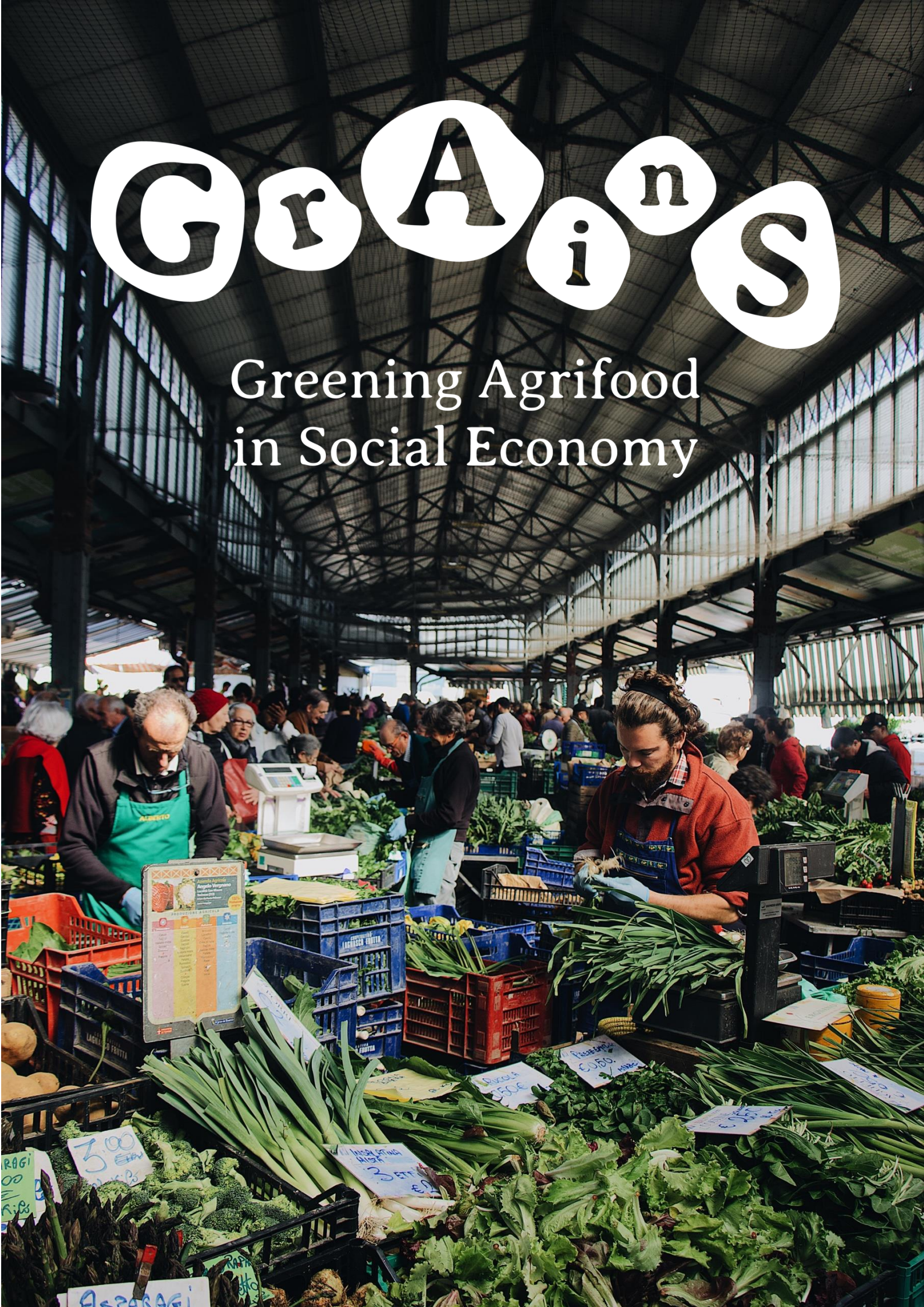


GrAins

Greening Agrifood
in Social Economy



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Executive Summary

The Green Action Plan (GAP) supports social economy SMEs in the agri-food sector to lead the green transition. By promoting sustainable farming, circular practices, digital tools, and local food systems, the GAP helps SMEs cut emissions, improve resilience, and create fair economic opportunities. Through the GRAINS project, **these goals were turned into action with financial support, training, mentoring, and knowledge exchange.** SMEs adopted eco-technologies, improved market access, and built stronger community ties, showing how social enterprises can combine environmental sustainability with social inclusion and competitiveness.

