



# GrAins

Greening Agrifood  
in Social Economy



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Capacity building on Greening Agrifood in Social Economy

# Clusters of Social and Ecological Innovation (CSEIs) and European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs)

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## Abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
DISC	Digital Innovation and Scale-up Initiative
DMA	Digital Maturity Assessment
EAFRD	European agricultural fund for rural development
EEN	Enterprise Europe Network
EC	European Commission
ECR	European Committee of the Regions
EDIH	European Digital Innovation Hub
EIC	European Industrial Clusters
EU	European Union
ECCP	EU Cluster Collaboration Platform
GECES	Commission Expert Group on the Social Economy and Social enterprises
ICC	Intelligent Cities Challenge
JRC	Joint Research Centre
LAGs	Local Action Groups
NEB	New European Bauhaus
PA	Public Administration
PPC	Public-Private-Collaboration
PPP	Public-private partnership
PTCE	Pôles territoriaux de coopération économique
RDPs	Rural Development Programmes
R&D	Research & Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SE	Social Economy
SEOs	Social Economy Organizations
SME	Small and medium enterprise
UNIDO	United Nations industrial Development Organisation

# 1. Green Deal Going Local

The European Commission (EC) has set the ambitious target of making Europe the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The European Green Deal<sup>1</sup> provides the roadmap to achieving this impressive goal. An extensive transformation across all aspects of society is required, facing major environmental, economic, and social challenges. Partnerships help drive the huge transformations in environment, society, and economy that the European Green Deal calls for<sup>2</sup>.

The scale of the challenges proposed by the Green Deal demands a multilevel approach to link up policy domains going deep into governance levels, where all the policy areas of the Green Deal are integrated into a defined spatial region. Therefore, the European Green Deal needs to be linked to the governance level closest to the citizens.<sup>3</sup>

Central to achieving the European Green Deal's ambitious goal is the empowerment of local and regional authorities. These authorities play a crucial role in translating high-level policy objectives into practical, actionable initiatives. One of the core components of this effort is the "Green Deal Going Local" initiative<sup>4</sup>. This initiative aims to inspire and accelerate the clean energy transition while fostering a just and sustainable recovery. It underscores the importance of partnerships and the development of Local Green Deals to mobilize local resources and expertise effectively. Local implementation ensures that the policies are adapted to the unique needs and characteristics of each region, making the transition more relevant and effective for the citizens.

Local implementation is even more critical for rural areas and the agricultural sector. These regions are intimately connected with the specific typology of the soil, climate, and all natural, not only cultural resources. Tailoring policies to the unique characteristics of rural areas ensures that agricultural practices align with environmental sustainability and local conditions, making the transition to climate neutrality both practical and impactful. One of the key actions highlighted in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform is the enhancement of partnerships. The CAP 2023-27 aims to strengthen the position of farmers in the supply chain and boost the competitiveness of the agri-food sector by improving bargaining power. New rules reinforce producer cooperation, encouraging farmers to work together and enabling them to create countervailing power in the market<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission. (2019). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions- The European Green Deal. European Commission. Available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:b828d165-1c22-11ea8c1f-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:b828d165-1c22-11ea8c1f-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC_1&format=PDF). Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (n. d.) Research and innovation for the European Green Deal. Available at [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/environment-and-climate/european-green-deal\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/environment-and-climate/european-green-deal_en). Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem note 1

<sup>4</sup> European Committee of the Region (n.d.) Green Deal Going Local. Available at [https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Pages/green-deal.aspx?utm\\_source=SharedLink&utm\\_medium=ShortURL&utm\\_campaign=Green%20Deal%20Going%20Local#:~:text=Green%20Deal%20Going%20Local%20aims,take%20action%20on%20climate%20change](https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Pages/green-deal.aspx?utm_source=SharedLink&utm_medium=ShortURL&utm_campaign=Green%20Deal%20Going%20Local#:~:text=Green%20Deal%20Going%20Local%20aims,take%20action%20on%20climate%20change). Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>5</sup> European Commission (n.d.). The common agricultural policy: 2023-27. Available at [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-2023-27\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-2023-27_en). Accessed 13 June 2024





The goals of the Local Green Deal are multifaceted, aiming to empower Europe's local and regional leaders to take decisive action on climate change. This includes accelerating the uptake of EU funds by local and regional authorities, showcasing adaptation and mitigation efforts across EU regions, cities, and villages, and improving EU policymaking to amplify the voices of cities and regions.

A critical aspect of implementing local green deals is creating new integrated governance and management structures that incorporate multidisciplinary values—environmental, economic, and social—to support sustainable decision-making and policy development. For example, partnerships that deliver concrete actions through collaboration agreements can align local plans, strategies, and policies with climate neutrality and sustainability goals.

Partnerships play a strategic role in the Local Green Deals' implementation. A multi-stakeholder approach ensures that public, private, community, and voluntary sectors collaborate across the city's industrial ecosystems to achieve common goals.

In the agri-food sector, partnerships are crucial for supporting farmers and agricultural communities in complying with European Green Deal regulations and reducing administrative burdens. The European Committee of the Regions (ECR) has emphasised the need to increase support for farmers, which can be facilitated by regionalizing the management of the CAP. This approach better addresses the unique challenges faced by farmers, promoting environmental sustainability over hectare-based direct payments. Supporting smaller producers and rural development aligns with the European Green Deal's goals of creating a sustainable and resilient agricultural sector.

Rural areas, often referred to as the beating heart of Europe's sustainable food systems, play a pivotal role in the European Green Deal.<sup>6</sup> These regions face unique challenges and opportunities in contributing to the Green Deal's objectives. The vision for rural areas includes thriving ecosystems, clean air and water, and sustainable agricultural practices that align with agroecology principles.

Recently, the role of the proximity and social economy ecosystem in revitalizing rural areas has gained significant attention. These ecosystems engage local communities in decision-making through inclusive, bottom-up approaches, bringing about sustainable change. Social Economy Organisations (SEOs) are at the heart of this transformation, connecting rural communities with broader networks to share ideas, adapt knowledge, and mobilize resources effectively.<sup>7</sup>

The EC has recognised the potential of these initiatives, aligning them with the goals of the European Green Deal. A key component of this alignment is the New European Bauhaus (NEB), which acts as the soul of the European Green Deal. The NEB, an interdisciplinary initiative, connects the European Green Deal to our living spaces and experiences, emphasising the aesthetic and functional aspects

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission (n.d.) Agriculture and the Green Deal. Available at [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/agriculture-and-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/agriculture-and-green-deal_en) . Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>7</sup> Costantini et al (2021). Empowering rural communities through social and solidarity economy: Observation and case study. Diesis Network. Available at [https://www.diesis.coop/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Ciriec\\_Paper\\_Empower-Rural-Community\\_AC\\_Final\\_edited0701-1.pdf](https://www.diesis.coop/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Ciriec_Paper_Empower-Rural-Community_AC_Final_edited0701-1.pdf) . Accessed 13 June 2024



of sustainable living. This initiative encourages the integration of design, sustainability, and inclusivity, promoting a holistic approach to the European Green Deal that encompasses environmental, economic, cultural, and social aspects. The NEB aims to create beautiful, sustainable, and inclusive spaces, enhancing quality of life and fostering community engagement in the transition towards sustainability.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the Intelligent Cities Challenge (ICC) has developed "Local Green Deals – A Blueprint for Action"<sup>9</sup> to guide cities and towns in implementing the European Green Deal locally. This blueprint provides a step-by-step guide for cities to build momentum and scale up their Local Green Deals, emphasizing the importance of integrated governance, collaborative action, and multi-stakeholder partnerships. By leveraging local capacities and resources, cities can create synergies between their LGDs and existing sustainability policies, ensuring a coherent and effective approach to achieving climate neutrality. This blueprint outlines key elements cities need to deliver the European Green Deal at the local level:

