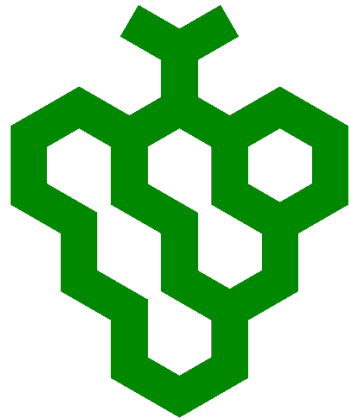




SMP-COSME-2021-RESILIENCE-SEM
(G.A. 101074093)



GRAPE

Action Title: SMP-COSME-2021-RESILIENCE
Social Economy and local green deals
supporting SMEs to become more resilient

Grant Agreement number: 101074093

Project acronym: GRAPE

Project title: Local Social Green Resilience Action Plans for
small and peripheral territories.

Deliverable: 4.2 - Policy paper and recommendations



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INTRODUCTION

In today's world of rapid changes a large number of inhabitants of remote and peripheral areas seems to feel rather disconnected, excluded and – most of all – powerless and unable to shape these changes. The latter appear to be linked very much to exogenous factors such as the development of markets, the climate and ecological crisis, dominating models of tourism, governmental decisions or behavioural changes.

Yet, transnational exchange between small municipalities and their social economy partners in the framework of the GRAPE project once again confirmed the potential and problem-solving force local communities are able to develop, and the fundamental role of social economy organisations herein.

Local communities have the capacity to propose alternatives to the current development model – alternatives that will give to the local people the income they need not from the over-exploitation of nature and cultural heritage, but from a new paradigm, a new economy that protects natural and cultural resources as well as social cohesion in the long term. A paradigm that focuses on green and social innovation, thereby putting emphasis on nature-based solutions that bridge past and existing local traditional experience, values and knowledge with new ecological and social scientific, cultural and technological knowledge.

Concretely, the exchange of experiences, practices and policies between GRAPE project partners has shown that the social economy *is* or *could be* a solution for supporting local communities in remote and peripheral areas by:

- enhancing social infrastructure and supporting social policies that might not exist today;
- preserving local cultural heritage and developing ecotourism /sustainable hospitality;
- revitalising agriculture;
- supporting environmental management, research, collection of environmental data and monitoring;
- identifying and mobilising social financing and funding, including crowdfunding, identifying innovative financial tools;
- preparing and implementing projects for the benefit of the community, the environment and climate;
- contributing to energy upgrading of buildings, installation of solar systems, or production of energy from renewable sources through energy communities;
- helping to create an economy geared towards green and social sustainability;
- promoting knowledge-sharing and life-long learning through non-formal education and the collaboration with formal education actors.

However, the social economy and the role it can play in empowering society and contribute to/lead green transition processes remains unknown to many persons, who at best limit the role of social enterprises to their work on social inclusion and activities with and for socially vulnerable persons only. Still too many persons ignore the role of the social economy in the production of environmentally responsible goods and services.

The following recommendations to policy-makers at different levels were developed by GRAPE partners in the course of their transnational exchange, but also during the participatory design, in cooperation with a number of local stakeholders, of their local action plans. They are not exhaustive, but have the objective to stimulate reflection on several main topics that emerged on a regular basis during the discussions between project partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Small municipalities experience reduced capacities of their technical/administrative structures in guaranteeing services and interventions that can fully meet the needs of the area and in intercepting and managing public funds that could bring in new resources. They suffer from a lack of expertise and a shortage of well-trained personnel. At the same time they are imposed heavy bureaucratic procedures. Therefore, very often, they are obliged to outsource services and the operation of infrastructure. As a consequence, small and remote municipalities might not be able to prepare long term and coherent plans, to follow the new scientific, green and social tendencies and to update their policies and technical planning.
For an isolated territory the design and implementation of an articulated transition programme is therefore certainly a complex process, requiring strong connections with external partners in order to have access to the appropriate skills and technologies, the ability to elaborate and adapt them to the local context, economic resources to implement the solutions and administrative-managerial capacities to guarantee their operation in the long term. For these aspects to combine and take effect, **careful planning is needed, which must involve the entire community**, activating all local actors (citizens, associations, enterprises, etc.), with a special focus on social economy actors, in order to ensure that the transition is not only ENVIRONMENTAL, but also SOCIAL, i.e. that it aims to eliminate inequalities and guarantee the involvement of the most fragile population groups.
- A fundamental point of departure in the planning process is the drafting of a common shared future vision of the community. In a context in which persons and organisations (are rather obliged to) focus on their day-to-day activities and have often few external connections a participatory process to draft a future vision, stimulating a reasoning on expectations and desires, is useful to build a context and local society that will then be more actively engaged also in realising such vision. This will in turn strengthen also the role and effectiveness of the public authority.
- Promote **meaningful dialogue**. This dialogue should not be limited to a workshop or to some events or decisions of the Municipal Council or other bodies. It requires a **participatory planning methodology** and different dialogue tools, combining for example face-to-face discussions, dialogue workshops, participatory planning exercises, workshops, online consultation, participatory action research, etc. A shared sense of **co-responsibility and alliances favouring new models of governance** have to guide actions.
- Local policy-makers and administration should **follow principles and practices of sustainable urban planning and infrastructure development**. This will help creating a favourable context for the creation of community energy initiatives, sustainable transport and mobility, the design of green spaces or proper waste management, to name just some examples.
- Fundamental for the mobilization of the local community, but also for the creation of alliances and partnerships that have the capacity and knowledge to co-design, launch and implement transition processes in remote areas (and elsewhere) is the **promotion of inter-cooperation between different social economy players, but also between the social economy, public authorities and other actors**. An example brought forward by GRAPE project partners is the cooperation between

