas and Lean Start-up, which are valuable tools for developing sustainable business models, enabling rural entrepreneurs to minimise risks and tailor their initiatives to the real needs of the community. Thanks to Lean Start-up, entrepreneurs can quickly identify what works and what doesn't, making real-time adjustments to ensure the project's viability. This facilitates adaptation to changing environments, particularly in rural areas where resources are limited and conditions can be unpredictable. Additionally, implementing social innovation practices creates support networks among actors, such as local organisations, governments, and educational institutions, thereby enhancing the sustainability and scalability of projects. Together, these approaches allow for the development of creative and resilient solutions that benefit not only the economy but also people's well-being and the environment.

5.3.3 Opportunities and Challenges of Rural Entrepreneurship through social economy

The social economy organizations are entities that provide goods and services to their members or society at large, namely **cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations,² and foundations**. These organisations share common principles and features, i.e. the primacy of people as well as social and/or environmental purpose over profit, the reinvestment of most of the profits and surpluses to carry out activities in the interest of members/users ('**collective interest**') or society at large ('**general interest**'), and democratic and/or participatory governance (European Commission, 2021).

Table 3. The main features of the social economy

Feature	Social economy
Objectives	Carry out activities in the interest of members/users or society at large
Distribution of profits	Primacy of people and social purpose over capital in the distribution and use of surpluses and/or profits, as well as assets. This includes reinvestment of most of the profits and compliance with asset lock
Governance	Democratic and/or participatory governance
Resources	Resource mix depending on whether an organisation is market-oriented (cooperatives, mutual benefit societies) or not (e.g. charities)
Type of entities	Market-oriented and non-market-oriented entities
Legal forms	Cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations (including charities), foundations and social enterprises

Source: Sforzi et al. (2025)

² Including charities.

The social economy offers a unique opportunity for economic, social, and environmental development. It is a way of doing business that combines general or social interest, economic results, and democratic governance, which can stimulate sustainable entrepreneurship in rural areas. It uses community action and co-entrepreneurship, with strong local roots and a great capacity to identify the potential of territories and detect local needs. The social economy has been a pioneer in identifying and implementing social innovations, in comparison to the market economy. The principles underpinning the social economy and its close connection with local communities make initiatives grounded in this social economy in rural areas more flexible and more resilient in critical situations. Furthermore the social economy can play a decisive role in the field of social innovation, which is extremely important in rural areas, thanks to its ability to provide basic services for the community and promote social inclusion such as social and health services, education, training, environmental products and services, food production, distribution, and consumption, culture, and tourism and in other sectors such as organic agriculture, rural tourism, and renewable energies present high growth potential, not only because of their capacity to create jobs but also due to their contribution to sustainability and the preservation of the natural environment. These activities allow for the diversification of the rural economy, increasing its resilience against economic and environmental crises. However, the backdrop is that social entrepreneurs and enterprises intend to compensate for decline and de-investment by private and public sectors in rural areas (Olmedo et al., 2023).

However, rural entrepreneurs face challenges such as limited access to adequate infrastructure, the lack of stable financing, and the need for specific training to manage socially innovative and sustainable businesses. Bureaucracy and the lack of fiscal incentives often become obstacles that hinder the development of rural entrepreneurship. To overcome these barriers, entrepreneurship through social innovation practices and social economy organizations can be the solution to these challenges by addressing new social needs and challenges with community-led and rooted new solutions.

Entrepreneurs must receive institutional support at both local and national levels, as well as access to training programmes that equip them with skills in business management, technology, and sustainability. Collaboration among institutions, communities, and entrepreneurs will be crucial in capitalising on the opportunities presented by this type of entrepreneurship, promoting a comprehensive approach that includes infrastructure development, improved access to financing, and the strengthening of support networks and cooperation among the different actors involved. Only through joint and coordinated action can rural entrepreneurship achieve more equitable and sustainable development for rural communities.

5.4 Environmental Analysis: Identifying Opportunities for Creating Sustainable Businesses

Analysing the environment is a crucial step in identifying sustainable business opportunities in rural areas. A structured approach allows us to understand the various dynamics that influence the success of rural entrepreneurship, considering both the general factors that affect the region and the specific characteristics of the local business landscape. In the context of sustainable rural entrepreneurship, it is essential to analyse the available resources, emerging opportunities, and specific challenges that characterise each environment. This comprehensive approach helps identify market niches, efficiently utilise combinations of local resources, and establish strategies that promote economic and social development with a positive environmental impact.

The analysis of the rural environment will not only allow us to identify threats and opportunities in the environment, but also to understand rural entrepreneurship as the result of an entrepreneurial activity that is involved and integrated into its spatial context through the use of resources. For this reason, it is not possible to replicate it elsewhere without losing all or part of its key value proposition due to its close relationship with the place.

Below, we examine the main environmental factors and how these influence the identification of opportunities for creating sustainable businesses, with a constant focus on the potential of sustainable rural entrepreneurship.

5.4.1 General Environmental Factors

- **Economic:** The economic context plays a fundamental role in determining opportunities for rural entrepreneurship. Factors such as economic growth, per capita income, poverty risk, the unemployment rate, the inflation rate, available investment, tax incentives, or public aid and subsidies can facilitate or obstruct the creation of new businesses. For instance, a growing economy with a focus on sustainability may offer better opportunities for the development of organic products or responsible tourism services. Additionally, grants and financial support programmes for sustainable rural initiatives, both nationally and from the European Union, can be key to lowering entry barriers and fostering innovation in rural areas.
- **Political and Legal:** Government policies and the current legislative framework also play a key role in rural development (Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), LEADER/CLLD programme). In the European rural context, policy actions have notably overlooked the capacity of locally based organisations to tackle social and economic concerns, and policy schemes are usually sectoral and top-down driven (Sforzi et al., 2025). However, laws that incentivise social economy organisations

that operate in all economic sectors (cooperatives, foundations, associations, etc), the use of renewable energy, environmental regulations that promote organic farming, or the conservation of natural spaces are aspects that can favour the creation of sustainable businesses. Moreover, simplifying administrative processes for rural entrepreneurship could facilitate new entrepreneurs' initiatives. A political environment that values and supports local community participation and sustainability can translate into concrete opportunities for those who wish to establish businesses aligned with these principles.

- **Social and Demographic:** Understanding the social and demographic structure of the rural population is essential for identifying specific opportunities. Population ageing, youth migration to cities, educational level, consumer tendencies, prevalent religiosity, minorities and the arrival of new residents with entrepreneurial profiles are shaping the landscape of needs and opportunities. For instance, an ageing population may require specialised healthcare services for older adults, or even adapted recreational activities, while the arrival of young people could create demand for rural co-working spaces, access to technology, training programmes, and digital services. This analysis may also reveal vulnerable groups to whom training and employment could be offered, thereby contributing to social cohesion.
- **Environmental:** The natural and landscape resources available in rural areas represent a fundamental asset for sustainable entrepreneurship. These resources can serve as the basis for projects such as organic farming, eco-tourism, or renewable energy generation. Access to natural resources, biodiversity, and unique landscapes enables the development of activities such as sustainable aquaculture, regenerative livestock, forestry management, nature tourism, or organic food production. Moreover, environmental conservation and the responsible use of local resources align with current trends towards more conscious consumption, thereby increasing the appeal of sustainable rural products and services.
- **Technological:** Technology including infrastructure, digitalisation, and connectivity, has the potential to transform rural businesses, overcoming physical and geographical barriers. Access to high-speed internet, improvements in road infrastructure, and public transport can facilitate local economic development. Connectivity allows rural businesses to participate in e-commerce, connect with clients worldwide, and access information and resources to enhance their operations. Digital platforms and social networks facilitate the marketing of local products to broader markets, enabling rural entrepreneurs to reach consumers who value unique, sustainable products. Digitalisation also enables new business models based on remote work, online sales, or digital services, increasing income opportunities in rural settings. For example, in the agricultural sector, technology enables precision farming and drone-based crop monitoring. Moreover, better

transport infrastructure facilitates the distribution of local products to urban markets and increases the competitiveness of rural businesses by reducing costs and transportation times. Therefore, technology is a fundamental factor that determines the competitiveness, resilience, inclusion and development of rural areas.

5.4.2 Factors Related to the Local Business Landscape

- **Competition:** Understanding who the local competitors are and how they differentiate themselves is fundamental to defining an effective positioning strategy. In rural settings, competition may be lower than in urban areas, but it is also possible to find established businesses with a loyal customer base. Analysing which products or services are available and how one can offer something different or complementary is key to a new venture's success. Competitive advantages could include a unique focus on sustainability, the use of local resources, or the ability to customise products and services according to consumer needs.
- **Collaborations:** Alliances and collaborations are essential to success in the rural setting. Partnering with other local businesses, cooperatives, NGOs, and government institutions can provide access to shared resources, generate synergies, and improve operational efficiency. For example, a cooperative of small farmers could partner with a distribution company to market their products in larger markets, or with a tourism organisation to offer agri-tourism experiences that connect visitors with rural life. Additionally, these collaborations can contribute to creating a circular economy, where one business's waste becomes resources for another, optimising local resources.
- **Value Chain:** Analysing the value chain in rural areas helps identify missing links or inefficiencies that could become business opportunities. For example, in many rural areas, raw material production is not accompanied by adequate local processing, offering the potential to develop small-scale industries that add value to products before they reach the market. Thus, producing jams, artisanal cheeses, or essential oils can increase the value of local resources and generate new sources of income. Additionally, support services for producers, such as logistics, marketing consulting, or training in new technologies, could be established to strengthen the productive chain and make it more competitive.

Therefore, environmental analysis for identifying sustainable business opportunities in the rural sphere requires a detailed understanding of the general and local factors that influence the development and potential success of initiatives. This approach allows us to detect opportunities where local resources, innovation, and consumption trends align

to create businesses with a positive impact on the economy, society, and the environment.

5.4.3 Proposed Exercise: Sustainable Business Opportunities Map

Objective:

Participants must conduct a comprehensive analysis of a specific rural area, identifying sustainable social economy business opportunities based on local resources, demographics, culture, consumer trends, and institutional support.

Instructions:

1. **Group Division:** Participants will be divided into groups and will select a rural area of interest, either a region close to their localities or an example provided by the training facilitator.
2. **Strategic Landscape Map:** In the chosen virtual tool (Miro or Mural) or physical whiteboard or flipchart, each group will create a “Strategic Landscape Map” including the following categories for analysis:
 - **Economic Environment:**
 - Available investments and grants.
 - Tax incentives for sustainable entrepreneurship.
 - Income per capita.
 - **Political and Legal Framework:**
 - Regulations that favour sustainability (renewable energy, organic farming).
 - Simplified administrative processes for rural businesses.
 - Government support programmes for sustainable rural development.
 - **Social and Demographic Factors:**
 - Population structure (balance between men and women, depopulation, ageing, youth migration, minorities, new residents).
 - Specific needs of the population (elderly healthcare, youth training and employment capacity building).
 - Inclusion of vulnerable groups in training and employment projects.
 - **Natural Resources and Environment:**
 - Availability of resources such as water and biodiversity.
 - Potential for activities such as eco-tourism, organic farming, and renewable energy.
 - Environmental conservation and sustainable resource use.
 - **Technology and Innovation:**
 - Connectivity and digitalisation in rural areas.
 - Application of technology for precision agriculture, crop monitoring and livestock

- E-commerce and remote work as rural business models.
 - **Local Business Landscape:**
 - Competitors and market analysis.
 - Collaborations with local businesses, cooperatives, associations and NGOs.
 - Integration of the circular economy and synergies between sectors.
 - **Local Value Chain:**
 - Processing and added value for local raw materials (artisan products, agribusiness).
 - Support services for production, such as logistics and training.
 - Identification of missing links to improve competitiveness.
 - **Infrastructure and Connectivity:**
 - Access to the internet and road infrastructure improvements.
 - Transport and logistics to facilitate access to external markets.
 - Impact of connectivity on the competitiveness of rural businesses.
 - Digital divide and digital inclusion.
 - **Climate Change and Social Sustainability:**
 - Climate adaptation strategies (reforestation, water management).
 - Sustainable practices to reduce ecological footprint.
 - Resilience to extreme climate events and resource conservation.
 - Strategies for inclusion of vulnerable groups (job opportunities, community events).
3. **Local Research:** Participants gather basic information about the chosen region. They can use online resources, statistical data, or local reports and document this information on the digital map.
 4. **Identification of Opportunities:** Groups place virtual post-its on their map, identifying specific opportunities for creating sustainable businesses within each category (e.g., in biodiversity: eco-tourism, species conservation).
 5. **Prioritisation:** Groups identify and rank the three most promising business opportunities, qualitatively evaluating them based on economic viability, social impact, and environmental benefits.
 6. **Presentation of Results:** Each group presents its analysis and the opportunities identified to the rest of the group, explaining the reasons behind their selection and how they believe these opportunities could be implemented.

Recommended Tools:

- Miro: An online tool that offers great flexibility with interactive visual maps and customisable templates. <https://miro.com>
- Mural: An online tool ideal for real-time collaborative sessions, with an intuitive and easy-to-use interface, perfect for large teams. <https://mural.co>
- Physical whiteboard or flipchart, sticky notes, markers.



5.5 Business Model Design

Designing a solid business model is crucial for any entrepreneurial project, especially in a rural setting where resources are limited and market conditions can be unstable. In this context, it is essential to use tools that allow entrepreneurs to structure, validate, and improve their business models in an agile and efficient manner.

A business model describes how an organisation does an economic activity, and consists of a **value proposition** (the product or service offered), the creation of that value (how it is produced or carried out), **the delivery of that value to customers** (how that product or service is made available to customers) **and the capture of value for the company** (how that value is monetised for the company or captured in any other way), bearing in mind that these elements may vary (Bocken and Short, 2016).

The concept of value creation in rural entrepreneurship is close to the shared value concept by Porter & Kramer (2011:66). They defined it as "policies and operations that enhance a company's competitiveness while improving economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates." The shared value approach has tremendous potential in rural areas, as it is about creating value, distributing the value created, and generating new collaborative processes that generate synergies, allowing all interested parties to benefit.

One of the most recognised methodologies in this field is the Lean Startup methodology, which relies on tools such as Business Model Canvas (BMC) by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010). The BMC is not a methodology in itself, but a key tool that facilitates the visualisation and structuring of the business model. By using the BMC within the Lean Startup methodology, rural entrepreneurs can design innovative, socially responsible, and sustainable business models that adapt to market needs and environmental sustainability demands. Social economy initiatives also need a structured representation of how an organisation creates, delivers, and captures value, but in this instance, considering the primacy of social benefit over economic benefit, a democratic and participative structure, and the reinvestment of most of the profits and surpluses to carry out activities in the interest of members/users (collective interest) or society at large (general interest).

5.5.1 Introduction to the Business Model Canvas

The Business Model Canvas (BMC), developed by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010), is a visual tool that helps entrepreneurs design, analyse, and modify their business model in a structured way. This tool establishes **a common vocabulary for discussing business models in a simple, intuitive way**, facilitating their study and discussion among the different stakeholders in the entrepreneurial process. It is applicable in different contexts; in particular, it is valid for a social economy business, although it is used from a different perspective. In this case, the business must pursue the creation of social and economic

value that benefits society. These are businesses that pursue economic, social and environmental sustainability. The Business Model Canvas defines a business model through nine blocks, visually represented on a canvas, allowing an understanding of what the business idea entails, how it is concretely implemented, and the process for generating a return from that idea. These blocks or dimensions are: value proposition, customer segments, distribution channel, customer relationships, key resources, key activities, key partners, revenue streams, and cost sources. This approach allows entrepreneurs to visualise all the components of the business on a single page, facilitating understanding of the initiative's overall functioning.

In the case of a social economy business, each of these should be examined in depth in terms of their social impact (e.g., through the inclusion of vulnerable groups or gender aspects) and their environmental impact (e.g., benefits for the planet).

These nine blocks are:

- **Value Proposition:** This block describes the set of products and services that create value for a specific customer/user segment as they alleviate or satisfy needs. In the case of social economy initiatives in a rural setting, the value proposition should include not only the product or service's functionality but also its positive impact on the environment and the community.

When analysing social impact, we should ask ourselves whether our product or service enables social inclusion and improved living conditions for vulnerable groups (older people, youth, women, migrants, etc.) and whether it is accessible to people with functional diversity. Some examples include thinking about the problems faced by older people and developing products or services that make life easier for this group, or a rural tourism project could offer authentic experiences that preserve local heritage and reduce environmental impact.

When analysing environmental impact, we should ask questions such as whether the product or service protects the environment or enables reduction, recycling, reuse, etc.

- **Customer Segments:** This block defines the different groups of people or entities to which the business is directed. Segmenting consumers, i.e., creating groups of customers with the same characteristics, allows you to better identify and meet their needs, as each segment or group will have similar needs, behaviours, and purchasing habits within the same group and different ones between segments. In the rural context, customer segments may include rural inhabitants, tourists seeking sustainable experiences, consumers who value organic locally sourced products, and local communities that benefit from social projects.

The social and environmental impact must also be considered here, analysing, for example, whether vulnerable groups have been included in our customer/user segment and, if not, how this could be done; by ensuring that our products and

services are accessible to customers regardless of their abilities (physical, economic); or whether customers/users are concerned about the environment and, if not, how they could be made aware of this.

- **Channels:** This block describes the means through which the business communicates and delivers its value proposition to customers/users. In a rural setting, channels may include digital platforms, local markets, eco-friendly product fairs, and proximity distribution networks. Recently, novel channels are seen in rural areas such as mobile delivery units (mobile vans or pop-up trucks that periodically bring groceries, health services, or administrative services), digital or hybrid platforms managed by cooperatives or community groups that aggregate local producers' goods and organise shared logistic services, local pick-up points (community centres, libraries, village shops) where residents can collect online orders, or pilot initiatives using drones to deliver medicines or urgent supplies to isolated rural locations.
- **Customer Relationships:** This block describes the type of relationships the business establishes with each customer segment. In rural entrepreneurship, it is essential to build trust-based relationships that emphasise authenticity and sustainability, which can be achieved through transparency in the production chain or the active participation of the community.
- **Revenue Streams:** Here, the business explains how it generates revenue from each customer segment. A business model can involve two revenue streams: revenue from individual, one-off customer transactions, or recurring revenue from the continued delivery of value to the customer or from post-purchase support. Revenue streams therefore come mainly from the sale of assets, usage fees or charges, subscription fees, loans, rentals, leasing, licences, commissions and advertising. In any case, the sources of revenue depend on the value proposition offered to customers and users. The mechanisms or policies for setting prices will vary depending on that value, the sector, the quality of the product, the characteristics of the market segment for which the company's products are intended (purchasing power or bargaining power, establishing differential pricing for low-income groups, or providing essential services or products free of charge), supply and demand, etc. It is crucial to find a balance between economic profitability and social or environmental impact.
- **Key Resources:** This block identifies the most essential resources required for the business model to function. In a rural setting, key resources may include fertile land, water, local labour, or traditional knowledge. In a social economy venture, we must not forget the social and environmental impact of our resources, such as the gender impact or whether the resources are socially and environmentally responsible, whether non-material resources that are not visible in traditional ventures, such as family support, work-life balance, ethical finance, carbon footprint reduction, etc., are valued.

