



D5.2 RAP draft



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Brief abstract	Deliverable D5.2 “Regional Action Plans – Consolidation and Cross-Pilot Synthesis” presents the progress made by the nine PoliRuralPlus pilot regions in 2025 as they moved from the design to the implementation phase of their Regional Action Plans (RAPs). The document consolidates the methodological, governance, and monitoring frameworks developed during the first project period and integrates feedback from the Mid-Term Review. Each RAP has been updated using the harmonised RAP Template 3.0, incorporating Gantt-based roadmaps, a refined KPI framework, and cross-cutting elements such as sustainability, gender and diversity awareness, and policy alignment with the Green Deal, CAP, NEB, and LTVRA. The process has been supported by strong cooperation among work packages—WP2 (foresight and governance), WP3 (methodology), WP4 (digital tools), WP6 (innovation), and WP7 (monitoring and exploitation)—ensuring coherence between regional action, innovation, and impact evaluation. The deliverable also highlights early results in stakeholder engagement, governance integration, and interregional learning. It sets the stage for the final phase of the project, where D5.3 (Effectiveness of the Multi-Actor Approach) and D5.4 (RAP Monitoring – Third Year) will document implementation progress, assess sustainability, and consolidate transferable best practices for replication across Europe.

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Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AKIS	Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
DiH	Digital Innovation Hub
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IoT	Internet of Things
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale (EU rural development program)
LTVRA	Long Term Vision for Rural Areas
MAA	Multi-Actor Approach
NEB	New European Bauhaus
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RAP	Regional Action Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SFSC	Short Food Supply Chain
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
WP	Work Package

Executive Summary

Deliverable D5.2 presents the progress made by the nine PoliRuralPlus pilot regions in the design, refinement, and consolidation of their Regional Action Plans (RAPs). Building on the foundations of D5.1 and incorporating insights from the other work packages of the project and recommendations from the Mid-Term Review, the document captures how pilots have moved from conceptualisation to implementation, harmonising their approaches while maintaining regional diversity.

The deliverable's main objectives are to provide an integrated overview of the status of each RAP, to document methodological and governance advances, and to ensure consistency across pilots in terms of structure, indicators, and monitoring processes. It also serves as a methodological benchmark and a reference point for the next project phase, preparing the ground for the next deliverables of WP5.

The nine RAPs cover a wide range of thematic areas reflecting the diverse socio-economic and environmental realities of the participating regions. While each pilot follows its own strategy and timeline, all share the same harmonised structure defined in the RAP Template, which was collaboratively refined during 2025 through the joint efforts of WP5, WP3, and WP2.

The use of Gantt-based roadmaps enabled pilots to translate foresight-derived visions into actionable plans. The harmonisation of KPIs provides a common monitoring framework -together with WP7- linking local implementation to project-wide impact. The interaction with WP6 Open Calls has also added value, allowing pilots to integrate practical experiments and innovations into their action plans.

Across regions, the RAPs demonstrate how multi-actor governance and foresight can be effectively combined to strengthen rural–urban linkages, promote innovation, and align local initiatives with EU priorities such as the Green Deal, CAP, New European Bauhaus (NEB), and Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA).

Key cross-cutting achievements include:

- Consolidation of participatory governance frameworks and institutional anchoring of RAPs in regional policy structures.
- Integration of sustainability, inclusiveness, and gender awareness into planning and monitoring.
- Strengthened cooperation with WP2 (foresight and governance), WP3 (methodology), WP4 (digital tools), WP6 (Open Calls), and WP7 (monitoring and exploitation) has allowed pilots to connect participatory visioning with methodological coherence, digital innovation, and impact-oriented monitoring, reinforcing the project's overall objective of fostering evidence-based and inclusive regional development.

The experience gained confirms that flexibility and methodological coherence are both essential for multi-regional implementation. The harmonised RAP Template, KPI framework, and peer review mechanisms have proven effective in balancing comparability with local adaptation.

Moving forward, 2026 will focus on the implementation-finance, monitoring, and exploitation of RAPs. This phase will consolidate evidence on their effectiveness, institutional integration, and sustainability. The forthcoming Best Practices will synthesise transferable lessons for replication in other European regions, ensuring that PoliRuralPlus leaves a legacy in participatory governance, foresight-based planning, and integrated rural–urban development.

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose and Objectives of the Deliverable

The purpose of Deliverable D5.2 is to document the consolidated versions of the nine Regional Action Plans developed within PoliRuralPlus and to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the methodological, governance, and operational progress achieved so far in the project. Building on the conceptual and procedural foundations established in D5.1, together with outputs and collaboration with the other Work Packages of the project, this deliverable captures the transition from design to implementation, illustrating how each pilot region has refined its vision, action framework, and monitoring mechanisms.

The deliverable serves several objectives:

- to ensure comparability across pilot regions by applying a harmonised RAP Template (version 3.0);
- to analyse the degree of alignment between regional strategies and project-wide objectives;
- to document lessons learned, methodological improvements, and early results; and
- to prepare the ground for the final monitoring and evaluation phase in 2026.

In doing so, D5.2 acts as both a progress report and a methodological benchmark, ensuring that the RAPs are ready for full-scale implementation and integrated monitoring in the project's final year.

1.2. Position within WP5 and Project Structure

Within the overall architecture of PoliRuralPlus, **WP5 – Pilot Implementation and Regional Action Plans** functions as the operational core that translates the project's conceptual, methodological, and technical components into concrete regional action. It connects the upstream work on foresight and governance (WP2 and WP3) with the deployment of digital tools (WP4), the experimentation and innovation mechanisms from Open Calls (WP6), and the evaluation, communication, and exploitation activities led by WP7.

Each of these interactions plays a distinct but complementary role:

- **WP2 – Foresight and Governance:** provides the conceptual foundation for regional visioning and multi-level governance, ensuring that the RAPs are informed by forward-looking perspectives and consistent with local institutional contexts. The RAPs build directly on WP2 analyses of rural–urban linkages and policy ecosystems, translating them into operational strategies and actions.
- **WP3 – Methodology and Framework Development:** offers the methodological backbone for the RAP process. The methodological guidance, tools, and evaluation criteria developed by WP3 have ensured that the RAPs remain coherent, comparable, and adaptable across regions. WP3's contribution has also been critical to defining the harmonised structure of the **RAP Template**, the common indicator framework, and the monitoring logic that underpin D5.2.
- **WP4 – Digital Tools and Data Integration:** provides the technological layer supporting evidence-based decision-making within the RAPs. During 2025, several pilots tested and provided feedback on digital tools developed under WP4 (such as MAAT and other data-driven modules), contributing to mutual learning and helping to refine user requirements for regional planning.



- **WP6 – Open Calls for Innovation:** has introduced bottom-up experimentation and practical validation into the RAP process. The two Open Calls launched under WP6 have generated concrete actions and collaborations that many pilots have incorporated into their RAP roadmaps. This interaction reinforces the innovation dimension of the RAPs, linking planning with real-world implementation and stakeholder-driven experimentation.
- **WP7 – Evaluation, Communication, and Exploitation:** ensures that RAP outcomes are systematically monitored, evaluated, and communicated. The alignment between the harmonised pilot-level KPIs (developed under WP5) and the overarching impact framework of WP7 allows for coherent project-wide assessment and policy uptake. WP7 also supports the dissemination and exploitation of RAP results, maximising their visibility and transfer potential.

Deliverable D5.2 thus occupies a pivotal position within this ecosystem, integrating inputs and feedback from all WPs into a single, coherent synthesis of pilot progress. It builds on the design and coordination work initiated in **D5.1**, incorporates feedback from the Mid-Term Review, and provides the foundation for the next phase of implementation and monitoring through **D5.3 “Effectiveness of the Multi-Actor Approach”**, which will assess governance, participation, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms; and **D5.4 “RAP Monitoring Third Year”**, which will evaluate progress, impact, and sustainability of the RAPs.

Through these coordinated interactions, WP5 ensures that the RAPs function as a bridge between policy design, innovation, and territorial implementation — reinforcing the project’s overall objective of strengthening rural–urban linkages through an integrated and evidence-based approach.

1.3. Connection with previous deliverables

D5.2 draws upon several earlier project outputs that shaped its methodological and analytical structure:

- **D5.1 “Prepared Pilot by Stakeholder Multi-Actor Approach”** provided the conceptual basis and initial RAP drafts, including foresight and engagement methodologies.
- **D3.1 “Methodological Framework for the Regional Action Plans”** and **D3.2 “PoliRuralPlus Toolbox”** defined the methodological backbone and introduced the harmonised structure later applied in the RAP Template 3.0.
- **D4.1 “Digital Tool Deployment and User Scenarios”** provided early insights on digital integration, informing RAP references to data-driven decision-making.
- **WP2 deliverables (D2.2–D2.3)** contributed the regional visioning and rural–urban linkage analyses that underpin each pilot’s strategic focus.
- **WP7 deliverables (e.g., D7.1)** established the monitoring and KPI framework that now underpins the RAP evaluation mechanisms.

Together, these deliverables provide the methodological, conceptual, and technical foundations on which D5.2 builds, ensuring full coherence within the project’s work structure.

1.4. Compilation and review process for the RAPs

The compilation of the nine RAPs followed a structured yet participatory process coordinated by WP5 throughout 2025. Each pilot team updated its RAP using the Template 3.0, incorporating feedback from coordination meetings, peer exchanges, and methodological guidance from WP3 and WP2.

The review process unfolded in three main phases:

1. **Draft Consolidation (Q1–Q2 2025):** Pilots updated their RAPs based on the revised template and submitted preliminary drafts for internal review.
2. **Peer Review and Cross-Pilot Exchange (Q2–Q3 2025):** During monthly WP5 meetings, pilots presented progress, shared challenges, and received structured feedback. This peer learning process facilitated harmonisation across RAPs while allowing regional flexibility.
3. **Finalisation (Q4 2025):** The coordination team and peer reviewers (CVUT, CCSS, and CKA) conducted a final technical review to ensure consistency, completeness, and alignment with the project-wide KPI framework.

This collaborative process ensured that the RAPs evolved as living documents, reflecting both local realities and collective methodological progress.

1.5. Structure of the deliverable

The structure of this deliverable mirrors the logical sequence of the RAP process and aligns with the overall objectives of WP5:

- Section 2 describes the development of the RAP Template and the methodological principles guiding pilot work.
- Section 3 provides an overview of the nine RAPs, summarising their thematic focus, objectives, and comparative characteristics.
- Section 4 synthesises cross-pilot insights, challenges, and lessons learned.
- Section 5 addresses monitoring and evaluation, including the alignment of pilot-level KPIs with WP7's framework.
- Section 6 explores horizontal and strategic dimensions such as governance, policy alignment, and inclusiveness.
- Section 7 focuses on sustainability and post-project continuity, summarising institutional, financial, and monitoring strategies for long-term impact.
- Section 8 presents conclusions and next steps, highlighting the strategic value of the RAP process and the forthcoming activities in 2026.

Annexes include the full versions of the nine RAPs.

2. Overview of the Regional Action Plan Process

2.1. Overview of the RAP Template

The RAP Template provides the common methodological framework for all PoliRuralPlus pilot regions. It was designed to ensure coherence across highly diverse territorial contexts while allowing each pilot the flexibility to adapt the structure to local needs, priorities, and capacities.

The template builds on lessons learned from the original PoliRural project and integrates new elements linked to foresight, multi-actor participation, sustainability, and monitoring.

Purpose and Design Principles

The RAP Template serves as both a **planning and reporting tool**. Its main purpose is to guide regions through a structured, evidence-based process for identifying challenges, setting shared goals, and developing actionable measures. It promotes comparability and cross-learning among pilots by defining a consistent format and a set of common KPIs, while also supporting locally driven innovation.

The design was guided by four key principles:

1. **Coherence** – ensuring all pilots follow a comparable logic for policy planning and monitoring.
2. **Flexibility** – allowing regions to tailor actions, targets, and language to their own socio-economic and institutional context.
3. **Participation** – embedding the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) throughout the planning and validation process.
4. **Sustainability** – aligning short-term activities with long-term goals and governance structures.

Towards a common RAP Template format

The first version of the RAP Template was introduced in **January 2025**, following the methodological principles established in WP3 and the strategic guidance of the *PoliRuralPlus Roadmap* developed under WP2. Its central purpose was to provide a **common framework** to describe, in a coherent and comparable way, **who is doing what, when, and how** across all participating regions.

From the outset, the template was conceived as a **living document**, capable of evolving alongside the pilots as their activities advanced. Continuous exchanges between **WP3 (Methodology)**, **WP2 (Regional Visioning)**, and **WP5 (Pilot Implementation)** ensured that the structure combined methodological consistency with practical applicability in real territorial contexts.

In **November 2024**, a key enhancement was proposed by **Daniel Molina**: the incorporation of a **Gantt chart** within the RAP *Roadmap* section. This visual element allowed pilots to translate their strategic objectives into **clear, time-bound action plans**, synchronised with the **PoliRuralPlus project timeline and milestones**, including the **Open Calls**. All pilot regions worked intensively on this exercise during **January and February 2025**, defining their specific action plans and implementation sequences. The introduction of the Gantt approach was **positively**



received by all pilots, as it helped to clarify dependencies, responsibilities, and progress monitoring across activities.

Throughout 2025, the RAP Template underwent **three iterative updates**, each refining its structure, guidance, and level of detail based on pilot feedback and inter-WP discussions. The latest version — **RAP Template 3.0** — reflects both the lessons learned from earlier versions and the recommendations received during the **Mid-Term Review**.

In its final form, the template integrates several key improvements:

- **A Gender and Diversity section**, addressing inclusivity and representation in regional planning and participation.
- **A Sustainability Checklist**, providing a systematic tool to assess long-term viability, governance ownership, and continuity of actions beyond the project.
- **An enhanced KPI framework**, harmonised across pilots and aligned with the WP7 indicator set for consistent performance monitoring.
- **Explicit reference to the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA)** and foresight-based tools as core guiding methodologies.
- **Stronger linkages with digital tools**, including MAAT and the PoliRuralPlus platform modules, supporting data-driven and evidence-based decision-making.

Together, these refinements have transformed the RAP Template into a **shared operational format** that balances **common structure and regional flexibility**, ensuring both **comparability across pilots** and **adaptability to diverse local contexts**.

Finally, it is important to note that, while the current version (3.0) provides a consolidated framework for all pilots, the template will remain **open to adjustment during the final year of the project** if emerging needs, policy updates, or evaluation feedback make such refinements necessary. This flexibility ensures that the RAPs will continue to reflect the evolving realities of each pilot region and maintain full alignment with the overall objectives of *PoliRuralPlus*.

Structure and Main Components

In its current version (3.0), the template is organised into ten sections that mirror the logic of a complete policy design and implementation cycle:

1. **Introduction** – provides background on the region and explains the purpose and objectives of the RAP, situating it within local, national, and EU frameworks.
2. **Analysis of the Current Situation** – presents evidence on socio-economic, environmental, and governance conditions, identifying key challenges and opportunities. It also includes a dedicated subsection on **Gender and Diversity Dimensions**, a new addition in version 3.0 to ensure inclusion and representation.
3. **Vision and Strategic Goals** – articulates the desired future state of the region and defines measurable, time-bound objectives. This section encourages the use of foresight tools (drivers analysis, scenarios, sense-making workshops) to create long-term strategic alignment.



4. **Action Plan** – specifies intervention areas, measures, and expected outcomes. It translates strategic goals into concrete actions supported by a clear intervention logic, inspired by the “policy jobs-to-be-done” approach used in PoliRural.
5. **Policy and Funding Alignment** – analyses how RAP priorities correspond with EU and national policy frameworks (e.g., the Green Deal, Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, Digital Europe) and identifies potential funding sources and partnerships.
6. **Roadmap** – includes a timeline and implementation plan, linking short-, medium-, and long-term milestones with responsible actors.
7. **Monitoring and Evaluation** – defines key performance indicators (KPIs) to track progress, supported by both quantitative and qualitative measures. Eight core KPIs are shared across all pilots, ensuring comparability in areas such as stakeholder engagement, innovation, governance, sustainability, and impact.
8. **Communication and Engagement** – describes mechanisms for stakeholder involvement and awareness-raising activities, with emphasis on maintaining ownership and participation beyond the project lifetime.
9. **Conclusion** – summarises expected impacts and formulates a call to action for stakeholders, ensuring continuity and shared responsibility.
10. **Annexes** – include supporting data, stakeholder lists, and a **Sustainability Checklist**, which assesses how each RAP embeds principles of economic, social, and environmental resilience.

2.2. Adaptation by regional pilots and flexibility in application

While the **RAP Template 3.0** provides a shared methodological backbone for all PoliRuralPlus pilots, its design intentionally allows **flexibility** so that each region can tailor the structure and level of detail to its specific context, priorities, and maturity. This balance between standardisation and adaptability has been essential for maintaining both **comparability across pilots** and **relevance to local realities**.

The **adaptation process** began in early 2025, once the consolidated template was shared among the pilot teams. Each region interpreted the framework according to its thematic focus — whether centred on **innovation ecosystems, circular economy, governance, or spatial integration** — and integrated region-specific data, priorities, and stakeholder structures. WP5 guided this process, ensuring that all pilots maintained the core elements of the template (introduction, analysis, vision, action plan, roadmap, and KPIs) while adjusting the emphasis and terminology as appropriate.

This flexible approach proved especially valuable given the **different levels of pilot maturity** and the diversity of governance systems represented in the consortium. For example:

- The **Vidzeme Planning Region (Latvia)** applied the template to strengthen inter-municipal cooperation and digital governance under the *VPR Pathwatch* initiative. Its RAP included detailed descriptions of monitoring indicators and partnerships, reflecting Vidzeme’s advanced regional coordination mechanisms.
- The **Monaghan Pilot (Ireland)** used the structure to develop a targeted **circular economy action plan**, focusing on collaboration among local businesses, authorities, and citizens. Its adaptation placed greater emphasis on stakeholder engagement and social innovation than on policy alignment.



Both examples demonstrate how pilots used the **same structural logic** while adapting content to reflect their **institutional, geographical, and thematic realities**.

Flexibility also applied to the **granularity of actions and indicators**. Some pilots preferred detailed descriptions of measures with quantified targets, while others focused on broader strategic pathways and governance arrangements. Similarly, the **Monitoring and Evaluation** sections evolved differently depending on the availability of regional data and the use of digital tools. This diversity reflects the “learning-by-doing” nature of PoliRuralPlus, where each pilot contributes insights that inform future refinement of the methodology.

To support consistency, WP5 meetings included **feedback and peer exchanges**, allowing pilots to compare approaches and identify common practices. The good participation and high level cooperation in these meetings reinforced mutual learning and helped align reporting formats without restricting creativity.

2.3. Stakeholder engagement, Foresight and Multi-Actor Approach integrated in RAPs

Stakeholder engagement and foresight are **core pillars of the PoliRuralPlus approach**, ensuring that each RAP is not only evidence-based but also **co-created and socially validated**. These two dimensions are operationalised through the **Multi-Actor Approach (MAA)**, which underpins the entire process of RAP development — from identifying needs and defining priorities to shaping and validating actions.

Stakeholder Engagement Framework

Each pilot region applied a structured process to map, mobilise, and involve local and regional stakeholders representing the **quadruple helix** — public authorities, private sector, academia, and civil society. Engagement activities were tailored to each region’s governance culture and thematic focus, ensuring broad participation and legitimacy.

Stakeholder groups typically included local governments, regional development agencies, NGOs, farmers’ associations, business representatives, and educational or research institutions. Particular attention was given to the **inclusion of underrepresented groups** — such as women, youth, minorities, and people with disabilities — as highlighted in the updated **Gender and Diversity** section of the RAP Template 3.0.

Throughout 2025, pilots conducted a variety of engagement actions, including:

- participatory workshops and focus groups to refine the vision and intervention areas;
- online and hybrid meetings to review draft actions and validate proposed measures;
- bilateral discussions with regional authorities to ensure policy coherence; and
- local dissemination events to broaden public awareness and ownership.

These interactions generated valuable **qualitative insights** that complemented statistical and spatial data, helping pilots prioritise feasible and high-impact actions. Stakeholders thus evolved from passive consultees to **active co-creators**, shaping both the design and future implementation of their RAPs.

Integration of Foresight Methods



The use of **foresight** tools — scenario analysis, drivers mapping, and visioning workshops — helped pilots explore long-term development pathways, identify uncertainties, and align short-term actions with broader regional visions.

Foresight was not conceived as a one-off exercise but as a **recurrent learning process**, guiding reflection at different stages of RAP elaboration. Most pilots used **driver analysis (STEEPV framework)** and **scenario discussions** to test the robustness of their strategies under alternative futures. These activities also contributed to consensus-building among stakeholders, enabling regions to articulate shared **visions and strategic goals** that are realistic yet forward-looking.

As part of the ongoing work of WP3, new Foresight tools have been developed and are being applied by the pilots. These focus on ‘implementation finance.’ An issue whose importance is often underestimated, and whose consideration is often either ignored or left until too late in the planning process, leading to plans being “left on the shelf.” With this in mind, two new formal methods have been defined and are being applied by the pilots, RIA and F4F. RIA refers to the “Review of Institutional Arrangements” which focuses on identifying administrative structures at the local level which play a role in the acquisition of budget and distribution of funds under local, national and EU funding programs. F4F refers to “Foresight for Finance” which focuses on identifying potential sources of finance to support the implementation of measures that make up each action plan. In the current context, and in view of changes to the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), implementation of measures will often require funding from a variety of mechanisms, public and private, traditional and alternative. This work, which is key to ensuring RAP implementation, started in earnest in mid-2025, and will continue well into 2026.

The Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) in Practice

The **MAA** provided the methodological bridge between stakeholder engagement and foresight. It ensured that different knowledge systems — institutional, scientific, local, and experiential — were brought together in the co-creation of the RAPs.

Through the MAA, each pilot established a **local governance network** or steering group that accompanied the RAP drafting process. These networks were instrumental in:

- validating the analysis of current challenges and opportunities;
- co-defining intervention areas and action priorities;
reviewing progress and adjusting timelines (e.g., in the Gantt roadmaps); and
- providing feedback on sustainability and policy alignment.

Several pilots embedded MAA interactions into existing regional platforms or clusters to maximise continuity and ownership beyond the project lifetime.

Added Value and Lessons Learned

The integration of **stakeholder engagement, foresight, and MAA** has given the RAPs a strong participatory foundation, reinforcing both their **legitimacy** and **implementability**. The process has:

- increased stakeholder trust and visibility of rural-urban initiatives;
- improved the alignment of actions with local needs and capacities;



- strengthened regional networks and cross-sector collaboration; and
- enhanced awareness of sustainability, digitalisation, and inclusion.

At the same time, differences in engagement intensity and institutional capacity among pilots highlighted the need for **continued peer learning** and methodological support. These insights will guide the final year of the project, when pilots will further deepen stakeholder participation and translate their action plans into operational partnerships.

2.4. Consistency, Peer Review and Learning Between Pilots

During the preparation of the RAPs, WP5 promoted an approach based on **collaboration, iteration, and mutual learning** rather than formal quality assurance procedures. The goal was to ensure coherence in how pilots developed their plans, while creating space for exchange and adaptation according to each region's specific context and maturity level.

To support this process, **WP5 worked closely with WP3 and WP2** to provide common methodological guidance, including the RAP Templates, illustrative examples, and short explanatory notes. Monthly **WP5 meetings** created a space where pilots could **present progress, raise methodological questions, and exchange experiences**. These sessions served both as coordination checkpoints and as **peer-learning opportunities**, allowing teams to compare drafts, discuss practical challenges, and receive feedback from the coordination team and fellow regions. Topics frequently addressed included stakeholder engagement, foresight, sustainability, and the use of digital tools. This continuous and interactive dialogue helped align the interpretation of key methodological elements—such as the structure of the analysis, formulation of actions, and use of indicators—while still leaving room for each region's individual focus. In addition, **thematic or bilateral exchanges** were encouraged among pilots with similar priorities or contexts, enabling more focused discussions and mutual support on specific issues like circular economy, governance structures, or rural–urban partnerships.

This **iterative and collaborative process** contributed directly to several methodological improvements adopted at project level. For instance, the integration of **Gantt charts** into the RAP roadmap, the introduction of a **Sustainability Checklist**, and the refinement of the **KPI framework** all emerged from shared discussions and collective feedback. Rather than applying a top-down review, methodological evolution took place organically, shaped by pilot experience and WP coordination.

By the end of 2025, all pilots had produced RAPs that combined a **shared methodological backbone** with their **own territorial specificities**. Following the recommendations of the Mid-Term Review, particular attention was paid to strengthening **cross-pilot comparability**, through harmonised KPI definitions and more consistent reporting formats. The collaborative approach adopted so far has proven effective in maintaining alignment across the consortium while encouraging innovation and ownership at regional level. During the final year of PoliRuralPlus, these peer learning and feedback processes will continue, focusing on implementation monitoring and exchange of best practices, further consolidating the RAPs as practical and transferable models for regional policy innovation.



2.5. Refinement of KPI framework – harmonised indicators and definitions

At the beginning of the project, the definition and application of **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** proved to be one of the most challenging methodological aspects for both the coordination team and the pilot regions. The **initial KPI framework**, derived from the Grant Agreement, contained a large number of indicators covering a wide range of dimensions — from participation and innovation to policy impact and sustainability. While comprehensive, this approach soon revealed its limitations in practice:

- several KPIs were **difficult to measure or verify** at the pilot level;
- some were **too abstract or unevenly interpreted** across regions; and
- the overall number of indicators made **reporting and comparison burdensome** for both pilots and the coordination team.

During the first project period, pilots tried to align their monitoring efforts with these indicators, but the heterogeneity of regional contexts and data availability made consistent reporting almost impossible. This challenge was also noted by the **external reviewers during the Mid-Term Review**, who recommended simplifying and harmonising the KPI system to ensure its practical relevance and usability.

Following this recommendation, WP5, together with WP7 and in consultation with the pilot teams, launched a process to **redefine the KPI framework** in Q4 2025. The objective was to establish a smaller, clearer, and more operational list of indicators that would be **meaningful at pilot level** while remaining **coherent across the project**.

The resulting framework, integrated into the **RAP Template 3.0**, introduced a set of **eight harmonised KPIs** with standardised definitions and adaptable metrics. These indicators cover the main dimensions of PoliRuralPlus — **stakeholder engagement, rural–urban collaboration, innovation and digitalisation, sustainability, social cohesion, governance, communication, and economic impact**. Each KPI includes a short description, the purpose of measurement, and a target timeline (2025–2026).

This streamlined structure offers multiple advantages:

- It ensures **consistency and comparability** across all nine pilots.
- It provides pilots with a **realistic and actionable monitoring tool**, reducing the reporting burden.
- It improves the **clarity of data collection** and supports integration with WP7’s global monitoring framework.

In practice, the new KPIs have helped pilots shift from theoretical metrics to **evidence-based monitoring**, aligning their actions with measurable outcomes while maintaining flexibility to adapt targets to local circumstances. The revised framework thus represents a key methodological improvement and a direct response to the reviewers’ call for a more **useful, harmonised, and pilot-oriented indicator system** within PoliRuralPlus.

2.6. Analysis of MTR Reviewer Comments Relevant to D5.2

The Mid-Term Review (MTR) provided valuable feedback that has guided the refinement of WP5 activities and the preparation of Deliverable D5.2. Reviewers recognised the overall progress and engagement achieved by the pilots but highlighted several areas requiring further consolidation and harmonisation. The comments were particularly

relevant to the coherence of the RAPs, the comparability of pilot results, and the integration of cross-cutting dimensions such as gender, sustainability, and digitalisation.

To ensure that these recommendations are effectively addressed, WP5 collaboratively analysed all reviewer remarks and identified their specific implications for the structure and content of D5.2. The table below summarises the **main thematic areas**, the **corresponding reviewer concerns**, and the **actions or methodological adjustments** incorporated into this deliverable to respond to them.

Theme	Reviewer Concern	Implication for D5.2
Pilot maturity and comparability	Uneven levels of maturity, need harmonisation and comparability.	D5.2 must include a methodology to assess pilot maturity and a cross-pilot comparison framework .
Stakeholder engagement	Engagement uneven; underrepresented groups; need for co-creation, citizen participation, and feedback loops.	D5.2 should include a comprehensive section on stakeholder engagement , integrating both qualitative and quantitative data and evidence of co-creation.
Gender and diversity	Lack of systematic gender and diversity data.	Include a dedicated subsection on gender/disability/youth inclusion within the “Cross-Pilot Synthesis” or “MAA” sections.
Policy replication and impact	Need stronger documentation of policy alignment, replicable practices, and engagement with authorities.	Strengthen policy relevance and institutional impact sections with evidence of dialogue and uptake by regional/national authorities.
Climate and environmental aspects	Need to show climate integration and environmental awareness.	Addressed transversally across several sections, particularly within Policy Alignment with EU Frameworks and Sustainability and Post-Project Continuity, which reference climate resilience, energy transition, and alignment with the Green Deal.
Digital tools and WP4 integration	Gap between technical and pilot work; lack of user-centred design and tool relevance.	Covered through transversal references in Cross-Pilot Synthesis and Monitoring and Evaluation, highlighting pilot feedback on digital tools and collaboration mechanisms with WP4 for usability and data integration.

Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH) methodologies	Gap between theory and citizen-level practice.	Integrate this within Stakeholder Engagement & Co-Creation , highlighting how foresight and participatory tools are applied in practice.
Need for KPI revision	Reviewers requested more meaningful KPIs and harmonised definitions.	Include a new KPI harmonisation framework sub-section under “Monitoring and Evaluation.”

2.7. Challenges and improvements identified for future use

The development of the RAPs has been an essential learning process for all pilot regions and for the coordination team. While the harmonised methodology and peer-learning mechanisms have ensured coherence and progress, several **challenges and opportunities for improvement** have also emerged, offering valuable insights for the final phase of the project and beyond.

One of the main challenges has been the **uneven pace of maturity** across pilots. Differences in institutional capacity, stakeholder networks, and policy contexts meant that some regions advanced more rapidly than others in transforming their strategies into operational actions. However, this diversity is also one of the project’s greatest assets. The variety of territorial, socio-economic, and governance conditions represented in the nine pilots closely **reflects the diversity of rural and peri-urban realities found across the European Union**. This richness of contexts allows PoliRuralPlus to generate lessons and models that are broadly transferable and relevant to the wide range of scenarios that characterise European rural policy implementation.

The simplification of the KPI framework and the introduction of practical tools such as Gantt charts have already helped address the differences in pace and methodology, but sustained follow-up will be essential in the final project year.

Another challenge relates to **ensuring long-term sustainability and exploitation** of the RAPs. Many pilots have successfully defined feasible action plans, but their continuation beyond the project lifetime depends on stable governance, local ownership, and access to funding. For this reason, the **third and final year of PoliRuralPlus** will place strong emphasis on **sustainability planning and exploitation strategies**, helping pilots identify institutional anchors and pathways for the integration of RAP measures into regional and national policy frameworks. WP5 will work closely with WP7 and WP2 to ensure that good practices, replicable actions, and policy impacts are properly documented and disseminated.

In parallel, more attention will be given to **quality assurance and evaluation** processes during 2026. While the RAPs have been developed through iterative peer learning and informal coordination, the next phase will include more systematic review mechanisms to ensure consistency and comparability in implementation and monitoring. This will help strengthen the evidence base of the project’s final outputs and support the credibility of policy recommendations derived from the RAPs.

Furthermore, during 2026, WP5 will place **special emphasis on reporting the use of technological tools developed under WP4**. As these tools reach higher levels of maturity and functionality, pilots will provide more detailed evidence on their testing, applicability, and added value in regional planning processes. This enhanced



reporting will contribute to demonstrating the integration of digital solutions into real-world policy contexts, ensuring that the outcomes of WP4 are effectively validated and exploited through pilot activities.

Finally, all pilot regions will **continue updating their RAPs** during the last project year. These updates will capture the progress made in implementation, reflect new stakeholder inputs, and integrate feedback from monitoring activities. The evolving nature of the RAPs remains one of the strengths of the PoliRuralPlus approach — they are dynamic, learning-based instruments that adapt to emerging needs, ensuring both relevance and practical impact in each regional context.

3. Overview of the Nine Regional Action Plans

3.1. Pilot Regions: Thematic Focus and Diversity of Approaches

Since the submission of *Deliverable D5.1*, all nine PoliRuralPlus pilots have continued to refine their RAPs, updating thematic priorities, structures, and actions in line with their regional dynamics and with the recommendations received during the Mid-Term Review. The 2025 updates show a clear shift from conceptual design towards implementation planning, with stronger attention to measurable outcomes, sustainability, and cross-sectoral integration. Each RAP now follows the updated guidance provided in the RAP Template 3.0, ensuring a more harmonised yet adaptable structure.

Compared to the versions included in D5.1, pilots have adjusted their focus areas to reflect emerging opportunities and the lessons learned from earlier activities. Most have clarified their vision, action frameworks, and expected impacts. The main thematic directions include:

- **Green and circular economy transitions**, particularly in Monaghan (Ireland) and Puglia (Italy), where pilots promote resource efficiency, circular business models, and sustainable local production.
- **Digital transformation and smart innovation**, central to Malta, Central Greece, and the Czech–Bavarian cross-border pilot, which focus on digital tools, entrepreneurship, and data-driven services supporting rural–urban linkages.
- **Territorial governance and foresight-based policy design**, developed in Vidzeme (Latvia) and Slovakia, where the RAPs strengthen coordination between institutions and use foresight methods to support strategic planning.
- **Cultural and natural heritage valorisation**, in Spain and Finland, combining tourism, landscape management, and local identity as drivers of rural attractiveness and economic diversification.

Although each RAP operates within its own thematic scope, several cross-cutting priorities are now more systematically embedded across regions, such as gender equality, inclusion of underrepresented groups, climate awareness, and sustainability assessment. These have become standard features in the updated template, ensuring comparability and shared understanding of transversal dimensions.

From a comparative standpoint, the pilots can be broadly grouped into different **types of approach**, reflecting both their objectives and territorial realities. A first group emphasises **governance innovation**, focusing on how planning, data, and foresight can improve decision-making in regional administrations. A second group drives **green and circular transitions**, linking local economic development to environmental performance. A third cluster advances **digital innovation and data ecosystems**, testing the integration of technological tools developed under



WP4 and providing feedback on their usability. Finally, a smaller set of pilots concentrates on **cultural and environmental assets**, using tourism, creative sectors, and ecosystem services to revitalise local economies.

The boundaries between these categories are fluid, as many RAPs combine multiple dimensions—linking digitalisation with sustainability, or connecting policy governance with social innovation. This interplay demonstrates the flexibility of the RAP framework and the capacity of each region to tailor it to its own needs.

The diversity observed across the nine RAPs mirrors the variety of socio-economic and institutional contexts found throughout the European Union. The consortium includes pilots from northern bioregions, Mediterranean and island territories, and cross-border areas, each operating under different governance systems and policy environments. This heterogeneity is not a limitation but an asset: it allows the project to test methodologies under conditions that closely resemble real European rural scenarios, enriching the collective learning process and ensuring that the tools and approaches developed within PoliRuralPlus remain relevant across multiple territorial settings.

3.2. Key objectives and intervention logic

In *Deliverable D5.1*, the objectives and actions of the pilots were described individually, reflecting the early stages of RAP development. As the project progressed, it became necessary to identify the **common logic** that underpins all RAPs and to explain how local actions collectively contribute to the overarching objectives of PoliRuralPlus. This section therefore provides a cross-regional synthesis of objectives and intervention logic, responding also to the recommendations of the Mid-Term Review, which highlighted the need for greater **comparability and clarity** in linking objectives, measures, and expected results.

Across the nine pilots, the RAPs have evolved from diagnostic or strategic documents into **operational frameworks** structured around clear objectives, measurable outcomes, and a shared intervention model. While each region maintains its own thematic priorities, all follow a similar logic that connects local challenges with targeted actions and long-term impacts.

The overall aim of all RAPs is to **strengthen rural–urban linkages** by promoting innovation, sustainability, and inclusive governance in regional development processes. Within this shared ambition, three broad categories of objectives can be distinguished:

- **Enhancing local innovation ecosystems**, through circular economy initiatives, digital transformation, and the creation of knowledge-sharing platforms that link rural and urban stakeholders.
- **Improving governance and participation**, by fostering foresight-based planning, multi-actor collaboration, and citizen engagement mechanisms that increase transparency and trust in public decision-making.
- **Fostering sustainability and resilience**, by embedding climate awareness, environmental stewardship, and long-term economic viability within regional strategies.

Each RAP translates these objectives into **intervention areas and actions** guided by a common logical sequence:

1. **Inputs** – regional resources, stakeholder networks, and technical tools provided through PoliRuralPlus;
2. **Activities** – co-creation workshops, pilot testing of WP4 tools, stakeholder engagement events, and local capacity-building initiatives;



3. **Outputs** – validated action plans, partnerships, and datasets supporting evidence-based governance;
4. **Outcomes** – improved cooperation, innovation capacity, and engagement between rural and urban actors;
5. **Impacts** – contributions to sustainable territorial development, policy innovation, and stronger rural–urban cohesion.

This structure makes it possible to interpret the RAPs not as isolated regional plans but as **interconnected components** of a collective learning process. The simplified KPI framework introduced in 2025 reinforces this approach by aligning objectives and actions with measurable indicators, ensuring traceability between what pilots plan, implement, and report.

The **value of this shared intervention logic** lies in providing a clear and comparable reference for analysis across pilots while preserving flexibility for regional adaptation. It ensures that each RAP can pursue locally relevant goals while contributing coherently to the overarching vision of PoliRuralPlus—bridging rural and urban territories through innovation, participation, and sustainability.

3.3. Comparative summary table of the RAPs

The RAPs reflect the diversity of regional realities within the PoliRuralPlus consortium while following a harmonised structure based on the RAP Template 3.0. Each pilot has refined its thematic focus and action plan since *D5.1*, integrating measurable objectives, sustainability considerations, and the use of digital and participatory tools. The table below summarises the main characteristics of the nine RAPs, highlighting their themes, objectives, stakeholder configurations, and approaches to sustainability.

Pilot Region	Theme	Main Objectives	Stakeholders	Tools Used	Key KPIs	Sustainability Approach
County Monaghan, Ireland	Circular economy and green entrepreneurship	Stimulate circular business models, strengthen rural–urban collaboration, and create a Circular Economy Hub	Monaghan Integrated Development (MID), County Council (MCC), Local Enterprise Office, Teagasc, SMEs, citizens	<i>No explicit use of WP4 tools mentioned</i>	Stakeholders engaged; number of CE initiatives; SMEs supported	Focus on long-term ownership through integration in LEADER and local policies; Circular Economy Hub ensures continuity
Slovakia	Foresight-based planning and	Strengthen multi-actor cooperation, foresight and innovation	Slovak Rural Parliament, ministries, universities,	MAATool, DSS, Knowledge Space	Stakeholders engaged; digital tools	Institutional anchoring through ministries and integration with national CAP monitoring tools

	innovation ecosystems	capacity; align with CAP and Green Deal	NGOs, municipalities		adopted; rural–urban partnerships	
Central Greece	Smart agriculture and digital transformation	Support digital skills, agri-tech adoption, and stakeholder cooperation for sustainability	Region of Central Greece, municipalities, Chambers of Commerce, women/youth groups, SMEs	<i>Testing of PoliRuralPlus tools mentioned</i>	Stakeholders engaged; digital tools used; cross-sector collaboration	Multi-level governance and inclusion of youth and women; integration in regional plans
Apulia, Italy	Agri-food innovation and circular economy	Strengthen agri-food networks, promote short supply chains, improve cooperation between producers and institutions	Regional agencies, cooperatives, universities, local authorities	<i>Not specified</i>	Number of producer partnerships; innovation initiatives	Long-term sustainability through regional agri-food ecosystems and policy alignment
Mallusjoki, Finland	Rural event ecosystem and sustainable tourism	Build a rural event industry ecosystem; foster partnerships and green event models	Mallusjoki Youth Association (MYA), municipalities, SMEs, NGOs	<i>No WP4 tools; use of apps/data /AI mentioned</i>	Events held; visitor numbers; CO ₂ reduction; new businesses	Zero-waste, renewable energy, and carbon-neutral event management by 2040
Czech-Bavarian border region, Czechia - Germany	Cross-border innovation and rural–urban	Create governance structures, digital infrastructures, and training	Regional councils, chambers, training academies, municipalities	Shared digital infrastructure, data platform	RAP updates; training participants; joint projects	Long-term cooperation mechanisms and institutional capacity-building

	connectivity	schemes to strengthen cross-border collaboration				
Spain	Cultural and natural heritage, smart rural development	Promote circular and renewable-based development; valorise heritage; strengthen social cohesion	ADESIMAN, provincial authorities, SMEs, tourism actors, NGOs	MAAT (explicitly used)	Events, heritage projects, digitalisation actions	Sustainability checklist applied; integration of renewables, circularity, and social inclusion
Vidzeme, Latvia	Regional data governance and territorial monitoring	Develop harmonised monitoring indicators and digital governance frameworks (VPR PATHWATCH)	VPR administration, municipalities, ministries, NGOs, IT experts	VPR PATHWATCH, Data & AI Community of Practice	Number of municipalities engaged; agreements on indicators; capacity-building events	Institutional sustainability through integration in regional and national monitoring systems
Malta	Community training and digital innovation	Build digital and green skills through training, cascade partnerships, and local collaboration	MCAST, GRDA, NGOs, youth groups, local councils	MAATool (for KPI tracking)	Training sessions; partnerships; participants engaged	

Across the nine RAPs, a clear progression can be observed from planning and analysis towards implementation and monitoring. Thematic diversity remains wide, yet certain patterns emerge: pilots such as **Ireland, Italy, and Finland** focus on circular and green transitions; **Latvia, Slovakia, and Greece** strengthen governance, data use, and innovation systems; while **Spain, Malta, and the Czech–Bavarian region** concentrate on culture, digitalisation, and cross-border cooperation. Sustainability approaches are consistently embedded across RAPs, though through different means: institutional anchoring in governance pilots, low-carbon and circular models in economic pilots, and community-led continuity in social and cultural pilots. Together, these variations reflect not fragmentation but



adaptation of a shared framework to distinct territorial realities, demonstrating the flexibility and contextual relevance of the PoliRuralPlus methodology.

4. Insights from RAP Implementation

4.1. Common Drivers, Challenges and Opportunities

Despite their differences in context and progress paces, the nine RAPs share a series of common **drivers** that have shaped their objectives and implementation logic. A primary driver across all regions is the **need to strengthen rural–urban linkages** through more integrated approaches to development. Many pilots, such as those in Ireland, Italy, and Spain, explicitly refer to the interdependence between rural and urban economies, and to the necessity of developing value chains, service systems, and governance structures that reflect this connection. Another recurring driver is the pursuit of **sustainable and resilient local economies**, supported by green and circular transitions, as seen in Monaghan, Puglia, and Finland. The ambition to enhance **digital capacity and innovation ecosystems** also appears widely, especially in Malta, Central Greece, and the Czech–Bavarian region, where pilots are testing new digital tools and data-driven planning methods. In parallel, **multi-actor governance and participatory foresight** remain foundational principles across all RAPs, acting as both a methodological driver and a practical means of ensuring legitimacy and inclusiveness.

While the pilots share common ambitions and a harmonised methodological framework, the process of translating these strategic goals into measurable and operational actions has naturally progressed at **different paces across regions**. This variation reflects the diversity of institutional contexts, resources, and local governance structures rather than uneven commitment or capacity. Throughout 2025, WP5 coordination and peer learning activities have significantly contributed to harmonising approaches and supporting regions in advancing from planning to implementation.

The integration of **digital tools developed under WP4** remains an evolving process. Most pilots have engaged in **testing and feedback cycles**, providing valuable input for tool refinement and usability improvements. A number of pilots have already started exploring practical applications within their regional planning workflows, while others are preparing integration steps as the tools reach higher levels of technical maturity.

Stakeholder engagement continues to be a strong dimension of all RAPs, with active networks of public authorities, businesses, research bodies, and community actors. The depth and forms of co-creation vary according to local conditions, but all regions demonstrate steady progress in consolidating participatory structures. In complex governance settings—such as cross-border or multi-level environments—the pilots have successfully adapted their coordination mechanisms to ensure coherence and inclusiveness in decision-making.

At the same time, the RAPs reveal important **opportunities** that have emerged through collaboration and learning. Many pilots are using their RAPs as frameworks to **build durable partnerships** among municipalities, research bodies, and civil society, with examples of new cooperation platforms in Slovakia, Central Greece, and Vidzeme. The use of foresight and participatory workshops has created openings for **policy dialogue and alignment**, helping local actors engage with regional or national strategies, such as CAP plans and climate policies. The introduction of the simplified KPI framework has also provided a common reference point for measuring progress, encouraging more evidence-based decision-making. In several regions, the growing maturity of WP4 tools and the cross-pilot exchange of experiences are fostering opportunities to **strengthen digital uptake** and enhance data-informed



regional governance during 2026. These developments suggest that while challenges remain, the common drivers continue to provide a coherent direction for collective progress across the PoliRuralPlus pilots.

4.2. Rural–urban linkages emerging from the RAPs

While the structural and analytical study of rural–urban linkages is developed in detail in *Deliverable D2.3 (WP2)*, this section focuses on how these linkages are translated into practice through the actions and governance frameworks defined in the RAPs.

Strengthening rural–urban linkages is one of the core ambitions of PoliRuralPlus and a unifying theme across all RAPs. The 2025 updates show how this concept has evolved from a strategic intention into a more operational framework, translating the idea of connectivity between territories into concrete actions, partnerships, and policy processes. While each pilot interprets these linkages according to its regional context, three main dimensions can be identified across the consortium: economic interdependence, governance integration, and social–territorial cohesion.

The first dimension is **economic interdependence**, visible in pilots such as Ireland, Italy, and Finland. These regions focus on strengthening value chains that link rural producers with urban markets through circular and sustainable business models. In Monaghan, the development of a Circular Economy Hub connects local enterprises with service providers and consumers in nearby towns, demonstrating how environmental and economic goals can reinforce each other. In Puglia, the RAP supports short agri-food supply chains and cooperation between rural producers and urban distribution networks. Finland’s Mallusjoki pilot, although smaller in scale, illustrates how cultural and event-based tourism can create new flows of visitors, income, and services between rural communities and nearby urban centres.

A second dimension concerns **governance and policy integration**, where rural–urban linkages are managed through institutional collaboration and data-based planning. Vidzeme and Slovakia have advanced this perspective by linking regional foresight, data governance, and policy monitoring systems that cover both rural and peri-urban territories. Vidzeme’s use of PATHWATCH and its cooperation with national ministries exemplify how evidence-based monitoring can inform multi-level policy. The Czech–Bavarian cross-border pilot also contributes to this dimension by building shared digital infrastructures and training schemes that connect rural administrations across borders. In these cases, the RAPs show how governance mechanisms can bridge administrative divides and enable more coherent territorial planning.

The third dimension relates to **social and territorial cohesion**, which underpins several RAPs through participatory processes and community-oriented actions. In Spain, the RAP integrates renewable energy, heritage preservation, and circularity within a framework that connects rural settlements with provincial urban centres, reinforcing shared identity and mutual dependence. Malta’s approach focuses on digital inclusion and skills development, aiming to reduce disparities between urban and rural populations while fostering innovation networks that span both settings. Central Greece similarly combines digital entrepreneurship and stakeholder cooperation to ensure that rural areas benefit from regional innovation policies and infrastructure.

Across all pilots, rural–urban linkages are increasingly seen not as a simple flow of resources or people but as **reciprocal relationships** that shape governance, economic opportunity, and social well-being. The RAPs collectively demonstrate that reinforcing these connections requires both institutional mechanisms—such as data



sharing, foresight, and joint planning—and community-based initiatives that ensure participation and inclusivity across territorial scales.

4.3. Challenges encountered during RAP design and stakeholder engagement

The process of designing and updating the RAPs throughout 2025 has revealed a number of challenges that are both methodological and operational in nature. These challenges stem from the diversity of pilot contexts, institutional settings, and stakeholder networks, but also from the iterative and experimental nature of the RAP methodology itself. While these factors are inherent to a multi-regional project like PoliRuralPlus, they have influenced the pace, depth, and comparability of RAP development across pilots.

A first group of challenges concerns **methodological interpretation and consistency**. Despite the common RAP Template and regular coordination meetings, pilots differed in how they applied certain concepts—such as defining actions, indicators, or expected outcomes. For some regions, the process of transforming strategic foresight into a concrete and time-bound action plan required additional support. The introduction of the Gantt-based roadmap in early 2025 helped clarify timelines and responsibilities, but achieving uniform levels of detail remained difficult. The diversity of governance systems, from centralised administrations to local partnerships, also affected how easily each pilot could operationalise the template. These variations occasionally limited cross-pilot comparability, an issue that was highlighted in the Mid-Term Review and later addressed through harmonisation efforts and clearer KPI definitions.

Another set of difficulties relates to **stakeholder engagement and participation dynamics**. While all pilots have established stakeholder groups, the intensity and continuity of engagement varied widely. Some regions, such as Ireland and Spain, maintained active cooperation through workshops and multi-actor meetings, while others experienced challenges in mobilising participants consistently. In certain cases, political cycles or administrative restructuring temporarily reduced participation from local authorities. Ensuring the inclusion of underrepresented groups—such as women, youth, and people with disabilities—was another area where progress was uneven, though the revised RAP Template now includes a dedicated gender and diversity section to address this. Maintaining stakeholder motivation throughout the design process, particularly when activities did not yield immediate tangible results, also proved challenging.

A third group of challenges involves **resource and contextual constraints**. Several pilots reported limited human or financial capacity to coordinate activities, particularly when stakeholder networks extended across large territories or multiple jurisdictions. The Czech–Bavarian pilot faced the additional complexity of cross-border coordination, while smaller pilots such as Malta and Finland needed to adapt the methodology to their more compact scales and networks. Digitalisation was another cross-cutting challenge: although pilots recognised the potential of WP4 tools, the limited maturity of some applications and varying levels of digital skills among partners slowed their practical uptake. These factors contributed to differences in the perceived relevance and usability of the technological components of the project.

Finally, the experimental and adaptive character of the RAP process itself presented a challenge but also a learning opportunity. The pilots' need to balance flexibility with structure required ongoing negotiation between harmonisation and local adaptation. The collaborative refinement of the template, the KPI framework, and the multi-actor engagement process gradually transformed these difficulties into mechanisms for improvement, shaping a more mature and coherent set of RAPs by the end of 2025.



4.4. Lessons learned and transferability to other regions

The RAP development process is generating a number of practical lessons that extend beyond the specific pilot contexts and hold relevance for other regions seeking to design and implement participatory, evidence-based action plans. These lessons emerge from the iterative nature of the PoliRuralPlus approach—combining local experimentation, cross-pilot learning, and methodological refinement—and point to the conditions that facilitate successful implementation and replication.

The first lesson concerns the **importance of process design and flexibility**. The experience so far demonstrated that the RAP Template is not simply a reporting tool but a dynamic framework that evolves with the pilots. Allowing room for regional adaptation, while maintaining a shared structure and terminology, proved essential to ensure both ownership and comparability.

A second lesson relates to the **central role of stakeholder engagement and the Multi-Actor Approach**. Pilots that invested in continuous dialogue and co-creation—such as Ireland, Spain, and Slovakia—reported stronger legitimacy and clearer pathways to implementation. Engagement processes that went beyond consultation and included capacity-building or joint decision-making generated more sustainable outcomes. The experience also showed that inclusiveness requires explicit planning: gender, youth, and minority participation did not automatically emerge from stakeholder networks but had to be actively fostered through targeted outreach and specific events.

A third area of learning concerns **interdisciplinary integration and coordination across WPs**. Collaboration between **WP3, WP5 and WP2** has been particularly important in ensuring methodological consistency and conceptual depth across the RAPs. WP3's contribution was instrumental in refining the overall methodological framework, linking foresight and participatory approaches with action planning and evaluation mechanisms. In parallel, interaction with **WP4** provided opportunities to test and provide feedback on digital tools, while WP2 reinforced the conceptual grounding of governance and foresight within regional contexts. Although the degree of technical integration varied, these exchanges underscored the value of combining methodological, social, and technological innovation in regional development. This multidimensional approach—linking **data, dialogue, and policy**—can serve as a transferable model for other EU initiatives working on territorial cohesion and digital transition.

Finally, the pilots demonstrated that **peer learning and progressive harmonisation** can significantly enhance quality and comparability. The informal peer-review exercises conducted in 2025 allowed pilots to identify methodological gaps, share templates, and replicate successful practices. This experience suggests that replication does not depend on identical conditions but on **adaptable mechanisms**—common language, shared indicators, and continuous feedback loops—that enable local actors to contextualise collective knowledge.

Taken together, these lessons provide a roadmap for future transferability. They illustrate how a combination of methodological coherence, participatory governance, and adaptive learning can strengthen not only the RAPs themselves but also the broader capacity of regions to engage in collaborative, data-informed, and inclusive rural–urban development. Thus, building on these experiences, WP5 has started designing a **Best Practices** exercise (Q4 2025), to be developed by all pilots. Best practices will capture concrete examples of successful approaches, tools, and governance mechanisms emerging from the RAPs. It will serve as a structured



dissemination and learning instrument throughout 2026, helping pilots reflect on implementation progress, share transferable insights, and contribute to the overall knowledge base of PoliRuralPlus.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

5.1. Link with project-wide KPI framework

The harmonised KPI framework introduced within the RAP Template 3.0 provides the foundation for consistent monitoring across all pilot regions, while ensuring alignment with the broader project-wide indicators coordinated under **WP7**. Following the refinement process described earlier in this deliverable (section 2.5), the RAP-level KPIs have been simplified and standardised to focus on dimensions that are both meaningful for regional implementation and compatible with the overall evaluation structure of PoliRuralPlus.

During 2025, the **coordination between WP5 and WP7** has been essential to ensure coherence between the monitoring of regional actions and the aggregation of project-wide results. WP7 has defined a comprehensive set of KPIs that cover the communication, dissemination, exploitation, and policy impact dimensions of the project. Several of these indicators are directly influenced by pilot activities—for instance, those related to stakeholder engagement, visibility of regional initiatives, gender balance in participation, and the uptake of digital tools. Through this linkage, data collected at pilot level feed into the central monitoring system, allowing WP7 to capture not only quantitative outputs but also the qualitative value of pilot implementation.

The RAP indicators thus serve a **dual function**: they provide pilots with operational feedback for their own management and simultaneously contribute to the project's collective performance assessment. For example, indicators such as the number of stakeholders involved, workshops held, or tools tested have been integrated into the WP7 dashboard to illustrate progress towards engagement and innovation targets. At the same time, WP7's higher-level KPIs—covering communication reach, replication potential, and policy influence—offer pilots a broader perspective on how their local actions contribute to project visibility and long-term impact.

This two-way alignment between WP5 and WP7 ensures that the monitoring system operates as a **coherent feedback loop**, connecting regional experimentation with consortium-wide evaluation. The collaboration also supports data quality assurance, with WP7 providing methodological guidance on indicator reporting formats and periodic collection schedules. As the project enters its final year, this integrated approach will enable more systematic reporting of outcomes and strengthen the evidence base for sustainability and exploitation activities in 2026.

5.2. Summary of RAP-specific indicators

While the harmonised KPI framework defines a common structure for monitoring progress across pilots, each RAP has selected and adapted a set of **context-specific indicators** that reflect its thematic priorities and governance arrangements. These RAP-specific indicators translate the general categories of the project framework—engagement, innovation, sustainability, and impact—into locally meaningful measures that can guide implementation and evaluation.



Most pilots have combined **quantitative indicators** (such as number of stakeholders involved, training sessions delivered, or digital tools tested) with **qualitative indicators** capturing the quality of collaboration, policy relevance, and stakeholder satisfaction. For instance, Ireland and Italy focus on metrics related to circular economy and SME participation, while Latvia and Slovakia emphasise governance effectiveness and data-sharing mechanisms. Spain, Finland, and Malta include indicators linked to social innovation, tourism, and digital literacy, reflecting their distinctive thematic scopes.

The updated RAP Template 3.0 ensures that these indicators are recorded systematically, with a clear distinction between **output**, **outcome**, and **impact** levels. This helps pilots monitor both immediate results and long-term effects of their actions. Moreover, the harmonised structure facilitates the aggregation of comparable data into the project-wide KPI system managed by WP7.

Rather than representing a fixed list, the RAP indicators function as a **dynamic monitoring tool**, evolving as pilots progress and new actions are implemented. This flexibility allows regions to refine their measurement frameworks as their plans mature, ensuring that evaluation remains both relevant and proportionate to local realities.

5.3. Evaluation and monitoring mechanisms

The evaluation and monitoring dimension of the RAPs has progressed significantly during 2025, though it remains an evolving component of the PoliRuralPlus framework. While the first year of pilot implementation focused on planning, engagement, and methodological harmonisation, the coming phase will place greater emphasis on **systematic monitoring, evaluation, and feedback loops** to assess progress and impact across regions.

A preliminary monitoring structure is already in place through the **RAP Template 3.0**, which defines a set of harmonised KPIs, qualitative descriptors, and progress reporting fields. These elements allow pilots to document the implementation status of their actions, report stakeholder activities, and track outputs and outcomes in a comparable way. The coordination between **WP5 and WP7** has ensured that these mechanisms align with the overall project-wide KPI framework and contribute to the aggregation of pilot data at consortium level. However, the monitoring process is still in its early stages, with pilots at different levels of readiness to apply these tools systematically.

To date, monitoring activities have largely consisted of **qualitative tracking** of actions through coordination meetings, peer reviews, and self-assessment templates. These exchanges have provided valuable insights into pilot progress, but the next stage will require more structured and evidence-based reporting. The **refined KPI framework** and the upcoming **Best Practices Report (Q4 2025)** will play a central role in supporting this transition, offering clear metrics, examples, and methodologies for assessing results.

During **2026**, monitoring and evaluation will become one of the core components of WP5 activities. The focus will shift towards:

- establishing a **common reporting calendar** (most likely quarterly) and templates for indicator submissions;
- improving **data consistency and verification** across pilots;
- integrating feedback from WP4 tool testing and WP7 evaluation processes; and
- linking monitoring results with sustainability, exploitation, and policy impact assessments.



By progressively strengthening these mechanisms, the project will be able to demonstrate not only the implementation of regional actions but also their tangible outcomes and cross-pilot contributions to rural–urban cohesion and innovation. The evolution of monitoring practices in 2026 will therefore represent both a consolidation of the RAP methodology and a key step towards ensuring long-term learning and policy relevance beyond the lifetime of the project.

5.4. Early results and feedback from pilots

Although the full monitoring and evaluation cycle will be implemented in 2026, several **early observations and qualitative results** have emerged from the pilots during 2025. These insights provide initial evidence of how the RAPs are influencing regional collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and the operationalisation of foresight-based planning.

Across most pilots, partners reported that the **RAP Template** and accompanying coordination under WP5 have significantly improved the clarity and structure of their planning processes. The introduction of Gantt-based roadmaps and harmonised KPIs has helped translate long-term visions into concrete, time-bound actions. Pilots such as Ireland, Slovakia, and Latvia highlighted that the structured format encouraged more systematic reflection and alignment with policy priorities. In smaller pilots—such as Malta and Finland—the template provided a practical framework for documenting initiatives and managing collaboration within limited resource environments.

Several regions also observed **enhanced stakeholder collaboration** as an indirect result of the RAP process. Regular workshops and participatory sessions have contributed to maintaining engagement networks and increasing the legitimacy of planned actions. In Spain and Italy, the use of the template and foresight tools facilitated more transparent discussions with local authorities and associations. In Vidzeme and Central Greece, the integration of foresight and data governance helped bridge communication between different administrative levels.

Feedback gathered during WP5 coordination meetings suggests that pilots view the RAP as both a planning and a **learning instrument**. Many teams reported that the process of preparing successive versions of their RAPs helped them identify gaps, prioritise actions, and recognise interdependencies with other WPs. This iterative approach has also strengthened the connection between regional implementation and the project’s broader goals on rural–urban linkages and sustainability.

While these insights remain preliminary, they confirm that the RAP framework is functioning as intended—as a mechanism that fosters coherence, participation, and learning across diverse regional contexts. The more formalised monitoring system to be launched in 2026 will build upon these early qualitative results, enabling the consortium to assess progress in a more structured and evidence-based manner.

6. Horizontal and Strategic Dimensions

The horizontal dimensions of the RAPs refer to the cross-cutting elements that ensure coherence, inclusiveness, and strategic alignment across all pilots. These include governance and institutional anchoring, policy alignment with European and national frameworks, and the integration of gender equality and diversity principles.



6.1. Governance and institutional anchoring of RAPs

The governance dimension of the RAPs has evolved significantly during 2025, moving from coordination structures within the project to tangible integration with existing regional and local governance frameworks. This institutional anchoring is essential to ensure that the RAPs are not only project outputs but also enduring instruments for territorial policy and planning.

In most pilot regions, governance arrangements have matured into multi-level and multi-actor structures, enabling coordination between public authorities, research organisations, and local stakeholders. In **Vidzeme** and **Slovakia**, the RAPs have been formally linked to regional development strategies and are now embedded in the planning cycles of local administrations. The **Spanish** pilot has integrated its RAP into the broader framework of the regional innovation and bioeconomy strategies, aligning its governance with the departments responsible for rural development and sustainability. In **Ireland**, the RAP is being implemented under a participatory structure led by local authorities and community organisations, creating a direct bridge between policy and practice.

Other pilots, such as **Italy** and **Central Greece**, have reinforced governance through structured cooperation between academia, regional agencies, and municipalities. These partnerships ensure that the foresight and participatory methodologies introduced by PoliRuralPlus are institutionalised within decision-making processes. The **Malta** pilot has strengthened collaboration with national ministries and agencies responsible for territorial and environmental planning, facilitating policy dialogue and future scaling. In **Czechia–Germany**, cross-border governance mechanisms have been initiated to coordinate planning actions, illustrating the adaptability of the RAP framework to complex territorial contexts.

This institutional anchoring has also been facilitated by the **Multi-Actor Approach (MAA)**, which has helped establish transparent decision-making processes and continuous feedback loops between stakeholders and governance bodies. The regular peer learning activities organised under WP5 have supported the exchange of governance practices, encouraging pilots to move from consultation-based participation to co-decision models where stakeholders play an active role in shaping actions and priorities.

While the degree of formalisation varies across pilots, all RAPs have now identified governance structures and responsible entities for implementation, monitoring, and follow-up. This marks a clear shift from project-driven coordination towards locally owned and sustainable governance models. The experiences gathered in this process will directly inform the analysis to be developed under **Deliverable D5.3 – Effectiveness of the Multi-Actor Approach**, ensuring that governance arrangements are evaluated, documented, and transferable to other regions.

6.2. Policy alignment across EU and national frameworks (Green Deal, CAP, NEB, LTVRA)

A key strength of the RAPs lies in their alignment with broader European and national policy frameworks that guide sustainable territorial development. Throughout 2025, pilots have progressively integrated these strategic priorities into their RAPs, ensuring that local actions contribute to the implementation of EU-level goals and that regional initiatives benefit from existing policy instruments and funding mechanisms.



The **European Green Deal** serves as a central reference point for most RAPs, particularly in areas related to the circular economy, sustainable mobility, energy transition, and ecosystem management. Pilots in **Spain, Ireland, and Italy** have explicitly linked their actions to Green Deal objectives, promoting climate-neutral practices, renewable energy solutions, and sustainable agriculture. Similarly, **Slovakia** and **Central Greece** have framed their RAP interventions around green innovation and environmental protection, ensuring that their regional strategies support the EU's overarching climate neutrality targets for 2050.

The **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** also provides a major policy connection. Several RAPs have aligned their actions with CAP objectives under the 2023–2027 programming period, especially in relation to rural diversification, smart farming, and the integration of environmental and digital innovations into rural production systems. This alignment not only reinforces policy coherence but also opens opportunities for future funding and mainstreaming of RAP activities into national CAP Strategic Plans.

In addition, the **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)** has guided the RAPs' focus on balanced rural–urban development, territorial cohesion, and social inclusion. Many pilots have drawn on LTVRA principles to strengthen citizen participation, foresight-driven planning, and community resilience. The LTVRA has been particularly relevant for pilots such as **Vidzeme, Slovakia, and Finland**, where long-term demographic and spatial trends have shaped regional foresight exercises and informed their vision-building processes.

The **New European Bauhaus (NEB)** framework, with its emphasis on sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion, has been referenced in a few RAPs—especially **Malta** and **Italy**—in connection with cultural heritage, place-based innovation, and creative economy initiatives. While not all pilots have direct links to NEB actions, the spirit of design thinking, community co-creation, and integration of beauty and sustainability is reflected in many RAP interventions.

At the **national level**, most RAPs are also aligned with ongoing policy and programming frameworks, including regional innovation strategies, smart specialisation agendas, and rural development programmes. This policy coherence ensures that the RAPs are not isolated project tools but complementary mechanisms reinforcing existing planning and investment cycles. The policy alignment achieved during 2025 thus represents an important step towards mainstreaming the RAPs into formal governance and funding structures, paving the way for long-term sustainability and replication across European regions.

6.3. Gender equality, diversity and inclusion in RAPs

The integration of gender equality, diversity, and inclusion has become an increasingly visible dimension within the RAPs, reflecting both project-level priorities and recommendations from the Mid-Term Review. In response, the latest version of the **RAP Template (3.0)** includes a dedicated subsection on gender and diversity to ensure systematic reporting and awareness across pilots. This has encouraged each region to reflect on inclusiveness not only as a social value but as a key factor for sustainable and resilient territorial development.

During 2025, several pilots took concrete steps to embed gender and diversity considerations in their RAP design and stakeholder engagement processes. The **Irish, Spanish, and Italian** pilots explicitly included gender-balanced participation targets in their stakeholder activities and foresight workshops. In **Vidzeme** and **Slovakia**, the RAPs acknowledge demographic challenges and the need to strengthen youth and women's participation in decision-making related to rural innovation and entrepreneurship. The **Maltese** and **Greek** pilots have highlighted



inclusion of underrepresented groups, including migrants, people with disabilities, and smallholder farmers, as part of their regional engagement strategies.

At the methodological level, WP5 encouraged pilots to apply the **Multi-Actor Approach (MAA)** as a framework for ensuring diversity of representation among participants, recognising that inclusive governance enhances both legitimacy and innovation capacity. This has resulted in broader stakeholder networks and a more balanced participation of social groups in regional foresight and policy dialogues. The inclusion of gender and diversity aspects within the KPI framework—developed jointly by WP5 and WP7—also represents an important step forward, providing measurable indicators for participation and representation to be monitored in 2026.

Although progress varies across regions, the inclusion of these dimensions has raised awareness and created a foundation for further improvement in the final project year. The forthcoming **Deliverable D5.3 – Effectiveness of the Multi-Actor Approach** will provide an opportunity to assess in greater depth how gender and diversity principles have influenced participation quality and governance dynamics in each pilot. In parallel, D5.4 will allow for systematic reporting of gender- and diversity-related indicators, supporting a more comprehensive understanding of inclusiveness within the overall PoliRuralPlus framework.

7. Sustainability and Post-Project Continuity

The sustainability dimension of the RAPs addresses the critical question of how project outcomes, governance arrangements, and partnerships will endure beyond the PoliRuralPlus funding period. During 2025, pilots have progressively developed strategies for institutional continuity, financial sustainability, long-term monitoring, and inter-regional cooperation. This section synthesises these approaches, highlighting common patterns and context-specific solutions that reflect the diversity of territorial and governance conditions across the nine pilot regions.

7.1. Institutional and Policy Continuity

The nine PoliRuralPlus pilots demonstrate varied but largely coherent approaches to ensuring that governance structures and institutional partnerships persist beyond 2026. A common strategy across pilots involves establishing formal coordination bodies with clear ownership and mandates. In **Slovakia**, the RAP Steering Committee, chaired by the Slovak Rural Parliament, provides a model of permanent advisory governance with multi-level representation. Similarly, the **Czech-Bavarian** pilot plans to formalise cross-border cooperation through a Memorandum of Understanding and a permanent Steering Committee involving Plan4all, Úhlava, MAS Pošumaví, and DIT Freyung. In **Finland**, the Mallusjoki pilot ensures continuity through formal agreements with the City of Orimattila and Päijänne Leader LAG.

Most pilots emphasise embedding RAP actions within existing institutional frameworks rather than creating parallel structures. **Ireland** explicitly integrates RAP measures into LEADER, SICAP, and Monaghan County Council's climate and waste plans, ensuring that activities become part of routine service delivery rather than project-dependent initiatives. **Latvia's** Vidzeme Planning Region plans to establish permanent specialist roles for Data Analysis and GIS, integrate its monitoring framework into statutory municipal planning cycles, and position VPR as a national competence centre for territorial monitoring. The **Maltese** pilot adopts a distributed



responsibility model, noting that sustainability depends on shared ownership among Local Councils, GRDA, MDIA, and educational institutions rather than single-entity control.

Policy alignment is strong across pilots, with explicit connections to EU frameworks including CAP Strategic Plans, the European Green Deal, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), and the EU Rural Pact. **Slovakia** advocates for legislative anchoring through a national framework law on rural development and the embedding of Vision 2040 into Programme Slovakia post-2027. **Malta** aligns its RAP with multiple national strategies, including the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, Digital Malta Strategy, and National Agricultural Policy 2023–2030. **Italy** contributes to CSR 2023–2027 and to the implementation of its CAP Strategic Plan, while **Central Greece** links its actions to regional smart specialisation and cohesion policy instruments. This institutional anchoring ensures that the RAPs are not isolated project outputs but rather complementary mechanisms that reinforce existing planning and policy cycles.

7.2. Financial Sustainability and Funding Sources

All nine pilots have mapped potential funding pathways to sustain RAP activities beyond 2026, with varying degrees of concreteness. The most common sources identified across pilots include EU Structural and Investment Funds (EAFRD, ERDF, ESF+), LEADER/CLLD programmes, CAP Strategic Plan measures, Horizon Europe, and national budget allocations. This alignment with established funding mechanisms reflects a strategic approach to embedding RAP activities within mainstream programming cycles rather than relying on ad hoc project financing.

The **Spanish** pilot demonstrates strong financial preparedness, with secured funding for two major initiatives: the Sustainable Tourism Plan for the Sierra and Mancha of Cuenca (€3.78 million, 2025–2030) and the Community Transformation Office (OTC) (2024–2030). These programmes combine regional, national, and European-level support, providing a comprehensive financial framework for continued implementation and sustainability in the pilot area.

The **Czech-Bavarian** pilot presents a strategic two-tier funding approach, positioning Interreg Bavaria-Czechia 2021–2027 and Horizon Europe as the primary instruments for establishing the Innovation Hub, while national programmes (OP TAK, BULE+, LEADER) provide operational continuity. The pilot plans to establish a joint cross-border coordination team to maintain a rolling pipeline of funding applications, ensuring sustained financial capacity. **Slovakia** adopts a blended funding model that combines ESIF, Slovak Investment Holding instruments, and public-private partnerships, explicitly mentioning social impact investment funds and participatory budgeting as innovative mechanisms. **Ireland** similarly demonstrates comprehensive mapping across local (LEADER, SICAP), national (SEAI, departmental supports), and EU instruments (LIFE, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe Programme).

While funding pathways have been identified, several pilots acknowledge access challenges that require attention. **Latvia** notes that planning regions lack dedicated operational funding, creating dependency on competitive project grants, and proposes municipal co-financing models for long-term maintenance. **Malta** and **Central Greece** highlight that smaller stakeholders face barriers due to administrative complexity and capacity constraints, recommending micro-grant schemes, innovation vouchers, and blended finance mechanisms to improve accessibility. These observations point to the need for continued simplification of funding access to realise the full potential of RAP sustainability.



7.3. Long-Term Monitoring and Ownership

The monitoring, evaluation, and data collection mechanisms developed under **WP5** and **WP7** represent significant investments in regional analytical capacity. All nine pilots have developed approaches to sustain these mechanisms post-project, with clear institutional ownership assignments for most regions. The common objective is to ensure that indicator reporting, knowledge management, and impact assessment continue to inform policy decisions and stakeholder learning beyond 2026.

Slovakia demonstrates the most comprehensive M&E governance structure, with the RAP Steering Committee coordinating a three-tiered evaluation process: bi-annual internal reviews, annual participatory evaluations through the **atraktivnyvidiek.sk** platform, and independent external assessments every three years (2026, 2029). The Slovak University of Agriculture and research institutions will continue to collect and analyse data using PoliRuralPlus tools, including **JackDaw GeoAI**, **DSS**, and **Knowledge Space**. This structured approach ensures that monitoring remains both technically robust and participatory.

Latvia's Vidzeme Planning Region establishes the most detailed technical maintenance framework, with VPR administration leading data governance and quality control, supported by a Regional Monitoring Committee for annual reviews and a Technical Working Group for semi-annual operational assessments. The pilot plans to recruit permanent Data Analysis and GIS specialists by 2028 and build an **AI and Data Community of Practice** involving ten municipalities, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences for Citizen Science methodologies, and the Central Statistical Bureau for methodological support. This institutional embedding ensures that monitoring capacity becomes a permanent feature of regional governance.

Ireland centres its monitoring continuity on the Circular Economy Hub as both a physical and digital knowledge-exchange platform, with MID coordinating stakeholder feedback through regular sessions integrated into Hub activities. Research partners, including Teagasc, DkIT, and BioConnect, will continue to provide technical support, while annual Evaluation and Learning Reports will document progress and inform cross-border learning exchanges. **Spain** plans to establish a dedicated working group that conducts quarterly review sessions, integrating **MAATool** to enable real-time KPI tracking and automated dashboard reporting. The Czech-Bavarian pilot emphasises embedding PoliRuralPlus tools and methodologies into regular regional planning and decision-making processes, with the University of West Bohemia supporting upskilling programmes and knowledge transfer.

Across all pilots, there is recognition that knowledge generated during the project will continue to be shared through EU Rural Pact events, peer-learning networks, and published case studies. This commitment to ongoing knowledge exchange ensures that lessons learned contribute to broader European rural development discourse and support replication in other regions. The forthcoming **Deliverable D5.4** will provide systematic documentation of monitoring approaches and their sustainability prospects.

7.4. Support Mechanisms and Future Cooperation

The nine pilots outline several mechanisms to sustain the PoliRuralPlus community and inter-regional cooperation beyond 2026. A key strategy involves maintaining digital platforms as permanent hubs for knowledge exchange and stakeholder engagement. **Slovakia's atraktivnyvidiek.sk** platform will continue serving as the official national hub for dialogue, consultation, and foresight, with policies and strategies uploaded into the **PoliRuralPlus Advisor**



tool. The platform aims to achieve recognition as a best practice under the EU Rural Pact by 2030, with targets of at least 100 regular contributors and continuous publication of content.

Several pilots plan to leverage PoliRuralPlus digital tools, including **MAATool**, **JackDaw GeoAI**, **Knowledge Space**, and the **Advisor**, for ongoing stakeholder engagement and data-driven planning. The **Czech-Bavarian** pilot will produce promotional materials demonstrating how these tools support evidence-based decision-making. In contrast, **Finland's** Mallusjoki pilot notes that familiarisation with these tools has strengthened digital resilience that will persist beyond the project. The continued accessibility and use of these tools represent an important legacy of the **WP7** dissemination and exploitation efforts.

Cross-border and inter-regional networks feature prominently in sustainability strategies. **Latvia's** Vidzeme Planning Region explicitly targets building Baltic knowledge-sharing networks by 2035, positioning VPR as a regional excellence hub for territorial monitoring with regular cross-border exchange platforms. The **Czech-Bavarian** pilot plans structured partnerships between innovation hubs across the border—linking Klatovy with Freyung, Teisnach, and Deggendorf—creating a resilient interconnected network capable of jointly implementing cross-border strategies aligned with EU cohesion policy objectives.

Malta envisions developing a national network of trained ambassadors from cascade call implementers and RAP trainees during 2030-2033 to create a self-sustaining peer learning network, with participation in EU-level learning exchanges through PRIMA and Interreg programmes planned for 2032-2035. **Ireland's** Circular Economy Hub will host annual learning forums that bring together stakeholders from Monaghan and other EU pilot regions, alongside peer-learning sessions within the PoliRuralPlus network. These mechanisms ensure that the collaborative relationships built during the project continue to generate value for participating regions.

Several pilots commit to sharing lessons through EU Rural Pact events, published case studies, and policy briefs. **Slovakia** aims to have its model cited in EU policy or in Rural Pact guidance by 2030, while the Czech-Bavarian pilot aims to document at least two replication cases for other border regions. This commitment to knowledge transfer and policy influence reflects the broader ambition of PoliRuralPlus to contribute not only to local and regional development but also to the evolution of European rural policy frameworks. The experiences documented through this sustainability planning will directly inform Deliverables D5.3 – Effectiveness of the Multi-Actor Approach, D5.4 – RAP Monitoring Third Year, and support the final assessment of project impact.

8. Conclusions and next steps

This deliverable marks a key milestone in the PoliRuralPlus project, documenting the consolidation and advancement of the nine RAPs developed by the pilot regions. Building on the methodological foundations established in D5.1 and informed by the recommendations of the Mid-Term Review, D5.2 provides a comprehensive synthesis of progress achieved during 2025. It captures how pilots have refined their strategies, enhanced their stakeholder networks, and strengthened their governance frameworks, transforming the RAPs from planning instruments into operational frameworks for territorial development. Through the harmonisation of templates, the introduction of Gantt-based roadmaps, and the refinement of KPIs, the RAPs now represent a coherent and comparative structure for monitoring regional innovation and policy alignment.

The insights presented in this document illustrate how the RAP process has evolved into a dynamic and participatory mechanism that bridges foresight, governance, and implementation. While D5.1 laid the conceptual



groundwork for the RAP methodology, D5.2 demonstrates its practical application, providing evidence of progress and lessons learned across diverse European regions. The following sections summarise key achievements and impacts, assess the strategic value of the RAPs for strengthening rural–urban linkages, and outline the path forward for sustainability, implementation, and exploitation in the project’s final phase.

8.1. Summary of key achievements and impacts

During 2025, the development and consolidation of the RAPs have represented a major step forward for PoliRuralPlus. Building on the foundations laid in D5.1, this deliverable captures a phase of methodological refinement, cross-pilot learning, and growing institutional maturity. The main achievements can be seen in the standardisation of the RAP process, the strengthening of pilot governance, and the establishment of a coherent monitoring and evaluation framework that connects local implementation with the overall project objectives.

One of the key advances has been the introduction and full adoption of the **RAP Template**, which provides a harmonised yet flexible structure for all pilots. This template has allowed for greater comparability, clearer reporting, and stronger integration of foresight, stakeholder engagement, and policy alignment within each RAP. The addition of a **Gantt-based roadmap**, introduced at the end of 2024 and implemented by all pilots during the first months of 2025, has been particularly impactful. It enabled each region to translate strategic objectives into concrete actions, timelines, and responsibilities, making progress more transparent and measurable.

The **harmonisation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** across pilots has been another milestone. Responding to recommendations from the Mid-Term Review, the indicator framework was simplified and made more relevant to pilot realities. The new set of indicators now provides both qualitative and quantitative insights, improving the capacity to monitor implementation and compare results across diverse territorial contexts. Close coordination between WP5 and WP7 has ensured that pilot-level data feed into the broader project-wide KPI framework, thereby linking regional progress with overall project impact.

Significant progress has also been made in **cross-pilot collaboration and methodological coherence**. Monthly WP5 meetings, peer review sessions, and exchanges with WP2 and WP3 have created a shared understanding of concepts and processes, while respecting regional diversity. Pilots have benefited from these interactions to refine their approaches to stakeholder engagement, governance, and policy integration. The resulting set of nine RAPs reflects a common methodological backbone, while showcasing the diversity of regional priorities across Europe — from digital transformation and bioeconomy to social innovation and environmental resilience.

At the strategic level, the RAPs are now functioning as **territorial governance instruments** rather than project deliverables. Many regions, including Vidzeme, Slovakia, and Spain, have embedded the RAP within existing regional development or planning frameworks, ensuring its institutional relevance. Others, such as Ireland, Italy, and Central Greece, have used the RAP process to strengthen links between research, policy, and practice, mobilising new actors and establishing mechanisms for dialogue that extend beyond the project consortium.

The cumulative effect of these achievements is the creation of a **mature and operational framework for regional action planning**, where foresight, participation, and evidence-based policymaking are combined in a coherent and replicable way. While measurable impacts will be assessed more fully during 2026, the progress made during 2025 already demonstrates that the RAP methodology has evolved into a practical and policy-relevant approach for fostering innovation, collaboration, and rural–urban cohesion across European regions.

8.2. Strategic value of the RAP process for rural–urban linkages

The RAPs have demonstrated their strategic value as instruments that translate the concept of rural–urban linkages into practical governance and planning frameworks. By combining foresight, participatory design, and evidence-based decision-making, the RAPs enable regions to identify, coordinate, and implement actions that connect rural and urban territories through shared objectives, resources, and policy agendas.

Through the RAP process, pilots have been able to move beyond traditional rural policy boundaries and address **interdependencies between territories**. In many cases, this has meant coordinating innovation, environmental, and social initiatives across administrative or sectoral borders. For example, the RAPs in Vidzeme and Slovakia have used shared data and foresight exercises to build common strategies that link rural municipalities and urban centres in regional development planning. In Spain and Ireland, RAPs have fostered circular economy initiatives that integrate rural production systems with urban consumption and waste management, creating new value chains and promoting territorial cohesion. Similarly, pilots in Italy and Central Greece have demonstrated how regional governance and innovation ecosystems can strengthen the resilience of peri-urban and rural communities through joint projects and shared infrastructure.

Beyond the implementation of specific actions, the RAPs have provided a **strategic interface between local experimentation and higher-level policy frameworks**. They connect pilot activities to European and national strategies such as the Green Deal, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). By doing so, they contribute to mainstreaming the rural–urban dimension within policy domains traditionally treated separately—such as innovation, sustainability, mobility, and governance. This integrative capacity gives the RAPs added value as tools for aligning multi-level policies and ensuring that local initiatives contribute to EU-wide priorities for territorial cohesion and sustainable transition.

The process has also enhanced the **capacity of local and regional authorities to engage in anticipatory and collaborative planning**. Through the use of foresight and the Multi-Actor Approach, pilots have built bridges between research, administration, and civil society. These interactions have strengthened collective understanding of rural–urban dynamics and have helped to identify strategic areas for cooperation, such as smart rural services, renewable energy, and digital transformation. The RAP methodology thus fosters institutional learning and empowers regional actors to shape long-term policies that are inclusive, adaptive, and territorially balanced.

Taken together, the RAPs demonstrate that rural–urban linkages are not an abstract policy concept but a **practical and strategic lens** through which regional innovation and development can be designed, monitored, and scaled. By providing a replicable methodology for participatory and foresight-based planning, PoliRuralPlus contributes to bridging the gap between policy design and implementation, reinforcing Europe’s capacity to manage transitions in a territorially integrated way.

8.3. Sustainability, Upscaling and Next Steps

Ensuring the long-term sustainability and scalability of the RAPs is a central objective for the final phase of PoliRuralPlus. As the project evolves from design and consolidation to full implementation and evaluation, the focus shifts towards maintaining the governance structures, partnerships, and knowledge networks established during 2025. The RAPs have matured into living instruments of territorial governance, capable of supporting integrated rural–urban development well beyond the project’s lifetime.



From a sustainability perspective, most pilots have achieved a solid level of **institutional anchoring**, ensuring that RAPs are embedded within existing regional planning and policy frameworks. In Vidzeme, Slovakia, and Spain, RAPs are now connected to regional development strategies and monitoring systems, while Italy and Central Greece have strengthened cooperation between academic institutions, municipalities, and regional administrations to sustain foresight and participatory planning practices. These institutional linkages ensure that the principles and methods developed within PoliRuralPlus—such as participatory foresight, stakeholder engagement, and evidence-based planning—will continue to guide regional governance processes after 2026.

In parallel, several **upscaling opportunities** have emerged from the pilots' thematic and methodological innovations. The harmonised **RAP Template 3.0**, the **refined KPI framework**, and the integration of **digital tools and foresight methodologies** represent transferable assets that can be replicated across other European regions and policy domains. Pilots such as Ireland and Spain are aligning their RAP outcomes with circular economy and bioeconomy networks, Latvia and Slovakia are expanding data-driven governance models, and Malta and Finland are applying their digital and stakeholder engagement experiences in broader policy contexts. These examples demonstrate that the RAPs are already generating ripple effects beyond the initial pilot scope. The **Best Practices Report**, to be finalised in early 2026 by WP5 in close cooperation with WP3 and WP2, will consolidate these results into a structured knowledge base to facilitate replication, learning, and policy integration.

The upcoming **Deliverable D5.3 – Effectiveness of the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA)** will analyse in depth how the participatory and governance mechanisms embedded in the RAPs have contributed to engagement, legitimacy, and collective decision-making. This analysis will provide critical input for the next stages of RAP implementation and monitoring, ensuring that stakeholder participation remains a driver of quality, inclusiveness, and policy relevance during the final project year.

In 2026, the consortium will focus on **systematic monitoring and impact assessment**, coordinated through **Deliverable D5.4 – RAP Monitoring (Third Year)**. This deliverable will document the execution status of all RAPs, analyse progress through the harmonised KPI framework, and evaluate cross-pilot impacts on sustainability, policy alignment, and rural–urban cohesion. It will also synthesise lessons for replication and transfer to European and national policy frameworks.

Collaboration with other work packages will remain at the core of this process. **WP4** will continue supporting the integration and testing of digital tools; **WP2** will contribute expertise on foresight and governance alignment; **WP3** will ensure methodological consistency and analytical depth; and **WP7** will consolidate results through communication, exploitation, and policy dialogue activities. This inter-WP collaboration ensures that RAP implementation, evaluation, and exploitation remain interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Through these coordinated efforts, PoliRuralPlus will consolidate the RAPs as a transferable, evidence-based approach to multi-level territorial governance. The combined focus on sustainability, institutional embedding, and cross-pilot learning provides a clear pathway for translating project achievements into enduring practices, reinforcing Europe's capacity for integrated, inclusive, and forward-looking rural–urban development.

Building on these strategic directions, the next project phase will focus on translating the consolidated RAP frameworks into concrete implementation and evaluation activities. While sustainability and upscaling provide the long-term perspective, the following section outlines the immediate operational steps that will guide pilots and work packages during 2026 to ensure effective delivery, monitoring, and exploitation of the RAPs.



8.4. Next steps for the implementation and exploitation of RAPs

The next phase of the PoliRuralPlus project will be dedicated to the **implementation, validation, and exploitation** of the RAPs, transforming the consolidated frameworks of 2025 into tangible actions and measurable outcomes. The term “implementation” should be understood broadly in the sense that a measure is being implemented if implementation is ongoing, or if the means to finance implementation has been identified, and steps needed to secure such funding are underway. During 2026, WP5 will coordinate the transition from planning to delivery, ensuring that all pilots activate their roadmaps, apply the harmonised monitoring tools, and document progress through regular reporting cycles.

The **first priority** will be the structured execution of the actions defined in each RAP. Pilots will continue implementing activities across their main thematic areas — from circular economy and sustainable agriculture to digital transformation, data governance, and social innovation. The Gantt-based roadmaps will serve as the operational reference, supported by continuous tracking of milestones, resources, and stakeholder engagement. WP5 will provide guidance and coordination to maintain consistency in monitoring, using the harmonised KPI framework and reporting templates defined in D5.2.

A **second line of work** will focus on feedback and evaluation through the upcoming **Deliverable D5.4 – RAP Monitoring (Third Year)**. This process will compile both quantitative and qualitative evidence from the pilots, assessing maturity, progress, and impact. It will also capture lessons for replication and alignment with EU and national policy frameworks. The results will feed into **Deliverable D5.3 – Effectiveness of the Multi-Actor Approach**, ensuring that the participatory dimension of RAP implementation is properly evaluated and integrated into the project’s overall impact assessment.

The **exploitation dimension** will advance in close cooperation with **WP7**, transforming the knowledge and results generated by the pilots into transferable outputs. Case studies, best practice fiches, and policy briefs will be produced based on the forthcoming **Best Practices Report** and the RAP monitoring data. These materials will be disseminated through the PoliRuralPlus platform, policy events, and interregional networks, supporting replication, visibility, and policy uptake.

Continuous collaboration with **WP2, WP3, and WP4** will ensure methodological robustness and coherence across activities. WP2 will provide analytical input on foresight and governance; WP3 will guide methodological refinement and evaluation design; and WP4 will continue supporting the practical use of digital tools and data integration in pilot contexts. This cross-WP collaboration will help ensure that RAP implementation during 2026 is evidence-based, participatory, and technologically informed.

By the end of 2026, all pilots are expected to have completed the main activities in their RAP roadmaps, reported on their KPIs, and contributed to a shared body of evidence on rural–urban governance and innovation. These outputs will provide the basis for the project’s final synthesis and for the continuation of the RAP approach in post-project initiatives and future European programmes.



9. Annexes

The annexes to this deliverable include the **nine Regional Action Plans (RAPs)** developed by the PoliRuralPlus pilot regions during 2025. The documents reflect the diversity of territorial contexts, thematic priorities, and governance structures across the consortium while adhering to the **harmonised RAP Template**. Together, they provide a comprehensive overview of regional strategies, actions, and implementation roadmaps that form the operational backbone of PoliRuralPlus.



Regional Action Plan

Pilot:	Irish
Version:	4.0 (Final)
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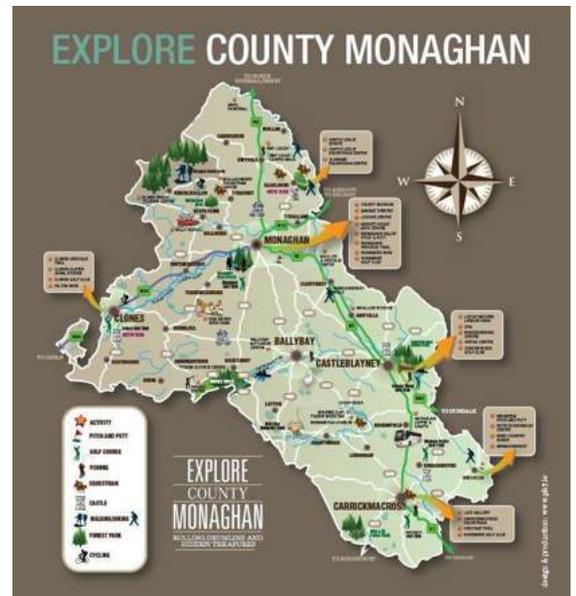
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1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Background

County Monaghan is a predominantly rural county located in Ireland's Border Region, within the province of Ulster. It is governed by Monaghan County Council (MCC) and plays a key role in Ireland's north-eastern rural economy. According to the 2022 Census, Monaghan has a population of 65,288, making it the fifth smallest county by area (1,295 km²) and the fourth smallest by population in the Republic of Ireland. Approximately 63% of residents live in rural areas, reflecting the county's deeply rural character and strong community identity.

Over the past decade, Monaghan has become increasingly diverse, welcoming new communities and international residents who now make up 11% (7,413 people) of the total population. Many have come to live, work, and study locally, adding to the county's cultural richness and workforce capacity.



Monaghan's socio-economic profile (Monaghan County Council, 2023) highlights a region in transition. The population is growing steadily, unemployment remains below the national average at 4.9% (2022), and employment continues to shift from agriculture to services and manufacturing. While the agriculture sector—with 4,478 active farms (CSO, 2020)—remains a cornerstone of local livelihoods, structural change is ongoing. The services sector now accounts for over 62% of employment, signalling diversification and new opportunities in green enterprise, digital innovation, and community development.

Average annual earnings in the county (€40,024, 2020) remain below the national average, and access to higher-value jobs continues to be more limited in rural areas. However, major public and private investments in digital infrastructure, education, and climate action are transforming this landscape. Monaghan now has one of the highest National Broadband Plan take-up rates in Ireland (38%, NBI 2025), demonstrating strong digital readiness among households and SMEs.

Monaghan's economic base is shaped by its agri-food industries — particularly poultry, mushroom, and dairy production — as well as by engineering, food processing, and cross-border trade. Its natural environment of rolling drumlins and fertile soils supports this productivity, but also faces environmental pressures such as nutrient runoff, waste management challenges, and biodiversity loss.

At the same time, the county's strong community networks, local enterprise supports, and innovation assets (including the BioConnect Innovation Centre, Local Enterprise Office, Monaghan Enterprising and Dundalk Institute of Technology partnerships) provide a strong foundation for green transition and circular innovation. Monaghan's collaborative culture — through programmes like LEADER, SICAP, and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP 2023–2029) — makes it well positioned to pioneer rural solutions in the circular economy, renewable energy, and sustainable enterprise.

Overall, County Monaghan presents a unique combination of rural strengths, industrial expertise, and community engagement, coupled with clear environmental and economic challenges. This mix makes it an ideal testbed for developing and demonstrating circular economy models that enhance rural prosperity, environmental stewardship, and regional resilience.

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

Purpose

The purpose of this Regional Action Plan (RAP) is to provide a strategic, inclusive, and evidence-based framework for strengthening rural–urban linkages and accelerating the transition to a circular and green economy in County Monaghan.

The RAP aims to guide coordinated action among local communities, policymakers, enterprises, and knowledge partners, ensuring alignment with Monaghan’s LEADER Rural Development Strategy, national sustainability and climate policies, and the broader goals of the PoliRuralPlus project. By integrating foresight methods, multi-actor engagement, and local knowledge, the RAP outlines practical pathways to enhance economic resilience, support innovation, and improve quality of life across both rural and urban areas of the county.

Objectives:

1. Stimulate Circular Economy Entrepreneurship:

To enable new and existing SMEs, social enterprises, and community groups to develop and scale circular business models through targeted support, innovation partnerships, and access to funding, focusing on waste valorisation, repair, reuse, and green product development.

2. Enhance Rural–Urban Collaboration:

To strengthen connections between rural communities and urban centres through joint circular initiatives—such as waste-to-resource systems, local supply chains, and community energy projects—that create shared environmental, social, and economic benefits across the county.

3. Establish and Strengthen Circular Economy Governance and Collaboration:

To build a coordinated and inclusive circular economy network in County Monaghan through the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA), ensuring all stakeholders actively participate in co-design, decision-making, and implementation via the Regional Circular Economy Hub.

4. Accelerate Community Energy Transition and Local Capacity:

To empower communities and SMEs to adopt renewable energy and energy efficiency practices through the County Sustainable Energy Community (SEC), supported by awareness campaigns, advisory services, and small-scale pilot projects.

5. Enhance Digital Infrastructure and Green Skills:

To improve digital literacy, circular economy competencies, and data-driven resource management among SMEs, social enterprises, and communities—maximising broadband expansion and access to digital tools for innovation, training, and collaboration.

2. Analysis of Current Situation

2.1. State of the Art

Monaghan’s Strategic Context

County Monaghan remains strongly anchored in agri-food and rural livelihoods: agriculture and food processing continue to drive much of the local economy. According to the most recent County-level data, approximately 69% of the land area is used for agriculture. This agricultural dominance means that by-products and waste streams from farms, poultry operations, and food processing are abundant — presenting both a resource challenge and a circular economy opportunity.

Monaghan County Council itself recognises this dual challenge and opportunity in its 2024–2029 Climate Action Plan, which situates Monaghan within its regional climate-action framework and underscores the need for sustainable development strategies given its largely rural population and land use.



Resource Pressure – Waste Streams and Environmental Risk, But Opportunity for Circular Value

The scale of agri-food activity in Monaghan means waste streams are significant and concentrated. High volumes of organic by-products such as poultry manure and residual compost/substrate from mushroom production are generated continuously. These waste flows impose environmental pressure and disposal burdens, especially given limited local processing capacity.

At the same time, this scale and concentration provide a unique opportunity for value recovery: nutrient recycling, composting, bio-based products, or energy/biogas — turning waste liabilities into circular economy assets. In other words: what is waste in conventional terms could become a base for new circular-economy enterprises and enhanced resource efficiency.

Innovation and Skills Gap

Monaghan has important existing innovation and support infrastructure: for example, the BioConnect Innovation Centre, which includes research and development facilities, provides a foundation for circular food-waste and bio-based enterprise development.

Additionally, recent improvements in digital infrastructure are notable: under the national fibre rollout, over 12,000 homes, farms, and businesses in Monaghan can now order high-speed fibre broadband, and around 4,500 plus premises are already connected — giving the county one of the higher take-up rates nationally. This reflects a promising digital readiness among rural households and SMEs, which is critical for circular economy platforms, resource-sharing systems, remote work, and digital marketplaces. Yet despite these enabling conditions, a major innovation adoption gap remains: many SMEs and small rural enterprises lack awareness, technical capacity, or the confidence and investment to engage with circular practices. This gap limits the realisation of circular potential, despite favourable waste streams, digital infrastructure and institutional supports.

Comparative Position – Strengths and Constraints vs. Other Regions

Compared with other rural regions in Ireland or the EU, Monaghan exhibits a mixed profile:

Strengths	Constraints
Strong agri-food base, abundant organic waste streams (ideal for waste-to-resource or bioeconomy models), existing innovation infrastructure (R&D centre, support organisations), rural community structures, and improving digital connectivity.	Limited uptake of circular innovation, low awareness among SMEs and farms, small enterprise scale, fragmented prior waste-processing infrastructure, and a need for coordinated multi-actor support to translate potential into practice.

These characteristics suggest that Monaghan is well placed to become a regional leader in circular innovation, provided it invests in coordination, capacity building, and enabling infrastructure — much like successful circular-economy hubs elsewhere.

Current Infrastructure and Readiness for Circular Economy Transition

Monaghan’s infrastructural context provides a strong foundation for circular economy transformation:

- The presence of a dedicated R&D and bio-innovation centre (BioConnect) offers access to needed expertise and facilities for testing and development of circular products and processes.
- The ongoing fibre-broadband rollout under the national plan enhances connectivity across rural and urban Monaghan, enabling digital tools, online platforms, and remote collaboration — all vital for modern circular-economy businesses.
- The institutional framework — including local authorities (County Council), enterprise support (LEO), community development (MID/LEADER), and the MCC’s Climate Action Plan — endorses sustainable development, resource efficiency, and green transition.

Together, these elements signal that the county already has many of the preconditions required to support a successful circular transition — infrastructure, policy intent, digital readiness, and waste/resource base.

Summary – Circular Potential and Key Constraints

Overall, County Monaghan presents high potential for a circular economy transition: its rural and agri-food character, abundant organic waste streams, emerging innovation infrastructure, and improving digital capacity create ideal conditions for resource efficiency, waste valorisation, and new circular enterprises.

At the same time, the county faces critical constraints: many SMEs and community actors lack awareness or capacity; prior waste-to-resource systems remain fragmented; investment and risk-aversion remain barriers; and coordinated multi-actor action is still limited.

This analysis underscores the need for a structured and comprehensive RAP — one that combines resource mapping, skill-building, capacity development, coordinated infrastructure (Hub), community engagement. That is precisely the purpose of the RAP: to bridge the gap between potential and action, and to transform Monaghan’s strengths into sustainable, circular economic realities.



2.2. Key Challenges

1. Low Awareness and Limited Adoption of Circular Practices

Many local SMEs, farms, and community organisations still have limited understanding of circular economy opportunities. This results in low uptake of circular business models, resource efficiency practices, and waste-to-resource solutions. Awareness of the economic and environmental benefits remains low, and practical examples are scarce, making it difficult for small enterprises to see the value or feasibility of circular approaches.

2. Environmental Pressures from Agri-Food Waste Streams

Monaghan's strong agri-food base also brings environmental challenges. The poultry and mushroom industries together generate more than 200,000 tonnes of poultry manure annually, along with significant volumes of spent mushroom compost. These concentrated waste streams create nutrient management and regulatory pressures. Limited local processing capacity means much of this material must be transported long distances for treatment or land spreading, increasing costs and carbon emissions.

3. Limited Circular Infrastructure and Innovation Capacity

Monaghan currently lacks key infrastructure needed to process and repurpose waste locally — such as anaerobic digestion (AD) plants, material valorisation facilities, and demonstration sites for testing circular technologies. The lack of localised repair hubs, reuse spaces, and resource exchange platforms limits both innovation and public participation. This investment gap slows experimentation and prevents the county from fully capitalising on its circular potential.

4. Weak Digital and Green Skills Base

Many small businesses and community organisations lack the digital innovation literacy and green technical skills required to engage with circular economy opportunities. There is a shortage of simple, locally relevant digital tools that allow SMEs to sell, share, or repurpose surplus materials. This skills gap affects rural areas most acutely, where training opportunities are fewer and access to expert advice is limited.

5. Lack of Coordinated Stakeholder Structure and Limited Pilot Readiness

Although Monaghan benefits from a broad network of active stakeholders — including Monaghan County Council (MCC), LEO, DkIT, Energy companies, Teagasc, Community Organizations and BioConnect — coordination among these actors remains uneven. Many participants face constraints in time, capacity, or resources to fully engage in circular initiatives. This results in delays in developing pilot projects and highlights the need for a stronger, more structured multi-actor coordination framework led by MID through the proposed Circular Economy Hub

6. Waste Management and Segregation Challenges (Residential and Commercial)

A large proportion of Monaghan's household and business waste is still not properly segregated. Studies show that up to two-thirds of household organic waste is placed incorrectly, and around 70% of commercial general waste could be diverted to recycling or composting. Many food businesses continue to mix food waste with general waste, leading to unnecessary costs and missed opportunities for resource recovery. Strengthening awareness, enforcement, and local waste-to-resource systems is essential to address this issue.

2.3. Opportunities

1. Circular Agriculture and Bioeconomy Potential

Monaghan's strong agri-food sectors — particularly poultry, mushrooms, and dairy — generate high volumes of organic by-products, including over 200,000 tonnes of poultry manure annually. These streams represent one of the county's greatest opportunities for circular value creation. Through composting, nutrient recovery, biofertilizer production, and small-scale biogas systems, Monaghan can reduce environmental pressures while creating new value chains in the bioeconomy. This aligns directly with Ireland's Circular Economy Strategy (2022) and Climate Action Plan (2024), positioning Monaghan as a leader in rural bioresource innovation.

2. Renewable and Community Energy Development

There is growing local interest in renewable energy solutions such as solar PV, biogas, and community energy cooperatives. Community groups, farms, and SMEs — particularly through the County Monaghan Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) — are increasingly exploring energy generation and efficiency opportunities. By leveraging SEAI Community Energy Grants, the Climate Action Fund, and the National Retrofit Scheme, Monaghan can expand local renewable projects, reduce emissions, and build community resilience. Integrating renewable energy with circular waste management (e.g., biogas from Agri-waste) can also support energy self-sufficiency and contribute to national net-zero targets.

3. Digitalisation and Remote Work Capacity

Monaghan's expanding broadband coverage and growing network of rural digital hubs create new pathways for circular innovation. Enhanced connectivity allows for:

- digital circular economy (CE) tools and training.
- e-commerce for circular products and services.
- data-driven resource management.
- remote consultancy; and
- participation in regional and EU innovation networks.

This digital foundation supports SMEs and community organisations to adopt more efficient, connected, and innovative circular practices — aligning with both the National Digital Strategy and the EU Digital Europe Programme.

4. Green Construction, Retrofitting, and Repair Economy

With national initiatives such as Retrofit Ready, the National Retrofit Plan, and the Climate Action Plan 2024 driving sustainable housing upgrades, Monaghan has significant potential to expand its green construction and repair economy. The county can grow local skills in retrofitting, promote reuse and recycling in construction materials, and develop local supply chains for sustainable building products. Supporting repair services and upcycling in communities will also reduce waste and create employment opportunities. These actions reinforce Ireland's climate action and just transition goals while improving local building quality and affordability.

5. Development of the Regional Circular Economy Hub

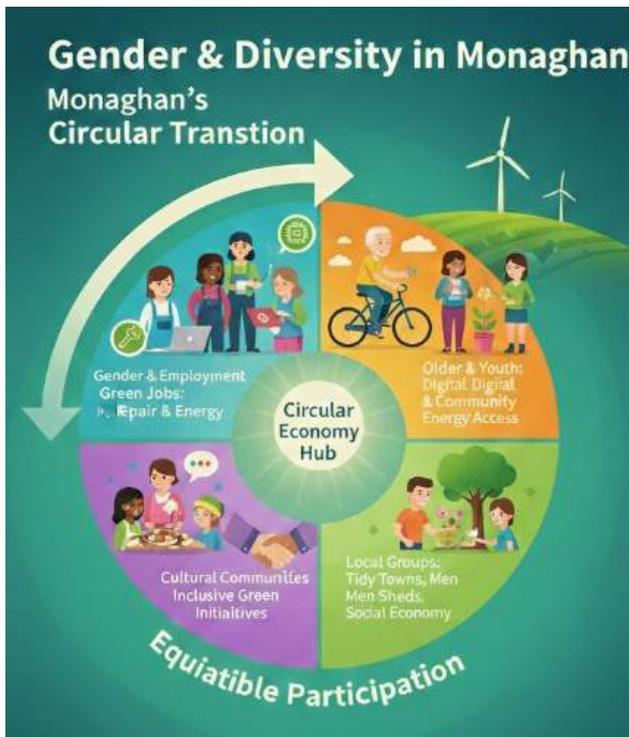


The planned Regional Circular Economy Hub, led by Monaghan Integrated Development (MID), represents a cornerstone opportunity for circular transformation. The Hub will act as a coordination and innovation centre — providing training, mentoring, innovation space, resource-sharing platforms, and demonstration activities. It will bring together communities, SMEs, public agencies, and education partners to share learning and co-develop projects. The Hub will increase visibility and participation in circular practices, attract investment, and connect Monaghan with national and EU circular networks.

6. Strong Stakeholder Ecosystem and Multi-Actor Readiness

Monaghan already benefits from an unusually diverse and collaborative network of stakeholders — including MCC, LEO, Teagasc, DkIT, TU Dublin, BioConnect, community groups, and private enterprises. Over 31 active stakeholders have been identified as part of the RAP process. This strong culture of cooperation creates an ideal environment for co-designing circular economy initiatives, implementing pilot projects, and scaling successful solutions. Through the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA), Monaghan can ensure that local knowledge, business innovation, and community leadership work together toward a sustainable circular transition.

2.4. Gender and Diversity Dimensions



County Monaghan’s population of just over 65,000 is diverse in terms of age, gender, and cultural background. Approximately 63% of residents live in rural areas, and 11% of the population are members of new and migrant communities, reflecting a steadily diversifying social landscape. While the county maintains strong community networks and volunteerism, demographic trends show ongoing challenges related to rural isolation, youth outmigration, and gender imbalances in certain sectors.

Gender and Employment:

Women remain underrepresented in agriculture, energy, and technology fields—key sectors within the green and circular transition. The Regional Action Plan (RAP) addresses this by embedding inclusive training and entrepreneurship supports within the new Regional Circular Economy Hub, promoting women’s participation in repair, reuse, digital, and community energy activities.



Age and Rural Participation:

An ageing rural population faces challenges related to transport, digital access, and participation in innovation programmes. Actions under the Community Energy Facilitation Hub and digital literacy training directly support older residents, helping them engage in local sustainability projects and access emerging opportunities in energy efficiency and community enterprises.

Cultural and Ethnic Diversity:

With migrants and new communities forming a growing part of the workforce, organisations such as Teach na nDaoine (Family Resource Centre, Monaghan Town and Clones) and the Monaghan Migrants Centre play an essential role in inclusion. The RAP encourages engagement of these groups in circular and renewable initiatives through targeted outreach, accessible communication, and translation where needed.

Inclusion through Community Structures:

Local initiatives such as Tidy Towns, Men’s Sheds, Social Enterprises, Community Groups, Community Gardening, Family Resource Centres, Migrants Groups, and the Social Economy sector provide accessible entry points for diverse participation, fostering intergenerational and cross-cultural collaboration. The Regional Circular Economy Hub will continue to strengthen this inclusiveness through workshops, peer learning, and open calls for participation.

Key Insight:

Gender equality, age diversity, and cultural inclusion are central to Monaghan’s circular transition. The RAP ensures that all groups—women, youth, older people, and migrants—can participate equitably in circular economy training, enterprise, and community energy initiatives, building a socially balanced and sustainable regional future.

3. Vision and Strategic Goals

3.1. Vision Statement

By 2030, County Monaghan will have a well-established circular and green economy, demonstrated through measurable reductions in waste, greater local reuse and recycling, and a strong network of circular SMEs supported by an active Regional Circular Economy Hub. Rural and Urban communities will collaborate through coordinated local governance, improved digital connectivity, and practical circular economy training, making Monaghan a recognised model of sustainable rural innovation and an inclusive green transition in Ireland.

3.2. Strategic Goals

Strategic Goals for County Monaghan RAP (2026–2030)

Year (by)	Strategic goal	Tasks
2026	Establish a Functional Circular Economy	Set up a dedicated Regional Circular Economy Hub as a coordination and innovation centre for local enterprises, farmers, and community groups.
	Complete County Waste and Resource Mapping	A full waste mapping study of County Monaghan will be completed by LEADER programme/ MID.
2027	Develop the Community Energy Facilitation Hub and	Conduct a full baseline assessment of agricultural and industrial waste streams and
	Pilot a Waste Valorisation Project	Implement at least one pilot project converting waste into valuable materials or energy.
2028	Expand Circular Agriculture and Green Infrastructure Initiatives	Build on 2027 results by extending circular practices across agriculture and local industries. Support at least two new circular pilot initiatives and integrate CE principles into local supply chains. Advance retrofitting and renewable initiatives through collaboration with SEAI, DkIT, and local communities.
2029	Strengthen Digital and Circular Innovation Capacity	Provide comprehensive CE and digital skills training to at least 10+ SMEs, social enterprises, and community organisations. Empower women, youth, and migrant entrepreneurs through inclusive innovation programmes. Promote digital tools (e.g., PoliRuralPlus Advisor, Jackdaw) to enhance participation, data sharing, and impact monitoring.
2030	Support Community Microgrid and	Facilitate the development of an integrated community biogrid /microgrid pilot, linking renewable generation and local users.
	Final RAP Evaluation	Conduct the final evaluation of RAP outcomes, measuring reductions in waste, increases in circular business activity, and community energy participation. Prepare recommendations for policy integration into Monaghan County Council’s Climate Action and Local Development Strategies beyond 2030.

4. Action Plan

4.1. Measures and Actions

Intervention Areas

I. Establish Regional Circular Economy Hub

Rationale:

County Monaghan needs a central space where people, businesses, and communities can learn, test, and grow circular economy ideas. The Regional Circular Economy Hub will act as a coordination and innovation centre — connecting local SMEs, community groups, and young people with training, resources, and practical examples. This Hub will help raise awareness, build skills, and support small projects that reduce waste, create local jobs, and strengthen rural–urban collaboration.

Scope of the Action:

The Hub will be a physical and digital meeting point based in County Monaghan and border counties – Cavan and Louth, hosted by Monaghan Integrated Development (MID) in partnership with MCC, LEO, and local education institutions. It will provide workshops, mentoring, and peer learning on circular business practices and support repair, reuse, and youth innovation projects. The Hub will also serve as a link between communities, policymakers, and research partners to coordinate circular activities across the county and attract external funding for new green initiatives.

II. Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems

Rationale:

Monaghan produces large quantities of agricultural and industrial by-products, such as poultry litter and mushroom compost, which currently have limited reuse options. This intervention aims to transform these waste streams into new resources through innovation, technical support, and small-scale pilots. By doing so, it will reduce environmental pressures, create new business opportunities, and contribute to Ireland’s Circular Economy Strategy and Climate Action Plan goals.

Scope of the Action:

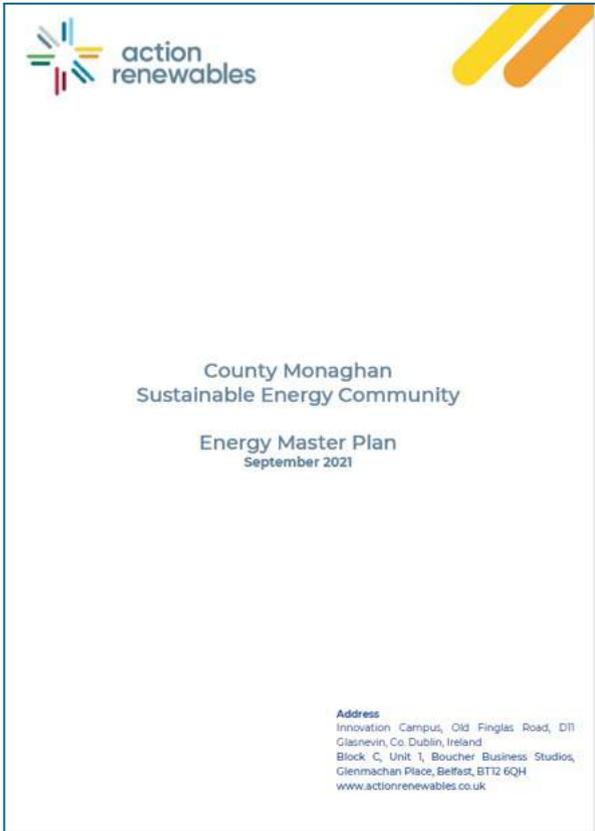
The intervention will include mapping key waste flows, evaluating technologies for recycling and reuse, and supporting pilot projects that demonstrate viable circular solutions. It will help farms, food producers, and SMEs to identify business models for turning waste into valuable materials like compost, biofertilizer, or ingredients for new products. These pilots will be supported by partners such as LEO, Teagasc, DkIT, and BioConnect. The initiative will build practical evidence for scaling circular approaches county-wide and link Monaghan’s activities with national and EU-level demonstration projects.



