MOBILISE CALL

Financial Support for Third Parties

Ideathon Report
Part A (Public)

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Executive Summary

The MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon, culminating on 3 October 2025 at DiHubMT, marked Malta's active contribution to the PoliRuralPlus project, funded under the European Union's Horizon Europe programme. Organised by the Malta Youth in Agriculture Foundation (MaYA), in collaboration with AcrossLimits, the event brought together farmers, youth, researchers, policymakers, and technology experts to co-create digital and AI-driven solutions to some of Malta's most pressing agricultural challenges.

The Ideathon was preceded by two online preparatory webinars in September, which introduced participants to the objectives of PoliRuralPlus, the concept of AI-driven rural transformation, and the three national challenges identified: access to agricultural land, market access and digital integration, and climate and water resilience. These sessions helped create a shared understanding of the local agricultural context and of the opportunities to use technology as an enabler of innovation and collaboration.

The in-person Ideathon encouraged teams to apply design thinking and use relevant PoliRuralPlus tools such as the Rural Attractiveness Explorer and the Jackdaw GeoAI platform. Participants developed five practical and locally relevant concepts. The winning idea, *Go(v) Local First*, proposed a digital framework that positions the Maltese government as a lead buyer of local agricultural produce, aligning institutional food procurement with national sustainability goals.

The event demonstrated how AI, data transparency and co-creation can support stronger rural-urban linkages, improve food system resilience, and empower young people to play an active role in shaping Malta's agricultural future.

1. Objectives and Structure of the Ideathon

The Ideathon aimed to address the objectives set under the Mobilise Call, by fostering AI-driven rural transformation, strengthening rural-urban collaboration, and promoting the use of PoliRuralPlus tools for community-led innovation. The core purpose was to mobilise a wide range of stakeholders; from farmers and agribusinesses to digital experts and youth, to co-create solutions that tackle Malta's agricultural challenges in practical, locally grounded ways.

Malta's rural-urban dynamics are unique: the country's small size, fragmented land ownership, and rapid urbanisation threaten its food security and the continuity of traditional farming. Against this backdrop, the Ideathon provided an open, collaborative space to explore how artificial intelligence, digital integration, and participatory design can support sustainable farming practices and better policy frameworks.

The event followed a clear structure, evolving over several months. The pre-event webinars (5 and 23 September 2025) served as awareness and capacity-building sessions. They introduced participants to the PoliRuralPlus vision, reviewed local data from the National Statistics Office, and presented use cases from other EU projects such as DEMETER, ATLAS, and the EU FarmBook. The sessions also offered practical guidance on brainstorming techniques and how PoliRuralPlus tools could support ideation.

The in-person Ideathon, held on 3 October, began with an introduction to MaYA's work and its mission to engage youth in the agricultural transition. This was followed by short talks on AI's relevance to agriculture and a walkthrough of available digital tools. Before the group work began, participants took part in an interactive activity in which they positioned themselves along a "strongly agree–strongly disagree" line in response to five provocative statements about Malta's agricultural challenges. This exercise sparked lively debate and helped participants articulate their perspectives before forming their teams.

Participants were then divided into five diverse groups, each consisting of four to five members representing different backgrounds - from farmers and students to researchers, entrepreneurs, and IT professionals. One group addressed *access to agricultural land*, while two groups each focused on *market access and digital integration* and *climate and water resilience*. MaYA facilitators and mentors moved among the tables to encourage balanced participation and ensure discussions stayed solution-oriented.

The final stage of the event consisted of short pitch presentations by each group. Teams presented their ideas to a panel of judges, outlining the problem identified, their proposed solution, the potential use of AI, and the anticipated local impact.

2. Implementation and Results

2.1 Challenges Addressed

The MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon focused on three interrelated challenges that define Malta's agricultural landscape and its rural–urban dynamics: access to agricultural land, market access and digital integration, and climate and water resilience.