- **Key Activities:** This block describes the most important actions the business must carry out for its model to function. We are referring to activities related to production (design, manufacturing, distribution, transport, logistics, etc.), organisational activities that enable problem solving (management and administration), and activities that enable interaction with other people, companies, and institutions (marketing, communication, social media, networking, maintenance of virtual platforms, etc.). In a sustainable project, key activities may include organic production, renewable energy management, or the implementation of circular economy practices. In addition to taking into account the social and environmental impact of these activities, such as the role played by women and other vulnerable groups in the distribution and execution of tasks, whether there is a wage gap, equal opportunities, whether there are unpaid tasks, whether resources are used efficiently, and whether environmental awareness activities are carried out.
- **Key Partnerships:** This block refers to the network of suppliers, allies, and collaborators that enable the business model to function. Collaborative networks have become the cornerstone of many business models and enable companies to gain advantages in securing key resources and performing activities they would otherwise be unable to carry out. In a rural context, key partners may be local cooperatives, NGOs that promote sustainability, private-public alliances, or institutions that fund social impact projects.
- **Cost Structure:** Finally, this block describes the most important costs associated with operating the business model. These costs arise from the resources, activities and relationships necessary in a business model. In general, they refer to fixed operating costs, such as facility rental, and variable costs related to the volume of production or activity, such as the cost of materials or inputs. In a sustainable business, it is essential to manage costs related to ecological practices, the use of clean technologies, and social impact.

Social Economy Initiatives and Business Models

Social economy initiatives need business models that show **how to include and empower social and vulnerable groups** to become productive partners and turn their needs into demand. Lüdeke-Freund, Breuer, and Massa (2022) identify different sustainable business model patterns that can be applied to social economy initiatives to guarantee access to products and services for vulnerable groups through social segmentation and to generate revenue in a field where customers (e.g., long-term

unemployed, migrants, youth, low-income inhabitants) often cannot pay for the services they use. These are some of those business model patterns³:

- **Differential pricing:** different target groups pay different prices for the same offering. Charging groups with higher payment thresholds, higher prices can be a way to subsidise those in need who cannot afford to pay as much and lack access to basic and sometimes urgently needed products and services.
- **Social Freemium (free + premium):** to unbundle an offering and provide a basic service or product free of charge, while charging a fee for advanced features and functionality. These free basic offerings allow businesses to serve customers who are unable or unwilling to pay, while they make money from customers who pay for the premium offering. It can be implemented in sustainability-driven businesses that often face weak demand for their products and services.
- **Customer financing:** to use financing schemes that lower purchasing barriers for customers, because sustainable value propositions are perceived as too expensive or too different.
- **Crowdfunding:** to mobilise an online network to raise capital through relatively small contributions from a large number of individuals. Crowdfunding helps to reach out to potential investors for financing sustainability-driven initiatives. This pattern involves lower levels of risk on both sides of the investment.
- **Microfinance:** to provide small loans or microloans, and other financial services such as savings accounts, insurance, and money transfers to low-income or poor individuals and groups without access to conventional loans.
- **Profit reinvestment:** to focus primarily on solving social problems rather than maximising financial returns for investors, using financing models without interest or dividend payments to investors. Financial gains are reinvested to expand outreach, improve product or service quality, or fund new social business models. Targeted social groups benefit from better quality products and services and lower prices.
- **Buy one, give one:** to donate goods or services to those in need in a fixed ratio to regular sales, thereby creating both commercial and social value. The cost structure of this model depends on the firm's ability to charge a premium price for its offerings or increase its sales by attracting more customers who identify with its social mission.
- **Data for social good:** to satisfy the consumption needs of a social group by offering a product or service for free, while at the same time allowing the firm to accumulate, curate, and commercialise data generated by using the product or service. A free offering attracts a targeted social group, which becomes a "data resource" for a second, paying target group.

³ All these patterns are in Lüdeke-Freund, Breuer, and Massa (2022).

- **Expertise broker:** to accumulate insights and expertise on social groups and their special situations and needs as a resource for commercial and non-commercial offerings, generating revenues from other stakeholders, for example, municipalities, associations, policy-makers, NGOs, governments, etc.
- **Employing minority talent:** to offer productive, meaningful, and suitable job opportunities to otherwise marginalised social groups with special needs and talents, creating value for them and the company by leveraging and improving their skills.
- **Soup kitchen:** to satisfy the consumption needs of a social group lacking the money to purchase needed products or services by drawing on third-party resources from donors. The business model finances its operations through donations of money, time, goods, or services. These donors are a second customer segment which “buys into” the entire social mission.
- **Socio-economic empowerment:** to offer new business opportunities for self-employed workers and low-income entrepreneurs caught in poverty traps through the provision of financial and social resources. Entrepreneurs are financially empowered by gaining access to formal labour and capital markets, asset building, and establishing a credit record. They are socially empowered through additional mentoring and peer support programs.
- **Two-sided social business:** to offer a platform to match two social groups, one on the production side and one on the consumption side, that have interrelated needs and shared interests. The group on the production side is willing to offer something for free to engage in a social mission in a productive and meaningful way. The group on the consumption side needs a product or service that is unavailable or unaffordable.
- **Cooperative ownership:** to turn stakeholders into owners and decision-makers, helping them to realise their economic and social needs and aspirations. Cooperatives are typically owned by the same people who operate them, and their main goal is to provide equal benefits to each member, reinvesting most of the profits and surpluses to carry out activities in the interests of members or users.

These socially-oriented business models can be combined, with those business models that combine a social and commercial mission having the most potential to generate income.

5.5.2 Applying the Lean Start-up Methodology

The Lean Start-up methodology, popularised by Eric Ries (2011), is an approach that allows entrepreneurs to **develop businesses and products through rapid experimentation**, continuous validation, and agile adaptation to customer needs. Its objective is to avoid significant investments of time and money before being certain that

there is market demand for a product or service. This methodology is deeply influenced by Steve Blank's Customer Development and the Lean Manufacturing concepts developed by Toyota, adapted to the entrepreneurial world. It has also been enhanced by contributions from later authors like Ash Maurya (2012), who added new tools for business model validation, such as the Lean Canvas.

Aware that the objectives of a social enterprise are different from those of a business venture, Dave Moskovitz and Rowan Yeoman (2013), two consultants from New Zealand, adapted the Lean Canvas to social entrepreneurship and proposed their Social Lean Canvas, which analyses the triple bottom line in business: long-term economic viability, positive impact on society and the least possible impact on the environment. This justifies the Social Lean Canvas, adding some blocks to the Lean Canvas, such as the objective or purpose and the impact.

Origin and Foundations of Lean Startup:

The Lean Startup's roots lie in Steve Blank's Customer Development, an approach developed in the 1990s that centres on customers throughout a business's creation process. Blank observed that many businesses failed because they invested substantial resources in product development without first validating whether there was actual demand for their products. From this observation, he proposed a method where entrepreneurship should begin with the search for and validation of a business model before scaling, with an emphasis on customer discovery and understanding their needs.

Lean Startup takes the core principles of Lean Manufacturing, such as waste reduction and continuous improvement, and applies them to entrepreneurship. Instead of developing fully finished products and waiting until their launch to receive feedback, Lean Startup proposes building **minimum viable products** (MVPs), launching them as early as possible, and collecting real data from customer behaviour. This feedback is essential to decide whether to "pivot" (change direction) or "persevere" (continue in the same direction), thus optimising resource use and minimising risks.

The Build-Measure-Learn Cycle:

At the heart of the Lean Startup methodology is the Build-Measure-Learn cycle. This cycle is a continuous repetition of three steps:

- **Build:** The entrepreneur creates a minimum viable product (MVP), a simplified version of the product that allows testing of a specific hypothesis with customers. The goal is to invest the least time and money possible in this phase to create the first functional version of the product.
- **Measure:** Once the MVP is launched, the entrepreneur measures customer behaviour. Quantitative and qualitative data are collected about how customers interact with the product and what issues or benefits they experience. This phase

involves validating the business model's initial hypotheses, including the value proposition, customer segments, and distribution channels.

- **Learn:** Based on the collected data, the entrepreneur evaluates whether their hypothesis was confirmed or refuted. From here, they decide whether to continue with the original plan (persevere) or make a significant adjustment in approach (pivot). This learning is crucial for adjusting the business model at each cycle iteration.

Innovation Accounting:

A critical aspect of the Lean Start-up methodology is innovation accounting. This is a way of measuring a business's progress by focusing on what has been learned, rather than relying solely on traditional indicators like sales or rapid growth. In other words, it involves evaluating whether the business is genuinely learning about what customers want and whether its ideas are working.

To carry out innovation accounting, specific metrics are used at each stage of the Build-Measure-Learn cycle. First, a simple version of the product called a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) is created, then customer reactions are measured, and finally, lessons are learned to make improvements. The key is that each experiment should help answer important questions about the business, such as "Are customers interested in this feature?" or "Are they willing to pay for this product?"

For example, imagine a rural entrepreneur who wants to launch a new type of sustainable honey. They might create an MVP by producing a small batch of honey with simple packaging and selling it at a local market for a week. They would then observe how many people buy the honey, how many try a sample but do not purchase, and how many show interest but mention that the price is high. All of these are metrics that help understand how well the product is performing.

Based on these observations, the entrepreneur might learn that customers like the honey but find the price a bit high. With this information, they could adjust their business model, perhaps by producing more honey to reduce costs or finding a more economical way to package the product. This process is repeated several times: build something (in this case, the packaged honey), measure customer reactions, and learn what can be improved. This is the essence of innovation accounting: ensuring that each step leads to learning something important about improving the business.

In the context of sustainable entrepreneurship in rural areas, innovation accounting not only measures financial success but also the social and environmental impact of the business model. For example, the honey entrepreneur could also measure whether their production methods help conserve local bees or if they reduce the ecological footprint compared to more traditional methods. This helps ensure that the business is not only profitable but also beneficial for the community and the environment.

The integration of the Business Model Canvas (BMC) with Lean Start-up is achieved through successive iterations, where the entrepreneur builds their business model based on experiments, customer validations, and constant adjustments. Each block of the Canvas can be tested with prototypes or minimum viable products (MVPs), allowing for direct customer feedback to refine the value proposition and other aspects of the business with each iteration.

For example, a rural entrepreneur launching a new sustainable agricultural product could start by testing their value proposition with a small group of local customers, adjusting production and distribution channels according to their responses. This approach ensures that the final product is better suited to market needs, minimising the risk of failure.

Continuous validation is one of the key principles of the Lean Start-up methodology. Through innovative accounting, entrepreneurs can measure their initiatives' progress, not only in terms of economic growth but also in terms of social and environmental impact. Innovation accounting involves establishing clear metrics for each BMC block and adjusting activities based on the results obtained.

For example, if an entrepreneur finds that their value proposition is not generating the expected environmental impact, they can modify their business model by introducing new production practices or adjusting their relationships with key partners to include more sustainable suppliers. This approach ensures that the business model is in constant improvement, aligned with sustainability and innovation principles.

5.5.3 Proposed Exercise: Applying the Lean Start-up Methodology in Sustainable Rural Entrepreneurship

Objective of the Exercise:

The purpose of this exercise is to apply the principles of the Lean Start-up methodology to develop a sustainable business model in a rural setting. Using tools like the Business Model Canvas and the Build-Measure-Learn approach, participants will learn how to validate their business ideas in an agile and efficient manner, minimising risks and optimising resources.

Exercise Context:

Imagine you are an entrepreneur in a rural community who wants to launch an organic farming project focused on high-quality organic produce. Your objective is to create a business model that is not only profitable but also contributes to the community's well-being and environmental protection.

Part 1: Generating an idea:

Try to devise possible solutions to customer/user problems. To identify issues and opportunities, you can use the “Strategic Landscape Map” of the environmental analysis. Try to find solutions to these issues through tools such as brainstorming or drawnstorming.

Part 2: Designing the Business Model

Using the Business Model Canvas (BMC) to describe each part of the initiative.

- **Value Proposition:** Define the value proposition of your sustainable venture. What value are you creating for customers? What problem are you solving?
 - Example: Offering organic agricultural products that respect the environment, without pesticides or chemicals, and supporting local biodiversity.
- **Customer Segments:** Identify your potential customers. Who is your product or service aimed at?
 - Example: Environmentally conscious consumers, local markets, and organic product stores.
- **Channels:** Describe how you will deliver your value proposition to your customers. What channels will you use to reach them?
 - Example: Direct sales at local markets, organic stores, and online platforms.
- **Customer Relationships:** Define how you will interact with your customers. What kind of relationship will you establish?
 - Example: Personalised relationship through direct sales at markets and social media, focusing on transparency in the production process.
- **Revenue Streams:** Identify how you will generate income. What are the main revenue sources?
 - Example: Sales of organic products through physical and online channels.
- **Key Resources:** Define the resources needed for your project. What resources are essential?
 - Example: Fertile land, local labour, sustainable agricultural tools.
- **Key Activities:** What are the most important activities to carry out your business model?
 - Example: Organic farming, distribution, and marketing of sustainable products.
- **Key Partnerships:** Who will you partner with to carry out your venture?

- Example: Agricultural associations, organic product stores, local distributors.
- **Cost Structure:** What are the main costs of your business model?
 - Example: Seeds purchase, organic production costs, transportation, salaries, taxes and marketing, promotion, etc.

Part 3: Creating the Minimum Viable Product (MVP)

Using the BMC you developed, identify the **riskiest hypothesis** of your business model (for example, that the local public is willing to pay more for organic products). Next, design a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) that allows you to validate this hypothesis with the minimum investment of time and resources.

- **Define your MVP:** What is the simplest version of your product or service that allows you to test your hypothesis?
 - Example: Create a small batch of organic products (fruits and vegetables) and sell them at a local market for a week to see if customers are willing to pay more for them.
- **Test your MVP:** Take your MVP to the market and measure the results. How many products do you sell? What feedback do you receive from customers?

Part 4: Build-Measure-Learn Cycle

- **Build:** Implement your MVP as defined in Part 2. Make sure to focus on validating your hypothesis.
- **Measure:** After launching your MVP, measure the results. Gather both quantitative data (number of sales, accepted prices) and qualitative data (customer feedback). Ask your customers about their opinions and perceptions of the value of your products.
- **Learn:** Analyse the collected data. Have you validated your hypothesis? Are your customers willing to pay for your organic products? What adjustments should you make to your business model based on these results?

Part 5: Iteration and Pivot

Based on what you have learned from the Build-Measure-Learn cycle, **make one of the following decisions:**

- **Persevere:** If your hypotheses are validated (for example, customers are willing to pay a premium for organic products), you can continue with your business model by increasing production or seeking new sales channels.
- **Pivot:** If your hypotheses are not validated (for example, customers are not willing to pay more for organic products), make a significant adjustment to your business

model. You may need to change your value proposition, adjust pricing, or target new customer segments.

Part 6: Innovation Accounting

Finally, establish key metrics to track your venture's progress. These metrics should align with sustainability objectives and social impact. Some potential metrics include:

- **Sales and Growth:** Number of products sold in local markets and online platforms.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Reduction in water or pesticide use compared to conventional methods.
- **Social Impact:** Number of jobs created in the local community or community involvement in agricultural activities.

Ensure you continuously follow this iterative process, improving and adjusting your business model based on the data you obtain.

5.6 Making a Business Plan

Creating a business plan is one of the most important steps after designing the business model through the Business Model Canvas methodology and validating the value proposition and business model using methodologies like Lean Startup. This phase marks the beginning of the detailed structuring of the venture, facilitating a comprehensive vision and organising all key aspects for the project's implementation, growth, and scalability. A business plan not only guides operational and strategic processes but also serves as a reference document for potential investors, partners, and collaborators.

The business plan should focus on three pillars: economic viability, positive environmental impact, and social contribution. This plan is intended to guide rural entrepreneurs as they transition from business model validation to execution and scalability. It will rely on the KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) obtained in the validation phase to establish a clear path toward long-term success and sustainability.

The key components of a business plan include the following:

5.6.1 Executive Summary

The executive summary provides a clear, **concise overview of the project**, highlighting its social purpose, value proposition, economic model, impact on the rural community, and key expected results. This section should be brief yet impactful, as it is often the first (and sometimes only) part of the business plan that investors or partners will read.

Example: Suppose the project is an organic dairy farm in a rural area with high biodiversity. The executive summary would highlight how this venture will use sustainable livestock practices that not only offer high-quality products but also

contribute to the conservation of local flora and fauna, create jobs for community residents, and generate both economic and social benefits.

5.6.2 Business Description

- **Mission and Vision:** The **mission** is the reason for an organisation's existence in the present, defining its purpose, its activity scope, and how it operates, while the **vision** describes the desired long-term future it aspires to achieve. Specifically, the **social mission** is the statement that clearly and concisely defines the central social purpose of a social economy organisation or social enterprise. It explains which social, environmental, or community problem it aims to address, for whom, and through which general approach.
 - Example: For a rural tourism project focused on well-being, the vision might be “To be a leading sustainable tourism provider in the region, offering immersive experiences that connect visitors with nature and local traditions.” The mission, in turn, could be “To offer eco-friendly tourism services that respect the environment while preserving local culture and generating income for the rural community.”
- **Sustainable Value Proposition:** This section should explain how the business will generate not only economic value but also social and environmental benefits. It is crucial to highlight how the venture will stand out from competitors and how it will benefit both the community and the natural environment.
 - Example: An organic farming project might offer fresh, pesticide-free products to the local community and larger markets, focusing on soil regeneration and responsible water use. The value proposition could include, for instance, direct-to-consumer sales through a circular economy model, where agricultural waste is transformed into compost to improve soil health.
- **SMART Objectives: Define specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) objectives.** These objectives should address not only economic growth but also the improvement of the project's social and environmental impact.
 - Example: “Increase production by 25% over the next two years while reducing energy use by 30% through the implementation of solar panels and recycling 80% of agricultural waste.”

5.6.3 Market Analysis

Building on the environmental analysis described in Section 3, a market analysis will be conducted to determine how the business model fits into the specific context of the rural environment. This analysis will focus on identifying existing opportunities based on demographic, socio-economic, and natural resource conditions, to adapt the business model to the characteristics and needs of the rural market.

The market study will be a key tool for assessing demand potential, identifying competitors, and defining appropriate customer segments. Specific aspects to address include:

- **Demand Study:** In this section, analyse the demand for sustainable products or services at both local and broader market levels. This involves researching consumers/users' preferences, purchasing trends, and customers' willingness to pay a premium for sustainable products or services.
 - Example: For an organic dairy product project, you could investigate the growing demand for organic foods in the region, identifying niches like health-conscious consumers or families seeking pesticide-free products.
- **Competitor Analysis:** This section should identify direct and indirect competitors and highlight the sustainable business's competitive advantages. It should compare both local competitors and those in nearby markets that may also offer sustainable products or services.
 - Example: In an agri-tourism project, competitors might include other rural accommodations. The sustainable venture's competitive advantage could lie in its unique offerings, such as permaculture workshops or gastronomic experiences featuring locally grown ingredients.
- **Customer Segmentation:** Precisely defining the business's target audience is crucial for creating an effective marketing strategy. It is important to consider customers' needs and preferences, as well as their willingness to pay for sustainable products or services, while being aware of the purchasing power and potential vulnerabilities of the selected social groups.
 - Example: In a direct-to-consumer organic vegetable project, customer segments might include urban, middle-to-upper-class consumers interested in healthy, environmentally friendly eating.

