



PATHFINDER – Paving the way for Digital Learning in Higher Education with Enterprise Community Development

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WP2 – Consolidated Report – Insights and challenges in community-led enterprise development

Prepared by Fifty-Fifty





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1. Introduction

PATHFINDER+, "Paving the way for Digital Learning in Higher Education with Enterprise Community Development," is a project with a goal to support the development of community-led enterprises through digital learning solutions and focused educational programs. Emphasis on sustainability, social enterprise, and community-focused ventures has grown steadily in recent years, and this project will help respond to some of the challenges related to the competencies, networking, and financial issues of CLEs.

In close collaboration with higher education institutions, local development agencies, and community leaders, PATHFINDER+ is keen to bridge academic knowledge with its translation into actual implementation in the community-driven enterprise. Mapping innovative models and best practices across Europe, the project intends to design a comprehensive training curriculum encompassing a digital learning repository. This means that the derived curriculum would be able to help to develop the required skills and knowledge among entrepreneurs, students, and trainers for the creation and sustainability of CLEs, further enhancing social, economic, and environmental resilience within local jurisdictions.

PATHFINDER+ focuses significantly on community entrepreneurship, social innovation, and digital literacy; it hence aligns its objectives with the EntreComp framework by the European Commission. It works toward a framework for a micro-credential in "community-led social innovation projects" that will enable participants to take part in transformative community-led activities with full awareness of governance, financial planning, and ethical decision-making.

There are six project partners involved, each contributing through research, focus group participation, and the development of tailored educational materials. This will include a best-practice toolkit and case studies shared across institutions to enable collaboration and knowledge transfer between regions for the improvement of the pan-European community-led enterprise ecosystem.

In the light of problems that currently face CLEs within the broader context of modern society, especially with regards to social, cultural, and economic sustainability, there is an emergent need to undertake structured interviews and focus groups as an important means for gaining insights and building toward targeted solutions. The purpose would be to discuss how CLEs are shifting their dynamics in practice and determining what competencies are called for in supporting community development.

The reason CLEs are becoming increasingly important is because they are reportedly further collective decision-making, social justice, and democratization of economic opportunities. On the other hand, CLEs also face rather significant obstacles such as bureaucracy, lack of financing, and inability to network well enough as reported by various reports. A way forward critically in need is pathways that can develop these enterprises through a collaborative approach among partners such as educational institutions, local governments, and entrepreneurs.

In addition, CLEs are often faced with difficult financial standing, lack of experienced labour, and complicated legal environments. Accordingly, most of the partners share that targeted training



programs are necessary; practical skills include financial literacy, community outreach, and resilience.

Meanwhile, the ability to make use of digital tools and fit into modern technologies is considered crucial for CLEs to outpace today's fast environment.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach of the PATHFINDER+ project uses mainly qualitative, with focus groups and interviews, but also quantitative approach to ensure comprehensive coverage of analysis in CLEs and competencies sustaining. Its core focus is basically empirical data generated through focus groups and surveys across six partner organizations leading this project. This provided a wide array of insights from bringing together academics, entrepreneurs, consultants, and trainers in various fields related to social and community-driven enterprise.

1. Focus Groups

The main qualitative tool was the focus groups, where invited related community-led stakeholders could express experiences, difficulties, and strategies that have been adopted regarding community-led enterprises and training programs. Each partner organization was responsible for organizing a focus group with local participants in the different sectors: higher education, social entrepreneurship, local development, and consulting. They were organized around key discussion points such as:

Conceptualization of the CLE, focusing on governance structures, ethical principles, existing educational and training programs, including innovative models and learning experience, and the role of the community in developing it.

Financial sustainability, legal frameworks, and community involvement: CLE's challenges and opportunities.

Competencies necessarily involved in the development and management of CLEs are those having to do with leadership, financial literacy, and digital tools.

Building Networks: It stresses the importance of collaboration between the public and private players in building community-driven social innovation.

