

# ESIRA GUIDE

FOR SUPPORTING  
INNOVATIVE  
SOCIAL ECONOMY  
INITIATIVES IN  
RURAL AREAS



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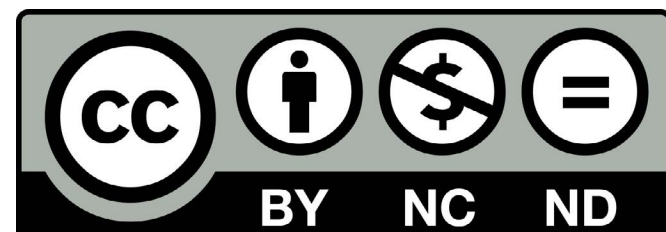
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Burgos (Spain)



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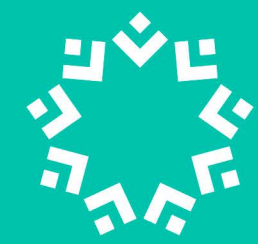
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The ESIRA GUIDE forms part of **Deliverable 5.3 (D5.3)** and is a core component of the **train-the-trainers programme** of the ESIRA project. It provides a practical and structured pathway for the identification, development and scaling of innovative social economy initiatives in rural areas, supporting the effective operation of ESIRA's Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) and other rural actors through Rural Labs.



## ESIRA GUIDE

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## GLOSSARY ..... 41 - 43

Whenever you see **a word highlighted in this color**, you can click on it to access its definition in the glossary.

The guide you have in your hands aims to help you



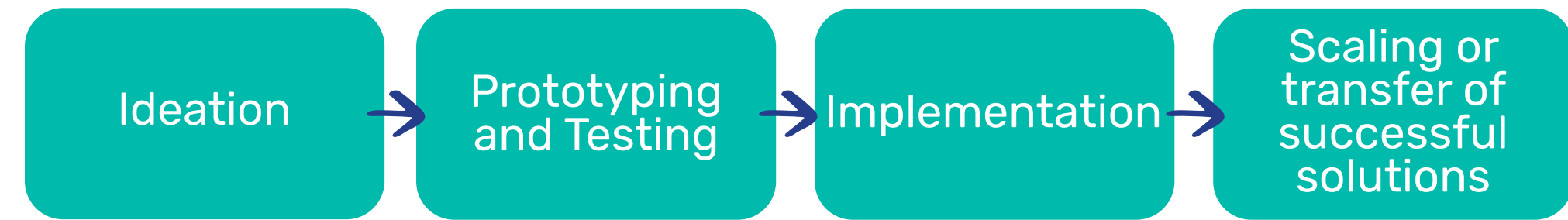
This guide is intended to support **MULTI-ACTOR PLATFORM (MAP)** facilitators and members in the development of ESIRA's social economy initiatives.

Additionally, **this guide can be used by any rural actor or entrepreneur to help them develop their own projects.**

## How to use this guide

This is a **step-by-step practical guide** to: **identifying, prototyping, validating and implementing** social economy initiatives in rural areas.

Social innovation follows similar stages to traditional innovation processes:



Scaling social innovations allows them to reach wider territories, beneficiaries or sectors, and, in some cases, to influence policy frameworks and become common practice, contributing to long-term social change.

Throughout the guide **you will find:**

Theoretical concepts

Visual Tools

Examples

Worksheets

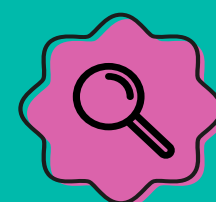
Checklists

that will support you in the process of identifying, prototyping, validating, implementing and scaling social economy initiatives.

**A glossary of key terms** is also included to help readers understand concepts commonly used within the ESIRA framework.

**The guide can be used flexibly:** you may follow the steps sequentially or consult specific sections depending on the stage of development of your initiative.

# WHAT is an Innovative Social Economy Initiative in Rural Areas?



## DEFINITION

An **innovative social economy initiative** is a form of economic activity that combines social or general interest objectives, economic viability and democratic or participatory governance, and that responds to rural social challenges through new or reconfigured social practices.

It prioritises people and social and/or environmental goals over profit maximisation, reinvests most surpluses for collective or general interest purposes, and actively involves civil society as key actors in the process. By pursuing a **triple social, economic and environmental impact**, it introduces alternative ways of organising economic activities in rural areas where conventional market or public solutions are insufficient.

Importantly, social economy initiatives in the ESIRA framework **are not defined by their size, level of formalisation or stage of development**. They may be small-scale, emerging or early-stage initiatives, and they can operate in rural contexts with **limited institutional capacity or resources**.

What defines them is not their maturity or scale, but their **social purpose**, their grounding in the territory, their commitment to social economy principles and their potential to generate social, economic and environmental value. This inclusive understanding ensures that innovative responses can emerge from diverse rural realities and that no initiative is excluded due to structural or contextual constraints.

Use **Checklist 1** to ensure your initiative is included in this definition.

## KEY IDEA



Rural areas face structural social and economic challenges that are often not addressed by conventional market-based solutions. Social economy initiatives respond to these challenges by putting people, social needs and the environment at the centre of economic activity.

## WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Many rural territories are affected by low income levels, unemployment, ageing populations, depopulation, limited economic opportunities and the outmigration of young people to urban areas. In these contexts, private businesses often consider rural areas economically unattractive and therefore do not invest. As a result, essential needs remain unmet. **Social economy initiatives have been pioneers in addressing these gaps** by developing innovative, locally grounded solutions adapted to rural realities.



# CHECKLIST 1: Innovative Social Economy Initiative



Use this checklist to evaluate your idea or initiative. Tick if the answer is "yes". The more questions you can answer "yes" to, the more your idea aligns with an innovative social economy initiative as described in the ESIRA GUIDE.



## 1. Social purpose and general interest

- Does your idea aim to address a social or environmental challenge in a rural area?
- Is the initiative designed to contribute to the general or collective interest, not only to individual benefit?
- Does it respond to unmet or insufficiently addressed needs in your local context?

## 2. People before profit

- Are people and social and/or environmental goals prioritised over profit maximisation?
- Would profits or surpluses be reinvested to support the initiative's social mission or the community?

## 3. Economic activity and viability

- Does your idea involve an economic activity (production of goods or provision of services)?
- Is economic viability considered as a means to sustain the **social mission**, rather than an end in itself?

### How to read your results

**Mostly "yes"** -> Your idea is well aligned with the definition of an innovative social economy initiative. **A mix of "yes" and "not yet"** -> Your idea has strong potential and could be strengthened by adjusting some elements. **Mostly "not yet"** -> Your idea might still be relevant, but it doesn't completely align with the social economy and social innovation approach outlined in this guide. It's time to refine it.

## 4. Democratic and participatory governance

- Are there plans for democratic or participatory decision-making?
- Will members, workers, users or local stakeholders have a voice in how the initiative is run?

## 5. Innovation in how challenges are addressed

- Does your idea propose a new or different way of responding to a social challenge compared to existing solutions?
- Does it reconfigure social practices, forms of organisation or collaboration in your territory?

## 6. Collective dimension and civil society involvement

- Is the initiative collective in nature, going beyond individual entrepreneurship?
- Are local actors or civil society actively involved as co-creators, not only as beneficiaries?

## 7. Triple impact perspective

- Does the initiative aim to generate social, economic and environmental value at the same time?
- Are potential positive effects on the local community and territory taken into account?

**Key message:** This checklist is not a selection or evaluation tool. Its purpose is to support reflection and learning, and to help you understand how your idea relates to the concepts of social economy and social innovation used in ESIRA.

