

WE GREEN

PR1 Inspirational package

Diesis Network

Transnational report based on the findings from Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus, Serbia and EU level

Co-funded by the European Union

Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship - WE-GREEN

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Transnational report based on the findings from Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus, Serbia and EU level

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Executive summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview on rural women's green social entrepreneurship at the level of four European countries: Cyprus, Romania, Slovenia and Serbia and at EU level. The report includes an analysis of the national context of each country and of the European context, detailed insights on the specific needs of rural women and the challenges they face, the educators' skills and competencies for green transition. The research and the drafting of this report are part of an Erasmus+ co-founded project, named Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship - WE-GREEN (project no. 2021-1-RO01-KA220-ADU-000026954).

The Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship (WE-GREEN) project proposed to foster social green entrepreneurship among women in rural communities through education in the form of practical local programs. The project aimed at bridging the "gap" in the educational system between the need for new green skills and entrepreneurial skills and the lack of adequate educational content for the development of such skills, through an innovative training course for teachers in delivering green social entrepreneurship education, utilizing blended learning methodology.

The specific objectives of the project were: a) Building awareness in rural areas about women and green entrepreneurship as vehicles of the empowerment of local communities; b) Building the capacities of formal & non-formal educators in a rural area on green social entrepreneurship for women; c) Design & implementation of local programmes aiming at empowering women in rural area through green social entrepreneurship and d) Develop guidelines for stakeholders at local, national and European level about needed measures for building an enabling environment for women's entrepreneurship in the rural area.

The research presented contributes to the first project result, aimed at developing a sound and updated knowledge base repository on rural women's green social entrepreneurship, necessary for the preparation of the upcoming activities. Two specific objectives guided the research: 1) to identify the exact needs and challenges for upskilling and reskilling to be part of green transition that women living in the rural areas face in all participating countries (Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia and at EU level) and 2) to identify good practices on empowering rural women for green economy at the local level, having entrepreneurial spirit and training in their core.

Methodology

The focus of the research at both national and EU levels was on **defining the needs of women living in rural areas** and the **respective skills and competencies** that educators (formal and non-formal)

working with them should have to effectively support them in the green transition. A common research protocol, including guidelines, common tools and templates to conduct concise research, combining both desk and field research (20 interviews – 5 in each country and 4 focus-groups – 1 in each country were conducted) was applied by researchers in all participating countries (Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia) and by the partner responsible for the EU level perspective.

European and national contexts on green rural entrepreneurship

Rural areas account for more than 341 million hectares, representing 83% of the total EU area but only 27.4% of the EU's population lives in rural areas. The highest value of people living in rural area comes from countries within Central Eastern Europe, in particular Slovakia (46.18%), Romania (45.67%) and Slovenia (44,57%). Concerning the North Europe countries, the average of population living in rural area is around 18% with significant difference between them (e.g., Lithuania and Latvia around 32% while Finland and Sweden around 11%). In the countries of the Southern Europe the population in rural area represent around the 30% (e.g., Italy 28.6%, Portugal 33,5%) with some countries where the average is bit lower such as Spain (18.9%). The Western Countries reflects the trend present in the North Europe with Belgium with a very low percentage with 1.8% of people living in rural area (The World Bank, 2021).

High unemployment, low employment on non-agricultural activities, low incomes, and a high proportion of people of 65 and older are among the main reasons for the higher poverty and social exclusion in rural areas (Bencheva et al., 2017). All these challenges activate a vicious circle where due to the low population density and the ageing profile of the rural regions, economic activity is low. Accordingly, rural areas suffer from lack or even the inaccessibility of goods and services. Moreover, a lack of employment prospects causes younger people to move to other areas, worsening the demographic profile and bringing the area into a low loop (van Twuijver et al., 2020).

Rural areas are crucial for the green transition. They cover around 80% of EU territories and contain the natural resources and ecosystem services needed to sustain our lives. However, climate change makes these areas vulnerable. Rural areas could contribute to our economy and way of life but are often left out of low-carbon planning and strategies. However, their transition must be supported, considering their distinct challenges, such as declining and ageing populations, fewer economic and social opportunities, and low population densities, which make infrastructure and service provision a challenge.

Without appropriately targeted training, education, employment placement, financial tools and supportive social policies, transitioning to a green economy may exacerbate existing inequities and hinder global human development goals. Rural people's access to education and training is often

limited by financial barriers (e.g., training costs) and non-financial barriers (e.g., inadequate education infrastructure, inflexible training schedules). Unequal gender relations and traditional gender roles entail difficulties for rural girls and women accessing education and training. ILO (2019) states that 1.2 billion jobs (40% of total employment) depend on a healthy environment.

Women living in rural areas within the European Union are not a homogenous group. They play many roles and contribute to society and rural development. They also face challenges depending on their nationality, age, family and other circumstances. They have different needs, interests and expectations. However, discrimination remains a constant feature. Women in rural areas of the EU make up almost 50% of the total rural population, they represent 45% of the economically active population, and about 40% of them work on family farms (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020). Their importance in the rural economy is even greater since their participation in the informal rural economy is not statistically recognized (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020). 43% of unpaid workers in agriculture are women, even if 26% of them are owners of their agricultural activity (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020).

The European Green Deal sets Europe on the pathway to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, while the EU's first-ever Gender Equality Strategy is designed to make gender equality in the EU a reality. Building synergies between these two strategies, especially in the rural area, will be crucial to improving gender equality in energy, climate, and sustainability space in Europe and harnessing Europe's talent to support a green and sustainable recovery from the last recent crisis (COVID-19 pandemic, energy crisis, the consequences of the war).

The EU is committed to improving the situation, notably through the EU Rural Action Plan, by supporting the uptake of female entrepreneurship, women's participation in decision-making and the provision of adequate services in rural areas. In this framework, the Rural Pact, launched by the European Commission in December 2021, aims to contribute to achieving the shared goals of the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas, including social resilience and women in rural areas.

The four countries included in the analysis - Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia present important percentages of their population living in rural areas, with almost half of them being women. Moreover, rural areas are characterized by low employment rates for both women and men and new enterprises are set up in lower percentages than in urban areas. Rural entrepreneurship is often organized in the area of agriculture or tourism, which poses challenges for scaling-up the business and for advancing past the subsistence milestone.

Social entrepreneurship in Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia has important historical roots, coming back from 19th century. Cooperatives, credit unions or associations found their place in the

national context of each country over the years. Nowadays, the social economy sector or the social entrepreneurship activity are regulated by laws, ordinances or policies in each of the four countries.

Green social entrepreneurship emerges as a new, but developing field, showing great potential for the development of women in rural areas, across all targeted countries. Entrepreneurial activities involving social and green directions can take very different forms, from traditional activities (in many cases considered green or ecological), to utilitarian business that can also develop community resilience (like, for example, gardening, or repairs).

Specific needs of rural women and the challenges they face

Rural women all over Europe and particularly in the four countries included in the project (Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia) face several challenges in their day-to-day life and when they want to access the work market and present specific needs for their endeavours to be successful. A common agreement among the persons involved in the research is that the challenges faced by women in general are a cross-cutting topic in all fields, to which is added the specific filter of rural women. These challenges are mainly related to mobility difficulties, societal issues, lack of opportunities, lack of market demand and limited digital skills.

Rural women's entrepreneurship can contribute to economic growth in rural areas and represents an untapped potential. Programs and services should consider rural women-specific needs and should strive to promote mutual learning, exchange of experiences and good practices, cooperation, marketing and communication, develop generic business skills and skills used in interpreting regulations and legislation, digital skills, human resources skills and capacity-building programs of design thinking.

As emerged from the participants at the in-depth interviews and the focus group, one of the main barriers for women starting an entrepreneurial activity is their involvement in household activities and the care of children or the elderly. Indeed, at European levels, most women choose to work or to do business part-time, and among migrants and asylum seekers who have a different understanding of gender equality, women are employed even less.

Empowering women entrepreneurship in rural areas is a complex issue: it is about lack of information and knowledge, but also a lack of opportunities. Lack of knowledge also refers to the possibility of reaching knowledge experiences. People living in rural areas maybe don't know that there are some opportunities for them to make the digital and green transition of their businesses and productions. The lack of knowledge, especially in the field of innovation or greening the ecosystem includes also the problem that people are not interested in changing their approach. If they don't see the financial

benefit, they are not interested in learning new approaches and building managerial skills and green skills for a more sustainable business.

Educators' skills and competencies for green transition

The training programs available for women in rural areas aimed to foster social green entrepreneurship initiatives are rather modest and focused mostly on general subjects, covering in a very low degree the actual needs of the women. In some cases, external support for developing green entrepreneurship initiatives came through various European or local funded programs.

Trainings on green or ecological concepts, to be applied in starting-up a business or in an already running business are organised seldomly, with none of the respondents being able to name a particular program. In general, most of the entrepreneurship trainings include in their curricula a module on sustainability, however keeping the information at a very basic level (what does it mean, what are the elements of sustainability etc.). Moreover, elements of digitalisation are also included in some of the trainings, but they often lack contextualisation and adaptation to the real situation in the rural areas.

Green skills are ultimately related to sustainability, circular economy and climate change and thus participants (men and women) should be trained and educated in these concepts, to be able to integrate these elements in their day-to-day businesses and activities. Other important green skills can also be related to technology, technological skills and communication processes between women and between women and others.

New training programs could have a greater orientation towards the development of local, personal, family initiatives that combine elements of social entrepreneurship, green entrepreneurship (types, forms, rationale etc.), business plan development, risk management, business management case studies, real examples etc. The adaption to the local context and to the needs of the rural women is paramount for any training program, which needs to be designed in such a way that participants can see themselves implementing in real life the hypothetical situation that they see and discuss.

Besides knowledge and information, educators would need to also tackle aspects of attitude, self-trust and empowerment, to work on women's self-esteem, on expression, on positioning. These are all matters that act as barriers or challenges in women's initiatives in business development. Specific modules should be designed aimed at the attitude of women and their social-psychological-emotional development.

Introduction

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Project summary

Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship (WE-GREEN) proposed to foster social green entrepreneurship among women in rural communities through education in the form of practical local programs. The project aimed at bridging the "gap" in the educational system between the need for new green skills and entrepreneurial skills and the lack of adequate educational content for the development of such skills, through an innovative training course for teachers in delivering green social entrepreneurship education, utilizing blended learning methodology.

The specific objectives of the project were:

a) Building awareness in rural areas about women and green entrepreneurship as vehicles of the empowerment of local communities

b) Building the capacities of formal & non-formal educators in a rural area on green social entrepreneurship for women;

c) Design & implementation of local programmes aiming at empowering women in rural area through green social entrepreneurship.

d) Develop guidelines for stakeholders at local, national and European level about needed measures for building an enabling environment for women's entrepreneurship in the rural area

The WE GREEN project foresaw four Project Results. The first result (PR1. Inspirational package) implied the development of a sound and updated knowledge base repository on rural women's green social entrepreneurship, necessary for the preparation of the upcoming activities. This repository includes reports at the national and EU level on specific the needs of rural women and the exact problems they face, preventing their integration in the labour market and fostering green social entrepreneurship and a collection of best practices related to green social entrepreneurship for women in rural areas.

The second result (PR2. Development of the capacity building programme for formal and non-formal educators working with women in a rural area) foresaw the organisations of a training programme for formal and non-formal educators working with women in a rural area. For delivering the training programme, a comprehensive interactive online tool was developed, which serve both the delivery of the capacity building programme for formal and non-formal educators and made available useful information for the development of green social entrepreneurial skills in rural areas. The activity involved both the development of the capacity building programme and information material for formal and non-formal educators, along with the basic tool that was utilized for their delivery (online platform).

A third project activity (PR3. Implementing Capacity building programme at the transnational and local level) implied the delivery of the capacity building programme for formal and non-formal educators supporting women in rural areas with the upskilling path in green social entrepreneurship. The results involved the training of trainers that deliver the training sessions, following a 3-day transnational webinar. The capacities of 40 formal & non-formal educators of rural women/ social entrepreneurship/ green skills in the 4 implementing countries (Romania, Cyprus, Slovenia and Serbia) were developed in terms of implementing the developed capacity building programme in green social entrepreneurship.

Finally, the fourth project result (PR4. Guide for Stakeholders. Elaboration of a guide for stakeholders at local, national and European level with recommendations about building an enabling environment for women's green social entrepreneurship in the rural area) includes the drafting of a toolkit on local policies and best practices for the inclusion of rural women at the local level having education and training as the main vehicle. In this toolkit the key success factors in each case, the specific skills and competencies necessary for the successful implementation of this practice are highlighted, as well as dos and don'ts for future reference.

Scope and objectives of the research

The research presented in this transnational report contributes to the first project result, aimed at developing a sound and updated knowledge base repository on rural women's green social entrepreneurship, necessary for the preparation of the upcoming activities. Two specific objectives guided the research: 1) to identify the exact needs and challenges for upskilling and reskilling to be part of green transition that women living in the rural areas face in all participating countries (Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia and at EU level) and 2) to identify good practices on empowering rural women for green economy at the local level, having entrepreneurial spirit and training in their core.

The focus of the research at both national and EU levels was on **defining the needs of women living in rural areas** and the **respective skills and competencies** that educators (formal and non-formal) working with them should have to effectively support them in the green transition. A common research protocol (including guidelines, common tools and templates to conduct concise research, combining both desk and field research components) was applied by researchers in all participating countries (Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia) and by the partner responsible for the EU level perspective.

During the data collection process and data analysis, all needs, challenges and skills were developed from the point of view of the local contexts and the EU context in terms of: organisations and stakeholders involved (local Authorities, NGOs active at local level etc.), local competitive advantages (mainly related with the labour market and the economic activities) and social challenges. Moreover, horizontal and crosscutting needs and also support areas were identified.

Methodology

Main concepts

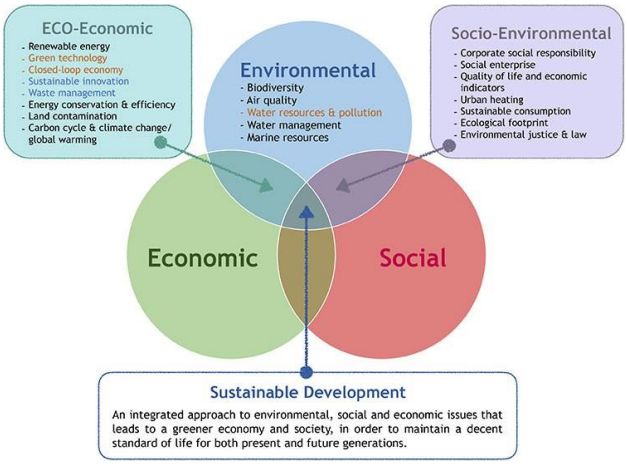
Several concepts guided the research, including the data collection process and the data analysis, at both national level in the four countries and the EU level. In order to set the conceptual stage of the research report, these concepts are briefly presented and described below.

Green entrepreneurship can be defined from two perspectives related to the 1) output (products and services) or 2) process (or production) of an economic activity (ILO, 2014). From the *output* perspective, entrepreneurs provide green and environmentally friendly products and services (e.g. waste management). From the *process* perspective, green entrepreneurs can provide their products or services through an environmentally friendly process or with the help of clean technologies (e.g. eco-tourism). Green entrepreneurship could be a new business paradigm because green entrepreneurs have wider motivations than just launching eco-friendly products and services for a niche market (Kirkwood and Walton, 2010).

Green entrepreneurs provide the hotbed for starting and sustaining a green economy by providing green products and services, introducing greener production techniques, boosting demand for green products and services, and creating green jobs.

Green social entrepreneurship refers to a special subset of entrepreneurship that aims at creating and implementing solutions to environmental problems and to promote social change so that the environment is not harmed (Saari and Joensuu-Salo, 2019). **Similar concepts on green entrepreneurship** are eco-entrepreneurship, ecopreneurship, environmental entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneurship, ecological entrepreneurship, enviropreneurship or sustainopreneurship.

Figure 1. Different areas of green entrepreneurship and their convergence points



Source: https://greenskillsresources.com/category/sustainable-issues

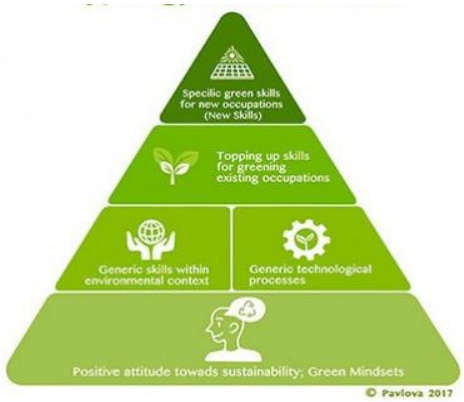
A green business is a business that address environmental and social issues. This type of business has several main characteristics (Global Green Growth Institute, 2014). A green business incorporates principles of sustainability into its business decisions and actively monitors them. The staff is paid a fair wage for the work they do and ensure that they are able to maintain a good work-life balance. Moreover, a green business distributes benefits equitably across the value chain. The social benefits of the business (e.g., by employing marginalised groups) are maximised and some businesses set up

foundations to assist with this - but a sustainable business doesn't confine its social activities just to charitable donations – it looks for every opportunity to increase the social benefits of the business in its day-to-day operations.

Production-wise, green business supply environmentally-friendly and/or local products and services that replace demand for non-green or imported products and services. In addition, such a business can help its community to become more sustainable (e.g., by reducing energy use or water use, or reducing waste or pollution). The green enterprises also make efforts to reduce resource use (energy, water, materials), and replenish, enhance, or substitute an environmental resource that is used by the business (e.g., replanting trees, enhancing soil fertility, using renewable energy). Overall, a green business makes an enduring commitment to environmental principles in its business operations, which will often be detailed in a publicly available and regularly updated Sustainability or Environmental Policy.

Green skills are the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society[1]. Green skills are those skills needed to reduce environmental impacts and support economic restructuring with the purpose of attaining cleaner, more climate resilient and efficient economies that preserve environmental sustainability and provide decent work conditions.[2]

Figure 2. Typology of green skills



Source: https://www.greenskillsresources.com/

Green jobs represent the "work (…) that contributes substantially to preserving or restoring environmental quality. (…) that helps to protect ecosystems and biodiversity, reduce energy, materials, and water consumption through high-efficiency strategies, decarbonize the economy, and minimize or altogether avoid the generation of all forms of waste and pollution." (UNEP, ILO, IOE, ITUC, 2008).