Access to Agricultural Land remains one of Malta's most complex structural issues. A considerable share of farmland lies idle, fragmented, or tied up in ownership and rental disputes. As highlighted in the first webinar, most farmers lease their land, facing high and rising rents, insecure tenure, and eviction risks that discourage long-term investment. Furthermore, speculative land purchases by non-farming individuals have further reduced accessibility for genuine farmers. These conditions restrict new entrants, particularly young people, who wish to start or expand their farming operations.

Market Access and Digital Integration emerged as another major challenge. Around 40% of Maltese holdings produce primarily for self-consumption, while the rest depend heavily on intermediaries. Farmers have limited visibility on pricing, demand, and market trends, and few use digital platforms to sell directly to consumers. This weakens farmers' bargaining power and distances rural production from urban consumers. Participants identified that while some digital tools exist, they are underutilised due to low digital literacy and limited institutional support.

Climate and Water Resilience was a third cross-cutting issue. Malta is one of Europe's most water-scarce countries, with highly variable rainfall, thin soils, and dependence on energy-intensive groundwater abstraction. The combination of droughts, rising temperatures, and extreme weather has raised costs, reduced yields, and undermined sustainability. During the ideathon, participants noted that while farmers have developed adaptive strategies, there remains a pressing need for coordinated water management, smarter use of irrigation, and more widespread adoption of climate-smart and regenerative farming practices.

Together, these challenges capture the tension between Malta's rural potential and its urban pressures. Addressing them requires data-driven innovation, policy reform, and closer collaboration between farmers, institutions, and the public; precisely the type of interaction the Ideathon was designed to foster.

2.2 Teams and Participants

The Ideathon brought together over 40 participants (webinars and in-person) from diverse professional, educational, and geographic backgrounds. Attendees included:

- Farmers and agricultural cooperative members, offering first-hand experience of local realities.
- Researchers, university professors, and students from the University of Malta and MCAST, contributing technical and analytical perspectives.

- Entrepreneurs and technology developers, including AI specialists, data scientists, and innovators with start-up experience.

- Policy officers and NGO representatives, linking ideas to existing frameworks and development priorities.

This diversity ensured a balanced exchange of views between practitioners and innovators. Each of the five multidisciplinary teams included 4–5 participants with mixed expertise, promoting collaboration across sectors and generations.

During the group phase, MaYA facilitators and mentors circulated to support discussions, help teams focus their ideas, and encourage practical applications of AI and PoliRuralPlus tools. Teams were encouraged to focus on real problems, propose solutions suited to the Maltese context, and consider the social, economic, and environmental implications of their ideas.

2.3 Winning Team and Idea

Winning Concept: "*Go(v) Local First*" (Team 2A – Market Access & Digital Integration)

The winning team developed Go(v) Local First, an AI-supported initiative aimed at strengthening Malta's food system through public procurement. The idea proposes that government institutions; such as schools, hospitals, elderly homes, and public canteens, give purchasing preference to locally produced food.

To make this viable, the concept integrates a digital matching and forecasting platform that:

- Maps available local products and producers,
- Predicts institutional demand based on menus and seasonality,
- Supports logistics and traceability, and
- Promotes transparency through data on product origin, quality, and nutrition.

By creating a reliable and structured market for local produce, the initiative would provide farmers with predictable income, reduce food miles, and reinforce consumer trust in Maltese agriculture. The judges selected this idea as the winner because it tackled a root cause: the insufficient and unstable demand for local food; while offering a clear, implementable model with potential policy impact. It also aligned strongly with national sustainability goals and demonstrated a meaningful, context-sensitive application of AI.

2.4 Other Group Concepts

Access to Agricultural Land – "*From Soil to Society*" (Team 1)
This team proposed a national approach to land access based on visibility, transparency, and shared responsibility. Their concept aimed to create a publicly accessible map of underused agricultural land, linked with a "land-matching" feature that connects aspiring farmers to available plots. Beyond digital tools, they emphasised public engagement, educational campaigns, and policy incentives to bring idle land back into productive use. The project resonated with EU examples such as *Perspektive Landwirtschaft* (Austria) and *Boer zoekt Boer* (Netherlands).