These pilots will be supported by partners such as LEO, Teagasc, DkIT, and BioConnect. The initiative will build practical evidence for scaling circular approaches county-wide and link Monaghan’s activities with national and EU-level demonstration projects.

III. Community Energy Transition

Rationale:



County Monaghan’s transition to clean and affordable energy depends on local capacity, partnerships, and citizen engagement. The County Monaghan Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) already provides a strong base for this work. This intervention strengthens the SEC by establishing a Community Energy Facilitation Hub within MID to provide clear guidance, education, and project support. It will empower communities, SMEs, and citizens to take practical energy actions — from efficiency upgrades to renewable generation — contributing to Monaghan’s Climate Action Plan and Ireland’s net-zero goals.

Scope of the Action:

The intervention will expand the reach and capacity of the SEC through the Community Energy Facilitation Hub. The Hub will coordinate local energy education programmes, support renovation and retrofit projects, and help communities plan renewable energy and microgrid pilots. It will work closely with MCC’s Climate Action Unit, SEAI mentors, and local technical partners to

ensure consistency with national programmes and funding schemes. Through citizen-led projects, training, and demonstration actions, this intervention will reduce energy costs, lower emissions, and strengthen community leadership in the energy transition.

4.2. Actions

Intervention I: Establish Regional Circular Economy Hub

NO	Actions	Small steps
1.1	Establish a Physical Regional Circular Economy Hub	Identify and prepare a suitable location for the Hub, ideally within an accessible town centre or innovation facility.
		Equip the Hub with basic facilities — meeting rooms, shared workspaces, and demonstration areas for repair, reuse, or innovation.
		Form an executive committee including Monaghan Integrated Development (MID), Monaghan County Council (MCC), LEO Monaghan, education partners, etc
		Develop a clear operating plan outlining the Hub's services, governance, and funding model.
		Launch the Hub with an open event to promote its role as a community and SME resource for circular economy activities.
1.2	Education and Training through the Circular Economy Hub	Deliver regular webinars, training and workshops on circular economy practices, waste reduction, digital tools, and green business skills.
		Provide mentoring and advice to SMEs, social enterprises, and community groups on how to develop circular business ideas.
		Offer simple toolkits, templates, and online resources that businesses and community groups can use
		Facilitate peer-to-peer learning by bringing together local entrepreneurs, innovators, and community leaders to share experience
		Promote training opportunities through local media, social networks, and schools to ensure broad participation.
1.3	Support Community Repair and Reuse Initiatives	Work with community groups to set up Repair Cafés, tool libraries, and reuse workshops across the county.
		Provide small-scale coordination and promotional support through the Hub
		Connect local repair skills (e.g., Tidy Towns, Men's Sheds, craft groups, and volunteers) with community needs.
		Highlight successful local initiatives as best practice and lesson learning for other communities to follow
1.4	Cultivate Youth Green Entrepreneurship	Provide youth-friendly training on circular economy and sustainability topics through schools, Foróige, youth centres, and Hub programme
		Set up a Youth Advisory Panel within the Hub to help guide youth-focused activities and ensure inclusiveness.
		Partner with LEO Monaghan to organise an annual "Green Solutions Challenge", inviting young people to develop and pitch their circular business ideas.
		Offer small grants or mentoring to support the best youth-led projects

Intervention II: Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems

NO	Actions	Small steps
2.1	Complete County Waste and Resource Mapping (LEADER is working on this action)	<p>Collect and analyse data on key organic and industrial waste streams</p> <p>Identify current disposal routes, associated costs, and processing gaps</p> <p>Produce a county “resource map” to highlight Circular Economy opportunities.</p>
2.2	Technical Evaluation of Technologies and Innovations for Waste Streams	<p>Review and document best practices and case studies from Ireland and other EU regions to assess suitable waste-to-resource technologies</p> <p>Select 3–5 potential pilot opportunities to include farms, SMEs, or processors for feasibility trials of selected technologies.</p> <p>Provide technical support through LEO, Teagasc, DkIT, TU Dublin, SEAI Mentor, Energy companies, etc to engage with selected pilots to address technical challenges and seek innovative solutions</p>
2.3	Identify Suitable Business Models and Pilot Small-Scale Circular Economy Solutions	<p>Work with farms, SMEs, and food producers to design business models for reusing agri-food by-products</p> <p>Connect producers with local and regional markets, retailers, and processors to establish value chains for circular products.</p> <p>Develop tools and training to help SMEs understand market demand, certification, and quality requirements for recycled or reused ingredients</p>
2.4	Pilot 2–3 Circular Economy Solutions in Agriculture and Industry	<p>Select 2–3 high-potential circular projects based on mapping and business model analysis. (reference from 2.2)</p> <p>Develop implementation plans with local partners, ensuring technical, environmental, and financial feasibility.</p> <p>Support pilot delivery through collaboration with LEO Monaghan, MCC, Teagasc, DkIT, Energy companies, SEAI, and BioConnect.</p> <p>Monitor outcomes (resource savings, emissions reduction, job creation) and showcase results</p> <p>Link pilots to national and EU demonstration projects to attract visibility and further investment.</p>

Intervention III: Community Energy Transition

NO	Actions	Small steps
3.1	Strengthening the County Monaghan Sustainable Energy Community (SEC)	<p>Establish the Community Energy Facilitation Hub within MID, operating under the County Monaghan SEC structure.</p> <p>Define and publish the Hub’s service offer (advice, mentoring, retrofit and renewable project coordination, funding signposting)</p> <p>Formalise collaboration with MCC Climate Action Unit, SEAI mentors, DkIT, and LEO Monaghan to share expertise and avoid duplication.</p> <p>Provide a single coordination point for community energy actions and small-scale renewable projects.</p> <p>Track participation and enquiries to measure demand and effectiveness.</p>
3.2	Deliver Community and SME Energy Education and Advisory Programme	<p>Deliver training sessions and drop-in clinics through the Hub on energy saving, solar PV, microgrids, and renewable heating.</p> <p>Run a dedicated SME Energy Support Series focusing on reducing energy costs, improving efficiency, and adopting solar solutions</p> <p>Partner with local corporate sponsors and energy companies to co-fund awareness campaigns and demonstration events.</p> <p>Develop clear, accessible guidance materials (flyers, online resources, videos) to simplify energy decisions for citizens.</p> <p>Integrate feedback from participants to refine the programme and inform SEC and MCC climate planning.</p>
3.3	Support Citizen-Led Renovation and Heating Upgrades of Community Buildings	<p>Identify high-energy-use community buildings and halls for upgrades and renewable installations.</p> <p>Conduct energy audits and BER assessments to establish baselines and guide investment priorities.</p> <p>Support communities to prepare funding applications under SEAI Community Energy Grants, LEADER, or LIFE programmes.</p> <p>Build partnerships with local SMEs, installers, and the Climate Action Unit for delivery.</p> <p>Monitor results and share savings data to motivate other communities.</p>
3.4	Support Development of Integrated Community Microgrids	<p>Identify 1–2 suitable community clusters (e.g., rural villages or business parks) for detailed feasibility studies.</p> <p>Partner with MCC, SEAI, MID, and technical experts from DkIT and BioConnect to co-design small-scale, locally powered microgrid models.</p> <p>Ensure community ownership and citizen participation from the planning stage</p> <p>Seek funding under SEAI, Climate Action Fund, LIFE, or Horizon Europe for pilot implementation.</p> <p>Monitor performance and share lessons through the Co. Monaghan SEC to encourage replication.</p>

Other interventions

1. **Develop a Cross-Border Circular Corridor with Northern Ireland:**
Build partnerships with nearby regions across the border to share circular economy know-how, reuse networks, and access to funding for joint recycling and repair initiatives

2. **Create a Local Circular Economy Dashboard / Knowledge hub:**
Use PoliRuralPlus tools to collect and share simple data on energy, waste, and SME innovation progress — helping communities see real impact and celebrate successes publicly

3. **Introduce a “Youth Circular Challenge” Programme:**
Work with schools and youth groups to design fun, hands-on projects (like upcycling contests or digital repair tutorials) to build awareness and spark innovation among young people

4. **Pilot a “Green Routes of Monaghan” Scheme:**
Map and promote local eco-friendly businesses, repair cafés, community gardens, and renewable projects — encouraging residents and visitors to support sustainable choices

5. **Set Up a Local “Circular Matchmaking Platform”:**
Create an easy-to-use online and community noticeboard where local farms, SMEs, and households can offer or request reusable materials — like wood, compost, or packaging — turning local waste into shared resources



Idea generation for Circular Economy Dashboard

4.3. Expected Outcomes

Intervention I: Establish Regional Circular Economy Hub

- A fully functional Regional Circular Economy Hub established as the focal point for CE coordination, training, and innovation in County Monaghan.
- Increased awareness, knowledge, and participation of SMEs, youth, and community groups in circular economy practices.
- At least 10–15 local SMEs and community initiatives supported circular solutions such as reuse, repair, and upcycling.
- Strengthened collaboration among key partners (MCC, LEO, DkIT, Enterprising Monaghan, BioConnect, Teagasc) for joint innovation and funding applications.
- Enhanced youth engagement and entrepreneurship, with annual “Green Solutions Challenge” events generating new CE business ideas.
- Visible growth in community-led repair and reuse activities, improving local skills, reducing waste, and fostering social inclusion

Intervention II: Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems

- A comprehensive waste and resource map completed, identifying key waste streams and circular opportunities across the county.
- 1-2 waste valorisation pilot projects implemented, proving the technical and financial feasibility of local circular solutions.
- 1 new or improved circular business models developed for local agri-food and industrial sectors, including composting, reuse of by-products, and resource recovery.
- Increased local processing and reuse of materials, reducing dependency on external waste facilities and transport costs.
- Strengthened collaboration among stakeholders (LEO, Teagasc, DkIT, BioConnect, SEAI, private sector) for innovation and pilot support.
- Tangible environmental benefits, including reduced emissions, better nutrient management, and enhanced resource efficiency.

Intervention III: Community Energy Transition

- A Community Energy Facilitation Hub (Local One Stop Shop – Facilitation Model) established under the County Monaghan SEC structure to coordinate local energy initiatives.
- Improved energy awareness and literacy among households, SMEs, and community groups, with clear, accessible guidance and training provided.
- Increased uptake of SEAI grants, retrofit supports, and solar PV adoption by communities and small enterprises.
- Implementation of citizen-led renovation projects improving the efficiency of community and public buildings.
- 1–2 community microgrid pilots initiated, integrating solar, wind, and storage solutions with strong citizen participation.
- Reduced energy costs and emissions, alongside stronger community ownership of local renewable energy actions.

5. Policy and Funding Alignment

5.1. EU and National Policy Alignment:

Alignment with EU Policies and Strategies



European Green Deal (2020–ongoing)

The RAP directly supports the objectives of the European Green Deal by advancing the transition to a climate-neutral, resource-efficient, and inclusive economy. Through its three interventions—Circular Economy Hub, Waste-to-Resource Systems, and Community Energy Transition—the RAP promotes waste reduction, renewable energy use, SME innovation, and community-led climate action across County Monaghan.

EU Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP, 2020)

The RAP contributes to CEAP goals by promoting sustainable product use, waste prevention, and the development of local circular value chains. It supports innovation among SMEs, repair and reuse activities, and the creation of local markets for secondary materials—helping County Monaghan act as a model for rural circular transition.

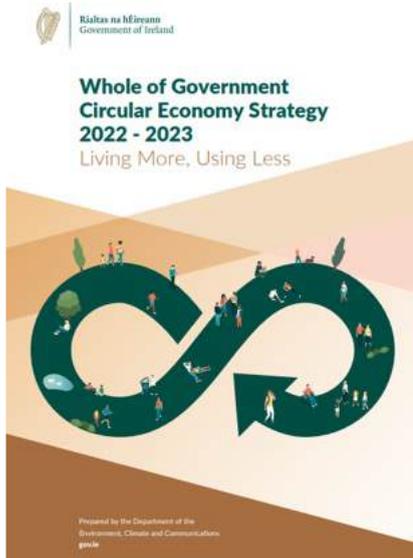
EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030

The RAP aligns with the EU Biodiversity Strategy by encouraging sustainable land and resource use, reducing pollution from waste, and fostering circular solutions that protect natural ecosystems.

Digital Europe Programme (DEP)

The RAP's focus on digital literacy, SME digitalisation, and data-driven circular tools directly supports DEP objectives. The Circular Economy Hub will provide digital skills training, promote online CE tools, and foster innovation through data use and networking—enabling digital inclusion and competitiveness in rural Monaghan.

Alignment with Ireland's National Policies and Strategies



Climate Action Plan 2024 (CAP24)

The RAP directly contributes to Ireland's Climate Action Plan 2024 objectives by promoting renewable energy uptake, waste reduction, and energy efficiency across communities and SMEs. Through the Community Energy Transition and Waste-to-Resource Systems interventions, the RAP supports local delivery of national emissions-reduction targets, aligning with the just transition and community climate resilience principles of CAP24.

OECD Urban Studies – The Circular Economy in Ireland (2024)

The RAP builds on OECD recommendations to localise Ireland's circular economy transition by empowering local authorities, SMEs, and communities. It reflects best practices outlined by the OECD—such as developing regional circular hubs, promoting innovation networks, and integrating circular principles into local planning and enterprise support systems.

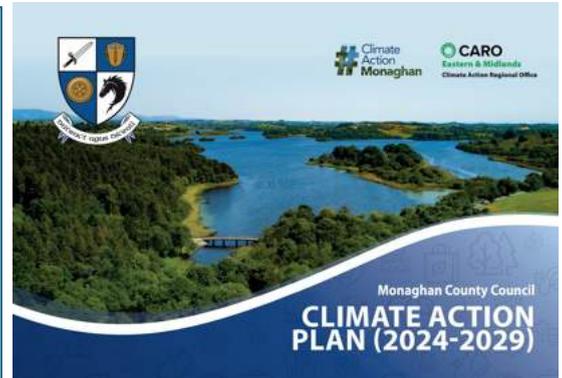
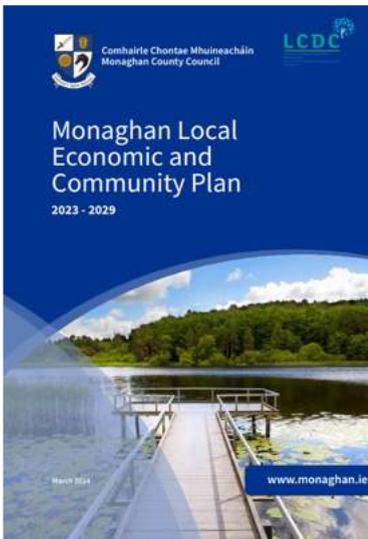
Ireland's National Circular Economy Strategy (2022–2023)

This RAP is a direct local-level implementation pathway for Ireland's Circular Economy Strategy, addressing its four pillars: production and consumption, waste prevention, market development, and innovation. It operationalises these priorities through practical actions—training SMEs, piloting reuse systems, and establishing a dedicated Circular Economy Hub for coordination and demonstration.

National Broadband Plan (NBP)

By enhancing digital skills and supporting SME digitalisation, the RAP complements the rollout of the National Broadband Plan. It ensures that increased connectivity translates into meaningful economic and environmental outcomes, such as digital CE tools, e-commerce for green businesses, and online resource-sharing platforms accessible across rural Monaghan.

Alignment with Ireland’s Regional Policies and Strategies



Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) for County Monaghan (2023–2028)

The RAP aligns closely with the LECP’s priorities for sustainable local development, enterprise growth, and community wellbeing. By promoting circular business models, social enterprise development, and inclusive innovation, the RAP supports LECP goals to build a resilient local economy, enhance environmental performance, and strengthen rural–urban collaboration.

County Monaghan Climate Action Plan (2024–2030)

The RAP complements the County Climate Action Plan’s objectives to reduce emissions, increase renewable energy adoption, and enhance local climate resilience. Through interventions on community energy, waste-to-resource systems, and circular innovation, the RAP provides practical mechanisms for delivering the Plan’s targets at community and SME levels.

LEADER Programme & Local Development Strategy for County Monaghan (2023–2027)

The RAP is directly aligned with the LEADER priorities on economic development, climate action, and social inclusion. LEADER provides a key funding and delivery mechanism for actions within the RAP, particularly those related to community circular initiatives, SME support, and renewable energy projects led by Monaghan Integrated Development (MID).

County Monaghan Social Enterprise Strategy (2021–2025)

The RAP reinforces the Social Enterprise Strategy’s focus on inclusive, community-based economic growth. By supporting repair, reuse, and upcycling initiatives, it creates opportunities for social enterprises and community groups to engage in the circular economy, fostering social inclusion, volunteering, and local job creation.

5.2. Funding Sources

Potential funding mechanisms - National and Regional funding:

No	Funding Source / Scheme	Managing Authority / Organisation	Purpose & Relevance to RAP
1	Circular Economy Innovation Grant Scheme (CEIGS)	Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications	Grants (€40,000–€50,000) for social enterprises, SMEs, and community groups developing circular economy projects in waste prevention, reuse, plastics, and construction waste. Suitable for pilot CE projects under the Circular Economy Hub and Waste-to-Resource interventions.
2	EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) – Community & Enterprise Grants	Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications	Grants up to €300,000 to support community and SME-led circular, renewable, or low-carbon innovation projects. Relevant to circular waste valorisation pilots and community renewable energy actions.
3	Green for Business / Energy Efficiency Grant	Local Enterprise Office (LEO Monaghan)	Offers up to 75% support (max €10,000) for SME energy-saving equipment, renewable installations, and process efficiency upgrades. Aligns with Community Energy Transition and SME capacity-building.
4	Environment, Biodiversity & Circular Economy Fund	Monaghan County Council	Annual grants to support local environmental initiatives such as community recycling, biodiversity restoration, and circular economy education. Ideal for small-scale community CE or repair café projects.
5	Rethink Ireland – Impact Fund and Social Innovation Funds	Rethink Ireland	Provides multi-year grants (up to €96,000) and mentoring to social and environmental enterprises. Supports CE Hub start-ups, youth green entrepreneurship, and community innovation actions.
6	Community Energy Grants / Community Benefit Funds / Community Grants	Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)	Grants for retrofit and renewable energy upgrades in homes and community buildings. Supports community-led renovation, microgrid, and solar PV projects under the Community Energy Transition intervention.
7	Pobal / Dormant Accounts Fund – Growing Social Enterprise Fund	Pobal	Grants (€1,500–€100,000) to grow social enterprises delivering circular, reuse, or energy-transition services. Aligns with the Circular Economy Hub and community repair/reuse initiatives.
8	Ideas Academy and Impact Programme	Social Entrepreneurs Ireland	Provides training and small seed grants (€20,000) to early-stage social or environmental innovators. Supports youth and community entrepreneurship under the CE Hub.
9	LEADER 2023–2027 Programme	Monaghan Integrated Development (MID)	Key funding mechanism for implementing RAP actions, supporting circular business development, community energy initiatives, and innovation hubs across rural Monaghan.
10	Community Climate Action Fund (2024–2027)	Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC)	Funds community-led climate actions such as waste reduction, local energy projects, and awareness campaigns. Aligns strongly with CE Hub outreach and SEC-based community energy initiatives.

Potential funding mechanisms - EU funding

No	Funding Source / Programme	Managing Authority / Organisation	Purpose & Relevance to RAP
1	Citizen-Led Renovation (CLR) Support Service	European Commission	Provides tailored technical and advisory support to communities for energy renovation, renewable energy integration, and citizen engagement. Ideal for the <i>Community Energy Transition</i> intervention
2	LIFE Programme – Clean Energy Transition (LIFE CET)	European Commission (CINEA)	Offers grants (€1–€5 million) for clean energy, climate action, circular economy, and waste/resource efficiency projects. Supports <i>Circular Waste-to-Resource</i> pilots, CE Hub innovation activities, and community energy projects
3	Just Transition Fund (JTF)	In Ireland: Managed by the Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA)	Prioritises economic diversification, the circular economy, sustainable energy, bioeconomy, and low-carbon innovation. Relevant for Monaghan’s waste valorisation pilots, CE Hub expansion, and capacity-building.
4	Social Climate Fund (SCF)	European Commission / Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications	Designed to assist vulnerable households and micro-enterprises in managing energy transition impacts. Supports local retrofit, energy efficiency, and carbon reduction measures aligned with <i>Community Energy Transition</i> actions.
5	European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)	Southern & Eastern Regional Assembly & Northern & Western Regional Assembly	Supports regional innovation, SME competitiveness, sustainable infrastructure, and energy efficiency. Relevant to <i>Circular Economy Hub</i> establishment, CE training, digital tools, and local CE infrastructure projects.
6	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Ireland)	Funds rural diversification, sustainable resource use, bioeconomy development, and rural-urban integration. Supports <i>Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems</i> and rural enterprise elements of the <i>CE Hub</i> .
7	European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Ireland)	Focuses on training, employment, inclusion, and upskilling. Ideal for <i>CE Hub training programmes</i> , SME capacity-building, and youth entrepreneurship initiatives.
8	Interreg (North-West Europe / Atlantic Area / Ireland–Wales)	European Regional Cooperation Programmes	Provides funding for cross-border and transnational cooperation projects in circular economy, energy, and innovation. Suitable for collaborative CE Hub networks or pilot projects with EU partners.
9	Horizon Europe – Clusters 5 & 6	European Commission (DG RTD)	Supports research and innovation in climate, energy, mobility (Cluster 5), and food, bioeconomy, natural resources, agriculture, and environment (Cluster 6). Aligns with Monaghan’s <i>Waste-to-Resource</i> and <i>Circular Innovation</i> actions and CE Hub research partnerships (DKIT, BioConnect, TU Dublin).
10	European Urban Initiative (EUI) / Innovative Actions	European Commission (DG REGIO)	Supports pilot actions for sustainable urban and regional development, focusing on circular economy and green innovation. Relevant to <i>Circular Economy Hub</i> and <i>Community Energy</i> demonstration pilots connecting Monaghan’s urban and rural areas.

5.2.1. Stakeholder access to financial instruments

Stakeholders in County Monaghan have broad access to existing financial instruments and incentives that can directly support the implementation of the RAP’s interventions. Monaghan Integrated Development (MID) can utilise LEADER and SICAP funds to back circular SME development, repair and reuse initiatives, and local energy awareness actions. Monaghan County Council (MCC) can co-finance pilot projects through its Climate Action, Environment and Waste Management, and LECP budgets—particularly those focused on training, coordination, and small-scale demonstration activities.

LEO Monaghan continues to offer enterprise-focused supports such as Green for Business and Energy Efficiency Grants, helping SMEs adopt circular and low-carbon business models. SEAI national schemes—such as Individual Energy Upgrade Grants (Better Energy Homes Scheme), National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme (One Stop Shop), Fully Funded Energy Upgrades (Warmer Homes Scheme), Community Grants - provide funding for retrofitting, renewable installations, and energy education under the Community Energy Transition intervention.

In addition, energy companies such as OHK Energy and KORE Energy, both active stakeholders in the RAP process, bring opportunities for corporate partnerships, technical collaboration, and potential co-financing of local renewable or efficiency projects. These partnerships can help scale community microgrids, improve building energy performance, and support innovation in energy poverty mitigation models.

Stakeholders from circular and waste industries—including local recyclers, processors, and service providers—offer complementary investment and technical capacity for pilot waste-to-resource projects, creating market-driven opportunities for valorisation and reuse. Meanwhile, academic institutions such as DkIT and TU Dublin provide research collaboration, innovation mentoring, and access to EU-funded programmes (e.g. Horizon Europe, LIFE), supporting evidence-based implementation and monitoring of RAP actions.

Given this strong ecosystem, it is not necessary to introduce entirely new funding mechanisms. However, establishing a small-scale Circular Innovation Fund or micro-grant scheme under the Regional Circular Economy Hub would enable local SMEs, youth, and community groups to test circular solutions and scale promising pilots. This blended approach—leveraging existing public instruments, corporate partnerships, and academic collaboration—ensures financial feasibility, innovation, and long-term sustainability of the RAP across all interventions.



5.3. Partnerships

The implementation of the County Monaghan Regional Action Plan (RAP) depends on a strong network of committed partners from across the public, private, academic, and community sectors. These stakeholders bring practical expertise in policy, technical innovation, enterprise development, and community action. Their collaboration reflects the multi-actor approach (MAA) that underpins the RAP — ensuring local ownership, shared responsibility, and effective delivery of circular economy and energy transition goals.

5.3.1 Public Authorities and Local Development Bodies:

No	Organization	Role and Responsibilities
1	Monaghan County Council (MCC)	Provides overall governance, integrates RAP priorities into the Climate Action Plan and LECP, and supports infrastructure, awareness campaigns, and funding alignment
2	Monaghan Integrated Development (MID)	Lead coordinator of the RAP. Responsible for managing the Regional Circular Economy Hub, facilitating stakeholder engagement, and enabling community-led and SME circular initiatives through LEADER funding.
3	Local Enterprise Office	Drives SME participation by providing business mentoring, green vouchers, and feasibility or innovation grants for circular and energy-efficient practices.
4	TFI Local Link Cavan–Monaghan	Supports rural mobility and access to CE Hub and training events, enabling inclusive participation from rural communities.

5.3.2 Agriculture, Environment, and Energy Partners:

No	Organization	Role and Responsibilities
1	Teagasc	Provides technical advice on waste valorisation, regenerative farming, and bioeconomy innovation aligned with the Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems intervention
2	Irish Farmers' Association (IFA)	Represents and mobilises farmers in piloting circular agri-waste and resource reuse initiatives.
3	OHK Energy and KORE Energy	Provide technical support, demonstration projects, and potential co-funding for renewable and efficiency initiatives within the energy transition actions.
4	County Monaghan Sustainable Energy Community	Acts as the anchor structure for the Community Energy Facilitation Hub, coordinating renewable energy and energy literacy actions.

5.3.3 Research, Innovation, and Higher Education:

No	Organization	Role and Responsibilities
1	Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)	Research and technical partner for circular innovation, digital tools, and waste-to-resource technology assessments.
2	Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin)	Contributes research expertise and design thinking in circular product innovation, repair/reuse models, and digital circularity.
3	BioConnect Innovation Centre	Supports CE pilots in agri-food and bioeconomy sectors with research facilities, technical mentoring, and innovation incubation.

5.3.4 Community Development and Social Inclusion:

No	Organization	Role and Responsibilities
1	Family Resource Centre/ Community Organization / Social Enterprises	Engage communities and youth groups in circular training, repair/reuse initiatives, and social inclusion programmes.
2	Monaghan Migration Centre	Ensures participation of migrant communities in entrepreneurship and CE activities, supporting diversity and inclusion within the RAP.

5.3.5 Private Sector and Circular Enterprises:

No	Organization	Role and Responsibilities
1	Greenfield Foods, Versatile Packaging, Wright Quarry Products, and Sicín Co-operative Society Ltd.	Key pilot partners for waste-to-resource and industrial symbiosis projects, contributing data, facilities, and innovation capacity.
2	Enterprising Monaghan	Facilitates enterprise spaces and business incubation linked to the CE Hub, promoting start-ups and SME collaboration.
3	Aura Internet Services Ltd.	Supports digital connectivity, online resource mapping, and the deployment of digital CE tools for SMEs and community group
4	MCA Consulting	Key consultant company in the region to provide technical support and facilitation. In addition, conducting feasibility studies and coordination with key stakeholders

6. Roadmap

6.1. Timeline:

Short Term (2026):

Description	Intervention	Actions
Foundation and Coordination Phase Focus: Establish key coordination structures, conduct mapping and baselining, and launch awareness and capacity-building activities	Intervention I: Establish Regional Circular Economy Hub	Action 1.1: Establish a Physical Regional Circular Economy Hub (location, governance, operating plan, launch).
		Action 1.2: Deliver initial Education and Training through the CE Hub (awareness, peer learning, toolkits).
		Action 1.4: Begin Youth Green Entrepreneurship initiatives (Advisory Panel and first “Green Solutions Challenge”).
	Intervention II: Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems	Action 2.1: Complete County Waste and Resource Mapping (baseline study).
		Action 2.2: Technical Evaluation of Technologies and Innovations for Waste Streams (best practice review, feasibility analysis).
	Intervention III: Community Energy Transition	Action 3.1: Strengthen the County Monaghan Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) and establish the Community Energy Facilitation Hub under MID
		Action 3.2: Deliver initial Community and SME Energy Education and Advisory sessions (energy literacy, solar PV, retrofitting).

Medium Term (2027–2028):

Description	Intervention	Actions
Implementation and Expansion Phase. Focus: Move from preparation to action—pilot projects, community retrofitting, and scaling circular and energy initiatives.	Intervention I: Establish Regional Circular Economy Hub	Action 1.2: Expand CE Hub training and mentoring programmes to more SMEs and community groups.
		Action 1.3: Support Community Repair and Reuse Initiatives (establish repair cafés, reuse events, tool libraries).
		Action 1.4: Continue Youth Entrepreneurship support with new cohorts and CE innovation mentoring
	Intervention II: Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems	Action 2.3: Identify Suitable Business Models and Pilot Small-Scale CE Solutions (work with SMEs/farms).
		Action 2.4: Pilot 2–3 Circular Economy Solutions in Agriculture and Industry (implementation and monitoring).
	Intervention III: Community Energy Transition	Action 3.2: Continue delivery of energy training and SME support (Energy Support Series).
		Action 3.3: Support Citizen-Led Renovation and Heating Upgrades of Community Buildings
		Action 3.4: Support Development of Integrated Community Microgrids – Feasibility Studies and Design Phase.



Long Term (2029–2030):

Timeline	Intervention	Actions
Consolidation, Innovation, and Evaluation Phase Focus: Strengthen innovation capacity, scale up successful pilots, and evaluate outcomes to inform post-2030 policy.	Intervention I: Establish Regional Circular Economy Hub	Scale Hub services and digital tools for SMEs and social enterprises (digital CE platform, innovation mentoring).
		Develop cross-county and EU-level collaboration through networks and Horizon-funded exchanges.
		Conduct final Hub evaluation and prepare sustainability plan beyond 2030.
	Intervention II: Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems	Expand successful circular pilots into long-term business or cooperative models.
		Integrate CE pilots into local value chains and promote regional replication.
		Document results (waste reduction, resource savings, job creation) and align with Climate and LECP updates.
	Intervention III: Community Energy Transition	Implement one integrated community microgrid or bio-grid pilot (linking renewable generation and local users).
		Evaluate SEC Hub outcomes (energy savings, citizen engagement, new partnerships).
		Final evaluation of RAP (2030): measure reductions in waste, CE adoption rates, and community energy participation; develop recommendations for MCC Climate Action and Local Development strategies post-2030

6.2. Implementation Plan

Intervention / Action	Lead Partner(s)	Key Supporting Partners	Main Responsibilities
Intervention I: Establish Regional Circular Economy Hub			
1.1 Establish a Physical Regional Circular Economy Hub	Monaghan Integrated Development (MID)	Monaghan County Council (MCC), LEO Monaghan and stakeholders	Lead establishment, identify site, manage funding applications, coordinate governance, oversee launch and daily management of the Hub.
1.2 Education and Training through the Regional Circular Economy Hub	MID and Regional Circular Economy Hub	LEO, DkIT, TU Dublin, Enterprise Ireland, Social Enterprises	Deliver training, mentoring, workshops, toolkits; integrate CE learning into SME and community programmes.
1.3 Support Community Repair and Reuse Initiatives	MID	MCC, LEO, Tidy Towns, Men's Sheds, Social Enterprises	Support creation of repair cafés and tool libraries; coordinate volunteers, venues, and promotion; collect lessons for replication.
1.4 Cultivate Youth Green Entrepreneurship	LEO Monaghan	MID, Foróige, Schools, Youth Centres, DkIT, MCC, Circular Economy Hub	Organise youth CE training and annual "Green Solutions Challenge"; provide mentoring and micro-grants for youth projects.
Intervention II: Circular Waste-to-Resource System			
2.1 Complete County Waste and Resource Mapping	LEADER (MID)	MCC (Environmental & Climate Unit) , LEO, DkIT, Teagasc, EPA	Lead waste data collection, analysis, mapping; integrate findings into local CE planning and policy
2.2 Technical Evaluation of Technologies and Innovations for Waste Streams	MID	BioConnect, Teagasc, DkIT, TU Dublin, MCC, LEO Monaghan	Identify and assess best available technologies; support SMEs/farms with feasibility studies and technical guidance
2.3 Identify Suitable Business Models and Pilot Small-Scale CE Solutions	MID	LEO Monaghan, Teagasc, BioConnect, Enterprise Ireland, Circular Economy Industries	Facilitate business model design, mentoring, and market linkages; connect to CE Hub for funding and support
2.4 Pilot 2–3 Circular Economy Solutions in Agriculture and Industry	MID	MCC, BioConnect, LEO, Circular Economy Industries, DkIT, Teagasc	Implement and monitor pilots (waste-to-value, biogas, composting, reuse); document impacts and lessons for scaling

Intervention III: Community Energy Transition			
3.1 Strengthen the County Monaghan Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) and Facilitation Hub	MID (Host of Hub)	MCC Climate Action Unit, SEAI, DkIT, LEO Monaghan, OHK Energy, KORE Energy	Operate the Community Energy Hub; coordinate energy advice, mentoring, retrofit facilitation, and project development
3.2 Deliver Community and SME Energy Education and Advisory Programme	Co. Monaghan SEC (MID)	MCC Climate Action Unit, SEAI, OHK Energy, KORE Energy, Corporate Partners, Community Groups	Run training and advisory sessions; develop guides, demonstration projects, and SME energy cost-saving programmes
3.3 Support Citizen-Led Renovation and Heating Upgrades of Community Buildings	Co. Monaghan SEC (MID)	MCC, SEAI, LEADER, OHK Energy, Local Contractors, Community Groups	Conduct audits, identify funding, support applications, and track retrofit outcomes
3.4 Support Development of Integrated Community Microgrids	Co. Monaghan SEC (MID)	MCC, LEO, SEAI, BioConnect, Technical Experts, Irish Farmer Association, Community Clusters	Conduct feasibility and pilot projects; ensure community participation; secure funding via SEAI, LIFE, or Horizon Europe.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

7.1. KPIs

#	Title	Purpose	2025 Metrics	2026 Target
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure the breadth and diversity of stakeholder engagement in RAP processes.	31 active stakeholders identified; 3 coordination meetings and 1 thematic workshop held.	Maintain at least 40 active stakeholders; conduct 2 multi-actor workshops including women, youth, and migrants
2	Rural–Urban Collaboration	Evaluate the level of cooperation between territories and sectors in integrating policies and actions.	Established collaboration between rural and urban groups; early coordination with MCC	Implement 1 joint rural–urban circular project via the Regional CE Hub; engage both rural and urban businesses in pilot design.
3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Promote the use of innovative and digital tools and practices.	Introduction of PoliRuralPlus Tools to 31 stakeholders; demonstration held for 11 stakeholders	Train 10+ SMEs/community reps in CE digital tools; at least 5 SMEs using digital systems for CE or energy data tracking
4	Territorial and Environmental Sustainability	Encourage sustainable, resilient and green practices in territories.	Waste mapping study initiated with LEADER; 1 pilot CE feasibility completed.	Complete county-wide waste/resource map; initiate 1 waste-to-resource pilot project in agri-food sector
5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Assess improvements in liability, wellbeing, and social inclusion.	Stakeholder diversity improving; representing new communities and local groups.	Involve 3+ new community organisations (e.g., Tidy Towns, MenShed, migrant groups) in CE or energy initiatives.
6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Strengthen governance structures and collaborative decision-making.	Coordination established between MID, LEO, DkIT and LEADER; RAP structure validated	Formalise Circular Economy Hub governance group and hold 1 policy alignment meeting with the MCC/Environment team.
7	Communication and Visibility	Measure how results and messages are shared and communicated.	12 communication pieces published (5 website news, 2 articles, 1 newsletter, 4 social media posts).	Publish 10+ outreach items (news articles, CE Hub updates, events); achieve >500 engagements on project communication platform
8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Assess sustainability and potential for scaling up the PoliRuralPlus model.	Stakeholder interest in CE Hub pilot and CE pilot pilots’ projects (e.g. Microgrid)	Support 2 SMEs/social enterprises to access CE-related funding (LEADER or SEAI)

KPIs – action level

NO	Interventions	Actions	KPIs
1.1	Interventions I: Establish Regional Circular Economy Hub	Establish a Physical Regional Circular Economy Hub	A regional circular economy hub and launched and function
1.2		Education and Training through the Circular Economy Hub	Number of Circular Economy Training Events Delivered
1.3		Support Community Repair and Reuse Initiatives	Support Community Repair and Reuse Initiatives
1.4		Cultivate Youth Green Entrepreneurship	Number of Youth Participants in Green Entrepreneurship Programmes
2.1	Interventions II: Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems	Complete County Waste and Resource Mapping (LEADER is working on this action)	County Waste and Resource Mapping Report Completed
2.2		Technical Evaluation of Technologies and Innovations for Waste Streams	Number of Technologies and Case Studies Reviewed and Number of Feasibility Assessments Conducted for Local Pilots
2.3		Identify Suitable Business Models and Pilot Small-Scale Circular Economy Solutions	Number of Circular Business Models Designed with Local SMEs/Farms
2.4		Pilot 2–3 Circular Economy Solutions in Agriculture and Industry	Number of Circular Pilot Projects Implemented
3.1	Interventions III: Community Energy Transition	Strengthening the County Monaghan Sustainable Energy Community (SEC)	Community Energy Facilitation Hub operational and recording ≥100 stakeholder engagements annually.
3.2		Deliver Community and SME Energy Education and Advisory Programme	At least 100 participants trained through Hub-led energy awareness and SME support sessions per year
3.3		Support Citizen-Led Renovation and Heating Upgrades of Community Buildings	Minimum of 5 community buildings upgraded with renewable or efficiency measures through supported funding applications.
3.4		Support Development of Integrated Community Microgrids	Two community microgrid feasibility studies completed, and one pilot project initiated under SEC coordination.

7.2. Evaluation Mechanisms

A practical and participatory evaluation system will ensure that the Regional Action Plan remains on track, transparent, and responsive to community and stakeholder needs. Evaluation will draw on both data from KPIs and stakeholder feedback to measure progress, guide decisions, and support continuous learning across County Monaghan and its cross-border partners.

1. Periodic Reviews and Governance

- A joint Evaluation Committee, coordinated by Monaghan Integrated Development (MID) with Monaghan County Council (MCC), LEO Monaghan, and partner organisations, will oversee annual and mid-term reviews.
- The committee will also liaise with cross-border partners to exchange lessons and align actions with wider regional and EU priorities.
- Reviews will assess implementation status, partner engagement, and alignment with the RAP's strategic goals.

2. Data-Driven Monitoring

- Each intervention will be assessed using the Key Performance Indicators defined in Section 7.1
- Implementing partners will collect quantitative data quarterly (e.g. number of SMEs supported, participants trained, waste reduced, energy savings achieved).
- MID will compile results; MCC will validate data against environmental and economic metrics; and summaries will be published through the Circular Economy Hub.
- Comparison with 2026 baseline data and 2030 targets will highlight progress and inform resource allocation.

3. Stakeholder Feedback and Course Correction

- Regular feedback sessions and community consultations will be held through the Circular Economy Hub and the County Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) network.
- Short online or in-person surveys will capture experiences from SMEs, community groups, and youth participants.
- The Evaluation Committee will use this feedback to adjust actions, address barriers, and identify new opportunities.

4. Reporting and Learning

- Findings will be summarised in an Annual Progress Update and a Mid-Term Evaluation and Learning Report.
- Reports will document results, lessons, and recommendations, and will be shared via partner websites and cross-border learning platforms under PoliRuralPlus.
- Key outcomes will feed into Monaghan County Council's Climate Action Plan and LECP updates, ensuring policy integration and long-term continuity.

8. Communication and Engagement

8.1. Stakeholder Involvement

The RAP's communication and engagement strategy builds on the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA), ensuring that all local stakeholders—communities, SMEs, public bodies, and research institutions—remain active partners in planning, implementation, and long-term sustainability.

- Local Communities and Social Enterprises

Engagement will be channelled through LEADER and SICAP networks, community forums, Repair Cafés, and reuse initiatives coordinated by Monaghan Integrated Development (MID). These actions empower residents to co-create solutions, build local ownership, and embed circular practices.

- Businesses and SMEs

LEO Monaghan will lead targeted outreach, mentoring, and training for SMEs, helping them adopt circular and energy-efficient practices. The Regional Circular Economy Hub will serve as the focal point for collaboration, pilot coordination, and visibility, ensuring businesses remain engaged beyond project funding cycles.

- Academic and Research Institutions

DkIT, TU Dublin, and BioConnect Innovation Centre will provide technical expertise, applied research, and student–enterprise projects. Their continued partnership ensures evidence-based innovation, access to EU research networks, and a pipeline of skills for regional circular economy growth.

- Public Authorities and Policy Partners

Monaghan County Council (MCC) and partner agencies will integrate RAP outcomes into existing frameworks—Climate Action Plan, LECP, and waste and enterprise strategies—to secure long-term policy alignment, governance continuity, and funding stability.

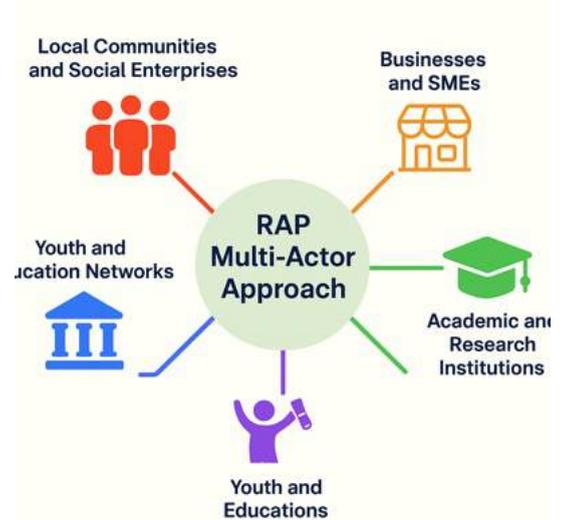
- Youth and Education Networks

Collaboration with schools, Foróige, and youth centres within the CE Hub will build awareness, promote green entrepreneurship, and ensure intergenerational continuity in circular and energy actions.

- Sustaining Engagement and Ownership

Engagement will be maintained through: Regular multi-actor coordination meetings and annual reviews hosted by the CE Hub, Integration of RAP actions into partner organisations' existing mandates and funding programmes, and Recognition of stakeholder contributions and visible local benefits—such as new pilots, training results, and funding access—to reinforce motivation and shared responsibility.

This strategic, network-based model ensures that the same actors who implement RAP measures in the short term will continue to lead and sustain them in the medium and long term.



8.2. Awareness Campaigns

Promoting RAP Initiatives

To strengthen public understanding and participation, the RAP will implement coordinated awareness campaigns highlighting its circular economy and energy transition initiatives. These campaigns will:

- Use local and social media to share progress stories, success examples, and opportunities for involvement.
- Organise community and business events, such as Climate Action Week, Circular Economy Days, repair cafés, and exhibitions at the CE Hub to demonstrate practical actions.
- Launch “Monaghan Circular Stories”, a storytelling campaign profiling SMEs, farmers, youth, and community leaders implementing circular solutions.
- Partner with schools and youth groups through competitions and educational workshops to embed sustainability thinking from an early age.
- Produce digital newsletters and short videos showcasing tangible results from pilots, training, and energy initiatives.
- Collaborate with corporate and academic partners (e.g. OHK Energy, KORE Energy, DkIT, TU Dublin, BioConnect) to amplify visibility and attract technical and investment support.

Sharing Lessons Learned and Creating Synergies

Knowledge sharing will be central to sustaining and scaling the RAP’s impact. Lessons and outcomes will be disseminated through:

- The Regional Circular Economy Hub Knowledge Platform – an online repository of case studies, reports, and practical guides accessible to all stakeholders.
- Annual learning forums and stakeholder review events convened by MID and MCC to exchange insights and evaluate progress.
- Peer-learning sessions and cross-regional exchange visits through the PoliRuralPlus network and Irish Circular Economy regional partnerships.
- Integration of outcomes into partner communications – including MCC, LEADER, LEO, and SEAI platforms – ensuring consistent messaging and alignment with regional and national strategies.
- Academic collaboration with DkIT and TU Dublin to document and publish applied research results, enhancing knowledge transfer across Ireland and the EU.

This integrated communication model ensures that awareness, engagement, and knowledge sharing remain continuous throughout the RAP lifecycle—encouraging replication, synergy, and long-term ownership of circular economy practices across County Monaghan and beyond.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Summary of Expected Impact

The County Monaghan Regional Action Plan (RAP) provides a practical, locally driven roadmap to strengthen circular economy practices, improve resource use, and build resilient rural–urban connections across the county. Its three interventions — ***the Regional Circular Economy Hub, Circular Waste-to-Resource Systems, and Community Energy Transition*** — will help local communities, enterprises, and institutions move from awareness to action.

By 2030, the RAP is expected to deliver visible and lasting benefits for Monaghan’s people and economy:

- **A stronger local circular enterprise base**, with SMEs, social enterprises, and community groups adopting circular models and developing new repair, reuse, and waste-to-value activities.
- **Improved coordination and knowledge-sharing**, achieved through the new Regional Circular Economy Hub and its role in training, mentoring, and supporting innovation partnerships.
- **Better use of local resources**, as waste streams from agriculture and industry are mapped and reused within the county instead of being exported.
- **Empowered communities**, with greater access to independent energy advice, small-scale renewable projects, and renovation supports delivered under the County Monaghan SEC.
- **Inclusive participation**, ensuring women, youth, and migrant groups are part of training, innovation, and circular business opportunities.

The RAP’s outcomes are supported by European, national, and local policies — including the EU Green Deal, New European Bauhaus and Circular Economy Action Plan, Ireland’s Climate Action Plan, National Circular Economy Strategy, Monaghan’s Climate Action Plan and Monaghan Local Economic and Community Plan (2023–2028) — ensuring that local actions align with wider development priorities and available funding streams.

In addition to its direct impacts, the RAP will influence related areas such as education, skills, community innovation, and social inclusion. It will inspire further collaboration between public authorities, businesses, and academic partners, helping Monaghan position itself as a practical example of how a rural county can lead Ireland’s circular transition from the ground up.

9.2. Call to Action

The success of the County Monaghan Regional Action Plan depends on strong, ongoing collaboration among all local and regional partners. Every stakeholder — from public authorities and businesses to community groups and citizens — has a role to play in turning the county’s circular economy vision into reality.

To ensure that this transformation continues beyond the lifetime of the RAP, the following key actions are called for:

- Strengthen collaboration and coordination among Monaghan County Council, MID, LEO Monaghan, DKIT, TU Dublin, and local community networks to deliver actions jointly and share knowledge openly.
- Empower the Regional Circular Economy Hub to act as the main coordination and support centre for SMEs, social enterprises, and community initiatives.
- Encourage active participation from businesses (SMEs), farms, and community groups in pilot projects, training programmes, and innovation challenges.
- Promote inclusivity by ensuring women, youth, and migrant communities are supported and represented in all circular economy and energy activities.
- Mobilise funding and investment, using national and EU programmes as well as local grants to scale up successful pilots and sustain operations beyond 2030.
- Integrate circular economy principles into local planning, procurement, and education systems to embed long-term change.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange and research by linking Monaghan’s initiatives with national and EU innovation networks.
- Support community-led energy and renovation projects through the County Monaghan SEC and new Community Energy Facilitation Hub (Local One Stop Shop).
- Recognise and celebrate success stories, sharing achievements through media, schools, and EU platforms to inspire wider participation.
- Commit to continuous learning and review, using feedback, KPIs, and evaluation tools to refine actions and keep the RAP relevant and effective.

By working together with shared responsibility, transparency, and ambition, County Monaghan can become a leading example of how rural and urban communities in Ireland can create a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable circular economy.

“The future we build for Monaghan will not arrive on its own — it will be created by the hands of those who choose to act together.”

10. Annexes (Optional)

10.1. Sustainability and extension of activities: Checklist for the RAP pilots

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation			
<i>Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.</i>	X		Challenges and opportunities related to sustainability have been considered. The RAP recognises issues such as uneven stakeholder engagement, limited circular economy awareness, and financial constraints for pilot projects, while also noting strong opportunities in Monaghan’s agri-food waste streams, community energy interest, and digital infrastructure. Ongoing coordination by MID and alignment with LEADER programme, Social Inclusive Activation Programme (SICAP), Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Monaghan County (MCC) Council strategies support long-term ownership and continuity beyond the project
Vision and Strategic Goals			
<i>How well are your vision and strategic goals aligned with the main areas of sustainability: Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing? What is the main focus? (You may use the sustainability compass for guidance here: https://compassu.wordpress.com/introduction/)</i>	X		The vision and strategic goals are well aligned with all four areas of sustainability—Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing. They support environmental sustainability through circular waste systems and reduced resource use; economic sustainability through SME development, Circular Economy innovation, and the creation of local value chains; social sustainability through inclusive participation, community-led initiatives, and rural–urban collaboration; and wellbeing by improving access to skills, reducing household costs, and strengthening community cohesion. The overall focus is strongest on Economic and Social sustainability, while still delivering clear benefits for Nature and Wellbeing
Action Plan			
<i>- How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained?</i>	X		Most measures can be sustained through existing local structures—particularly the Circular Economy Hub, MID/SICAP facilitation, LEO enterprise supports, and MCC waste and climate actions. By embedding CE training, community repair/reuse initiatives, SME mentoring, and energy literacy activities into these ongoing programmes, the actions become part of routine service delivery rather than one-off pilots. Partnerships with Teagasc, DkIT, BioConnect, and SEAI also provide continued technical support, while alignment with LEADER, SEAI grants, and national circular economy policies helps secure future funding and long-term continuity.

<p><i>- Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future?</i></p>	<p>X</p>	<p>Primary responsibility for maintaining the RAP’s tangible results will lie with Monaghan Integrated Development (MID) as the lead coordinator and manager of the Circular Economy Hub. MID will ensure continuity of CE training, SME mentoring, community initiatives, and the One-Stop-Shop energy support model. Monaghan County Council (MCC) will support long-term waste-to-resource actions, local policy integration, and alignment with climate and economic plans. Local Enterprise Office (LEO), Monaghan will sustain enterprise, and innovation support for circular SMEs, while SICAP will continue inclusive community engagement and digital/energy literacy work. Technical partners such as Teagasc, DkIT, and BioConnect will maintain pilot knowledge, research links, and innovation capacity. Community organisations, repair/reuse groups, and participating SMEs will also play an ongoing role in sustaining activities at local level. Collectively, these actors provide a stable governance structure to ensure the RAP’s results remain active beyond the project period.</p>
<p>Policy and Funding Alignment</p>		
<p><i>- Do the stakeholders/actors have access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP?</i></p>	<p>X</p>	<p>Stakeholders in County Monaghan have access to several financial instruments and supports that can help implement the RAP measures. These include LEADER 2023–2027 for community-led circular initiatives and SME development; SICAP for social inclusion, digital skills, and energy literacy actions; and LEO Monaghan supports enterprise innovation and green business development. SEAI grants and community energy schemes are available for retrofit and energy-awareness activities, while MCC can align funding through climate action, waste management, and local development budgets. At EU level, stakeholders can access programmes such as Horizon Europe, Interreg, and Digital Europe for innovation, digital tools, and CE pilots. Together, these provide a realistic financial base to sustain and scale RAP actions beyond 2026.</p>

<p><i>- Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms?</i></p>		<p>X</p>	<p>It is not strictly necessary to introduce new funding mechanisms at this stage, because the measures in the RAP can be realistically delivered using existing and accessible instruments such as LEADER, SICAP, LEO supports, MCC climate and waste budgets, SEAI grants, and available EU programmes (Horizon Europe, Interreg, Digital Europe). These sources are already aligned with the circular economy, community development, SME innovation, and energy awareness activities outlined in the RAP.</p> <p>However, innovative funding approaches may be helpful in the future—for example small pilot funds within the CE Hub, community micro-grants, or blended finance models—if opportunities expand or if demand grows. For now, existing mechanisms are sufficient to begin implementation and ensure continuity.</p>
<p>Communication and Engagement</p>			
<p><i>- What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?</i></p>		<p>X</p>	<p>Ongoing involvement and ownership will be sustained through the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA), continued coordination by MID, and regular engagement activities delivered through the Circular Economy Hub. Mechanisms include recurring stakeholder meetings, co-design workshops, pilot reviews, community events, and targeted outreach through SICAP and LEO. The CE Hub will act as a central physical and digital platform where partners can access information, training, and project support, helping to maintain momentum. Clear roles, shared decision-making, and integration of RAP actions into existing organisational workplans (MCC, MID, LEO, community groups) further ensure long-term commitment and collective ownership.</p>
<p><i>- Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?</i></p>		<p>X</p>	<p>The RAP is designed so that the same stakeholders who implement actions in the short term—such as MID, MCC, LEO, SICAP, community groups, SMEs, and research partners—are also the actors best positioned to continue these activities in the medium and long term. This continuity is supported by integrating RAP actions into existing programmes (LEADER, SICAP, MCC climate and waste plans), embedding activities within the Circular Economy Hub, and maintaining active partnerships through the Multi-Actor Approach. Because the actions build on the organisations’ core mandates rather than creating new structures, it is realistic and expected that these actors will sustain their roles beyond the initial project period.</p>

<p><i>- How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?</i></p>		<p>Lessons learned will be shared through the Circular Economy Hub as the main coordination and knowledge-exchange platform, supported by MID, MCC, LEO, and project partners. Regular stakeholder meetings, learning workshops, pilot debriefs, and community events will ensure continuous internal sharing. Externally, lessons will be communicated through reports, case studies, newsletters, social media, and regional networks (e.g., SEAI communities, LEADER/Local Development networks, academic partners). Cross-visits, peer-learning sessions, and collaboration with national and EU networks will also help transfer successful practices, create synergies, and support scaling of circular initiatives across Monaghan and beyond.</p>
<p>Conclusion</p>		
<p><i>- Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?</i></p>	<p>X</p>	<p>Yes. The intended outcomes of the RAP are strongly supported by existing policies and plans at local, regional, national, and EU levels. At EU level, the RAP aligns with the Circular Economy Action Plan, the European Green Deal, the Digital Europe Programme, Horizon Europe, and the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas. Nationally, it is reinforced by Ireland’s Circular Economy Strategy, Climate Action Plan 2024, the National Waste Management Plan, SEAI programmes, and the CAP Strategic Plan. Locally, the RAP complements Monaghan’s LEADER and SICAP strategies, the Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP), and MCC climate and waste initiatives. Together, these frameworks provide policy continuity, practical support, and long-term stability for the RAP’s actions and outcomes.</p>
<p><i>- Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?</i></p>		<p>The processes identified in the RAP have strong potential to influence other sectors beyond the circular economy. Waste-to-resource systems can stimulate innovation in construction, transport, and local manufacturing by providing secondary materials and promoting resource efficiency. Energy literacy and digital upskilling actions can benefit the housing, tourism, and service sectors, reducing operating costs and carbon footprints. Community-led repair, reuse, and SME initiatives can strengthen social enterprise, retail, and education, encouraging sustainable consumption and local job creation. Collectively, these cross-sector effects can enhance Monaghan’s overall economic resilience, environmental performance, and social wellbeing.</p>

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10.3. Glossary of Key Terms and Acronyms

CAP24 – Climate Action Plan 2024

CE / CEAP – Circular Economy / Circular Economy Action Plan (EU strategy, 2020)

CE Hub – Circular Economy Hub

CEAP – Circular Economy Action Plan

CEIGS – Circular Economy Innovation Grant Scheme

CSO – Central Statistics Office

DCEE / DECC – Department of Climate, Energy and Communications (Ireland)

DEP – Digital Europe Programme

DG RID - Directorate General for Research and Innovation

DG RIGO – Directorate General for Regional & Urban Policy

DkIT – Dundalk Institute of Technology,

DRCD – Department of Rural and Community Development (Ireland)

EAFRD – European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development

EMRA: East & Midland Regional Assembly

EPA – Environmental Protection Agency (Ireland)

ERDF – European Regional Development Fund

ESF+ – European Social Fund Plus, supporting employment, skills, and inclusion.

EU Green Deal – European Green Deal (2020–ongoing)

IFA – Irish Farmers’ Association

JTF – Just Transition Fund

JTF – Just Transition Fund (EU and Ireland)

LEADER –an EU-funded rural development programme delivered locally by MID.

LECP – Local Economic and Community Plan

LEO – Local Enterprise Office

LIFE CET – LIFE Clean Energy Transition Programme

MAA – Multi-Actor Approach

MCC – Monaghan County Council

MID – Monaghan Integrated Development CLG

NBP – National Broadband Plan

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development,

R&D – Research and Development

RAP – Regional Action Plan for County Monaghan (2026–2030).

Rethink Ireland – National social innovation funder supporting social enterprises and circular initiatives.

SCF – Social Climate Fund

SEAI – Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland

SEC – Sustainable Energy Community, a local network promoting renewable energy and energy efficiency.

SICAP – Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme

SME – Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise.

Teagasc – Ireland’s Agriculture and Food Development Authority

TFI Local Link – Transport for Ireland Local Link

TU Dublin – Technological University Dublin

UN SDGs – United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, global framework for sustainability.

10.4. Stakeholders List

No	Name	Postion/ Organization
1	Alan McCabe	Manager, Glaslough Tyholland Group Water Scheme
2	Allen McAdam	Managing Director, MCA Consulting
3	Barry McCarron	Managing Director, KORE Energy
4	Cathal Flynn	Director of Planning, Regeneration, Economic Development and Capital Projects, Monaghan County Council
5	Clarie Cunningham	Manager, Aura Internet Services Ltd
6	Conor Foley	CEO, Ohk Energy
7	Cora Maguire	Manager, Chadwicks
8	Eamon Mullen	Lecturer, Dep. of Agriculture, Food and Animal Health, Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)
9	Eilín Connolly	Senior Enterprise Development Officer, Local Enterprise Office, Monaghan
10	Emer Brennan	Chairperson, Monaghan Tidy Towns
11	Finbarr Daly	CEO, Enterprising Monaghan
12	Fiona McCaffrey Jones	CEO, Truagh Spirit
13	Gerard Reaburn	Business Development Engineer, Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)
14	Iain Miskelly	Bioprocess Manager, BioConnect project
15	Ian Hall	Health & Safety / Environmental Officer, Wright Quarry Products
16	Jane McConnon	Business & Technology Advisor, Teagasc - Agriculture and Food Development Authority, Ireland
17	Jeyald Antony Rasaratnam	Project Officer, MID
18	John McArdle	Broadband Officer, Monaghan County Council
19	Kieran O'Connell	Knowledge Transfer and Commercialisation Manager, TU Dublin
20	Killian Cawley	CEO, MID
21	Marianne McEaney	Rural Development Coordinator, LEADER Programme, MID
22	Marie Mohan	Finance Controller, Greenfield Foods
23	Niall Malone	Administrative Officer, Environment Section, Monaghan County Council
24	Nigel Renaghan	Member, Irish Farmer Association
25	Padraic Smyth	General Manager, TFI Local Link, Cavan and Monaghan
26	Pamela Kerr	Head of Enterprise, Local Enterprise Office, Monaghan
27	Paul MacArtain	Head of Department, Electronic and Mechanical Engineering, Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)
28	Peter MacCann	Lecturer, Technical University of Dublin
29	Proinsias Mc Kenna (Peadar)	Managing Director, Sicín Co-operative Society Limited
30	Richard Mulligan	Managing Director, Versatile Packaging
31	Sammy Leslie	Founder- Castle Leslie Estate (TM),
32	Simon Murray	Founder and Director, CameraMatics
33	Sunday Abel Ayodeji	Vice Chairmen, Linking Ireland New Communities - LINC
34	Tony Martin Callaghan	CEO, SomaTech



Regional Action Plan Slovakia 4.0

From Dialogue to Action: Strengthening Rural-Urban Linkages through Multi-Sector and Multi-Actor Cooperation & Innovation

Pilot:	Slovakia
Version:	4.0
Date:	December 2025

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1. Introduction

The Slovak pilot, unique in covering the entire national territory, builds on the achievements of the **PoliRural project (2019–2021)** and its strategic outcome: *Vision for More Attractive Rural Areas 2040 (Vision 2040)*. This vision serves as the foundation of the Slovak Regional Action Plan (RAP), whose update and implementation are being advanced under **PoliRuralPlus (2023–2026)**. The RAP aims to create **attractive, inclusive, and resilient rural territories** through participatory foresight, digital innovation, and multi-actor collaboration.

Between the two projects, several **“Attractive Rural Areas” conferences** have been organised to maintain public dialogue, raise awareness, and promote the Vision 2040. These national events have become an essential platform for ongoing consultation and for fostering a shared understanding of Slovakia’s long-term rural priorities.

The Slovak pilot functions as a **national testbed for collaborative policy innovation**, engaging ministries, research institutions, youth and women’s associations, NGOs, and local communities in open dialogue and evidence-based decision-making. By linking national strategies with local realities, it seeks to strengthen trust, cooperation, and ownership in shaping Slovakia’s rural future.

1.1. Context and Background

Slovakia, a landlocked Central European country bordered by Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine, combines diverse natural and cultural landscapes, from the Tatra Mountains in the north to the fertile Danube lowlands in the south. Its rural territories, home to around 40% of the country’s 5,4 million inhabitants, encompass rich ecosystems, dense forests, and numerous rivers, providing strong potential for sustainable agriculture, ecotourism and renewable energy development.



Despite these assets, rural Slovakia faces deep socio-economic and demographic challenges. Many regions are marked by population ageing, youth outmigration, limited access to modern infrastructure and uneven availability of services. These trends weaken local economies, vitality of rural areas and social cohesion. The predominance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) supports employment but often struggles with innovation capacity, digitalization and access to finance. Addressing these weaknesses requires targeted support for entrepreneurship, digital skills, and local value chains.

Culturally, Slovakia’s rural areas are deeply rooted in tradition and community values. Folk music, crafts, and regional festivals remain important expressions of social life and identity. Preserving this cultural heritage while fostering innovation presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Heritage can serve as a driver of creative industries, territorial branding, and sustainable tourism.



Photos: Conference Rural Women: The Heart and Future of Regions, connected with Easter egg exhibition, 7 March 202

Environmental sustainability is an equally vital pillar of rural transformation. Climate change, soil degradation, and water scarcity are increasingly pressing concerns. RAP places strong emphasis on ecological farming, climate adaptation, and efficient water management, building on the national ambition to transition toward 100% organic or low-input agriculture by 2040. This shift aligns Slovakia with the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy, and the EU Biodiversity Strategy, reinforcing the country’s role in Europe’s green transition.



Photo: Kick-off conference, 16 April 2024, Tále, Central Slovakia

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

The Slovak RAP provides a strategic and operational framework for partnerships that revitalise rural areas, address long-term challenges, and unlock new opportunities for sustainable growth. It promotes thriving, innovative rural communities and stronger rural–urban linkages through digitalisation, foresight, and cross-sectoral cooperation.

The RAP leverages advanced tools such as the PoliRuralPlus Advisor, JackDaw, and the Multi-Actor Approach Tool (MAAT) to enable data-driven and participatory policymaking. These instruments foster collaborative learning, ensure transparency, and enhance the adaptability of rural strategies to changing socio-economic and environmental conditions.

By integrating digital tools, participatory foresight, and cross-sectoral cooperation, the Slovak RAP provides a future-oriented roadmap for rural transformation. It aligns with the EU’s Green Deal, Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the Rural Pact, ensuring coherence with European sustainability and cohesion goals. Through gender-sensitive approaches, inclusive governance, and evidence-based policymaking, the RAP seeks to bridge the urban–rural divide, foster innovation, and unlock new opportunities for balanced territorial development.

1.3. Main Theme

The RAP's vision and priorities were shaped through an extensive **one-year stakeholder consultation process** (March 2024–March 2025), which included **three national conferences** attended by over **250 participants** from government, academia, business, and civil society.

From Dialogue to Action: Strengthening Rural–Urban Linkages through Multi-Sector and Multi-Actor Cooperation & Innovation

This theme reflects the RAP's mission to translate collective insights into tangible actions that enhance local leadership, improve governance, and promote collaboration.

1.4. Core Areas of Focus

The RAP focuses on four core areas:

1. **Enhancing Rural Leadership** – Empower local leaders with digital, AI, and foresight tools to co-create and implement innovative solutions.
2. **Boosting Governance** – Strengthen participatory, transparent, and evidence-based decision-making to ensure inclusive and accountable policies.
3. **Encouraging Collaboration** – Reinforce multi-sector cooperation between rural and urban areas, fostering synergies that drive innovation and territorial cohesion.
4. **Advancing Ecological Transition** – Support the shift to 100% organic or low-input agriculture, resource-efficient economies, and nature-based solutions for climate resilience.

1.5. Alignment with EU's goals

The Slovak RAP and the VISION 2040 are fully aligned with the EU's long-term strategic priorities for creating greener, more inclusive, innovative, and better-connected rural regions. By promoting sustainable land use, ecological farming, digital transformation, and participatory governance, the RAP operationalises EU policy frameworks. This alignment strengthens policy coherence, improves access to EU funding instruments, and reinforces Slovakia's contribution to Europe's collective vision of vibrant, innovative, and sustainable rural areas.

2. Analysis of Current Situation

2.1. State of the Art

2.1.1. Territorial Context

Slovakia, with 60% of its territory mountainous and 40% lowlands, presents a geographically diverse landscape that combines productive agricultural plains with forested uplands and rich biodiversity. Administratively, it is divided into four NUTS 2 regions, eight NUTS 3 regions, and 79 districts, encompassing 2,890 municipalities, of which 138 hold city status.

With 38% of its population living in rural areas, double the EU average of 19%, Slovakia remains one of the most rural countries in Europe. Despite this, it still **lacks a dedicated national rural development strategy**. The absence of a unified framework contributes to fragmented responsibilities among ministries, limited coordination between governance levels, and uneven implementation of rural policies.

Although Slovakia has benefited from nearly €30 billion in EU cohesion funds, public perception remains skeptical, only about one-third of citizens believe these investments have effectively reduced regional disparities.

2.1.2. Current Socio-Economic and Environmental Conditions

Overall, Slovakia's rural areas exhibit **strong natural capital but limited socio-economic dynamism**, requiring policies that link human, financial, and ecological resources more effectively.

Rural Slovakia faces a complex mix of demographic, economic, and environmental challenges that shape its long-term development potential:

- **Demographic imbalance:** Aging populations and continued youth outmigration to cities and abroad reduce labour availability and threaten community vitality.
- **Labour-market disparities:** While regions such as Nitra and Trnava exhibit strong human capital and industrial presence, others suffer from persistent unemployment, low skills adaptability, and limited job diversity.
- **Economic concentration:** Agriculture remains the dominant rural activity but is under-diversified. SMEs and circular-economy ventures are emerging yet constrained by limited financing, insufficient innovation support, and bureaucratic complexity.
- **Environmental assets:** Extensive forests, fertile soils, and water resources provide a strong foundation for the green transition. However, ecological management and climate adaptation policies remain underdeveloped, and water scarcity is increasing, particularly in lowland agricultural zones.

Overall, Slovakia's rural areas exhibit strong natural capital but limited socio-economic dynamism, requiring policies that link human, financial, and ecological resources more effectively.

2.1.3. Existing Infrastructure, Innovation Ecosystems, and Market Trends

Slovakia has achieved near-universal broadband coverage (98%), with only 21 municipalities lacking access. However, transport infrastructure remains a key weakness, especially in peripheral and mountainous areas, limiting access to markets, services, and employment opportunities.

The innovative ecosystem shows potential but suffers from fragmentation:

Strengths

- Long-term experimental agricultural research sites and a solid academic base.
- A national Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3 2021–2027) prioritising agri-tech and digitalisation.

Weaknesses:

- Weak collaboration between academia and the private sector.
- Underdeveloped Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS).
- Insufficient incentives for green and social innovation among rural SMEs.

The result is a gap between knowledge generation and its practical application—limiting Slovakia's capacity to turn innovation into economic value and regional competitiveness.

2.1.4. Comparative and Strategic Position

Within the PoliRuralPlus network, Slovakia's pilot stands out for its national scope and its focus on mission-oriented foresight and policy integration. However, it trails behind peer countries in implementing coordinated, cross-sectoral rural governance.

Latvia's experience with its Rural Parliament and inclusive stakeholder governance offers valuable lessons for building bottom-up participation and gender balance, while Ireland's Midlands pilot illustrates how a national rural strategy can align digitalisation, skills, and policy coherence. Spain's Segovia and Greece's Central Greece pilots demonstrate effective inter-municipal cooperation and cross-sectoral clustering in tourism and the bioeconomy, and Hungary's Northern Great Plain provides a model for supporting young farmers and agricultural digitalisation.

Drawing on these experiences, Slovakia can combine its strengths in national coordination and digital tools (e.g., JackDaw GeoAI, Advisor and) with the participatory, inclusive, and cross-sectoral practices of other pilots to build a cohesive, innovation-driven framework for rural transformation.

2.2. Key Challenges and Policy Gaps

Slovakia's primary challenge is to **revitalize its rural regions and strengthen rural–urban linkages** amid demographic decline, youth outmigration, and uneven territorial development. Addressing these issues requires not only investment in infrastructure and innovation but also a coherent governance framework that links national, regional, and local actors under a shared long-term vision.

These interlinked challenges reflect several deep structural weaknesses:

1) Absence of a Strategic Vision for Rural Areas

Slovakia currently has an updated, forward-looking rural strategy comparable to the EU's LTVRA. Ministries, regions, and municipalities operate without unified priorities or monitoring frameworks, weakening alignment with EU initiatives such as the Rural Pact, European Green Deal, and Smart Villages concept.

The VISION 2040, developed under the previous PoliRural project, provides a valuable foundation but requires revision, institutionalization, and policy uptake to ensure its integration into Slovakia's national development frameworks and regional planning instruments and to guide long-term rural transformation.

2) Fragmented Policy and Support System

Despite the central role of rural areas in Slovakia's overall progress, state authorities continue to address rural issues in isolation. Rural development governance is fragmented across multiple ministries and agencies with overlapping responsibilities.

The lack of a cross-sectoral coordination mechanism leads to inefficiencies, duplication, and weak policy coherence. Establishing a horizontal coordination mechanism between ministries and vertical one between national, regional and local levels is critical to harmonise efforts, integrate funding streams and for achieving sustainable, evidence-based, and integrated rural development.

3) Limited Economic Diversification and Employment Opportunities

Overreliance on traditional agriculture and limited expansion of green, creative, and digital industries constrain rural employment. Bureaucratic and financial barriers discourage entrepreneurship or prevent the existing ones from scaling, particularly among youth and small businesses.

4) **Digital and Infrastructure Gaps**

Despite strong broadband coverage, poor transport links and uneven access to public services (education, healthcare, childcare) continue to hinder rural attractiveness and inclusion.

5) **Insufficient Support for Local Entrepreneurship**

Start-ups, SMEs and micro-enterprises, particularly those led by youth, women, and social innovators, face limited access to finance, mentoring and advisory services. Excessive bureaucracy and a lack of micro-financing tools hinder the growth of innovative rural businesses.

6) **Weak Community Resilience and Social Cohesion**

Ageing, depopulation, and short-term project-based funding erode social capital. Sustained engagement and intergenerational cooperation are needed to rebuild trust and participation.

7) **Barriers to Generational Renewal in Agriculture and Young Farmers Limitations**

Slovakia ranks among the lowest in the EU for young farmers' participation. Limited access to land, credit, and advisory support, combined with high administrative burdens, significantly constrains entry into the agricultural sector. Current direct payment structures remain among the least favourable in the EU, providing support only up to 28 ha per farm compared to the EU average of 90 ha. As a result, fewer than 800 farmers under 40 manage less than 2% of farmland on significantly smaller farms, averaging 43 hectares. Generational renewal is at risk, threatening agricultural innovation, with holdings averaging only 43 ha, less than half the national average. This demographic imbalance places Slovakia's agricultural innovation, productivity, and long-term food security at risk.

8) **Increasing Water Scarcity and Climate Vulnerabilities**

Increasing droughts, flash floods, and declining groundwater levels threaten rural productivity and food security. Integrated water management, modern irrigation, and climate adaptation are urgently required.

2.2.1. **Strategic Implications**

Overcoming these structural barriers demands a coordinated, multi-actor transformation grounded in inclusive governance, foresight, and ecological transition. The Slovak RAP addresses these challenges through three interlinked goals:

- Strengthening stakeholder engagement to build participatory governance.
- Consolidating and promoting shared long-term vision for rural Slovakia.
- **Fostering cross-sectoral cooperation** for coherent, sustainable and inclusive development.

Together, these objectives form a pathway from fragmented governance to integrated, forward-looking rural transformation

2.3. **Opportunities for Growth in Slovakia**

Despite its structural challenges, Slovakia holds significant untapped potential for sustainable rural transformation. Building on its rich natural capital, human resources, and cultural heritage, the country can position its rural regions as dynamic contributors to national prosperity, environmental stewardship, and social innovation. Strategic action and governance reform can unlock this potential and drive balanced territorial development across the country.

Key opportunity areas include:

1) Integration of the VISION 2040 into National Development Strategies

A central opportunity lies in incorporating VISION 2040 into Slovakia's national and regional development frameworks. By its institutionalization it would:

- Provide a long-term, cross-sectoral framework for rural policy coherence.
- Strengthen alignment with EU priorities such as the LTVRA, the Green Deal, and the Rural Pact.
- Enable ministries, regional governments, and municipalities to coordinate investments and monitor progress under a shared national vision for rural development.
- Reinforce Slovakia's position as a frontrunner in participatory foresight and multi-actor governance within the EU.

2) Sustainable Tourism and Agrotourism Development

Slovakia's diverse landscapes, cultural richness, and rural traditions provide exceptional potential for sustainable and experience-based tourism. The establishment of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport (February 2024) marks a turning point for integrated policy support and financing. A forthcoming Strategy for Rural Tourism Development aims to promote sustainability, diversification, and innovation.

- Eco-tourism and agrotourism: Promoting green, wellness, and nature-based experiences connecting visitors with local traditions and biodiversity.
- Local gastronomy and short food chains: Expanding farm-to-table networks, farmers' markets, and culinary tourism linked to regional branding.
- Adventure and cultural tourism: Investing in cycling, hiking, and cultural infrastructure, while safeguarding intangible heritage.
- Skills and digital marketing support: Training SMEs, guides, and entrepreneurs in storytelling, branding, and sustainable business practices.

3) Ecological Agriculture and Circular Bioeconomy

Agriculture remains the cornerstone of Slovakia's rural economy. However, its long-term viability requires a shift toward ecological, regenerative, and diversified production systems. Building on the national ambition embedded in Vision 2040, Slovakia aims to become a European pioneer in organic and sustainable agriculture, progressively expanding organic and low-input farming across its entire agricultural territory.

- Implementing a phased national roadmap for organic farming expansion and certification.
- Promoting climate-smart and regenerative practices that restore soil health, biodiversity, and water retention.
- Supporting short food supply chains, local branding, and circular bioeconomy models.
- Mobilizing CAP eco-schemes, national incentives, and innovation funds to reward ecological production and ensure fair farmer incomes.
- Positioning Slovakia as a leader in organic innovation and education, leveraging research, demonstration farms, and EU networks.

By combining organic farming expansion, smart technologies, and local innovation, Slovakia can become a model for ecological transformation and circular bioeconomy in Central Europe. This vision

not only supports environmental goals but also offers a competitive advantage for rural areas through premium markets, rural employment, and sustainable food security.

2.3.1. Strategic implications

Slovakia's growth potential lies in **transforming its rural areas into innovative, inclusive, and sustainable territories** that connect local assets with global opportunities. Achieving this requires:

- Institutionalizing the VISION 2040 as a guiding framework for all rural policies.
- Establishing integrated governance and inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms to reduce fragmentation and ensure policy coherence.
- Mobilizing funding for green, cultural, and tourism-based diversification.
- Strengthening rural identity, local leadership, and community participation through participatory foresight and stakeholder platforms.
- Ensuring that rural transformation contributes directly to EU Green Deal objectives, sustainable food systems, and territorial cohesion.

2.4. Gender and Diversity Dimensions

Ensuring gender equality, generational renewal, and social inclusion is essential for achieving a balanced and resilient rural Slovakia. The Slovak RAP recognizes that sustainable rural development cannot succeed without the full participation of women, youth, minorities, and other underrepresented groups. Integrating gender and diversity perspectives strengthens innovation capacity, social cohesion, and democratic legitimacy.

2.4.1. Demographic and Social Context

Rural Slovakia is undergoing profound demographic and social transformation:

- *Ageing and depopulation*: Outmigration of youth to cities and abroad, combined with low birth rates, results in an ageing population and declining community resilience.
- *Gender composition*: Women form a slightly higher share of the rural population, particularly in smaller municipalities, reflecting male labour migration to urban or cross-border areas.
- *Ethnic diversity*: Minority groups, including Roma, Hungarian, Ruthenian, and Ukrainian communities, contribute to cultural richness but face persistent barriers in education, employment, and political representation.
- *Generational gaps*: Youth are often disconnected from local governance and agricultural sectors, while older generations hold institutional memory and land assets but face digital and economic exclusion.

These dynamics have direct implications for social equity, economic vitality, and the ability of rural areas to adapt to demographic and technological change.

2.4.2. Socio-Economic Participation and Inequalities

Gender and diversity disparities are visible across key sectors:

- *Employment and entrepreneurship*: Women's employment in rural Slovakia is concentrated in services, education, and health, while their representation in leadership roles and high-value sectors (agriculture, forestry, and digital innovation) remains low. Young entrepreneurs face barriers to accessing finance, land, and mentoring.

- *Education and digital divide:* While gender parity exists in primary and secondary education, rural women remain underrepresented in STEM and ICT fields. Limited digital literacy among seniors and low-income groups hampers participation in online governance platforms such as atraktivnyvidiek.sk.
- *Land ownership and finance:* Land and credit remain heavily male-dominated. Only a small share of female farmers has access to direct subsidies or land leases, which limits their ability to modernize or expand businesses.
- *Social inclusion of minorities:* Roma and other ethnic minorities face systemic exclusion, unemployment, and housing segregation, despite national integration strategies.

Addressing these disparities is crucial to unlock the full potential of rural human capital and ensure inclusive participation in Slovakia's ecological and economic transitions.

2.4.3. Rural–Urban Differences and Social Norms

Gender and diversity aspects differ significantly between rural and urban contexts:

Urban areas offer more employment opportunities, diversified services, and better infrastructure, while rural women, elderly, and minority groups often face barriers in transport, healthcare, and childcare access.

Men are more likely to commute long distances for work, while women tend to work locally in lower-paid service or care roles.

Representation of women in local governance is lower in rural municipalities than in urban councils.

Traditional gender norms continue to shape household and community roles. However, cultural festivals, youth movements, and LEADER initiatives increasingly promote gender equality, intergenerational cooperation, and social innovation.

2.4.4. Policy Alignment and Frameworks

Slovakia's efforts to advance gender equality and inclusion align with key European and national frameworks:

EU Level: EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, European Pillar of Social Rights (equal opportunities and inclusion) and Rural Pact and LTVRA (inclusive governance and demographic renewal).

National Level: National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021–2027, National Action Plan for the Roma Integration 2021–2030, Slovak Youth Strategy 2030 and VISION 2040 (inclusive, diverse, and resilient rural communities).

The RAP operationalizes these frameworks by embedding inclusion and diversity across all three strategic goals: governance, shared vision, and cross-sectoral cooperation.

2.4.5. Key Challenges

- Persistent gender pay gaps and unequal access to land, funding, and leadership roles.
- Low female and youth representation in decision-making structures, especially local councils and producer organizations.
- Limited financial instruments and mentorship for female and minority entrepreneurs.
- Cultural stereotypes and rigid gender norms constrain women's public participation.

- Insufficient integration of diverse perspectives (ethnic, generational, cultural) in rural policy-making and monitoring.

2.4.6. Emerging Good Practices

Despite persistent gaps, the Slovak RAP builds on positive experiences and innovative initiatives:

- *Annual Award Ceremony for Rural Leader Women*: a national recognition program under the Slovak Rural Parliament, celebrating female leadership in community innovation, governance, and entrepreneurship.
- *MAAT*: ensures that women, youth, minorities, and local entrepreneurs are actively represented in consultations and policy dialogues.
- *Stakeholder platform*: provides inclusive digital spaces for participation and capacity-building, improving access for women and rural youth.
- *Intergenerational cooperation projects*: bridge older and younger generations through mentoring schemes, cultural initiatives, and leadership training.
- *Youth and minority engagement*: through the Slovak Rural Youth Parliament, Young Farmers Association and local NGOs, enhancing democratic participation and rural innovation.

These practices create the foundation for a gender-responsive and socially inclusive governance model aligned with EU and national priorities.

2.4.7. Opportunities and Strategic Priorities

The findings of this analysis have several strategic implications for the implementation and monitoring of the RAP:

1. Mainstream Gender and Diversity Across All RAP Actions
 - Ensure that every strategic goal includes specific measures to promote equal participation of women, youth, minorities, and marginalised groups.
 - Apply gender-sensitive budgeting and monitoring to assess inclusiveness in funding allocation and project results.
2. Strengthen Institutional Mechanisms for Inclusion
 - Establish a Gender and Inclusion Task Force within the national coordination of the RAP to provide guidance, collect data, and ensure cross-sectoral alignment.
 - Build partnerships with national equality bodies, rural women's associations, Roma organisations, and youth councils to co-design and evaluate RAP activities.
3. Foster Leadership and Capacity Building
 - Introduce tailored training for women, young leaders, and minority representatives to enhance participation in local governance, LEADER groups, and Smart Village initiatives.
 - Expand visibility through initiatives such as the Annual Award Ceremony for Rural Leader Women, highlighting best practices and inspiring interregional peer learning.
4. Promote Digital and Economic Empowerment
 - Support digital upskilling programs targeting rural women and youth to enhance employability, entrepreneurship, and innovation potential.
 - Encourage inclusive rural innovation ecosystems through DIHs and start-up accelerators that prioritise social and gender equity in funding access.
5. Enhance Social Cohesion and Community Resilience

- Integrate intercultural and intergenerational dialogue into local development actions, reinforcing cooperation between Slovak, Hungarian, Roma, and other communities.
 - Strengthen community-based services (healthcare, childcare, education) that enable women's and elderly participation in economic and social life.
6. Embed Inclusivity in Monitoring and Evaluation
- Introduce measurable gender and diversity indicators into the RAP monitoring system (e.g., women's participation in governance, minority inclusion rates, youth entrepreneurship share).
 - Use participatory foresight and stakeholder consultations to track inclusiveness trends and adapt policies accordingly.

In essence, embedding gender and diversity considerations across the Slovak RAP will ensure that rural transformation is both inclusive and future-ready, maximising human capital, innovation capacity, and community wellbeing across all Slovak regions.

2.5. Strategic implications

Integrating gender equality, age, social, cultural, and ethnic diversity into the Slovak RAP is not only a matter of fairness but a key driver of sustainable rural transformation. Inclusive policies strengthen social cohesion, increase innovation potential, and ensure that the benefits of rural–urban development are equitably shared among all groups. By embedding gender equality, generational renewal, and diversity into every aspect of the Slovak RAP ensures that rural transformation is socially just and sustainable. Inclusive governance will:

- Strengthen community resilience and innovation capacity.
- Broaden the talent base for green and digital transitions.
- Foster intergenerational solidarity and cultural continuity.
- Align Slovakia's rural development with EU social, gender, and demographic objectives.

By empowering women, youth, and minorities as active agents of change — not passive beneficiaries — Slovakia can transform its rural areas into vibrant, equitable, and future-ready territories.

3. Vision and Strategic Goals

3.1. Vision Statement

Vision 2040:
A vibrant, resilient, and inclusive rural Slovakia, where communities thrive through sustainable innovation, cross-sectoral cooperation, and participatory governance that strengthens rural–urban linkages and ensures prosperity for all.

By 2040, Slovakia's rural areas will stand as an exemplar of European sustainable transformation, combining environmental stewardship, digital innovation, and social inclusion. Rural territories will be economically dynamic, socially cohesive, and environmentally responsible places where people choose to live, work, rest and invest.

This vision statement reflects Slovakia's ambition to:

- Institutionalize the VISION 2030.

- Achieve a nationwide transition to organic and regenerative agriculture, becoming a pioneer in sustainable food systems, soil restoration, and climate-smart farming.
- Build inclusive and participatory governance systems, ensuring that women, youth, minorities, and local entrepreneurs co-create and implement rural policies.
- Promote cross-sectoral cooperation among agriculture, regional development, tourism, innovation, social affairs and environmental sectors.
- Foster stronger rural–urban partnerships, leveraging shared resources, innovation ecosystems, and joint regional planning.

The Slovak RAP thus envisions a future-ready, inclusive, and green rural Slovakia, contributing to the EU’s broader goals.

3.2. Strategic Goals

To respond effectively to Slovakia’s territorial challenges and unlock opportunities for transformation, the Slovak RAP defines **three interlocking strategic goals** that translate its guiding theme “*From Dialogue to Action: Strengthening Rural–Urban Linkages through Multi-Sector and Multi-Actor Cooperation & Innovation*” and four core areas into practice.

GOALS	Purpose	Key Actions	Tools	Expected Results
GOAL 1 Strengthening Stakeholder Engagement	To empower all relevant actors, public authorities, businesses, academia, civil society, and communities, to co-create rural development policies through open, inclusive, and evidence-based processes.	Build capacity for participatory governance through continuous stakeholder involvement and multi-actor collaboration. Facilitate inclusive consultations, foresight workshops, conferences and thematic dialogues to co-create locally grounded solutions. Ensure balanced representation of women, youth, minorities, marginalized groups and small entrepreneurs across all	Multi-Actor Approach (MAA), PoliRuralPlus Knowledge Space, JackDaw, Advisor and other digital platforms and Slovak digital hub.	Broader participation and improved trust among rural stakeholders. Functioning digital engagement hub with monthly content updates and interactive consultations. At least 100 active registered users contribute to online discussions and feedback loops. Institutionalized gender-responsive and inclusive consultation mechanisms. Strengthened trust and collaboration between citizens and public authorities.

		<p>decision-making processes.</p> <p>Integrate rural women's empowerment as a horizontal priority across all RAP actions.</p> <p>Build partnerships with national networks to strengthen women's representation in all fora.</p> <p>Celebrate success stories through initiatives like the Annual Award Ceremony for Rural Leader Women, fostering peer learning, recognition and visibility.</p> <p>Develop a national case study on women rural leaders to inspire replication and policy inclusion.</p> <p>Apply and validate JackDaw, a GeoAI chat agent that supports participatory spatial planning and foresight.</p> <p>Strengthen the national online platform as a permanent digital hub for consultation, feedback, and</p>		<p>Enhanced digital participation and policy transparency.</p> <p>Enhanced visibility of rural development initiatives, foresight studies, and success stories.</p> <p>Published case study on women rural leaders and replication guidelines.</p>
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		knowledge exchange.		
GOAL 2 Consolidating and Promoting a Shared Vision for Rural Areas	To refine and promote the VISION 2040, ensuring it is co-created with stakeholders and aligned with national and EU strategic frameworks.	<p>Conduct an extensive participatory consultation involving local authorities, civil society, academia, CSOs and private sector to refine VISION 2040.</p> <p>Ensure that the updated VISION 2040 aligns with the EU Rural Pact, the LTVRA, the CAP National Strategic Plan 2023–2027, and Slovakia’s National Rural Development Strategy.</p> <p>Integrate evidence and foresight insights gathered through PoliRuralPlus tools into the revised document.</p> <p>Use the digital hub for open consultations, document publication, and feedback collection.</p> <p>Organise conferences and events to communicate, consult and strengthen ownership.</p> <p>Promote the VISION 2040</p>	Participatory foresight methodology, PoliRuralPlus Knowledge Space and MAATool, EU Rural Pact engagement mechanisms and Slovak digital hub.	<p>Updated and widely endorsed VISION 2040 reflecting stakeholder consensus.</p> <p>VISION 2040 integrated into at least two policy frameworks.</p> <p>Increased awareness and adoption of VISION 2040 by public authorities, and community networks.</p> <p>Enhanced visibility of VISION 2040 in the EU Rural Pact platform.</p> <p>Transparent communication of progress through a digital hub, ensuring citizens remain engaged in shaping rural policy.</p> <p>Roadmap for organic transition established and monitored.</p>

		<p>through EU Rural Pact to elevate Slovakia’s rural priorities on the European stage.</p> <p>Prepare policy briefs and guidance notes for ministries and regional governments to facilitate uptake.</p> <p>Promote international exchange and peer learning with other PoliRuralPlus regions to benchmark progress and share good practices.</p> <p>Develop a National Roadmap for Organic and Regenerative Agriculture, targeting 100% organic or low-input farming systems by 2040.</p>		
<p>GOAL 3</p> <p>Fostering Cross-Sectoral Strategic Cooperation</p>	<p>To promote coordinated, multi-sectoral action to overcome fragmentation and strengthen policy coherence across economic, social, digital, and environmental domains.</p>	<p>Conduct a policy coherence analysis to identify overlaps and synergies among ministries and funding streams.</p> <p>Analyze possible mechanisms for addressing policy fragmentation and improving horizontal coordination</p>	<p>AKIS collaboration networks, inter-ministerial task forces, Rural Pact platform, digital hub.</p>	<p>Suggestions for improved policy coherence and coordination across sectors and governance levels.</p> <p>Analysis of cross-sectoral mechanisms for joint planning and funding.</p> <p>Contribution to the development</p>

		<p>among ministries and agencies and vertical coordination across national, regional, and local levels.</p> <p>Encourage multi-sectoral partnerships for rural areas that integrate social, economic, and environmental objectives into a single, cohesive framework.</p> <p>Promote holistic approach to rural areas to align strategies, maximize synergies and avoid fragmented interventions and inefficient resource allocation.</p> <p>Facilitate horizontal cooperation among ministries and vertical coordination between national, regional, and local levels.</p> <p>Encourage multi-sector partnerships linking agriculture, tourism, digitalization, and social innovation.</p> <p>Contribute to the establishment of the AKIS.</p>		<p>of AKIS at the national level.</p> <p>Contribution to relevant and related national policy processes.</p> <p>Improved policy coherence and alignment across sectors and levels of governance.</p>
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		<p>Use the digital hub as a collaborative platform for project matchmaking, funding alignment, and EU-level exchange.</p> <p>Promote integrated funding mechanisms combining CAP, ERDF, ESF+, and Horizon Europe.</p>		
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The three strategic goals are interdependent. Together, they ensure that Slovakia’s rural transformation moves from vision to action — combining participatory governance (Goal 1), shared direction (Goal 2), and systemic coordination (Goal 3). This integrated approach positions Slovakia as a European reference point for inclusive, green, and innovation-driven rural development.

4. Action Plan

4.1. Measures and Actions

To operationalize the three strategic goals of the Slovak RAP, this Action Plan outlines concrete measures and actions across **three key intervention areas**. Each intervention area contributes to strengthening rural–urban linkages, inclusive participation, digital transformation, and sustainable growth while addressing the structural challenges identified in Chapter 2.

Strategic Goal	Objective	Key Measures & Actions	Lead Actors	Timeline	Expected Outcomes
GOAL 1 Strengthening Stakeholder Engagement	Empower multi-actor collaboration and inclusive participation in shaping rural development policies.	Develop and enhance the national stakeholder platform as a digital hub for dialogue and consultation. Conduct inclusive foresight workshops,	Slovak Rural Parliament, Slovak Rural Youth Parliament, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD),	2025–2030	≥100 active platform users. Institutionalised participatory governance model. Improved trust among stakeholders. Increased female and

		<p>consultations, and regional forums.</p> <p>Ensure representation of women, youth, minorities, and SMEs.</p> <p>Apply the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA).</p> <p>Support Annual Award Ceremony for Rural Leader Women and develop a case study on women rural leaders.</p> <p>Use JackDaw GeoAI for participatory analysis.</p>	<p>regional authorities, NGOs, CSOs</p>		<p>youth participation.</p> <p>Published case study on women leaders.</p>
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<p>GOAL 2</p> <p>Consolidating and Promoting a Shared Vision for Rural Areas</p>	<p>Update and institutionalise the <i>Vision for More Attractive Rural Areas 2040</i>, aligned with EU and national frameworks.</p>	<p>Conduct participatory foresight processes using PoliRuralPlus tools.</p> <p>Align the Vision with EU LTVRA, CAP 2023–2027, and Rural Pact.</p> <p>Disseminate and promote the Vision through national and EU-level events.</p> <p>Integrate Vision priorities into regional and municipal plans.</p> <p>Develop National Organic Farming Roadmap targeting 100% organic/low-input agriculture by 2040.</p> <p>Advocate for Vision uptake in EU and national policies.</p>	<p>Slovak Rural Parliament, MoARD, Slovak University of Agriculture, National Rural Network, Office of the Government for Civil Society</p>	<p>2025–2040</p>	<p>Updated and endorsed Vision 2040.</p> <p>Integrated into ≥3 regional strategies.</p> <p>Increased awareness and adoption of Vision at national and EU levels.</p> <p>Roadmap for organic transition developed.</p>
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<p>GOAL 3</p> <p>Fostering Cross-Sectoral Strategic Cooperation</p>	<p>Strengthen policy coherence and coordination across ministries, regions, and sectors.</p>	<p>Promote Inter-Ministerial Council for Rural Development.</p> <p>Conduct policy coherence analysis across EU/national funding mechanisms.</p> <p>Develop pilot cross-sector projects linking agriculture, tourism, and digitalisation.</p> <p>Support development of AKIS.</p> <p>Use atraktivnyvidie k.sk for project matchmaking and dissemination.</p>	<p>MoARD, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Education,</p>	<p>AKIS collaboration networks, inter-ministerial task forces, Rural Pact platform, digital hub.</p>	<p>Recommendations for improved policy coherence and coordination across sectors and governance levels.</p> <p>Analysis of cross-sectoral mechanisms for joint planning and funding.</p> <p>Contribution to the development of AKIS at the national level.</p> <p>Contribution to relevant and related national policy processes.</p> <p>Improved policy coherence and alignment across sectors and levels of governance.</p>
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4.2. Intervention Areas, Actions and Expected Outcomes

1) Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement and Participatory Governance

Objective: Foster a culture of trust, collaboration, and inclusivity in rural development decision-making by engaging stakeholders continuously and effectively, ensuring the Slovak pilot is genuinely stakeholder-driven.

Measures and Actions:

- **Create an enabling environment for consultations** by improving access, technical support, and clear participation guidelines for online engagement.
- **Address accessibility barriers** through targeted assistance for older adults, individuals with limited digital literacy, and residents in areas with poor connectivity.
- **Redesign and expand** the national stakeholder platform www.atraktivnyvidiek.sk into a more interactive and user-friendly space for dialogue, featuring forums, polls, and comment sections.
- **Regularly update the platform** with project news, consultation schedules, and results summaries, ensuring transparent and user-paced engagement.
- **Acknowledge stakeholder contributions** publicly to encourage continued participation and recognise community efforts.
- Organise **National Rural Forums, regional thematic workshops, and online consultations** to co-create policy priorities and share best practices.
- Apply the **Multi-Actor Approach (MAA)** to ensure balanced representation of women, youth, minorities, and local entrepreneurs.
- **Broaden stakeholder diversity** through targeted outreach campaigns to involve underrepresented groups and new participants.
- Improve **data collection and feedback quality** by using dynamic survey tools (e.g., SurveyMonkey, Google Forms) with adaptive and open-ended questions to capture qualitative insights.
- **Ensure transparency and accountability** by clearly communicating how feedback informs project outcomes and policies.
- **Visualise data** effectively to present findings in engaging and accessible formats.
- Introduce **follow-up mechanisms** after each consultation, including summary reports and evaluation sessions where participants assess implementation progress.
- Establish **long-term engagement plans**, replacing one-off consultations with continuous feedback loops.
- Facilitate **thematic working groups** where stakeholders collaborate on specific areas (digitalisation, sustainability, governance).
- Promote **cross-sector partnerships** to foster shared ownership of solutions.
- Support and promote the **Annual Award Ceremony for Rural Leader Women**, recognising female leadership and innovation.
- Publish a **national case study on rural women leaders** highlighting pathways to empowerment and policy relevance.
- Conduct a **post-COVID follow-up survey** (building on the PoliRural project) to assess evolving stakeholder needs, with comparative analysis on economic, social, and digital dimensions.

Lead Actors: Slovak Rural Parliament, Slovak Rural Youth Parliament, rural networks, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD), Regional Authorities, municipalities, CSOs, NGOs.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Periodic evaluation based on participation rates, diversity of stakeholder representation, feedback quality, and measurable policy impact.

Timeline: 2025–2030

Expected Outcomes:

- Active and diverse online stakeholder community (≥100 regular contributors).

- Minimum two to three articles or blogs published monthly on *atraktivnyvidiek.sk*.
- Functioning, transparent, and user-driven digital engagement platform.
- Institutionalised and inclusive consultation process embedded in rural policymaking.
- Increased participation from women, youth, and marginalised groups.
- Continuous feedback and collaboration mechanisms established.
- Enhanced visibility, transparency, and trust between institutions and stakeholders.

2) Vision 2040 Development and Promotion

Objective: Update, institutionalise, and communicate the *Vision for More Attractive Rural Areas 2040* as Slovakia's long-term framework for inclusive, sustainable, and resilient rural development.

Measures and Actions:

- Conduct a **nationwide participatory consultation** using foresight methodologies and PoliRuralPlus tools (MAATool, Knowledge Space).
- Ensure alignment with EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), EU Rural Pact, and CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027.
- Disseminate the Vision through national conferences, EU Rural Pact events, and regional workshops.
- Produce **accessible communication materials** (policy briefs, infographics, videos) to raise awareness of Vision priorities.
- Provide **technical guidance** to integrate Vision 2040 principles into regional and municipal development plans.
- Analyse the current status of organic farming and develop a **National Organic Farming Roadmap**, aiming for 100% organic or low-input agricultural land by 2040.
- Draft and consult a **position paper** on Slovakia's contribution to the new **EU Cohesion and CAP framework post-2027**, advocating for rural-friendly reforms.

Lead Actors: Slovak Rural Parliament, Slovak Rural Youth Parliament, Office of the Government for Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Engagement, Council for Civil Society Development, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, National Rural Network, professional and civic organisations.

Timeline: 2025–2040

Expected Outcomes:

- Updated and widely endorsed Vision for More Attractive Rural Areas 2040.
- Enhanced policy coherence across national and regional strategies.
- Integration of Vision principles into at least three regional or sectoral plans.
- Adoption of the **National Organic Farming Roadmap** as a flagship policy for sustainability.
- Increased recognition of Slovakia's Vision at EU level through Rural Pact activities.

3) Enhancing Cross-Sectoral Strategic Cooperation and Policy Coherence

Objective: Strengthen horizontal and vertical coordination among ministries, agencies, and regional governments to overcome fragmentation and ensure efficient, integrated use of resources.

Measures and Actions:

- Establish a **cross-sectoral coordination body**, such as an *Inter-Ministerial Council for Rural Development*, linking ministries of Agriculture, Environment, Economy, Education, Tourism, Transport, and Social Affairs.

- Conduct a **comprehensive policy coherence analysis** to identify overlaps and gaps across funding instruments (CAP, ERDF, ESF+, LIFE, Horizon Europe).
- Pilot **cross-sector partnership models** combining agriculture, tourism, digitalisation, and social innovation for rural diversification.
- Support the **development of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS)** to connect research institutions, education, and practice.
- Use *atraktivnyvidiek.sk* as a collaborative platform for promoting joint projects, matchmaking, and funding alignment.
- Launch **awareness and communication campaigns** highlighting the value of cross-sector collaboration in rural development.

Lead Actors: MoARD, Ministry of Tourism and Sport, Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Innovation, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Education, research institutions, and regional authorities.

Timeline: 2025–2030

Expected Outcomes:

- Functional inter-ministerial coordination mechanism for rural development.
- Policy brief proposing mechanisms for funding and governance coherence.
- Pilot cross-sectoral projects linking multiple policy areas and EU instruments.
- Strengthened AKIS supporting innovation and knowledge transfer.

4.2.1. Strategic Integration

These three intervention areas collectively ensure that the Slovak RAP moves *from dialogue to action*, turning stakeholder insights into measurable policy results. By 2040, Slovakia's rural regions will be **digitally connected, ecologically advanced, and socially inclusive**, fully aligned with the **EU Green Deal, Rural Pact**, and **Digital Decade** objectives.

5. Policy and Funding Alignment

5.1. EU and National Policy Alignment

The Slovak RAP is fully aligned with EU and national strategies promoting sustainable, inclusive, and digitally connected rural development. Its three strategic goals directly contribute to the EU's green, digital, and social priorities, while addressing Slovakia's specific territorial and institutional context.

1) European Green Deal – Sustainability and Resilience

In line with the European Green Deal, the RAP supports sustainable food systems and low-emission rural economies through ecological agriculture, regenerative soil management, and circular bioeconomy models.

Linked Goal: Vision 2040 – The ambition to achieve 100% organic or low-input agriculture by 2040 advances the EU's **Farm to Fork** and **Biodiversity Strategies**, strengthening climate resilience and rural sustainability.

2) Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas– Vibrant and Connected Communities

Both the LTVRA and Slovakia's Vision 2040 share the objective of building strong, connected, and resilient territories. The RAP reinforces **rural–urban linkages**, digital connectivity, and place-based innovation to counter depopulation and foster local vitality.

Linked Goal: Vision 2040 and Stakeholder Engagement – ensuring bottom-up participation and inter-regional cooperation consistent with the **EU Rural Pact**.

3) **Cohesion Policy 2021–2027 – Smart, Sustainable, and Inclusive Growth**

The RAP complements the EU Cohesion Policy by promoting cross-sector collaboration, stakeholder participation, and evidence-based planning. It supports diversification through SME development, tourism, and social innovation while ensuring that investments reflect regional needs.

Linked Goal: Cross-Sectoral Cooperation – enhancing coordination among ministries and alignment with the **Partnership Agreement** managed by the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization.

4) **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – Sustainable Agriculture and Innovation**

The RAP advances the **CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027** by promoting ecological farming, digital innovation, and fairer access to resources for small and young farmers. It supports the creation of a **national Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System** and strengthens Slovakia’s position in EU agri-food sustainability.

Linked Goal: Vision 2040 and Cross-Sectoral Cooperation – modernising agriculture and reducing administrative barriers.

5) **Digital Decade Strategy – Connectivity and Innovation**

Aligned with the EU Digital Decade (2030), the RAP bridges the digital divide by promoting digital entrepreneurship and participatory tools such as **JackDaw GeoAI** and **PoliRuralPlus Advisor** for inclusive planning and service delivery.

Linked Goal: Stakeholder Engagement – supporting data-driven, participatory governance and smart rural transformation.

6) **European Pillar of Social Rights – Inclusion and Equal Opportunities**

The RAP strengthens social cohesion through gender-responsive governance, youth empowerment, and minority inclusion. It promotes fair access to services, employment, and decision-making, ensuring that no rural citizen is left behind.

Linked Goal: Stakeholder Engagement – mainstreaming equality and participation in all RAP activities.

7) **EU Vision for Agriculture and Food – Sustainable and Innovative Agri-Food Systems**

The RAP supports the **EU Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025)** by promoting precision farming, regenerative practices, and local food systems. Slovakia’s ambition to lead the EU in organic production by 2040 exemplifies this alignment.

Linked Goal: Vision 2040 – driving innovation and sustainability in the agri-food sector.

5.2. Funding Alignment and Resource Mobilisation

To implement its strategic goals, the Slovak RAP adopts a **blended funding approach**, combining EU, national, and private sources to ensure financial sustainability and policy coherence. A dedicated monitoring team coordinated by the **RAP Steering Committee** will track opportunities, prepare proposals, and manage partnerships.

Key Funding Streams

- **EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF):** EAFRD (rural development, innovation), ERDF (infrastructure and digitalisation), ESF+ (skills and inclusion), and CF (green transition).
- **National Instruments:** Environmental Fund, Slovak Investment Holding (SIH), and sectoral grants from the Ministries of Agriculture, Economy, Education, and Environment.
- **EU Programmes:** *Horizon Europe*, *LIFE*, and *EIP-AGRI* for innovation and sustainability.
- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPP):** Encouraging co-investment in eco-tourism, renewable energy, and digital infrastructure.
- **Community-Led Local Development (LEADER):** Supporting bottom-up projects under Local Action Groups.
- **Programme Slovakia 2021–2027:** Integrates funding for digitalisation, green transition, and regional competitiveness across rural and urban areas.

Linked Goals:

- **Stakeholder Engagement** – funding participatory tools and community platforms.
- **Vision 2040** – supporting ecological transition and sustainable farming models.
- **Cross-Sectoral Cooperation** – financing multi-sectoral pilots and AKIS initiatives.

5.3. Partnerships and Governance Model

Effective implementation of the RAP depends on **collaborative, multi-level governance** that combines national leadership with strong local ownership.

- **Top-down alignment:** Ministries provide strategic direction, funding, and policy coherence.
- **Bottom-up participation:** Local governments, civil society, and communities co-design and implement actions.
- **Hybrid “Joined-Up Governance” model:** Ensures dynamic coordination across all governance levels and sectors.
 - The Inter-Ministerial Council for Rural Development will provide policy alignment.
 - The **Slovak Rural Parliament** and **Rural Youth Parliament** will sustain continuous consultation and foresight processes.
 - The www.atraktivnyvidiek.sk platform will serve as the communication and monitoring hub.

Linked Goals:

- **Stakeholder Engagement** – ensuring participatory governance.
- **Vision 2040** – anchoring a long-term strategic framework.
- **Cross-Sectoral Cooperation** – promoting coherence, integration, and accountability.

Summary Table:

EU / National Policy Framework	Alignment with Slovak RAP	Linked Strategic Goal
European Green Deal	Promotes regenerative, low-emission farming and circular bioeconomy	Vision 2040
LTVRA & Rural Pact	Strengthens rural–urban linkages and community resilience	Vision 2040 / Stakeholder Engagement

Cohesion Policy 2021–2027	Fosters multi-level governance and place-based investment	Cross-Sectoral Cooperation
Common Agricultural Policy	Advances sustainable farming, AKIS, and youth inclusion	Vision 2040 / Cooperation
Digital Decade	Enhances digital connectivity and participatory tools	Stakeholder Engagement
European Pillar of Social Rights	Ensures social inclusion and gender equality	Stakeholder Engagement
EU Vision for Agriculture & Food	Positions Slovakia as EU pioneer in organic transition	Vision 2040

The Slovak RAP aligns closely with both EU and national strategies for sustainable, inclusive, and digitally connected rural development. It ensures that actions and investments contribute to the EU’s overarching green, digital, and social priorities while reflecting Slovakia’s territorial and institutional context.

6. Roadmap

6.1. Timeline

Phase	Timeline	Key Activities
Phase 1: Planning	Q1 2024 - Q2 2024	Stakeholder identification, kick-off conference, needs analysis, visioning
Phase 2: Co-Creation	Q3 2024 - Q4 2024	Participatory foresight, second conference on digitalization, policy option development
Phase 3: Implementation	Q1 2025 - Q4 2025	Policy rollout, capacity building, monitoring, online stakeholders consultations (www.atraktivnyvidiek.sk) and RAP drafting
Phase 4: Evaluation	Q1 2026	Impact assessment, feedback loops

For the second and third year of the project the following Roadmap Gantt was prepared.

		2025												2026											
		Month												Month											
	Activity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Enhanced Stakeholders Consultations																								
1.1	Create an enabling environment for ongoing online consultations																								
1.2	Drafting of COVID follow up questionnaire																								
1.3	COVID follow up online Questionnaire																								
1.4	Evaluation of results of questionnaire																								
1.5	Facilitate online consultations																								
1.6	Organize third and fourth conference																								
1.7	Improve online platform																								
1.8	Regular communication with stakeholders																								
1.9	Address accessibility issues																								
1.10	Strengthen stakeholders' diversity																								
1.11	Enhance data collection tools																								
1.12	Promote transparency and trust																								
1.13	Incorporate follow-up mechanisms																								

6.2. Implementation Plan

The implementation of the RAP builds upon the foundations laid by the *Vision 2040*, originally developed during the **PoliRural project (2019–2021)** in parallel with the EU’s LTVRA. That project introduced a forward-looking, participatory foresight approach engaging a wide spectrum of stakeholders across whole Slovakia to define long-term priorities for rural attractiveness, resilience, and innovation.

The ongoing **PoliRuralPlus project (2023–2026)** expands on this groundwork by operationalising the Vision through concrete measures, actions, tools and governance structures defined in this RAP. It seeks to **translate foresight into action**, ensuring that the principles of inclusivity, digitalisation, sustainability, and cross-sectoral cooperation guide Slovakia’s rural transformation in line with national and EU policy frameworks.

To maintain participatory momentum and national visibility, a series of national conferences titled **“Attractive Rural Areas”** has been organised annually since 2022. These gatherings provide open platforms for **public consultation, awareness-raising, policy dialogue, and knowledge exchange**, bringing together policymakers, national and regional authorities, local leaders and communities, youth and women’s organisations, and thematic and sectoral experts to discuss emerging priorities in rural development, digitalisation, and sustainability. Their outcomes directly inform RAP implementation, ensuring that it remains a **living, continuously evolving framework** for rural transformation shaped by collective insights and national policies.

6.2.1. Governance and Responsibilities

Implementation follows a **multi-level governance model** combining national coordination, regional cooperation, and strong local ownership. This model draws on Slovakia’s experience with the **Multi-Actor Approach**, ensuring transparency, inclusiveness, and continuity from the original PoliRural structures.

At the core stands the **RAP Steering Committee**, chaired by the **Slovak Rural Parliament**.

It functions as a **permanent advisory and coordination body** responsible for strategic oversight, policy alignment, and continuous stakeholder engagement. The Committee ensures that participatory governance remains embedded throughout all phases of implementation.

Stakeholder / Institution	Role and Responsibilities
Office of the Government for Civil Society Engagement Development	Facilitate structured civic participation and public consultation processes; ensure alignment between the RAP, national participation frameworks, and the <i>Council for Civil Society Development</i> ; promote open government, inclusivity, and transparency.
Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Institute	It is one of the departmental educational institutions of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, which has been in operation for almost 50 years. It provides a broad portfolio of services mainly in continuing vocational, lifelong education, training and certification of agricultural advisors, compiles a specialized library collection, ensures effective and efficient access

	to information and information resources through information services and information technology.
Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	Policy integration with CAP and rural development frameworks; oversight of Smart Villages, AKIS, and sustainable land management initiatives.
Ministry of Investment, Regional Development, and Informatization	Leads digitalisation, broadband rollout, and smart infrastructure; supports data-driven governance and digital inclusion. Responsible for Operational Programme “Slovakia” for the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy.
Ministry of Environment	Coordinates biodiversity, circular economy, and climate resilience projects; ensures water management and sustainable resource use.
Ministry of Economy	Supports entrepreneurship, SME development, innovation ecosystems, and green transition initiatives in rural areas.
Ministry of Tourism and Sport	Develops and implements the National Strategy for Rural Tourism ; promotes agrotourism, sports tourism, and wellness infrastructure.
Slovak Investment Holding	Provides financial instruments (loans, guarantees, blended finance) for rural innovation and Smart Villages projects.
Slovak University of Agriculture and Research Institutions	Conduct applied research, digital innovation, and foresight studies; support implementation of JackDaw GeoAI and MAATool.
Slovak Rural Parliament & Slovak Rural Youth Parliament	Facilitate stakeholder engagement, youth participation, and participatory governance; manage the national platform and coordinate the Annual Rural Leader Women Award .
Local Governments and Municipalities	Implement local RAP measures, facilitate participatory processes, and manage regional project delivery.
NGOs and Civil Society Organisations	Promote inclusion, gender equality, and local innovation.

6.2.2. Implementation Timeline (2024-2028)

To ensure **structured execution**, the RAP will be carried out in **four phases**, with clear goals and deliverables.