Methods

The main research activities and methods to be implemented were common to all countries in the consortium, as stated in the project's research guidelines. The research approach was one of mixed methods, including desk research, field research (in-depth interviews and focus groups) and the collection of best practices.

[1] https://www.unido.org/stories/what-are-green-skills
[2] https://www.greenskillsresources.com/

Desk Research

The desk research aimed to help the consortium gain a deeper insight into the current state of affairs regarding the green and social entrepreneurship targeting women in rural areas and the women's empowerment for green skills challenges they face in each partner country. Several specific objectives guided the desk research in each country:

a) to deeply understand the roots of the green social entrepreneurship of rural women,
b) to explore the experiences of the project target groups in terms of providing training on green social skills for women in rural areas
c) to identify their needs and gaps in order to develop a targeted training tools providing practical guidelines on green social skills for rural women
d) to identify relevant good practices on empowering rural women at the local level, having entrepreneurial spirit and training in their core.

Desk research took place in two phases. In the beginning of the planned research work, the researchers collected background information to present the current state of affairs in Romania on the topic under investigation. The initial conclusions and findings of the desk research were the validated through field research, including the focus groups and the interviews. In the second phase, the public policies in the social and green women entrepreneurship in rural areas were analysed and best practices in this area were described and presented.

In order to reach the aforementioned objectives, a number of relevant aspects and topics were analysed at national level, including: the national context and legal framework, research findings and data on women social entrepreneurship in rural areas and on green entrepreneurship in rural areas, EU and national policies, strategies and resources, as well as existing good practices.

As a general note, the sources identified had to meet two important criteria: 1) to be relevant for the national context and 2) if they correspond to framework publications or policy recommendations, preferably the date of publication to not be older than 2010. Also, authors, contributors or coordinating teams behind the publication of the item should be identifiable.

The desk research in in each country involved in the project (Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia) and at EU level involved the following types of actions:

- review and analysis of any relevant data and resources (reports, policy documents, previous surveys and research on rural women, rural women entrepreneurs, rural social entrepreneurship etc.) regarding the empowerment of women in rural areas and promotion of green and social entrepreneurship targeting women
- statistical data regarding: entrepreneurship in rural areas, women entrepreneurship in rural areas, social entrepreneurship in rural areas, green entrepreneurship in rural areas, participants at training programmes on green skills, women social entrepreneurship etc.
- analysis of public policy on social economy, rural development and green transition/ Green Deal areas, empowerment of women in rural areas and promotion of green and social entrepreneurship targeting women.

Field Research

The second phase of the research was the field research, which aimed at: 1) identifying the specific needs of rural women and the exact problems they face, preventing their integration in the labour market and fostering green social entrepreneurship in all participating countries (Romania, Slovenia,

Cyprus and Serbia and at EU level); 2) establishing the challenges in supporting the empowerment of women in rural areas; 3) analysing the implementation of green skills and social green skills in training curricula for rural women empowerment and 4) identifying good practices on empowering rural women at the local level, having entrepreneurial spirit and training in their core.

Primary data collection included 20 interviews (5 in each implementing country) and 4 focus groups (1 in each implementing country) with professionals and stakeholders supporting rural women entrepreneurship and green skills development. For all interviews and focus-groups, identical questions were used in each participating country, to ensure that cross-country and cross-cultural comparisons are achievable.

In-depth interviews with educators

The in-depth interviews conducted in Romania took place both online (4 interviews) and face-to-face (1 interview) and were held in Romanian, to ensure participants comprehension. Each discussion was recorded with the participants' approval and them summarised to facilitate the analysis of the information obtained. The 5 participants were formal and non-formal educators working with rural women in Romania, in different regions of the country (the Danube Delta, Transylvania, the Centre region, the West region and also in the Southern region). In Slovenia, 5 interviews were conducted with educators from academia (employed at the university), combined part-time employment at academia (at the university) and at a social enterprise, regional development agency and its education centre, secondary and higher education, and potential user/customer of such education or potential educator in rural areas. According to gender, two were men and three were women. In Cyprus, 5 in-depth interviews were conducted with educators working with women in rural areas and NGO representatives.

The discussions aimed to identify the specific country context and actual needs of rural women and the best practices in Romania related with the empowerment of women in rural areas. The main topics included in the interview guide were: gaps for rural women in development of social or green business; gaps for educators in covering the requirements of rural women; aspects of training curricula – topics included; there are topics related to social or green dimension of a business; there are topics related to green skills or digital skills; skills and competences targeted by training programmes; potential of rural areas (what kind of development could be) and what is done; green skills/ green businesses; barriers related to gender in entrepreneurship (if women can be entrepreneurs); green social entrepreneurship (eco-social entrepreneurship); local competitive advantages (mainly related with the labour market and the economic activities); challenges in rural women integration in the labour market; challenges in fostering green social entrepreneurship in rural areas and specific skills and competences of formal and non-formal educators working with women in the rural area that need to be enhanced and fostered.

Focus groups at national level in Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus, Serbia

The focus groups discussions used identical questions in each of the countries involved to ensure that cross-country and cross-cultural comparisons are achievable. In Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia the focus group discussions were organised with 6 key stakeholders of rural women empowerment associations. The focus group in Romania had 4 participants, representatives of NGOs and other organisations supporting the empowerment of women in rural areas and took place online. The focus group was held in Romanian, to ensure participants comprehension. The 4 participants in the focus

group in Romania also represented various organisations, with different activities related to green and/or social entrepreneurship.

The discussions focused on several dimensions: the types of support provided to entrepreneurship and women entrepreneurship in rural areas, barriers related to gender in entrepreneurship (if women can be entrepreneurs), green skills/ green businesses, green social entrepreneurship (eco-social entrepreneurship), local competitive advantages (mainly related with the labour market and the economic activities), challenges in fostering green or social green entrepreneurship in rural areas, challenges in empowerment of rural women, challenges in rural women integration in the labour market and interventions/ programmes dedicated to promote green and social entrepreneurship targeting women in rural areas.

Focus group at EU level

In the framework of the inspirational package, Diesis Network organised a focus group at the EU level to explore the needs of women living in rural areas and the skills and competencies that the educators (formal and non-formal) should have to support them in the green transition effectively. The focus group took place online and lasted 2 hours with eight women from different European countries (Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Albania, Spain and Belgium). The women presented in the focus group were selected within Diesis Network and among partners that usually collaborate with Diesis Network in implementing projects and training at the EU level. The group included: a women entrepreneur in a rural area, project managers of intermediary organisations supporting the development of local communities in rural areas, an expert in conducting training in intercultural citizenship education, women integration and migrants, and a university professor of sociology.

The focus group's primary objective has been to individuate the main challenges faced by supporting rural women in developing a business, what type of support is provided for rural women's entrepreneurship, and what kind of support is needed. It was also a moment to explore the connections with the local authorities and organisations regarding regional partnership and their potential role in implementing the local green deal in rural areas. The focus group was permitted to identify horizontal and crosscutting needs and support areas (see in annexe the question of the focus group).

Best practices

Two best practices related with green social entrepreneurship for women in rural areas were selected in each of the four participating countries – Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia and also 10 best practices were selected from the EU level. The cases were drafted according to the template provided in the framework of the project and collected information on the name of the practice, website, country, region, rural or urban area, start date, sector of activity concerned, details of the activity (the social business: its aim(s), how is it structured/management, target group/beneficiaries, etc.; the green dimension of the social business), services and products, green skills needed, trends and potential benefits from this good practice and how the good practice could be used/ transferred. The best practices are collected in separate report drafted by the Diesis Network.

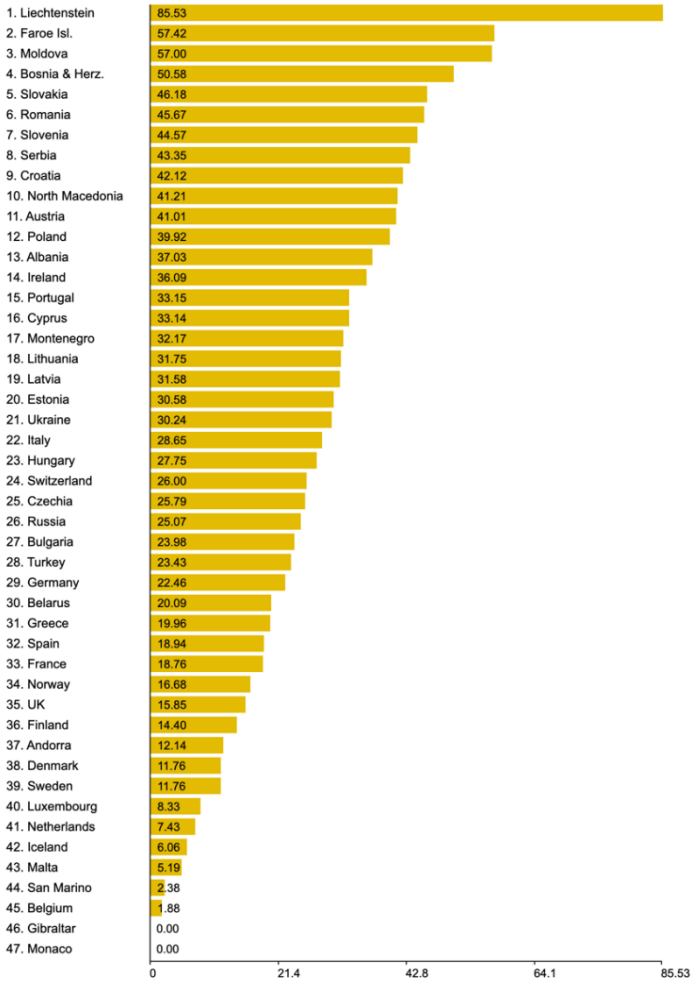
European and national contexts on green rural entrepreneurship

European context

Background of rural areas in Europe

Rural areas account for more than 341 million hectares, representing 83% of the total EU area but only 27.4% of the EU's population lives in rural areas. The highest value of people living in rural area comes from countries within Central Eastern Europe, in particular Slovakia (46.18%), Romania (45.67%) and Slovenia (44,57%). Concerning the North Europe countries, the average of population living in rural area is around 18% with significant difference between them (e.g., Lithuania and Latvia around 32% while Finland and Sweden around 11%). In the countries of the Southern Europe the population in rural area represent around the 30% (e.g., Italy 28.6%, Portugal 33,5%) with some countries where the average is bit lower such as Spain (18.9%). The Western Countries reflects the trend present in the North Europe with Belgium with a very low percentage with 1.8% of people living in rural area (The World Bank, 2021).

Figure 3. Rural population, percent of total population, 2021 - Country rankings.



Source: World Bank 2021, readapted by theglobaleconomy.com[3]

[3] https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/rural_population_percent/Europe/

With almost half of rural citizens without access to a good internet connection, the rural communities face the double challenge of low GDP per capita and rapidly ageing population with the lowest population shares in age groups below 50 years old (Eurostat, 2018). High unemployment, low employment on non-agricultural activities, low incomes, and a high proportion of people of 65 and older are among the main reasons for the higher poverty and social exclusion in rural areas (Bencheva et al., 2017).

All these challenges activate a vicious circle where due to the low population density and the ageing profile of the rural regions, economic activity is low. Accordingly, rural areas suffer from lack or even the inaccessibility of goods and services. Moreover, a lack of employment prospects causes younger people to move to other areas, worsening the demographic profile and bringing the area into a low loop (van Twuijver et al., 2020).

Rural areas also face an increasing digital divide compared to urban areas which is in part due to a lack of development of the digital infrastructure (Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform on SME competitiveness, 2020). On the supply side, many rural communities in Europe are lagging behind in terms of net generation access infrastructure like fibre internet connection or 5G wireless connection. Additionally, rural areas face demand side limitations as there is a lack of basic skills and knowledge of the potential of digital technology in their daily lives (European network for Rural Development, 2017). Such shortfalls make difficult the implementation of the digital transition of SMEs in rural areas, even if existing SMEs could improve their firm's efficiency with digital tools. For example, it has been estimated that an increase of 10% in broadband connections in a country could result in a 1% increase in GDP per capita per year and raise labour productivity by 1.5% over the next five years (EU Special Report, 2018).

Rural areas are crucial for the green transition. They cover around 80% of EU territories and contain the natural resources and ecosystem services needed to sustain our lives. However, climate change makes these areas vulnerable. Rural areas could contribute to our economy and way of life but are often left out of low-carbon planning and strategies. However, their transition must be supported, considering their distinct challenges, such as declining and ageing populations, fewer economic and social opportunities, and low population densities, which make infrastructure and service provision a challenge.

Thus, local communities and rural areas should be empowered and actively involved in the green transition through various strategies. An example could be the enhancement of energy communities and the strengthening of local production systems that rely on the social economy and are based on the safeguarding of local agriculture and biodiversity to foster strategic autonomy and resilience (Costantini and Pastorelli, 2021).

The green transition can help to bring many benefits to rural areas and tackle these challenges with new service provisions and socio-economic and environmental practices. The change tackles many areas, including renewable energy and energy efficiency, waste management, mobility, a sustainable agri-food sector, and ecosystem service support. This would be an opportunity to create social entrepreneurship opportunities.

As ILO guidance suggests, greening the rural economy should be at the heart of rural economies. It could be an engine for a sustainable economic transformation, by: powering the rural economy through green business initiatives; revitalising agriculture through durable and high-productivity

farming methods; fostering sustainable tourism and restoring ecosystems for productivity, income and resilience (ILO, 2019).

Without appropriately targeted training, education, employment placement, financial tools and supportive social policies, transitioning to a green economy may exacerbate existing inequities and hinder global human development goals. Rural people's access to education and training is often limited by financial barriers (e.g. training costs) and non-financial barriers (e.g. inadequate education infrastructure, inflexible training schedules). Unequal gender relations and traditional gender roles entail difficulties for rural girls and women accessing education and training. ILO (2019) states that 1.2 billion jobs (40% of total employment) depend on a healthy environment.

Also, the estimations of ILO on measures tackling the environmental issues consider that acting to address climate change can generate 24M new jobs by 2030 (ILO, 2018). The EU analysis (Green Deal) showed insufficient development of green entrepreneurship initiatives. In rural areas, many actions in sustainable development focus on agriculture and food, but these are less supported by fiscal measures or other public policies. The project addresses the need to transform the EU economy into green and develop new skills required for green jobs and entrepreneurship in rural areas, using digitalisation and social economy models. Fostering female social green entrepreneurship in rural areas can be crucial for the vitality of our countryside.

Therefore, the whole rural economy is a much more complex ecosystem of activities than farming and forestry. It's about services, it's about quality of life, it's about creative economy and tourism. Rural areas provide a wide variety of flora and fauna and natural resources that can contribute to employment, economic growth, and prosperity, preserving the environment and cultural heritage (ILO, 2018). Various experiences suggest that diversified economies [4] could provide new opportunities to improve local development in sparsely populated and underpopulated areas and mitigate the youngster's emigration from rural regions to find good quality and sustainable jobs.

Rural women in the EU

Women living in rural areas within the European Union are not a homogenous group. They play many roles and contribute to society and rural development. They also face challenges depending on their nationality, age, family and other circumstances. They have different needs, interests and expectations. However, discrimination remains a constant feature. Women in rural areas of the EU make up almost 50% of the total rural population, they represent 45% of the economically active population, and about 40% of them work on family farms (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020). Their importance in the rural economy is even greater since their participation in the informal rural economy is not statistically recognised (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020). 43% of unpaid workers in agriculture are women, even if 26% of them are owners of their agricultural activity (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020).

One of the obstacles for young women entering the profession is their access to family property and finally, being able to invest and be granted a loan in the same way as the farmer owner. At the European level, Directive-2010/41/EU has been adopted to develop an adequate social cover for women in agriculture to facilitate and improve access to social services and loans for women, and

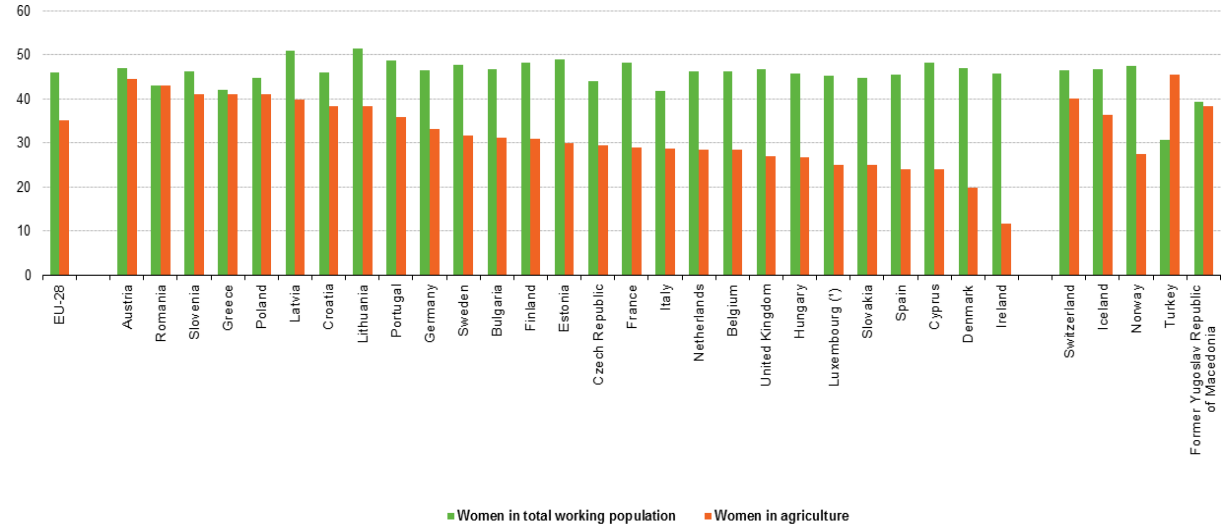
[4] A recent trend analysis conducted in the framework of the Ruralization project identifies 60 different trends in rural areas. For more info please visit https://ruraltrends.eu/

encourage the establishment of women in rural areas as actors in the agricultural sector concerning country-specific property-law and tax-law situations (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020).

Women tend to play a greater role than men in natural resource management – farming, planting, protecting and caring for seedlings and small trees – and ensuring nutrition and as care providers for their families. Yet, in the long run, no one – women or men, rich or poor – can remain immune from the challenges and dangers brought on by climate change. Agriculture, still the most abundant sector of rural economy, in 2016 (Figure 4), women comprised about 45% of the total working population and about 35% of workers in the agricultural sector of the EU-28.