# < WHAT is an Innovative Social Economy Initiative in Rural Areas? >



## ? WHAT IS A SOCIAL ECONOMY INITIATIVE?

The European Commission (2021) defines the social economy as a way of doing business that combines:

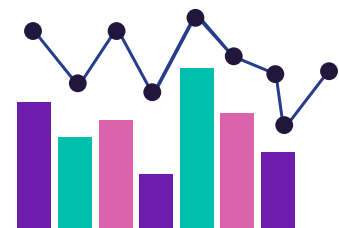
**Social or general interest objectives**



**Democratic governance**



**Economic performance**



This definition highlights that social economy initiatives are not only economic actors, but also **agents of social change**.

## ! CORE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL ECONOMY INITIATIVES

Social economy initiatives share a set of common principles:

**People and social and/or environmental goals come before profit**

**Most profits and surpluses are reinvested to serve members or users (collective interest) or society as a whole (general interest)**

**Governance is democratic and/or participatory, involving members and stakeholders in decision-making**



# WHAT is an Innovative Social Economy Initiative in Rural Areas?



## WHAT MAKES THEM INNOVATIVE?

Social economy initiatives in rural areas are innovative not only because of what they do, but also because of how they do it. They introduce **new ways of responding to social challenges**, reconfiguring established social practices. Instead of addressing problems through conventional market or public-sector approaches, they explore **alternative solutions** that better fit local needs and constraints.

## SEVERAL KEY DIMENSIONS CHARACTERISE THEIR INNOVATION

### Reconfiguration of social practices

Social economy initiatives address rural challenges in ways that differ from “business as usual”, introducing **new forms of organisation**, service provision or collaboration.

### Orientation towards the general interest

While they frequently address the needs of disadvantaged or underserved groups, their ultimate aim is to contribute to **broader societal well-being**.

### Pursuit of triple impact

They seek to generate **social, economic and environmental value simultaneously**, rather than prioritising economic outcomes alone.

### Hybrid forms of social economy entrepreneurship

Social economy initiatives combine economic activity with social purpose, addressing challenges related both to **economic viability and social welfare**.

### Collective and societal dimension

These initiatives go beyond individual entrepreneurship. They often lead to the creation of **new institutions, networks or governance arrangements** rooted in the local community.

### Active and voluntary participation of civil society

Local actors are not merely beneficiaries. They play an **active role as co-creators and protagonists** in the innovation process, contributing knowledge, resources and decision-making capacity.

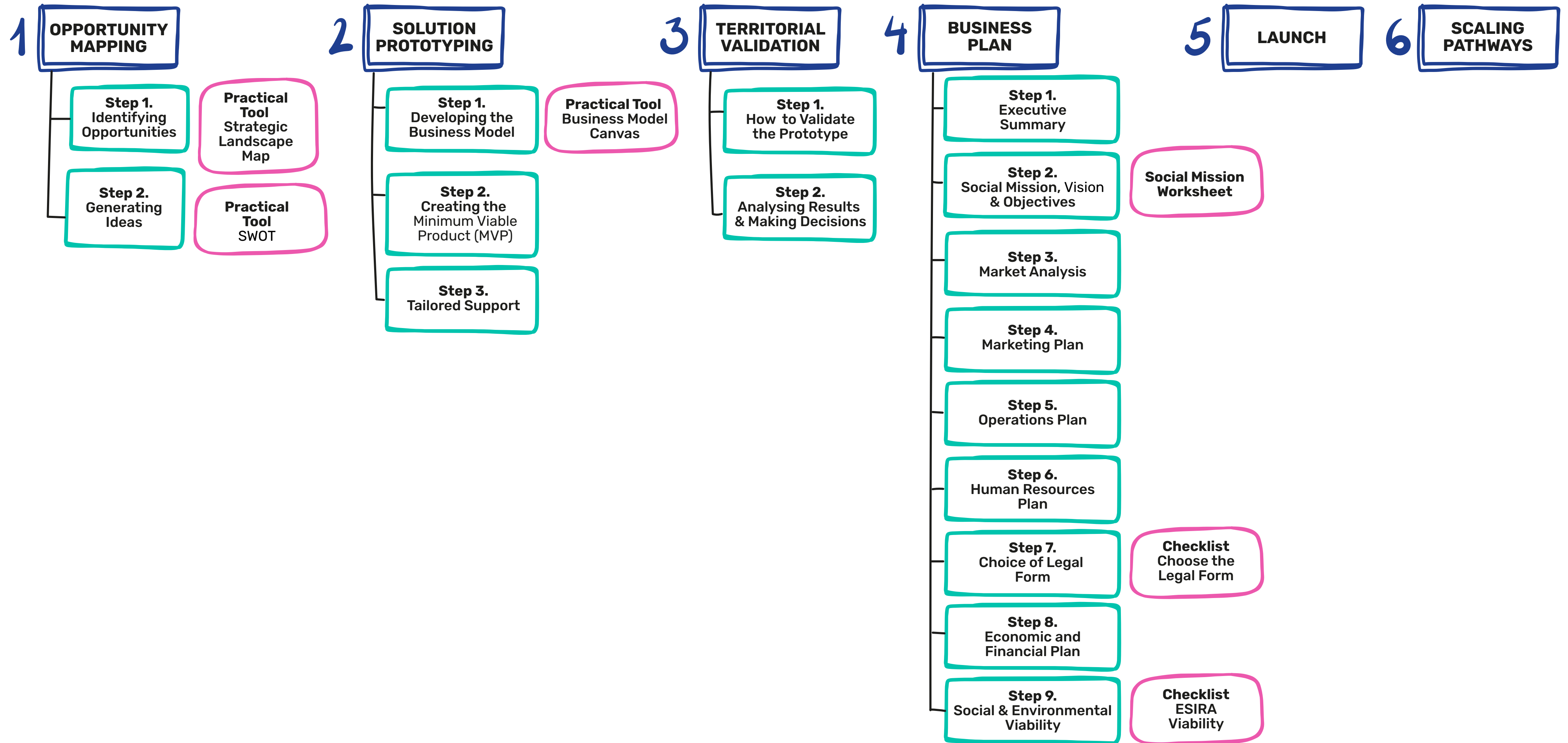
In this sense, social economy initiatives embody **processes of social innovation**, offering alternative and participatory ways of organising economic activities in rural areas when traditional solutions prove insufficient.



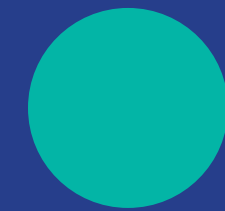
# ESIRA GUIDE



## PHASES TO DEVELOP SOCIAL ECONOMY INITIATIVES IN RURAL AREAS



PHASE



## Opportunity Mapping

This phase focuses on **understanding the rural territory**, identifying **needs, challenges and opportunities**, and generating **initial ideas** through a **participatory and multi-actor process**.

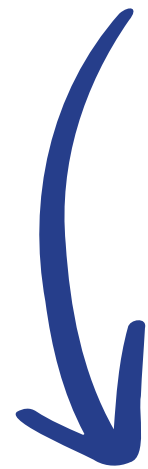
The result of this phase is the **selection of a first batch of social economy initiatives** to be further developed.



STEP

1

## Identifying opportunities



Before generating ideas for innovative social economy initiatives, it is essential to **understand the rural territory in which the initiative will be developed.**



This means analysing:

- ✓ The **general factors** that affect the rural area
- ✓ The **specific characteristics of the local economic and entrepreneurial ecosystem**

A thorough analysis of these factors helps to identify **opportunities, challenges, risks and unmet needs**, and to define strategic lines of action that can promote **social and economic development with a positive environmental impact.**

Although many rural challenges are shared, **each territory has its own specific context, assets and opportunities.**

### Participatory & multi-actor approach

This analysis should be carried out **in a participatory way**, for example through a **Multi-Actor Platform (MAP)**. Through collaborative work, MAP members jointly identify opportunities, needs and problems emerging from the territorial context.