Each discussion was led by a moderator in accordance with a structured agenda to ensure that wide ranging perspectives were captured. The findings summarized the broad themes and solutions that these discussions brought forth. This qualitative data had an important role to play in helping identify gaps in existing training programs and informing a more tailored curriculum for the project.

The focus group was also helpful in validating the conclusions in the WP2 "Mapping analysis".

2. Interview-Survey

On the other hand, Qualitative-Quantitative data collection was done through a survey based on structured interviews with the Google Form to complement the focus group insights. The survey was carried out within the focus groups participants and additional stakeholders in the ecosystem of



community entrepreneurship. Key areas covered include:

Competency Assessment: One of the questions asked related to the key competencies' participants felt community-led entrepreneurship requires.

Program Familiarity: The survey also asked about participants' familiarity with existing training programs and their ideas on what might be done to more adequately support the CLEs.

The requirement was for each partner to get at least **40 survey responses**, thus totalling 240 completed responses in the consortium.

3. Data Compilation and Analysis

Data obtained from the focus groups and surveys of each partner are compiled into reports on the local and national challenges of the CLEs. The findings from these consolidations might be used in the creation of a micro-credencial framework and a digital toolkit to support community-led social innovation in Europe.

In this regard, the dual approach-using focus groups and surveys-in the PATHFINDER+ project ensures that the methodology is comprehensive and participatory, representing most of the diverse experiences and needs from regions, while remaining firmly rooted in those real-world practices essential to formulating innovative solutions needed at each level of challenge faced by CLEs.

The Questionnaire

Below is provided the Questionnaire that has been used for research purposes. The Questionnaire created by the consensus of the Project Partners in order to include close-type questions (multiple choice form), and open type questions, in order to collect data, 40 stakeholders per country.

Link to survey: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1nX9IgpavBmXDwPMptHSptCDURKuvZSJS4yKVm9KmAo/edit>

Main questions:

1. According to your experience, select the tips for the development of "community-led" projects in our territories.
2. In your opinion, what competences are required for the development of a community-led project?
3. Have you ever participated in or known any community-led training/entrepreneurial program?
4. What training programme, linked to the development of "social community" projects, do you know of, and could you provide very briefly the main aspects (University/Institution where it is given; name of the programme; main content, you can include the link if you may have it...)?
5. What training content did you work on in the training program/s for "community-led" entrepreneurs?
6. In relation to this training programme, what do you think are its 3 main "strengths"?
7. In relation to this training programme, what do you think are its 3 main "weaknesses"?
8. In relation to this training programme, what do you think are its 3 main "key success factors"?
9. In relation to this training programme, what do you think it is its main impact and contribution in the



community?

10. In your personal/professional life, what change/impact did this programme have on you?
11. In relation to this training programme, what do you think are the most innovative activities for the participants, and could you describe them very briefly?
12. In relation to this training programme, what do you think are the most interesting applied digital tools for the development of "social-community" projects?
13. What training content do you think is missing in the training programmes for "community" entrepreneurs?
14. In relation to this training programme, in which contexts/tasks/jobs could it be applicable? (For example, in volunteer programs or citizen participation activities, etc...)
15. Describe VERY BRIEFLY your vision of the development of "community-led" projects in universities higher education.
16. According to your experience, which competencies favour the constitution of a consistent network of stakeholder-partners to support a "community-led" (social/environmental/cultural) project?
17. According to your experience, what are the main CHALLENGES faced by entrepreneurs who want to create a "community-led" enterprise?
18. According to your opinion, what are the best sources of funding for a community-led enterprise?
19. What advice would you give to an entrepreneur who wants to develop a community-led enterprise?
20. Other relevant training aspects that should be considered

Questionnaire Administration

1. Online Survey Platform

In this regard, the online survey platform for the project was Google Forms; it is quite reliable and easy to use. The online questionnaire was used as a monitoring tool to verify the proposal indicator, that is the number of interviews and responses to be achieved. With Google Forms, one can easily create and share the questionnaire with the target population efficiently while allowing real-time data collection and analysis. Since the tool is accessible on all kinds of devices and very easy to use, it will be a very suitable way to get in touch with the different respondents.