Generally, women are more frequently employed in part-time and temporary jobs in rural areas than in urban areas. There is a higher concentration of women in lower-paid roles, resulting in women being more likely to live in poverty or social exclusion than men (COPA, 2017). The gender pays and pension gaps are predominant in rural areas compared to the urban areas: women's gross hourly earnings are, on average, 16.2% lower than men's in the EU-28 (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020).

Figure 4. Women in the total working population and in agriculture, 2016.



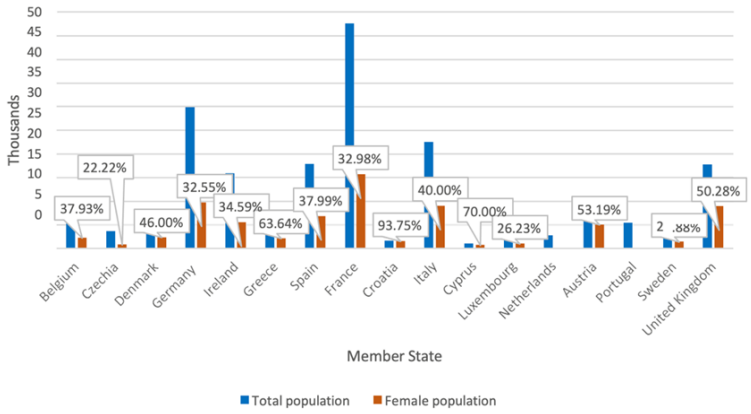
Note: Malta not represented due to low reliability.
(*) women working in agriculture: low reliability.

Source: EU Parliament 2020. The professional status of rural women in the EU

Women manage around 30% of farms across the EU-28. Member States with the highest share of women as farm managers are Latvia and Lithuania, while in some Member States (Germany, Denmark, Malta, and The Netherlands), the proportion of female farm managers is below the EU average (30%). In rural areas of the EU, the share of women in self-employment is about 38%, slightly higher than in total areas.

The greatest number of self-employed people in rural areas are in France, Germany, and Italy. According to available data, the highest share of self-employed women in rural areas is registered in Croatia, Cyprus and Greece (Figure 2). Regarding the share of women in unemployment in predominantly rural regions (2017), Franić and Kovačićek (2020) show a significantly high percentage of unemployed women in Mediterranean countries (Greece, Spain, Italy), but also in new Member States (Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia).

Figure 5. Total self-employment and women in self-employment in rural areas, age class 15-64, 2017



Source: EU Parliament 2020. The professional status of rural women in the EU

There is a new phenomenon occurring in some European regions showing that well-educated women decide to move to the countryside to carry out their professional activities. Due to the structural deficiencies of local labour markets, women (mostly highly-qualified) have to out-migrate from rural areas at a higher rate than men. Out-migration is essential for rural women to access higher-quality occupations. Yet, for older generations, the domestic caregiver role is a significant barrier to mobility.

Recently, the European Commission developed two indices to map the state of gender equality in almost all of the EU's regions. The Female Achievement Index (FemAI) shows how well women thrive compared to the best regional performance, while the Female Disadvantage Index (FemDI) measures how disadvantaged women are compared to men in each of 235 NUTS-2 regions. In general, women achieve more and face less gender disadvantage in more developed regions but have more limited prospects in the least developed regions. The best results are in regions around capitals and in regions with strong economic performance, human development and good-quality government. In concrete terms, women in Nordic regions have the highest level of achievement, while the lowest performances are in south-eastern Member States. Women in Nordic regions also face the least disadvantage as do women in France and Spain. Meanwhile, women in Greece and Romania face the highest disadvantage of all the regions compared to men[5].

Policies in supporting rural women at EU level

The European Green Deal sets Europe on the pathway to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, while the EU's first-ever Gender Equality Strategy is designed to make gender equality in the EU a reality. Building synergies between these two strategies, especially in the rural area, will be crucial to improving gender equality in energy, climate, and sustainability space in Europe and harnessing Europe's talent to support a green and sustainable recovery from the last recent crisis (COVID-19 pandemic, energy crisis, the consequences of the war).

The EU is committed to improving the situation, notably through the EU Rural Action Plan[6], by supporting the uptake of female entrepreneurship, women's participation in decision-making and the

[5] https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/panorama/2022/02/23-02-2022-mapping-the-state-of-women-s-equality-region-by-region
[6] https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas_en#eururalactionplan

provision of adequate services in rural areas. In this framework, the Rural Pact, launched by the European Commission[7] in December 2021, aims to contribute to achieving the shared goals of the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas, including social resilience and women in rural areas.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will continue supporting gender equality in rural areas through the new CAP Strategic Plans (2023-2027) and particularly under Specific Objective 8, promoting employment, growth, representation in decision-making processes, participation in farming businesses, social inclusion and local development. However, the CAP cannot provide the sole support for accomplishing these aims; therefore, enhanced awareness and integration of all available and relevant EU and national funding tools and policies are needed. The role of national and local authorities is to provide the necessary social and physical infrastructure that enables rural women's participation in projects and activities, in turn resulting in sustainable, climate-resilient agricultural production, processing, transport and marketing (Franić and Kovačićek, 2020).

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is one of the funds that can financially help women entrepreneurs, it aims to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions. The more developed regions use it to improve competitiveness and employment. In 2021, the EU entered a new multiannual programming period with around EUR 200.36 billion allocated to the ERDF. Rules for the ERDF in the 2021-2027 period are established in a regulation on the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund and a regulation on specific provisions for the European Territorial Cooperation goal (Interreg).

These regulations maintain the two current goals of the ERDF: 'Investment for jobs and growth' and 'European Territorial Cooperation'. In 2021-2027, the fund will also enable investments to make Europe and its regions: 1) more competitive and smarter, through innovation and support to small and medium-sized businesses, as well as digitization and digital connectivity; 2) greener, low-carbon and resilient; 3) more connected by enhancing mobility; 4) more social, supporting effective and inclusive employment, education, skills, social inclusion and equal access to healthcare, as well as enhancing the role of culture and sustainable tourism and 5) closer to citizens, supporting locally-led development and sustainable urban development across the EU.

Another European fund is the European Social Fund - ESF invests in people, with a focus on improving employment and education opportunities across the European Union. It also aims to improve the situation of the most vulnerable people at risk of poverty. To deal with the socio- economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and prepare for a green, digital and resilient recovery the EU update the resources to help Member States and regions with the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) initiatives that will provide needed funding for creating and preserving jobs, advancing education and skills, and promoting the social inclusion of people in vulnerable situations, long-term recovery programmes under the 2021-2027 cohesion policy.

[7] https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas_en#eururalactionplan

National contexts in Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia

This section presents the national contexts of Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia on several topics such as rural entrepreneurship, the legal framework for entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship and social enterprises and some developments in the area of green social entrepreneurship (eco-social entrepreneurship).

The four countries included in the analysis present important percentages of their population living in rural areas, with almost half of them being women. Moreover, rural areas are characterizes by low employment rates for both women and men and new enterprises are set up in lower percentages than in urban areas. Rural entrepreneurship is often organised in the area of agriculture or tourism, which poses challenges for scaling-up the business and for advancing past the subsistence milestone.

Social entrepreneurship in Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia has important historical roots, coming back from 19th century. Cooperatives, credit unions or associations found their place in the national context of each country over the years. Nowadays, the social economy sector or the social entrepreneurship activity are regulated by laws, ordinances or policies in each of the four countries.

Green social entrepreneurship emerges as a new, but developing field, showing great potential for the development of women in rural areas, across all targeted countries. Entrepreneurial activities involving social and green directions can take very different forms, from traditional activities (in many cases considered green or ecological), to utilitarian business that can also develop community resilience (like, for example, gardening, or repairs).

Rural entrepreneurship

Romania

Romania has 10296393 (46%) of its population in rural areas, of which 49% are women and 51% men. The rural population has registered a decrease of 447374 people between 2010 and 2021. The decline in population over the last 11 years has been more pronounced for the female population, with the figure being almost double that for men. The population of women in rural areas in Romania tends to decrease slowly, with the average age slowly increasing, from 42.9 years old in 2012 to 44.1 years old in 2020. Thus, the number of women in rural areas has decreased by 297772 persons and the number of men by 149602 (Table 1).

Table 1. Rural population evolution by gender between 2010 - 2021

Urban-rural	Sex	2010	2014	2015	2019	2020	2021	Difference 2021-2010
Urban	Total	10942040	10752617	10703051	10463886	10474555	10296393	-645647
	Males	5233346	5148467	5118061	4988571	4990761	4890129	-343217
	Females	5708694	5604150	5584990	5475315	5483794	5406264	-302430
Rural	Total	9352643	9200472	9172491	8961987	8879784	8905269	-447374
	Males	4647063	4600512	4591324	4517925	4483041	4497461	-149602
	Females	4705580	4599960	4581167	4444062	4396743	4407808	-297772

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo data base, indicator POP105A

The average age of the rural population has increased with 1.3 years between 2012 and 2020. In 2020, the average age of rural population was 42.4 years old, with a difference of 2.3 years between men

(40.8 years old) and women (44.1 years old). There are not significant differences between rural and urban areas (Table 2).

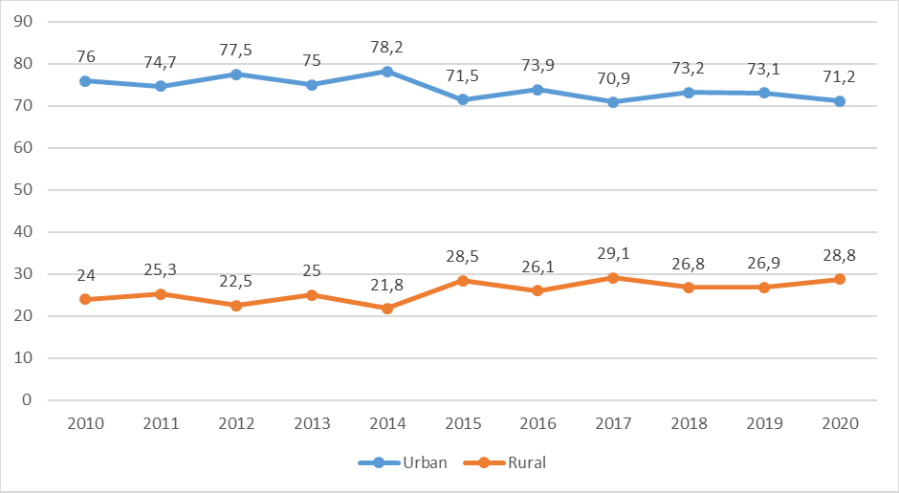
Table 2. The average age of population by degree of urbanisation and sex

Urban-rural	Sex	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Urban	Total	40,4	40,7	41	41,2	41,5	41,7	41,9	42	42,1
	Males	38,9	39,2	39,4	39,6	39,8	40	40,2	40,3	40,4
	Females	41,8	42,2	42,5	42,7	43	43,2	43,4	43,5	43,7
Rural	Total	41,1	41,3	41,5	41,6	41,8	41,9	42,1	42,2	42,4
	Males	39,4	39,6	39,7	39,9	40,1	40,2	40,4	40,6	40,8
	Females	42,9	43	43,2	43,3	43,5	43,6	43,8	43,9	44,1

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo data base, indicator POP109A

The percentage of newly created enterprises in rural areas increased slightly between 2012 and 2020, from 24% to 28.8%. It is still a huge gap (42%) between urban and rural areas related to the development of new enterprises (Figure 6). The increase in the number of newly created enterprises in rural areas is also largely due to the European funds that have been dedicated to the creation of businesses in rural areas.

Figure 6. Distribution of newly created active enterprises by the degree of urbanisation



Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo data base, indicator INT111L

The number of the population employed in economic activities in rural areas decreased in the period 2010 – 2021 with 936.772 persons. 25% of the population employed in rural areas is in agriculture, forestry, and fishing and 19% in industry (Table 3).

Table 3. Population employed by economic activities in rural areas

	2010	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total	4108187	3872894	3919819	3896749	3818520	3171465
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	2537756	2003089	1762708	1683314	1589197	812019
Extractive industry	38661	29202	27846	27168	28732	29311
Manufacturing industry	461445	548936	649299	630260	590083	603009
Production and supply of electricity and thermal energy, gas, hot water and air conditioning	22371	21422	20110	16722	16520	21878

	2010	2015	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total	4108187	3872894	3919819	3896749	3818520	3171465
Water distribution; sanitation, waste management, decontamination activities	22106	26954	31918	39241	42711	51942
Construction	247079	277478	340904	371502	395297	413219
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	238984	290842	352299	362650	377787	419245
Transport and storage	110509	146543	161069	179093	197768	210801
Hotels and restaurants	33930	42653	66178	65237	61499	58610
Information and communications	9311	23444	29006	24002	19409	20823
Financial intermediation and insurance	9882	9185	10401	10412	11581	17718
Real estate transactions	2686	2393	1794	2359	2692	2746
Professional, scientific and technical activities	14391	22401	25046	23975	23866	24908
Administrative service activities and support service activities	47001	73966	71705	85117	84339	78502
Public administration and defence; social insurance from the public system	110370	110101	108039	107740	114082	120672
Education	88573	91742	90273	92191	92802	99606
Health and social assistance	72258	78444	92123	96588	97623	114281
Performance, cultural and recreational activities	6647	11770	11329	13677	13663	12636
Other activities of the national economy	34229	62329	67772	65501	58868	59539

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo data base, indicator AMG110P

The employment rate in Romanian rural areas is quite low – 42.7% in 2021, despite an increase of 6.7% between 2010 and 2021. The gap in employment rate between urban and rural areas in Romania is more than 10% (53% in urban areas and 42.7% in rural ones). The employment rate in rural areas is very low at people between 15 and 24 years old – 24.8%. During 2010 – 2021 period, significant increases in the employment rate are recorded in the age category 25 – 54 years-old (from 57.5% to 68.4%) and 55-64 years old (from 29.7% to 42%) (Table 4).

Table 4. Employment rate by age in rural areas

	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021
Total	36	37.3	40.6	40.5	42.7
15 - 24 years old	21.8	22.2	24.5	24.1	24.8
25 - 54 years old	57.5	60.2	65.2	64.8	68.4
55 - 64 years old	29.7	30.5	36.9	38.8	42

Source: National Institute of Statistics. Tempo data base. indicator AMG158B

In Romanian rural areas the percent of employees increase in the last 12 years from 35.9% in 2010 to 55.3% in 2021. A significant decrease is registered in case of self-employed people (from 37.9% to 15.5%) or unpaid family worker (from 25.5% to 5.5 %) between 2010 and 2021.

Table 5. Population employed by labour market status in rural areas

Labour market status	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021
Employee	35.9	43.4	51.5	51.8	55.3
Business owner	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.9
Self employed	37.9	31.4	27.5	26.1	15.5
Unpaid family worker	25.5	18.8	15.1	14.2	5.5

Source: National Institute of Statistics. Tempo data base. indicator AMG1102

In Romania social economy entities have existed since the 19th century when the first cooperatives were registered (in 1850's). Their evolution was deeply affected by the communist regime which took control of their activities (in the case of cooperatives and mutual societies) or banned them (in the case of associations and foundations) (Lambru & Petrescu, 2021). After the fall of the communist regime, the most important development, both quantitative (number of entities and employees, income) and qualitative (activities carried out, services offered) was registered by associations and foundations. Mutual societies experienced a decline in activity in the case of employee mutuals because the number of large employers where they were active was reduced. In the case of pensioners' mutuals, after an initial period of decline, there was a diversification of activities, with many medical and social services starting to be offered in addition to financial services (credit).

The cooperatives experienced a major decline in activity as a result of the negative image among the population associating them with the forced cooperativisation of the agricultural sector during the communist era. Unfortunately, data on these entities are not available from public sources. The advent of the social economy law in 2015 brought with it the obligation for social economy entities to register in the National Register of Social Enterprises in order to obtain the status of social enterprise. The number of those who have registered is not very high, especially as there are no financial incentives or other benefits for them. Many of those registered were newly established in projects financed from European funds.

According to the last available data from the National Register of Social Enterprises (October 2022), there are 2782 social enterprises in Romania. Most of them (89%) are limited liability companies that accomplish the criteria of a social enterprise from Law 219/ 2015 on social economy. 10% of social enterprises are associations and foundations. The Law 219/ 2015 introduces also the social insertion enterprise, a form of work integration social enterprise for people from vulnerable groups. Their number increases from 10 in 2018 to 193 in 2022 (Table 6).

Table 6. Social enterprises registered in Romania

Type of social enterprises	March 2018	November 2018	March 2020	October 2021	May 2022	October 2022
Limited liability companies	37	42	54	2122	2333	2482
Associations and foundations	54	59	66	255	275	285
Mutuals	6	7	7	6	6	6
Cooperatives	6	7	7	9	9	9
Total	**103**	**115**	**134**	**2392**	**2623**	**2782**
Out of which – Social insertion enterprises	10	12	17	113	186	193

Source: National Register of Social Enterprises, Romanian PES,
https://www.anofm.ro/index.html?agentie=&categ=9&subcateg=1&idpostare=21973

Slovenia

Rural entrepreneurship in Slovenia has a long tradition. Unlike in some other Central and Eastern European countries, family farms were not collectivized. They were operating within the set maximum of agricultural and forestry land. While family farms were limited in their size and operation, since mid-1960 and particularly since the 1990s the size and operation limitations have been largely abolished. In addition to agricultural and farm entrepreneurship, also family craft and micro business and entrepreneurial activities were allowed. This has contributed to development of rural entrepreneurial activities particularly in activities such as hospitality and tourism, wood and small furniture activities, construction and housing activities. Since the 1990s, rural entrepreneurship can be in different economic activities.

Between the agricultural censuses in 2000, 2010 and 2020, with the decline in the number of farms, the average farm size has increased (SORS, 2022). According to the first provisional data from the Census of Agriculture 2020, in Slovenia there were 67,927 agricultural holdings, 9% less than in 2010 (74,646) and 21% less than in 2000 (86,467). The average agricultural holding in Slovenia in 2020 used 7 hectares (ha) of agricultural land (common pastures are not included). The average area of agricultural land in use was 0.6 ha larger than in 2010 and 1.4 ha larger than in 2000 (Kranjc and Šuštar, 2021). The previous research for Slovenia has confirmed that farms with greater engagement and with young woman farmers holding a role in farm management are more agri-environmentally concerned. They are more likely to adapt and participate in voluntary agri-environmental measures (Unay-Gailhard and Bojnec, 2021). The challenge in rural areas can be also the gender balance on farms and in rural areas, with greater integration and role of rural women in farm management and rural development (Černič Istenič, 2015).