For this collaborative process to work effectively, the MAP should be:

- ✓ **Properly constituted**
- ✓ Based on **democratic principles**
- ✓ **Representative** of the local community

Relevant actors include vulnerable groups (such as young people, older people, migrants or people with disabilities), as well as public administrations, institutions, businesses, associations and other local stakeholders. This **ensures the active participation of civil society as a protagonist, not merely a beneficiary.**





During this step, **both face-to-face and online meetings** are recommended. MAP members are encouraged to collect and share information about their rural area, such as:

- **Local reports**
- **Statistical data**
- **Digital resources**

With the support of a **facilitator**, this information is jointly organised and visualised in an **Strategic Landscape Map** (physical or digital).

When mapping opportunities, the following factors should be considered:



### Environment

Economic	Political and legal
Social and demographic	
Natural and environmental resources	
Technological and innovation-related	



### Local Business Landscape

Competition	Alliances and collaborations
Value chain	Infrastructure and connectivity

Use Practical Tool **Strategic Landscape Map**



## INTERPRETING THE OPPORTUNITY MAP

Based on the Opportunity Map, participants identify **key opportunities, challenges and unmet needs** using tools such as **brainstorming or drawnstorming**, guided by the MAP.

The process concludes with a **SWOT analysis** that summarises:

- Strengths and weaknesses
- Opportunities and threats



Use Practical Tool **SWOT**



# STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE MAP

A tool for identifying opportunities in rural areas

## PHASE 1. Opportunity Mapping



### GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

**ECONOMIC FACTORS**



**TECHNOLOGICAL FACTORS**



**ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**



**POLITIC -LEGAL FACTORS**



**SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS**



### LOCAL BUSINESS LANDSCAPE

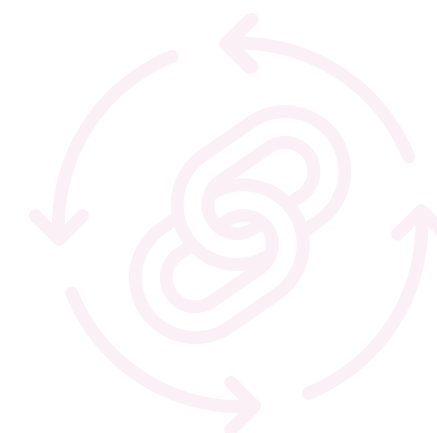
**COMPETITORS**



**COLLABORATORS**



**VALUE CHAIN**



**INFRAESTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY**





**SWOT ANALYSIS**

Fill your own SWOT Analysis



**S**

**STRENGTHS**

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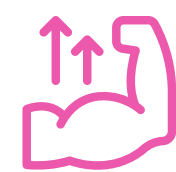
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**W**

**WEAKNESSES**

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**O**

**OPPORTUNITIES**

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**T**

**THREATS**

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Using the **co-created SWOT analysis**, MAP members generate ideas or initiatives, individually or collectively, that:

- \* Address identified problems
- \* Take advantage of opportunities detected in the territory



## HOW?

A **simple questionnaire** prepared by the facilitator can support reflection, focusing on:

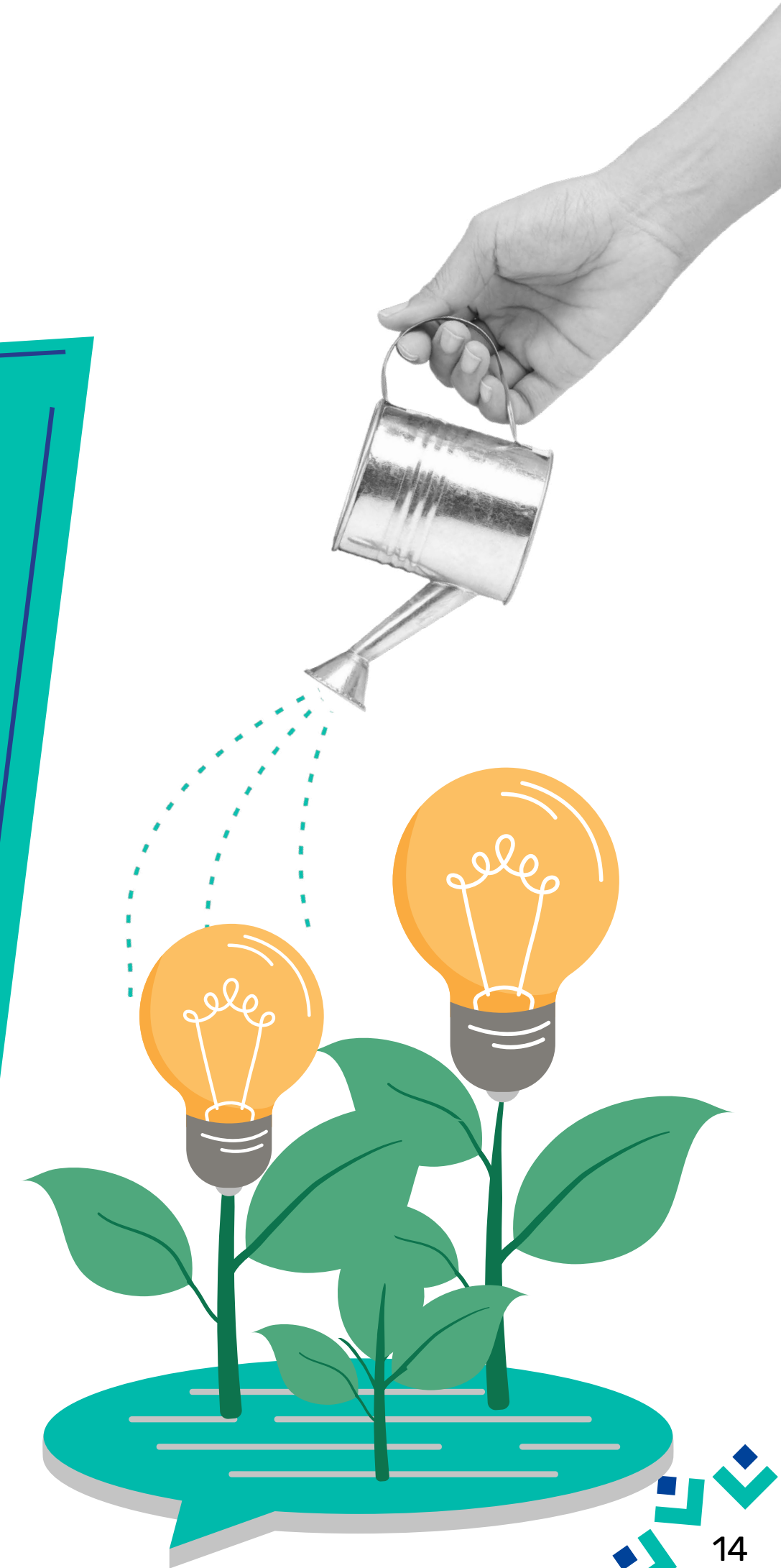
- What is the idea or initiative?
- Which problem does it address or which opportunity does it respond to?
- Who benefits from it?
- How is it implemented through a **social economy approach?**

MAP members who develop ideas are referred to as promoters.



## WHO?

A **promoter** is one or more individuals or legal entities who propose an initiative that addresses territorial challenges and contributes to improving social conditions, particularly for vulnerable groups. Promoters commit to the development of the initiative, **without necessarily providing financial investment.**





## RURAL LAB



### Identifying a first batch of potential innovative social economy initiatives

The **Rural Lab** identifies which ideas have the potential to become **innovative social economy initiatives**.