Phase	Key Actions & Milestones (including recent events & publications)	Timeframe
Phase 1 – Preparation & Strategy Alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RAP Steering Committee (continuation from PoliRuralPlus). ● Align RAP with national and EU frameworks. ● Identify funding sources and investment priorities. ● Launch stakeholder consultations via the national platform atraktivnyvidiek.sk and continually make it lively. ● Organise the Kick-off National Conference “More Attractive Rural Areas” (16 April 2024) marking the formal start of pilot activities. ● Draft, disseminate and promote a post-COVID follow-up evaluation questionnaire to assess needs and priorities among rural stakeholders. ● Awareness Journalling and Buddy meetings. 	First half of 2024
Phase 2 – Pilot Projects & Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Launch Vision promotion at national and EU level ● Provide capacity-building and digital-skills training for local leaders, youth, small entrepreneurs, and municipalities. ● Hold the Second National Conference / Rural Forum “Smart Rural Communities in the Digital Era” (25–26 Oct 2024, Žilina) focusing on digitalisation, rural-urban connectivity, and inclusive innovation. ● Launch and support the winner project DigiStake of the first round of open calls, targeting community-led digital solutions for rural-urban linkages, sustainability, and public services. 	Second half 2024 – 2025
Phase 3 – Expansion & Policy Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Scale up successful pilots (Smart Villages, digital tools, rural-tourism, agri-innovation). ● Establish a formal Inter-Ministerial Council for Rural Development to coordinate cross-sectoral governance (agriculture, environment, digitalisation, economy, tourism). ● Integrate RAP/Vision 2040 priorities into national and regional strategies, including the post-2027 CAP Strategic Plan and Slovakia’s spatial/regional development plans. ● Continue stakeholder engagement via atraktivnyvidiek.sk, publish results and refine policies accordingly. ● Engage in EU-level processes (e.g., the EU Rural Pact) to raise the profile of Slovak rural priorities. 	2026–2027

Phase 4 – Evaluation & Long-Term Sustainability	<p>Conduct comprehensive impact assessment (social, economic, environmental) of implemented measures.</p> <p>Institutionalise the updated Vision 2040 and RAP governance structures for long-term continuity.</p> <p>Secure multi-annual funding — EU funds, national grants, public–private partnerships — for sustained rural development.</p> <p>Organise a National Conference (circa 2028) to present results, share lessons learned, and define the roadmap beyond 2030.</p> <p>Update and publish synthesis reports, best-practice case studies (e.g., from Vision promoting, rural women’s leadership, digital innovation).</p>	2028–2030 (and beyond)
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6.2.3. Progress Highlights and Key Milestones (2024–2025)

Steering Committee Activities (since March 2024): The Committee, continuing from PoliRural, convened regularly to coordinate pilot activities and organise the national “Attractive Rural Areas” events.

Stakeholder Mapping: By 2025, the Slovak pilot had engaged **71 stakeholders** (30 men, 41 women), exceeded initial targets and ensured balanced representation.

Buddy Meetings (since July 2024): Regular peer meetings strengthened coordination, methodological alignment, and collaboration with the Monitoring Committee.

Major Conferences and Events (2024–2025):

- *Kick-off Conference – Tále, April 2024:* Launch of pilot activities and consultations on Vision 2040 priorities.
- *Rural Forum – Žilina, Oct 2024:* Focus on digitalisation, Smart Villages, and youth participation.
- *Rural Women: The Heart and Future of Regions – Veľký Klíž, March 2025:* Over 60 participants celebrating women’s leadership and regional vitality.
- *Dialogue, Vision & Cooperation Across Generations – April 2025:* Over 100 participants discussing intergenerational cooperation and rural–urban partnerships.
- *Marketing that Makes Sense – June 2025:* Around 80 participants discussing updated Vision 2040 and tested JackDaw.
- *Rural Woman – Leader of the Year – Župčany, Oct 2025:* Recognition of women’s contribution to food security, culture, and innovation.

Questionnaire (Jan 2025): Nationwide survey assessing rural trends post-COVID and progress toward Vision 2040.

DigiStake Open Call project (January – March 2025): Launch of the *atraktivnyvidiek.sk* upgrade as a central hub for participatory dialogue and innovation exchange. **Policies and strategies** uploaded into GPT Chat PoliRuralPlus Advisor in June 2025.

Vision 2040 Uptake (2024-2025):

- 13 practical proposals presented to the Anti-Bureaucratic Commission to Reduce Administrative Burden established by the Slovak minister of agriculture and rural development (March-December 2024).
- 8 anticorruption measures presented to the Agricultural Paying Agency.
- Contribution to the Initial position of the Slovak government to the Cohesion Policy post 2027.
- New Vision for Slovak Agriculture and Rural Areas developed in August 2025 with strategic priorities to stimulate a national discussion on the future of the CAP post 2027.
- Presentation of Vision 2040 to the national working group Partnership for Cohesion Policy held on 24 October 2025 at the invitation of the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization.
- Presentation of Vision 2040 in the Council of the Government for Civil Society Development on 2 December 2025 with a recommendation to the government to include it in the national strategic documents, such as Vision and Strategy for Development of Slovakia to be presented by the Slovak government in June 2026.
- Meeting with the Ministry of Tourism and Sports regarding the uptake of Vision 2040 into the national Rural Tourism Strategy on 4 December 2025.

Contribution to the development of the AKIS in Slovakia through participation in the working groups established at the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Institute (2024-2025).

Engagement with EU Rural Pact activities highlighted the Slovak Vision on a European level, promoting international visibility and cooperation.

Research Outputs (2025):

- “Addressing the Cross-Sectoral Strategy Gap in Slovak Rural Development” – policy recommendations published March 2025.
- “Rural Women Leaders as Catalysts of Social Innovation and Community Resilience” – case study prepared for publication.



Photo: Local Youth presenting their activities

6.2.4. Implementation Outlook

The RAP will continue evolving as a living policy instrument, ensuring that foresight and participatory innovation translate into concrete policy impact.

By 2030, it aims to achieve:

- Institutionalised participatory governance through the Steering Committee and digital platform.
- Full policy integration of Vision 2040 within national development strategies.
- Strengthened cross-sectoral cooperation via the Inter-Ministerial Council.
- Scalable models of ecological farming, tourism, and community innovation supported by sustained multi-level funding.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

7.1. Purpose and Approach

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of the RAP ensures that implementation remains transparent, inclusive, and results oriented. It provides continuous feedback on progress, informs policy adjustments, and strengthens accountability across all governance levels.

The M&E framework follows the PoliRuralPlus logic of *evidence-based, participatory, and adaptive management*, combining quantitative indicators (KPIs) with qualitative insights derived from stakeholder engagement, foresight reflection, and field observation.

The system aims to:

- Track progress toward the **Vision 2040**;
- Ensure alignment with **EU frameworks** (CAP, LTVRA, Green Deal, Rural Pact);
- Measure social, economic, environmental, and governance outcomes;
- Strengthen the learning process within the **RAP Steering Committee** and stakeholder networks;
- Foster **replicability and sustainability** of the Slovak model across Europe.

7.2. Governance of the M&E Process

The **RAP Steering Committee**, chaired by the **Slovak Rural Parliament (VSR)**, is responsible for continuous monitoring and evaluation, ensuring participatory oversight and regular feedback loops.

Key roles:

Institution / Stakeholder	Monitoring & Evaluation Responsibilities
RAP Steering Committee (VSR)	Overall coordination of monitoring; reviews progress reports bi-annually; validates indicators and recommends adjustments.
Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	Integrates M&E results into national CAP reporting and agricultural policy review.
Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatization	Aligns RAP monitoring with EU Cohesion Policy indicators and digital performance measures.
Office of the Government for Civil Society Development	Ensures participatory evaluation, stakeholder inclusion, and open data transparency.
Slovak University of Agriculture and Research Institutions	Collect and analyse data using PoliRuralPlus tools (MAATool, DSS, Knowledge Space).

Local Governments & Regional Authorities	Provide territorial progress data and contribute to local evaluation reports.
NGOs, Civil Society & Youth Organisations	Participate in evaluation workshops, surveys, and community feedback mechanisms.

A **bi-annual Monitoring Report** will be prepared by the **Steering Committee Secretariat** (hosted by VSR), integrating data from ministries, regional partners, and digital platform. Results will be shared publicly through open-access dashboards and policy briefs to ensure transparency and stakeholder trust.

7.3. Monitoring Framework and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

The Slovak RAP uses **eight core KPIs** — harmonised with the **PoliRuralPlus** framework — complemented by pilot-specific targets. Each indicator includes metrics for 2025 (baseline), 2026 (interim target), and 2030 (final target).

#	KPI Title	Purpose	2025 Baseline / Metrics	2026 Target	2030 Goal	Data Sources
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure stakeholder engagement and diversity in RAP activities.	≥80 stakeholders engaged (gender-balanced).	≥150 active stakeholders.	Institutionalised multi-actor governance at national and regional levels.	MAATool database, event attendance, atraktivnyvidiek.sk analytics.
2	Rural–Urban Collaboration	Assess integration between rural and urban actors in joint initiatives.	3 pilot partnerships formed.	6 partnerships formalised (e.g., food systems, mobility).	Rural–urban collaboration embedded in regional planning frameworks.	Partnership reports, municipal strategies, RAP project data.
3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Track adoption of digital tools and innovative solutions in rural areas.	3 pilots (DigiStake, JackDaw, MAATool) active.	10 municipalities use digital tools for planning.	30+ municipalities integrated in the national Smart Villages network.	Project documentation, digital usage stats, survey data.
4	Territorial Environmental Sustainability	Evaluate progress in ecological farming, resource efficiency, and green practices.	15% of agricultural land under organic or low-input management.	25% by 2026.	100% transition roadmap by 2040 underway.	CAP monitoring, Ministry of Agriculture, EAFRD data.
5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Measure wellbeing, participation, and community resilience.	Baseline survey (2025).	+10% improvement in perceived quality of life.	Strengthened intergenerational and inclusive rural communities.	Surveys, foresight results, local reports.
6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Assess effectiveness of cross-sectoral coordination.	Steering Committee fully operational.	Inter-Ministerial Council established.	Integrated governance model institutionalised.	Steering Committee minutes, MIRRI reports.
7	Communication and Visibility	Track outreach, transparency, and awareness.	5 blog/news items per quarter.	Continuous communication on atraktivnyvidiek.sk.	National platform recognised as best practice under Rural Pact.	Website analytics, media tracking.

8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Evaluate the sustainability and scalability of the Slovak RAP model.	Initial case study drafted (2025).	Replication plan shared with 2 other EU pilots.	Slovak model cited in EU policy or Rural Pact guidance.	
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7.4. Evaluation Process

The evaluation process will follow a **three-tiered structure** combining internal review, stakeholder reflection, and external validation:

1. **Internal Review** – Conducted bi-annually by the RAP Steering Committee and Secretariat to assess progress against KPIs.
2. **Participatory Evaluation** – Organised annually through workshops and online consultations (via *atraktivnyvidiek.sk*) to capture qualitative feedback from citizens and stakeholders.
3. **External Assessment** – Independent evaluation every three years (2026, 2029) by a research institution or consultancy, ensuring objectivity and policy relevance.

Each cycle will produce:

- A Monitoring Brief (every six months);
- An Annual Evaluation Report;
- A Mid-Term Review (2026);
- A Final Impact Report (2030).

These deliverables will be published on *atraktivnyvidiek.sk* and submitted to relevant ministries and the EU Rural Pact community.

7.5. Data Collection and Tools

The RAP monitoring relies on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data:

- **Digital Platforms:** MAATool, JackDaw GeoAI, DSS, and Knowledge Space (PoliRuralPlus suite);
- **Administrative Data:** Ministry reports, CAP data, and regional development indicators;
- **Surveys and Questionnaires:** Conducted through *atraktivnyvidiek.sk* and public events;
- **Workshops and Forums:** Collect qualitative data through foresight and scenario reflection;
- **Media and Communication Analytics:** Monitor outreach, engagement, and sentiment.

Data will be validated through triangulation between digital sources, stakeholder feedback, and official statistics to ensure accuracy and reliability.

7.6. Learning, Adaptation, and Policy Feedback

Monitoring in the Slovak RAP is not only about compliance but also about **learning and adaptation**. Evaluation results will feed back into:

- Policy updates and CAP strategic planning cycles;
- Adjustments to the Vision 2040 priorities;
- Future EU programming and funding alignment (2028+);
- Ongoing dialogue in the Rural Pact and international peer-learning networks.

By fostering continuous learning, transparency, and participation, the monitoring and evaluation system ensures that the Slovak RAP remains **dynamic, inclusive, and impactful** — a living roadmap for resilient, green, and community-driven rural transformation.

8. Communication and Engagement - Next Steps

The successful execution of the Slovak Regional Action Plan (RAP) will depend on sustained cooperation, shared responsibility, and continuous adaptation. Building on the participatory foundations of the *PoliRural* and *PoliRuralPlus* projects, the next phase aims to ensure that the Vision 2040 becomes a permanent component of Slovakia's national and regional development frameworks.

To achieve this, the following **four strategic next steps** are proposed:

8.1. Strengthening Political and Institutional Support

Ensuring the full integration of the RAP and Vision 2040 into Slovakia’s strategic policy architecture requires strong political commitment at both national and regional levels.

- **Institutionalisation of the Vision 2040:** Embed the updated Vision into the *Programme Slovakia post 2027*, the *CAP Strategic Plan post-2027*, and national spatial and regional development strategies.
- **Inter-Ministerial Council for Rural Development:** Formally establish and operationalise this Council as a coordination body for rural affairs, bringing together ministries of agriculture, environment, tourism, economy, and education.
- **Legislative Anchoring:** Advocate for a national policy or framework law on rural development that ensures continuity, coordination, and coherence of rural actions beyond political cycles.
- **Integration into EU Platforms:** Strengthen Slovakia’s active participation in the *EU Rural Pact*, *LTVRA* networks, and EU forums on organic farming, smart villages, and social innovation.

These actions will ensure that the RAP’s outcomes influence national policymaking and contribute to Europe’s collective vision of greener, more resilient, and better-connected rural regions.

8.2. Deepening Stakeholder Collaboration

The RAP’s long-term success depends on maintaining and expanding the collaborative ecosystem created during *PoliRuralPlus*.

- **Permanent Stakeholder Platform:** Sustain www.atraktivnyvidiek.sk as the official Slovak platform for dialogue, consultation, and foresight. Regularly update it with news, surveys, reports, and calls for participation.
- **Annual “Attractive Rural Areas” Conferences:** Continue the tradition of inclusive, participatory events serving as milestones for evaluating progress, exchanging knowledge, and celebrating rural innovation.
- **Capacity-Building and Leadership Development:** Provide continuous training in digital skills, participatory governance, and policy innovation for rural leaders, women’s networks, and youth organisations.
- **Local Partnerships:** Encourage regional governments, LEADER groups, and municipalities to establish joint rural–urban partnerships promoting innovation, mobility, and social inclusion.

This multi-actor approach ensures that every voice—citizen, entrepreneur, policymaker, or researcher—remains part of Slovakia’s evolving rural narrative.

8.3. Ensuring Sustainable Funding and Investment

To translate foresight into lasting action, a diversified and stable funding ecosystem must be in place.

- **Leverage EU Funding:** Mobilise *Horizon Europe*, *EAFRD*, *ESF+*, *LIFE*, and *ERDF* resources for pilot projects, smart villages, and ecological transformation.
- **National Co-Financing:** Use *Slovak Investment Holding* and *Environmental Fund* instruments to provide guarantees, blended finance, and micro-grants for small rural entrepreneurs and women-led businesses.

- **Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs):** Develop models that engage local cooperatives, investors, and social enterprises in co-financing eco-tourism, green infrastructure, and digital solutions.
- **Dedicated Funding for Organic Transition:** Secure long-term support for the *National Organic Farming Roadmap* targeting 100% organic or low-input agricultural land by 2040.

A transparent, multi-source funding model will ensure both resilience and scalability of the RAP’s initiatives beyond 2030.

8.4. Building Adaptive and Learning-Oriented Policy Frameworks

As Slovakia’s rural landscape evolves, policies must remain flexible and evidence-driven.

- **Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E):** Continue the multi-level monitoring system led by the *RAP Steering Committee* (see Chapter 9), ensuring real-time data collection and community feedback loops.
- **Evidence-Based Adaptation:** Use data from MAATool, JackDaw GeoAI, and surveys to refine interventions, address emerging needs, and adjust strategies dynamically.
- **Policy Experimentation:** Encourage pilot testing of innovative approaches (e.g., green financing, participatory budgeting, circular economy hubs) before national scaling.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** Publish periodic *Rural Insights Reports* summarising progress, good practices, and policy recommendations for national and EU dissemination.

By fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, the RAP will remain relevant, responsive, and resilient in the face of demographic, economic, and environmental change.

8.5. Summary of Next Steps (2025–2030)

Priority Area	Key Actions (2025–2030)	Lead Institutions
Institutionalisation of Vision 2040	Integration into national policies and CAP post-2027; legal anchoring of rural vision; inter-ministerial coordination mechanism.	MoARD, MIRRI, Office of Government for Civil Society Development, Slovak Rural Parliament.
Stakeholder Collaboration	Maintain <i>atraktivnyvidiek.sk</i> , annual conferences, thematic dialogues, leadership and digital skills training.	Slovak Rural Parliament, NGOs, universities, local governments.
Sustainable Funding	Combine EU, national, and private funding; operationalise financial instruments for green and social innovation.	MoARD, SIH, MoE, MoT&S, MoEcon.
Adaptive Governance and Learning	Implement participatory M&E; share lessons via Rural Pact and EU networks; publish annual progress reports.	Steering Committee, Slovak University of Agriculture, research partners.

8.6. Outlook: From Vision to Practice

By 2030, Slovakia's rural transformation will be driven by a strong partnership between citizens and institutions, linking **visionary planning with concrete action**.

The next steps outlined above ensure that the **Vision 2040** becomes a living policy framework — dynamic, inclusive, and grounded in evidence — positioning Slovakia as a **European leader in participatory governance, ecological innovation, and rural resilience**.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Summary of Expected Impact

The RAP represents a strategic milestone in translating the *Vision 2040* into concrete actions that strengthen sustainability, inclusivity, and territorial cohesion. By combining participatory foresight, digital innovation, and cross-sectoral cooperation, the RAP paves the way for a **comprehensive rural transformation** that contributes to national resilience and Europe's long-term vision for vibrant, connected, and prosperous rural regions.

9.1.1. Contribution to Sustainable Development

The RAP directly supports the European Green Deal, the EU LTVRA, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting:

- **Ecological transition** through the nationwide shift toward organic and regenerative agriculture, aiming for 100% sustainable or low-input production by 2040.
- **Climate resilience and water security** via integrated landscape management, soil restoration, and water-retention strategies.
- **Circular and green economy models**, reducing emissions and waste while creating new business opportunities in renewable energy, agri-tourism, and eco-innovation.

These actions will position Slovakia as a regional leader in green transformation, improving environmental performance while enhancing rural competitiveness and quality of life.

9.1.2. Contribution to Regional Integration and Governance

The RAP promotes **stronger rural–urban linkages** through shared infrastructure, innovation ecosystems, and integrated planning. By aligning with *Programme Slovakia 2021–2027*, the *CAP*, and the *EU Cohesion Policy*, it creates a consistent framework for **multi-level governance** and **balanced regional development**.

Key expected outcomes include:

- Institutionalised cooperation through an *Inter-Ministerial Council for Rural Development* and improved coordination among ministries, regions, and municipalities.
- Enhanced public trust and civic participation through continuous dialogue on www.otraktivnyvidiek.sk and inclusive governance processes.
- Integration of rural priorities into national spatial and economic planning frameworks, reducing territorial disparities and promoting cohesion.

9.1.3. Contribution to Economic Growth and Innovation

Economically, the RAP will **diversify the rural economy**, create new employment opportunities, and foster innovation through:

- Support for SMEs, women-led enterprises, and youth entrepreneurship in green, digital, and creative sectors.
- Investment in **agri-tech, precision farming, and circular economy ventures**, enhancing productivity and competitiveness.
- Promotion of **eco-tourism and cultural heritage industries**, attracting visitors and investment while reinforcing local identity.

Together, these measures will stimulate local economies, strengthen value chains, and enhance Slovakia's overall economic resilience.

9.1.4. Expected Cross-Sectoral and Systemic Effects

The RAP's three intervention areas—**stakeholder engagement, vision consolidation, and cross-sectoral cooperation**—will have broad and interdependent effects:

- **Governance and Policy:** Improved coordination across policy domains (agriculture, environment, economy, tourism, digitalisation) and between administrative levels.
- **Social Inclusion:** Increased participation of women, youth, and minorities in decision-making and local entrepreneurship.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Greater adoption of sustainable farming practices and water-efficient systems with direct positive impacts on biodiversity and carbon sequestration.
- **Knowledge and Innovation:** Stronger partnerships between research institutions, public authorities, and the private sector within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS).
- **Cultural and Community Renewal:** Revitalisation of rural heritage, creativity, and community identity through inclusive, place-based initiatives.

By fostering these interlinked impacts, the Slovak RAP ensures that rural development becomes a catalyst for **systemic transformation** rather than isolated sectoral progress.

9.1.5. Policy and Programmatic Synergies

The intended outcomes of the RAP are fully supported and reinforced by existing policies and frameworks at multiple levels:

- **EU Level:** European Green Deal, LTVRA, CAP, Cohesion Policy, Digital Decade, Rural Pact, and EU Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025).
- **National Level:** Programme Slovakia 2021–2027, CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, National Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2027, and Strategy for Rural Tourism Development.
- **Regional and Local Level:** Integration with county and municipal strategies promoting smart villages, inclusive governance, and place-based innovation.

This alignment ensures policy coherence, funding synergy, and long-term institutional support for the RAP's objectives.

9.2. Call to Action

This RAP is not merely a policy document—it is a shared commitment to shaping the future of Slovakia’s rural territories as **living, innovative, and resilient communities**. Its success depends on **collaboration, ownership, and continuity**.

To all partners and stakeholders—ministries, municipalities, businesses, academia, civil society, and citizens—this is a **call to action**:

- **Collaborate** across sectors and generations to ensure that rural policies are inclusive, data-driven, and future-ready.
- **Invest** in innovation, ecological farming, and circular economy models that create new jobs and sustain natural resources.
- **Participate** actively in the national platform www.atraktivnyvidiek.sk, conferences, and foresight dialogues to co-shape Slovakia’s rural vision.
- **Champion the Vision 2040** by embedding its principles into regional plans, community projects, and educational programs.
- **Advocate** for continued political and financial commitment to ensure that rural development remains at the heart of Slovakia’s national agenda.

Together, we can transform the Vision 2040 from a foresight framework into **tangible, lasting progress**—creating a Slovakia where every rural citizen has the opportunity to thrive, innovate, and belong.

10. Annex

10.1. Sustainability and extension of activities: Checklist for the RAP pilots

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation			
Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.	X		Yes. The analysis identifies demographic decline, ageing population, youth outmigration, and uneven access to services as key sustainability challenges. Opportunities include stronger community-based governance, digitalisation, and the creation of multi-actor networks for knowledge exchange. Stakeholder ownership is promoted through foresight participation and the Rural Pact framework.
Action Plan			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained? 	X		Through long-term collaboration between local governments, universities, and rural development associations, supported by the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) platform. Ongoing funding from CAP, LEADER, and national innovation grants will ensure continuity. Community-based initiatives such as the Annual Award Ceremony for Rural Leader Women help sustain motivation and visibility.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future? 	X		Key actors include the Slovak University of Agriculture (SUA), Rural Youth Parliament, Ministry of Tourism and Sport, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization, Slovak Rural Parliament, and regional LEADER groups. These institutions ensure long-term operation of actions related to training, innovation hubs, and local entrepreneurship.
Policy and Funding Alignment			

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do the stakeholders/actors have access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP? 	X		Yes. Access is available through CAP Strategic Plan, LEADER/CLLD, Interreg, Horizon Europe, and Slovak Recovery and Resilience Plan . Local banks and regional innovation funds also offer micro-loans for rural entrepreneurs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms? 	X		Yes. Innovative mechanisms such as social impact investment funds, participatory budgeting, and blended finance models are recommended to support youth entrepreneurship, green transition, and gender-focused initiatives.
Communication and Engagement			
What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?	X		Continuous stakeholder engagement through the Slovak webpage www.atraktivnyvidiek.sk , foresight dialogues, and regular stakeholder forums and conferences. These support mutual learning, co-creation, and shared responsibility for implementation.
Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?	X		Yes. Most actors are already integrated in national and regional networks (e.g., CAP partnerships, Smart Villages, and Rural Pact communities) ensuring continuation beyond the project lifecycle.
How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?	X		Lessons will be shared via national conferences, Slovak webpage, EU Rural Pact events, and publications. Local best practices will feed into newsletters, blogs, news articles and policy briefs.
Conclusion			
Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?	X		Yes. RAP outcomes are embedded in national rural policy frameworks and aligned with EU priorities (Green Deal, Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, and CAP). Integration into regional strategic documents ensures policy continuity.

<p>Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?</p>	<p>X</p>		<p>Yes. The RAP's emphasis on digitalisation, gender equality, and sustainable land management positively affects education, innovation, tourism, and environmental planning sectors. Strengthened rural–urban linkages may also enhance mobility and service delivery efficiency.</p>
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Regional Action Plan

Pilot:	Central Greece
Version:	3.0
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1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Background

Located in the heart of the country, Central Greece hosts the Greek pilot within a geographically diverse region marked by striking contrasts. The region is distinguished by its diverse landscapes, ranging from mountains, plains, and coastlines, fostering rich natural resources, a vibrant agricultural sector and an uprising tourism sector. This diversity underpins a strong resource base, enriched by cultural heritage that includes historical monuments and living traditions. Due to its central position, Central Greece plays a vital role in the national economy, acting as a geographic and economic bridge between northern and southern Greece.

The socio-economic profile of Central Greece combines traditional agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and a rapidly expanding service sector, particularly in tourism and cultural and creative industries (CCI). Despite demographic pressures including rural depopulation and youth outmigration, the region actively promotes innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable agri-food development. Agricultural practices are diversifying through innovations such as agritourism, supported by cross-sectoral initiatives that connect the agri-food and tourism sectors with the creative economy. The Local Action Plan, through activities like ecosystem mapping and stakeholder matchmaking, explicitly encourages collaboration between CCI enterprises and enterprises from other sectors (e.g. Agri-food, Tourism) to strengthen value chains and regional identity. Central Greece strategically leverages its substantial cultural heritage, including globally acclaimed heritage sites and diverse natural environments, to enhance economic competitiveness and regional branding. Through targeted initiatives such as the Regional Film Office, the region fosters cross-sectoral collaborations, supports SMEs in adopting innovative methodologies, and strengthens regional resilience. This coordinated approach, underpinned by multi-stakeholder engagement and dedicated policies, aims to stimulate inclusive growth, retain local talent, and reinforce economic sustainability.

Central Greece exhibits a diverse and significant cultural heritage characterized by internationally recognized historical sites listed on UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, such as the archaeological site Delphi and the Osios Loukas monastery, integrated alongside vibrant local traditions. Strategic regional development initiatives target the preservation and valorization of these cultural assets. Emphasis is placed on fostering synergies between cultural tourism, local crafts, and the creative industries to enhance regional competitiveness and economic diversification. By promoting cross-sectoral collaboration and leveraging cultural identity, Central Greece aims to stimulate sustainable local development and reinforce regional resilience.

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

The Regional Action Plan (RAP) for Central Greece under the PoliRuralPlus initiative aims to establish a resilient, inclusive, and digitally transformed rural-urban ecosystem, leveraging the region's agricultural potential, cultural richness, and innovation capacity to foster sustainable development. The RAP responds to regional imbalances and demographic pressures by introducing targeted interventions in smart agriculture, agritourism, and digital upskilling. It focuses on the empowerment of local communities by enhancing the digital competencies of AKIS

stakeholders, directly supporting farmers and agribusinesses in Central Greece to adopt modern technologies, streamline operations, and improve productivity.

This vision is strategically aligned with regional priorities such as the revitalization of rural areas, agri-food value chain enhancement, and cultural and creative industry synergies. At the national level, it supports Greece's Digital Transformation Strategy and CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 by promoting precision agriculture, fostering innovation within the AKIS framework, and facilitating knowledge transfer. It also contributes to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan through climate adaptation, flood protection, and the deployment of 5G infrastructure to reduce digital exclusion in rural zones. At the EU level, the RAP is fully aligned with the European Green Deal, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3), and the New European Bauhaus initiative, addressing sustainability, connectivity, inclusivity, and the aesthetic and cultural value of rural spaces.

Core objectives of the RAP include the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices through digital tools, the adoption of smart farming methods, and the integration of agritech into everyday farming activities. Training programmes will support AKIS actors, enabling them to apply ICT tools, data-driven decision-making, and climate-smart techniques. The RAP also fosters rural economic diversification through the promotion of agritourism and the valorisation of local products. By developing dedicated digital marketing strategies and promotional content, the plan enhances the visibility of Central Greece's agricultural and cultural assets which is anticipated to contribute in strengthening regional branding and attracting investment and visitors.

In terms of achieving cohesive regional development, the RAP addresses urban-rural imbalances through upgraded infrastructure, 5G connectivity, and improved mobility. These measures facilitate cross-sectoral integration, particularly among the agri-food, tourism, and cultural sectors. Additionally, foresight approaches combined with multi-actor collaboration mechanisms support inclusive governance and the co-creation of policies that reflect local priorities, needs and gaps.

The intended outcomes include increased digital and green competences among rural actors, stronger agritourism-driven local economies, improved environmental resilience through sustainable land and water management, and greater social cohesion across rural communities. Ultimately, the RAP aspires to position Central Greece as a reference example for balanced and innovation-led rural-urban development, aligned with European missions on climate adaptation, soil health, and sustainable food systems.

2. Analysis of Current Situation

2.1. State of the Art

The Greek pilot exhibits a territorially varied and economically multifaceted landscape, where traditional agriculture intersects with small-scale manufacturing and a growing service sector, particularly in tourism and cultural industries. While these sectors contribute to a diversified regional economy, Central Greece continues to face persistent socio-demographic shifts and increasing environmental pressures. Structural gaps continue to affect the pace of regional transformation. In response, targeted initiatives at regional, national, and EU levels aim to promote smart farming, agritourism, and innovation as levers for rural and sustainable development, fostering a more resilient and future-oriented local economy.

Central Greece features a diverse socio-economic profile that integrates traditional agriculture, small-scale industry, and a rapidly expanding service sector focused on tourism and cultural and creative industries. While traditional agriculture remains central to rural livelihoods, the sector is evolving through the adoption of sustainable and digital practices. However, this transition is constrained by limited financial incentives, digital literacy and infrastructure, and insufficient training mechanisms. Agricultural productivity is also constrained by environmental stressors such as land use changes, biodiversity loss, and increased climate variability, often intensified by water scarcity and recurring drought and flooding extreme events. Additionally, socio-demographic trends such as the ageing population, significant youth outmigration, and the growing concentration of opportunities in urban centers, coupled with limited access to jobs in emerging sectors like information and communications technology (ICT), undermine the prospects of the region's long-term resilience. It is worth noting that between 2014 and 2023, the total population slightly declined, while the proportion of residents aged 65 and over increased. All the aforementioned factors have slowed the diffusion and uptake of modern agritech solutions across rural areas. Nonetheless, the region's natural capital (mountains, coastlines, forests) and cultural heritage (including UNESCO-listed sites) continue to offer potential for environmentally and socially sustainable growth.

From a market perspective, agriculture in Central Greece is undergoing a gradual transformation through the adoption of digital technologies and sustainable farming practices, reflecting broader trends that define the emerging landscape of modern agriculture. The region is also witnessing a growing interest in agritourism, which combines agricultural production with tourism services to diversify income and stimulate rural economies. Nevertheless, the uptake of these innovations remains limited, primarily due to the lack of targeted financial incentives, insufficient training mechanisms, and gaps in digital infrastructure. Local agri-food producers increasingly leverage regional identity and product traceability through geographical indications and quality certifications, aiming to boost visibility and market competitiveness, while the cultural and creative sectors are showing signs of renewed dynamism supported by EU and regional programmes. Moreover, tourism trends in the region are shifting toward more experiential utilizing the diverse landscape and the heritage-based models, which aligns well with the area's natural and historical assets, though stronger integration into the regional economy is still needed.

Comparative analysis of Central Greece with Epirus region

Central Greece, like many rural regions in Greece, faces structural challenges such as an aging population, youth outmigration, low digital skills among farmers, and limited use of smart agriculture technologies. Similar conditions are observed in the Region of Epirus, where over 30% of arable land has been abandoned due to demographic decline and low profitability.¹

Both regions show limited but growing efforts to introduce digital technologies in agriculture and rural development. In Epirus, small-scale community-led initiatives have emerged, including local energy systems and agroecological practices². While adoption of smart farming remains low, national programmes such as the Smart Farming Initiative aim to strengthen digital capacity in rural areas³. Both regions are supported by national and EU instruments, including the NSRF 2021-2027 and micro-loan schemes co-financed by the EAFRD, offering targeted support to small agricultural businesses and innovation in rural economies⁴.

¹ <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359157406>

² <https://margistar.eu/socio-ecosystems-of-community-led-initiatives-for-post-growth-the-case-of-epirus-greece/>

³ <https://training.agriskills40.com/modules/document/file.php/AGR150/Smart%20Farming%20Initiative.pdf>

⁴ https://www.fi-compass.eu/sites/default/files/publications/CaseStudy_EAFRD_Greece_Nov_2024_RTW_0.pdf

2.2. Key Challenges

Central Greece faces several interlinked barriers that hinder the potential for development and limit the region's capacity to fully leverage its assets. The most prominent challenge is the demographic imbalance, marked by a notably aging population, increasing outmigration of young people and gender imbalances. A substantial portion of the youth population, particularly ICT graduates, relocates to urban centres in search of better employment opportunities. This locally-induced talent drain is further aggravated by the limited local demand for digital services, thus creating a cycle that hinders the development of a robust and resilient digital economy.

Digital skill deficiencies are widespread, affecting also large segments of the rural and agricultural workforce. This gap poses a major obstacle to the adoption of emerging technologies and constrains the growth of innovation-driven entrepreneurship in critical sectors. In the agricultural domain, which remains a foundational pillar of the regional economy, the transition toward sustainable and technologically enhanced practices continues to progress slowly. This is largely attributed to limited access to targeted training programmes, the absence of tailored advisory support, and inadequate financial incentives for adopting innovation.

Infrastructural deficits further amplify these challenges. While road connectivity is generally adequate along central roads, regional disparities exist, affecting more particularly remote areas. Central Greece ranks relatively low nationally in road network density, highlighting broader connectivity challenges beyond urban centres. Central Greece faces persistent challenges in digital connectivity and access to services, despite performing above the national average in areas such as safety and civic engagement. In 2017, household broadband access in the region stood at 67%, slightly above the country average of 65% but significantly below the OECD median of 78%. These infrastructural gaps restrict inclusive digital participation, mainly impacting women, elderly populations, and small producers, thereby resulting in not fully harnessing human capital, delayed adoption of smart technologies, and contributes to fragmented development across the region. Even when digital solutions are available, the limited technical know-how and the absence of structured advisory support systems in general, remain a barrier to practical, efficient and scalable deployment. Furthermore, a persistent innovation gap continues to affect both SMEs and individual producers, many of whom lack the institutional capacity and necessary infrastructure to integrate precision farming, digital monitoring tools, or climate-smart farming methods into their operations. Collectively, these barriers undermine cohesive and sustainable regional growth, delay climate adaptation, and weaken socio-economic resilience.

2.3. Opportunities

Despite the aforementioned barriers, Central Greece presents significant opportunities for growth and sustainable development across multiple interconnected sectors. The region's rich cultural heritage and diverse natural landscapes provide substantial potential for tourism development, particularly in experiential, eco-based, and heritage tourism. Leveraging UNESCO-recognised monuments and ecologically diverse territories through integrated and targeted tourism promotion strategies, including agritourism, can stimulate economic diversification and local employment.

Agritourism emerges as a high-value growth area, capitalizing on the region's rich cultural and natural heritage. Central Greece's diverse landscapes, historical sites, and traditional agri-food products offer the foundation for

experiential tourism models. These models can connect visitors with authentic rural life while generating additional income streams for farmers and local producers.

The transition toward digitalisation and smart agriculture offers considerable promise. Central Greece's agricultural sector is gradually adopting precision farming techniques, sustainable practices, and innovative agritech solutions. Enhanced training programmes aimed at addressing existing digital skills gaps, especially among AKIS stakeholders and small producers, could significantly accelerate the uptake of these technologies. Improved broadband infrastructure, coupled with supportive policy instruments and tailored financing mechanisms, would facilitate broader adoption, resulting in increased agricultural productivity and economic resilience.

Additionally, opportunities exist in the renewable energy sector, driven by the region's favourable geographic conditions, for solar and wind energy installations, and growing interest in sustainable energy solutions. Investments in renewable energy infrastructure and energy-efficient practices align well with EU and national strategic priorities, including those outlined in the European Green Deal and Greece's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Such initiatives would not only enhance regional energy autonomy but also provide a strong foundation for green economic growth.

Furthermore, the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) represent a promising area for regional innovation. Strengthening sectoral linkages among CCIs, tourism, agriculture, and digital services could further amplify Central Greece's attractiveness and economic competitiveness. Enhanced support for SME innovation, coupled with stronger regional branding, can unlock new market opportunities both domestically and internationally, contributing substantially to inclusive and sustainable regional development.

Finally, the digital sector, although currently underdeveloped, could become a driver of regional innovation if supported through ICT skills development, the promotion of regional e-services, and the integration of smart technologies in rural areas. The deployment of digital promotional tools, regional platforms, and tailored marketing campaigns can enhance the visibility of local products and attract investment, aligning with broader digital transformation strategies at the national and EU levels.

In addition to sectoral opportunities, there is growing readiness among local stakeholders to take an active role in shaping the region's development path. Local authorities, producer cooperatives, tourism networks, and educational institutions have shown increased interest in collaborative projects, particularly in areas like agritourism, local branding, and digital transformation. The presence of active LEADER/CLLD Local Action Groups and participation in EU-funded rural development programmes indicate a high level of engagement and organisational capacity. Moreover, the region's history of bottom-up initiatives in agri-food and cultural heritage demonstrates a strong predisposition for local ownership of new measures.

2.4. Gender and Diversity Dimensions

The social and demographic landscape of Central Greece reflects many of the broader rural trends observed across the country, including population ageing, youth outmigration, and gender imbalances in economic participation.

Demographically, the region is facing significant challenges. Many rural municipalities are experiencing steady population decline, largely due to low birth rates and the departure of young people to urban centres in search of education, employment, and better services. As a result, the population is ageing, with growing pressure on local services and reduced community vitality in remote areas. While the overall gender distribution in the region is relatively balanced, women remain underrepresented in key sectors such as agriculture, entrepreneurship, digital innovation, and governance.

Socio-economic participation is not equal across groups. Women and youth often face greater barriers in accessing employment, training, and funding opportunities. National data indicate that women's full-time employment rate in Greece remains significantly lower than men's (36% vs. 56%)⁵, with rural areas facing even more pronounced gaps. Women are also less likely to own land, lead cooperatives, or participate in local governance structures.

Urban centres such as Lamia offer comparatively better access to education, digital infrastructure, healthcare, and mobility services, while rural areas often lack adequate childcare, transport options, or digital connectivity, factors that inequitably affect women, older adults, and low-income households.

Cultural and social norms continue to shape local attitudes toward gender roles and participation. In many rural communities, traditional expectations place greater unpaid care responsibilities on women, limiting their time and ability to engage in economic or civic life⁶. However, there are encouraging signs of change: across the region, women's cooperatives, cultural associations, and local initiatives are emerging as important actors in agri-food value chains, crafts, and tourism.

From a policy perspective, Central Greece benefits from national and EU-level strategies that promote gender equality and inclusion. The National Gender Equality Action Plan⁷, the NSRF 2021-2027⁸, and the LEADER/CLLD⁹ framework provide tools and funding opportunities to support women entrepreneurs, youth employment, and inclusive innovation ecosystems.

However, challenges remain. Barriers such as limited female leadership, unequal access to resources, low digital skill levels, and weak youth retention strategies continue to hinder inclusive development. At the same time, the region has several key enablers, including active local networks and community-based organisations.

3. Vision and Strategic Goals

3.1. Vision Statement

Central Greece is entering a decisive phase of transformation, laying the groundwork for its green and digital transition, by 2028, in accordance with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan "Greece 2.0"¹⁰ and the Common

⁵ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024>

⁶ <https://www.womentors.gr/en/i-anagki-2>

⁷ <https://isotita.gr/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/National-Action-Plan-for-Gender-Equality-2021-2025.pdf>

⁸ <https://espa.io/en/nsrf-2021-2027-the-final-draft-to-the-european-commission>

⁹ <https://www.agrotikianaptixi.gr/metra-paa-pages/leader-clld>

¹⁰ <https://greece20.gov.gr/en/>

Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan 2023–2027^{11,12} (Ministry of Rural Development and Food, 2023). Over the coming years, this transition will be supported through targeted upskilling of farmers and entrepreneurs, the establishment of local innovation hubs, and early deployment of smart village pilots, thereby empowering local communities, farmers, and entrepreneurs to embrace digital tools, advisory services, and circular economy practices. These foundational efforts will reinforce the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) actors, expand rural connectivity, and foster digital literacy, directly contributing to the objectives of the EU Digital Decade¹³ and setting the groundwork for sustainable, innovation-driven rural development, bridging rural connectivity gaps and enabling data-driven public services.

By 2030, Central Greece will have achieved the widespread adoption of sustainable agritech solutions and circular economy practices, fully consistent with the objectives of the Farm to Fork Strategy for a Fair, Healthy and Environmentally Friendly Food System (European Commission, 2020, COM (2020) 381 final)¹⁴. This transition will be characterised by the integration of digital services, precision agriculture, and resource-efficient technologies that enhance productivity, reduce environmental pressures, foster inclusive economic participation, while achieving at the same time full digital literacy among AKIS actors. Measurable improvements in resource efficiency, climate resilience, and social inclusion will emerge as a direct outcome of policies promoted under the European Green Deal¹⁵ (European Commission, 2019, COM (2019) 640 final)¹⁶. Guided by the Smart Specialisation Strategy of Central Greece¹⁷, this phase will also consolidate innovation-led diversification across the agri-food, tourism, and cultural and creative sectors, positioning the region as a dynamic hub of sustainable entrepreneurship and knowledge exchange within the national and European innovation landscape.

By 2040, Central Greece envisions itself as a green, digital, and inclusive region, that serves as a model region that will have fully embraced climate-resilient agriculture, sustainable agritech, agritourism, and digital transformation. This aligns with the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture (European Commission, 2024)¹⁸, which advocates for balancing productivity, environmental care, and rural well-being. The vision reflects the four pillars of the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (European Commission, 2021, COM (2021) 345 final)¹⁹, Stronger, Connected, Resilient, Prosperous, and draws inspiration from the New European Bauhaus (European Commission, 2022)²⁰ in integrating sustainability, inclusiveness, and cultural identity in landscape-based tourism assets. Building on the PoliRural and PoliRuralPlus initiatives, the region will foster climate-smart innovation, heritage-based tourism, and participatory governance that connects rural and urban communities.

Looking ahead to 2050, the region aligns with the European Climate Law (Regulation (EU) 2021/1119)²¹, which sets the legally binding target of EU-wide climate neutrality by 2050. Central Greece seeks to strengthen its

¹¹ https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/cap-my-country/cap-strategic-plans_en

¹² https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/b13e3e86-2c12-45e5-9659-35f0384c76b2_en?filename=csp-at-a-glance-greece_en.pdf

¹³ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/europes-digital-decade>

¹⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020DC0381>

¹⁵ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

¹⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52019DC0640>

¹⁷ <https://gsri.gov.gr/ethniki-stratigiki-exypnis-exeidikefsis-2021-2027/>

¹⁸ https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024_en.pdf

¹⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021DC0345>

²⁰ https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en

²¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R1119&from=EN>

resilience and self-reliance in food, energy, and knowledge systems, consistent with the objectives of the European Green Deal²², the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, THE REPowerEU Plan (European Commission, 2022, COM (2022) 230 final)²³ and the EU Missions on Climate Adaptation²⁴ and Soil Strategy for 2030²⁵ for healthy soils. By achieving these long-term ambitions, the region will actively contribute to the European Green Deal (2019) and the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2021), becoming a model territory where technology, culture, and ecology coexist, ensuring prosperity and high quality of life for future generations.

3.2. Strategic Goals

Goal 1 – Building a Greener and More Sustainable Economy

By 2030, Central Greece will have transformed its agricultural systems into sustainable, climate-resilient, and circular ecosystems. The goal is to increase the share of farms that adopt sustainable farming methods such as precision irrigation and precision farming to 30% and to reduce the use of fertilizers by at least 20% compared to 2025 levels, thus adhering to the EU Farm to Fork Strategy and EU Green Deal. This goal aligns directly with the policy recommendation to integrate nature-based climate-adaptation measures and to support green and digital rural transformation through targeted financial incentives. It also responds to the call for innovative financial mechanisms that facilitate investment in smart agriculture, renewable energy, and the circular economy, helping farmers adopt technologies that reduce resource consumption and environmental impact. Furthermore, the goal's emphasis on localised production systems contributes to the inclusive and sustainable development of rural communities, ensuring that environmental and climate adaptation is embedded in every local development plan.

This goal is specific to the agritech and environmental context of Central Greece, measurable through adoption rates and input reduction, achievable through CAP and Horizon Europe funding, relevant to the EU Green Deal, and time-bound to 2030.

Goal 2 – Advancing Digitalisation and Smart Rural Connectivity

This second goal is directly linked to the recommendation to promote inclusive, smart rural development through grants for digital services and to utilise digital tools and repositories of best practices. By 2028, Central Greece aims to achieve near-universal broadband access and to significantly increase the number of local stakeholders, who have been trained in the use of digital tools. By developing broadband infrastructure, digital training, and open-data hubs, Central Greece will modernise its rural economy and enhance digital inclusion. This goal aims to address the digital divide by deploying Smart Village pilots, establishing Digital Agri-Labs, and integrating open data systems for environmental monitoring and local governance. By strengthening digital literacy and ICT infrastructure, the region will improve productivity, enhance digital participation, attract investment, and foster

²² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

²³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52022DC0230>

²⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2021:82:FIN>

²⁵ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/soil-health/soil-strategy-2030_en

innovation in agriculture, tourism, and business services. This approach not only enhances operational efficiency but also ensures evidence-based territorial benchmarking and data-driven policy design, responding directly to the call for the use of digital tools to support policy learning and implementation.

These targets directly reflect the EU Digital Decade²⁶ 2030 Policy Programme (COM(2021)574)²⁷ which mandates gigabit connectivity and advanced digital skills for all Europeans by 2030. Moreover, Digital Europe, national co-financing instruments, and Smart Village initiatives provide the necessary financing and implementation tools to initiate progress. The goal is specific in its focus on connectivity and skills, measurable through coverage and training targets, achievable via EU and national financing schemes.

Goal 3 – Promoting Sustainable Agritourism and Territorial Identity

By 2035, positioning Central Greece as a leading sustainable agritourism destination is an achievable and relevant goal, integrating agriculture, culture, and landscape into an authentic visitor experience. The aim is to increase rural tourism arrivals by 20% and to support the creation of new eco-certified agritourism enterprises, while also strengthening and evolving existing ones through funding schemes such as Interreg, CLLD/LEADER (Sub-measure 19.2/19.3)²⁸, and ERDF²⁹ tourism innovation projects. This contributes to economic diversification and is clearly time-bound to 2035.

To support this transition, the region can develop a *Central Greece Agritourism Route* connecting farms, vineyards, olive groves, and mountain villages, accompanied by a digital storytelling platform that promotes local heritage and implement certification schemes for sustainability and quality. This approach reflects the New European Bauhaus³⁰ principles (aesthetics, sustainability, inclusion) and aligns with the LTVRA pillar of a Prosperous Rural Europe.

This goal is closely aligned with the recommendation to promote inclusive, smart rural development and to strengthen regional innovation ecosystems by integrating digital technologies and sectoral linkages. Agritourism in Central Greece offers a practical cross-sectoral model that combines agricultural innovation, cultural heritage, digital promotion, and environmental protection. These actions contribute to the inclusive growth of peripheral areas by creating jobs, diversifying income sources, and increasing the digital capacity and visibility of small rural enterprises involved in tourism, strongly aligning with the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027, both in its specific objectives and its implementation priorities under the Greek CAP Strategic Plan.

Goal 4 – Strengthening Entrepreneurship and Innovation Ecosystems

This goal aims to strengthen regional innovation ecosystems through collaborative hubs, targeted financial incentives, and facilitate access to innovative financing instruments. By 2030, Central Greece aims to become a

²⁶ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/europes-digital-decade>

²⁷ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:6785f365-1627-11ec-b4fe-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

²⁸ <https://www.agrotikianaptixi.gr/metra-paa-pages/leader-clld/prosklisi-gia-tin-epilogi-otd/>

²⁹ https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/european-regional-development-fund-erdf_en

³⁰ https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en

vibrant hub for rural innovation and green entrepreneurship, fostering collaboration among academia, enterprises, and public authorities.

The region's objective is to support at least 8 to 15 new rural start-ups and SMEs in green innovation and to facilitate 3 cross-sector partnerships, involving academia, industry, and local authorities. Key initiatives include the establishment of a Rural Innovation Hub, a Green Business Incubator, and an annual AgriTech & Tourism Innovation Forum³¹, all designed to encourage stakeholder engagement, promote sustainable business models, and stimulate cooperation across sectors. Additionally, the goal foresees that at least 45% of AKIS advisors will be trained in digital and circular practices, ensuring that innovation capacity is embedded. These structures correspond to collaborative hubs integrating digital technologies, research and stakeholder engagement. At the same time, the incubator and its mentoring programmes will provide entrepreneurs and SMEs with the tools and financial support needed to access funding for innovation in agri-food, renewable energy, and tourism.

This goal directly supports the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027 and the Greek CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, which prioritise rural diversification, innovation, and the modernisation of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS). The goal also aligns with the European Green Deal, the EU Industrial Strategy³²(COM (2020) 102) and the Research & Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization (RIS3)³³, that call for a green and digital transformation of Europe's economies by empowering SMEs and start-ups to develop sustainable business models. By promoting green entrepreneurship through incubators and innovation hubs, Central Greece contributes to the "twin transition" envisioned by these frameworks.

Goal 5 – Enhancing Governance, Cooperation, and Policy Integration

This goal aims to strengthen multi-level governance mechanisms, improve regional policy coordination, and enhance stakeholder participation in decision-making processes. By 2028, Central Greece will have created a more unified framework for governance that is in line with national and EU priorities with a strong focus on the regional needs. This framework will promote cooperation between public authorities, local action groups, producers and farmers, representatives from the agritourism sector and civil society through cooperative learning initiatives and shared monitoring tools.

The region's objective is to establish at least one interregional cooperation agreement and deploy the PoliRuralPlus Services, supporting evidence-based policymaking and transparent monitoring. These actions will strengthen regional innovation ecosystems by promoting the use of collaborative hubs, digital tools, and knowledge repositories that facilitate data sharing, benchmarking, and structured policy learning. In parallel, by 2035, Central Greece aims to increase youth participation in rural employment and entrepreneurship by 15%, supported through training programmes utilizing the PoliRuralPlus Knowledge Transfer repository, rural mobility schemes, and partnerships with universities and relevant institutes. These interventions will also reinforce collaboration within the Rural Pact, Smart Villages, and EIP-AGRI networks, contributing to more integrated governance, cross-sector coordination, and inclusive rural development.

This goal directly supports the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027 and the Greek CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, which prioritise improved governance, stronger cooperation within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), and modernised advisory structures. It also aligns with the EU Cohesion Policy

³¹ https://gsri.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Synopsis_National-Smart-Specialisation-Strategy-2021-2027.pdf

³² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020DC0102>

³³ <https://gsri.gov.gr/en/research-innovation-strategy-for-smart-specialization-ris3/>

2021–2027, which promotes multi-level cooperation and knowledge exchange between regions, and advances the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2021) by reinforcing the pillars of a Stronger, Connected, Resilient, and Prosperous rural Europe.

Goal 6 – Fostering Social Inclusion, Education, and Youth Retention

This goal aims to strengthen social cohesion, promote equitable access to opportunities, and reverse rural depopulation trends by investing in education, skills, and youth empowerment. By 2035, Central Greece seeks to create inclusive pathways for employment, innovation, and community participation, ensuring that rural areas become attractive places for young people, women, and vulnerable groups to live, work, and build their futures.

Key actions include strengthening AKIS through regional knowledge hubs to provide practical training on sustainable practices, business development, digital tools, and advisory services. By leveraging digital services, education, and sustainable tourism as drivers of territorial cohesion and local attractiveness, these interventions will support inclusive smart rural development.

These actions address rural communities limited digital capacity, skills shortages, and demographic decline. By investing in youth entrepreneurship, skills development, and collaborative learning, Central Greece will build human capital capable of supporting the green and digital transition while enhancing social inclusion and community resilience.

This goal aligns with the CAP 2023–2027 and the Greek CAP Strategic Plan, which emphasize generational renewal, inclusion, and skills transfer within AKIS. It also reflects the priorities of the EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027, supports the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, and contributes to the European Education Area and Digital Decade targets for digital skills. Furthermore, it complements Greece’s Recovery and Resilience Plan (“Greece 2.0”), which invests in skills development, youth entrepreneurship, and digital transform

4. Action Plan

4.1. Measures and Actions

4.1.1. Intervention Areas

Identify sectors or domains needing intervention (e.g., innovation, workforce development, infrastructure).

Based on the analysis of challenges, opportunities, and stakeholder input, the following key intervention areas have been identified for Central Greece:

- Digitalisation and smart agriculture
- Youth engagement and skills development
- Rural entrepreneurship and Innovation
- Sustainable tourism
- Inclusive governance and social participation

4.1.2. Actions

Digitalisation and Smart agriculture

- Action: Create an upskilling programme for farmers. Agricultural schools and cooperatives to offer tailored training on digital tools, in collaboration with other EU/ national projects where feasible.

Steps: National studies show low digital skills among rural populations in Greece³⁴

- Action: Improve rural infrastructure

Steps: Map underserved areas, collaborate with telecom providers, leverage national digital transformation funding (RRF/NSRF). Broadband access is a prerequisite for digital agriculture and e-services³⁵

Youth engagement and skills development

- Action: introduce rural innovation bootcamps for students

Steps: Collaborate with universities to deliver short-term, project-based innovation labs in rural communities. Builds local innovation culture and links education with place-based development

Rural Entrepreneurship and Innovation

- Action: Facilitate access to microfinance for rural

Steps: Promote existing micro-loan schemes (e.g. EAFRD), provide application support

Sustainable tourism

- Action: Develop agri-tourism routes

Steps: co-create routes with local partners

Inclusive governance and social participation

- Action: Establish a stakeholder forum

Steps: Involve farmers, women’s cooperatives, youth, municipalities. This supports participatory governance and better uptake of policies

4.2. Expected Outcomes

Measure	Expected outcomes
Upskilling programme for farmers	improved adoption of smart tools by trained farmers
Access to finance	improved financial access for producers
Agri-tourism routes	increase in rural tourism arrivals
Stakeholder forum	increased stakeholder engagement and better policy feedback loops

5. Policy and Funding Alignment

5.1. EU and National Policy Alignment:

³⁴ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024>

³⁵ <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu>

The vision and priorities set out in the RAP for Central Greece are closely aligned with major European and national strategies that guide the future of rural development, sustainability, and innovation.

At the heart of the RAP is a strong commitment to the goals of the European Green Deal (especially the transition to a greener, fairer, and more climate-resilient economy). Many of the proposed actions, such as the promotion of sustainable farming practices, support for community-based renewable energy, and the development of agri-tourism, respond directly to the Green Deal's objectives. These actions not only help reduce environmental pressures in the region but also create new opportunities for inclusive green growth and rural vitality.

The plan also reflects the spirit of Horizon Europe, particularly its focus on climate action, biodiversity, food systems, and resilient communities. By encouraging local innovation (through pilot projects, youth entrepreneurship, and digital upskilling) the RAP supports solutions to shared European challenges. This bottom-up approach reflects Horizon Europe's emphasis on innovation that is ambitious in the rural life.

Digital transformation is another central pillar of the RAP, and here the alignment with the Digital Europe Programme is clear. The plan includes measures to improve broadband infrastructure, build digital skills, and introduce smart technologies in farming, tourism, and local governance. These efforts support Digital Europe's goal of bridging the digital divide, especially in rural and remote areas, and ensuring that everyone can benefit from the digital transition.

At the national level, the RAP supports key priorities set out in Greece's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and the Partnership Agreement for the 2021–2027 programming period (NSRF). These include green and digital transition, innovation in agri-food, youth employment, and support for SMEs and local communities. The RAP translates these national goals into concrete local actions, tailored to the specific needs and strengths of Central Greece.

By aligning with these strategic frameworks, the Central Greece RAP positions the region to take full advantage of available funding, policy momentum, and European collaboration. More importantly, it ensures that the region's development path contributes to broader goals, not only to grow the economy, but to do so in a way that is sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready.

5.2. Funding Sources

5.2.1. Potential funding mechanisms

Ensuring the implementation and long-term sustainability of the proposed actions in the RAP will require a combination of EU, national, and private funding sources. Central Greece is positioned to leverage a variety of mechanisms, many of which align with the intervention areas identified in the plan.

Under the Partnership Agreement for Greece from 2021 to 2027 (NSRF), key programs include:

- The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which supports investments in smart specialization, digitalization, SME support, and innovation hubs.
- The European Social Fund+ (ESF+) supports training, skills development, and youth entrepreneurship.
- The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) supports actions related to smart farming, agritourism, biodiversity, and LEADER/CLLD initiatives.

Interreg programs offer funding opportunities for cooperation, especially in rural innovation, tourism networks, and shared natural resource management.

Horizon Europe and Digital Europe can support local initiatives through funding for applied research, experimentation, and digital capacity building, particularly in partnership with universities, research centers, and businesses.

To ensure long-term impact, the region should consider using financial instruments such as microloans particularly in the agriculture and energy sectors.

Maintaining access to funding depends on more than just identifying financial instruments; it also requires building local capacity for project design, funding, and implementation.

5.2.2. Stakeholder access to financial instruments

In Central Greece, stakeholders, including farmers, cooperatives, small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs), municipalities, and civil society organizations, have limited access to various existing funding mechanisms. However, this access is often fragmented.

Many stakeholders in the region are familiar with EU-funded programs, particularly those under the Rural Development Program (EAFRD) and LEADER/CLLD. These funds have supported local infrastructure, entrepreneurship, and community-based initiatives. Access to other instruments, such as microfinance schemes, and innovation vouchers, remains limited, especially for smaller stakeholders or those without prior funding experience.

A key barrier is not only the availability of funds but also the capacity to apply for and manage them. Many local actors, especially small agricultural producers, may be prevented from fully participating due to administrative complexity, lack of co-financing, or limited awareness of available tools.

In this context, it is clear that access to existing financial instruments must be strengthened, and more flexible, and tailored funding mechanisms must be introduced.

These could include:

- Simplified grant schemes for small-scale innovation
- Micro-loan models co-funded by public and private sources
- Incentives for social and green enterprises, including tax relief
- Technical assistance funds to support proposal writing, partnership development, and project management.

Integrating advisory support and outreach with financial tools is essential to ensuring funding reaches a wider, more diverse group of beneficiaries, including youth, women, and underrepresented communities. Creating a regional funding help desk could be a valuable step in building capacity among stakeholder groups, and it would also align funding opportunities with the RAP priorities, by increasing long-term impact.

5.3. Partnerships

- **Municipalities:** Municipalities will lead the coordination and governance due to their responsibilities of aligning actions with regional development goals, mobilizing funding, facilitating partnerships, and integrating suggestions into policy cycles.

- **Region of Central Greece:** As the lead coordinating authority, the Region of Central Greece will monitor the governance and strategic alignment of the suggested actions with the Regional operational program for the period 2021-2027, managing EU and national funds, and ensuring coherence with regional policy priorities, particularly those related to entrepreneurship, digitalization, tourism, and the green transition.
- **Hellenic Agricultural Organization “DEMETER”:** This is Greece’s national agricultural research and extension organisation. It carries out research on agriculture, forestry, plant breeding, smart farming, sustainable practices, etc.
- **Local Chambers of Commerce and Industry/ Business Support Units, such as the Fthiotida Chamber of Commerce, and similar bodies in regions such as Evia and Viotia,** can support entrepreneurship, SMEs, business services and rural enterprises. They can also potentially help with accessing funding, providing business advice and facilitating networking.
- **Agronomists’ associations, agricultural cooperatives:** These are important for the rural economy, agri-food production and farming practices.
- **Farmers, producers:** They play a key role in designing and implementing smart farming initiatives, agritourism, and innovation pilots. Their local knowledge is essential for tailoring solutions to specific needs.

6. Roadmap

6.1. Timeline:

The implementation timeline for the Central Greece Regional Action Plan is divided into three phases: short term (2025–2027), medium term (2028–2035) and long term (2036–2040). Each phase builds upon the outcomes and lessons of the previous one and is supported by an ongoing monitoring mechanism. The Gantt chart below outlines the planned activities for the short-term period, while the medium- and long-term objectives are presented below.

Activity	2025												2026											
	Month												Month											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.1	Identification of new stakeholders and gather feedback																							
1.2	Focus groups to gather feedback																							
1.3	Identification of financial sources																							
1.4	Gain feedback in agritourism sector																							
2	Polirural+ tools																							
2.1	Gain feedback on Polirural+ tools by stakeholders																							
2.2	Tool adaptation for local context																							
2.3	Test tools with pilot participants																							
2.4	Follow-up mechanisms to gain feedback																							
3	Development of RAP																							
3.1	Input in RAP																							
3.2	Drafting of RAP & verifying the identified financial sources																							
3.3	Finalize RAP																							
3.4	Feedback mechanisms for next versions of RAP																							
4	Dissemination activities																							
4.1	Co-creation workshops with EU/ national projects																							
4.2	Participate in conferences and events																							
4.3																								
5	Training on agritech solutions																							
5.1	Develop training materials																							
5.2	Identify target audience for training																							
5.3	Training events and/or demonstration activities																							
6	Synergies with EU initiatives																							
6.1	Collaboration with EU projects (past, ongoing and NEB projects)																							
6.2	Workshops and extraction of results for further investigation and development of the RAP																							
6.3	Set up Monitoring Indicators																							

Short-term (2025-2027)

The initial phase focuses on the development, engagement, introduction and local adaptation of PoliruralPlus tools for stakeholders, as well as the finalisation of the RAP. These activities include:

- Identification and engagement of stakeholders through interviews, focus groups and workshops.
- Mapping of financial instruments and support schemes.
- Testing of Polirural+ tools with pilot users.
- Drafting and finalisation of the Regional Action Plan.
- Training programmes for agri-tech technologies adoption and participation in knowledge exchange events, taking into account gender equality, youth and limitations in digital skills.

Medium-term (2028-2035)

- The second phase involves scaling up and monitoring the implementation of the RAP. Suggested actions include:
- Continued digital upskilling of key stakeholder groups, especially young people and small-scale farmers
- Integrating RAP priorities into broader regional development strategies and planning frameworks.
- Establishment of monitoring systems and periodic evaluations to assess progress.
- Reinforcing synergies between the agri-tech, sustainable tourism and renewable energy sectors to support rural diversification.
- Deepening cross-sectoral collaboration between policymakers, businesses and civil society.

Long-term (2036-2040)



The final phase focuses on stabilising results and ensuring long-term sustainability. Actions during this period include:

- Integration and alignment with evolving EU policy frameworks, such as the updated CAP and the European Green Deal
- Long-term evaluation of social programmes and their responsiveness to changing community needs.
- Continued investment in digital inclusion, focusing on vulnerable groups and populations with low digital skills.
- Adapting training and innovation ecosystems to sustain transformation across agriculture, tourism and rural services.

6.2. Implementation Plan

The implementation of the RAP for Central Greece will rely on collaboration between public authorities, local governments, civil society and sectoral stakeholders. During the active implementation phase (2025–2027), municipalities will support local delivery by organising workshops, facilitating access to local communities, and integrating RAP actions into their strategies, while the Region of Central Greece will have an overall responsibility and role to coordinate the above and ensure the policy alignment, oversee the financial tracking of measures.

Additionally, Chambers of Commerce and business support units will provide technical and advisory services to SMEs, helping to connect businesses with available funding tools. Institutions will contribute their expertise in digital agriculture, training and evaluation to support agricultural cooperatives, agronomists and producer organisations in promoting knowledge exchange with farmers and small-scale producers. Women's cooperatives and youth groups will promote inclusive participation, representing underrepresented voices and supporting outreach and feedback loops. Beyond 2027, the focus will be on integrating effective measures into long-term regional planning, ensuring continued access to financing and reinforcing local partnerships to sustain the impact of the RAP.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

7.1. KPIs

#	Common KPI (PR+ level)	Purpose	Metrics	2025 Metrics	2026 Target
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure the breadth and diversity of stakeholder engagement in RAP processes.	Number of stakeholders (public, private) and cooperations collaborating on the RAP.	> 20 stakeholders were engaged	>3 partnerships ≥2 events with stakeholders
2	Rural–Urban Collaboration	Evaluate the level of cooperation between territories and sectors in integrating policies and actions.	Number of collaborations between rural and urban sectors; joint planning actions or projects linking rural-urban areas.	3+ Collaboration initiatives/ events	≥ 4 collaboration projects /events with rural- urban actors.
3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Promote the use of innovative and digital tools and practices.	Number of digital tools used (eg, Poli+ tools); Number of farmers/ producers/ cooperatives trained in smart agriculture.	30+ participants were trained, demonstrated, introduced to smart-farming technologies. +60 were introduced to digital tools, LLMs	100+ stakeholders trained, used digital tools

4	Territorial Environmental Sustainability and	Encourage sustainable, resilient and green practices in territories.	Number of events/ actions on sustainability, agritourism.	1 event	3 actions/ events
5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Assess improvements in livability, wellbeing, and social inclusion.	Surveyed satisfaction with digital training and services; engagement in social and well-being initiatives in rural areas.	50+ participants	10 communities
6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Strengthen governance structures and collaborative decision-making.	Number of regional policies or decisions influenced by the RAP.	2 multi-actor groups formed	2 influenced policies
7	Communication and Visibility	Measure how results and messages are shared and communicated.	Number of news, posts, articles in media and social media mentions in websites/ social media;	10+ blogs/ news in PoliruralPlus and partners websites 3 published articles in media	4+ articles 1 pilot video 6+ blogs/ news
8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Assess sustainability and potential for scaling up the PoliRuralPlus model.	number of initiatives with replication or scale-up potential		3 initiatives

7.2. Evaluation Mechanisms

The evaluation of the RAP for Central Greece will be based on a combination of quantitative indicators and qualitative feedback. A periodic review mechanism will be established to monitor the progress of implementation, identify any challenges and guide any necessary course corrections throughout the lifecycle of the action plan.

A multi-actor working group consisting of local and regional stakeholders will meet regularly to assess progress against the KPIs. This group's work will be supported by contributions from other PoliRuralPlus pilots, as well as participation in cross-regional knowledge exchange activities. This will ensure alignment with shared goals and provide opportunities for mutual learning.

Evaluation activities will incorporate data from workshops, focus groups and surveys, as well as the use of PoliRuralPlus tools. Additionally, the feedback loops with key stakeholders and community actors will play a central role. Media and dissemination monitoring will also provide valuable insights.

All of these activities will inform the final evaluation in late 2026, and the findings will be integrated into future strategic and funding plans. This will support the region's development vision.

8. Communication and Engagement

8.1. Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder engagement is a key component of the RAP. The plan emphasises the importance of inclusive participation from local communities, businesses, academic institutions, and public bodies. Engagement strategies have included consultations, focus groups, and workshops, ensuring that voices from all areas are represented. Special attention has been given to involving underrepresented groups, such as women-led cooperatives, young professionals, and smallholder farmers, whose insights are crucial for designing effective and locally relevant interventions. To ensure continuity, the RAP proposes the establishment of multi-actor working groups and thematic clusters (e.g. on agritech, tourism, digitalisation), which will serve both as implementation tools and feedback mechanisms.

Academic institutions and business support services are expected to play a key role in knowledge transfer, training, and monitoring beyond the short-term phase. It is also anticipated that stakeholders actively involved during the initial period (2025-2027) will continue to be involved in the medium (2028–2035) and long-term (2036–2040) phases.

8.2. Awareness Campaigns

It is crucial to recognise the importance of fostering awareness to ensure that the RAP is well understood, supported, and embraced by local communities, businesses, and other key actors. A variety of communication tools, such as social media, articles on regional press and community events, will be used to keep stakeholders informed and involved throughout the process.

Progress on the RAP, lessons learned, as well as the tools and success stories, will be shared through simple materials, such as short articles and social media. This will help to make local efforts more visible and generate broader interest. Events and workshops will also provide an opportunity for people to share their experiences and learn from one another. To increase the impact, the lessons learned could be documented and shared with other regions and partners.

These efforts aim to create stronger links, attract new partnerships, and inspire similar actions elsewhere.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Summary of Expected Impact

The RAP for Central Greece is expected to make a meaningful contribution to sustainable development, regional cohesion and inclusive economic growth, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. By promoting the adoption of agri-tech, developing digital skills and encouraging smart tourism, the RAP will address the region's structural challenges and realise its potential. It aims to achieve this by activating local communities and providing targeted training in digital and green practices. Enhancing access to innovation tools and digital solutions is crucial. Furthermore, rural entrepreneurship and employment must be promoted. Additionally, the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources must be promoted. Finally, cooperation between rural and urban areas must be strengthened.

These outcomes align with key regional, national and EU policy priorities. Local and regional authorities, chambers and support organisations are expected to incorporate successful initiatives into their long-term planning frameworks.

The RAP is expected to have positive effects on related sectors such as education and the circular economy. By fostering a more collaborative and inclusive development culture, the RAP supports economic resilience, social cohesion, gender equality and youth retention. Overall, the RAP provides a strategic and adaptable roadmap, offering tools and practices that can be replicated or scaled up in other regions facing similar challenges, both within Greece and across Europe.

9.2. Call to Action

Each group of stakeholders plays a valuable role in the implementation of the RAP. More specifically:

Local/ regional authorities and municipalities can coordinate local actions and facilitate access to communities and integrate RAP priorities into local strategies.

Business support organisations, can provide entrepreneurs with advisory services and access to funding as well as promoting innovation in rural areas.

Agricultural cooperatives/ producers and agronomists can promote smart farming practices, as well as testing and scaling new technologies and tools.

Civil society can ensure participation, contribute to outreach and feedback processes and support access to opportunities.

They are encouraged to stay engaged, share lessons learned and take action that matters to communities.

10 Sustainability and extension of activities: Checklist for the RAP pilots

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation			

<i>Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.</i>	X		A number of sustainability challenges have been identified, including an ageing population, digital skills gaps, financial barriers, particularly in smart agriculture and youth engagement.
Vision and Strategic Goals			
<i>How well are your vision and strategic goals aligned with the main areas of sustainability: Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing? What is the main focus? (You may use the sustainability compass for guidance here: https://compassu.wordpress.com/introduction/)</i>	X		The vision and strategic goals align with sustainability dimensions: Nature: green transition, biodiversity, climate adaptation Economy: agri-tech, tourism, SMEs Society: inclusion, employment Wellbeing: quality of life
Action Plan			
<i>- How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained?</i>	X		Actions are described to be integrated into local/regional strategies.
<i>- Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future?</i>	X		Ownership is held by public authorities, chambers, cooperatives and training institutions, who will maintain and increase their efforts after 2026.
Policy and Funding Alignment			
<i>- Do the stakeholders/actors have access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP?</i>	X		
<i>- Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms?</i>	X		New funding instruments are needed, particularly for digital and smart farming solutions for small-scale producers.
Communication and Engagement			
<i>- What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?</i>	X		Stakeholder engagement supported by workshops, feedback loops, and working groups.
<i>- Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?</i>	X		
<i>- How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?</i>	X		Continued engagement is expected beyond 2027 through networks. Lessons will be shared via events, publications, and EU exchanges.

Conclusion			
- Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?	X		
- Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?	X		The measures and processes are expected to affect other sectors such as education, social innovation, and digital services.



Regional Action Plan

Pilot:	Italian pilot
Version:	V.3
Date:	14/12/2025

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Background

Puglia (also known as Apulia) is a region in southern Italy, covering an area of approximately 19,500 km² and home to nearly 4 million inhabitants. It borders Molise to the north, Campania and Basilicata to the west, and is bounded by the Adriatic Sea to the east and the Ionian Sea to the south.

The region's terrain is predominantly flat (about 53%) and hilly (45%), with a small mountainous area (2%). The largest plain is the Tavoliere delle Puglie, while the main hilly areas include the Murge and Salento. Puglia has a typically Mediterranean climate, characterized by hot, dry summers and mild winters.

From a socioeconomic point of view, Puglia is a region with an economy based on agriculture, tourism and manufacturing industry. The agricultural sector is particularly important thanks to the favourable climatic conditions and the fertility of the soil. The region also boasts a rapidly growing tourism sector, with cultural, historical and landscape attractions of great appeal.

Agriculture is one of the main economic resources of the region, with over 260,000 active farms. In fact, the agricultural sector employs about 9% of the regional workforce and generates a turnover of over 3 billion euros per year. Puglia's agri-food exports are constantly growing, with a strong demand especially for extra virgin olive oil and wines.

The agricultural offer is quite diverse and the main crops include, but are not limited to:

- Olive growing which reaches about 50% of national production.
- Viticulture: presenting a vast production of wines, with a vineyard area of about 100,000 hectares, and high-quality wines such as Primitivo di Manduria, Negroamaro and Nero di Troia.
- Fruit and vegetable crops: such as tomatoes, artichokes, table grapes, almonds and figs.
- Cereals and legumes: with a high cultivation of durum wheat, lentils and broad beans.

The region is famous for its gastronomic traditions, with typical dishes such as orecchiette with turnip tops, Altamura bread, and the popular burrata from Andria.

In addition to the agricultural sector, Puglia boasts a rich cultural and historical heritage. The main cities, such as Bari, Lecce and Taranto, offer a wide range of attractions, from historic centres with baroque architecture to Norman-Swabian influences, as well as numerous religious and folkloristic festivities such as the celebrations for Saint Nicola in the city of Bari, and the "Taranta night" in the southern part of the region called "Salento".

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

In the context of the POLIRURAL+ project, the Regional Action Plan (RAP) for Italy establishes a collaboration framework aimed at fostering stronger and more functional rural-urban integration. To achieve this objective, the Italian pilot identifies Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC) as a strategic sector for reinforcing these linkages, promoting key policy measures that support the local food system while enhancing territorial cohesion.

The main measures and areas of intervention have been selected for their potential to provide valuable policy input for the Short Food Supply Chains in the Apulia region, as well as for their alignment with regional, national, and European policies as described below:

Regional

- **Regional Law, April 30th 2018, n.16:** Rules for the valorisation and promotion of zero-mile agricultural and agri-food products and on the direct sale of agricultural products.
The Puglia Region promotes the valorisation of zero-mile agricultural and agri-food products, forestry, aquaculture and fishing, encouraging their consumption and marketing and guaranteeing consumers adequate information on their origin and specificity.
- **Regional Law, August 3rd 2007, n.23:** Promotion and recognition of production districts.
The Puglia Region promotes, supports and encourages development initiatives and programs on a territorial basis aimed at strengthening competitiveness, innovation, internationalization, the creation of new and better employment and the growth of businesses operating in the sectors of agriculture, fishing, crafts, industry, tourism, trade and business services.
- **Smart Specialisation strategy Puglia 2030 (Chapter 4 - Innovation Supply chain)**
"SmartPuglia 2030" aims to make the best use of the opportunities offered by digital technologies and innovation to create new jobs, improve infrastructure, and foster sustainable and inclusive economic growth, by focusing on three major social challenges: demographic changes; youth and female employment; and quality of life, safety, and health. Chapter 4, on the "Innovation Supply Chain," contains a specific focus on the Apulian agri-food supply chain, which is distinguished by the high quality of its production and its strong connection to the territorial identity of its products.

National:

- **National Law, May 17th 2022, n.61** Rules for the valorization and promotion of zero-mile agricultural and food products and those from short supply chains.
This law aims to enhance and promote the demand and supply of zero-kilometre agricultural and food products, as well as those from short supply chains, by encouraging their consumption and commercialization, and by ensuring that consumers receive adequate information about their origin and specific characteristics
- **Italy's Cap Strategic Plan (2023-2027):** It emphasizes the importance of enhancing Short Food Supply Chain (SFSC) dynamics. In particular, the plan aims to strengthen farmers' competitiveness and improve their position within the supply chain by fostering better integration among the various stakeholders, especially by improving relationships between the different actors at the local level. Knowledge sharing and cooperation also play a key role in the strategy, with dedicated resources aimed at fostering innovation through collaboration and capacity building. The plan highlights the value of a multi-actor approach and the creation of networks to support sustainable and inclusive development across the agricultural sector

European:

- **Farm to Fork strategy:** The farm to fork strategy aims to accelerate the transition toward a more sustainable food system. In this context, the development and implementation of Short Food Supply Chains can bring an important contribution in preserving food affordability while generating fairer economic returns, fostering competitiveness of the EU supply sector and promoting fair trade.
- **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union (2023-2027):** Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) play a significant role in advancing the key objectives of the CAP 2023–2027 framework. In particular,

SFSCs contribute to improving farmers' position within the food supply chain, strengthening the socio-economic fabric of rural areas, and promoting knowledge sharing and innovation across the agricultural sector.

- **Long term vision for rural areas:** In line with the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, the Italian Regional Action Plan aims to promote territorial cohesion by strengthening connections between rural and urban areas. This approach seeks to empower rural communities, improve access to essential services, and foster social innovation. The pilot initiative in Italy also responds to the need for economic diversification and recognizes the added value of farming, agri-food production, and agri-tourism.
- **New European Bauhaus:** The Italian pilot is deeply rooted in the local territory and actively engages with local stakeholders to co-develop solutions that reflect the cultural and culinary heritage of the region, while strengthening local economies and networks. This approach runs in parallel with the New European Bauhaus initiative, which emphasizes grassroots engagement and the inclusion of diverse stakeholder perspectives in both the design and implementation processes. It prioritizes people and social inclusion, while also supporting economic development to enhance competitiveness and contribute to the EU's strategic autonomy.

2. Analysis of Current Situation

2.1. State of the Art

The population density in the Apulia region is approximately 206 inhabitants per km², distributed mainly in the urban areas of Bari, Lecce, Foggia and Taranto, while the rural and mountainous areas have a lower density. The region is characterized by a great diversity of landscapes that range from the coasts of the Adriatic Sea and the Ionian Sea to hilly and mountainous areas such as Gargano and Murgia.

From an environmental point of view, Puglia is rich in biodiversity, with ecosystems ranging from coastal areas, ideal for fishing and tourism, to fertile agricultural lands such as the Tavoliere delle Puglie. However, the region faces several challenges related to the management of natural resources, such as water scarcity, climate change and the need to protect its natural and agricultural heritage from degradation.

Existing infrastructure

Puglia's infrastructure is constantly evolving, with both public and private investments. The region is well connected to the rest of Italy and Europe thanks to the motorway network and the ports of Bari, Brindisi and Taranto, which play a crucial role in commercial and tourist traffic. Airports such as Bari-Palese and Brindisi-Casale facilitate international accessibility. However, the railway system remains less developed in some inland areas, reducing mobility in rural areas.

On the digital front, Puglia is experiencing a transition towards digitalization, with incentives for businesses to undertake innovative processes, as demonstrated by the creation of technology hubs and science parks, such as Tecnopolis in Bari. The digital infrastructure, although growing, still has room for improvement, especially in more remote areas.

Innovation ecosystems

The region is promoting the transition towards a sustainable economy, with a focus on innovation in sectors such as agri-food, renewable energy and bioeconomy. Puglia stands out for its innovative agri-food ecosystem, which integrates tradition and modernity, in which agriculture 4.0 and technologies for environmental sustainability are constantly developing. Puglia is also one of the Italian leaders in the production of renewable energy, in particular with wind and photovoltaic parks.

In the agricultural sector, the region is renowned for the production of olive oil, wine, vegetables and citrus fruits, with a strong orientation towards organic farming. Agricultural innovation in Puglia is supported by European and regional programs, with the involvement of universities, research centers and innovative small and medium-sized enterprises.

Market Trends

In the global market, Puglia is consolidating its position as a hub of agri-food excellence, with a growing number of certified typical products, such as extra virgin olive oil, Primitivo wine and burrata. On an economic level, the export of agri-food products is expanding, with the sector benefiting from the growing demand for organic and sustainable products, fuelled by consumers who are more attentive to quality and environmental impact.

The tourism sector is growing strongly, thanks to the valorisation of cultural heritage (such as the trulli of Alberobello and the breathtaking coasts) and the promotion of sustainable tourism. Market trends indicate a growing interest in rural tourism, wine tourism and experiential tourism, which embraces both the environment and the local culture.

Comparative analysis with other regions

Although Puglia has unique characteristics, it can be compared with other southern regions such as Calabria, Campania, and Sicily in terms of agricultural production and tourism potential. Compared to Calabria, Puglia is generally more advanced in terms of infrastructure, with a more developed transport network and a greater attractiveness for international tourism. However, in terms of technological innovation and digitalization, Puglia is still developing, while Sicily is trying to reduce the gap in this sector.

With Campania, Puglia shares the importance of the agri-food tradition, but Puglia stands out for its excellence in olive oil and wine. Economically, Puglia has a lower unemployment rate than Calabria and Sicily, thanks to a greater diversification of its economic activities, although youth unemployment remains one of the main socio-economic challenges.

Furthermore, compared to other regions of Southern Italy, Puglia is one of the most competitive in the agri-food sector, with a higher number of farms and typical products than other regions such as Calabria or Sicily. Puglia is the Italian region with the highest production of industrial tomatoes and among the first producers of almonds and strawberries.

2.2. Key Challenges

Despite significant progress, Puglia faces some structural challenges that hinder its full economic and social development. The main problems identified include:

1. Innovation and Digitalization Gaps

The technological disparity between urban and rural areas is one of the main obstacles for innovation in Puglia. Although there are technological hubs in Bari and Lecce, much of the region is still characterized by a delay in the adoption of digital technologies, especially in rural and mountainous areas.

- Lack of advanced digital infrastructure: In many areas, internet connectivity is insufficient, with slow and unstable connections, limiting the ability to attract investments and technology start-ups.
- Poor digitalization in small businesses: Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are the heart of the Puglia economy, face difficulties in adopting modern technologies to improve productivity and compete in the global market.

2. Unemployment and Socio-Economic Inequality

Despite economic growth in recent years, unemployment in Puglia remains a significant challenge, especially among young people and women. Youth unemployment is particularly high, with over 40% of young people under 30 unemployed, representing a major loss of potential for the region.

- Unemployment in inland areas: Rural and mountainous areas, which do not benefit from the same levels of infrastructural and industrial development as urban areas, have higher unemployment rates.
- Mismatch between labour supply and demand: The lack of specific skills, especially in high-tech and innovation sectors, causes a mismatch between the skills required by the market and those offered by the local workforce.

3. Lack of skills development

One of the central problems is the lack of professional skills in strategic sectors, particularly in digital technologies, industry 4.0 and the energy sector. Training in these areas is still insufficient, both in higher education and vocational training.

- Inadequate training for new technologies: Universities and training centres in Puglia are still unable to provide the necessary preparation to face the challenges of an increasingly digital and technologically advanced labour market.
- Poor career guidance: Many young people do not receive adequate guidance counselling to help them choose courses of study or professions in line with market needs, generating a lowering of the quality of human capital.

4. Demographic Decline

Another problem that Puglia is facing is the demographic decline, which mainly affects rural and internal areas.

- Depopulation of internal areas: Youth emigration to Northern Italy or abroad, together with low birth rates, is progressively reducing the population in the most isolated areas. This phenomenon contributes to the deterioration of local infrastructure and economic desperation in many areas.

5. Bureaucracy and Administrative Difficulties

Bureaucratic difficulties and delays in the implementation of public policies can slow down the development of new businesses and the implementation of infrastructure projects.

- Slowness in the implementation of projects: Despite European and national investments, infrastructure projects and local development initiatives are often hampered by bureaucratic complexity and the lack of coordination between local and regional authorities.

2.3. Opportunities

1. Digitalization and Technological Innovation

Digitalization represents one of the challenges, but also one of the greatest opportunities for the future of Puglia. The integration of advanced technologies in traditional sectors can lead to significant growth.

- **Agri-tech:** Puglia has already launched several agriculture 4.0 projects with the use of digital technologies and innovations such as satellite monitoring, artificial intelligence and drones. These technologies allow to optimize agricultural production, reduce waste and improve the sustainability of the sector, especially in a context of climate change.
- **Start-ups and innovation:** The region is becoming an emerging hub for technological start-ups, particularly in the sectors of artificial intelligence, big data, fintech and cybersecurity. Innovation centres such as Tecnopolis in Bari and the Polytechnic of Bari represent opportunities to attract investments in research and development.
- **Smart cities and digital technologies:** The digitalisation of public services and the creation of smart cities in urban areas, with the implementation of IoT (Internet of Things) technologies, could improve the quality of life and foster economic and tourist development, increasing the competitiveness of the region.

2. Agri-food Sector and Sustainability

Puglia is one of the Italian regions with the strongest agricultural vocation, and the agri-food sector represents a fundamental resource for economic growth.

- **Organic and sustainable agriculture:** Puglia is the second-largest Italian region in terms of organic farming surface area, and the global market for organic products is rapidly expanding. The growing demand for organic and zero-kilometre foods offers opportunities for Apulian farmers to access new markets, enhancing their offerings through organic certification
- **Short supply chain and food innovation:** The development of the short supply chain, which reduces the distance between producer and consumer, can be an opportunity for agricultural companies of Puglia to access consumers directly. Furthermore, food innovation, with the improvement of production processes and the introduction of new food products, is creating new opportunities for the regional food industry.

3. Infrastructure and Transport Sector

The enhancement of infrastructure is a priority for Puglia, and the growth opportunities are considerable.

- **Intermodality:** The integration of rail, road and maritime transport can improve the logistics and competitiveness of the region. The redevelopment of railway networks and the improvement of regional mobility through smart mobility and more sustainable transport systems offer ideas for future investments.
- **Port infrastructure:** The ports of Puglia (Bari, Brindisi, Taranto) are strategic points for international trade. The modernization of port infrastructure and the expansion of trade routes could position Puglia as a logistics hub for the Mediterranean, with significant benefits for the regional economy.

4. Health and Biotechnology Sector

Puglia has great growth potential in the biotechnology and health sector, thanks to the presence of research and development centres, particularly in universities and technology parks.

- **Biomedical research:** Investing in biotechnology and personalized medicine offers Puglia the opportunity to develop a highly specialized sector, with repercussions also on the employment level.
- **Health and wellness tourism:** With the growing interest in preventive medicine and health tourism, Puglia, with its spas and wellness centres, can expand the tourist offer, attract investments and promote high-quality health tourism.

2.4. Gender and Diversity Dimensions

Demographic overview

According to ISTAT (2024)¹, Puglia continues to face a progressive ageing trend, with over 24% of the population older than 65 years old. The rest of the regional ageing is composed of 11,8% of people aged 0-14 years old, 63,5% of people aged 0-64 years old. Hence, the regional medium age is 46,7 years old. Looking at the territorial trends, rural and inland municipalities, especially in Gargano and the Murgia areas, show the highest ageing indices, combined with a decline of 7% in the youth population (0–34 years) over the past decade. Youth outmigration remains a structural issue: data from SVIMEZ (2024)² indicate that southern Italian regions, including Puglia, have experienced significant youth outflow, particularly of university graduates, contributing to persistent skills shortages. There are 138,689 foreign citizens residing in Puglia, 3.6% of the regional population. 19.3% of foreign citizens are minors, 56,525 are employed, and 19,210 are students (CGIL, 2023). Regarding gender diversity, it has a notable impact on labor participation. The female employment rate in Puglia is 36% (Osservatorio del mercato del Lavoro, 2024³), significantly below the EU average of 69% (Eurostat, 2024)⁴ and lower than the national level. However, data are encouraging since the female employment has recorded a positive trend of 15,2 for fixed contracts, and a decrease of 4,4 for temporary positions (Osservatorio del mercato del Lavoro, 2024).

Socio-Economic Participation

Gender, age, educational background, and socio-cultural characteristics significantly influence access to education, employment, digital skills, land ownership, and participation in innovation and decision-making processes in Puglia. Women face particularly strong challenges: employment rates remain significantly lower than those of men, especially in rural areas where traditional gender norms, limited labour opportunities, and insufficient childcare

services constrain women's participation in the workforce. The availability of early childhood services - such as nurseries, kindergartens, and municipal childcare facilities - is considerably lower than the national average in many parts of the region, especially in small municipalities. This gap restricts women's ability to balance family responsibilities with work, training, and entrepreneurship. Although female entrepreneurship is expanding, women remain underrepresented in strategic sectors such as agritech, digital innovation, and advanced manufacturing, where access to specialised skills, investor networks, and innovation ecosystems is still limited.

Beyond gender-based inequalities, education and skills disparities constitute a major obstacle to socio-economic participation. Puglia performs below both the national and Southern Italy averages across multiple education indicators. Only 22.1% of adults aged 25–39 hold a tertiary degree - 6.5 percentage points lower than the Italian average - while just 52.5% of the population aged 25–64 has at least an upper secondary diploma, compared with 63% nationally. Skills gaps emerged early: in 2022, 42.5% of lower secondary students in Puglia had inadequate

¹ ISTAT, 2024. Indicatori demografici - Anno 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/indicatori-demografici-anno-2024/>

² SVIMEZ. 2024. [Rapporto Svimez 2024 - Svimez - Associazione per lo sviluppo dell'industria nel Mezzogiorno.](https://www.svimez.it/rapporto-svimez-2024/)

³ Osservatorio del mercato del Lavoro, 2024. Analisi del mercato del lavoro in Puglia nel periodo 2021 – 2024. Retrieved from: <https://osservatoriolavoro.arti.puglia.it/osservatorio/report/analisi-del-mercato-del-lavoro-in-puglia-nel-periodo-2021-2024>

⁴ EUROSTAR, 2024. Gender statistics - Statistics Explained – Eurostat. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_statistics

Italian competences, and 50% had inadequate mathematics skills, significantly above national figures. These deficits disproportionately affect young people in rural areas, who already have limited access to quality schools, digital training, and innovation infrastructures (ISTAT, 2023)⁵.

The region also shows a high rate of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs): 26% in 2022, 7 points above the national average. Participation in lifelong learning is low as well (7.2% vs 9.6% nationally), which limits opportunities for reskilling and entry into emerging sectors such as digital technologies and green innovation. These challenges contribute to persistent youth outmigration, especially from inland areas, further weakening the region's human capital base (ISTAT, 2023).

Migrants and ethnic minorities play a vital role in sectors such as agriculture, caregiving, and tourism. However, they often face precarious working conditions, linguistic and administrative barriers, and limited access to training and public services. Migrant women face compounded disadvantages, with labour market participation rates around six percentage points lower than those of Italian-born women, reflecting both gender- and migration-related vulnerabilities. Their participation in entrepreneurship, professional networks, and community organisations remains limited, as does access to land ownership and financing opportunities.

People with disabilities also encounter substantial barriers, including limited accessibility in education, public transport, workplaces, and training programmes. These inequalities are more pronounced in rural and sparsely populated municipalities, where infrastructure gaps restrict mobility and reduce opportunities for labour market inclusion. As a result, their engagement in innovation processes, community initiatives, and local governance remains significantly lower than regional averages.

Overall, socio-economic participation in Puglia is shaped by multiple, overlapping inequalities. Women, youth, migrants, minorities, and people with disabilities are systematically underrepresented in key sectors such as digital innovation, advanced manufacturing, agricultural leadership, entrepreneurship, and local governance. Addressing these disparities is essential to promote inclusive regional development and ensure that the benefits of rural–urban integration and Short Food Supply Chain strategies are shared equitably across all communities.

Cultural and Community Context

The cultural and social fabric of Puglia plays a significant role in shaping participation, inclusion, and gender equality across the region. Strong family networks, long-standing traditions, and deeply rooted social norms often promote community cohesion, but they can also reinforce traditional gender roles, particularly in rural areas. Studies on Southern Italy show that women continue to bear the majority of unpaid care work, which limits their availability for employment, training, and civic engagement. In many small municipalities, social expectations still influence choices related to education, mobility, and professional development, especially for young women.

At the same time, Puglia is home to vibrant community-based initiatives that promote inclusion and innovation. Women-led cooperatives, social farming projects, and local cultural associations actively contribute to social cohesion and empowerment, particularly in the agri-food and cultural sectors. In several territories, local festivals, food traditions, and intergenerational networks foster a strong sense of identity that can serve as an asset for participatory processes and community resilience.

⁵ ISTAT 2023. IL BENESSERE EQUO E SOSTENIBILE DEI TERRITORI PUGLIA 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-territoriale/bes-territori-2023/>

The presence of migrant communities has added new layers of cultural diversity, contributing to the local economy and enriching the social landscape. However, integration pathways vary across the region: urban areas tend to offer more structured services and support networks, while rural areas often rely on informal social ties and community solidarity. Regional programs promoting active citizenship, youth participation, and social innovation - such as those supported through the Smart Specialization Strategy and local development groups (GALs)—are gradually increasing opportunities for inclusive community engagement.

Existing policies and initiatives

Several regional, national, and European frameworks support gender equality, youth engagement, and social inclusion in Puglia, providing a solid foundation for the RAP's objectives. At the national level, the Italian Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2025⁶ promotes women's labour participation, work–life balance, and equal access to decision-making roles. Complementary measures under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) include investments in childcare services, youth employment programmes, and interventions to reduce territorial disparities - key aspects influencing rural–urban dynamics in Puglia.

At the regional level, the Regional Strategy for Social Inclusion and Active Citizenship (Regione Puglia, 2022) focuses on vulnerable groups, including migrants, women, and young people, by strengthening access to services, labour inclusion, and community participation. The Smart Specialisation Strategy Puglia 2030 also highlights inclusive innovation, supporting women and youth entrepreneurship in strategic sectors such as agri-food, digital technologies, and sustainable development. Furthermore, Local Action Groups (GALs) operating under LEADER policies actively promote social innovation, community participation, and inclusive rural development.

These initiatives are fully aligned with the RAP's vision of fostering equitable rural–urban linkages and enhancing the inclusiveness of Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs). By building on existing policy frameworks, the RAP can reinforce regional efforts to reduce gender gaps, support youth retention, promote migrant integration, and strengthen participatory governance across the territory.

Challenges and opportunities

The gender and diversity analysis highlights several structural barriers that hinder inclusive and sustainable development in Puglia. Persistent gender gaps in employment, entrepreneurship, and leadership continue to affect women's participation - particularly in rural areas, where traditional social norms, limited childcare services, and reduced economic diversification restrict their opportunities. Despite some progress, women's representation in local governance remains below parity: in 2022, only 32.4% of municipal administrators were women, a figure aligned with the national average but still far from gender balance. Moreover, the low participation in EU elections (49.8% in 2019, 6.3 percentage points below the national average) reflects broader challenges in civic engagement and political inclusion.

Youth participation and representation also remain limited. Only 23.9% of local administrators are under 40, indicating limited generational renewal and reduced youth influence in public decision-making. These governance gaps reinforce structural issues such as youth outmigration, driven by limited access to high-quality employment,

⁶ Dipartimento per le Pari Opportunità, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. 2021. Strategia nazionale per la parità di genere 2021-2026. Retrieved from: <https://www.pariopportunita.gov.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/parita-di-genere-ed-empowerment-femminile/strategia-nazionale-per-la-parita-di-genere-2021-2026/>

innovation ecosystems, and advanced training opportunities. The lack of inclusive governance mechanisms further weakens young people's involvement in shaping local development strategies.

Migrants and ethnic minorities face unequal access to rights, services, and training opportunities, especially in the agricultural and care sectors where informal or precarious employment remains widespread. For migrant women, labour participation remains significantly lower than that of both migrant men and Italian-born women, reflecting compounded vulnerabilities. People with disabilities, on the other hand, encounter mobility and accessibility barriers in education, transport, and employment - particularly in remote territories with weaker infrastructure.

Institutional weaknesses also contribute to inequalities.

Across rural areas, structural disadvantages persist: weaker digital infrastructure, insufficient public transport, scarcity of childcare facilities, and reduced access to education and training amplify socio-economic exclusion for women, young people, migrants, and minorities. These territorial gaps limit access to funding, innovation networks, and strategic sectors such as digitalisation, advanced manufacturing, and sustainable agriculture.

Despite these challenges, Puglia offers significant opportunities to foster equality, participation, and inclusion. The region benefits from strong community networks, well-established women-led cooperatives, and vibrant social innovation ecosystems that support empowerment and local engagement. The presence of universities, technology hubs, and innovation centers provides strategic potential for youth upskilling, digital transformation, and inclusive entrepreneurship. Regional and national frameworks promoting gender equality, childcare expansion, migrant integration, and youth participation create a favorable environment for more equitable territorial development. Additionally, the growth of sustainable agri-food systems, Short Food Supply Chains, and rural tourism opens new opportunities for underrepresented groups to access markets, contribute to value creation, and strengthen rural-urban linkages.

Leveraging these assets can support a more inclusive, competitive, and resilient development model - ensuring that the benefits of innovation and territorial cohesion extend to all communities across Puglia.

3. Vision and Strategic Goals

3.1. Vision Statement

The regional action plan (RAP) for the improvement and strengthening of the short supply chain in Puglia will focus on policies and programmes that facilitate access to resources, innovation, sustainability and the promotion of local products. The short supply chain, which promotes the consumption of local products, represents a winning strategy to improve the agricultural economy, reduce environmental impact and support Puglia producers. In this context, the role of technical consultants, through the AKIS (Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System), is essential to support agricultural companies and businesses in the short supply chain in adopting more innovative, sustainable and efficient practices.

1. Strengthening the Technical Advisory Systems (AKIS)

Objective: Strengthen and expand the technical advisory network (AKIS) to improve the ability of Puglia agricultural companies to adapt to modern challenges, innovate and adopt sustainability practices.

Actions:

- Training and updating of consultants: Create continuous training programs for consultants, focusing on innovative techniques in sustainable agriculture, agriculture 4.0, techniques for valorising local products and niche markets.

- Strengthening the AKIS network: Implement a coordinated regional network of experts, universities, research centres and private consultants, who collaborate to provide personalized consultancy to Apulian agricultural companies, in particular those oriented towards the short supply chain.
- Support for the digitalization of consultancy: Introduce digital platforms and mobile applications that can easily connect farmers with consultants, providing them with immediate technical support, information on market trends, advanced cultivation techniques and innovative solutions for direct sales of products.
- Improved access to information: Create a central regional platform where consultants can share best practices, legislative updates, and financing opportunities related to the short supply chain and renewable energy applicable to the agricultural sector.

2. Promotion of the Short Supply Chain as a Sustainable Model

Objective: Encourage the adoption of the short supply chain model as a tool for sustainable economic growth for Apulian producers.

Actions:

- Creation of local networks of producers and consumers: Stimulate the creation of local markets and distribution networks that allow Apulian producers to sell their products directly to consumers, bypassing traditional distribution channels, with a focus on fresh and local products (e.g. fruit, vegetables, meat, cheese and oil).
- Sustainability and quality certification: Support the adoption of quality certifications (e.g. organic, DOP, IGP) for local products, improving their competitiveness on the market and ensuring better visibility and valorisation.
- Consumer awareness and education: Launch awareness campaigns to educate Apulian consumers on the value of local products and sustainable agricultural practices. Education on the consumption of zero-mile products will foster a more informed demand and help strengthen the local economy.
- Creation of an online direct sales network: Promote the use of online sales platforms, facilitating consumer access to local products directly from producers. Dedicated portals could be developed where consumers can order fresh and organic zero-mile products, which will be delivered directly.

3. Support Innovation and Digitalization in Agriculture

Objective: Promote the adoption of innovative technologies to optimize productivity and sustainability in short supply chains, improving the competitiveness of Apulian agricultural businesses.

Actions:

- Incentivize the use of 4.0 and 5.0 technologies in agriculture: Support the adoption of advanced technologies such as IoT sensors, drones for agricultural monitoring, precision agriculture systems and AI systems. These technologies will allow more efficient management of natural resources (water, soil), improved productivity and enhance direct connection with consumers.
- Financing for innovations in sustainable agriculture: Create financial incentives, in the form of European funds or public funding, for agricultural businesses that want to invest in green technologies (such as photovoltaic systems or intelligent irrigation systems) and in local product transformation processes.
- Research and development projects: Encourage collaboration between universities, research institutions and agricultural businesses to develop new short supply chain models that can integrate innovations throughout the entire supply chain from production to selling.

4. Integration of Economic and Legal Support Policies

Objective: Support the short supply chain system with favourable economic policies and simplified regulation.

Actions:

- Bureaucratic simplification: Work with regional authorities to simplify bureaucratic procedures related to the direct sale of agricultural products, the creation of cooperatives and local distribution, reducing administrative obstacles that slow down the entry of small businesses into the market.
- Access to credit for farmers: Facilitate access to subsidized credit for agricultural businesses that wish to diversify and invest in the short supply chain, focusing on innovation, quality and sustainability.
- Promotion of short supply chain products abroad: Implement internationalization policies that allow the products of the Apulian short supply chain to enter international markets, promoting the export of local excellence and increasing the competitiveness of the region at a global level.

3.2. Strategic Goals

Objective 1: Strengthen the connection among Short Supply Chain actors (SFSC)

- Strengthen the network of regional actors to support agricultural companies in the transition towards sustainable and innovative practices, focusing on 4.0, 5.0 technologies and the integration of the short supply chain. By the end of the project, it is expected that at least **10 professionals among advisors, innovators, cooperatives and producers** with experience in **agriculture, digital innovation and sustainability** will be involved in project activities to discuss and propose potential solutions to support SFSC innovation

Objective 2: Promote the Short Supply Chain and sustainable agriculture in rural areas of Puglia

- Encourage the creation of **local producer networks and strengthen models and tools for direct sales** of agricultural products, supporting sustainable agriculture in rural areas and, if possible, the use of digital solutions. By the end of the project, **at least 50 operators and organizations** are expected to be involved, including agricultural companies, LAGs, cooperatives, trade associations, Researchers, advisors, and IT experts.

Objective 3: Identifying resources and funding for the short supply chain and innovation in agriculture

- Facilitate the identification and promotion of public and private funding for Apulian agricultural businesses that want to **invest in green technologies, quality certifications, and short supply chain sales**. The objective is to improve knowledge on financial instruments, grants, and partnership opportunities at regional, national, and European level for small and medium-sized agricultural businesses in Puglia by 2027. The Objective will be achieved through the **development of an information sheet** that summarizes the resources and funding to support the short supply chain and agricultural innovation, which will be presented through **a final seminar in 2026** before the conclusion of the project.

Objective 4: Promote the digitalization of the Short Supply Chain

- Explore the development of **digital platforms and tools** that allow producers to directly sell their local products and consumers to more easily identify and learn about products or farms in the Puglia Region. This solution could also be tested to reach consumers internationally, **increasing the visibility of the short supply chain**. The goal is to **identify or test at least 1 digital platform or tool by the end of the project**.

4. Action Plan

4.1. Measures and Actions

4.1.1. Intervention Areas

Innovation and Digitalization

Today, even in the agricultural sector, digitalization represents a fundamental condition for the progress of companies and for the improvement of their position in the markets. Promoting digitalization activities of the system relating to the short supply chain, for example through measures to increase the level of data literacy of the actors involved, would represent a long-term development opportunity, projected into the future. It is therefore essential to incentivize companies that operate along the supply chain to internally adopt some advanced technologies, such as IoT and precision agriculture systems. These technologies are very important not only to increase and optimize production, but also to manage natural resources more efficiently, consequently reducing waste and combining production activity with the cause of sustainability, respecting the environment that provides resources and raw materials. The creation of specific platforms for the direct sale of short supply chain products can be extremely useful: in this way, consumers are guaranteed a wide choice, while offering a high quality of raw materials and items for sale. These platforms can include dialogue windows between producer and consumer, useful for two reasons: they allow the producer to better describe the vision and mission of his production reality, at the same time establishing a relationship of trust that constitutes a further measure of guarantee for the consumer on the reliability of the seller and on the quality of the product purchased. Finally, through digitalization measures of this type, companies part of the Apulian short supply chain would increase their chances of being known not only in the local market, but also in the global one.

Training and Workforce Development

The provision of specific training programs, aimed at the actors involved along the entire short supply chain, represents a very useful opportunity, for example to prepare farmers and operators working in the sector for modern challenges related to sustainability and the digitalization of agricultural systems. Equally useful in this context are actions to expand and strengthen the AKIS technical consultancy network, useful for providing specialized support to companies, depending on their priorities: refresher courses for consultants can constitute a valuable training method to inform on the new sustainability techniques and practices to be adopted in agriculture, also to speed up the transition towards efficient but at the same time more responsible production models.

Network and Collaboration

The success of the Apulian short supply chain depends first on the ability of the stakeholders involved to create collaborative networks in which the real protagonists are the producers. The creation of distribution circuits and local markets for the sale of Apulian products would allow producers to bypass the traditional distribution channels that separate them from final consumers. Another particularly important tool, in a perspective of expanding the number of actors participating in the activities of the short supply chain, is represented by public-private partnerships involving public bodies, companies and universities. Collaborations of this type facilitate the design and implementation of research and development projects based on scientific-technical activities capable of integrating innovation and tradition, thus contributing to generating a more competitive and robust agri-food ecosystem.

Marketing

The promotion of local products and the creation of an image that represents quality, attention and care in the choice of raw materials passes through targeted marketing activities. It is necessary to develop marketing and advertising campaigns capable of highlighting the typicality and peculiarities that distinguish Apulian agri-food products from those of other regions and the world. Particular attention should be paid to olive oil, wine and cheeses: these are products that already enjoy high fame because they are unique in their kind and with a centuries-old history. Especially in recent years, for these reasons, the gastronomic sector has been affected by significant growth linked to experiential and sustainable tourism, in turn focused on the rediscovery of traditions and culture. In this, Puglia enjoys great potential: offering tourist experiences that combine visits to the places of production with tastings and cultural activities that retrace the history of the territories can certainly give impetus to the strengthening of the local economy and the empowerment of consumers.

Digital connectivity and Infrastructure

Strengthening digital connectivity in underserved areas is essential to support innovation and the adoption of modern technologies, allowing agricultural companies to compete effectively in the global market. Furthermore, to date, improving infrastructure efficiency is a generalized priority for the whole of Southern Italy: a region like Puglia, which has such a large potential in the rural, agri-food and tourism sectors, must necessarily invest in strengthening connections between rural areas and the rest of the territory. A modernization of transport and logistics networks can facilitate travel from peripheral areas to markets and finally to cities, where short supply chain products have a greater chance of being known and appreciated.

4.1.2. Actions

Innovation and Digitalization

Action: Promote and strengthen cross-sectoral innovation centers

Steps:

- Strengthening physical and digital infrastructures in the region
- Feasibility studies to identify needs/opportunities to innovate the agricultural sector;
- Incentives for the adoption of 4.0 technologies to be allocated to producers through specific European and regional funding programs that support agricultural companies that invest in IoT and precision agriculture;
- Promotion and development of digital platforms, for example an online portal useful for the sale of short supply chain products;
- Training of stakeholders who work along the supply chain, through specialization courses on the use of innovative digital tools;

The experience of other innovation hubs at European level (European Digital Innovation Hubs – EDIHs) represents proof of the fact that contributing to the creation of centers of excellence favors the economic growth of the territories, technological innovation and the birth of startups. Cross-sectoral innovation centers in the Puglia Region would help short supply chain companies to seize and exploit the opportunities offered by the network, as well as improve skills and foster cooperation in the territory.

Training and Development

Action: Implement continuous training programs for farmers

Steps:

- Analysis of the training needs of the chosen targets to identify the skills to work on;
- Collaboration with centers of excellence and training institutions to develop targeted courses;
- Organization of interactive workshops and seminars to facilitate learning;
- Implementation of post-evaluation systems of the courses, through questionnaires and written feedback useful for testing the effectiveness of the actions;

Continuous training increases the productivity of agricultural companies and promotes the modernization of production systems, allowing even small businesses involved in the agri-food sector to adopt innovative, economically sustainable and environmentally and natural resource-friendly practices. Initiatives such as those promoted by CIA-Agricoltori Italiani (<https://agricolturavita.it/corsi-a-catalogo/>) but also financial measures such as the For.Agri funds for continuous training in agriculture (<https://www.foragri.com/presentazione-foragri/>), represent just a few examples of the effectiveness of measures focused on learning in the agri-food sector.

Network and Collaboration

Action 1: Facilitate the creation of a Puglia Network of companies in the short supply chain

Steps:

- Formation of farmers' markets and product distribution circuits at a regional level;
- Formalization of partnerships with universities and research centers;
- Design of public-private collaborations to implement R&D projects;
- Organization of networking events, focus labs and round tables between producers, consumers and distributors;
- Promotion of the formation of producer cooperatives to better distribute and market products;
- Support for new trade associations to better describe the interests of producers;

The short supply chain brings together producers and consumers who have similar goals and interests: to have access to quality products that preserve the environment, the territory and protect the people who contribute to their creation. Only by strengthening local food networks can these goals be achieved, reducing to a minimum the intermediaries usually involved in the traditional food chain. The EU Rural Review, the result of a careful study on European agri-food systems and short supply chains, highlights the importance that the creation of local networks and markets has in ensuring greater added value to farmers, strengthening local economies, with high food security and guaranteed access to quality products, even for low-income individuals and families. The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) has also set up a working group on short supply chains (SSC): in this context, especially some examples can be defined as best practices. In particular, realities such as those born in the Pays de la Loire (France) for the production of fruit and vegetables and livestock, the system of direct collective sales Aitojamakuja.fi (Finland) or the local agri-food system 'Skekszàrd es vidéke' (Hungary) highlight the importance that sharing positive experiences, within a circuit formed by stakeholders of similar origin, has for the growth of local economic systems considered as a whole (<https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/enrd-static/fms/pdf/3E98A485-0639-02F5-D8C5-B74B1D641680.pdf>).

Action 2: Strengthen the AKIS expert network

Steps: Establish a regional forum that brings together experts and consultants in Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) to provide tailored support to agricultural businesses.

Marketing

Action: Develop an integrated marketing strategy for the promotion of Apulian products and sustainable tourism

Steps:

- Conduct market research to identify consumer targets and preferences;
- Improve the brand identity of Apulian products, focusing on history and tradition;
- Involvement of public figures involved in the agri-food sector and with a good following on social media;
- Creation of tourist offers that include gastronomic experiences, visits to production sites and nature excursions;

Territorial marketing represents a fundamental strategic lever for the development of territories, as reiterated by numerous local development strategies adopted in various regions of Europe and Italy: for Puglia, focusing on sustainability, tradition, history and quality of food products through targeted advertising campaigns would certainly represent a strong point. In fact, the promotion of the territory goes beyond the mere advertising of a location; it is a broader approach that actively involves the community, local businesses and institutions in a shared project of development and growth. For this reason, developing effective strategies, through a holistic approach that can enhance the peculiarities of the Region, would give a strong boost to the growth of the short supply chain and the rediscovery of the agricultural, culinary and rural heritage of Puglia.

Connectivity and Infrastructure

Action 1: Strengthen transport infrastructure to improve access to rural areas

Action 2: Develop smart sustainable and intermodal transport systems

Steps:

- Mapping of existing infrastructure;
- Identification of critical areas that need implementation;
- Identification of investment funds to be allocated to transport infrastructure;
- Monitoring of the impact of investments on the accessibility and competitiveness of agricultural companies;

In its Focus on Fruit and Vegetables, the national observatory Nomisma highlights how the Italian fruit and vegetable sector represents excellence and one of the most important segments for the country's economy. However, the increase in value of this sector is strongly penalized by the state of the infrastructure which, especially in the South, limits logistics and therefore the transport of goods from the production areas - typically rural - to those designated for the marketing of the products. Added to this is the high environmental impact which sees the transport sector excel in terms of carbon footprint and therefore pollution. Infrastructure efficiency is therefore a global priority, which could be addressed by adopting a multilevel approach, involving various institutional actors and above all investing in green mobility. In this way, the short supply chain would become completely sustainable, since it is already characterized by a limited carbon footprint.

Action 3: Improve digital connectivity**Steps:**

- Investments in internet infrastructure to ensure a stable connection in less served areas
- Adoption of innovations from agriculture 4.0
- Collaboration with internet service providers to improve connectivity in rural areas

The development of digital technology is deeply intertwined with the adoption of technologies aimed at making agriculture increasingly sustainable, eco-friendly and transparent towards consumers. It is essential to integrate traditional strategies with the innovations offered by agriculture 4.0, to face the challenges of the future. The quality of the agri-food supply chain represents a true excellence of Made in Italy, for this reason it is necessary for a region like Puglia to equip itself with digital technologies useful for improving its brand identity in the national circuit. In particular, traceability, the use of blockchain technology and the collection of strategic data, are tools to be put at the service of the regional short supply chain: these practices offer significant opportunities for

development and growth. Investments in these technologies and promoting a culture of innovation would support the positioning of the Puglia Region in the international market would be significantly strengthened.

4.2. Expected Outcomes

Innovation and Digitalization

- Increase in agricultural startups adopting 4.0 and IoT technologies by 2027;
- Increase in online sales through the use of a dedicated digital platform within the first two years;

Training and Development

- Improvement of the skills of agri-food operators thanks to participation in technical and digital education programmes.
- Growth of the AKIS expert network within two years and greater support for agricultural companies.
- Optimization of the use of natural resources such as water and soil, thanks to modern irrigation techniques.

Network and Collaboration

- Expansion of Apulian fruit and vegetable markets, with active participation of at least 200 producers involved in the local circuit.
- Increase in collaborations between producers, with strategic partnerships between different companies;
- Agricultural and technological innovation projects thanks to the support of universities and research centers;

Marketing and Promotion

- Increase in the visibility of Apulian agri-food products through specific marketing campaigns for each type of product;
- Improvement of the brand identity of the products, increasing their international notoriety;
- Growth of experiential and sustainable tourism with an increase in visits to producing companies, tasting itineraries of typical products and stays at local establishments;

Connectivity and Infrastructure

- Greater accessibility to places, especially rural or peripheral ones, through a reduction in travel times, thanks to investments in the transport sector.
- Improved digital connectivity within two years with 90% of partner companies enjoying fast and stable internet access.