5.6.4 Sustainable Marketing Plan

- **Product/Service Strategy:** Detail the distinguishing features of the product or service, emphasising the sustainable aspects that make it attractive to consumers.
 - Example: For a rural solar energy company, the product strategy could focus on offering affordable and sustainable energy solutions for rural households, highlighting long-term savings and reduced carbon footprint.
- **Pricing Strategy:** The pricing policy should reflect the added value of sustainability. While sustainable products are often priced higher due to production costs, consumers are willing to pay more for the positive impact they provide. However, pricing strategies such as "differential pricing" or "social freemium" can incentivise the purchase by low-income groups.

- Example: For organic dairy products, the pricing strategy could be based on superior product quality, as well as the company's commitment to animal welfare and responsible production.
- **Distribution Strategy:** Distribution channels should be efficient and low in environmental impact. This may include direct-to-consumer sales at local markets or the use of sustainable e-commerce platforms.
 - Example: An organic farm could distribute its products via a home delivery service using bicycles or electric vehicles, minimising the carbon footprint.
- **Promotion Strategy:** The communication plan should highlight the project's sustainable benefits and its positive impact on the rural community.
 - Example: A sustainable rural tourism project could be promoted through social media campaigns showing how the activities respect nature and offer an authentic, eco-conscious experience.

5.6.5 Sustainable Operational Plan

- **Processes and Technologies:** Describe the operational processes and technologies that will be employed to maintain sustainability. This may include renewable energy sources, low-impact agricultural practices, or waste reduction methods.
 - Example: A sustainable honey production company could implement eco-friendly beekeeping practices that respect the natural life cycle of bees, using renewable energy for extraction and product processing.
- **Resource Management:** Explain how natural resources will be managed responsibly.
 - Example: An organic farm might implement crop rotation and composting to maintain soil fertility without the need for chemical fertilisers.
- **Supply Chain:** Detail how sustainability will be integrated into the supply chain, prioritising local suppliers and ethical practices.
 - Example: A natural cosmetics producer could source ingredients exclusively from small, local farmers who practice regenerative agriculture.

5.6.6 Organisational and Human Resources Plan

- **Organisational Structure:** Define roles and responsibilities within the team, participatory practices and democratic governance, including functions related to sustainability.
 - Example: In a sustainable agricultural cooperative, roles could include a sustainability manager responsible for overseeing water efficiency and composting practices.
- **Hiring Policy:** Establish hiring criteria that prioritise local people and promote minority talent and diversity, to offer productive, meaningful, and suitable job opportunities to otherwise marginalised social groups with special needs and

talents, creating value for them and the company by leveraging and improving their skills. This section must include an Equality and Social Inclusion Plan for the company.

- Example: A rural tourism project might prioritise hiring local guides with extensive knowledge of the area's culture and natural environment or employ vulnerable groups, such as migrants, people with disabilities, women, or unemployed youth.
- **Staff Development:** Plan for continuous training programmes on sustainability, circular economy, technology, digitalisation, and social inclusion.
 - Example: In a sustainable textile production company, regular workshops could be organised for employees on new techniques to reduce waste and use recycled materials.

5.6.7 Choice of legal form

The social economy encompasses a wide range of organisations and enterprises, from traditional structures such as **cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations (including charities), and foundations** to more innovative ones such as **social enterprises**. Although they are regulated specifically in each Member State of the European Union, they share a way of doing business that combines the general or social interest with economic viability and democratic governance. The social economy overcomes the limitations of the economy with social and environmental considerations.

Their focus on people and the environment over income and their close relationship with local communities make them highly relevant to entrepreneurship in rural areas. In this way, it meets the social service needs of the most vulnerable (the elderly, migrants, young people, people with disabilities, etc.), education needs, food production and distribution needs for isolated people, creates jobs and collaborates in the digital transition. In other words, it stimulates entrepreneurship in response to the basic needs of areas where the traditional economy does not reach due to low profit expectations.

The legal form that best suits the product/service offered must be chosen, as well as those who can collaborate in establishing it: from the users themselves through an association, the workers through a cooperative, or the sponsorship of institutions or individuals who contribute their resources to the creation of a foundation, in addition to a company with a traditional legal form but with limited profit distribution in its statutes and which contributes to the social and environmental development of the area.

5.6.8 Economic and Financial Plan

- **Initial Investment:** Outline the start-up costs, including all necessary investments for initial operations, with a particular emphasis on sustainable technologies and essential resources for business operations. These costs may

cover infrastructure, equipment acquisition, clean energy technologies, and hiring specialised staff in the early stages of the project. It is essential to consider all necessary resources to ensure efficient and sustainable operation from the beginning.

- Example: A renewable energy company may need an initial investment for the purchase and installation of solar panels in rural communities. Additionally, they should consider training local workers for the maintenance of these panels and implementing remote monitoring systems to ensure long-term energy efficiency.
- **Financial Projections:** Provide detailed projections of income and expenses, including analysis of possible scenarios for business development, such as optimistic, pessimistic, and realistic outlooks. It is crucial to estimate not only potential revenue growth but also variable and fixed costs, along with investments needed in marketing, technology, and human resources. Including a cash flow projection to ensure the project's liquidity during its early years is also essential.
 - Example: A direct-to-consumer organic food venture could project an annual sales growth of 20% due to rising demand for healthy, sustainable foods. Additionally, they should estimate the cost of expanding to new markets, including logistics, digital marketing, and organic certifications needed to attract more discerning consumers. A reinvestment plan for profits should also be included to enhance production and distribution efficiency.
- **Funding Sources:** Identify potential funding sources, such as grants for green projects, social investors, low-interest loans, or crowdfunding. Diversifying funding sources is essential to reduce risks and enhance the project's financial stability, while taking advantage of government and international support programmes that promote sustainable development. Partnerships with companies sharing the project's sustainable vision could also be considered, potentially resulting in financial or in-kind contributions.
 - Example: A rural tourism business could access rural development funds or financing programmes for sustainable tourism. Additionally, it could explore collaborations with NGOs supporting environmental conservation initiatives, attracting investors interested in the project's positive social and environmental impact. Another option would be using crowdfunding platforms to involve the community and generate initial capital, fostering a sense of belonging among future clients and collaborators.

5.6.9 Social and Environmental Impact

- **Sustainability Metrics:** Define key performance indicators (KPIs) that measure social and environmental impact.

- Example: In an organic farm, an environmental KPI could be reducing water usage by 30% through efficient irrigation techniques, while a social KPI could be the number of people with disabilities involved within the value chain.
- **Evaluation Plan:** Establish a monitoring and evaluation system to measure progress towards sustainability objectives.
 - Example: A renewable energy project could conduct annual evaluations of energy savings and CO₂ emissions reductions.
- **Risk Management:** Identify potential risks and develop mitigation strategies.
 - Example: In an agricultural project, climate risks could be managed by diversifying crops that are more resistant to droughts.

5.6.10 Conclusions and Future Projections

The conclusions and future projections section in the business plan is crucial, as it provides a final overview that summarises the project's viability and long-term outlook. This section presents a consolidated analysis of all aspects covered in the plan, highlighting the most relevant points regarding economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Additionally, it should outline a clear vision of how the enterprise will evolve and scale in the future, underscoring its potential for growth and replicability in other rural contexts.

The conclusions should demonstrate that the project is financially viable and has a positive social and environmental impact, reinforcing the value proposition developed in the business plan. It is important to summarise the following key points:

- **Economic Sustainability:** Summarise the elements that ensure long-term profitability, such as financial forecasts, established demand for products or services, and identified growth opportunities in the market. This includes justifying that the business model is profitable and capable of sustaining itself through consistent revenue generation.
- **Social Impact:** This section should summarise the social benefits the project will bring to the rural community. This may include local job creation, the promotion of social inclusion, and how the project helps improve the population's quality of life. For instance, the enterprise might offer training and employment to disadvantaged groups within the community, such as youth without job opportunities or women in rural areas.
- **Environmental Impact:** Finally, it is essential to highlight the positive impact the business will have on the natural environment, emphasising sustainable practices implemented. This could include reducing the use of non-renewable resources, conserving biodiversity, or minimising waste. For example, an agricultural venture

might mention the use of regenerative agriculture techniques that not only preserve the soil but also improve it.

Future projections should present a clear vision of how the business **plans to scale and consolidate over the coming years**, based on the experience gained during the project's initial phases. It is important for these future projections to focus not only on financial growth but also on how the project will maintain and expand its positive impact on communities and the environment.

- **Market Growth:** Project how the business plans to expand its market reach in the coming years. This could involve broadening the range of products or services offered, exploring new geographic markets, or increasing the customer base.
 - Example: If the project is an organic farm currently selling products in local markets, future projections could include expansion to regional or even national markets through e-commerce channels. Product diversification, such as introducing organic dairy products and selling them in specialised health food stores, could also be planned.
- **Business Model Replicability:** A sustainable rural project can have significant potential for replicability in other rural communities with similar characteristics. Projections should include how this model can be adapted to other environments, allowing more regions to benefit from the experience gained.
 - Example: A successful sustainable rural tourism business in a mountainous region could replicate its model in other rural areas with similar attractions. The focus on sustainability, including offering ecotourism experiences and preserving natural heritage, can be a competitive advantage that can be replicated in new locations, benefiting both the community and the environment.
- **Investment in Innovation and Sustainability:** Future projections should include plans for continued innovation to maintain competitiveness and improve business impact. This may involve investment in new sustainable technologies, improved production processes, or the adoption of more advanced sustainability practices.
 - Example: An organic farm might project investments in precision irrigation systems to further reduce water use or install technology for real-time soil health monitoring. Such investments not only improve operational efficiency but also reinforce the business's commitment to sustainability.
- **Scalability:** It is essential to anticipate how the business can scale sustainably. Scalability implies increasing production capacity without compromising core sustainability values. Planning for growth should ensure the business maintains its positive impact on the environment and community.
 - Example: A renewable energy venture in a rural community could project expanding its energy generation capacity by installing more solar panels or wind turbines, supplying more local homes and businesses. As demand for

clean energy grows, the business can scale while prioritising sustainability and responsible resource use.

- **Collaborations and Strategic Partnerships:** Finally, future projections may include establishing new partnerships and collaborations with other businesses, local governments, or NGOs that can contribute to the business's growth and strengthen its social and environmental impact.
 - Example: A reforestation business in rural areas might seek partnerships with international NGOs supporting environmental conservation initiatives. These collaborations would not only provide additional resources and visibility but also increase the project's positive environmental impact.

5.6.11 Practical Example

Imagine the project is an agricultural cooperative that produces and markets organic honey in a rural area. The conclusions could summarise that the cooperative has successfully created a network of local beekeepers, adopted sustainable agricultural practices that protect the ecosystem, and established marketing channels in regional markets. Future projections would include expanding the cooperative to other rural areas with beekeeping potential, diversifying into honey-derived products (such as organic cosmetics), and adopting new technologies to optimise production without compromising sustainability principles.

Regarding scalability, the cooperative could project a 30% growth in honey production over the next five years through investment in new eco-friendly hives and the implementation of digital monitoring systems to ensure bee health. At the same time, the cooperative would aim to expand its network of beekeepers by training more community members in sustainable beekeeping, generating a positive impact on local employment and biodiversity.

5.7 Specific Marketing for Rural Products and Services

Marketing for sustainable rural products and services plays a crucial role in the development of local economies while driving environmental preservation and social well-being. In rural settings, the sustainable approach to marketing is not only a growing trend but also a necessity. The key is to promote products and services that not only generate economic value but also respect natural resources and strengthen rural communities.

In a world where sustainability awareness is on the rise, consumers seek products aligned with their environmental values. Rural products have the potential to offer authentic and sustainable solutions, and through effective marketing, these products can reach local, regional, and even global markets. This section explores how to develop specific

marketing strategies that not only boost profitability but also contribute to sustainability in rural environments.

5.7.1 Introduction to Sustainable Marketing in Rural Settings

Sustainable marketing in rural environments aims not only to meet consumer needs but to do so in a way that minimises environmental impact and maximises social benefits. Unlike traditional marketing approaches, which focus solely on economic profit, sustainable marketing integrates ethical and ecological principles at every stage of the value chain and is accessible to different social groups.

One of the main characteristics of rural sustainable marketing is its orientation towards shared value. This means that marketed products and services should not only be profitable but also improve the quality of life of local communities. This can be achieved through the use of local materials, the implementation of fair-trade practices, and the protection of the natural resources that are essential for rural economies.

- **Challenges and opportunities in the rural environment:** Marketing in rural areas presents specific challenges, such as a lack of technological infrastructure, limited access to global markets, and the geographical dispersion of consumers/users. However, it also offers significant opportunities, such as the authenticity of products, local culture, and the growing demand for sustainable products from conscious consumers.
- **Shared Value:** Rather than focusing solely on maximising financial return, rural marketing strategies should integrate the concept of shared value, where both the company and the community benefit. An example of this is the promotion of agroecological products that not only generate income but also foster the preservation of local biodiversity.

5.7.2 Market Analysis and Segmentation in Rural Areas

The foundation of any effective marketing strategy is a thorough market analysis. In the case of sustainable rural products and services, this must consider both the demographic and psychographic aspects of consumers. In rural areas, this analysis faces challenges such as the lack of detailed statistical data or limited technology presence, requiring adapted research methods.

Market analysis in rural areas should focus on identifying who the potential consumers of sustainable products are. These may include not only local residents but also tourists, nearby urban communities, and, in many cases, global consumers who value authentic and sustainable rural products. It is essential for rural businesses to understand the diverse motivations and behaviours of these segments.

- **Market Research in Rural Areas:** Due to low population density and limited access to technological tools, traditional market research techniques may not be

feasible in rural settings. Instead, it is important to use more informal data collection methods, such as direct interviews with residents, surveys at local fairs, or focus groups within communities. For example, an agricultural cooperative in a rural area could conduct surveys at local markets to understand consumer preferences for organic

- **Rural Market Segmentation:** Once data is collected, it is essential to segment the market into specific groups with common characteristics. For instance, in the case of a product like sustainable artisanal cheese, market segments could include tourists interested in local products, urban consumers concerned with food sustainability, and local customers who value traditional products. Each segment will require a tailored marketing strategy to meet its particular needs.
- **Sustainable Consumption Trends:** Globally, consumers are increasingly interested in products that have a positive impact on the environment and society. In rural areas, this trend can be leveraged to promote products that use regenerative agricultural practices, respect natural cycles, and minimise the use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. One example is the rise of sustainable beekeeping in rural areas, where marketing focuses on bee protection and biodiversity promotion.

5.7.3 Development of Sustainable Products and Services

The development of sustainable products and services in a rural setting is based on creating goods that not only satisfy consumer needs but also respect ecological limits. Sustainable rural products are often closely linked to the natural environment, including organic foods, artisanal goods, renewable energies, or ecotourism services.

A key strategy in developing sustainable products is the use of local materials and traditional techniques that have proven to be efficient and environmentally friendly over time. Furthermore, it is important for these products to maintain clear traceability, which means that consumers should have access to information about the product's origin, production practices used, and the environmental impact of its manufacture.

- **Design of Sustainable Products:** For a product to be truly sustainable, its design must consider the entire lifecycle, from the sourcing of raw materials to final disposal. An example could be the design of furniture made from reclaimed wood in a rural setting, where marketing focuses not only on the quality and durability of the product but also on its low environmental impact.
- **Product Lifecycle:** In rural contexts, a product's lifecycle may be affected by factors such as seasonality, raw material availability, or climate variability. Businesses should be able to adjust their production and marketing strategies according to the product's lifecycle stage. For instance, a company that produces organic olive oil may emphasise sustainable farming practices during the growth



phase, while in the maturity phase, it may focus on expanding into international markets interested in premium products.

- **Innovation in Rural Services:** In addition to tangible products, sustainable rural services like ecotourism or agricultural experiences are on the rise. For example, a rural farm offering agro-ecological tourism stays is not only marketing an experience but also promoting a sustainable lifestyle. Innovation in these services should focus on ensuring authenticity and a connection with nature, two values highly appreciated by today's consumers.

5.7.4 Pricing Strategies for Sustainable Products in Rural Environments

Pricing is a crucial factor in marketing sustainable products and services in rural settings. Consumers are often willing to pay a higher price for products that are eco-friendly and sustainable, as long as they perceive added value. However, in rural areas, setting competitive prices can be challenging due to higher production costs and reduced profit margins. Therefore, rural businesses must adopt a pricing strategy that reflects both the sustainable production costs and the perceived customer value.

- **Value-Based Pricing:** Instead of simply calculating production costs and adding a profit margin, value-based pricing focuses on what consumers are willing to pay for the additional benefits of sustainable products.
 - Example: Organic honey produced in a rural area, where consumers value not only the taste and quality but also the fact that production respects bee welfare and promotes biodiversity.
- **Pricing Strategies Adapted to Rural Markets and Vulnerable Groups:** It is essential to differentiate between prices set for local consumers and those set for external markets, such as tourism or exports. Also, pricing strategies such as "differential pricing" or "social freemium" can make products and services affordable for low-income groups.
 - Example: A rural cooperative producing organic dairy products could set a more accessible price for local consumers, while premium products aimed at international markets could be priced higher due to their added value and exclusivity.
- **Incentives and Subsidies:** Many rural areas can benefit from government or international incentives and subsidies that promote sustainable production or social services. These financial supports enable rural producers to reduce costs and offer more competitive prices.
- Social economy enterprises often cover basic services such as social services for the elderly, education, the disabled and other vulnerable groups. As these enterprises do not focus on maximising profits and benefit from incentives, they are able to be economically viable while providing services at one or more different prices according to the economic capacity of the type of users they target.

- Example: Organic farming support programmes help farmers transition to more sustainable practices without significantly increasing the cost for the end consumer.
- Example: The Dependency Law allows part of the cost of an elderly person's stay in a day centre or residential home to be financed through the assistance they receive, with the price of the service being commensurate with their financial means.

5.7.5 Distribution Channels in Rural Areas

One of the greatest challenges for rural products is distribution. The distance from urban centres and the lack of adequate infrastructure can make it difficult to access markets. However, the development of efficient and sustainable distribution channels can help overcome these barriers, allowing rural products to reach both local consumers and broader markets.

- **Local Distribution:** In many rural areas, local markets, farmers' fairs, and cooperatives play a fundamental role in the distribution of sustainable products. These channels not only allow producers to connect directly with consumers but also promote a more sustainable local economy model.
 - Example: A cooperative selling organic products at a local market not only distributes its goods but also promotes a circular economy within the community.
- **Access to Urban and Global Markets:** Although local markets are important, most sustainable rural products have the potential to reach broader markets. E-commerce platforms have enabled small rural producers to sell their products nationally and internationally.
 - Example: The sale of rural crafts on online platforms specialising in ethical and sustainable products allows urban and even global consumers to access rural products without intermediaries.
- **Rural Logistics:** Logistics is an ongoing challenge in rural areas due to distances, terrain, and limited infrastructure. Companies wishing to implement sustainable distribution must find innovative solutions, such as using electric or shared vehicles to reduce carbon emissions.
 - Example: An agricultural cooperative using shared vehicles to distribute products to nearby communities, thereby reducing costs and environmental impact.

5.7.6 Communication and Promotion Strategies

In the marketing of sustainable rural products, communication is essential to highlight the environmental and social value of the products. Consumers need to understand how rural products contribute to sustainability and how choosing these products can make a

difference. Communication strategies should be authentic and highlight the ecological, social, and economic benefits of sustainable products.