Relevance to the Project

The GAP is directly aligned with the GRAINS project's mission to green social economy SMEs through transnational cooperation. It connects project activities with EU priorities such as the Green Deal, CAP, and Farm-to-Fork Strategy. GRAINS demonstrated how GAP principles work in practice by funding SMEs, supporting skills development, and fostering local green markets. Both place SMEs at the centre of the twin transition—green and digital—while ensuring social fairness, resilience, and decent work.



Introduction

Context and Background

Agri-food systems stand at an intersection of climate, economy, and society. They are both contributors to and vulnerable to climate change. Yet, as a highly subsidised and therefore extremely politically controlled sector of the economy, agri-food systems offer the greatest potential for tackling the climate crisis. Agriculture and food production can drive this shift by adopting solutions such as sustainable farming practices, reducing food loss and waste, promoting local markets and sustainable diets, developing eco-packaging, and investing in innovative, low-impact technologies. These changes can significantly reduce carbon emissions, conserve biodiversity, and contribute to a healthier, more resilient planet. Across Europe, a wide range of social economy organisations are already shaping alternative food systems grounded in ecological and social values: agricultural cooperatives, solidarity-based grocery stores, food waste recovery enterprises, participatory supermarkets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and social farms. There are more than 41,000 farmer producer organisations in the EU, over 22,000 of which are cooperatives. These entities contribute to greener supply chains while ensuring social fairness—promoting decent work, accessible healthy food, community engagement, social participation and environmental awareness.

Social economy SMEs in the agri-food sector thus present a dual value: they meet growing consumer demand for ethical and sustainable products, and they demonstrate strong compliance with evolving EU standards on environmental and social performance. By embedding circular practices and reducing emissions across the production and consumption chain, they support a low-impact and inclusive food system that delivers value for people and the planet alike. Certain cultivation methods, such as adding terra preta to the soil and conservation tillage, even have the potential to store CO₂, which will also be urgently needed in the coming years to tackle the climate crisis. It is precisely these kinds of cultivation practices that need to be developed and tested, and the social enterprise environment in the agrifood sector is ideally suited to this.

The GRAINS project served as a key platform to support SMEs in unlocking their potential to adopt and promote sustainable practices, contributing to a broader shift toward embedding these principles within the green economy. GRAINS provided both financial and strategic support—funding innovative projects that often-utilized digital tools to modernize operations and enabling the purchase of equipment that contributed to a more circular supply chain (e.g., solar panels). Beyond financial assistance, SMEs leveraged this support to expand their product portfolios and strengthen stakeholder engagement across both supply and demand chains. This was achieved through extensive public relations efforts, communication strategies, and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at building visibility and market presence.

Additionally, SMEs benefited from comprehensive training programs delivered throughout the first two years of the project. These capacity-building efforts were designed to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement sustainable practices effectively.



Collectively, these activities have brought the project closer to achieving its dual objective: stimulating economic growth while upholding sustainable development priorities.

Definition of Social Economy SMEs

Greening social economy SMEs and entrepreneurs in the proximity and social economy ecosystem through transnational co-operation. 99.9% of the companies in the Proximity & Social Economy (P&SE) ecosystem are SMEs, with a significant part being micro enterprises and starts-ups. This ecosystem employs 22,9 million people and accounts for 6.54% of EU value added (EUR 791 billion). Actors of the proximity and social economy are pooled under this ecosystem given that they often share common characteristics (i.e. local anchorage and short value chains) although the features of these entities vary to a certain extent. This call will target social economy SMEs and entrepreneurs operating in this ecosystem and will benefit proximity initiatives such as Local Green Deals but also support the development of sustainable practices (e.g. 15-minutes city, ecofriendly last mile delivery and short food supply chains) at local level.

Alignment with EU Green Deal and CAP

By encouraging sustainable practices among social economy SMEs in the agri-food sector, the GRAINS project fits with the European Green Deal (EGD) and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Emphasizing a circular economy and a healthy food system, the EGD seeks climate neutrality by 2050 and substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. GRAINS helps SMEs to be competitive to meet EU environmental requirements by offering training on sustainable practices, supporting the deployment of eco-friendly technologies (e. g. , solar panels), and By enabling social economy SMEs that give social purpose above economic activity, this also helps to guarantee a just transition.