5. Policy and Funding Alignment

5.1. EU and National Policy Alignment:

The regional action plan for Puglia can be identified as a manual for sustainable development, maintaining competitiveness and territorial innovation. To make it possible to achieve these objectives, it is necessary to facilitate their alignment with some of the main European and national initiatives in the field of green and development policies; in particular in the Green Deal promoted by the EU starting from 2019, but also other funding programs such as Horizon Europe and Digital Europe. These programs, in addition to providing funding

opportunities, deal with outlining a regulatory and strategic framework to support the transition towards a sustainable, circular and digital economy. The architecture of the RAP Puglia is perfectly in line with these programs, which, if correctly integrated into the activities envisaged by the same plan, could offer the region a precious opportunity to become a model of excellence in the European panorama, helping to meet the objectives of sustainability and innovation.

European Green Deal

The Green Deal represents an ambitious package of policy strategies, aimed at making Europe the first carbon neutral continent by 2050. From this point of view, as set up, the Rural Strategic Action Plan for Puglia is perfectly aligned with the discipline contained in the European Green Agreement; in particular, the Regional Action Plan of Puglia promotes sustainable agricultural practices but also the conservation of biodiversity and natural ecosystems, through a more efficient use of resources and the introduction of technologically advanced agricultural practices (e.g. agrivoltaics, vertical farming, hydroponic cultivation, etc.). The actions envisaged in the plan, such as the promotion of organic farming and the application of technologies are extremely useful for reducing the carbon footprint of the agricultural sector, another common objective that confirms the link between the Green Deal and RAP Puglia.

Horizon Europe

Horizon Europe is a program created by the EU and aimed at supporting scientific research; it was preceded by the Horizon 2020 program (2014-2020) and other framework programs for research and technological development. In the current programming period, 2021-2027, the EU has allocated a budget of approximately 95.5 billion euros to the Horizon program. This is a crucial opportunity for Puglia, in particular for the universities and research centres that operate in the regional territory, as it supports projects in key sectors such as, precisely, health, digitalization and sustainability. The same themes on which the Strategic Action Plan of Puglia focuses, with the aim of revolutionizing and improving the agri-food sector, enhancing the short supply chain and promoting quality, environmentally friendly and healthy products. For this reason, the creation of innovation and research centres in the region can benefit from funding for projects that develop advanced technologies for agriculture 4.0. Furthermore, especially the collaboration between Apulian universities and European research centres can facilitate access to knowledge and skills networks, strengthening Puglia's ability to compete at an international level.

Digital Europe

The Digital Europe programme, with a budget of 7.5 billion euros, aims to accelerate the digital transformation of Europe. The Puglia Regional Action Plan aligns itself with this initiative through the integration of digital solutions in agriculture and the agri-food supply chain. The planned actions include the digitalisation of production processes, the implementation of blockchain-based traceability systems and the use of IoT (Internet of Things) technologies for crop monitoring. These measures not only improve the efficiency and sustainability of agricultural practices, but also transparency towards consumers. By using these tools, the Puglia Region could thus position itself as an example of best practice in the adoption of digital technologies, contributing to the objectives of the Digital Europe programme.

EU Strategic Programmes

In addition to the programmes mentioned above, the Regional Action Plan also aligns with other EU strategic initiatives, such as the LIFE programme, dedicated to the environment and climate action, and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The LIFE programme offers funding opportunities for projects

that aim to improve the quality of the environment and promote the sustainable use of resources. Actions in the plan that concern biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of natural resources can benefit from these funds, helping to make Puglia a greener and more resilient region. The EAFRD, on the other hand, supports rural development and innovation in the agricultural sector. The Regional Action Plan includes measures to improve the competitiveness of local farms and promote sustainable agricultural practices, in line with the objectives of the EAFRD. Through this alignment, Puglia can access significant funds to support the modernization and sustainability of the agri-food sector and the short supply chain.

Environmental sustainability and climate integration

Environmental sustainability and climate resilience play a central role for the development trajectory of the Apulian Region, particularly in rural areas where agricultural systems and local communities are highly exposed to climate-related risks.

The region faces growing environmental pressures - such as water scarcity, soil degradation, extreme weather events, and loss of biodiversity - that require integrated strategies aligned with EU climate objectives, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and regional priorities outlined in the Smart Specialisation Strategy of Regione Puglia⁷.

1. Key Environmental Challenges in Puglia

Water scarcity and drought risk

One of the most urgent environmental issues is the structural water scarcity. According to ISPRA, over 70% of regional agricultural land is classified as medium-to-high drought risk. ARPA Puglia reports a long-term decline in water availability and increased variability in rainfall patterns.

Soil degradation and desertification

ISPRA's National Soil Consumption Report (2023)⁸ highlights that 57% of soils in Puglia show signs of moderate to severe degradation, including erosion, salinisation and organic matter depletion. The southern coastal areas face increasing desertification risk.

Biodiversity loss and ecosystem pressure

Protected areas (such as Gargano, Alta Murgia, and coastal wetlands) face pressures linked to land use change, invasive species and climate stress.

Climate vulnerability and extreme events

⁷ Regione Puglia. [Strategie di specializzazione intelligente \(S3\) 2030 - Ricerca e relazioni internazionali - Regione Puglia](https://www.regione.puglia.it/web/ricerca-e-relazioni-internazionali/strategie-di-specializzazione-intelligente-s3-2030#:~:text=La%20Strategia%20regionale%20per%20la%20Specializzazione%20intelligente%20%22SmartPuglia,promuovere%20uno%20sviluppo%20sostenibile%20e%20intelligente%20del%20territorio.). Retrieved from: <https://www.regione.puglia.it/web/ricerca-e-relazioni-internazionali/strategie-di-specializzazione-intelligente-s3-2030#:~:text=La%20Strategia%20regionale%20per%20la%20Specializzazione%20intelligente%20%22SmartPuglia,promuovere%20uno%20sviluppo%20sostenibile%20e%20intelligente%20del%20territorio.>

⁸ISPRA, 2023. Atlante nazionale del consumo di suolo. Edizione 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/it/pubblicazioni/pubblicazioni-di-pregio/atlante-nazionale-del-consumo-di-suolo-edizione-2023>

The Italian Climate Risk Index (ISPRA, 2024)⁹ identifies Puglia as one of the regions with higher vulnerability, due to heatwaves, heavy rainfall and coastal flooding affecting agriculture, tourism and infrastructure.

2. Alignment with EU, National and Regional Climate Frameworks

The RAP aligns with:

- EU Green Deal
- EU Climate Adaptation Strategy (2021)
- Farm to Fork Strategy
- Common Agricultural Policy 2023–2027 (climate architecture + eco-schemes)
- UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2, 6, 12, 13, 15)
- Puglia Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) 2030 – Green & Blue Transition
- Regione Puglia Environmental Strategy & Piano Regionale per l'Ambiente

3. Environmental Indicators & Climate Metrics

3.1. Agriculture & Natural Resources

- Water consumption per hectare (m³/ha)
- Share of farms using water-efficient irrigation (%)
- Soil organic carbon (%)
- Farmland under organic/low-input management (%)
- Climate Action & Resilience
- GHG emissions from agriculture (CO₂-eq)
- Share of farms adopting climate-adaptive practices (%)
- Areas with implemented nature-based solutions (ha)

3.2. Biodiversity

- Pollinator-friendly habitats (ha)
- Landscape fragmentation indices
- Investments growth in Short Food Supply Chains (€)
- Reduction in food miles (km)
- Local procurement rates (%)
- Packing waste reduction (kg)

4. Opportunities for Climate Resilience

- Expansion of precision agriculture (IoT, satellite monitoring, smart irrigation)
- Development of agroecological and regenerative farming practices
- Promotion of circular economy in the agri-food sector

⁹ISPRA, 2024. Dissesto idrogeologico in Italia: pericolosità e indicatori di rischio. Retrieved from: <https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/en/publications/reports/hydrogeological-instability-in-italy-hazards-and-risk-indicators-2024-edition>

- Strengthening low-carbon logistics for SFSCs
- Growth of renewable energy communities in rural areas
- Increased investment in digital innovation ecosystems and climate services

5.2. Funding Sources

5.2.1. Potential funding mechanisms

The Regional Action Plan can count on access to a wide range of public and private financing mechanisms, to support the implementation of the activities planned in the field of sustainability and digitalization of the agri-food sector. Through the creation of synergies between different types of actors, the Puglia region could generate virtuous circuits useful for ensuring the growth of the territory, making use of strategic financing, such as EU structural funds, but also national programs and private financing opportunities. Among the European programs and in addition to the structural funds, one could focus on:

- **CSR (2021-2027):** The CSR 2023–2027 serves as Puglia’s regional implementation of Italy’s CAP Strategic Plan, aligning with EU rural development priorities.
It mobilizes over €1.2 billion to support a competitive, sustainable, and resilient agri-food system. Policy priorities include climate-smart agriculture, natural resource preservation, and biodiversity enhancement.
The program promotes generational renewal, territorial equity, and social inclusion in rural areas.
- **Horizon Europe:** promotes R&I in Europe; Puglia could access it by participating in European consortia, therefore making use of strategic partners in the academic sector and in general in research, aiming to develop innovative projects in the agri-food and technological sector;
- **LIFE Program:** supports environmental and climate action initiatives and the fight against climate change; Puglia could create, together with other European actors, projects for the conservation of biodiversity, the sustainable management of natural resources and generally have easy access to funding under this program.
- **Digital Europe:** aims to accelerate technological and digital transformation in the EU; Puglia can contribute to the design of projects that promote the adoption of digital technologies in the agri-food sector, thus benefiting from funding for the digitalization of companies.
- **Private Financing:** in addition to public funds, financial contributions made available by private individuals can also play a crucial role in the implementation of activities aimed at promoting the short supply chain that the plan provides.
- **PPP (public-private partnerships):** promote collaboration between entities of different nature for the implementation of projects of common interest; the creation of partnerships such as these allows for the merging of various resources and skills, useful for developing highly effective technological and infrastructural projects.
- **Investments from Venture Capital Funds to support startups and innovative companies:** Apulian startups in the agri-food and technology sector can attract funds that aim to make space for themselves in the innovation market.
- **Crowdfunding:** provides for large fundraising for the financing of innovative projects. Agricultural companies and startups in Puglia can use crowdfunding platforms to raise capital for innovative and sustainable projects, involving the local community and consumers.

5.2.2. Stakeholder access to financial instruments

While the existing funding ecosystem is robust, it is often fragmented and complex, and not all stakeholders—especially smaller actors, rural SMEs, or early-stage startups - can easily access or navigate these instruments. Therefore, introducing complementary and innovative financing mechanisms could be highly beneficial. These may include:

- Simplified access procedures and bundling of different funding sources (e.g., blended finance combining public and private contributions).
- Micro-financing or revolving funds for small-scale producers and cooperatives.
- Long-term incentive schemes to support the maintenance and scalability of digital platforms, training networks, and collaborative governance models.

5.3. Partnerships

The implementation of the Strategic Action Plan for Puglia is accompanied by the involvement of a number of key stakeholders, each of which plays a unique and significant role. These actors include public bodies, private organisations, trade organisations and communities, integral parts to ensure the eventual implementation and efficiency of the plan.

Public Bodies

- **Puglia Region:** the main body responsible for the creation and implementation of the plan is the Puglia Region. Its task is to organize and coordinate the development and implementation of activities, ensure financial control and crucially EU funding.
- **Municipalities:** Apulian municipalities are crucial for the local implementation of actions. They can promote specific projects, facilitate community participation and ensure that local demands and needs are respected. Furthermore, municipalities can collaborate with the Region for easier access to funding and resources.

Private Sector

- **SMEs and agricultural cooperatives:** essential as key players in the development of sustainable and innovative agricultural practices; they can benefit from the adoption of advanced technologies and participation in research and development projects useful for strengthening the competitiveness of the agri-food chain. The high technical expertise that SMEs and cooperatives can count on, in fact, is crucial to transform policies into concrete actions.
- **Research centers:** as in the case of Universities, they play a central role in the generation of knowledge and innovation. In the agri-food sector, they can rely on close collaborations with SMEs and Cooperatives for the creation and implementation of new technologies, also making use of feasibility studies and dedicated training courses. Participation in EU-funded research projects, for example within Horizon Europe, also facilitates the catalysis of resources and skills.

Local Communities

The involvement of local communities and citizens is an important tool for the success of the plan. The active participation of the population can ensure that the actions contained in the RAP are closely related to the real needs and expectations of the community. Awareness and engagement campaigns can generate interest and a desire to collaborate, promoting a sense of belonging and shared responsibility, as well as real grassroots social innovation initiatives.

6. Roadmap

6.1. Timeline:

Activity	2025												2026											
	Month												Month											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Stakeholder engagement and feedback																								
1.1 Collection of stakeholders policy input_year 2																								
1.2 Compare stakeholders feedback with current policies and funding																								
1.3 Extend the identification of local stakeholders in relation to the SFSC sector																								
2 institutions																								
2.1 Identify gaps in policy or funding in struments in connection with stakeholders inputs																								
2.2 Report the results of the stakeholders inputs to local agencies																								
2.3 measures and funding to foster SFSC activities																								
3 Innovative practices and solutions																								
3.1 Explore the integration of AI and digital technologies to support SFSC																								
3.2 Identification of potential solutions and activities that align with digital tools																								
3.3 Collection of feedback by practitioners																								
4 Evaluation and integration of the results																								
4.1 Corrective measures to integrate the proposed solutions into mainstream policy																								
4.2 Address the main results and policy/funding proposals with policy actors																								
4.3 Finalisation of the Regional Action Plan with final adjustments																								

Medium-term strategy 2028-2035

- **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP):**

In the medium term, Apulia will increasingly support rural–urban integration by strengthening local food systems and promoting short supply chains that directly connect rural producers with urban consumers. Future CAP funding can prioritize diversification in rural areas, supporting agri-tourism, bio-economy initiatives, and digital agriculture to create stronger economic links with urban markets. Investments in rural infrastructure and services (such as broadband and mobility) will improve connectivity, reducing the gap between rural and urban living standards.

- **Sustainable Food Cities:**

Over the next several years, the Sustainable Food Cities model can serve as a key framework to deepen rural–urban ties through inclusive, resilient food systems for the Apulia region. Municipal food policies should be expanded to include structured partnerships with surrounding rural producers, ensuring stable access to healthy, local food. Supporting infrastructure such as urban food hubs, logistics centres, and processing facilities will help scale up rural sourcing and reduce food miles.

- **Smart Specialisation Strategy 2040:**

When updating its Smart Specialisation Strategy toward 2040, greater emphasis should be placed on integrating rural areas into innovation ecosystems that link urban research centres with rural production clusters across the Apulia region. Rural–urban collaboration should be encouraged in priority sectors such as sustainable agriculture, food innovation, green energy, and eco-tourism. Investments in digital infrastructure, open innovation platforms, and skills development will empower rural communities to co-lead regional transformation.

Long-term strategy 2035-2040

Lifelong Learning Programmes:

In the long term, investing in lifelong learning will be essential to build adaptive, skilled rural and urban communities capable of navigating complex, interconnected food and territorial systems. Special focus should be placed on upskilling advisors, farmers, and entrepreneurs engaged in short food supply chains (SFSC), with training in digital tools, sustainability practices, and market diversification. Lifelong learning hubs or centres for vocational excellence can bridge knowledge gaps between urban research and rural application. Continuous education will also empower local actors to actively participate in planning, governance, and innovation processes that connect rural and urban spaces.

Multi-Actor connections and collaborations:

Territorial cohesion in the long term will depend on deepening multi-actor collaboration that brings together stakeholders from rural and urban areas - farmers, local authorities, businesses, civil society, and research institutions. Future strategies should support co-designed territorial plans that reflect shared priorities, such as climate adaptation, food security, and sustainable commerce. Building formalized networks and participatory governance structures will ensure continuity, accountability, and shared ownership within the region and across regions. These collaborations can foster integrated service delivery, strengthen regional identity, and ensure that no community is left behind in the transition toward sustainability.

International collaboration:

Rural–urban integration should increasingly be addressed through international partnerships that foster the exchange of knowledge, practices, and policy innovations. Collaborative platforms such as EU missions, Horizon Europe projects, and global city-region initiatives can support experimentation and learning across borders. International dialogue can also accelerate the co-creation of scalable models for sustainable rural–urban linkages in areas like food systems, mobility, energy, and circular economy. In the long term, coordinated transnational efforts will be crucial to address current and future global challenges.

6.2. Implementation Plan

The implementation plan consists of four key phases. It will address the main elements characterizing the Italian pilot: a) involving key regional stakeholders; b) Fostering the policy framework for SFSC; c) exploring the potential of digital technologies; and d) promoting the SFSC sector as an enabler of stronger rural-urban linkages.

Activity 1	Stakeholder engagement and feedback -	Year of implementation 2024-2025
<p>Activity 1 aims to engage key stakeholders in the Short Food Supply Chain (SFSC) to identify their needs and priorities. Through interviews, and consultations, the project will collect input from producers, cooperatives, Local Action Groups, farmers’ associations, and other local actors. The focus is on understanding challenges, opportunities, and support required for SFSC development. Special attention will be given to inclusivity across territories and supply chain actors.</p> <p>Stakeholder feedback will be systematically analyzed to identify common themes. This input will be compared with existing regional policies and CSR 2023–2027 funding instruments. The analysis will highlight policy gaps, misalignments, and areas for improvement, and ensures bottom-up policy development grounded in real needs.</p> <p>Implementation phase</p> <p>The stakeholders contacted in the first two years of project implementation are predominantly located in Apulia, with a strong concentration in the provinces of Bari, Foggia, Barletta-Andria-Trani, and surrounding rural areas.</p> <p>Local and territorial development actors, mainly based in small and medium-sized towns such as Bisceglie and Spinazzola, operate in rural contexts. Their primary role is the design and implementation of local development strategies, with a focus on rural development, community engagement, and policy delivery at local and regional level.</p> <p>Farmers’ associations and representative bodies, mostly located in the city of Bari and operating across the region, provide services, advocacy, and technical support to agricultural producers. Their activities focus on representation, capacity building, and support for the primary sector for the promotion of local food and Short Food Supply Chain initiatives.</p> <p>Primary agricultural producers, widely distributed across rural areas of Bari and Foggia provinces, represent a significant share of stakeholders. These actors are engaged in primary production activities and operate mainly as individual farms or small agricultural enterprises. Together with Agri-food cooperatives and producers organisations represent a</p> <p>Agri-food cooperatives and producer organisations, mainly located in rural areas of Foggia province, focus on aggregation of production, market access, and strengthening farmers’ economic position.</p> <p>Agricultural SMEs and entrepreneurs, based in both urban and rural areas (notably Bari and BAT province), are active along the agri-food value chain. Their roles include production, processing, and commercial activities linked to the primary sector.</p>		

Academic and research stakeholders, located in the cities of Bari and Foggia, contribute through research, education, and applied innovation in agriculture, rural development, and policy-related fields

The needs assessment conducted with stakeholders in early 2025, highlighted both strong interest and structural gaps in the development of short supply chains in Apulia. While regional strategies and regulations on short supply chains are present, they have so far generated limited structural impact, although future regional incentives are expected to play a strategic role.

The survey, conducted among mainly small agricultural businesses based in Apulia, shows a high level of awareness and use of short supply chains: around 90% of respondents are familiar with this distribution model and 76% have used it at least once, mainly for olive oil sales, with home delivery as the most common channel. All respondents recognize the short supply chain as a valuable tool for business growth.

However, several needs and constraints emerged, including the fragmentation of supply, logistical and organizational challenges, lack of time, skills, and dedicated staff, high communication costs, and insufficient training. In addition, a significant information gap was identified, as about 80% of producers were unaware of the existing regional law supporting short supply chains, indicating a clear need for better communication, capacity building, and policy outreach.

Activity 2	Facilitation of policy dialogue with local institutions	Year of implementation 2025
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Activity 2 focuses on policy dialogue with local and regional institutions to align policy support with stakeholder needs in the Short Food Supply Chain (SFSC). Based on findings from Phase 1, the project will present key insights to relevant authorities and facilitate discussions to foster future policies and funding instruments. This dialogue will support the joint identification of appropriate measures and adjustments within existing frameworks, such as the CSR 2023–2027, to better foster SFSC development. The phase aims to promote a coordinated and responsive policy environment connected with the regional needs in terms of rural-urban synergies.

Implementation phase

Dialogue with regional policy actors has been initiated since the first year of the project and is intended to continue throughout its implementation and beyond. The initial exchanges aimed to present the PoliRural Plus initiative and to establish an open and constructive channel of communication with regional authorities, in particular with the regional agricultural office.

In parallel, pilot activities allowed a more practical assessment of the policy and regulatory environment affecting Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC), identifying both existing enabling elements and areas for improvement.

Existing framework supporting SFSC includes:

- Regional and national legislation promoting zero-mile and local agricultural products
- Rules supporting direct sales and alternative marketing channels
- Measures encouraging ethical purchasing groups and collective consumption models
- Policies on production districts and open innovation relevant to agri-food systems

Key gaps and challenges identified:

- Lack of an explicit focus on Short Food Supply Chains within the current Smart Specialisation Strategy
- Absence of formal SFSC policies or strategies at municipal and urban district level
- No indications and references to AI and digital technologies to support local food strategies

- Limited policy attention to cooperation, logistics, and marketing, which are critical for SFSC effectiveness

Potential areas for policy improvement:

- Introduction of dedicated SFSC chapters or objectives within regional strategies
- Stronger integration of rural and urban dimensions in policy design
- Targeted measures to support coordination, market access, and innovation along short supply chains

Specific areas of intervention have also been identified within regional and CAP-related financial instruments. These focus on mobilising additional resources to strengthen innovation, cooperation, and capacity building in support of SFSC. In particular, certain measures could be adapted within the current programming period and further reinforced in the next CAP cycle, including SRG08 supporting pilot actions and innovation testing, SRG01 supporting EIP-AGRI Operational Groups, and SRH measures related to training, advisory services, and capacity building.

Activity 3	Innovative practices and solutions	Year of implementation 2025-2026
<p>Activity 3 focuses on the identifications of digital solutions that could support, improve or foster SFSC models. This includes assessing the potential to integrate AI and other digital technologies developed or proposed within the PoliRuralPlus project, including relevant innovations emerging from the Open Call projects. Emphasis will be placed on solutions that are adaptable to local contexts and capable of addressing stakeholder needs while enhancing efficiency, traceability, and market access. Practitioners will provide feedback to deepen understanding on the relevance and usability of the proposed solutions. Overall, this activity aims to bridge innovation and practice, fostering digital transformation across regional food systems.</p> <p>Implementation phase</p> <p>The pilot is currently undergoing an exploration of potential digital solutions to support local food systems. This process started with the organisation of a hackathon under the Mobilise call, which provided a practical setting to collect, discuss, and assess potential solutions.</p> <p>The hackathon focused on testing digital and AI-based solutions for Short Food Supply Chains, with particular attention to traceability and rural–urban connections. The work carried out during the event addressed two main operational objectives: improving supply-chain transparency through digital tools and AI, and strengthening links between rural producers and urban consumers through new communication approaches.</p> <p>Four teams developed preliminary prototypes during the event. The selected solution is an intelligent traceability system proposed by a team of developers.</p> <p>The solution was selected due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · feasibility and real-world implementation potential; · added value for producers and consumers; · alignment with PoliRuralPlus objectives; · potential integration with existing PoliRuralPlus digital platforms. <p>Overall, the hackathon produced early-stage but practical digital solutions that are potentially replicable and scalable at regional level. It also strengthened collaboration among producers, developers, territorial actors, and communication professionals.</p>		

Activity 4	Evaluation and integration of the results	Year of implementation 2026
<p>Activity 4 works on evaluating and integrating the project’s findings into regional policy frameworks. It will identify corrective measures to incorporate proposed solutions into mainstream policies and funding instruments, creating opportunities for innovation within the SFSC sector. Focus groups with local policy actors will identify actionable adjustments and explore opportunities for innovation within SFSC models, particularly around enhancing rural-urban linkages.</p> <p>All the results are collected to finalise the Regional Action Plan, with the integration of the stakeholder feedback and ensuring that the initiatives developed during the project are considered as a valuable contribution for a sustainable and inclusive regional development.</p> <p>Implementation phase Under implementation</p>		

Beyond the core implementation phase, several key territorial stakeholders are expected to support the continuity of the regional plan, each contributing according to their role and expertise:

- **Local Action Groups (GALs)** may facilitate ongoing stakeholder engagement, light monitoring, and coordination of local SFSC initiatives, particularly within the LEADER framework.
- **Farmers’ associations and cooperatives** can help disseminate and test innovative practices in production, logistics, and marketing, encouraging the broader use of digital tools and short supply chain models.
- **Municipalities and regional authorities** may integrate the project outcomes into local planning instruments and development strategies, fostering alignment with the CSR 2023-2027 and future funding opportunities.
- **Universities, research centres,** and innovation hubs are expected to contribute technical insight and applied research, supporting the refinement of digital solutions and future policy development.
- **Digital platform providers and SMEs** will benefit from the lessons learned and use them to strengthen existing tools or develop new ones.

This multi-actor framework supports the long-term continuity and potential replication of the Italian pilot, helping ensure that its approaches and methods remain relevant and actionable within the territory.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

7.1. KPIs

#	Common KPI (PR+ level)	Purpose	Example of Local Metrics (by Pilot Type)	Indicative 2026 Target
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure the breadth and diversity of stakeholder engagement in RAP processes.	Regional (Apulia, IT): Number of organisations/stakeholders (public, private, civic) collaborating on the RAP.	Regional: 50 organisations
2	Rural-Urban Collaboration	Evaluate the level of cooperation between territories and sectors in integrating policies and actions.	Regional: Number of sessions with local/regional stakeholders	Regional: ≥ 3 sessions
3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Promote the use of innovative and digital tools and practices.	Regional: Number of local collaborations to promote innovation in SFSC Regional: % of stakeholders providing feedback, evaluations or assessments on the suggested practices or solutions (by individuals or organisations)	Regional: 1 project plan (e.g. Operational Groups); Regional: 50% of the stakeholders contacted
4	Territorial and Environmental Sustainability	Encourage sustainable, resilient and green practices in territories.	Regional: Number of sustainability-related policies or programs influenced by the RAP	Regional: 2 regional policies + municipal policies
5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Assess improvements in liveability, wellbeing, and social inclusion.	Regional: Number of municipalities/citizens potentially served by new SFSC digital services	Regional: 10 communities; 20.000 citizens
6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Strengthen governance structures and collaborative decision-making.	Regional: Number of regional policy actors and regional policies potentially impacted by the RAP	Regional: 1 regional policy actor + local municipalities and rural actors; 2 major regional policies
7	Communication and Visibility	Measure how results and messages are shared and communicated.	Regional: Number of events, campaigns, articles and other communication activities	Regional: 3 articles/events National and Transnational: 5 posts through social media channels and project website; 1 video
8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Assess sustainability and potential for scaling up the PoliRuralPlus model.	Regional: Number of initiatives derived from the RAP (e.g. projects, start-up, collaboration, associations, cooperatives, or innovative models)	Regional: 1 project plan; 1 seminar for the local actors; 1 memorandum of understanding with local stakeholders

Regarding the persistence and reliability of the defined data sources, the monitoring and evaluation system will rely on official, regularly updated, and institutionally validated datasets, ensuring both continuity and comparability over time. Key sources will include:

- Regional statistical offices (ISTAT, Regione Puglia – Sezione Osservatori e Statistica) for socio-economic indicators;
- Agricultural and rural development databases from AGEA, INPS, and the Puglia RDP Monitoring System for data on farms, certifications, and funding uptake;
- Project-based reporting tools, such as digital platforms and open-source monitoring dashboards developed during the project (e.g., for tracking digital adoption);
- EU programme evaluation reports and data from programmes like CSR 2023–2027, Horizon Europe, Interreg, etc.;
- Surveys and stakeholder feedback mechanisms conducted during and after implementation phases, ensuring qualitative insights are captured consistently.

To ensure data quality, all sources will be assessed based on criteria such as periodicity, institutional credibility, accessibility, and methodological transparency. Where needed, data collection protocols and responsibility assignments will be formalised among stakeholders to ensure sustained access and regular updates beyond the project lifecycle

7.2. Evaluation Mechanisms

The RAP action will be monitored and evaluated in relation to the activities and objectives set out in this document.

The evaluation mechanism will consist of the following:

1. Co-Design & initial Assessment

- Identification of key stakeholders (e.g. farmers, cooperatives, policy makers, regional actors) in defining main measures and priorities
- Identify and select a number of stakeholders/experts to join the Italian panel for the Regional Action Plan
- 1st meeting with the regional panel during the first year of the PoliRuralPlus project

2. Continuous Monitoring

- Integrate formative evaluation during project activities to support ongoing improvement.
- Gather feedback from the stakeholders involved in the focus groups, meetings, events, and other initiatives organized from and for the PoliRuralPlus project.
- 2nd meeting with the regional panel during the second year of the PoliRuralPlus project
- Adopt, if needed, any corrective measures to the initial Plan

3. Outcome Analysis

- Analyze whether and how the project contributed to the strengthening of short food supply chains in the target region/areas.
- Measure results against the initial baseline and objectives, especially in relation to policy measures, stakeholders' engagement and funding instruments that could strengthen rural-urban linkages in the territory
- 3rd meeting with the regional panel during the third year of the PoliRuralPlus project
- Document lessons learned and results for dissemination and potential replication.

8. Communication and Engagement

8.1. Stakeholder Involvement

Throughout the development and implementation of the Regional Action Plan (RAP), a multi-level stakeholder engagement strategy has been adopted to ensure broad participation and ownership. This includes targeted involvement of local communities, producer groups, cooperatives, Local Action Groups (GALs), business associations, universities, and public authorities. Engagement activities - such as focus groups, interviews, co-design workshops, and feedback consultations - have been structured around a participatory and inclusive approach, with attention to gender balance, youth, and marginalised rural actors.

To sustain stakeholder engagement in the medium and long term, several mechanisms are foreseen:

- Participatory processes, such as the creation of multi-stakeholder working groups or rural innovation clusters, which will remain active beyond the project's timeline;
- Embedding actions within local development strategies, especially through existing frameworks like the CSR 2023–2027 and GAL-led LEADER strategies, ensuring that stakeholders remain involved in implementation through familiar governance channels;
- Capacity-building initiatives (e.g., training, digital literacy, business model development) aimed at empowering local actors and increasing their ability to autonomously manage the proposed measures;
- Partnership agreements and public-private collaborations, which will be formalised where possible to ensure commitment and resource sharing in the long run;
- Monitoring and feedback systems, which include stakeholders in the evaluation of impact and the fine-tuning of ongoing actions.

As a result, it is expected that key actors who contributed to the short-term implementation of the RAP will continue to play an active role in the medium and long term. Their involvement will evolve from project participants to co-owners of processes, ensuring continuity, policy alignment, and a shared vision for sustainable rural development.

8.2. Awareness Campaigns

Lessons learned will be shared through a combination of structured dissemination activities, stakeholder dialogue, and open knowledge-sharing tools, with the goal of encouraging replication, synergy, and integration with complementary initiatives. Specifically:

- Public workshops and multi-actor forums will be organized and attended at regional and interregional level to present key findings, success stories, and tested solutions emerging from the RAP implementation;
- Policy briefs and summary documents will be drafted and circulated to institutional stakeholders, including regional and national authorities, to support evidence-based policy adjustments and align with broader strategies such as the CSR 2023-2027 or Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3);
- A dedicated digital repository or online section within the project or institutional website will host relevant materials (e.g., case studies, toolkits, monitoring dashboards), ensuring open access for practitioners, researchers, and policy actors;
- Collaboration with academic and research institutions (e.g., universities, innovation hubs) will enable integration of the RAP's outputs into training programmes, research projects, and rural innovation ecosystems;
- Participation in national and EU networks, such as EIP-AGRI or Ruract, will support the transregional diffusion of best practices and engagement with similar initiatives.

These activities aim to transform the RAP from a localised strategy into a catalyst for broader territorial innovation, fostering multi-level cooperation and long-term impact across regions and sectors.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Summary of Expected Impact

The Regional Action Plan (RAP) for strengthening the Apulian short food supply chain is structured around five key action areas. **Innovation and digitalization** encourage the adoption of advanced technologies, improved data literacy, and digital platforms that connect producers with consumers, enhancing sustainability, efficiency, and global visibility. **Training and workforce** development equip farmers and operators with the skills required for sustainable and digital agriculture, while strengthening technical consultancy networks to accelerate the transition towards responsible production models. **Networking and collaboration** foster producer-led partnerships, local markets, and public-private initiatives that integrate innovation with tradition, creating a more resilient agri-food ecosystem. **Marketing actions** reinforce the identity and value of Apulian products - especially olive oil, wine, and cheese - while leveraging experiential tourism to drive local economic growth. Finally, investments in **digital connectivity and infrastructure** aim to reduce territorial gaps, modernise logistics and transport, and improve market access for rural enterprises.

The intended outcomes of the RAP are designed to align with and strengthen existing policy frameworks. At the regional level, the plan directly contributes to the priorities of the CSR 2023–2027 and Apulia’s implementation of Italy’s CAP Strategic Plan, particularly in sustainable agriculture, short food supply chains (SFSC), digital transition, and generational renewal. It also supports the objectives of the Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) and the Regional Strategy for Sustainable Development, ensuring consistency with **long-term planning and resource allocation**.

Looking ahead, the RAP seeks to anchor these priorities within future CAP programmes by promoting dedicated funding measures. Particular emphasis will be placed on investments in **artificial intelligence for agriculture** and on resources for **capacity building** to strengthen the regional AKIS system.

At the EU level, the RAP is coherent with the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, and the Digital Europe Programme, thereby supporting sustainability, resilience, and innovation in rural territories.

Although the plan focuses on the agri-food sector and rural-urban linkages within the identified intervention area, its measures and processes are expected to generate positive spillover effects in multiple domains:

- a) **Territorial impact:** Improvements in rural infrastructure, advances in digitalisation, and enhanced market access strengthen interregional cooperation and improve service delivery, creating positive spillover effects for adjacent territories.
- b) **Economic impact:** The creation of new business models, support to agri-food startups, and promotion of local products will stimulate rural entrepreneurship and strengthen local economies, potentially inspiring replication in other regions.
- c) **Environmental impact:** The adoption of sustainable practices and efficient resource management (e.g., water, soil, carbon reduction) will contribute to climate goals, biodiversity protection, and long-term ecosystem resilience.
- d) **Social and institutional impact:** Through participatory governance and stakeholder empowerment, the RAP promotes a model of community-led rural innovation that could influence social cohesion, inclusion policies, and institutional practices elsewhere.

In this sense, the RAP is not only territorially grounded but also scalable and transferable, capable of contributing to broader strategies and inspiring integrated development approaches across sectors and regions.

9.2. Call to Action

Farms, food cooperatives, and agri-businesses:

They are the core of the SFSC model and essential for building stronger links between rural and urban areas. They need support to develop collaborative models not only among producers but also with consumers and the Ho.Re.Ca. sector. It is also important to guide them in using digital tools for production, logistics, and marketing, with the help of advisors, technology providers, and innovation centres.

Local Action Groups (LAGs):

LAGs can play a key role in promoting innovation and new business models through local initiatives and projects. They can connect farmers, innovation actors, and urban stakeholders. It is important to integrate current CAP funds with measures that can support these processes and help LAGs act as facilitators of change.

Advisors and AKIS actors:

Advisors and AKIS actors can help spread knowledge and good practices about SFSCs. They can guide farmers and cooperatives in adopting collaborative and digital models. More funding and training are needed to strengthen their capacity to support innovation at the local level.

Technology providers:

Technology providers can bring digital and AI-based solutions to improve SFSC efficiency and transparency. They should work closely with farmers, local communities, and urban markets to ensure that technologies are practical, affordable, and respond to real needs along the supply chain.

Researchers and innovation centres:

Researchers and innovation centres can test and adapt new solutions for SFSCs, working together with farmers and local actors. They can provide evidence, tools, and training to make innovation easier to apply in the field and to connect digital tools with sustainability goals.

Policy actors, regional and local agencies:

Public authorities can enable SFSC innovation by promoting local food systems and supporting digitalisation in agriculture. Municipal and regional administrations can adopt measures to encourage local food procurement (for example in schools and public canteens) and support the adaptation of CAP funds to emerging technologies that can support initiatives on short food chains.

10. Sustainability and extension of activities

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation	X		The current situation highlights key regional challenges and opportunities, especially regarding

			the sustainability of the agri-food sector, digitalisation, rural-urban connections, and stakeholder fragmentation.
<i>Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.</i>	x		Yes, issues such as uneven access to funding, gaps in digital skills, and long-term ownership of initiatives are recognised. The RAP proposes strategies to address them through inclusive governance and capacity building.
Vision and Strategic Goals	X		
<i>How well are your vision and strategic goals aligned with the main areas of sustainability: Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing? What is the main focus? (You may use the sustainability compass for guidance here: https://compassu.wordpress.com/introduction/)</i>	X		The RAP aligns with sustainability pillars: environmental sustainability (organic farming, resource efficiency), economic resilience (rural entrepreneurship), social inclusion (youth, women, marginalised areas), and wellbeing (short supply chains, quality food, digital services). Focus is on community-led transformation and rural-urban synergy.
Action Plan	X		Actions are designed to be sustained via integration into policy tools (e.g. CSR 2023–2027), support from LAGs, cooperatives, and local authorities, and through digital and organizational capacity strengthening.
<i>- How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained?</i>	x		By embedding them into regional strategies (e.g., LEADER, RIS3), leveraging long-term funding mechanisms, and assigning follow-up roles to existing institutions and networks.
<i>- Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future?</i>	x		LAGs, producer organisations, local municipalities, digital service providers, and academic institutions will share ownership of key actions and outputs.
Policy and Funding Alignment	X		

- Do the stakeholders/actors have access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP?	X		Some of the stakeholders have access, others have more difficulties in accessing appropriate financial resources.
- Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms?	X		There already different funding mechanism, it is important to foster the implementation of those already in place.
Communication and Engagement	X		The RAP includes strategies for continuous stakeholder engagement via working groups, LAG networks, training, and digital tools.
- What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?	x		Participatory governance structures, integration into local policies, and the use of regional rural development networks (e.g. LAGs) are key for sustaining engagement.
- Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?	x		Yes, many actors have confirmed their intention to maintain involvement through existing programmes and collaborative models beyond the project timeline.
- How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?	x		Via public events, policy briefs, digital repositories, participation in EU networks, and cooperation with academic institutions.
Conclusion	x		
- Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?			The RAP is aligned with CSR 2023–2027, the Green Deal, Farm to Fork Strategy, and Apulia’s RIS3 and sustainable development plans.
- Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?	x		There is the potential to influence different sectors, such as: digitalisation, environmental sustainability, tourism, logistics, and community engagement models are expected to benefit from and contribute to the ripple effects of RAP measures.



Regional Action Plan

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Background

The Mallusjoki region is sparsely populated and ageing. However, it still has considerable potential for community-led local development (CLLD), particularly in cultural and event tourism.

The Finnish pilot region is called Mallusjoki. The Mallusjoki region is part of the municipality of Orimattila, the province of Päijät-Häme (NUTS2) and the region of Southern Finland (NUTS1).



The driving force behind the Mallusjoki region is the Mallusjoki Youth Association, which is the consortium partner.

The Mallusjoki region is a representative and typical Finnish region. There are more than 100 similar regions in the province of Päijät-Häme and more than 3000 in the whole of Finland.

Demographics and socio-economics

The Päijät-Häme region¹ has a population density of 68 inhabitants per square kilometre. The ageing index, which means population 65+ / population 0-14, is 115. The youth

¹ There is no statistics from Mallusjoki region because it's not a public administration area

dependency ratio, which means population 0-14 / population 15-64 (lower means fewer dependents), is 34. The urbanisation rate in the province is almost 60%. In the rural areas of the province of Päijät-Häme, the trend is that the population is steadily decreasing, with more people moving out than moving in.

Multi-locality means that instead of living in one fixed place, people spend their working and leisure time in several places, moving between them. In Mallusjoki, there are many summer cottages, which increases the possibility of living partly in the region and partly, for example, in the capital region. The number of multi-local inhabitants is not known.

Agriculture and the forest landscape, as well as traditional and cultural events that reflect the community spirit and intellectual landscape of the inhabitants, are typical common features of Mallusjoki region.

People-place bond building - children, youngsters, newcomers

The mission of the Mallusjoki Youth Association is to build a sense of community and a bond between people and place, from children to silver citizens. For children, the association has set up hobby groups for circus, sports and theatre. The region's children and young people are also heavily involved as volunteers in rural events.

As part of the PoliRuralPlus project, young people in the region have been conducting intergenerational interviews with older people in the area. The interviews are recorded on video and translated into English, again by the young people. The aim of the intergenerational work and discussions is to foster a sense of community, record the history of the village and promote a sense of place among young people.

Community-led local development (CLLD) in the Mallusjoki region

The Mallusjoki pilot project embodies the principles of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) through its participatory, multi-actor approach, which is integrated within the PoliRuralPlus initiative. CLLD is a bottom-up development model that empowers local communities to identify their priorities, design tailored solutions, and select projects that address their specific needs. While the process demands time and sustained engagement, even modest financial investments can yield significant social and economic benefits, sparking new ideas, encouraging collaboration, and strengthening local resilience. In Mallusjoki region, the CLLD approach cultivates grassroots innovation, shared responsibility, and strong people–place connections, enhancing collective ownership and social cohesion across the community.

Rural cultural events and creative arts

The Mallusjoki Youth Association has been organising rural cultural events in the village of Mallusjoki since 1902. The society is mainly based in the clubhouse built in 1917. It's estimated that the association's events attract more than 4000 visitors and guests to the area every year.

All the work is done by Mallusjoki region volunteers with a relaxed attitude and a big heart. We aim to maintain the spirit of fun and to enliven the countryside by bringing quality performers and cultural experiences to the people. We do not aim to make a profit, but if there is any money left over, we use it to organise activities and events for children and young people.

Since 1992, every summer the highlight event - TAKINKÄÄNTÖVIKKO - has been held in the village of Mallusjoki in Orimattila! Singing, games, dancing, food and drink to get you in the mood!

TAKKARI-CLUB is located in the rural surroundings of the idyllic Mallusjoki clubhouse, where you can experience the summer festival atmosphere of TAKINKÄÄNTÖVIKKO in the company of well-known artists all year round. In addition, there is always something local, something from Orimattila. Either in the form of a performer, food or drink. Local products can be food from local producers, local microbreweries, bands from the village, etc. In addition to the farmhouse spirit, the rustic and small-scale atmosphere, the intimacy and informality of a small place are important themes for us.

The visual appearance of the TAKKARI-CLUB is the work of local sculptor Tapani Kokko. He is also a man of the village. Tapani has designed and created the club's logo, signs, decorations and other elements.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

Mallusjoki's Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach promotes cultural exchange and economic growth by creating a rural event economy.

Mallusjoki pilot's main theme is event tourism, and more specifically rural event tourism in the creative sector. Event tourism is essentially any tourism that relates to events. Events come in all shapes and sizes- they can be large scale events or small events, private events or public events. Rural event tourism can bring income and visibility to the community and the surrounding ecosystem adding vibrancy and economic viability of the rural area at large. The main theme of rural event tourism can be broken down into 3 sub-themes:

Theme 1: *Cultural heritage and creative arts*

Description: Building territorial identities and a sense of community, as well as improving access to a valorised cultural heritage and cultural life to enhance the attractiveness and vitality of the region.

Theme 2: *Tourism, specifically Rural Event Industry in the creative sector*

Description: Emphasis on rural event tourism in the creative sector aims to build a thriving Rural Event Industry Ecosystem. By engaging local and regional stakeholders, leveraging cultural and natural assets, and fostering urban-rural interactions, the pilot aims to create a vibrant ecosystem that not only attracts urban visitors but also empowers the local community by enhancing their cultural identity and economic opportunities.

Theme 3: *Entrepreneurship and innovation*

Description: Aiming to foster a dynamic ecosystem of entrepreneurship and innovation, leveraging the unique assets and opportunities within the Mallusjoki region to drive economic growth and sustainability. In the 2024 Finnish Entrepreneurs' Municipal Barometer survey, Orimattila was ranked as the most business-friendly municipality in the Päijät-Häme region. The city has invested heavily in fostering collaboration with entrepreneurs and providing them with the best opportunities for success².

The preliminary concept of the Rural Event Industry Ecosystem is shown in Figure 1.

² <https://orimattila.fi/orimattila-nousi-maakunnan-yrittysystavallisimmaksi-kunnaksi/>

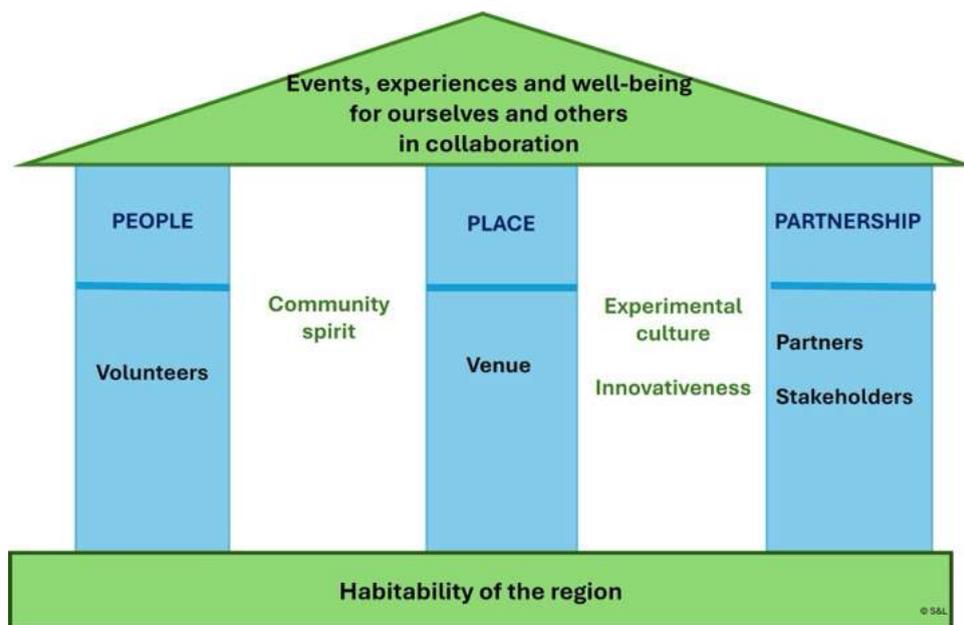


Figure 1: Mallusjoki Rural Event Industry Ecosystem concept

Mallusjoki pilot objectives are:

1. **Strengthen community engagement and intergenerational knowledge transfer** by empowering local actors to co-create the Mallusjoki vision 2040, actively participate in rural-urban cooperation, and provide constructive feedback to multi-level governance (local to EU).
2. **Activate and consolidate the Rural Event Industry Ecosystem** to enhance the flow of people, information and resources between rural and urban areas, while raising the profile of Mallusjoki as a cultural innovation hub.
3. **Transform the clubhouse into a Green Cultural Centre by 2030** as a flagship space for cultural heritage, innovation, sustainability, and experimental practices that attract regional, national, and EU-level attention.
4. **Pilot Smart Village solutions** in energy, mobility, and digital services to showcase sustainable rural living, increase habitability, and strengthen human skills, digital capacities, and engagement within the community.
5. **Build strategic rural-urban partnerships** with Helsinki, Lahti, and EU networks, leveraging cross-regional cooperation to secure resources, scale up initiatives, and foster socio-environmental resilience and sustainable growth.

The table 1 below shows how the Mallusjoki pilot is contributing to Long-Term Rural Vision for the EU's Rural Areas up to 2040 (LRTV) in different rural development sectors. H= high contribution, M=medium contribution, L=low contribution.

Table 1: LRTV in Mallusjoki pilot

Impact areas	Stronger	Connected	Resilient	Prosperous
Tourism		Rural Event		Rural Event Industry

Impact areas	Stronger	Connected	Resilient	Prosperous
		Industry (H); MAA ³ (H)		(H); MAA (H)
Culture and arts		Rural Event Industry (H); MAA (H) Communication (H)		Rural Event Industry (H); MAA (H)
Physical Infrastructure	CLub house (L); Promote habitability, vibrancy, and rural economies (H)	MAA (H)	CLub house (L); Promote habitability, vibrancy, and rural economies (H)	Promote habitability, vibrancy, and rural economies (H)
Environment & climate	Waste management (M); Local food circle (H)	MAA (H)	Waste management (M); Local food (H); Energy efficiency (M); CLub house (L);	
Community empowerment and Comprehensive Security^{4 5}	MAA (H)	MAA (H)	MAA (H); Promote habitability, vibrancy, and rural economies (H)	MAA (H)

1.3 Methodology - Integrated Concept Matrix Approach

The Mallusjoki pilot employs an integrated methodological approach that combines regional development, foresight, PoliRuralPlus digital tools and multi-actor collaboration. This approach is referred to as the **Integrated Concept Matrix**, and involves linking together the phases of the foresight process and the tools and methods used.

Foresight Process Phases	Foresight Toolbox: Tools And Methods
Preparation and scoping Diagnosis and exploration Co-development of vision, action plan and roadmap	Core Methodological Framework (WP3) Digital Infrastructure (WP4) Participatory Layer (WP5)

³ Multi-Actor Approach

⁴ Comprehensive security, <https://turvallisuskomitea.fi/en/comprehensive-security/>

⁵ Comprehensive security, for society, <https://turvallisuskomitea.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Security-strategy-for-society-Leaflet.pdf>

Implementation, monitoring, and learning	KPI & Evaluation Framework (project) Ethical AI and GenAI Integration (project) ⁶
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Integrated Concept Matrix forms a hybrid system that supports analysis, co-creation, decision-making and long-term learning. All key activities in the Mallusjoki pilot, from the analysis of the current state to the 2040 vision, action plan and roadmap, are grounded in this matrix.

Integrated Concept Matrix: Foresight Process × Foresight Toolbox

Foresight Process Phase	Core Methodological Framework (WP3)	Digital Infrastructure / Tools (WP4)	Participatory Layer (WP5)	KPI & Evaluation Framework	Ethical AI & GenAI Integration
1. Preparation & Scoping	Needs gathering, stakeholder mapping, drivers' identification, institutional review i.e. Rural Action Plan (RAP) Methodology. Provides the analytical grammar of "what to explore and why."	Provides access to baseline datasets, attractiveness layers, institutional datasets, AI-assisted work awareness scanning. Supports early diagnostics.	Multi-Actor Approach (MAA) onboarding; identification of stakeholders; first outreach & inclusivity mapping.	KPIs for stakeholder engagement readiness, data completeness, and process baselines.	AI-assisted horizon scanning; automated stakeholder clustering; ethical guidelines for data use and participation.
2. Diagnosis & Exploration	Deep dives, SWOT, MoSCoW, drivers analysis, advantages analysis, enablers analysis, PESTLE, trend/trajjectory analysis, exploratory scenarios. Ensures rigorous thinking and regional specificity.	Toolbox modules for scenario simulations, geospatial analytics, attractiveness modelling, AI-driven pattern detection.	Workshops for problem framing; co-analysis sessions; thematic focus groups; participatory scenario exploration.	Diagnostic KPIs (pressures, opportunities, baseline indicators). Consistency checks across regions.	GenAI support for generating scenario narratives, translating technical outputs into stakeholder-friendly formats. Bias checks and transparency logs.
3. Co-development of Vision, Action Plan & Roadmap	Vision building methods, policy options exploration, strategic choice structuring, mission-oriented foresight workflow.	DSS tools supporting option comparison, roadmap builders, intervention modelling, visual analytics for trade-offs.	Co-creation workshops, MAA-enabled feedback loops, participatory prioritisation, dual-role actor engagement.	Vision KPIs, strategic alignment KPIs, expected impact pathways. Early monitoring baseline for RAP actions.	AI-assisted vision synthesis, action-plan drafting support, structured deliberation tools ensuring traceability and fairness.
4. Implementation, Monitoring & Learning	Continuous foresight practice, learning loops, policy iteration, reflexive governance.	Real-time monitoring dashboards, KPI tracking modules, alerts, data feeds, impact visualisation.	Stakeholder validation cycles, community reporting, iterative consultations, ecosystem engagement.	Full KPI framework for transformation monitoring: stakeholder KPIs, impact KPIs, dissemination KPIs, exploitation KPIs.	Ethical AI for monitoring interpretation, anomaly detection, narrative synthesis for policymakers. Ensures explainability of results.

2. Analysis of Current Situation

2.1 State of the Art

Driving local transformation through strong community spirit, innovation and cultural heritage

The approach of the Mallusjoki pilot project is to explore the rural landscape attributes such as current state, opportunities, barriers, strengths and vulnerabilities etc. from ten (10) different perspectives. The 10 deep dives revealed high **visitor satisfaction, strong volunteerism, but also gaps in digital skills and infrastructure**. The results of the deep dives are presented in table 2 below.

⁶ In the third year of the PoliRuralPlus project, the integration of ethical AI and GenAI will be further embedded into practical rural foresight work.

Table2: Exploration into Rural Event Industry Ecosystem success factors

Deep dive	Current state
1: Build up a rural-urban stakeholder panel and a rural event industry ecosystem	<p>The main policy actors are the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finnish Food Authority and regional Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. The system includes local action groups such as LEADER-groups, universities and research institutes, and village associations. The village of Mallusjoki or the Mallusjoki region has no legal status and therefore its direct influence is limited to the production of culture and art on its own initiative.</p> <p>The ecosystem comprises more than 1000 people, covering local, regional and interregional as well as national scope, representing society in accordance with the quadruple helix model and multi-actor approach. The most important members of the ecosystem are the customers who visit Mallusjoki events and the service and product providers (Deep dive 6). The PoliRuralPlus stakeholder panel (23 people) is part of the ecosystem of the Mallusjoki rural events industry.</p>
2: Acquire funding for the Mallusjoki Rural Event Industry Ecosystem development	<p>According to the Mallusjoki Youth Association decision (September 2024), external funding will be used mainly for renovation and improvement of the clubhouse and other premises (Deep dive 4).</p>
3: Build capacity on Mallusjoki Event Industry Ecosystem operators	<p>Based on internal (Mallusjoki Youth Association) discussions and analysis, the following three skill gaps have been identified in the Mallusjoki rural event industry ecosystem. The ecosystem consists of Mallusjoki Youth Association operators, village volunteers in the region and other stakeholders who have an influence on the future of the rural event industry in the region.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of digital skills among rural actors, such as AI; 2. The need for project management skills development; 3. Need for enhanced strategic development skills.
4: Functional, safe and energy efficient premises of Mallusjoki Youth Association	<p>The 100-year-old club house is the hub of Mallusjoki's events and a meeting place for people from the community. Each year the house has been used extensively for events that are either the club's own (including the club's hobby activities), collaborative events, or personal - or family - events of individuals.</p> <p>Without a functional, safe and up-to-date house, the club's activities are at stake.</p>
5: Ensure and bolster Mallusjoki community members' engagement and skills	<p>According to the survey, the most important factors contributing to a sense of community were the spirit of the community, the atmosphere, the warm welcome and the experience of being welcome. However, ongoing work to engage children, young people and newcomers requires effort.</p>
6: Marketing and communication towards stakeholders, inhabitants, customers and guests	<p>Based on the survey, the top 5 reasons to attend Takkari Club nights are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unique atmosphere + incredible atmosphere Great performers + immediate contact with the performers + quality music Intimate, immediate atmosphere + warm welcome + intimate + people-oriented The friendliness of the volunteers and the wonder at the spirit of the volunteers Diversity of the venue + personal atmosphere + rustic ambience
7: Understand and develop rural-urban	<p>The vision for 2040 is that the Mallusjoki will be a liveable area, where a thriving rural event industry will promote interaction between rural and urban areas.</p>

<p>interactions through improved provision and services</p>	<p>EVENT MARKETING: Rural-urban interaction means that music and cultural events on the Mallusjoki will attract visitors and customers from around 100 km around the Mallusjoki. This perimeter includes both urban and rural areas. Thus, people from urban areas travel to events on the Mallusjoki. According to the studies and the best estimate based on them, at least 50% of the guests at the events come from urban areas in southern Finland.</p> <p>STRATEGIC COOPERATION: Interaction between rural and urban areas also means that the Mallusjoki Youth Society is forging partnerships and building cooperation with operators in the surrounding urban areas (e.g. Helsinki and Lahti). The actors may represent creative sectors, event organisers and public service providers. Such strategic cooperation will result in the joint production of events in the Mallusjoki.</p> <p>PURCHASING MATERIALS AND SERVICES: the Mallusjoki events industry buys products and services from the surrounding areas, including the nearby city regions, for its own events. This flow of materials is a key element in the cooperation and interaction between rural and urban areas.</p>
<p>8: Foster the uptake of Smart Village concept</p>	<p>The Mallusjoki Steering Group's decision is that the Mallusjoki Youth Association will start the Smart Village concept preparation.</p>
<p>9: Habitability and comprehensive security^{7 8} of the Mallusjoki region</p>	<p><u>Habitability project</u> in co-operation with EU project Asuttava Päijät-Häme which is managed by the Local Action Group Päijänne Leader. The findings will be ready by 12/2025.</p> <p><u>Comprehensive security & cross-checking village security</u></p> <p>The current strengths and opportunities in Mallusjoki are a strong local commitment and good cooperation with the municipality of Orimattila to identify threats and solutions. The challenges are the ageing population and the trend towards underutilised infrastructure and decreasing availability of services, including health, mobility and digital skills and infrastructure.</p>
<p>10. Societal influencing and democracy</p>	<p>The level of citizen activity in Mallusjoki is exemplary and highly organised. The community initiates the development of its own area and demonstrates a strong capacity to influence decision-making at multiple governance levels, from municipal to regional and national. Local stakeholders actively contribute to the implementation of PoliRuralPlus objectives, including enhancing liveability, encouraging volunteering, supporting youth engagement and fostering entrepreneurship.</p> <p>Mallusjoki is a prime example of the 'Dual-Role Multi-Actor Approach', in which civil society acts as both a beneficiary and a driver of change. Residents are both recipients of policies and co-creators of strategies, bridging the gap between community-level needs and institutional frameworks.</p>

2.2 Key Challenges

Infrastructure & Venues; Demographics & Community Vitality; Skills & Capacity; Digitalisation & Innovation; Finance & Sustainability

⁷ Comprehensive security, <https://turvallisuskomitea.fi/en/comprehensive-security/>

⁸ Comprehensive security, for society, <https://turvallisuskomitea.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Security-strategy-for-society-Leaflet.pdf>

The Mallusjoki Rural Event Industry Ecosystem faces significant challenges that constrain its future growth and development. The key challenges are:

- Limited infrastructure (aging and small clubhouse, need for modern Green Cultural Centre)
- Ageing population and declining rural services
- Volunteer fatigue and shortage of younger skilled organisers
- Digitalisation gaps (AI nor data-driven event management not yet widely adopted)
- Funding fragmentation and reliance on short-term grants

Together, these factors pose a serious constraint on Mallusjoki's ability to position itself as a vibrant, future-oriented rural event hub.

2.3 Opportunities

Rustic rural festivals and year-round tourism supported by strong community sense

Mallusjoki region community sense is the driving force to upkeep and develop community - driven transformation.

- Smart Village testbed for piloting solutions in mobility, energy, and digital platforms to showcase innovation and sustainability.
- Rural-urban tourism cooperation strengthens links with Helsinki and Lahti, attracting visitors and customers from a 100 km radius.
- Cultural and creative industries expansion to build on the niche yet attractive Mallusjoki brand of music and cultural events to grow the sector⁹.
- Year-round event tourism to extend activities through the Takkari-Club concept, winter events, and hybrid/virtual formats.
- EU Green Deal alignment to advance renewable energy, waste management, and local food sourcing to enhance sustainability and visibility.
- Community cohesion and identity to leverage the strong sense of belonging and collective spirit as a driving force for transformation and resilience.

2.3.1 Stakeholder Readiness and Ownership of Planned Measures

Stakeholders in the Mallusjoki region have demonstrated a strong willingness to take responsibility for and ownership of the planned measures. This is evidenced by high levels of engagement, formalised cooperation agreements and clearly defined roles across sectors. As the local coordinating entity, the Mallusjoki Youth Association (MYA) plays a central role in driving implementation, supported by a broad network of local actors, including the City of Orimattila, Päijänne Leader local action group, entrepreneurs, cultural organisations and academic institutions.

A robust multi-actor approach underpins stakeholder readiness. Volunteer targets are ambitious yet realistic, with over 200 community members expected to contribute by 2040. Local businesses have expressed a commitment to

⁹ <https://youtu.be/RaqZqXtpWck>

co-developing services and experiences, while educational and innovation organisations are providing capacity building to ensure that stakeholders remain equipped to fulfil their responsibilities.

This ownership is further reinforced through institutional alignment with regional policy frameworks, such as the Päijät-Häme Strategy 2050+, and European policy frameworks, such as the Green Deal and the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.

2.4 Gender and Diversity Dimensions

2.4.1 Demographic and Social Context

The MYA (Mallusjoki Youth Association) pilot operates within the challenging demographic landscape of rural Finland, particularly in the Päijät-Häme region, characterised by an ageing population, youth outmigration, and strong urban pull factors. These trends threaten the continuity of community life, local entrepreneurship, and civic engagement.

The core group of the Mallusjoki pilot is locally rooted and relatively homogeneous, reflecting the small-village composition typical of Southern Finland. However, the Regional Action Plan (RAP) deliberately aims to extend participation and foster Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) by engaging a more diverse range of stakeholders, including young people, families, migrants, and minority groups, through the **Rural Event Industry Ecosystem** (over 1,000 participants) and a **stakeholder panel** (23 members).

2.4.2 Socio-Economic Participation and Rural-Urban Dimension

Local gender dynamics mirror broader national patterns in rural Finland.

- Women are highly active in voluntary community work and cultural initiatives, partly because family-friendly volunteering allows combining civic participation with childcare and domestic responsibilities.
- Men, by contrast, tend to work in agriculture, forestry, construction, or commute to nearby urban centres such as Lahti, which limits their involvement in local associations and social governance.

This division reinforces a gendered participation gap: women dominate the social and cultural sectors, while men remain underrepresented in community leadership and civic decision-making.

The reliance on family-based voluntary structures also unintentionally excludes young singles, migrants, or individuals without strong local roots, narrowing the diversity of voices influencing local priorities. The RAP recognises this imbalance and introduces targeted actions to create more flexible, interest-based participation models.

A significant innovation in the pilot is the integration of **Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital tools** into community planning, communication, and content creation. This strategy lowers participation barriers for **digitally-native youth** and facilitates hybrid rural-urban collaboration by connecting rural actors with academic and policy partners located in urban centres.

The RAP's **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)** strategy provides a platform for inclusive governance, connecting local residents with regional and national initiatives such as LEADER programmes and Smart Village

projects. Through the Multi-Actor Approach (MAA), the pilot encourages dual-role engagement, where rural actors are both contributors to and beneficiaries of policy processes, ensuring that gender and diversity dimensions are systematically reflected in planning, implementation, and evaluation.

2.4.3 Existing Policies and Strategic Integration

The Mallusjoki pilot aligns its actions with key Finnish and European policy frameworks:

- Finnish Equality Act (609/1986) and Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014), mandating equal treatment and proactive inclusion.
- Youth Act (1285/2016), promoting intergenerational participation and youth empowerment.
- EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, encouraging gender-sensitive and inclusive rural revitalisation.

2.4.4 Operationalisation through KPIs

The pilot translates identified demographic and participation imbalances into measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) consistent with the PoliRuralPlus framework:

- Gender equality target: Achieve balanced participation — 50% women and 50% men — in volunteer and civic activities by 2040.
- Generational inclusion: Ensure that 30% of active volunteers are under 30 years old, supported by targeted youth engagement, training, and digital co-creation methods.
- Structural diversity: Broaden stakeholder composition across the Quadruple Helix — Community, Academia, Industry, and Government — ensuring that different knowledge domains, age groups, and cultural perspectives are represented in decision-making.

2.4.5 Summary of Challenges and Enablers

Opportunities:

- AI-supported engagement tools to attract young people.
- Flexible volunteering models that are family-inclusive.
- Quadruple Helix stakeholder diversity and digital participation.

Challenges:

- An ageing population and youth outmigration.
- The gendered division of labour in rural communities.
- Limited representation of men, migrants and single people in community governance.

3. Vision and Strategic Goals

3.1 Vision Statement

Mallusjoki is a vibrant rural creative hub where culture, community, and collaboration generate everyday vitality and long-term resilience.

Building on its strong events ecosystem and active volunteer networks, the village strengthens its identity while serving as a model for participatory rural development.

Mallusjoki remains a place where people come together to create cultural value, support one another, and shape a thriving future.

Expected Impact by 2040:

- Mallusjoki region has become a global destination for rural events and cultural tourism.
- Strong community spirit, cooperation and economic opportunities arise from rural event tourism.
- Social cohesion and territorial identity are strengthened across rural and urban areas.

RAP Outline:

- **Short-term Objectives:** Promote habitability (Deep dive 9), enhance premises (Deep dive 4), and develop partnerships between rural communities and urban areas through rural events.
- **Actions:** Promote habitability (Deep dive 9), build community spirit, local collaboration and capacity for organizing events, attract visitors through event tourism, and promote economic opportunities and digital innovations in rural areas.
- **Long-Term Strategies:** Strengthen the capacity of the rural event industry by enhancing infrastructure and services in alignment with the Smart Village concept, transforming venues into a **Green Cultural Centre**. Foster community spirit by promoting year-round tourism. Developing strategic urban-rural cooperation agreements with key urban centers such as Helsinki, Lahti, and regional hubs, and establishing a coordinated tourism strategy to attract urban residents to rural events (Deep dive 7).

3.2 Strategic Goals by 2040

- Host 12+ annual events with 10,000+ visitors by 2040
- Achieve 100% renewable energy and zero-waste certification by 2035
- Train 200+ volunteers, with 30% under age 30
- Contribute to the establishment of 10+ new rural businesses by 2040
- Establish 5 international partnerships in rural events and cultural tourism

4. Action Plan

4.1 Measures and Actions

4.1.1 Intervention Areas during the project time frame

The following areas, sectors or domains need an intervention:

- Carry out the analysis of the state of the art in Mallusjoki region.
- Identify and engage stakeholders, and build the rural event industry ecosystem.
- Explore and understand Mallusjoki region habitability and strengthen people-place bonds.
- Develop Mallusjoki Rural Event Industry Ecosystem concept.
- Initiate the renovation of the Green Cultural Centre.

- Empower people with digital know-how, hands-on skills, and the drive to explore.

4.1.2 Actions

Table 3 below lists the **actions and outcomes achieved so far** in each area of intervention. These actions are necessary to achieve our vision. They are based on the current situation analysis (see Chapter 2.1) and the Mallusjoki team's assessment of feasibility. The key actions were confirmed through **multi-stakeholder consultation** and by the **Mallusjoki Youth Association's steering committee**, making them highly practical and specific.

Table3: Actions and outcome

Action	Steps	Responsible	Time-frame	Readiness level
Analysis of the Mallusjoki region current state through 9 Deep Dives (See table 2)				
Map stakeholders and ecosystem	Identify and engage stakeholders for the PoliRuralPlus project (23 pcs) and the ecosystem actors (1000+ pcs) (Deep dive 1). Ecosystem actors include paying customers of rural events, as well as visitors and guests of the region, such as summer visitors. Mallusjoki Pilot and Mallusjoki Youth Association is an active body that promotes a multi-actor and participatory approach in all possible occasions such as volunteer work, event planning and organisation, ecosystem building. Outcome: 23 multi-actor stakeholders mapped and engaged. Over 1,000 ecosystem actors reached out and made contact.	MYA	1-12/2024	100 %
Desk work to collect data	Desk work on external funding (Deep dive 2), community premises (Deep dive 4), capacity building of ecosystem actors (Deep dive 3). Outcome: data gathering to 3 deep dives	SML MYA	1-12/2024	100 %
Consult stakeholders and ecosystem to collect data	1 survey of rural event clients (Deep dive 6); 2 surveys of community volunteers (Deep dive 5); 3 surveys on rural-urban interaction in the context of rural events (Deep dive 7); 4 consulting meetings on Smart Village concept (Deep dive 8). Outcome: 6 surveys and 4 consulting meetings	MYA SML	1-6/2024	100 %
Analyse the current state	Analyse the collected data, communicate the findings, decide or suggest strategies and define the actions. Outcome: 10 deep dives	MYA SML	7-12/2024	100 %
AI and data	Test the PoliRuralPlus Adviser and explore AI powered tools e.g. Jackdaw in the context of deep dives, data	MYA SML	7-12/2024	100 %

Action	Steps	Responsible	Time-frame	Readiness level
	collection and analysis. Outcome: 2 test cases (Adviser, Vulture)			
Mallusjoki region habitability				
People-place bond	Strengthen young people's connection to the area, e.g. intergenerational video project ¹⁰ and involvement in rural events. Outcome: 2 videos and 10+ youngsters contributed to the rural event organisation	MYA	1-12/2024	100 %
Consult stakeholders to collect data	Series of 7 innovation workshops (Deep dive 9) about habitability of the region. Cooperation and synergy with another EU project which is Asuttava Päijät-Häme, led by Päijänne-LEADER ¹¹ . Outcome: 7 habitability innovation workshops with 50+ participants.	MYA SML	1-6/2025	100 %
Analyse the current state of habitability	Analyse the collected data, communicate the findings, decide or suggest strategies, and define the actions. The use of applications, data and AI is included. Outcome: 1 internal report (Deep dive 9). 1 open access report by Päijänne-LEADER led synergy project Habitable Päijät-Häme. Two (2) dissemination events jointly organised.	MYA SML	7-12/2025	100 %
Go Mallusjoki - Ideathon for needs	Carry out an ideathon to gather inhabitants, guests and visitors ideas for Mallusjoki region development. Outcome: Analysis of ideas. The results are shared in an in-person event in November 2025, and through website and social media.	Avoinry	7-12/2025	100%
Rural Event Industry Ecosystem concept development in years 2024-2027¹²				
New event format design Development and innovation actions	<u>General Plan for the Event schedule:</u> In 2024, 4000+ visitors and guest in 10 events In 2025, 4000+ visitors and guest in 10 events In 2026, 4000+ visitors and guest in 10 events In 2027, 4000+ visitors and guest in 10 events ¹³ <u>Outcome: New event format design in 2024 and 2025</u> <u>2024 - 7 new formats or innovations</u>	MYA	2024 and 2025	100%

¹⁰ Project KPI no 15

¹¹ Communication KPI related to the task 7.3

¹² Impact KPI - Establishment of at least 19 rural-urban innovation hubs across different regions.

¹³ Project KPI no 6

Action	Steps	Responsible	Time-frame	Readiness level
	<p>7 new rural events designed and piloted^{14 15}. They attract new guests and visitors to the region.</p> <p>2025 - 3 new formats One (1) new rural event format for paying customers designed and piloted in 2025^{16 17}. Two (2) new community event formats for guests, inhabitants and volunteers piloted in 2025.</p> <p>2025 - 9 actions for innovation and development Seven (9) innovation and development events for inhabitants carried out in 2025</p> <p>Notifications The total volume of the events is not going to increase, it has reached its maximum in the current premises and facilities (Deep dive 4). The new rural events 2025 and 2026 described at deep dive 7 a.k.a Deep dive 7.</p>			
Event Promotion	<p>1. Mobilisation sub-project - Go Mallusjoki! to advance event promotion.</p> <p>2. Involvement of Young People as an Underrepresented Group in Community Development</p> <p>A youth-led marketing strategy will be developed for rural festivals and the Mallusjoki Youth Association. The strategy will be designed by local youngsters under the guidance of the Mallusjoki pilot team. Plans include establishing a social media channel managed by the youth. Prior to its launch, a training session on social media use will be organised in cooperation with Päijänne-Leader, featuring an invited influencer or content creator as an expert speaker. This initiative aims to enhance youth participation in community development and strengthen digital communication capacities in the region.</p> <p>3. Establishing a Coherent Website Planning Procedure for the Takkari Club Concept</p> <p>The establishment of a dedicated website provides a central platform for communication and information sharing related to the Takkari Club concept. It enhances</p>	<p>Avoinry</p> <p>MYA</p> <p>MYA</p>	<p>6-12/2025</p> <p>10/2025 - 6/2026</p> <p>02/2026 -</p>	<p>100%</p> <p>20%</p> <p>50%</p>

¹⁴ Project KPI no 7

¹⁵ Impact KPI - The project aims to develop 10 of new or improved products, services, practices or models

¹⁶ Project KPI no 7

¹⁷ Impact KPI - The project aims to develop 10 of new or improved products, services, practices or models

Action	Steps	Responsible	Time-frame	Readiness level
	<p>visibility, supports stakeholder engagement, and ensures transparent dissemination of activities and results. Furthermore, the website contributes to long-term sustainability by serving as a digital tool for promoting cooperation, knowledge exchange, and regional development beyond the project’s duration.</p> <p>4. Investigate the option to digitalise rural event management</p> <p>The scope includes exploring the use of applications, open data and AI, for example testing data- and AI-driven event management platforms for logistics, ticketing and feedback analysis. This action may cover the development of an official calendar of rural events.</p> <p>Outcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Go!Mallusjoki sub-project is completed 	MYA	3/2026-6/2026	5%
Rural Event Industry Ecosystem Development	<p>Mallusjoki pilot fosters strategic partnerships with Mallusjoki Youth Association and stakeholders and between stakeholders to promote the development of the Mallusjoki region in the context of the Mallusjoki Rural Event Industry Ecosystem. The partnership is confirmed by a signed Memorandum of Understanding.</p> <p>MYA has introduced a new concept called the 'Local Food Circle'. It promotes the local food supply and culture, as well as networking and cooperation among food producers (farmers and food processors). This concept enhances the Mallusjoki event's service portfolio. As well as music, we now offer good food experiences too. It has been tested 2025 and will be validated in 2026.</p> <p>Mallusjoki pilot actively supports new innovations and business establishments in Mallusjoki region through peer-support and cooperation¹⁸.</p> <p>Outcome - Partnerships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 Memorandum of Understanding signed 2024¹⁹ <p>Outcome - new emerging innovations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 in 2024: Local Food Circle established 1 in 2025: Local Food Circle tested <p>Outcome - enterprises mapped in the region</p> <p>The pilot has developed an application which can be used</p>	MYA SML	2024-2027	70%

¹⁸ Project KPI no 4

¹⁹ Impact KPI

Action	Steps	Responsible	Time-frame	Readiness level
	to monitor regional new and existing enterprises. The link to the application is: https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMTNkOTNjZTMtNDI2ZC00YmU0LWE2NTQtOWEwNzljOGExMTEzliwidCI6ImM4NTBmZTljLWl0NmMtNGlyZC1iODYzLTAxZmEyYTg5ODAzOCIsImMiOiJh9			
Green Cultural Centre²⁰				
Waste management facilities	Sustainable waste management in event industry ²¹ : Biowaste treatment is being updated. Practices relating to the supply of food and drink at events are audited, and consequently, recycling methods in kitchens and at events are updated and improved. Outcome: the waste management system is audited and improved 8/2025. The new systems are in use.	MYA	08/2025	100%
Energy Efficiency	Energy efficiency measures: an air Deep dive heat pump installed; all front doors replaced to improve energy efficiency; roof maintenance. The measures are co-funded by Päijänne-Leader. Outcome: Measures completed by 10/2025. The new systems are in use.	MYA	10/2025	100%
Renovation and new premises	The planning of the Green Cultural Centre begins in line with the EU's long-term rural vision action (LTRVA), Green Deal and NEB. The use of applications, open data data sets and AI is included. Outcome: The kick-off meeting in the context of Develop-Open-Call is scheduled.	MYA	1-12/2026	5%
External funding for renovation and new premises	Apply for LEADER Smart Village preparation grant for 12 months to plan for renovation of premises (Deep dive 4 and 8). Outcome: The application is in planning phase and will be submitted by 08/2026	MYA	5-8/2026	5%
External funding for renovation and new premises	Preparation to apply for EU Structural Funds. The preparatory work for applying for the grant is scheduled for 10-12/2026, the actual implementation will take place in 2027-2028. Outcome: TBD	MYA	10-12/2026	0%
Advance the anticipated results of the Mallusjoki pilot				

²⁰ Project KPI no 5 and no 10

²¹ Impact KPI - Implementation of sustainable and circular practices in at least 50 rural businesses.

Action	Steps	Responsible	Time-frame	Readiness level
Advance the anticipated results of the pilot.	The Rural Event Industry Ecosystem concept. The Rural Event Industry strategy 2040 for Mallusjoki Youth Association. Seek the feedback from the steering group of the association. Finalise the documents. Outcome: Both the concept and strategy are drafted.	MYA SML	2024-2026	70%
Digital Co-Design: Empowering Community for Sustainable Rural Development				
Digital Co-Design	<p>The third party project AVOIN MAP turns MYA from a local youth association into a digital co-designer and community development actor, gaining visibility, competence, and influence in shaping the sustainable future of the Mallusjoki region.</p> <p>MYA contributes to the co-design and testing of new tools for event promotion and participatory planning, gaining practical experience in digital communication and open data use.</p> <p>This collaboration enhances the visibility of initiatives, builds local digital capacity, and empowers people to contribute actively to sustainable rural development.</p> <p>Phase 1: Prototype and Stakeholder Co-Design 10/2025-01/2026 Phase 2: Final Development and Piloting 02/2026-6/2026</p> <p>MYA will participate in the European Social Funding project led by LAB University. The aim is to improve digital skills.</p> <p>Outcome: TBD</p>	Avoinry MYA SML	10/2025-6/2026	5%
		MYA	2026-2027	5%

4.2 Expected Outcomes by 2040

Cultural and Economic Transformation

- Mallusjoki becomes a recognised **hub for rural event tourism** in Finland and across Europe, attracting more than 10,000 annual visitors through a portfolio of 12 or more recurring cultural events.
- The **Green Cultural Centre** functions as a year-round flagship for sustainable culture, entrepreneurship, and digital innovation.
- Creation of at least 10 **new rural enterprises** in hospitality, creative industries, crafts, and event services.
- Expansion of the **Local Food Circle** into a permanent network linking farmers, processors, and event organisers to promote sustainable gastronomy.

Environmental and Climate Impact

- Achieve **100% renewable energy use** in event facilities by **2035**, supported by smart energy and AI monitoring systems.
- Reach **zero-waste certification** for event operations by **2035**, through circular procurement and waste management.
- Reduce the community's **carbon footprint by 50% by 2030** and achieve **carbon neutrality by 2040**, aligned with EU Green Deal and Finnish Climate Law targets.
- Source **80% of event catering** from local and regional food producers.

Social Cohesion and Citizen Empowerment

- Engage 200+ active **volunteers** annually, with at least 30% under age 30.
- Ensure **gender equality** (50% women / 50% men) in volunteering, leadership, and decision-making roles.
- Maintain **intergenerational** cooperation and **youth-led** projects to ensure sustainable community leadership.

Digital and Smart Village Development

- Implement **Smart Village** solutions in energy, mobility, and communication by 2035.
- Mainstream **data- and AI-driven tools** for planning, foresight, and participatory governance.
- Establish **Digital Co-Design** as a standard practice for community engagement and co-creation.

Governance, Partnerships, and Global Visibility

- Establish 5+ **international partnerships** in cultural tourism, innovation, and sustainability.
- Establish 10+ **formal cooperation agreements** with nearby cities and regional hubs, enhancing rural–urban collaboration.
- Secure a long-term **governance and monitoring framework** to maintain alignment with EU and national policy goals beyond 2040.

By 2040, Mallusjoki will evolve into a model Smart Village and Green Cultural Centre — an integrated ecosystem where cultural vitality, environmental sustainability, economic resilience, and digital innovation are guided by strong citizen leadership and inclusive multi-actor collaboration.

5. Policy and Funding Alignment

5.1 EU and National Policy Alignment

Mallusjoki RAP contributes to **local transformation actions** in line with Long-Term-Rural-Vision-Action using a bottom-up approach in synchronisation with top-down policies. Mallusjoki RAP demonstrates that community led action is possible in the framework of the rural event industry ecosystem.

Mallusjoki RAP promotes and implements Green Deal in three ways .

- Firstly, by developing **sustainable waste management** at rural events. The practical outcome of the action is that the waste management system will be audited and improved to comply with EU policies and directives.

- Secondly, the project cooperates and supports **Local Food Circle** that is coordinated by a SME entrepreneur. The aim is to scale up the business in terms of portfolio and territory, increase revenue and enhance awareness of the circle.
- Thirdly, Mallusjoki Youth Association club house **energy efficiency** will be improved by renovating the premises and integrating data- and AI-driven digital solutions into energy solutions (Green and Digital Transition) (Deep dive 4).

Mallusjoki RAP follows a **multi-actor and participatory approach**. This is in line with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), European Green Deal, Territorial Agenda 2030, EU Cohesion Policy, Horizon Europe, LEADER, LIFE, European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI), and Community-Led Local Development, CLLD.

Through the development of rural tourism, Mallusjoki RAP promotes **rural-urban interaction**. The numerous rural cultural and other events attract annually even more than 10,000 visitors in the region. In addition, the RAP aims to expand **rural-urban policy integration** through developing urban-rural cooperation agreements with Helsinki, Lahti, and regional hubs and establishing a coordinated tourism strategy to attract urban residents to rural events (Deep dive 7).

The project's open data, AI- and other **digital solutions** will be analysed upon their value, feasibility, accessibility and scalability through the context of the rural event industry. The analysis contributes to awareness raising of emerging digital solutions, promotes personal and team learning and readiness to adopt new practices. This is in line with Digital Europe policy.

The aim of the Mallusjoki pilot project is to **explore the New European Bauhaus** as part of the renovation of the premises of the Mallusjoki Youth Association (Deep dive 4).

Since the Mallusjoki RAP is in line with the strategy of the **municipality of Orimattila**, it was easy for the municipality to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Mallusjoki Youth Association in 2024. The aim of the cooperation is to provide cultural experiences for senior citizens in the Orimattila city region. Orimattila will organise several cultural days in Mallusjoki, and the city will organise transport for the seniors to Mallusjoki. This kind of co-operation is new.

Following an extensive participatory process, the Päijät-Häme Regional Council developed a new regional strategy for 2050+. This was approved on 11 June 2025. The Mallusjoki pilot project informed the development of the new regional strategy. The Mallusjoki pilot's action plan (RAP) acknowledges and aligns with the strategy.

The new vision statement of the Päijät-Häme regional strategy 2050+ is *"Päijänteiden verran parempi"*²².

²² https://paijat-hame.fi/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/100625_Maakuntastrategia_2050_nettiin.pdf

2. Strategian visio ja tavoitteet

Maakuntastrategian laadinta on ollut maakunnan eri toimijat osallistava prosessi. Maakuntavaltuuston jäsenet työstivät viime syksyn valmistelevien työpajojen aineiston pohjalta visiota ja sen sisältöjä. Maakuntavaltuusto päätti 3.12.2024 kokouksessaan vision ytimen ja se tiivistyi muotoon: **Päijät-Häme 2050+ - Kestävän elämän, luovan yhteisöllisyyden ja monipuolisten mahdollisuuksien maakunta.**

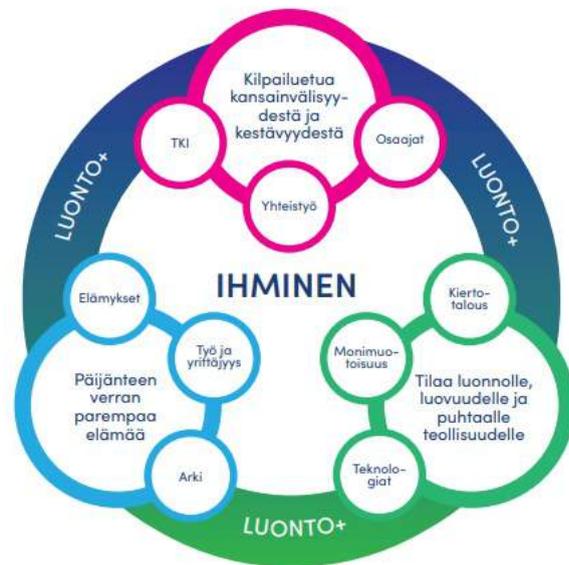
Valmistelun aikana todettiin tarve muotoilla visiolle lyhyempi ja iskevampi muoto, joka erottaa meidät muista maakunnista. Viesti kirkastui muotoon:

Päijänteen verran parempi

Päijänteen verran parempi on lyhyt, mieleenpainuva ja paikallisten titeettiä vahvistava. Se herättää uteliaisuutta ja kytkee maakunnan tärkeän vetovoimatekijän – puhtaat vesistöt, uusiutuvat luonnonvarat – kaikkeen kehittämiseen. Päijät-Häme hakee strategialla kilpailuetua – olemme monessa asiassa parhaita ja aina Päijänteen verran muita parempia.

Maakuntastrategian visiota edistetään kolmella päätavoitteella:

- Kilpailuetua kansainvälisyydestä ja kestävydestä
- Tilaa luonnolle, luovuudelle ja puhtaalle teollisuudelle
- Päijänteen verran parempaa elämää



Maakuntastrategian tavoitteet.

5.2 Funding Sources

5.2.1 Potential funding sources for implementing and sustaining actions

Taking in account Mallusjoki Youth Association's resources and legal form the following funding sources are possible for **implementing actions**:

- LEADER (Smart Village grant): Used for planning and renovating premises
- EU Structural Funds: Applications prepared for renovation projects
- National public funding: Supported through entities like the ELY-Centre
- Interreg programmes
- Private investments and sponsorships.
- Horizon Europe: Considered for innovation-driven actions.

The following funding sources are relevant for **sustaining actions**:

- Revenue from event tourism (through increased visitor engagement)
- Ecosystem partner commitments (for recurring rural festivals)
- Volunteer and community contributions: Especially for cultural and tourism activities
- Public-private partnerships
- Crowdfunding campaigns

A comprehensive funding strategy and diversified model are explored in **Deep dive 2**, titled *External Funding Strategy for the Mallusjoki Region*. This Deep dive includes the feasibility of funding instruments and sustainability approaches tailored to each phase of the RAP.

5.2.2 Stakeholders access to financial instruments

Some of the stakeholders and actors involved, such as companies and NGOs, do have access to financial instruments and incentive measures in the Mallusjoki RAP. The most relevant financial instruments currently available are national and regional Finnish funding (e.g. ELY-keskus and the Päijät-Häme Regional Council) and regional development organisations (e.g. Päijänne-Leader and Lahti Region Development Services). These sources currently fund entrepreneurship, cultural initiatives, infrastructure upgrades, tourism development and community engagement.

Despite these options, the RAP indicates the need for diversified and innovative funding models, particularly for medium- to long-term goals such as the expansion and renovation of the Green Cultural Centre, the integration of AI and digital tools into event management and tourism services, and the provision of support for community-driven initiatives that extend beyond the project's duration. PoliRuralPlus deliverable D7.3, the Policy Brief, introduces new funding models, such as:

- Launch a €40 million Rural Creative Infrastructure Fund: co-financed by LEADER, Interreg, and private capital to renovate the Green Cultural Centre, deploy renewable micro-grids, and expand accommodation.
- Introduce a public support mechanism to incentivise investment in certified low-carbon infrastructure and digital platforms (including geospatial data) that enable sustainable rural events and local service ecosystems.
- Create a regional partnership agreement with cities of Orimattila, Lahti and Helsinki to coordinate marketing, transport, and cultural-exchange programming to promote bi-directional urban-rural interaction.

5.3 Partnerships

The success of the Mallusjoki pilot is founded on a rich network of **multi-actor partnerships** that connect community, business, academia, and government reflecting the **Quadruple Helix model** central to PoliRuralPlus. The key partnerships operate mainly at local and regional levels to secure resources, exchange knowledge, and sustain long-term collaboration beyond the project's lifetime.

Local and Community Partnerships

At the heart of the implementation process lies the **Mallusjoki Youth Association (MYA)**, which coordinates activities and represents a mature model of citizen-driven governance. The MYA collaborates with **associations and NGOs** in Orimattila and the wider Päijät-Häme region, supporting cultural events and volunteering initiatives. The MYA engages **local entrepreneurs and SMEs** (50+) from the catering, creative industries, event logistics and hospitality sectors to form the Rural Event Industry Ecosystem. Last but not least, the MYA considers **residents, volunteers and guests** to be partners. Together, they co-create cultural and social initiatives.

Municipal and Regional Partners

Municipality of Orimattila which provides policy, financial, and logistical support. **Päijät-Häme Regional Council** which integrates Mallusjoki's approach into the Regional Strategy 2050+. **Päijänne Leader Local Action Group** is key partner in Smart Village preparation, habitability studies, and funding facilitation; leads the **Asuttava Päijät-Häme (Habitable Päijät-Häme)** synergy project in which Mallusjoki contributes through workshops and knowledge sharing. **ELY-Centre** (Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment) provides

advisory services, financial instruments, and technical guidance for SME and environmental development.

6. Roadmap

6.1 Timeline

6.1.1 Short-term actions (2025-2027)

Interventions - Community-Driven Approach	2025												2026											
	Month												Month											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.4 Mobilisation subproject - Go Mallusjoki - ideathon for needs						Plan	Do	Check			Share													
2 Rural Event Industry Ecosystem concept development																								
2.1 New event format design, testing and validation																								
2.2 Improve and strengthen Events Promotion																								
2.2.1 - Mobilisation subproject - Go Mallusjoki - visibility and promotion of events																								
2.3 Rural Event industry Ecosystem Development: strategic partnerships; innovations; new business establishments																								
2.3.1 - Local food circle business/SME - elaboration of the network and concept																								
3 Green Cultural Centre in line with New European Bauhaus																								
3.1 Waste management facilities: Sustainable waste management in event industry: Biowaste treatment is being updated. Practices relating to the supply of food and drink at events are audited, and consequently, recycling methods in kitchens and at events are updated and improved.																								
3.2 Energy efficiency: a air source heat pump installed; all front doors replaced to improve energy efficiency; roof maintenance. The measures are co-funded by Päijänne-Leader.																								
3.3 Start planning phase for refurbishment and new premises in line with LTRVA, Green Deal and NEB. Implementation under the "Avoim Map" subproject in 2026.																								
3.3.1 - Data collection, needs, requirements analysis and a rough plan for next years																								
3.3.2 - MYA steering group decision making. Next steps																								
3.4 External funding for renovation and new premises: Apply for a LEADER Smart Village preparation grant for 12 months																								
3.8 External funding for renovation and new premises: Preparing to apply for EU structural funds in 2027 and beyond																								
4 Sustain and advance the outcomes of the Mallusjoki pilot																								
4.1 The Rural Event Industry Ecosystem concept						v.0												v.1						
4.2 The Rural Event Industry strategy 2040 for Mallusjoki Youth Association.						v.0												v.1						
5 Digital Co-Design: Empowering Community for Sustainable Rural Development																								
5.1 "Avoim Map" subproject to promote Digital Co-Design and capacity building, and intelligent use of open data sets																								
5.1.1 Prototype and Stakeholder Co-Design																								
5.1.2 Final Development and Piloting																								

- **2024 Action:** Organize 4 pilot rural cultural events addressed to music and art lovers, and specially to senior citizen and families
 - **Details:** Collaborate with rural artisans and local food producers to showcase their products in events, building connections with urban consumers.
 - **Target:** 4 new types of rural events held, 800 visitors engaged, 5 partnerships with rural and urban stakeholders established.
- **2025 Action:** Expand event programming to include rural innovation events to promote habitability and community spirit (Deep dive 5 and 9)
 - **Details:** Hosting events that explore habitability (ref. Habitability synergy project) and needs gathering (ref. GoMallusjoki sub-project), and promote rural innovation, including topics such as renewable energy, housing, ecosystems, local economics, community spaces, event service design, and public services targeting rural and urban stakeholders.
 - **Target:** 7 rural innovation events for community members held, 7 new ideas/initiatives.
- **2026 Action:** Innovating Regional Tourism Through Culture and Community

- o **Details:** Position the region as a vibrant cultural and artistic destination by implementing innovative promotion strategies and engaging storytelling campaigns. Launch the **Green Cultural Centre** as a flagship initiative to showcase creativity, sustainability, and community-driven innovation. Strengthen local empowerment and sustainable rural development through the **Digital Co-Design** approach, enabling communities to actively shape projects and services. Maximize year-round tourism potential by creating immersive, environmentally responsible experiences that highlight the region's unique cultural and natural assets.
- o **Target:** 8 rural events held, 1600 visitors engaged, 5 partnerships with rural and urban stakeholders established. A strategic plan for the Green Cultural Centre.
- **2027 Action:** Planning of the Green Cultural Centre expansion and renovation
 - o **Details:** The concept for the Mallusjoki Region Green Cultural Centre is ready. The concept includes the ownership of the premises, the operating model, the diversified funding model for the expansion and renovation (e.g., public-private partnerships, corporate sponsorships, crowdfunding), and a 3-phase implementation plan. The concept is prepared respecting the policies of Green Deal and New European Bauhaus.
 - o **Target:** Ownership and operating model is discussed. A rough 3-phase implementation plan up to 2035 is ready and potential funding instruments are known.

6.1.2 Medium-term actions (2028-2035)

- **2028 - 2035 Action:** Expansion and Renovation of the Green Cultural Centre
 - o **Objectives:** Strengthen Mallusjoki as a leading hub for rural event tourism and cultural activities. Improve infrastructure to support sustainable, year-round tourism and local entrepreneurship. Integrate energy-efficient and eco-friendly solutions that are equipped with Artificial Intelligence, in event and community spaces.
 - o **Details:** *Phase 1 (2028-2030) - Infrastructure Development:* Reposition and expand event spaces within the Green Cultural Centre to meet increased demand. Develop multi-functional indoor and outdoor facilities for year-round use. Upgrade catering and waste management facilities to comply with EU Green Deal standards. *Phase 2 (2031-2033) - Sustainable Energy Solutions:* Transition event venues to 100% renewable energy sources (e.g., solar, geothermal, bioenergy) that are monitored and controlled by data- and AI driven solutions. Enhance waste management practices to achieve zero-waste certification. *Phase 3 (2034-2035) - Community & Business Integration:* Launch new cultural and business incubator programs within the centre. Develop a co-working space for rural entrepreneurs linked to tourism and creative industries. Establish a visitor center to showcase local heritage, sustainable innovations, and rural tourism. The funding needed for investment and improvements will have to come mainly from external sources such as EU and national funding, but also other models are included such as public-private partnerships, corporate sponsorships, and crowdfunding (Deep dive 2).
 - o **Target:** **1. Infrastructure & Event Capacity:** Expand the Green Cultural Centre to accommodate 30% more visitors per event; Develop 5 new event spaces (indoor/outdoor) for concerts, workshops, and cultural gatherings; Renovate and modernize catering and waste management facilities. **2. Sustainability, Climate and Environmental Impacts:** Reduce carbon footprint by 50%, ensuring 100% of energy use comes from renewable sources; Implement zero-waste strategies



for all events and community activities; Increase local food sourcing to 70% for event catering. **3. Economic & Business Development:** Support the creation of 5 new local businesses in hospitality, crafts, and event services. Establish long-term partnerships with at least 10 regional and national partners. **4. Community Engagement & Cultural Identity:** Host at least 12 annual cultural events integrating local traditions, music, and arts. Engage 120+ volunteers in cultural and tourism activities. Launch an interactive digital heritage platform showcasing the history and evolution of rural events in Mallusjoki.

6.1.3 Long-term actions (2036-2040)

- **2036 - 2040 Action:** Expansion and Global Recognition of the Mallusjoki Rural Event Industry
 - Details: Fully utilizing the Green Cultural Centre and other renovated premises to host larger and more diverse events (Deep dive 4). Establishing partnerships with global cultural and event organizations. Ensuring long-term viability through innovative and diversified funding model (Deep dive 2), digital tools, and green solutions. Creating a lasting impact through knowledge sharing, training programs (Deep dive 3), and intergenerational community engagement.
 - Target: Host at least 12 major cultural and rural tourism events per year, attracting over 10,000 visitors annually. Establish at least 5 international partnerships with cultural, tourism, or event industry organizations. Achieve 100% carbon-neutral rural events through renewable energy, waste management, and eco-friendly logistics. Support the creation of 5 new rural businesses within the Mallusjoki region (e.g., local food producers, event service providers). Ensure that at least 50% of event-related services (catering, accommodation, transportation) are sourced from local entrepreneurs. Train at least 50 volunteers in event management, digital marketing, and sustainable tourism. Engage 30% of the local youth population in cultural and tourism initiatives through employment or volunteer programs. Aim to gender equity. Document the replicable practices in a transferable format, i.e. a PoliRuralPlus Practice Atlas, to ensure the concept of the Rural Event Industry is replicable in other Finnish regions and adopted in the long term.

6.2 Implementation Plan

The successful implementation of the Mallusjoki Regional Action Plan (RAP) requires coordinated efforts from multiple stakeholders, including local governments, agencies, businesses, and community organizations. The following table outlines the key responsibilities and roles of each stakeholder:

Key Responsibilities by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder	Primary Responsibilities
Mallusjoki Youth Association (MYA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lead the coordination of rural events and cultural activities. ● Oversee the renovation and management of the Green Cultural Centre ● Is responsible for securing funding by applying for grants, such as those for the Smart Village and Green Cultural Centre initiatives, and developing additional funding models (e.g. public-private partnerships, corporate sponsorships, crowdfunding) to support infrastructure improvements (Deep dive 2,4 and 8).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitate community engagement and volunteer programs (Deep dive 5). ● Ensure alignment with EU and national rural development strategies. ● Monitor progress through KPIs and take action when necessary.
Municipality of Orimattila	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support policy alignment and infrastructure development. ● Provide municipal funding and administrative support for rural event projects. ● Amplify the communication and visibility when possible. ● Facilitate partnerships between rural and urban stakeholders. ● Ensure sustainability compliance and smart village integration. ● Enable and support citizen participation in municipality strategy planning and implementation
Päijät-Häme Regional Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop the Regional Development Strategy 2050+, which can be adopted by rural areas and villages. ● Facilitate access to regional funding and policy support (see Deep dive 2). ● Promote inter-municipal collaboration for tourism and economic development. ● Encourage and support citizens and communities to participate in the planning and implementation of the regional strategy in Päijät-Häme. ● Monitor progress through regional KPIs and take action when necessary.
ELY-Centre (Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide advisory services and financial instruments for business development and sustainability initiatives. ● Support rural entrepreneurship and innovation (e.g., grants for startups). ● Monitor climate and environmental impact and ensure compliance with Green Deal policies.
LEADER Action Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assist in securing EU and national funding for rural development projects (Deep dive 2). ● Provide strategic planning support for Smart Village initiatives. ● Connect local businesses with innovation hubs and investment opportunities.
Cultural and Event Industry Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collaborate with local artists, musicians, and performers to develop unique cultural programs. ● Support the expansion of Mallusjoki as a cultural tourism hub. ● Provide logistical and promotional support for international collaborations.
Local Entrepreneurs and SMEs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engage in local food and service provision for events. ● Establish business partnerships within the Mallusjoki Rural Event Industry Ecosystem.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contribute to the sustainable growth of hospitality, catering, and event services.
Tourism Boards & Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) e.g. Lahti Visit ²³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promote Mallusjoki as a rural event destination. ● Develop marketing campaigns targeting urban-rural visitors (Deep dive 7). ● Assist in organizing international partnerships for event collaborations.
Educational Institutions & Research Partners such as LAB University of Applied Sciences ²⁴ and Lahden - Lappeenranta Technical University ²⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct impact assessments on rural tourism and event sustainability. ● Provide training and capacity-building programs for event organizers, volunteers, and rural entrepreneurs (Deep dive 3). ● Support the integration of digital and AI-driven solutions for event management.
European Union & National Government Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure alignment with EU rural policies (e.g., CAP, Green Deal, Digital Europe). ● Provide financial support through EU Structural Funds, Interreg, and Horizon Europe. ● Support policy frameworks for long-term sustainability and innovation.

Implementation Phases and Milestones

Phase	Timeframe	Key Actions	Responsible Stakeholders
Stage 0: Planning & Stakeholder Engagement (Deep dive 5)	2025-2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Finalize the Rural Event Industry Ecosystem framework. ● Secure initial funding (e.g., LEADER, Interreg, Horizon Europe). ● Establish governance structures for Green Cultural Centre renovation. 	MYA, Municipality of Orimattila, ELY-Centre, LEADER Group, Päijät-Häme Regional Council
Stage 1: Infrastructure & Sustainability Investments (Deep dive 4)	2027-2030	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Implement Phase 1 of Green Cultural Centre expansion. ● Converting the venue to exploit renewable energy and integrating open and other types of data- and AI-driven digital solutions into energy solutions (Green and Digital Transition). 	MYA, Local SMEs, Päijät-Häme Council, EU Funding Programs, Sustainability Experts

²³ <https://visitlahti.fi/>

²⁴ www.lab.fi

²⁵ www.lut.fi

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop new cultural tourism services & business incubators. 	
Stage 3: Community & Business Growth	2031-2035	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand event programming to attract 10,000+ visitors annually. • Launch data- and/or AI-driven rural event marketing & ticketing platform. • Strengthen rural-urban collaboration through new policy and business networks. 	MYA, Tourism Boards, Local Entrepreneurs, Universities, EU Innovation Programs
Stage 4: Global Expansion & Policy Integration	2036-2040	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Position Mallusjoki as a recognized European hub for rural events. • Secure long-term public-private partnerships for sustainable tourism. • Establish a legacy program to sustain community-driven initiatives. 	MYA, EU Institutions, Finnish Ministries, Global Cultural Organizations

Risk Management & Contingency Planning

To ensure the smooth execution of the implementation plan, **risk assessments and mitigation strategies** will be put in place:

Potential Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Funding Gaps (e.g., delays in EU grants)	Diversify funding sources, including private sector sponsorships and crowdfunding initiatives.
Volunteer Shortages	Strengthen youth engagement programs and introduce incentive models (e.g., skills training, certifications) (Deep dive 5).
Climate and Environmental Compliance Issues	Conduct annual sustainability audits and adjust strategies to meet EU Green Deal targets.
Limited Digital Adoption in Rural Areas	Partner with tech companies and universities to offer digital training programs for event organizers.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

7.1 Metrics/KPIs

7.1.1 Common metrics/KPIs for the all PoliRuralPlus pilots

Mallusjoki pilot is acting on a **local scale** focusing on communities and citizens.

#	Title	Purpose	2025 Metrics	2026 Target
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure the breadth and diversity of stakeholder engagement in RAP processes.	5 pcs of established cooperation agreements 9 pcs of joint events with stakeholders and inhabitants	≥2 new confirmed partnerships. ≥2 joint events with stakeholders and inhabitants.
2	Rural–Urban Collaboration	Evaluate the level of cooperation between territories and sectors in integrating policies and actions.	5+ collaboration initiatives/events with urban actors ²⁶ .	≥ 3 collaboration initiatives/events with urban actors.
3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Promote the use of innovative and digital tools and practices.	20+ participants were briefed, demonstrated and trained on digital tools, AI, ML and LLM.	≥ 20+ participants adopt digital skills.
4	Territorial and Environmental Sustainability	Encourage sustainable, resilient and green practices in territories.	The sustainable events industry focuses on reducing environmental, social and economic impacts through waste reduction, energy efficiency and responsible sourcing. This pilot has strengthened sustainability in six (6) key areas.	≥2 new measures/areas to advance sustainable events industry
5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Assess improvements in livability, wellbeing, and social inclusion.	9 workshops + 2 dissemination events on habitability. 1 video on enhancing people-place bonds. Plan to engage young people in revising the event marketing strategy. Plan to revise Mallusjoki brand.	≥1 video on enhancing people-place bonds. A youth-led marketing strategy formulation. A regional branding program implemented.

²⁶ For example, Regional Council of Päijät-Häme, Orimattila municipality; LAB university, LUT university

6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Strengthen governance structures and collaborative decision-making.	12+ local stakeholders have participated in formal decision-making or co-design processes ²⁷ . 2 formalized cooperation agreements or joint policy actions between Mallusjoki municipality and regional institutions ²⁸ .	≥5 new local stakeholders involved in decision making. ≥2 new collaboration instruments (e.g. MoUs, joint strategy documents, shared service platforms).
7	Communication and Visibility	Measure how results and messages are shared and communicated.	11 Mallusjoki pilot newsflashes for stakeholders. 25 Mallusjoki pilot blogs or news on PoliRuralPlus and partners websites.	≥5 Mallusjoki pilot newsflashes for stakeholders. ≥5 Mallusjoki pilot blogs or news on PoliRuralPlus and partners websites
8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Assess sustainability and potential for scaling up the PoliRuralPlus model.	The models for the Rural Event Industry Ecosystem, Habitability and Place-People Bonding in Mallusjoki have been structured.	≥2 replication areas for the Rural Event Industry Ecosystem model have been identified, and those involved are engaged in dialogue.

7.1.2 Other Specific Metrics/KPIs by 2040

The Mallusjoki Regional Action Plan (RAP) establishes Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) across five core areas to measure the success of the Rural Event Industry Ecosystem. These KPIs will guide the monitoring process and ensure alignment with strategic goals.

The **reliability** of KPI-related data sources is ensured through a structured, multi-source data collection process. This involves gathering event, visitor and stakeholder data (MYA), as well as climate, environmental, economic and employee data from public and other digital sources (e.g. SEO). The strategy, including evaluation mechanisms and the responsible body, is shown in the tables below and in more detail in chapter 7.2. The data originates from bodies responsible for institutions with long-term mandates, adding to the **persistence** of the sources over time and their institutional backing. These features are key to maintaining robust monitoring and adaptive planning throughout the RAP’s lifecycle and beyond.

1. Cultural & Event Development KPIs

Goal: Strengthen Mallusjoki as a leading rural event destination

Indicator	Target by 2040	Evaluation mechanism	Responsible body
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²⁷ Mallusjoki Youth Association Steering Group

²⁸ Orimattila municipality and Päijänne-Leader

Number of cultural and tourism events held per year	12+ annual events	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Annual visitor numbers	10,000+ visitors	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Percentage of repeat visitors	50% of visitors return within two years	Post-event participant surveys and annual community meetings for assessment and qualitative validation	MYA
Number of international partnerships	5+ global event collaborations	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Diversity of event offerings	At least 5 new event formats or innovations introduced	Annual reporting cycles	MYA

2. Sustainability, Climate and Environmental Impact KPIs

Goal: Achieve a sustainable rural event industry environment

Indicator	Target	Evaluation mechanism	Responsible body
Carbon footprint reduction	50% reduction in emissions by 2030, 100% carbon neutrality by 2040	Annual monitoring and assessment	Collected by the EU, regional authorities or municipality
Use of renewable energy in event spaces	100% renewable energy adoption by 2035	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Zero-waste certification	Achieved by 2035	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Sustainable transport options	30% of visitors use eco-friendly transport (biking, public transport, carpooling) by 2030	Post-event participant surveys and annual community meetings for assessment and qualitative validation	MYA
Local food sourcing percentage	80% of event catering sourced from local producers by 2040	Post-event participant surveys and annual community meetings for assessment and qualitative validation	MYA

3. Economic Growth & Rural Entrepreneurship KPIs

Goal: Foster rural economic development through event-driven business opportunities

Indicator	Target	Evaluation mechanism	Responsible body
Number of new rural businesses created	10+ new businesses in hospitality, catering, and event services by 2040	Public statistics on established companies per municipality	MYA
Revenue generated from rural event tourism	20% annual growth in event-related income	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Employment increase in the tourism and event sector	50+ jobs created by 2035	Public statistics on employment	MYA
Sponsorships and private-sector investments	10+ long-term partnerships secured by 2035	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Expansion of accommodation capacity	5+ new eco-friendly lodging options by 2035	Public statistics	MYA

4. Community Engagement & Social Impact KPIs

Goal: Enhance diversity and inclusion monitoring. Strengthen local participation and preserve cultural identity.

Indicator	Target	Evaluation mechanism	Responsible body
Number of volunteers involved annually	200+ volunteers by 2040	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Gender balance across all volunteer and event participation surveys.	50 % women, 50% men	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Youth participation in event planning	30% of volunteers under 30 years old	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Local stakeholder engagement rate	80% of local businesses and residents actively involved in events	Post-event participant surveys and annual community meetings for assessment and qualitative validation	MYA
Intergenerational storytelling & heritage projects	10+ community documentation projects by 2035	Annual reporting cycles	MYA

Community satisfaction index	80%+ positive feedback from event participants and volunteers.	Post-event participant surveys and annual community meetings for assessment and qualitative validation	MYA
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5. Digital Transformation & Innovation KPIs

Goal: Leverage technology for smarter, more efficient event management

Indicator	Target	Evaluation mechanism	Responsible body
Adoption of data- and AI-driven event management tools	Intelligent and informative visitor analytics & ticketing system by 2030	Annual reporting cycles and digital technology metrics	MYA
Growth in online engagement	25% annual increase in social media & website traffic	Annual reporting cycles and digital technology metrics	MYA
Development of a digital cultural archive	Launched by 2030	Annual reporting cycles	MYA
Virtual and hybrid event participation	20% of total attendance from digital platforms by 2035	Annual reporting cycles and digital technology metrics	MYA
Implementation of Smart Village solutions	At least 5 digital and data-driven innovations in place by 2040	Annual reporting cycles	MYA

7.2 Evaluation Mechanisms

To ensure effective monitoring and evaluation of the **Mallusjoki Regional Action Plan (RAP)**, a structured evaluation system will be implemented. This system will track progress, measure impact, and allow for adjustments as needed. The following mechanisms will be used to assess the success of the initiative.

1. Annual Progress Reporting

- Goal: Provide structured updates on KPI achievements and challenges.
- Process:
 - Mallusjoki Youth Association (MYA) collects event and visitor data, volunteer participation, and business engagement metrics
 - The municipality of Orimattila compiles infrastructure and sustainability updates (energy efficiency, emissions reduction, waste management).
 - Päijät-Häme Regional Council aggregates regional economic data, funding utilization, and policy alignment.

- Annual reports are published and presented in stakeholder meetings and publicly accessible online platforms.
- Responsible Entities: MYA, Municipality of Orimattila, Päijät-Häme Regional Council

2. Stakeholder & Community Feedback Mechanisms

- Goal: Ensure continuous dialogue between project managers, local entrepreneurs, residents, and visitors.
- Process:
 - Event participant surveys collected after each major event to assess satisfaction, service quality, and areas for improvement.
 - Quarterly community meetings to discuss progress, address challenges, and incorporate new ideas.
 - Feedback forms and digital platforms allow local businesses, cultural organizations, and volunteers to share insights.
- Responsible Entities: Mallusjoki Youth Association, Local Entrepreneurs, Cultural & Event Industry Partners

3. Climate and Environmental Compliance Audits

- Goal: Track progress toward climate and environmental goals and ensure compliance with EU Green Deal policies and New European Bauhaus initiative.
- Process:
 - Bi-annual sustainability audits to assess waste reduction, renewable energy adoption, and carbon footprint.
 - External sustainability experts evaluate compliance with zero-waste certification goals.
 - Monitoring of local food sourcing practices to ensure 80% of event catering uses locally sourced products.
- Responsible Entities: ELY-Centre (Centre for Economic Development, Transport, and the Environment), Päijät-Häme Regional Council, External Environmental Consultants

4. Digital Performance & Smart Technology Evaluation

- Goal: Measure the adoption and efficiency of digital innovations in event management.
- Process:
 - Analysis of tested data- and AI-powered event management tools, tracking improvements in logistics, marketing, and visitor engagement.
 - Growth in online engagement monitored via website traffic, social media metrics, and virtual participation rates.
 - Assessment of Smart Village solutions, including energy monitoring systems and data and AI-driven rural business support.
- Responsible Entities: Educational Institutions (e.g., LAB University of Applied Sciences), Local Tech Companies, MYA

5. Cross-Border & International Benchmarking

- Goal: Compare progress with similar rural event industry models across Europe.
- Process:
 - Collaboration with international rural event organizations to exchange best practices.

- Annual participation in EU rural development conferences to align strategies with evolving policies.
- Comparative analysis of rural business growth, event impact, and sustainability efforts in similar European regions.
- Responsible Entities: MYA, EU Institutions, LEADER Action Group, Päijät-Häme Regional Council

6. Funding & Financial Impact Assessment

- Goal: Ensure financial sustainability and optimal utilization of funding resources (Deep dive 2).
- Process:
 - Tracking of external funding sources (LEADER, Horizon Europe, private sponsorships).
 - Analysis of return on investment (ROI) for event infrastructure development and rural business incubation.
 - Quarterly financial reports to assess revenue generation from events, sponsorships, and tourism.
- Responsible Entities: MYA, Municipality of Orimattila, Päijät-Häme Regional Council, ELY-Centre

7. Policy & Strategic Review

- Goal: Align RAP actions with evolving EU and national rural development policies.
- Process:
 - Annual policy review meetings with governmental stakeholders.
 - Evaluation of RAP's contribution to the Long-Term Rural Vision for the EU and regional sustainability policies.
 - Adjustments to the RAP based on policy shifts and funding opportunities (Deep dive 2).
- Responsible Entities: Municipality of Orimattila, EU Institutions, Päijät-Häme Regional Council, MYA

8. Corrective Actions & Continuous Improvement

- Goal: Adapt to challenges and continuously refine strategies for success.
- Process:
 - Annual strategic review to assess underperforming KPIs and adjust targets.
 - Redirection of resources or funding toward areas needing improvement (Deep dive 2).
 - Introduction of new initiatives based on community needs and global rural tourism trends.
- Responsible Entities: RAP Steering Committee (MYA, Municipality, Regional Council, Cultural Organizations, Business Representatives)

Through these evaluation mechanisms, the RAP will ensure accountability, transparency, and adaptability. The Mallusjoki Rural Event Industry Ecosystem will be continuously improved based on data-driven insights, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability tracking.