Most of the Slovenian territory is considered rural, with relatively small regional towns in rural areas. This polycentric economic development has mitigated a decline of rural population. In Slovenia, around 50% of the population lives in rural areas compared to the European average of 35%. The comprehensive inclusion of women and equal opportunities at all levels of decision-making and investing in their education, health and well-being have been important objectives (MLFSAEO, 2016). This strengthens the entire community and rural society, and is also important for achieving the goals of sustainable development and ensuring human rights for all people. Poverty, exposure and vulnerable groups in rural areas as broader objectives have been addressed with the help of regional, agricultural, social, infrastructure, health, cultural and other policies.

Box 1. Promising practice - the Council for Rural Women in Slovenia

In March 2019, the Council for Rural Women was established in Slovenia. The Council for Rural Women is a consultative body of the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food. The council formulates opinions on important decisions in the field of ensuring women's rights in rural areas as a neglected topic. The council monitors the situation of women in rural areas and makes proposals for improving their situation, gives expert opinions on agricultural and other policy measures that affect the situation of women in rural areas, contributes to raising awareness of the special situation of women in rural areas and informing the general public about this issue, promotes and encourages organized action and intergenerational cooperation of women in rural areas, and in social security system and supports (assistance in cases such as illness, accidents, maternity

leave, recovery, education, participation in community activities, recreation and leisure). The aim of the social-labour supports and services of social welfare among agricultural population is to ensure equality of working conditions between farmers and other categories of employees.

The establishment the council is considered as an important step towards the recognition of the position of women in all areas of agriculture of exceptional importance in ensuring the rights of women in rural areas. Among the first activities and tasks were the review of the legislation governing social rights and the preparation of proposals for possible changes, informing women about rights in the work and social spheres. The council works closely with the Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry and Food, and Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. Other organizations include the Farmers' Union of Slovenia, the Association of Slovenian Rural Youth, the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia and the Association of Farmers' Women of Slovenia (Zveza kmetic Slovenije). The latter was founded in 1995 as a voluntary, non-governmental organization that works in the public interest with more than 6,500 women members, who work in associations in the territory of Slovenia. The association aims to raise awareness among women and concern the aging of the population to take care of the next generations of women.

The field research conducted in Slovenia revealed the opinion that rural areas have some limitations, as usually the farms are not very big. People try to have a regular job and do the work on the farm additionally to their main source of income. At the Slovenian coastal area, those that took the challenge and want to live from farming, try to differentiate their products and services, offering tourist accommodations, farming experience, producing products for final consumers (yoghurt for schools and other short food supply chains), connecting tourism providers in joint projects (Istrian breakfast and other similar events), organizing school visits, guided tours of the fish and shellfish farm (Fonda fish farm), branding their products (Piran sea bass Fonda) and others.

The Slovenian entrepreneurship in rural areas and the new trends in rural communities are diverse, and a one-size-fits-all approach to rural entrepreneurship will not work. Each community has to develop its own specific strategies. An emerging trend is e-commerce to conduct business and provide services, because people in rural areas are becoming more tech-savvy, they are increasing rural commercialization growth. This could be attributed to the availability of smartphones and cheap high-speed internet connectivity all over the rural areas. There are successful women entrepreneurs in rural areas. In general, they are extremely active in the non-governmental sector in rural areas as generators of community development.

Moreover, women are important in rural development as they make up about half of the rural population. For this reason, women should be encouraged in their independence and employment. A trend in the countryside is the setting up of family farms, where all members of the family are employed. The question that arises is if all family members or all women also officially employed and if they are socially protected or if they are entitled to sick pay and maternity leave.

Cyprus

According to the typology of rural-urban areas used at the level of the European Union, the entire territory of Cyprus falls into the category of "intermediate rural areas". Apart from the urban areas of the 4 cities of the Republic of Cyprus, namely Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca and Paphos, all other areas and their population are considered rural[8]. Rural areas in Cyprus are thinly populated, showing an insignificant increase each year, with 32,6% of the total population residing in rural areas in 2011 to 33,1% in 2021[9]. These are characterized by small towns and villages that offer a range of commercial, retail, social, and other services. Smaller cities, villages, and rural areas in Cyprus face similar challenges in retaining their economically engaged population, as most other European countries. Areas near the UN Buffer Zone, face added disadvantages caused by movement restrictions. The relatively recent road upgrade has improved the connection of these areas to the country's capital Nicosia. Many of the occupations that are available in rural areas unfortunately pay less, like those in the tourism, hospitality, and service sectors. Some of these professions are also occasionally available, due to their seasonal character.

The main fields of rural entrepreneurial activity in Cyprus are agriculture, crop and livestock production and fishery, offering a range of products and services with particular importance to the food and beverage industry. Data issued by Eurostat in 2016 show that by that time, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Cyprus' rural areas reached 32,2%. Moreover, the unemployment rate of persons aged 15-64 in rural areas in 2017 touched the percentage of 12,4%, and the share of young people aged 18-24 who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEETS) amounted to 22,7%.

Rural women's entrepreneurship in Cyprus consists of mainly cottage agroindustry, agri-tourism activities, and handicrafts. The majority of women are entirely responsible for the management of non-agricultural enterprises and according to Dr. Chimonidou's paper (2004), such activities encompass the professionalization of careers in the informal economy. This professionalization of the role of the "housewife" and the proven impact it had in distinguishing the exceptional characteristics of agricultural production in each country and in conserving the tangible and intangible cultural heritage has led to the recent efforts for the institutionalization of the cottage industry[10].

The Minister of Agriculture announced in September 2022 that a bill is being promoted to regulate the cottage industry in rural areas, which will support small units that carry out their work from home by securing funding and selling their products in the retail market[11]. The institutionalization of the cottage industry will help the development of entrepreneurship in rural areas, especially in the sectors of traditional products and handcrafting which are mainly supported by women.

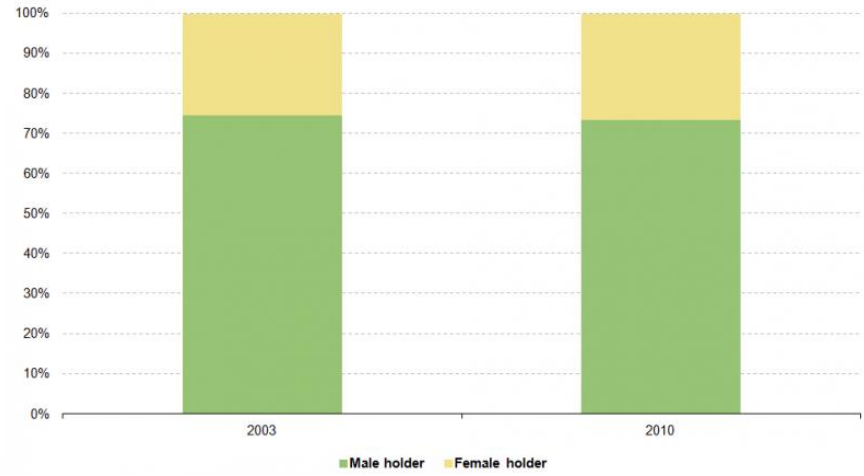
When it comes to agriculture, which forms the main sector of employment of rural areas' population (similar to the other countries included in the research), gender demographics of farmers in Cyprus rely on the 2010 Agriculture Census according to which, less than 30% of holders that had agriculture

[8] Cyprus Rural Development Programme 2014-2020: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-11/rdp-factsheet-cyprus_en_0.pdf
[9] Cyprus Rural Population 1960-2022 | MacroTrends
[10] https://news.ccci.org.cy/%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%89%CE%B8%CE%B5%CE%AF%CF%84%CE%B1%CE%B9-%CE%BD%CE%BF%CE%BC%CE%BF%CF%83%CF%87%CE%AD%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%BF-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%BF%CF%84%CE%B5/
[11] https://www.brief.com.cy/oikonomia/kypros/kadis-nomoshedio-tha-rythmizei-tin-oikotehnia-se-oreines-periohe

as a sole occupation were women[12]. The Statistical Services of Cyprus published new data in 2016 following research on agriculture and livestock holdings in Cyprus, based on which the number of women holders has decreased compared to 2010, to 24,5%[13].

The Census of Agriculture 2020, with comparative tables between the 2010 census along with the necessary metadata will be available by the end of 2022, hence outside the time frame of the present research output. The 2010 Census also reveals that the involvement of women in farm field work is closely related to the size of the farm. The bigger the size the greater the participation in farm operations, like harvesting, whereas the younger the age of women the less their willingness to undertake fieldwork (Chimonidou, 2004). Younger women in family agriculture business show more willingness to get involved in administrative or management tasks.

Figure 7. Sole Holders by Gender CY 2003 and 2010



Source: Eurostat FSS, 2003 and 2010 (Agricultural Census in Cyprus, 2017)

Research on the role of women in rural communities in Cyprus is limited, as well as relevant statistical data that reveal women's contribution to entrepreneurial activities in rural areas. Women have always made a significant contribution to rural life in Cyprus. They are involved in many facets of farming, including the production of dairy and meat products, wine and olive oil, grains, potatoes, fruits, and vegetables, as well as other meals. Women still play a significant role in agricultural communities in Cyprus's rural districts. The creation of organic and traditional goods, the resurgence of handicrafts and traditional embroideries, and the direct sale of their goods are all activities in which women are actively engaged. The woman frequently takes the initiative and establishes a new on-farm enterprise. A study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs shows that Cyprus is among the three countries with the highest share of self-employed women in rural areas. As a result, farm women make a significant contribution to the sustainability of rural economies and family farms[14].

[12] File: Figure Sole Holders by Gender CY 2003 and 2010.PNG - Statistics Explained (europa.eu)
[13] Αποτελέσματα Έρευνας: Έρευνα Διάρθρωσης Γεωργικών και Κτηνοτροφικών Εκμεταλλεύσεων (cystat.gov.cy)
[14] https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Cyprus.pdf

Serbia

The territory of the Republic of Serbia is not categorized on urban and rural areas, but it is estimated that more than 40% of population lives in territory which could be categorized as rural area. Without a legal framework, Serbia has no exact definition, but rural areas can be described as areas outside of urban centres with less developed infrastructure than urban areas, characterized by agriculture, forestry, and other natural resource-based industries. According to Farm Structure Survey (FSS) 2018 of SORS (2018,2019), the number of agricultural holdings in Serbia is 564.541, mostly family holdings - 562-896. Most of agricultural holdings have one or two members with share of women in 59%. Holding managers are mostly man - 84,7%.

In the last two decades, the economy of Serbia records economic growth beside negative impacts of global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic negative impact on economy. In comparison with 4.2% of annual GDP growth in 2019, Serbian economy recorded negative growth balance of 2.5 % in 2020 caused by Covid-19 crises. Unemployment rate in Serbia is lowest in the region but higher than the European average. According to Official Labour Force Survey for 2020 (SORS, 2020), "the unemployment rate amounted to 9.0%, which is a drop of 1.4 percentage points (p. p.) compared to 2019, while the employment rate amounted to 49.1%, which is a growth of 0.1 p. p."

As a one of the main problems, Serbia is facing internal and external migrations, the former being a consequence of the undeveloped to urban areas. According to WFD and Institute for Development and Innovation research "Serbia has one of the highest youth emigration levels in the Balkan region."[15] Serbia does not have official data about external migrations but OECD "estimates that 598.200 people have emigrated from Serbia in the last 20 years, and this number is only for people who immigrated to the countries members of this organization."[16]

Rural entrepreneurship in Serbia refers to the variety of fields, mostly agriculture, tourism, and craft production. In recent years, there has been a growing trend towards rural entrepreneurship in Serbia as a means of stimulating economic development in these areas and improving the quality of life for rural residents. Also, the pandemic of COVID-19 has affected to some part of society to back from urban to the sub-urban areas or villages.

According to information presented on "Women Entrepreneurship - Connect to Create and Accelerate Your Business"[17], the number of entrepreneurs in rural areas of Serbia has increased in recent years. In 2019, there were approximately 130,000 rural entrepreneurs in the country, representing around 15% of all entrepreneurs in Serbia. Around 30% of rural entrepreneurs in Serbia are women. These women are often involved in businesses related to agriculture, craft production, and tourism, and they play a vital role in the economic development of their communities.

One of the key challenges facing rural entrepreneurship in Serbia is the limited availability of resources and infrastructure in these areas. Many rural areas lack access to capital, markets, and other resources that are necessary for businesses to grow. In addition, there is often a lack of trained personnel and specialized knowledge in rural areas, which can make it difficult for entrepreneurs to start and grow their businesses.

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[15] WFD, *Youth emigration costs Serbia €1.2 billion a year*
[16] Strategy on Economic Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2021-2027
[17] Women Entrepreneurship – Connect to Create and Accelerate Your Business

Despite the growth of rural entrepreneurship in Serbia, there are still significant regional disparities in terms of the number and types of businesses that exist in different parts of the country. In general, rural areas in central and western Serbia tend to have higher levels of entrepreneurship, while rural areas in eastern and southern Serbia tend to have fewer businesses. This is due in part to differences in infrastructure, access to resources, and other factors.

The business activities of individuals in rural regions, predominantly related to agriculture and crafts, significantly impact the standard of living and preservation of life in those areas.[18] By providing employment opportunities and generating income, these businesses can help to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life in rural areas. In addition, rural women entrepreneurs can also serve as role models and inspire other women in their communities to start their own businesses.

In addition to providing economic benefits, rural women entrepreneurship can also have positive social and cultural impacts. Many rural women entrepreneurs are involved in preserving traditional crafts and cultural practices, which can be an important source of pride and identity for their communities. These businesses can also serve as a source of empowerment for rural women, giving them the opportunity to be independent and make their own decisions about their businesses and their lives.

Legal framework

Romania

The social economy sector is regulated in Romania by the Law 219/2015. This law provides recognition as a social enterprise or social insertion enterprise to various types of entities (regardless of their legal form) that meet a number of criteria and comply with the principles of social economy. The principles of social economy stipulated by Law 219/2015 are (article 4): priority given to the individual and social objectives compared to the increase of profit; solidarity and collective responsibility; convergence between the associated members' interests and the general interest and/or the interests of a community; democratic control of members over their activities; voluntary and free nature of association in forms of organization specific to the social economy; distinct legal personality, management autonomy and independence from public authorities; allocating most of the financial profit/ surplus to achieve the objectives of the general interest, of a community or for the non-economic personal interest of members.

The criteria stated in Art. 80 foresee that a social enterprise: acts for the social purpose and/or in the general interest of the community; allocates a minimum of 90 % of the achieved profit/ surplus to the social purpose and the statutory reserve; commits to transmit the remaining assets from the liquidation to one or several social enterprises and applies the principle of social equity towards employees, ensuring fair payment levels, between which there can be no differences exceeding the ratio of 1 to 8.

In addition to the above criteria, an insertion social enterprise should have at least 30% of its staff or cooperative members belonging to the vulnerable group, or the aggregate working time of employees from vulnerable groups must represent at least 30% of the total working time of all employees and

[18] Milan Krkobabic, the Minister for rural welfare, states that 1,200 settlements in Serbia have no residents and 550 have less than 100 residents. He cites inadequate conditions as the main problem for their existence – Daily newspaper Politika, 24/01/2019.

should aim to combat exclusion, discrimination and unemployment through the socio-professional integration of disadvantaged persons (Article 10).

Each entity which can be considered a social enterprise shall be organized and operate on the basis of its own legislation:

- Associations and foundations - Government Ordinance No 26/2000 on associations and foundations;
- Grade I cooperative societies - Law No 1/2005 on the organization and functioning of a cooperation;
- Agricultural cooperatives – Law No. 21/2019 for the amendment and completion of the Law on agricultural cooperation No. 566/2004;
- Credit unions - Government Emergency Ordinance No 99/2006 on credit institutions and capital adequacy;
- Employees' mutual aid funds - Law No 122/1996 on the legal regime of employees' mutual aid funds and their unions;
- Pensioners' mutual aid funds - Law No 540/2002 on pensioners' mutual aid funds;
- Limited liability companies – Law No. 31/1990 of companies;

The legal framework that supports social economy entities is not well developed in Romania, mainly because it is considered an instrument for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups on the labour market. However, the public procurement law (Law 98/ 2016) has provisions related to reserved contracts (article 56) and procurement with social and green clauses (articles 157 and 187) that can benefit social enterprises (Petrescu et al., 2021).

For green public procurement, a separate order is adopted (Order No. 1068/1652/2018) approving the Green Procurement Guide which includes minimum environmental protection requirements for certain groups of products and services to be requested in the tender documents. Although at European level environmental criteria for procurement are developed for 20 groups of products and services (https://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/eu_gpp_criteria_en.htm) at the national level the guide provides criteria only for 6 categories: 1) copy paper and graph paper, 2) indoor and outdoor furniture, furniture refurbishment/reconditioning services and end-of-life furniture stock collection and reuse services, 3) food and catering services, 4) transport vehicles, 5) cleaning products and services and 6) office IT equipment.

However, this legal initiative poses important opportunities for the development of rural women entrepreneurship, since by having some type of legislation, green businesses have a greater potential to enter the market and become attractive to public or private buyers. Also, the legal framework allows the development of this activity sector and the development of related support policies.

Box 2. Romanian National promising practice for green economy

Green economy policy framework
In 2018, Romania adopted the National Strategy for Green Jobs 2018 – 2025 which proposes to ensure sustainable employment by stimulating and exploiting the green job potential of competitive sectors. This Strategy has three main objectives:

1. To stimulate entrepreneurship and green job creation with a focus on sectors of increased competitiveness identified in the National Competitiveness Strategy 2014 - 2020 and the National Strategy for Research, Development and Innovation 2014 - 2020
2. To develop the skills of the workforce to ensure quality employment in competitive, green jobs sectors.
3. To strengthen cooperation with relevant actors and dialogue with social partners in sectors with potential for green jobs.

Some of the main actions considered under the first objective aim to strengthen the entrepreneurial initiatives for creating green jobs, develop small and medium enterprises in rural areas and promote sustainable tourism. The measures dedicated to rural areas propose to reduce non-performing agriculture through the implementation of new technologies and the creation of green jobs, but also to develop the non-agricultural sector which is poorly represented in rural areas. They include also the restoration and preservation of heritage cultural heritage, promoting sustainable tourism and investing in renewable energy sources.