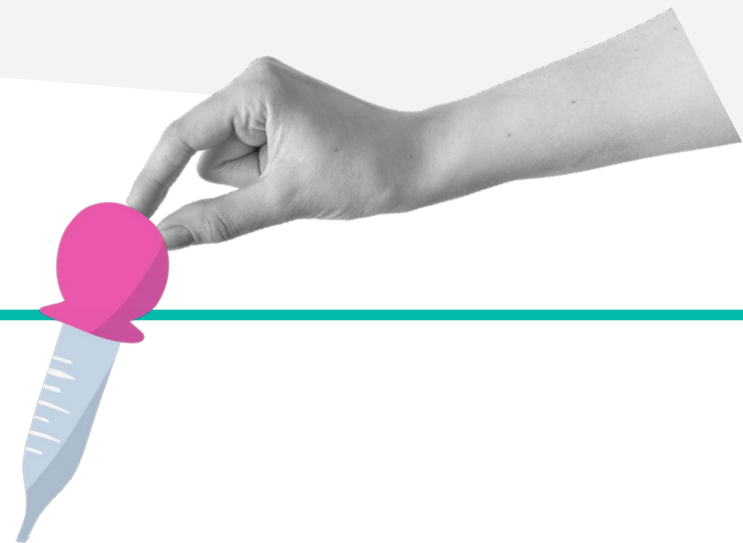
It acts as a space for **co-creation, experimentation and learning, involving MAP members and other relevant stakeholders**.

Using participatory methods such as **design thinking** or **World Café**, initiatives are assessed according to whether they:

- Meet key social innovation criteria.
- Address multiple challenges or opportunities.
- Generate **economic, social and environmental value**.



Selected initiatives form part of the **first batch** to be supported.

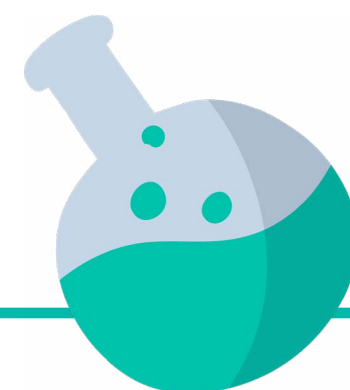
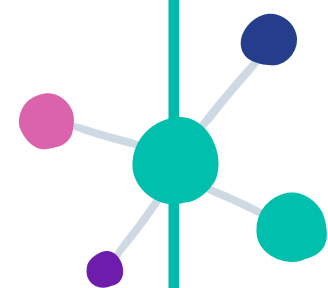


### ORGANISING WORK WITHIN THE RURAL LAB

When several initiatives are selected, **working groups** may be created around similar themes or needs, ensuring the active **inclusion of vulnerable groups**.

This supports:

- Synergies between initiatives.
- Collaboration and networking.
- Stronger collective learning.



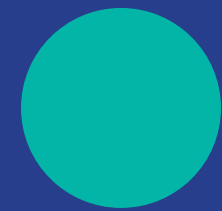
Examples of possible Rural Lab working groups include:

- Health, well-being and community.
- Entrepreneurship and economy.
- Tourism, hospitality and services.
- Culture, education, leisure and heritage.
- Environment, nature and digitalisation.



PHASE

2



## Solution Prototyping

This phase focuses on **giving concrete form to the ideas generated** during Opportunity Mapping through **prototyping**.

The aim of prototyping is **not to sell**, but to ensure that the proposed product or service:

- Effectively addresses the identified problems.
- Meets the real needs of the target groups.



## FROM IDEA TO MODEL: HOW WILL THE INITIATIVE WORK?

A single idea can be implemented through **different business models**.

Before developing a prototype, it is therefore essential to clarify **how the initiative will operate**.

This requires the development of a **business model** that explains:

- How value is created
- How it is delivered
- How the initiative is sustained over time



At this stage, ideas are transformed into **testable solutions** that can be discussed, improved and adapted before moving towards implementation.





STEP

1

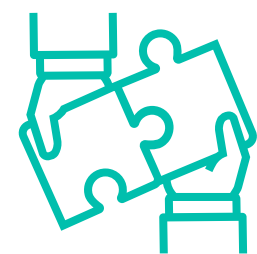
# Developing the Business Model

The **Rural Lab** supports each initiative in designing its business model using tools such as the **Business Model Canvas (BMC)**.

The Canvas is a **one-page visual tool** that represents the key elements of an initiative across **nine building blocks**. It provides a shared overview of how the initiative works and facilitates discussion and reflection among the different stakeholders involved in the Rural Lab.



## THE NINE BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS



### KEY PARTNERS

Which **strategic alliances** or partners are needed?



### KEY ACTIVITIES

What are the most important **actions** required?



### VALUE PROPOSITION

What makes our offer **distinctive**? Why do **customers choose** it?



### CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

What **type of relationship** do we build with users or **customers**?



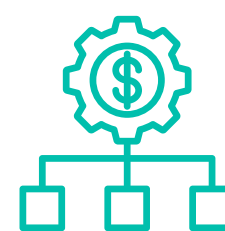
### CUSTOMER SEGMENTS

Who do we **create value** for?



### KEY RESOURCES

What **resources** are needed to operate the initiative?



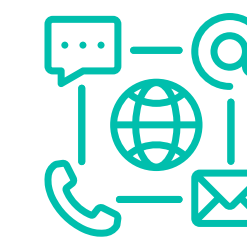
### COST STRUCTURE

What are the **main costs** of the initiative?



### REVENUE STREAMS

What are users willing and able to **pay**?



### CHANNELS

How is the value proposition **delivered**?