8. Communication and Engagement

8.1 Stakeholder Involvement

The success of the Mallusjoki Regional Action Plan (RAP) depends on active participation from diverse stakeholders, including local government, businesses, cultural organizations, educational institutions, and the

broader community. Key stakeholders and their roles in the project implementation in years 2024-2026 are defined in the **Deep dive 1**.

This chapter outlines the **main steps of the strategies** for ensuring effective stakeholder engagement, fostering collaboration, and maximizing impact.

1. Identifying Key Stakeholders to ensure the involvement of all relevant actors in decision-making and implementation.
2. Stakeholder Collaboration Framework to define roles and responsibilities to ensure clear and efficient collaboration (Deep dive 1, 5 and 6).
3. Community Engagement & Grassroots Participation to strengthen local ownership and active participation in RAP initiatives (Deep dive 1, 5 and 6).
4. Business & Entrepreneurship Collaboration to strengthen economic opportunities through partnerships with local businesses (Deep dive 1, 5 and 6).
5. Educational & Research Partnerships to foster knowledge exchange and capacity-building through academic collaboration (Deep dive 1, 5 and 6).
6. Public Awareness & Communication Strategy to increase visibility and public engagement with RAP activities (Deep dive 1, 5 and 6).
7. International & Cross-Border Cooperation to expand Mallusjoki's rural event industry through global partnerships.
8. Stakeholder Feedback & Continuous Improvement to ensure that stakeholder input is actively used to refine RAP implementation.

Stakeholder engagement is at the core of the Mallusjoki Regional Action Plan (RAP). Through collaborative partnerships, community-driven initiatives, and strategic alliances, Mallusjoki will transform into a globally recognized rural event hub while preserving its cultural heritage and fostering local economic growth.

The RAP explicitly expects the local multi-actor stakeholders involved in implementing the short-term measures during the project timeframe to maintain their engagement in the medium and long term. However, it is clear that bodies further afield, such as universities, will only act if the issue is on their agenda and they have the necessary funding.

Mallusjoki Youth Association aims to establish and maintain the following mechanisms that will sustain engagement with local stakeholders:

- Multi-channel awareness campaigns: These include digital tools, newsletters, social media, and local media, supported by an interactive website to keep the public informed and involved.
- Community-driven engagement: Activities such as information sessions, workshops, and open days are designed to reinforce grassroots involvement. Institutional partnerships:
- Agreements with entities like the City of Orimattila and Päijänne Leader (LAG) are aimed at securing institutional support and continuity.
- Educational collaboration: Involvement of educational institutions ensures knowledge transfer, capacity building, and generational continuity.
- Volunteer programs and intergenerational participation: Ongoing involvement of local volunteers and youth engagement strategies are central to ensuring sustainability.

8.2 Awareness Campaigns

To effectively promote the Mallusjoki Regional Action Plan (RAP) initiatives and attract community support and participation, a multi-channel awareness campaign should be implemented.

A key strategy is leveraging digital platforms and local media to disseminate information about rural tourism, cultural events, and sustainable practices. The campaign should highlight success stories and key initiatives such as the Local Food Circle expansion, rural event sustainability measures, and energy-efficient renovations of the Mallusjoki Youth Association clubhouse.

Social media engagement, targeted email campaigns, newsletters, and collaboration with local influencers and stakeholders (Deep dive 1) can amplify visibility. Additionally, an interactive **website** with event calendars, project updates, and volunteer opportunities will encourage greater public involvement.

Beyond digital outreach, **community-driven engagement activities** should be prioritized. Hosting information sessions (e.g., Mallusjoki Youth Association steering group), workshops (e.g. the collaboration with the Päijät-Leader project Habitability), and public forums will allow stakeholders to contribute ideas and feel invested in the RAP's success. The organization of open days at event locations in Mallusjoki, guided tours and videos showcasing sustainable tourism practices, and collaboration with schools and educational institutions will further integrate awareness into local networks.

Additionally, **partnerships with regional policymakers** (e.g. City of Orimattila) and businesses can drive funding and institutional support, ensuring long-term sustainability. By adopting a participatory and multimedia-based approach, the campaign will successfully bridge rural-urban connections in policy and business, and promote the Mallusjoki RAP as a model for sustainable regional development.

Results and impact assessments (e.g., sustainability audits, funding assessments, KPI tracking) are regularly **documented** and can serve as replicable models for other regions.

9. Conclusion

9.1 Summary of Expected Impact

9.1.1 Outline how the RAP will contribute to sustainable development, regional integration, and economic growth.

The RAP is designed to foster local transformation through the development of a rural event economy, promoting cultural exchange, and enhancing economic vitality in the Mallusjoki region. By focusing on rural event tourism, the plan aims to integrate rural and urban areas, leveraging the unique cultural and natural assets of Mallusjoki to attract paying customers, visitors and stimulate the local economy, particularly SME companies. **This strategy not only supports economic growth but also strengthens social cohesion and territorial identity across rural and urban areas.**

The plan includes specific actions aimed at sustainable development, such as improving waste management practices at rural events, supporting the local food circle, and enhancing the energy efficiency of the Mallusjoki Youth Association clubhouse. These initiatives align with the EU's Green Deal and the New European Bauhaus, demonstrating a commitment to climate and environmental sustainability.

9.1.2 Analysis of expected impact in line with the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)

The Mallusjoki RAP's alignment with the LTVRA is evident in its strategic goals and actions, which directly address the vision's key dimensions:

Stronger: The RAP empowers the Mallusjoki community by fostering a sense of community spirit and engaging community members of all ages through Community-Led Local Development. It supports local collaboration and capacity building for organizing rural events, which enhances community resilience, social innovation and well-being.

Connected: The plan focuses on improving rural-urban cooperation and interaction through Rural Event Industry Ecosystem actions, increasing the flow of people, information, and materials between urban and rural areas. Developing strategic partnerships with urban centers (mainly Orimattila, Lahti and Helsinki regions) and creating a coordinated rural tourism strategy are key actions to enhance connectivity.

Resilient: In the Mallusjoki pilot, resilience refers to the community's ability to adapt, recover, and thrive amid social, economic, and environmental change, while preserving its unique rural identity and sense of place. Resilience in Mallusjoki is built through several interconnected actions within the PoliRuralPlus framework:

- **Social resilience** is strengthened by fostering intergenerational connections and community participation, especially through the Mallusjoki Youth Association's activities that unite children, young people, and older residents. Initiatives such as hobby groups, volunteer work in rural events, and video interviews between generations help sustain a shared identity and mutual support. The Mallusjoki RAP seeks to enhance social resilience by ensuring access to training and capacity-building opportunities (Deep dive 3), enabling residents to develop new skills and participate in emerging economic activities.
- **Economic resilience** is promoted through the creation of a Rural Event Industry Ecosystem, which diversifies local livelihoods, attracts visitors, and generates income opportunities for local service providers. By linking rural creativity with urban markets, Mallusjoki enhances its capacity to withstand economic fluctuations.
- **Environmental and climate resilience** is supported by measures that align with the European Green Deal, including sustainable waste management, Local Food Circle initiatives, and energy-efficient practices. These actions help the community manage resources responsibly and adapt to climate challenges.
- **Governance resilience** in the Mallusjoki pilot emerges through participatory, multi-actor approaches that ensure local stakeholders are informed, involved, and empowered to co-create solutions and respond proactively to evolving policy and environmental contexts. This inclusive governance model strengthens transparency, trust, and cooperation among community members,

local authorities, and regional institutions. Moreover, governance resilience is reinforced by the active civic engagement of Mallusjoki residents in national, regional and municipal political life through participation in consultations, public discussions, and citizen initiatives. This bottom-up involvement not only amplifies local voices in decision-making but also enhances the community's capacity to influence policy directions, adapt governance practices, and sustain long-term, community-driven development (Deep dive 10).

- **Digital resilience** in the Mallusjoki pilot emerges through the awareness, familiarisation, and active testing and use of emerging **digital tools introduced by the PoliRuralPlus project**, such as Jackdaw, the Advisor, the Multi-Actor Approach Tool (MAAT), cloud-based data managements systems (e.g. Google Drive) and the Knowledge Hub built on Wagteil platform. These tools enhance digital literacy, support data-driven decision-making, and foster collaboration among local stakeholders. Digital resilience is further reinforced through active the adoption of **digital solutions in the organisation of rural events**, including social media promotion, online communication, and digital money transfer systems that streamline operations and widen participation. Additionally, the **video production process**, where young people record, edit, and translate intergenerational interviews with older residents, plays a role in strengthening digital competence and creativity. This activity not only preserves local heritage but also empowers the youth with hands-on digital skills in filming, editing, and content sharing.

Prosperous: The plan seeks to diversify economic activities by developing the Rural Event Industry Ecosystem, enhancing the value-added of farming and agri-food activities through the Local Food Circle, and promoting agri-tourism and other business sectors (e.g. IT, communication, PR, marketing). These actions aim to create new business establishments, increase revenue, and generate economic growth in the Mallusjoki region.

Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies, plans (local, regional, national, EU level)?

EU and National Level: The Mallusjoki RAP contributes to local transformation actions that align with the EU's Long-Term Rural Vision and the EU Green Deal. Specifically, the plan promotes the Green Deal by developing sustainable waste management (e.g. in event organisation), supporting a Local Food Circle, and improving the energy efficiency of the Mallusjoki Youth Association clubhouse.

Regional Level: The Mallusjoki pilot project informed the development of the Päijät-Häme Regional Council's new regional strategy for 2050+, which was approved on June 11, 2025. The RAP acknowledges and aligns with this regional strategy. Mallusjoki pilot co-operates closely with the LEADER action group Päijänne-Leader, which provides small-scale funding for rural development in line with the CAP. Mallusjoki Youth Association and Päijänne-Leader have signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

Local Level: The plan's success is supported by the Municipality of Orimattila, which will provide administrative and communication support for rural event projects. Mallusjoki Youth Association and Orimattila municipality have signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The RAP also seeks to secure long-term sponsorships from municipalities, including the cities of Orimattila, Helsinki and Lahti.

Expected influence/effects on other areas: Do intended processes (measures, initiatives, programs) within the identified intervention areas of the RAP affect other areas? What kind of changes does it bring?

The intended processes (measures, initiatives, programs) within the identified Intervention Area of the Mallusjoki RAP (see the chapter 4.1.1) are designed to affect other sectors functioning as a cross-sectoral catalyst.

Governance reform - Multi-level and Cross-regional Cooperation: The RAP aims to improve the relationship between the local community and larger governing bodies, representing society through a quadruple helix model (academia, government, industry, and civil society) and a multi-actor approach. Building strategic rural-urban partnerships with nearby urban centers like Orimattila, Helsinki and Lahti. This cooperation involves the joint production of events, the purchasing of materials and services, and a coordinated tourism strategy to attract urban residents. Empowering local residents and actors to provide constructive feedback to multi-level governance and practice active societal influencing through various arenas and channels. (from local municipal level up to the EU). The project's action plan is formally acknowledged and aligned with the new Päijät-Häme Regional Strategy 2050+.

Green transition - Sustainability and Climate Action: The RAP aligns with the EU Green Deal to transform the Mallusjoki Youth Association's clubhouse into a Green Cultural Centre by 2030. The major changes involve the following measures: Converting the main venue to exploit renewable energy, with a goal to achieve 100% renewable energy adoption by 2035. Improving the sustainable waste management system at rural events (after an audit). The long-term goals are to achieve a 50% reduction in emissions by 2030 and 100% carbon neutrality by 2040, including the achievement of a zero-waste certification by 2035. Supporting the scaling up of a Local Food Circle, aiming for 80% of event catering to be sourced from local producers by 2040.

Cultural development - Creative Sector and Identity: While the main theme is event tourism, the initiatives are explicitly designed to expand the cultural sector and territorial identity: Transforming the clubhouse into a flagship Green Cultural Centre for cultural heritage and experimental practices. Expanding the cultural and creative industries by building on the niche Mallusjoki brand of music and cultural events. Improving access to a valorised cultural heritage and cultural life, which directly contributes to building territorial identities and enhancing the region's attractiveness and vitality.

Digital innovation - Smart Village Concept: The RAP addresses a significant challenge of digitalization gaps among rural actors by fostering the uptake of the Smart Village concept. The planned changes include: Piloting Smart Village solutions in energy, mobility, and digital services to increase the habitability of the area. Incorporating the use of open data and AI to test event management platforms for logistics, ticketing, and feedback analysis. Strengthening human skills and digital capacities within the community. The ultimate goal is to have at least five digital and open data-driven innovations in place by 2040.

Social empowerment - Community Vitality and Cohesion: The RAP leverages the strong community spirit as a driving force for transformation. Changes focus on strengthening the community bond and ensuring long-term vitality: Strengthening community engagement and fostering a sense of community through grassroots innovation and shared responsibility. Bolstering intergenerational knowledge transfer, notably through an intergenerational video project to connect young people with the area's history and heritage. The target is to involve 200+ volunteers annually by 2040 and achieve an 80% local stakeholder engagement rate in events.

9.2 Call to Action

The Mallusjoki pilot involves a diverse group of stakeholders (Deep dive 1) who are essential to the success of the Regional Action Plan.

At the heart of this ecosystem is the **Mallusjoki Youth Association**, which serves as a driving force and plays a crucial role in leading the implementation of activities, managing infrastructure development through intelligent usage of spatial and other data, and fostering community engagement.

The success of the RAP also relies heavily on the participation of **local and regional service providers and entrepreneurs, (i.e. Rural Event Industry Ecosystem) and NGOs**, who contribute to the economic vitality of the region by delivering essential services and products for events and collaborating to enhance the overall quality of event offerings. Pilot has actively promoted cooperation with businesses and has signed cooperation agreements with, for example, a media company and youth association.

Volunteers from the community are another vital group, providing invaluable support in event organization and execution, contributing to the welcoming atmosphere, and participating in capacity-building activities to further their skills.

The customers and guests who attend the events are also key stakeholders, providing economic support through their participation, offering valuable feedback, and promoting the Mallusjoki region as a destination.

Policy and governance bodies, including nearby cities (Orimattila, Lahti, Helsinki), the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Häme ELY-keskus - Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, and Päijät-Häme Regional Council, play a crucial role in providing funding, aligning policies to support the growth of the rural event industry, and facilitating cooperation between rural and urban areas. The pilot signed a cooperation agreement with the city of Orimattila and Päijänne Leader which is the local action group.

Knowledge and capacity-building organizations, such as educational institutions and research bodies (e.g., Lappeenranta University, Salpaus (VET), The University of Lahti Applied Science) contribute by offering training programs, supporting sustainable development practices, and promoting the integration of innovation (Deep dive 3).

Finally, the **creative arts sector** enriches the cultural experiences offered at events, enhancing the attractiveness and distinctiveness of the Mallusjoki region. Effective collaboration among these diverse stakeholders is paramount to achieving the goals of the RAP and ensuring the sustainable development of the region.

10. Annex

10.1 Sustainability and extension of activities: Checklist for the RAP pilots

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation			

<p><i>Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.</i></p>	<p>x</p>	<p>The following chapters: 2.2 Key Challenges - Explicitly identifies "Finance & Sustainability" and "Skills & Capacity" (volunteer fatigue) as constraints 2.3 Opportunities - Lists areas for success, including Community cohesion and identity, Rural-urban tourism cooperation, and EU Green Deal alignment. 2.3.1 Stakeholder Readiness and Ownership of Planned Measures A dedicated sub-section that directly addresses the level of commitment from partners 5.2 Funding Sources - Explores a comprehensive funding strategy and diversified model for sustaining actions, including revenue from event tourism and ecosystem partner commitments 6.2 Implementation Plan- Contains a dedicated Potential Risk Mitigation Strategy table that details how to address risks like Funding Gaps and Volunteer Shortages</p>
<p>Vision and Strategic Goals</p>		
<p><i>How well are your vision and strategic goals aligned with the main areas of sustainability: Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing? What is the main focus? (You may use the sustainability compass for guidance here: https://compassu.wordpress.com/introduction/)</i></p>	<p>x</p>	<p>NATURE - ENVIRONMENTAL-CLIMATE Strongly Aligned. The plan commits to the highest environmental standards. Key elements: The concept of a "Green Cultural Centre," a commitment to 100% renewable energy and zero-waste certification by 2035, and promoting sustainable tourism. ECONOMY Very Strongly Aligned. The entire strategy is built around creating a sustainable economic model for the region. Key elements: The vision is to be a "key player in the rural events industry," which is expected to generate economic opportunities and support the establishment of 10+ new rural businesses by 2040. It also focuses on digital innovation and enhancing infrastructure and services through intelligent usage of spatial and other data. SOCIETY Very Strongly Aligned. The plan deeply focuses on strengthening the community and regional identity. Key elements: Community-Led Local Development approach. Orchestrating a "community-based ecosystem," creating social cohesion and territorial identity, building community spirit, and fostering strong rural-urban cooperation (with Orimattila, Helsinki, Lahti). The goal to train 200+ volunteers and establish international partnerships also supports social capacity building. Wellbeing Strongly aligned. This is addressed through factors that directly improve the quality of life and opportunities for residents. Key elements: The objective to Promote habitability (Deep dive 9)</p>

			(repeated in the objectives and actions) directly relates to improving the living environment. The focus on community spirit and providing new economic opportunities also contributes significantly to the overall wellbeing of the population. See the figure 1.
Action Plan			
- How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained?	x		<p>The identified processes will be sustained through a four-part strategy focused on financial independence, community strength, institutionalization, and green branding.</p> <p>1. Financial Self-Sufficiency Revenue Generation: The core plan is to achieve 12+ annual events with 10,000+ visitors by 2040, creating direct, ongoing revenue (tickets, services) to fund operations and maintenance. Economic Diversification: Supporting the establishment of 10+ new rural businesses by 2040 ensures a broader, resilient economic base that benefits directly from event success. Cost Efficiency: Achieving 100% renewable energy and zero-waste certification by 2035 (the Green Cultural Centre) permanently lowers operating costs while attracting premium, sustainable tourism.</p> <p>2. Social & Capacity Building Succession Planning: The goal to train 200+ genre balanced volunteers, with 30% under age 30, builds a sustainable local skill base and transfers capacity to the next generation, combating 'volunteer fatigue.' Community Ownership: Orchestrating a community-based ecosystem ensures that local people have a direct stake in the outcome, turning measures into self-driven social processes rather than temporary programs.</p> <p>3. Institutionalization Strategic Partnerships: Developing strategic urban-rural cooperation agreements (Deep dive 7) with key hubs (Orimattila,Helsinki, Lahti) institutionalizes a guaranteed flow of visitors and resources, making the rural events a permanent part of the regional tourism strategy. Year-Round Activity: Promoting year-round tourism shifts the focus from intense, seasonal efforts to a continuous, manageable stream of economic activity.</p>
-Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future?	x		<p>Mallusjoki Youth Association (MYA) – leading coordination and funding.</p> <p>Local municipalities and regional councils – aligning policies and resources.</p> <p>Local entrepreneurs, cultural bodies, and citizens – ensuring bottom-up continuity.</p>
Policy and Funding Alignment			
- Do the stakeholders/actors have	x		See the chapter 5.2.1

<i>access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP?</i>			
<i>- Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms?</i>	x		See the chapter 5.2.1
Communication and Engagement			
<i>- What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?</i>	x		See the chapter 8.1
<i>- Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?</i>	x		See the chapter 8.1
<i>- How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?</i>	x		See the chapter 8.2: Multi-Channel Awareness Campaigns, Interactive Website & Digital Tools, Workshops and Public Forums: Strategic Partnerships: Documentation and Monitoring Tools: The PoliRural Practice Atlas (task 5.3) will disseminate the emerging and replicable practices of Mallusjoki.
Conclusion			
<i>- Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?</i>	x		It is aligned with the Orimattila municipality strategy. It is aligned with the strategy of the Päijät-Häme region for 2050+. It is aligned with EU policies.



<p>- Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?</p>	<p>x</p>	<p>The Mallusjoki RAP functions as a cross-sectoral catalyst. It interweaves event-based tourism with governance reform, green transition, cultural development, digital innovation, and social empowerment — offering a model for integrated rural-urban transformation. These influences could serve as replicable strategies for similar regions across Europe.</p>
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Regional Action Plan

Pilot:	Czech-Bavarian Border Region
Version:	1.0
Date:	15/12/2025



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Executive Summary

The Czech–Bavarian Regional Action Plan (RAP) sets out a comprehensive roadmap for strengthening innovation, sustainability, and cross-border cooperation across one of Central Europe’s most rural border regions. Building on the foundations laid by the PoliRuralPlus project, the RAP responds to long-term structural challenges—demographic decline, fragmented innovation infrastructures, climate pressures on agriculture, and limited cross-border connectivity—while leveraging significant opportunities in digitalisation, sustainable agriculture, regional identity, and cross-border knowledge exchange.

The RAP proposes the establishment of a **Czech–Bavarian Innovation Hub in Klatovy**, serving as the central engine for rural transformation. Inspired by successful models on the Bavarian side, such as the Technology Campus network and the GREG entrepreneurship centre, the Hub will provide physical and digital spaces for co-creation, training, experimentation, and business development. Its purpose is to connect farmers, SMEs, researchers, start-ups, municipalities, and youth, creating a functional cross-border innovation ecosystem that accelerates digital, green, and economic transitions.

The plan is structured around **five Intervention Areas**, each contributing to long-term regional resilience:

1. **Governance & Cross-Border Cooperation** – Establishing a permanent Steering Committee, formalising the Czech–Bavarian cooperation framework, and maintaining the RAP as a dynamic, regularly updated instrument.
2. **Financing & Operational Efficiency** – Developing a blended financing model and adopting a performance-based approach inspired by the Bavarian Technology Campus model to ensure long-term sustainability.
3. **Infrastructure & Digital Foundation** – Creating the physical Hub in Klatovy, deploying shared digital infrastructures, and integrating regional datasets with PoliRuralPlus tools for evidence-based planning and decision-making.
4. **Innovation, Skills & Knowledge Transfer** – Launching smart agriculture pilots, establishing a cross-border training academy, and introducing certified training pathways to strengthen digital and green skills in the region.
5. **Community Engagement, Foresight & Outreach** – Supporting regional identity, local food systems, agri-tourism, youth engagement, and participatory monitoring, ensuring broad societal involvement.

The RAP aligns strongly with **EU, national, and regional strategies**, including the EU Green Deal, CAP Strategic Plans, Horizon Europe priorities, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, and Czech and Bavarian regional development strategies. This ensures coherence with broader policy objectives and opens access to multiple funding opportunities—Interreg Bavaria–Czechia, Horizon Europe, CAP/LEADER, OP TAK, and national Bavarian programmes.

Implementation of the RAP will begin during the final year of the PoliRuralPlus project and continue through 2030 and beyond. Responsibilities for each Action and its associated KPIs will be agreed with key actors

during 2026, ensuring ownership and a governance structure capable of sustaining long-term cooperation. The Monitoring and KPI Framework provides clear metrics for tracking progress and supporting annual RAP updates.

The expected impact of the RAP includes:

- A functional, visible Innovation Hub driving cross-border learning and rural innovation.
- Increased resilience and competitiveness in agriculture through smart technologies and climate-smart practices.
- Stronger local value chains, new business opportunities, and improved digital and green skills.
- Enhanced regional identity, youth engagement, and attractiveness for residents, professionals, and visitors.
- More efficient territorial governance and a long-term platform for Czech–Bavarian integration.

Overall, the RAP positions the Czech–Bavarian region as a leading European example of how rural border regions can leverage cross-border cooperation, digital innovation, and place-based strategies to achieve sustainable, inclusive, and future-proof development.

1. Introduction

1.1. Geographical and Historical Context

The Czech-Bavarian border region, encompassing the Bohemian Forest (Šumava) and Bavarian Forest (Bayerischer Wald), is a geographically distinctive and historically rich rural area situated at the heart of Central Europe. It forms part of the European Green Belt and is characterised by extensive forest landscapes, significant biodiversity, and a shared cultural heritage that reflects centuries of cross-border interaction.

Despite its natural beauty and ecological significance, the region has long been shaped by its peripheral status. Compared to other EU border regions, and even to the Czech-Saxon border, the Czech-Bavarian border region is marked by a particularly rural character, low population density, and underdeveloped infrastructure, especially in terms of cross-border connectivity and cooperation. These characteristics are deeply rooted in the region's political history and geography. For much of the 20th century, the Iron Curtain cut through this landscape, physically and symbolically dividing East and West. The militarised border restricted human and animal movement, stifled economic exchange, and left lasting scars on the socio-economic fabric of the region, which are visible until today.

Historically, however, the borderlands were anything but isolated. Archaeological evidence shows human presence in the Šumava region since the end of the last Ice Age, with prehistoric communities using the area for hunting, gathering, and later for trade. The development of long-distance trade routes such as the Golden Trail facilitated the exchange of salt, grain, glass, and other goods, linking Bohemia with Bavaria and beyond. During the medieval period, noble families and monastic orders colonised the forests, established settlements, and developed glassmaking, mining, and forestry industries, creating a vibrant cross-border economy and cultural landscape. The post-1989 political transformation reopened these historical connections. Cross-border mobility resumed, and after the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the liberalization of the German labour market in 2011, a cross-border labour market began to emerge. Goods, services, labour, and ideas now can move freely across the border. However, challenges remain: the region still faces the realities of a dual administrative structure - Germany's federal system and the Czech Republic's centralised governance - as well as persistent language barriers, which continue to hinder seamless cooperation.

Nevertheless, the shared history, cultural interconnectedness, and renewed political will have laid the groundwork for stronger collaboration. The region now stands poised to leverage its natural assets, historical identity, and evolving institutional frameworks to foster rural innovation, sustainable development, and economic revitalisation.

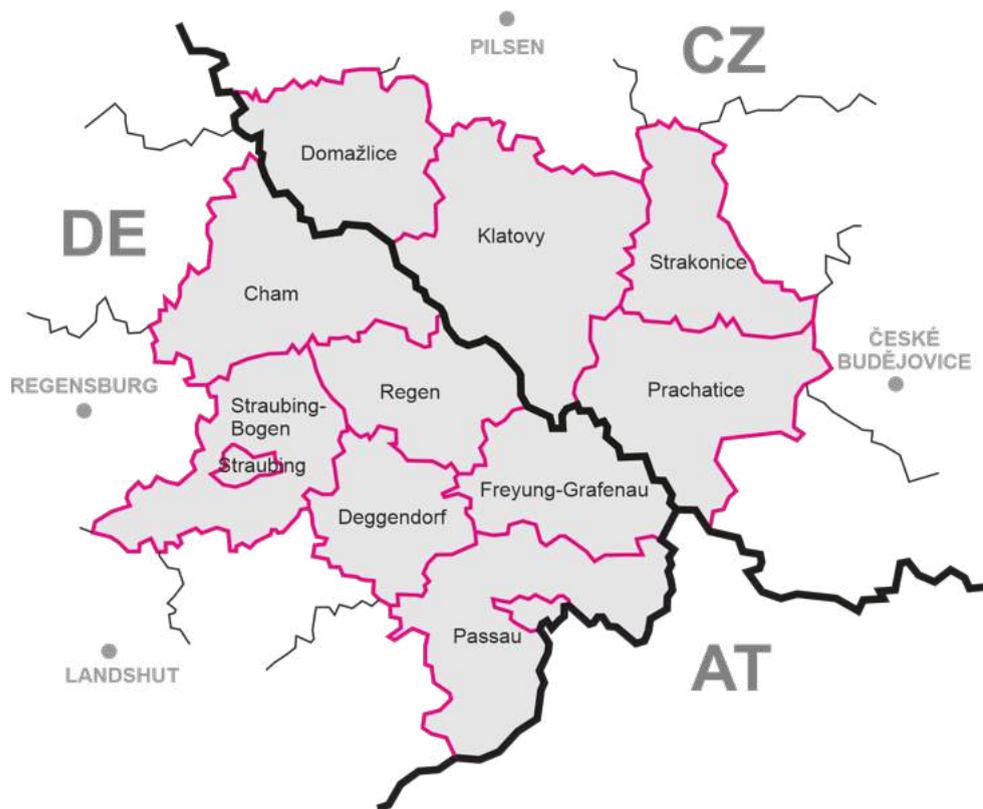


Figure 1: The geographical extent of the Czech-Bavarian pilot area

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this Regional Action Plan (RAP) is to support the transformation of the Czech-Bavarian border region into a model of sustainable, cross-border rural innovation. Through targeted measures, the RAP seeks to foster economic resilience, social cohesion, and ecological balance in a traditionally peripheral and underconnected region. It aims to strengthen the capacities of regional stakeholders by enhancing collaboration, innovation infrastructure, and knowledge transfer between both sides of the border.

This RAP contributes to the overall goals of the **PoliRuralPlus project**, with a specific emphasis on supporting rural transformation through pilot-led, place-based strategies accustomed to the need of the specific pilot (border) region. The Czech-Bavarian pilot focuses on unlocking the region's innovation potential by leveraging and adapting successful models from the Bavarian side, such as the Technology Campus system or the placement of innovation hubs in the peripheral region, and applying them to the Czech context, particularly in the town Klatovy and its surrounding areas.

Why Klatovy?

Klatovy is geographically located at the core of the Czech–Bavarian border region, directly between major innovation nodes — Plzeň to the northeast and Freyung/ Deggendorf on the Bavarian side.

This makes it a natural connector and gateway between Czech and Bavarian innovation ecosystems. The city provides accessibility while still being embedded in a predominantly rural context, ideal for cross-border and rural innovation transfer.

The map from the PoliRuralPlus Attractiveness Tool clearly highlights the innovation potential in the Pilsen Region (Figure 2). Municipalities marked in yellow represent areas with low innovation potential. The darker the color, the higher the innovation potential. Innovation potential is assessed on the basis of infrastructure, which plays a key role in the creation and implementation of innovations. This includes research centers, schools, transport infrastructure, and the like. At the regional level, the regional capital of Plzeň dominates. Settlements in the Plzeň agglomeration and along major transport routes have a high level of innovation potential. Klatovy (the area outlined in black) is the second largest city in the region, but in terms of innovation potential, it ranks only 17th among all municipalities in the Pilsen Region. In addition, it is the center of a large area with very low innovation potential. Therefore, the innovation hub established in the city of Klatovy will not only strengthen the innovation potential of the center itself, but its impact will extend to a large area from southern Plzeň to the border with Bavaria.

Klatovy is large enough to host research, incubation, and training infrastructure, yet small enough to remain rooted in rural realities. It can thus serve as a **“transmission hub”** — translating urban-based research and technology (e.g., from Plzeň or DIT Freyung) into practical applications for farmers, SMEs, and municipalities.

The RAP aligns with key policy frameworks at multiple levels:

- **Regional level:** Aligns with regional development goals, including the Klatovy Strategic Plan and innovation strategies of the Plzeň Region and Lower Bavaria.
National level: Supports the Czech Regional Development Strategy 2021+ and Bavaria’s Higher Education Innovation Act (BayHIG), strengthening decentralised innovation and cross-border cooperation.
- **European level:** Contributes to the EU Green Deal, Digital Europe, and New European Bauhaus, and aligns with EU Cohesion Policy, Horizon Europe, and Interreg Bavaria–Czech Republic.

Intended Outcomes

- Establish a **cross-border Innovation Hub in Klatovy**, inspired by the Bavarian Technology Campus model and the GREG hub in Freyung-Grafenau ([GreG Freyung-Grafenau](#) | [GREG DIGITALES GRÜNDERZENTRUM](#)).
- **Strengthen cross-border cooperation** among Czech and Bavarian stakeholders from academia, business, and public administration.
- Expand support for startups, SMEs, and farmers through digitalisation, training, and funding access.
- **Improve rural infrastructure and connectivity** to boost accessibility and economic activity.
- Increase **regional attractiveness** and **retain young talent** to support demographic stability. Integrate **environmental sustainability** into economic development, especially in agriculture and tourism.
- **Analyse Bavarian Technology Campuses and innovation hubs** to identify key lessons for implementation.

In summary, the RAP sets out a roadmap for actionable, inclusive, and evidence-based interventions that leverage the region’s assets while addressing its challenges. It aims to make the Czech-Bavarian border region a reference point for cross-border rural innovation in Europe.

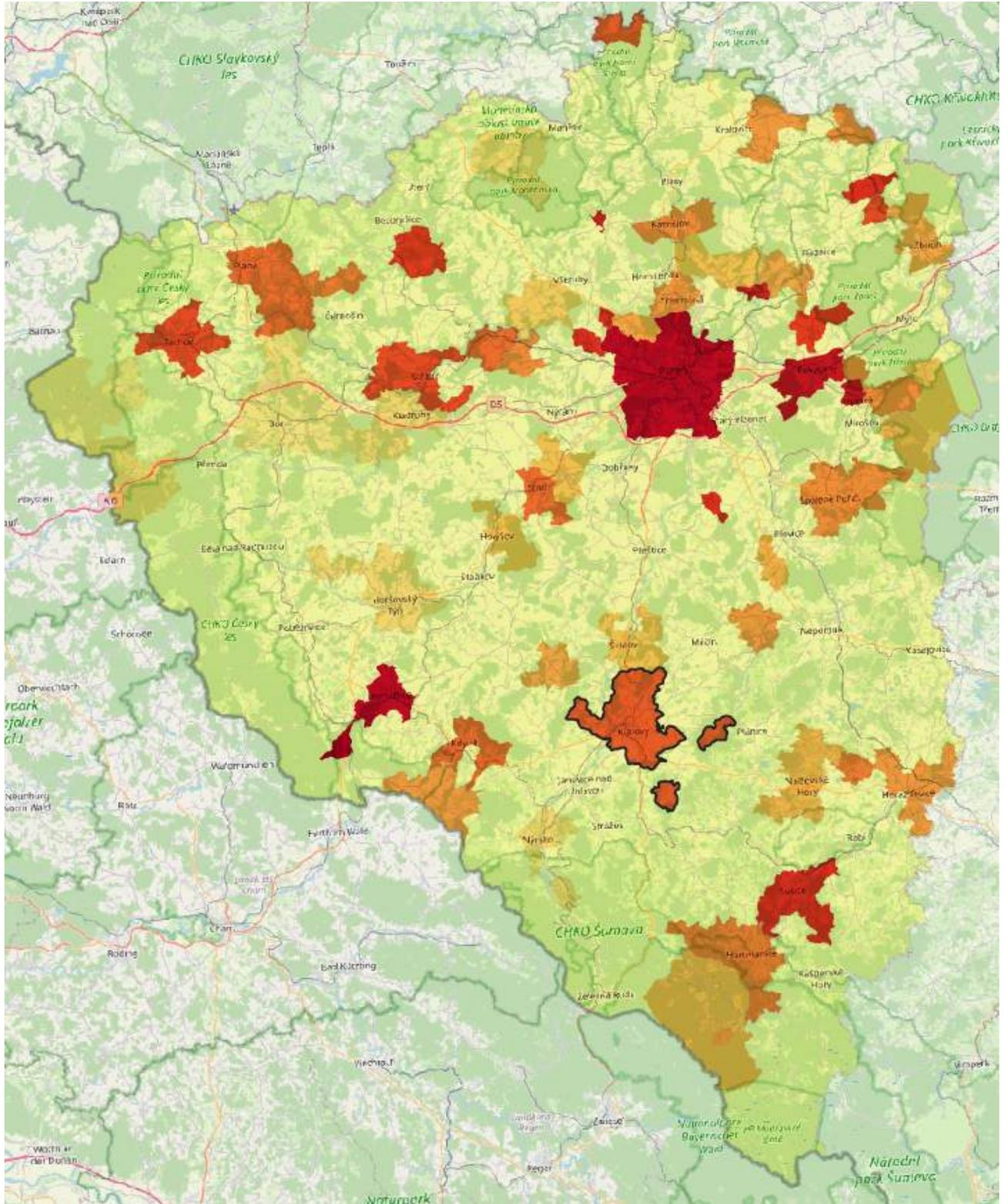


Figure 2: Outcome of the application of the rural attractiveness tool in the Plisen region

2. Analysis of the Current Situation

2.1. State of the Art

In this Chapter, the current development landscape in the pilot region is presented.

2.1.1. Institutional and Innovation Ecosystem on the Bavarian Side

Crucial for the Czech-Bavarian pilot is the existing Technology (Research) Campus and innovation hub structure in Eastern Bavaria. The emergence of a network of research campuses that is unique for Bavaria and the innovation centre in the border region is described in this section.

Bavarian Higher Education Innovation Act (BayHIG) - Summary of Key Changes and points of interest

The **Bavarian Higher Education Innovation Act (BayHIG)** emerged from a broad consultation process starting in 2018 to update the outdated 2006 framework. Since then, Bavaria's higher education landscape has become more international, and external pressures such as globalisation, digitalisation, sustainability challenges, and the COVID-19 pandemic required a modern response. The revised law aims to strengthen the international competitiveness of Bavarian universities for the next 20–30 years. After consultations with universities and stakeholders, it was adopted by the Bavarian Parliament in July 2022 and came into force in January 2023.

Key Measures

- **More autonomy and agility:** Greater flexibility in resource and personnel management; Innovation Fund supports strategic internal funding.
- **Flexible organisational framework:** Existing structures remain for legal clarity, while an innovation clause allows universities to design their own internal models.
- **Support for innovation and entrepreneurship:** Founding activities become a formal university task; infrastructure can support spin-offs; founding sabbaticals for professors are introduced.
- **Stronger knowledge and technology transfer:** Research roles—especially at universities of applied sciences—are reinforced, and transfer tasks are formalised for all staff.
- **Modern recruitment and talent development:** Direct appointments, excellence professorships, expanded tenure-track pathways, and stronger support for early-career researchers.
- **Better study conditions:** State-wide student council and formal recognition of innovative teaching methods.
- **Faster construction processes:** Universities may obtain building ownership rights to speed up projects.
- **Expanded research opportunities:** Research professorships and sabbaticals strengthen research focus and support work–family balance.
- **Modernised university role:** Universities are positioned as drivers of social, ecological, cultural, and economic progress, emphasising sustainability, digitalisation, inclusion, and science communication.

This summary is based on an official announcement of the [Bavarian Higher Education Innovation Act](#). The official law can be found [here](#).

Development of the Technology Campus system of the DIT on the Bavarian side

Deggendorf Institute of Technology (DIT), founded in 1994, is one of Bavaria's most international universities of applied sciences, with about 8,500 students from over 100 countries. It is the state's fastest-growing university and operates three teaching sites, eight faculties, and 18 innovation and technology campuses. The DIT and its campuses cover a wide range of research topics. An overview of current and past projects can be found [here](#).

DIT is also Bavaria's most athletically successful applied sciences university and the only one with an international campus. The Technology Campus Freyung (TC Freyung) is one of these 18 campuses, and the DIT staff involved in PoliRuralPlus are based there. Located in the border county of Freyung-Grafenau, just 17 km from the Czech border, TC Freyung was one of the first two technology campuses. Founded in 2009 in a different form—as a private limited company jointly run by DIT and the city of Freyung—it aimed to involve local companies and promote start-ups and business development in the region.

News articles excursion: What the region expected from the research campus system before its implementation?

Before the research campuses in Teisnach and Freyung opened in 2009, local newspapers highlighted strong regional expectations. The campuses were seen as proof of Munich's commitment to bringing innovation into rural areas, attracting skilled labour, and serving as models for decentralised research. The initial five-year start-up phase was funded by the state; afterward, campuses adopted their current structure and became responsible for covering their own costs—standard practice for all new campuses. Since then, the network has expanded to 18 campuses (as of 2025), each following the same model: five years of seed funding and annual reporting, followed by evaluation and, if approved, permanent integration into DIT. Once established, campuses finance their staff through research projects. Some also teach; others focus solely on research.

The overarching vision is to develop the Bavarian Forest into a technology hub through strong industry–academia cooperation. The growing network also fosters inter-university collaboration, as seen with Campus Kemnath, launched in early 2025 as a joint initiative of DIT and OTH Amberg-Weiden.



Figure 3: Overview map of the locations of the Deggendorf Institute of Technology
 (Source: <https://www.th-deg.de/de/hochschule/standorte>)

The Founding of the GREG innovation hub (ger: Grenzüberschreitendes Gründerzentrum/ eng: Cross-border entrepreneurship centre) – Background and Link to the TC Freyung

GREG is a startup centre in the Bavarian county of Freyung-Grafenau, established in 2019 as part of Bavaria's digitalisation funding programme, which began in 2016 to support digital business models. The goal was to set up **startup centres in each Bavarian administrative district**. In Lower Bavaria, the university locations Passau, Deggendorf, and Landshut formed a network to apply jointly for funding and to distinguish themselves from major cities like Munich.

In a second funding round in 2019, new locations were to be added to existing networks. Freyung was chosen - partly due to its rural location, **proximity to the Czech border**, and potential for cross-border collaboration. Although Freyung has a Technology Campus, as described above, it lacks a full university site (no students are on site at TC Freyung), and **many of the location's advantages were secondary rather than strategic**. The district administration submitted the application, and a supporting association was founded, with **Deggendorf Institute of Technology (DIT) as a formal partner**. However, the decision for Freyung as a location was more influenced by personal interests and ideas of cross-border cooperation than by strategic planning. The hope that research at the nearby Technology Campus Freyung-Grafenau would lead to startup

activity did not materialise. Both the GREG and the Technology campus are located in the same building. But the GREG is not an extension of the Technology Campus Freyung (TCF) but a separate initiative of the district. While there were **initial plans to bring TCF research to market via GREG**, this proved **unfeasible** - TCF runs research projects without students, which limits startup potential. In contrast, other locations of the technology campuses, like the ECRI Pfarrkirchen, see more start-up activity due to the presence of students interested in entrepreneurship.

In summary, the physical proximity between GREG and TCF has not translated into successful spin-offs. Startup dynamics in rural regions like Freyung differ significantly from those in academic environments, where students and university networks play a much larger role. However, both locations separately foster economic growth and innovation in the region from different perspectives, the TC from the research perspective and the GREG from the incubator perspective. These insights are based on interviews and conversations with the organizational lead of the GREG and TC Freyung conducted in 2025. The following key aspects for establishing an innovation hub in a rural area are based on the same interviews:

Key aspects for establishing an innovation hub in a rural area based on the case study in the Bavarian border region:

- **Strong political support:** Engagement from local politicians and policymakers is essential for the initial spark and the long-term success.
- **Independence from universities:** A rural innovation hub should not rely solely on university partnerships but instead tap into diverse local and regional networks.
- **Broad target group:** Avoid limiting the hub to a single industry - diversity fosters resilience and cross-sector collaboration.
- **Distinct founder profiles:** Unlike urban entrepreneurs, many rural innovators relocate for personal reasons. They often have well-developed ideas, products, or startups but require support with bureaucratic processes, such as securing office space, childcare, or schooling. Thus, the offer of support needs to be accustomed to the needs of the startups.
- **Regional ties & talent challenges:** While some ideas are region-specific, others are not. Regardless, finding skilled professionals in rural areas remains a significant challenge. Only focussing on regional idea support is therefore not beneficial.

Summary of the Bavarian Campus Model and Innovation hub system in the rural peripheral region

1. A successful model in Bavaria: The Freyung Technology Campus has established itself as an innovation hub, particularly in the digital transformation of rural regions and has long experience in this field.
2. Cross-border networking: Existing collaborations with Czech partners (e.g. University of West Bohemia, EUREGIO Bavarian Forest) facilitate knowledge transfer.
3. Support from GreG Freyung: The Freyung-Grafenau Digital Start-up Center offers start-ups and young companies a strong network and infrastructure.
4. Interest from local stakeholders: (The town of Klatovy and) regional Stakeholders like UHLAVA show willingness to cooperate and implement a technology campus

2.1.2. Current Development Landscape on the Czech Side

The decision to establish an Innovation Hub focused on agriculture within the Czech-Bavarian pilot region comes from both the specific needs of the area and the long-standing work of Plan4all and other key actors in this field. Agriculture is a key part of the region's identity and economy, and there's a clear opportunity to support it with practical tools, better data usage, and stronger cooperation and engagement between the regional stakeholders.

Plan4all has been active for many years in European research and innovation projects, particularly in areas related to agriculture, spatial planning, and the use of digital tools for rural development. Projects like PoliRural, AgriHub CZ&SK, EUHubs4Data, PoliVisu, and current projects trans4num, Agri-Digital Growth, BioClima (and more, see Annex 1.2) have helped Plan4all gain extensive experience in applying geospatial technologies, working with open data, and supporting smart farming approaches. This background provides a solid foundation for addressing the needs of rural areas, not only through technical solutions but also by connecting research, policy, and practice.

The focus on agriculture is also a direct response to needs identified in the Czech-Bavarian pilot. Local stakeholders, including farmers, public authorities, educational institutions, and development agencies, have highlighted agriculture as a sector facing several challenges, from adapting to climate change and labour shortages to integrating digital technologies and ensuring generational renewal.

Through the PoliRuralPlus project, these issues have been discussed in multi-actor workshops and through stakeholder consultations. There is clear interest in better connecting rural producers with urban demand, improving access to knowledge and technology, and supporting cooperation across sectors and borders. The Innovation Hub will help meet these needs by offering a shared platform for cooperation, experimentation, and learning.

This Hub builds on earlier work carried out during the original PoliRural project and continues into PoliRuralPlus. In previous stages, Plan4all and its partners contributed to tools and methods for stakeholder engagement (e.g. the Multi-Actor Approach), data analysis (e.g. the Attractiveness Mapping Toolbox), and collaborative planning. These are now being adapted and applied to support innovation in agriculture at the regional level.

In addition, Plan4all has been active in educational activities, including hackathons, capacity-building workshops, online training, and support for local institutions. This is important for helping rural areas make full use of new technologies and for ensuring the long-term sustainability of innovation efforts.

The Innovation Hub will act as a connector, bringing together farmers, researchers, local governments, and educators. It will support pilot activities, foster the use of new tools, and create opportunities for practical collaboration. It also offers a space for testing approaches that can later be adapted in other regions.

By focusing on agriculture, the Hub addresses a sector that is central to both rural identity and regional development. At the same time, it supports broader goals of sustainability, digital transformation, and improved rural-urban linkages.

To provide context for ongoing activities and build on existing synergies, a table of relevant projects has been compiled. It includes initiatives focused on regional development, agriculture, and innovation in which Plan4all and its key members have participated. This overview illustrates the breadth of experience and existing capacities that support the implementation of the Czech-Bavarian pilot and highlight opportunities for knowledge transfer, alignment, and scaling of proven approaches within this Regional Action Plan.

The Czech section of the pilot area covers both the Klatovy District and the broader Šumava region. Together, they present a complex and evolving socio-economic and environmental profile, shaped by rural characteristics, natural assets, and growing development ambitions.

Klatovy District: Demographic and Economic Characteristics

Klatovy District, located in the Plzeň Region, is home to approximately 87,000 inhabitants. It faces demographic challenges, including a high ageing index of 141.9, indicating a significantly larger elderly population compared to youth. Despite this, the district hosts a diverse economy with key employers such as the Klatovy Hospital, Pfeifer Holz (wood products), and Rodenstock ČR (optical lenses), each employing between 500 to 1,500 workers. The district capital, Klatovy, maintains a solid fiscal position, with a 2024 municipal budget surplus of over CZK 174 million.

Urban planning has been proactive, guided by the latest version of the Klatovy Urban Plan (December 2024), which promotes sustainable land use and infrastructural upgrades. Environmental infrastructure projects are underway, particularly focused on wastewater management, water supply, and sewerage improvements.

University Education in Klatovy

In Klatovy, higher education opportunities are supported through a long-established centre for university distance learning affiliated with the Czech University of Life Sciences (CULS). For more than twenty years, this centre has enabled students and professionals of all ages from Klatovy and the wider surrounding area to pursue bachelor's and master's degrees without the need to relocate. The educational activities are implemented in cooperation with the Uhlava organisation, which provides premises and facilitates coordination. Although it is not a full university campus, the centre plays an important regional role by promoting lifelong learning, strengthening local human capital, and enhancing connections between education, labour market needs, and innovation within the Czech-Bavarian border region.

Šumava Region: A Nature-Based Economy and Environmental Assets

The broader Šumava region, which includes Šumava National Park and extends to the Bavarian Forest, is defined by its low population density and an economy rooted in tourism, forestry, and agriculture. Quality beef production has become a prominent and sustainable economic activity. Tourism is a major economic driver, with significant spending from visitors to the Šumava and Bavarian Forest national parks contributing to local development.

Environmentally, the region faces both opportunities and vulnerabilities. In 2024, above-average rainfall (115–117% of the long-term average) led to severe flooding, underscoring the need for stronger water

management strategies. Biodiversity is a key strength, supported by initiatives like the "LIFE for MIREs" project and long-term ecological monitoring through the Silva Gabreta database. However, bark beetle infestations, climate change, and tourism pressure continue to pose risks to forest ecosystems.

Infrastructure, Innovation Ecosystem, and Market Trends

Both Klatovy and the Šumava region are navigating development with increasing attention to innovation and sustainability.

In Šumava, infrastructure supports eco-tourism and sustainable agriculture, with careful planning to balance environmental protection and community needs. Agricultural innovation is particularly visible in advanced methods of cattle breeding and meat processing, which support both ecological and economic goals. Market trends in the region emphasise ecosystem services and nature-based innovation in tourism and agriculture.

Klatovy combines historical heritage with modern infrastructure. Its strategic location near the Bavarian border enhances its potential for cross-border economic integration. While Klatovy does not yet host a formal innovation hub, it is influenced by regional innovation strategies and is exploring pathways to stimulate local innovation, inspired by successful models elsewhere in Czechia and Germany. Key priorities include reversing population decline, enhancing quality of life, and capitalising on its geographic advantages to attract investment and residents.

Agriculture and Climate Resilience in the Czech Border Region

Agriculture in the Klatovy District and the Šumava foothills remains a key sector of the rural economy, with farms specialising in livestock production (notably beef), forage crops, and mixed farming. The region's topography and protected areas limit the scale of intensive agriculture, but this also provides opportunities for more ecological and sustainable practices.

Farmers face increasing environmental and economic pressures due to **climate change**. In recent years, irregular precipitation, prolonged droughts followed by heavy rainfall, and shifting seasonal patterns have impacted pasture quality, crop yields, and soil health. The extreme flooding events in 2024 highlighted vulnerabilities in water retention and hydrological management across the landscape.

At the same time, opportunities exist to build on **existing innovation in quality beef production** and natural resource management. Several farms are already experimenting with improved grazing techniques, soil regeneration, and digital monitoring. However, the broader **innovation ecosystem for sustainable agriculture is underdeveloped**. There is limited access to advanced technologies (e.g. precision farming), advisory services, and funding tools tailored to rural agricultural contexts.

To ensure long-term viability, farmers in the Czech-Bavarian border region need better access to **climate-smart solutions**, technical training, and platforms that connect them to cross-border knowledge and markets.

Key takeaways from the Czech side:

- Plan4all's long-standing experience from EU projects provides a strong base for supporting innovation and stakeholder engagement.
- Local actors want better access to technology, knowledge, and cross-border cooperation.
- The Hub will connect farmers, authorities, researchers, and educators for training, experimentation, and practical collaboration.
- The pilot area (Klatovy + Šumava) faces demographic decline, environmental risks, and pressure on agriculture, but also has opportunities in sustainable beef production and ecological land management.
- Farmers need climate-smart tools, skills, and better access to innovation to stay resilient.

2.2. Key Challenges

Despite recent progress and growing momentum for cross-border cooperation, the Czech-Bavarian border region—particularly on the Czech side—continues to face several critical challenges that hinder its potential for innovation-driven, sustainable development. These challenges are rooted in structural, institutional, and demographic realities specific to rural, peripheral regions.

1. Fragmented Innovation Infrastructure: Unlike the Bavarian side, which benefits from a mature and decentralised network of Technology Campuses and startup support structure, the Czech side lacks comparable innovation infrastructure in rural areas. Klatovy, while strategically located and economically active, does not yet host a formal innovation hub. This gap limits opportunities for knowledge transfer, local entrepreneurship, and cross-border collaboration.

2. Demographic Decline and Ageing Population: The Klatovy District exhibits a high ageing index, reflecting a shrinking proportion of young people and a growing elderly population. Combined with outmigration of youth to urban centres, this demographic imbalance poses long-term risks for labour availability, innovation capacity, and service sustainability in rural communities.

3. Divergent Policy and Administrative Frameworks: Cross-border cooperation is complicated by the coexistence of two distinct governance models: the Czech Republic's centralised public administration and Germany's federal system. These structural differences affect everything from project design to funding access and create additional complexity for joint initiatives.

4. Bureaucratic and Institutional Barriers: Varying administrative processes, funding rules, and legal frameworks often slow down or complicate cross-border implementation. Czech stakeholders—especially smaller municipalities or NGOs—may lack the administrative capacity or experience to navigate EU and German funding programmes, resulting in missed collaboration opportunities.

5. Limited Startup and Entrepreneurial Culture: While Bavaria supports a growing ecosystem of rural innovation, including startup centres like GREG, such culture is less developed in Czech rural regions. Entrepreneurial activities remain limited, and the absence of university branches or a startup community in Klatovy hinders the formation of a local innovation ecosystem.

6. Technological Hesitation and Infrastructure Gaps: Rural areas in Czechia often show slower adoption of new technologies, partly due to digital literacy gaps, weak local incentives, and the absence of strong innovation leadership. Additionally, while infrastructure in Klatovy is improving, gaps remain in broadband connectivity and smart services, especially in more remote villages.

7. Competition from Urban Centres: Nearby cities like Plzeň or Prague, with established innovation infrastructures and academic institutions, attract much of the talent, investment, and entrepreneurial activity in the region. This urban pull creates a competitive disadvantage for rural areas like Klatovy unless targeted interventions are made.

8. Vulnerability of Farmers to Climate Change and Lack of Innovation Support: Farmers in the region are already experiencing the impacts of climate change, including unpredictable weather, floods, and soil degradation. Yet, support structures to help them adapt, such as training in regenerative practices, precision technologies, and climate risk management, are weak or fragmented. Many small farms lack the technical capacity, digital tools, and financial advice needed to transition toward sustainable and resilient models. Without targeted innovation support, these farms may become increasingly vulnerable, threatening the region's food security, economy, and landscape management.

Primary challenge: Limited cross-border innovation infrastructure in the rural Czech-Bavarian border region, which is hindering entrepreneurship and sustainable regional development, especially when thinking about cross-border innovation cooperation. The following reasons can be named:

1. Different economic framework conditions: The Czech Republic and Bavaria have different innovation support programs and funding mechanisms, as well as different structures in regional administration.
2. Different political priorities: National and regional politics in the Czech Republic could set different priorities than in Bavaria, which makes implementation more difficult.
3. Bureaucratic hurdles: Differences in funding structures and administrative processes could delay the establishment of a technology campus in Klatovy.
4. Slow adoption of new technologies: In rural regions, there is often a more conservative attitude towards technological innovations, which could slow down acceptance.
5. Still little start-up culture in the region: Compared to Germany, there are fewer established start-up ecosystems in rural areas in the Czech Republic.
6. Competition with existing technology centres: Prague and Pilsen are already established innovation locations that could attract young companies.

2.3. Opportunities

Despite the challenges facing the Czech-Bavarian border region, **several strategic opportunities** create a favourable environment for innovation-led rural development. These opportunities reflect the region's natural assets, policy alignment, stakeholder readiness, and untapped potential for cross-border cooperation, particularly in agriculture, digitalisation, and sustainable practices.

1. Cross-Border Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange: The region benefits from growing interest in cross-border cooperation between Czech and Bavarian stakeholders. Existing partnerships with universities,

innovation centres, and local governments can be leveraged to promote bilateral exchange of expertise, joint research projects, and integrated development planning. The Bavarian Technology Campus model offers a transferable blueprint for decentralised innovation that can be adapted to the Czech rural context.

2. Demand for Climate-Smart and Sustainable Agriculture: There is increasing awareness among local farmers and policymakers of the need to adapt agricultural practices to changing climate conditions. Rising interest in soil regeneration, water retention, precision farming, and sustainable grazing practices creates fertile ground for piloting climate-smart agricultural solutions. EU policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Green Deal, and the Farm to Fork Strategy offer both policy alignment and financial support for such transitions.

3. Potential for a Cross-Border Innovation Hub in Klatovy: The establishment of an innovation hub in Klatovy represents a unique opportunity to stimulate economic diversification, attract investment, and reverse demographic decline. By integrating applied research, digital services, and entrepreneurship support, particularly in agri-tech and sustainable tourism, the hub can serve as a central catalyst for regional transformation.

4. Availability of European and National Funding Mechanisms: Several EU funding programmes support rural innovation, including **Interreg Bavaria–Czechia**, **Horizon Europe**, **Digital Europe**, and **CAP eco-schemes**. On the national level, the Czech and Bavarian ministries offer funding for regional development, digitalisation, and green transition. These instruments can be mobilised to finance pilot projects, capacity building, and infrastructure investment.

5. Increasing Demand for Local, Sustainable, and Digitally Connected Food Systems: Market trends favour short supply chains, regional branding, and ecological food production. The Šumava region is well positioned to respond to this demand by promoting locally sourced, sustainable products—especially beef and dairy—supported by digital platforms and marketing innovations. This opens space for direct-to-consumer models, smart logistics, and eco-certification.

6. Rising Interest from Local Stakeholders: Municipalities, farmers, businesses, and NGOs on both sides of the border are increasingly open to cooperation and innovation. The willingness of local actors (e.g., the town of Klatovy, MAS Pošumaví, UHLAVA o.p.s.) to engage in regional transformation is a valuable asset. This social capital can be activated through participatory planning, pilot projects, and capacity-building initiatives.

7. Green and Digital Transition as a Policy Driver: The alignment of regional priorities with EU strategies—such as the **Green Deal**, **New European Bauhaus**, and **Just Transition**—creates momentum for integrated solutions that combine environmental sustainability, digital innovation, and rural revitalisation. The Innovation Hub can serve as a testing ground for smart rural solutions with EU-wide relevance.

2.4. Foresight

The Bavarian-Czech pilot hub is designed as a catalyst for regional innovation and sustainable rural-urban development. Its foresight-driven approach balances digital innovation, socio-economic inclusion, and environmental stewardship. Through strong regional partnerships, cross-border networks, and a focus on

real-world impacts, the hub aims to address complex challenges through continuous learning. Further, it should offer a possibility as a dynamic, attractive employer for young Professionals and translate cutting-edge research into practical applications for the local economy to create a vibrant and inclusive ecosystem that bridges rural and urban communities as well as cross border exchange.

The hub adopts a Multi-Actor Approach (MAA), ensuring continuous feedback and scenario refinement. This methodology fosters agility and adaptability, enhancing problem-solving quality in real-world pilot environments.

By leveraging digital innovation, sustainability initiatives, and collaborations with research and technology partners (e.g. Deggendorf Institute of Technology, Technology Campus Freyung), the hub positions itself as a desirable employer. It attracts professionals in digital transformation, sustainability, and regional development while supporting young talent and upskilling local workers.

For a long-term and successful realization of these goals and strong regional effectiveness, the following points should be considered when realizing and establishing the Innovation Hub.

1. Current Trends and Topics

- **Initial focus** should be on agriculture and forestry, as the region is strongly characterized by this economic sector
- **Subsequent expansion** of further topics desirable
- **Digital transformation:** Incorporation of AI tools, spatial data analytics, and digital twins for land-use planning.
- **Sustainability:** Emphasis on green technologies, circular economy, and short supply chains (e.g., Farm2fork models).
- **Cross-border collaboration:** Strengthening economic and social ties between Bavaria and the Czech Republic, harnessing cultural and environmental synergies.
- **Climate-resilient strategies:** Develop solutions to prepare agriculture and forestry in this area for the impending consequences of climate change and develop adaptation strategies

2. Regional Focus and Priorities

- **Regional Business Support:** Developing climate-resilient solutions in agriculture and forestry.
- **Local food systems:** Strengthening regional producers and short supply chains to ensure food security and sustainability (e.g. Šumavaprodukt).
- **Regional mobility and digital infrastructure:** Developing cross-border transport and digital connectivity to promote equitable growth.
- **Improvement of cross-border cooperation** between Bavaria and the Czech Republic, incentives for international cooperation between businesses and science

3. Regional Partners

Key partners include:

- **THD** – for academic research and innovation.
- **Uhlava o.p.s.** - a regional non-profit supporting education and community development
- **EUREGIO Bayerischer Wald** – fostering cross-border economic cooperation.
- **Local governments (e.g. Klatovy, Freyung-Grafenau)** – for integrated territorial strategies and policy support.

- **GREG Freyung and Incubators on the Czech side**– supporting start-ups and digital initiatives.

4. Network Building

- **Hackathons and collaborative workshops** with local and regional actors to generate innovative solutions and engage diverse communities.
- **Linking rural and urban stakeholders** through knowledge-sharing platforms and participatory events.
- **Strategic alliances** with chambers of commerce, tourism offices, and civic organizations to leverage regional knowledge and foster cohesion.

5. Application-Oriented Research

- **Pilot-testing** of advanced digital solutions and co-creation of data-driven planning tools.
- **Relevant research activities**, designed to be immediately relevant to local needs, ensuring a practical impact on regional development (e.g., digital twins, spatial planning optimization).

6. Knowledge Transfer to the Economy

- **Bridging academia and SMEs:** Using Digital Innovation Hubs (like DInO) to help businesses adopt new technologies and integrate digital tools.
- **Supporting entrepreneurship:** Strengthening start-ups through incubators (e.g., GreG Digitales Gründerzentrum) and fostering an innovation ecosystem that supports regional economic growth.

7. Science Communication and Public Information

- **Bilingual communication strategies:** Delivering information in German and Czech to ensure accessibility and inclusiveness.
- **Community workshops and events:** Actively engaging residents and stakeholders in co-creation, fostering ownership of the pilot's results.
- **Transparent data sharing and digital platforms:** Promoting open data principles and participatory governance.

8. Public Outreach

- **Regional showcases:** Participating in trade fairs and exhibitions (e.g., Země Živitelka in České Budějovice) to highlight the hub's work.
- **Cross-border economic days:** Organizing events to share progress, attract external interest, and foster regional pride.
- **Media engagement:** Leveraging local press, social media, and cross-border news platforms to disseminate key findings and invite further collaboration.

2.5. Gender and Diversity Dimensions

The Czech–Bavarian border region is shaped by demographic ageing, youth outmigration, and traditionally male-dominated sectors such as agriculture and forestry. These dynamics disproportionately limit opportunities for women, young people, and newcomers, particularly on the Czech side where rural innovation infrastructure is less developed. Women often remain underrepresented in entrepreneurship, digital occupations, and decision-making, while young professionals face limited pathways for career development outside urban centres. Cultural and linguistic differences across the border also influence labour mobility and participation in cross-border initiatives.

To address these disparities, the pilot promotes inclusive stakeholder participation and gender-balanced engagement across all activities. Rural innovation networks have historically underrepresented women and marginalised groups; correcting this requires intentional design of stakeholder panels, training programmes, and co-creation processes. Bavaria offers relevant inspiration, particularly through GreG Freyung’s collaboration with the women-led entrepreneurial network innen:raum, which brings together female founders, executives, and independent professionals. This model provides a transferable example for expanding women’s innovation networks across the Czech–Bavarian pilot area.

The cross-border setting itself functions as a living laboratory for cultural collaboration, enabling the development of governance models that integrate Central European cultural, linguistic, and social diversity. This supports EU cohesion principles and offers practical insights for other border regions.

Digital tools developed within the project also contribute to gender and diversity awareness. AI-enabled analysis and spatial data visualisation can reveal patterns such as gender gaps in employment, unequal access to services, or differences in participation in rural innovation ecosystems. Mapping indicators—such as the gender composition of rural enterprises, migration trends, or access to education and care facilities—helps target interventions where they are most needed.

Overall, strengthening gender equality and diversity is essential for building a resilient innovation ecosystem in the Czech–Bavarian border region. By creating more inclusive participation structures, supporting women and young professionals, and using data-driven insights to reduce inequalities, the RAP contributes to a more balanced and socially sustainable transformation of the region.

3. Vision and Strategic Goals

3.1. Vision Statement

The **Czech-Bavarian Innovation Hub in Klatovy** will be a cross-border engine for modernising the agriculture and food sectors in the Czech-Bavarian border region. Rooted in the Šumava landscape, the Hub will drive sustainable rural development by equipping local farmers, food producers, and agri-entrepreneurs with the tools, knowledge, and partnerships needed to thrive in a climate-smart, digitally connected, and competitive environment.



Core Objectives:

	<p>Smart Agriculture & Digital Farming Empowering small and medium-sized farms with AI-driven precision tools, shared technology, and specialised training to boost productivity, sustainability, and climate resilience.</p>
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	<p>Food Innovation & Rural Entrepreneurship Supporting startups and SMEs in the food sector through business incubation, funding access, and collaboration with Bavarian partners to create new products, markets, and value chains.</p>
	<p>Digital Skills & AI Competence Enhancing the regional agri-food workforce with training in digital tools, data use, and smart governance for better farm management and food system innovation.</p>
	<p>AI-Powered Grant & Subsidy Assistance Making EU and national funding more accessible for rural actors through AI-based advisory services and simplified application processes.</p>
	<p>Creating Critical Mass for Transformation Building a regional platform that connects stakeholders, concentrates innovation efforts, and generates the momentum needed to attract funding, drive digitalisation, and support long-term sustainability and climate resilience in the agri-food economy.</p>

By placing agri-food innovation at its centre, the Klatovy Innovation Hub will become a model for rural regeneration - linking tradition with technology, and local production with cross-border opportunity.

3.2. Strategic Goals and Expected Impact by 2030

By 2030, the Czech–Bavarian border region aims to create a practical, operational innovation ecosystem centred in Klatovy, supporting climate-smart agriculture, rural entrepreneurship, and cross-border cooperation.

Strategic Goals by 2030

1. **Establish the Klatovy innovation hub** - A functional cross-border centre providing training, advisory services, digital tools, and space for cooperation between Czech and Bavarian partners.
2. **Support climate-smart and digital agriculture** - Help farms adopt simple, practical digital tools and sustainable practices through demonstrations, training, and cross-border knowledge exchange.
3. **Strengthen rural entrepreneurship** - Assist SMEs and local producers with innovation, short supply chains, marketing, and cooperation with Bavarian partners.
4. **Improve skills and youth opportunities** - Deliver digital, green, and entrepreneurial training with Czech and Bavarian schools and universities, increasing the region’s capacity and attractiveness.

5. **Enhance cross-border cooperation and services** - Provide bilingual support, simplified access to funding, and regular joint events to reduce barriers and strengthen regional integration.

Expected Impact by 2030

- A visible and functional rural innovation hub in Klatovy.
- More resilient farms and SMEs using digital tools and climate-smart practices.
- Stronger local value chains and new business opportunities.
- Improved skills, youth engagement, and regional attractiveness.
- Closer, more efficient Czech–Bavarian cooperation across sectors.

Synergies with the FarmTourist project (Úhlava, o.p.s.)

Results from Úhlava’s cascade project “*From Farm to Tourist*”, implemented under PoliRuralPlus, provide valuable input for the Czech-Bavarian RAP. The project engaged over 80 regional stakeholders and identified strong interest in connecting local farms, gastronomy, and tourism through short supply chains and digital tools. The findings highlight the need for training in digital marketing, the creation of shared sales platforms, and continued cross-border cooperation. These insights directly inform the Innovation Hub’s focus on agri-tourism, local value chains, and digitalisation, and demonstrate strong stakeholder readiness in the Klatovy–Šumava region.

4. Action Plan

4.1. Intervention Areas

To transform the Czech–Bavarian border region into a model of cross-border rural innovation, five mutually reinforcing intervention areas are defined (Fig. 4). Each area responds to the challenges and opportunities identified in the RAP and provides the framework for concrete actions listed in Section 4.1.2.

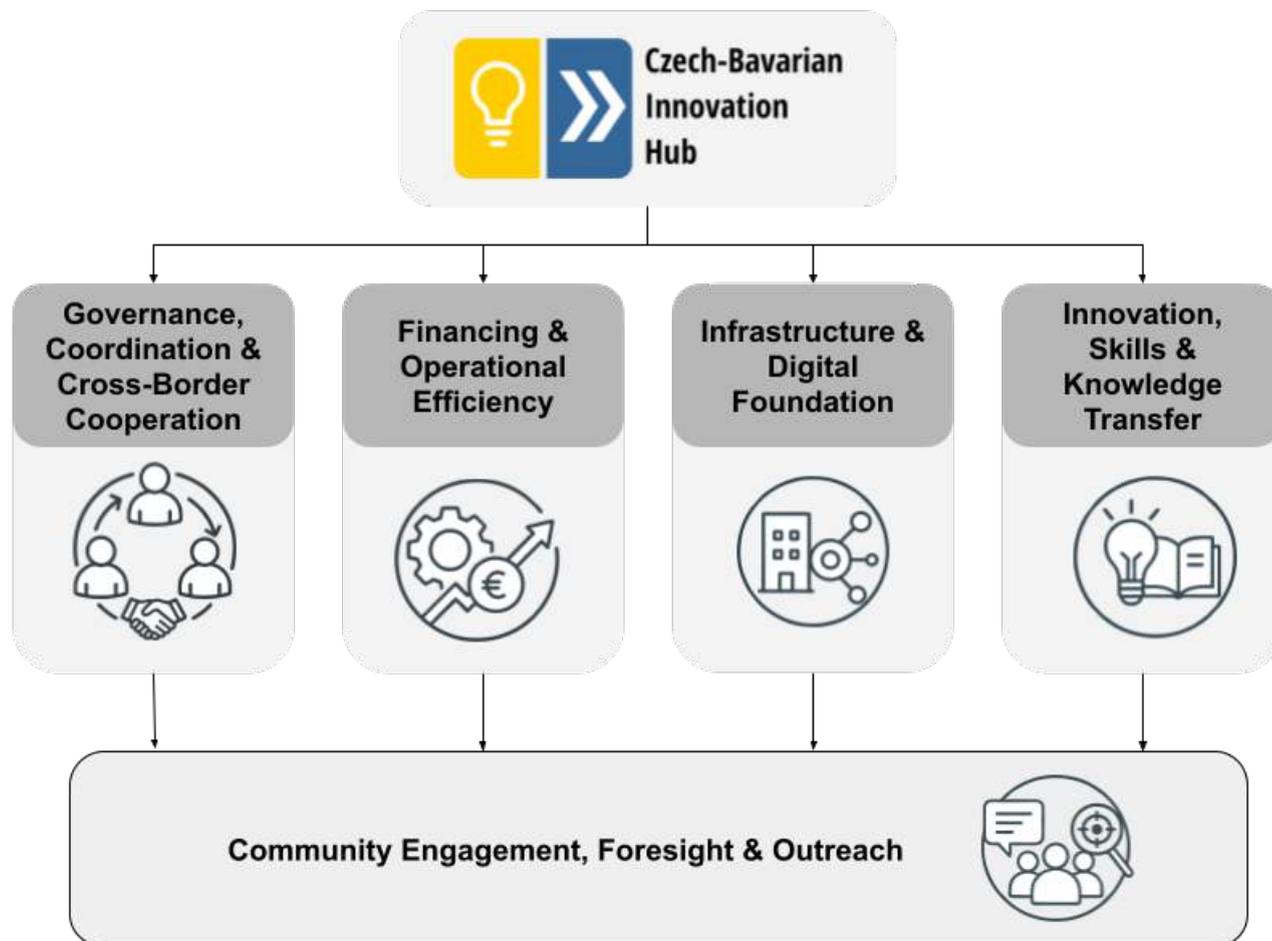


Figure 4: Model of Czech-Bavarian Innovation Hub



Intervention Area 1: Governance, Coordination & Cross-Border Cooperation

Establish the institutional, organisational, and cross-border structures needed to launch and manage the Czech–Bavarian Innovation Hub:

- Design and governance of the Innovation Hub in Klatovy.
- Creation of a joint steering committee bringing together Czech and Bavarian partners.
- Formalisation of cooperation frameworks with Bavarian institutions.
- Adoption of a performance-based operational model inspired by the Bavarian Technology Campus network.



Intervention Area 2: Financing & Operational Efficiency

Secure sustainable financing and ensure efficient use of resources throughout the hub's lifecycle:

- Develop a blended financial model combining EU, national, regional, and other sources (Interreg, CAP, Horizon Europe, LEADER).

- Introduce a five-year start-up and evaluation phase mirroring the Bavarian approach to ensure accountability and cost efficiency.
- Establish performance indicators linking continued support to measurable outputs (e.g. start-ups, research projects, training participants).
- Create a long-term business plan including income diversification and service-based revenue streams.



Intervention Area 3: Infrastructure & Digital Foundation

Provide the physical and digital infrastructure necessary for innovation and collaboration in rural settings:

- Identify and equip a multifunctional hub space in Klatovy combining co-working, training, and demonstration facilities.
- Deploy shared digital tools: open-data repository, virtual workspace, and bilingual (Czech–German) collaboration platform.
- Integrate AI-supported grant advisory and data-driven management systems to improve efficiency and transparency.



Intervention Area 4: Innovation, Skills & Knowledge Transfer

Build regional innovation capacity, foster entrepreneurship, and strengthen digital and green skills among farmers, SMEs, and youth:

- Launch pilot programmes in smart agriculture, climate-smart technologies, and circular economy.
- Establish incubation and mentoring services for rural start-ups.
- Introduce a cross-border training academy in collaboration with universities and technology campuses.
- Facilitate living labs, hackathons, and joint research activities to stimulate applied innovation and technology transfer.



Intervention Area 5: Community Engagement, Foresight & Outreach

Ensure broad stakeholder participation, long-term ownership, and public visibility of innovation efforts:

- Conduct participatory foresight exercises and stakeholder consultations using PoliRural Plus tools.
- Strengthen agri-tourism, local food systems, and short supply chains linking farmers and SMEs.
- Organise communication campaigns, cross-border innovation days, and youth engagement programmes.
- Implement continuous monitoring and evaluation to track progress, share lessons, and guide policy feedback.

4.2. Actions and Expected Outcomes

Intervention Area 1: Governance, Coordination & Cross-Border Cooperation



Action 1.1 – Maintain and Regularly Update the Regional Action Plan (RAP)

Formalise a process to keep the RAP active, relevant, and regularly updated. Introduce annual or semi-annual review cycles, integrate monitoring results, and continuously revise priorities based on new data, stakeholder feedback, and emerging opportunities on both sides of the border.

Expected outcome: A dynamic, jointly maintained RAP that guides long-term cooperation and adapts to evolving regional needs.

Action 1.2 – Establish a Cross-border Steering Committee and Formalise Czech-Bavarian Cooperation Framework

Create a permanent governance body with representatives from key actors including Plan4all, Úhlava, MAS Pošumaví, and DIT Freyung to coordinate implementation and monitor progress. Sign a Memorandum of Understanding between Czech and Bavarian partners to facilitate joint calls and project development.

Expected outcome: A signed Memorandum of Understanding, establish the Steering Committee, define a meeting schedule, complete annual coordination reports.

Action 1.3 – Adopt Efficiency and Performance Model

Adapt the Bavarian Technology Campus model: a five-year start-up phase with annual evaluation and transition to self-financing.

Expected outcome: Operational and evaluation framework approved by the Steering Committee.



Intervention Area 2: Financing & Operational Efficiency

Action 2.1 – Develop a Blended Financing Scheme

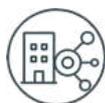
Combine Interreg, Horizon Europe, CAP Strategic Plan, and regional funds, complemented by municipal and private contributions.

Expected outcome: Hub financing plan 2027–2030 with confirmed sources.

Action 2.2 – Implement Performance-Based Funding System

Introduce annual performance reviews linking continued support to achievements (e.g. start-ups supported, training events held, projects secured).

Expected outcome: Annual performance report and revised funding allocations.



Intervention Area 3: Infrastructure & Digital Foundation

Action 3.1 – Set Up Physical Hub in Klatovy

Identify a building as a co-working, training, and demonstration space, ensuring cross-border accessibility.

Expected outcome: Fully equipped Innovation Hub premises.

Action 3.2 – Deploy Shared Digital Infrastructure

Create an online collaboration platform integrating data repository, event management, and AI-assisted funding advice, operating in Czech and German.

Expected outcome: Operational digital workspace.

Action 3.3 – Connect Regional Data and PoliRural Plus Tools

Integrate regional datasets (open data, agri-food, environmental, socio-economic) with PoliRural Plus

analytical tools to strengthen evidence-based planning, innovation transfer, and cross-border cooperation. This coordinated data ecosystem will make it easier for stakeholders to use shared information for decision-making, training, and collaborative projects.

Expected outcome: An accessible data ecosystem that interlinks more than 100 regional datasets and supports stakeholders in applying data-driven approaches for rural development and innovation.

Intervention Area 4: Innovation, Skills & Knowledge Transfer



Action 4.1 – Smart Agriculture Pilot Programme

Pilot precision-farming technologies and AI-assisted decision tools on local farms in collaboration with Bavarian research campuses. These pilots will demonstrate practical benefits, support climate-smart agriculture, and help farmers adopt digital solutions.

Expected outcome: A set of real-life demonstrations showing improved farm management, stronger digital uptake, and enhanced cooperation between Czech and Bavarian agricultural actors.

Action 4.2 – Cross-Border Training Academy

Organise training courses in AI, data use, circular economy, and digital agriculture, linked with UWB and DIT. Training will focus on practical skills needed for rural transformation and the modernisation of the agri-food sector.

Expected outcome: A steady increase in digital and green skills across the region, supported by recognised cross-border training formats and strengthened cooperation between Czech and Bavarian educational institutions.

Action 4.3 – Strengthen Digital and Professional Skills Through Certified Training Pathways

Build on the expertise and methodologies developed by the Plan4all Living Lab within the Agri-Digital Growth project to enhance skills development in the agri-food sector. Collaborate closely with WirelessInfo and the Czech Living Lab network to implement certified training programmes for agro specialists, focusing on precision farming, digital tools, AI-supported decision-making, and sustainable agricultural practices. These training pathways will support farmers, advisors, students, and SMEs in acquiring practical competencies needed for modern agriculture, while ensuring recognition and transferability of skills across the Czech–Bavarian region.

Expected outcome: A structured, cross-border skills development framework that equips regional stakeholders with certified competencies in digital and climate-smart agriculture, strengthening the long-term innovation capacity of the agri-food sector.

Intervention Area 5: Community Engagement, Foresight & Outreach



Action 5.1 – Foresight and Strategic Dialogue Across the Border

Use PoliRural Plus methods to engage stakeholders from both sides of the border in identifying regional priorities, future scenarios, and shared development trajectories. These regular foresight dialogues will feed into updates of the RAP and support evidence-based decision-making.

Expected outcome: A continuous cross-border learning process that informs strategic choices and keeps the RAP forward-looking and responsive.

Action 5.2 – Strengthen Regional Identity Through Local Food, Agro-Tourism, and Youth Engagement

Promote short supply chains, local food branding, and cross-border agri-tourism initiatives (e.g., Šumava–Bayerwald product identity). Integrate youth programmes, schools, and young professionals into these activities through internships, project-based learning, and ambassador roles.

Expected outcome: A stronger regional identity supported by active youth participation, new business collaborations, and enhanced visibility of local products and tourism offers.

Action 5.3 – Communication, Outreach, and Participatory Monitoring

Coordinate bilingual communication, public events, and storytelling to showcase cross-border innovation. Develop a light monitoring and evaluation approach that tracks progress, shares insights publicly, and supports transparency in RAP implementation.

Expected outcome: Clear communication of achievements, broader community involvement, and regular feedback loops that guide strategic adjustments.

5. Policy and Funding Alignment

5.1. EU, National and Regional Policy Alignment

5.1.1. European Level Alignment

The Czech-Bavarian Regional Action Plan (RAP), through its flagship Innovation Hub in Klatovy, is strongly aligned with a suite of **key EU strategies** aimed at creating a fairer, greener, more resilient and inclusive Europe. By targeting rural innovation, digital transformation, cross-border cooperation, and participatory governance, the RAP embodies a tangible, place-based response to multiple European policy visions.

The **EU Territorial Agenda 2030** frames the ambition for a “Just and Green Europe.” The RAP responds by reducing rural-urban inequalities, empowering small municipalities, and enhancing cross-border collaboration. Its interventions help build more balanced development across regions and reinforce territorial cohesion by ensuring innovation reaches rural border areas like Klatovy.

In line with the **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)** and the accompanying **Rural Pact**, the RAP aims to make rural areas more attractive places to live and work. It operationalises this vision by improving digital infrastructure, fostering youth-led entrepreneurship, and enabling access to education and funding. Through foresight schools, community engagement, and AI-powered services, the RAP strengthens **local governance and civic participation**, which are central to the Rural Pact’s bottom-up transformation agenda.

The RAP also contributes to the **European Green Deal**, particularly its **Farm to Fork** and **Biodiversity Strategies**. It does so by promoting sustainable agriculture, circular resource use, nature-based tourism, and environmental stewardship. Precision farming and smart rural energy practices contribute to greener rural systems and support the EU’s climate neutrality and biodiversity targets.

On the digital front, the RAP supports the **Digital Europe Programme** by delivering AI training, smart governance tools, and SME digitalisation in rural areas. This ensures that the digital transition reaches all corners of the EU and builds the technological capacities of often-overlooked rural communities.

Crucially, the RAP resonates with the **New European Bauhaus (NEB)** initiative, which aims to connect the Green Deal to people’s lives through beauty, sustainability, and inclusiveness. The Innovation Hub aligns with NEB principles by fostering multifunctional, community-driven, and aesthetically integrated rural spaces. Whether it’s a co-working space in a heritage site, an eco-tourism route along the border, or a digital classroom in a repurposed rural school, the RAP places human-centred design and **spatial innovation** at the heart of transformation. More details on the NEB alignment can be found in Section 5.1.4.

The RAP also supports the **EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027**, especially through its focus on innovation, social inclusion, and digital and environmental transitions. It strengthens territorial cooperation by acting as a cross-border pilot site, integrating EU, national, and local resources into cohesive, co-designed actions.

Finally, the RAP contributes to the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan 2023–2027** by supporting smart agriculture, small farm innovation, rural employment, and advisory services. Its AI-driven agricultural training and subsidy access tools complement CAP’s focus on competitiveness, sustainability, and vibrant rural communities.

5.1.2. Czech Alignment

5.1.2.1. National Level

The Czech-Bavarian RAP operates in strong alignment with the Czech Republic’s national policy landscape. Its priorities—rural innovation, digital transformation, sustainable development, and cross-border collaboration—mirror and operationalise national strategies aimed at territorial cohesion, smart growth, and regional resilience.

The Czech-Bavarian Innovation Hub in Klatovy aligns closely with the [Spatial Development Policy of the Czech Republic](#) by promoting balanced territorial development, strengthening rural-urban linkages, and supporting efficient, sustainable land use. Situated in a regional centre with strong ties to its rural hinterland, the Hub reinforces the policy’s polycentric vision by delivering digital services, smart infrastructure, and innovation tools to peripheral areas. Its focus on smart agriculture, eco-tourism, and AI-supported public services contributes to spatial cohesion, environmental sustainability, and the integration of local governance into broader spatial planning frameworks—thus translating national spatial objectives into practical, community-based action.

The [Regional Development Strategy of the Czech Republic 2021+ \(RDS 2021+\)](#) defines a national vision for balanced territorial development, emphasising the integration of lagging and peripheral regions into the broader national growth trajectory. The RAP contributes directly to this by targeting the border district of Klatovy with initiatives that stimulate economic diversification, address service accessibility, and foster cross-border partnerships. The Innovation Hub, situated in a rural setting but connected to the Bavarian innovation ecosystem, represents a tangible application of the RDS 2021+ vision—bringing “smart growth” to a traditionally underserved area.

The [Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030 \(CZ2030\)](#) sets long-term priorities around sustainability, resilience, social cohesion, and digital transformation. The RAP strongly reflects these dimensions: its focus on precision agriculture, AI training, eco-tourism, and digital inclusion addresses both environmental and

social pillars of CZ2030. Moreover, its participatory foresight approach aligns with the framework's emphasis on governance innovation and bottom-up regional planning, thus reinforcing national ambitions through a place-based and citizen-oriented model.

In terms of rural policy, the RAP contributes to the implementation of the [Strategic Plan of the Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\) 2023–2027](#), which defines Czech rural development priorities under the EU's CAP framework. The Innovation Hub's pillars—smart agriculture, digital access for farmers, short supply chains, and advisory services—mirror CAP objectives such as fostering innovation, enhancing rural viability, and promoting environmental stewardship. Importantly, the RAP introduces AI-supported advisory and grant assistance mechanisms, which complement the CAP's LEADER-based support system and enhance the administrative capacity of local actors to effectively absorb rural funding.

The [National Recovery Plan \(Národní plán obnovy, NPO\)](#)—designed to mobilise EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds—identifies digitalisation, green transformation, and education reform as top priorities. The RAP contributes to all three. It advances digital upskilling through its AI competence centre, supports green growth via sustainable tourism and circular agriculture, and pilots innovative education through foresight schools. The cross-cutting, integrated nature of the RAP makes it a suitable vehicle for implementing the systemic reforms envisioned in the NPO at the regional level.

The [National RIS3 Strategy \(Research and Innovation for Smart Specialisation, Annexe I, Annexe II, Annexe III\)](#) guides the country's science, research, and innovation agenda. It calls for stronger regional innovation ecosystems and inter-regional and cross-border cooperation. The RAP directly answers this by creating an innovation hub embedded in a functional rural region, but linked to Bavarian and Czech R&D partners. Its applied focus on agriculture, business, and public administration gives real-world grounding to RIS3 goals, and supports capacity building in sectors typically underrepresented in the national innovation system.

5.1.2.2. Regional Level (Pilsen Region)

The Czech-Bavarian Regional Action Plan (RAP), centred on the Innovation Hub in Klatovy, demonstrates a high degree of strategic coherence with both the [Plzeň Region Development Programme 2022+ \(PRPK 2022+\)](#) and the [Integrated Territorial Investment \(ITI\) Strategy for the Plzeň Metropolitan Area](#). While the PRPK provides a region-wide framework for economic growth, sustainability, and service accessibility, the ITI strategy focuses more specifically on the urban–rural integration, competitiveness, and innovation within the functional territory surrounding the city of Plzeň. The RAP, operating from Klatovy—a key node in the region's rural and cross-border fabric—bridges these two strategic layers.

At the heart of PRPK 2022+ is the ambition to enhance regional competitiveness and innovation capacity. The RAP contributes directly to this aim by incubating new businesses, introducing smart agriculture tools, and facilitating cross-border cooperation with Bavarian innovation partners. This not only reflects the PRPK's regional economic goals but also mirrors the ITI's emphasis on **developing high-value technology ecosystems** within the wider metropolitan region. By embedding digital tools such as AI and precision agriculture into rural economies, the Innovation Hub helps **distribute innovation beyond the urban centre**, a key aspiration of both strategies.

Both PRPK and the ITI identify the retention of a skilled workforce and the reduction of demographic imbalances as urgent priorities. The RAP addresses these through **digital training, foresight-based education, and youth entrepreneurship programs**, making rural regions more attractive for young people to live and work. This aligns with the ITI's objective of eliminating barriers between Plzeň and its surrounding municipalities, ensuring that rural residents benefit from comparable opportunities in education, employment, and connectivity.

The RAP also speaks directly to the PRPK goal of **sustainable tourism and environmental resilience**, as well as the ITI's focus on **climate adaptation and smart infrastructure**. Through eco-tourism development, environmental awareness campaigns, and sustainable land use via smart farming, the Innovation Hub reinforces both frameworks' sustainability objectives. These activities also help deliver the ITI's climate goals by applying digital solutions that enhance ecological planning and resource use.

Service accessibility, another shared pillar of PRPK and ITI, is a critical area where the RAP provides added value. With AI-powered grant assistance and decentralised digital service points, the RAP helps smaller municipalities and rural stakeholders engage more effectively with public funding systems. This not only empowers local governance in line with PRPK's goal of inclusive development, but also supports the ITI's intent to create **well-functioning micro-regional service centres** that bridge administrative and digital divides.

Infrastructure-wise, both PRPK and the ITI prioritise **digital connectivity and smart systems** as foundational elements of regional cohesion. The Innovation Hub contributes to this by targeting rural digital exclusion and promoting cross-sectoral applications of smart technology. Its alignment with the ITI's existing investments in green mobility and broadband rollout ensures that the RAP leverages and builds upon prior EU and regional investments.

In summary, the Czech-Bavarian RAP serves as a **strategic bridge** between the **broad developmental vision of PRPK 2022+** and the **integrated, place-based innovation objectives of the ITI strategy**. By operating from the rural-peripheral but strategically positioned town of Klatovy, the Innovation Hub acts as a **catalyst for rural-urban-functional integration**, ensuring that innovation, sustainability, and prosperity are shared more evenly across the Plzeň Region.

5.1.2.3. Local Level

[Klatovy's long-term development plan](#) (2017–2025) outlines economic diversification, digitalisation, and youth retention as strategic priorities. The Innovation Hub amplifies these ambitions by introducing business incubation services, startup mentoring, and tailored support for rural and youth-led enterprises. This emphasis on entrepreneurship complements the goals of local **Local Action Groups (LAGs or MAS in)**, especially **MAS Ekoregion Úhlava**, **MAS Český Západ**, and **MAS Pošumaví**, which have consistently prioritised rural SME support, product innovation, and capacity building in their LEADER strategies.

The **rural-urban innovation corridor** that the Hub facilitates also aligns with the LAGs' focus on reducing service disparities and promoting digital inclusion. Through AI training, digital skills workshops, and remote business services, the Hub becomes a vehicle for implementing **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)** strategies at a higher level of technological sophistication. In practice, this could mean Hub-supported

digital learning centres in villages, farm-based technology trials, or AI-assisted municipal grant services — initiatives that respond directly to existing LEADER pipelines for service innovation and community engagement.

Agriculture, a cornerstone of both Klatovy’s identity and the surrounding rural economy, is another area where synergies are evident. The Innovation Hub’s **smart agriculture** component — focused on precision tools, data-driven farming, and shared access to technology — adds depth to ongoing LAG initiatives promoting local food systems, agro-tourism, and environmental education. Several LEADER-funded projects in the Klatovy area have already addressed issues like food processing, short supply chains, and organic transition. The Hub can offer an additional layer of impact by integrating digital monitoring systems, AI-based crop management, and regional agri-data platforms.

The challenge of navigating complex funding landscapes is one shared by municipalities and rural actors alike. Here, the Innovation Hub’s AI-powered grant and subsidy advisory system offers critical added value. Many LAGs report that smaller project promoters in their territories lack the administrative capacity to access available EU or national funds. The Hub’s advisory function, combining automation, expert consulting, and simplified applications, can directly support both municipal offices and local project applicants, effectively increasing uptake and successful implementation of rural development funds, including future CAP allocations under LEADER.

At the governance level, the Hub also reinforces the **participatory ethos** embedded in both the city’s development strategy and LEADER methodology. Klatovy’s plan promotes community involvement in strategic planning, while LAGs operate on the principle of tripartite local partnership. The Innovation Hub’s integration of **foresight methods, co-design processes, and community workshops** contributes to this participatory culture. In doing so, it becomes not just a service provider, but a **platform for collaborative territorial intelligence** — bringing farmers, youth, local governments, and cross-border partners into shared visioning and experimentation.

This alignment with **ongoing LAG strategies and LEADER project pipelines** ensures that the Hub is not imposed from the top down, but rather emerges organically from existing local efforts. It also offers a mechanism for scaling successful LEADER pilots regionally or transnationally, thanks to the Hub’s technological and institutional infrastructure.

5.1.3. German Alignment

5.1.3.1. National Level

The Czech-Bavarian RAP aligns strongly with Germany’s national rural and agricultural development frameworks. The RAP supports the objectives of Germany’s [CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027](#), particularly in promoting sustainability, digital transformation, and support for small-scale, regional agriculture. It contributes to the “**Digitale Zukunft ländlicher Räume**” initiative by integrating digital tools (like MAAT and the PoliRuralPlus dashboard) to foster participatory governance, improve service access, and support foresight in decision-making. Additionally, the RAP aligns with the national goals of strengthening **rural resilience, decentralised cooperation, and rural-urban synergies**, as embedded in Germany’s **National Strategy for Rural Development (DVS)**.

5.1.3.2. State Level

The RAP is well-aligned with the strategic objectives outlined in “[Heimatstrategie Bayern 2025](#)”, promoting decentralized, livable rural areas through inclusive governance and stakeholder participation. It supports Bavaria’s **State Development Programme (LEP)** by encouraging functional regional planning and rural-urban linkages. Digital transformation—central to [Digital Bavaria](#)—is embedded in the RAP through geospatial planning tools, digital foresight processes, and stakeholder engagement platforms. The counties of Regen, Cham and Freyung-Grafenau are all part of the LEADER programme.

5.1.3.3. Regional/ Local Level

5.1.3.3.1. Lower Bavaria

The Czech-Bavarian RAP supports the **regional development priorities of Lower Bavaria** by fostering cross-border cooperation, strengthening rural-urban linkages, and implementing participatory foresight processes that align with both [ILE](#) and [LEADER strategies to foster innovation and digitalization](#). Through the use of digital engagement tools like MAAT and regional foresight dashboards, the RAP helps address Lower Bavaria’s needs for demographic stabilization, sustainable agriculture, and local value chain development. The RAP aligns with goals such as improving inter-municipal cooperation, sustainable land management, digital infrastructure, and climate resilience. It also complements the **LEADER region strategies**, especially in supporting regional identity, green economy, and innovation in agri-food systems and tourism.

By reinforcing local development efforts of local action groups (LAGs) of LEADER, the RAP helps implement CAP 2023–2027 priorities and promotes circular regional economies, smart services, and ecosystem-based resource use in rural communities.

5.1.3.3.1.1. County of Freyung-Grafenau

The RAP addresses Freyung-Grafenau’s rural development needs by enhancing **youth participation**, supporting **climate-friendly agriculture**, and leveraging **spatial data** to improve planning. It strengthens the region’s [LEADER](#) and EAFRD-funded projects through tools that facilitate co-creation and stakeholder foresight. The RAP also supports the implementation of **digital innovation hubs** and social infrastructure, aligning with the county’s focus on countering population decline and fostering smart services in rural villages.

5.1.3.3.1.2. County of Regen

In alignment with the Czech-Bavarian RAP, the [LAG Arberland](#) supports **cross-border cooperation**, **digital engagement**, and **community-led innovation**, making it a key platform for implementing participatory foresight and policy experiments under PoliRuralPlus. The region’s mountainous character and ecological richness also make it central to **climate-smart land use**, a core element of both the RAP and the **Bayerische Agrar- und Waldstrategie 2030**.

5.1.3.3.2. Upper Palatine

In Upper Palatinate, the RAP directly supports the region’s focus on **demographic sustainability, rural economic diversification, and environmental resilience**. It builds upon the **ILE and LEADER development goals** that emphasize smart regional cooperation, support for local agri-food and tourism value chains, and the protection of cultural and natural landscapes.

The RAP particularly aligns with LEADER and ILE priorities in eastern Oberpfalz counties like [Cham](#), where the emphasis lies on cross-border cooperation with the Czech Republic, promoting climate-friendly forestry and sustainable rural development. The participatory tools and data-enabled planning from PoliRuralPlus strengthen efforts around Smart Villages, digital governance, and integrated mobility. By supporting the implementation of **LES (Local Development Strategies)**, the RAP acts as a delivery mechanism for both regional strategies and EU-wide policies like the Green Deal and CAP 2023–2027.

5.1.3.3.2.1. County of Cham

In Cham, the RAP aligns with local ambitions for **sustainable forestry, tourism, and cross-border cooperation** with Czech regions. It reinforces Cham’s Smart Village efforts by offering digital participatory tools and linking rural communities with regional strategies. With a strong emphasis on environmental protection, mobility, and the circular economy, the RAP contributes to Cham’s goals under the [LEADER project](#).

Altogether, the Czech-Bavarian RAP strengthens rural-urban and cross-border cooperation by aligning with EU, German, Bavarian, regional, and local development strategies—especially in areas like sustainable agriculture, digital innovation, and climate resilience. It leverages local structures such as LAGs and ILEs to implement participatory foresight, smart rural services, and circular economy actions that support the goals of CAP 2023–2027, the European Green Deal, and regional development plans.

5.1.4. Cross Border (Czech-Bavaria) Policy and Strategy Alignment

The Czech-Bavarian Regional Action Plan (RAP) is not a stand-alone initiative. It is **deeply embedded in and supported by a wide array of strategic frameworks** at the EU, national, and regional levels. This alignment ensures that the RAP is not only locally grounded but also **strategically connected to funding opportunities, policy priorities, and long-term development visions**.

To demonstrate this alignment clearly, we developed a **Strategy Alignment Matrix**, which maps core policy goals from key strategies against the RAP’s objectives and activities. This matrix highlights **how the RAP brings strategic intentions into tangible action on the ground**.

Each row illustrates a shared priority—from digital transformation to youth engagement—and shows how the RAP operationalises these goals through targeted measures such as foresight training, rural innovation support, cross-border collaboration, and community-led development.

Strategy Alignment Matrix on the Czech and Bavarian side of the pilot area.

Policy Goal	Matching RAP Objective	How the RAP Delivers It	Source Strategy Czechia	Source Strategy Bavaria
Balanced territorial development	Revitalising rural Klatovy via services and jobs	Addresses depopulation, local services, digital access	RDS 2021+	Bayerisches Landesentwicklungskonzept (LEP) 2023
Youth engagement & innovation ecosystems	Youth retention, skills-building, local jobs	Foresight schools, entrepreneurship support	CZ2030, RIS3	Hightech Agenda Bayern , Jugendstrategie Bayern , Start-up Förderung Bayern Innovativ, EXIST, FLÜGGE
Smart specialisation & innovation	Support for local SMEs, cross-border R&D	Taps into regional innovation assets	National & Regional RIS3	Bayerische Forschungs- und Innovationsstrategie, RIS3 Bayern, EFRE, Cluster Offensive Bayern
Digital transformation	Overcoming digital exclusion in rural areas	Community WiFi, digital skills, remote services	CZ2030, CAP, RIS3	Digitalplan Bayern, Breitbandförderprogramm Bayern, Digitales Dorf Bayern
Climate resilience & sustainability	Eco-tourism, circular practices, local food	Environmental awareness + local value chains	CZ2030, CAP	Bayerische Bioökonomiestrategie, Bayerisches Klimaschutzprogramm 2050, Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie Bayern
Cross-border cohesion	Bavarian partnerships, common actions	Shared knowledge base, joint planning	INTERREG, Spatial Policy	INTERREG Bavaria–Czech Republic 2021–2027 , Euregio Egrensis, Euregio Bayerischer Wald–Böhmerwald
Bottom-up, participatory governance	Local foresight teams & community-driven vision	Co-creation, LAG support, pilot foresight methods	CAP (LEADER), RDS	LEADER Bayern 2023–2027, Heimatstrategie Bayern , Bayerische Demografie Strategie
Enhancing regional SME ecosystems	Rural SME support and inter-regional cooperation	Vouchers, cross-border incubation, mentoring	PRPK 2022+ (Strategic Goal 1.1, 1.2)	Bayerisches Mittelstandsförderungsprogramm, Invest in Bavaria, Cluster Offensive Bayern
Improving access to public services	Decentralised services and digital access	Digital health, e-government, community centres	PRPK 2022+ (Goal 4), Strategy Klatovy 2017–2025	Digitales Rathaus Bayern, Zukunftsstrategie Kommune, GesundheitsregionenPlus Bayern
Revitalising	Link urban	Bridges	Strategy Klatovy	Städtebauförderung Bayern,

historic urban centres	renewal with rural attractiveness	urban-rural appeal through integrated planning	2017-2025, PRPK 2022+	Landstadt Bayern Initiative, Heimat Bayern 2030
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Similarities and Differences in Regional Development Strategies Based on LEADER Programs Focus' in the Border Region

The LEADER programme is implemented along the Bavarian–Czech border via Local Action Groups (LAGs) at the NUTS 3 level. Bavarian LAGs (Oberpfalz, Niederbayern, Oberfranken) focus on digital rural hubs, sustainable tourism, and SME development with strong institutional support, while Czech LAGs (Plzeňský, Jihočeský, Karlovarský) emphasize community-based tourism, local food, and rural entrepreneurship with higher grassroots engagement.

Cross-border collaboration exists but faces administrative, linguistic, and capacity challenges. Together, the regions complement each other—Bavaria provides innovation and structural support, Czechia contributes cultural assets and agile community networks—illustrating the potential and complexity of transnational LEADER implementation.

NEB Alignment

The Bavarian-Czech pilot of the PoliRuralPlus project exemplifies a deeply place-based and policy-relevant interpretation of the New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative. Grounded in the border region of Klatovy and Lower Bavaria, the pilot actively reflects NEB's core values—sustainability, inclusion, and aesthetics—while operationalising its working principles such as transdisciplinary cooperation, participatory design, and locality.

From a sustainability perspective, the pilot integrates green innovation and circular economic models that speak directly to NEB's call for regenerative design and harmonious integration with nature. The adaptation of the Bavarian Technology Campus model to rural areas demonstrates how digital and ecological innovation can be merged in peripheral settings. This is further exemplified by local initiatives such as Šumavaprodukt's farm-to-fork logistics system, which supports short supply chains and resilient local food networks. These initiatives embody the NEB's ambition to translate the European Green Deal into tangible, visible improvements in everyday life—where sustainability is not abstract but lived, practical, and beautiful.

Inclusivity is woven through the pilot's participatory and cross-border structure. Through its multilingual programming and collaboration between Czech and Bavarian communities, the pilot fosters social cohesion and mutual learning across territorial and cultural divides. Its foresight schools, workshops, and community engagements empower a wide spectrum of local stakeholders—farmers, youth, SMEs, and public servants—demonstrating NEB's principle of “leaving no one behind.” The pilot actively responds to the challenge of depopulation and disconnection in rural areas by investing in human capital, local agency, and shared innovation spaces.

Aesthetics, in the NEB sense of quality of experience, identity, and environment, is central to the pilot's approach. The preservation and creative reactivation of cultural landscapes, particularly within the Šumava

and Bavarian Forest regions, exemplify an appreciation of place that extends beyond functional design. The pilot supports initiatives that reinforce a sense of belonging and environmental stewardship, while also encouraging architectural and spatial innovation rooted in local character. This aesthetic sensitivity is not ornamental—it is foundational to creating vibrant, liveable rural spaces.

Methodologically, the pilot echoes NEB’s emphasis on co-creation and knowledge integration. It applies foresight techniques, hackathons, and transdisciplinary collaboration to co-design territorial solutions. Tools like the Rural Attractiveness Explorer and the PoliRuralPlus Knowledge Hub provide digital environments where data, imagination, and action converge—supporting the kind of informed, creative, and participatory planning that NEB envisions.

Strategically, the pilot aligns with the NEB Compass at both the baseline and aspirational levels. It integrates NEB values into regional development strategies, showing how inclusion, sustainability, and aesthetics can reinforce each other rather than compete. Rather than treating NEB as a separate design or cultural layer, the pilot positions it as a guiding philosophy embedded in rural transformation, territorial cooperation, and future-oriented governance.

In sum, the Bavarian-Czech pilot offers a compelling territorial expression of the New European Bauhaus. It proves that rural and cross-border areas can not only benefit from NEB-inspired design and planning but can also lead its evolution by grounding abstract ideals in real communities, real ecosystems, and real innovation. The pilot is thus not only NEB-aligned, it is NEB-enabling, contributing to the broader European effort to reimagine how we live together, sustainably and beautifully, across every type of territory.

5.2. Funding Sources

5.2.1. Potential funding mechanisms

Implementation of the Regional Action Plan will require a diversified and coordinated funding approach drawing on European, national, and regional financial instruments. The objective is to mobilise resources not only for the **initial establishment of the Czech–Bavarian Innovation Hub**, but also to secure a **sustainable operational framework** capable of supporting farmers, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), municipalities, and other regional actors in the long term.

The Czech–Bavarian pilot benefits from extensive experience with major European funding instruments such as **Horizon Europe** and the **Interreg Bavaria–Czechia Programme**. This provides a strong basis for participation in future calls and for designing initiatives that deliver measurable, cross-border impact. The funding ecosystem for the pilot is therefore structured around two complementary components:

- (1) strategic programmes aimed at establishing the Hub and supporting cross-border innovation, and
- (2) operational and thematic programmes designed to maintain its regular activities and services.

5.2.1.1. Strategic funding for hub establishment and cross-border innovation

The **Interreg Bavaria–Czechia Programme 2021–2027** represents the primary instrument for supporting joint Czech–German cooperation in the region. The programme’s priorities—innovation, environment, and governance—are directly aligned with the aims of the Regional Action Plan, particularly in strengthening

digitalisation, knowledge transfer, and sustainability in a cross-border context. The programme has demonstrated steady absorption rates and a consistent record of approval for well-prepared partnerships. Its focus on collaborative research, infrastructure development, and exchange of expertise makes it particularly suitable for establishing the Innovation Hub as a shared Czech–Bavarian platform for experimentation and policy learning.

At the European level, **Horizon Europe** provides opportunities for large-scale thematic projects in areas relevant to the Hub’s mission, including food systems, bioeconomy, sustainable agriculture, digital transformation, and rural innovation. The programme’s Cluster 6 calls for 2025 explicitly encourage the application of multi-actor approaches and territorial innovation models. The Czech–Bavarian Hub offers an appropriate testing ground for such actions, combining pilot activities, stakeholder engagement, and digital tools. Although Horizon Europe calls are highly competitive, participation would enhance the visibility of the region and enable transfer of innovative methodologies developed within previous PoliRural and PoliRuralPlus initiatives.

Beyond the bilateral framework of the Interreg Bavaria–Czechia Programme, the **Interreg Central Europe (CE)** Programme offers complementary opportunities for scaling and transnational knowledge exchange. Its transnational scope and thematic priorities—innovation ecosystems, digitalisation, resilience, and governance—are closely aligned with the objectives of the Czech–Bavarian Innovation Hub. While the bilateral Interreg programme supports the establishment and operation of the Hub within the border region, Interreg CE can facilitate the **transfer and replication of successful approaches** to other Central European regions. Participation in future calls would enable the Hub to share its methodologies, digital tools, and foresight practices with a wider network of partners, thereby strengthening its European relevance and policy impact.

Complementary instruments such as **Digital Europe** and the **Connecting Europe Facility** may further contribute to the Hub’s technological infrastructure. These programmes support artificial intelligence, high-performance data management, and digital skills, which are essential for the Hub’s long-term functionality and integration into European digital ecosystems.

5.2.1.2. Operational and thematic funding for ongoing hub activities

Following establishment, the continuous operation of the Innovation Hub and the implementation of activities for farmers, SMEs, and municipalities will depend on funding from **national and regional programmes** that form part of the Czech Republic’s development policy framework.

The **Czech Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan 2023–2027** offers a comprehensive set of measures promoting innovation, cooperation, and sustainability in the agri-food sector. Through **LEADER/CLLD initiatives, European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Operational Groups**, and targeted eco-schemes, it supports knowledge transfer, demonstration actions, and the adoption of digital and climate-smart practices. These instruments provide an effective channel for linking the Hub’s services with local rural actors, enabling the translation of research and innovation into practical applications.

Additional resources can be accessed through the **Operational Programme Technologies and Applications for Competitiveness (OP TAK)**, managed by the Ministry of Industry and Trade. This programme supports

innovation in SMEs, technology transfer, and applied research, all of which are integral to the Hub's business-oriented activities. The **National Recovery Plan (Národní plán obnovy – NPO)** further provides opportunities for financing digital transformation, capacity building, and environmental transition projects. These national schemes can sustain the Hub's operational agenda and reinforce its role as a regional digital innovation centre serving both rural and urban territories.

Further Funding Options Bavarian side

On the German side, several relevant funding opportunities exist for the Bavarian–Czech PoliRuralPlus pilot, supported by EU, Bavarian, and national sources. The documents show that the **Deggendorf Institute of Technology (DIT)** acts as the German lead institution, driving cooperation in cross-border regional development.

5.2.1.3. EU Level: Horizon Europe & Interreg

Horizon Europe – Innovation Actions

PoliRuralPlus itself is funded through Horizon Europe (GA 101136910) and serves as a model for co-financing regional innovation and implementation projects.

- **Focus:** Digitalization, sustainability, rural innovation
- **Funding rate:** Up to 100% for research, 70% for innovation (100% for non-profits)

Interreg Bavaria–Czech Republic 2021–2027

Supports cross-border cooperation in the Upper Palatinate, Lower Bavaria, and West Bohemia regions.

- **Priority areas:** “Europe closer to citizens” (rural-urban linkages, smart villages), “Greener Europe” (climate adaptation, sustainable mobility)
- **Funding rate:** Up to 80% ERDF
- **Managing authority:** Government of Upper Palatinate / Pilsen Region

5.2.1.4. National and Bavarian Programs

Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs, Regional Development and Energy (StMWi)

Funds regional development, digitalization, and innovation ecosystems (e.g. cluster support, Digital Bonus, Regional Management Bavaria).

Bavarian Ministry of Finance and Homeland (StMFH)

Responsible for cross-border cooperation and the Homeland Strategy.

- **Programs:** Regional budgets, *Small Project Fund Bavaria–Czech Republic (KPF)* – supports local partnerships and pilot actions up to €25,000.

Federal Programs (BMEL / BBSR / BMUV)

- **MORO:** Supports innovative spatial development and urban–rural linkages.
- **BULE+:** Funds transnational pilots on rural digitalization and services of general interest.

5.2.1.5. Cooperation and Innovation Instruments

LEADER / CLLD:

Local Action Groups (e.g. ARBERLAND, Ilzer Land, ILE Donau-Wald) can provide co-financed EU/Bavaria funds for regional development, tourism, and citizen participation.

New European Bauhaus (NEB):

PoliRuralPlus is linked with NEB initiatives, fostering synergies with sustainable and culturally innovative cross-border projects.

5.2.1.6. Recommendations for the Bavarian–Czech Pilot

The Bavarian–Czech pilot should treat the strategic instruments identified in Section 5.2.1.1 as the primary backbone for establishing and positioning the Innovation Hub, and then complement them with national and regional programmes on both sides of the border.

Use Interreg Bavaria–Czechia as the core vehicle for hub establishment

The Interreg Bavaria–Czechia Programme 2021–2027 should be regarded as the central funding instrument for the initial design and launch of the Innovation Hub. Its focus on cross-border innovation, governance, and sustainability is directly aligned with the RAP, and it offers the most suitable framework for:

- financing preparatory and feasibility work (governance model, location, service portfolio);
- creating and equipping the physical hub in Klatovy and linked facilities on the Bavarian side;
- supporting joint pilot activities (smart agriculture, digital tools, foresight) that visibly demonstrate cross-border added value.

A first strategic recommendation is therefore to prepare a dedicated Interreg project (or project sequence) that explicitly frames the Innovation Hub as a shared Czech–Bavarian platform for experimentation, capacity building, and policy learning.

Position the hub as a testbed in Horizon Europe and Interreg Central Europe

Horizon Europe and Interreg Central Europe should be used to “scale up” the Innovation Hub rather than to finance its basic operations. The hub should be presented as:

- a real-world testbed for Cluster 6 and related calls (climate-smart agriculture, bioeconomy, rural innovation, digital tools);
- a demonstration region for territorial innovation models and multi-actor approaches developed in PoliRural and PoliRuralPlus;
- a Central European reference site for cross-border rural innovation in Interreg Central Europe projects.

This implies a proactive strategy where the hub and its partners (Plan4all, DIT, Úhlava, MAS Pošumaví, etc.) systematically seek roles as pilot regions or living labs in relevant consortia, using Interreg Bavaria–Czechia to “anchor” activities locally and Horizon/Interreg CE to connect them to broader European networks.

Build a layered financing model around the hub

Once the strategic layer is in place, operational and thematic funding streams should be organised around it:

- **On the Czech side**, the CAP Strategic Plan (LEADER/CLLD, EIP Operational Groups, eco-schemes), OP TAK, and the National Recovery Plan should support concrete services for farmers and SMEs (training, advisory, demonstration actions).
- **On the Bavarian side**, national and regional programmes (e.g. BULE+, MORO, LEADER, regional development and digitalisation schemes of StMWi and StMFH) should finance complementary activities such as regional pilots, digital skills development, and local infrastructure.

The recommendation is to treat these instruments as a “second ring” of funding that feeds into the hub’s portfolio (training offers, pilots, advisory services), while the main structural and cross-border costs are covered by Interreg Bavaria–Czechia and selected Horizon/Interreg CE projects.

