

ESIRA – ENHANCING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL AREAS

TRAINING MODULES

Module 1. Social Innovation in Rural Areas



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Horizon Europe Grant agreement: 101136253

Credits

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Acknowledgements:

Experts from the University of Burgos, Oxígeno Foundation and SODEBUR have contributed to the development of these materials in different ways: reviewing their content and structure, educational design and support in the adaptation of the resources to the needs of the target groups. The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their constructive and valuable contributions: Juanjo Asensio, Sara Azcona, Jose Luis Foradada, Virginia Fuentes, Javier Hoyuelos, Beatriz Izquierdo, Luis Marcos, M^a Elena Nogueira & Ángel Pérez.

2026

Burgos (Spain)



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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 in rural areas.**
- **Practical Tools 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 (Annex).**



1.1 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.

1.2 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.

1.3 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.

1.3.1 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.

1.3.2 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.

1.3.3 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.

1.3.4 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.

1.3.5 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.

1.3.6 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.

1.3.7 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.

1.3.8 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)".

1.3.9 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.

1.3.10 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.

1.3.11 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 Rurality 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.

1.3.12 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.

1.4 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.

1.5 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:

1.5.1 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

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.



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.

1.5.2 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 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.

1.5.3 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.

1.5.4 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.

1.5.5 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.

1.5.6 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.

1.5.7 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.

1.6 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/>

1.7 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.

1.7.1 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.

1.7.2 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.

1.7.3 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.

1.7.4 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.

1.7.5 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.

1.7.6 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.



1.8 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.

Image1.

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.



1.9 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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