local (cooperative) shops and other players in the establishment, for example, of an energy community.

Interesting experiences have been made and added value demonstrated by so-called “Clusters for Social and Ecological innovation” which the European Commission’s Expert Group on Social Economy and Social Enterprise describes as “ecosystems which group mainly social economy entities with mainstream enterprises, civil society organisations, public authorities, education and research institutions that cooperate in a particular location to improve local economic, ecological and societal prosperity and regeneration by facilitating cooperation, pooling of resources and enhancing innovation capacity”, “a quadruple-helix model, rather than the triple helix model that is pursued by traditional competitive clusters (...).”

- **Transfer of good practices, collaborations, networking with universities, social and environmental organizations, local, regional, national and transnational networks**, participation in programs, events and activities that give valuable experience, knowledge, ideas, possibilities and tools is of utmost importance. A good practice example provided by GRAPE partners in Italy is, for example, the '[Renewable and Solidarity Energy Community Network](#)', initially promoted by Legambiente and the East Naples Energy and Solidarity Community in 2021 and which now has more than 50 members throughout Italy.
Small and remote territories should try to exploit possibilities for cooperation and **exchange with other municipalities** from their region, country or other countries in Europe and the world.
- **Likewise, GRAPE partners encourage local governments and local communities as such to use the human capital, knowledge and capabilities that exist not only among permanent residents, but also inhabitants living (temporarily) in other places, new residents with different origin or even occasional visitors** who in some way or the other relate with the territory.
- The **existence of training opportunities** is key for the success of the design and implementation of social green transition processes. This also includes training and education in technology which is essential for citizens to adapt and take advantage of the opportunities of the current technological environment. Skills development does not only improve the employability of people, but also leads to empowerment and the ability to adapt to change. Also here, the social economy can be/is an important partner – not at least, though not exclusively, with regard to capacity-building and (work) integration of persons with very low or medium levels of qualification.
- **Remote areas are hit strongly and more than other areas by demographic change. Yet, possibilities exist to attract young people and families and ensure employment and quality of life for example through innovation in the organizational and business fabric** (an example here might be integrated solutions between work on multifunctional farms in remote areas and smart-working contracts in companies that might be located outside the area).
- Small municipalities and territories, exactly due to their size, *have often been and are* fertile grounds for **experimentation** of new social and economic models – also and in particular those based on participation. Local policy-makers and communities should – as much as possible- not exclude opportunities provided, for example, in the framework of EU cohesion policy, the new CAP, the European Green Deal and a diversity of other European or national programmes (the latter, however, need to become more accessible and less burdensome for these territories).

Cooperation and partnership with universities and/or other actors at different levels might also facilitate this kind of experimentation.

Moreover, a number of tools have already been developed to support emerging initiatives. Examples here are platforms such as PELL (PUBLIC ENERGY LIVING LAB) or simulators provided by different type of companies or platforms.

- **GRAPE partners encourage public authorities to make better use of existing possibilities to facilitate access of social economy enterprises to public procurement** as well as to use the flexibility offered by current EU state aid rules, especially in times of crisis (pandemic, energy, economic crisis, etc.). A number of tools and capacity-building measures have been created at European and national level which might provide additional assistance.
- **Awareness-raising and education campaigns** to educate citizens about the importance of sustainability, climate change mitigation and the transition towards a green and digital economy are indispensable and will help creating a favourable environment for social green transition processes. They might include workshops, talks and educational programs in schools, campaigns carried out in cooperation with media, events, etc.

Financial and other opportunities

GRAPE partners state a lack of proper financing and the high dependency of local authorities in remote and peripheral areas on funding made available by regional or national authorities. More, flexible and efficient financial tools are needed for a quick and just green social transition leaving no-one behind.