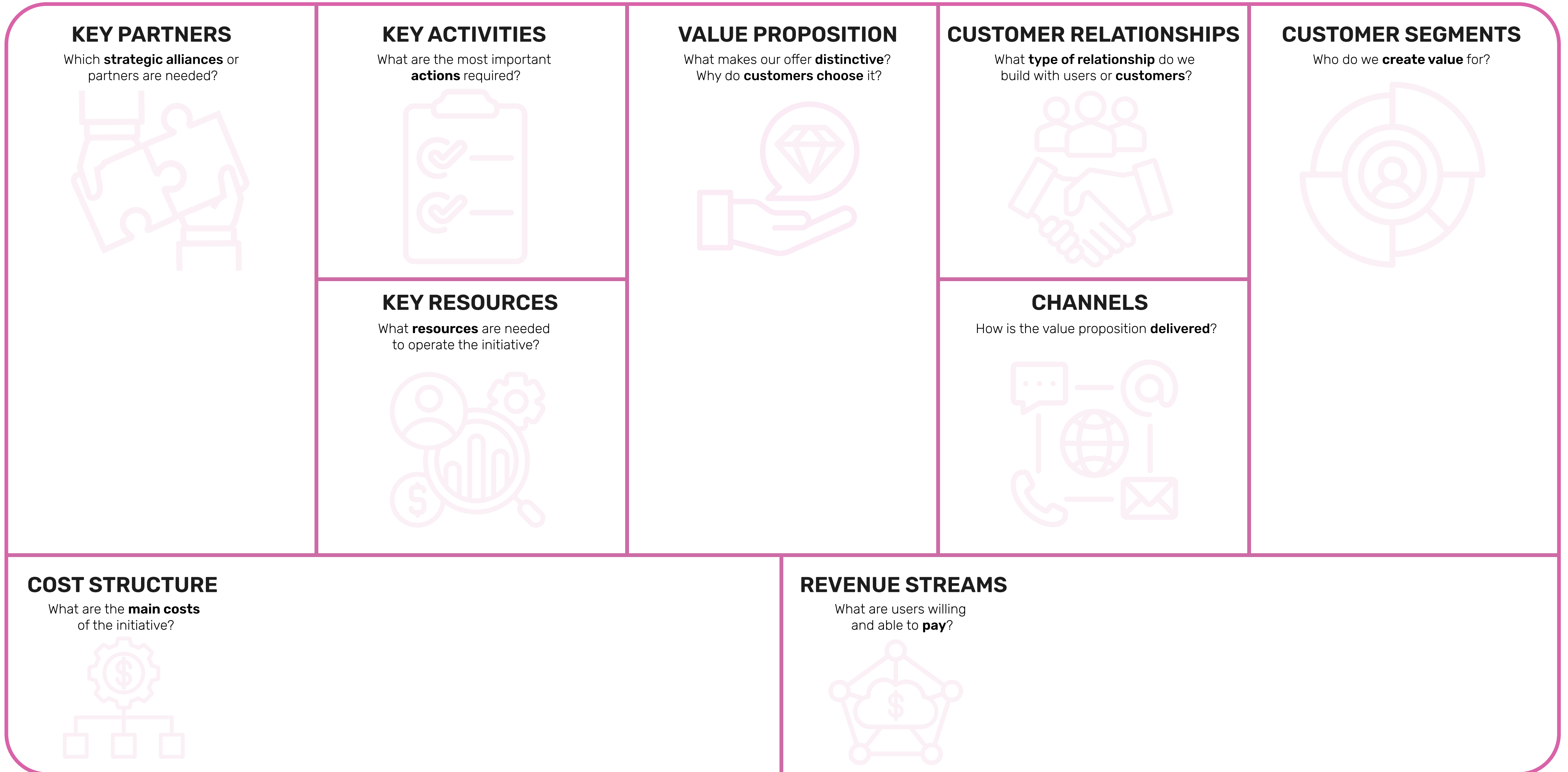


Use the Practical Tool **Business Model Canvas**



# BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS

Fill your own Business Model Canvas





## EMBEDDING SOCIAL INNOVATION INTO THE BUSINESS MODEL

Social innovation should permeate the entire business model. For this reason, it is essential that the Rural Lab analyses the social and environmental impact of the initiative across all nine blocks, using tools such as brainstorming.

### Examples of reflective questions to adapt the Canvas to an innovative social economy initiative include:



Do we differentiate products or services according to the social groups addressed?



Are pricing strategies adapted to different social groups?



Are groups with specific needs or vulnerabilities explicitly considered in the customer segments? How can they be included?



Have financing solutions been considered for vulnerable groups?



Is inclusive language used in communication with users and customers?



Are CO<sub>2</sub> emissions minimised in distribution channels?



Are local or km-0 products and services prioritised?



Have pay gaps been addressed or eliminated?



Do partnerships share and support the initiative's social mission?



Have alternative financing options been considered, such as collective financing or **crowdfunding**?



Are profits reinvested in the initiative or the community?



What type of employment is generated? Are job opportunities created for vulnerable groups?



Are donations or contributions (e.g. through foundations) considered?

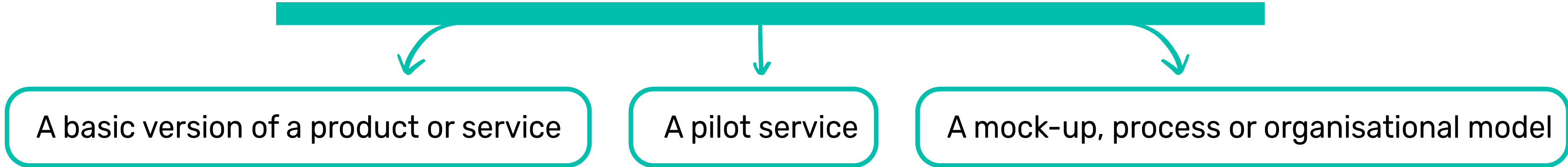


Is the cooperative model a possible option?



This phase focuses on **transforming ideas into testable solutions**. It is not about final products or selling, but about **learning through experimentation**.

**DESIGNING A MINIMUM VIABLE PRODUCT (MVP) IS ABOUT CREATING:**



**ASK YOURSELF**



**What is the simplest version of your product or service that allows you to test your business model?**

The prototype should be **simple, low-cost and adaptable**. The goal is to **test assumptions**, not to perfect the solution.



At this stage, each initiative receives **tailored support within the ESIRA project**, depending on its specific characteristics and needs.

The support provided includes:



### Administrative & legal support

Project partners advise initiatives on the **most appropriate legal form** for social economy activities (e.g. social enterprise, association, cooperative), and support administrative procedures for becoming a legal entity, taking into account relevant public policies.

Governance structures are also reviewed as part of this support.



### Business & financial support

A **roadmap for launching the initiative** is jointly developed, identifying the technical, legal and business steps needed to reach the market.

This includes:

- Support in defining an appropriate business model.
- Assessment of economic viability alongside social and environmental value.
- Development of marketing approaches.
- Analysis of funding strategies, including public grants, state aid and other regional financing mechanisms.



### Technical support

Project partners provide **technical support to test ideas**, adapted to the nature of each initiative.

This may include, for example:

- Social and consumer acceptance studies to improve service or product design.
- Pilot testing environments, such as agricultural test plots for agroecological initiatives.



PHASE

## Territorial Validation

Once the **business model and prototype** have been designed, the next step is to **test and validate the solution in the territory.**



 Territorial validation aims to assess whether the prototype:



Effectively meets the needs it intends to address



Provides real value to users or beneficiaries



Works in the specific rural context in which it will be implemented



Territorial validation should be based on a combination of **quantitative and qualitative data**, allowing for both measurable results and in-depth understanding of user experiences.



To validate the prototype, it is recommended to use **testing techniques and tools** such as:

- \* Surveys or questionnaires addressed to potential future users or customers of the prototyped product or service.
- \* Feedback collected during pilot tests or demonstrations.



## KEY QUESTIONS for user surveys:

The following questions can be used as a basis for designing validation surveys.



### General satisfaction and usability

- On a scale from 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with this prototype?
- How easy or difficult was it to use the prototype?



### Meeting needs and perceived value

- To what extent does this prototype meet your needs or expectations?
- What problems does this prototype help you solve, or what does it make easier or more difficult?
- If you had to explain this prototype to a friend, how would you describe its main value?



### Design and user experience

- What do you think about the visual design and overall aesthetics of the prototype?
- Which part of the experience made you feel most confident or uncertain?
- Did you experience any slowness, errors or technical issues while using it?



### Open feedback and improvement

- What did you like most and least about your experience?
- What would you change or improve in the prototype, and why?
- On a scale from 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend this prototype to someone like you?



STEP

2

# Analysing Results And Making Decisions

PHASE 3. Territorial Validation



Once all data has been collected, the next step is to analyse the results and decide how to proceed.