Core component of the EGD, the Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy aspires for a fair, nutritious, and environmentally sustainable food supply. Supporting SMEs in lowering their environmental impact, guaranteeing food security, and encouraging fair economic returns via local markets and short supply chains, GRAINS helps them.

The CAP encourages farmers and guarantees food security while tackling environmental and climate targets. GRAINS complements the CAP by assisting SMEs with sustainable resource management, sustaining rural vitality via local economic contributions, and boosting their general competitiveness and sustainability via financial and advisory support. Basically, GRAINS operationalizes the EGD and CAP ideas, thereby allowing social economy SMEs to steer a greener and more just agri-food system in Europe.

Policy Framework

The social economy plays a vital part in a "regenerative transition"—that is, going beyond just sustainability to intentionally heal ecological health and create equal communities. Supporting



social economy SMEs in the agri-food sector, promoting activities that renew ecosystems and advance social justice, the GRAINS project is a direct representation of this.

As Diesis Network points out and **GRAINS shows**, important aspects of this regenerative change include:

- Demonstrating a regenerative economy paradigm, GRAINS helps SMEs to embrace circular methods and lower emissions.
- Ecological regeneration is directly promoted by GRAINS-sponsored projects, which help to restore ecosystem function and solve underlying causes of environmental deterioration.
- Social: Combining social justice with solutions for past exploitation. GRAINS supports social economy SME's that give fair work, accessible wholesome food, and community involvement top priority, so guaranteeing fair advantages of the green revolution.

Directives and Policies of the European Union Promoting Green Transition and Social Economy

GRAINS offers concrete examples for EU policies that will better encourage the social economy during the green transformation. Emphasizing the dual value of social economy SMEs, the initiative shows how they may satisfy consumer demand for ethical and sustainable goods while following changing EU environmental and social performance rules. GRAINS assists social economy businesses overcome systemic hurdles including skill gaps, restricted access to finance, and regulatory complexity by offering targeted training, mentoring, and financial support. GRAINS moreover highlights how cross-border cooperation can speed the uptake of sustainable policies and help to create a more resilient agri-food economy consistent with EU regulations by means of active knowledge sharing among social economy actors across Europe.

Integrating Regional and National Policy

GRAINS shows how well funding local projects helps to green transition at both national and regional levels. The project shows how empowering social economy SMEs to use sustainable practices adapted for their local context may help to create local green agreements. GRAINS also emphasizes how crucial it is to create eco-friendly supply chains, especially short food supply networks, which lower environmental effect and support local economies. By its interaction with many different stakeholders, GRAINS stresses the need for strong stakeholder engagement systems at regional and national levels to guarantee policies are inclusive and properly support the special contributions of social economy businesses.

ESG Framework for Regenerative Transverse

GRAINS is a fascinating case study for how to develop ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) standards to properly reflect the entire multi-capital value produced by social

economy companies. The initiative calls for metrics that extend beyond simple financial returns to encompass measurable social and ecological effects including biodiversity enhancement, community well-being, and equitable wealth distribution. GRAINS offers actual proof for the creation of more thorough ESG reporting criteria that accurately capture the regenerative contributions of the social economy by showing the real positive results of its supported SMEs. This can help investors and legislators to focus funds on companies working to improve environmental health and foster just societies.

The GRAINS project then presents actual proof of how social economy SMEs can steer Europe towards a greener, more equitable, regenerative future inside the agri-food industry.

Needs Assessment and Gap Analysis

Before the initiation of the GRAINS project, a comprehensive needs assessment and gap analysis was conducted to better understand the structural, economic, and environmental challenges faced by social economy SMEs operating in the agrifood sector across partnering countries. This analysis drew on national reports, cooperative data, and sectoral studies provided by project partners. The findings revealed significant commonalities and structural barriers across countries, particularly concerning market access, technological capacity, funding, and readiness for the green transition. **As the project progressed and close collaboration was established with social economy SMEs in each region, the initial conclusions of the needs analysis were confirmed and further reinforced through direct engagement with stakeholders.** The gap analysis served not only as a diagnostic tool but also as a foundation for strategic intervention design.