- **Governance:** New integrated and multidisciplinary governance considering environmental, economic, and social values leading to sustainable decision-making and policy development.
- **Action:** A collaborative approach where local partnerships deliver concrete action through collaborative agreements.
- **Integrated goals:** Strategies and policies that bring together targets, local plans, partnerships, funding, and initiatives to ensure climate neutrality and sustainability.
- **Partnership:** A multi-stakeholder approach, where public, private, community, and SEOs cooperate to reach common goals. The setting up of partnerships for the development of local green deals with multilevel governance of strategies, initiatives, and financing issues through vertical (national, regional, and local government) and horizontal cooperation of local actors.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information about the New European Bauhaus, please visit [https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en). Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, Durieux, E., Hidson, M., (2021) Local green deals – A blueprint for action – The European Commission's 100 intelligent cities challenge, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2826/94389>

## 2. Building Resilience Through Partnerships

### 2.1 Introduction

On March 10, 2020, the EC introduced a new EU industrial strategy<sup>10</sup> aimed at positioning the European industry at the forefront of both green and digital transformations. The strategy's objective was to enhance the EU's global competitiveness and promote strategic autonomy.

Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission updated its strategy in May 2021<sup>11</sup> to strengthen the resilience of key industrial networks by initiating transition pathways. In its policy document on the digital and green transition facilitators, the EC identified emerging mega-trends in consultation with stakeholders, emphasising their impact on the ecosystem's resilience. The document highlighted the potential for collaboration between mainstream businesses and the Social Economy (SE) through "cross-fertilization."

During the collaborative process of developing the transition pathway of the proximity and social economy ecosystem<sup>12</sup>, stakeholders extensively discussed the potential for cooperation between mainstream businesses and/or public authorities and the SE. The rise of 'impact or mission-led' enterprises and private initiatives for self-recognition presents opportunities for fostering advanced forms of cooperation. Promoting 'business partnerships on an equal footing' with shared objectives has become crucial to establishing equitable ground between mainstream and SEOs. However, numerous barriers hinder more advanced forms of collaboration, such as challenges in integrating business models and undertaking mergers and joint ventures. Stakeholders identified root causes like 'inequality of power,' differences in governance models, divergent mission objectives, and differences in scalability that obstruct cooperation. Raising awareness and changing perceptions among mainstream businesses about the potential benefits of SE models, especially regarding economic performance and sectoral value addition, is vital for fostering such partnerships. Achieving this requires ensuring that SEOs have access to business support that will enable them to form or enhance existing partnerships. Further, national recognition of cooperative and participatory business models would improve the visibility of the products and services offered by SEOs.

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<sup>10</sup>European Commission (2020), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A New Industrial Strategy for Europe, COM(2020) 102 final.

<sup>11</sup> European Commission (2021), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Updating the 2020 New Industrial Strategy: Building a Stronger Single Market for Europe's recovery, COM (2021) 350 final.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission (2022) Transition pathway for Proximity and Social Economy Ecosystem. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/52015>. Accessed 13 June 2024



Integrating social and circular goals in the purchasing policies of mainstream businesses would further support this collaboration. To achieve this, SEOs must have access to the same business support available to mainstream businesses. The role of business communities, such as sector organizations, chambers of commerce, incubators, and entrepreneurs, is not just significant, but pivotal in achieving this. Besides national and regional initiatives, as well as EU business support initiatives like the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) and the EU Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP), were identified, although they are not yet fully utilised by ecosystem stakeholders.

Building partnerships involves multiple stages influenced by specific ecosystem factors and the parties' circumstances. Mainstream businesses can contribute to green or digital transition initiatives by designing intelligent solutions that operate in harmony with the ecosystem, ensuring that their role is effective, consistent, and aligned with the overall ecosystem perspective.

## 2.2 Exploring Partnership Models

As highlighted in previous discussions, fostering 'business partnerships on an equal footing' is essential for establishing equitable collaboration and achieving shared objectives. In this subchapter, various models of partnership will be explored that exemplify how mainstream businesses and SEOs can effectively collaborate to enhance economic performance, support sustainability goals, and contribute to the resilience of our industrial ecosystems.

### From Triple to Quintuple Helix

The development of innovation systems has produced increasingly intricate models that integrate various societal sectors. Commencing with the Triple Helix, these models have expanded to include the Quadruple and Quintuple Helix frameworks, each introducing additional layers of interaction and contextual elements essential for fostering sustainable and inclusive growth. The interaction among academia, industry, and government is crucial for developing digital technologies and green solutions. Universities provide research and expertise, industries drive technological advancements, and governments create supportive policies and regulations. Including civil society ensures that digital and green transitions are inclusive and address the needs of all societal groups. Public engagement through media and cultural institutions fosters a more democratic approach to innovation<sup>13</sup>.

The **Triple Helix** model, pioneered by Henry Etzkowitz and Loet Leydesdorff<sup>14</sup>, delineates the relationship and interactions among three essential institutional spheres: academia (universities), industry (businesses), and government. These sectors collaborate to propel innovation and knowledge production. Initially proposed in the 1990s, the Triple Helix model underscores the dynamic interactions and hybrid organizations that emerge from the collaboration between

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<sup>13</sup> Elias G. Carayannis & David F. J. Campbell & Evangelos Grigoroudis, (2022). "Helix Trilogy: the Triple, Quadruple, and Quintuple Innovation Helices from a Theory, Policy, and Practice Set of Perspectives," *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*, Springer;Portland International Center for Management of Engineering and Technology (PICMET), vol. 13(3), pages 2272-2301, September.

<sup>14</sup> Leydesdorff, L., & Etzkowitz, H. (2003). Can 'the public' be considered as a fourth helix in university–industry–government relations? Report on the Fourth Triple Helix Conference, 2002. *Science and Public Policy*, 30(1), 55–61.

universities, industries, and governments. It reflects a shift from a linear innovation model to a more interactive, application-oriented approach. The Triple Helix model accentuates the significance of trilateral networks and hybrid organizations in establishing a robust national innovation system. It facilitates the development of policies and strategies that enhance innovation capacity by harnessing the synergies among academia, industry, and government.