Market Access & Digital Integration – *"Smart Cooperative Tools"* (Team 2B)
The second market access team focused on improving efficiency and competitiveness for livestock producers. They envisioned an AI-based cooperative monitoring system to help pig farmers and other livestock producers collect and analyse data on animal welfare, feed and water use, and performance benchmarks. The goal was to enhance production standards, reduce costs, and strengthen farmers' market narratives by providing verifiable data on sustainability and quality.

Climate & Water Resilience – *"Smart Water Network"* (Team 3A)
This group proposed a national rainwater collection and distribution network supported by AI forecasting and sensor data. The system would optimise water allocation across farms, balancing availability, demand, and sustainability. The concept's strength lay in combining existing infrastructure with predictive analytics to manage one of Malta's most scarce and valuable resources more efficiently.

Climate & Water Resilience – *"Farming with Nature"* (Team 3B)
The final team adopted a socio-environmental lens, proposing an AI-enabled knowledge-sharing platform to promote regenerative farming. Their solution focused on using AI for pattern recognition and market forecasting while connecting farmers in a digital network where they can share local experiences, techniques, and data on soil and biodiversity health. The vision was to shift from reactive to regenerative farming practices through collaboration and shared learning.

2.5 Evaluation Criteria

Each team presented their ideas to a panel of judges composed of agricultural, environmental, and digital innovation experts. Ideas were evaluated on six weighted criteria:

Criterion	Weight
Tackles the real problem (not just the symptom)	20%
Real utility and relevance of technology	20%
Potential impact (social, economic, environmental)	20%
Fit and applicability to the local context	20%
Presentation and communication	10%
Teamwork and collaboration	10%

The balanced scoring framework ensured fair evaluation of both technical and collaborative aspects, rewarding ideas that were innovative, realistic, and community-driven.

2.6 Engagement and Experience

The Ideathon's collaborative and community spirit was central to its success. Between sessions, participants enjoyed locally sourced food made from Maltese ingredients, reinforcing the event's commitment to local production and sustainability.

At the close of the day, all participants were presented with a bottle of freshly pressed Maltese olive oil as a token of appreciation for their contribution. The winning team received a voucher for a local rural tourism experience at an olive grove, symbolising the connection between innovation, tradition, and the landscape that sustains Maltese agriculture.

3. Media Outputs

The MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon and its preparatory stages were documented through a series of blog posts, news articles, and social media updates published on MaYA's official channels. Nine main blogs and articles were released between September and November 2025:

- *MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon - Welcome page*
- *MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon - Launch post Facebook* (29 August 2025)
- *MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon - Facebook event* (Created 31 August 2025)
- *First Webinar Sets Stage for the MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon* (8 September 2025)
- *Preparing for Malta's First Agri-Tech Ideathon* (30 September 2025)
- *MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon – Co-Creating Innovative Solutions for Malta's Agriculture* (18 October 2025)
- *MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon - Post event photos* (18 October 2025)
- *Setting the Stage for the Malta MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon* (22 October 2025)
- *Insights from the Second Agri-Tech Ideathon Webinar* (26 October 2025)
- *From Ideas to Action: What the MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon Unlocked for Malta's Rural Future* (17 November 2025)
- *From Soil to Society – Rethinking Access to Agricultural Land in Malta* (28 November 2025)
- *Local First – Using AI to Strengthen Malta's Local Food Markets - Winning Idea* (29 November 2025)
- *Farming with Nature – Smart Water, Smarter Communities* (30 November 2025)

Together, these publications chronicled the evolution of the initiative; from mobilisation and awareness-building to ideation and follow-up. The events were also featured across MaYA's Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram pages, generating engagement from farmers, students, and rural development organisations. All posts and resources remain accessible at www.maya.org.mt/ideathon.

4. Conclusions

The MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon was a successful and transformative experience for Malta's rural innovation ecosystem. It achieved the main objectives outlined in the Mobilise Call proposal: fostering AI-driven rural transformation, strengthening rural-urban collaboration, and integrating PoliRuralPlus tools into participatory innovation processes.

The event demonstrated that cross-sectoral collaboration; between farmers, youth, digital innovators, and policymakers - can generate concrete, context-sensitive solutions. It also strengthened the link between Malta's agricultural community and the wider European network of rural innovation projects.