2. Interviews

Apart from the fact that it can also be administered online, interviews are a worthwhile method of conducting the questionnaire, particularly if richer and more revealing responses are being sought. This method allows more personal interaction and thus can be used to clarify questions or ideas that might be vague during the process.

3. Translation

First, the questionnaire was translated into all relevant languages spoken in the participating countries to make it representative, inclusive, and understandable for all target groups. This step is, in fact, relevant to the gathering of valid and meaningful responses, as participants will work with the content in their native language, ensuring that all terms and questions set therein are understood.



4. Distribution

The link of the survey is shared with possible respondents through several forms of distribution, including:

E-mail invitations were sent directly to the stakeholders, academics, entrepreneurs, youth workers, and other relevant participants.

Professional networks: outreach via local and international networks concerned with community-led enterprise, education, and social entrepreneurship. A reliable database was created during the "Mapping analysis".

These channels ensure wide coverage, allowing participation from all different sectors, and thereby acting as a conduit for the survey to reach its targeted audience.

Data Collection

In the PATHFINDER+ project, data collection is conducted in full compliance with data protection regulations and participant consent protocols. As part of the survey process, participants are informed about how their personal data will be managed and processed. The consent statement included in the questionnaire ensures transparency and legal compliance in handling participant data. The statement reads as follows:

Consent Statement: *"I hereby consent to my data being processed in order to keep me informed of all the latest news, European projects, events, grants, programs for companies, entrepreneurs, students, and graduates, etc. Fundeun will process your data in order to manage and legitimise such processing, in accordance with your consent. You can exercise your rights of access, rectification, deletion, and other rights as indicated in the additional information located in the Privacy Policy."*

Key Aspects of Data Collection:

All the respondents who answered both the survey and interviews provided data on a voluntary basis. They are allowed to go through the consent statement before submitting their responses.

Data Usage: Data is collected only to keep informed participants about training programs, webinars, networking meetings or events in regards with community-led projects. No data disclosure to third parties, except when specifically indicated, would be used only for further development of communication and dissemination activities concerning the project.

Data Management: The consortium guarantees data management according to the current rules for the protection of personal data in the European Union, GDPR, considering security measures to prevent the disappearance of those, prejudicial use or unauthorized access, guaranteeing information that is accurate and relevant, to make sure the exercise of the participants' rights is assured.

With the attachment to these principles, the PATHFINDER+ project ensures ethics, transparency, and observance of privacy rights in all activities related to data collection; thus, trust is built, and active



participation both during the survey and interview phases is encouraged.

3. Insights and challenges

This section compiles the insights gained from focus groups and interviews to different profiles to stakeholders (academics, local development technicians, consultants, mentors, entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs and higher education students). Insights will help PATHFINDER+ project to develop an inclusive framework that would address the existing gaps and provide a workable foundation where the CLEs should thrive. In this respect, the approach is very important for empowering local communities by amplifying the social dividends accruing to the people, as well as guaranteed long-term success of such enterprises across varied regions.

a) The number of strengths and weaknesses of existing training programs.

The strengths and weaknesses that feature in the training programs offered within the various CLEs are highlighted below. This analysis is informed by discussions through focus groups, giving insight into comprehensive observations of the effectiveness of the programs and areas needing improvement.

Summary: Strengths of Existing Training Programs

Strength	% partners*
High levels of citizen participation and collaboration	100%
Emphasis on teamwork and mentoring	83%
Institutional support and community engagement	83%
Practical, hands-on learning approach	67%
Strong focus on social economy principles	50%
Networking and mentorship opportunities	83%
Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	33%
Development of financial literacy	50%
Focus on innovation and entrepreneurial skills	67%
Emphasis on digital literacy and tool usage	33%

*% partners: How many partners have identified this strength over the total.