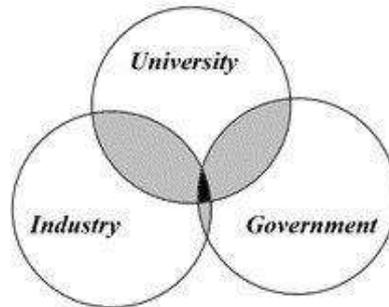


Fig. 1 Triple Helix model. Source Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2003

The **Quadruple Helix model** expands on the Triple Helix by adding a fourth component: civil society. This component encompasses citizens, media, and cultural institutions, emphasizing the role of public engagement and societal context in the innovation process. Developed by Elias G. Carayannis and David F. J. Campbell<sup>15</sup>, the Quadruple Helix emerged in the early 2000s, reflecting the growing recognition of the societal dimension in innovation systems. It integrates the civil society and cultural and democratic aspects of knowledge production and application.

The Quadruple Helix model broadens the innovation landscape to include public perspectives, democratic values, and cultural contexts. This approach enriches the inclusivity and relevance of innovation activities, ensuring that they address societal needs and contribute to the knowledge society and democracy. Quadruple helix collaborations, throw up innovation through interactive processes in which different groups of actors coming from the four main categories of players contribute with their knowledge due to their function in society<sup>16</sup>. One of the results is the formalisation of the civil society's role that pushes a more transparent innovation process enabling responsible research and innovation. Definitely, innovation processes become more open through the belief that different stakeholders in society jointly and actively are part of creating new ways of innovating.

<sup>15</sup> Carayannis, E. G., & Campbell, D. F. J. (2009). "Mode 3" and "quadruple helix": Toward a 21st century fractal innovation ecosystem. *International Journal of Technology Management* 46 (3/4), 201

<sup>16</sup> Carayannis, E. G., & Campbell, D. F. J. (2009). "Mode 3" and "quadruple helix": Toward a 21st century fractal innovation ecosystem. *International Journal of Technology Management* 46 (3/4), 201

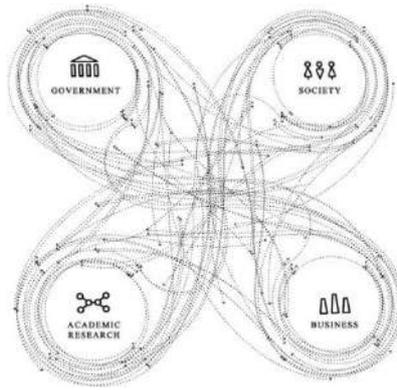


Fig. 2 The Quadruple Helix Model adapted by Fraunhofer (2016), originally developed by Carayannis and Campbell (2009). Copyright © 2015 Fraunhofer.

The **Quintuple Helix model** further extends the Quadruple Helix by incorporating the natural environment as the fifth component. This model emphasizes the interdependencies between social ecology and innovation, highlighting sustainability and environmental considerations. Introduced in 2010 by Carayannis and Campbell<sup>17</sup>, the Quintuple Helix represents a comprehensive framework that aligns with the socio-ecological transition identified by the EC<sup>18</sup>. It underscores the importance of ecological sensitivity and environmental sustainability in driving innovation. This model integrates ecological challenges as drivers of innovation, promoting a win-win situation between ecology, knowledge, and innovation. It supports the development of sustainable solutions that contribute to the resilience of both the economy and society, fostering a balance between economic growth and environmental protection, encouraging innovations that not only advance technology but also safeguard and enrich the natural environment.

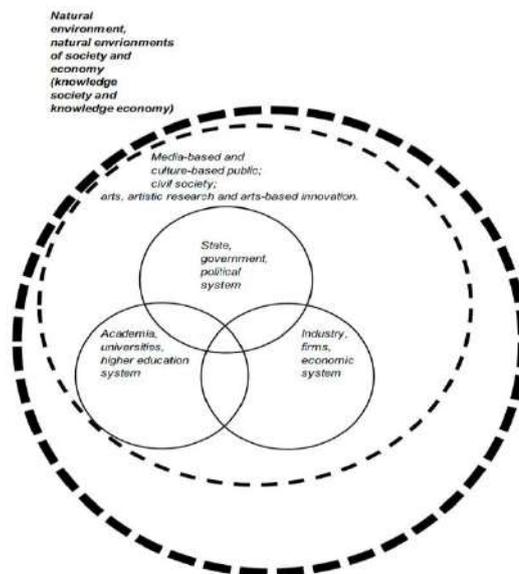


Fig. 3 The Quintuple Helix Innovation System. Source: Carayannis, Campbell and Grigoroudis, (2022).

<sup>17</sup> Carayannis, E. G., & Campbell, D. F. J. (2011). Open innovation diplomacy and a 21st century fractal research, education and innovation (FREIE) ecosystem: Building on the quadruple and quintuple helix innovation concepts and the “mode 3” knowledge production system. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*, 2(3), 327–372.

<sup>18</sup> European Commission. (2009). *The world in 2025. Rising Asia and socio-ecological transition*. Brussels: European Commission ([http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/the-world-in-2025-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/the-world-in-2025-report_en.pdf)).

The evolution from Triple to Quadruple and Quintuple Helix models underscores an increasing recognition of the complex interplay between different societal sectors in propelling innovation. These models provide a comprehensive framework for fostering digital and green transitions, particularly in the social economy, by ensuring that innovation is inclusive, democratic, and sustainable.

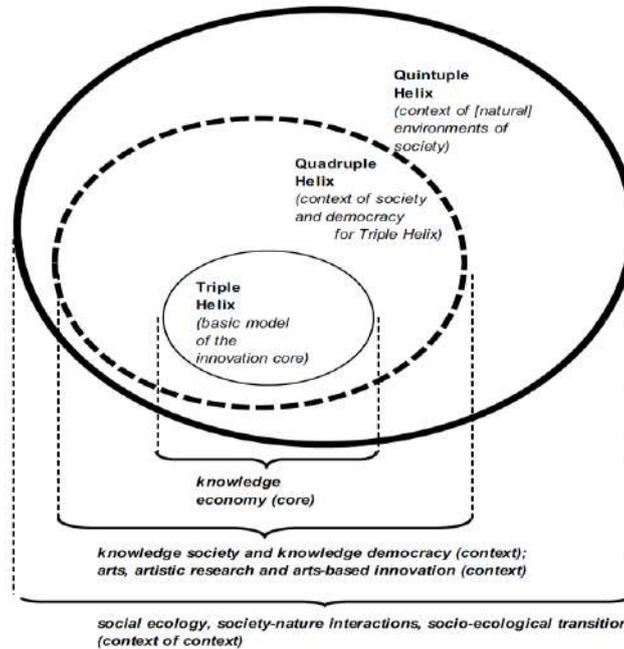


Fig. 4 The Quadruple and Quintuple Helix Innovation Systems in relation to society, democracy, and social ecology. Source: Carayannis, Campbell and Grigoroudis, (2022).

### PPP for green transition

A public-private partnership (PPP) is a long-term cooperation contract between private organisations and government agencies to provide public assets or services, in which the private party bears significant risk and management responsibility<sup>19</sup>. In this contract, both the public and private sectors have certain advantages relative to each other in performing specific tasks. It is usual that the private sector is responsible for the finance, design, construction, operation, management, and maintenance of the project. PPPs often involve the concession to the private sector of tax or other operating revenue, protection from liability, or partial ownership rights over nominally public services and property. PPP for green transition could be a way to incentivise private investment to accelerate the sustainable transition and address strategic sustainability challenges such as reducing carbon emissions, especially regarding the transition to cleaner energy technologies and sustainable development. As PPP schemes could introduce certain limitations in adapting to the green transition and sustainability needs, several hybrid schemes have emerged from PPPs, for example, the Public-

<sup>19</sup> European Court of Auditors. (2018). Public Private Partnerships in the EU: Widespread shortcomings and limited benefits (Special Report No. 09/2018). Publications Office of the European Union.