The second objective is dedicated to the development of the skills of the workforce and includes among their main actions: the training and development of green skills; encouraging lifelong learning and vocational training in sectors agricultural and forestry sectors; developing waste management skills; promote improved levels of clean technologies and low-emission energy or zero-carbon energy; increase participation in vocational and technical education and lifelong learning programmes. A green economy (waste management, biodiversity, green energy, green agriculture, sustainable tourism, emission control and other areas) requires the development of workforce skills: digital skills and specific green skills. This also implies the development of training providers offers. The third objective includes actions that aim to facilitate the cooperation between actors in rural development for the development of green jobs.

In 2022, the National Strategy for Circular Economy was approved in Romania. It aims to ensure Romania's transition from a linear to a circular economic model, in line with the European Union Action Plan for the Circular Economy. According to the evidence and analysis in the Strategy, the sectors with the greatest potential for improving the circular economy are: agriculture and forestry; automotive; construction; consumer goods such as food and beverages; packaging (glass, paper, plastics, etc.); textiles; electrical and electronic equipment. The main objectives of this Strategy are:

1. Give priority to local production over imported products and materials;
2. Strengthening economic competitiveness and the workforce;
3. Responsible and sustainable supply of raw materials;
4. Priority promotion of innovation and research in the circular economy;
5. Preservation, conservation and sustainable use of natural resources;
6. Waste prevention and sustainable waste management;
7. Promoting responsible consumption and environmental education;

8. Protection of ecosystems and citizens' health.

These strategic documents set out measures for the development of the green economy, including in rural areas, but do not include references to social economy entities/ social enterprises and their role in this process. Although there are examples of effective involvement of social enterprises in the green economy (green energy - Energy Cooperative or Green Energy Cluster; circular economy – Workshops without Borders, Oil Rights, Paper Mill, Ophori), their role is less visible to policy makers or the population.

Slovenia

In Slovenia, the possibility to establish a social enterprise came into legal order with the adoption of the Social Entrepreneurship Act (ZSocP) in March 2015. The goals of social entrepreneurship are to strengthen social solidarity and cohesion, to encourage people's cooperation and voluntary work, to strengthen society's innovative ability to solve social, economic, environmental and other problems, to provide an additional range of products and services that are in the public interest, develop new employment opportunities, provide additional jobs and social integration and professional reintegration of the most vulnerable groups of people on the labour market. The main purpose of social entrepreneurship is to employ long-term unemployed persons and to engage them in such a way that they independently generate income and provide for their own survival within the framework of social entrepreneurship.

A non-profit legal entity can operate as a social enterprise if it obtains such a status. It must be established for the permanent performance of social entrepreneurship activities in such a way that it permanently employs at least one worker in the first year and at least two workers in subsequent years of operation (social enterprise type A) or is established for the employment of a certain type of person (from the sixth article of the ZSocP) so that it will perform a certain activity by permanently employing at least one third of all employed workers (social enterprise type B). A profit-oriented company can establish a social enterprise only for the purpose of providing new jobs for its redundant workers.

The law is designed to enable an open model of social entrepreneurship, which means that the establishment of a social enterprise is not limited to the classic status form of the holder, but the holder can also be an association or institute. In a similar way is determined responsibility for the obligations of a social enterprise, since the law governing the concrete legal organization of each type of legal entity is used to determine it.

The law defines the activities that a social enterprise can perform, which must be socially beneficial or must be aimed at employing the most vulnerable groups of people on the labour market. Social entrepreneurship activities can be carried out in the field of: social care, family care, care for the disabled; science, research, education, upbringing and provision and organization of youth work; health protection and promotion; ensuring social inclusion, promoting employment and vocational training of persons who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment; organic food production, nature conservation, regulation and protection of the environment and animal protection; promoting the use of renewable energy sources and the development of the green economy; tourism for people whose living conditions prevent or hinder access to tourist services, in a way that respects the values of

sustainability, accessibility and solidarity (social tourism); stores for socially vulnerable people (social store) and stores that ensure the sale of products from smaller producers from the most economically underdeveloped environments on the basis of ethical, transparent and equal business relations between producers and traders, aimed primarily at ensuring the possibility of fair payment for producers and thus their livelihoods (fair trade) and trade in services and products from social entrepreneurship activities; culture, technical culture and preservation of cultural, technical and natural heritage; amateur sports and physical culture, the purpose of which is recreation and socialization; promoting the development of local communities; support services for social enterprises.

In addition to the content specified in the Act on the Legal Organization of a Single Type of Legal Entity (e.g., the Companies Act, the Societies Act, the Institutes Act), the Act on the establishment of a social enterprise must also define the non-profit purpose of the establishment of the legal entity and justify its public benefit and social character. As an activity or the tasks of a social enterprise must define the performance of social entrepreneurship or other activities, demarcate them from other activities or tasks, and define the method of disposing of assets and spending profits or surplus income.

The founding act must thus: define the method of managing a social enterprise according to the principle of equality; determine the persons responsible for management in the implementation of social entrepreneurship activities and the conditions for their appointment or election and responsibilities; determine the supervisory body and the method of electing or appointing the members of the supervisory body, the term of office and their powers, authorities and responsibilities; determine the type of social enterprise (type A or type B); determine whether the social enterprise also includes volunteers in its work; determine the method of participation of stakeholders (i.e., employees, volunteers) in management (consultation, mandatory opinion, etc.); determine the rules for keeping business books and preparing financial statements of a social enterprise or determine the rules in a special act and determine the conditions for the status transformation of a social enterprise and the disposal of the social enterprise's assets in the event of termination.

A social enterprise can share part of the profit or excess revenue to members, management and employees only if this share does not exceed 20% of all generated profit or excess revenue in a given year and only if the excess revenue does not represent unspent public funds and has defined in the act of incorporation. If the management of a social enterprise decides to share part of the profit or surplus income, it must not exclude workers.

Different policies and programmes are dedicated to social and green entrepreneurship, such as for social enterprises and young farmers. Social entrepreneurship is a form of entrepreneurship that operates on non-profit principles that profit invests back in own activity. It is supported by policies, but government supports are not permanent subsidy supports. Therefore, entrepreneurial skills, knowledge and tools are needed to operate and to deal with relevant social problems using business model contributing to sustainable development.
A generational renewal is important for agriculture and rural economy. Young farmers and women on farms are important for sustainability and resilience of farm households with on-farm and off-farming activities and incomes. Business and social entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship in farming and non-farming activities can be important for competitiveness and survival of rural economy. There is a special support for setting-up of farms by young farmers and succession of existing farms from older to young farmers. There are also some other initiatives and financial supports for young farmers and

residents in rural areas. One of them is a tool for promoting joint local development (LEADER) approach based on the "bottom-up" principle.

In rural women's empowerment and in their transition from education to employment different local players and stakeholders are engaged, from education institutions, local offices for employment, enterprises and different other organizations. In this transition process, the transfer of knowledge and skills to rural women is also important. A generational renewal brings not only younger-vis-vis older generation, but there is also potential of improvements and catch-up in knowledge and innovation due to more educated and more likely more flexible youth-vis-vis older population that can possess skills and experiences to be combined in this process.

Traditional policies dedicated to rural women empowerment are focusing on their knowledge and skills in households' activities such as education and trainings in cooking and sewing in the winter months. While these activities are still important, there are new challenges and needs for rural women empowerment, which are related to more advanced and contemporary knowledge in information and communication technologies, business and management of farms and rural businesses.

Social enterprises and social entrepreneurship can be important for women, vulnerable and socially excluded groups in their integration into labour market, social integration and local development. Exchange of ideas and networking between education institutions, public and private sector organizations and civil societies can be important in mitigating possible gaps in different interests contributing to social cohesion and wellbeing among women and different structures of rural population particularly in integration of women and youth in employment. In addition to public support, it is important to encourage women and young entrepreneurs to become engines of innovation, job creation and income generation in local development of rural areas.

Cyprus

The term social entrepreneurship is relatively recent in Cyprus as it was legally sanctioned in December 2020 when the "Law for the development and maintenance of a Registry for Social Enterprises[19]" was implemented. The purpose of the said legal instrument is to regulate the registration of businesses in the social economy in a Social Enterprises Registry and to set the criteria and obligations that a legal or natural person must meet once registered. Almost 2 years have passed since the Parliament passed the Bill into law and the relevant regulations that should accompany the Law are still pending[20]. As a result, there are still no enterprises currently registered in the Registry, and the potential of the Law for the encouragement and establishment of social enterprises in the country remains unknown.

The National Action Plan (NAP) for the Development of the Social Enterprise Ecosystem was prepared by Cyprus in January 2018 and contains policies and incentives for launching or growing social enterprises in the country. Accordingly, it offers grants, loans, access to expertise and infrastructure, as well as public procurement for social enterprises. The budget is anticipated at EUR 3.1 million. The NAP supports policies like funding for new and existing social enterprises up to EUR 25,000, support from incubators, a label and certification system for social enterprises, an e-portal that provides information on how to start a new social enterprise, funding options, and training opportunities, as well as mentoring. However, the majority of respondents who participated in the field research were

[19] http://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/arith/2020_1_207.pdf
[20] https://www.nomoplatform.cy/bills/oi-peri-koinonikon-epicheiriseon-kanonismoi-toy-2022/

unfamiliar with these policies or they did not recognize that certain businesses in the agriculture-related sectors fall under the umbrella of social entrepreneurship.

Moreover, the NAP does not have standing until the regulations that accompany the Law are set in place since as mentioned above, there are still no enterprises that hold the legal title of "social" enterprises in the country. Further support to social enterprises has been provided through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)/ESF. Through this funding mechanism support has been provided for the development of social enterprises in Cyprus between 2014 and 2020, despite the fact that the government of Cyprus does not offer publicly funded support programmes for the growth of social enterprises and social entrepreneurship.

In Cyprus, at the time being, there are no policies in place dedicated to rural women's economic and social empowerment. The dimension of gender in the agricultural and related sectors is dealt with in the general framework of gender equality policy without any mention of rural women in particular. This further highlights the need to address the concerns of women in rural areas that stand as impediments to their economic and social development.

The main policy tool for rural development in Cyprus is the Rural Development Programme of the Ministry of Agriculture[21], funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. The Programme is a call to face the various challenges that rural areas come across in Cyprus by setting relevant priorities and measures, aiming at creating a positive environment that will allow men and women to expand their activities and competitiveness. The most relevant priorities to the scope of the present research are presented in the table below.

Table 7. The most relevant priorities of the Rural Development Programme of the Ministry of Agriculture in Cyprus

Priority 1: Knowledge Transfer & Innovation - Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry, and rural areas • Very low participation rate of farmers in training programs due to lack of interest • The level of education and training of agricultural workers is considered very low in terms of general and technical knowledge and entrepreneurial knowledge • The culture of lifelong learning is absent • Lack of research and innovation promotion mechanisms • The current training programs of the Agricultural Applications Sector focus on practical agricultural production and do not address or provide training programs on processing, packaging, product placement, and entrepreneurship, while the corresponding training infrastructure in the private sector is deficient.	Priority 5: Resource efficiency & climate - Promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift towards a low carbon and climate resilient economy in agriculture, food and forestry sectors • Energy consumption in agriculture and food processing has been growing at a very high rate over the last decade. • Limited environmental awareness among those involved in agriculture, especially in relation to the rational use of the limited water resources. • Limited interest in the installation of renewable energy sources (RES) systems

[21] Rural Development Programme: ΠΑΑ 2014-2020 Final.pdf (paa.gov.cy)

Priority 2: Competitiveness - Enhancing farm viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture in all regions and promoting innovative farm technologies and sustainable management of forest • Lack of entrepreneurship-focused Research and Innovation structures which further widens the gap between technological development and Cypriot producers • Low expertise in specific production methods • Distance from local markets and a considerable distance from European and international markets • Lack of participation in product quality schemes that could add value and increase competitiveness.	Priority 6: Social inclusion & local development - Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas • Depopulation and adverse age composition and ageing of the agricultural population with low levels of training and limited potential for business initiatives, in particular in mountain areas. • Inadequate road network in mountainous areas resulting in depopulation and abandonment of large agricultural areas. • There is lack in the usage of e-governance, particularly in mountainous and rural areas, as well as in the use of e-commerce and ICT for educational purposes.

Within the framework of the Rural Development Programme, women have utilized the following programs[22]: 1) The Business start-up aid for young farmers, where 7,5% of approved applications came from women; 2) Support for investments in agricultural holdings, where 188 applications were approved, and 24 were submitted by women; 3) Vocational training and skills acquisition actions, with 300 women participating and 4) Short-term farm and forest management exchanges and farm and forest visits, with 31 female participants out of 258.

Other national strategies that support the wider sector of agriculture and agroindustry by carrying the development of rural areas are the National Strategy for the Development of the Troodos Mountain Communities and the Strategy for the Revival of Rural and Mountain areas. The second strategy is complementary to the first and regards the expansion and inclusion of communities in the Paphos, Larnaca and Limassol districts. The strategies contain policies and actions in these Communities, which aim to reverse the wave of urbanization and regenerate the rural/mountain areas by making them attractive places for permanent living and economic activity for young families, investors and entrepreneurs.

As mentioned above and of particular importance to women who make up the biggest percentage of workers in the cottage agroindustry, is the approval of the bill for the institutionalization of the cottage business. As women in rural communities are foremost responsible for carrying out family duties, they have created small businesses in product manufacturing, in particular traditional products and handcrafts in their homes. Such institutionalization of the cottage industry will most importantly certify their production units, secure funding, and give them incentives to sell their products in the retail market[23].

The Deputy Ministry of Tourism has issued various incentives and subsidies that relate to the revitalization and enrichment of rural areas in the past years. Amongst them, the most beneficial schemes for women in rural areas are the Subsidy scheme for visitable handicraft and enogastronomy

[22] https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/Nationalreviews/Cyprus.pdf
[23] https://www.brief.com.cy/oikonomia/kypros/kadis-nomoshedio-tha-rythmizei-tin-oikotehnia-se-oreines-periohe

workshops[24], the Incentive Scheme for the revival of countryside, mountainous and remote areas through the creation of authentic experiences to enrich the tourism product[25] and the Subsidy Scheme for the upgrade of traditional hosting venues and traditional products "Taste Cyprus". The former has proven much beneficial for women in the handicraft industry by giving them the chance to host workshops in rural villages, teach their art, and display and sell their creations. For the scope of this research, women who are beneficiaries of the said scheme were interviewed. They revealed that although the workshops were indeed beneficial for them in terms of networking and reaching people with their art, in economic terms the benefits were not at all substantial. People who attended the workshops funded by the Deputy Ministry of Tourism were very keen on learning the different handicraft techniques but more reluctant to purchase the products on display made by these women.

Moreover, the interviewees in Cyprus stressed the fact that there is indeed an initiative from the Cyprus government to bolster entrepreneurial activity in rural areas, as shown by the various incentives and subsidies now in place, yet in reality, such support programs are of limited potential to beneficiaries considering the lack of available financial resources (beyond funding). Furthermore, the current inflation in Europe and the rising prices of raw materials along with energy, water and production costs contribute further to the discouragement of entrepreneurial activity in rural areas.

Serbia

The first lines of social entrepreneurship in Serbia could be recognized in the 19th century through the establishment of cooperatives. The first cooperative in Serbia was founded in 1846, immediately after the formation of first cooperatives in Europe. Also, the first Union of cooperatives in Serbia was founded in 1895 and as national association participated in the founding of International Cooperative Alliance – ICA[26] in 1895. Three years later, in 1898, the first Law on Agricultural and Craft Cooperatives in Serbia (srp. Zakon o zemaljoradničkim i zanatskim zadrugama)[27] was adopted. Today, in the sector of social economy, cooperatives, civic associations, limited liability companies and registered entrepreneurs – legal entities which work on the principles of social economy and therefore it is difficult to determine the exact number of social enterprises in Serbia.

After years of preparation and discussions of draft document, the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Law on Social Entrepreneurship on 4 February 2022. According to Article 1, the Republic of Serbia regulates the concept, objectives, principles and area of activity of social entrepreneurship, legal position, rights and obligations of entities performing activities under the status of social entrepreneurship, conditions for acquiring and terminating the status of social entrepreneurship, the concept of socially vulnerable groups, encouragement of the development of social entrepreneurship and the support for socially vulnerable groups, registration of the social entrepreneurship status, reporting, supervision and other issues of importance for social entrepreneurship.

Before the adoption of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship, social economy activities were partly legally framed through Law on Cooperatives, Law on Associations, Law on Social Protection, Law on

[24] https://www.tourism.gov.cy/tourism/tourism.nsf/All/113F85CFC0E0394BC22586D1002EA1A1?OpenDocument
[25] https://www.fundingprogrammesportal.gov.cy/en/call/incentive-scheme-for-the-revival-of-countryside-mountainous-and-remote-areas-through-the-creation-of-authentic-experiences-to-enrich-the-tourism-product-2022-call/
[26] International Cooperative Alliance – ICA https://www.ica.coop/en, 8/9/2022
[27] Ministry of Economy, *Cooperatives in Serbia,* https://www.privreda.gov.rs/oglasna-tabla/zadrugarstvo-u-srbiji, 8/9/2022

professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities, Law on Business, Law on Profit Tax, Law on Value Added Tax and other legal regulation and strategic documents.

Besides adopting the Law on Social Entrepreneurship, the Serbian government formed the Council for social entrepreneurship and started with the preparation of the Program for social entrepreneurship with aim to support current and formation of new social enterprises. Also, the Serbian Chamber of Commerce (PKS) formed the Social Entrepreneurship Section to work on sustainability, innovation and market orientation of social enterprises.

The Law on Agriculture and Rural Development is the regulatory framework for agricultural policy and rural development in Serbia. Article 3 defines the objectives of agricultural policy and rural development policy of the Republic of Serbia: 1) strengthening competitiveness of agricultural products on the market; 2) providing high-quality and safe food; 3) providing support to the living standard of farmers that cannot, through their own production, ensure economic survival on the market; 4) providing support to rural development and 5) protecting the environment from adverse effects of agricultural production.