Coordinate funding pipelines through a joint cross-border team

To manage this multi-layered funding mix, partners should establish a small, joint Czech–Bavarian coordination team (embedded in the future hub) tasked with:

- maintaining a rolling pipeline of Interreg, Horizon, Interreg CE and national calls relevant to the RAP;
- preparing combined project concepts where Interreg Bavaria–Czechia provides the core structure and other programmes finance thematic modules;
- supporting smaller municipalities, SMEs and farmers in accessing CAP/LEADER and national schemes, using the hub’s AI-supported grant advisory tools.

5.2.2. Obstacles

Although Czech and European strategic documents strongly emphasise climate-smart agriculture, regenerative practices, digitalisation, and sustainable rural development, the current national funding landscape only partially reflects this ambition. The most substantial and accessible instrument for farmers remains the CAP Strategic Plan (eco-schemes and rural development investments), which provides stable support for sustainable practices but limits funding to specific measures and yearly cycles.

Beyond the CAP, national programmes such as OP TAK, TAČR *Prostředí pro život*, and various environmental schemes align thematically with sustainability goals but tend to focus on research, innovation, or horizontal enterprise support - making them less accessible for small and medium-sized farms seeking operational changes.

As a result, there is a structural gap between policy ambition and practical, low-threshold funding for on-farm sustainability transitions. The Innovation Hub in Klatovy will address this gap by acting as a regional integrator: helping stakeholders navigate available instruments, combining multiple funding streams into coherent project pathways, reducing administrative burdens through digital and AI-enhanced advisory services, and advocating for future funding mechanisms that better reflect regional needs.

Implementation of the Regional Action Plan relies primarily on two funding instruments - **Horizon Europe** and the **Interreg Bavaria–Czechia Programme** - each offering distinct advantages but also presenting

specific operational constraints. Addressing these constraints is essential to ensure continuity between research, innovation, and practical application across the Czech–Bavarian border.

5.2.3. Horizon Europe

5.2.3.1. High Entry Barriers and Competitive Environment

Horizon Europe remains the most significant source of funding for transnational research and innovation in Europe. However, its highly competitive nature creates substantial entry barriers.

Success rates in the relevant thematic clusters (e.g., Cluster 6 – Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources and Environment) typically range from 10 % to 15 %, with calls attracting hundreds of proposals. Consortia are generally led by large research institutions or established innovation networks, leaving smaller regional partners in supportive roles.

Implication for the Hub:

Regional and local actors in the Czech–Bavarian pilot may find it difficult to assume coordination roles or secure significant budgets within Horizon Europe consortia. There is a risk of being included as peripheral partners rather than as drivers of innovation.

Mitigation:

The Innovation Hub should position itself as a **demonstration and replication site** within larger European projects. Partnerships with universities and experienced Horizon participants will ensure relevance while maintaining scientific and territorial credibility.

5.2.3.2. Administrative and Financial Complexity

Horizon Europe projects entail demanding administrative and financial procedures, but within the Czech–Bavarian pilot, these challenges are largely mitigated by the experience and infrastructure of key partners such as **Plan4all** and the **Digital Innovation Hub of DIT (Deggendorf Institute of Technology)**.

Both organisations have extensive experience in EU framework programmes, including proposal preparation, financial management, and ethical compliance, and can provide centralised coordination for the consortium.

Implication for the Hub:

While administrative requirements (e.g. financial audits, reporting, and data management plans) remain complex, the risk of non-compliance is limited when such experienced partners are involved. The main residual challenge lies in aligning technical reporting cycles with the operational pace of local stakeholders.

Mitigation:

Administrative and reporting tasks will be concentrated under Plan4all and DIT, allowing regional and municipal partners to focus on pilot activities and knowledge transfer. Early definition of internal procedures and cost-allocation mechanisms will ensure smooth delivery and financial stability.

5.2.4. Interreg Bavaria–Czechia Programme

The Interreg Bavaria–Czechia Programme serves as the primary mechanism for implementing cross-border activities of the Innovation Hub. Its priorities - innovation, environment, and governance - closely match the objectives of the Regional Action Plan. For the Czech–Bavarian pilot, the programme presents practical rather than thematic challenges.

1. Administrative and Reporting Demands

The programme’s dual-language documentation and electronic monitoring system (eMS) require precise coordination between Czech and Bavarian partners.

Differing national procedures and levels of experience may cause inconsistencies in documentation or delays in verification.

Mitigation:

A bilingual coordination unit and harmonised reporting templates will be established within the Hub.

Capacity-building sessions for Czech municipalities and SMEs will ensure equal administrative proficiency across both sides of the border.

2. Co-financing and Reimbursement Delays

Although the programme offers co-financing of up to 80 %, the remaining share must be provided by project partners and covered upfront. Reimbursements are processed periodically after expenditure verification, which may create short-term liquidity gaps for smaller organisations.

3. Timing and Call Predictability

Interreg calls are typically issued twice per year, with evaluation processes extending up to six months. This schedule can create gaps between project phases and affect staff continuity.

Mitigation:

A rolling **project pipeline** will be maintained within the Hub, ensuring that follow-up proposals are prepared ahead of call openings. Shorter national programmes (e.g. OP TAK) can serve as bridging instruments between Interreg funding cycles.

5.3. Partnerships

This section presents the key stakeholders and their roles in implementation.

5.3.1. Czech Stakeholders

The Czech-Bavarian Innovation Hub is anchored in a diverse and experienced ecosystem of Czech stakeholders, many of whom have ongoing collaborations with Plan4all. These actors bring critical capacity, territorial knowledge, and institutional legitimacy, making the Innovation Hub a truly place-based, cross-sectoral initiative.

Úhlava, o.p.s.

Based in Klatovy, Úhlava is one of the key coordinating entities of the Czech-Bavarian pilot. With a strong track record in regional development and EU-funded projects, Úhlava facilitates stakeholder engagement, organizes participatory foresight processes, and ensures that pilot activities align with Czech and EU development agendas. Plan4all collaborates with Úhlava on territorial foresight and data-driven rural strategies, positioning Úhlava as a central orchestrator within the Innovation Hub.

MAS Pošumaví (Local Action Group)

As a long-term partner of Plan4all under LEADER and CLLD initiatives, MAS Pošumaví serves as a vital intermediary between municipalities, communities, and regional authorities. Within the hub, it will mobilize grassroots initiatives, ensure alignment with local development strategies, and help identify pilot beneficiaries. It also plays a key role in activating LEADER project pipelines to support early-stage rural innovation.

City of Klatovy

The city is a strategic urban actor in the region and host location of the Innovation Hub. It provides institutional support, public infrastructure, and alignment with local planning. Plan4all has engaged with the city through smart governance projects and participatory processes. In the hub, Klatovy will connect rural initiatives with urban capacities and help shape inclusive, integrated development pathways.

University of West Bohemia (UWB)

A promising academic partner with ties to Plan4all in digital innovation and spatial data management. UWB can support the Innovation Hub through research, student engagement, and applied digital tools for smart agriculture, rural-urban modelling, and data literacy. Joint activities may include AI training, hackathons, and curriculum co-design with local schools.

Šumavaprodukt

This dynamic local enterprise represents the food and bioeconomy sector. Its innovative direct-to-consumer model exemplifies how traditional sectors can be revitalized through digitalisation and sustainable practices. Šumavaprodukt's participation offers entrepreneurial insights and serves as a practical testbed for innovation tools and short supply chains.

TO Pošumaví (Tourist Organisation Pošumaví)

With experience in regional branding and sustainable tourism, TO Pošumaví brings a valuable perspective to the Innovation Hub's efforts to enhance rural attractiveness. Their role includes contributing to circular economy initiatives, promoting digital tourism platforms, and supporting climate-smart visitor strategies.

Agricultural High Schools in Klatovy and Sušice

These schools are important for youth engagement and workforce development. Plan4all collaborates with them on education-driven innovation, including curricula that support precision farming and digital competencies. In the hub, they will serve as local talent pipelines, pilot sites for applied training, and bridges to young rural changemakers.

Czech University of Life Sciences (CZU) & Institute of Agricultural Economics and Information (ÚZEI)

Plan4all's long-standing research partnerships with CZU and ÚZEI bring valuable expertise in smart

agriculture, sustainability modelling, and rural policy analysis. These institutions will support evidence-based tool development, foresight methods, and research validation within the Innovation Hub framework.

Ministries and National Agencies (e.g. MMR, Ministry of Agriculture, SZIF)

While not direct operational partners, these entities are crucial enablers of funding, strategic coherence, and scaling. Plan4all participates in their consultations and programme evaluations, ensuring that Innovation Hub activities reflect national priorities and benefit from ongoing policy alignment.

Czech Centre for Science and Society (CCSS)

A core technical partner of Plan4all, CCSS will support the digital infrastructure of the Innovation Hub, including AI-driven tools for funding navigation, spatial visualisation, and rural data analytics.

Wirelessinfo (WRLS)

Plan4all's partner specialising in digital innovation and education in agriculture. It develops an online platform with courses on precision farming and supports knowledge transfer in rural areas. As an experienced project management partner, Wirelessinfo may contribute to coordination, training, and cross-border cooperation activities within Innovation Hub.

5.3.2. Bavarian Stakeholders

Greg Freyung-Grafenau

The GreG Freyung-Grafenau is the central point of contact and hub for start-up ideas and creative future thinkers in the district of Freyung-Grafenau. Innovators find all the important information and interesting facts about the realization of their ideas. The people of GreG will put them in touch with the right contacts for questions and they offer many opportunities to gather inspiration, motivation and courage.

Europaregion Donau-Moldau

Founded in Linz on June 30, 2012, the EDM is a trilateral working group of seven partner regions: Upper Austria, Lower Austrian Most- and Waldviertel, Lower Bavaria, Upper Palatinate, and the Czech districts of Pilsen, South Bohemia, and Vysočina. It promotes regional cooperation and the European idea, focusing since 2019 on "EDM – Space for Society 4.0" with priorities in Industry 4.0, Health, Tourism, and a cross-cutting Language initiative.

Landkreis Freyung-Grafenau/Economic Development

With the self-image of a service provider for the companies located in the district of Freyung-Grafenau, the district administration has been practising committed economic development for many years with the aim of optimizing the location conditions of the resident companies and attracting new companies to the region. This service serves as the basis for good cooperation and will be further expanded in the future.

Landkreis Freyung-Grafenau/Regional Management

Since 2008, Freyung-Grafenau Regional Management, coordinated with the District Office's Department 14 and funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Economic Affairs, develops and implements projects based on its action plan. Working closely with local and cross-district partners, it aims to keep the region liveable and sustainable.

INDIGO Network

Six East Bavarian universities—OTH Amberg-Weiden, TH Deggendorf, Landshut University of Applied Sciences, University of Passau, University of Regensburg, and OTH Regensburg—combine their expertise in internet and digitalization in the INDIGO Network. The network aims to strengthen Eastern Bavaria as a leading science and business region and promotes interdisciplinary cooperation in applied and basic research.

DINO

The Digital Innovation East Bavaria (DInO) project, is a European Digital Innovation Hub (EDIH) with the aim of driving digital transformation and promoting innovation in the rural regions of East Bavaria. It supports companies, public institutions and other stakeholders in turning digital ideas into innovative solutions. The project focuses in particular on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and public administrations.

6. Roadmap

6.1. Timeline

The implementation of the Pilot Action is planned over two main time horizons:

1. Project Phase (2024–2026)

Activities during this period focus on the **delivery of this regional action plan** using the PoliRuralPlus tools and services.

Key focus areas include:

- State-of-the-art analysis
- Validation of the PoliRuralPlus tools
- Interactions with stakeholders
- Synergies with third party calls of PoliRuralPlus
- Development of this regional action plan

Activity	2025												2026											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 State-of-the-art analysis																								
1.1 Historical development of the Bavarian network of innovation hubs																								
1.2 Efficiency analysis of TC Freyung and TC Teisenach																								
1.3 Foresight analysis - technological campus in Freyung in 5 years time																								
1.4 Lessons learned - transfer to future development of pilot																								
2 Validation of the PoliRuralPlus tools																								
2.1 Attractiveness tool																								
2.2 Jackdaw																								
2.3 MAA tool																								
2.4 Vulture																								
2.5 Avisor																								
2.6 Brainstorming on additional tools																								
3 Interaction with stakeholders																								
3.1 Events/ Round tables in groups																								
3.2 Other interactions																								
3.3 1:1 Interactions with key stakeholder																								
3.4 Find new stakeholders																								
5 Synergies with third party calls of PoliRuralPlus																								
5.1 Outreach																								
5.2 Mobilise																								
5.3 Develop																								
5.4 Enhance																								
4 Development of this regional action plan																								
4.1 Vision building																								
4.2 Revision of the vision																								
4.3 Policy and strategy framework																								
4.4 Policy and strategy alignment																								
4.5 Governance and ownership																								
4.6 Financing opportunities																								
4.7 Pilot sustainability - plan after the end of the project																								
4.8 RAP development																								

2. Post-Project Phase (2026–2030 and beyond)

Although the PoliRuralPlus project formally concludes in 2026, preparations for the implementation of the Regional Action Plan (RAP) will already begin during the final project year. This creates an intentional overlap between the project phase and the post-project phase to ensure continuity, early mobilisation of stakeholders, and a smooth transition into long-term action.

From **2026 onward**, and extending through **2030 and beyond**, the focus shifts from analysis and validation to **full implementation, scaling, and sustainability** of the actions defined in Section 4.2. While the project phase concentrated on state-of-the-art assessment, tool validation, stakeholder engagement, and the development of the RAP, the post-project phase is dedicated to **putting the RAP into practice**.

This phase aims to transform the proposed actions into **concrete regional interventions**, making full use of national and EU funding opportunities, existing institutional capacities, and partnerships established during PoliRuralPlus. Implementation efforts will prioritise:

- **Execution of the action points from Section 4.2** in close collaboration with regional stakeholders.
- **Continued stakeholder engagement** to ensure legitimacy, uptake, and iterative refinement of activities.

- **Embedding PoliRuralPlus tools and methodologies** into regular regional planning and decision-making processes.
- **Systematic monitoring of progress**, aligned with the KPIs defined in the RAP.
- **Scaling and replication** of successful approaches in neighbouring or cross-border regions where relevant.

The post-project phase is therefore essential for ensuring that the knowledge, tools, and insights developed during PoliRuralPlus lead to **tangible rural development outcomes**, strengthened cross-border cooperation, and lasting policy impact across the Czech–Bavarian area.

	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032
Intervention Area 1: Governance, Coordination & Cross-Border Cooperation							
Action 1.1 Maintain & Update RAP							
Action 1.2 Cross-border Steering Committee							
Action 1.3 Efficiency & Performance Model							
Intervention Area 2: Financing & Operational Efficiency							
Action 2.1 Blended Financing Scheme							
Action 2.2 Performance-Based Funding							
Intervention Area 3: Infrastructure & Digital Foundation							
Action 3.1 Physical Hub in Klatovy							
Action 3.2 Shared Digital Infrastructure							
Action 3.3 Connect Data & PoliRuralPlus Tools							
Intervention Area 4: Innovation, Skills & Knowledge Transfer							
Action 4.1 Smart Agriculture Pilot Programme							
Action 4.2 Cross-Border Training Academy							
Action 4.3 Certified Training Pathways							
Intervention Area 5: Community Engagement, Foresight & Outreach							
Action 5.1 Foresight & Strategic Dialogue							
Action 5.2 Regional Identity & Agro-tourism							
Action 5.3 Communication & Monitoring							

6.2. Implementation Plan

6.2.1. Project Phase (2024–2026)

Between 2024 and 2025, multiple coordination and engagement activities were carried out to build the foundation for the cross-border Regional Action Plan and the establishment of the Innovation Hub:

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Regular coordination meetings have been held between the core partners Plan4all (P4A), Úhlava, and the Deggendorf Institute of Technology (DIT) to jointly steer the pilot's progress and define its strategic direction. In addition, an in-person meeting took place with representatives of the Pilsen Region and the City of Klatovy to discuss the potential establishment of the Innovation Hub and its alignment with regional development priorities. Engagement with the Regional Development Agency (RDA) of the Pilsen Region is planned for the next phase, as part of the extended stakeholder outreach process.
- **Feasibility and Vision Building:** A series of consultations and workshops with public authorities, innovation bodies, and universities defined the concept of the Innovation Hub as a cross-border structure connecting Czech and Bavarian innovation ecosystems.

- **Tool and Data Integration:** Technical discussions focused on integrating digital tools such as the *Attractiveness Explorer*, the *PoliRuralPlus Advisor*, and *JackDaw* into the regional planning processes, with datasets developed by Plan4all and partners from DIT.
- **Cross-border Cooperation:** The in-person workshop at the Technology Campus Freyung (April 2024) initiated direct collaboration between Czech and Bavarian partners, exploring synergies with GREG Startup Center and DiNO initiatives.
- **Funding and Strategic Alignment:** Meetings in 2025 mapped available funding sources (Interreg, Horizon Europe, ERDF/ESIF, BMBF, LEADER) and discussed embedding the hub within existing regional strategies on both sides of the border.
- **Visibility and Dissemination:** Continuous dissemination through project events, social media, and participation in conferences and personal discussions (e.g., Passau Business Forum, Agri fairs in CZ, Association of Small Farmers of CZ) supported awareness and stakeholder inclusion.

The year 2026 will be covered in the final regional plan due in December 2026.

6.2.2. Post-Project Phase (2026–2030 and beyond)

Following the completion of the PoliRuralPlus project, the Regional Action Plan (RAP) enters a long-term implementation phase focused on translating strategic objectives into operational activities. This phase builds on the governance structures, evidence base, and stakeholder networks developed during the project, and mobilises new partnerships and financing instruments to achieve sustained territorial impact. Implementation is organised into five Intervention Areas aligned with Section 4.2, each structured as a set of coherent tasks with clearly defined objectives, processes, and expected outcomes.



Intervention Area 1: Governance, Coordination & Cross-Border Cooperation

Action 1.1 – Maintenance and Continuous Updating of the RAP

Objective: Ensure the RAP remains a living, relevant, and operational document guiding rural development on both sides of the Czech–Bavarian border.

Description:

- Establish a structured update mechanism that defines responsibilities, review triggers, and stakeholder inputs.
- Integrate monitoring evidence, foresight insights, and new policy or funding opportunities into each revision cycle.
- Facilitate multi-actor consultations to validate proposed changes and maintain alignment with regional needs.

Expected Outcome: A continuously updated RAP that reflects evolving socio-economic, environmental, and cross-border dynamics and supports evidence-based decision-making.

Action 1.2 – Establishment and Operation of a Cross-Border Steering Committee

Objective: Create a permanent governance platform that oversees RAP implementation and ensures coherent cross-border coordination.

Description:

- Formalise cooperation between key regional actors through a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Set up a Steering Committee including representatives of Plan4all, Úhlava, MAS Pošumaví, DIT Freyung, and additional partners.
- Conduct regular coordination meetings, review progress reports, and provide strategic guidance.
- Mobilise partners for joint initiatives, cross-border project development, and shared funding applications.

Expected Outcome: A functional governance mechanism enabling coordinated decision-making, accountability, and sustained collaboration across regions.

Action 1.3 – Adoption and Application of an Efficiency and Performance Model

Objective: Improve operational effectiveness and sustainability of the Innovation Hub and related structures.

Description:

- Adapt the Bavarian Technology Campus operational model to the regional context.
- Define performance indicators, monitoring procedures, and evaluation criteria.
- Conduct regular performance reviews and recommend adjustments to improve efficiency and long-term viability.

Expected Outcome: A performance-driven operational framework supporting continuous improvement and sustainability.



Intervention Area 2: Financing & Operational Efficiency

Action 2.1 – Development and Management of a Blended Financing Scheme

Objective: Secure diversified and long-term funding for Hub operations and RAP implementation.

Description:

- Identify and combine suitable funding instruments (Interreg, Horizon Europe, CAP Strategic Plan, OP TAK, regional budgets, private contributions).
- Prepare a multi-source financing plan and negotiate commitments from partners and funders.
- Adjust the financial model based on evolving external opportunities and performance results.

Expected Outcome: A robust financing scheme enabling stable, continuous implementation of Innovation Hub activities.

Action 2.2 – Implementation of a Performance-Based Funding Mechanism

Objective: Align financial allocations with demonstrated achievements and impact.

Description:

- Establish measurable performance criteria (e.g., start-ups supported, training participants, cross-border projects initiated).
- Introduce periodical performance reviews feeding into future funding decisions.
- Provide incentives for actors that achieve above-target results.

Expected Outcome: Increased efficiency and accountability through evidence-informed funding decisions.



Intervention Area 3: Infrastructure & Digital Foundation

Action 3.1 – Establishment of a Physical Innovation Hub in Klatovy

Objective: Provide a dedicated space for collaboration, training, and demonstration activities.

Description:

- Identify suitable real estate and secure stakeholder support for its refurbishment or adaptation.
- Equip the space with digital tools, co-working infrastructure, training rooms, and demonstration technologies.
- Launch the Hub as a cross-border facility for innovation, collaboration, and SME support.

Expected Outcome: A fully operational innovation space acting as a regional anchor for rural development initiatives.

Action 3.2 – Deployment of Shared Digital Infrastructure

Objective: Enable continuous cross-border collaboration through a unified digital platform.

Description:

- Develop an online environment integrating event management, knowledge repositories, data access, and AI-assisted funding navigation.
- Ensure bilingual operation and compatibility with stakeholders' existing tools.
- Support user onboarding, training, and iterative development of new platform features.

Expected Outcome: A digital ecosystem widely used by regional stakeholders to collaborate, learn, and co-create projects.

Action 3.3 – Integration of Regional Data with PoliRuralPlus Tools

Objective: Build a coherent cross-border data environment to support evidence-based planning and innovation.

Description:

- Identify, collect, and harmonise datasets relevant for agriculture, environment, socio-economic development, and territorial planning.
- Integrate datasets with PoliRuralPlus analytical modules and visualisation tools.
- Provide training and support to regional actors to enable practical use of data for planning and innovation.

Expected Outcome: A cross-border data ecosystem facilitating data-driven decision-making and knowledge transfer.



Intervention Area 4: Innovation, Skills & Knowledge Transfer

Action 4.1 – Smart Agriculture Pilot Programme

Objective: Demonstrate practical benefits of precision farming, AI tools, and digital technologies in real operational conditions.

Description:

- Select partner farms and define pilot objectives together with Bavarian research institutions.
- Deploy sensors, decision-support tools, and precision agriculture technologies.
- Organise demonstration events and evaluate pilot performance with farmers and advisors.

Expected Outcome: Real-world evidence supporting wider adoption of climate-smart and technology-enabled agricultural practices.

Action 4.2 – Establishment of a Cross-Border Training Academy

Objective: Develop and deliver training programmes that enhance digital and green skills across the region.

Description:

- Co-create training modules with UWB, DIT Freyung, and the Innovation Hub.
- Provide capacity-building activities in AI, data use, circular economy, and digital agriculture.
- Support SMEs, farmers, students, and public authorities in adopting new knowledge.

Expected Outcome: Increased human capital supporting rural innovation and competitiveness.

Action 4.3 – Implementation of Certified Training Pathways

Objective: Establish formal, transferable training qualifications for agro-specialists and rural innovators.

Description:

- Adapt methodologies from the Plan4all Living Lab and WirelessInfo to create structured training pathways.
- Deliver certified courses focusing on precision farming, digital tools, decision-support systems, and sustainable agriculture.

- Promote certification as a cross-border competency standard.

Expected Outcome: A recognised skills framework improving employability, innovation capacity, and knowledge exchange.



Intervention Area 5: Community Engagement, Foresight & Outreach

Action 5.1 – Continuous Foresight and Strategic Dialogue

Objective: Maintain a long-term vision for the region and support evidence-based policy adjustments.

Description:

- Facilitate recurring foresight workshops involving Czech and Bavarian stakeholders.
- Update strategic priorities and scenario outlooks based on emerging needs and trends.
- Feed results directly into RAP revision cycles.

Expected Outcome: A sustained strategic dialogue enabling adaptive and forward-looking regional development.

Action 5.2 – Strengthening Regional Identity and Supporting Local Food & Agro-Tourism

Objective: Enhance the visibility, attractiveness, and cultural cohesion of the Czech–Bavarian border region.

Description:

- Support the development of local food branding, short supply chains, and cross-border agri-tourism initiatives.
- Engage youth through internships, ambassador programmes, and project-based learning.
- Foster partnerships among producers, tourism actors, and local governments.

Expected Outcome: A stronger shared regional identity and increased socio-economic activity.

Action 5.3 – Communication, Outreach & Participatory Monitoring

Objective: Ensure transparency, visibility, and inclusive involvement in RAP implementation.

Description:

- Establish bilingual communication channels and coordinated outreach strategies.
- Implement participatory monitoring allowing stakeholders and citizens to follow progress.
- Collect and share success stories, lessons learned, and evidence of impact.

Expected Outcome: Broader community engagement, increased trust, and improved policy learning.

6.3. Solving Key Problems with the Innovation Hub

Strengthening the Role of Regional Centres as Economic Anchors

How the Innovation Hub Helps:

- The hub will act as a knowledge-sharing platform, linking Klatovy and its rural hinterlands with high-tech agricultural innovations from Bavaria.
- It will foster cross-sector cooperation between local businesses, research institutions, and policymakers, strengthening the micro-region's economy.
- Through tailored training and business incubation programs, rural businesses and farms can diversify their activities, reducing dependency on a few dominant employers.

Example Initiative:

The INN.Kubator Passau, a startup support centre in Bavaria, has already established links with Czech businesses. Its expertise in digitalization and networking will help small towns outside main development axes tap into regional and EU funding for agritech and rural enterprises.

Addressing Labour Shortages & Skill Mismatches

How the Innovation Hub Helps:

- Upskilling Programs: The hub will collaborate with the University of West Bohemia to offer training on smart farming, precision agriculture, and agritech solutions, aligning education supply with market demand.
- Lifelong Learning for Rural Workers: By integrating multi-actor stakeholder engagement, local farmers and rural entrepreneurs will be trained in digital tools, ensuring they stay competitive in an evolving agricultural landscape.

Example Initiative:

In Finland, the SMARTA project successfully implemented digital learning hubs for rural workers, offering courses in precision agriculture and renewable energy. A similar model in Klatovy could retrain rural workers and attract young professionals.

Diversifying the Economic Base of Regional Centres

How the Innovation Hub Helps:

- Encouraging Agritech Startups: The hub will support startup incubation programs, particularly in vertical farming, bioeconomy, and smart irrigation technologies.
- Fostering SME Growth in the Agri-Food Sector: Through cross-border collaborations, rural SMEs will gain access to EU markets and digital supply chains.

Example Initiative:

A Farm-to-Fork e-commerce platform is already being piloted, allowing farmers, bakers, and beekeepers in Šumava to sell directly to consumers through a regional online marketplace, reducing reliance on traditional distribution networks.

Improving Infrastructure & Access to Services

How the Innovation Hub Helps:

- Smart Transport Solutions: The hub will facilitate rural mobility initiatives (e.g., electric shuttle services for farm workers).
- Better Digital Connectivity: Investment in rural broadband expansion will enhance access to digital services and e-learning opportunities.
- Smart Logistics Hubs: Efficient agricultural transport networks will reduce costs and improve farm-to-market efficiency.

Example Initiative:

The SMARTA initiative in Ireland successfully implemented demand-responsive rural transport for agrifood businesses. A similar model could be adopted in Klatovy to improve logistics for small-scale agricultural enterprises.

Reducing Social Exclusion & Enhancing Rural Attractiveness

How the Innovation Hub Helps:

- Social Innovation & Youth Engagement: By promoting community-driven entrepreneurship, young professionals will have a reason to stay.
- Agri-tourism & Cultural Revitalization: The hub will integrate local food production with sustainable tourism, boosting local economies.

Example Initiative:

The Greek PoliRuralPlus pilot successfully blended digital agritech solutions with agritourism, creating new income streams for farmers while attracting urban visitors.

A Game Changer for the Czech-Bavarian Border Region

The Czech-Bavarian Innovation Hub in Klatovy is poised to revitalize regional centres and their rural hinterlands by fostering cross-border collaboration, digital transformation, and agritech innovation. With a focus on sustainability, skill-building, and entrepreneurship, it ensures that rural economies thrive while retaining young professionals.

Long-Term Impact:

- Strengthened regional resilience against economic downturns.
- Increased youth retention through attractive career paths.
- Enhanced rural-urban connectivity and business competitiveness.

This initiative positions the region at the forefront of sustainable rural development in Central Europe, making Klatovy a model for innovation-driven, balanced rural-urban growth.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

7.1. KPI's

The Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) presented in this section provide a structured framework to monitor, evaluate, and guide the implementation of the Czech–Bavarian Regional Action Plan (RAP) within the PoliRuralPlus project context. These KPIs serve as a bridge between strategic intent and practical impact, ensuring that the RAP's activities generate tangible benefits for stakeholders across both sides of the border. They are designed to capture progress in key thematic areas, including multi-actor participation, innovation, environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and economic resilience. The indicators also address horizontal priorities such as digital transformation, governance capacity, communication, and policy integration.

#	Common KPI (PR+ level)	Purpose	Example of Local Metrics (by Pilot Type)	2025 Metrics	Indicative 2026 Target
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure the breadth and diversity of stakeholder engagement in RAP processes.	<i>National and transnational (CZ-GER):</i> Number of Czech and Bavarian entities participating in bilateral consultations, workshops, or joint planning sessions (public, private, academic, civic)	25	25
2	Rural–Urban/ Cross-border Collaboration	Evaluate the level of cooperation between territories and sectors in integrating policies and actions	Number of cross-border exchange activities (joint meetings, study visits, or co-creation sessions), Strengthen institutional collaboration between Bavaria and Czechia	3 consultation rounds (local, regional, cross-border) with ≥30 participants in total	6 consultation rounds, ≥60 participants in total (40% women / young people), at least 15 entities from both sides in total

3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Promote the use of innovative and digital tools and practices	<i>Regional/Transnational:</i> Number of Czech and Bavarian stakeholders adopting innovative approaches, Training & capacity-building activities	2 pilot projects include innovation or data-driven elements	3-4 stakeholders apply digital/innovative tools; 3 cross-border pilots using data-informed planning
4	Territorial and Environmental Sustainability	Encourage sustainable, resilient and green practices in territories	<i>National and transnational (CZ-GER):</i> Number of joint sustainability initiatives (forestry, energy, land-use); number of actions linked to SDGs or Green Deal	Baseline mapping of joint environmental priorities	≥2 Czech–Bavarian joint sustainability projects; 25% of RAP actions aligned with SDG 11, 13, 15
5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Assess improvements in livability, wellbeing, and social inclusion	<i>National and transnational (CZ-GER):</i> Number of community, educational, or cultural exchange, Measure perception of livability and attractiveness	2 cross-border knowledge and innovation events	5 cross-border exchanges in form of round tables or networking options interested (civic) parties/stakeholders with learning interactions
6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Strengthen governance structures and collaborative decision-making	Establish joint working groups, clusters, or networks within the pilot area, or adoption of formalised cross-border coordination protocol	0	1
7	Communication and Visibility	Measure how results and messages are shared and communicated	<i>National and transnational (CZ-GER):</i> Number of bilingual communication materials (press, online, events); number of joint visibility actions	3 bilingual news articles; 1 public event	10 communication actions (press, blogs, events); ≥5,000 online reach; 2 joint media pieces
8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Assess sustainability and potential for scaling up the	<i>National and transnational (CZ-GER):</i> Number of	2 business cooperation ideas; 1	≥4 cooperation agreements or business

		PoliRuralPlus model	Czech–Bavarian business partnerships, spin-off ideas, or replication cases from RAP initiatives, support entrepreneurship and innovation	investment concept note	partnerships; 2 replication cases documented for other border regions
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7.2. Monitoring

To ensure effective and transparent implementation of the Regional Action Plan (RAP), a streamlined Monitoring and KPI Framework has been established. Its purpose is to track progress across all post-project actions, support evidence-based decision-making, and provide regular feedback for updating the RAP over time.

The framework focuses on a limited number of clear, meaningful indicators that capture the essence of each Action without creating unnecessary administrative burden. For every Action, the framework specifies:

- **What will be monitored**
- **Which key performance indicators (KPIs) will be used**
- **How the information will be verified**

Responsibilities associated with each Action will be **jointly agreed with the key actors during 2026**, ensuring that monitoring duties are distributed fairly, reflect institutional capacities, and align with the emerging governance structure of the Czech–Bavarian cooperation.

This approach ensures that monitoring remains practical, manageable, and aligned with the long-term goals of the Czech–Bavarian cooperation. It also provides a common reference point for partners involved in governance, financing, infrastructure development, innovation, and community engagement.

The following table summarises the Monitoring and KPI Framework for all Actions included in the RAP.

Action	Monitoring Focus	Key KPIs	Verification Sources
1.1 Maintain & Update RAP	RAP revisions & stakeholder input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of RAP updates • Stakeholder participation 	RAP versions, consultation notes
1.2 Cross-border Steering Committee	Functioning of governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings held • Attendance rate 	Minutes, MoU
1.3 Efficiency & Performance Model	Application of evaluation model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance reviews completed • Improvements introduced 	Evaluation reports

2.1 Blended Financing Scheme	Securing diversified funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding sources mobilised • Total financing secured 	Financial plan, grant docs
2.2 Performance-Based Funding	Linking funding to results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entities evaluated • Funding adjustments made 	Performance data, funding decisions
3.1 Physical Hub in Klatovy	Hub establishment & use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hub operational (Y/N) • Events hosted 	Hub logs, event records
3.2 Shared Digital Infrastructure	Digital platform deployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Platform usage • Services integrated 	Usage analytics
3.3 Data & Tools Integration	Dataset availability & use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Datasets integrated • Users applying tools 	Data catalogues, usage logs
4.1 Smart Agriculture Pilots	Pilot execution & results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farms participating • Digital tools deployed 	Pilot reports
4.2 Cross-Border Training Academy	Delivery of training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training modules delivered • Participants trained 	Training logs
4.3 Certified Training Pathways	Certification & uptake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certified programmes • Individuals certified 	Certificates, records
5.1 Foresight Dialogue	Recurring foresight cycles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foresight workshops • Findings used in RAP 	Workshop reports
5.2 Regional Identity & Tourism	Engagement & branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food/agritourism initiatives • Youth participation Holding young professionals in the region	Campaign reports
5.3 Communication & Monitoring	Outreach & transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach activities • Public progress summaries 	Communication records

The responsibilities for the actions are to be agreed on in the year 2026 when the implementation of the regional action plan is executed. This will be one of the main objects to identify in 2026.

7.3. Evaluation of Monitoring Parameters and KPIs

The evaluation of the monitoring parameters and KPIs will be carried out through a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative data collection with qualitative stakeholder feedback. Progress will be assessed using measurable indicators defined for each Action, complemented by platform analytics, and pilot reports. Regular reflection workshops and foresight dialogues should provide an opportunity to interpret results, identify trends, and agree on corrective measures where necessary. The evaluation process will be supported by the Multi-Actor Approach Tool (MAAT) and the cross-border Steering Committee to ensure transparency, inclusiveness, and data consistency. Findings from each monitoring cycle will feed a continuous improvement of Czech–Bavarian cooperation outcomes.

8. Communication and Engagement

8.1. Stakeholder Involvement

8.1.1. Strategies to engage local communities, businesses, and academic Institutions

The CZ-DE pilot has adopted a **multi-tiered and participatory approach** to stakeholder engagement, tailored to the needs of rural regions in the Czech-Bavarian border area. This strategy focuses on *long-term collaboration*, *local innovation*, and *cross-border synergies*, while ensuring that rural voices, particularly those of small farmers and local communities, are central to decision-making.

8.1.1.1. Key Strategies:

- **Regional Innovation Hub in Klatovy:** A key vehicle for stakeholder engagement is the proposed Innovation Hub in Klatovy. Designed as an extension of existing regional structures, it aims to connect rural SMEs, farmers, municipalities, and universities. By addressing local needs (e.g., digital connectivity, funding access, AI training), the hub fosters a viable, participatory rural ecosystem that crosses administrative boundaries.
- **Community-led Consultations & Surveys:** Grassroots involvement has been encouraged through structured consultations. For example, small farmers across the region were invited to participate in surveys that sought honest feedback on digitalisation, AI, and precision agriculture. These tools are not only for collecting opinions but also for guiding future investments and training.
- **Targeted Workshops & Training:** Recognising gaps in digital literacy and access to technologies like LPIS and precision tools, the RAP foresees tailored workshops (e.g., on AI, funding applications, digital mapping) for farmers and municipalities.
- **Cross-border Policy Briefing:** Dissemination of policy briefs (e.g., “Utilising Cross-Border Innovations”, “AI-Enhanced AKIS”) to local authorities and development actors has helped build a shared language for innovation and has begun aligning regional policy narratives.

8.1.2. Intended mechanisms to sustain engagement and ownership

To ensure that stakeholder engagement is **not one-off**, but instead becomes **embedded in local governance and development processes**, several mechanisms are planned:

8.1.2.1. Long-term ownership models:

- **Localised governance through the Innovation Hub:** The Innovation Hub is envisioned as a locally governed entity, potentially co-managed by regional actors (e.g., Úhlava, local universities, business associations). This promotes local ownership of innovation trajectories and enhances stakeholder accountability.

- **Formalisation of stakeholder roles:** Through tools like the Multi-Actor Approach Tool (MAAT) and structured KPI frameworks, stakeholders (e.g., farmers' associations, NGOs, public bodies) will be formally included in the monitoring, evaluation, and evolution of the Hub.
- **Continuous feedback loops:** Regular stakeholder meetings (e.g., twice annually) to revisit the Hub activities, adapt strategies, and reflect on pilot-level data. Digital tools (e.g., Jackdaw, Attractiveness Tool) will support transparent tracking of progress.
- **Advisory & coordination role within the Innovation Hub:** A dedicated advisory and coordination unit embedded within the proposed Innovation Hub in Klatovy will serve as a critical bridge between local stakeholders — particularly small and medium-sized farmers — and relevant administrative, funding, and innovation structures. This unit will provide tailored support for grant applications, project development, and digital upskilling, helping stakeholders navigate complex procedures and reduce administrative burdens. It will also act as a regional contact point for LEADER local action groups and Interreg partnerships, aligning hub activities with broader rural development and cohesion objectives.
- **Funding alignment and continuity through strategic programmes:** To ensure long-term viability, the Innovation Hub will actively support stakeholders in accessing and aligning with key European and national funding programmes, including LEADER/CLLD, Interreg, Horizon Europe, ERDF (EFRE), ESIF, BMBF, and innovation-focused bodies such as BIDT (Bavarian Institute for Digital Transformation). The Hub will offer structured guidance and matchmaking for project opportunities, enhancing the transition from short-term pilots to sustained development initiatives, and fostering co-financing and co-creation models that include both public and private actors.
- **Structured cross-border innovation cooperation:** initiate structured partnerships between innovation hubs and knowledge centers across the border. This includes plans to establish formal cooperation frameworks between the Klatovy Innovation Hub and existing counterparts in regions such as Freyung, Teisnach, or Deggendorf. The goal is to create a resilient, interconnected network of rural innovation nodes capable of jointly developing and implementing cross-border strategies aligned with shared development priorities and EU cohesion policy.

8.2. Awareness Campaigns

Awareness and communication activities will focus on dissemination within the existing stakeholder networks on both sides of the Czech–Bavarian border rather than broad public campaigns. The main goal is to ensure that key actors such as municipalities, development agencies, education and research institutions, and local businesses are informed about the RAP's progress, and opportunities for involvement.

Information will be shared primarily through established communication channels of project partners and regional stakeholders, including social media, newsletters, and regular coordination meetings. These exchanges will support mutual learning, help identify good practices, and maintain engagement throughout implementation.

A short promotional video will be produced to present the main objectives, results, and benefits of the RAP and to demonstrate how PoliRuralPlus tools (such as the Attractiveness, Advisor, or JackDaw) can support evidence-based decision-making and regional planning. The video and related materials will be circulated through project and institutional channels, ensuring consistent visibility within the stakeholder community.

By keeping the communication targeted, participatory, and transparent, the awareness campaign will strengthen cooperation across borders, encourage continued use of PoliRuralPlus methodologies, and contribute to knowledge transfer and replication in other regions.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Summary of Expected Impact

The Regional Action Plan (RAP) is designed to generate long-term, sustainable benefits for the Czech–Bavarian border region by strengthening cross-border cooperation, enhancing innovation capacity, and improving the resilience and attractiveness of rural areas. Through a balanced set of actions in governance, financing, infrastructure, innovation, and community engagement, the RAP contributes to sustainable development, supports regional cohesion, and creates favourable conditions for economic growth.

Contribution to Sustainable Development

The RAP promotes sustainable development by:

- Encouraging climate-smart agriculture, digitalisation, and responsible natural resource management through pilot programmes and capacity-building actions.
- Supporting short supply chains, local food systems, and agri-tourism, which reduce environmental pressure and stimulate local economies.
- Facilitating evidence-based planning using harmonised regional datasets and PoliRuralPlus tools, leading to more efficient land use, improved environmental management, and better-informed policy decisions.

These activities contribute to the long-term resilience of rural communities and the transition towards a greener, more inclusive regional economy.

Contribution to Regional Integration

The RAP strengthens Czech–Bavarian integration through:

- The establishment of a permanent Steering Committee and cross-border governance structures.
- Joint foresight processes, participatory monitoring, and shared planning cycles.
- Cross-border training, knowledge exchange, and digital infrastructure that enable continuous cooperation between institutions, farmers, SMEs, and citizens.

This creates a coherent functional region with shared priorities, coordinated action, and mutually reinforcing development trajectories.

Contribution to Economic Growth

Economic benefits are expected through:

- Increased digital and green skills among farmers, SMEs, students, and public authorities.
- Better access to innovation infrastructure, demonstration spaces, and digital tools.
- New business opportunities in precision agriculture, local food production, tourism, and data-driven services.
- Strengthened financing capacity through blended funding schemes and performance-based mechanisms.

These factors improve competitiveness, stimulate entrepreneurship, and attract investment to the rural economy.

9.2. Call to Action

The successful implementation of this Regional Action Plan depends on the active involvement of all partners across the Czech–Bavarian region. We call on public institutions, businesses, educational organisations, farmers, community groups, and citizens to engage, cooperate, and contribute their expertise. Only through joint commitment and continuous collaboration can we realise the shared vision of a resilient, innovative, and attractive cross-border region.

10. Annexes

10.1. Annex 10.1 Sustainability and extension of activities: Checklist for the RAP pilots

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation			
<i>Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.</i>	X		The RAP provides a detailed and balanced view of both challenges (aging population, weak innovation infrastructure) and opportunities (cross-border cooperation, green transition).
Vision and Strategic Goals			
<i>How well are your vision and strategic goals aligned with the main areas of sustainability: Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing? What is the main focus? (You may use the sustainability compass for guidance here: https://compassu.wordpress.com/introduction/)</i>	X		The vision is strongly aligned with the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability through focus on digitalisation and climate-smart agriculture.
Action Plan			
<i>- How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained?</i>	X		Actions include feasible mechanisms for long-term operation (e.g., blended financing, performance-based funding, integration into LEADER).
<i>- Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future?</i>	X		Cross-border steering committee of the Innovation hub.
Policy and Funding Alignment			
<i>- Do the stakeholders/actors have access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP?</i>	X		Interreg, Horizon Europe, CAP, and OP TAK are clearly mapped.
<i>- Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms?</i>		X	This is not in our power in any way. ->No.
Communication and Engagement			
<i>- What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?</i>	X		A Memorandum of Understanding to be concluded.

- Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?	X		The plan foresees this.
- How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?	X		Mentioned via foresight workshops and cross-border events.
Conclusion			
- Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?	X		Strong policy alignment is demonstrated across EU, national, and regional levels.
- Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?	X		Spillover to tourism, education, and digital public services

10.2. Annex 10.2 Bavarian Projects

The following table shows the finished and currently running projects relating to agriculture in the campus of the Deggendorf Institute of Technology that are located in the directly bordering counties, Regen, Cham, and Freyung Grafenau. The projects are related to agriculture in the broader sense.

TC Cham

The Technology Campus Cham conducts research in key areas of mechatronic systems, including mechatronic production technology, rapid prototyping, robotics, simulation technology, and smart sensor applications. Its work bridges applied research and industry needs, with a focus on integrating emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and cyber-physical systems into digital production environments.

Project name and link to description	Project aim
SchmuFruKI https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/325?embedded=false (01.12.2022 - 30.11.2025)	The SchmuFruKI project develops a real-time, AI-based method to measure soil attached to freshly harvested crops using multi-sensor data. It aims to improve fair farmer compensation, machine efficiency, and soil conservation, confirming the need for multispectral and multi-sensor data fusion.

TC Grafenau

In close cooperation with industry, municipalities, and research institutions, the Technology Campus Grafenau focuses on forward-looking projects such as rural digitalisation, Industry 4.0, food waste reduction, and sensor-based data analysis. Its core strengths lie in algorithm and app development, cloud

technologies, material flow optimisation, and machine learning, all aimed at advancing the "Silicon Forest" vision for the Bavarian Forest region.

Project name and link to description	Project aim
AI4GREEN https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/335?embedded=true (01.05.2024 - 30.04.2027)	The AI4GREEN project creates a cross-border platform for AI-based solutions that reduce energy and resource use, supported by pilot actions in mobility, energy, production, and circular economy. It unites universities and companies, developing reusable tools and methods and promoting knowledge transfer through workshops, events, and hackathons.
Digitales Alpendorf https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/8 (Feb 2018-Sept 2023)	The Digitales Alpendorf project, part of Bavaria's "Digitales Dorf" initiative, enhanced quality of life in rural Alpine areas by testing digital solutions in care, services, tourism, agriculture, and education. As a living lab in the Waginger See–Rupertiwinkel region, it created best-practice models and strengthened inter-municipal cooperation for wider regional use.
BeyondSnow https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/270 (Nov 2022 – Oct 2025)	The BeyondSnow project (Interreg Alpine Space) strengthens climate resilience in small and medium-altitude Alpine snow tourism areas by developing local adaptation strategies. It produces a Resilience Decision-Making Digital Tool (RDMDT) combining climate data, socioeconomic scenarios, and stakeholder input to guide sustainable development.
FreshAnalytics https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/144 (July 2019 – Sept 2021)	The FreshAnalytics project developed a cloud-based platform for real-time, AI-supported quality monitoring to reduce food waste along the supply chain and support sustainable, transparent, and safe food supply.

TC Freyung

The vision behind the regionalization of the campus is to develop the Bavarian Forest region into a technology hub, focusing on close collaboration between industry and academia. The concept, "Technology Region Bavarian Forest – Technology Transfer Centers of the University," supported by the Bavarian Ministry of Science and partner municipalities, was awarded the Bavarian Founders' Prize in 2010. The Technology Campus Freyung (TCF), part of the Technical University of Deggendorf, conducts application-oriented research to create market-ready optimized products, processes, and services, working closely with industry partners to develop solutions for businesses.

Project name and link to description	Project aim
DminE https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/339 (Jan 2025 – Jun 2026)	The DminE project (Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs) develops a drone-based system for landmine detection using multi-sensor data fusion and AI (GANs) for real-time analysis, aiming to improve safety and efficiency.
PoliRuralPlus https://www.poliruralplus.eu/ (March 2024-Dec 2026)	The Czech-Bavarian pilot project adapts urban incubator and Technology Campus models to rural areas, fostering cross-border cooperation, supporting startups and young academics, and creating a local innovation hub linking Czech and Bavarian knowledge centres.
BarkBeeDet https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/103 (March 2017 – February 2020)	BarkBeeDet developed a drone-based method using remote sensing to detect bark beetle infestations early in the Bavarian Forest and Šumava National Parks, establishing a practical workflow to prevent outbreaks.
VIT5G https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/242 (Nov 2021 – Dec 2024)	VIT5G develops a 5G-based forest monitoring system using drones and multisensor platforms to create a digital twin, enabling real-time analysis and AR-assisted collaboration, with applications transferable to Industry 4.0 for sustainable, decentralized monitoring.
WilDa https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/50 (01.04.2017–30.06.2020)	WilDa developed a system using Big Data to predict wildlife–vehicle accident hotspots by combining accident, traffic, environmental, and remote sensing data, providing real-time driver warnings and supporting targeted protective measures.
KIWA https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/277 (01.01.2023 - 31.03.2026)	KIWA develops AI-based early forest fire detection using UAV and satellite data, integrating multi-scale analysis and on-site AI tools to support emergency services and enhance forest monitoring and climate resilience.
RED-RES-GH2 https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/363 (01.04.2024 - 31.03.2027)	RED-RES-GH2 models optimal mixes of renewable energy and green hydrogen storage to reduce extreme drought risks in Chile’s power system, providing a replicable methodology, risk indicators, and a roadmap for resilient, sustainable energy supply.
Smart-SWS https://zaf.th-deg.de/public/project/fact-sheet/253 (01.03.2022 - 28.02.2026)	Smart-SWS develops multifunctional water storage systems that capture flood peaks and runoff for use during droughts, combining infiltration, water conditioning, and monitoring to provide scalable, sustainable water management solutions.

The projects all relate to the field of agriculture and are approached from different angles. Depending on the location of the campus, the region context is taken into account in the campus’ general research interest. The projects show a variety of methodological approaches with innovative ideas. Throughout the projects, different funding schemes were used, whether it is on a national, international, or EU-wide level.

An overview to all finished and current projects can be found here:

<https://www.th-deg.de/en/research/projects>

10.3. Annex 10.3 Czech (Plan4all) Projects

The following table shows the finished and currently running projects relating to agriculture of Plan4all and its members.

Project	Short description
Plan4all	
GoDigiBios	GoDigiBioS aims to support biodiversity-relevant transformative change towards a nature-positive governance, economy and society that will use new digital and emerging technologies to assist in reversing biodiversity loss, promoting sustainable norms and consumption patterns, innovating policies for a nature-positive economy, and balancing technology use with ecosystem health.
SPARROW	Solid Preparedness And Resilience for Robust Operations during disaster Wilderness - The project aims to deliver a pioneering solution for enhancing societal resilience and crisis management in the face of digital breakdowns. Employing a modular architecture encompassing data integration, simulation modeling, and a collaborative platform, SPARROW orchestrates large datasets and expert insights to create a dynamic digital twin of a city, which will become a robust testing ground for assessing vulnerabilities and preparing for diverse crisis scenarios.
FAIR2Adapt	AIR2Adapt is a multidisciplinary project geared towards transforming data into actionable knowledge to shape climate adaptation strategies. It will adopt FAIR Digital Objects (FDOs) and use semantic bridging strategies, such as the I-ADOPT framework, and tailored FDO services to build a collaborative, user-friendly FAIR and open data sharing framework. A significant aspect of the FAIR2Adapt project is stakeholder engagement and capacity-building activities, which will be instrumental in raising awareness and devising customised solutions. By transforming data into flexible, practical, and resilient climate adaptation strategies, FAIR2Adapt constructs a scalable and extensible model for data sharing that can be adapted to multiple climate adaptation scenarios.
BioClima	Climate monitoring through Earth observations, AI and global collaboration: The world is facing challenges related to biodiversity loss and climate change, which impact ecosystems and human societies. Monitoring these issues is essential for informed policymaking and environmental conservation. However, the current systems often struggle with integration and accuracy across regions. To address these gaps, the EU-funded BioClima project merges cutting-edge AI with ground and remote sensing data to enhance monitoring systems. Through EU-China collaboration, the project aims to develop harmonised monitoring systems to improve data models for biodiversity and climate assessments. Overall, BioClima will support robust policymaking and contribute to climate neutrality, adaptation, and biodiversity conservation. Its findings will inform EU-wide strategies and strengthen global cooperation, particularly between Europe and China.
FOCAL	Disseminating climate data to support sustainable practices at local level:

	<p>Access to climate data and services is often confined to scientists and modelling experts. However, it should also be available locally to improve societal resistance to climate change. Consequently, the EU-funded FOCAL project aims to establish an open platform that incorporates intelligent workflow management with high-performance computing infrastructures and AI analyses. Focusing on urban planning and forestry, it intends to provide reliable climate impact assessments at the local level based on earth observation and system modelling data. It also encourages web/cloud app development through a co-design process with urban planners and foresters and supports developers, especially SMEs, by providing services, modules, tools and workflows that can be integrated into their own solutions.</p>
<p>KijaniSpace</p>	<p>KijaniSpace (GreenSpace in Swahili) is a highly innovative initiative built on the foundation of previous successful AU-EU collaborations and partnerships in the fields of space, IoT, climate and agriculture. The vision of the project is to extend the use of Copernicus Earth observation data for the application of climate-smart agriculture in Africa to regional research and innovation development. To enhance the use of Copernicus data by local African stakeholders, we have proposed several practical but innovative approaches. First of all, Copernicus data should be integrated into the local IoT dataset to enhance the local context, users and market needs of the application.</p> <p>Therefore, the project proposed to develop a Space-IoT Solution Box (called KijaniBox, GreenBox in Swahili) that integrates the existing platform, tools and dataset for simplified local availability and accessibility. Using the KijaniBox EO and IoT resources, the project will launch two programs, one called Training Program for skills development and creation of minimum viable products and another Innovation Program for SMS innovation experiments. In addition, the project will conduct the pilot demonstration of two agricultural applications (crop farming and fish farming). Finally, the project will engage the various local and international stakeholders and actors with a multi-stakeholder approach to co-create innovation and collaboration environments. KijaniBox is a highly innovation-oriented consortium composed of thirteen (13) companies, six European and seven African partners from seven (7) different countries. The concept of the KijaniSpace project is being piloted in the Great Lake Victoria basin region. The ultimate aim of KijaniSpace is to pave the way for long-term sustainable economic growth and green job creation in Africa and Europe through Copernicus and IoT.</p>
<p>AGRI-DIGITAL GROWTH</p>	<p>Precision Farming Ecosystem for Digital Skills enhancement across CE, to support digitalisation, sustainability and specialisation of Agri food manufacturing SMEs in Precision Farming transition - AGRI-DIGITAL GROWTH builds on the Transform 4.0 project to enhance digital skills in traditional SMEs within the EU agricultural machinery sector, which includes about 7,000 manufacturers. These SMEs, especially in peripheral areas, lack digital competencies necessary for adapting to and benefiting from the expanding market of precision and digital farming. This project aims to establish a Precision Farming Knowledge Transfer Ecosystem, involving universities, research centers, and business support organizations to foster digital capabilities, aiming to improve sector competitiveness. Activities include transnational pilot courses and living labs to facilitate hands-on learning and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. The ultimate goal is to bridge digital skill gaps and bolster long-term sustainability through continuous support and resource development even post-project.</p>
<p>trans4num</p>	<p>The project “transformation for sustainable nutrient supply and management” (trans4num)</p>

	<p>aspires to substantiate and broadly promote Nature-based solution (NBS) innovations for sustainable agriculture in Europe and China. In particular, trans4num will focus on nutrient management (bio-based nutrient sources, sustainable crop rotations, optimization of nutrient flows) and will develop a differentiated understanding of NBS potentials for achieving sustainable agricultural practices, study the complexities of applying NBS, develop a dynamic and smart nutrient management tool to support regional decision making for optimum nutrient supply, and assess the (net) impact of technological and social innovations as well as policies related to NBS. To realize its objectives, trans4num will use a social-ecological transformation (SET) framework tailored to study 20 NBS farm-level innovations in 7 regions with intensive farming systems. The project will implement the multi-actor approach to consider various societal concerns and interests related to NBS in agricultural nutrient management and to identify promising transformation pathways for social innovations conducive to a wider acceptance and adoption of NBS.</p>
PLUS Change	<p>PLUS Change brings together 23 institutions from across Europe including 5 Universities, 5 research institutes, 3 stakeholder network organisations, 1 performing arts collective, and 9 practice partners representing regional planning and land management authorities and organisations. The objectives directly address the call with an aim to create land use strategies and decision-making processes that meet climate, biodiversity and human well-being objectives of sustainability, and to develop interventions that leverage political, economic, societal, material and cultural contexts to achieve these strategies, by involving actors at multiple decision-making levels (individual, land management, planning, policy). Activities include land use modelling (including historical and future trajectories of change), systems mapping, causal loop diagrams, performing arts approaches, randomized controlled trials of behaviour change, sociological surveys, and policy and governance reviews. All activities brought together in an integrated research design that draws on their different contributions to a holistic approach to understand multi-scale land use systems across a diversity of socioeconomic and biogeographical contexts, and create usable tools for land managers, users, planners and policy makers.</p>
PoliRural	<p>Changes in rural areas, such as depopulation, land abandonment and the loss of biodiversity, may proceed very slowly yet are often irreversible. Policymakers can steer these developments in order to reduce their negative impacts but this requires knowing whether current policy instruments are effective, who is benefiting from them and in what measure, what driving forces will be most influential and how they will affect people, planet, profits and land-use. To be truly useful, this knowledge must transcend siloed thinking and be the corollary of a joint effort uniting different actors under a common cause.</p> <p>PoliRural provided this knowledge by combining several key activities needed to design effective place-based, human-centric and forward-looking rural policies. These include actionable research that takes place within an inclusive learning environment where rural populations, researchers and policymakers come together to address common problems; an evaluation exercise that uses text mining to assess the perceived effectiveness of past or planned policy interventions; and a foresight study that tries to glean the development trajectory of agriculture and its allied sectors until 2040 using several scenarios in which the evolution of rural populations occupies a central place.</p>
EUHubs4Data	<p>Sub-grant agreement to the EUHubs4Data project on providing services and datasets for the EUHubs4Data open calls.</p>

	<p>The European federation of Data Driven Innovation Hubs aims to consolidate as the European reference for data driven innovation and experimentation, fostering collaboration between data driven initiatives in Europe, federating solutions in a global common catalogue of data services, and sharing data in a cross-border and cross-sector basis.</p> <p>With the objective of serving as reference to the establishment of the Common European Data Spaces, the federation is initially composed of 12 DIHs, covering 10 countries and 12 different regions, and plans to increase the geographical coverage by incorporating other relevant initiatives in the upcoming months.</p> <p>Plan4all DIH is supporting two experiments which were part of the third open call of EUH4Data.</p>
MANDOLIN	<p>The MANDOLIN experiment run in part of West Bohemia in the Posumavi Region. Uhlava as Local Leader Group is a member of Plan4all and has also cooperation cross-border with Bavaria. The region is famous for a large number of small local food producers and there already exist solutions supporting local promotion and selling of these products. Target community was small food producers. They have limited access to digital technologies supporting quality of production including food traceability, logistics and distribution. Also their support for consumers is limited. The goal of the experiment was to integrate existing data and tools in DIH, with technologies of Lesprojekt SME into a platform to overcome the lack of solutions for small producers.</p>
AgriHub CZ&SK	<p>The AgriHub CZ&SK project supported the digital innovation hubs for Czech Republic and Slovakia funded by the SmartAgriHubs (Grant Agreement No. 818182) H2020 project. It promoted digital innovation in the agri-food domain and will facilitate set-up and realisation of Innovation Experiments (IEs) in the region with additional mobilised funding. The main idea of the 12 month project is to integrate activities of existing Innovation Hubs in Czech and Slovakia and to support the interaction of all players in the agriculture production chain (farmers, advisors, machinery producers, researchers, developers) to move the Czech and Slovak farming sector towards SmartFarming 4.0. AgriHub CZ&SK became a platform inter-connecting various stakeholders from industry, training, start-ups support, farm consultancy and services to support the introduction of SmartFarming 4.0. This platform aims to build a fertile environment for networking of organisations and individuals, mobilisation of talents, in the agri-food chain and facilitate cooperation. These efforts resulted in a new, smart, environmentally, socially and economically more sustainable agriculture.</p>
S4ALLCities	<p>Smart cities have frontline responsibility to ensure a secure and safe physical and digital ecosystem promoting cohesive and sustainable urban development for the well being of EU citizens. S4AllCities integrates advanced technological and organizational solutions in a market oriented unified Cyber – Physical Security Management framework, aiming at raising the resilience of cities’ infrastructures, services, ICT systems, IoT and fostering intelligence and information sharing among city’s security stakeholders.</p>
Wirelessinfo	
THEROS	<p>An integrated toolbox for improved verification and prevention of adulterations and non-compliances in organic and geographical indications food supply chain (THEROS), 2023 – present.</p>
Data4Food	<p>Pathways towards a fair, inclusive and innovative Data Economy for Sustainable Food</p>

	Systems (Data4Food2030), 2022 – present. The Data4Food2030 project aims to improve the data economy for food systems (DE4FS) by expanding its definition, mapping its development, performance and impact to create new insights and opportunities. This contributes to a more competitive and sustainable food system in the EU and supports implementation and adaptation of relevant policies.
LIVERUR	LIVERUR (Living Lab research concept in Rural Areas) project aims at modernising the small – medium rural businesses present in the European territory. SMAEs (Small – Medium Agricultural Enterprises) do represent crucial actors in the structure and the dynamics of EU rural economy: despite the on-going consolidation process, rural activities in Europe are still carried out primarily by small or very small holdings.
SmartAgriHubs	SmartAgriHubs is dedicated to accelerate the digital transformation of the European agri-food sector. It will consolidate, activate and extend the current ecosystem by building a network of Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) that will boost the uptake of digital solutions by the farming sector. This will be achieved by integrating technology and business support in a local onestop-shop approach involving all regions and all relevant players in Europe.
EUXDAT	EUXDAT - European e-Infrastructure for Extreme Data Analytics in Sustainable Development Platform-driven e-infrastructure innovation. EUXDAT proposes an e-Infrastructure addressing agriculture, land monitoring and energy efficiency for sustainable development and policy planning. This involves management and processing of large volumes of heterogeneous data coming from the field sensors, agriculture machinery and remote sensing.
EO4Agri	The main objective of EO4AGRI (Bringing together the Knowledge for Better Agriculture Monitoring) was to catalyze the evolution of the European capacity for improving operational agriculture monitoring from local to global levels based on information derived from Copernicus satellite observation data and through exploitation of associated geospatial and socio-economic information services.
ENABLING	Enabling project (Enhance New Approaches in BioBased Local Innovation Networks for Growth), formed in large part by national and regional stakeholders across 13 countries, shared the vision that intervening on the improvement of the supply - demand dynamic will unlock a huge potential, likely to benefit both sides (farming and industry), as well as other types of stakeholders connected to the biomass production or transformation processes (service providers, innovation brokers, logistics)
Lesprojekt-slужby	
COMUNIDAD	Combined use of EGNSS and COPERNICUS data to develop innovative downstream services for the users from Chile and Colombia. Project n. 101131859. COMUNIDAD aims at advancing the Consortium’s European experiences in developing Copernicus-based services and combining use of EGNSS and Copernicus for supporting more sustainable agriculture, forestry, and land management in Latin America, with the focus on Chile and Colombia. HE / EUSPA project.
ALIANCE	Innovative and technologically advanced solutions to support precision agriculture using AI, satellite imagery and sensor measurements. The ALIANCE project represents a significant step towards innovative and technologically advanced agriculture that is competitive on the international market. By using artificial intelligence methods and

	combining different data sources, ALIANCE brings new possibilities and more accurate predictions for precision agriculture.
SIEUSOIL	SIEUSOIL designs, implements, and tests a shared China-EU Web Observatory platform that will provide Open Linked Data to monitor status and threats of soil and assist in decision making for sustainable support of agroecosystem functions, in view of the projected climate change.
Stargate	The STARGATE project (reSilient fARminG by Adaptive microclimaTe management) is focused on integrating data on sustainable productivity and microclimate features to provide a better model for policymakers. Its comparative analysis will draw in national and European data and create visual analysis to provide more efficient and modern management in farming, by adding to the understanding of a local ecology and its features, including meteorological data.
AgriClima EUREKA	Development of innovative climate (monitoring and warning) systems for effective nutrient and water management in the environment in the framework of EU-CELAC cooperation. The aim of the AgriClima project is to design a system for optimizing agricultural Water management (with a focus on vineyards) in selected wine regions of the Czech Republic (Čepirohy) and Argentina (Province of San Juan – ECOHUMUS farm).
Czech Center for Science and Society	
INTERESH	INnovation for TERitorial CohEision around Soil Health - a collaborative, transdisciplinary initiative to enhance soil health through Nature-Based Solutions, biofertiliser supply chains, precision fertigation, and data-driven policy tools. Supported by international partners, the project aims to develop scalable, regionally representative models that strengthen the agrarian innovation and contribute to sustainable soil policies aligned with new European legislation.
DALIA	The project brings to DRB integrated DALIA tool, which will be integrated into Danube Mission Hub for better decision making to improve DRB restoration of fresh and transitional water ecosystems; it provides options for strategies and policies that concern freshwater ecosystem protection and ecosystem connectivity in DRB and improved protection of local communities and ecosystems from extreme events and pollution threats.
SDI4App	Uptake of Open Geographic Information Through Innovative Services Based on Linked Data – SDI4Apps www.sdi4apps.eu



Regional Action Plan

Pilot:	Spain
Version:	3.0
Date:	04/12/2025

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Background

The Sierra and Mancha Conquense, in Cuenca (Castilla–La Mancha, Spain), covers 3,443.55 km² with a very low density (7.82 inh/km²). It combines mountains and plains, protected natural areas, and high-value ecosystems. 29,045 ha fall under Natura 2000 (8.14% of the territory), with notable oak forests, wetlands, and geomorphological landmarks.

The region has 41,064 residents, with ageing and depopulation trends. Its economy is led by the primary sector (agriculture, livestock, forestry) while rural tourism and the agri-food industry are growing to diversify activity. Infrastructure is basic, with needs in telecoms, public transport, and sanitation; average income is €21,041 (2022).

Culturally, it boasts rich heritage—archaeological sites like Segóbriga and Valeria, and significant religious and civil architecture. Traditions remain strong through festivals such as La Endiablada (Almonacid del Marquesado) and Moros y Cristianos (Valverde del Júcar), supported by an active network of local associations.



1.2. Purpose and Objectives

Approach. An integrated, participatory strategy responds to deep territorial vulnerabilities—urban and rural—arising from uneven development, service access, and quality of life. It requires coordinated, long-term action.

Key vulnerabilities:

- Accelerated depopulation
- Population ageing
- Unequal access to basic infrastructure and services
- Limited economic diversification

Strategic pillars & alignment. The model integrates economic, social, and environmental sustainability; aligns with the 2030 Agenda SDGs and Spain's Urban Agenda (AUE), and relies on multilevel governance.

Economic sustainability. Diversify the productive base by promoting sustainable tourism, renewable energy, and the circular economy, while strengthening agriculture and livestock. Goals: create local jobs, energise the rural economy, reduce external dependence, and leverage rural–urban synergies and digital connectivity.

Environmental sustainability. Protect historical, natural, ethnographic, and cultural heritage; advance the energy transition (renewable infrastructure, local energy communities); and deploy circular-economy initiatives to valorise waste and cut environmental impacts.

Participatory governance. An inclusive process engages local authorities, the Provincial Council of Cuenca, the Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha, businesses, associations, social partners, and citizens to identify needs and set priorities—building co-responsibility for implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement, and strengthening community cohesion.

Policy alignment. The RAP follows ADESIMAN's CLLD Strategy (EDLP) 2023–2027, addressing needs prioritised through participation and linked to LEADER in Castilla-La Mancha under Spain's CAP Strategic Plan (PEPAC) 2023–2027. It complies with Order 52/2023 (21 March) regulating the selection of LAGs and CLLD strategies in Castilla-La Mancha, pursuant to Articles 31–33 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, targeting employment, growth, gender equality, social inclusion, and local rural development—including bioeconomy and sustainable forestry. From these objectives, targets and an interlinked action plan are defined.

PEPAC 2023-2027 (LEADER Intervention in Castilla la Mancha)	AGRO-FOOD SECTOR NEEDS IN THE ADESIMAN TERRITORY	OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGY
07.07. 08.12. 08.13.0 08.03.	N1. Promote relief generational, especially for young people and women in the agri-food sector.	O1 O5
02.01. 08.03.	N2. Support the agri-food RDI processes to increase quality, competitiveness and sustainability	
06.10. 08.03.	N3. Boost the agri-food ecological	
06.10j	N4. Boost the joint between initiatives of production, transformation, marketing and consumption of product sustainability locally with special attention to short marketing channels	
06.10.	N5. Support the training and the exchange of knowledge/good practices, for an advance toward the ecological and digital transition in the production and marketing of agri-food industries.	
04.06.	N6. Support energy collectivization formulas within the sector and in collaboration with other sectors.	O1
01.04.	N7. Support the processes of R&D&I of the sector agri-food, and silvicultural to increase quality, competitiveness and sustainability	
08.03.	N8. Promote projects that contribute to creating synergies and alliances strategically with other sectors: gastronomy, tourism, trade, crafts and culture etc.	
PEPAC 2023-2027 (LEADER Intervention in Castilla la Mancha)	NEEDS OF THE INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITY, EMPLOYMENT AND INNOVATION.	OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGY
08.03.	N9. Encourage the culture of entrepreneurship, increase support for self-employed workers and the creation and maintenance of SMEs in general	O1

08.13. 08.03. 08.01	N10. Promote a culture of entrepreneurship, increase support for the self-employed and the creation and maintenance of SMEs, particularly among women.	O1 O5
07.07. 08.03.08.01.	N11. Promote an entrepreneurship culture, increase support for self-employed workers and the creation and maintenance of SMEs, particularly among young people.	O1
08.03. 08.07	N12. Support to innovation, the transfer of knowledge and projects based on the economy circular for trigger added value to products, creating new lines of business and improving waste management.	O1
08.03.	N13. Support to innovation, the transfer of knowledge and projects based in the industry and the services of the energy sector, as well as industries 4.0 and the cultural industry.	O1
07.06.	N14. Promote training in Industry 4.0.	O1
07.06.	N15. Promote training in culture industries.	O1
08.05.	N16. Interrelate and create synergies and strategic alliances between the economic and public sectors and the Industry 4.0 and cultural industry.	
08.05. 08.04.	N17. Boost the productive fabric by creating networks between companies, local entities, technological centres, universities, financial institutions, etc.	
08.05.	N18.Support energy collectivization formulas among the different economic and public sectors.	O1
08.04.	N19. Develop actions to adapt the supply of industrial land to needs.	
08.05. 08.04.	N20. Promote local business and entrepreneurial initiatives by leveraging local public and private resources that are unused or underutilized.	
08.03. 08.04	N21. Promote business and entrepreneurial projects that address the social needs and shortcomings of the territory: local services, care for dependent people, ageing, etc.	
08.05. 08.04	N22. Provide local and regional services and infrastructure, common physical and digital spaces for business activity and entrepreneurship development.	O1 O2

ADESIMAN STRATEGY GOALS 2023-2027	LINK WITH THE OBJECTIVES SET OUT IN ORDER 52/2023, OF MARCH 21, OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WATER AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN TURN LINKED TO THE PEPAC (OE8 – PROMOTE THE EMPLOYMENT, THE GROWTH, THE EQUALITY OF GENDER, INCLUDED THE STAKE OF THE WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE, SOCIAL INCLUSION AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS, INCLUDING CIRCULAR BIOECONOMY AND SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY)
O1. Consolidate, increase and promote the economic fabric through competitiveness, innovation, diversification, sustainability, the creation and maintenance of employment and the promotion of real and effective equality between women and men and generational change.	Employment promotion
	Gender equality.
	Sustainable bioeconomy and forestry.
	Social inclusion.
	Rural areas local development.
O2. Increase and improve services and quality of life from digitalization, sensorization, energy efficiency, social inclusion of all people and effective equality between men and women.	Social inclusion.
	Gender equality.
	Rural areas local development.
	Employment promotion
O3. Protecting the environment by promoting action on climate, the circular economy, water efficiency, energy efficiency and self-consumption of energy, and investment in green landscapes and infrastructure.	Sustainable bioeconomy and forestry.
O4. Conserve and recover tangible and intangible cultural heritage and architectural heritage with principles of sustainability, efficiency and profitability.	Rural areas local development.

05. Ensure generational change in the population, political, business, cultural and associative dimensions by promoting children, women and youth.

Social inclusion.

Gender equality.

2. Current Situation Analysis

2.1. State of the Art

Overview of current socio-economic and environmental conditions; existing infrastructure, innovation ecosystems, and market trends; plus a benchmark against comparable rural regions.

2.1.1. Demographic Analysis.

The territory has 41,064 residents. The average per municipality is ~733.3, with uneven distribution. Tarancón (16,257) is the main urban hub, while Mota de Altarejos (29) illustrates severe rural depopulation. The median municipality has 245.5 residents, highlighting many very small settlements, depopulation risk, and population concentrated in a few centres.

Municipality	Total	Men	Women	% men	% women
ABIA OF THE BISHOP'S OFFICE	61	38	23	62.30%	37.70%
THE ACEBRÓN	226	111	115	49.12%	50.88%
ALBALADEJO DEL CUENDE	225	120	105	53.33%	46.67%
King's Alcazar	159	87	72	54.72%	45.28%
ALMARCHA (THE)	434	234	200	53.92%	46.08%
ALMOND TREES	244	127	117	52.05%	47.95%
ALMONACID OF THE MARQUISATE	434	224	210	51.61%	48.39%
ALTAREJOS	210	116	94	55.24%	44.76%
ARCAS	2.094	1.059	1.035	50.57%	49.43%
Cuenca Screech	771	399	372	51.75%	48.25%
BARCHÍN DEL HOYO	92	60	32	65.22%	34.78%
BELINCHÓN	398	206	192	51.76%	48.24%
BELMONTEJO	135	77	58	57.04%	42.96%
Cervera del Llano	210	103	107	49.05%	50.95%
CHUMILLAS	61	36	25	59.02%	40.98%
FRESNEDA DE ALTAREJOS	37	19	18	51.35%	48.65%
Pedro Naharro Fountain	1.234	648	586	52.51%	47.49%
Fuentelespino de Haro	239	119	120	49.79%	50.21%
HINOJOSA (THE)	191	98	93	51.31%	48.69%
MILESTONE (THE)	145	80	65	55.17%	44.83%
Horcajo de Santiago	3.671	1,869	1,802	50.91%	49.09%
HUELVES	89	48	41	53.93%	46.07%
BISHOP'S GARDEN	140	80	60	57.14%	42.86%
MONTALBANEJO	87	43	44	49.43%	50.57%

MONTALBO	697	356	341	51.08%	48.92%
MOTA DE ALTAREJOS	29	20	9	68.97%	31.03%
JÚCAR OLIVE GROVES	310	160	150	51.61%	48.39%
OLMEDA DEL REY	127	64	63	50.39%	49.61%
DOVECOTS OF THE FIELD	557	283	274	50.81%	49.19%
WALLS	75	42	33	56.00%	44.00%
PARRA DE LAS VEGAS (LA)	34	24	10	70.59%	29.41%
CASTLE PIQUERAS	46	28	18	60.87%	39.13%
POZORRUBIO DE SANTIAGO	323	155	168	47.99%	52.01%
TOWN OF ALMENARA	331	172	159	51.96%	48.04%
ROZALÉN DEL MONTE	59	27	32	45.76%	54.24%
SAELICES	466	246	220	52.79%	47.21%
Saint Lorenzo of the Grill	1.106	581	525	52.53%	47.47%
SOLERA OF GABALDÓN	31	18	13	58.06%	41.94%
TARANCON	16.257	8.029	8.228	49.39%	50.61%
TORRUBIA DEL CAMPO	311	152	159	48.87%	51.13%
TRIBALDOS	97	53	44	54.64%	45.36%
UCLÉS	247	132	115	53.44%	46.56%
VALVERDE DE JÚCAR	1.085	537	548	49.49%	50.51%
VILLAR DE CAÑAS	391	212	179	54.22%	45.78%
VILLAR DE OLALLA	1.425	761	664	53.40%	46.60%
VILLAREJO DE FUENTES	396	198	198	50.00%	50.00%
VILLAREJO-PERIESTEBAN	387	194	193	50.13%	49.87%
VILLARES DEL SAZ	464	245	219	52.80%	47.20%

VILLARRUBIO	207	114	93	55.07%	44.93%
VILLAVERDE AND PASACONSOL	339	181	158	53.39%	46.61%
ZÁNCARA HARVEST	93	55	38	59.14%	40.86%
TAGUS BRAMBLE	273	150	123	54.95%	45.05%
FIELDS OF PARADISE	672	346	326	51.49%	48.51%
VALDETORTOLA	123	69	54	56.10%	43.90%
VALERAS (THE)	1,587	850	737	53.56%	46.44%
Fuentenava de Jabaga	579	301	278	51.99%	48.01%
	41,064	20,973	20,091	51.07%	48.93%

Source: Castilla-La Mancha Statistics Institute. 2023 data. Prepared by the authors.

The gender distribution in the territory shows a slight predominance of the male population, with 50.98% men versus 49.02% women. Although the overall difference is not significant, when analyzing the data by municipality, significant imbalances are observed in some localities.

In some municipalities, the proportion of men is significantly higher, such as in Mota de Altarejos, where 68.97% of the population are men, and in Parra de las Vegas, where men represent 70.59%. This phenomenon may be due to the emigration of young women to urban areas in search of employment or better living conditions.

On the contrary, some municipalities have a higher percentage of women. Rozalén del Monte is an example, with a 54.24% female population, suggesting that in certain localities the trend may be the opposite, possibly due to a higher life expectancy among women in older age groups.

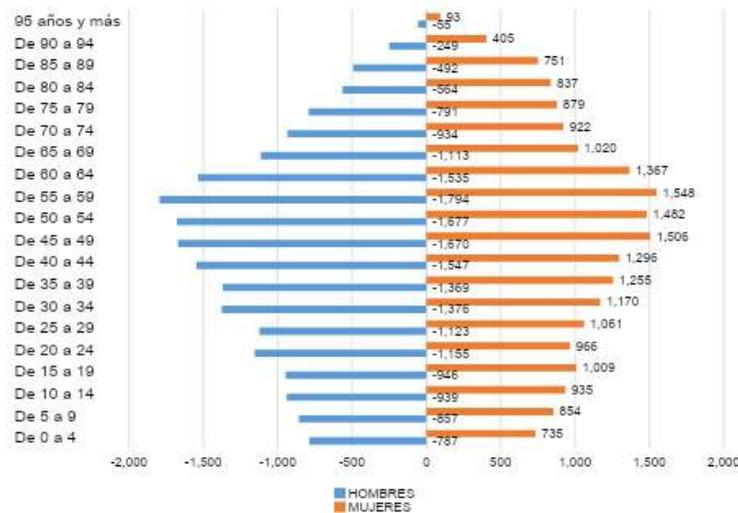
Generally speaking, gender distribution across the territory tends to be balanced in municipalities with larger populations, while in smaller municipalities the differences are more marked. These imbalances can influence the social and economic structure of the territory, affecting the dynamics of the labor market, the provision of services, and household configuration.

The territory has a demographic structure typical of developed countries, with few births and a high life expectancy.

AGE GROUPS	BOTH SEXES	MEN	WOMEN	% MEN	% WOMEN	% TOTAL
0 to 4	1,522	787	735	1.92%	1.79%	3.71%
5 to 9	1,711	857	854	2.09%	2.08%	4.17%
10 to 14	1,874	939	935	2.29%	2.28%	4.56%
15 to 19	1,955	946	1,009	2.30%	2.46%	4.76%
20 to 24	2,121	1,155	966	2.81%	2.35%	5.17%
25 to 29	2,184	1,123	1,061	2.73%	2.58%	5.32%
30 to 34	2,546	1,376	1,170	3.35%	2.85%	6.20%
35 to 39	2,624	1,369	1,255	3.33%	3.06%	6.39%
40 to 44	2,843	1,547	1,296	3.77%	3.16%	6.92%
45 to 49	3,176	1,670	1,506	4.07%	3.67%	7.73%
50 to 54	3,159	1,677	1,482	4.08%	3.61%	7.69%
55 to 59	3,342	1,794	1,548	4.37%	3.77%	8.14%
60 to 64	2,902	1,535	1,367	3.74%	3.33%	7.07%
65 to 69	2,133	1,113	1,020	2.71%	2.48%	5.19%
70 to 74	1,856	934	922	2.27%	2.25%	4.52%
75 to 79	1,670	791	879	1.93%	2.14%	4.07%
80 to 84	1,401	564	837	1.37%	2.04%	3.41%
85 to 89	1,243	492	751	1.20%	1.83%	3.03%
90 to 94	654	249	405	0.61%	0.99%	1.59%
95 years +	148	55	93	0.13%	0.23%	0.36%
TOTAL	41,064	20,973	20,091	51.07%	48.93%	100.00%

Source: Castilla-La Mancha Statistics Institute. Prepared by the authors.

The age–sex pyramid shows aging, low birth rates, and a female-skewed older population. Its narrow base, bulging middle, and tall apex indicate a shrinking population. Low fertility and youth out-migration undermine demographic balance and heighten depopulation risk.



Source: Castilla-La Mancha Statistics Institute. Prepared by the authors.

A narrow base signals low recent births: 0–19 = 17.2%, risking weak generational replacement. The working-age group (20–64) is largest (60.6%), but the 45–59 cohort dominates—many will enter 65+ soon. Aging is clear at the top: 65+ = 22.2%, with especially fast growth 80+, implying rising demand for healthcare, long-term care, and social support.

Gender pattern. Men slightly outnumber women through youth and working ages; from 60+ the trend reverses, peaking at 80+, due to longer female life expectancy. Many older women may live alone, requiring tailored housing, care, and community programs.

Key challenges & levers.

- Strengthen elder care (health, residential, active-aging services).
- Retain/attract youth to counter low fertility and out-migration.
- Create jobs via infrastructure and digitalisation, and by boosting rural tourism and the circular economy.

Bottom line. Low birth rates + accelerated aging + late-life gender imbalance threaten demographic and economic sustainability. A comprehensive response—birth incentives, better elder QoL, and youth-retention policies—is essential to curb depopulation.

Density note. The GDR covers 3,554 km² (20.7% of Cuenca; 4.7% of Castilla-La Mancha) with a population density of 11.55 inh/km².

MUNICIPALITY	Population 2023 (inhabitants)	Surface/Km ²	Population density
Abía of the Bishopric	61	63.07	0.97
Acebron (The)	226	22.11	10.22
Albaladejo del Cuende	225	55.19	4.08
King's Alcazar	159	46.5	3.42
Almarcha (The)	434	64.36	6.74
Almond trees	244	63.11	3.87
Almonacid del Marquesado	434	47.15	9.20
Altarejos	210	91.32	2.30
Arcas	2.094	81.48	25.70

Barchín del Hoyo	92	65.25	1.41
Belinchón	398	79.73	4.99
Belmontejo	135	52.23	2.58
Fields of Paradise	672	216.89	3.10
Cervera del Llano	210	55.49	3.78
Cuenca Chillarón	771	39.41	19.56
Chumillas	61	40.25	1.52
Fresneda de Altarejos	37	59.9	0.62
Pedro Naharro Fountain	1.234	64	19.28
Fuenteespino de Haro	239	33.44	7.15
Fuentenava de Jábaga	579	133.09	4.35
Hinojosa (The)	191	42.11	4.54
Milestone (The)	145	41.22	3.52
Horcajo de Santiago	3.671	96	38.24
Huelves	89	39.44	2.26
Garden of the Bishopric	140	41.88	3.34
Montalbanejo	87	59.33	1.47
Montalbo	697	73,965	9.42
Mota de Altarejos	29	16.9	1.72
Olive groves of Júcar	310	50	6.20
Olmeda del Rey	127	74.57	1.70
Palomares del Campo	557	60.98	9.13
Walls	75	19.36	3.87
Parra de las Vegas (The)	34	61.51	0.55
Piqueras del Castillo	46	45.86	1.00
Pozorrubio	323	44.7	7.23
Puebla de Almenara	331	37.67	8.79
Rozalén del Monte	59	30.63	1.93
Saelices	466	80.62	5.78
Saint Lawrence of the Grill	1.106	60	18.43
Gabaldón Solera	31	50.49	0.61
Tarancón	16.257	107	151.93
Torrubia del Campo	311	53.36	5.83
Tribalds	97	21.33	4.55
Uclés	247	64.61	3.82
Valdetórtola	123	103.21	1.19
Valeras, The	1,587	112.96	14.05
Valverde de Júcar	1.085	56	19.38
Villar de Cañas	391	70.36	5.56
Villar de Olalla	1.425	158	9.02
Villarejo de Fuentes	396	128.36	3.09
Villarejo-Periesteban	387	33.43	11.58
Villares del Saz	464	70.16	6.61
Villarrubio	207	28.26	7.32
Villaverde and Pasaconsol	339	21.2	15.99
Záncara Harvest	93	78.72	1.18
Bramble of Tajo	273	45.93	5.94

Source: Castilla-La Mancha Statistics Institute. Prepared by the authors.

The data analyzed reflect a territory with strong demographic contrasts, where some municipalities maintain a stable population, while others are experiencing severe depopulation. Population distribution shows a tendency toward concentration in larger centers such as Tarancón and Horcajo de Santiago, while many rural localities have extremely low population densities, which hampers their long-term sustainability.

The municipalities with the largest number of inhabitants are:

- Tarancón (16,257 inhabitants): It is the most populated nucleus in the territory and the only one with a significant urban density (151.93 inhabitants/km²).

- *Horcajo de Santiago (3,671 inhabitants): It is the second most populated municipality, with a density of 38.24 inhabitants/km².*

- *Arcas (2,094 inhabitants). Third-largest municipality in population. 25.70 inhabitants/km²*

- *Las Valeras (1,587 inhabitants) and San Lorenzo de la Parrilla (1,106 inhabitants): Both have an average density (14.05 and 18.43 inhabitants/km², respectively).*

The municipalities with the fewest inhabitants are:

- *Mota de Altarejos (29 inhabitants)*

- *Solera de Gabaldón (31 inhabitants)*

- *Parra de las Vegas (34 inhabitants)*

- *Fresneda de Altarejos (37 inhabitants)*

- *Piqueras del Castillo (46 inhabitants)*

The phenomenon of depopulation and aging is one of the most pressing issues in most municipalities, especially those with fewer than 100 inhabitants and densities below 2 inhabitants per km². This situation poses a risk to the viability of these localities, as generational renewal is insufficient and migration to larger municipalities continues to increase. Furthermore, municipalities with large areas and low populations require additional efforts in infrastructure and services to guarantee the quality of life of their inhabitants.

On the other hand, there are municipalities with a medium-to-high population density that can act as hubs of attraction, facilitating the provision of services and economic activity.

The municipalities with the highest population density, in addition to Tarancón (151.93 inhabitants/km²), include:

- *Horcajo de Santiago (38.24 inhabitants/km²)*

- *Arcas (25.70 inhabitants/km²)*

- *Chillarón de Cuenca (19.56 inhabitants/km²)*

- *Fuente de Pedro Naharro (19.28 inhabitants/km²)*

- *San Lorenzo de la Parrilla (18.43 inhabitants/km²)*

- *Villaverde and Pasaconsol (15.99 inhabitants/km²)*

Some municipalities with extremely low densities are:

- *Fresneda de Altarejos (0.62 inhabitants/km²)*

- *Solera de Gabaldón (0.61 inhabitants/km²)*

- *Parra de las Vegas (0.55 inhabitants/km²)*

- *Zafra de Zánacara (1.18 inhabitants/km²)*

- *Valdetórtola (1.19 inhabitants/km²)*

Sustained repopulation and economic recovery are needed—attract/retain youth, enable telework, boost rural tourism, and support entrepreneurship. Without action, gaps between growing and shrinking municipalities will widen, deepening territorial inequality.

2.1.2. Demographic Indicators

Key rates—fertility, mortality, migration, age structure—together reveal population dynamics and are vital for socio-economic planning. The next section reviews these indicators at the national level.

Population Unit	Rate depends.	Longevity rate.	Maternity Rate.	Trend	Replacement rate	Aging Rate
ABIA OF THE BISHOP'S OFFICE	66.70%	69.60%	0.00%	0.00%	44.40%	1150.00%
ACEBRÓN (THE)	63.80%	63.80%	10.00%	50.00%	80.00%	287.50%
ALBALADEJO DEL CUENDE	127.70%	67.20%	5.60%	20.00%	25.60%	892.30%
King's Alcazar	78.70%	60.40%	25.00%	42.90%	55.60%	436.40%
ALMARCHA (THE)	61.60%	58.80%	14.80%	114.30%	44.60%	503.70%
ALMOND TREES	74.60%	60.20%	8.80%	50.00%	46.50%	733.30%
ALMONACID OF THE MARQUISATE	61.80%	65.20%	7.50%	35.70%	57.50%	465.50%
ALTARJOS	95.20%	60.70%	0.00%	0.00%	56.70%	809.10%
Cuenca Screech	47.40%	54.30%	13.60%	50.00%	56.10%	110.40%
BARCHÍN DEL HOYO	64.40%	59.50%	12.50%	0.00%	45.00%	3700.00%
BELINCHÓN	79.00%	64.20%	21.90%	107.70%	78.60%	244.90%
BELMONTEJO	85.50%	56.30%	0.00%	0.00%	41.40%	3200.00%
Cervera del Llano	63.20%	71.40%	6.10%	40.00%	41.90%	437.50%
CHUMILLAS	65.70%	50.00%	18.20%	200.00%	33.30%	107.70%
FRESNEDA DE ALTAREJOS	29.60%	87.50%	0.00%	0.00%	20.00%	0.00%
Pedro Naharro Fountain	46.30%	56.00%	15.40%	88.10%	75.90%	169.90%
Fuentelespino de Haro	117.60%	70.00%	7.10%	25.00%	48.30%	578.90%
HINOJOSA (THE)	78.50%	60.00%	8.70%	100.00%	36.40%	833.30%
MILESTONE (THE)	98.70%	67.20%	21.40%	150.00%	56.00%	837.50%
Horcajo de Santiago	54.40%	55.30%	18.40%	86.50%	80.90%	161.20%

Population Unit	Rate depends.	Longevity rate.	Maternity Rate.	Trend	Replacement rate	Aging Rate
HUELVES	75.60%	27.30%	10.00%	50.00%	60.00%	220.00%
BISHOP'S GARDEN	54.70%	61.10%	5.60%	33.30%	66.70%	720.00%
MONTALBANEJO	82.40%	47.60%	0.00%	0.00%	38.90%	0.00%
MONTALBO	58.50%	59.40%	26.50%	115.40%	48.30%	188.90%
MOTA DE ALTAREJOS	88.90%	75.00%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	0.00%
JÚCAR OLIVE GROVES	98.60%	69.10%	0.00%	0.00%	67.40%	1544.40%
OLMEDA DEL REY	71.80%	59.60%	17.60%	300.00%	44.40%	1300.00%
DOVECOTS OF THE FIELD	68.70%	66.80%	5.70%	55.60%	56.80%	673.30%
WALLS	71.90%	71.40%	0.00%	0.00%	21.40%	1050.00%
PARRA DE LAS VEGAS (LA)	83.30%	64.30%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	1400.00%
CASTLE PIQUERAS	84.00%	70.00%	0.00%	0.00%	45.50%	2000.00%
POZORRUBIO DE SANTIAGO	60.20%	69.20%	15.70%	160.00%	44.00%	668.80%
TOWN OF ALMENARA	96.80%	61.70%	0.00%	0.00%	60.80%	2483.30%
ROZALÉN DEL MONTE	132.00%	55.20%	0.00%	0.00%	18.20%	725.00%
Saelices	66.10%	65.40%	15.00%	171.40%	54.40%	546.40%

Saint Lorenzo of the Grill	57.20%	62.40%	14.40%	100.00%	85.30%	295.00%
SOLERA OF GABALDÓN	176.90%	52.20%	0.00%	0.00%	66.70%	0.00%
TARANCON	45.80%	49.20%	19.20%	85.30%	84.30%	92.10%
TORRUBIA DEL CAMPO	59.10%	75.90%	21.20%	157.10%	58.20%	307.40%
TRIBALDOS	98.00%	66.70%	0.00%	0.00%	26.70%	600.00%
UCLÉS	63.20%	76.00%	7.90%	75.00%	40.90%	500.00%
VALVERDE DE JÚCAR	68.90%	56.90%	21.30%	121.10%	70.90%	235.30%
VILLAR DE CAÑAS	72.60%	57.00%	3.90%	12.50%	37.10%	355.60%
VILLAR DE OLALLA	49.80%	56.20%	21.60%	92.40%	72.60%	131.80%
VILLAREJO DE FUENTES	86.70%	55.60%	11.80%	60.00%	46.90%	695.70%
VILLAREJO-PERIESTEBAN	80.70%	63.10%	8.90%	62.50%	56.50%	596.00%

Population Unit	Rate depends.	Longevity rate.	Maternity Rate.	Trend	Replacement rate	Aging Rate
VILLARES DEL SAZ	72.10%	62.10%	14.30%	100.00%	55.40%	392.70%
VILLARRUBIO	61.50%	64.00%	8.80%	27.30%	29.40%	227.30%
VILLAVERDE AND PASACONSOL	95.40%	65.00%	15.20%	116.70%	56.50%	538.50%
ZÁNCARA HARVEST	112.80%	78.40%	33.30%	0.00%	9.10%	2550.00%
TAGUS BRAMBLE	44.90%	58.10%	18.20%	80.00%	42.30%	295.20%
FIELDS OF PARADISE	84.30%	69.50%	11.70%	73.30%	35.50%	527.50%
VALDETORTOLA	84.10%	66.10%	6.70%	0.00%	55.60%	1866.70%
VALERAS (THE)	43.90%	57.60%	17.20%	108.50%	70.00%	182.80%
Fuentenava de Jabaga	41.50%	38.90%	13.10%	92.90%	38.10%	213.20%
ARCAS	36.30%	38.10%	16.00%	60.90%	73.80%	48.70%

Source: Castilla-La Mancha Statistics Institute. Prepared by the authors.

Demographic Indicators.

- Method. Rates are computed as a weighted average so each municipality counts by its demographic weight.
- Dependency ratio (0–14 & 65+ vs. 15–64): 55.24% → >1 dependent for every 2 working-age people.
- Longevity rate (*non-standard; 75+ within 65+*): 54.39% → more 65–74 than 75+. *Limits: not life expectancy; no 75+ breakdown; not standardized.*
- Maternity rate (*non-standard; crude births among women 15–49*): 16.5% → few women with young children. *Limits: no age-specific fertility; not TFR; ignores socio-economic factors; not standardized.*
- Replacement rate proxy (20–29 vs. 55–64): 71.4% → relatively few young adults vs. near-retirees. *Limits: ignores life expectancy and true dependency; not standardized.*
- Aging index (65+ per 100 under-16): 277.36% → far more older adults than children.
- Trend index (0–4 vs. 5–9 ×100): 82.58% → declining births and aging.
- Sex ratio: 108.8 → significant male majority.

Bottom line. The territory is masculinized, aging, and low-fertility, with weak generational replacement—reinforcing the need for youth attraction/retention and strengthened elder-care and social services.

2.1.3. Socioeconomic characterization: Presentation of detailed data on employment, educational level, economic dynamism and social cohesion

Infrastructures linked to services in the territory:

TYPE OF INFRASTRUCTURE	COVERAGE IN THE TERRITORY
Social center	85% of population centers
House of Culture	20% of population centers
Senior center	90% of population centers
Early Childhood Education Centers and Centers for People with Disabilities	1% of population centers
Libraries	24.6% of population centers
Internet centers	75% of the municipalities
Approved training centers	3.85% of population centers
Sports facilities	99% of population centers
Nursing home	12 residences
Sheltered housing	14 homes
Day centers	5 day centers
Home help	100% population centers
Telecare	50% of the territory
Home delivery	11 locations
Tourist offices	2 locations
Educational System	Children: 22 centers Primary: 12 CRA ESO: 7 High School Centers: 5 FP Centers: 2 Centers PCPI: 2 Centers Adult education: 3
Health	7 health centers 1 specialty center 78 medical offices

Housing & Urban Planning.

In 2021 the region had 35,815 dwellings. Second homes (54.2%) outnumber primary residences (45.8%); the rental market is tiny (4.9%), and most primary homes are owner-occupied. Household size skews small—many one- and two-person households—linked to aging and low birth rates. Primary residences tend toward medium usable areas, suiting moderate-size families.

Land use. Predominantly residential, reflecting urban-focused development, with industrial zones and vacant land offering growth potential.

In terms of land use, residential use predominates, highlighting the focus on urban development, although there is also growth potential in industrial areas and vacant land.



Source: Castilla-La Mancha Statistics, own elaboration 2024

Housing Overview.

- Total dwellings (2021): 35,815.
- Primary residences: 16,406 (45.8%).
- Non-primary residences: 19,409 (54.2%) — many second homes.
- Rental stock: 1,762 (4.9%) → very limited rental market.
- Owner-occupied primary homes: 12,564.
- Other tenures: 2,080 (e.g., rent-to-own).

Bottom line: A high share of non-primary homes and a thin rental market define the territory's housing profile. *(Household breakdown is provided in the referenced table.)*



Source: Statistics Castilla-La Mancha, own elaboration 2024

The chart showing household size in 2021 reveals the following characteristics:

- Single-person households: 5,091, representing the largest group of households in the region.
- Two-person households: 4,677, showing a trend towards smaller households.
- Households of 3 people: 3,182.
- Households of 4 people: 2,426.
- Households of 5 or more people: 933, which constitute the smallest group.

This reflects a trend toward smaller household sizes, with a high percentage of single- and two-person households. This phenomenon may be related to the aging of the population, the increase in elderly households, or even a lower birth rate in the region.



Source: Statistics Castilla-La Mancha, own elaboration 2024

Primary residences in 2021 are predominantly medium-sized, with most units in the 61–90 m² and 91–120 m² ranges, while very small (≤ 60 m²) and very large (≥ 180 m²) homes are uncommon. This pattern suggests a mature, demand-matched market in which planning rules likely steer average sizes and limit extremes. It also reflects the territory’s socioeconomic profile: a broad middle class and fewer young single/couple households or large, high-income families, hence the lower share of the smallest and largest dwellings.



Source: Castilla-La Mancha Statistics, own elaboration 2024

Land Use

Land use is overwhelmingly residential, with 34,000+ dwellings making housing the dominant use. Vacant and industrial land follow, indicating development capacity and room for new economic activity, while commercial, cultural, and sports uses are marginal.

Town planning

FIGURE	PGOU: General Urban Planning Plan, equivalent to POM	1
	POM: Municipal Planning Plan	7
	DSU: Urban Land Delimitation Project, equivalent to PDSU	9
	PDSU: Urban Land Delimitation Plan	10
	NNSS-A: Subsidiary Standards Type A, equivalent to PDSU	7
	NNSS-B: Subsidiary Standards type b, equivalent to POM	4
	SP: Without planning	17

Source: ADESIMAN. GDR documentation. Prepared by the authors.

Housing, Planning & Heritage — Issues & Fixes

Context. Demographic decline and weak housing demand in many municipalities aggravate policy, planning, and heritage challenges.

- Policy gaps. Limited affordable supply and difficulty upgrading older stock hinder retention and attraction of residents. Fix: Launch affordable, quality housing programs; prioritise renovation of pre-1980 homes (energy efficiency, accessibility), expand rental options, and use incentives/public-private partnerships.
- Weak planning instruments. Insufficient integrated land-use, resource, and infrastructure planning slows sustainable development. Fix: Adopt strategic, long-term plans with legal tools (updated zoning, design codes), align infrastructure and natural-resource management, and set clear, measurable targets.
- Deteriorating historic centres. Traditional cores and aging housing decline amid depopulation and low demand. Fix: Revitalise town centres (heritage preservation, adaptive reuse), fund rehabilitation via tax credits and grants, promote sustainable construction, and activate ground floors for services and local business.

Bottom line. Combine affordable housing + targeted rehab + integrated planning to stabilise population, protect urban heritage, and enable balanced, sustainable growth.

Strategies

A strategic, collaborative approach should prioritise land use that delivers public value—attracting/retaining population, improving services, advancing digitalisation, boosting energy self-sufficiency, and upgrading waste management. The economy must lean into rural strengths (agriculture, livestock, crafts, rural tourism) while adding compatible commercial/industrial activity to diversify and create jobs. Build municipal capacity by training and motivating technical teams and fostering inter-municipal collaboration. Pair affordable, quality housing and rehabilitation of older stock with comprehensive planning instruments, better infrastructure, and revitalised historic centres. Finally, drive the digital transition: expand connectivity, energy efficiency and

self-consumption, IoT for smart towns, and local waste treatment/reuse. Together, these measures can stabilise population and enable balanced, lasting development.

INFRASTRUCTURE	FIBER	LIGHTING WITH REMOTE MANAGEMENT AND OTHER SERVICES	ENERGY COMMUNITIE S	CLEAN POINTS	COMMUNITY COMPOSTING PLANT
TOTAL MUNICIPALITIES	54	8	0	23	1

Source: ADESIMAN. GDR documentation. Prepared by the authors.

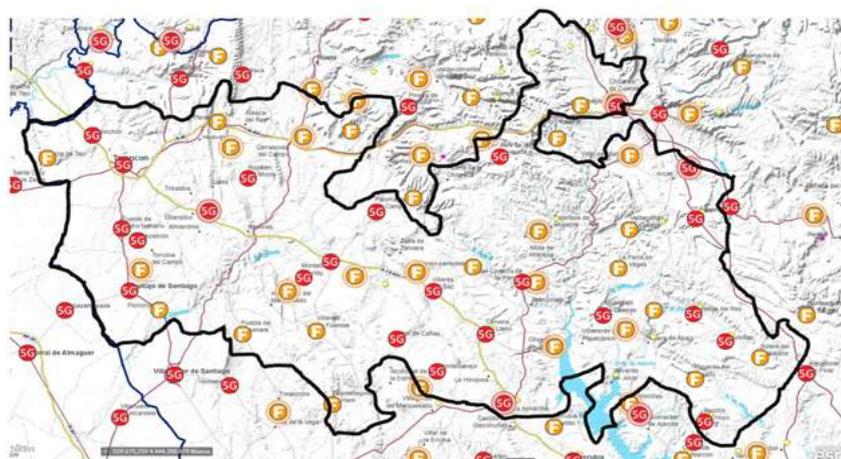
Digital Connectivity → Smart Towns.

Fiber-optic rollout by the Government of Castilla-La Mancha has largely closed the digital divide and enabled municipal sensorization—networks that track air quality, traffic, energy use, and other variables in real time. This data layer underpins smart villages, improving service efficiency, safety, sustainability, and civic participation through evidence-based decisions. To succeed, the shift requires careful planning, steady investment, digital-skills training, and close public-private-civic collaboration, with strong privacy and security safeguards.

Waste Management Gap

Sustainability lags behind in waste systems: only 23 municipalities operate clean points, and none treat biowaste locally. Given biowaste’s large share of household refuse, the absence of composting or anaerobic digestion limits landfill diversion, resource recovery, and emissions cuts. Priorities include expanding clean points, building biowaste facilities, and investing in environmental education and circular-economy policies so citizens separate and dispose of waste correctly.

The region has made a decisive leap in digital inclusion that opens the door to smart towns; matching it with robust waste-management upgrades is essential to deliver balanced, resilient, and sustainable development.



MUNICIPALITIES	FIBER	5 G	MUNICIPALITY	FIBER	5 G
Abía of the Bishopric			Puebla de Almenara		
Albaladejo del Cuende			Rozalén del Monte		

King's Alcazar			Saelices		
Almond trees			Saint Lawrence of the Grill		
Almonacid del Marquesado			Gabaldón Solera		
Altarejos			Sotoca		
Arcas			Tarancón		
Quarry arches			Torrubia del Campo		
Cleanbeard			Tribalds		
Barchín del Hoyo			Uclés		
Belinchón			Valdetórtola		
Belmontejo			Valera de Abajo		
Carrascosa del Campo			Valeria		
Cervera del Llano			Valparaíso de Abajo		
Chillarón			Valparaíso de Arriba		
Chumillas			Valverde de Júcar		
The Acebron			Villar de Cañas		
The Milestone			Villar de Olalla		
Fresneda de Altarejos			Villar del Saz		
Pedro Naharro Fountain			Villar del Saz de Arcas		
Fuentelespino de Haro			Villar del Saz de Navalón		
Clear fountains of Chillarón			Villarejo - Periesteban		
Horcajo de Santiago			Villarejo de Fuentes		
Huelves			Villares del Saz		
Garden of the Bishopric			Villarrubio		
Jabaga			Villaverde and Pasaconsol		
The Almarcha			Záncara Harvest		
The Hinojosa			Bramble of Tajo		
Loranca del Campo					
Montalbanejo					
Montalbo					
Mota de Altarejos			TOTAL	65	28
Navalón					
Olmeda del Rey					
Olmedilla del Campo					
Palomares del Campo					
Walls					
Parra de las Vegas					
Piqueras del Castillo					
Poveda of the Bishopric					
Pozorrubio de Santiago					

2.1.4. Leisure, Sport & Culture.

Leisure and sport jointly enhance wellbeing, offering physical, social, and psychological benefits. The region's facilities are broadly adequate, but the core challenge is maintenance and optimisation, constrained by high costs and a shortage of trained professionals (culture/industry). Priority actions: build human capital through targeted training and inter-municipal collaboration; pair ongoing maintenance with programmes that foster innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship so infrastructure generates cultural and economic activity.

Festivals & traditions.

Local celebrations embody identity, attract tourism, and preserve intangible heritage. Notable examples include La Endiablada (Almonacid del Marquesado), El Vitor (Horcajo de Santiago, often cited as the longest procession), the Danzantes of Belinchón (Corpus Christi), and Moors and Christians in Valverde de Júcar; Valera de Abajo seeks Regional Tourist Interest status. To help these festivals thrive, strengthen promotion and education about their cultural value—supporting sustainable development, cohesion, and long-term preservation.

Cultural festivals declared BIC

Intangible Assets in Castilla-La Mancha February 2020	
The Dance of Belinchón	The Devilish One Almonacid del Marquesado

Festival declared of REGIONAL TOURIST INTEREST
The Vitor (Horcajo de Santiago)
Moors and Christians Valverde de Júcar

Source: ADESIMAN. GDR documentation. Prepared by the authors.

Sport

Sport delivers major physical and mental gains—preventing NCDs, easing depression/anxiety, improving brain and eye health—and inactivity is a key global mortality risk (WHO). In small municipalities, sport drives social cohesion, inclusion, belonging, and skills (leadership, teamwork, discipline). Councils manage facilities directly or via partners; Spain’s Constitution (Art. 140) secures municipal autonomy. Participatory Sports Management can expand services, optimise spaces, create jobs, and attract visitors; coordination with culture and education amplifies impact. Despite resource and maintenance constraints, inter-municipal and public-private collaboration offer solutions. Every municipality has at least one sports facility and scenic trails for walking, running, or cycling.

School Sport — Somos Deporte 3–18.

Castilla-La Mancha’s programme (Order 159/2023), led by the Youth & Sports Directorate with support from the five Provincial Councils, promotes school-age sport via four lines: (1) Regional School Sports Championship (ages 10–16; multi-sport, local→regional phases); (2) Sports initiation (inter-school camps, modified/alternative games); (3) Promotion of physical activity (ages 3–18, including women’s and adaptive sport); and (4) Training for athletes, coaches, instructors, and judges—aligned with the regional Quality Plan for School-Age Sports.

2.1.5. Healthcare services

MUNICIPALITY	SENIOR HOUSING	SENIOR RESIDENCE	DAY CENTER	SOCIAL SERVICES
Abía of the Bishopric				
Albaladejo del Cuende				
King's Alcazar				
Almond trees				
Almonacid del Marquesado				
Altarejos				
Arcas				
Quarry arches				
Cleanbeard				
Barchín del Hoyo				
Belinchón				
Belmontejo				
Carrascosa del Campo				
Cervera del Llano				

Chillarón				
Chumillas				
The Acebron				
The Milestone				
Fresneda de Altarejos				
Pedro Naharro Fountain				
Fuentelespino de Haro				
Clear fountains of Chillarón				
Horcajo de Santiago		2		
Huelves				
Garden of the Bishopric				
Jabaga				
The Almarcha				
The Hinojosa				
Loranca del Campo				

MUNICIPALITY	SENIOR HOUSING	SENIOR RESIDENCE	DAY CENTER	SOCIAL SERVICES
Montalbanejo				
Montalbo				
Mota de Altarejos				
Navalón				
Júcar Olive Groves				
Olmeda del Rey				
Olmedilla del Campo				
Palomares del Campo				
Walls				
Parra de las Vegas				
Piqueras del Castillo				
Poveda of the Bishopric				
Pozorrubio de Santiago				
Puebla de Almenara				
Rozalén del Monte				
Saelices				
Saint Lawrence of the Grill				
Gabaldón Solera				
Sotoca				
Tarancón	2		2	
Torrubia del Campo				
Tribalds				
Uclés				
Valdetórtola				
Valera de Abajo				
Valeria				
Valparaíso de Abajo				
Valparaíso de Arriba				

Valverde de Júcar				
Villar de Cañas				

MUNICIPALITY	SENIOR HOUSING	SENIOR RESIDENCE	DAY CENTER	SOCIAL SERVICES
Villar de Olalla				
Villar del Saz				
Villar del Saz de Arcas				
Villarejo - Periesteban				
Villarejo de Fuentes				
Villares del Saz				
Villarrubio				
Villaverde and Pasaconsol				
Záncara Harvest				
Bramble of Tajo				
TOTAL	14	11	5	69
% ABOUT TOTAL MUNICIPALITIES	20.29	15.94	7.25	100.00

Service provision is limited: only 14 municipalities (20.29%) offer senior housing, 15.94% have senior residences, and just 7 municipalities (7.25%) run adult day centres. Owing to high 70+ care needs, all municipalities receive at least weekly visits from a social worker. Despite elder facilities, the region shows major social-service gaps and will need further investment as ageing accelerates. Provision for other groups is sparse—1 adult classroom, 6 childcare centres, 38 preschool/primary schools, 7 secondary schools, 1 child development & early-intervention centre, and 1 youth information centre. The territory needs family meeting/mediation spaces, rural educational-innovation hubs, special-education and disability support centres. Priority: invest in services for women, children, youth, families, and people with disabilities, and expand equality and work-life-balance resources (women’s centres, childcare, senior care, play centres, schools) alongside broader social-inclusion and welfare programmes.

2.1.6. Training

Vocational Training Cycles - Ordinary Face-to-Face, Intermediate and Advanced Level					
Municipalities	Administration and Finance (1st, 2nd)	Electromechanics of Motor Vehicles (1st, 2nd)	Administrative Management (1st, 2nd)	Telecommunications Installations (1st, 2nd)	Microcomputer Systems and Networks (1st, 2nd)
Horcajo de Santiago	0	0	0	0	1
TARANCON	1	1	1	1	0
TOTAL	1	1	1	1	1

The region offers only five VET options, leaving critical shortages in health & social care, dependent care, tourism, electrification/energy efficiency & self-consumption, and environmental training. As a result, clinics and care services struggle to staff qualified roles; tourism lacks trained guides and hospitality workers; and fast-growing

green-energy fields cannot find local talent. Environmental education also lags, slowing the shift to sustainable practices. Provision is highly concentrated in Tarancón, easing access there but disadvantaging rural residents. Net effect: constrained economic development and lower quality of life.

What's needed: expand and decentralise VET aligned to labour demand; use dual/apprenticeship models with hospitals, care homes, hotels, and energy firms; deploy blended/online learning and mobile training units; add micro-credentials in priority skills; and incentivise instructors and partnerships—so residents can train locally for the jobs the territory needs.