Challenges Faced by Social Economy SMEs

The gap analysis highlighted several recurring challenges that social economy enterprises face across national contexts:

A) Limited Market Access and Supply Chain Integration

In Romania and Germany, SMEs struggle to enter formal markets or build short supply chains due to a lack of inter-sectoral collaboration (e.g., with HORECA or tourism), limited digital presence, and fragmented logistics infrastructure. Many cooperatives remain small-scale with constrained commercial reach. In Romania, these challenges are further compounded by farmers' reluctance to join or sustain cooperative structures, rooted in low trust, past negative experiences, and a preference for individual market strategies, which limits their collective bargaining power and access to larger value chains.

B) Operational and Infrastructural Constraints

Many social enterprises operate without adequate storage, processing, or distribution capacity. In Romania, for example, most agri-food social enterprises lack marketing skills, professional packaging solutions, or adequate warehousing infrastructure. In Germany,

similar issues exist with local cooperatives unable to scale due to limited technological resources or land access.

C) Lack of Financial Resilience and Public Support

Despite an increase in cooperative activity in countries like Romania and a strong cooperative tradition in Germany, many SMEs lack access to sustainable financing, mainly for the development of their activities or for innovative solutions. In Italy, small farms and sole proprietors face high capital requirements for ecological transition and often lack sufficient financial structures. Additionally, limited fiscal incentives and policy frameworks inhibit growth, particularly in Romania where social enterprises receive little direct tax benefit.

D) Perception of Sustainability as a Burden

In both Italy and Romania, a cultural gap historically framed sustainability as a regulatory cost rather than a strategic investment. This mindset has limited the integration of environmental goals into core business models, especially for smaller agricultural enterprises.

In both Italy and Romania, sustainability has often been perceived through a regulatory lens, seen primarily as an additional cost rather than a strategic investment. Introducing sustainable practices frequently entails high upfront costs for technology, certification, or infrastructure, which smaller agricultural enterprises in particular struggle to absorb. This mindset has slowed the integration of environmental objectives into core business practices and limited progress toward greener business models.

E) Shrinking Membership

In Germany, particularly in the East, agricultural cooperatives face declining membership and a risk of demutualisation. This structural weakening poses a risk to the long-term sustainability of the cooperative model.

Opportunities for the Green transition in the sector

Assessing the available opportunities enabled us to effectively identify and recruit beneficiaries for financial support. By aligning the eligibility criteria of the call for applications with the actual needs of SMEs, we ensured a strategic match that brought us closer to engaging with emerging trends and market opportunities. **Below are the key opportunities identified during the assessments conducted in partner countries, along with examples of beneficiaries we supported that align with each of these areas.**

A) Cooperatives as the drivers of Agroecology and Circular Economy

In Germany models such as CSAs (community supported agriculture) and regional producer-consumer cooperatives promote citizen engagement, local organic food systems, and agroecological practices. Many CSAs build a strong relationship with their stakeholders

(suppliers, customers and people in the local community). This made the business more attractive especially during the COVID pandemic. To underline this relationship and to strengthen their equity many CSAs offer their stakeholders to become member of a cooperative and contribute to the capital of the business.

In Italy, agricultural cooperatives increasingly act as aggregators for green investments, helping small members achieve economies of scale for sustainability initiatives. We had as well the example of SME who used the financial facility to transition into cooperative, like the organic seed company Piluweri In Germany, the vegetable cooperative Gemüsekooperative Rote Beete eG has demonstrated how community-supported agriculture can be expanded without compromising its ecological orientation. With support from GRAINS, it invested in the planning of a solar power system, solar greenhouses and the involvement of its members, enabling them to participate in the investments necessary for the further development of the enterprise.

Another example is the CSA bakery in Saxony, which combines community ownership with regional sourcing of raw materials. This example shows that even smaller food producers can achieve sustainable development through cooperation.

In Italy, Orto del Sorriso represents a model of how cooperatives link social inclusion with ecological transition. It employs people from vulnerable backgrounds in horticultural production while also adopting photovoltaic greenhouses and drip irrigation systems. Other Italian cooperatives have pioneered circular practices, from composting and soil regeneration to renewable energy investments, proving how small enterprises can aggregate efforts to reach economies of scale in sustainability.