Private-Collaboration (PPC), which includes those practices with a governance structure that allows more discretion to the private partners<sup>20</sup>.

In PPC for green transition or green growth, the government usually supports Research and Development (R&D) in the first stage through financial and non-financial assistance, bringing forward technologies. In the second stage, when technologies are mature, the public sector promotes policy frameworks to unlock private capital. Continuous signals for sufficient investment certainty to the private sector will also contribute to building confidence and ensuring the enabling environment for another innovation.

### **Community-Led Local Development**

Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) is a strategic approach implemented across the European Union to encourage sustainable local development. It emphasizes local involvement and decision-making, advocating for a development process determined and directed by local actors. The CLLD approach builds on the principles of using local resources effectively and fostering cooperation among various community members to enhance their developmental capabilities. It aims to empower communities, build local capacities, and promote an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to ensure long-term, flexible solutions to local development challenges. This framework has been a key part of initiatives funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) from 2014 to 2020, focusing on creating lasting change by capitalizing on the unique strengths and potential of each locality.<sup>21</sup>

### **Green industrial partnerships**

Industrial partnerships are medium/long-term agreements among businesses or between businesses and universities, on issues of common interest, aiming to run activities in all fields of cooperation: research and development, innovation, human capital, and corporate social responsibility. They bring together employers across an industry sector to lead the development of skills, with a focus on growth and competitiveness. In this regard, in 2009 a Green Industry initiative was launched by UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organisation)<sup>22</sup>. It is a platform based on multi-stakeholder partnerships between business, government and civil society for the realisation of a green economy and green growth in the manufacturing and allied industry sectors. Green Industry promotes industrial production and development that does not come at the expense of the health of natural systems or lead to adverse human health outcomes by:

- Scaling up and mainstreaming proven practices to reduce negative environmental impacts.
- Transforming manufacturing and associated sectors into more effective contributors to sustainable industrial development.

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<sup>20</sup> Green Growth Best Practice Initiative. (2014). Green growth in practice: Lessons from country experiences. Global Green Growth Institute, European Climate Foundation, and Climate & Development Knowledge Network.

<sup>21</sup> Claudia Petrescu, (2015). Association and cooperation in Romanian rural areas? The leader experience, Journal of Community Positive Practices, Catalactica NGO, issue 2, pages 28-42.

<sup>22</sup> UNIDO (n.d.). Green Industry Available at <https://www.unido.org/our-focus-cross-cutting-services-green-industry/green-industry-initiative>. Accessed 13 June 2024



- Helping enterprises improve resource productivity and environmental performance (greening of existing industry);
- Establishing new operations delivering environmental goods and services (creating new green industries).

# 3. Clusters and Collaboration: A Model for Triple Transition

## 3.1 Comparison of Traditional Clusters and Social Economy Clusters

The Triple Transition model represents an integrated approach designed to address the interconnected challenges of digital, green, and social transitions. This model is distinguished by its ambitious objectives, which include fostering mutually reinforcing transitions, achieving climate neutrality and circularity by 2050, enhancing the competitiveness and resilience of Europe's industry, and reducing social and territorial disparities through a just transition. On July 5, 2023, the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union convened the event "Triple Transition: shaping international cooperation to address digital, green, and social transitions," setting the stage for the evolution of an enhanced transition policy.<sup>23</sup> In this context, clusters and other partnership models offer a potent framework for realizing the ambitious goals outlined by the European Union.

Clusters, defined by the EC *"as groups of firms, related economic actors, and institutions located near each other, have reached a sufficient scale to develop specialized expertise, services, resources, suppliers, and skills"*.<sup>24</sup>

Clusters play a crucial role in the European industrial landscape by forming vibrant geographic concentrations of interconnected firms and associated economic entities in a specific field, creating dynamic and synergistic networks of companies, suppliers, service providers, and associated institutions such as universities and research centres.<sup>25</sup> This synergy fosters a competitive environment that drives innovation, productivity, and economic growth. Examples of well-known clusters include Hollywood in the film industry, Silicon Valley in technology. The collaborative ethos of clusters ensures that diverse stakeholders, including businesses, research institutions, and governmental bodies, work together to nurture innovation and propel regional development. This integrated approach not only fortifies competitiveness and resilience but also ensures that economic growth is inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

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<sup>23</sup> Spanish Presidency Council Of The European Union (2023) . Seminar "Triple Transition: shaping international cooperation to address digital, green and social transitions. <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/events/seminar-triple-transition-shaping-international-cooperation-to-address-digital-green-and-social-transitions/>. Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>24</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, Clusters of social and ecological innovation in the European Union, perspectives and experiences – The role of clusters and similar forms of business cooperation in fostering the development of social economy, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021. Page 12

<sup>25</sup> Ketels, C. H. M. (2017). Cluster mapping as a tool for development. Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, Harvard Business School. Retrieved from <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=53385>. Accessed 13 June 2024



Traditional cluster models exhibit several key characteristics:<sup>26</sup>

1. **Geographical Concentration:** Businesses within a cluster are typically located near each other, facilitating frequent interaction and collaboration.
2. **Industry-Specific Focus:** Clusters often concentrate on specific industries.
3. **Interconnectedness:** Firms within a cluster are linked through various relationships, including supplier-manufacturer connections and collaborative research efforts.
4. **Competition and Cooperation:** Firms in a cluster compete while also collaborating in ways that enhance their collective competitiveness.

### Box 1. Clust-ER Agri-food (Italy)<sup>27</sup>

Clust-ER Agri-food is a private association comprising public and private entities, social economy SMEs in agrifood, research centers, businesses, and educational institutions. It aims to enhance sector competitiveness by sharing expertise, ideas, tools, and resources. Recognized by the Emilia-Romagna region, Clust-ER promotes innovation through collaborative approaches aligned with regional development policies. Clust-ER focuses on four main research and innovation areas:

- Sustainable and Precision Agriculture: Enhancing economic and environmental sustainability.
- Nutritional Integrity and Quality: Ensuring food safety, quality, authenticity, and traceability, with a focus on human health.
- Processes, Equipment, and Packaging: Improving food quality and sustainability.
- Valorisation of Byproducts and Waste: Increasing the economic and environmental sustainability of agri-food processes.

SE clusters, although a relatively new concept compared to traditional industrial clusters, are gaining attention for their unique structure and benefits. These clusters encompass a variety of sectors and are typically formed in specific geographic areas, yet they maintain an openness that allows for external ideas and values to influence their development. SE clusters interact closely with their communities, aiming to meet local needs<sup>28</sup>. REVES<sup>29</sup> describes SE clusters as flexible, community-

<sup>26</sup>Catalin Boja, (2011). "Clusters Models, Factors and Characteristics," International Journal of Economic Practices and Theories, Academy of Economic Studies - Bucharest, Romania, vol. 1(1), pages 34-43, July.