The Law also defines the main documents for the development of rural areas in Serbia: 1) The Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy – which defines the long-term courses of agricultural development, in particular: establishment of market economy, increase of agricultural profitability in the Republic of Serbia and care for the development of rural areas; 2) The National Agricultural Program – which defines the medium and short-term objectives of agricultural policy, manner, order and deadlines for achieving abovementioned objectives, expected results, as well as the form, type, purpose and volume of certain incentives; and 3) The National Rural Development Program – which defines the measures and other activities, as well as expected results, forms, types, purposes and volume of certain incentive measures related to rural development.

In 2020 the Ministry for the Care of the Villages of Serbia was formed, recognizing the importance of rural areas in the Republic of Serbia[28]. The Ministry performs the tasks of state administration and related professional tasks related to: strategic assessment of the position of villages and the rural population; proposing measures and activities to improve living and working conditions in the countryside; nurturing traditions and the traditional way of life in the countryside, in order to preserve the cultural and historical contents of rural areas.

As important for women in rural areas, the National Strategy for Gender Equality for the period from 2021 to 2030[29] recognizes the economic position of rural women. The strategy emphasizes that existing support for women in agriculture and rural development is insufficient and it is necessary to replace it with systemic support that contributes to sustainable changes and improving the quality of everyday life in the villages.

Green social entrepreneurship (eco-social entrepreneurship)

Romania

The educators that participated in the interviews and the national focus group in Romania portrayed an important potential of the rural areas for entrepreneurship in general, and for green social

[28] Ministry for the Care of the Village - https://www.mbs.gov.rs/index.php
[29]

entrepreneurship in particular. Women's green and social entrepreneurial activities can be regarded from two perspective – one, of younger women, who have always lived in rural areas, and some were educated in the city and could return to their villages to capitalize on their newly acquired skills / knowledge at home and secondly, from the perspective of the women who migrated to the village from urban areas.

Moreover, entrepreneurial activities involving social and green directions can take very different forms, from traditional activities (in many cases considered green or ecological), to utilitarian business that can also develop community resilience (like gardening, or repairs). The first direction, that of more traditional occupations tends to be the prerogative of rural women that during their lives stayed longer in households and thus developed specific skills, which would have great exploitation potential.

An example of customary occupation that could be transformed in a green social business is the valorisation of wild edible plants, with all the related process of picking, processing, marketing. This kind of activity emphasizes a type of knowledge of nature, transmitted from generation to generation in the rural environment, specific to women that approach the sacred side of nature. Other similar activities can involve traditional cooking, the preparation of canned products or other products prepared according to traditional recipes (like pasta, matured cheese, or local products, which could be promoted in urban networks - for example, the croissant and milk or yogurt in schools could be produced locally, in women's cooperatives or small businesses).

In the services area, one can notice a lot of interest from urban families, who want to get more in touch with the rural environment, so demonstration farms would also be appropriate, to facilitate contact with animals, or to experience life in the country. In this sense, small agritourism guesthouses can be opened for the public, traditional leisure activities can be organised or mini museums that exhibit local objects. Another idea with great potential would be organising handicraft workshops, rural arts, or workshops in specific rural activities (carpet weaving, blacksmithing) – where there should be more structure to allow direct participation from tourists.

The second direction, that of utilitarian social or green businesses has a greater potential to be implemented by women that migrate from the cities in the rural areas and try to make use of their skills. For example, respondents think that it would be worth developing in the countryside types of businesses related to cleaning, because the skills of rural women could also be used in this sense - e.g. an association of several women who could go to the nearby town to provide cleaning services. The lack of services from the state in rural areas is - in the opinion of one respondent - a double-edged sword. This lack creates a vacuum and negatively affects living conditions, but at the same time it leaves some empty places, where women could be active - they could organise an after school, organize tutoring classes, cosmetic centres, shops, funeral houses, construction services etc.

Based on the experience of the organization in the area of climate change she is a part of, one respondent points out that there is a significant potential in rural areas in terms of climate resilience. Rural and small urban areas have a specific type of knowledge and skills that have a very important role beyond the cultural role. These specific knowledge and skills can serve them in resilience to climate change and shocks to come. The respondent explains that, through practical skills - also found in women from these environments, they can ensure their own survival. Although essential for survival, these skills are not realized, exploited and assumed by the inhabitants of the villages. No one

talks to them about the importance, the power of the set of knowledge they have in the current context, including in the development of this type of green social entrepreneurship.

Slovenia

In Slovenia, the potential of rural areas to improve the situation of rural women is better than it used to be, but it is still a considerable challenge for women to start their own businesses and become an entrepreneur. Women use more opportunities for education and training than men and are very socially involved. To a large extent, they are developing a business related to the sale of home-made products, home-grown vegetables and fruits, jams, juices, and home-made pastries. Recently, women have also been choosing a business that they are interested in and that they can master, and which is not related to agriculture. More education in the field of entrepreneurship such as how to prepare business plan and start-up a business should be introduced so that women know what awaits them on their business journey and are better prepared.

While agriculture has remained important in rural areas, there is an increasing importance of non-agricultural activities with higher added value activities. This requires and demands different knowledge and skills that are not anymore linked only to a traditional way of life in rural areas. This is an opportunity and challenge particularly for young women and for a new role of rural women in their integration into the labour market and local employment development.

While local competitive advantages related with the labour market and the economic activities are important, social entrepreneurs more often deal with areas that are less attractive for classical business entrepreneurs due to lower profit. These areas include waste management, unemployment, education, healthy way of life, local food production and food security, tourist and craft products. They are building social capital, providing help and resolving problems in local community of their operation. The bottom-up approach and possible close link with consumers can contribute to resolving specific problems in local community.

Social enterprises offer a business model that considers financial, social, cultural and environmental needs and resources for the development of activities that contribute to sustainable development with their products and services. In this sense, the social entrepreneurship sector is very promising in terms of the creation of new jobs, which we classify in the ZDM category. Actors of social entrepreneurship are particularly active in the areas of social and work integration of vulnerable population groups, social services, healthcare, ethical banking, insurance, supplies, manufacturing activities and agriculture, services in the local environment, education and training, in the areas of culture, sports and activities for free time.

Serbia

The adoption of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship in Serbia introduces the term environmental protection through the principle of sustainable growth and development under the Article 3, that implies that social entrepreneurship and incentives for social entrepreneurship shall be planned and implemented while considering: requirements pertaining to environmental protection; climate change fight; mitigating the effects of climate change and adapting to climate change; preventing the overuse of natural resources; increasing energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The effects thereof on society, especially on local communities, their development and specificities, vulnerable categories of the population, gender equality, as well as regarding the requirements of the fight against poverty.

Social entrepreneurship in rural areas is still in its infancy. The Sociolab project was aimed at establishing a comprehensive ecosystem for strengthening the potential of individuals, initiatives and communities with the aim of expanding the social economy (social enterprises and cooperatives) and the associated creation and preservation of quality and permanent jobs in the social sector of economy and the expansion of the offer of accessible (socially) innovative products (services and products), which will ensure greater social inclusion of vulnerable groups, contribute to reducing poverty and increasing the quality of life and economic and social development in the Podravska region. The ecosystem was brought closer to every user via info points. However, the vast majority of people did not see the major advantages of establishing a social enterprise.

The ecological dimension in the social enterprises in Serbia is mostly based on the use of sustainable raw materials in production (recycling and reusing) and reducing the impact on the environment through business activities (e.g., sustainable ways of transportation, biodegradable packaging, digitized administration...). Also, digital trends in the business sector provided new opportunities. Today many digital products with social missions related to environmental issues exist on the Serbian market (e.g., City & Me: digital platform with Android and iOS application which encourages activism and action of users in the field of recycling, cycling, through rewarding for achieving proposed green goals - if users ride a bike for 50 km in the city areas, they will receive 1 CM token that can be exchanged for two tickets public theatre).

Cyprus

Contributing to the European Commission's ambitious climate neutrality target for 2050, Cyprus, as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRP), has allocated over 440 million euros for green growth and transition to green economy[30]. Substantial focus is given to the upskilling of employees working in green economy professions or sectors, or to unemployed people wishing to pursue careers in green economy professions, through participation in training programs implemented in VET centres. When it comes to agriculture and related industries, the NRP includes educational programs for farmers and livestock breeders, with particular emphasis on young first-time farmers. The purpose of these vocational trainings is the development of skills necessary for farmers in fields relevant to green intervention and the transition to a green economy. Additionally, vocational training programs will be targeted at young professionals and students in order to encourage them to pursue studies in agriculture-related topics[31] as well as scholarships to Cypriots, secondary school graduates, who are eager to pursue studies in agriculture-related degrees in Cypriot Universities.

Further promotion to green entrepreneurship comes from the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) and the Cyprus International Institute of Management (CIIM). Both institutions signed an MOU last February that seals a framework for joint cooperation, with the aim of creating an Observatory that promotes green entrepreneurship actions and enhances the knowledge and skills of stakeholders to exploit sustainable development practices and opportunities. Apart from national policies to encourage the green transition of enterprises, there are numerous NGOs and civil society

[30] http://www.cyprus-tomorrow.gov.cy/cypresidency/kyprostoavrio.nsf/all/B37B4D3AC1DB73B6C22586DA00421E05/$file/Cyprus%20RRP%20For%20Upload%2020052021.pdf?openelement

[31] National Recovery and Resilience Plan 3.8.7.

organizations that implement European-funded projects that aim in upskilling entrepreneurs and develop their green competencies.

Green entrepreneurship in Cyprus' rural areas mainly takes the form of organic farming. Organic agriculture is an ecological production management method where biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity are all promoted. It is based on management techniques that restore, maintain, or improve ecological balance as well as support the limited use of off-farm inputs. Organic agriculture can be termed an international trend in recent years that is followed by ecological product processing and results in organic food. In Cyprus, this new trend is rising in the last decade, with more and more farms turning their production systems into organic ones (1.4% of farms).

When it comes to local competitive advantages for green social enterprises, apart from actions covered by the policies and initiatives mentioned above, there are currently no local competitive advantages in place based on the desk research carried. Moreover, the field research shows that even if such local competitive advantages were in place for green social entrepreneurs, there are institutional challenges related to the information mechanisms set in place by governmental bodies which are significantly insufficient in spreading the word and providing substantial help to entrepreneurs. What is more, access to such information or support instruments is even harder in rural areas.

Further challenges in fostering green entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Cyprus, apart from insufficient communication between different stakeholders, are climatic challenges. Cyprus is an island with low rainfall and very high temperatures that result in increased periods of drought. The climate puts great pressure on the island's sacred natural resources like water, agricultural land, forests, and soils and subsequently, threatens the ecosystem biodiversity. Along with water supply, soil pollution is also a major concern in Cyprus, taking for example the underground aquifers which are classified as "less than good" status. When it comes to energy consumption, Cyprus relies heavily on imported fuel. This calls for immediate adoption of innovative technologies and the use of renewable energy sources installed in farms and agri-food businesses.

Climate challenges are addressed in depth in the Rural Development Programme under Priority 5: Resource efficiency & climate – Promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift toward a low carbon and climate resilient economy in agriculture, food and forestry sectors. Among others, the limited environmental awareness of agriculture stakeholders, especially when it comes to rational use of water resources, as well as the limited interest that exists in the installation of renewable energy sources systems are areas that need to be addressed through educational programs. These challenges can be seen as opportunities that call for alternative routes of production and manufacturing, opportunities that respect the sacred resources of the island through "greener" solutions.

Specific needs of rural women and the challenges they face

The specific need of rural women and the challenges they face was the first of the two main topics of the interviews and focus groups conducted in the field research phase with professionals and stakeholders supporting rural women entrepreneurship and green skills development. For all interviews and focus-groups, identical questions were used in each participating country, to ensure that cross-country and cross-cultural comparisons are achievable. The following section discussed and synthetises the main results.

Rural women's challenges

Rural women all over Europe and particularly in the four countries included in the project (Romania, Slovenia, Cyprus and Serbia) face several challenges in their day-to-day life and when they want to access the work market and present specific needs for their endeavours to be successful. A common agreement among the persons involved in the research is that the challenges faced by women in general are a cross-cutting topic in all fields, to which is added the specific filter of rural women. These challenges are mainly related to mobility difficulties, societal issues, lack of opportunities, lack of market demand and limited digital skills.

Mobility difficulties

To begin with, one of the main challenges concerning people living in rural areas, that emerged in the interviews and the focus groups, was the one regarding their mobility. For instance, in Poland, 80% of the bus connections between towns and rural areas have been lost. Nowadays, people living in rural areas need private vehicles, and usually, the man decides how the vehicle is used within the family. Lack of public transport affects more women and kids than men, influencing their access to social and public services such as healthcare and public school.

In rural areas at EU level, many public schools have been closed in the last few years; thus, the families have the problem of bringing pupils to schools, but not every community can provide them with public transport. Even where the services or infrastructures are present, they are usually abandoned or inactive. For instance, Extremadura (Spain) has an airport and all the necessary infrastructure, but it is closed. Lack of connections affects access not only to services but also to the access level of information.

The problem of less developed public transportation as a disadvantage of rural areas is also present in Slovenia. Since rural areas can be away from the city/town, many times a person is also required to have a car and driving license. Employers are not impressed if a person lives far away from the workplace, because they have to pay for travel expenses. In Slovenia, rural women are less likely to differ importantly from women of different backgrounds. There might be some issues connected with the distance that has to be travelled to the school or maybe periods when there is a more intensive job to be done on the fields and they might have more troubles to fulfil their duties in the school.

In Cyprus, the lack of entrepreneurial initiatives in rural areas is caused by the lack of social infrastructure which makes it challenging for young families to reside and develop businesses in these areas. Educational needs are hard to fulfil since there are not enough nurseries, schools, and opportunities for extracurricular activities for children. Entertainment needs are also hard to meet especially for the younger generations and the transport conditions (public transport, road networks, fuel costs) are not encouraging for people that are eager to move to rural areas yet they want to be

in touch with the city. The government of Cyprus has issued sponsorship plans for housing in rural areas, providing advantages to people that want to make a life there, yet these are not sufficiently taken advantage of since their social, educational, and employment needs are hard to meet.

Societal issues

At EU level, societal issues are more present in Eastern Europe than in The Netherlands, Spain or Belgium. In Albania, there is still a patriarchal society where men are considered the head of the house. The women are the ones that follow them and do not have a sense of freedom. According to this, most women in rural areas are not involved in economic activities and don't have the opportunity to be part of the job market or approach entrepreneurial ventures. Women are responsible for doing household chores, which is their primary duty, and when involved in family businesses such as family farms, their contribution is considered unpaid work. In Albania, women own only 7% of the rural farms, whereas, as said before, the rest of them are more involved informal economy.

In Cyprus, rural women still face serious challenges in entering or remaining in the labour market. The reasons are many and are related first to the general conditions prevailing in rural areas such as the fact that the primary sector is not attractive and is constantly shrinking and there is insufficient development of the secondary and tertiary sectors. Another factor that poses a substantial challenge for women is gender. Gender stereotypes are often more prevalent in rural communities. There is a lack of respect towards women that needs to be addressed, a disbelief in their abilities to be economically productive, and discouragement from their close family environment. Especially for mothers, it becomes even more challenging to persuade their spouses/ families that they can be effective both in their responsibilities at home and that they can hold a business on their own. At last, the lack of education and women empowerment initiatives prevent rural women from coming out of isolation and taking entrepreneurial initiatives.

Similarly, in Slovenia, women's obstacles are often in the trade-off decision between raising a family and career. For example, if a farm is bigger, the man goes often after a stable income in some kind of industry and the woman remains at the farm. It is less likely that the gender issue with some kind of discrimination makes a great impact in Slovenia, or that there are some stereotypes about rural women. They are equal to men, driving tractors and other machineries, making deals with customers deciding about the crop and other businesses on farms.

However, gender stereotypes might appear in Slovenia when women what a start a business of their own. The main challenges for women preventing their integration in the labour market are related to how to start an independent entrepreneurial journey, since most of them have a lot of knowledge from their activity, but no entrepreneurial knowledge. If they gather enough courage and start a company, they may encounter problems that they did not expect or did not know. There are challenges for rural women in developing a business in rural areas as there is still a stereotype that a woman raises children, takes care of the family's food and does housework and helps with work on the farm. The problem is that all the work that is taken for granted makes it harder to become financially independent. Entrepreneurship is still considered to be more suitable for men.

In the Romanian society, there are also gender imbalances and less participation in decision-making of the women in both rural and urban areas. In rural areas one can also observe structural problems, greater gender discrimination, even less access to various facilities, lack of employment opportunities, lower access to services - education, health, transport, etc., lack of basic digital skills (e. g. using a

computer, communicating through email, using a reservation platform for touristic activities etc.). All of these further reinforce the obstacles rural women face compared to urban women.

Several Romanian respondents also proposed a systemic perspective, at the level of society. In Romania, the countryside is seen as something retrograde, an environment where those who do not assert themselves in the urban environment usually end up. Respondents believe that there is a general level of discouragement and disregard for the countryside, both in discourse and in the imagination of people, including the inhabitants of the villages, who themselves make things move very hard. Although living in the countryside can be an opportunity, starting from the quality of life, the residents here see life in this environment as something retrograde overall. Therefore, in the interviewees' opinion, our collective imagination and mentality, the collective perception when defining the countryside, is in the first place a challenge.

In this sense, retrograde thinking also refers directly to women and their ability to carry out an entrepreneurial activity - many are not allowed to go to work, so even less to open a business, because the man is the one who has the role of provider in the household. Several anecdotic examples were given in this respect during the filed research by most of the respondents. When it comes to female entrepreneurship in rural areas, respondents agree that the success of female entrepreneurs depends to a large extent on the family environment (favourable or not), which can be encouraging or not for the women's endeavours, for the education they can access, as well as for their will to succeed in advancing, despite the obstacles. Entrepreneurship becomes even more difficult in such a context.

This ultimately translates, for most of the countries includes in the research, in another main challenge of rural women, preventing their integration in the labour market, that is their lack of self-confidence. The solutions are to gain more self-confidence, to be more determined, and to gain experience through training to empower their knowledge and skills. Women have too much work at home and sometimes cannot attend trainings or they do not feel empowered enough to participate in discussions. The potential for development in rural areas is seen in different forms of tourism, small private boutique farms with specific products and a common brand. More emphasis and support from policy, funding and training would be needed.

Lack of opportunities

Generally speaking, rural areas experience a vicious circle due to the low population density, the ageing profile of the rural regions, and low economic activities with high unemployment and low income. This condition also affects the possibility of starting own businesses. Rural areas are small ecosystems, and the potential local market is not enough to develop a business because aspirant entrepreneurs need people to get associated with or enough customers.