2.1.7. Average unemployment rate January to December 2024



ENERO	FEBRERO	MARZO	ABRIL	MAYO	JUNIO	JULIO	AGOSTO	SEPTIEMBRE	OCTUBRE	NOVIEMBRE	DICIEMBRE
2.232	2.288	2.289	2.240	2.176	2.079	2.054	2.017	2.055	2.149	2.144	2.129

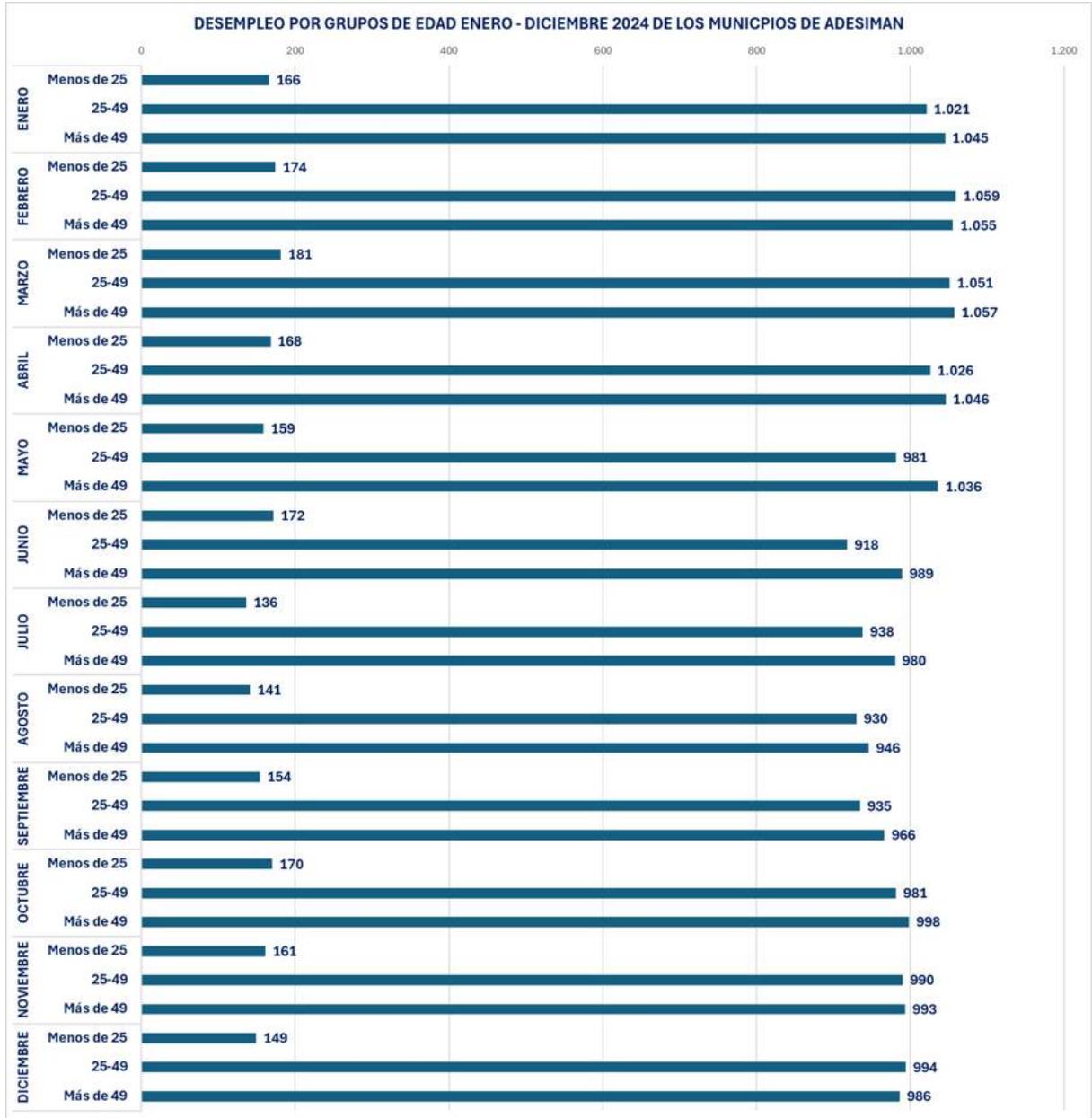
Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration



ENERO		FEBRERO		MARZO		ABRIL		MAYO		JUNIO	
VARONES	MUJERES										
788	1.444	794	1.494	800	1.489	760	1.480	736	1.440	702	1.377

JULIO		AGOSTO		SEPTIEMBRE		OCTUBRE		NOVIEMBRE		DICIEMBRE	
VARONES	MUJERES	VARONES	MUJERES	VARONES	MUJERES	VARONES	MUJERES	VARONES	MUJERES	VARONES	MUJERES
693	1.361	686	1.331	692	1.363	743	1.406	746	1.398	743	1.386

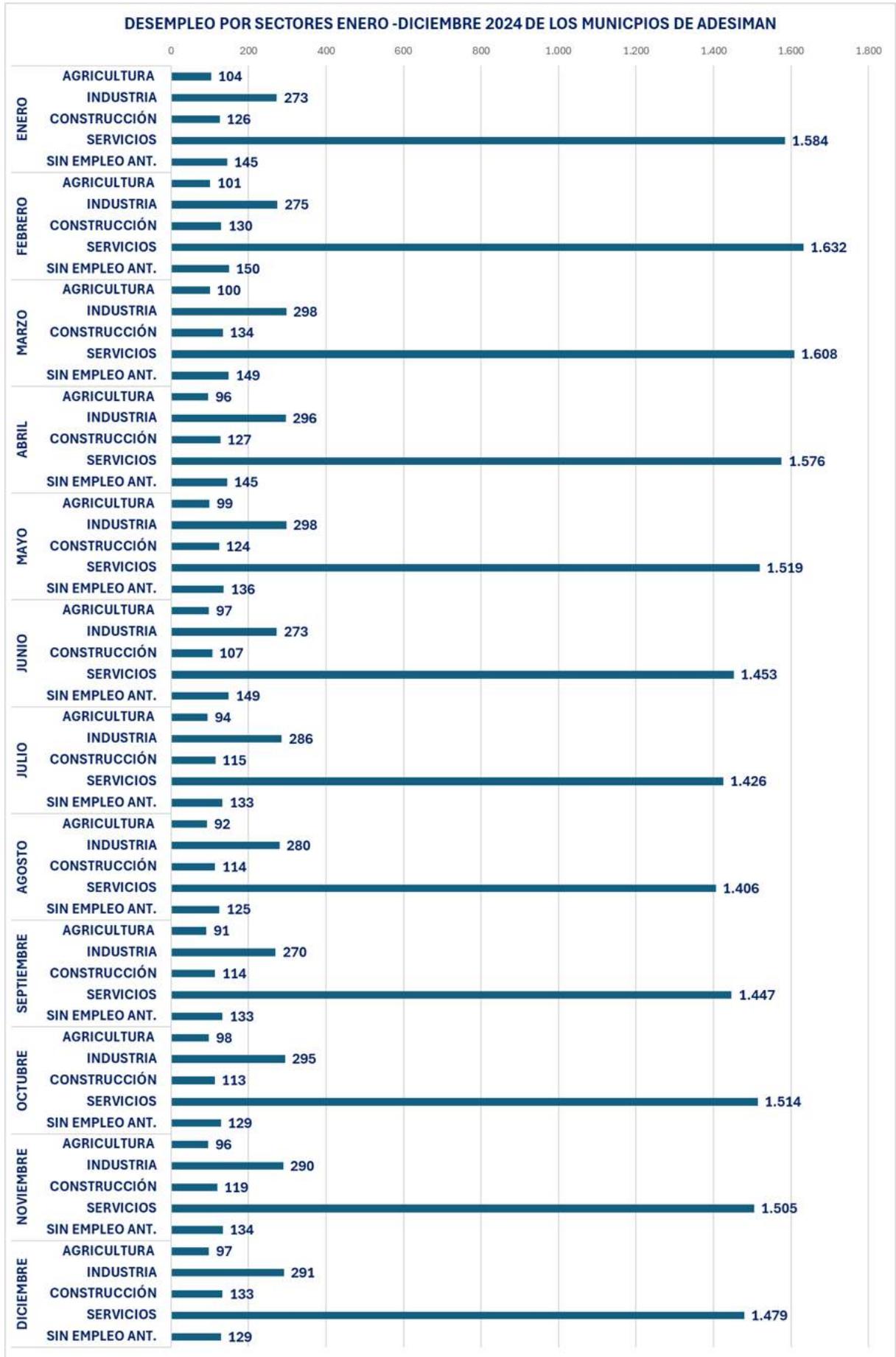
Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration



ENERO			FEBRERO			MARZO			ABRIL			MAYO			JUNIO		
Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49
166	1.021	1.045	174	1.059	1.055	181	1.051	1.057	168	1.026	1.046	159	981	1.036	172	918	989

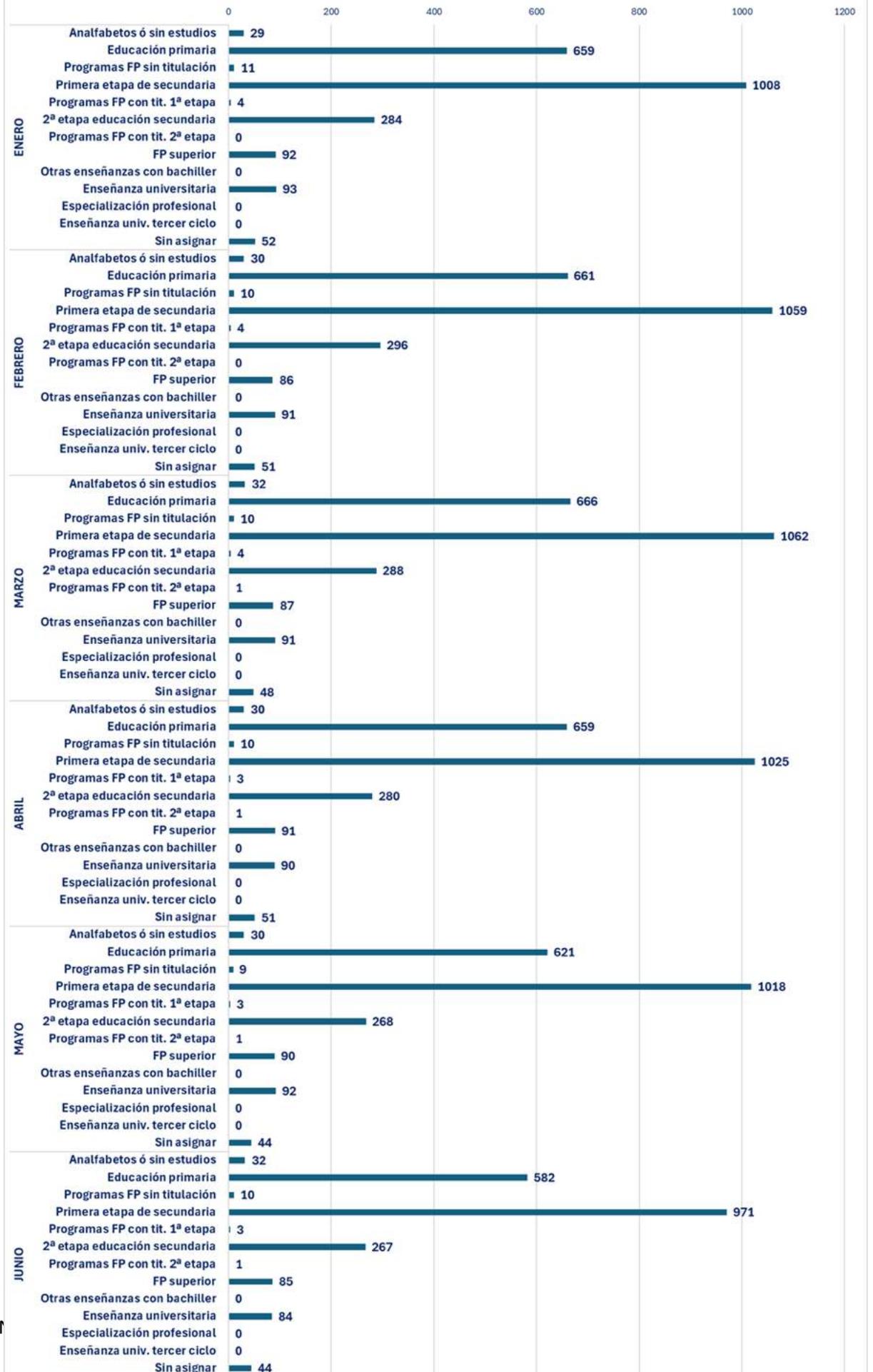
JULIO			AGOSTO			SEPTIEMBRE			OCTUBRE			NOVIEMBRE			DICIEMBRE		
Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49	Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49
136	938	980	141	930	946	154	935	966	170	981	998	161	990	993	149	994	986

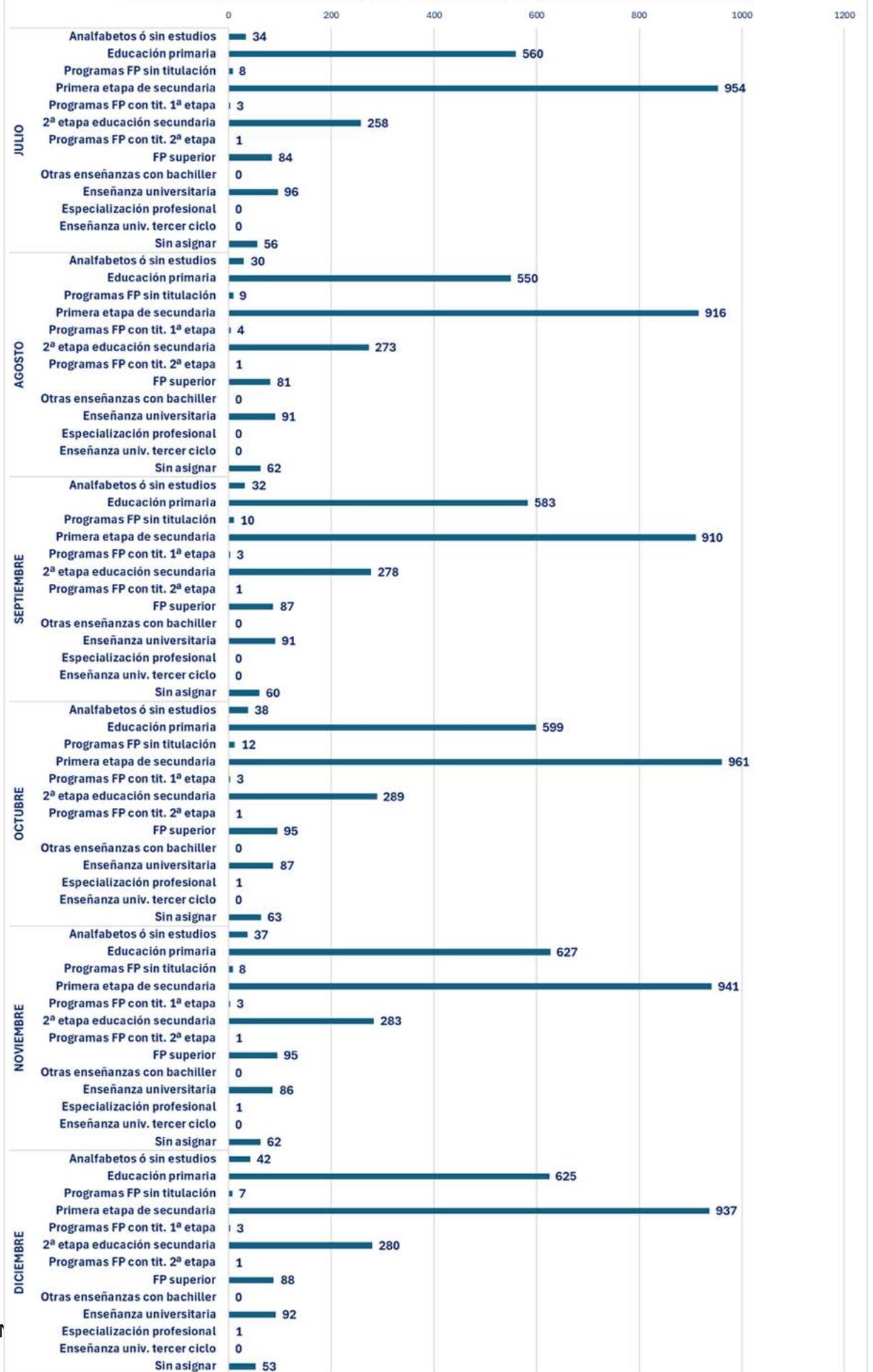
Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration



ENERO					FEBRERO					MARZO				
AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.	AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.	AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.
104	273	126	1.584	145	101	275	130	1.632	150	100	298	134	1.608	149
ABRIL					MAYO					JUNIO				
AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.	AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.	AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.
96	296	127	1.576	145	99	298	124	1.519	136	97	273	107	1.453	149
JULIO					AGOSTO					SEPTIEMBRE				
AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.	AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.	AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.
94	286	115	1.426	133	92	280	114	1.406	125	91	270	114	1.447	133
OCTUBRE					NOVIEMBRE					DICIEMBRE				
AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.	AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.	AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.
98	295	113	1.514	129	96	290	119	1.505	134	97	291	133	1.479	129

Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration

DESEMPLEO POR NIVEL DE ESTUDIOS ENERO - JUNIO 2024 DE LOS MUNICIPIOS DE ADESIMAN


DESEMPLEO POR NIVEL DE ESTUDIOS JULIO - DICIEMBRE 2024 DE LOS MUNICIPIOS DE ADESIMAN


ENERO												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
29	659	11	1008	4	284	0	92	0	93	0	0	52

FEBRERO												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
30	661	10	1059	4	296	0	86	0	91	0	0	51

MARZO												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
32	666	10	1062	4	288	1	87	0	91	0	0	48

ABRIL												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
30	659	10	1025	3	280	1	91	0	90	0	0	51

MAYO												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
30	621	9	1018	3	268	1	90	0	92	0	0	44

JUNIO												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
32	582	10	971	3	267	1	85	0	84	0	0	44

JULIO												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
34	560	8	954	3	258	1	84	0	96	0	0	56

AGOSTO												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
30	550	9	916	4	273	1	81	0	91	0	0	62

SEPTIEMBRE												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
32	583	10	910	3	278	1	87	0	91	0	0	60

OCTUBRE												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
38	599	12	961	3	289	1	95	0	87	1	0	63

NOVIEMBRE												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
37	627	8	941	3	283	1	95	0	86	1	0	62

DICIEMBRE												
Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
42	625	7	937	3	280	1	88	0	92	1	0	53

Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration



MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPEÑO POR GRUPOS DE EDAD 2024 ADESIMAN		
Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49
161	985	1.008

PORCENTAJES DE LA MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPEÑO POR GRUPOS DE EDAD 2024 ADESIMAN		
Menos de 25	25-49	Más de 49
7,47%	45,73%	46,80%

Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration

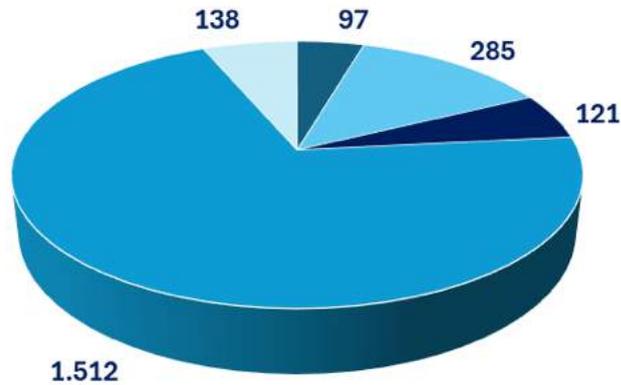


MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SEXOS 2024 ADESIMAN		
VARON		MUJER
740		1.414

PORCENTAJES DE LA MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SEXOS 2024 ADESIMAN		
VARON		MUJER
34,35%		65,65%

Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration

MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SECTORES 2024 ADESIMAN



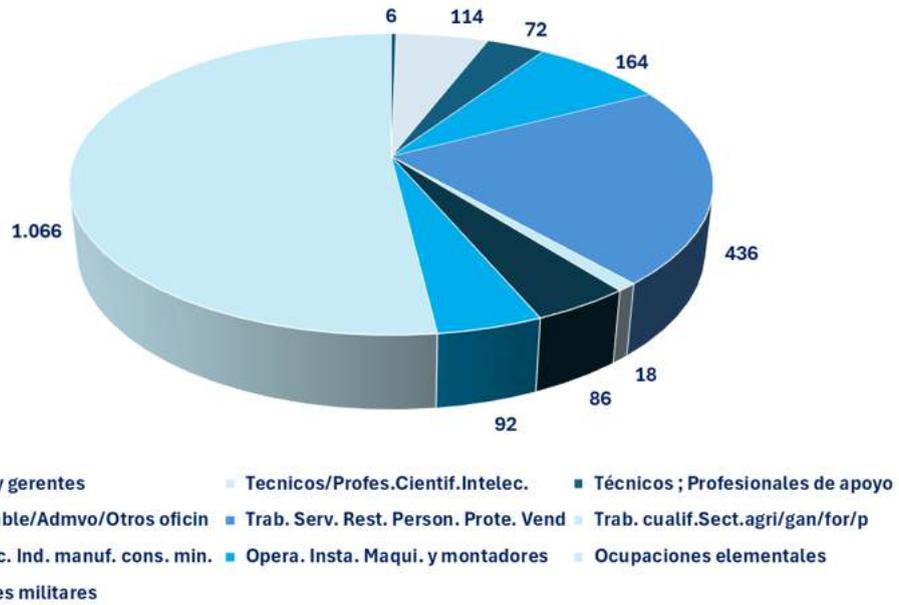
- MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SECTORES 2024 ADESIMAN AGRICULTURA
- MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SECTORES 2024 ADESIMAN INDUSTRIA
- MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SECTORES 2024 ADESIMAN CONSTRUCCIÓN
- MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SECTORES 2024 ADESIMAN SERVICIOS
- MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SECTORES 2024 ADESIMAN SIN EMPLEO ANT.

MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SECTORES 2024 ADESIMAN				
AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.
97	285	121	1.512	138

PORCENTAJES DE LA MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR SECTORES 2024 ADESIMAN				
AGRICULTURA	INDUSTRIA	CONSTRUCCIÓN	SERVICIOS	SIN EMPLEO ANT.
4,50%	13,23%	5,62%	70,19%	6,41%

Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration

MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR GRUPOS DE OCUPACIÓN 2024 ADESIMAN

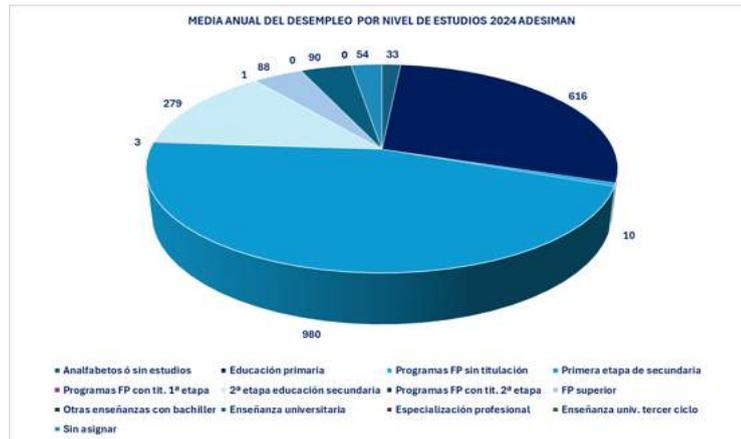


MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR GRUPOS DE OCUPACIÓN 2024 ADESIMAN

Directores y gerentes	Técnicos/Profes. Cientif. Intelec.	Técnicos ; Profesionales de apoyo	Empl. Contable/Admvo/Otros oficin	Trab. Serv. Rest. Person. Prote. Vend	Trab. cualif. Sect. agri/gan/for/p	Artes Trab. c. Ind. manuf. cons. min.	Opera. Insta. Maqui. y montadores	Ocupaciones elementales	Ocupaciones militares
6	114	72	164	436	18	86	92	1.066	0

Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration

MEDIA ANUAL DEL DESEMPLEO POR NIVEL DE ESTUDIOS 2024 ADESIMAN



Analfabetos ó sin estudios	Educación primaria	Programas FP sin titulación	Primera etapa de secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 1ª etapa	2ª etapa educación secundaria	Programas FP con tit. 2ª etapa	FP superior	Otras enseñanzas con bachiller	Enseñanza universitaria	Especialización profesional	Enseñanza univ. tercer ciclo	Sin asignar
33	616	10	980	3	279	1	88	0	90	0	0	54

Source: statistics.castillalamancha.es Year 2024 Own elaboration

2.1.8. Productive models and urban economy

The region's economy is led by agriculture and livestock (wheat, barley, sunflower, grapes; sheep and goats), which underpin a strong agri-food industry (wine, olive oil, cheese, traditional products). Rural tourism—driven by natural landscapes and heritage—supports lodging, restaurants, and recreation. A broad services base (commerce, education, health) sustains community life.

Agricultural and agri-food sector

The agricultural sector is a cornerstone of the territory's economy, generating food, jobs, and rural development. Though it represents only ~15% of firms and ~10.5% of Social Security beneficiaries, its impact is amplified by strong upstream and downstream links—farm-machinery workshops, specialist consultancies, and distributors of agricultural and agri-food products. These spillovers make agriculture a key engine for multi-sector growth despite its modest direct share.

	2020						
	Farms by type of crop						
	SAU		SAU/inhabitant ratio	Outdoor SAU		Gardens for own consumption	
	No.	Surface (ha.)		No.	Surface (ha.)	No.	Surface (ha.)
TOTALS	3.755	228,994.51	5.84	3.755	228,994.51	187	4.45

	2020					
	Farms by type of crop					
	Farms with SAU of herbaceous crops and fallow land (Arable land)		Farms with SAU of woody crops		Farms with SAU of land for pasture (Permanent pastures)	
	No.	Surface (ha.)	No.	Surface (ha.)	No.	Surface (ha.)
TOTALS	3.243	207,219.01	2.546	12,734.27	106	9,036.78

Source: Castilla-La Mancha Statistics Institute. Prepared by the authors.

Main characteristics of the sector

- Aging producers: Older farmers/ranchers → succession and knowledge-transfer risks.
- Primary livelihood: Many rely mainly on farm income → high exposure to climate/market volatility.
- Smallholdings: Limited scale hinders productivity, tech uptake, and profitability.
- Land use: Cropland predominates; pasture/forest are minor.

- Ownership: Mostly owner-operated—fast decisions but harder modernization/restructuring.
- Crops: ~94.69% herbaceous (cereals, pulses, similar); tree/horticulture are marginal.
- Livestock: Poultry and sheep dominate, matching local conditions and demand.

Transformation and marketing

Across the region, many small firms process and market farm and livestock products, lifting quality standards and selectivity. This downstream activity adds value, raises farmers' and ranchers' profitability, and offers consumers higher-quality, more diverse goods. Crucially, these companies champion Protected Designations of Origin (PDOs), which certify origin and quality. PDOs boost sector competitiveness by commanding price premiums, and their rigorous requirements push more firms to meet elevated standards—creating a virtuous cycle of differentiation, value-added production, and market credibility.

Oil from La Alcarria	Saffron from La Mancha	Honey from La Alcarria	Manchego Cheese	Organic food producers registered in December 2019
2	29	2	29	86

Purple Garlic from Las Pedroñeras	Manchego Lamb	La Mancha onion (in process)
29	29	41

Source: ADESIMAN. GDR documentation. Prepared by the authors.

Challenges and opportunities

Agriculture remains essential but faces aging producers, fragmented land, and climate variability. Rising demand for sustainable/organic food and sector modernisation/digitalisation create upside: precision farming, sensors, and AI can lift efficiency, cut inputs, and shrink environmental impacts. Value-added processing/marketing and PDOs drive differentiation, price premiums, and stronger rural value chains. With investment in skills, cooperation/scale solutions, and climate-smart practices, the sector can adapt to new consumer trends and technologies—while SMEs and a firm PDO commitment stay pivotal to sustainable growth.

2.1.9. Rural tourism

Rural tourism is a strong driver of the region's economy. It attracts visitors seeking authentic nature and heritage, creating direct jobs in lodging, restaurants, and activities, and indirect jobs in construction, transport, and crafts—supporting local population retention and countering depopulation. Tourist spending boosts small businesses and the circular economy, while diversifying an area traditionally reliant on agriculture and livestock. Increased visitation often catalyzes better roads, signage, and public services that also benefit residents. It promotes local products and preserves cultural traditions. To safeguard long-term appeal, tourism should be

sustainable, protecting the environment and sharing benefits fairly within communities. In sum, rural tourism improves quality of life, strengthens local enterprise, and underpins balanced, resilient growth.

2.1.10. Service sector

The services sector is a major driver of the region's GDP and employment. Rural tourism and agri-food services generate local income, while training in energy efficiency and the circular economy boosts firms' competitiveness and sustainability. The sector also catalyzes innovation and tech adoption, creating new businesses and jobs—ultimately raising quality of life.

Transport Sector

Transport underpins the region's economic and social life. A connected road network links towns, speeds access to education, healthcare, and markets, and moves agricultural/artisanal goods efficiently. Freight carriers (full-load and pallet services) are vital for the agri-food sector, taking wine, eggs, olive oil, Manchego cheese, and livestock to national markets. Though public transport is limited, buses and on-demand services reduce isolation for residents without cars. The sector is shifting toward sustainability—electric vehicles and energy-efficient operations cut emissions, improve air quality, and lower costs. Key challenges remain: modernising infrastructure and boosting connectivity in remote areas. Yet these gaps are opportunities for investment and innovation, from upgrading roads to deploying intelligent transport management systems that raise efficiency and safety.

3. Key Challenges

3.1. Weaknesses

3.1.1. Demographics & Population

- Depopulation, ageing; high female/youth unemployment.
- Some towns lack shops/bars → out-migration.
- Farm owners mostly 50+ / 65+; many derelict homes.
- Rigid urban rules hinder youth housing; weaker youth associations.
- Municipal finances are strained by energy costs + population loss.

3.1.2. Economy & Employment

- Weak work–family support; brain drain of graduates.
- Low succession in microbusinesses; skills shortages (incl. trades).
- Gaps in transport, lighting, industrial estates, public realm.
- Few physical/virtual hubs for entrepreneurs.
- Low R&D&I (outside large firms); low SME digitalisation.
- Limited diversification and entrepreneurial drive.

3.1.3. Trade, Tourism & Services

- Little specialisation; unclear place brand and offer.
- Fragmented agri-food: 95% <10 employees, >90% solo operators.
- Few organic producers/processors.
- Degraded/unsustainably used natural settings; underused heritage assets.

3.1.4. Infrastructure & Housing

- Few accredited VET centres (Professional Certificates).
- Little business activity in self-sufficient energy, IoT/Industry 4.0, bio/circular economy; low SME circularity.
- Inadequate housing supply; few protected areas with active plans.

3.1.5. Public & Social Services

- Low primary-sector productivity; industry/services concentrated in main towns.
- Small municipalities lack capacity to apply for grants.
- Shortage of 0–3 childcare; under-resourced primary care and women’s health.
- Service gaps for elderly, youth, vulnerable; scarce grant advisory support.

3.1.6. Environment

- Deteriorated local natural settings; few protected areas with management instruments.

3.2. Threats.

3.2.1. Demographics & Population

- Ongoing decline with strong youth loss; increasing female out-migration and inequality.
- Cuenca/Tarancón pull (spacious housing, better planning) diverts residents and investment; centralisation of services there hastens depopulation and local service loss.
- Growth of vacant buildings/shops/warehouses further degrades towns.

3.2.2. Economy & Competitiveness

- Pressure from emerging economies; weak tech transfer; rising skill requirements.
- High commodity/price volatility for farms; vulnerable micro-SMEs (succession gaps).
- Small shops face large-retail competition.

3.2.3. Environment & Landscape

- Landscape impacts from large renewable projects.
- Climate change threatens soils, fires, ecosystems, agro-forestry output, tourism, and water security.

3.2.4. Culture, Youth & Leisure

- Shifting youth leisure tastes complicate small-town programming; erosion of rural/agrarian/community culture.

3.2.5. Public Services & Administration

- Loss of professional services; bureaucratic aid procedures limit access for citizens and small municipalities.
- Associative fabric at risk due to weak generational renewal.

3.3. Opportunities

3.3.1. Technology, Digitalization & Energy

- Wider ICT use in production and services; better mobile coverage.
- Renewables + ICT as rural job niches; supportive regulations and retrofit aid.
- Launch energy communities via participatory governance.

- Smart towns: digitalization/sensorization (IoT) at territorial scale.
- Strong public programs for innovation, bio/circular economy, Industry 4.0.

3.3.2. Tourism & Territorial Development

- Growth in cultural/archaeological and nature tourism; interoperable local services.
- Strategic logistics location (Madrid–Levante corridor).
- ADESIMAN's Sustainable Tourism Plan: investments in infrastructure, skills, sustainability, energy efficiency, digital and promotion.
- Leverage Order of Santiago heritage; diversify with wine/olive/agri-food tourism; hunting as an economic driver.
- Strong agri-food exports open international markets for other products.

3.3.3. Employment, Rural Economy & Sustainability

- Local services as job niches; EU grants/projects for smart specialisation.
- More telework enables relocation and rural entrepreneurship.
- Prior RDP training shows impact (youth/entrepreneurs).
- Use fairs/gastronomy (three fairgrounds) to brand and sell local products.
- Scope for social housing policy in small towns.

3.3.4. Sustainable Mobility & Quality of Life

- Promote shared, low-emission mobility, using digital platforms and public–private networks to reduce private car dependence.

3.3.5. Health, Sustainability & Organic Production

- Social shift to healthy/natural; rising demand for quality/organic/differentiated foods with added value.
- New food tech/sectors; policies aligned with Agenda 2030.
- CLM Circular Economy Law → projects on agricultural waste, diversification, community composting.
- Job opportunities in forestry and broader environmental sectors.

3.4. Gender and Diversity Dimensions — Purpose

This section assesses how gender equality, age and social/cultural/ethnic diversity shape the Sierra and Mancha Conquense reality. It identifies gaps affecting participation, resource access and the impact of RAP actions, combining quantitative evidence with qualitative insights from stakeholder engagement.

Demographic overview

The area shows a mild male skew at working ages, rapid ageing and a reduced youth base due to out-migration—especially among women—to urban hubs. Small

municipalities display sharper imbalances, while women predominate at older ages. This structure drives rising care needs, constrains youth talent and strains service sustainability.

Socio-economic participation

Gaps persist in education, employment and entrepreneurship. VET is narrow and centralised in Tarancón, limiting pathways for youth and women across care/health, sustainable tourism, digital/energy and environmental fields. Scarce rentals and many second homes hinder access for youth, single-parent women and newcomers. Childcare, day-care, family mediation and disability support remain below demographic needs.

Rural–urban dimension

Service and education concentration in the urban pole raises mobility and care costs in rural peripheries, disproportionately borne by female carers, seniors and people with disabilities. Fibre rollout and municipal sensorisation enable “smart village” options, yet gaps in mobile connectivity, proximity services and waste management still have differentiated gender- and age-specific impacts.

Cultural & community context

Active associations and flagship festivals (La Endiablada, El Vitor, Moors & Christians, Danzantes) strengthen identity and cohesion. Linked to training, volunteering and the cultural economy, they can foster intergenerational inclusion, women’s leadership and youth engagement, catalysing social innovation and local jobs.

Existing policies & initiatives

The RAP aligns with ADESIMAN’s 2023–2027 CLLD and the CAP/Order 52/2023 framework, as well as the Spanish Urban Agenda and the SDGs, prioritising jobs, equality, inclusion and local development. Programmes like Somos Deporte 3–18 support health, equal opportunities and youth/women’s participation.

Challenges & opportunities

Challenges: youth/female out-migration in small towns; limited female leadership; scarce affordable rentals and care/conciliation services; narrow, centralised VET; late-life loneliness and vulnerability. Opportunities: decentralised dual VET and micro-credentials (care, health, sustainable tourism, energy transition); stronger long-term care systems as quality female-employment niches; inclusive digital and proximity services (smart towns); leveraging heritage and festivals for inclusive entrepreneurship.

Outcome

These findings feed the vision, goals and actions (Ch. 3–4), embedding gender- and age-responsive targets and indicators to ensure equitable, inclusive and sustainable development.

4. Vision and Strategic Goals

4.1. Vision Statement

By 2030, all rural–urban actors will co-create with communities on renewables, sustainable tourism, skills, and entrepreneurship—enabled by digitalization, interoperable systems, and AI to strengthen rural–urban synergies and protect cultural heritage.

ADESIMAN will deliver this vision through merged action plans that include the EDIL, a community-led strategy to tackle depopulation, stagnation, and environmental risk; a Community Transformation Office (OTC) to coordinate citizen–business–authority generation, use, and sharing of clean energy; the Sustainable Tourism Plan (PSTD), rolling out since February 24 to drive innovation, digitalization, and energy efficiency while digitally integrating flagship sites such as Segóbriga, Valeria, the Monastery of Uclés, and the Abbey of Jábaga; and a digital transformation and community-engagement strand aligned with the POLIRURAL open calls.

Expected impact (EU-aligned):

- Stronger social cohesion and circular economy.
- Better digital infrastructure and connectivity.
- Jobs and local markets while safeguarding natural/cultural heritage.
- Priority for renewables, conservation, and circular practices.

4.2. Strategic Goals

- Lead and foster digital innovation.
- Revitalise the region's urban and rural model and its synergies.
- Boost and foster the region's economy.
- Sustainably manage resources and promote a circular economy.
- Prevent and reduce the impacts of climate change and improve resilience.

5. Action Plan

5.1. Measures and Actions

5.1.1. Intervention Areas

1. Rural-Urban Synergies & Cultural Heritage
2. Digital Transformation and Entrepreneurship
3. Renewable Energy and Environmental Sustainability
4. Agrotourism and Education
5. Capacity Building and Community Engagement
6. Other Activities
7. Third party calls - synergies with third parties.

5.1.2. Actions

1. Rural-Urban Synergies & Cultural Heritage
 - o ADESIMAN Rural Development Strategy
 - o ADESIMAN Rural-Urban Development Agenda
 - o The Influence of "La Orden de Santiago" in the ADESIMAN Territory: Ethnographic Heritage
 - o Development of the ADESIMAN Sustainable Tourism Plan in Destination
 - o Participatory Local Development Strategy. 2023-2027
2. Digital Transformation and Entrepreneurship
 - o Development of the project "ADESIMAN. Smart Territory".
 - o Creation and implementation of the "Smart museums network in the ADESIMAN territory".
3. Renewable Energy and Environmental Sustainability
 - o Community transformation office of the Sierra and Mancha Conquense.
 - o Study on Community Composting. Pilot Project for the Implementation of 16 Composters in Municipalities of the ADESIMAN Territory.
 - o Development and implementation of the study of needs and actions for the implementation of the circular economy in the ADESIMAN territory.
4. Agrotourism and Education
 - o Development of an extended Training Plan in the ADESIMAN Territory
5. Capacity Building and Community Engagement
 - o Training sessions.
 - o Co-creation WSs (EDIL, ADUR)

- o OTC actions executions
- 6. Other Activities
 - o Development of the promotional action plan for the ADESIMAN territory
 - o Creation and implementation of the ADESIMAN territory observatory.
- 7. Third party calls - synergies with third parties
 - o Outreach
 - o Mobilise
 - o Develop
 - o Enhance

5.2. Expected Outcomes.

5.2.1. Rural-Urban Synergies & Cultural Heritage

Through participatory governance, ADESIMAN's rural development and rural–urban agendas curb depopulation, raise local employment, and balance access to services. Leveraging the legacy of the Order of Santiago boosts cultural pride and tourism, while the Sustainable Tourism Plan integrates innovation and energy efficiency. The 2023–2027 participatory strategy empowers communities and strengthens territorial cohesion.

5.2.2. Digital Transformation and Entrepreneurship

“ADESIMAN. Smart Territory” upgrades digital infrastructure and services to spur innovation, entrepreneurship, and smart governance, and the smart-museums network enhances heritage management and visitor engagement via accessible digital tools.

5.2.3. Renewable Energy and Environmental Sustainability

The Community Transformation Office supports Renewable Energy Communities with guidance and training, increasing local energy autonomy and cutting emissions. Community composting pilots reduce organic waste, and a circular-economy action plan drives resource efficiency and resilience.

5.2.4. Agrotourism and Education

An extended training plan upskills residents, underpinning sustainable agrotourism and diversifying local economies.

5.2.5. Capacity Building and Community Engagement

Targeted training, co-creation workshops (EDIL, ADUR), and OTC implementations build local capabilities, embed participatory governance, and improve energy sustainability and resilience.

5.2.6. Other Activities

A promotional action plan raises the territory's visibility and investment appeal, while a territorial observatory enables data-driven decisions and continuous monitoring.

5.2.7. Third party calls - synergies with third parties

Outreach widens stakeholder engagement; mobilisation via hackathons/ideathons activates ecosystems; funded pilots advance applied innovation; and scaling efforts embed lessons into long-term rural–urban strategies.

6. Policy and Funding Alignment

6.1. EU and National Policy Alignment:

A detailed description of how the RAP supports policies such as the European Green Deal, Horizon Europe, and Digital Europe is provided in section 1.2 of the document.

6.2. Funding Sources

6.2.1. Potential funding mechanisms

The following table lists the programs, framed within the project objectives, for which the local development group Adesimán has obtained funding:

Program	Funding body	Budget	Period
Integrated Local Development Strategy EDIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Castilla-La Mancha Community Council Ministry of Finance and Public Service Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITECO). European Funds (ERDF and ESF+). Civil society and private sector 	<3M€	2025-2030
Sustainable Tourism Plan for the Sierra and La Mancha of Cuenca	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministry of Industry and Tourism. 	3.780.000 €	2025-2030
Community Transformation Office of the Sierra and La Mancha of Cuenca OTC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITECO) 		2024-2030

In addition to the financing managed by Adesimán, there are other sources of financing:

Category	Rural Areas	Urban Areas
European Structural & Investment Funds (ESIF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) ERDF, ESF+, CF (for rural infrastructure, social inclusion, cohesion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ERDF, ESF+, CF (urban regeneration, inclusion, innovation) UIA (Urban Innovative Actions, where applicable)
Special Grant Programmes & Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EIP-AGRI (Agricultural Innovation Support) Climate and Energy Efficiency Grants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BOOST: Urban Future Finance Challenge Climate Action funding & energy efficiency retrofits

EU-Supported Financial Instruments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horizon Europe (agri-tech, foresight) • INTERREG, LIFE, Erasmus+ (rural mobility, environment) • European Investment Bank (EIB) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horizon Europe, EIT Urban Mobility, Erasmus+ • INTERREG Europe, JRC Urban Living Labs • EIF (urban-focused SMEs and entrepreneurship)
Private & Public-Private Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEADER Programme (community-led local development) • PPP schemes (e.g., rural broadband) • Venture Capital (agro-tech, sustainability start-ups) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PPP projects (infrastructure, smart mobility) • Banking sector & VC funds (urban innovation hubs) • SURGe (UN-Habitat) for sustainable urban transformation

6.2.2. Stakeholder access to financial instruments.

The financial instruments map covers the RAP ambition.

6.3. Partnerships.

Successful RAP delivery hinges on coordinated action by all stakeholders. Municipalities lead local governance, assess needs, run participatory planning, and execute projects. The Cuenca provincial government aligns initiatives, coordinates municipalities, and provides technical/financial support and capacity building. The regional government sets the policy framework, resources inter-municipal cooperation, and scales innovation; the national government supplies legislation, funding, oversight, and impact evaluation. Rural-urban entrepreneurs bring investment, jobs, technology, and diversification, while associations amplify community voices, build capacity, and broker collaboration. Inhabitants and volunteers co-design and implement actions, contribute skills and local knowledge, and sustain ownership through ongoing feedback.

7. Roadmap

7.1. Timeline:

Short-term Actions (2025-2027)

		2025												2026											
		Month												Month											
	Activity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Rural-Urban Synergies & Cultural Heritage																								
1.1	ADESIMAN Rural Development Strategy																								
1.2	ADESIMAN Rural-Urban Development Agenda																								
1.3	The Influence of "La Orden de Santiago" in the ADESIMAN Territory: Ethnographic Heritage																								
1.4	Development of the ADESIMAN Sustainable Tourism Plan in Destination																								
1.5	Participatory Local Development Strategy. LEADER 2023-2027																								
2	Digital Transformation and Entrepreneurship																								
2.1	Development of the project "ADESIMAN. Smart Territory"																								
2.2	Creation and implementation of the "Smart museums network in the ADESIMAN territory".																								
3	Renewable Energy and Environmental Sustainability																								
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3.2	Study on Community Composting. Pilot Project for the Implementation of 16 Composters in Municipalities of the ADESIMAN Territory																								
3.3	Development and implementation of the study of needs and actions for the implementation of the circular economy in the ADESIMAN territory.																								
4	Agrotourism and Education																								
4.1	Development of an extended Training Plan in the ADESIMAN Territory																								
5	Capacity Building and Community Engagement																								
5.1	Training sessions,																								
5.2	Co-creation WSs (EDIL, ADUR)																								
5.3	OTC actions executions																								
6	Other Activities																								
6.1	Development of the promotional action plan for the ADESIMAN territory																								

- Achieve 50% renewable energy self-sufficiency in rural areas.
- Implement advanced waste-to-energy technologies.
- Advance to a zero-waste rural economy.

4. Tourism and Education

Medium-Term (2028–2035)

- Develop eco-tourism initiatives that leverage natural and cultural assets.
- Expand vocational training programs in sustainable tourism.
- Create educational partnerships with urban universities.

Long-Term (2036–2040)

- Establish a leading eco-tourism destination in the region.
- Integrate lifelong learning programs into rural education systems.
- Develop a comprehensive rural education and tourism strategy.

5. Capacity Building and Community Engagement

Medium-Term (2028–2035)

- Implement community leadership training programs.
- Develop participatory governance models for rural development.
- Create platforms for continuous community feedback and engagement.

Long-Term (2036–2040)

- Establish a network of rural community development centres.
- Achieve full community participation in local governance.
- Create a sustainable model for ongoing community capacity building.

7.2. Implementation Plan

Assignment of responsibilities to each stakeholder during the active implementation phase and the post-implementation phase of the Rural Action Plan:

Municipalities

During implementation, they coordinate local projects and initiatives, foster community engagement, and monitor progress with reports to higher authorities; after implementation, they maintain and improve projects, keep residents involved, and adapt based on feedback.

Cuenca Government

During implementation, it provides funding and resources, offers technical support, and ensures alignment with regional policies; afterward, it tracks long-term outcomes, backs improvements and expansions, and facilitates inter-municipal collaboration.

Regional Government

During implementation, it develops and enforces regional policies, allocates resources, and coordinates with the national government; afterward, it evaluates progress, adjusts policies, and scales successful initiatives across the region.

National Government

During implementation, it sets overarching frameworks, allocates national funding and grants, and supports regional and local authorities; afterward, it monitors national impact, updates policies, and promotes successful initiatives nationwide.

Rural-Urban entrepreneurs

During implementation, they develop innovative projects, collaborate with communities, and invest in sustainable initiatives; afterward, they scale what works, mentor new entrepreneurs, and continue to innovate.

Rural-Urban associations

During implementation, they mobilize community members, enable collaboration and networking, and advocate local needs; afterward, they sustain engagement, track and report results, and press for continuous improvements.

Inhabitants and volunteers

During implementation, they join local projects, contribute feedback, and support outreach; afterward, they remain active, keep providing input, and back new initiatives and upgrades.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation

8.1. KPIs

#	Title	Purpose	2025 Metrics	2026 Target
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure the breadth and diversity of stakeholder engagement in RAP processes.	≥10 participatory assemblies; ≥400 participants; ≥10 co-creation workshops (EDIL/ADUR); ≥5 training sessions (≥80% satisfaction).	≥6 assemblies; ≥240 participants; ≥4 workshops; ≥5 sessions (≥80%).
2	Rural–Urban Collaboration	Evaluate the level of cooperation between territories and sectors in integrating policies and actions.	≥5 joint urban–rural actions; ≥56 municipalities advised by the OTC.	
3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Promote the use of innovative and digital tools and practices.	≥3 digital solutions (apps/sensors/platforms);	≥5 solutions; ≥6 smart museums; operational territorial observatory with monthly update.
4	Territorial and Environmental Sustainability	Encourage sustainable, resilient and green practices in territories.	OTC: ≥150 sessions in 56 municipalities; composting: 16 energy communities.	OTC: 10 energy communities. PSTD: 16 composters in 16 municipalities;
5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Assess improvements in livability, wellbeing, and social inclusion.	Training plan: ≥5 courses; ≥100 participants. Ethnographic heritage: ≥1 events/publications.	≥5 courses; ≥100 participants. Heritage: ≥5 events/publications.
6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Strengthen governance structures and collaborative decision-making.	1 development strategy published and validated: ADUR. 1 strategy submitted to EDIL funds	Annual update published (ADUR). OTC review.
7	Communication and Visibility	Measure how results and messages are shared and communicated.	≥3 campaigns; ≥500 people reached (open calls); operational portal/observatory.	≥5 campaigns; ≥800 people reached;
8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Assess sustainability and potential for scaling up the PoliRuralPlus model.	≥3 collaborative projects; ≥€100,000 in external funding;	≥3 projects; ≥€150,000 external;

To assess the persistence and reliability of project data, we will apply a structured methodology that evaluates continuity over time and the quality/consistency of each source. The dataset comprises: EDIL (assembly minutes, strategies, participatory

diagnostics), ADUR (urban–rural agenda, action plans), OTC (technical reports, workshop results, energy diagnostics), PoliRuralPlus/MAATool (impact indicators, monitoring reports), official sites (adesiman.com, otcadesiman.com, turismosierraymanchaalta.com), and participation records (attendee lists, surveys, forms).

Evaluation Mechanisms

To ensure effective monitoring and continuous improvement of the pilot, it will be established a dedicated working group composed of representatives from key stakeholders, including local authorities, community leaders, technical experts, and project coordinators. This group should conduct regular review sessions—ideally on a quarterly basis—to assess progress, validate data, and identify any operational or strategic deviations. These sessions would serve as checkpoints to realign actions with the objectives of the EDIL and ADUR strategies, ensuring that the pilot remains responsive to local needs and evolving conditions.

In addition to manual reviews, the integration of digital tools such as the MaaTool (Monitoring and Assessment Tool) is highly encouraged. MaaTool can provide real-time tracking of key performance indicators (KPIs), flagging anomalies or delays in implementation. Its dashboard functionality allows stakeholders to visualize trends, compare planned versus actual progress, and generate automated reports. This enhances transparency and facilitates data-driven decision-making, especially in complex, multi-actor environments like rural-urban development.

Finally, community feedback mechanisms should be embedded into the evaluation process. This can include periodic surveys, participatory workshops, and open forums where citizens can express concerns, suggest improvements, and validate the outcomes of the pilot. By combining structured internal reviews, digital monitoring tools, and grassroots input, the pilot can maintain a high level of accountability, adaptability, and impact throughout its lifecycle.

9. Communication and Engagement

9.1. Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder engagement will build on EDIL's participatory assemblies and workshops—using regular meetings, open forums, and broad outreach—to give local communities a clear voice. Businesses will be brought in through networking events, sector workshops, collaboration with business associations, and ongoing updates via newsletters and dedicated portals. Academic institutions will partner through joint research, seminars, internships, and participation in PoliRuralPlus open calls to channel expertise and foster innovation.

To sustain participation, a cross-stakeholder working group will coordinate engagement, MaaTool will monitor it in real time, and periodic surveys and feedback sessions will refine strategies. Open-call funding will be used as an incentive, complemented by transparent, timely communication across newsletters, social media, and community portals. The pilot expects public bodies, NGOs, communities, firms, and universities that adopt RAP measures in the short term to remain active over the medium and long term; the Communication and Participation Plan underpins this continuity to secure lasting impact in the ADESIMAN territory.

9.2. Awareness Campaigns

To attract support and participation, promote RAP through targeted campaigns (social media, newsletters, community events), stakeholder spotlights, and interactive web hubs on PoliRuralPlus, SocialInnolabs, and ADESIMAN with maps, dashboards, and testimonials. Ensure knowledge transfer via concise knowledge briefs/case studies, workshops and webinars, and peer-learning exchanges between territories. Scale and build synergies by collaborating with EU/regional projects, sharing open data, methods, and tools (e.g., MaaTool), and holding policy dialogues to embed RAP outcomes in broader development frameworks.

10. Conclusion

10.1. Summary of Expected Impact

The RAP drives sustainable development, territorial integration, and economic growth by aligning progress with the preservation of cultural and natural heritage. Its pillars include heritage enhancement, renewable energy, sustainable tourism, the circular economy, digital transformation, and social inclusion—aimed at cutting emissions and improving quality of life.

To close the rural–urban gap, the RAP promotes ADUR and the development of smart territories while energising the local economy through entrepreneurship, digitalisation, and capacity building (including agrotourism). It is supported by policies at every level: local (EDIL, OTC), regional (ADUR), national (renewables, digital transformation, rural development), and EU (Green Deal, Digital Agenda, Cohesion Policy).

Its measures yield environmental gains (greater resilience via renewables and circularity), social benefits (stronger cohesion and community empowerment), and economic impact (jobs and investment). Overall, the RAP is a transformative lever whose effects extend beyond its immediate scope, embedding a holistic approach to regional development.

10.2. Call to Action

Urge stakeholders to collaborate for successful implementation.

11. Sustainability and extension of activities:

Checklist for the RAP pilots

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation			
<i>Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.</i>	X		The analysis includes sustainability challenges (depopulation and ageing, service gaps, housing and waste, and financial sustainability risks) and opportunities (digitalisation and sensorisation, renewables/Energy Communities, sustainable tourism and circular economy), with a participatory-governance approach and PEPAC/LEADER alignment to

			ensure ownership and continuity.
Vision and Strategic Goals			
<p><i>How well are your vision and strategic goals aligned with the main areas of sustainability: Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing? What is the main focus? (You may use the sustainability compass for guidance here: https://compassu.wordpress.com/introduction/)</i></p>	X		<p>The vision and goals are fully aligned with the four areas of the sustainability “compass”: Nature (renewables, circularity, protection of natural heritage), Economy (diversification, entrepreneurship, jobs), Society (cohesion, participation, equality) and Wellbeing (services, housing, care, connectivity). Main focus: economic revitalisation and social cohesion via the digital–energy transition and safeguarding cultural/natural heritage.</p>
Action Plan			
<p><i>- How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained?</i></p>			<p>Integration into municipal and county plans and budgets; multi-level governance with ADESIMAN; continuous capacity-building and an observatory with KPIs; knowledge transfer (guides, workshops, peer learning); and diversified financing (LEADER/PEPAC, ERDF/ESF+, LIFE, Horizon, EIB/PPP) for operation and scaling.</p>
<p><i>- Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future?</i></p>			<p>Municipalities (local owners/operators); Provincial Council of Cuenca (alignment, technical/financial support); Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha (policy framework and resources); Central Government of Spain (legislation and co-funding);</p>

			ADESIMAN (CLLD/LEADER coordination); business and associative fabric (implementation/scaling); citizens and volunteers (co-governance and social upkeep).
Policy and Funding Alignment			
- Do the stakeholders/actors have access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP?	X		Stakeholders have access to LEADER/PEPAC 2023–2027, EAFRD and cohesion funds (ERDF, ESF+, CF); national and regional programmes (e.g., PSTD €3.78M and OTC); plus Horizon Europe, Interreg, LIFE, Erasmus+, and EIB/EIF financing, banks/VC and PPP. The “instrument map” matches the RAP’s ambition.
- Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms?	X		Advisable for scaling: blended finance with EIB/PPP, micro-grants/pilots for SMEs, and challenge calls such as BOOST Urban Future Finance, EIT Urban Mobility or SURGe (UN-Habitat); also useful for Energy Communities and the circular economy.
Communication and Engagement			
- What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?			Inter-actor working group; periodic assemblies/workshops (EDIL/ADUR); real-time monitoring with MaaTool; surveys/feedback; and continuous communication (newsletters, social media, ADESIMAN/PoliRuralPlus portals) with open calls as incentives.

<p>- Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?</p>	X		<p>Administrations, NGOs, communities, businesses and universities are expected to remain engaged; this is supported by a Communication and Participation Plan to ensure lasting impact.</p>
<p>- How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?</p>			<p>Via briefs/case studies, workshops and webinars, peer learning across territories, collaboration with EU/regional projects, open data/methods, and policy dialogues to scale and create synergies (supported by MaaTool and web hubs).</p>
<p>Conclusion</p>			
<p>- Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?</p>	X		<p>RAP outcomes are supported at all levels: local (EDIL, OTC), regional (ADUR), national (renewables, digital transformation, rural development) and EU (Green Deal, Digital Agenda, Cohesion Policy).</p>
<p>- Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?</p>	X		<p>Tractor effect on energy (Energy Communities), waste/circularity, tourism and heritage, digitalisation/employment and care; expected impacts: jobs and investment, emissions reduction, resilience and social inclusion/cohesion.</p>



Regional Action Plan

Pilot:	Vidzeme planning region
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1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Background

The Vidzeme Planning Region should be described from two angles – as a territory and as a public body.

VIDZEME PLANNING REGION = a territory

Vidzeme Planning Region (Vidzeme), the northern region of Latvia, holds the distinction of being the largest region in the country, covering 30.6% of its territory. Despite its vast size, Vidzeme is the least populated region in Latvia, with a population of 274,019 (2025)¹, accounting for only 14.6% of the total population. Consequently, it also boasts the lowest population density in the country, with just 14 people per square kilometre² (the next lowest population density applies to the Latgale planning region – 17 people per square kilometre).



Locations of the VPR and Latvia

The decrease in population is observed in 9 of 10 municipalities (except for Saulkrasti, which is closest to the capital) and in 9 regional development centres. The settlement structure of the region is formed by 24 towns, over 1000 villages within its rural areas, and scattered farmsteads. Over the last 30 years, the population of Vidzeme has decreased by a third. Also, the future doesn't look promising either.³

Vidzeme is the European Union's border region – Alūksne municipality has a 15,64 km border line with the Russian Federation. It should be particularly considered in the context of today's geopolitical situation. It should be noted that not only the number of kilometres of the border, but the entire region as a whole, should be considered the external border of Europe.

Vidzeme is characterised by an agrarian economic structure with low added value and a small share of innovative companies. The gross domestic product (GDP) produced in Vidzeme in 2018 was 1.811 billion EUR or 6.2%⁴ of the country's total (traditionally the smallest share in the national economy compared to other regions of Latvia). Similarly, the region's added value in 2018 was 1.572 billion EUR or 6.22%⁵ of the country's total. In 2021, these

¹ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IRS/IRS031/table/tableViewLayout1/

² https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IRD/IRD062/table/tableViewLayout1/

³ <https://observatory.rural-vision.europa.eu/place?lng=en&ctx=RUROBS&tu=LV008&tl=3&stu=LV008&ts=RUROBS&pil=level-indicator&is=Default&cl=rural&clc=highlights&fys=false> (NB: The forecast shows a depopulation trend in the region, but it should be noted that data reflect situation prior 2021, when VPR did not yet include the Saulkrasti, Ogre and Limbaži municipalities)

⁴ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_VEK_IK_IKR/IKR010/table/tableViewLayout1/

⁵ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_VEK_IK_IKR/IKR020/table/tableViewLayout1/

indicators will grow significantly, not because of productivity improvements, but because of administrative territorial reform that took place during 2021, which resulted in Vidzeme's area being expanded by adding three municipalities: Ogre, Limbaži, and Saulkrasti. In 2022, Vidzeme took third place (just behind Riga and Kurzeme planning regions) in GDP produced.⁶

Turning businesses towards high-added-value production with strong innovation and internationalisation potential is a key factor in raising companies' profitability, ensuring better working conditions for employees, and strengthening the regional economy. It would also help companies attract young professionals to stay in the region after graduation, or to move to the region if previously located elsewhere, and be employed there. This can, in turn, boost the potential for new business formation in the foreseeable future as young professionals transition into company ownership.

The region can benefit not only from highly technological on-site jobs. Nowadays, more people can work remotely, and most of them, when looking for a primary and secondary place of residence, give more attention to the quality of the local living environment than to the distance to the physical workplace, as was previously the case. That's an opportunity for rural areas and smaller towns to seize and explore. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend by forcing more workplaces to adopt remote work and making more people anxious about their health as they spend their day-to-day lives in densely populated areas with higher levels of physical interaction. Even though people are relocating to the countryside more intensively, the current dynamic still can't close the decades-in-the-making depopulation gap.

One of the valuable initiatives that Vidzeme has pursued after Covid-19 is the memorandum on the Gauja National Park as the first bioregion in Latvia: a commitment to create a resilient, inclusive, and vibrant area, where sustainable management of natural assets and the bioeconomy are a priority.⁷ It was signed by 13 partners (municipalities, public bodies, educational and research institutions, NGOs, entrepreneurs) and helps strengthen Vidzeme's role as Latvia's most attractive region. However, nature alone can't guarantee a region's attractiveness. Even more emphasis should be placed on creating a welcoming environment for local residents and newcomers by providing high-quality services and fostering an atmosphere of inclusiveness and trust. The application "The Baltic's First Bioregion: A New Model for Sustainable Place-Based Development" has been shortlisted for The Innovation in Politics Awards 2025 in the Circular Economy category.⁸

The VIDZEME PLANNING REGION = a public body

The Vidzeme Planning Region (VPR) is a public institution for regional development and coordination, overseen by the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development. The VPR's primary functions are to ensure regional strategic and spatial planning and coordination, and to foster cooperation between municipalities and governmental institutions.

The VPR provides planning services at the national, regional, and local levels, ensuring that regional and local perspectives are represented in the elaboration of national policies. The mission of the VPR is to coordinate and promote the long-term and balanced development of the Vidzeme region.

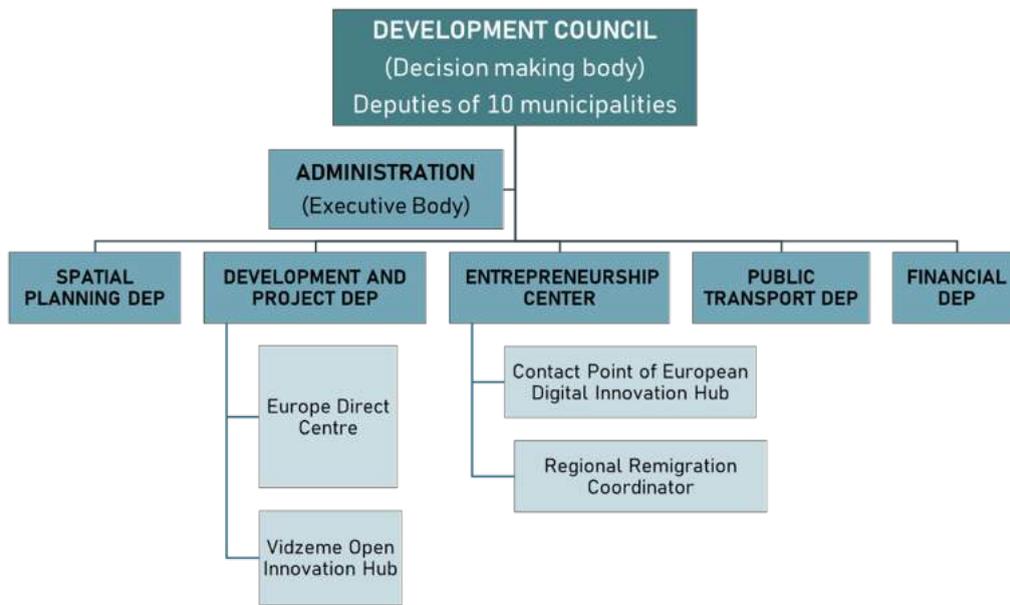
The planning region's decision-making body is the Development Council, which represents all municipalities within the region's territory. Meanwhile, the main tasks of the VPR's administration are to ensure collaboration at the local and national levels, elaborate and oversee the implementation of the VPR's planning documents, and prepare monitoring reports on implementation progress.

The VPR's administration employs 20 to 55 staff members, who are primarily engaged in implementing various projects. The core activities of the planning region are financed by a state budget grant (annual budget ~ 300,000 EUR), supplemented by project funding, primarily from international programs (such as Interreg Europe, Interreg Central Baltic, Horizon Europe, and the Just Transition Fund).

⁶ <https://stat.gov.lv/lv/statistikas-temas/valsts-ekonomika/ikp-gada/2352-regionu-un-pilsetu-pievienota-vertiba?themeCode=IK>

⁷ <https://old.sigulda.lv/public/lat/jaunumi/25459/> and <https://www.cesis.lv/lv/vide/bioregions/>

⁸ <https://awards.innovationinpolitics.eu/best-practices-hub/>



VPR's organisational structure

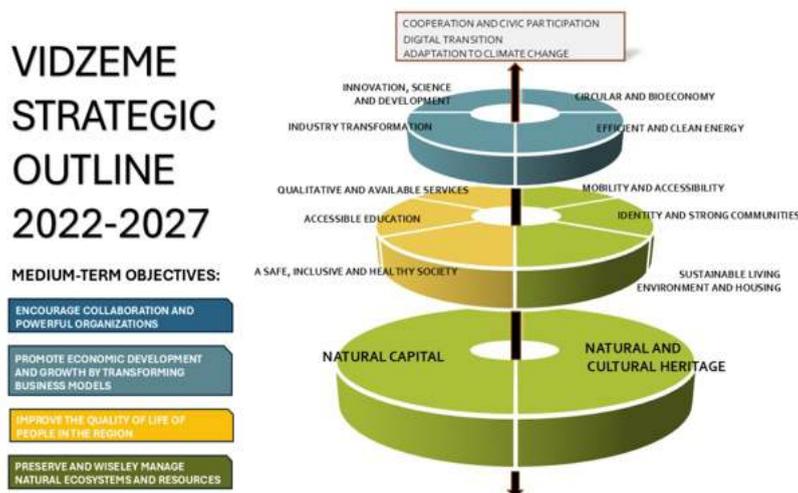
According to the vision defined in the region's planning documents, by 2030 Vidzeme aims to be attractive to talented and active people, well-connected, internally integrated, secure, resilient, and competitive, and to strive for excellence in specific smart specialisation areas.

The regional territorial development plan and activities implemented aim to achieve goals not just for the public sector but for the whole region's inhabitants, e.g., the regional development plan should respond to the needs of people.

In the Regional Development Program for 2022-2027, four medium-term goals have been set:

1. Preserve and wisely manage natural ecosystems and resources.
2. Improve people's quality of life.
3. Foster economic development and growth by transforming business models.
4. Promote cooperation and strong organisations.

To achieve Vidzeme's goals, twelve medium-term thematic priorities and three horizontal priorities have been defined.



The implementation of the planning region's development program is currently limited because the planning region lacks its own dedicated funding. According to the Law on Regional Development (section 17.¹), its financing sources can include:

- State budget grants for the support of planning regions and other state budget grants;
- Own revenues, including revenues from paid services provided by the planning region;
- Grants from municipal budgets in accordance with agreements concluded between municipalities and the planning region;
- EU and other foreign financial assistance funds;
- Donations and gifts.⁹

Currently, the planning region's operations, including the implementation of actions outlined in its planning documents, are primarily sustained by state budget grants and funding secured through involvement in various national and international projects. Consequently, achieving the goals defined in the planning region's development program largely depends on the engagement of other stakeholders, such as municipalities, ministries and their subordinate state administrative institutions, entrepreneurs, local action groups, and communities.

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

According to the "Methodological Recommendations for Developing Development Programs at Regional and Local Levels" prepared by the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, a planning document's "monitoring system is developed to create a framework that enables the evaluation of territorial development progress and achievements during the implementation of the development program. **Monitoring is a regular, systematic review of resources, actions, and results.**"

The aforementioned methodological recommendations define monitoring indicators and institutions responsible for overseeing the development program as key elements of the monitoring system. However, a crucial element of the monitoring system comprises the stakeholders who implement the actions outlined in the development planning document. The goals, priorities, and directions of action that delineate the direction of territorial development constitute the core of the planning document's strategic section. Meanwhile, specific tasks and activities for achieving the set strategic goals are included in the planning document's action plan, which also defines the responsible stakeholders (organisations or their structural units, public interest representatives, etc.) for implementing the activity, the planned timeframe, the necessary funding source, and the outcome indicator.

Herein lies the fundamental challenge of the monitoring system: how to ensure that someone assumes genuine and conscious responsibility for the task included in the action plan and the activities intended for its realisation, which are necessary for implementing the defined strategic goal, priority, and direction of action. Most likely, strengthening mutual interests would foster readiness to take "ownership" of the task, so that the beneficiary is not only the institution that developed the planning documents but also the stakeholder nominated as responsible for implementing the specific activity.

Assuming that the creation of this mutual cooperation and interest could be based on data exchange and data analysis, we aim to establish a regional development monitoring system where:

- **Monitoring indicators and their definitions are mutually aligned**, considering the needs at local, regional, and national levels.
- **Data are current and comparable across various territorial breakdowns** (local (parishes, cities, municipalities), regional (planning regions (NUTS 3)), national (Latvia, NUTS 1,2), international).
- **Data are available in a geospatial format**, allowing for visual analysis of development processes and easy comparison across different territories—including parishes, municipalities, and regions.
- **Monitoring reports on the region's territorial development progress**—whether in whole, in part, or by specific theme—**could be retrieved as needed, in real-time**. Based on these reports, decisions regarding

⁹ <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/61002-regional-development-law>

the region's development direction would be made not only by politicians, experts, and specialists, but also by entrepreneurs, local communities, and individuals.

- **The integrated monitoring framework (expected – AI-driven) is available, providing information on current financial programs/instruments**, enabling the implementation of previously data-driven decisions.

2. Analysis of Current Situation

2.1. State of the Art

Based on the legislation of the Republic of Latvia, “regional development monitoring and evaluation includes continuous and systematic collection, processing, and analysis of data significant for regional development (including territorial development) across the entire territory of the country or in its individual parts.” To ensure regional development monitoring and evaluation, the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development has created and maintains the RAIM - the Regional Development Indicator Module (www.raim.gov.lv). This module is a tool for regional development monitoring and decision-making support, for assessing municipal territorial development trends, and preparing and overseeing development programs.¹⁰

The sources of indicators included in the module are: Central Statistical Bureau, Spatial Development Planning Information System, State Revenue Service, Treasury, State Social Insurance Agency, Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, State Employment Agency, Ministry of Education and Science, Latvian State Roads, Ministry of Welfare, Register of Enterprises, European Union Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund Management Information System, Rural Support Service, Information Center of the Ministry of the Interior, A / S "Sadales tīkls".

The module provides 153 different indicators divided into several categories, including demography, economy, social indicators, and infrastructure. However, it lacks several sets of indicators that are essential for assessing territorial development – for example, natural and cultural resources, environmental quality, availability of services (excluding social services), and mobility.

Data are also available on the Latvian Open Data Portal (data.gov.lv), a unified platform for accessing open public administration data. These data are provided to the public in a technical format that allows for downloading, processing, and utilisation.¹¹ However, despite these seemingly promising instruments, the private sector has found a lucrative niche selling and analysing data for municipalities.¹²

Data enable more effective utilisation of the territory and its resources, moving closer to achieving the development goals defined in planning documents and to consciously choosing to invest in tasks that implement specific priority actions. In Latvia, investment in territorial development is often interpreted as the volume of European Union Structural Funds or Cohesion Fund financing attracted. However, it's crucial to view this in the context of return on investment. For example, if a municipality builds an infrastructure object to support entrepreneurship, are businesses actually using it, and does it increase their economic activity and competitiveness relative to companies in other regions?

Investment in territorial development can also be directly unrelated to attracting additional funding, but rather a set of actions. For instance, sustainably managing available natural resources or limiting intensive farming methods strengthens the value of natural capital in a specific territory.

¹⁰ <https://www.vdaa.gov.lv/lv/regionalas-attistibas-indikatoru-modulis>

¹¹ <https://www.vdaa.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-atverto-datu-portals>

¹² <https://www.zzdats.lv/datu-analizes-riks-paligs-pasvaldibai-datos-balstisu-lemumu-pienemsanai/> //According to information on the website, the data analysis tool is used by Cēsis and Madona municipalities within the Vidzeme Planning Region.

2.2. Key Challenges

Regional development monitoring is a strategic tool that ensures data-driven decision-making and promotes sustainable growth. In the Vidzeme Planning Region, where development processes are influenced by demographic changes, diverse economic structures, and uneven infrastructure development, implementing a unified monitoring system faces several significant challenges. These challenges include data availability and quality, attracting necessary specialists, and public trust in the system's effectiveness.

Evaluating the effectiveness of regional development and formulating long-term strategies relies on the use of reliable, accurate, and integrated data. Data provides the opportunity not only to monitor the current situation but also to make forecasts and model development scenarios, which are essential for the region's sustainable governance. However, in the Vidzeme Planning Region, as in many other European regional administrative units, there are significant challenges in data collection, integration, and quality assurance.

Data Management Challenges

- **Data fragmentation** across various state and municipal institutions hinders effective development monitoring.
- The **RAIM (Regional Development Indicators Module) incompletely integrates data**, leading to an incomplete picture of regional development.
- **Limited availability of statistical data** necessary for regional planning at the parish and county level.
- **Lack of municipal capacity** in utilising digital tools limits accurate and timely decision-making.

Lack of Institutional Cooperation

- **Lack of coordination** among state, regional, and municipal levels complicates the implementation of a unified development policy.
- **Fragmentation of strategic documents** creates differing interpretations of development, impeding effective policy planning.
- **Weak collaboration** among academia, businesses, and public administration limits the spread of innovation and regional economic development.
- **Insufficient alignment** between education and the labour market contributes to skills mismatch and limits economic growth in regions.

Technical and Methodological Limitations

- **Outdated data processing technologies** and manual input methods increase the risk of errors and slow down decision-making.
- **Different data management platforms** hinder automated data exchange between institutions.
- **Inconsistency in indicators and methodologies** impedes the comparison of development trends and the evaluation of policy effectiveness.
- **Insufficient standardisation of regional development indicators** complicates long-term policy planning.

Financial and Resource Deficiencies

- **Limited municipal capacity to finance digital infrastructure development** creates uneven monitoring capabilities.
- **Shortage of qualified data analysts** affects the quality of regional development data analysis and policy planning.
- **Prevalence of the shadow economy** results in incomplete official economic data and distorts policy effectiveness.

Normative and Political Instability

- **Frequent legislative changes** hinder the establishment of long-term monitoring systems and continuity in development strategies.

- **Insufficient data sharing** between institutions increases administrative burden and information duplication.

Lack of Public Engagement

- **Low trust in institutions** limits citizen participation in data provision and regional policy-making.
- **Lack of municipal capacity** in development monitoring processes creates dependence on central government data.
- **Insufficient feedback to residents** reduces public motivation to participate in regional development processes actively.

2.3. Opportunities

The enhancement of Vidzeme Planning Region's regional development monitoring presents several strategic opportunities that can fundamentally transform how regional development is understood, measured, and guided.

Breaking down institutional silos represents a critical opportunity to foster seamless coordination and cooperation across multiple levels of governance. By establishing stronger collaborative frameworks between VPR departments and projects, the region can eliminate duplication of effort and create synergies that amplify development outcomes. Enhanced cooperation between VPR and municipal authorities will ensure that regional strategies are effectively translated into local action. At the same time, improved coordination with ministries and national institutions will align regional priorities with broader policy objectives and unlock additional resources for territorial development.

Harnessing data as a strategic asset offers the potential to create a unified, coherent monitoring ecosystem through systematic harmonisation of development indicators, data sources, and calculation methodologies. This alignment across VPR structures, local authorities, and national institutions will eliminate inconsistencies that currently hamper effective comparison and analysis. By establishing common standards and shared data protocols, the region can create a robust foundation for evidence-based decision-making that speaks the same analytical language at all governance levels.

Building future-ready analytical capabilities encompasses both human capacity development and technological transformation. Investing in data analytics, artificial intelligence, and geospatial competencies will equip regional stakeholders with the tools needed for sophisticated territorial analysis. Simultaneously, evolving the monitoring system from retrospective reporting toward predictive analysis will enable the region to move beyond simply documenting what has happened to actively anticipating and shaping what will happen, transforming monitoring from a historical record into a strategic navigation tool for regional development.

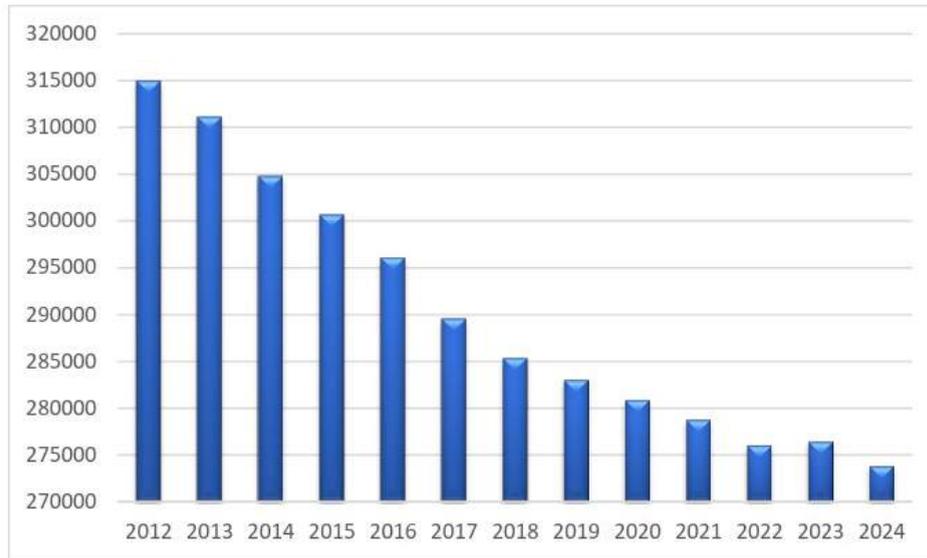
2.4. Gender and Diversity Dimensions

Since 2000, 12.3% of the population have left the VPR for other regions, and the population density is the lowest in the country (*VPR 14, LV 30, RPR 265, ZPR 21, KPR 18, LPR 17 (2025)*). The Vidzeme Planning Region is very unlikely to see an increase in its population or population density in the near future. Statistical data shows that over three years, Vidzeme has been the only region with a negative migration balance (*-270%*), with the population decreasing by 0.8% (2022-2024).

The decrease in population is a trend not only in Vidzeme (see Figure 2.1) but in almost the entire territory of Latvia. The population in the VPR territory increased slightly in 2023 (276,449) compared to 2022 (276,037)¹³, which is an atypical situation and does not correspond to the overall trend. However, at the beginning of 2024 the population decreased again.

¹³ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IRS/IRS031/table/tableViewLayout1/

The migration balance from 2012 to 2024 has mostly been negative, reaching its lowest point of -5,247 in 2016, except for a positive indicator in 2022 (2,646)¹⁴. The positive migration balance may be explained by the trend of moving to rural areas and the remote-work opportunities created by Covid-19. Too little time has passed to determine whether migration could potentially level out or even reverse the declining population trend.



Population changes in the VPR from 2012 to 2024 ¹⁵

Vidzeme is not a region of young people; here, the generation characterised by silver and maturity prevails: inhabitants of the age group 0-14 make up 15.2% of the total inhabitants, inhabitants of the age group 15-64 make up 62.5% and inhabitants of the age group 65+ - 22.3% (2025)¹⁶. In the period 2021-2025, the average age of the population has remained stable at 43 years.¹⁷

Since 2020, the growth in gross wages for employees in the region has not been the most attractive, showing the lowest proportional increase among Latvian regions (49% - from 704 euros in 2020 to 1373 euros in 2024).¹⁸ This reflects the slower economic development of Vidzeme and the smaller supply of high-paying work, especially compared to the Rīga region and other territories of Latvia.

New businesses are not choosing Vidzeme as their place of operation—since 2021, the dynamic of economically active enterprises has stagnated, with no growth observed (2021: 16,098, 2022: 16,785, 2023: 16,551).

Mobility options for the region's residents are shrinking—in 2026, the state plans to close almost 10% of existing routes in Vidzeme (220 out of 2407).

¹⁴ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IRS/IRS031/table/tableViewLayout1/

¹⁵ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IRS/IRS031/table/tableViewLayout1/

¹⁶ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IRD/IRD081/table/tableViewLayout1/

¹⁷ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_POP_IR_IRD/RIG020/table/tableViewLayout1/

¹⁸ https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START_EMP_DS_DSV/DSV010c

3. Vision and Strategic Goals

3.1. Vision Statement

By 2040, the Vidzeme planning region is the area inhabited by organised, mutual-trust-based, self-conscious, and vibrant local communities whose voices are crucial in political decision-making processes regarding the future of the territory. Despite the region's low population density, civic engagement has been tightly woven into the fabric of Vidzeme's future. Thanks to the region's development monitoring framework (VPR PATHWATCH), data-informed territorial development strengthens public trust and fosters community engagement in municipal and regional initiatives.

Inspired by the region's slogan (Vidzeme – the only way is up!, in Latvian – Ceļš ved augšup!), VPR PATHWATCH is a monitoring framework and guide that illuminates future directions.



MISSION STATEMENTS

Empowering Spatial Development

VPR PATHWATCH leverages AI-driven and geospatial data selection and analysis to support the planning and monitoring of Vidzeme's regional development, ensuring informed, data-driven decision-making.

User-Centered Intelligence

Designed with user experience at its core, VPR PATHWATCH is an intuitive and accessible framework that enables all Vidzeme residents to assess development trends and shape the region's future with confidence.

Transparent Policy Evaluation

VPR PATHWATCH provides fast, objective assessments of political programmes of elected political forces in VPR municipalities against local and regional planning frameworks to ensure accountability and transparency.

Strategy Decision-Making

As a vital tool for regional and municipal planning, VPR PATHWATCH informs budget allocation, policy updates, and electoral choices, empowering citizens and decision-makers to drive sustainable regional growth.

In envisioning the future of the Vidzeme Planning Region, we aspire to pioneer a transformative paradigm in regional development. Our vision is to create a dynamic, sustainable environment where everyone can actively shape their community's destiny because they trust governmental decisions and are engaged in local and regional development. To reach that purpose, we aim to ensure the transparency of our efforts, which are inclusive and responsive to the real needs of the people. A robust Monitoring Framework, grounded in collaborative efforts and data-driven insights, will contribute to our vision by continuously tracking the effectiveness of our strategies, enabling adaptive planning and fostering trust through measurable progress.

We aim to develop stronger, connected, and resilient rural areas by promoting sustainability and inclusivity in our projects and creating beautiful, eco-friendly living spaces. Reducing carbon emissions, embracing renewable energy, and driving Vidzeme towards smart economic specialisation are a few of our strategies to ensure equitable benefits for all communities. The Monitoring Framework will help us assess our progress towards our environmental goals, ensuring that our efforts to reduce carbon footprints and enhance renewable energy adoption remain on track.

This holistic approach, supported by real-time monitoring and feedback, will foster inclusive growth, preserve our cultural and natural heritage, and nurture a vibrant ecosystem of opportunities, building a resilient and sustainable Vidzeme Planning Region.

3.2. Strategic Goals

Goal 1: Establish an integrated multi-level data governance system by 2027

Create a harmonised monitoring framework that aligns development indicators, data sources, and monitoring methodologies across VPR departments, municipalities, and national institutions. This includes implementing standardised data collection protocols and establishing formal data-sharing agreements with all 10 municipalities and relevant ministries. A prerequisite for successful regional development data management is the establishment of an AI & Data Community of Practice within VPR.

Goal 2: Deploy GIS and AI-driven regional monitoring platform (VPR PATHWATCH) by 2027

Develop and launch a user-centred, geospatial monitoring framework that transforms regional development assessment from retrospective reporting to predictive analysis. The platform will provide real-time access to territorial development data and enable evidence-based decision-making for citizens, businesses, and policymakers.

Goal 3: Build regional data analytics capacity by 2028

Establish VPR as a centre of excellence for regional development monitoring by creating permanent positions for Data Analysis and GIS specialists, training municipal staff in data literacy, and developing competencies in artificial intelligence and geospatial data use across partner organisations.

Goal 4: Achieve a growing citizen engagement in regional monitoring by 2029

Foster transparent, participatory governance by ensuring widespread adoption of the monitoring framework, with a growing number of the region's population actively using the public dashboards and web maps and engaging in Citizen Science projects. This includes leveraging the framework for electoral accountability and community-driven development planning.

Goal 5: Scale monitoring excellence nationally and build Baltic networks by 2035

Position VPR as the national leader in development monitoring by facilitating the adoption of the harmonised monitoring approach across all Latvian planning regions and establishing knowledge-sharing networks with Baltic regional authorities to exchange best practices and methodologies.

4. Action Plan

4.1. Measures and Actions

4.1.1. Intervention Areas

The intervention areas address the key governance, economic, and social challenges identified in Vidzeme and create the foundation for a modern, data-driven regional development management and monitoring system.

1. Digital and data infrastructure

Strengthen the region's digital backbone by developing interoperable data systems, harmonising development indicators, and deploying the AI- and GIS-enabled monitoring platform *VPR PATHWATCH*. This includes improving data governance, promoting open data usage, and ensuring secure, accessible digital infrastructure across all municipalities.

2. Institutional capacity and workforce development

Build analytical and digital capabilities within VPR and municipal administrations by establishing new specialist roles (Data Analysis, GIS), enhancing staff skills in data literacy and AI tools, and creating continuous learning networks with universities and innovation partners. This area ensures long-term sustainability of the monitoring system.

3. Innovation and Smart Specialisation

Accelerate the transition from low-value-added economic structures toward innovation-driven growth. Support bioeconomy, circular economy, digital services, and other smart specialisation domains through improved data access, innovation partnerships, and the use of monitoring insights to guide investment and policy decisions.

4. Governance, cooperation, and multi-level coordination

Improve coherence between local, regional, and national strategies by establishing shared monitoring standards, formal cooperation agreements, and coordinated planning processes. Strengthen VPR's role as a facilitator of intermunicipal collaboration and as a national/Baltic-level competence centre for regional monitoring.

5. Citizen science - engagement and social innovation

Promote participatory and transparent governance through user-friendly digital interfaces, public access to regional data, and initiatives that increase civic involvement (e.g., hackathons, participatory workshops, youth engagement). Support widespread adoption of the monitoring framework to enhance accountability and public trust.

6. Sustainable infrastructure and green transition

Integrate environmental and climate indicators into regional planning, using the monitoring system to steer investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency, green mobility, and sustainable land use. Reinforce Vidzeme's commitment to nature-based solutions and the emerging bioregional development model.

4.1.2. Actions

In the Vidzeme region's pilot case, the planned activities for implementing the RAP align with the stages of information technology (IT) tool development. Developing an IT tool typically involves several key stages that ensure a systematic approach and the successful creation of the final product – in this case, the tool for the regional development monitoring and evaluation, *VPR PATHWATCH*.

I ACTION: Definition of idea and requirements - the initial stage where the problem to be solved and the tool's primary functions are clearly defined.

STEPS:

- Analysis of existing regional planning and development monitoring tools (TAPIS/RAIM, LV Open Data Portal), good practices (*PRP Open Call #1, 2025*) and private initiatives.
- Identified stakeholders, their needs, interests and capacity to engage in the prototyping of the monitoring framework . Consultations with the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia, as well as with planning regions and municipalities, on the harmonisation of development indicators.
- Audit of indicators and available data, definition of data needed to assess development indicators, and their sources.

II ACTION: Monitoring framework design and process mapping - in this stage, the monitoring framework's structure, processes, and data governance model are developed and validated with stakeholders.

STEPS:

- Organised a hackathon to co-design the monitoring framework vision, including process flows, stakeholder roles, and data requirements (*PRP Open Call #2 - September 2025*).
- Developed detailed process flow documentation specifying: (a) monitoring activities and their sequence, (b) responsible institutions and roles, (c) data sources and collection methods, (d) reporting timelines and formats, (e) resource requirements.
- Evaluated and selected existing GIS applications available on the market (e.g., QGIS, ArcGIS Online, municipal GIS systems) for spatial data visualisation, ensuring compatibility with municipal and national data infrastructure.
- Established data governance protocols defining data sharing agreements, quality standards, and inter-institutional data migration procedures.

III ACTION: Monitoring framework operationalisation and capacity building - in this stage, the monitoring framework is piloted, stakeholders are trained, and the selected GIS tools are configured for regional use.

STEPS

- Piloting the monitoring framework with 3-5 municipalities, testing process flows, data collection procedures, and reporting mechanisms.
- Configuring selected GIS applications with regional development indicator layers, spatial data templates, and visualisation dashboards.
- Delivering capacity building programme for VPR staff and municipal representatives on: (a) monitoring framework procedures, (b) GIS application usage, (c) data collection and quality assurance, (d) indicator interpretation and reporting.
- Establishing feedback mechanisms to refine framework processes based on pilot experience.
- Input of regional territorial development indicators into selected GIS platforms with standardised symbology and metadata.

VI ACTION: Implementation and deployment

STEPS:

- Elaboration of the new VPR Development Programme 2028-2035, indicators of development are defined in line with the monitoring framework methodology and in accordance with the agreement of stakeholders on the harmonisation of development indicators.
- As municipalities develop their new development programs, they are incorporating the regional monitoring framework processes and data sharing protocols. It's anticipated that nine in ten regions' municipalities will have prepared new medium-term spatial planning documents by 2028.

V ACTION: **Maintenance and improvement** - Continuous maintenance and improvement of the monitoring framework are crucial for long-term success.

STEPS:

- The regional development monitoring framework is fully operational, and costs for GIS license subscriptions (if applicable) and framework coordination have been identified.
- Stakeholders have validated the framework processes and provided feedback.
- Society of the future - children and young people are informed and knowledgeable about the understanding of monitoring data and processes.
- Inhabitants using the tool as a guideline for the municipal election (2029), deciding which political force to entrust with future leadership.
- A new staff member - Data Analysis/GIS Specialist - joined the VPR.
- Application of the monitoring framework is being carried out in the process of developing the new Sustainable Development Strategy for the VPR.
- Needed improvements in framework processes and GIS configurations have been identified.
- New features are added based on user feedback and changing needs.

VI ACTION: **Dissemination & extension** - transferring the gained experience and expertise in regional development monitoring.

STEPS:

- VPR has become a centre of expertise in regional development monitoring.
- The monitoring framework is applied by all municipalities in the region for drafting or updating local territorial development planning documents.
- The tool is used by municipal management for decision-making on the use of the municipal budget.
- Thanks to the analytical capabilities of the framework and GIS tools, the content of the electoral programmes of local governments of political forces is used to forecast development scenarios for the region.
- A growing number (preferably 25%) of the region's inhabitants are aware of publicly accessible monitoring dashboards and GIS web maps, with the most active period of accessing them occurring in the run-up to the municipal elections.
- Other planning regions are adopting the experience of the VPR.
- Alongside the Data Analysis Specialist, the VPR employs a GIS specialist to ensure data localisation in cartographic materials.
- VPR has become the centre of excellence for regional development monitoring in the Baltics.

4.2. Expected Outcomes

 The agreement of stakeholders on the harmonisation of development indicators:

- Within VPR administration (structural units & projects' teams)
- With 10 municipalities within the Vidzeme planning region
- With four other planning regions of Latvia
- With the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia

 Established a comprehensive regional development monitoring framework (VPR PATHWATCH) consisting of:

- Documented process flow chart detailing monitoring activities, responsible participants, timelines, and data flows
- Data governance protocols for inter-institutional data sharing and quality assurance
- Configured GIS applications (existing market solutions) for spatial visualisation of regional development indicators

- Capacity building programme materials and trained stakeholder network
 - Reporting templates and communication guidelines
- 👊 Strengthened the competence of the VPR in regional development planning and monitoring
- Data Analysis Specialist and GIS specialist - new, permanent positions have been created in the regional administration

5. Policy and Funding Alignment

5.1. EU and National Policy Alignment

The Vidzeme Regional Action Plan for enhanced impact monitoring strongly aligns with multiple layers of EU and national policy frameworks.

The Vidzeme pilot in Latvia contributes to the **New European Bauhaus** by focusing on inclusive governance, sustainability, and the creation of resilient rural spaces. It aims to bridge the gap between regional, municipal, and local priorities, promoting collaborative solutions for rural development. The pilot aims to integrate innovative monitoring frameworks to track progress also in environmental sustainability, such as reducing carbon emissions and promoting renewable energy use. This aligns with the NEB's focus on sustainability, inclusion, and aesthetics, aiming to create eco-friendly and aesthetically pleasing rural environments.

The Vidzeme pilot supports the **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)** by fostering stronger rural governance, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and building regional resilience. The pilot focuses on promoting collaboration among public sector institutions, civil society, and residents to address local challenges through a participatory approach. Additionally, the pilot works to strengthen the bioeconomy sector, promoting sustainable practices and creating a framework for balanced regional development. This contributes to the LTVRA's goals of creating prosperous, connected, and resilient rural communities.

The integrated monitoring framework enables systematic tracking of environmental indicators essential for achieving **climate neutrality** by 2050. By providing real-time data on carbon emissions, renewable energy adoption, and sustainable land use within the bioregion framework, the tool supports evidence-based implementation of green transition policies at the territorial level in line with the **European Green Deal**.

The development of VPR PATHWATCH directly supports the **EU's Digital Decade objectives** by advancing digital public services and enhancing digital skills across regional and municipal administrations. The AI-driven monitoring platform exemplifies the transformation toward intelligent public administration and contributes to the target of 100% online provision of key public services by 2030.

The RAP directly enhances the effectiveness of EU Structural and Investment Funds under the **Cohesion Policy 2021-2027** by improving monitoring and evaluation capabilities. The harmonised indicator system facilitates better tracking of cohesion policy outcomes, ensuring more strategic allocation of resources and demonstrating territorial impact in line with the partnership principle and multi-level governance approach.

The RAP supports Latvia's strategic objective of digital transformation in public administration while strengthening territorial cohesion in line with **Latvia's National Development Plan 2027**. The harmonised monitoring approach aligns with national priorities for evidence-based policymaking and contributes to the goal of creating an efficient, transparent, and citizen-focused public sector.

Following Latvia's 2021 **Administrative territorial reform**, the monitoring framework provides essential tools for evaluating the effectiveness of enlarged municipalities and supporting their capacity development. The platform facilitates knowledge sharing and coordination between the expanded municipal territories within the Vidzeme region.

5.2. Funding Sources

5.2.1. Potential funding mechanisms

RAP Actions	Sources of funding for the implementation	Sources of funding for the sustaining
I. Idea and requirements Definition for the monitoring framework VPR PATHWATCH	PRP project, national budget	-
II Planning and Design VPR PATHWATCH's IT architecture and interface	PRP project, national budget	-
III Development ("tailoring") of the VPR PATHWATCH, inviting stakeholders in testing activities	PRP project, national budget, other supporting EU funds programmes (ERDF, ESF), EDIH programme	-
VI Implementation and deployment of the VPR PATHWATCH within the VPR administration, inviting external users/defined stakeholders	PRP project, national budget, other supporting EU funds programmes (ERDF, ESF), EDIH programme	-
V Maintenance and improvement , providing the VPR PATHWATCH with necessary updates and improvements	PRP project, national budget, other supporting EU funds programmes (ERDF, ESF), EDIH programme	National and municipal budget, supporting EU funds programmes (ERDF, ESF), EDIH programme
VI Dissemination & extension , transferring VPR's experience and expertise on regional development monitoring	National and municipal budget, other supporting EU funds programmes (ERDF, ESF), EDIH programme, Horizon Europe, Cross-border cooperation programmes (Interreg)	National and municipal budget, other supporting EU funds programmes (ERDF, ESF), EDIH programme, Horizon Europe, Cross-border cooperation programmes (Interreg)

5.2.2. Stakeholder access to financial instruments

VPR and municipalities have access to EU Structural Funds and national budget allocations. However, planning regions lack dedicated operational funding, creating dependency on competitive project grants for development initiatives. Another concern is that no sustained funding mechanism exists for the maintenance of the regional monitoring framework beyond 2027.

Mechanism	Management Authority in Latvia	Measures
LEADER (3)	The Rural Support Service of Latvia (RSS)	-
EAFRD The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development	The Rural Support Service of Latvia (RSS)	-

ERDF The European Regional Development Fund	The Ministry of Finance, The Central Finance and Contracting Agency (CFCA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified stakeholders, their needs, interests and capacity to engage in the prototyping of the monitoring framework . Consultations with the administration of VPR (focused on project managers) on assessing the impact of their project activities on the development of the region's territory. <i>(VPR as a partner in the project of the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, Strengthening the capacity of local governments to improve the efficiency and quality of their operations)</i>
INTERREG	The Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consultations with the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, planning regions on the harmonisation of development indicators for rural areas <i>(VPR as a stakeholder in the project of the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, Empowering European Regions through Policy Transformation: A Paradigm Shift in Territorial Development (RuralProof))</i> Digital civic engagement in an elaboration process of the new VPR Development Programme 2028-2035
ESF+	The Ministry of Finance, The Central Finance and Contracting Agency (CFCA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous maintenance and improvement of the monitoring framework , a new staff member - Data Analysis (GIS) Specialist - joined the VPR <i>(The Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand)</i>
SCF The Social Climate Fund	Ministry of Climate and Energy	-
JTF The Just Transition Fund	The Ministry of Finance, The Central Finance and Contracting Agency (CFCA)	?
RRF The Recovery and Resilience Facility	The Ministry of Finance, The Central Finance and Contracting Agency (CFCA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dissemination of information on the VPR RAP's actions. Training of potential users of the monitoring framework , while involving them in testing the functionality of the monitoring framework . <i>(The project led by the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, "Strengthening the capacity of local governments to improve the efficiency and quality of their operations" (all planning regions participate as the project's partners); The project led by the School of Public Administration "Digital Academy of Public Administration")</i>

Horizon Europe	The Latvian Council of Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Analysis of existing regional planning and development monitoring tools (TAPIS/RAIM, LV Open Data Portal...), good practices and private initiatives (<i>PoliRuralPlus Open Call #1, 2025</i>) ● Identified stakeholders, their needs, interests and capacity to engage in the prototyping of the monitoring framework . Consultations with municipalities on the harmonisation of development indicators. ● Organised a hackathon and modelled the vision of the region’s monitoring framework prototype. Audit of indicators and available data, definition of data needed to assess development indicators, and their sources. (<i>PoliRuralPlus Open call #2 – 3rd & 19th September, 2025</i>). ● Elaborated process flow documentation for the prototype of the regional development monitoring and data analysis tool. ● Ensuring information coordination between potential users (VPR, municipalities, ministry) of the monitoring framework. ● Input of regional territorial development indicators into the monitoring framework.
Technical Support Instrument, TSI	The Ministry of Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consultations and collaboration with the the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, planning regions on the harmonisation of development indicators (<i>VPR as a stakeholder in the project of The Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, “Promoting Regional Development: Monitoring and Evaluation Tools” (No. 24LV08) = “The project for the RAIM’s improvement”</i>)

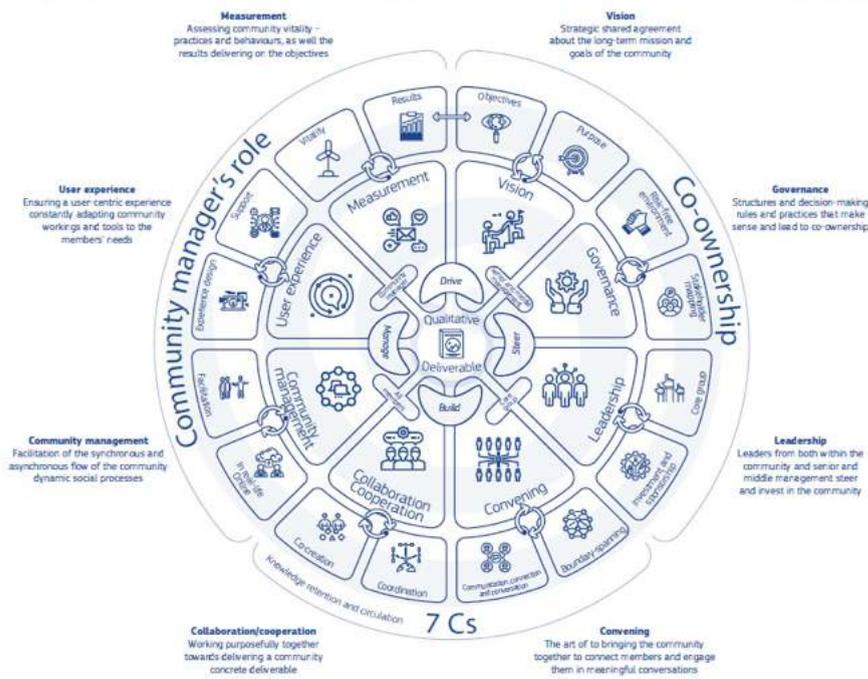
5.3. Partnerships

The main goal of stakeholder engagement is to build an **AI and Data Community of Practice** within VPR, which will be able to use and maintain a harmonized monitoring framework (including VPR PATHWATCH tool) that aligns development indicators, data sources, and monitoring methodologies across VPR departments/projects, municipalities, other planning regions and national institutions.

Communities of Practice stimulate cross-organizational collaboration and knowledge sharing. These communities are defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Lave and Wenger, 1991; 1996). The idea of connecting people through their practice, both within and outside organizations, has existed for as long as organizations themselves. The increasing interest in communities of practice can be attributed to the valuable perspective they provide on explicit and tacit knowledge, as well as on learning and development within a field of practice, which are key to improving

performance.¹⁹ The involvement of stakeholders in RAP activities will largely depend on their level of participation in an AI and Data Community of Practice. To move purposefully towards the creation of a AI and Data Community of Practice within VPR, the **Communities of Practice Success Wheel** (eight success factors for communities to thrive and succeed) methodology will be used. This methodology can be applied in any organisation, assisting them in developing communities, networks and other formal or informal structures that require collaboration and cooperation between various stakeholders who need to work together with a common purpose and vision.²⁰

2.1. The Communities of Practice Success Wheel



*The Communities of Practice Success Wheel*²¹

The roles and activities of the stakeholders involved in the implementation of the VPR RAP will be determined by the level and intensity of their participation in the creation and maintenance of the **AI and Data Community of Practice** within VPR.

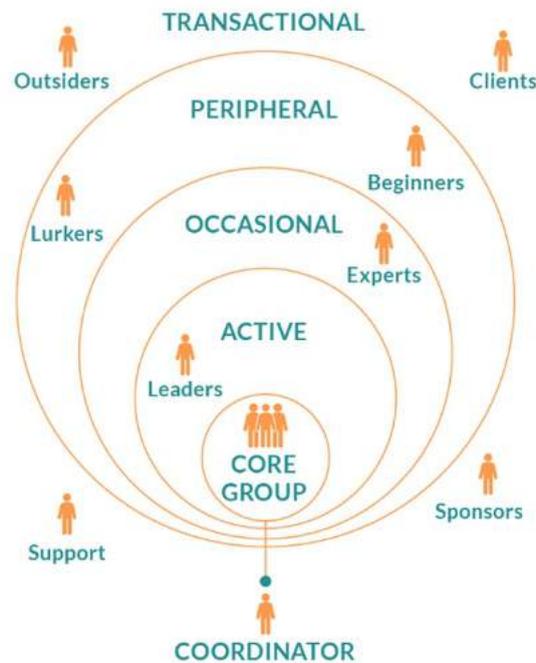
Key stakeholders	Role in the implementation of the RAP actions
Vidzeme Planning Region administration	The main driver of the AI and Data Community of Practice implementation. The Core group/Coordinator – Territorial Planning Department, including an intended Data/GIS Specialist. Active participants of the Community of Practice – VPR's projects and other departments/specialists (public transport, reemigration specialist...) Responsible for organising the capacity-building and knowledge-sharing events for stakeholders, harmonising regional indicators, developing a

¹⁹ The Communities of Practice Playbook. A playbook to collectively run and develop communities of practice <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/jrc/communities-of-practice-playbook/en/methodology.html>, p.9

²⁰ The Communities of Practice Playbook. A playbook to collectively run and develop communities of practice <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/jrc/communities-of-practice-playbook/en/methodology.html>, p.9

²¹ *ibid.*

10 municipalities representing the region	monitoring system for the regional development, and coordinating maintenance measures. Active participant of the AI and Data Community of Practice. Ensures participation in capacity-building and knowledge-sharing events, harmonisation of regional indicators, testing the monitoring system for regional development, and provides data. Participation in maintenance measures.
Other planning regions (4) of Latvia	Active participant of the AI and Data Community of Practice
Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia	Active participant of the AI and Data Community of Practice
Other ministries (Ministry of Climate and Energy, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Economics)	Occasional participants of the AI and Data Community of Practice
Central Statistical Bureau of the Republic of Latvia	Occasional participants of the AI and Data Community of Practice
Local Action Groups, NGOs	Occasional participants of the AI and Data Community of Practice
Vidzeme University of Applied Science	Occasional participants of the AI and Data Community of Practice
Local community/residents of the VPR	Occasional and peripheral participants of the AI and Data Community of Practice
Entrepreneurs	Occasional and peripheral participants of the AI and Data Community of Practice



Levels of Participation in Communities of Practice²²

²² <https://waterknowledgehub.org/learn/iwrm-tools/communities-practice>

6. Roadmap

6.1. Timeline

The Roadmap provides a structured, time-bound pathway for implementing, scaling, and sustaining the Vidzeme regional development monitoring system (VPR PATHWATCH). It translates the RAP's actions into a clear sequence of milestones, assigns responsibilities, and ensures long-term operability of the monitoring system beyond the PoliRuralPlus project.

[RAP Roadmap Gantt](#) for short term (2025 - 2026)

Activity	2025												2026											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Serving the main ingredients: examination of requirements for a new regional monitoring framework																							
1.1	Analysis of existing regional planning and development monitoring tools (TAPIS/RAIM, LV Open Data Portal...), good practices and private initiatives (PRP Open Call #1, 2025)																							
1.2	Identified stakeholders, their needs, interests and capacity to engage in the prototyping of the region's monitoring tool																							
1.3	Consultations with the the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development, planning regions and municipalities on the harmonisation of development indicators.																							
1.4	Audit of indicators and available data, definition of data needed to assess development indicators, their sources.																							
2	Boosting data literacy: capacity building of stakeholders																							
2.1	Organization of capacity-building and knowledge-sharing events for stakeholders																							
2.2	Organization of a data hackathon: work on harmonization of indicators and outline the vision of the region's monitoring tool prototype (PRP Open call #2 – September, 2025)																							
2.3	Enhance cooperation within VPR's administration for the provision of development data (thematic working groups of projects, LEAN training)																							
2.4	Validation of an AI tools developed within PoliRuralPlus (VPR's main interest in Vulture functionality)																							
3	Sketching the shape: functionality, usability and maintenance of the regional monitoring framework																							
3.1	Continuous communication regarding the importance of development monitoring and data-driven decisions for regional growth (via publications in the media and VPR's web page and social networks)																							
3.2	Engaging with local government leaders/politicians regarding the importance of development monitoring and data-driven decisions for regional growth (via VPR's Development Council meetings, discussions on regional development politics after 2027)																							
3.3	Discussion on establishing a regional development data (GIS & AI) center within the VPR administration																							
3.4	Establishment of a system for the continuous evaluation of the impact of regional administration projects on regional development																							
4	Baking in regional monitoring: harmonized indicators, territorially grounded data and cross-sectoral collaboration																							
	Joint elaboration of a unified set of monitoring indicators together with regional																							

The implementation is structured into **three phases**: short-term (2025–2027), medium-term (2028–2035), and long-term (2036–2040). These phases reflect the maturity levels of the VPR PATHWATCH framework, the institutional readiness of stakeholders, and the broader shift toward data-driven regional governance.

Short-Term (2025–2027): Foundation & Prototype Deployment

Focus: Concept validation, prototype creation of monitoring framework VPR PATHWATCH, stakeholder alignment, harmonisation of indicators.

Milestones:

- Completion of needs assessment, indicator audit, and data source mapping (unchanged)
- Harmonisation agreement on regional development indicators (unchanged)
- Hackathon for co-designing the monitoring framework vision and process flows
- Process flow documentation completed and validated with stakeholders
- GIS application(s) selected and configured for regional monitoring
- Framework piloted with 3-5 municipalities, capacity building delivered
- Draft monitoring framework operational (Q2 2026) and tested during VPR Development Programme 2028-2035 preparation
- Fully operational VPR PATHWATCH framework prepared for regional deployment (Q4 2027)

Expected short-term output:

A documented, validated monitoring framework with configured GIS tools, trained users, and an emerging AI & Data Community of Practice.

Medium-Term (2028–2035): Institutionalisation & Expansion

Focus: Full implementation across municipalities, governance embedding, capacity building, and national and Baltic-level transfer.

Milestones:

- Integration of the VPR PATHWATCH framework processes into all municipal monitoring and planning cycles.
- Establishment of permanent Data Analysis and GIS Specialist roles within VPR.
- Full municipal adoption of framework methodology and GIS-based reporting.
- Citizen Science project ecosystem launched, involving residents in real-time data collection.
- A growing number (ideally up to 25%) of Vidzeme residents are accessing publicly available monitoring dashboards and GIS web maps (by the 2029 municipal elections).
- Advanced analytical capabilities (including predictive analysis where feasible) integrated into framework processes.
- Tool used for evaluating political programmes and supporting election-related decision-making (2029 & 2033).
- Adoption of the monitoring approach by other Latvian planning regions.
- Vidzeme recognised as a national competence centre for territorial monitoring.

Expected medium-term output:

A mature, widely adopted monitoring ecosystem embedded in governance, planning, and civic engagement across Vidzeme and beyond.

Long-Term (2036–2040): Scaling, Knowledge Transfer & Sustainability

Focus: Consolidation of excellence, international leadership, and continuous innovation.

Milestones:

- Full integration of AI-driven monitoring practices into long-term spatial and sustainable development plans (post-2035).
- Expansion of the VPR PATHWATCH model to all Baltic planning regions, with Vidzeme acting as the regional excellence hub.
- Regular cross-border knowledge exchange platforms established.
- Long-term maintenance secured through national budget lines and municipal co-financing mechanisms.
- Continuous system improvements informed by Citizen Science datasets and evolving territorial challenges.

Expected long-term output:

A resilient, future-proof monitoring system that drives sustainable development and positions Vidzeme as a European leader in data-driven rural governance.

6.2. Implementation and Maintenance Plan

This section assigns responsibilities for the execution, operation, improvement, and long-term sustainability of the VPR PATHWATCH monitoring system. It outlines governance structures, operational roles, and mechanisms for keeping the system up to date beyond project-based funding cycles.

6.2.1. Implementation Responsibilities (2025–2028)

Implementation is led by VPR but executed through coordinated multi-level governance.

Vidzeme Planning Region (VPR) – Core coordinator

- Indicator audit and harmonisation with municipalities, other planning regions and ministries.
- Development and maintenance of monitoring framework documentation and GIS configurations.
- Stakeholder engagement, training and capacity building – foundation for an AI and Data Community of Practice

- Integration of framework outputs and GIS visualisations into planning documents (development programme 2028–2035).

VPR Municipalities (10)

- Provide data and validate indicators.
- Participate in monitoring framework testing.
- Adopt the tool into local planning processes.
- Implement data-collection protocols aligned with regional standards.

Other planning regions of Latvia (4)

- Participate in monitoring framework testing.
- Sharing experience and knowledge about regional development data and their analysis.

Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development

- Alignment with national digitalisation and territorial monitoring policies.
- Ensure methodological compatibility between VPR PATHWATCH and RAIM.
- Support legislative or policy adjustments to ensure tool uptake.

Other ministries (Climate & Energy, Agriculture, Economics.....)

- Provide sectoral data streams and validate environmental/economic indicators.

Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences & other research institutions

- Support development of Citizen Science methodologies.
- Contribute to data analysis, scenario modelling and methodological research.

Communities & NGOs

- Participate in Citizen Science activities.
- Provide local knowledge, feedback and crowdsourced data.

6.2.2. Maintenance, Governance & Continuous Improvement (2028–2040)

The long-term operation of the regional development monitoring system (including the VPR PATHWATCH framework) consists of the following fields of activity:

1. Technical Maintenance & System Evolution

Responsible: VPR administration + external IT partners

- Server hosting, updates, security patches.
- Algorithm and AI-module updates.
- process design and GIS configuration.
- Integration of new datasets and geospatial layers.

2. Data Governance & Quality Control

Responsible: VPR administration (lead), VPR municipalities (data providers), Central Statistical Bureau (methodological support)

Tasks include:

- Maintaining indicator definitions and metadata.
- Ensuring data accuracy, comparability and timeliness.
- Updating territorial layers (administrative changes, new datasets).

3. Human Resources for Long-Term Operation

From 2028 onward, VPR will maintain at least 1- 2 specialists in the field of Data Analysis and GIS (permanent)

Additional staffing (e.g., AI specialist) to be considered after 2030, depending on system complexity.

4. Financial Maintenance Framework

To ensure sustainability beyond project funding:

- National budget allocations (digital governance lines)
- Municipal co-funding model for maintenance costs
- EU structural funds (ERDF/ESF+) for upgrades
- Horizon Europe for methodological innovation
- Interreg for Baltic-level scaling

5. Monitoring Committees & Governance Bodies

To ensure oversight and continuous system improvement:

Regional Monitoring Committee (annually)

Led by VPR; includes all municipalities

- Reviews KPIs and regional development outcomes
- Reviews how the monitoring system has helped to make data-based decisions
- Approves adjustments to monitoring methodology

Technical Working Group (semi-annual)

Includes IT teams, data specialists, GIS experts, and municipal planners

- Reviews technical performance and data quality
- Recommends upgrades and fixes

Citizen Science Advisory Group (as needed)

Includes researchers, NGOs, schools, and community leaders

- Ensures participatory data collection approaches remain inclusive and relevant
- Monitors whether data analysis is accessible and understandable to the general public

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

7.1. KPIs

7.1.1 Common KPIs for all PoliRuralPlus pilots

VPR is a regional-level pilot and aims to develop a harmonised monitoring framework that aligns development indicators, data sources, and monitoring methodologies across VPR departments/projects, municipalities within VPR, and national institutions to support data-based decision-making in the development of the region’s territory. For this to happen, coordinated data management is essential, which is why it is planned to establish an AI & Data Community of Practice within VPR, with the VPR administration as the core coordinator.