<sup>27</sup> For more details, please visit <https://agrifood.clust-er.it>. Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>28</sup> Bembenek, B., & Kowalska, K. (2016). SMEs Development within Industrial Clusters - Strategic Challenge for Cluster Management. Modern Management Review, 33-50.

<sup>29</sup>REVES (European Network of Cities & Regions for the Social economy) (2018). The Role of Clusters and Regions in Scaling Up. European Day of Social economy Enterprises 2018, European Economic and Social Committee, 4 June 2018, Brussels.



rooted networks that include non-governmental organizations, socially-oriented enterprises, and other institutions. These clusters promote cooperation and competition among diverse stakeholders, fostering a culture of shared rights and responsibilities. The benefits of social economy clusters mirror those of traditional clusters, such as the exchange of experience, skill diversification, and innovation.

### **Box 2. Alaturi de Voi Romania Foundation (Romania)<sup>30</sup>**

ADV Romania is an accelerator for the Social Enterprises Cluster, which comprises 48 member organizations, including 45 SMEs. The organization is dedicated to supporting social entrepreneurs by providing tailored instruments, consultancy, and educational and training activities. Their mission is to foster the growth and competitiveness of social enterprises, thereby amplifying their positive impact on local communities and the environment.

In 2019, ADV Romania launched "The Social Enterprises Accelerator" program, which became the grant administrator for 42 social enterprises across Romania. This initiative evolved into a significant cluster in the social economy by 2020, highlighting the organization's commitment to fostering collaborative and innovative environments. In 2021, ADV Romania, in collaboration with its partners, introduced AFIN, the first Romanian non-banking financial instrument specifically designed to support social enterprises, showcasing their dedication to financial innovation within the social sector. Moreover, through the ADV Academy, the organization invests in education, research, public policies, and social innovation. Their efforts span across Romania, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and the European Union, underscoring their broad impact and commitment to advancing the social economy on a regional and international scale.

### **Box 3. Torino Social Impact (Italy).<sup>31</sup>**

Originating from the Social Entrepreneurship Committee created by the Chamber of Commerce in 2004, TSI formally launched in 2017 with the support of the Chamber and 11 local actors. Torino Social Impact brings together over 240 member organizations, including companies, institutions, financial operators, charities, and foundations. These members collaborate through a shared Memorandum of Understanding, aiming to attract investments and activities that address social issues through sustainable business models. This unique public-private partnership model aims to innovate local governance and strengthen the social economy ecosystem in alignment with Agenda 2030.

<sup>30</sup> For more details, please visit <https://alaturidevoi.ro/en/>. Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>31</sup> For more details, please visit <https://www.torinosocialimpact.it/>. Accessed 13 June 2024

Below is a table comparing traditional competitive clusters with social economy clusters, based on the findings of the 2021 report from GECES.

**Table 1. Comparison of Traditional Competitive Clusters and Social Economy Clusters.** <sup>32</sup>

	Traditional Competitive Clusters	Social Economy Clusters
<b>Primary Aim</b>	Drive economic growth through technological advancements and increased productivity	Stimulate local development, promote social entrepreneurship, and address social and ecological issues
<b>Focus</b>	Sector-specific activities	Local needs and aspirations
<b>Guidance</b>	National and local economic policies	Community-driven, participatory and democratic approach
<b>Governance Model</b>	Top-down, technocratic	Bottom-up, democratic and participative
<b>Key Stakeholders</b>	Large multinational firms, SMEs, public authorities	Local authorities, civil society, SMEs, social enterprises
<b>Innovation Focus</b>	Technological innovation	Social and ecological innovation
<b>Funding Sources</b>	National and local governments	Local and regional authorities
<b>Collaboration Potential</b>	Can align business strategies with social values through cooperation	Can integrate competitive logics and enhance welfare, sustainability, and health considerations through cooperation

### The Pôles territoriaux de coopération économique

An example of a social economy cluster is the *Pôles territoriaux de coopération économique* (PTCE) in France<sup>33</sup>. PTCEs encompass a variety of legal forms, with a dominance of associative structures. Organizations within each PTCE share common strategies and pool resources, reducing individual costs and enhancing collective efficiency. They bring together a diverse array of stakeholders from the SSE, including public and private actors, to foster innovative projects that address local needs. Since 2021, PTCEs have benefited from increased governmental support through a national recovery strategy and operate within the legal framework of the SE Act of 31 July 2014. This legislation defines PTCEs as clusters that unite SEOs within a specific geographical area, partnering with other companies, local authorities, research institutions, and higher education establishments. The primary aim of PTCEs is to promote socially or technologically innovative projects that support sustainable local development and encourage collaboration between public and private SE participants, rooted in strong territorial connections, to expand their activities and maximize their social, economic, and environmental impact to offer socio-economic benefits for local communities.

<sup>32</sup> Own elaboration based on the results of the GECES report of 2021 on the role of clusters and similar forms of business cooperation in fostering the development of social economy. Available at <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2873/07591> . Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>33</sup> Le Labo de l'ESS (n. d.) Pôles territoriaux de coopération économique. Available at <https://www.lelabo-ess.org/poles-territoriaux-de-cooperation-economique-ptce-0>. Accessed 13 June 2024.

#### Box 4. Bou'Sol (France)<sup>34</sup>

*Bou'Sol* focuses on establishing a sustainable and inclusive food ecosystem in the wheat, flour, and bread supply chain. It leverages social economy principles to promote collaboration among local stakeholders, addressing various development challenges such as economic, ecological, health, and social issues. A key aspect of Bou'Sol is its "Pain & Partage" network of bakeries, which aims to expand from six locations to an anticipated 20 by 2025. This expansion will improve local food ecosystems by establishing shorter supply chains. Each bakery collaborates with local stakeholders to create an environmentally friendly supply chain for wheat, flour, and bread, ensuring sustainability and high quality from farm to consumer. The initiative emphasizes collective projects that prioritize job creation, the sustainable use of natural resources, and health considerations. Cooperation is central to Bou'Sol's operations, involving a diverse range of participants including consumers, local actors, research centers, and public authorities. These stakeholders engage in decision-making and project development processes, promoting a strong community-based approach to sustainable development.

Bou'Sol has made a significant impact on local employment by creating numerous job opportunities. It also promotes sustainable practices by encouraging shorter supply chains and local cooperation, thereby enhancing environmental sustainability. Furthermore, through collective catering and evolving purchasing behaviors, Bou'Sol expands access to quality food, ensuring that more people can benefit from healthy and sustainable food options. The economic model combines revenue from bakery operations with public subsidies, ensuring the financial sustainability and scalability of the initiative.