Two main options are possible:

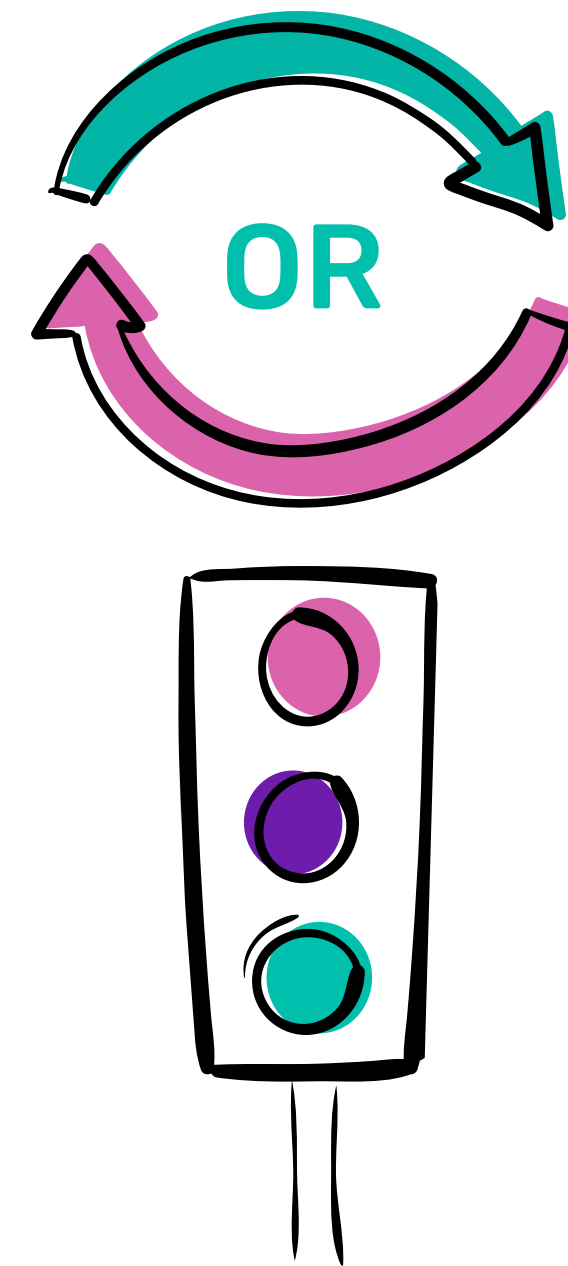
## PIVOT

If validation shows that the prototype or business model **requires adjustments**, it is necessary to return to the business model, introduce changes, and develop a **new or improved prototype** that better addresses the identified needs or problems.



RETURN TO THE BUSINESS MODEL

Return to PHASE 2



## PERSEVERE

If the prototype and the business model **respond well to user needs** and validation results are positive, the initiative can move forward to the next stage: **developing the Business Plan.**



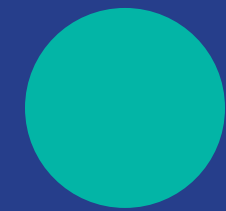
DEVELOPING THE BUSINESS PLAN



Move on to the PHASE 4

PHASE


4



## BUSINESS PLAN

Once the prototype and business model have been validated, the Business Plan helps you **organise your idea in a clear and realistic way** and decide whether it can be implemented and sustained over time.



 For rural social economy initiatives, the Business Plan should be understood as:

A **practical roadmap**, not an overly technical document



A **tool** to clarify priorities, resources and risks



A **document that can be shared** with partners, public authorities or potential funders





STEP



## Executive Summary

Briefly describe (short and clear):

- \* What the initiative is?
- \* Which social or environmental problem it addresses?
- \* Who it benefits?
- \* How it works?
- \* Why it matters in the rural context?

STEP



## Social Mission, Vision And Objectives

Clearly define:

- \* The social mission (why the initiative exists).
- \* The **vision** (what change it aims to achieve in the long term).
- \* A small number of **SMART** (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) objectives, covering: economic sustainability, social impact, and environmental contribution.



STEP



## Market Analysis

Based on the Opportunity Mapping:

- \* Identify who your users or customers are (including socio-eco-demographic variables and lifestyles).
- \* Describe their primary needs and constraints (price sensitivity, vulnerability, convenience, etc.).
- \* Explain existing alternatives and competitors, and highlight unmet needs in the rural territory.

**The focus should be on relevance and realism, not on exhaustive market data.**

Use the **Social Mission Worksheet** to define your initiative's social mission





### 1. The social problem or need

What challenge does your initiative address in the rural territory?

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### 2. Target groups and beneficiaries

Who does your initiative aim to benefit?

- Local community
- Vulnerable or underserved groups
- Other groups:

### 3. Intended social change

What positive change do you want to achieve?

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### 4. How the initiative creates social value

How does your initiative contribute to this change?

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### 5. Values and principles

Which values guide your initiative?

- Inclusion  Solidarity  Sustainability  Participation  Equality
- Other:

### 6. Territorial relevance

Why is this mission relevant for this specific rural area?

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### 7. Your Social Mission Statement

Write a short and clear mission statement (2-3 sentences).

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### 8. Long-term vision

How do you envision your initiative in the long term (5-10 years)?

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### 9. SMART objectives

#### Objective 1 (SMART):

Specific: \_\_\_\_\_

Measurable: \_\_\_\_\_

Achievable: \_\_\_\_\_

Relevant: \_\_\_\_\_

Time-bound: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Objective 2 (SMART):

Specific: \_\_\_\_\_

Measurable: \_\_\_\_\_

Achievable: \_\_\_\_\_

Relevant: \_\_\_\_\_

Time-bound: \_\_\_\_\_



#### Quick check

- Is the mission easy to understand?
- Is it clearly social and/or environmental in nature?
- Is it relevant to the rural territory?
- Can it guide decisions and actions?

**Tip:** A good social mission is clear, shared and practical. It should guide strategy, governance and everyday decisions.



This section explains how the **four core elements of marketing** will be combined:



PRODUCT

Description of the product or service as perceived by users or customers.

This includes:

- Competitive advantage.
- Strengths and weaknesses compared to competitors or substitutes.
- Cost structure.
- Quality components.
- Where possible, the expected **life cycle** of the product or service, favouring a responsible life-cycle approach.

Sales estimates across the different life-cycle phases may be included.



PRICE

Comparative analysis of market prices.

Definition of pricing policy according to:

- Customer profiles.
- Social segmentation (differential price strategies depending on purchasing power).
- Different life-cycle stages. This includes analysis of price-value relationships, payment terms and discounts.



DISTRIBUTION (PLACE)

Identifying **distribution channels**, evaluating their convenience from the consumer's viewpoint, and determining priorities:

- **Green logistics.**
- Ensuring accessibility.
- Local distribution.
- Responsible suppliers.



PROMOTION

Definition of the desired image, based on **ethical, equality, and inclusive commercial communication** and avoiding **greenwashing**.

This includes positioning, promotional instruments, merchandising policy, sales force and public relations activities.





## STEP 5 Operations Plan



Explain in simple terms:

- How the product or service is delivered
- Justification of location
- Which activities are essential (production, commercialisation, selling, buying, communication, etc.)
- Which resources are needed (technology used, knowledge, raw materials and inputs)
- Which partners or suppliers are involved, prioritising local actors where possible



This information supports the estimation of **investment needs** and **fixed and variable costs**.

## STEP 6 Human Resources Plan

This section analyses employment needs and organisational structure. Who is involved in the initiative, how decisions are made, and what type of employment or collaboration is created.

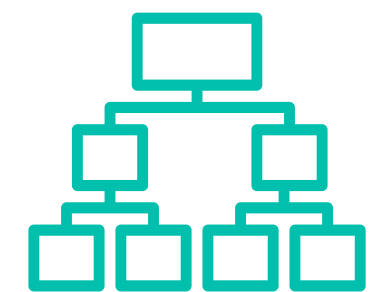
### Job Analysis

- Job descriptions and responsibilities.
- Required knowledge, skills and competencies.
- Participatory practices and democratic governance, including sustainability-related roles.

### Human Resources Needs

- Type of profiles required (attention to job opportunities for vulnerable groups).
- Number of people needed, including volunteers' participation.
- Timing of recruitment.

### Organisational Chart



## STEP 7 Choice of Legal Form

Analyse the legal forms available within the social economy and identify the one that best fits the initiative's business model.