B) Bioeconomy development and Policy support

Italy's national bioeconomy strategy and action plan support the integration of agriculture into circular systems (e.g., organic waste recovery, bioplastics, carbon capture). The AGCI Agrital model aligns with this framework, leveraging public-private partnerships and EU funding mechanisms to support green innovation.

In Italy, several cooperatives illustrate how bioeconomy and circular practices can be applied in practice. Cooperativa Sociale Ventuno has developed inclusive farming projects that connect agriculture with social services and community reintegration. Terra Felix promotes soil regeneration and biodiversity through organic farming, strengthening soils and ecosystems. Localcarbon Italia experiments with carbon-neutral farming systems, while Oliapulia and Valle del Cedrino work on sustainable olive oil production rooted in local communities. Casalina APS and Agrifutura Farm bring together traditional knowledge with modern sustainable methods, while Future Food Mediterraneo develops innovative food concepts with clear environmental and social impact. Together, these enterprises show how the bioeconomy can be embedded in everyday agricultural practice.

C) Emerging food hubs in Romania

In Romania socially oriented food hubs represent a new model of localised, short supply chain development. These hubs reinvest profits in community development, offer educational services, and act as intermediaries between small producers and urban consumers—effectively bridging gaps in access, quality assurance, and social impact.

Enterprises like Salazar Bakery and Veve Desert show how small social businesses can innovate in food production from artisanal bread to vegan desserts with eco-friendly packaging proving that small enterprises can generate strong social and environmental value.

D) Technological and Digital advancement

Agricultural cooperatives have started to implement precision technologies in fertilisation, irrigation, and soil management. Similarly, in Italy, precision agriculture and supply chain transparency through digitisation are seen as the future pillars of a sustainable food economy.

Digitalisation has been transformative for many SMEs. L’Orto Magico in Italy introduced digital traceability tools while involving young people with disabilities in agricultural work, showing how technology and inclusion can go hand in hand. WeidenHof GbR in Germany manages the subscription service ‘Grüne Kiste’, which allows efficient production planning and reduced food waste. Veve Desert in Romania redesigned its products with compostable packaging and a strong eco-brand identity. In Ukraine, the Lviv Bread Plant modernised its energy system with solar panels and automated management, cutting costs and emissions while inspiring similar businesses in Eastern Europe

E) Shifting Entrepreneurial mindset

Due to the increasingly noticeable effects of climate change, farmers are increasingly exposed to the consequences of climate change, which is also associated with powerlessness and helplessness. However, through close contact with consumers and involvement in a network, this experience can be transformed into energy for change. Farmers are becoming inventors and pioneers of sustainable economic models. Growing awareness means that sustainable development is increasingly seen as a prerequisite for competitiveness and part of the solution to the climate crisis. This change opens the door to better coordinated and systemic green investments in cooperative networks.

Capacity Building Initiatives

The capacity-building programme for social economy SMEs in the agri-food sector has proven to be a transformative initiative, equipping participants with the knowledge, tools, and networks necessary to navigate the green transition. Over the two-year cycle, the training courses covered a comprehensive set of themes essential for sustainable agri-food business development: financial tools for the green transition, access to technology and digitalisation, clusters of social and ecological innovation (CSEIs) and European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH), branding and green labelling, sustainable packaging, food loss reduction and footprint

assessment, local markets, biodiversity, and resilience. The programme created a comprehensive learning path that combined technical innovation with organizational, financial, and environmental skills.

One of the most significant impacts was the increased capacity and improved skills of participating SMEs. The training enabled entrepreneurs to understand and apply financial instruments for green investments, integrate digital solutions into their operations, and adopt sustainable packaging and food waste reduction practices. These skills strengthened their ability to adapt to evolving market demands while enhancing productivity, income generation, and long-term climate resilience. Importantly, the emphasis on biodiversity and ecological resilience encouraged SMEs to view sustainability not just as compliance, but as a strategic pathway to competitiveness.

Equally important was the networking dimension of the programme. Through exposure to CSEIs, EDIHs, and local partnerships, SMEs were able to connect with peers, technology providers, and local stakeholders. This created new opportunities for collaboration in short supply chains, branding initiatives, and eco-innovation clusters. Participants reported that networking allowed them to exchange experiences, benchmark practices across different regions, and explore joint solutions for scaling their green transition. Such collaborative dynamics are crucial for overcoming structural barriers like fragmented logistics or limited access to mainstream markets.