### 3.2 Cluster of Social and Ecological Innovation

A new concept known as **Clusters of Social and Ecological Innovation (CSEI)** has been outlined in the recent report "Clusters of Social and Ecological Innovation in the European Union, perspectives and experiences," which was published in December 2021 by the expert group on social economy and social enterprises (GECES)<sup>35</sup>. CSEI refers to ecosystems that bring together social economy entities, mainstream enterprises, civil society organizations, public authorities, education, and research institutions in a specific location to enhance local economic, ecological, and societal prosperity and regeneration by promoting cooperation, pooling of resources, and fostering innovation capacity. CSEI are collaborative networks that comprise social economy entities, mainstream enterprises, civil society organizations, public authorities, and educational institutions,

<sup>34</sup> For more details, please visit <https://www.bou-sol.eu/>. Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>35</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, Clusters of social and ecological innovation in the European Union, perspectives and experiences – The role of clusters and similar forms of business cooperation in fostering the development of social economy, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2873/07591>. Accessed 13 June 2024



aiming to improve local economic, ecological, and societal well-being through cooperation and innovation. Key features of CSEI include:

1. **Quadruple-Helix Model:** Unlike traditional clusters that follow a triple-helix model (industry, government, and academia), CSEI integrates civil society, emphasizing collective interest and amplifying social impact.
2. **Collaborative Approach:** CSEI fosters partnerships across various sectors, facilitating resource pooling, innovation capacity, and shared objectives.
3. **Cross-Sectoral Activities:** These clusters operate in diverse fields, often addressing multiple sectors simultaneously to promote social and ecological innovations.

#### **Box 5. Ceinture Alimentaires (Belgium)<sup>36</sup>**

*Ceinture Alimentaires* are ambitious territorial projects aimed at cultivating sustainable local food systems through the development of short food circuits. The term "ceinture", which means "belt", aptly characterizes these initiatives as they establish a connected ring of food production, processing, distribution, and consumption encircling metropolitan areas. This model highlights the essential relationship between urban centers and their surrounding rural landscapes, fostering a mutually beneficial partnership. Grounded in the cooperative movement, *Ceinture Alimentaires* projects are built on a foundation of solidarity and mutual support, thereby enhancing local food security and resilience. These projects strive to bolster a robust local food economy by emphasizing the significance of local and organic (bio) labels. This approach not only meets the growing consumer demand for sustainable and ethically produced food, but also ensures that the economic benefits stay within the local community. The cooperative nature ensures active involvement of various stakeholders, from farmers to consumers, in the decision-making process, fostering a strong sense of community ownership and accountability.

#### **Box 6. Regionalwert AG (Germany)<sup>37</sup>**

The Regionalwert AG (RWAG) model enhances the concept of local food clusters by integrating comprehensive rural financing and investment schemes. This model promotes regional cooperation by fostering connections across the entire agricultural value chain, from production to consumption, with a strong emphasis on organic practices. What makes RWAG unique is its financing mechanism that brings together private and institutional investors to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the agri-food sector. Unlike traditional investment funds, RWAG attracts mainly local citizens deeply committed to the sustainable development of their

<sup>36</sup> For more details, please visit <https://www.ceinturealimentaire.be/fonctionnement> . Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>37</sup> For more details, please visit <https://www.regionalwert-ag.de/> . Accessed 13 June 2024

region. This grassroots investment approach ensures that the financial gains are reinvested within the local economy, promoting long-term sustainability and community prosperity<sup>38</sup>.

Furthermore, RWAG goes beyond financial investment by acting as a catalyst for innovation, offering a comprehensive array of services including training, networking, and business support. This holistic approach strengthens the entire regional agri-food ecosystem, ensuring that all participants, from rural businesses to civil society organizations, benefit from enhanced collaboration and resource sharing.

### Box 7. CEDRA Split (Croatia)<sup>39</sup>

CEDRA Split is a CSEI comprising 20 organizations, including 9 SMEs and start-ups. Its mission is to support the agile, integrative, and regenerative development of people, organizations, communities, and ecosystems through training, consulting, projects, and programs.

Founded in 2012, CEDRA Split pioneered a quintuple helix cluster structure, involving public, private, civic non-profit, R&D&I, and education sectors. In 2015, it established CEDRA Split Ltd., a business support organization providing services to social enterprises, SMEs, and public institutions. CEDRA Split focuses on education, consultancy, project development, and strategic planning. Recognized for its innovative eco-socio-economic and technological initiatives, the cluster aligns with the European Green Deal and UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The concept of CSEI represents a significant advancement in cluster development. By integrating social and ecological aspects in addition to the traditional economic focus, CSEI's models offer a promising approach to addressing the current transitional challenges in Europe and promoting a sustainable and inclusive economy.

## 3.3 Services for Partnership

The **European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP)**<sup>40</sup> is a consortium funded by the EC that aims to provide cluster organisations with opportunities to promote collaborations, expand businesses and take advantage of the various tools/facilities. The ECCP provides networking opportunities and information support for clusters and their members aiming to improve their performance and

<sup>38</sup> Pour la solidarité (n. d.) Regionalwert ag bürgeraktiengesellschaft in der region freiburg (RWAG) ; Available at <https://www.ess-europe.eu/fr/bonnepratique/regionalwert-ag-burgeraktiengesellschaft-der-region-freiburg-rwag> Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>39</sup> For more details, please visit <https://cedrasplit.hr/cluster-model/>. Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>40</sup> For more details please visit <https://clustercollaboration.eu/>. Accessed 13 June 2024



increase their competitiveness through trans-national and international cooperation. It aims at intensifying cluster collaboration across regional and sectoral boundaries and facilitating SMEs' access to clusters and internationalisation activities. All the partners are associated with the ECCP by a consortium agreement and the consortium is, at the same time, linked with the EC by a contract. The contract has been settled after the selection of the technical offer by the Commission.

The online platform provides a wide range of tools for cluster organisations, cluster partnerships, initiatives and networks, cluster associations and resource efficiency support actors. The different services offered are focused on a range of events and opportunities both online and offline for entities and SMEs to connect with peers from the EU and beyond:

- A unique one-stop shop for news, learning and collaboration opportunities for industrial clusters across Europe.
- Boosting the visibility and showcasing the impact of European clusters in cutting-edge industries and expanding markets throughout the world.
- Supporting business competitiveness through information on resource efficiency and innovation.

Being part of the ECCP community gives cluster organisations access to a vast wealth of knowledge, information and global opportunities. The mission of the ECCP is to be the European online hub for cluster stakeholders (cluster organisations, policymakers and other related stakeholders from the cluster ecosystem) and the reference one-stop-shop for stakeholders in third countries aiming to set up partnerships with European counterparts.

The ECCP acts as a service facility aiming to provide cluster organisations, cluster partnerships, initiatives, meta-clusters and clusters networks, cluster associations and resource efficiency support actors with a variety of modern tools. Furthermore, these tools also enable training providers and public/policy institutions to:

- Make efficient use of networking instruments (search and find potential partners and collaboration opportunities).
- Develop collaboration trans-nationally (within Europe) and internationally (beyond Europe).
- Support the emergence of new value chains through cross-sectoral and cross-industrial cooperation
- Access the latest quality information on cluster development through news announcements and events.
- Improve their performance and increase their – as well as their members' – competitiveness.
- Build up knowledge and capacities on industrial ecosystems and cluster development.

The platform offers a comprehensive suite of services designed to support cluster organizations globally. One of its key features is the detailed mapping of over 1,500 cluster organizations worldwide, providing a rich resource for identifying and connecting with potential partners. This



mapping is complemented by a leading information repository, which disseminates the latest news, open calls, and updates through the ECCP newsletter, ensuring that the cluster community stays informed about relevant developments.