Use **Checklist 2** to choose your legal form



## CHECKLIST 2: Choose the Legal Form of your Social Economy Initiative

Tick if the answer is "yes"

### 1. Social purpose first

- Is your main goal social and/or environmental, not profit maximisation?
- Does the initiative serve the general interest or a community?
- Will most surpluses be reinvested in the mission or the territory?

If YES to most → You are in the social economy

### 2. Governance and participation

- Do you want democratic or participatory governance?
- Will members, workers, users or citizens take part in decisions?
- Is collective ownership important?

If YES to most → Prefer collective legal forms

### 3. Type of activity

- Will you sell goods or services?
- Is economic activity a means to achieve a social mission?
- Will you combine market activity and social goals?

If YES to most → You need a legally recognised social economy form

### 4. Which legal form fits best?

#### ASSOCIATION

- ✓ Non-profit
- ✓ Community, cultural or social goals
- ✓ Democratic governance
- ✓ Limited or complementary economic activity

Best if: your initiative focuses on community action and participation

#### COOPERATIVE

- ✓ Member-owned and democratically governed
- ✓ Economic activity + social objectives
- ✓ Collective entrepreneurship
- ✓ Strong local roots

Best if: your initiative is collective, economic and community-based

#### SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

- ✓ Market-oriented activity
- ✓ Clear social mission
- ✓ Profits mainly reinvested
- ✓ Hybrid logic (economic + social)

Best if: you want economic sustainability with a strong social impact

#### FOUNDATION

- ✓ Non-profit
- ✓ Public or social interest purpose
- ✓ Often service provision or long-term goals
- ✓ Less participatory governance

Best if: your initiative focuses on long-term social impact, often grant-based

#### MUTUAL ORGANISATION

- ✓ Member-based solidarity
- ✓ Services for members (health, welfare, etc.)
- ✓ Democratic governance

Best if: your initiative responds to the shared needs of a defined group

### ✓ FINAL CHECK

- Does the legal form support your social mission?
- Does it allow participation and democracy?
- Does it fit the scale and capacity of your rural initiative?

If YES to most → You have identified a suitable legal form



**Key message:** This checklist is a guidance tool, not legal advice. Always check national and regional regulations before registering your initiative.



This section consolidates information from the previous sections into a financial framework (primary sources of income, main costs, basic funding needs, and possible funding sources).

Using **spreadsheets or dedicated public tools** is recommended to simulate different scenarios.

**PHASE 1:  
OPERATIONAL PLANS**

- Sales plan
- Investment plan
- Procurement plan
- Staffing plan
- General expenses
- Production plan
- Taxes (VAT, corporate tax)

**PHASE 2:  
FORECAST FINANCIAL STATEMENTS**

- Forecast Profit and Loss Account
- Forecast Balance Sheet
- Forecast Cash Flow Statement (operating and investment cash flows)

**PHASE 3:  
FINANCING PLAN**

Determination of financing sources and their cost, taking into account:

- The chosen legal form
- Available financing options (grants for green projects, **social investors**, low-interest loans, or crowdfunding)

The financing plan should ensure a balance among assets, equity, and liabilities and be consistent with projected cash flows.





In ESIRA, the viability of social economy initiatives is assessed using a **People-Planet-Profit framework** to ensure a balanced approach to sustainability.

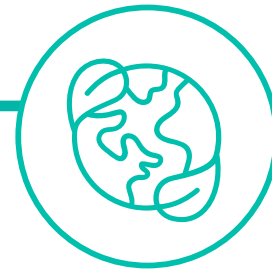
PEOPLE PILLAR

The People pillar focuses on social impact, including employment, fair and inclusive working conditions, community engagement and democratic ownership.



PLANET PILLAR

The Planet pillar assesses environmental responsibility, considering how initiatives reduce their ecological footprint and contribute to ecosystem protection.



PROFIT PILLAR

The Profit pillar looks at economic sustainability beyond short-term financial performance, emphasising long-term stability, ethical practices, transparency and the reinvestment of resources into social and environmental objectives.



According to the **ESIRA viability criteria**, initiatives are assessed using **11 key indicators** grouped into **four categories**:

ORGANISATIONAL STABILITY

PEOPLE

PLANET

PROFIT

An initiative is considered **viable** if it meets **at least one indicator in each category**.

Use **Checklist ESIRA Viability** to see where your initiative currently stands

This approach reflects the **triple-impact logic of the social economy** while also ensuring a minimum level of organisational and economic sustainability.



## ✓ CHECKLIST 3: ESIRA Viability

### Minimum conditions for the viability of ESIRA social economy initiatives.

An ESIRA social economy initiative is considered viable when it meets **at least one indicator in each category**.

Use this checklist to see where your initiative currently stands.

#### 1. Organisational Stability

*Does the initiative have a basic organisational structure?*

##### Mission statement

- Does the initiative have a written mission statement?  
→ Criteria: Yes

##### Legal form

- Is the initiative part of an existing organisation?  
→ Criteria: Yes  
At least one "Yes" is required in this category.

#### 2. People

*Does the initiative create fair and inclusive social value?*

##### Full-time employees

Number of paid, full-time employees: \_\_\_\_\_  
→ Criteria: At least one (numeric)

##### Part-time employees

Number of paid, part-time employees: \_\_\_\_\_  
→ Criteria: Numeric

##### Anti-discrimination policy

- Is there a written anti-discrimination policy and a system to monitor compliance?  
→ Criteria: Yes

##### 👁️ How to read your results

One or more indicators met in each category: The initiative meets the ESIRA viability criteria.  
Missing indicators in one category: This highlights a priority area for improvement, not a failure.

#### Equity plan

- Does the initiative have an equity plan?  
→ Criteria: Yes  
At least one indicator must be met in this category.

#### 3. Planet

*Does the initiative show environmental responsibility?*

##### Product lifecycle management practices

- Are there practices to manage products beyond the point of sale?  
→ Criteria: Yes

##### Ecosystems

- Does the initiative plan to support at least one ecosystem service?  
→ Criteria: At least one.  
At least one indicator must be met in this category.

#### 4. Profit

*Is the initiative economically active and sustainable?*

##### Total revenue

- Total revenue received in the last year:  
→ Criteria: At least €1,500 per year

##### Business plan

- Does the initiative have a written business plan or feasibility plan?  
→ Criteria: Yes

##### Business stage Main focus of the initiative in the coming year:

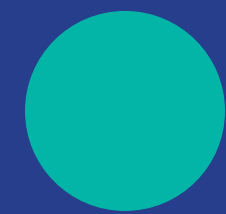
- A – Create/establish the organisation  
 B – Create stable foundations  
 C – Maintain a sustainable social economy model  
 D – Get resources to grow  
 E – Grow  
 F – Return profit to investors or the community  
→ Criteria: Stage C or above.

At least one indicator must be met in this category.

🔑 **Key message:** In ESIRA, viability is not about size or profit maximisation, but about balancing organisational stability, people, planet, and profit.

# 5

PHASE



LAUNCH

This phase marks the **start of the initiative's operations.**



Productive activities or service delivery begin; local support networks are activated (such as associations, social organisations, and local authorities); and feedback is collected from the first users, customers, participants or beneficiaries.

Based on these **initial results and feedback**, improvements are introduced in:



Management Practices



Production or Service Delivery Processes



Governance Mechanisms

\* Ensuring that the initiative effectively responds to the **social needs previously identified**.