An important added value of the capacity-building programme was the use of case studies from across EU countries. Each training session included 3–4 practical examples showcasing successful initiatives in the agri-food sector or clusters, ranging from sustainable packaging solutions and local market integration to biodiversity-friendly farming practices and digital innovation in food production. These case studies provided participants not only with new ideas and inspiration but also with a clear understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by similar enterprises in other contexts. By illustrating how innovative solutions were designed and implemented elsewhere in Europe, the case studies helped participants to reflect on the transferability of such practices to their own businesses and communities, fostering creativity, adaptability, and cross-border learning.

Finally, the programme stimulated new ideas and knowledge exchange. Many SMEs discovered innovative approaches to branding, green labelling, access to markets and circular business models, while also gaining a deeper understanding of EU policies and how these are implemented in other member states.

Mentoring and Coaching and Advisory Facilities

Methodologies for Mentoring Social Economy SMEs

- Diagnostic phase: initial assessment of the SME's baseline situation, identifying environmental, financial, and organisational needs.
- Action planning: definition of a customised roadmap with practical measures, milestones, and clear objectives.
- Delivery: personalised consultations, technical advice, and mentoring sessions; in some cases, on-site visits to provide hands-on guidance.
- Follow-up: scheduled check-ins to monitor progress, troubleshoot barriers to adoption, and capture early results.
- Linkages and integration: connecting SMEs with additional resources such as the GRAINS Financial Facility, the Knowledge Hub, and relevant training modules.
- Peer-learning: opportunities for SMEs to exchange experiences and best practices across countries.

Specific Recommendations

Following the mentoring and coaching sessions, several lessons learned were identified, leading to the drafting of specific recommendations:

Embed structured needs assessments in all capacity-building programs

A rigorous diagnostic phase should be mandatory in any future intervention. This ensures that support is relevant, demand-driven, and efficient. Needs assessments should be participatory, allowing SMEs to articulate their own challenges rather than relying solely on external assumptions.

Ensure flexibility of content and delivery

Future programs should allow national or regional partners to adapt both the themes and delivery formats of coaching. A modular structure, where certain elements are standardized (e.g., sustainability principles) while others are locally tailored, would balance consistency with flexibility.

Strengthen follow-up and implementation support

Short-term coaching is valuable, but impact is maximized when participants are supported through the implementation phase. Options include phased coaching (initial support followed by follow-ups), peer mentoring circles, or small grants linked to coaching outcomes.

Facilitate access to finance alongside coaching

Financing challenges were one of the strongest barriers across all countries. Future programs should include explicit mechanisms to help SMEs access EU, national, and private funding. This could involve simplified application procedures, matchmaking with financial institutions, or capacity-building in financial management.

Enhance alignment with policy and regulatory frameworks

Coaching cannot succeed in isolation from enabling policy conditions. EU programming should include dialogue with national policymakers and regulators to ensure that bureaucratic obstacles are reduced and that SMEs are better integrated into relevant support schemes.

Optimize the use of hybrid formats:

While hybrid delivery has proven highly effective, lessons from Italy show the risks of digital fatigue. Future programs should diversify online tools, keep sessions concise, and balance digital and physical encounters to maintain engagement.

Promote digital marketing and communication skills as a core competence

Given the cross-country demand for digital visibility, future EU programming should consistently integrate digital skills training, with a specific focus on green storytelling and sustainable brand building. This is a transferable and high-impact competence that strengthens both business viability and the visibility of the EU's sustainability agenda.

Leverage innovative coaching methods

Promising practices — such as video feedback, shadowing, peer learning, and pilot phases — should be codified and mainstreamed into EU capacity-building programs. Creating a toolkit of proven coaching methods would help scale and replicate success.

Conclusion

Coaching and Mentoring activities provided tailored guidance to enterprises. The Olive Growers Cooperative Lucana in Italy introduced hedgerows and integrated grazing in olive groves to strengthen biodiversity and improve oil quality. Oleificio Obelanum modernised its governance structure with GRAINS coaching, increasing transparency and member participation. In Ukraine, Zарvanytsia Social Enterprises diversified agricultural production while creating jobs for disadvantaged groups. Other small businesses, including Andreea LM Style and Brutăria Salazar in Romania, received mentoring on packaging, marketing and sustainable product development. Together, these stories show how mentoring enabled SMEs to combine tradition with innovation and build resilience for the future.