- **Relational Marketing in Rural Environments:** Relational marketing focuses on building long-term relationships with customers, based on trust and transparency. In rural contexts, this involves engaging consumers in the story behind the product, showcasing the production process, and connecting with them emotionally.
 - Example: A farm offering guided tours where consumers can see first-hand how organic food is produced, strengthening trust and loyalty toward the brand.
- **Communicating Sustainable Value:** Consumers are increasingly interested in understanding the environmental and social impact of the products they consume. Rural businesses should therefore ensure that sustainability is at the core of their message. This includes highlighting sustainable practices such as the use of renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, or support for local communities.
 - Example: A company that produces handmade textiles in a rural area can promote how its production supports indigenous communities and preserves ancestral traditions.
- **Digital Marketing in Rural Areas:** Despite connectivity challenges in rural areas, digital marketing offers a unique opportunity to expand the reach of sustainable products. Social media, blogs, and e-commerce platforms allow small rural producers to connect with sustainability-conscious consumers worldwide.
 - Example: A small natural cosmetics company from a rural area might use Instagram and Facebook to promote its products and educate consumers on the benefits of natural ingredients and the sustainability of its practices.

5.8 Ethical Financial Management

Ethical financial management is a crucial component for the success of sustainable entrepreneurial projects in rural environments. This type of management not only aims to maximise financial benefits but also aligns with principles of sustainability, social justice, and transparency. In rural entrepreneurship, where the local community and environment play a fundamental role, implementing ethical financial management ensures that resources are used efficiently, responsibly, and with a positive impact on all stakeholders (Schoenmaker & Schramade, 2019).

Sustainable rural entrepreneurship projects can benefit from adopting sustainable finance, which seeks to balance economic growth with environmental and social well-being. This involves considering the long-term impacts of financial decisions and adopting practices that promote equity and inclusive economic development. In this context, financial ethics translates into the implementation of principles that include

transparency in fund management, fair distribution of benefits, and investment in practices that protect and restore natural resources, as well as empowering local communities.

5.8.1 Principles of Ethical Financial Management

- **Transparency and Accountability:** Entrepreneurs must ensure that all financial decisions are transparent and that the local community is informed about the use of financial resources. This strengthens trust and enables greater stakeholder participation. For example, rural cooperatives often report to their members on the profits obtained and investments made, ensuring that funds are used to support both the enterprise and the community.
- **Investments in Sustainable and Social Projects:** Ethical management includes prioritising investments that respect the environment and contribute to long-term sustainability while generating positive social impact. This involves financing initiatives that not only promote the use of renewable energies or regenerative agricultural practices but also projects that improve the quality of life of local communities, such as creating decent employment, providing access to essential services, and promoting education and training.
- **Financial and Social Inclusion:** It is essential that sustainable rural projects include all community members, particularly the most vulnerable, such as small producers, women, youth, or families with limited resources. Through financial instruments like microcredits, cooperative loans, or ethical financing, rural entrepreneurs can ensure that project benefits are equitably shared, promoting social cohesion and reducing inequality. This fosters more inclusive development, valuing and strengthening the capacities of diverse local actors, ensuring that economic and social sustainability go hand in hand.

5.8.2 Application of Ethical Finance in Rural Projects

For example, an agricultural cooperative operating in a rural area can implement ethical financial management by using its profits not only to improve community infrastructure, such as access to clean water or education, but also to strengthen social cohesion by creating local employment programmes and supporting the most vulnerable community sectors. This might include training youth in sustainable agricultural practices or supporting small producers through microcredits or technical assistance.

At the same time, it can establish clear policies for reinvesting profits in sustainable agricultural practices, such as purchasing technology to reduce water or energy consumption, and in social projects that improve the quality of life in the community, such as building health centres or creating educational spaces. This approach ensures that the economic benefits generated by the cooperative have a direct positive impact on social equity, fostering inclusive and sustainable development.

This type of management not only generates economic benefits but also improves the quality of life for all community members, reduces inequality, and strengthens the project's long-term sustainability by creating a more just and balanced environment both socially and environmentally.

Ethical financial management in rural entrepreneurship is not only a matter of responsibility but a key strategy to ensure the long-term viability of projects, fostering both economic development and the preservation of the natural and social environment.

5.9 New Opportunities for Rural Entrepreneurship

Sustainable rural development goes beyond agriculture and natural resource management; it also involves integrating various economic and social activities that promote overall well-being and economic growth. In this context, digitalisation, sustainable tourism, social services, and the valorisation of culture and heritage play crucial roles in creating dynamic and resilient rural communities. This section explores how these elements can be integrated to promote sustainable rural development in diverse areas, from service provision to cultural heritage preservation.

5.9.1 Digitalisation in the Rural Environment

Digitalisation has transformed all industries, and rural areas are no exception. The implementation of digital technologies in rural areas enables small businesses and communities to access broader markets, improve operational efficiency, and develop new business models.

- **Access to New Markets:** Digital tools allow rural products and services to be marketed globally through e-commerce and digital platforms. For instance, rural artisans can sell their products on platforms like Etsy or Amazon Handmade, eliminating traditional geographical barriers.
- **Precision Agriculture:** Technologies like drones, sensors, and big data allow farmers to optimise resource management, reducing waste and increasing productivity. These innovations not only make agriculture more efficient but also more sustainable.
- **Digital Inclusion and Connectivity:** Despite the benefits, rural areas often face connectivity challenges. Improving internet access and technology availability is crucial for rural entrepreneurs to fully leverage the opportunities offered by digitalisation. Initiatives such as the expansion of 5G networks and access to online training platforms are essential steps to reduce the digital divide in these areas.

5.9.2 Sustainable Tourism in Rural Communities

Sustainable tourism has become a major economic activity for many rural communities, providing employment opportunities while fostering the conservation of the natural and

cultural environment. This type of tourism focuses on minimising environmental impact and promoting authentic experiences that respect the local cultural heritage.

- **Ecotourism:** Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism aimed at connecting visitors with nature, encouraging environmental education and respect for the natural environment. Rural communities can develop small, sustainable tourist infrastructures, such as eco-lodges or interpretative trails, to attract tourists interested in biodiversity and traditional agricultural practices.
- **Cultural Tourism:** In addition to nature tourism, cultural tourism offers an opportunity for rural communities to promote their traditions, cuisine, and crafts. For example, traditional festivals or visits to historical sites can attract visitors interested in learning more about the region's heritage.
- **Community Benefits:** Sustainable tourism generates jobs and can revitalise economically depressed rural areas. However, it is essential to manage it so that the benefits are distributed equitably among community members, ensuring that neither the environment nor cultural traditions are compromised.

5.9.3 Social Services in Rural Areas

Access to quality social services remains a persistent challenge in rural areas. However, social entrepreneurship and innovation offer solutions tailored to the needs of these communities.

- **Telemedicine:** Digitalisation has enabled healthcare to reach rural areas through telemedicine. This allows residents in remote locations to access medical consultations, diagnoses, and treatments without travelling long distances.
- **Education and Training Programmes:** Education is key to sustainable development, and in rural areas, professional training can focus on skills relevant to sustainable agriculture or tourism. Online training and distance learning courses also enable young people to access education without leaving their communities.
- **Community Inclusion Projects:** In the realm of social services, initiatives that promote inclusion and social well-being for vulnerable groups, such as the elderly or people with disabilities, are essential. Projects that encourage digital inclusion, healthcare access, and recreational activities involving the entire community are crucial for fostering social cohesion and improving the quality of life in rural areas.

5.9.4 Culture and Heritage as Drivers of Development

The cultural heritage of rural communities is a unique asset that, when managed correctly, can become a driver of development. Preserving local culture not only strengthens community identity but also has the potential to attract tourism and generate income.

- **Heritage Preservation:** Conserving historical buildings, archaeological sites, and local traditions—such as festivals and cuisine—is essential to maintaining the cultural identity of rural areas. For example, in Spain, some rural villages have transformed centuries-old festivals into tourist attractions, creating jobs and increasing local pride.
- **Local Cultural Production:** Promoting cultural production, such as handicrafts, traditional music, or rural literature, can generate income while revitalising local traditions. Collaborative projects between local artisans and designers can create products that attract both tourists and international markets.
- **Integrating Heritage into Economic Development:** Integrating cultural heritage into local economic planning allows for the creation of narratives that promote both conservation and development. For instance, revitalisation programmes in abandoned or declining villages can attract investment and new job opportunities, especially in tourism and culture.

5.10 Corporate Sustainability Indicators

To **manage and measure the success of sustainable entrepreneurship** in rural areas, it is essential to use sustainability indicators, both **quantitative and qualitative**, that encompass economic, environmental, and social aspects. These indicators allow entrepreneurs to assess the impact of their activities and improve decision-making to ensure long-term success. Additionally, these indicators provide a comprehensive view of business performance, facilitating the identification of improvement areas and the establishment of strategies that maximise positive impacts on both the environment and the community.

Sustainability indicators not only help monitor progress toward environmental and social objectives but also enable businesses to adapt to new regulations and market trends demanding increased social and environmental responsibility. This is crucial for ensuring competitiveness and business resilience in an increasingly sustainability-focused economic environment. Implementing these indicators also promotes transparency, which strengthens trust among consumers, investors, and other stakeholders, fostering strategic partnerships and access to new financing opportunities.

5.10.1 Environmental Indicators

- **Carbon Footprint:** This indicator measures the greenhouse gas emissions produced by business activities. Reducing the carbon footprint is essential to minimise environmental impact. An example of its application is agricultural businesses implementing organic farming techniques to reduce the use of fossil fuels and chemicals. Additionally, companies can perform periodic energy audits to identify areas for improvement and set emissions reduction targets.

- **Efficient Resource Use:** This indicator refers to the number of natural resources, such as water or energy, that the company uses. Sustainable practices should focus on optimising these resources, such as efficient irrigation or using renewable energy in production processes. For example, drip irrigation technology can significantly reduce water consumption, while solar panel installations can decrease reliance on non-renewable energy sources.
- **Biodiversity Conservation:** Protecting local ecosystems is essential to ensure that economic growth does not degrade the natural environment. An example of this indicator is monitoring conservation areas in ecotourism projects. Companies can also establish ecological reserves within their properties to protect native species and promote natural habitat regeneration.

5.10.2 Social Indicators:

- **Community Impact:** This indicator measures the positive effects of business activities on the local community. Examples include job creation in rural areas with limited employment opportunities and evaluating educational or health programmes initiated by the companies for local benefit. Businesses can also engage in community activities, such as organising training workshops or collaborating with local schools to enhance educational quality.
- **Gender Equality and Social Inclusion:** This involves the participation of women and other traditionally marginalised groups in rural businesses, including people with disabilities, migrants, unemployed youth without education, and ethnic minorities. Companies that promote gender equality, offer equal opportunities, and encourage social inclusion tend to have a more positive impact on rural communities. For example, implementing mentorship programmes for women entrepreneurs helps them develop leadership skills and access business opportunities.
- **Employee Quality of Life:** Working conditions and employee well-being are essential for the long-term success of any enterprise. Offering fair wages, professional development opportunities, and social benefits demonstrates a socially responsible company. Furthermore, businesses can introduce wellness programmes that include recreational activities, healthcare access, and support for employees' children's education.

5.10.3 Economic Indicators

- **Profitability:** Although sustainability encompasses more than financial success, profitability remains an essential indicator to ensure the venture can sustain and grow. Assessing profit margins and return on investment is key for measuring success. Additionally, companies should balance profitability with investment in

sustainable practices, ensuring that economic growth does not compromise long-term positive impact.

- **Investment in Innovation:** Businesses that invest in research and development of new technologies and sustainable practices are more likely to stay competitive and reduce their environmental impact. This indicator measures the percentage of income allocated to innovation. For instance, adopting advanced technologies to optimise production processes, such as using artificial intelligence to improve supply chain efficiency.
- **Growth and Expansion:** Evaluating growth in terms of new products or services, expansion into new markets, or an increase in the customer base is essential to measure the business's economic progress. Rural businesses can also measure success by opening new retail points, participating in trade fairs, and collaborating with other companies to expand their reach.

Implementing business sustainability indicators is fundamental for ensuring rural ventures strike a balance between economic growth, positive environmental impact, and social welfare. These indicators enable more effective and transparent management, providing entrepreneurs with a clear tool to assess their performance and make continuous improvements. In this way, sustainability indicators not only help measure success but also foster a business culture committed to sustainable development and a positive impact on rural communities.

5.11 Motivation for Sustainable Entrepreneurship

Rural entrepreneurs driven by sustainability are motivated by more than just economic benefits. These entrepreneurs often seek to enhance their environment, prioritising both environmental sustainability and social equity. Beyond financial aspects, they aspire to create a legacy that benefits their communities and the environment over the long term. This long-term vision is fuelled by a profound sense of responsibility to future generations, aiming to leave behind a healthier, more prosperous world. Personal satisfaction and a connection to the land also play significant roles, as many feel a deep commitment to the place where they live and work. Additionally, preserving rural traditions and promoting a lifestyle in harmony with nature provides a sense of purpose and personal fulfilment.

The motivation for rural entrepreneurs also stems from their ability to observe the direct impact of their work. Unlike urban enterprises, where impact might be less perceptible, rural entrepreneurs can tangibly see how their efforts benefit their communities and natural surroundings. This immediate gratification provides an extra incentive to continue developing sustainable practices. Working closely with the community and witnessing the benefits their businesses bring to neighbours and family members strengthens their commitment, pushing them to innovate and enhance their practices further.

- **Environmental Responsibility:** Concerns over climate change and natural resource degradation are major motivators for rural entrepreneurs, who strive to implement practices that reduce environmental impact. Examples include organic farming and renewable energy use. Rural entrepreneurs also focus on local ecosystem conservation and efficient natural resource use, leading to a preference for sustainable practices that minimise chemical use and promote biodiversity.
- **Positive Social Impact:** Rural entrepreneurs are often motivated by the desire to improve their communities' quality of life by providing dignified jobs, education, and improved services. Cooperatives and community businesses often serve as effective models for achieving this impact. Additionally, these entrepreneurs strive for social inclusion, ensuring the benefits of their activities reach all community members, including the most vulnerable. Creating community infrastructure, such as educational and healthcare centres, and participating in community projects are examples of how rural entrepreneurs work to foster positive social impact.
- **Innovation and Creativity:** Sustainable entrepreneurship demands innovative solutions. The challenges of rural settings, such as a lack of infrastructure or limited market access, often inspire entrepreneurs to develop new products or services that are not only economically viable but also environmentally friendly and beneficial to local communities. Innovation in the rural context also involves adapting technologies to meet specific community needs, such as designing efficient irrigation systems or creating products that sustainably harness local resources. These entrepreneurs excel in turning challenges into opportunities, using creativity to devise unique solutions that drive both economic and social development without compromising sustainability.
- Ultimately, the motivation for sustainable entrepreneurship is rooted in a profound desire **to be agents of change within their communities**. Rural social economy entrepreneurs aim not only for economic gain but also for positive transformation of their surroundings through practices that protect the environment and improve the quality of life for those around them. A personal connection to their location and commitment to the people in their lives strengthen their determination to overcome obstacles and continue innovating sustainably.

5.12 Summary

This module is designed to train rural entrepreneurs in creating innovative and sustainable businesses, leveraging local resources and contributing to the economic, social, and environmental development of rural areas. Through this module, the goal is to provide a solid foundation of knowledge and practical tools that enable social economy entrepreneurs to face the specific challenges of their communities, maximising the use

of available resources and fostering resilience in rural settings. The main contents include:

The module underscores the importance of social economy entrepreneurship in rural areas as a comprehensive solution to socio-economic challenges. Combining sustainability, innovation, and technology can drive the development of rural communities, address depopulation, and enhance the quality of life of their inhabitants. Business models developed in this context should be economically viable and socially and environmentally responsible, contributing to the welfare of current and future generations. Collaboration among entrepreneurs, institutions, and the community is key to achieving inclusive and sustainable development. By fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange, a conducive ecosystem for innovation and resilience is created within the rural landscape, enabling these communities to thrive and adapt to future changes.

5.13 Success stories

Business sustainability has emerged as a key concept in rural development, focusing on balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being. The integration of sustainable practices in rural enterprises not only helps maintain a balance among these three pillars but also ensures the resilience of rural communities in the face of socio-economic and environmental challenges. Furthermore, the emphasis on sustainability contributes to the conservation of natural resources, which are essential for the ongoing development of these areas.

Successful experiences in social-economy rural enterprises stand out not only for their financial viability but also for the positive impact they have on local communities and ecosystems. These success stories demonstrate how innovation and collaboration can lead to business models that are not only profitable but also create shared value and foster community development, largely due to their ability to incorporate practices that respect the natural environment and improve the quality of life within communities.

This section delves into specific success cases, providing inspiration and tools for current and future entrepreneurs. These enterprises must balance economic needs with natural resource conservation and the strengthening of the social fabric. Additionally, it is crucial for these ventures to have clear strategies for community participation and resource management to ensure long-term sustainability. Innovation and the use of appropriate technologies also play an important role, enabling entrepreneurs to optimise processes and reduce environmental impact.

Likewise, sustainable rural enterprises need to generate a sense of belonging and motivation within local communities, ensuring that economic benefits are distributed equitably and that decisions are made in a participative manner. This community integration is key to ensuring not only the project's viability but also its resilience to

economic or environmental changes. Below are three emblematic cases of rural enterprises in Europe that have achieved this balance:

Case 1: Mondragón Corporation (Spain)

The Mondragón Corporation, one of the world's largest cooperative groups, began as a small project in the Basque Country and has expanded internationally. What makes Mondragón unique is its approach to cooperative management, where employees are partners in the company, fostering equity and democratic participation in decision-making. However, the full participation of workers is mainly limited to employees in the Basque Country, as many of Mondragón's international employees are not cooperative members and do not have access to the benefits of shared ownership. This situation has drawn criticism for creating a disparity between local and international workers, who do not partake in cooperative governance nor enjoy the same social benefits.

This model promotes inclusive and participatory business management, where every worker has a voice and vote, creating a sense of belonging and commitment that goes beyond a mere employment relationship.

Moreover, the cooperative has implemented sustainable practices, such as renewable energy use and responsible production, ensuring that economic growth does not compromise local resources. Mondragón has also developed circular economy initiatives that aim to reduce waste and maximise material reuse. However, not all its activities are fully aligned with environmental sustainability. In fact, the adoption of sustainable practices has been uneven and, in some cases, more market-driven than internally motivated. While these practices benefit the environment and generate new economic opportunities, sustainability has not always been a central focus in all its operations.

Over the years, Mondragón has established a network of companies across various sectors, from manufacturing to education and research, which has been essential to its expansion and diversification. This network enables the cooperative to adapt to market changes and create stable employment even in times of economic crisis. Additionally, Mondragón has invested significantly in education and vocational training, creating its own educational institutions, such as Mondragón University, which focuses on preparing new generations to face labour market challenges and foster an entrepreneurial spirit.

This model has been successful not only financially but has also generated stable employment and contributed to the region's economic and social development. The combination of equity, sustainability, and innovation has made Mondragón a global reference for how a company can grow sustainably while improving the quality of life for its workers and the community in which it operates. However, it is important to note that Mondragón faces significant challenges, such as integrating sustainability across all its operations and including international workers in cooperative ownership. These

challenges show that, although Mondragón has made substantial progress, there are still areas to improve to fully achieve its sustainability and equity goals.