An aspect worth pointing out, that emerged mainly from the research in Romania, but is also applicable in the other countries, is the fact that rural women are very aware of the lack of opportunities for them, and thus, what motivates them to become entrepreneurs is, often, the lack of employment options. However, this is challenged by the lack of access to education and information on both entrepreneurship and ecological sustainability, corroborated with the lack of clarity and information about the opportunities for small producers in various areas. The opportunities in question are also the ones regarding potential funding opportunities which are surrounded by their own set of challenges – European funded projects sometimes inspire fear of the unknown, especially

in the context in which the mass media popularized numerous cases of people who accessed such funds and came under the scrutiny of the criminal authorities.

Moreover, particularly in Romania, in completion to the systemic perspective, addressing specifically the social or green entrepreneurial initiatives, it is worth mentioning that many social entrepreneurship programs or projects are facilitated by institutionalized groups, by people from diverse backgrounds who have access to information from multiple sources. The moment when that institutional support is withdrawn is a very sensitive moment, and many social entrepreneurship units become vulnerable without that support, risking to disappear in a short time. In such a case, the empowerment of women actually happens only up to a certain point, which is not enough for them to become self-reliant and for the social entrepreneurship structures to continue to function and fulfil the goals set at the beginning of the project.

Lack of market demand

From the market demand perspective, suppose an entrepreneur wants to establish a business in a rural area and has all the tools and support required to start up. In that case, the enterprise risks not be sustainable, because of the lack of market demand in the long term. In this regard, digitalisation can foster the linkage with urban area, expand the market and reach potential clients far from the rural areas.

In Romania, the lack of market demand comes in connection to the lack of continued support for social enterprises in general and for women's empowerment in particular, and brings the challenges of ensuring the market for the products and services provided by the green and social enterprises. One of the great challenges of the social economy is the creation of the market, and the green component makes things even more challenging. The lack of cooperation at local level aggravates this challenge and, connected to the retrograde perspective that rural areas lack in opportunities for development, the few initiatives that are developed remain unintegrated in a network.

In Slovenia, rural women are interested in green social entrepreneurship. They grew up in the countryside, are very attached to green meadows, cultivated fields and vineyards, and are proud of their home-grown vegetables and fruits and livestock raised with home-grown food. Women are quick to recognize and identify social problems in the area, but they are most afraid of acting as entrepreneurs because they do not know what awaits them. Among others, the risks of failure and uncertainty about business survival are among challenges a rural woman face in developing a green social entrepreneurship. Rural women are not encouraged enough to become entrepreneurs.

Limited digital skills

Lastly, rural areas don't have good connections also in terms of digital infrastructure. Frequently, people living in rural areas have very basic housing, and connectivity is not included. The lack of digital connections included also lack of digital skills and consequently, less practice in using or creating digital content. Today, the digital sector is a source of opportunities and services also in terms of programs and training in supporting the development of new business.

In Slovenian rural areas a good information and communication infrastructure with a high-speed broadband network has been developed, and thus the potential and opportunities for green jobs are much greater. The most important aspect to be considered is to create conditions, suitable infrastructure for the development of new green jobs for all rural stakeholders. The greatest potentials

include organic production and processing, organic farms, tourism, shops with local and organic food, social and family care. Nature conservation, environmental management and protection, and animal protection are also among the most potentially interesting.

Rural women's needs in developing social green businesses

Rural women's entrepreneurship can contribute to economic growth in rural areas and represents an untapped potential. Programs and services should consider rural women-specific needs and should strive to promote mutual learning, exchange of experiences and good practices, cooperation, marketing and communication, develop generic business skills and skills used in interpreting regulations and legislation, digital skills, human resources skills and capacity-building programs of design thinking.

Generic and specific business skills

Competitiveness requires having the skills and competencies to face the current challenges, thus women in rural areas that what to establish their own business need to acquire certain business skills, generic ore more specific. All over EU and specifically in the four countries included in the research, in order to develop social green businesses, rural women need a wide range of skills to be developed, along with targeted empowerment programs. In the first place, there lays the need for rural women to acquire general entrepreneurial skills, completed by specialized trainings on financial and managerial matters. Specifically, women need to learn first-hand how to plan their business, how manage the finances separately from the personal budget and how to establish prices and costs in order to ensure a balance between offering a fair price and obtaining profits.

In Slovenia, rural women's needs in developing social green businesses are a complex question. Common entrepreneurial knowledge is needed on a wide scale, especially regarding ways of how to research the market, assess the potential, and competition and develop an offer that would differentiate from others. Also, women need to learn how to find a source of financing for their idea, receive financial support and start-up the business. Green social business is dependent also on the difference between the declarative will of buyers to buy (more expensive) green products or services and the actual transformation of this will to action.

To sum up with the findings from the interviews and focus groups, business and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills can be among the recommendations for activities targeting the empowerment of skills and knowledge of rural women to improve their economic and social integration, contributing both to possible closing gaps in rural labour market mismatches and possible gender unbalances in different economic activities in rural areas. These can represent certain practical knowledge and experiences on how to implement a certain business idea in terms of business and green social entrepreneurship. A competitive business plan can then be supported in green social business development via financial support for the women start-up business.

Specific skills used in interpreting regulations and legislation are also needed. It is critical for women to understand the legal framework, the rules and regulations in place to set up an enterprise, and some training should also be provided on how to start and what are the duties towards state authorities when you're operating in a company. In Romania, competences on the legislative/ legal side are also needed and should be developed, because without them it is very difficult for entrepreneurs to deal with the dialogue with the authorities, especially in the case of controls, but

also in the day-to-day activities. The Slovenian respondents also mentioned the certain knowledge about legal bases and master the basics of accounting, among the skills rural women need to develop a business and for a green social business.

Marketing and communication on the business products is another key element for the sustainability of a good enterprise, because women entrepreneurs have to be good communicators to attract people to visit their enterprise, for example, and to attract local partnerships with public authorities and business to business cooperation. Having more skills of how to communicate what you are doing, to show the steps and the impact of rural women's enterprise can be consider strategic assets. Moreover, marketing and PR abilities are also of the essence, given that in rural areas it is very difficult to find highly specialized service providers.

Even if there is a lack of digital infrastructure, acquiring digital skills can be crucial to enlarge the market in a rural area. Using computer tools, the Internet, organizational support and having a good idea to implement in business are also essential skills. Also, human resources skills are strategic to learning how to deal with potential employees and collaborators, build a strong team and work with other people, and your partners in business.

An improvement in knowledge and a better understanding of what a business implies could also tackle a second important need of rural women – that of improving self-confidence and courage in taking on an entrepreneurial activity. An improvement in the women's attitude could help a lot in overcome the lack in knowledge.

Mutual learning, cooperation, exchange of experiences and good practices

To improve the motivation of women living in rural areas to follow the entrepreneurial path, it is vital to show them concrete experiences shared by the practitioners and not by someone that doesn't live in or doesn't know what it means to live in a rural area. Sharing the experience between peers can also be useful to introduce new concepts (such as green and digital transition) and new methods more sustainable (such as alternative agriculture). It also emerged as important to create a network of rural women that can support each other.

The Romanian respondents also pointed towards the need of case studies, learning trips and presentation of real examples with which rural women can relate, that could be really useful in fostering both the understanding and the actual implementation of the theoretical aspects on entrepreneurship. Community facilitators could have a defining role in advancing women's knowledge and could also foster connexions between different business that can collaborate and draw mutual advantages from one another. Women could use better abilities to identify and use in their advantage the specifics of the area they live in.

As stressed by the woman entrepreneur that took part in the EU focus group, cooperation is essential to establish new businesses in rural areas. In order to be sustainable in the long term, developing a business requires building an ecosystem and creating a network, synergies and alliances. Due to the tailored approach required in implementing business in rural areas, creativity is also important, because one has to find a way to implement their business. Women entrepreneurs must be creative and flexible to adapt their business idea to the context.

From the Serbian perspective, to support women to overcome challenges they face, besides education, it is important to work with the whole rural community for a better understanding of

women in business through public discussions and community activities that empower communities to support social and green business initiatives.

Innovation and design thinking

Improving the relationship with the community through innovation is essential. There are social businesses in handmade products and traditional handicraft products, using models that have been used by their mothers and grandmothers but updated once with new models that the customers want. In these terms, proposing training and capacity-building programs of design thinking can contribute to developing the capacity to be innovative is fundamental for the business implemented in rural areas, which can contribute to creating a new concept of rurality and enlarge the market at the services for their communities. An equally important factor in developing a sound business is the vision, but not the vision in terms only of the business idea. Rural areas are particular contexts, and also, different rural regions face different issues. To establish a business in a rural area, the women entrepreneur should clearly understand the context and the demographic, geographical, economic and social background around herself.

The research conducted in Slovenia showed that the specific needs of rural women for their integration into the labour market and fostering green social entrepreneurship can be divided according to sector of economic activities, geographical location, and level of economic development and wellbeing in a certain region. The sector of economic activity is important because it can require specific knowledge, skills, and experiences to perform in a such specific activity. In addition, it can require also specific assets that can be linked with risks and possible higher sunk costs of a failed investment. This can be one reason why rural women are afraid to undertake and start-up business entrepreneurship as well as social entrepreneurship. The latter is also still less clearly understood in rural areas. The geographic location can be important due to possible higher transportation costs and gravity to towns/markets with their products/services. While distances in relatively smaller countries like Slovenia are smaller, the less developed local infrastructure can present limitations for the attractiveness of certain rural areas for start-up and the development of businesses.

The level of economic development and well-being in a certain region is a pull factor that attracts people to stay or to move in a such rural area. However, this can be often associated with the location of such a developed region where a crucial role can play a regional town or a specific economic activity such as tourism, which provides both attractive locations to leave and to develop economic and social activities. Unlike such advantageous areas, there are more remote areas which experience more disadvantages and difficulties in their development as an issue for further investigation.

The Serbian research also had similar findings and showed that tor the better understanding of specific needs and challenges of rural women related to their business activities, it is important to understand the economic environment where women in rural areas live. The Serbian National Strategy for Gender Equality for the period from 2021 to 2030 in the part of economic position of rural women indicates unfavourable economic position of rural women, which is reflected in fewer chances for sustainable employment, in addition to less ownership of private resources such as land, arable land and real estate, is also affected by inadequate access to opportunities in the community that would increase their chances on the labour market (care services and care and children, sick and elderly), transportation, access to information about rights and available forms of support, access to information technologies, access to knowledge and lifelong learning programs that would create

opportunities for sustainable employment, self-employment, cooperatives and social entrepreneurship. The interviewees highlighted that rural women have support from the state and other donors, but there is little incentive from family, husbands and the local environment.

Social and green skills

The interviewees conducted pointed out that social entrepreneurship requires a lot of education and support about social importance and social engagement that each of us as individuals should have. Green entrepreneurship requires an additional effort of continuous information and education about why only healthy villages and their surroundings make sense and have value. Regarding the specificities of green social business, women in rural areas also need to better understand green and ecological concepts, in order to develop a sustainability-oriented attitude. There is a great need for women to know and understand the technicalities of a green or ecological business, as just wishing for a green business is not enough.

Based on the needs identified, the research in Serbia showed that basic educational programs should introduce rural women to the principles and practices of social green entrepreneurship, including concepts such as sustainability, environmental responsibility, and social impact. The curriculum needs to also include topics such as business planning, marketing, and financial management, as well as training in specific sustainability practices and technologies adapted to conditions in rural areas where education is held.

Challenges in fostering green or social green entrepreneurship in rural areas

Involvement of women in household activities

As emerged from the participants at the in-depth interviews and the focus group, one of the main barriers for women starting an entrepreneurial activity is their involvement in household activities and the care of children or the elderly. Indeed, at European levels, most women choose to work or to do business part-time, and among migrants and asylum seekers who have a different understanding of gender equality, women are employed even less.

However, in some cases, as for example, in Poland, but also in Albania and in Italy, we assist many women who migrate to the urban areas to attend education and professional opportunities living far from their families for ten-twenty years. Even if women come back to their home villages, the ambitions that they have, are already different from being on the farm of their father or brothers or their husbands, those women will not recognise anymore in the role as responsible only for household duties.

Lack of knowledge and opportunities

Empowering women entrepreneurship in rural areas is a complex issue: it is about lack of information and knowledge, but also a lack of opportunities. Lack of knowledge also refers to the possibility of reaching knowledge experiences. People living in rural areas maybe don't know that there are some opportunities for them to make the digital and green transition of their businesses and productions. The lack of knowledge, especially in the field of innovation or greening the ecosystem includes also the problem that people are not interested in changing their approach. If they don't see the financial benefit, they are not interested in learning new approaches and building managerial skills and green skills for a more sustainable business.

An important transversal matter highlighted by respondents in Romania on fostering green social entrepreneurship in rural areas is that the concept is not significantly related to the current concept of ecological sustainability or sustainable development, but rather it is related to some peasant traditions that were themselves ecological, or green. In most cases, women in rural areas in Romania do what they have been taught, without realizing that their actions, or that their products are sustainable or could be marketed as such.

In the opposite situation, encountered in Poland, where education for farmers in high schools and universities doesn't provide any lessons on ecological farming or alternative methods. What students learn is the mainstream method, and of course, all of the big companies providing seeds and fertilizers are based on the traditional way of production. Alternative agriculture could be perceived as a big risk for some because of economic pressure. Indeed, the traditional farming approach has been perceived as more remunerative and secure. Sustainable processes seem to be too risky. It is difficult for farmers to change towards ecological or green food production because of economic reasons. Mainstream food production is more profitable. All of those aspects become more and more complicated if we consider also the gender prospective.

In Slovenia, there are several challenges in fostering green social entrepreneurship in rural areas, the most important being that the concept of social entrepreneurship is still quite unknown and unclear, so first of all it is necessary to explain to people what social entrepreneurship is, what are the advantages and conditions of establishment, and to emphasize that this promotes positive social changes. As far as social enterprises are concerned, there have been some attempts to start agricultural or other types of cooperatives as social enterprises, involving some deprived or underprivileged groups. Some of them survived and some of them did not.

As confirmed by the focus group discussion conducted in Slovenia, some enterprises even though they operated according to social principles did not want to register as social because it more or less only brought them additional bureaucracy. This can be also seen from national data on entry, exit, and survival of social enterprises (OECD, 2022). Social entrepreneurship has a bad reputation in Slovenia. While in EU countries, the average number of employees working in social enterprise is between 7-8%, in Slovenia it is 3%. The reason for that might be the fact, that many (almost all) social enterprises stop operating, as soon as the project funding ends. There is no systematic and continuous infrastructure that could help those interested to keep the business running.

A similar case is encountered in Serbia, where, as a part of the explanation for the adoption of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship sent to the National Assembly, key challenges for the development of the social economy sector in Serbia where identified through public discussions with relevant stakeholders included: inadequate legal form; insufficient investment in human capital; difficult access to funding sources; tax treatment; lack of statistical monitoring. On this level, understanding and integrating the adopted legal framework of social entrepreneurship in the regional and local policy documents, action plans and budgets emerges as a big challenge for many authorities and can be observed as an obstacle to the development of eco-social companies in the real conditions.

On the level of society, a key weakness for developing and supporting social enterprises and entrepreneurs, as well as eco-social projects and activities is a low level of understanding of “social” in the concept of business among general populations caused by low visibility of eco-social enterprises and its stories, recognition and understanding of the social mission in activities. Also, this is particularly

influenced by awareness of the concept and importance of social entrepreneurship, as well as the level of environmental awareness. Besides visibility and recognition, social enterprises need additional support through access to resources, education and skills development, mentoring and consultancy as well as market support measures which will together support social enterprises to be sustainable, profitable and competitive in the market in real business conditions.

Lack of motivation and self-confidence

The challenges in fostering green or social green entrepreneurship in rural areas also include aspects of lack of motivation, especially when it comes to the women not being very much involved in the decision-making of family enterprises. This happens more in Eastern Europe, where women are less motivated to participate and approach this kind of opportunity, apart from their role in society, which is more related to taking care of the household. This background is a big barrier to overcome in promoting women's entrepreneurship in rural areas. So, few of them are eager to participate in training and/or benefit opportunities for setting up enterprises and learning something that would serve them to build their enterprise and continue a tradition they have in their families. It is difficult for women in rural areas to gain acceptance those female children can take over the family business because, as a matter of mindset, the male child should be trained to cover this role.

The profile that emerged concerning young women that still remain in rural areas is that of a young woman with a lack of proactivity and an entrepreneurial attitude. Not surprisingly that in rural areas there is a huge concentration of young NEET women - not in employment, education or training. In 2019, NEET rates in the EU were 5.6% for youths aged 15-19, 14.5 % for people aged 20–24, 17.2 % for those aged 25–29, and 17.4 % for those aged 30–34. The percentage of NEET is higher in rural regions with 15.0%, compare to urban areas with 12.9%. This difference is greater in Southern and Eastern European countries (Eurostat, 2019).

Another challenge in fostering green or social green entrepreneurship in rural areas, emerging from the discussions carried out in Romania, is that women often do not see themselves as capable enough or empowered enough to start-up a local business, given the aforementioned lacks in knowledge or self-trust. Among the involved respondents, none could point towards a successful initiative dedicated to empowering rural women to develop entrepreneurial activities in their areas, being social, green or not.

In Slovenia, rural women are interested in green social entrepreneurship to learn about new business possibilities, but when they start asking about financing and experiences from previous projects, they usually decide on standard entrepreneurship forms. Whether rural women are encouraged to become entrepreneurs, it is a personal trait matter, some people have the desire, courage, and skills to become entrepreneurs, and some do not. The same goes for rural women.

Lack of financial support

Lack of motivation is also related to a lack of financial support. In Albania, some programs try to support young entrepreneurs from rural areas to develop business ideas and plans, but the programs are not always associated with the funds. The lack of financial support discourages the participation of young people in this kind of programme because they are prone to follow this type of experience if there are subsidies that help them to build the business and they are not interested in learning the way out to reach these moneys. Moreover, women lack both the skills and the courage to access the public funds available to them, fearing that they could be tricked or that they could jeopardize the

family's wellbeing by engaging in activities perceived as high-risk. This fear is also fed by an overall attitude of distrust in entrepreneurial activities in general, in developing a legal person to conduct activities, all concepts that are seen to be too complicated and complex. When it comes to green initiatives, one could also observe a general distrust that such perspectives would be of relevance for their local needs and opportunities.