In addition to information sharing, the platform organizes a variety of events, including webinars, capacity building seminars, and conferences. These events, orchestrated by the ECCP, ECP (European Cluster Partnerships), and the broader cluster community, are crucial for facilitating capacity building and peer-to-peer discussions. Furthermore, matchmaking events are held to foster cooperation between clusters not only within Europe but also internationally.

The platform's extensive knowledge database is another significant asset. It includes mappings of regional, national, international, and sectoral cluster networks, along with toolkits and publications developed by the ECCP, EC, academia, and the wider community. This database serves as a valuable resource for anyone involved in cluster development.

The platform provides detailed insights into European Cluster Partnerships and offers a dedicated forum for these partnerships. This forum enables members to engage in mutual learning and exchange information on activities and funding opportunities. Cluster Associations and Networks also have a specialized forum to promote the exchange of ideas and best practices.

For those seeking to expand their network, the platform features a partner search facility that helps cluster organizations identify potential collaborators. The ClusterXchange facility enhances this by enabling direct exchanges of offers and demands through private messaging. To keep organizations abreast of future trends, the ECCP Trend Universe offers in-depth insights into how emerging trends might impact clusters. Supporting international cooperation, the platform includes tailored pages featuring profiles of strategically important countries and a technical assistance facility known as SMEs Go International. Moreover, it provides timely updates on key policy areas of the EC, such as green and digital policies, social economy, economic resilience, and industrial ecosystems, ensuring that users are well-informed about policy developments that may affect their activities.

#### **Box 8. Diesis Network (EU)<sup>41</sup>**

Diesis Network is the unique Meta-Cluster of the Social Economy registered in the ECCP Platform. It gathers 6 regional clusters of the Social Economy Ecosystem around Europe. Diesis Network is one of the widest networks supporting the social economy federating 60 national SE organisations and clusters from 27 countries, of which 16 are EU, 7 other European countries and 4 internationals. The condition to be a meta cluster is to gather at least 3 clusters registered on the ECCP platform.

<sup>41</sup> For more details please visit <https://www.diesis.coop>. Accessed 13 June 2024



The **European Digital Innovation Hubs**<sup>42</sup> (EDIHs) are support centres that help companies overcome challenges and enhance their competitiveness through digitalisation. They provide tech expertise and testing facilities so companies can improve their processes, products, and services through digital technologies by:

- providing access to technical expertise and testing, as well as the possibility to 'test before invest';
- providing innovation services, such as financing advice, training, and skills development that are central to successful digital transformation;
- helping companies tackle environmental issues, in particular the use of digital technologies for sustainability and circularity.

EDIHs combine the benefits of a regional presence with the opportunities available to a pan-European network. This regional presence leaves them well-placed to provide the services local companies need, through the local language and innovation ecosystem. The European coverage of the network facilitates the exchange of best practices across hubs in different countries as well as the provision of specialised services across regions when the required skills are not locally available.

The **EDIH Network** comprises 228 EDIHs across all EU Member States as well as Iceland, Lichtenstein, and Norway, leveraging cutting-edge technologies in key sectors. The network's core mission is to build up the digital capacities of companies and public sector organisations. With the EDIH network the EC built a vibrant community of hubs and other stakeholders fostering networking, cooperation, and knowledge transfer activities between EDIH, SME and mid-caps, the public sector and the other relevant stakeholders and initiatives.

The EDIH network web portal includes a catalogue to find essential information about the European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH), including hub descriptions and organizing them in three types of hubs:

- **Funded under the Digital Europe Programme:** Co-funded by the EC and Member States/Associated Countries.
- **Seal of Excellence:** Positively evaluated in a European competitive call but funded exclusively by national or regional resources.
- **Funded by other initiatives:** Digital innovation hubs with similar activities to EDIHs but not connected to the network.

The EDIH network web portal offers tools to assess the performance and impact of EDIHs on the digital maturity of the organizations they support. The JRC of the EC has developed a Digital Maturity Assessment (DMA) Tool for EDIHs to measure the digital progress of their customers. Each

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<sup>42</sup> For more details please visit <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/edihs> . Accessed 13 June 2024



collaboration between an EDIH and a company is planned and assessed using the DMA Tool, allowing EDIHs to understand each company's digital needs and provide tailored interventions. By evaluating a company's digital readiness before and after collaboration, the DMA Tool provides valuable insights into their digital growth.

By May 2024, the DMA Tool has been widely adopted, with over 4,700 assessments performed. These assessments help map digital transformation journeys and identify improvement areas, resulting in over 7,300 services delivered to SMEs and Public Sector Organizations (PSOs). From March to May 2024, the number of registered services more than doubled, reflecting increased EDIH activity and engagement. The Badge Programme, launched in December 2024, has awarded 149 badges to 75 EDIHs for achievements in various categories, such as Test Before Invest, Support to Find Investment, Training and Skills Development, Networking and Access to Innovation Ecosystems, and DMAs performed. This recognition highlights EDIHs' accomplishments and incentivizes continued excellence. The Digital Speed Test, a tool for quick self-evaluation of digital capabilities, registered over 280 tests by May 2024. The test has been well received, particularly in the education, public administration, and manufacturing sectors<sup>43</sup>.

#### **Box 9. EDIH in the Social Economy Ecosystem: PAI - Public Administration Intelligence<sup>44</sup>**

Public Administration Intelligence is the unique EDIH in Europe targeted to Social Economy SMEs. It is focused in fact on the applicative area of public services to citizens, delivered by Public Administrations (PA) and, increasingly, by SEOs. The convergence of these two actors in delivering services is particularly strong in Italy, where after the reform of the third sector, SEOs have been invested in the role of co-programming and co-designing with PAs that have to ensure their active involvement in the exercise of their functions of planning and organisation at the territorial level of interventions and services in the sectors of activity of general interest. Thus, PAIs targets are PAs and SMEs from the SE sector in Friuli Venezia Giulia, Piedmont and the Aosta Valley in northern Italy delivering public services to citizens.

PAI coordinates public and private ICT providers, a university, a Digital Innovation Hub, training agency from the SE, an independent financial consultant, and representatives of the target.

The expertise is focused on:

- artificial intelligence (AI)
- high-performance computing
- cybersecurity, blockchain and technologies for social good and e-participation of citizens,

<sup>43</sup> European Commission (2024). The Impact of the European Digital Innovation Hubs Network. Available at <https://european-digital-innovation-hubs.ec.europa.eu/news/impact-european-digital-innovation-hubs-network>. Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>44</sup> For more details please visit [https://european-digital-innovation-hubs.ec.europa.eu/edih-catalogue/pai#:~:text=Public%20Administration%20Intelligence%20\(PAI\)%20is,Social%20Economy%20Organizations%20\(SEO\).A](https://european-digital-innovation-hubs.ec.europa.eu/edih-catalogue/pai#:~:text=Public%20Administration%20Intelligence%20(PAI)%20is,Social%20Economy%20Organizations%20(SEO).A) ccessed .Accessed 13 June 2024

- higher technology readiness level solutions given the low level of digitalization of its customers.