Case 2: Chão do Rio Ecotourism (Portugal)

Located in Travancinha, about 12 km from Portugal's Serra da Estrela Natural Park, Chão do Rio is an excellent example of a sustainable ecotourism project. This accommodation offers a unique experience that combines comfort with the conservation of the natural environment. Key features of this project include:

- Sustainable accommodation: Comfortable stone cottages with thatched roofs, built with respect for the surrounding environment.
- Biological swimming pool: The cottages are arranged around a biological pool that uses natural processes to keep the water clean.
- Eco-farm: The project takes place on a 19-acre farm where nature is nurtured and enjoyed, contributing to the enrichment of local biodiversity.
- Local gastronomic experiences: Breakfast is served in baskets and includes local specialities, promoting the regional economy.
- Sustainable activities: Guests are encouraged to explore trails on foot or using available bicycles, promoting non-polluting transportation.
- Environmental education: Children can participate in activities like collecting eggs in the mobile chicken coop, fostering a connection with nature from an early age.
- Local collaboration: Through local partners, food and entertainment services are provided, supporting the surrounding community.

This project shows how a small tourist accommodation can integrate sustainable practices in all aspects of its operations, from construction to daily activities, offering visitors an authentic and environmentally friendly experience. Chão do Rio not only provides a place to stay but also educates its guests on the importance of conservation and responsible tourism.

Case 3: Fischer Farm (Austria)

Located in Styria, Austria, Fischer Farm is an outstanding example of a small, innovative ecological farm. Run by Erika and Martin Fischer, this farm focuses on breeding Fleckvieh cattle, known for their dual-purpose milk and meat production. With a herd of 55 animals, including 27 milking cows, the farm has managed to position itself as a benchmark in organic production.

From the start, Erika and Martin chose to prioritise quality over quantity. This philosophy has earned them recognition as a "Styria Elite Herd" for the past five years. Instead of seeking excessive growth, they have worked to continually improve their practices and outcomes.

In 2000, the farm suffered a devastating fire that forced the family to rebuild their facilities in just four months. This challenge became an opportunity to modernise and

adopt a more sustainable approach to production. Martin emphasises that their goal has always been to improve: "Eighteen years ago, we were clear that we didn't want to grow, but to get better."

Fischer Farm spans 51 hectares, where they grow forage to feed their animals. Their crops include maize, cereals, and alfalfa. Their goal is to produce all necessary forage to ensure the quality of the feed consumed by their cows, thus avoiding the complications associated with buying external feed.

In addition to dairy production, the farm benefits from rearing calves. The calves are raised until they are 18 months old and reach an average weight of 250 kilos at slaughter. The meat is sold directly to consumers on the farm itself, which allows them to generate additional income and maintain a direct connection with their customers.

The combination of sustainable practices, a focus on quality, and resilience in the face of adversity has allowed Fischer Farm not only to survive but to thrive in a competitive environment. This case exemplifies how a small farm can be both innovative and ecological, contributing to a more sustainable agricultural model in Europe.



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6. Module 4. Community Strengthening in Rural Areas

Objective

This training module is an educational resource created as part of the ESIRA train-the-trainers programme, which forms part of Deliverable 5.2. Training modules, included in WP5 – Community-led innovation spaces and pilot social economy initiatives. The main objective of the train-the-trainers programme is to capacity build and to strengthen the skills of Multi-Actor Platform (MAP) facilitators and rural actors to identify, support and ensure the sustainability of social economy initiatives and develop community networks in the rural territory.

The main objective of the Training Module 4 is to provide theoretical and practical knowledge and skills to training facilitators and rural actors in the areas of examining alternative approaches for strengthening community structures in rural areas, with a specific focus on the concepts, practices, and enabling conditions that support socially meaningful innovation and social inclusion. The training material provides a conceptual and analytical foundation to guide project activities related to community empowerment, territorial knowledge, and rural social innovation.

Structure

This training module is structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of community-centred approaches to social innovation in rural areas. It begins with an introduction to the definition and practical application of key concepts, such as capacity building, community strengthening, and territorial knowledge, framing them within the context of increasing individualisation and the growing fragility of rural areas, which call for community-based action to prevent social exclusion and foster social cohesion. The second section focuses on the specific features of social innovation in rural contexts and its relationship with community-led initiatives, with particular attention to vulnerable groups at higher risk of social exclusion in rural territories. The third section examines the factors that enable or hinder community strengthening and rural socialisation processes, identifying structural, social, and institutional dynamics that shape collective action. Finally, the module concludes with a summary of the main findings and key insights, offering guidance for advancing socially meaningful innovation and reinforcing inclusive development pathways in rural communities.

The content of this training module is complemented by the following materials in Deliverable 5.3 “Training Modules Updated”:

- **ESIRA Guide for supporting innovative social economy initiatives.**
- **Practical Tools 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4**



6.1 The search for community in an increasingly individualistic society

The current society, particularly in developed countries, has undergone a gradual and inevitable transformation towards individualisation. Over recent decades, numerous social changes (in organisation, intimate relationships, family structure, and socialisation methods) have led to social atomisation or fragmentation, resulting in a predominantly individualistic society (Richard-Schuster et al., 2009).

In a society where individualism and personal autonomy are extolled, the community is no longer sustained solely by tradition or obligation; instead, it becomes a choice and a functional necessity. It is sought for support, security, or meaning that the State or the traditional family no longer fully provide. We establish weaker, but more numerous, ties, which the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2003) called the "cloakroom community": something that is put on and taken off according to need. Faced with global uncertainty, people look to the community (local or virtual) for a space of shared identity and collective action that allows them to influence their environment and transcend individual loneliness. Communal nuclei still exist, functioning as emotional refuges and sources of solidarity, but they require a conscious and sustained effort for their maintenance.

This evolutionary trend towards individualisation is causing the disarticulation of communal ties in developed societies, which leads to a series of interconnected social problems: social fragmentation, disaffiliation, and social exclusion (Richard-Schuster et al., 2009).

- **Social Fragmentation:** This refers to the breaking of the social fabric that previously bound people together. Society breaks down into groups or individuals with few interdependent ties, making collective vision and action difficult.
- **Disaffiliation or Rootlessness:** This is the process of disengagement or loss of social ties and institutional protections that integrate the individual into society (such as stable employment, social security, or membership in a strong community). Sociologist Robert Castel (1997) used it to describe the fragility of people who are neither fully integrated nor totally excluded, but in a zone of vulnerability.
- **Social Exclusion:** This is the final and most serious result. Social exclusion is a concept that highlights the deprivation of access and rights affecting an individual or group, caused by a variety of factors (social, political, geographical, etc.), resulting in an inequality compared to the majority of the population (Escribano-Pizarro et al., 2020). This consequently results in the deprivation of full participation in the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres of society.

The complexity of the social problems generated by individualisation (fragmentation, disaffiliation, and exclusion) demands a pragmatic, context-specific community

intervention strategy. When facing any initiative or action project, it is preferable to adopt an operational approach. The truly important factor for guiding intervention is understanding the specific characteristics of the community one will be working with. This involves answering essential questions that reveal its internal perception and structure, such as:

- Identity: Do people recognise themselves as a community?
- Meaning: What implications or value does the concept of "being a community" hold for them?
- Representation and Power: Who are the voices that speak for or seek to represent the community?
- Social Inclusion: Are all voices represented, or are there excluded groups, and what are the reasons for that exclusion?

These are some of the questions that should guide and define the community strengthening of each local environment. Unlike the community of origin—which one cannot choose—the conception of community as choice implies that people mobilise all their resources and capacities (both local and global) to access the necessary means for social transformation. This perspective is not passive: it requires constant action and a vigilant commitment.

6.2 Groups at Risk of Vulnerability in Rural Areas

The rural population is highly exposed to processes of social exclusion and is even more vulnerable than the urban population. It is fundamental to understand that vulnerability in rural areas is deeply linked to depopulation, ageing, and the scarcity of services, housing, and a lack of youth employment and leisure, creating an environment of structural fragility. Vulnerability in these areas is not solely due to a lack of money, but to the deprivation of access to rights and services. This fragility is the starting point for identifying specific risks:

6.2.1 Migrants

The settlement of migrants in rural areas that are experiencing a demographic decline has gained greater relevance in recent years as a significant economic, social, and political issue, as well as an opportunity for development for local communities. In Spain, for example, the way in which different national groups plan their migration is clearly manifested in their residential configuration—that is, the type of household established by foreign-born immigrants (Camarero & Sampedro, 2019). There is a clear contrast in the residency pattern of immigrants in small municipalities: Romanian and Bulgarian citizens typically live in traditional family structures, while Moroccan men are characterised by living without a family nucleus or alone. Additionally, there is a significant proportion of women from Colombia and Ecuador who have married Spaniards.

Understanding the lived realities of integration and inclusion is essential. Interactions between the local and immigrant populations are often characterised by instrumentality and subordination. However, for rural areas suffering from demographic decline and a lack of labour, the successful integration of immigrants is crucial (Zahl-Thanem & Haugen, 2019). Despite the arrival of new residents, this movement does not always result in a long-term or permanent settlement but is characterised by a high degree of volatility (Camarero & Rivera, 2024).

Among the main problems surrounding migration are social prejudices: the greater the cultural difference between the immigrants and the receiving society, the higher the probability that the host society will perceive a cultural threat (Esses, 2021). Another outstanding issue is precarious employment: immigrants are perceived as the workforce to fill the jobs least desirable by the local population, given their poor working conditions (Sampedro, 2022).

6.2.2 Women

In the words of the same author, regarding the gender issue, a key element for the demographic sustainability of rural areas, inequalities persist, particularly in the labour ecosystem (affecting both native and migrant women). This can lead to female rootlessness and, consequently, a scarce participation of women in the social, family, cultural, and economic life of the villages:

"We have seen a transition from the major issues that initially dominated the women's question (their exclusion from the agricultural profession, access to employment, the issue of care and balancing work and family life) towards new ones that were previously absent from the rural agenda, such as gender violence or the opening up of rural communities to ethnic diversity or sexual orientation" (Sampedro, 2022, p. 2).

6.2.3 Young People

In the case of the situation of young people in rural areas—a group we could call 'late-young' between 25 and 34 years old, according to Camarero Rioja & Rivera Escribano (2024)—the individual efforts of this group to overcome challenges shared by their generation (the individualisation discussed at the beginning) are marked by a strong asymmetry, as success largely depends on the personal and class resources of each young person (Shucksmith, 2004).

The difficulties young people face when trying to settle in rural areas can be grouped into two main categories (Camarero & Rivera, 2024): on the one hand, structural obstacles—difficulty in accessing affordable housing. Ironically, in many of these rural settings, there is a process of gentrification or elitisation that raises costs; on the other hand, the failure to meet personal motivations makes it difficult for young people to create a relational environment (social circle).

When addressing community processes, another recurring difficulty is the participation of young people. In rural areas, young people often feel disconnected from community decisions, both due to the topics discussed and the lack of motivation and communication channels outside their circles and language. Allowing them to manage and take responsibility for online platforms, social networks, or digital tools in the region can create a more accessible and attractive participation channel for them. Similarly, creating virtual forums, online surveys, or consultation platforms are effective ways to allow young people to contribute their ideas and feel part of the process, even if they cannot physically attend meetings.

6.2.4 Older People

The older population is the most representative group among rural inhabitants and faces several challenges. Firstly, increased longevity implies changes related to health, the care associated with the ageing stage, housing, and ageism.

Secondly, the accessibility of specialised services (medical specialists, social services, aid organisations, etc.) is included in the structure of social inequality (Camarero, Cruz & Oliva, 2016). Inaccessibility takes on special relevance in the case of older people, as their reduced ability to travel by car exacerbates the problem. This translates into an additional burden for the supporting generation and for family groups who must assume or make up for these logistical deficiencies (Camarero, 2022).

This need for proximity also brings about other triggers, which, while occurring in specific episodes (such as widowhood or a health crisis), also happen through gradual transitions. In these transitional periods, the person gradually loses faculties, and the family slowly adapts, for example, by hosting the relative in the home for periods or rotating care among several members. This results in ageing also transforming the relationship between families and mobility. It is from these lines that new possibilities for ageing in the rural environment emerge (ageing in place, co-housing, etc.) (del Pino & Camarero, 2022).

However, for these new ways of life to succeed, it is crucial to address the specificities of rural ageing from a community perspective. The study by Ponce de León & Andrés (2017) suggests that rural ageing implies fewer resources and more isolation (with entrenched social stigmas), but also more active and supportive social relationships. Promoting active ageing through the community and older people's centres can prevent loneliness and delay dependency, which represents an economic benefit for the Administration.

Although this section has dealt with the main groups that may have greater visibility, other groups also experience various forms of exclusion with similar problems to those addressed. These include current or former inmates, people with addictions, those facing discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, race or ethnicity, as well as the long-term unemployed and people who are homeless. These groups are likely

statistically invisible because they are not captured by traditional statistics or studies (Escribano-Pizarro et al., 2019).

6.2.5 People with disabilities

The vulnerability of persons with disabilities in rural areas is exacerbated by a combination of geographical factors and a shortage of specialised resources, creating a double barrier to full inclusion.

Regarding physical and service barriers, rural life often lacks the necessary adaptations for autonomy and equal opportunities. This barrier manifests itself on two levels:

- **Infrastructure and physical environment:** There is a lack or insufficiency of accessible infrastructure, affecting basic elements such as public buildings, interurban and local transport, and the design of pavements and streets. This significantly limits mobility and autonomous social participation.
- **Specialised services:** There is a marked lack of specialised support services at the local level. Low population density does not justify the presence of essential resources such as specific therapies, adapted day centres, or local social and health support teams, forcing users and their families to rely on long journeys to urban centres (Quezada & Esteban, 2025).

Regarding barriers to labour market inclusion, the rural labour market is rigid, making it difficult for this group to find employment. The barrier is not only the lack of job offers, but also the lack of suitability.

Employment and Training: There is greater difficulty in accessing decent employment and adequate vocational training. This is due to the scarcity of job opportunities in general and, crucially, the lack of adaptation of jobs to specific needs, which perpetuates dependence on social assistance (Quezada & Esteban, 2025).

6.2.6 Ethnic Minorities

The integration of ethnic minorities in rural areas is marked by the persistence of historical mechanisms of exclusion that hinder their social and economic development. The exclusion of this group is particularly acute in the fundamental pillars of well-being:

- **Employment and precariousness:** High rates of unemployment or a high concentration of informal or precarious employment persist, hindering economic stability and social security contributions.
- **Access to Basic Resources:** They often face barriers in accessing basic resources, including difficulties related to housing and situations of residential segregation in rural areas themselves (Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, 2023).

On the other hand, these groups also face barriers related to stigmatisation and prejudice. The social dynamics of villages, which are often small and closed, can exacerbate integration problems, with a greater risk of discrimination and social stigmatisation based

on cultural and historical prejudices. This mistrust or rejection limits their full participation and integration into community life (school, social, associations), creating a vicious circle of isolation and marginalisation (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2022).

6.3 Techniques for Community Leadership and Strategies for Citizen Participation

The Industrial Revolution came about due to the improvement and efficiency of goods production and the generation of jobs, which caused the massive rural-to-urban exodus. The 21st century is leaving the importance of production and factories in the background, giving way to a future of work led by knowledge, science, innovation, information, new ways of relating to one another, and data analysis.

The European Union (EU) has about 30% of its population, some 137 million inhabitants, living in its rural areas, which span 83% of its territory. This imbalance between territory and population is also due to a similar process of rural exodus, but the EU has a common and defined vision of how to improve the situation of these territories.

Specifically, by 2040, the EU aims to achieve stronger, better-connected, more prosperous, and more resilient rural communities. To this end, particular attention is paid to aspects such as strengthening transport networks, educational and healthcare services, and job opportunities; as well as empowering the population and developing social innovation dynamics.

The technological leap we are experiencing is transforming our reality, creating jobs that did not exist 15 years ago and discovering new lines of development that will require professionals and professions whose functions we do not yet know. The primary sector must open itself to new ways of approaching agriculture and livestock farming, and have the capacity to innovate, just as it did in the 60s-80s with the advent of agricultural machinery that facilitated fieldwork. The connectivity of our villages is essential and key to this rural revolution. We are one of the best-connected European countries, whether through fibre, 5G, or satellite; although there are still grey areas, and some villages still lack internet access, with satellite, you can practically connect from anywhere. Just as decades ago, water, electricity, and telephone were essential, today it is crucial to be connected to the internet.

This technological revolution means that decentralising work is now a reality, and the possibility of practising almost any profession from a village, no matter how small, is feasible. I know architects, creatives, physicists, engineers, programmers, writers, fashion designers, etc., who practice their profession from towns with fewer than 200 inhabitants.

We live in a reality that allows us to face the future with hope. We can be the protagonists of a new revolution, a rural revolution that changes the inertia of exodus to cities into a

controlled and conscious exodus back to our villages. We need strategies that address the demographic challenge and territorial balance from this perspective, enhance our rural environments, our villages, and medium-sized cities, and reduce the trend towards overpopulated cities.

It is in our hands, both for those living in cities and those of us living in villages, to generate new forms of relationship and dialogue between rural and urban areas, aimed at developing strategies and action plans that respond to this emergency.

This requires working from other approaches linked to people, enabling us to become aware and break paradigms that limit us creatively and culturally. Therefore, a facilitating leadership that fosters collaboration is a fundamental pillar for the development of sustainable initiatives in rural areas. Leadership does not only imply the ability to direct or coordinate, but also the ability to inspire, motivate, and mobilise the community towards common goals. In a rural context, where community relationships are closer and more personal, leadership has a special nuance: leaders must be trusted figures who can interpret the needs of the community, manage resources fairly, and promote inclusive participation.

There are various community leadership techniques that have proven effective in rural settings. One of them is facilitative leadership, which focuses on promoting cooperation among community members and acting as a bridge between different groups. This type of leadership is characterised by fostering dialogue, building consensus, and ensuring that all voices are heard. Instead of imposing solutions, the facilitative leader helps the community find its own answers, promoting co-creation and autonomy.

Another key approach is shared leadership. Instead of concentrating all the decision-making and execution power in one person or group, shared leadership involves distributing responsibilities among various community actors, giving each a share of leadership within the process and the project's development. This approach fosters a greater diversity of perspectives and ensures that decisions reflect the interests of all groups involved, from young people to the elderly, women, and vulnerable groups. This leadership model has been common for decades in our villages, but it has gradually been lost due to the spread of an increasingly dominant individualistic and competitive culture in our society. It is important to recover the wisdom of this type of community work, where the diversity of opinions and experiences enriches decision-making and facilitates conflict resolution by having common goals that benefit the village.

We have all heard at some point the term coined by physicist Edward Lorenz (1963), the "butterfly effect," which stems from the old Chinese proverb: "The flap of a butterfly's wings can be felt on the other side of the world," which this scientist explained mathematically.

In one way or another, everything is connected; nothing is isolated, and every action has positive or negative consequences on another person or another system. Let's break

down the term "ecosystem" into the two words it comprises: "eco" and "system," and we will better understand the need for balance and coexistence in order to have a future as a planet and one centred on people.

In 1935, English ecologist Tansley introduced the concept of "ecosystem," considering the complex interactions between the organisms forming the community and the flows of energy and materials that pass through it. In this way, he defined the ecosystem as a biological system made up of a community of living organisms and the physical environment in which they interact.