The major strength highlighted is the **deep engagement and participation** throughout the programs, especially in the case of students and community individuals. Active involvement in collaboration and teamwork will provide the basis upon which community-led projects will take place. The immediacy of the work and practical applicability gives participants first-hand experience with work they are being trained in. Engagement, therefore, empowers the individual to take responsibilities out of ownership, and having this in mind, it will lead to the sustainability of the initiatives developed during the training. With involvement in practical real projects, the participants apply theoretical insights into concrete action and hence valuable experience to enable hands-on implementation of their own community-led enterprises.

A number of the training programs match the **SDGs** by offering **perspectives** on how the work of the participants contributes towards the achievement of global social, environmental, and economic goals. The programs urge participants to think beyond their own context in terms of long-term sustainability and how their enterprises can contribute on both a local and global scale. These links to global goals enhance the sense of social responsibility for the participants to design enterprises that will contribute not only to local needs but also to wider societal change. It was identified that deeper training would be necessary.

Other strengths of the programs are the **mentorship** and **networking opportunities** provided. They are also afforded the priceless opportunity of having access to experience from a number of professionals who will be in a position to offer guidance and support both during and after the training. It is also there to address problems arising from the difficult task of managing community-led enterprises through practical advice on issues such as leadership, management of resources, and decision-making processes. The networking opportunities will also allow participants a chance to establish a relationship with other entrepreneurs, organizations, and stakeholders that would eventually help in acquiring resources and support for the continued sustenance of the enterprise in the long run.

The programs also impress because of an emphasis **on practical learning**. Many training sessions use simulations, case studies, and real-world exercises, which help the participants apply theoretical knowledge to tangible problems. The hands-on learning has confirmed that the participant is developing the necessary skills and confidence to effectively manage a community-led enterprise. Working on actual projects during the course of training means participants come out with an in-depth understanding of the challenges they might face at the field level and how to handle those once they hit the field.

The programs therefore also benefit from institutional and community support in the fact that participants have access to a wide array of resources, tools, and networks that further enhance the training impact. Involvement by universities and community organizations means participants will be connected to a larger ecosystem of support, hence leveraging the expertise and infrastructure available through such partnerships. Such strong support provided makes participants feel empowered and well equipped to pursue their entrepreneurial interests.



Summary: Weaknesses of Existing Training Programs

Weaknesses	% partners*
Lack of comprehensive legal and financial knowledge	100%
Limited funding and financial resources	83%
Short duration of programs and lack of follow-up	67%
Insufficient digital literacy and tool usage	50%
Limited local relevance and scalability	50%
Bureaucratic and administrative barriers	50%
Lack of practical, real-world applications	33%
High complexity of bureaucratic processes	33%
Academic language as a barrier to accessibility	33%

* % partners: How many partners have identified this strength over the total.

Yet there were some key gaps that existed in most of the training programs that must be attended to. Most significant in these respects are **comprehensive finance and legal training**. While participants in the program may be oriented on basic financial concepts, most of the programs do not delve deep into financial management aspects, acquisition of funds, and legal frameworks. This gap leaves many participants ill-equipped to deal with the economic realities of running a community-led enterprise in securing sustainable funding and long-term management of financial resources. Without appropriate underpinning in financial literacy and legal knowledge, it is difficult for participants to sustain enterprises beyond the early stages.

The second major weakness relates to the short duration that many programs adopt while undertaking training. This is because of the very little time allotted to training, which most participants say does not help them to fully comprehend complex matters involved in managing community-led enterprises. Although the programs are useful at introductory levels, their brief sessions do not allow for the coverage of critical topics such as **business development and community engagement**. This, too, short a period limits the internalization of concepts by the participants themselves and may affect effective application in their projects.