Policy Recommendations

1. Simplify and Strengthen the Regulatory Framework

Social economy SMEs often face fragmented rules, excessive bureaucracy, and limited fiscal incentives, which hinder innovation and scaling. Streamlined, SME-friendly regulations can reduce compliance burdens while creating enabling environments for sustainable practices. For instance, Romanian enterprises identified lack of tax incentives and complex cooperative rules as barriers, while Italian SMEs noted high upfront costs for ecological transition. The GRAINS project demonstrated that advisory support and mentoring can help SMEs navigate regulatory systems, but systemic simplification is essential to unlock their full potential.

Relevance: Simplified frameworks will help SMEs move from seeing sustainability as a regulatory cost to viewing it as an investment in competitiveness and resilience.

2. Enhance Green Transition Incentives

SMEs need stronger financial instruments, subsidies, and investment support for decarbonisation, renewable energy, and eco-innovation. Many enterprises lack access to long-term financing, especially smaller farms or cooperatives with limited collateral. Yet, project beneficiaries showed that small investments—solar panels, eco-packaging, drip irrigation—had outsized impacts on competitiveness and resilience. Incentives should include grants, low-interest loans, and fiscal benefits tied to measurable green outcomes.

Relevance: The GRAINS financial facility proved that even modest funding can trigger innovation, community engagement, and circular practices. Expanding such targeted incentives can multiply these effects across Europe.

3. Strengthen Standardisation and Value Chains

Weak supply chain integration and limited access to markets—highlighted in Romania and Germany—prevent SMEs from scaling their impact. Standardisation (e.g., eco-labels, green certifications) combined with cooperative cluster-building can help SMEs reach mainstream markets and build consumer trust. Project-supported cooperatives and food hubs showed that localised short supply chains can thrive when supported by clear branding, professional packaging, and collaboration across sectors (e.g., with tourism or HORECA).

Relevance: GRAINS demonstrated how connecting SMEs into networks and clusters improves market reach, reduces food waste, and strengthens local economies. Policy should encourage regional food hubs, cooperative platforms, and joint infrastructure.

4. Invest in Capacity Building and Skills Development

The gap analysis identified limited green and digital skills as one of the most critical barriers for SMEs. The GRAINS training programme proved transformative, equipping entrepreneurs with knowledge on eco-packaging, biodiversity, finance for green transition, and digital traceability tools. Embedding such training into EU and national programmes (e.g., Erasmus+, Digital Innovation Hubs) would create systemic change. Dual-study programs and apprenticeships in agroecology and sustainable entrepreneurship could also bridge the skills gap for the next generation.

Relevance: Skills are not just a complement but a prerequisite for SMEs to adopt and sustain green practices. GRAINS shows the high return on investment when SMEs are supported with the right tools and knowledge.

5. Expand Access to Finance through Tailored Instruments

The lack of financial resilience was a recurring barrier across partner countries. Cooperatives and small farms often cannot access mainstream financing due to limited collateral or small scale. GRAINS showed that tailored financial instruments—flexible grants, cooperative investment models, community-supported financing—enable SMEs to make green investments that would otherwise be out of reach. Policy should design financial tools adapted to cooperative structures, community enterprises, and smallholder realities.

Relevance: Without tailored finance, many SMEs cannot join the green transition. GRAINS proved that unlocking finance for small-scale actors multiplies ecological and social returns.

6. Foster Cross-Sectoral and Transnational Collaboration

SMEs often work in isolation, missing opportunities to innovate through shared knowledge or joint action. GRAINS demonstrated the power of collaboration: cooperatives pooling investments in Italy, cross-border exchanges of good practices, and local partnerships with schools and municipalities. Policy should support European knowledge hubs, cross-border cooperative platforms, and regional ecosystems that connect agriculture with bioeconomy, tourism, and digital innovation.

Relevance: Transnational cooperation makes the transition faster and more resilient. GRAINS is living proof that when SMEs share solutions across borders, they accelerate green innovation while embedding social values.

In short, the policy recommendations gain strength by being grounded in real challenges and tested solutions. The GRAINS project provides the evidence base for how these measures can be applied to scale the green transition in Europe's social economy.