In other sources, we can find definitions like "a social, professional, or educational environment in which a group of people evolves" or "a complex set of interrelated elements belonging to a particular domain." We cannot separate the parts from the whole, just as we cannot separate human behaviour from the rest of living organisms and the physical environment in which we interact. What might seem obvious is something we have lost, whether consciously or unconsciously, in large cities and over-industrialised environments, where everything is only understood in terms of human relations, professional, educational, social, and economic, supposedly to develop society for a group of people. This one-directional view creates an unsustainable ecosystem imbalance. Studies like those from the Global Footprint Network assert that year after year, we exceed the capacity of Earth's ecosystems by more than 75%, overwhelming their ability to regenerate natural resources and support ecosystems; these are sufficiently alarming data for us to question and become aware of how we are living within a global and local ecosystem that is essentially a biological system made up of a community of living organisms (including humans) and the physical environment in which we interact.

Similarly, we cannot speak about urban environments without speaking about rural environments, and vice versa. We cannot isolate the urban world from the realities, challenges, and difficulties of the rural world. It has been proven that megacities with millions of inhabitants are not environmentally sustainable; they are black holes that absorb resources without maintaining an ecosystem balance. And if we speak socially, cities are the cradle of the greatest social inequalities, with the widest wage gap among their residents and the highest levels of social isolation.

If we truly want to transition to an economic and political model that places people and the planet at its core and serves them, this transition must go through the rural world, through territorial balance, and through new relationships of equality between urban and rural.

The first step is to move from thinking in isolated and individual terms to understanding that we live connected, and that all our actions have repercussions on other people and the planet.

As Gandhi said, "There is enough on Earth for everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed," or, "Live simply so others may simply live."

The second step is recognising that we live in a community; no one lives in isolation. There is always contact with something, someone, a living being. If we want to develop our rural areas, we must know and recognise the local communities, respect and foster coexistence, and seek balance. You cannot come to a region and impose a vision of development without considering the receiving community, just as the village cannot be isolated or closed off to new residents. The attitude of listening from those arriving and the welcoming attitude from those receiving is key to building a strong community resilient to change.

We are part of a common unity, a community; our limitations, barriers, and fears acquired over the years through lived experiences, education, or culture hinder us from understanding that we are part of this common unity – our family, our village, our region, our territory... our planet.

It is essential to develop a region to understand that we must work together in unity, not in isolation, and with each one pursuing their own interests without considering the rest. In the long term, this lack of community vision leads to failure and self-destruction. To evolve, we must do so collectively; it cannot be done in isolation. Balance becomes essential for evolution.

Normally, when participatory processes are undertaken, they revolve around the general interest or common good, without considering particular or private interests. Just as mentioned how individual action affects the collective, collective actions also affect individuals. This leads to low citizen participation in these processes, and it is often the same people who participate, acting as spokespeople for the voices of everyone, the majority. Participatory processes must be based on a balance between the collective and the individual to work for the common good and also the private interests that contribute to the evolution towards a healthy ecosystem.

6.4 Tools, Organisation and Management of Rural Community Initiatives

To address the strategic challenges of our territories, we must transition toward a governance model that abandons old hierarchical structures and shifts toward participatory and horizontal models. For this, we need to encourage a more active citizenry in public matters and a more open and transparent administration, with shared values of participatory culture and co-responsibility for continuous improvement, creating shared and open co-creation processes that are built from the definition of participatory workshops to reach consensus on scope, needs, objectives, criteria, and context. There doesn't have to be a pre-defined model, and all stakeholders should be included in the process.

The process of transitioning to a more open and horizontal governance begins with active listening sessions in the territory and applying new governance trends so that reflections on a paradigm shift emerge, where we must understand and transition from institutions that give orders to institutions that facilitate processes, conversations, and learning. We must move from hierarchical structures to collaboration ecosystems.

We must work on the trust crisis that our institutions have lost, and to do this, we need to build territories that bet on social innovation, the power of co-creation, and face the fear of making mistakes by moving to action. For all this, it is key to understand our environment, fostering effective conversations to enhance creativity, knowing our history and culture, and innovating to build a future together without leaving anyone behind.

The co-creation process of a participation model in the territory is organised into three areas that will allow us to increase the number of people and organisations involved and thereby improve the quality of participation:

1. Capacity Building:

To improve participation and its quality, it is necessary to motivate learning in soft skills to empower citizens, open new paths for technical staff, and change entrenched dynamics of political representatives. Some development lines for information and training, among others, may include social skills, the rights and duties of citizens, deliberation and decision-making, project management, failure management, social innovation, and how to develop triple-bottom-line projects (social, environmental, and economic).

2. Sociocommunity Strengthening:

Strengthening the spirit of community and pride in belonging are fundamental to motivating participation. Examples of how to achieve this strengthening can be through community projects that develop the value of common assets, create cross-sectional spaces for deliberation from diversity (gender, age, culture, territory, language, etc.), or design challenge programs for citizens to collectively co-create solutions and proposals. Promoting an active population through leisure, culture, activities, and more, integrating all views, needs, and expectations, will create an environment of opportunities and include a gender perspective.

3. Territory Knowledge:

It is necessary to open doors to the knowledge of municipalities and territories. Therefore, we should create communication and awareness campaigns about spaces, projects, and experiences within the territory, highlighting the heritage, natural spaces, history, traditions, and art. We should generate community experiences that link territory

knowledge with current issues and encourage participation in the cultural and social activities of the regions. At the same time, it is essential to raise awareness about the closest institutions, their structure, organisation, functions, limitations, and competencies so that from this knowledge, we can generate better-informed participation spaces, prepared to develop projects in response to the territory's challenges

The development of a successful participatory ecosystem depends on occupying new spaces that have not yet been covered in the territory and recognising and enhancing existing projects. By doing this, we can merge and balance the particular interests of different groups with the general interest or common good of the region, which is essential for generating conversation spaces with new interlocutors and involving actors who had not previously seen participatory processes as a way to develop the territory, as well as their personal or professional projects.

The organisation and management of community initiatives in rural areas is a key process for strengthening the social fabric and revitalising the territory. The ability of rural communities to unite around common goals, design collaborative initiatives, and efficiently manage their own resources is fundamental to the success of any project. However, for these initiatives to be sustainable and effective in the long term, in addition to the three areas mentioned earlier, it is necessary to have participatory strategic planning. This methodology allows rural communities to clearly define their goals, prioritise actions, and establish a roadmap to achieve the expected results. The participatory approach ensures that all community members have a voice in the planning process, increasing the legitimacy of decisions and ensuring that proposed solutions are aligned with the real needs of the territory.

Democratic management of initiatives is another fundamental aspect. Instead of relying on external leaders or entities, rural communities must be able to organise themselves in a horizontal and democratic manner, where all members have the opportunity to participate in decision-making. This not only strengthens the inhabitants' commitment to the initiatives but also fosters greater transparency and shared responsibility in resource management.

We can also add online relationship-building tools to the processes of collaborative community building, which can facilitate this process, though always overcoming the large digital divide that exists in rural settings. The use of digital platforms and online communication tools can help coordinate the different actors involved in an initiative, especially when the community is geographically dispersed. These tools allow for virtual meetings, document sharing, and continuous monitoring of project progress. Additionally, digital platforms can be used to involve those who, due to time or distance, cannot participate in face-to-face meetings. An example of such platforms is *Rural Citizen* (<https://www.ruralcitizen.org/>).

In terms of organisation, it is crucial that community initiatives have a clear and well-defined structure. This implies having well-delineated roles and responsibilities for the different actors involved, as well as an effective system for coordinating and monitoring activities. Creating specialised committees or working groups can be an effective strategy to divide tasks and ensure that every aspect of the project is managed efficiently.

Moreover, community initiatives must be developed in a flexible and adaptive manner. Rural communities are subject to constant changes, whether in economic, demographic, or environmental terms, so projects must be designed to adjust to these new realities without losing sight of their core objectives. Adaptive management allows initiatives to remain viable in the long term, adapting to the changing needs of the territory and proactively responding to emerging challenges.

Finally, it is important to highlight the significance of continuous evaluation in the management of rural community initiatives. Projects must be periodically evaluated to measure their impact and determine whether they are meeting the established goals. Evaluation not only allows for strategy adjustments, if necessary, but it also offers an opportunity to celebrate achievements and reinforce the community's commitment to the project.

Local, provincial, and national leaders who aim to develop community development strategies and collaborative innovation ecosystems must understand that we are entering an era of change, and therefore, leadership styles must change as well. The hierarchical models we have known, both at the institutional and corporate levels, are no longer valid.

In this new changing scenario, the organisations that can adapt and move from entities that issue orders to organisations that facilitate processes, conversations, bring positions closer, and learn, will be the ones that survive and succeed.

According to Laloux (2014), the **Teal model** represents an advanced stage in the evolution of human organisations. Laloux identifies five stages of organisational evolution, associated with colours, and Teal organisations represent the most advanced stage in this model and the aspirational model that organisations should adopt if they want to survive the economic model change we are experiencing.

Teal organisations are organisational structures that operate with innovative principles and practices based on **self-management, wholeness, and an evolutionary purpose**. These organisations seek to create a more human and adaptive work environment, capable of responding to environmental changes with flexibility and resilience.

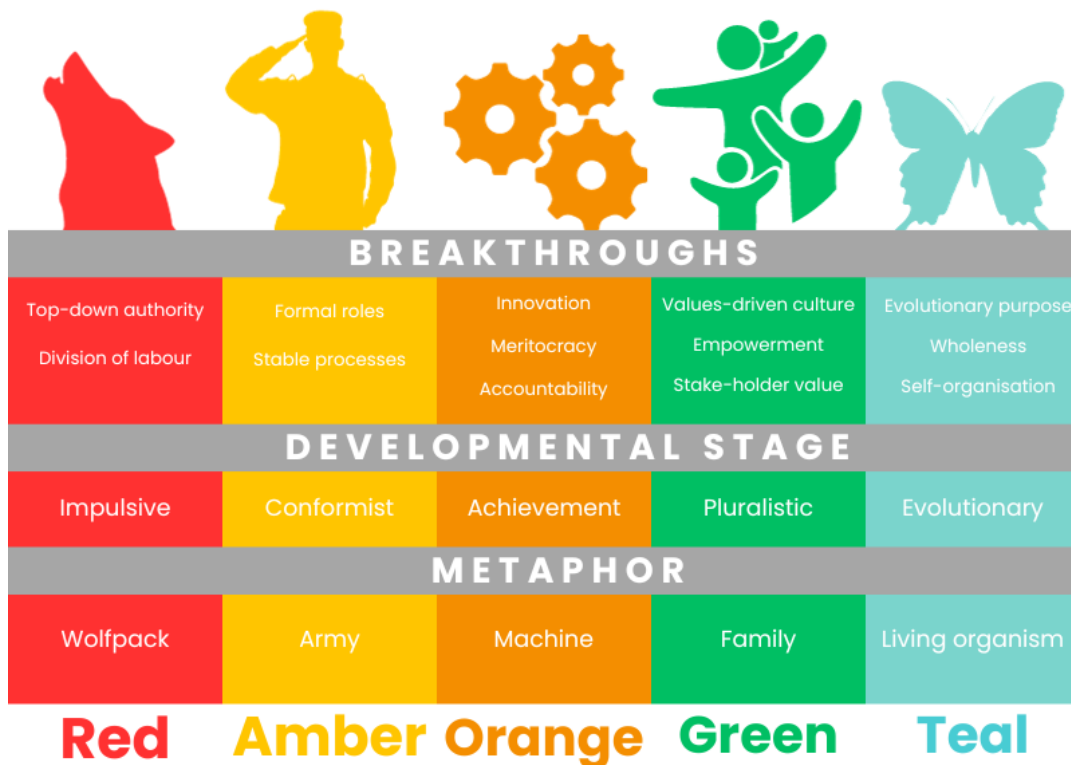
Self-management: Teal organisations do not rely on traditional hierarchies or command-and-control structures. Instead, they implement self-management models where teams

are autonomous and responsible for their decisions and results. This fosters collaboration, creativity, and shared responsibility.

Wholeness: Teal organisations promote an environment where employees can be themselves, bringing their "whole self" to work. This involves creating a workplace culture that values authenticity, emotional well-being, and personal development. It's about an environment where people can express their emotions and vulnerabilities without fear of reprisal.

Evolutionary Purpose: Teal organisations are guided by a purpose larger than the mere maximisation of profits. This **evolutionary purpose** is a dynamic guiding principle that can change and adapt as the organisation and its environment evolve. Employees align with this purpose, which motivates them and gives their work meaning.

Image 26. Roles in the organisations.



Source: [Libertymind](http://libertymind.com).

In addition to these foundational elements, there are a series of additional characteristics of **Teal Organisations** that I want to highlight in order to understand the model and how it can be applied to governance in rural settings.

Decentralization: Decisions are made in a decentralized manner, trusting that those closest to the problems have the best perspective to resolve them.

Transparency: Information is openly shared within the organisation, fostering a culture of trust and accountability.

Flexibility and Adaptability: The structures and processes in Teal organisations are flexible, allowing them to quickly adapt to changes in the environment.

Trust-based Relationships: Trust is a fundamental pillar, replacing strict controls and fostering a culture of mutual support and collaboration.

These types of organisations aim to create more human and adaptive environments, where people can work collaboratively and meaningfully, aligned with a common purpose. We need territories to bet on **social and relational innovation**, co-creation as a development model, to act, become the protagonists of change, and have the capacity to face the fear of the new.

6.5 Innovative and Cross-Sectional Community Actions

In rural areas, **innovative actions are essential** for revitalising communities and improving the quality of life of their inhabitants. However, for these actions to have a profound and lasting impact, they must be cross-sectional, meaning that they should address various dimensions of rural development simultaneously: economy, social cohesion, education, culture, environmental sustainability, and more. These actions should be designed not only to solve immediate problems but also to generate **structural changes** that strengthen the community fabric in the long term.

Innovative and cross-sectional actions allow rural communities to effectively tackle multiple challenges at once. For example, a sustainable rural tourism initiative can not only generate employment but also promote the preservation of the cultural and natural heritage of the region, strengthen the sense of local identity, and at the same time offer educational and training opportunities for young people. These types of **comprehensive projects** create synergies between different areas, maximizing the impact and sustainability of actions.

6.5.1 Rural Leaders

Leadership is defined as the process by which individuals, as part of a group, influence all members of the group to achieve a goal – that is, rural leaders are those members of the rural community who coordinate, represent the group, plan, direct activities, and evaluate group progress under the specific conditions of rural communities. Rural leaders can be traditional, emerging, or professional figures, selected or identified by their social prestige, technical knowledge, or organisational capacity, organising community activities, proposing and coordinating plans, representing the community, and channelling external resources when required (Meshram et al., 2022). They contribute to

creating extensive social networks, organising community actions, and mobilising human, social, cultural, and economic capital in rural areas.

The potential to highlight the work of these rural leaders serves as an inspiring foundation for others and is essential for changing the narrative about rural areas, fostering a new way of perceiving our villages from the cities.

6.6 Evaluation and Indicators for Strengthening Rural Communities

Defining a series of impact indicators that allow us to measure and quantify the results generated by the creation and implementation of Rural Innovation ecosystems is essential.

Below are some indicators that can help measure the results and impacts achieved by projects that promote the strengthening of the community. This is not an exhaustive list, nor does it include measures of economic growth, but rather examples that may be useful when analysing and evaluating the impact of a project on the community in relation to: participation and job creation (Table 4), support for entrepreneurship (Table 5), promotion of cultural, leisure, and sports activities (Table 6), and promotion of local heritage (Table 7).

Table 4. Participation and Job Creation Indicators

Indicator	Measurement Methodology	Verification Sources
Number of direct and indirect beneficiaries of the project, disaggregated by gender	Implement a detailed registration system for all employees and participants in project activities and any other initiatives, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of attendance at events, courses, and project activities; documentation of employment contracts; provision of equipment and service contracts associated with the project.
Number of jobs generated directly and indirectly by the project, disaggregated by gender	Implement a detailed registration system for all new jobs generated directly and indirectly by the project, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of direct work contracts and service contracts.

Average remuneration for generated jobs, disaggregated by gender and professional categories	Implement a job registration system detailing salaries from which the average remuneration will be calculated, disaggregated by gender and professional category.	Documentation of employment contracts.
Number of participants in training and capacity-building actions, disaggregated by gender	Implement a registration system for participants in training and capacity-building actions, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of attendance at training actions, whether in-person or online, disaggregated by gender.
Number of participants in awareness-raising and dissemination actions, disaggregated by gender	Implement a registration system for participants in awareness-raising and dissemination actions, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of participant attendance in awareness-raising and dissemination actions, disaggregated by gender.
Number of volunteers who participated in activities, disaggregated by gender	Implement a detailed registration system for all volunteers participating in project activities, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of volunteer attendance at project events and activities, disaggregated by gender.
Number of municipalities benefiting from project activities	Implement a detailed registration system for all municipalities where project activities are conducted.	Documentation of activities carried out in each municipality.
Number of associations, cooperatives, and businesses	Implement a monitoring and registration system for new associations,	Incorporation records, documentation of

established/registered/consolidated directly or indirectly by the project	cooperatives, and businesses created or strengthened by the project, disaggregated by gender and sector.	official registrations, and service contracts.
Number of tables, participation forums, panels, working groups, networks, etc., promoted	Implement a registration system for all tables, forums, panels, working groups, and networks created or promoted by the project.	Meeting minutes, attendance lists, and documentation of organised events.
(If applicable to the project) Number of visits (or visitors) to websites created by the project	Use web analytics tools to track and record the number of visits and visitors to project websites.	Web analysis reports and visit logs.

Table 5. Support for Entrepreneurship and Building Innovative Rural Ecosystems

Indicator	Measurement Methodology	Verification Sources
Number of new or improved businesses and/or self-employed workers	Implement a detailed registration system for all new businesses and self-employed workers created or improved by the project.	Incorporation records of new businesses, documentation of self-employed registrations, and service contracts.
New or improved spaces for training and/or support for entrepreneurship	Implement a monitoring and photographic registration system for new or improved spaces dedicated to training and support for entrepreneurship.	Documentation of opening or improvement of spaces, lease or purchase contracts, activity records, before-and-after photos.
Others	As needed by the project	As needed by the project

Table 6. Culture, Leisure, and Sports

Indicator	Measurement Methodology	Verification Sources
Actions and facilities associated with artistic creation and cultural projects	Implement a detailed registration system for all actions and facilities dedicated to artistic creation and cultural projects.	Documentation of cultural events, records of facility usage, contracts for cultural services.
Leisure actions and facilities	Implement a monitoring and registration system for all actions and facilities dedicated to leisure arising from the project.	Documentation of leisure events, records of leisure facility usage, contracts for leisure services.
Others	As needed by the project	As needed by the project

Table 7. Promotion of Local Heritage

Indicator	Measurement Methodology	Verification Sources
Cultural heritage elements enhanced by the project's actions	Implement a detailed registration system for all cultural heritage elements enhanced through the project's actions.	Documentation of enhancement projects, activity reports, and visitor logs.
Restoration and improvement of cultural heritage elements	Implement a monitoring and registration system for all restoration and improvement actions conducted on cultural heritage elements.	Restoration documentation, progress reports, contracts for restoration services.
Others	As needed by the project	As needed by the project

6.7 Factors for Action to Promote and Strengthen Community in Rural Areas

The activation areas and social innovation levers we have seen in this module provide the framework for building the development strategy of the territory. However, we must consider a series of action factors for the correct application of that strategy in order to reactivate rural territories from a systemic perspective.

