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Green
X-CHANGE

COMPARATIVE ACTION RESEARCH GREEN X-CHANGE

Exchanging Good Practices of Youth Entrepreneurship
to Promote the Green Transition of Europe in Rural Areas





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1. General Context and Project Objectives

The "Green X-Change" project aims to promote youth entrepreneurship in rural areas of Southern Europe through the exchange of good practices, the enhancement of skills, and the use of digital tools. The main goal is to identify common barriers that hinder young entrepreneurs in rural areas and build shared European responses.

Using an action-research methodology, the project partners — Amunì Step by Step (Italy), ASN - Associação Sociedade e Natureza (Portugal), Los Ojos del Júcar (Spain), and Iroko DFS (Spain) — analyzed their local contexts to:

- highlight concrete obstacles to green youth entrepreneurship;
- strengthen the participation of local youth in analysis and proposal processes;
- compare collected data to identify convergences and differences across territories.

2. Regional and National Contexts in Comparison

Below is a summary of the main social and economic data from the regions involved in the research, focusing on youth presence, local economies, and opportunities linked to the green economy.

Italy – Marsala and the Province of Trapani

Marsala is a town of around 80,000 inhabitants in western Sicily, characterized by a rural economy based mainly on viticulture, agriculture, and tourism. The youth population is declining, with a high NEET rate (over 35% in the province). Green employment opportunities are still limited but growing, especially in sustainable tourism, regenerative agriculture, and renewable energy. Distance from major urban centers and weak infrastructure reduce access to services and markets.

Spain – Rural areas of the Community of Madrid

Although Madrid is known for its metropolitan area, it also includes rural regions such as Sierra Norte and Sierra Oeste, which suffer from isolation, depopulation, and lack of services. Youth unemployment in rural areas is significantly higher than the regional average (28%). Key growth sectors include eco-tourism, organic farming, renewable energy, and rural digital services. Public programs exist to support sustainability and local development, though entrepreneurship support networks remain weak.

Spain – Province of Cuenca

Cuenca has around 200,000 inhabitants, with a predominantly aging population and low population density. The economy is underindustrialized and depends largely on the service and agriculture sectors. Youth unemployment is high, aligned with Castilla-La Mancha regional data. Local green economy initiatives include incubators such as UFIL (Urban Forest Innovation Lab), promoting green start-ups and technical training in rural areas.

Portugal – Lisbon Metropolitan Area (peri-urban/rural zones)

With over 2.8 million residents, Lisbon's metropolitan area includes peripheral and rural zones that face specific challenges, such as high living costs, a lack of decentralized services, and mobility issues. Despite a strong economic concentration in services and innovation sectors, these areas struggle to retain young entrepreneurs. Initiatives such as the Lisbon Climate Action Plan, Startup Lisboa, and CityLab promote sustainable development, but stronger links with rural outskirts are still needed.

3. Action-Research Methodology

The action research was conducted in a coordinated manner by the four Green X-Change project partners (Italy, Portugal, and Spain x2), aiming to explore the barriers that prevent young people from starting entrepreneurial activities in rural areas.

The process consisted of four common phases:



Co-design of a shared questionnaire

Partners collaborated on designing an exploratory questionnaire (Google Form) to gather perceptions, obstacles, experiences, and areas of interest among young people in their respective territories.



Local questionnaire distribution

Each organization launched the questionnaire in its own region, targeting youth aged 18 to 30, with a focus on NEETs, those in peripheral areas, and individuals with fewer opportunities. 32 young people involved.



National focus groups

Based on the collected data, each partner organized one or more in-person focus groups where participants discussed the key barriers and shared personal experiences. 24 young people involved.

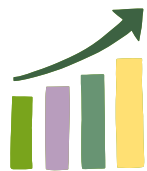


Transnational synthesis of results

By comparing national focus group summaries, partners identified six common barriers recurring across territories. These were collectively validated as shared needs in Southern Europe's rural contexts.



4. Common Barriers and Territorial Comparison



Through the action-research process, six key barriers to youth entrepreneurship in rural areas were identified. While these barriers are shared across the territories, their manifestations and intensity vary locally.

The six common barriers identified are:



Geographical position – isolation, mobility issues, and limited access to services;



Social and personal barriers – low self-esteem, family pressure, lack of role models;



Access to financial resources – difficulty accessing funds, credit, and microfinance;



Market access – weak local markets and challenges entering national/international markets;



Technical and digital skills – gaps in specific knowledge and technology use;



Bureaucracy and public policy – complex regulations and lack of administrative support.

How these barriers appear across territories:



Italy (Marsala): strong geographic and infrastructure isolation, limited access to credit, low entrepreneurial culture among youth.



Spain (Cuenca): mobility issues and depopulation, weak commercial networks, limited support services.



Spain (Madrid rural): lack of cultural and social services, fragmented local networks, challenges in accessing natural and market resources.



Portugal (Lisbon periphery): lack of work and networking spaces, complex funding regulations, competition with urban core.

This comparative map shows how, despite territorial diversity, shared patterns emerge that require integrated responses adapted to local specificities.

5. Final Reflections

The comparative analysis across the four territories revealed common and unique elements that provide a deeper understanding of rural youth entrepreneurship.

Key shared issues include:



fragile infrastructure and physical/digital connectivity



disconnect between youth and entrepreneurship support networks



difficulty accessing funding and markets



lack of targeted training paths, especially in innovation and digital skills



sense of isolation and cultural disconnection in rural areas

In all territories, young people expressed strong motivation toward sustainable entrepreneurship, but also a need for more practical, accessible, and flexible tools. The transnational comparison reinforced the awareness that many barriers are structural and shared at the European level, requiring systemic, multi-level, and coordinated responses.

The Green X-Change project proved the value of a participatory approach focused on dialogue and co-creating knowledge, giving voice to youth and fostering collective learning processes.

6. Final Recommendations

Based on the findings from the comparative research, we propose the following recommendations for institutions, youth workers, and policymakers:



Develop integrated territorial policies to reduce geographic isolation by improving transport, digital connectivity, and public services in rural areas;



Strengthen technical and digital training paths, especially in entrepreneurship and the green economy;



Simplify access to funding procedures, through one-stop shops, digital tools, and personalized support for young entrepreneurs;



Foster the creation of physical and virtual networking spaces between youth, local businesses, institutions, and incubators;



Promote local success stories and role models, highlighting young people who have launched sustainable ventures;



Encourage transnational partnerships for the exchange of best practices and the development of European networks of rural youth entrepreneurs.

These actions can help build more favorable environments for youth engagement and creativity, unlocking the transformative potential of rural areas as spaces of social and environmental innovation.



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