The European dimension of PAI is ensured by the coordination with the Digital Transformation Accelerator, the connection with other EDIHs through the EDIH Network, and the participation of the DIESIS Network.

Many EDIHs include organisations that are part of other networks, developing strong connections, and providing a seamless service to SMEs within local and regional ecosystems:

- **Enterprise Europe Network (EEN)**<sup>45</sup>, the world's largest support network for SMEs with international ambitions. The EEN is active worldwide. It brings together experts from member organisations that are renowned for their excellence in business support. Member organisations include chambers of commerce and industry; regional development organisations; universities and research institutes; innovation agencies. Individual businesses can't become Network members, but they can enjoy the many services offered.
- **European Industrial Clusters (EIC)**<sup>46</sup>, is a voluntary association of individual companies, based on the joint interests of its members and their willingness to pool together their efforts through the activities set out in their Program for Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing to optimize cooperation for joint projects, implementation as well as strengthening and expanding their regional and international market positions through national, regional and trans-border cooperation. The EIC aims to improve the cooperation of its members with universities and technology centers within clusters and across regional and sectoral organizations. The EIC will generate joint actions and projects to fulfill sustainable partnering process for strategic European interregional collaboration in industrial modernization (industry 4.0) to help improve the European industrial environment.
- the **Start-up Europe**<sup>47</sup> is an initiative of the EC to connect high-tech startups, scaleups, investors, accelerators, corporate networks, universities and the media. It is supported by a portfolio of EU-funded projects and policy actions such as the EU Startup Nation Standard, Innovation Radar and the Digital Innovation and Scale-up Initiative (DISC). It is fully aligned with the SME strategy of the EC.

<sup>45</sup> For more details please visit <https://een.ec.europa.eu/>. Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>46</sup> For more details please visit [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/industry/strategy/cluster-policy\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/industry/strategy/cluster-policy_en). Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>47</sup> For more details please visit <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/startup-europe>. Accessed 13 June 2024

## 4. Local partnership for greening SE SMEs in Agri-food

Local partnerships play a crucial role in the development of greening agri-food systems by fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including public institutions, private enterprises, community-based organizations, and voluntary groups. These partnerships, whether formal or informal, enable the pooling of resources, knowledge, and expertise to address local development challenges and create sustainable solutions.

A key aspect of effective local partnerships is their ability to design and implement localized development agendas that are tailored to the specific needs and conditions of their communities. This approach ensures that the strategies and actions taken are relevant and impactful. The partnerships aim to stimulate economic growth, promote social inclusion, and enhance the quality of life through coordinated efforts and integrated policies.<sup>48</sup>

For example, in the European context, the establishment of Territorial Employment Pacts (TEPs) has shown the benefits of embedding the partnership principle into social and economic policies. These pacts have facilitated the creation of multi-agency collaborations that receive government funding to maintain a permanent organizational structure and deliver agreed-upon programs of work. Countries like Ireland, Austria, and the UK have institutionalized local partnerships in the form of registered companies or non-profit organizations, which further strengthens their role in local development.<sup>49</sup>

In the agri-food sector, local partnerships can be instrumental in piloting new projects and services that promote sustainable agricultural practices, reduce carbon footprints, and enhance food security. They involve local actors in defining priorities and designing action plans, ensuring that the strategies are grounded in local knowledge and experience. This participatory approach not only enhances the effectiveness of the interventions but also builds community ownership and commitment to the greening initiatives.

Moreover, successful local partnerships often rely on a supportive framework at the national level, which includes flexible policies, open communication channels, and recognition of local diversity. Governments play a crucial role in providing financial and human resources, as well as in facilitating the exchange of best practices and lessons learned among different partnerships.

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<sup>48</sup> Hofer, A.-R., & Juric, A. (2016). Making partnerships effective in their contribution to local development: Conclusions and recommendations. OECD and USAID.

<sup>49</sup> European Commission (1993): White Paper on growth, competitiveness, and employment: The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century, COM(93) 700 final.



LEADER<sup>50</sup> is a local development approach that has been utilized for 30 years to involve local stakeholders in the creation and implementation of strategies, decision-making processes, and resource distribution for the advancement of their rural regions. Approximately 2,800 Local Action Groups (LAGs) implement this method, encompassing 61% of the rural population in the EU. These groups unite public, private, and civil-society stakeholders within a specific area (status as of the end of 2018 - EU-28).

In the realm of rural development, LEADER operates under the national and regional Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) of each EU Member State, with co-financing from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The LEADER approach, characterized by seven key features, stands out from traditional funding programs by integrating local expertise in rural development. Its bottom-up approach empowers local communities to shape their development paths, ensuring fair participation and decision-making. The area-based focus targets regional strategic priorities, fostering cohesion and utilizing local resources. LAGs form diverse partnerships that drive development through structured governance. These groups create integrated, multi-sectoral strategies that address regional needs comprehensively. Networking enhances collaboration and knowledge sharing among stakeholders, while a focus on innovation encourages novel solutions to local challenges. Cooperation extends the impact of local development by facilitating joint projects with other regions and countries, promoting knowledge transfer and new perspectives. As of 2024, the latest generation of LEADER continues to address the challenges and seize the opportunities in rural areas within the new framework of the 27 Member States and their CAP Strategic Plans.

#### **Box 10. Innovation Cluster for Plant Proteins (Estonia)<sup>51</sup>**

The Innovation Cluster for Plant Proteins project was promoted by the Estonian non-profit organisation, *MTÜ Taimste Valkude Innovatsiooniklaster*. Over four years, the project explored which crops would be best suited for plant protein production in Estonia. It identified the most appropriate technological approach to extract plant protein from seeds and how to make the best, most consumer-friendly, meat- and milk-like products from plant protein powder. The aim of the cluster project was to valorise protein-rich crops and process them into value-added products in line with customer demand. The project activities incorporated four distinct research and innovation aspects, including crop selection and suitability for protein isolation; isolation, concentration and characterisation of plant proteins; development of extrusion technology for plant proteins; and development of technology for fermented plant milks. Fostering the collaboration between the cluster members (farmers and processors) and the scientific stakeholders were important project features.

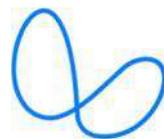
<sup>50</sup> For more details please visit [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/news-events/news/leaderclld-declaration-2021-2027\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/news-events/news/leaderclld-declaration-2021-2027_en.html). Accessed 13 June 2024

<sup>51</sup> For more details, please visit [https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/good-practice/innovation-cluster-plant-proteins\\_de](https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/good-practice/innovation-cluster-plant-proteins_de). Accessed 13 June 2024

Find more on the  
Grains Project  
[https://www.diesis.  
coop/grains/](https://www.diesis.coop/grains/)

## Partners

- Diesis Network - Coordinator
- Asociatia Centrul Pentru Legislatie Nonprofit (Romania)
- Associazione Generale Cooperative Italiane (Italy)
- Charitable Organization Platform for Social Change (Ukraine)
- Consorzio Ruini Societa' Cooperativa Consortile Impresa Sociale (Italy)
- innova eG (Germany)



Platform for  
Social  
Change



Center for  
Not-for-profit  
Law