In Romania, a connected challenge is one regarding infrastructure, since, for example, in some rural areas, women (and sometimes neither their families) are not the owners of the lands or buildings they could use in developing a business and thus efforts are needed for them to be able to actually start the activity.

In Slovenia, research showed that women living in rural areas do not have enough incentive to become entrepreneurs. One reason is a lack of financial support to start their entrepreneurial journey, already because of transportation to the place of work or to the place where she will practice her profession, she will need a driving licence, a car, rent for a business place, and similar. In the countryside and in rural areas, there is a problem with public transport, or the bus line, which ran only a couple of times a day to that village. Every day it is necessary to wait for several hours at the bus station. Meanwhile, women who live in cities do not have to worry about this cost. The reasons for the smaller incentives are in fact that people prefer to do their work in cities where they are closer to their everyday tasks. In some rural areas, there is still a backward thinking that women can take care of the family, so they do not get enough support.

Educators' skills and competencies for green transition

Educators' skills and competencies for green transition was the second main topic of the interviews and focus groups conducted in the field research phase with professionals and stakeholders supporting rural women entrepreneurship and green skills development. For all interviews and focus-groups, identical questions were used in each participating country, to ensure that cross-country and cross-cultural comparisons are achievable. The following section discussed and synthetises the main results.

Training programs' curricula to foster social green entrepreneurship in rural areas

In the opinion of the Romanian respondents, the training programs available for women in rural areas aimed to foster social green entrepreneurship initiatives are rather modest and focused mostly on general subjects, covering in a very low degree the actual needs of the women. For example, in the Danube Delta area, the majority of the trainings available are centred on various occupations (like housekeeping or waiters), for which the demand in the area is not very high.

In some cases, external support for developing green entrepreneurship initiatives came through various European or local funded programs. For example, one of the respondents points to the Erasmus Plus Program, which works on green skills, climate change and everything related to the green economy being a priority of this program. Also, at national level in Romania there is a program named The Woman Entrepreneur, dedicated to the SMEs established by women.

In the regions were different NGOs are active and take the role of community facilitators or mentors, the specific needs are met by specific training or mentorship activities on the operation of a private legal person or a limited liability business or specific trainings on entrepreneurship in general or social entrepreneurship in particular (e.g. basic elements of entrepreneurship, what it means to be an entrepreneur, what are the forms/documents to fill in and follow, elements of circular economy etc.).

Trainings on green or ecological concepts, to be applied in starting-up a business or in an already running business are organised seldomly, with none of the respondents being able to name a particular program. In general, most of the entrepreneurship trainings include in their curricula a module on sustainability, however keeping the information at a very basic level (what does it mean, what are the elements of sustainability etc.). Moreover, elements of digitalisation are also included in some of the trainings, but they often lack contextualisation and adaptation to the real situation in the rural areas.

Green skills are ultimately related to sustainability, circular economy and climate change and thus participants (men and women) should be trained and educated in these concepts, to be able to integrate these elements in their day-to-day businesses and activities. Other important green skills can also be related to technology, technological skills and communication processes between women and between women and others.

New training programs could have a greater orientation towards the development of local, personal, family initiatives that combine elements of social entrepreneurship, green entrepreneurship (types, forms, rationale etc.), business plan development, risk management, business management case studies, real examples etc. The adaption to the local context and to the needs of the rural women is paramount for any training program, which needs to be designed in such a way that participants can see themselves implementing in real life the hypothetical situation that they see and discuss.

Respondents believe that training programs were women are positively discriminated would be appropriate in the Romanian context, with the mention that their relevance must be ensured. In some respondent's experience, programs for the rural environment are poorly conceived, being designed by professionals outside the area, without considering the reality on the ground. An important point to consider in this type of action is that the design of such program should also consider the impact and the lessons learned after the implementation of similar positive discrimination programs for other categories (for example those for the Roma).

Consequently, for these programs to yield the benefits expected from them, the implementors could engage the whole community and the local authorities, in order to help reduce the mentality that women are not suited to be entrepreneurs. Equally important is the networking component, of being part of a community of practice, which increases the level of motivation. In addition, a participant notes, an emotional, psychological or therapeutic support component must be added, essential for people who need a boost in self-confidence.

A similar situation si encountered in Cyprus, where, taking into consideration the absence of training programs for women in rural areas on the topic of entrepreneurship in general, field research has shown that what is most important for the target is the cultivation of basic business development and management skills, followed by green-related skills and at last, interpersonal or soft skills. Accordingly, a training program curriculum applicable in the context of Cyprus, should give substantial focus on entrepreneurial skills such as: business plan development, business value proposition, marketing strategy, time planning and goal setting, financial basics, legal and ethical considerations.

Regarding green-related skills, from the perspective of the Cypriot research, a training program curriculum should include the following: understanding of the green economy and its interrelation with social economy, green marketing, design of green products and services, eco-friendly manufacturing, promotion of sustainable thinking, renewable energy sources, regal and ethical considerations.

The advancement of interpersonal or soft skills for entrepreneurs is also particularly essential. The training program curriculum should give emphasis on the following skills: problem solving/adaptability, communication/ public speaking, critical thinking, time management and ethical leadership.

In Serbia, green and social entrepreneurship came into focus in the last few years, but training programs are including them as a part of general entrepreneurship education. Formal and non-formal educational programs pay more attention to the social impact of businesses as well as to environmental protection. Through the introduction of the social entrepreneurship concept and inspirational success stories of social entrepreneurs, educators encourage participants to think deeply about the impact of their businesses or business ideas on the whole community. Also, business support programs in Serbia evaluate social impact as one of the key components in awarding process.

Related to rural areas, the interviewees point out that is important to raise awareness about green and social entrepreneurship in rural areas and provide continual support and tailor-made education for women to involve green and social components in their businesses. Tailor-made programs are particularly important because of specific conditions in different rural areas where general education programs cannot meet the needs of women in business for different areas of Serbia.

Slovenia stands out as a particular case, where respondents showed that there are different training programmes dedicated to rural women's empowerment for business development, covering diverse needs. The skills and competencies targeted by the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment are focused on developing the business model, researching the market potential, searching and receiving financial support, connecting, preparing the offer (marketing mix) and similar how-to start-up business. Among the topics of the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment are also courses and programmes offering social entrepreneurship topics.

The Serbian interviewees believe that the present training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment provide enough opportunities for them to respond to their needs for business development because there are certain programmes offered by the supportive environment for entrepreneurship in the region. The biggest problem then is to find investors or business angels for their business ideas. Otherwise, there are no specialized programmes just dedicated to rural women empowerment, but for entrepreneurs in general. Moreover, there are initiatives that also deal with female entrepreneurship. The trainings in the region are mainly dedicated to strengthening the following competencies: business modelling, marketing, and incubation in the start-up phase.

However, the general idea is that more training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment respond to their needs for social business development would be needed. The skills and competences targeted by the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment are in one of the following areas: familiarization with the concept of social entrepreneurship, advantages and obligations, support in the establishment, development and growth of a social enterprise, strengthening of their support environment, assistance in obtaining non-refundable and returnable funds.

In Slovenia, the topics of the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment also include green skills, learning about green jobs and their purpose, environmental protection, and sustainable development. The Green Slovenske Gorice project covers vulnerable target groups and all generations. They are conducting workshops that deal with topics related to improving the state of the environment. They present sustainable neighbourhoods, talk about how to handle food sparingly (do not throw it away), shop wisely, propose zero waste in tourism, sustainable decisions in life, and similar. In the last triad of primary school, they run an entrepreneurial circle, where children make a mini business plan for designated green workplace. They will also include activities that will contribute to the reduction of poverty and a better quality of life.

Specific skills and competences of formal and non-formal educators working with women in the rural area that need to be enhanced and fostered

The interviews and the focus group allowed the research team in Romania to extract several specific skills and competences of formal and non-formal educators working with women in the rural area that need to be enhanced and fostered. Overall, the respondents believe that formal and non-formal educators could have better results if they act as community facilitators, that document and understand the community and community life and are able to engage people, authorities and other stakeholders.

Similarly, Serbian research showed that it is very important for educators in rural areas to have experience and knowledge related to working activities in rural areas and a good understanding of the

local context in which they are working, including the economic, social, and cultural challenges facing these communities. Even more so since rural areas in Serbia may have unique cultural traditions and values that differ from those in urban areas. Educators working with women in these areas should be sensitive to these differences and be able to adapt their approaches and methods to meet the needs of education participants. Educators need to be able to communicate effectively with their students and establish positive, supportive relationships. For example, to be able to speak the local language, be patient and understanding, and be able to listen actively and respond to participants' needs and concerns

Formal and non-formal educators should also be very prepared in the areas they offer training, including green competencies and knowledge, legal knowledge, social economy etc. It is essential that educators understand what the concepts of green, sustainable mean, so that information can then be passed on to the community. In the same sense, an important aspect is that they should be able to adapt and model their language, behaviour and attitude depending on their target group, to be able to present complex concepts to the people of interest, so that they understand in practice what the activities entails.

This is similar to Slovenia, where respondents argued that that specific skills and competences of formal and non-formal educators working with women in the rural area that need to be enhanced and fostered are the ones related to practical (hands-on) experience. In this sense, formal and non-formal educators working with women in rural areas should also have certain practical experience or at least know how to connect theory with practice or help with advice on how to implement a certain business idea in terms of green social entrepreneurship.

The research in Cyprus also showed that the skills and competencies of formal and non-formal educators working with women in rural areas that need to be enhanced and fostered are the “green” ones, in the sense that educators are fostering a green culture among these women. To do so, educators need to have an adequate understanding of the green economy/ sustainable economy, and its specific key definitions and principles. They need to thoroughly understand green entrepreneurship, and components such as ecology, and be able to provide a plethora of ecological practices such as redesigning of existing business processes and renewable energy systems, which is very important in the context of Cyprus. Educators need to be well-informed on national policies and schemes on green and social entrepreneurship that could be of use to these women and offer the necessary guidance and instructions on how to take advantage of any potential subsidies or competitive advantages.

Besides knowledge and information, educators would need to also tackle aspects of attitude, self-trust and empowerment, to work on women’s self-esteem, on expression, on positioning. These are all matters that act as barriers or challenges in women's initiatives in business development. Specific modules should be designed aimed at the attitude of women and their social-psychological-emotional development. An interviewee from Slovenia also suggested that formal and non-formal educators working with women in the rural areas need to be very encouraging and empathetic and able to motivate.

The Cyprus respondents also point towards a similar direction, arguing that apart from green skills, educators need to be capable of providing entrepreneurial upskilling for these women, both in terms of soft skills necessary for success as well as technical business management knowledge. Examples

given can be personal enterprising skills and attitudes required for a successful green entrepreneur through interpersonal strength/weaknesses analysis, ways in which they can identify and pitch a new business opportunity, how to turn an idea into reality, how to lead and manage a team and how to balance their social/green mission with profitable activities.

In addition, the Slovenian research highlighted the need for formal and non-formal educators working with women in the rural areas to present the ability to analyse, connect and foresee the resolution of matters, autonomy in professional action and decision-making and managing matters, the ability to apply knowledge in practice, the development of techniques and procedures for project management as a way to achieve the organization's goals, cooperation and teamwork. The main challenges as an educator supporting rural woman were mainly related to a great desire to acquire new knowledge and look for educational opportunities in the local community.

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Annex 1 - Data collection instruments

In-depth interview with educators – guide

Introduction

My name is …… and represent …….. (partner organization). …….. (partner organization) is implementing the project Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship (WE-GREEN) that proposes to foster social green entrepreneurship among women in rural communities through education in the form of practical local programs. The first result of the project is a research on specific needs of rural women and the exact problems they face, preventing their integration in the labour market and fostering green social entrepreneurship and a collection of best practices related to green social entrepreneurship for women in rural areas.

Thank you for taking part at our research! Your responses will be confidential and only used in the research.

Introductory questions

1. Let's know each other – please provide us some information about you - age, education, region, position on the labour market
2. Please provide some info regarding the status and type of the organization you work for (NGO, School for adults, secondary education etc.) as well as your role and position (years of experience, years in the particular position/ organization).
3. Briefly describe the main challenges you have faced as an educator supporting rural women.

Main questions

4. From your experience what is the potential of rural areas? What kind of business could be developed? What was done? What should be done?
5. How can you describe the entrepreneurship in rural areas? What are the new trends in rural entrepreneurship?
6. From your experience, what are the main challenges rural women face preventing their integration in the labour market?
7. In your opinion, what are the challenges rural women face in developing a business? In rural areas are there gender stereotypes related to entrepreneurship? If yes, what kind of gender stereotypes?
8. How can you describe the social entrepreneurship in rural areas? What type of business were developed? In what areas?
9. What are the challenges in fostering green social entrepreneurship in rural areas?
10. Are rural women interested in green social entrepreneurship area? What are the challenges that rural women face in developing a green social entrepreneurship? Could you provide more details?
11. In your view, are rural women encouraged to become entrepreneurs? If not, what are the main reasons? Are you aware of any best practice at national level?

12. What skills rural women need to develop a business? What are the skills needed for a green social business?
13. In your opinion the present training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment respond to their needs for business development? If yes, please provide some more details. What should be improved?
14. What are the skills and competences targeted by the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment?
15. What are the topics of the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment? Do they include green skills or social entrepreneurship topics? Can you explain more?
16. Are there trainings that include green skills topics? What kind of green skills are addressed in these trainings? Can you provide some more information? What are topics should be included?
17. What specific skills and competences of formal and non-formal educators working with women in the rural area that need to be enhanced and fostered?

Focus group at national level guide

Introduction

My name is …… and represent ……. (partner organization). ……. (partner organization) is implementing the project Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship (WE-GREEN) that proposes to foster social green entrepreneurship among women in rural communities through education in the form of practical local programs. The first result of the project is a research on specific needs of rural women and the exact problems they face, preventing their integration in the labour market and fostering green social entrepreneurship and a collection of best practices related to green social entrepreneurship for women in rural areas.

Thank you for taking part at our research! Your responses will be confidential and only used in the research.

Introductory questions

1. Let's know each other – please provide us some information about you - age, education, region, position on the labour market
2. Please provide some info regarding the status and type of the organization you work for (e.g. NGO, informal group, research institution) as well as your role and position (years of experience, years in the particular position/organization etc.).
3. Briefly present the main projects/ activities your organisation implements for rural women.
4. What are the main challenges faced by supporting rural women? You could refer to the experience (if any) of your organization.

Main questions

5. From your experience what is the potential of rural areas? What kind of business could be developed? What was done? What should be done?
6. How can you describe the entrepreneurship in rural areas? What are the new trends in rural entrepreneurship?
7. How can you describe the social entrepreneurship in rural areas? What type of business were developed? In what areas?
8. How can you describe the women entrepreneurship in rural areas? In your opinion, what are the challenges rural women face in developing a business? In rural areas are there gender stereotypes related to entrepreneurship? If yes, what kind of gender stereotypes?
9. What skills rural women need to develop a business? What are the skills needed for a green social business?
10. What type of support for rural entrepreneurship development is provided at national level? What should be improved? What kind of support is needed?
11. What type of support is provided for rural women entrepreneurship? What should be improved? What kind of support is needed?
12. What type of support is provided for social entrepreneurship? What should be improved? What kind of support is needed?

13. What type of support is provided for green entrepreneurship? What should be improved? What kind of support is needed?
14. What are the challenges in fostering green social entrepreneurship in rural areas?
15. Are rural women interested in green social entrepreneurship area? What are the challenges that rural women face in developing a green social entrepreneurship? Could you provide more details?
16. In your opinion the present training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment respond to their needs for business development? If yes, please provide some more details. What should be improved?
17. What are the skills and competences targeted by the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment?
18. What are the topics of the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment? Do they include green skills or social entrepreneurship topics? Can you explain more?
19. Are there trainings that include green skills topics? What kind of green skills are addressed in these trainings? Can you provide some more information? What are topics should be included?
20. What interventions/ programmes dedicated to promote green and social entrepreneurship targeting women in rural areas do you know? Can you provide some more details about them?

Focus group at EU level

Introduction

My name is …… and represent …… (partner organization). …….. (partner organization) is implementing the project Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship (WE-GREEN) that proposes to foster social green entrepreneurship among women in rural communities through education in the form of practical local programs. The first result of the project is a research on specific needs of rural women and the exact problems they face, preventing their integration in the labour market and fostering green social entrepreneurship and a collection of best practices related to green social entrepreneurship for women in rural areas. Thank you for taking part at our research! Your responses will be confidential and only used in the research.

Introductory questions

1. Please provide some info regarding the status and type of the organization you work for (e.g. NGO, informal group, research institution) as well as your role and position (years of experience, years in the particular position/organization etc.).
2. Briefly present the main projects/ activities your organisation implements for rural women.
3. What are the main challenges faced by supporting rural women? You could refer to the experience (if any) of your organization.

Main questions

4. How can you describe the social entrepreneurship in rural areas? What type of business were developed? In what areas?
5. How can you describe the women entrepreneurship in rural areas? In your opinion, what are the challenges rural women face in developing a business? In rural areas are there gender stereotypes related to entrepreneurship? If yes, what kind of gender stereotypes?
6. What skills rural women need to develop a business? What are the skills needed for a green social business?
7. What type of support is provided for rural women entrepreneurship? What should be improved? What kind of support is needed?
8. What type of support is provided for social entrepreneurship? What should be improved? What kind of support is needed?
9. What type of support is provided for green entrepreneurship? What should be improved? What kind of support is needed?
10. What are the challenges in fostering green social entrepreneurship in rural areas?
11. What are the skills and competences targeted by the training programmes dedicated to rural women empowerment?
12. What interventions/ programmes dedicated to promote green and social entrepreneurship targeting women in rural areas do you know? Can you provide some more details about them?

Best practice template on green social entrepreneurship for women in rural areas at national level

Name of the practice	
Website	
Country	
Region	
Rural or urban area	
Start Date	
Sector of activity concerned	
Description **– please describe the social business: its aim(s), how is it structured/management, target group/beneficiaries, etc.** **– please describe the green dimension of the social business**	
Services and products **– please describe the services and/or products provided**	
Green skills needed	
Trends and Potential Benefits from this Good Practice **(500 words max)**	
How this Good Practice could be used/ transferred **(500 words max)**	



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