#	Common KPI (PR+ level)	Purpose	VPR-Specific Contributing Indicator(s) & 2025 Metrics	Indicative 2026 Target
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure the breadth and diversity of stakeholder engagement in RAP processes.	Number of stakeholder consultations held for indicator harmonisation and framework co-design 2025 Metrics:	# 50+ organisations in AI & Data Community of Practice

			<p># 3+ consultations with municipalities on indicator harmonisation</p> <p># 1 hackathon organised for framework vision co-design (Sept 2025)</p> <p># Stakeholder mapping completed (core, active, peripheral groups identified)</p>	
2	Rural–Urban Collaboration	Evaluate the level of cooperation between territories and sectors in integrating policies and actions.	<p>Number of inter-municipal data-sharing agreements and joint monitoring initiatives under the framework</p> <p>2025 Metrics:</p> <p># Data governance protocols drafted</p> <p># Pilot data exchange initiated with 3 municipalities</p> <p># Joint indicator audit completed with municipalities</p>	<p># 10 municipalities sharing data through standardised protocols</p> <p># Joint rural-urban territorial analysis conducted using GIS tools</p> <p># 2 inter-municipal monitoring projects initiated under the framework</p>
3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Promote the use of innovative and digital tools and practices.	<p>VPR PATHWATCH framework implementation milestones and GIS adoption metrics</p> <p>2025 Metrics:</p> <p># Process flow documentation completed and validated</p> <p># GIS application(s) selected</p> <p># Data governance protocols established</p> <p># Framework vision model created</p>	<p># GIS configurations operational with regional indicator layers (Q2 2026)</p> <p># 3-5 municipalities participating in framework pilot</p> <p># Capacity building programme delivered to 50+ stakeholders</p> <p># VPR staff regularly use framework processes and GIS tools</p>
4	Territorial and Environmental Sustainability	Encourage sustainable, resilient and green practices in territories.	<p>Environmental and bioeconomy indicators integrated into the monitoring framework</p> <p>2025 Metrics:</p> <p># Sustainability indicators reviewed</p> <p># 3+ bioregion-related data sources identified</p> <p># Alignment with Green Deal indicators mapped</p>	<p># Environmental indicators operational in GIS configurations</p> <p># Sustainability data layers are functional in web maps</p> <p># 2 bioregion municipalities providing environmental data</p> <p># Carbon emission tracking indicators defined in the framework</p>

5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Assess improvements in livability, wellbeing, and social inclusion.	Citizen engagement mechanisms and quality of life indicator accessibility through the framework 2025 Metrics: # Process design started with an accessibility focus # Stakeholder feedback collection mechanism ideation done	# Quality of life indicators publicly accessible via GIS web maps/dashboards # Framework participant satisfaction survey conducted (target: ≥4/5) # 3 community groups engaged in data collection under the framework
6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Strengthen governance structures and collaborative decision-making.	VPR institutional capacity and framework governance structure establishment 2025 Metrics: # Capacity building programme for framework participants delivered # AI & Data Community of Practice core group formed # VPR Territorial Planning Dept designated as framework coordinator	# 1 new Data Analysis/GIS Specialist position advertised # Regional Monitoring Committee operational # Technical Working Group conducting semi-annual reviews # 3+ municipal/regional policies informed by framework monitoring data
7	Communication and Visibility	Measure how results and messages are shared and communicated.	RAP awareness activities and framework information events 2025 Metrics: # 3+ stakeholder events organised # Hackathon materials published online	# VPR website updated with monitoring framework information # 10+ news/media mentions of VPR PATHWATCH framework # 2 framework and GIS demonstration events # 10+ articles/posts on regional development monitoring
8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Assess sustainability and potential for scaling up the PoliRuralPlus model.	Knowledge transfer activities and framework replication readiness 2025 Metrics: # Framework methodology documentation initiated # Interest mapping from other planning regions	# Framework coordination and GIS license cost model established # Guidelines for the framework approach published

For monitoring implementation and success of the RAP, the following groups of KPIs are identified:

- Framework implementation indicators (framework development phases – process flow documentation completed by the end of 2025, GIS configurations and pilot testing by Q2 2026, fully operational framework by Q4 2026).
- Stakeholder engagement, including:
 - o indicator harmonisation with 10 municipalities
 - o User engagement (regular use of the platform by VPR staff)
 - o Municipal integration (municipalities incorporating the platform in monitoring processes of their development programs by 2028)
- Institutional Capacity Indicators:
 - o Staff capacity building (recruitment of 2 permanent specialists (Data Analysis + GIS) by 2028)
- Development Impact:
 - o Decision-making enhancement by reduction in planning document preparation time
 - o Use of evidence generated through the platform (policy decisions based on data provided by the platform)
 - o Transparency improvement: increase of public access to regional development data.

7.2. Evaluation Mechanisms

The Regional Monitoring Committee's annual reviews are chaired by the VPR, with municipal representatives and technical experts in attendance. The committee evaluates the KPIs set in the region's development programme progress, addresses implementation challenges, and approves strategic adjustments.

Technical Working Group semi-annual operational reviews are conducted by framework participants, technical specialists, and the development team. Focus on system performance, user experience improvements, and data quality issues. Rapid-response protocol for technical problems and user-support needs.

8. Communication and Engagement

8.1. Stakeholder Involvement

The primary objective of stakeholder engagement is to build an **AI and Data Community of Practice** within VPR that can use and maintain a harmonised monitoring framework that aligns development indicators, data sources, and monitoring methodologies across VPR departments, municipalities, other planning regions, and national institutions.

Another important concept that we see as essential for the operation of a full-fledged regional development monitoring system is **Citizen Science**. Through this approach, VPR plans to involve the wider community—residents of different ages and social groups, local action groups, and entrepreneurs—in monitoring, data collection, and the analysis of territorial development.

Citizen involvement in producing and interpreting data gathered locally by community members, to raise local awareness and action, is a common model of citizen science.²³ Citizen science is making an important contribution to knowledge production at local, national and international scales. Whether monitoring air quality, mapping biodiversity, or contributing to medical research, citizens are helping to collect and analyse data, shape research

²³ ECSA's characteristics of citizen science (2020)

chrome-extension://efaidnbmnmbpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://ecsa.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ecsa_characteristics_of_citizen_science_-_v1_final.pdf

questions, and generate real-world impact.²⁴ A research organisation collaborating with VPR will play a crucial role in the successful implementation of citizen science projects and activities.

The development of the AI and Data Community of Practice will take place in several stages:

1. Building Foundations for the AI and Data Community of Practice (2025–2027)

- Mapping stakeholders according to their levels of participation (core, active, occasional, peripheral, transactional).
- Forming the core group and identifying the coordinating unit (VPR Territorial Planning Department).
- Analysing the skills and technological capabilities of stakeholders, and inviting them to participate in capacity-building and networking activities (VPR administration/project teams, municipalities of the VPR, ministries, and other organisations).
- Exploring the concept of **Citizen Science** to help involve local stakeholders in data collection and monitoring activities (occasional and peripheral), while identifying potential collaborative research organisations to put this concept into practice.
- Identifying transactional stakeholders (funding organisations, sponsors—including national and international financing programs—entrepreneurs, local decision-makers) and initiating discussions, led by core and active stakeholders (VPR administration, municipalities), on establishing a regional development data centre (**GIS & AI**) within the VPR administration.

2. Activating the AI and Data Community of Practice (2026–2028)

- Implementing standardised data-collection protocols and establishing formal data-sharing agreements with all 10 municipalities and relevant ministries.
- Developing a prototype model of processes and information flow between core, active, and transactional stakeholders, and creating an IT tool (**VPR Pathwatch**) for assessing territorial development, which will be tested during the preparation of the new VPR development programme for the period after 2027.
- Analysing the interests, skills, and technological capabilities of occasional and peripheral stakeholders, and inviting them to participate in capacity-building and networking activities.
- Launching a new VPR project to strengthen the **Citizen Science** approach in Vidzeme, involving local residents (occasional and peripheral stakeholders) in activities related to territorial development—from data collection to data-based decision-making.
- Supporting the transition of occasional stakeholders into the active stakeholder group through Citizen Science, and inviting peripheral stakeholders to engage and start using the tools and content provided by core and active stakeholders.

3. Maintaining and Improving Tools for the AI and Data Community of Practice (after 2028)

- Establishing a clearly defined process flow between all stakeholder groups (core, active, occasional, peripheral, transactional).
- Further improving the **VPR Pathwatch** IT tool for assessing territorial development during the preparation of VPR's long-term sustainable development plan for the period after 2030.
- A significant portion of the data that allows us to assess the development of the region is obtained through **Citizen Science projects**.

8.2. Awareness Campaigns

VPR's RAP awareness activities take place on multiple platforms:

- Events for the stakeholders to share experience and knowledge, strengthen capacity (mainly in person) (six events organised since autumn 2024, gathering more than 100 participants)
- A data hackathon that served as a collaborative platform for discussing the importance of data in assessing regional development and highlighting the challenges of creating an AI & Data Community of

²⁴ What is citizen science and why should policymakers care?

<https://www.oecd.org/en/blogs/2025/04/what-is-citizen-science-and-why-should-policymakers-care.html>

Practice within VPR. Work materials elaborated during the hackathon are available to anyone interested on <https://novofutura.lv/hakatons/>

- Regular internal meetings on the contribution of VPR's project activities to the implementation of the regional development program (meetings are organised in 4 thematic working groups)
- Regular online meetings with the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development on the territorial development data and their harmonisation
- Participation in VPR's Development Council meetings
- Participation in international events and workshops (6th European Rural Parliament in Scotland, VPR as a case study at the workshop "Indicators for rural development"; presentation in Lapland)
- A [separate section for the project "PoliRuralPlus"](#) has been created on the VPR website, where project updates are regularly published
- Information on both the project "PoliRuralPlus" and VPR's RAP activities is regularly published on VPR social media (LinkedIn, Facebook)



9. Conclusion

9.1. Summary of Expected Impact

Contribution to Sustainable Development

The Vidzeme pilot fundamentally transforms regional governance by establishing evidence-based decision-making as the cornerstone of sustainable territorial development. Through the VPR PATHWATCH platform, the region will achieve unprecedented integration of environmental, social, and economic monitoring, enabling real-time tracking of progress toward UN Sustainable Development Goals. The AI-driven predictive capabilities will shift regional planning from reactive to proactive management, ensuring that development interventions are both timely and effective in addressing emerging challenges.

Regional data governance and integration. The harmonised monitoring framework creates a new basis for multi-level governance, breaking down institutional silos that have historically hindered coordinated development efforts. By aligning indicators across municipal, regional, and national levels, the initiative enables more strategic allocation of resources and reduces duplication of efforts. The enhanced data transparency will demonstrate regional commitment to good governance and accountability. The anticipated reduction in planning document preparation time will free up municipal resources for direct development activities.

Cross-Sectoral impact. The enhanced data literacy among municipal staff will improve performance across all policy areas, from infrastructure planning to social service delivery. Improved monitoring capabilities will position Vidzeme as a leader in sustainable territorial management, attracting research partnerships and green economy investments. The knowledge transfer model will generate new revenue streams while contributing to national and Baltic regional development capacity.

Systemic change. By 2035, the Vidzeme approach will have established a new standard for regional governance in the Baltic region, demonstrating how data-driven transparency can revitalise rural territories. The initiative's success in achieving higher citizen engagement with the monitoring framework will provide a replicable model for democratic innovation in sparsely populated regions across Europe.

9.2. Call to Action

The Time for Transformation is Now

The Vidzeme Planning Region stands at a pivotal moment where demographic challenges and digital opportunities converge to demand bold action. The Regional Action Plan provides a clear roadmap, but its success depends on the collective commitment of every stakeholder to embrace change and take ownership of our shared future.

Municipal Leaders: Champion this initiative by committing your technical staff to the training programs and dedicating the necessary resources to regional data collaboration. Your leadership will determine whether Vidzeme becomes a model of innovative governance or remains constrained by outdated approaches.

National Partners: Support this pioneering effort through sustained policy alignment and financial backing. The Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development has the opportunity to showcase Latvia's digital governance leadership on the European stage through the success of this initiative.

Business and innovation community: Partner with us in developing and refining the monitoring framework. Your expertise in data analytics, user experience design, and digital innovation is essential for creating a platform that truly serves territorial development needs.

Academic and research institutions: Contribute your analytical capabilities and help us document and share the lessons learned. This initiative offers unique opportunities for research collaboration and student engagement in real-world governance innovation.

The window for action is limited. The PoliRuralPlus project provides the catalyst, but long-term success requires sustained commitment from all partners. By 2026, we will either have established the foundation for data-driven



regional governance, or we will have missed an opportunity to transform how rural regions navigate the challenges of the 21st century.

 **Join us in building the future of territorial governance. The path leads upward – Cejš ved augšup!**

10. Annexes (Optional)

10.1. Sustainability and extension of activities: Checklist for the RAP pilots

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation			
<i>Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.</i>			The RAP addresses sustainability risks related to fragmented data systems, limited institutional capacity (digital and data literacy), financial uncertainty for long-term tool maintenance, and uneven municipal readiness. Opportunities — including stronger multi-level cooperation, digital transformation, and the creation of a unified monitoring ecosystem — are also fully integrated.
Vision and Strategic Goals			
<i>How well are your vision and strategic goals aligned with the main areas of sustainability: Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing? What is the main focus? (You may use the sustainability compass for guidance here: https://compassu.wordpress.com/introduction/)</i>			The vision directly contributes to societal wellbeing through transparent governance and citizen engagement; economic sustainability through data-driven decision-making and innovation support; environmental sustainability via integration of climate and land-use indicators; and institutional wellbeing through improved administrative capacity.
Action Plan			
<i>- How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained?</i>			Sustainability is ensured through the creation of permanent specialist roles (Data Analyst, GIS Specialist), the integration of the tool into municipal planning cycles, and the establishment of VPR as a long-term centre of excellence for monitoring. Continuous updates and user feedback loops are embedded in the plan.
<i>- Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future?</i>			Vidzeme Planning Region (core responsibility), municipal administrations (operational use and data supply), and national institutions (methodology alignment and legislative support).
Policy and Funding Alignment			
<i>- Do the stakeholders/actors have access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP?</i>			Multiple sources are identified: ERDF, ESF+, EDIH, Interreg, Horizon Europe. The basic financial foundation for VPR actions is provided by the allocated national budget, with potential for future municipal contributions.

<p>- Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms?</p>		<p>Yes. Dedicated and predictable long-term funding for the region’s monitoring system maintenance is needed, as current financing relies heavily on short-term projects. The future options include integrating tool maintenance into national digital governance budgets or creating a shared municipal co-financing model.</p>
<p>Communication and Engagement</p>		
<p>- What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?</p>		<p>Mechanisms include municipal integration of the monitoring framework into development planning, regular stakeholder consultations, training programmes, and public engagement through digital platforms and participatory processes.</p>
<p>- Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?</p>		<p>Expected that the region and municipalities will rely on the tool for statutory planning documents, budgeting, and communication – both with politicians and inhabitants.</p>
<p>- How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?</p>		<p>Through knowledge transfer to other planning regions, Baltic-level cooperation networks, training sessions, open communication materials, and participation in national digital governance initiatives.</p>
<p>Conclusion</p>		
<p>- Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?</p>		<p>The RAP aligns with the EU Green Deal, Digital Decade, Cohesion Policy, NEB, LTVRA, Latvia’s National Development Plan 2027, VPR’s Development Programme 2022-2027 and national digitalisation strategies.</p>
<p>- Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?</p>		<p>The monitoring framework and data governance reforms will influence public administration, economic development, environmental planning, education, innovation ecosystems, and democratic participation by providing more transparent data, enabling evidence-based policy making, and improving cross-sectoral cooperation. The integrated monitoring system enables more coherent territorial development and strengthens the overall resilience of the Vidzeme region.</p>



Regional Action Plan

Pilot:	Malta
Version:	2
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1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Background

Malta, a Southern European island state in the central Mediterranean, is the European Union's smallest member state both in size and population. The country consists of three inhabited islands - Malta, Gozo, and Comino, with Gozo being the second largest and a primary focus for rural development, many times in fact referred to as Eco-Gozo. The islands' total landmass is just over 316 km², yet it supports a population of almost 600,000 people, due to a major influx of foreign labour supply, making Malta one of the most densely populated countries in the EU.

Despite its small size, Malta exhibits notable rural-urban contrasts, particularly between the main island (Malta) and Gozo. While the former is heavily urbanised and hosts the administrative, economic, and political centres, Gozo retains a more rural and insular character, with agriculture, heritage tourism, and small-scale craft industries playing key roles in the local economy. The population of Gozo is slightly above 40,000, with approximately 21% of its land area urbanised, compared to about 33% in Malta, which hosts a population nearly twelve times larger. This illustrates the sharp spatial and demographic contrasts between the two islands.

Geographically, Malta and Gozo are characterised by limestone plateaus, terraced fields, and limited freshwater resources, influencing land use and traditional farming practices. Gozo's topography includes low hills and a patchwork of agricultural valleys, often defined by dry stone walls - remnants of traditional land management that also shape the cultural landscape.

Socio-economically, Malta has transitioned from a predominantly agricultural society to a diversified services-based economy, with key sectors including financial services, ICT, tourism, and gaming. However, rural communities, particularly in Gozo, Northern and Western Districts of the island of Malta face challenges such as youth outmigration, ageing populations, digital divides, and a dependency on seasonal tourism and harsh dry long summers. In this context, digitalisation, skills development, and innovation adoption remain unevenly distributed.

Culturally, Malta boasts a rich heritage shaped by Phoenician, Roman, Arab, and European influences. The Gozitan and Maltese small rural village core identity is particularly strong, marked by local dialects, artisan traditions, and a strong sense of community autonomy. Cultural and religious festivals play a central role in rural life, contributing to local cohesion but also highlighting gaps in digital and governance infrastructure that could better support participation and innovation. In contrast, Malta's heavily urbanised zones are characterised by dense traffic, rapid development, and a fast-paced lifestyle, standing in sharp relief to the calmer, community-oriented rhythm of rural villages.

The Malta PoliRuralPlus pilot aims to strengthen rural-urban linkages and support a more sustainable and inclusive agri-rural ecosystem by enhancing digital transformation and entrepreneurial capacity across both Malta and Gozo. With a focus on the agricultural and rural communities, the pilot addresses sector-wide challenges such as an ageing workforce, low digital adoption, and declining youth interest in agriculture. Through targeted workshops, training initiatives, and stakeholder engagement, the pilot seeks to bridge the gap between national innovation policy and local capacity, ensuring development is inclusive, context-sensitive, and rooted in the region's socio-cultural realities. Emphasising practical implementation over policy drafting, the pilot complements

existing frameworks such as the LEADER Programme by activating tangible, community-led change and fostering multi-actor collaboration at the grassroots level.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

Aim of the Regional Action Plan (RAP)

The Regional Action Plan (RAP) for Malta's PoliRuralPlus pilot is designed to serve as a **practical implementation framework** to build capacity, enhance digital readiness, and foster entrepreneurial innovation within rural and agricultural communities across both Malta and Gozo. The RAP focuses on delivering **targeted, grassroots-level activities**, including workshops, training programmes, and stakeholder engagement aimed at bridging the gap between top-down innovation priorities and on-the-ground needs. It recognises the importance of enabling local actors, particularly farmers and youth, to co-create change and navigate digital and economic transitions in an inclusive, context-appropriate way.

Strategic Alignment

Regional Alignment

- **LEADER Local Development Strategies (LDS):** The RAP complements the strategic goals of Malta's three LAGs (Gozo, Majjistral, Xlokk) by offering implementation pathways in areas such as digital upskilling, rural entrepreneurship, and agri-tourism innovation. It aligns with their priorities of knowledge transfer, youth engagement, and innovation-led rural development.
- **Stakeholder Engagement Infrastructure:** The RAP builds upon Malta's **well-established system for community and stakeholder engagement**, which has evolved over several EU programming periods through the **LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs)** in Gozo, Majjistral, and Xlokk. This model provides a structured platform for collaboration among local councils, farmers, youth, NGOs, entrepreneurs, and public authorities. By using this existing participatory framework, the RAP ensures that all planned activities, such as training, workshops, and innovation initiatives remain aligned with ongoing **Local Development Strategy (LDS)** implementation. These Local Development Strategies are community-led development plans that guide investment and action in rural areas, focusing on priorities such as economic diversification, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and knowledge transfer. In practice, this means the RAP does not create new or parallel consultation mechanisms. Instead, it **builds on Malta's mature stakeholder network**, using the same local committees, engagement channels, and participatory tools already in place to co-design and implement activities that complement the existing rural development strategies and ensure strong coordination between national, regional, and local levels.
- **Gozo Regional Development Strategy (2021–2030):** The RAP aligns with Gozo's regional priorities for sustainable development, heritage conservation, and innovation-led diversification. By positioning Gozo as a living laboratory for digital transformation and green innovation, the pilot supports the Strategy's goals to enhance employment, attract investment, and strengthen Gozo's role as a sustainable island region within the national framework.

National Alignment

- **Malta's CAP Strategic Plan (2023–2027):** The RAP supports national objectives in farm modernisation, generational renewal, and sustainability through non-invasive, accessible initiatives for small and part-time farmers.
- **Digital Malta Strategy:** By embedding digital literacy and practical tool adoption into the agricultural sector, the RAP contributes to national goals of digital inclusion and sectoral transformation.
- **National Agricultural Policy for the Maltese Islands (2023–2030):** The RAP supports the objectives of Malta's Agricultural Policy, which emphasises sustainability, innovation, and resilience in local food systems. Actions focusing on agritech, smart irrigation, and rural entrepreneurship directly contribute to the policy's goals of modernising agriculture while safeguarding the rural landscape and heritage. The Malta pilot's collaboration with initiatives such as the **MAYA Agritech Ideathon** and the upcoming **MALTESE training programme** reinforces the national agenda for smart farming and digital capacity building.
- **National Smart Specialisation Strategy (2021–2027):** Through its emphasis on digitalisation, rural innovation, the RAP contributes to the Smart Specialisation Strategy's thematic areas of "**Digital, Sustainable, and Resilient Industries.**" The pilot fosters collaboration between research institutions, SMEs, and local authorities, creating pathways for innovation uptake in agritech and circular economy domains.
- **National Environment Strategy and Low-Carbon Development Vision:** The RAP promotes sustainable resource management, local renewable initiatives, and community-level adaptation to climate change in line with Malta's national climate and environmental targets. These efforts complement the **Low Carbon Development Strategy** and the **National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP)**, by encouraging bottom-up innovation and citizen participation in climate action.
- **National Digital Strategy (2022–2027):** The planned activities under the **MALTESE programme** and the **RAP's digitalisation measures** contribute to Malta's wider digital transformation agenda by promoting digital literacy, IoT adoption, and data-driven governance in rural and remote areas. The RAP also supports the creation of cross-sector digital networks that strengthen Malta's overall digital ecosystem and bridge the rural-urban divide.

EU-Level Alignment

- **EU Green Deal & Farm to Fork Strategy:** The RAP promotes sustainable agricultural practices and innovation, directly supporting these goals while addressing the challenges of smallholder modernisation.
- **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP):** CAP rural development policy emphasises youth by promoting rural job creation, education, and community development to keep young people active in agriculture and rural areas.
- **New European Bauhaus (NEB):** The pilot incorporates the NEB's values of sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion through community storytelling, place-based identity, and digital empowerment.
- **Horizon Europe & PoliRuralPlus Framework:** The RAP implements foresight-informed, stakeholder-driven pilot actions as intended by the PoliRuralPlus methodology. The use of tools like MAAT and the Digital Platform have not been prevalent as yet, but will be considered in the future to capture feedback and track change.

Intended Outcomes

- **Capacity Building:**
 - Delivery of sector-relevant digital and entrepreneurial training modules reaching farmers, youth, and rural actors.
 - Improved awareness and capability to use digital tools, platforms, and funding instruments.
- **Youth & Community Empowerment:**
 - Increased engagement of young people in agriculture and rural innovation through tailored outreach and success stories.
 - Strengthening of local identity and pride in rural professions via storytelling and showcasing.
- **Digital Transition:**
 - Progress in the uptake of digital tools and modern practices in small and part-time farms.
 - Improved access to agri-innovation services through cooperation with entities like MDIA and Gozo Regional Development.
- **Stronger Rural-Urban Linkages:**
 - Enhanced collaboration between farmers, NGOs, local councils, digital SMEs, and education providers.
 - Increased visibility and integration of rural concerns in national innovation and development conversations.
- **Scalability & Sustainability:**
 - Development of replicable formats for training, outreach, and cooperation that can inform future initiatives or be embedded in local development strategies.

2. Analysis of Current Situation

2.1 State of the Art

2.1.1. Analysis of Current Situation

Socio-Economic & Environmental Conditions

- **Demographics & Population Pressure:** Malta has a high population density, with rural areas like Gozo and northern Malta facing pressures from urbanization, aging populations, and youth migration.
- **Land Use Challenges:** Agricultural land is under pressure due to urban sprawl and tourism-driven development. Despite strong tourism revenues, this duality is straining local ecosystems and agriculture.

- **Environmental Stressors:** Limited freshwater resources, high traffic emissions, and coastal erosion are pressing environmental issues. Climate change adds pressure through rising temperatures and more frequent droughts.

Stakeholder Observations:

- Farmers, local councils, and NGOs highlight **climate vulnerability, insufficient support for young farmers, and fragmented governance** as critical hurdles.

2.1.2 State of the Art

Innovation Ecosystem

- Malta's pilot is aligned with the **PoliRuralPlus methodology**, which promotes participatory foresight and multi-actor engagement for rural development, however the use of digital tools such as the **Multi-Actor Approach Tool (MAATool)** and related foresight platforms has not been taken up as much. The pilot has thus focused on **building the relationships, foundations, and institutional awareness** needed for their effective future use.

Smart Specialisation and Innovation Alignment

- Malta continues to align its rural innovation efforts with the principles of **Smart Specialisation**, prioritising areas such as **agritech, digital innovation, and sustainable rural tourism**. Current efforts focus on strengthening collaboration between education, ICT, and agriculture sectors, while also exploring how innovation and entrepreneurship can be better integrated into rural and island economies. The **MAYA Agritech Ideathon** and **cascade-funded MALTESE project** represent key stepping stones toward establishing a more inclusive and digitally enabled rural innovation ecosystem.

Existing Infrastructure

- **Transport:** Good national transport but limited rural infrastructure in Gozo and isolated villages, also the mainland Malta is characterised by extensive traffic, due to the high population increase in the past decade.
- **Digital Infrastructure:** High broadband penetration, but varying uptake in rural areas, especially in agriculture land.
- **Education & Training:** Institutions like MCAST and University of Malta are active in sustainability and innovation training, but rural uptake remains low. Despite growing policy attention to sustainable agriculture and rural innovation, **Malta lacks consistent statistical data on the number or percentage of people engaged in agriculture- or rural-related education and training**. National statistics do not currently disaggregate enrolment figures by agricultural or agritech fields, making it difficult to assess the

current skill base or future workforce pipeline in the sector. While institutions such as MCAST, the University of Malta, and private training providers offer relevant programmes, there is no comprehensive overview of participation rates, gender balance, or career outcomes in these domains.

2.1.3 Comparative Analysis with Similar Regions

Compared to other island or peri-urban regions (e.g., Canary Islands, Corsica):

- **Similarities:**
 - High pressure from tourism on natural resources;
 - Depopulation in rural pockets despite overall population growth;
 - Tensions between conservation and development;

- **Unique to Malta:**
 - Its micro-scale limits spatial differentiation thus rural and urban dynamics often overlap.
 - Strong reliance on EU funding and external policy instruments for environmental and agricultural innovation.

Regional Benchmarks:

Compared with innovation-leading regions such as the Basque Country or South Tyrol, Malta is still developing an integrated approach to landscape management and climate policy. Nonetheless, it demonstrates **strong technical and policy design capacity**, with several well-articulated national strategies addressing sustainability, digitalisation, and rural development.

The main challenges tend to emerge during the **implementation and policy-integration phases**, where complex governance structures, competing priorities, and the short-term nature of political cycles can sometimes delay or dilute the translation of expert recommendations into practical measures. For example, Malta's energy transition policies are progressing within a dynamic policy landscape that requires continuous coordination across economic, social, and environmental priorities, reflecting the realities of a small island state.

Addressing these coordination and governance challenges offers an opportunity for accelerated progress. Malta retains **strong potential for rapid transformation** if it can leverage its **digital tools, evidence-based policymaking frameworks, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms** to foster a more integrated, long-term approach to rural–urban development and climate adaptation.

2.1.4 Key Insights from RAP and Project Documents

Strengths

- Well-developed strategic and technical policy capacity; alignment with EU frameworks;
- Strong tourism and cultural heritage assets, offering potential for rural/eco-tourism diversification;

RAP

- Access to EU networks and funding mechanisms (e.g. cascade funds, Horizon, etc.), facilitating innovation programmes;
- Presence of education and research institutions capable of supporting agritech / rural development;
- Manageable number of Stakeholders;

Weaknesses

- Demographic pressures within the agricultural sector, characterised by an ageing workforce and slower adoption of digital and smart farming practices, which may constrain innovation uptake without tailored capacity-building measures.
 - Limited cross-sector and inter-actor collaboration (e.g. between agriculture, ICT, tourism, local authorities);
 - Lack of comprehensive baseline data on rural education uptake, agritech adoption, and rural-urban disparities;
 - Underuse of nature-based solutions and sustainable resource management - despite favourable policy frameworks;
 - Fragmented governance and rural development frameworks across different ministries and agencies;
- Weaknesses.

Opportunities

- Collaboration with the national innovation and digitalisation authority-MDIA, particularly in relation to access to shared facilities and innovation spaces that can support start-ups, pilots, and proof-of-concept activities linked to rural and agritech innovation
- Renewable energy integration (e.g. solar, wind), circular economy and sustainable resource use in rural zones;
- Agri-tourism and eco-tourism leveraging cultural heritage, traditional crafts, and natural landscapes;
- Youth-led innovation hubs, digital/agritech start-ups, and local entrepreneurship - supported by cascade funding and pilot programmes;
- Implementation of cascade-funded initiatives (e.g. MALTESE, Ideathon follow-ups) to strengthen digitalisation, capacity building, and rural-urban linkages;
- Potential to collect and generate meaningful baseline data, filling current evidence gaps and enabling evidence-based policy and planning;

Threats / Risks

- Urban encroachment and land pressure, leading to loss of rural character and arable land.
- Climate change, especially water scarcity, extreme weather, and pressure on natural resources threatening agriculture, heritage sites, and rural livelihoods.
- Centralisation of decision-making and short-term political cycles, potentially undermining long-term rural policies and strategies;
- Outmigration or demographic pressure - loss of youth from rural to urban areas / abroad/ other job sectors, weakening rural human capital;

- Implementation and funding risks - delays, bureaucratic obstacles, or limited institutional capacity might hamper successful delivery of pilot actions.

2.2 Key Challenges

2.2.1 Innovation Gaps

- **Limited Cross-Sector Integration**

Malta's strong digital infrastructure has not yet translated into widespread innovation within rural sectors such as **agriculture, fisheries, and traditional crafts**. These sectors remain only partially connected to national and EU innovation ecosystems involving **research, entrepreneurship, and technology transfer**. Recent collaborative initiatives, including the **MAYA Agritech Ideathon** and the upcoming **MALTESE Develop Call funded project** are beginning to bridge this divide by promoting cooperation between agriculture, ICT, and education sectors, and by introducing early models for rural innovation partnerships.

Rationale / Evidence:

Stakeholder feedback and pilot consultations confirm that while Malta's ICT backbone ranks among the EU's strongest, rural and micro-enterprise integration into digital innovation systems remains limited. National strategies (Smart Specialisation, Gozo Regional Development Strategy 2030) have identified the need for stronger links between agriculture, digital industries, and education/training entities.

Implication:

Without sustained coordination and investment, rural sectors risk remaining peripheral to Malta's broader innovation economy.

- **Pending Uptake of EU-Driven Digital Tools**

While tools such as the **Multi-Actor Approach Tool (MAATool)** and **spatial planning platforms** are being developed and tested under the **PoliRuralPlus framework**, their adoption in Malta's rural context remains at an early, preparatory stage. Key challenges include limited human resources, competing operational priorities, and the need for targeted training to demonstrate the practical value of these digital solutions for small farmers, rural SMEs, and local administrators. While uptake remains limited at this stage, the forthcoming implementation phase (2026) under the **Develop** cascade-funded initiatives may provide an opportunity to **explore the practical application** of such tools within Malta's rural and island context.

Rationale / Evidence:

Internal reporting from PoliRuralPlus (WP3–WP5) confirms that Malta is among the pilots where the deployment of digital tools has been strategically deferred to later phases in order to ensure contextual alignment and stakeholder readiness. Consultations carried out during 2024–2025 consistently highlighted digital literacy gaps, limited time availability, and resource constraints as primary barriers to adoption among farmers, SMEs, and local authorities.

Implication:

Moving forward, capacity-building and exploratory co-design activities, particularly through and in collaboration with the MALTESE project, IoT and data-analytics training, can play a key role in assessing local relevance and building foundational competencies. These activities will help determine the conditions under which digital tools such as MAATool or other spatial and participatory platforms could be meaningfully introduced or adapted within Malta's rural and island governance systems.

- **Underdeveloped Rural Innovation Clusters**

Malta currently lacks **formalised innovation clusters** in rural areas, particularly outside central urban regions. Although there is increasing interest in agritech, circular economy, and sustainable tourism, **structured ecosystems linking farmers, SMEs, researchers, and digital innovators** are still in early development.

The Malta pilot, in collaboration with **local institutions, the MAYA Agritech Ideathon community, and the MALTESE partnership**, is laying the groundwork for more coordinated rural innovation hubs capable of pooling expertise, resources, and investment.

Rationale / Evidence:

Existing innovation infrastructure (e.g. Malta Enterprise, Malta Digital Innovation Agency, MCAST, University of Malta incubation schemes) is predominantly urban-centred. Policy documents (Smart Specialisation, National Agricultural Policy 2023–2030) highlight the need to extend innovation support to rural and island contexts.

Implication:

Developing regional innovation clusters would enable rural areas especially Gozo to serve as **“living laboratories”** for digital agriculture, renewable energy, and sustainable tourism models. This would foster inclusive economic diversification and enhance rural-urban integration.

2.2.2 Unemployment and Labour Mismatch

- **Youth underemployment and skills mismatch**

Although Malta's overall unemployment rate remains comparatively low, there is growing evidence that many young people, especially those from rural or peripheral areas such as Gozo face limited employment opportunities matching their education levels. This results in underemployment or out-migration to urban centres or abroad, weakening rural human capital and contributing to demographic imbalance in less-urbanised zones.

Rationale / Evidence:

National labour market reports indicate a discrepancy between educational attainment and available local job types; stakeholders in rural development report migration of youth seeking better opportunities. This trend is frequently mentioned in policy discussions on rural sustainability and demographic renewal (see e.g. national youth employment strategy reviews; reports by rural development stakeholders).

Implication:

Without targeted rural-oriented employment and entrepreneurship schemes (e.g. agritech, circular economy, agri-tourism) under the RAP, rural under-employment may persist, undermining long-term sustainability of rural communities.

- **Decline and aging in agricultural labour force**

Farming in Malta continues to be dominated by an ageing generation of farmers, with very few young entrants joining the sector. According to the **Agricultural Census 2020**, the agricultural labour force **decreased by around 26.7%** over the last decade (from approximately 18,200 persons in 2010 to 13,340 in 2020). The workforce is also significantly ageing: **76.2% of all agricultural workers are over 45**, and only **17.5% of agricultural managers are 44 or younger**, with a mere **0.5% under the age of 25**. Complementary national studies indicate that **only about 7% of farms are managed by young farmers (<40)**, and that **just 3.8% of farm holders are under 35**, well below the EU average. At the same time, the number of active agricultural holdings has **fallen by around 15–16%** over the past decade, signalling structural decline.

- **Rationale / Evidence:**

These figures demonstrate persistent low engagement of young farmers, a rapidly ageing labour base, and limited uptake of renewal or modernisation schemes. Stakeholder interviews further highlight that many younger individuals perceive farming as economically unattractive due to high land and operational costs, low returns, and limited incentives to adopt innovation or agritech solutions.

- **Implication:**

Without revitalisation measures including targeted training, incentives for sustainable and digital farming, and support for agritech adoption, Malta risks widening its succession gap. This would further weaken the rural labour backbone, undermining long-term food security, agricultural landscapes, and the socio-economic viability of rural communities.

- **Tourism-dependency and seasonal employment vulnerability**

Many rural and island areas (e.g. in Gozo) rely heavily on tourism, including agritourism, cultural heritage tourism, and seasonal services. This creates cycles of **seasonal employment**, with peaks in high tourism seasons and troughs in off-season periods, leading to economic instability, precarious incomes, and limited long-term job security for rural residents.

Rationale / Evidence:

National tourism economy statistics indicate that tourism-related activities represent a substantial share of Gozo's economy, with estimates suggesting that over **50–60%** of the island's employment is linked directly or indirectly to accommodation, food services, cultural tourism and seasonal visitor demand. Labour market data also shows that temporary or part-time contracts increase markedly between *June and September*, highlighting the strong seasonality of the sector.

Insights gathered through the Malta Pilot's 2024–2025 one-to-one interviews, stakeholder consultations and the AgriFusion cascade call further confirm this challenge. Rural SMEs and informal workers repeatedly described a heavy reliance on summer months to secure the majority of their annual income, with some estimating that 70–80% of turnover occurs during peak tourism months. Stakeholders also reported that limited diversification outside tourism restricts opportunities for stable, year-round employment.

Implication:

Without diversification into agriculture, agritech, circular economy, or year-round services, rural areas remain vulnerable to seasonal shocks, limiting resilience and long-term rural development.

2.2.3 Connectivity Deficits

- **Transport and inter-island linkage limitations**

While Malta overall benefits from a modern main road network, rural areas, particularly in the smaller island of Gozo still suffer from **limited public transport options**, infrequent inter-island connections, and insufficient services reaching remote or dispersed rural localities. This impedes access to essential services (healthcare, education), reduces mobility for work or entrepreneurship, and constrains rural economic opportunities.

Rationale / Evidence:

Regional mobility assessments, including studies by the Gozo Regional Development Authority, highlight persistent gaps in public transport coverage for localities with lower population density or located at the periphery of main village centres. Available data indicates that several rural routes operate with *reduced frequency*, particularly during off-peak hours, leading to long travel times and limited schedule flexibility. Stakeholders also emphasised challenges for youth and elderly residents who rely entirely on public transport.

Implication:

Without improved mobility infrastructure or alternative transport models (e.g. demand-responsive transport, enhanced ferry links, green mobility), rural residents remain isolated, limiting labour mobility, social inclusion, and access to services. This reduces the attractiveness of rural living and undermines rural-urban balance efforts.

- **Digital divide in application despite broad access**

Although Malta achieves **very high levels of broadband coverage and mobile connectivity**, with **national internet penetration around 93.5%** of the population and extensive fixed and mobile broadband access, significant gaps remain in the **digital skills and practical uptake of digital tools** among rural residents, micro-enterprises, and SMEs. [DataReportal – Global Digital Insights+1](#) While basic connectivity is nearly universal, only **63% of the Maltese population possesses at least basic digital skills**, leaving more than one-third of individuals with limited digital capability. [Digital Strategy+1](#) In parallel, data from SME

digitalisation assessments show that **around 23.5% of SMEs lack basic digital intensity**, indicating that a notable share of small enterprises have not fully integrated fundamental digital practices into their operations.

Many rural stakeholders report that **limited digital literacy, lack of tailored training, low awareness of digital tool benefits, and small organisational capacity** are recurring barriers to adoption particularly for advanced solutions such as IoT technologies, data analytics, e-markets, or platform-based services. These constraints reduce the ability of rural businesses and farmers to exploit digital and agritech innovations, despite widespread physical access to broadband infrastructure.

Rationale / Evidence:

National digital skills data show that basic digital competence is not yet universal, with **37% of the population lacking basic digital skills** - [Digital Strategy](#). Malta also faces challenges in expanding the pool of ICT specialists, and while connectivity infrastructure is strong, practical adoption of digital technologies varies by sector and organisational capacity - [Digital Skills and Jobs Platform](#). Stakeholder engagement in rural project planning repeatedly highlights these issues as key obstacles to digital uptake outside urban centres.

Implication:

Without targeted **capacity-building, awareness-raising, and support mechanisms** including tailored digital training, advisory services, and incentives for adoption, under-utilisation will persist. This limits the potential gains from **smart agriculture, rural services digitisation, and data-driven rural development**, ultimately constraining productivity, competitiveness, and the resilience of Malta's rural economy.

2.2.4 Mismatch Between Education and Rural Needs

Malta's vocational and higher education systems including MCAST, ITS, and the University of Malta increasingly offer programmes related to sustainability, digital transition, and green technologies. However, despite this progress, the alignment between training content and the practical needs of rural sectors remains limited. Many rural micro-enterprises, family farms, and local environmental initiatives report that existing curricula do not yet fully integrate *hands-on rural applications, digital agriculture, water-efficient farming, soil management, circular rural business models, or agri-entrepreneurship* tailored to Malta's small-scale context. This creates a situation where Malta has strong educational provision overall, but **rural sectors still struggle to find graduates with the specific, applied skills needed for modernised agriculture, green transition roles, and rural innovation**.

Rationale / Evidence:

National strategies such as the **National Employment Policy 2021–2030**, the **National Skills Strategy**, and **Human Capital Report updates** highlight persistent skills mismatches in green technologies, sustainable resource management, and digital innovation. Rural consultations under PoliRuralPlus indicate that while training exists, **exposure to real-world rural challenges is limited**, and students often lack opportunities for placements, apprenticeships, or pilots within rural contexts (e.g., farms, agri-tourism, landscape stewardship, local councils). Stakeholders also note that **current courses tend to be more generalised**,

with insufficient tailoring to Malta's unique small-plot agriculture, water scarcity, and niche agri-business models.

Implication:

Without stronger collaboration between educational institutions, rural enterprises, and local authorities, the next generation may continue to lack the **applied, place-specific, and entrepreneurial skills** required to drive innovation in Malta's rural economy. This limits the adoption of new technologies, sustainable farming practices, and diversification opportunities, despite the existence of strong general programmes at national level.

- **Limited Continuous Learning Infrastructure**

Adult learning, re-skilling, and professional development opportunities remain underdeveloped in Malta's rural and island communities. Although national initiatives for lifelong learning exist, rural participation rates are low due to limited accessibility, awareness, lack of tailored rural content, low awareness, time constraints, and manpower shortages within micro-enterprises and family-run agricultural holdings.

Rationale / Evidence:

The *Adult Learning Participation Report (NSO, 2024)* indicates that adult education participation in Gozo and rural districts is below the national average. Employers and rural SMEs report difficulties finding targeted short courses related to smart farming, digital agriculture tools, sustainable resource management, and circular economy practices relevant to Malta's small-scale agricultural context. Stakeholder feedback also highlights the absence of flexible, modular, or community-based training formats suited to farmers' irregular schedules and seasonal workloads.

Implication:

Strengthening adult and community-based learning particularly via **cascade-funded initiatives such as MALTESE** and partnerships with local institutions can boost adaptability and foster rural workforce resilience amid rapid technological change.

- **Brain Drain and Youth Outmigration**

Talented youth often migrate from rural areas to urban centres or abroad in search of better education and employment prospects, resulting in a long-term **skills vacuum** and demographic imbalance. Gozo, in particular, faces challenges in retaining young professionals, as job opportunities in high-value or innovation sectors remain concentrated on the main island.

Rationale / Evidence:

Demographic data from the *NSO (2023)* and findings from consultations led by the Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) highlight consistent youth outmigration trends, especially among individuals aged 18–34. Despite improvements in digital connectivity and transport links, young people continue to relocate due to perceived limited local opportunities, narrower career progression pathways, and wage differentials between Gozo and Malta.

Implication:

Addressing brain drain requires fostering localised innovation ecosystems, creating hybrid education–employment pathways, and expanding high-skill job opportunities within rural and island regions. Investments in sectors such as agritech, renewable energy, creative digital industries, and sustainable tourism combined with remote-work enablement, business incubation, and targeted youth entrepreneurship programmes can help retain talent, attract returnees, and restore demographic balance.

2.2.5 Governance & Institutional Fragmentation

- **Disjointed Rural Development Policies**

Malta’s rural development governance is spread across multiple ministries and agencies including those responsible for **agriculture, environment, water, tourism, energy, education and regional development**, often operating with limited cross-sector coordination. This leads to overlaps, inconsistent implementation, and missed opportunities to align rural, digital, environmental, and skills policies into a coherent long-term vision. These challenges are particularly evident in areas such as digital agriculture, water resource management, adult learning, and rural innovation.

Rationale / Evidence:

Review of policy frameworks (e.g., *National Agricultural Policy 2023–2030*, *Gozo Regional Development Strategy 2030*, *National Environment Strategy*) reveals fragmented mandates and limited mechanisms for inter-ministerial coordination. Stakeholder consultations under PoliRuralPlus noted the need for a dedicated coordination mechanism to streamline rural policy actions.

Evidence from related initiatives reinforces this pattern:

- The **AgriFusion cascade call** revealed challenges for rural entrepreneurs in accessing coordinated advisory services and guidance, with The Veg Box requiring significant handholding due to unclear institutional pathways.
- The **MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon** highlighted the lack of a single, unified platform or governance mechanism bringing together agriculture, digital innovation, youth engagement, and regional development actors.
- The **MALTESE project** (maltese-project.eu) identified governance and coordination gaps as structural barriers preventing effective adult learning and skills deployment for the twin transition in rural areas.

Implication:

Improved policy integration and inter-agency communication would ensure that rural development measures are coherent, cost-effective, and aligned with national sustainability and innovation goals.

- **Slow Administrative Procedures and Regulatory Bottlenecks**

Implementation of rural initiatives often faces delays due to **bureaucratic complexity**, lengthy approval processes, and limited institutional capacity, particularly in areas such as **funding access, land-use permits, environmental approvals** and regulatory compliance. Land fragmentation and complex tenure rules add further administrative burdens, slowing investment and innovation.

Rationale / Evidence:

Feedback from project implementers and SMEs cites administrative delays as a recurrent obstacle. Policy analyses (e.g., *Malta Country Report – European Semester 2024*) highlight public administration bottlenecks as a constraint to business competitiveness and innovation rollout. Land fragmentation issues have been noted in agricultural strategy reviews and stakeholder interviews.

Implication:

Simplifying procedures, harmonising regulations, and enhancing administrative transparency would significantly improve rural project uptake.

2.3 Opportunities

Malta as a partially rural and island region, particularly Gozo and peri-urban fringe areas, present a range of strategic opportunities that can be activated through coordinated, place-based action. These opportunities align well with national policy priorities and EU-level goals such as the Green Deal, the Digital Decade, and Smart Specialisation.

2.3.1 Growth Potential in Key Sectors

- **Youth Entrepreneurship and Innovation**

Malta's Youth Strategy 2020–2030 and the National Entrepreneurship Strategy provide strong national frameworks for encouraging youth engagement, creativity, and enterprise development. However, the real opportunity lies in localising these frameworks through grassroots innovation hubs, rural start-up incubators, and project-based learning that respond directly to community needs and youth aspirations. Such community-anchored approaches are essential for stimulating rural entrepreneurship, retaining young talent, and counteracting ongoing brain drain from Gozo and rural districts.

A supportive component of this ecosystem is the provision of **introductory entrepreneurship guidance**, particularly for young people exploring early ideas or considering pathways into innovation. Within the scope of PoliRuralPlus and related initiatives, AcrossLimits can clearly contribute by sharing its experience from EU-funded innovation projects and by offering guidance to participants, especially those emerging from training delivered under the MALTESE project or similar programmes.

This support may include broad inputs such as:

- general advice on developing or refining a business idea including the business and pricing models;

- sharing knowledge about innovation practices or relevant opportunities within Europe for companies and entities in Malta;
- Supporting networking, marketing and promotion of local products, services and initiatives;
- Pointing young people towards useful resources, networks, or platforms at an EU level;
- offering insights on collaboration or project development based on experience.

By combining this support with local hubs, youth-focused innovation activities, and opportunities such as agri-tech ideathons or micro-incubators, rural communities can create a more enabling environment for young people interested in entrepreneurship. This balanced approach grounded in national strategies but adapted to realistic pilot capacities can help foster youth-led rural innovation while remaining feasible within available resources.

- **Sustainable Tourism and Agri-tourism**

The diversification of Malta’s tourism sector, especially through the National Tourism Strategy 2021–2030, creates fertile ground for expanding sustainable, experience-based rural tourism. Gozo and smaller farming communities can leverage their cultural and environmental assets to attract responsible, high-value tourism. Agri-tourism offers a dual benefit of income diversification and heritage conservation.

- **Renewable Energy and Circular Economy Models**

Malta’s geographic and climatic profile is highly suitable for solar energy uptake in rural and agricultural settings. There is strong potential to integrate renewable energy with circular economy practices such as composting, waste reuse, land regeneration, and water-saving technologies like hydroponics. These approaches not only enhance the resilience and self-sufficiency of rural communities but also contribute to environmental restoration, aligning with the objectives set out in the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP).

- **Digitalisation and Smart Rural Transformation**

While rural areas still face digital application gaps, the foundational infrastructure is strong. Planned activities under the PoliRuralPlus pilot will deliver targeted training on IoT, digital analytics, and platform use, complimenting the ‘MALTESE’ project funded through the 3rd Cascade Call.

This joint initiative will introduce rural actors - farmers, local entrepreneurs, and community groups to practical applications of smart technologies supporting agriculture, agritourism, and service innovation. By aligning the training with the broader PoliRuralPlus framework, Malta’s rural zones will have the opportunity to start experiencing living laboratories for digital rural transformation, strengthening local innovation ecosystems and supporting evidence-based policy development in the years ahead.

Stakeholder Readiness and Ownership

- **Challenging but Ongoing Stakeholder Engagement**

Building an active ecosystem of farmers, innovators, educators, civil society organisations, and local authorities has been an ongoing effort within the Malta pilot. Engagement has not been automatic or uniform, **many stakeholders have initially shown hesitancy or asked “what’s in it for them,”** especially in

relation to unfamiliar tools or long-term policy visions. Nevertheless, through persistent outreach, practical demonstrations, and transparent communication, the pilot team has made important inroads. While full community mobilisation remains a work in progress, there is **growing awareness and curiosity** that continues to be nurtured.

- **Willingness to Co-create and Implement with Encouragement**

Although enthusiasm for co-creation varies, some rural stakeholders have begun to demonstrate a willingness to engage when the value proposition is made clear and relevant to their immediate realities. The Malta pilot recognises that stakeholder ownership is not a given, but must be **earned and continuously reinforced**. With tailored support and flexible facilitation, there is cautious but emerging potential for stakeholders to shift from passive involvement to active partnership.

- **Alignment with Strategic Objectives**

National strategies (Digital Strategy 2030, S3, NECP) provide a clear roadmap, but require adaptation to local rural realities. The Malta pilot serves as a translation mechanism, bridging policy ambition with practical community-led action, supported by clear demand and emerging local champions.

Agritech Innovation and Digital Transformation Opportunities

- A key emerging opportunity identified through the **MAYA Agritech Ideathon**, held in collaboration with Maltese stakeholders under the PoliRuralPlus framework, is the rapid development of an **innovation-driven agritech ecosystem** in Malta. The Ideathon engaged students, entrepreneurs, researchers, and farmers to co-create solutions addressing rural challenges such as water efficiency, sustainable crop management, data-driven agriculture, and climate resilience.
- This participatory initiative revealed the **untapped potential of youth entrepreneurship, digital technologies, and collaborative networks** as catalysts for rural transformation. Outcomes from the Ideathon include conceptual prototypes for precision agriculture tools, ideas for smart irrigation systems, and proposals for digital platforms connecting rural producers with local and urban markets.
- The event demonstrated how **multi-actor and co-creation approaches can** mobilize new innovation communities, foster technology adoption, and contribute directly to Malta's broader **digital transition and agriculture modernisation agenda**.

2.4 Gender and Diversity Dimensions

Gender participation patterns in rural Malta broadly mirror national trends:

Malta's rural and island communities present a distinctive demographic profile shaped by **high population density, small settlement size, and limited land availability**. Gozo and several rural localities on the main island retain strong social cohesion and inter-generational ties, yet face gradual ageing and youth out-migration.

Within the PoliRuralPlus pilot, participation has been **broadly balanced across genders**, with women actively engaged in community consultations, agritourism initiatives, and innovation events such as the **MAYA Agritech Ideathon**. Female participants have contributed significantly to discussions on sustainable agriculture, entrepreneurship, and community heritage, reinforcing inclusive representation within the pilot's stakeholder activities.

Women are often active in **education, tourism, and local entrepreneurship**, while men continue to dominate traditional sectors such as **construction, transport, and fisheries**. The pilot's inclusive engagement strategy has helped to bring these groups together through mixed workshops, co-creation sessions, and innovation challenges, ensuring a **balanced and representative dialogue**.

The pilot also promotes digital and entrepreneurial literacy among women and youth through upcoming **cascade-funded training (MALTESE)** and community-based innovation activities. These measures aim to **reduce structural participation gaps** and to strengthen the role of women, young professionals, and creative entrepreneurs in rural digital transformation.

3. Vision and Strategic Goals

3.1 Vision Statement

By **2040**, Malta's rural and island communities, particularly **Gozo** and smaller agricultural regions, will have **broader access to the knowledge, skills, and tools** needed to navigate environmental, digital, and demographic transitions in ways that reflect their unique context, capacity, and pace.

This vision does not assume rapid or top-down transformation, but rather a **gradual and inclusive evolution**, supported through **capacity-building, dialogue, and co-creation processes**. As an independent, non-governmental actor, the **Malta PoliRuralPlus pilot** serves as a **facilitator of informed change**, connecting local stakeholders, offering practical tools, and promoting the development of **place-based solutions** that make sense locally.

Through participatory foresight workshops, scenario exercises, and initiatives such as the **MAYA Agritech Ideathon** and the **MALTESE Develop Call project**, the pilot helps communities **imagine, test, and prepare for multiple possible futures**. These initiatives strengthen collaboration between education, technology, and agriculture sectors, and help rural actors adopt innovation at a pace suited to their realities.

By **2026**, the goal is to deepen stakeholder engagement and build trust among rural actors and institutions. By **2030**, the focus will be on expanding **digital fluency, youth and women's participation**, and **alignment between rural needs and national policy frameworks**.

Rather than prescribing a single model of development, this vision supports the **conditions for locally owned, adaptive decision-making**, acknowledging that progress will be uneven and shaped by governance, environmental, and economic dynamics beyond direct control. What matters most is that Malta's rural and island communities are **empowered to co-create their own futures**, resiliently and sustainably.

3.2 Strategic Goals

The Malta pilot will focus on **facilitating knowledge exchange, showcasing digital tools, supporting youth engagement**, and strengthening rural stakeholder dialogue. These goals reflect realistic timelines, known constraints, and recent progress in building trust and interest among key actors.

Goal 1: Deliver Targeted Training and Awareness Workshops (in coordination with the MALTESE project)

Objective:

Between Q1 2026 and Q4 2026, organise at least four joint training or knowledge-sharing events in collaboration with the MALTESE cascade-funded project, focusing on topics such as digital tools for agriculture, sustainable practices (e.g. hydroponics, composting, water management), circular economy principles, European opportunities and rural entrepreneurship.

Target:

Four coordinated workshops (including both Malta and Gozo) each engaging around 20 participants, with a balanced mix of youth, women, and small rural enterprises.

Context / Rationale:

This goal was deferred to align with the launch of MALTESE (2025–2026), ensuring synergies, shared resources, and consistent messaging on digitalisation and smart rural transformation. Delivering these workshops in a complimentary fashion will maximise outreach while reducing duplication of efforts.

SMART Summary:

- Specific: Practical, in-person knowledge exchange tailored to local needs.
- Measurable: 4 events delivered, participant attendance and gender balance tracked.
- Achievable: Coordinated with MALTESE delivery teams and local partners.
- Relevant: Central to pilot's objective of stakeholder capacity-building and engagement.
- Time-bound: Implemented within the 2026 calendar year.

Goal 2: Analyse and Integrate Lessons from the MAYA Agritech Ideathon

Objective:

By the end of the 1st quarter of 2026, review and analyse the outcomes of the MAYA Agritech Ideathon, drawing on the final MAYA report to identify key insights, transferable ideas, and potential synergies relevant to Malta's rural and agritech innovation landscape.

Target:

Produce one short analytical brief or internal summary highlighting at least three to five actionable insights or collaboration opportunities that can inform the Malta RAP implementation, future cascade activities, or stakeholder engagement strategy.

Context / Rationale:

The MAYA Agritech Ideathon, implemented in 2025, successfully mobilised youth and innovators to generate creative solutions for sustainable rural development. Its results were already communicated through project blogs and social-media channels, increasing visibility and awareness. The next step is to systematically analyse these results, drawing lessons, identifying relevant ideas for Malta's agritech context, and assessing potential areas for knowledge exchange or collaboration under PoliRuralPlus and MALTESE.

SMART Summary:

- **Specific:** Focused on extracting and contextualising lessons from an existing initiative.
- **Measurable:** One analytical note / summary report with at least 3–5 insights or recommendations.
- **Achievable:** Based on existing documentation and team expertise.
- **Relevant:** Strengthens evidence-based learning and cross-project knowledge transfer.
- **Time-bound:** Completed by Q1 2026.

Goal 3: Showcase Digital and Sustainable Tools through Demonstrations

Objective:

By the end of Q2 2026, conduct at least **two demonstration sessions** allowing rural actors to **observe and test digital or sustainable technologies** (e.g. IoT sensors, precision-farming apps, renewable-energy micro-solutions) in practical local settings.

Target:

Two demonstration events were held with participation of **at least 15 rural stakeholders per event**, including farmers, SMEs, and educators.

Context / Rationale:

Stakeholder feedback highlights the need for tangible, “see-and-touch” exposure to innovation rather than theoretical presentations. Demonstrations coordinated with MALTESE and local champions will translate innovation into relatable practice.

SMART Summary:

- **Specific:** Hands-on demonstration of applicable technologies.
- **Measurable:** Three sessions delivered; participant feedback collected.
- **Achievable:** Supported by project partners and technology providers.
- **Relevant:** Addresses low perceived relevance of digital tools.
- **Time-bound:** completion Q2 2026.

Goal 4: Establish Baseline Data and Monitoring Framework

Objective:

By **Q3 2026**, design and implement a **baseline survey** among rural stakeholders (farmers, SMEs, households, youth) to assess current **digital tool use, skills levels, innovation attitudes, and demographic participation**.

Target:

At least **40 responses** collected across Malta and Gozo, disaggregated by age, gender, and sector, to serve as a reference for monitoring progress and guiding future policy recommendations.

Context / Rationale:

Reliable rural-specific data are currently limited. Establishing a baseline will fill this gap and provide an evidence foundation for evaluation, policymaking, and future projects under the Malta RAP. Collaboration with the Malta Digital Innovation Agency will be sought since they are already doing a digital skills for SMEs audit.

SMART Summary:

- **Specific:** Baseline data collection and reporting.
- **Measurable:** 40 responses analysed; findings summarised.
- **Achievable:** Conducted using online/field survey tools and partner networks including MDIA.
- **Relevant:** Enables evidence-based planning and monitoring.
- **Time-bound:** Completed by Q3 2026.

Goal 5: Facilitate Knowledge Sharing and Potential Policy Uptake

Objective:

By **late 2026**, prepare and share a concise summary of key findings, insights, and lessons learned from the **Malta PoliRuralPlus pilot**, including outcomes from workshops, demonstrations, stakeholder dialogues, and analyses such as the **MAYA Agritech Ideathon review and the completion of 'MALTESE'**. The summary will be made available to relevant **national or regional authorities, policy stakeholders, and development agencies** for their consideration in future rural or innovation initiatives.

Target:

One **non-binding policy brief or presentation** delivered to at least **one relevant government or institutional audience**, showcasing evidence and examples of good practice emerging from the pilot.

Context / Rationale:

As a non-governmental and facilitative initiative, the Malta PoliRuralPlus pilot has no formal decision-making role. However, it can **serve as a bridge** between research, practice, and policy by sharing practical, community-level insights that may support national rural development strategies or Smart Specialisation updates. Any future uptake of the pilot's results will depend entirely on the interest and discretion of public authorities.

SMART Summary:

- **Specific:** Share consolidated lessons and outputs with policymakers.
- **Measurable:** At least one policy brief or presentation prepared and shared.
- **Achievable:** Based on completed pilot actions and data.
- **Relevant:** Enhances visibility, transparency, and potential for policy alignment.
- **Time-bound:** Completed by Q4 2026.

4. Action Plan

4.1 Measures and Actions

4.1.1 Intervention Areas

Intervention Area	Needs Identified	Measures	Actions (2025–2026)
Digital Skills & Technology	Low uptake of digital tools in rural sectors; limited awareness of relevance and practical applications.	Improve digital literacy and promote hands-on, context-specific technology use in agriculture, tourism, and small enterprises.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver 4 joint digital-focused workshops in collaboration with MALTESE (including both Malta & Gozo) on IoT, water management, circular economy, and rural entrepreneurship. • Conduct 2 demonstration sessions showcasing applicable digital and sustainable tools. • Collect and summarise participant feedback to inform RAP implementation and MALTESE coordination.
Youth Engagement & Innovation	Youth migration; limited visibility of rural innovation opportunities.	Strengthen youth participation and promote creative agritech and entrepreneurship pathways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse and integrate lessons from the MAYA Agritech Ideathon (2025) by reviewing its final report and related blogs. • Produce one analytical brief highlighting 3–5 relevant insights for Malta’s rural innovation context. • Share findings through RAP communication channels and partner events.
Sustainable Rural Practices	Limited adoption of regenerative, circular, or water-efficient practices.	Introduce small-scale, replicable sustainable practices aligned with local needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise 2 training sessions on hydroponics, composting, and water conservation in collaboration with MALTESE and local partners. • Document and showcase case studies of effective local practices during events and through RAP dissemination.

Capacity Building for Change Agents	Limited number of local facilitators or champions able to sustain initiatives beyond the pilot.	Identify and support motivated individuals through participatory training and mentoring opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide ad hoc mentoring and peer-learning opportunities for workshop participants. • Engage selected individuals as co-facilitators or resource persons in follow-up events. • Promote cross-pilot knowledge exchange through PoliRuralPlus channels.
Evidence & Monitoring	Lack of rural-specific data on digital skills, innovation attitudes, and participation.	Develop baseline data and a light monitoring framework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a baseline survey (Q2–Q3 2026) with at least 40 respondents across Malta and Gozo. • Analyse and report key findings (disaggregated by age, gender, sector) to guide future planning.
Knowledge Sharing & Potential Policy Uptake	Limited visibility of pilot outcomes within public policy circles.	Facilitate voluntary knowledge transfer and communication of pilot findings to relevant institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare one non-binding policy brief or presentation summarising key pilot results, lessons, and examples of good practice. • Present or share the brief with at least one government or institutional body by Q4 2026. • Clarify that any uptake of outcomes will depend on institutional interest and discretion.

Notes:

- I. Actions are designed to be **high-impact**, and **co-delivered with local actors** where possible.
- II. Interventions aim not to replace government responsibility but to **catalyse dialogue, uptake, and experimentation**.
- III. Flexibility is embedded to adapt based on feedback and participation levels, especially in politically sensitive areas.

4.1.2 Actions

To address the challenges identified and advance the vision for Malta’s rural and island areas, the PoliRuralPlus pilot proposes a coherent set of **realistic, evidence-informed actions** organised around five intervention areas. These actions emphasise *enabling conditions* -awareness, exposure, and local capacity rather than systemic reform, recognising the pilot’s facilitative, non-governmental role. Each action is grounded in observed needs, stakeholder feedback, and proven models from comparable European contexts.

A. Digital Skills & Technology Exposure

Action:

Support the organisation of a series of **four hands-on workshops** and **two demonstration sessions** across rural and peri-urban Malta (including Gozo) in coordination with the **MALTESE cascade-funded project**, focusing on the **practical use of digital tools** in agriculture, agritourism, and circular entrepreneurship.

Steps:

- Identify locally relevant technologies (e.g., IoT sensors, precision-farming apps, digital marketing tools).
- Partner with technology providers and educators for demonstrations.
- Deliver workshops in accessible community venues.
- Gather participant feedback to guide future capacity-building.

Justification:

Repeated foresight consultations and stakeholder dialogues confirm low awareness and perceived relevance of digital tools among rural actors. Practical demonstrations have proven effective in similar small-island or southern EU contexts where abstract training is insufficient to spur adoption.

Expected Outcomes:

- ~40 rural stakeholders gain direct exposure to relevant tools.
- Increased confidence in how digitalisation supports productivity and diversification.
- Local early adopters act as informal multipliers.

B. Youth Engagement through Innovation Learning

Action:

Analyse and integrate lessons from the **MAYA Agritech Ideathon (2025)** to extract key youth-driven insights and identify collaboration opportunities for Malta's rural innovation ecosystem.

Steps:

- Review the MAYA final report and associated blogs.
- Identify 3–5 key insights or transferable ideas.
- Produce one short analytical brief summarising findings and relevance for Malta.
- Share conclusions through RAP updates, partner events, and social media.

Justification:

The Ideathon successfully mobilised young innovators and generated diverse agritech ideas. Systematic analysis and visibility of these results can inform Malta's emerging innovation dialogue and inspire similar youth-focused approaches.

Expected Outcomes:

- Analytical brief highlighting actionable youth innovation lessons.
- Greater awareness of agritech and digital entrepreneurship potential among young people.
- Stronger bridges between EU youth initiatives and Malta's rural context.

C. Sustainable Rural Practices**Action:**

Deliver **two thematic training sessions** on low-barrier sustainable practices such as hydroponics, composting, circular production, and water-saving systems.

Steps:

- Select topics of high local relevance (e.g., water reuse).
- Collaborate with NGOs or practitioners already applying these methods.
- Deliver practical, half-day sessions supported by MALTESE where possible.
- Document and disseminate good practices through brief summaries or videos.

Justification:

Water scarcity and land-use pressure are critical issues in Malta's rural zones. Hands-on learning in sustainable resource management has proven effective in other Mediterranean contexts with similar environmental constraints.

Expected Outcomes:

- ~40 participants introduced to regenerative and circular techniques.
- Adoption of small-scale sustainable practices by early adopters.
- Locally generated examples feed into future environmental policy discussions.

D. Capacity Building for Local Change Agents**Action:**

Identify and support **a small group of motivated rural actors** who can serve as facilitators, peer mentors, or communication bridges within their communities.

Steps:

- Observe active participants during events.
- Invite selected individuals to assist in facilitation or outreach roles.
- Offer ad hoc mentoring and visibility.
- Connect them with peers through the PoliRuralPlus Knowledge Space.

Justification:

Local leadership and peer learning are critical for sustaining momentum after project completion. “Local champions” approaches have shown strong ripple effects in Slovenia and Ireland.

Expected Outcomes:

- 2–5 local multipliers identified and active.
- Improved ownership and continuity of rural innovation activities.
- Strengthened self-organising capacity of rural networks.

E. Evidence & Knowledge Transfer for Policy Consideration

Action:

Conduct a **baseline data survey** on rural digitalisation and participation, and compile a **non-binding policy brief** summarising key findings and pilot lessons for potential consideration by national and regional authorities.

Steps:

- Design and administer a baseline survey (Q2–Q3 2026) with at least 40 respondents.
- Analyse data disaggregated by age, gender, and sector.
- Prepare a concise policy brief or presentation summarising results and lessons learned.
- Share outputs with at least one relevant institutional or policy forum.

Justification:

Robust data and transparent knowledge sharing enhance evidence-based policymaking. While the pilot has no formal mandate, voluntary communication of results supports alignment with national and EU rural innovation objectives.

Expected Outcomes:

- Reliable baseline data established for future monitoring.
- Pilot findings visible to policymakers and stakeholders.
- Opportunities identified for voluntary uptake or collaboration.

Implementation Matrix

Action	Lead Actor(s)	Supporting Stakeholders	Timeline
Digital Skills & Technology Exposure	Malta Pilot Team, MALTESE Project Partners	Farmers, Rural SMEs, NGOs, Tech Providers	Q1 2026 – Q4 2026
Youth Engagement through MAYA Ideathon Analysis	Malta Pilot Team	MAYA Project Partners, Youth Organisations, Education Networks	Q1 2026 – Q2 2026

Sustainable Rural Practices Training	Malta Pilot Team, Local Practitioners, MALTESE Partners	Environmental NGOs, Demonstration Farms, Rural Stakeholders	Q2 2026 – Q4 2026
Capacity Building for Local Change Agents	Malta Pilot Team, Engaged Participants	Educational Institutions, Civil Society, Local Communities	Q4 2025 – Q3 2026
Baseline Data Collection & Monitoring	Malta Pilot Team, Research Support	Local Councils, Rural Associations, Stakeholder Networks	Q2 2026 – Q3 2026
Knowledge Sharing & Potential Policy Uptake	Malta Pilot Team	National Agencies, Development Partners, EU Projects	Q3 2026 – Q4 2026

4.2 Expected Outcomes

Expected Outcomes Table

Action Area	Expected Outcomes (2025–2026)
Digital Skills & Technology Exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 60 rural stakeholders (farmers, SMEs, educators) introduced to practical digital tools and applications. • At least 2 demonstration events were conducted, with early adopters beginning local trials or pilot uses. • Increased awareness and confidence in digitalisation as a driver of productivity and diversification.
Youth Engagement through MAYA Ideathon Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One analytical brief produced summarising 3–5 key insights from the MAYA Agritech Ideathon. • Lessons from youth-led innovation integrated into Malta’s rural innovation and education dialogue. • Broader visibility of agritech and creative entrepreneurship opportunities among youth networks.
Sustainable Rural Practices Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40+ participants trained in sustainable practices such as hydroponics, composting, and water reuse. • 1-2 small-scale case examples or local trial adopters identified and documented. • Improved local understanding of regenerative and resource-efficient approaches.
Capacity Building for Local Change Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 motivated individuals emerge as local “change agents,” taking facilitation or peer-learning roles in workshops and events. • Strengthened continuity and ownership of rural innovation activities beyond project lifespan.
Baseline Data Collection & Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline dataset established from at least 40 survey responses, disaggregated by gender, age, and sector. • Findings provide evidence for tracking progress and supporting future project planning.

<p>Knowledge Sharing & Potential Policy Uptake</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One concise, non-binding policy brief or presentation produced and shared with at least one institutional body. • Pilot outcomes, lessons, and recommendations made available for voluntary consideration by authorities. • Increased visibility of Malta’s pilot within the broader EU rural innovation context.
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5. Policy and Funding Alignment

5.1 EU and National Policy Alignment:

The Malta Regional Action Plan (RAP) has been developed with careful consideration of the broader European and national policy landscape. While the plan operates at a grassroots and facilitative level, it contributes meaningfully to the ambitions of the **EU Green Deal**, **Horizon Europe (Cluster 6)**, **Digital Europe Programme**, and the **EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)**, by translating their strategic goals into tangible, locally appropriate actions. Through the **PoliRuralPlus framework**, the RAP acts as a bridge between high-level EU strategies and on-the-ground implementation, creating enabling conditions for uptake, dialogue, and future policy alignment.

Alignment with the EU Green Deal

The Malta RAP supports the Green Deal’s objectives of **climate neutrality**, **sustainable resource use**, and **resilient ecosystems** through locally tailored, participatory measures, including:

- **Training in regenerative, circular, and low-input agricultural practices** (e.g., composting, hydroponics, water reuse), promoting climate-smart solutions adapted to Malta’s resource-constrained agricultural context.
- **Stakeholder awareness-building on land restoration, biodiversity, and sustainable tourism**, strengthening the socio-ecological resilience of local communities.
- **Community-led contributions to national climate targets**, encouraging informal climate action, citizen participation, and small-scale experimentation that complement Malta’s national adaptation strategy and CAP strategic plan.

These actions collectively advance Green Deal priorities on sustainable food systems, ecosystem restoration, and just transition pathways at local scale.

Alignment with Horizon Europe

The Malta pilot supports **Horizon Europe’s mission-driven approach** notably *Soil Health and Food, Adaptation to Climate Change*, and *Climate-Neutral and Smart Communities* by:

RAP

- Acting as a **knowledge transfer conduit**, translating innovation outputs (from EU projects or partners) into digestible, usable formats for rural actors.
- Supporting **multi-actor co-creation**, as encouraged under Horizon Europe’s mission-driven approach, especially in food, climate adaptation, and soil health.
- Testing participatory methods like **MAATool** and visioning workshops that contribute to foresight, social innovation, and responsible research practices.

Through these mechanisms, the RAP enhances Malta’s integration into European innovation ecosystems and supports the **Horizon Europe Cluster 6 priorities on food, bioeconomy, natural resources, and environment**.

Alignment with the Digital Europe Programme and the Digital Decade

Digital capacity-building is a core pillar of the Malta RAP and a key enabler of inclusive rural development. In alignment with **Digital Europe** and the **EU Digital Decade**, the RAP contributes to Europe’s digital transition by:

- **Introducing rural and island stakeholders to digital tools and data-driven platforms** that enhance sustainable agriculture, rural tourism, micro-enterprise management, and e-services.
- **Promoting digital inclusion in rural areas such as Gozo**, where digital skills and confidence remain limited, thereby addressing gaps identified in Malta’s national digital strategy.
- **Facilitating local participation in Europe’s digital transformation agenda**, ensuring that rural users are active participants and visible contributors to the broader digital ecosystem.

These actions contribute directly to **PoliRuralPlus Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** on digital capacity-building and policy uptake, reinforcing the twin green-and-digital transition at regional scale.

The Malta RAP does not aim to directly contribute to EU policy; rather, it **translates European ambitions into locally feasible actions** that prepare communities for future alignment and participation. By fostering awareness, capacity, and collaboration, the plan supports the **EU Green Deal’s climate and biodiversity goals**, **Horizon Europe’s mission-oriented innovation logic**, and **Digital Europe’s inclusivity objectives**.

In doing so, it offers a **modest but meaningful contribution to Europe’s green, digital, and socially inclusive transformation**, demonstrating how **place-based, multi-actor approaches** can make EU strategies real and relevant in small-island contexts like Malta.

5.2 Funding Sources

5.1.1 Potential funding mechanisms

Implementation and long-term sustainability of the Malta Regional Action Plan will look into mobilising a combination of EU, national, and regional funding instruments, ensuring complementarity and continuity with

existing Maltese and European policy frameworks. The RAP’s actions are designed to be adaptable within the programming logic of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP 2023–2027), Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, and the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), as well as national grant schemes promoting digitalisation, innovation, and sustainable land management.

The table below summarises the principal funding opportunities and synergies relevant to the RAP implementation phase.

Funding Source	Type	Use / Link to RAP Actions
National Aid through MDIA (Malta Digital Innovation Authority)	National Grant	Supports awareness-raising, digital literacy, and the uptake of innovation tools in micro-enterprises and cooperatives. Aligns with RAP digital-capacity KPIs.
National “Digitalise Your SME” Grant	National Grant	Suitable for rural tourism and agri-businesses adopting digital tools, online booking, e-marketing, or precision-farming applications.
National Training Scheme for Young Farmers	National Scheme	Enables youth engagement, capacity building, and follow-up activities from the MAYA ideathon and other innovation challenges.
Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)	EU Fund	Provides support for sustainable farming, agro-ecology, and circular bioeconomy measures. RAP actions on regenerative agriculture and soil health are aligned with Malta’s CAP Strategic Plan eco-schemes.
European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)	EU Structural Fund	Funds demonstration farms, training, and innovation pilots in land regeneration and water reuse. Can complement community workshops under the RAP.
LEADER / Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)	EU Programme	Facilitates bottom-up rural initiatives and supports local partnerships implementing RAP measures at micro-regional scale (e.g., Gozo).
Business Enhance RRP (Digitise Micro Business)	Recovery and Resilience Facility Grant	Supports small enterprises piloting smart or digital tools, consistent with the RAP’s digital transition pillar and the EU Digital Decade targets.
Digital Europe Programme	EU Digital Programme	Contributes to training, networking, and exposure of rural stakeholders to digital ecosystems and open-data services, in line with PoliRuralPlus Platform use .
Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA)	Horizon Europe Partnership	Supports collaboration on sustainable water management, climate adaptation, and agri-food innovation—key focus areas of the Malta RAP.
Interreg Cross-Border Co-operation (Italy–Malta 2021–2027)	EU Territorial Co-operation Programme	Enables co-development with similar island and coastal regions (e.g., Sicily, Gozo), fostering interregional learning and joint pilots on green and blue economy.
EIT Food / EIT WE Lead Food Initiative	EU Innovation Instrument	Promotes youth entrepreneurship, women’s leadership, and agri-food innovation—complementary to RAP training and circular-economy actions.

5.1.2 Stakeholder access to financial instruments

Access to financial instruments among Malta’s rural stakeholders remains **uneven** and often **fragmented across administrative levels**. While national and EU-level programmes exist, their uptake by small-scale rural actors especially micro-enterprises, community organisations, and young farmers tends to be low due to **limited awareness across the board, administrative complexity, and capacity constraints**.

Existing Access and Challenges

- **Agricultural and rural actors** have access to **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** and **EAFRD** measures through national calls; however, the complexity of applications and the need for co-financing discourage smaller or informal stakeholders from applying.
- **Digitalisation grants** (e.g., MDIA and “Digitalise your SME”) are accessible to registered businesses but less so for cooperatives, informal rural networks, and social enterprises - groups that form a core part of the Malta RAP’s target audience.
- **LEADER/CLLD** initiatives offer valuable support for local partnerships and community projects, yet coverage is limited, and funding windows do not always align with grassroots readiness or the timing of emerging ideas.
- **Private finance and green investment schemes** are still in early development in Malta’s rural sector, with few blended or micro-financing options tailored for environmental or circular economy innovation.

Name of Fund / Grant / Call	Time Window / Deadline (2026-relevant)	Eligible Actors	Relevant RAP Use (Why It Fits)
Digitalise Your SME (ERDF-backed)	Rolling call with scheduled cut-offs into 2026, including: 16 Jan 2026, 30 Jan 2026, 13 Feb 2026, 27 Feb 2026, 13 Mar 2026 PwC+1	Micro / small / medium enterprises (SMEs) legally established in Malta or Gozo EU funding for Maltese SMEs+1	Supports digital capacity building, adoption of digital tools - directly relevant to RAP’s digital inclusion / enterprise pillar
LEADER Xlokk – Measure 1 & 2	Deadline 16 January 2026 for currently published call round sem.gov.mt+1	Regional Councils; Local Councils; NGOs; Enterprises (depending on measure) sem.gov.mt+1	Useful for community-led rural development: environmental improvement, rural infrastructure, social infrastructure - fits RAP’s rural-urban and community development aims

LEADER / Rural-Development Calls via Majjistral Action Group Foundation (LEADER Majjistral)	As part of the 2021–2027 funding period - consult current open call lists; though no fixed date publicly confirmed (requires checking periodically) sem.gov.mt	Local communities, NGOs, enterprises, stakeholders in rural zones sem.gov.mt	Funding for heritage safeguarding; biodiversity; short supply-chain; capacity building aligns with RAP’s regenerative agriculture, biodiversity, local tourism / food systems
SME Enhance (Business Enhance umbrella, ERDF-backed)	Latest known rounds had deadlines in late 2025 but given the 2021–2027 ERDF cycle and previous renewals, likely to reopen in 2026 (subject to SEM scheduling) fondi.eu+1	SMEs / enterprises (including start-ups) Deloitte+1	Could support small rural-based enterprises, agri-business, rural tourism ventures needing equipment, diversification or digital/green investment
Rural Infrastructure / Environment Measures via LEADER / EU-funded rural dev. programmes	Ongoing 2021–2027 funding period under EU rural development - calls may recur; check periodically for announcements (especially via regional councils or Local Councils) e.g. for infrastructure, environment, regeneration projects	Local / regional councils, NGOs, enterprises, community groups (depending on specific measure)	Useful for rural-urban linkages, land restoration, biodiversity, green infrastructure - key for RAP’s environmental and territorial resilience focus

As a result, **many rural stakeholders lack flexible, small-scale funding instruments** that can support experimentation, digital adoption, and regenerative practices, the very actions promoted in the RAP.

Need for Innovative and Complementary Mechanisms

To close this gap, the RAP recommends exploring discussions about **new and innovative financial mechanisms** that are **accessible, low-barrier, and impact-oriented**. Potential options include:

- **Micro-grant or seed funding schemes** to support bottom-up experimentation, particularly in regenerative farming, sustainable tourism, or digital innovation (linked to CAP or RRP funds).
- **Innovation vouchers or co-creation credits**, allowing local actors to access expert advice, digital tools, or research collaboration via universities and PoliRuralPlus partners.

- **Blended finance models**, combining small public grants with private sponsorship or community investment for initiatives that have clear environmental and social returns.
- **Revolving funds or community investment pools**, inspired by LEADER approaches, to sustain funding cycles beyond initial grants and build local ownership.
- **Digital finance literacy and capacity-building**, ensuring that local organisations understand how to identify, apply for, and manage EU and national funds effectively.

Summary

While several funding instruments are theoretically available to Malta's rural stakeholders, **their practical accessibility remains limited**. The introduction of **smaller, more agile, and community-oriented mechanisms** supported by **digital tools** and **multi-actor cooperation frameworks** (such as the MAATool) would greatly enhance local engagement, uptake, and long-term sustainability of the RAP measures.

These actions align with **PoliRuralPlus objectives** to foster **inclusive financing ecosystems, capacity building, and sustainable resource mobilisation** for regional transformation.

5.3 Partnerships

Overview

The Malta Regional Action Plan (RAP) is implemented through a **facilitative, training-oriented partnership model** designed to build local capacity and foster collaboration among actors engaged in Malta's rural innovation ecosystem.

As a **non-governmental and non-affiliated actor**, the RAP team's focus is not on influencing policy or formal institutional change. Instead, it concentrates on **practical training, awareness building, and skills enhancement**, supporting stakeholders in applying digital, green, and participatory tools in their own contexts.

The approach is consistent with the **PoliRuralPlus "cascade" model**, where knowledge and innovation are shared horizontally through community partnerships, local enterprises, and regional stakeholders.

Core Partnerships and Collaborations

The strongest collaborations developed so far are with the **implementers of the PoliRuralPlus Cascade Calls**, which have provided practical entry points for training and co-learning. These partnerships demonstrate the RAP's community-based, action-driven character:

Partner / Initiative	Role / Contribution
Veg Box Initiative	Promotes community-based circular food systems and supports awareness training on sustainable consumption and regenerative practices.
MAYA (Malta Youth in Agriculture) Initiative	Provides a youth-led platform for innovation and capacity building in agri-entrepreneurship; connects younger participants to digital tools and peer mentoring.
MALTESE Implementors – PAMEA, SemaBlu, and associated partner entity	Demonstrate practical applications of sustainable technology and innovation in agriculture and water management; act as hosts or collaborators in technical training and demonstration activities.

These collaborations are not formal institutional partnerships but rather **learning alliances** - relationships built on shared objectives of knowledge exchange, experimentation, and the application of innovative practices in local settings.

Future Engagements

To extend the reach and sustainability of the RAP's training and awareness activities, the team is **engaging with key national and regional stakeholders** in a cooperative, non-binding manner.

Prospective collaborators include:

- **MDIA (Malta Digital Innovation Authority)** – for digital literacy, trust, and innovation awareness.
- **SEM (Servizzi Ewropej f' Malta)** – for guidance on EU funding opportunities and access to information.
- **GRDA (Gozo Regional Development Authority)** – for regional coordination and rural innovation outreach.
- **Local Councils and Regional Groups** – as venues and multipliers for training, community events, and stakeholder networking.
- **MCAST (Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology)** – with potential involvement in the implementation of selected activities, particularly those linked to the MALTESE project. MCAST can serve as a valuable partner for youth outreach, helping promote participation among vocational students and facilitating engagement in digital skills, sustainability, and introductory entrepreneurship training relevant to rural and agritech contexts.

Such actors are expected to participate **as enablers, facilitators, or contributors or co-implementors to training sessions**. Their involvement would strengthen local visibility, promote inclusion, and support the cascading of knowledge to rural communities.

Partnership Function

The Malta RAP partnership structure remains **non-hierarchical and facilitative**. Its goal is to:

- Use in-house **expertise network** to deliver training and mentoring sessions on regenerative practices, circular economy, digital tools, and entrepreneurship.
- Provide **neutral learning spaces** where community actors can exchange ideas and strengthen local cooperation.
- Encourage **voluntary and informal participation** from farmer and industry operators, local councils, youth networks, and social enterprises.

This ensures that training and knowledge exchange remain practical, inclusive, and scalable within available resources.

Sustainability and Continuity

Partnership sustainability will be achieved by:

- Continuing **low-cost, modular training formats** that can be reused by future community groups.
- Sharing **materials and toolkits openly** through the PoliRuralPlus Knowledge Space and partner networks.
- Strengthening ties with cascade call implementors (Veg Box, MAYA, MATESE) as long-term collaborators in community engagement and skills transfer.
- Gradually expanding cooperation with public and regional entities (MDIA, SEM, GRDA, local councils) as training allies, that could sustain this approach long term.

This pragmatic, resource-efficient approach ensures that the RAP remains consistent with its facilitative mission while embedding knowledge and skills in Malta's rural communities.

Summary

The Malta RAP partnership framework is **based on collaboration**. Its value lies in **training, enabling, and connecting**, helping local actors gain the awareness and skills needed to participate in Malta's ongoing green and digital transition.

By working closely with **cascade call implementors (Veg Box, MAYA, MATESE)** and progressively engaging **national and regional entities (MDIA, SEM, GRDA, local councils)**, the RAP demonstrates how small-scale, in-house capacity-building actions can create meaningful, long-term ripple effects across the rural innovation ecosystem.

6. Roadmap

This Roadmap outlines the phased, realistic implementation pathway for the Malta PoliRuralPlus RAP between 2025 and 2026. It translates the strategic goals, intervention areas, and planned actions into a clear timeline, implementation plan, and monitoring approach. The Roadmap reflects the resource-light, facilitative nature of the Malta pilot and is aligned with the complementary timeline of the MALTESE cascade-funded project and insights from the MAYA Agritech Ideathon.

6.1 Timeline:

Sequencing of actions with short-term (2025–2027), medium-term (2028–2035), and long-term (2036–2040) milestones

The Malta PoliRuralPlus Roadmap follows a **phased, adaptive approach** that reflects both the preparatory work undertaken prior to the RAP and the realistic implementation capacity of a small-scale, facilitative pilot. Rather than a linear progression, the timeline combines **iterative learning, stakeholder engagement, and gradual scaling**, ensuring that actions remain responsive to local needs and evolving policy and funding contexts.

Preparatory Phase (2024 – early 2025): Foundations and Evidence Gathering

Although the formal RAP timeline begins in 2025, significant groundwork was undertaken during 2024 and early 2025 to inform and shape the Action Plan.

Key preparatory activities included:

- One-to-one meetings with farmers, rural SMEs, youth organisations, and local stakeholders to understand operational realities, technology use, constraints, and expectations;
- Hands-on support during the implementation of the **AgriFusion** cascade-funded initiative (December 2024 – Spring 2025), providing close mentoring and insight into practical challenges faced by rural innovators;
- Support to the preparation and submission of the **MaYA Agritech Ideathon** application (Spring–Summer 2025), followed by active participation in preparatory webinars, the Ideathon itself, and post-event reflection;
- Continuous review and assistance during the preparation and launch of the **3rd Cascade Call** project (**MALTESE**), with ongoing collaboration during its early implementation phase.

These activities generated critical qualitative insights and lessons learned, which directly informed the RAP's priorities, intervention areas, and sequencing.

Short-Term Milestones (2025–2027): Implementation, Learning, and Coordination

The short-term phase focuses on **active implementation, coordination with cascade-funded projects, and structured learning**, as reflected in the RAP Roadmap Gantt for 2025–2026.

Key milestones include:

- **2025**
 - Continued stakeholder management and outreach, building on existing trust and relationships;
 - Ongoing collaboration with cascade-funded initiatives (AgriFusion, MaYA, MALTESE), including mentoring, review, and informal monitoring of outcomes;
 - Initial use and exploration of PoliRuralPlus tools (e.g. Jackdaw, attractiveness tools, communication tools), primarily for awareness and feedback purposes;
 - Iterative updates to the RAP based on observed outcomes and stakeholder feedback.

- **2026**
 - Delivery of joint workshops, training sessions, and demonstration events in coordination with the MALTESE project;
 - Structured analysis of lessons learned from the MaYA Agritech Ideathon and cascade-funded mini-projects;
 - Collection of baseline data on digital skills, innovation uptake, and participation patterns among rural stakeholders;
 - Preparation and voluntary sharing of a non-binding summary of findings with relevant institutions for awareness and possible future alignment.

Throughout this phase, RAP actions are implemented in a **non-prescriptive manner**, emphasising participation, exposure, and capacity-building.

Medium-Term Milestones (2028–2035): Consolidation and Scaling

The medium-term horizon envisions **consolidation and potential scaling**, depending on stakeholder uptake, institutional interest, and funding availability.

RAP

Indicative directions include:

- Replication or expansion of successful training formats, demonstration activities, and community-led innovation initiatives through LEADER, CAP, or other national/EU programmes;
- Stronger integration of digital and agritech practices into rural education, vocational training, and SME support schemes;
- Use of accumulated evidence and baseline data to inform future rural development strategies, research projects, or funding proposals;
- Emergence of informal rural innovation clusters or networks, particularly in Gozo, supported by partnerships with education institutions and innovation agencies.

The RAP itself does not mandate these developments but aims to **create enabling conditions** for such outcomes.

Long-Term Milestones (2036–2040): Systemic Readiness and Resilience

In the long term, the impact of the Malta PoliRuralPlus pilot is expected to be indirect but cumulative.

By 2040, the intended legacy includes:

- A more digitally confident and innovation-aware rural stakeholder base;
- Stronger rural–urban linkages supported by evidence, dialogue, and community-level experimentation;
- Improved readiness of rural communities to engage with future green and digital transitions;
- Availability of tested, context-appropriate models for rural training, engagement, and co-creation that can inform national or EU-level initiatives.

The Malta RAP therefore positions itself not as a driver of systemic reform, but as a **catalyst for learning, preparedness, and long-term resilience** within Malta’s rural and island context.

Activity	2025												2026											
	Month												Month											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Stakeholders Management																								
1.1 Stakeholders Meeting/s																								
1.2 Stakeholder meetings																								
1.3 1.2 Focus groups & workshops																								
1.3 Attracting new stakeholders																								
2 Third party calls - synergies with third parties																								
2.1 Outreach																								
2.2 Mobilise																								
2.3 Develop																								
2.4 Enhance																								
3 TOOLS - Intro																								
3.1 Attractiveness tool																								
3.2 Jackdaw																								
3.3 MAA tool																								
3.4 WP3 tools - email analyser (Vulture) and newsletters																								
3.5 WP2 PR+ Advisor																								
3.6 Brainstorming on additional tools																								
3.7 Collate feedback from stakeholders																								
4 RAP																								
3.1 Drafting																								
3.2 Updating																								
3.3 Finalising																								
3.4 Review																								

6.1 Timeline: Sequencing of Actions

The Malta Regional Action Plan (RAP) builds on a foundation of **field learning, participatory experimentation, and collaboration** established during the first two years of PoliRuralPlus implementation. The roadmap below outlines the **sequenced actions and milestones** envisaged for short-, medium-, and long-term phases, with emphasis on **in-house capacity building, collaborative learning, and gradual expansion** of partnerships and outreach.

Short-term (2025–2027): Foundation, Learning, and Demonstration

Objectives:

To consolidate learning from cascade call collaborations (AgriFusion, MaYA, MATESE) and translate them into structured modular training activities for rural and island stakeholders.

Action / Milestone	Period	Lead / Support	Expected Outcome
Stakeholder engagement through one-to-one meetings and interviews to understand sectoral realities, digital gaps, and social dynamics	2024–Q1 2025	RAP Team (in-house)	Comprehensive mapping of farmer needs, digital readiness, and socio-economic context
Collaboration with AgriFusion (The Veg Box) – co-learning and support during implementation, focusing on cooperation, data collection, and resilience to sectoral challenges	2024–Q2 2025	The Veg Box	Enhanced understanding of agricultural practices and policy needs; identification of fragmentation and cooperation barriers

Implementation support and facilitation of MaYA Ideathon (Mobilise Call) including preparatory webinars and ideation workshops	Q3–Q4 2025	MaYA Foundation, AcrossLimits	Youth engagement, co-creation of digital and AI concepts (e.g., Go(v) Local First), strengthened awareness on innovation in agriculture
Contribution to design and support of MATESE project activities (PAMEA, SemaBlu, Selfoody)	Q1–Q2 2026	Implementors & RAP in support role	Capacity exchange on technology deployment, training modules on data use and sustainability
Establishment of Training & Capacity-Building Framework using in-house trainers and materials derived from the cascade experiences	Q3 2026	RAP Team	Modular sessions on circularity, digital literacy, and cooperation for rural stakeholders
Initial outreach to MDIA, SEM, GRDA, and local councils for inclusion in training or co-facilitation	Late 2026–2027	RAP Team (facilitation)	Informal cooperation agreements and participation of regional actors in capacity-building sessions

Short-Term Deliverable:

By the end of 2027, the Malta RAP will have established a **foundation of collaboration, a working set of training materials, and a pool of informed stakeholders** prepared to adopt circular and digital practices at community level.

6.1.2 Medium-term (2028–2035): Consolidation and Capacity Expansion

Objectives:

To embed training outcomes into local and regional initiatives, ensure continuity through knowledge transfer, and encourage integration with national and EU frameworks.

Action / Milestone	Period	Lead / Support	Expected Outcome
Continuation of in-house training programmes, adapting modules for youth, women, and micro-enterprises	2028–2030	Actors involved in the implementation in 2026 whom can sustain this approach	Sustained knowledge dissemination; increased local capacity for innovation
Collaboration with educational and community partners (e.g., MCAST, GRDA, NGOs) to integrate modules into existing programmes	2029–2032	Actors involved in the implementation in 2026 whom can sustain this approach + Educational partners	Institutional embedding of PoliRuralPlus learning content
Development of a national network of trained ambassadors from cascade call implementers and RAP trainees	2030–2033	Actors involved in the implementation in 2026 whom can sustain this approach + other local partners	Self-sustaining peer learning network supporting innovation and cooperation
Periodic monitoring through PoliRuralPlus KPIs and MAATool	2028–2035	RAP + other project partners	Evidence-based tracking of training impacts and rural attractiveness indicators

Participation in EU-level learning exchanges and project calls (PRIMA, Interreg, etc)	2032–2035	Actors involved in the implementation in 2026 whom can sustain this approach + other partners	Cross-border knowledge sharing and Malta’s visibility in Mediterranean cooperation
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6.1.3 Long-term (2036–2040): Systemic Readiness and Sustainability

Objectives:

To ensure that the knowledge, practices, and collaborative approaches piloted through the Malta RAP contribute to **long-term rural resilience, institutional learning, and adaptive capacity**, while remaining aligned with evolving national and EU policy frameworks.

In this phase, the RAP’s role is **indirect and enabling**, focusing on legacy, continuity, and preparedness rather than implementation.

Action / Milestone	Period	Lead / Support	Expected Outcome
Continued use and adaptation of training materials, toolkits, and learning formats developed under the RAP	2036–2040	Local actors, training providers, community organisations	Long-term availability of context-appropriate learning resources supporting digital, circular, and cooperative practices
Informal embedding of RAP approaches (participatory learning, demonstrations, co-creation) into future rural initiatives	2036–2040	Public bodies, NGOs, education and innovation actors (voluntary uptake)	Increased use of participatory and practice-based approaches in rural development actions
Use of accumulated evidence (baseline data, lessons learned, qualitative insights) to inform future strategies or projects	2036–2040	Policy analysts, research institutions, project consortia	Evidence-informed rural policy design and project preparation
Strengthening of rural–urban and cross-sector cooperation built through RAP networks	2036–2040	Rural stakeholders, SMEs, local councils, innovation actors	More resilient cooperation networks supporting rural innovation and diversification

Alignment with future EU and national frameworks (post-2030 CAP, Green Deal updates, Digital Decade follow-ups)	2036–2040	Interested institutions and project partners	Readiness of rural stakeholders to engage with future funding, policy, and innovation opportunities
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6.2 Implementation Plan

This subsection describes how the Malta RAP will be carried out in practice, building on the Implementation Matrix (Section 4). It emphasises the RAP's facilitative, non-institutional role and aligns actions with available capacity and stakeholder readiness.

Implementation Approach

1. Collaborative Delivery Model

Activities will be co-delivered with MALTESE partners, MAYA, Veg Box (AgriFusion experience), MCAST, MDIA, local councils, and civil-society actors, ensuring broad reach and practical relevance.

2. Place-Based Training & Demonstration

Sessions will be held in community venues across Malta and Gozo, ensuring accessibility and reinforcing rural-urban inclusion.

3. Incremental Capacity Building

Implementation begins with awareness and exposure (Q1–Q2), proceeds to hands-on practice (Q2–Q3), and concludes with reflection and knowledge exchange (Q3–Q4).

4. Low-Barrier, High-Relevance Interventions

Activities avoid complex technology and instead prioritise introductions to IoT tools, digital basics for rural SMEs, water-saving methods, composting, small-scale hydroponics, and foundational entrepreneurship awareness.

5. Leveraging Existing Ecosystems

The plan intentionally aligns with:

- MALTESE training curricula
- MAYA youth innovation outcomes
- Veg Box regenerative insights
- Local Council outreach channels
- MCAST youth engagement potential
- GRDA rural development networks

6. Resource Efficiency

The actions are intentionally modest and feasible within pilot capacity, avoiding commitments to

long-term mentoring or infrastructure-heavy interventions.

7. Evidence Collection

Monitoring remains light and proportional, focusing on attendance, feedback, early adopters, and qualitative insights.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring ensures that the RAP remains adaptive, realistic, and grounded in evidence from rural stakeholders.

7.1 KPIs

#	Common KPI (PR+ level)	Purpose	Example of Local Metric (by Pilot Type)	2025 Metrics – Malta Pilot	Indicative 2026 Target – Malta Pilot
1	Multi-Actor Participation and Co-Creation	Measure the breadth and diversity of stakeholder engagement in RAP processes.	Local: Number of ecosystem members participating in workshops or MAATool.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ~20 stakeholders already engaged through interviews, AgriFusion, MAYA and initial outreach. • Early connections with GRDA, MALTESE partners, MDIA, Local Councils, MCAST. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60–100 total individuals engaged across workshops, demos, training and survey. • At least 40% women. • Representation from youth, SMEs, farmers, NGOs, educators, councils, digital actors.
2	Rural–Urban Collaboration	Evaluate cooperation between territories and sectors in integrating policies and actions.	Local: Number of collaborations with nearby municipalities or urban actors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerging collaborations with GRDA, MAYA, MALTESE, Veg Box. • 0 formal agreements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3–5 collaborative actions (co-delivered workshops, demos, joint training, youth engagement). • Involvement of at least 2 local community entities/clusters
3	Innovation and Digitalisation	Promote the use of innovative and digital tools and practices.	Local: Number of digital or innovative tools used (maps, MAATool, apps).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools briefly introduced during the implementation of the MAYA Agritech Ideathon in September-October 2025. • Further planning underway with MALTESE project partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 demonstration events delivered. • 40–60 individuals introduced to digital/agritech tools. • 1–2 early adopters beginning simple trials.

4	Territorial and Environmental Sustainability	Encourage sustainable, resilient and green practices in territories.	Local: Number of sustainable actions/events (recycling, clean energy, mobility).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AgriFusion project & MAYA Agritech Ideathon provided practice insights. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20+ participants trained in best practices like hydroponics/composting/water reuse. • 1–2 small-scale local examples documented.
5	Social Cohesion and Quality of Life	Assess improvements in livability, wellbeing and social inclusion.	Local: Satisfaction level of residents or actors (survey).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No survey data collected yet. • Qualitative interviews highlight mobility/access barriers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≥4/5 satisfaction across workshops & demos. • Participation from youth, women. • 1 short note summarising inclusion feedback.
6	Governance and Institutional Capacity	Strengthen governance structures and collaborative decision-making.	Local: Establishment of working groups or local councils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial coordination with GRDA, MDIA, MALTESE partners. • No formal groups formed (in line with pilot scope). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 informal working clusters (youth innovation / sustainability / digital tools) emerging from events. • Inputs shared with at least 1 institutional actor.
7	Communication and Visibility	Measure how results and messages are shared and communicated.	Local: Number of posts, mentions or materials shared.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 project mentions during AcrossLimits Expert Webinars; 18 inclusions in AcrossLimits Newsletter or Blog re project & cascade implementation; 14 social media posts; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 communication outputs (posts, visuals, summaries). • Dissemination through GRDA, MALTESE, MAYA, Local Councils.
8	Economic Impact and Replicability	Assess sustainability and potential for scaling up the PoliRuralPlus model.	Local: Number of micro-enterprises or cooperatives emerging from ecosystem actions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No RAP-linked initiatives yet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–2 small follow-up initiatives or trials (digital tool use, sustainability practice). • RAP lessons integrated into MALTESE outputs to support replication

7.2 Evaluation Mechanisms

The Malta RAP adopts a **light, realistic, and context-appropriate evaluation framework** that reflects the pilot’s facilitative nature, limited administrative burden, and focus on training, awareness-building, and stakeholder engagement. Evaluation will rely primarily on **qualitative feedback**, simple quantitative indicators, and practical

evidence from workshops and demonstration sessions. The intention is not to measure institutional change, but to **track progress, capture learning, and ensure transparency** across all actions delivered between 2025–2026.

7.2.1. Multi-Source Continuous Monitoring

Evaluation will be carried out through multiple, low-barrier data sources, including:

- **Attendance sheets** from workshops, training, and demonstrations
- **Short participant feedback forms** (digital or paper-based) assessing relevance, satisfaction, and perceived usefulness
- **Informal interviews and discussions** with rural stakeholders for qualitative insights
- **Event documentation** such as photos, agendas, and summaries
- **Outputs from cascade calls** (e.g., MALTESE, MAYA, AgriFusion)
- **Social media engagement** and visibility metrics relevant to Communication KPIs
- **Baseline and endline survey data** (digital tool use, skills levels, participation rates, attitudes)

These sources collectively provide a mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence under a pragmatic monitoring approach.

8. Communication and Engagement

Communication and engagement activities will support visibility, transparency, and community participation throughout the RAP implementation. Efforts are designed to be low-cost, inclusive, and aligned with the grassroots character of the Malta pilot.

Key Communication Measures

1. Public Updates on Workshops & Demonstrations

Short posts, visuals, and community stories will be shared through:

- PoliRuralPlus website
- Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn)
- Partner channels (MALTESE, MAYA, Veg Box, Local Councils)

2. Community Storytelling & Good Practices

Short narratives, photos, or interviews highlighting:

- Early adopters of digital tools
- Sustainable farming practices
- Youth innovation stories
- Examples emerging from Ideathon follow-up activities

3. Visual Summaries & Explainers

Infographics or one-page summaries to explain:

- Training topics
- Benefits of digital tools
- Findings from the baseline survey
- Outputs from the MALTESE collaboration

4. Local Engagement Opportunities

In collaboration with:

- Local Councils
- MCAST (particularly for youth outreach)
- MDIA
- GRDA

These actors act as multipliers for specific communication efforts.

Engagement Principles

- **Inclusive:** ensuring participation of farmers, youth, women, and small rural enterprises
- **Practical:** messages framed around immediate benefits rather than abstract policy goals
- **Non-binding:** communication invites voluntary participation and collaboration
- **Culturally appropriate:** recognising rural identity, time constraints, and communication preferences

8.1 Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder involvement is essential for achieving the objectives of the Malta RAP. The approach focuses on accessibility, trust-building, and realistic engagement with the rural and island community.

8.1.2 Stakeholder Engagement Mechanisms

- **Direct outreach and one-to-one meetings**, continuing the engagement approach used during 2024–2025
- **Co-hosted workshops** with MALTESE, Local Councils, NGOs, MCAST, and regional actors
- **Practical demonstrations** that allow farmers and SMEs to “see and touch” digital or sustainable solutions
- **Peer learning**, identifying 2–5 “local champions” to help extend reach

- **Participation incentives** such as visibility, networking, and access to training resources

8.1.3 Key Stakeholder Groups

- Farmers and cooperatives
- Rural SMEs and micro-enterprises
- Youth groups (including MAYA and MCAST students)
- NGOs and environmental organisations
- Local Councils and Regional Committees
- GRDA, MDIA, SEM
- Education and research institutions (MCAST, University of Malta)

8.2 Awareness Campaigns

Awareness campaigns will focus on enhancing visibility of rural innovation opportunities, encouraging participation, and showcasing positive examples emerging from the pilot.

8.2.1 Campaign Themes

- Digital tools for agriculture and rural entrepreneurship
- Sustainable resource practices (hydroponics, composting, water reuse)
- Youth-led agritech innovation (MAYA insights)
- Outputs from MALTESE training programmes
- Rural success stories and community champions

8.2.2 Campaign Tools

- Visual social media posts
- Short videos or reels from demonstrations
- Infographics explaining key RAP findings

9. Conclusion

9.1 Summary of Expected Impact

The Malta Rural Action Plan (RAP) is designed as a **practical, people-centred, and capacity-building roadmap** that strengthens skills, awareness, and collaboration across rural and island communities. By focusing on digital literacy, sustainable resource use, youth innovation, and multi-actor cooperation, the RAP contributes to the long-term goals of sustainable development, territorial cohesion, and inclusive economic growth.

The combined actions - training workshops, technology demonstrations, stakeholder dialogues, and baseline data collection will support rural communities in:

- **Adopting digital tools and innovative practices**, enabling smarter decision-making, efficiency, and diversification.
- **Strengthening environmental sustainability**, particularly in water management, regenerative methods, and resource efficiency.
- **Enhancing youth engagement and entrepreneurship**, creating new pathways for skills development and local innovation.
- **Improving cooperation between local councils, institutions, and grassroots actors**, reducing fragmentation and improving service reach.
- **Building a shared evidence base** to inform policy, future investment, and continuous learning.

Together, these impacts foster a more resilient rural ecosystem where communities are empowered with knowledge, supported by practical tools, and encouraged to experiment with new solutions relevant to Malta's small-scale and island context. The RAP's intended outcomes are **strongly supported by existing policy frameworks** at local, regional, national, and EU levels. These include:

- **National Agricultural Policy 2023–2030**
(recognising the need for innovation, sustainability, and digital transformation in farming)
- **Gozo Regional Development Strategy 2030**
(promoting skills, regional integration, and greener economic development)
- **National Employment Policy 2021–2030 & National Skills Strategy**
(emphasising digital skills, adult learning, and green-transition capabilities)
- **National Environment Strategy**
(supporting regenerative and resource-efficient practices)
- **EU Green Deal, Farm-to-Fork, Digital Decade, and CAP strategic priorities**
(encouraging digitalisation, sustainability, innovation, and resilience)
- **MALTESE project (Erasmus+)**
(offering a platform for adult learning and digital upskilling)
- **MAYA Agritech Ideathon outcomes**
(supporting youth creativity and experimental learning)

- **AgriFusion cascade pilot**
(illustrating the value of hands-on support and guidance for small rural enterprises)

Because of these strong policy links, the RAP's activities are not isolated interventions; they are **well-aligned with wider national and EU ambitions** for sustainable rural development, making long-term uptake and replication more likely.

9.2 Expected Cross-Area Influence and Broader Effects

The intended processes and measures in this RAP will generate **positive spillovers across multiple domains**, including:

- **Rural Entrepreneurship:**
Increased awareness of digital and sustainable tools can stimulate micro-enterprise development and diversification.
- **Education and Training Systems:**
Collaboration with UoM, MCAST, MALTESE, and youth groups enhances real-world learning opportunities and strengthens vocational relevance.
- **Environmental Management:**
Training on composting, hydroponics, and water conservation supports Malta's national environmental targets and promotes greener community practices.
- **Governance and Participation:**
Multi-actor workshops and informal clusters foster dialogue, trust, and cooperative behaviour among rural actors and institutions.
- **Social Inclusion and Community Wellbeing:**
Activities encourage youth participation, support women's involvement, and create new community engagement opportunities.
- **Digital Transformation:**
Increased familiarity with IoT, apps, sensors, and digital platforms gradually reduces resistance to technology adoption.

These cross-cutting benefits strengthen Malta's rural resilience and broaden the impact of each intervention beyond its immediate scope.

9.2 Call to Action

The Malta RAP can only succeed through **collaborative effort**. All rural stakeholders—farmers, SMEs, youth organisations, educators, NGOs, local councils, and national authorities—are encouraged to participate actively in training sessions, share knowledge, and support experimentation with digital and sustainable solutions.

We invite all partners to:

- **Engage openly** in workshops, demonstrations, and stakeholder dialogues.
- **Share insights and local practices**, contributing to collective learning.
- **Support youth involvement** by offering opportunities for experimentation and creative problem-solving.
- **Promote cooperation** across islands, sectors, and communities.
- **Help ensure continuity**, by embedding good practices within local structures and daily routines.

Together, we can build a more innovative, connected, and environmentally responsible rural Malta—one that values community knowledge, supports young talent, and strengthens resilience for generations to come.

10. Annexes (Optional)

10.1 Sustainability and extension of activities: Checklist for the RAP pilots

Section of the RAP	Yes	No	Comments
Analysis of Current Situation			The analysis clearly integrates sustainability-related challenges such as skills gaps, institutional fragmentation, youth outmigration, and limited digital uptake. It also acknowledges risks related to stakeholder capacity, ownership, and resource constraints. These factors influence long-term sustainability.
<i>Are challenges and/or opportunities concerning the sustainability provisions taken into account? These might be related to responsiveness and ownership of stakeholders, financial sustainability challenges, etc.</i>	✓		The RAP reflects challenges including limited rural participation, aging workforce, low adoption of digital tools, and fragmentation. Opportunities such as MALTESE training, MAYA ideathon outcomes, local experimentation (AgriFusion), and youth engagement are used to strengthen sustainability potential.
Vision and Strategic Goals			The vision and goals align strongly with Nature (sustainability practices), Economy (digitalisation, entrepreneurship), Society (youth engagement, inclusion), and Wellbeing (improved access, participation). The main focus is capacity-building and

		community empowerment, delivered through sustainable practices and digital innovation.
<i>How well are your vision and strategic goals aligned with the main areas of sustainability: Nature, Economy, Society, and Wellbeing? What is the main focus? (You may use the sustainability compass for guidance here: https://compassu.wordpress.com/introduction/)</i>	✓	Vision addresses environmental resilience (Nature), skills & innovation (Economy), multi-actor cooperation (Society), and improved opportunities for youth and rural communities (Wellbeing).
Action Plan		Measures are small-scale but replicable. They focus on awareness, training, demonstrations, and baseline evidence — all conducive to sustainability.
<i>- How might identified processes (measures, initiatives, programs) be sustained?</i>	✓	Sustainability is enabled through existing structures such as Local Councils, MCAST, NGOs, GRDA, and national programmes (e.g. MALTESE). Activities can continue through regular training cycles, community initiatives, and integration into ongoing rural and digital literacy programmes.
<i>- Who/which organizations will be responsible (ownership) for maintaining the tangible results achieved within RAP and ensuring their operation in the future?</i>	✓	Local Councils (venues, community outreach), GRDA (regional alignment), MALTESE partners (continuation of training), MCAST (youth engagement), MDIA (digital awareness), NGOs and community champions (peer learning). No single entity assumes full ownership; sustainability depends on distributed responsibility.
Policy and Funding Alignment		RAP actions align with existing national and regional strategies and can be supported through existing calls (e.g. VET/skills programmes, LEADER-type actions, MDIA initiatives, community grants).
<i>- Do the stakeholders/actors have access to financial instruments or other sources to implement the measures defined in the RAP?</i>	✓	Yes — via national training schemes, EU calls, small grant mechanisms, MDIA digital awareness funds, and future cascade opportunities. However, absorption depends on capacity and awareness.
<i>- Is it necessary to introduce new and innovative funding mechanisms?</i>	✓	Not essential for the scope of this RAP. The pilot relies on light, low-cost interventions. Future replication could benefit from micro-grants, but this is not required for immediate sustainability.

Communication and Engagement		Communication is built on low-cost channels (social media, partner networks, councils), which are sustainable beyond the pilot.
- <i>What are the intended mechanisms of sustaining involvement and ownership of partners?</i>	✓	Regular information sharing through partners, continued use of local venues, involvement of youth groups, and identification of local champions support long-term engagement.
- <i>Is it expected that the stakeholders/actors (public bodies, NGOs, local communities, businesses, academic institutions...) who implemented the measures and actions defined in the RAP in the short term will continue to do so in the medium and long term?</i>	✓	While not guaranteed, there is strong likelihood that local councils, NGOs, MCAST, and MALTESE project partners will continue related activities as these align with their mandates. The RAP builds foundational capacities rather than creating dependency.
- <i>How lessons learned will be shared with stakeholders and other interested parties aiming to scale up, create a synergy, and/or contribute?</i>	✓	Through the policy brief, workshop summaries, community stories, visuals, and sharing of findings with GRDA, MDIA, MCAST, MALTESE, and other partners. These materials can be reused in future training cycles or integrated into local programmes.
Conclusion		The intended outcomes are aligned with policy frameworks at all levels. Expected impacts extend to youth participation, digital readiness, environmental awareness, and improved local collaboration.
- <i>Will the intended outcomes of the RAP be supported by policies and plans (local, regional, national, and EU level)?</i>	✓	Yes. The RAP aligns with national agricultural, skills, digital, and environmental strategies, as well as EU Green Deal, CAP Strategic Plan, and MALTESE adult learning outcomes. These policies reinforce long-term continuity.
- <i>Do identified processes have the potential to affect other sectors? What kind of potential influences might these bring?</i>	✓	Yes. Digital tools training affects education, tourism, and SME competitiveness. Sustainability practices influence waste management, water use, and community wellbeing. Youth entrepreneurship impacts innovation ecosystems and local economic diversification.

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