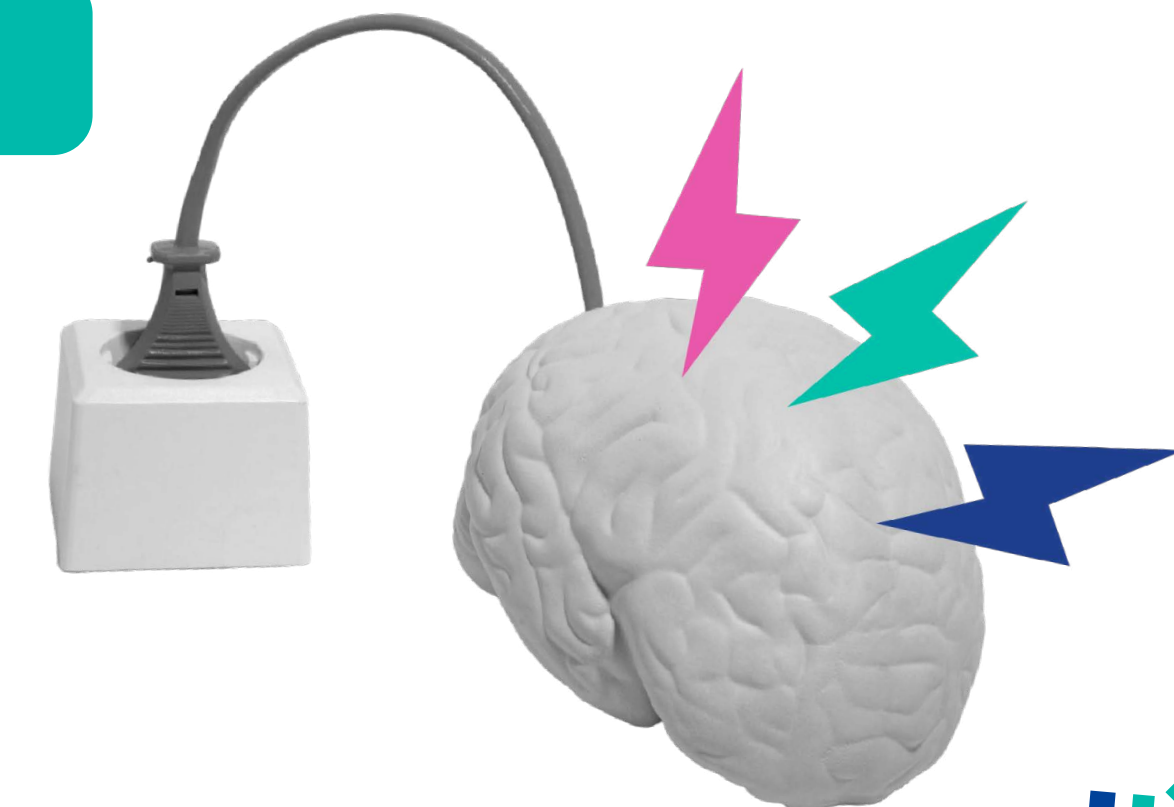
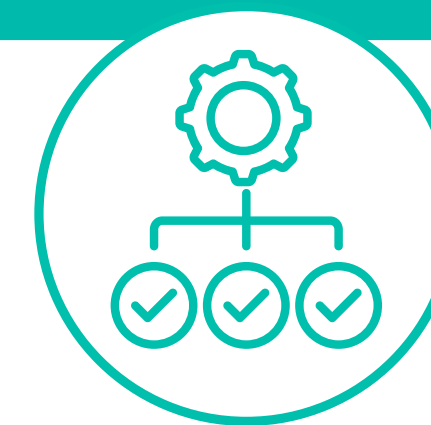


At this stage, the initiative moves towards consolidation, which involves:

Institutional Formalisation

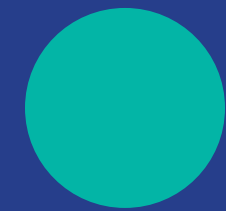


Standardisation of Key Processes



\* While maintaining the core principles of the social economy.

PHASE



## SCALING PATHWAYS

This phase focuses on **expanding the reach and impact** of the initiative.




 The **Scaling Pathways phase** may involve:

Replicating the model in other territories or communities



Strengthening collaborative networks



Growth is pursued in a **responsible, context-sensitive way, adapting the model to new territorial realities and accessing ethical financing sources, such as impact investing** or public funding, without losing the initiative's **social and solidarity-based focus**. Ultimately, sustainable and transformative scaling aims to ensure **long-term impact**.

**This includes:**



Continuous measurement of social, economic and environmental impact



Promotion of social innovation based on collective learning



Strengthening of organisational resilience

Through this process, the initiative is consolidated as a **key actor in territorial development and social transformation**, reaffirming the values and principles of the **social and solidarity economy**.

# GLOSSARY



This glossary presents key terms used throughout the ESIRA GUIDE and within the ESIRA project framework. It supports facilitators and rural actors in understanding concepts related to developing innovative social economy initiatives in rural areas.



Click the word again to return to the originating page.



**Anti-Discrimination Policy:** A formal organisational commitment ensuring that all individuals are treated fairly and equally, regardless of personal characteristics or background.

**Association:** A non-profit organisation created by individuals who collaborate voluntarily to pursue shared social, cultural or community objectives.

**Cooperative:** An enterprise owned and democratically governed by its members, who jointly manage activities to meet common economic and social needs.

**Crowdfunding:** A financing method in which many individuals contribute small amounts of money, usually through online platforms, to support initiatives.

**Entrepreneurial Ecosystem:** The network of institutions, policies, organisations and actors that support entrepreneurship, innovation and economic development within a territory.

**Equity Plan:** A structured set of actions aimed at promoting fairness, equal opportunities and balanced participation within an organisation or initiative.

**Facilitator:** A person responsible for guiding discussions and collaborative processes, helping participants work effectively and reach shared outcomes.

**Forecast Financial Statements:** Estimated financial documents that project future revenues, expenses and cash flows of an initiative.

**Foundation:** A non-profit organisation established to pursue public or social interest objectives, often supporting projects through services, programmes or funding.

**Green Logistics:** Logistics practices designed to minimise environmental impact by reducing emissions, promoting local supply chains and improving resource efficiency.

**Greenwashing:** The use of advertising strategies to create the impression of environmental responsibility without taking any actual action, in an attempt to attract environmentally conscious consumers.

**Legal Form:** The legally recognised organisational structure under which an initiative operates, determining governance rules, responsibilities and regulatory requirements.

**Minimum Viable Product (MVP):** A basic version of a product or service developed to test key assumptions and gather feedback before full implementation.

**Multi-Actor Platform (MAP):** A collaborative forum bringing together diverse stakeholders to jointly identify rural challenges and develop innovative territorial solutions.

**Mutual Organisation:** A member-based organisation that provides services or benefits to its members based on solidarity, collective responsibility and democratic governance.

**Promoter:** An individual or organisation proposing and supporting the development of an initiative addressing a specific need or opportunity in a territory.



Click the word again to return to the originating page.



**Prototyping:** The process of creating and testing early versions of products, services or organisational solutions to refine ideas before implementation.

**SMART Objective:** A clearly defined goal that is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound, facilitating planning and evaluation of progress.

**Social Enterprise:** An organisation conducting economic activities to achieve social or environmental objectives, reinvesting most profits to support its mission.

**Social Investors:** Individuals or organisations providing financial resources to initiatives that generate measurable social or environmental impact alongside financial sustainability.

**Social Mission:** A clear statement describing the social or environmental purpose of an organisation and the positive change it aims to achieve.

**SWOT Analysis:** A strategic tool used to analyse the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats affecting an initiative, organisation or territory.

**Triple Impact:** An approach aimed at generating balanced social, environmental, and economic benefits through responsible and sustainable activities.

**Vision:** A description of the long-term change or future situation that an initiative aims to achieve in its community or territory.



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