- All Regulations for the programming period 2021-2027 of Cohesion Policy Funds provide for the access of social economy enterprises to different programmes. Also, a number of other programmes is open to social economy enterprises as well. Ultimately, however, the criteria applied for the evaluation may in practice exclude (social economy) companies – including those that have been affected by the pandemic and the energy crisis. This happens, for example, by placing great emphasis on the existence of profits in the previous year, regardless of the viability of the proposed business plan or the resilience a company has shown through crises. Frequently, only banking criteria prevail, which exclude many innovative investment projects that are not immediately "profitable" or have a particular social and green impact.

GRAPE partners therefore encourage the European Commission and national authorities to **consider a possible revision of evaluation criteria and practices and to carry out a pre-assessment of the impact on social economy enterprises of future programmes and initiatives.**

- **The Recovery and Resilience Facility** provides Member States with significant opportunities to implement reforms and investments through social and inclusive entrepreneurship. In addition, some Member States have identified the social economy and entrepreneurship as priorities in their national recovery and resilience plans. But this does not correspond to the priorities of the plans of other Member States such as Greece which excluded 80-90% of small and medium-sized enterprises. GRAPE partners ask the European Commission and the European Parliament to **monitor and support Member States in implementing their respective plans so that they are fairer and more inclusive.**

- **Investment funds, at local and national level, are frequently not available to social economy actors. Also, it is difficult for the social economy to have access to fair bank lending and diverse programmes**, even if at an early stage they are not excluded as forms of entrepreneurship, since all the European Regulations of the various Programs emphasize the obligation of Member States not to exclude social economy enterprises from beneficiary programmes. Proposals should be made by Member States – for example in the framework of the work on the upcoming Council Recommendations on Developing Social Economy Framework Conditions – on how to improve this situation, encourage banks and investors to develop financial instruments and make them accessible specifically for the social economy. Moreover, Member States could envisage the (further) development of guarantee schemes which might further improve access of the social economy to financing.
- In the case of programmes providing capacity-building often too much emphasis is placed on education, training and talent promotion programmes alone (an example here are programmes related to the European Social Fund). Yet, in order to have more impact, these **programmes should be part of an integrated approach accompanied by fair access to appropriate financial tools**. A similar approach could be taken for mentoring and counseling programmes, which, often, do not take into account the problem of access to working capital and social investment capital.

Renewable Energy/Energy communities

- **Local authorities can be an active part of a local energy community**. At the same time they can **establish favorable policies and regulations** to encourage the creation and operation of these communities. This may include simplifying authorization and licensing procedures, as well as removing legal and administrative barriers that make it difficult for citizens to participate in community energy projects.
- Local governments/Local authorities also have competence in urban and planning issues. They may play a vital role in the **identification or provision of land or buildings for the development of local energy communities**.
- In their efforts to promote local energy communities, local governments/authorities and their partners should **explore the mobilization potential of local meeting places** (shops, libraries, cultural offers). They might also help mobilising for and developing energy communities in a coherent and synergetic way in order to create economies of scale and therewith enhance the solidarity aspect of the initiatives.
- **Local authorities are often also important interlocutors when it comes to accessing national financing (e.g. in the framework of Next Generation EU/RRF). Possibilities in this context might be more strongly explored and used.**
- Local authorities, in cooperation with other players including the social economy, may be important promoters of **specific training and education programmes on renewable energy, energy efficiency and the concept of local energy communities**. Education and training are one of the pre-conditions for successful mobilization of citizens and capacity-building. In this context, transnational programmes such as "SCHOOLS OPEN TO CLIMATE PROTECTION AND ENERGY SAVINGS Athens – Berlin" funded by the "European Climate Initiative" proved to provide



important inspiration – not at least also through the creation of a digital moodle platform on which all participating schools posted their work and which will be maintained and enriched by the work of other schools.

Agriculture

A number of remote regions – though not all – have been relying, in their (economic) development, on agricultural activities. Many now see these activities (strongly) reduced due to a number of factors, including broader macroeconomic changes at the international level, demographic change, climate change or reorientations of the economic tissue, including the development of tourism, to name just a few.

In particular one GRAPE partner region deplores the ever increasing weight of tourism and related land use change. Farmers prefer to sell their land for promising amounts instead of continuing badly paid agricultural activity. As a consequence, the local population becomes increasingly dependent on import of food. Specific local species and varieties of plants are getting lost. Moreover, the impact of these changes in ecological terms (environmental protection, water management, etc.) is considerable.