The results of the Ideathon, including the winning *Go(v) Local First* concept, will now feed into MaYA's broader strategy for agri-tech engagement and policy dialogue. Discussions are already underway to explore potential pilots with public institutions and cooperatives. Other promising ideas, particularly around water efficiency and data-sharing for livestock producers, will be explored through follow-up workshops and funding calls.

In terms of impact, the Ideathon helped raise awareness of AI's potential in agriculture, built new relationships between stakeholders who rarely collaborate, and gave young people a leading voice in designing the future of Malta's agri-food systems.

While preparation time was tight, the success of the event reflected the strong commitment of MaYA's team, the responsiveness of participants, and the support of PoliRuralPlus partners. The lessons learned will be applied to future initiatives, ensuring continued engagement with the rural innovation community.

Ultimately, the MaYA Agri-Tech Ideathon proved that Malta's small scale can be a strength - enabling direct collaboration, rapid idea development, and a shared sense of ownership over the country's agricultural future.

Annex I - Team Presentations

Project presentations of all teams: *Attach or embed slide decks or digital presentations from each participating team. Each should describe:*

- *The problem tackled*
- *The proposed solution and its novelty*
- *The use of PoliRuralPlus tools in solution development*
- *The potential impact on regional development and rural-urban interactions*

Additional Supporting Materials: *GDPR compliant photos, videos, media articles, or other relevant documentation, if available.*

Each team submitted a short concept note and pitch presentation structured around four guiding questions. Below is a concise summary for inclusion in the report annex.

Team 1: "From Soil to Society" – Access to Agricultural Land

- Problem Tackled: Idle and inaccessible farmland due to ownership disputes and speculative pricing.
- Proposed Solution: Digital land registry and matching platform connecting landowners with aspiring farmers. Public engagement campaigns and transparent data to increase land use efficiency.
- Use of PoliRuralPlus Tools: Explored integration of Jackdaw GeoAI for land mapping and Rural Attractiveness Explorer for policy scenario testing.
- Potential Impact: Improved access for new entrants, better land-use planning, and stronger public awareness of agricultural value.

Team 2A: "Go(v) Local First" – Market Access & Digital Integration (Winning Idea)

- Problem Tackled: Weak demand and unstable income for local producers due to reliance on imports and intermediaries.
- Proposed Solution: AI-driven procurement platform linking public institutions with local suppliers. Matching algorithms forecast demand and optimise supply.
- Use of PoliRuralPlus Tools: Applied Policy Advisor Tool to model procurement impacts on local economies.
- Potential Impact: Strengthened local markets, improved food system resilience, and alignment with public sustainability goals.

Team 2B: "Smart Cooperative Tools" – Market Access & Digital Integration

- Problem Tackled: Limited digitalisation in livestock management and weak competitiveness.

- Proposed Solution: Cooperative monitoring platform using AI for benchmarking, feed/water tracking, and animal welfare analytics.
- Use of PoliRuralPlus Tools: Considered Jackdaw GeoAI for linking farm data with regional production patterns.
- Potential Impact: Increased efficiency, improved welfare standards, and better positioning for local products.