The reactivation of rural territories is a complex process that requires a series of strategies and integrated approaches. Below, I detail the key points I consider essential for achieving effective and sustainable reactivation:

6.7.1 Integrate Strategies

- **Respond to Rural Diversity:** Rural environments are diverse in terms of geography, culture, economy, and needs. Strategies must be customized for each community, considering their unique characteristics and specific potentials. Therefore, before any action in the territory, it is crucial to understand the strategies of local action groups, municipalities, provinces, etc., to integrate all strategies in a complementary manner and respond to various interests.
- **Specific Intervention and Broaden the Scope of Action:** Interventions should be specific and focused, addressing particular issues in each region while adapting the methodology to each context. At the same time, it is essential to expand the scope of action to include a variety of sectors (agriculture, industry, technology, services, etc.) and actors (local governments, businesses, associations, etc.).
- **Create Positive Rural Narratives:** Changing the narrative around rural areas is key to generating opportunities. It is necessary to shift the negative perception and defeatism often associated with rural zones by creating and disseminating success stories, valuing the territory, recognising what already exists, and enhancing what works and unites the community. Promoting the benefits of rural life, such as quality of life, closeness to nature, and opportunities for innovation, is essential.

6.7.2 Multilevel Governance

- **Personal and Institutional Responsibilities (Local, National, and Transnational) for Social Inclusion in Rural Areas:** The OECD (2008) defines a rural area as one with a population density of less than 150 inhabitants per square kilometre. This low threshold is not merely a statistical metric; it's an indicator of the challenges faced by the State and society in ensuring a dignified life and meeting basic needs. This aligns with the focus of "development" as outlined in various global cultural reports, which insist that development shouldn't be understood simply as economic growth, but must be based on meeting basic needs so all people can lead a dignified life. Furthermore, extending this protection

to future generations is paramount, making the development of socially sustainable initiatives essential.

- The fight against poverty and social exclusion has been a fundamental and constant priority in the social policies of EU Member States since the European Social Charter of 1961. This concern peaked at the Lisbon Summit (2000), culminating in the establishment of the European Social Agenda.
- **Global Frameworks and Local Implementation:** Just as community action ensures that rules translate into an increase in the effective freedom and quality of life of the most vulnerable individuals, culture becomes a driving force capable of stimulating the creation and development of protocols and global normative frameworks—similar to existing ones (such as human rights, children's rights, or the Kyoto Protocol). The objective is to provide useful and appropriate instruments that regulate the complex relationships between nations, societies, cultures, and communities, setting the rules of the game at the international level. These protocols and agreements define the universal values and dignity that must be protected. In turn, community action ensures that these abstract and global principles are materialised practically and concretely at the local level.
- **Political Leadership:** Political leadership is crucial for driving meaningful changes. Leaders must be committed to rural development and actively work to promote policies and resources that benefit these areas. We need political representatives who look beyond their party affiliations, prioritising the development of their municipality or region. When we think of entrepreneurs, we often think of the business world, but there are new generations of politicians who genuinely serve the public interest. We need entrepreneurial mayors to reactivate our territories, capable of initiating innovative projects and taking calculated risks to break free from the immobilising dynamics present in many of our towns.
- **Transition from Hierarchical to Facilitating Leadership:** Throughout this discussion, I have frequently referred to facilitating leadership. Just as we need entrepreneurial mayors, we must promote leadership that empowers local communities by facilitating collaboration and participation rather than imposing top-down decisions.
- **Coordination Among All Public Administrations:** Whenever I engage with a territory, I often encounter overlapping municipal and territorial policies, duplicated efforts, repeated mistakes, or contradictory policies directed at the same citizens. If we consider that the autonomous community is of one political colour, the provincial government another, and the municipalities of different parties, we create the perfect storm for each entity to seek its share of prominence and power. This situation is entirely contrary to the interests of local residents and generates a culture of competition and confrontation that leads nowhere. I am

reminded of a quote attributed to Gandhi: “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind. What is obtained through violence can only be maintained through violence.” Part of the function of facilitating leadership is to reconcile positions and ensure that all levels of government (local, regional, national) work in a coordinated and efficient manner, avoiding duplications and leveraging synergies for the benefit of each territory.

- **Commitment, Dialogue, and Participation of Stakeholders:** It is fundamental to include all stakeholders (local communities, businesses, institutions, non-governmental organisations, local action groups, etc.) in the decision-making and action process, promoting open dialogue and active engagement. This is essential for developing a rural ecosystem that fosters innovation and development.
- **Facilitation, Motivation, and Animation:** In every region, there are individuals capable of uniting wills, and it is essential to identify and involve them, as they are best equipped to motivate, unite, and encourage the local population, helping to identify resources and potentials while fostering an entrepreneurial spirit.

6.7.3 Territorial Cooperation

- **The Call for Community Action:** Despite numerous reports and plans diagnosing this situation, the desired change is not materialising due to a lack of political will and definition. This paralysis forces civil society to take on the task of ensuring continued residence in the villages. The most frustrating aspect is that the solution does not require inventing new policies, but rather applying existing ones in a differentiated, territorial, and integrative way, abandoning the current uniform and universalist approach that doesn't work in rural settings (Escribano-Pizarro et al., 2020). Community action and socio-educational intervention are strategies designed to operate at the local and daily-life level. Their main goal is to accompany specific individuals in their empowerment processes (both personal and collective) to contribute to a substantive and significant improvement in their quality of life. Community action operates at the micro-level (local and daily), seeking the empowerment of concrete individuals to improve their quality of life.
- **Encourage Cooperation Among Territories and Actors:** Fostering collaboration among different provinces and diverse actors, both sectorally and territorially, increases development possibilities, innovation, scalability of projects, and replicability of successful initiatives. Additionally, promoting the formation of associations and alliances that drive social innovation enables creative solutions to recurring local problems through community collaboration and inter-territorial partnerships. This also facilitates access to relevant and up-to-date information and promotes the exchange of knowledge and best practices among rural communities and other involved actors.
- **Create Rural-Urban Alliances:** The dialogue and relationship between the rural and urban worlds, especially between medium and large cities and villages, needs

to change. Although we sometimes hesitate to acknowledge it, the perception of superiority held by urban residents over those living in rural areas is still prevalent in the collective imagination. Changing this imbalance, engaging in equal dialogue, and establishing strategic alliances between rural and urban areas to leverage complementarities and create synergies is key to evolving towards a new economic and political model that places people and the planet at the centre of the equation.

Conclusion

To effectively reactivate rural territories, it is crucial to adopt a holistic approach that integrates diverse strategies and promotes collaboration and innovation. Multilevel governance, facilitation of processes, strengthening local capacities, territorial cooperation, and promoting social innovation are essential pillars of this process. By involving all stakeholders, fostering a sense of pride and belonging, and adapting to the specific needs and realities of each community, we can advance towards more prosperous and sustainable rural environments, shifting the inertia from urban exodus to a controlled rural migration.



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7. Module 5. Rural Depopulation and Demographic Challenge

Objective

This training module is an educational resource created as part of the ESIRA train-the-trainers programme, which forms part of Deliverable 5.2. Training modules, included in WP5 – Community-led innovation spaces and pilot social economy initiatives. The main objective of the train-the-trainers programme is to capacity build and to strengthen the skills of Multi-Actor Platform (MAP) facilitators and members, and rural actors to identify, support and ensure the sustainability of social economy initiatives and develop community networks in the rural territory.

The main objective of the Training Module 5 is to provide theoretical and practical knowledge and skills to training facilitators, MAP members, and rural actors in rural depopulation and demographic challenges.

Structure

This training module provides stakeholders with a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the challenges that modern populations face due to changes in their structure and dynamics. By addressing topics such as population ageing, low birth rates, migration, and changes in family structures, this module aims to equip rural actors with the tools and knowledge needed to analyse these phenomena and their implications both globally and locally.

Additionally, the module highlights the crucial role of technology in solving demographic problems, providing examples of how technological innovations can improve the quality of life and productivity in a changing society. Ultimately, this module seeks to prepare participants to contribute effectively and sustainably to demographic planning and management in their respective professional fields.

The content of this training module is complemented by the following materials in Deliverable 5.3. “Training Modules Updated”:

- **ESIRA Guide for supporting innovative social economy initiatives.**
- **Practical Tools 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4.**



7.1 Rural Depopulation in Europe: Challenges, Responses, and Repopulation Initiatives

Rural depopulation is a critical social issue facing much of the inner Iberian Peninsula. It's a complex phenomenon driven by multiple causes, manifesting differently across various regions. Consequently, addressing it requires the coordinated efforts of numerous disciplines and the implementation of measures tailored to each area's reality. Fortunately, in recent years, this issue has gained prominence in public and political discourse, sparking social awareness and a variety of initiatives. However, a common mistake when addressing depopulation is to focus solely on the negative aspects, ignoring the potential opportunities the situation might present. It's time to discuss repopulation rather than depopulation.

This training module aims to serve as a forum for sharing successful initiatives that have attracted new residents to rural areas. Rather than isolated successful projects, these initiatives have transformed the local environments they've settled in. The module will also consider how rural communities can generate economic opportunities and attract new populations by drawing on examples from other towns that have managed to reverse declining population trends. Successful projects from around the world, each facing unique depopulation challenges, will be highlighted for their effective results.

1. Context on the Demographic Challenge

The demographic challenge encompasses the difficulties faced by populations as their structure and dynamics change, including ageing, low birth rates, migration, and shifts in family patterns.

Rural depopulation is an issue affecting several European countries, especially in areas where migration to cities is pronounced. Some affected countries and their unique characteristics include:

- **Spain:** Many rural areas, particularly in regions like Castilla y León, Galicia, and Aragón, have experienced significant depopulation. This is due to young people migrating to cities in search of employment and better opportunities. Additionally, the ageing of the rural population is a significant problem.
- **Italy:** Regions like southern Italy (for example, Calabria and Sicily) face severe depopulation. The lack of employment and basic services, as well as youth migration to other parts of Europe, have contributed to this phenomenon. There is also significant population ageing in these areas.
- **Greece:** The islands and rural areas of mainland Greece have seen a population decline, especially after the economic crisis. Migration to cities and abroad has left many villages uninhabited, and the lack of job opportunities exacerbates the situation.

- **Romania:** Many rural areas have lost population due to migration to EU countries in search of work. The northern and eastern regions are the most affected, where infrastructure and services are limited.
- **Bulgaria:** Bulgaria faces one of the highest rates of rural depopulation in Europe. Migration to cities and abroad, combined with a high rate of ageing, has left many villages uninhabited. The rural areas in the north and east are particularly vulnerable.
- **Portugal:** In this country, particularly in the interior, many rural communities are losing population. Migration to cities and the lack of economic opportunities have led to a youth exodus, leaving communities with an increasingly aged population.
- **Great Britain:** Experienced early industrialisation in the 19th century, which led to migration from rural to urban areas. This process still affects rural areas today, with a large concentration of the population in big cities like London, Manchester, and Birmingham. Specific aspects affecting the United Kingdom include rural population ageing, rising rural housing prices, and limited infrastructure and services in rural areas.
- **Ireland:** Historical emigration trends continue to impact rural areas, with young people still emigrating in search of better opportunities. There is a strong agricultural dependency, but modernisation and land consolidation have reduced the need for labour in this sector, driving depopulation. Furthermore, there are migration stimulus policies and a strong culture of rural identity and return.
- **Sweden:** Experiences major urbanisation in the southern region, with a high urban concentration in cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö, while the north, with a more extreme climate, is less populated. Sweden faces climate and geographical challenges, youth migration to urban centres, and has implemented digitalisation and online service programs to facilitate life in rural areas and maintain population levels, although the results are mixed.
- **Finland:** This country endures deep regional inequality, with depopulated northern areas and clear internal migration toward the south, where cities like Helsinki, Turku, and Tampere attract the majority of young people, leading to depopulation in northern regions. The healthcare and education infrastructure is centralised, consolidating services in urban areas and thus driving migration to these areas, leaving rural ones with fewer services and an ageing population. Finland has also developed relocation and remote work policies.
- **Lithuania:** Has experienced massive migration to Western Europe in search of better salaries and living conditions, which has particularly affected rural areas. There is low investment in rural areas: Lithuanian rural regions often receive less



investment in infrastructure and public services, leading young people to migrate to cities or abroad. The lack of rural employment and the rapid ageing of the population are serious problems that fuel rural depopulation. The Lithuanian government has implemented some return programs to encourage emigrants to return and live in rural areas, although with limited success.

- **Poland:** Suffers from rural exodus to Western Europe and major cities, an option that has been popular among rural youth seeking better economic opportunities. There is a strong inequality in regional development: Poland has notable differences between its regions, with Warsaw and other large cities attracting most investments and high-paying jobs, leaving rural areas economically lagging. Agricultural modernisation has reduced the labour needed in rural areas, contributing to rural-to-urban migration. Poland has also implemented European and national funds for rural infrastructure and revitalisation programs, although the effects are slow and limited in the face of constant migration.
- **France:** Has historically centralised opportunities and services around Paris and other large cities, encouraging internal migration toward these urban centres. Challenges in rural areas include ageing populations, economic reconversion, agricultural change, and rural revitalisation initiatives like improving services in towns and creating tax incentives to attract youth and families, although results have been insufficient.
- **Scotland:** Notable rurality in the Highlands and islands: Scotland's rural areas, especially in the Highlands and islands such as the Hebrides and Orkney, face serious depopulation due to a lack of job opportunities, limited connectivity, and challenging climatic conditions. Housing prices are an issue: In some areas, urban residents buying second homes have driven prices up, making it harder for locals and young people to stay in their communities. There is a lack of infrastructure: Scottish rural areas often have limited transport, healthcare, and educational services, which has prompted migration to cities like Edinburgh and Glasgow. In response to depopulation, Scotland has implemented rural development projects, including support for small local businesses, housing subsidies, and improvements in digital and transportation connectivity to revitalise these areas.
- **Slovakia:** A deep division exists between urban and rural areas: Slovakia shows a significant gap between urban areas, which are more prosperous and modern, and rural areas, which depend mainly on agriculture and have less access to services. There is substantial migration to Western Europe: After Slovakia's entry into the EU in 2004, many young people migrated to Western Europe for jobs, which has particularly impacted rural communities, resulting in a loss of young populations. The rural employment market is limited: Agricultural modernisation has reduced rural job availability. Additionally, investment in rural infrastructure and economic

development has been limited. Slovakia has received EU funds to promote rural development, improving infrastructure and services, although these programs have had partial success, and depopulation remains a challenge.

- **Serbia:** This country experiences strong emigration from rural areas: Serbia's rural areas have suffered significant emigration, both internally (to cities like Belgrade) and externally (to Western European countries), in search of better economic opportunities. There is a stark inequality between urban and rural areas: Serbia faces a major economic disparity between urban and rural areas, where agriculture and traditional industries dominate but offer few job opportunities to young people. Economic and social challenges are evident after years of economic hardship and conflicts that have affected the country's stability and accelerated rural depopulation. Moreover, access to basic services in rural areas remains limited. The Serbian government has launched programs to promote rural development, including incentives for small business creation, but emigration remains high due to the country's economic difficulties.
- **Croatia:** Displays strong migration since EU accession: Croatia joined the EU in 2013, facilitating migration to other European countries, especially Germany and Austria. Croatian rural areas have notably suffered from this youth exodus. The consequences of the Balkan conflict are evident; Croatian rural areas, particularly in the Krajina region, were affected by the Balkan war in the 1990s. Destruction and displacement left many areas depopulated and with damaged infrastructure. Croatia has a limited agricultural economy and is tourism-dependent: Croatian rural economies rely heavily on agriculture and seasonal tourism. In non-tourist rural areas, job opportunities are scarce, driving emigration. There are investments in rural development: The Croatian government, with EU support, has sought to revitalise rural areas through infrastructure modernisation, healthcare and education service improvements, and subsidies for agriculture and rural tourism, though the impact has been slow.



7.2 Factors Contributing to the Demographic Challenge

7.2.1 Population Ageing

This subsection provides a clear and detailed view of how population ageing affects various aspects of society and the economy and lays the foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities it represents.

- **Definition and Causes:** Population ageing refers to the increase in the proportion of older people in a population. "Population ageing is largely due to advances in medicine and improved living conditions" (Fernández, 2021, p. 45).
- **Economic Consequences:** Population ageing has several significant economic implications:
 - **Impact on the Workforce:** As a larger proportion of the population ages, the number of people of working age decreases, which can lead to reduced economic productivity and an increased demand for young workers.
 - **Pension System:** The sustainability of pension systems is threatened, as fewer active workers must support a growing number of retirees. This may require pension reforms and an increase in retirement ages.
 - **Health Expenditures:** Older people tend to require more medical attention, increasing healthcare spending and potentially straining public health systems.
- **Social Consequences:** Ageing also affects the social structure:
 - **Changes in Family Structure:** Families are transformed with the presence of a greater number of older people who need care and support. This can alter family dynamics and increase the burden on family caregivers.
 - **Demand for Services for Older Adults:** There is a growing demand for specialised services for older people, such as nursing homes, home care programs, and specific health services. These needs require significant planning and resources to ensure adequate and dignified care for the elderly population.

7.2.2 Low Birth Rate

This subsection provides a clear and detailed view of how low birth rates affect various aspects of society and the economy, setting the foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities it represents.

- **Global Trends:** In recent decades, many countries have experienced a decline in birth rates. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in developed countries such as Japan, Italy, and Spain, where birth rates have fallen below the

replacement level necessary to maintain a stable population. This trend has raised concerns about demographic sustainability and these countries' ability to maintain population levels and economic activity. According to the European Commission, "In many developed countries, birth rates have fallen below replacement levels" (European Commission, 2021, p. 98).

- **Socioeconomic Factors:** Several factors contribute to low birth rates:
 - **Education:** Access to education, especially for women, has led to a delay in the age of having the first child and a reduction in the total number of children. Women with higher education tend to prioritise their careers and education before having children.
 - **Female Employment:** The growing participation of women in the workforce has contributed to the decline in birth rates. Many women find it difficult to balance work and family responsibilities, leading them to choose to have fewer children or none at all.
- **Family Policies:** Government policies that do not adequately support families, such as a lack of childcare subsidies and insufficient parental leave, also play a crucial role in the decision to have fewer children. Countries with more generous policies in this area, like the Nordic countries, tend to have higher birth rates.
- **Long-term Impact:** Low birth rates have significant consequences for population and economic sustainability:
 - **Demographic Challenges:** With a low birth rate, the population structure ages, resulting in a higher proportion of elderly people requiring care and fewer people of working age. This can impact a country's ability to sustain economic growth and maintain social welfare systems.
 - **Economic Impact:** A low birth rate can lead to reduced long-term economic growth due to a smaller workforce and lower demand for goods and services. This can also increase the tax burden on active workers who must support a larger retired population.
 - **Pension System Sustainability:** With fewer young people contributing to the pension system, it becomes more difficult to maintain benefit levels for retirees, potentially requiring significant and unpopular reforms.

7.2.3 Migration

- **Types of Migration:**
 - **Internal Migration:** Movement of people within a country's borders, typically from rural to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities and quality of life.