- GRAPE partners perceive a need, but also a real potential to **make agriculture and food production** – in cooperation with the social economy and other partners - **again sustainable, regenerative and resilient** (in environmental, social, but also economic terms). This could include the promotion of a new food culture based on traditions, but also new tendencies – connected to local products and the promotion of local seeds and species. Moreover, **sustainable synergies could be created between agriculture, a climate-friendly food culture and sustainable tourism.**
- **Local authorities, in cooperation with stakeholders, should therefore seek to establish a local supportive regulative and financial framework for a sustainable agriculture with multi-level aims:** production of food, restoring nature, maintaining soil fertility and small ecosystems, protection against fires and floods, strengthening social cohesion, regeneration of abandoned lands, new products for special diets and needs, etc.
- **Cooperation between universities, local authorities, (social economy) organisations, civil society, farmers and other professionals can lead to the creation of a knowledge platform bringing together knowledge, know-how and (training) tools regarding sustainable agriculture and ways to revalue land in a socially, ecologically and economically responsible way.**
- **Also transnational exchange with other regions and municipalities might provide additional support, capacities and tools.**
Local, regional and national authorities, in cooperation with the social economy, should improve opportunities for life-long learning of farmers, civil servants and other interested persons not only on farming but also on mitigation and adaptation climate policies, circular economy, biodiversity, nature restoration strategies and social economy entrepreneurship.
- **A local (possibly digital) registry, in small municipalities, of all agricultural buildings and human creations, offering information about their status and history as well as about persons behind their creation and maintenance could provide important data and input for future policies and plans.** At the same time, it could become a basis for the creation of a **knowledge platform** (buildings, people,

good practices, scientific work, ...), help local communities to protect these human creations in the long term and connect people, stories and experiences.

Moreover, this type of registry and network of buildings/creations could be a fundament for “alternative” tourism and therewith a source for income for their owners who might then better be able to maintain and protect instead of selling them.

- **Land which, for different reasons such as the age of its owners, is unused could be reconverted to production and therefore become an economically usable asset. Cooperation with the social economy** could enhance the social and ecological value of this reconversion. Cooperatives, or small associations, generally do not (often) enjoy land ownership, but would need land in order to be able to activate work placement paths and/or create employment and economic activities with social added value. Cooperation between land owners and the social economy could lead to a win-win situation in many aspects. A good practice here is the **Terra e Vita initiative** (*Earth and Life* – by Solco Camunia and Cooperative). The project promotes the recovery for productive use of land now in conditions of evident abandonment - through the activation of a territorial network made up of type A and type B social cooperatives and public bodies sensitive to environmental issues - as well as social inclusion and skills development of disadvantaged persons.

Tourism and protection of nature

- Alternative forms of tourism which respect the environment and culture of the host region and contribute to a diversification of activities, employment creation as well as to a maintenance of (local) knowledge and know-how exist and can be promoted also in remote areas. Their development necessitates, of course, the support for example of farmers and other land owners, who need to be encouraged and incentivized to maintain their activities and keep their land (developing the latter in the interest of the local community and its guests rather than letting it serve the purpose of the traditional tourism industry).

Social economy enterprises and organisations can be an important partner in the creation of sustainable tourism/ecotourism and related activities. Moreover, they can also benefit from the existence of the latter and reinforce their own potential:

- a) **Job opportunities.** Ecotourism can create new social economy-led job opportunities for the local community - especially in the areas of hospitality, tourism and local food production, guided tours, nature walks and culture.
- b) **Promotion of social and environmental values:** Ecotourism is often associated with social and environmental values such as sustainability, responsible tourism and community involvement. Social economy enterprises that promote these values can benefit from greater visibility and recognition among ecotourists.
- c) Social economy can play a role in **preserving local cultural heritage and promoting it among ecotourists.** This can involve activities such as cultural events, handicrafts and traditional food production, to name just some examples.
- d) Social economy enterprises and organisations can **develop new networks and partnerships for sustainable tourism with other local businesses and organisations.** This can facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing, thereby benefitting the entire community.
- e) **Interlinkages can be made and synergies be created– also through the social economy – between ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, (cooperative) neighborhood shops and energy communities.**



In summary, by leveraging their strengths and expertise, social economy enterprises and organisations can contribute to the development of a sustainable and responsible ecotourism industry that benefits both the local community and the environment.

GRAPE partners therefore encourage policy-makers at different level to give the potential contribution of the social economy to another, sustainable type of tourism more visibility and support in different type of programmes and initiatives.

- Finally and in this context, GRAPE partners would also like- to draw the attention of policy-makers on the centralized management of **NATURA areas** in several Member States, which leaves these areas frequently without management and management tools. In fact, what should be promoted in these areas are **management systems with the participation of the local community**. A protection with legislative tools only won't be enough.

A main conclusion GRAPE partners draw from their work is the urgent necessity to leave the silo approach in processes of policy-making and implementation. Connections have to be made between different policy fields, sectors, budget lines and administrative responsibilities. Work on policies promoting sustainable agriculture and diversification of the activities of farmers should include aspects and elements related to energy policy and/or sustainable tourism, to provide just one example. Here, smaller territories could lead by example and should be able to act also in a national and European (policy) context based on an integrated approach.