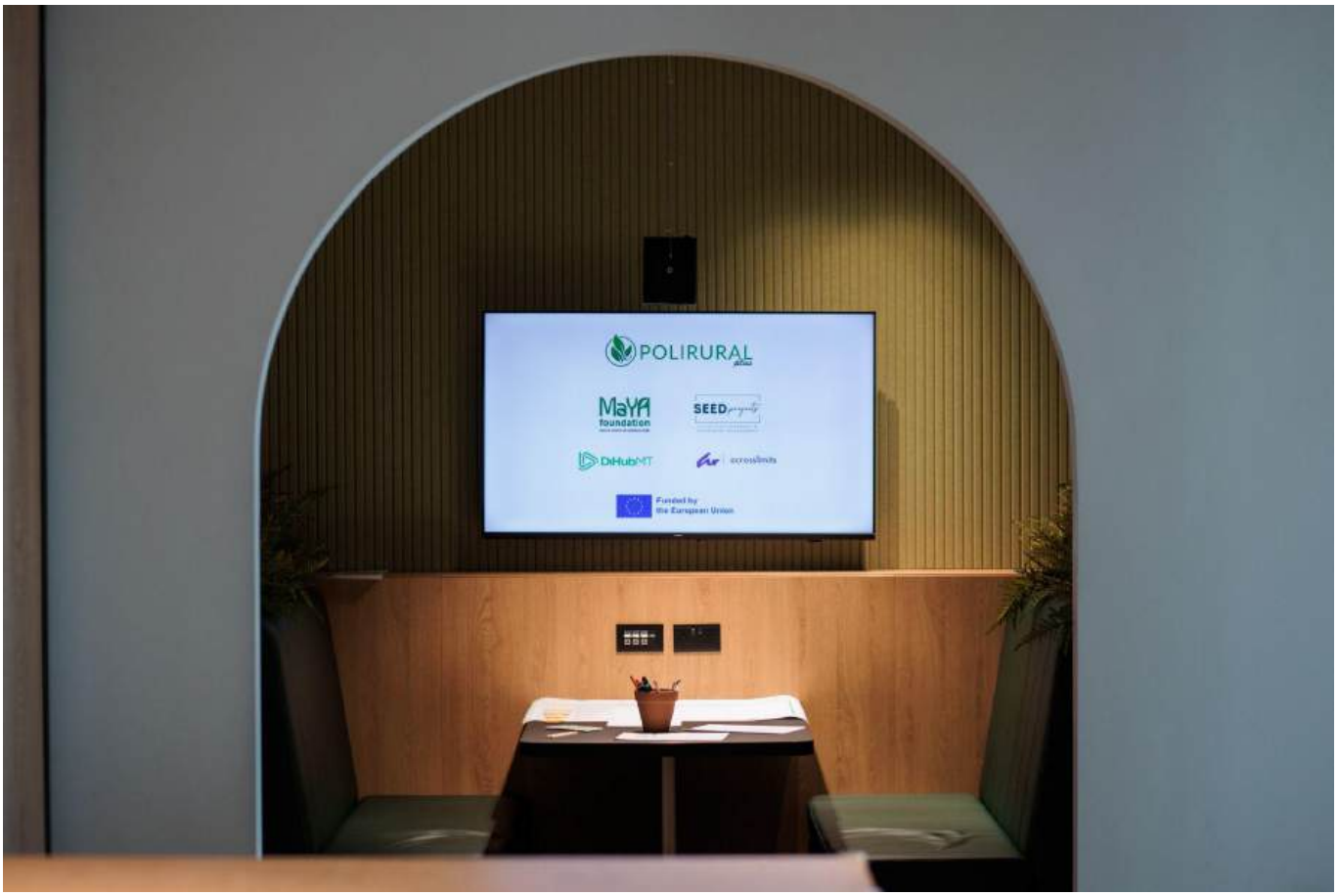
Team 3A: "Smart Water Network" – Climate & Water Resilience

- Problem Tackled: Water scarcity and inefficient irrigation across farms.
- Proposed Solution: AI-based prediction and allocation system linking rainwater collection infrastructure with farm-level sensors.
- Use of PoliRuralPlus Tools: Proposed use of Jackdaw GeoAI for mapping catchment areas and Rural Attractiveness Explorer for climate modelling.
- Potential Impact: Improved water efficiency, reduced dependence on groundwater, and enhanced environmental sustainability.

Team 3B: "Farming with Nature" – Climate & Water Resilience

- Problem Tackled: Declining soil health, lack of access to regenerative farming knowledge, and isolation among farmers.
- Proposed Solution: AI-supported digital learning and collaboration network for sharing regenerative practices and real-time soil data.
- Use of PoliRuralPlus Tools: Used Rural Attractiveness Explorer to identify resilience indicators and support learning content design.
- Potential Impact: Strengthened knowledge exchange, healthier soils, and a more adaptive farming community.

Annex II - Events Images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