- **External Migration:** Movement of people between countries seeking better economic, educational, or social conditions.
- **Forced Migration:** Displacement caused by conflicts, persecution, natural disasters, or humanitarian crises.
- **Causes of Migration:**
 - **Economic:** Search for employment, better wages, and more favourable living conditions.
 - **Political:** Fleeing persecution, conflicts, and authoritarian regimes.
 - **Social:** Family reunification, access to education and healthcare, and improvements in quality of life.
- **Impact on Countries of Origin and Destination:** “Migration can bring economic benefits but also poses social challenges” (Rodríguez, 2019, p. 67).
 - **Countries of Origin:**
 - **Benefits:** Remittances sent by migrants support the local economy.
 - **Challenges:** Loss of human capital, especially young and skilled professionals, which can affect the country’s development.
 - **Countries of Destination:**
 - **Benefits:** Increase in the workforce, cultural diversity, and economic contributions.
 - **Challenges:** Need to integrate migrants, provide adequate services, and manage potential social tensions.

7.2.4 Changes in Family Structures

- **Evolution of the Family:**
 - **Extended Families:** Traditional models where multiple generations live together, common in rural areas and in the past.
 - **Nuclear Families:** Families consisting only of parents and their children, more common in urban areas and modern society.
 - **Single-Person Families:** Individuals living alone, a phenomenon on the rise due to social and economic changes.
- **Influencing Factors:**
 - **Urbanisation:** The movement of people from rural to urban areas in search of employment and opportunities promotes the formation of nuclear families.

- **Changes in Gender Roles:** Increased female participation in the labour market and changes in traditional gender roles.
- **Increase in Divorces:** Higher divorce rates have led to an increase in single-person households and single-parent families.
- **Demographic Consequences:** “The reduction in household size has led to changes in care dynamics” (Fernández, 2021, p. 45).
 - **Reduction in Household Size:** Fewer children per family and an increase in households with one or two people.
 - **Changes in Care Dynamics:** Greater demand for childcare and elderly care services, as well as the need for policies that support family caregivers.

7.2.5 Scarcity of Services and Economic Resources

- **Definition and Causes:** The scarcity of services and economic resources can exacerbate demographic challenges by limiting access to essential services such as healthcare, employment, and housing (López, 2020). Among the most affected services, which would be identified as threats and/or weaknesses in rural areas, we find:
 - **Healthcare:** In many areas, especially rural and marginalized communities, there is a notable lack of accessible and quality medical services. This includes shortages of doctors, nurses, and adequate health centres (Pérez, 2022).
 - **Education:** The lack of quality educational institutions affects the training of new generations, limiting their job opportunities and perpetuating poverty (Rodríguez, 2019).
 - **Affordable Housing:** The scarcity of adequate and affordable housing is a significant problem, especially in urban areas where demand exceeds supply, resulting in high rental and purchase costs (García, 2020).
 - **Social Services:** A lack of social support programs, such as childcare services, support for the elderly, and assistance for low-income families, which are crucial for the population’s well-being (Fernández, 2021).
 - **Public Transportation:** Insufficient accessible and efficient public transport infrastructure that limits mobility and access to job opportunities and essential services, especially in rural areas (López, 2020).



7.2.6 Lack of Educational and Cultural Opportunities

- **Definition and Causes:** The lack of educational and cultural opportunities can limit the personal and professional development of the population, affecting social cohesion and economic mobility (Rodríguez, 2019).
- **Direct Consequences:** This would result in lower levels of innovation and perpetuate cycles of poverty and social exclusion (García, 2020), weakening and reducing services like:
- **Continuous and Professional Training:** The lack of continuous and professional training programs prevents adults from updating their skills and improving their job prospects (García, 2020).
 - **Access to Cultural Activities:** The absence of cultural infrastructure, such as libraries, museums, theatres, and community centres, limits opportunities for cultural participation and the development of a strong cultural identity (Pérez, 2022).
 - **Community Development Programs:** The lack of programs that promote community development and social participation can lead to lower social cohesion and increased social exclusion (López, 2020).

7.3 Economic and Social Consequences of Demographic Changes

7.3.1 Impact on the Labour Market

- **Reduction of the Workforce:** "Population ageing can lead to a reduction in the workforce" (Pérez, 2022, p. 98).
 - **Ageing Population:** As the population ages, there are fewer people of working age. This can lead to a smaller labour supply and reduced economic productivity.
 - **Decrease in Young Workers:** Low birth rates result in fewer young people entering the workforce, which can worsen labour shortages.
- **Changes in Employment Demand:**
 - **New and Growing Industries and Professions:** Sectors such as technology, healthcare, and services for the elderly are expanding, requiring new skills and job profiles.
 - **Disappearance of Traditional Jobs:** Automation and digitalization are replacing traditional jobs, forcing workers to adapt and acquire new skills.
- **Challenges and Opportunities:** How to adapt to a changing workforce.

- **Adapting to a Changing Workforce:** Companies and governments must invest in training and retraining the workforce to ensure that workers have the skills needed for future jobs.
- **Promoting Inclusion and Diversity:** Integrating different demographic groups into the labor market, including women, older people, and migrants, can help mitigate workforce reduction.

7.3.2 Pension and Social Security Systems

- **Financial Challenges:**
 - **Sustainability of Current Systems:** With fewer workers contributing and more retirees receiving benefits, pension systems face a deficit that threatens their long-term viability.
 - **Necessary Reforms:** Proposals to improve the sustainability of pension systems.
- **Improvement Proposals:** Some proposals include raising the retirement age, adjusting contribution rates, and modifying benefit calculations to reflect life expectancy.
 - **Incentives for Private Investment:** Encouraging complementary private pension plans can ease the pressure on public systems.
- **Case Studies:**
 - **Countries that Have Implemented Successful Reforms:** Countries such as Sweden and Germany have introduced structural reforms to their pension systems, including automatic adjustment mechanisms that help maintain financial sustainability.

7.3.3 Healthcare and Elderly Care Services

- **Growing Demand:**
 - **Increased Need for Health Services:** Population ageing leads to greater demand for medical services, chronic treatments, and long-term care.
- **Healthcare Systems:**
 - **Capacity and Efficiency:** It is essential to ensure that healthcare systems have the necessary capacity and resources to care for an ageing population, including the training of specialised healthcare professionals.
- **Innovations in Elderly Care:**

- **New Technologies and Care Models:** Telemedicine, remote monitoring devices, and smart homes are examples of how technology can improve healthcare and quality of life for the elderly.
- **Inequality and Social Cohesion**
 - **Impact on Inequality:**
 - **Widening Gap Between Rich and Poor:** Demographic changes can exacerbate existing inequalities, especially if appropriate policies are not implemented to support the most vulnerable.
- **Social Cohesion:**
 - **Strategies to Maintain Unity:** Promoting social inclusion, strengthening community networks, and fostering intergenerational solidarity are key to maintaining cohesion in diverse societies.
- **Social Programs:**
 - **Initiatives to Support the Most Vulnerable Groups:** Specific programs aimed at supporting vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, low-income families, and migrants, are essential to reducing inequality and improving social cohesion.

7.4 Policies and Strategies to Address the Challenge

7.4.1 Reforms in Social Security

- **Implemented Strategies:** Examples of effective policies.
 - **Adjustments in Retirement Age:** Some countries have raised the retirement age to prolong working life and reduce the pressure on pension systems.
 - **Mixed Pension Systems:** Combining public and private pension systems to diversify income sources in retirement.
 - **Defined Contributions vs. Defined Benefits:** Transitioning from defined benefit systems (where pensions are calculated based on salary and years worked) to defined contribution systems (where pensions depend on accumulated contributions and investment returns).
- **Results:**
 - **Evaluation of Reform Effects:** Studies have shown that raising the retirement age can ease the financial burden on pension systems and increase the labor participation of older people.

- **Impact on Sustainability:** Mixed systems have demonstrated greater economic resilience by combining the security of public systems with the flexibility of private systems.
- **Recommendations:**
 - **Best Practices and Learnings:** Promoting active ageing policies, continuous education and training programs for older workers, and automatic adjustment mechanisms in pensions to adapt to demographic and economic changes.

7.4.2 Immigration Policies

- **Integration Models:**
 - **Successful Policies for Immigrant Inclusion:** Integration programs that facilitate access to employment, education, and social services, as well as promote civic and cultural participation of immigrants.
 - **Examples:** Canada and Germany, which have implemented inclusive policies and specific training and employment programs for immigrants.
- **Benefits and Challenges:**
 - **Economic and Social Impact of Immigration:** Immigration can revitalise local economies, fill gaps in the labour market, and enrich communities culturally. However, it also poses challenges in integration and service provision.
 - **Balancing Costs and Benefits:** The long-term benefits of immigration can outweigh initial costs if inclusion policies are effectively managed.
- **Case Studies:**
 - **Countries with Exemplary Immigration Policies:** Canada is recognised for its point-based immigrant selection system and integration programs, while Germany has significantly improved its refugee and asylum policies in recent years.

7.4.3 Incentives for Birth Rates

- **Support Programs:**
 - **Work-Family Balance Policies:** Implementation of paid parental leave, flexible working hours, and affordable, quality childcare services.
 - **Examples:** Nordic countries, which offer extensive parental leave and a strong support network for families, have achieved more balanced birth rates.

- **Impact of Incentives:**
 - **Evaluation of Measures such as Subsidies and Parental Leave:** Studies have shown that effective work-family balance policies can increase birth rates and female workforce participation.
 - **Success Factors:** The effectiveness of incentives depends on their design, funding, and accessibility.
- **International Comparison:**
 - **Examples of Countries with Birth Rate Incentive Policies:** France and Sweden have successfully implemented family support policies, resulting in higher birth rates than the European average.

7.4.4 Technological Innovation

- **Health Technologies:**
 - **Applications and Devices for Elderly Care:** Tools such as telemedicine, remote monitoring devices, and assistive technologies that enhance quality of life and reduce the burden on healthcare systems.
- **Automation and Robotics:**
 - **Solutions to Compensate for Workforce Decline:** Assistance robots, industrial process automation, and services that maintain productivity and fill gaps in the labour market.
- **Sustainable Development:**
 - **Innovations that Support Demographic Sustainability:** Green and sustainable technologies that support balanced demographic growth and respect the environment, such as smart buildings, eco-friendly transportation, and renewable energy.

7.4.5 Programs or Plans for Culture and Leisure

Development of Cultural Infrastructure:

- **Community and Cultural Centers:** Creation and maintenance of community centers offering cultural, educational, and recreational activities for people of all ages. These centres can include libraries, theatres, art galleries, and meeting spaces.
- **Local Events and Festivals:** Organisation of events and festivals that promote local culture, traditions, and community participation. These not only strengthen cultural identity but also foster social cohesion.
- **Access to Recreational Activities:**

- **Programs for Seniors:** Development of recreational activities specifically designed for older adults, such as crafts workshops, dance classes, excursions, and book clubs.
- **Sports and Physical Activities:** Promotion of sports and physical activities through accessible programs, including yoga classes, gymnastics, hiking, and swimming. These programs contribute to the physical and mental health of the population.

Promotion of Lifelong Learning and Education

- **Classes and Educational Workshops:** Offering classes and workshops in a variety of subjects, from practical skills like cooking and gardening to academic and technological subjects. These programs can be held in community centers, public universities, and libraries.
- **Intergenerational Programs:** Creation of programs that promote interaction between different generations, such as mentorships, skill-sharing, and joint activities. These programs strengthen community bonds and facilitate knowledge and experience exchange.

Encouraging Cultural Participation

- **Grants and Support for Cultural Projects:** Provision of funds and resources to support community-involving cultural and artistic projects that promote cultural diversity.
- **Access to Digital Culture:** Implementation of initiatives to facilitate access to digital cultural resources, such as e-books, movies, music, and online courses. This is especially important in rural areas and communities with less cultural infrastructure.

Entrepreneurship Promotion Programs

Startup Incubators and Accelerators: Spaces and programs that provide support to entrepreneurs in the early stages of their projects, offering resources, mentorship, and funding.

- **Example:** Many cities have developed incubators and accelerators that assist entrepreneurs with initial guidance, seed funding, and access to networks, proving effective in launching successful new businesses.

Venture Capital Funds and Grants: Investment funds and specific grants for startups and entrepreneurs, providing the capital needed for the growth of new businesses.

- **Example:** Government and private programs offering venture capital funds and grants targeted at innovative, high-growth sectors, stimulating economic development and job creation.

Business Education and Training: Educational programs and ongoing training for entrepreneurs, including workshops, courses, and seminars on business management, finance, and marketing.

- **Example:** Universities and training centres offering specialised programs in entrepreneurship, equipping new entrepreneurs with the skills and knowledge needed to manage and scale their businesses effectively.

Support Networks and Mentorship: Support networks and mentorship programs connecting entrepreneurs with experienced businesspeople, facilitating knowledge and experience exchange.

- **Example:** Platforms that enable entrepreneurs to connect with mentors and industry experts, providing strategic guidance and emotional support during the development of their projects.

Coworking Spaces: Shared workspaces that offer infrastructure and basic services to entrepreneurs and small businesses, promoting collaboration and innovation.

- **Example:** Coworking spaces in urban and rural areas that facilitate networking and access to shared resources, increasing the viability of new businesses and projects.

7.5 Technology and its Role in Solving Demographic Challenges

Technologies for Elderly Care: Devices and applications that enhance the quality of life for older adults.

- **Remote Monitoring Devices:** Use of sensors and smart devices to monitor the health of elderly people in their homes. This includes devices that monitor vital signs, physical activity, and sleep patterns, alerting caregivers or doctors in case of abnormalities.
- **Mobile Applications and Telemedicine:** Enable elderly individuals to access medical consultations from the comfort of their homes, reducing the need for travel and improving the monitoring of medical treatments.
- **Assistance Robots:** Robots designed to assist with daily tasks, such as medication reminders, mobility assistance, and companionship. These robots can provide significant support to help elderly individuals maintain their independence.

Housing Solutions: Innovations in design and construction to accommodate an ageing population.

- **Accessible and Adaptable Design:** Homes that are designed to be accessible and adaptable to the needs of an ageing population. This includes features such as wide doors, ramps instead of stairs, and bathrooms adapted for wheelchair use.
- **Smart Homes:** Equipped with IoT (Internet of Things) technology that facilitates home management through connected devices. For example, lights and appliances that can be controlled by voice or through mobile apps, enhancing the safety and comfort of elderly residents.
- **Planned Communities for Seniors:** Residential developments that include integrated services such as medical care, recreational activities, and transportation, specifically designed to meet the needs of older adults.

Automation and Productivity: How automation can offset the reduction in the workforce.

- **Industrial Robotics:** Use of robots to perform repetitive or dangerous tasks in factories and warehouses, increasing efficiency and compensating for labour shortages.
- **Automation in the Service Sector:** Implementation of automated systems in sectors such as retail, hospitality, and customer service. This includes self-service kiosks, advanced ATMs, and automated phone systems.
- **Education and Retraining:** Online learning platforms that offer courses and certifications in high-demand skills, allowing workers to adapt to labour market changes and prepare for jobs in emerging sectors.

7.6 Success Stories

Facing the demographic challenge requires implementing innovative and effective strategies that can be adapted to different contexts and needs. This section will examine various success stories at the international and national levels that have achieved positive results in addressing demographic challenges. These examples provide valuable lessons learned and offer replicable models for other regions and countries facing similar situations.

At the international level, we will highlight countries such as Japan, Finland, and Canada, which have implemented innovative policies in areas like the labor participation of older adults, birth rate incentives, and inclusive immigration policies.

At the national level, we will analyze Spain's National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge and local examples such as the Next Deputy Office of A Coruña and the A Coruña Coworking Network, recognized for their efforts to attract and retain population in rural areas.

These success stories demonstrate that, with the right combination of policies, innovation, and collaboration, it is possible to tackle demographic challenges and transform these issues into opportunities for sustainable development and social welfare.

7.6.1 International

- **Japan:** Japan has implemented various strategies to address its ageing population, such as promoting the labour participation of older adults and investing in care technologies. These measures have helped mitigate some of the negative impacts of ageing. For instance, they use assistive robots, remote monitoring devices, and telemedicine systems to improve the quality of life for older adults. For example, the robot "Pepper" is used in nursing homes to provide companionship and assist with daily tasks.
- **Sweden:** In Sweden, smart housing systems have been implemented that allow older people to live independently while remaining connected to healthcare and emergency services. These systems include motion sensors, fall alarms, and communication devices that facilitate interaction with caregivers and family members.
- **United States:** In the United States, mobile applications and telemedicine platforms have been developed to allow older adults to access health services remotely. These technologies have proven effective in managing chronic diseases and providing medical care more efficiently.
- **Silicon Valley, United States:** Known for its ecosystem of incubators, accelerators, and venture capital funds that have supported the growth of numerous technology startups (Martínez, 2021).
- **Germany:** Germany has implemented training and retraining programs for elderly care workers, using advanced technologies like virtual reality and artificial intelligence to improve the quality of care.
- **Finland:** Finland has developed family support policies, such as generous parental leave and accessible childcare services, which have contributed to increasing birth rates.
- **Canada:** Canada has implemented inclusive immigration policies that have helped counteract low birth rates and attract international talent, benefiting its economy and society.
- **United Kingdom:** The United Kingdom's "AgeTech" program has pioneered the implementation of innovative technologies for elderly care. This program includes the use of remote monitoring devices, telemedicine applications, and assistance robots to improve the quality of life of elderly individuals. Additionally, smart

housing solutions have been developed to allow elderly people to live independently while connected to healthcare and emergency services.

- **Chile:** Startup Program: A Chilean government initiative that offers funding, mentorship, and resources to entrepreneurs from around the world, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship in the country (García, 2020).
- **Spain:** Red Emprende Platform: A platform that connects entrepreneurs with mentors, investors, and resources, facilitating access to training and financing opportunities (Pérez, 2022).

7.6.2 National

Regarding national success stories, specific cases are not indicated here, as each partner is invited to highlight the cases, they consider relevant. Instead, suggested themes for these success stories are provided:

- **Technological Innovation:** Telemedicine and mobile applications, assistive robotics, remote monitoring systems for vital signs and elderly care.
- **Housing Solutions:** Smart homes, accessible design, or senior communities.
- **Immigration Policies:** Employment integration programs, social support services, and immigrant selection models.
- **Birth Rate Incentives:** Paid parental leave, subsidies and family support, access to childcare services, among others.
- **Social Security Reforms:** Retirement age, mixed pensions.
- **Economy and Entrepreneurship:** Emerging technology companies, entrepreneurship support programs, or social entrepreneurship initiatives.
- **Cultural:** Promotion of cultural diversity, preservation of traditions.
- **Education:** Educational innovations and accessibility in rural areas, environmental education programs.
- **Environment:** Renewable energy, ecosystem conservation.

Conclusion

This didactic module on the demographic challenge addresses the main challenges modern populations face due to changes in their structure and dynamics, such as ageing, low birth rates, migration, and transformations in family structures.

Through various sections, the module explores the factors contributing to these challenges, their economic and social consequences, and the strategies and policies implemented to tackle them.

It also presents success stories at the international level, like Japan, Finland, and Canada, and at the national level in Spain, such as the National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge.

The goal is to provide students with an in-depth understanding of these challenges, evaluate effective policies and strategies, and develop innovative proposals to address them. Technological initiatives are highlighted as key tools to enhance quality of life and productivity in a changing demographic context. This module offers an integral and multidisciplinary approach, supported by successful experiences, serving as a guide for analysing and applying effective demographic solutions in various contexts.

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8. Partners