Another issue that compounds this is a **lack of follow-up** after the training courses are over. Many participants said that after the initial trainings, no follow-up was done in terms of mentorship or access to resources, hence making it difficult to sustain momentum for the implementation of such projects. In the absence of follow-up and continued support, the participants are often at a loss to overcome some challenges that may subsequently arise. As a matter of fact, a project may stall or fail completely without continued guidance. Absence of follow-up mechanisms lessens the long-term impact which may be created by the training because the participants lack tools to keep their enterprises running in the long term.

Another limitation is that a few programs **lack digital literacy training**. While some participants are introduced to basic digital tools, the training falls below truly equipping them to work with such tools. Digital literacy is critical for handling contemporary enterprises, from managing projects to communication to even fundraising. This gap in digital skills places participants at a disadvantage in scaling their enterprises or utilizing digital platforms to enhance their operations.

Some programs are perceived to lack **local relevance and scalability**. The participants felt that training materials, including case studies and examples, were mostly very general and not adequately touching on the problems faced by their immediate local communities. As a result, participants found it difficult to apply these lessons in their own contexts. Rendering the trainings reflective of realities within which they operate in the local environment will make the programs more relevant and effective. Also, in this context, the participants highlighted a number of bureaucratic and administrative barriers that hinder scaling up successful enterprises to other regions. In addition to that, the complication of securing adequate funding exacerbates another concern-the prospect for community-led enterprises to expand beyond initial stages.

Finally, **access to finance** is unfortunately not improving across the training programs. For many participants, access to funding and resultant financial support necessary to ensure that their enterprises were sustained remained a problem. This lack of financial backing often prevents projects from moving beyond the experimental phase to consolidate and expand. Without adequate funding, there are real barriers to the participants consolidating long-term, sustainable community-led enterprises.

b) Number of innovative models. Degree of scalability and replicability.

Summary: Number of innovative models

Innovative models	% partners*
Discussion forums and open dialogue	100%
Hands-on workshops and practical exercises	100%
Field trips and direct interaction with practitioners	83%
Role-playing simulations and hackathons	83%
Co-creation workshops and collaborative activities	83%

Social project simulations	67%
Impact measurement and challenge-based learning	67%
Networking events and mentorship opportunities	50%
Pop-up project fairs and interactive presentations	50%

* % partners: How many partners have identified this strength over the total.

While the focus groups and interviews conducted across the PATHFINDER+ partners indeed demonstrated a great deal of creativity in innovative activities inserted into existing training programs for CLEs, these activities represent an attempt to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application by fostering greater participation, collaboration, and hands-on learning among participants. In short, creative approaches were implanted in the training programs of all partners to coach the participants on how to handle the many complexities associated with managing and scaling CLEs.

There was a high number of innovative models introduced within these training programs, where each partner introduced unique strategies in response to diversified participant needs. Most of the models included a combination of **discussion forums, hands-on workshops, field trips, interactive learning techniques, and simulations** to provide a real-life glimpse of how community-led enterprises could operate. Each of the programs underscored how important those practical exercises were that allowed participants to engage in real-life problems and develop viable solutions. This can include co-creation workshops, **hackathons**, or even simulations. Such innovative approaches incentivized participants to take active ownership of their learning process and hence contributed to the overall success of the programs in empowering participants to own community projects.

Other partners also provided models that promoted **direct interaction with practitioners** in the field and, therefore, exposed participants to the realities encountered in practice as they worked within community-led enterprises. Most programs, for instance, integrated **field trips** to social enterprises or internships that allowed participants to gain practical experience in natural settings. Such interactions impart valuable knowledge regarding the challenges and opportunities faced by community-led businesses and help participants apply learning in meaningful ways.

Many of these innovative models showed promise, especially those related to **practical engagement and co-creation**, regarding the extent of scalability and replicability. Role-playing simulations, hackathons, and social simulations were reported as having a high degree of adaptability across different community contexts. Approaches are easily replicable, since the processes of collaboration in problem-solving and stakeholder engagement are constituent’s integral to community-led enterprise success. Further, the frameworks provided through the challenge-based learning approach and open forums were quite flexible and could be adapted easily to suit different communities. Accordingly, such approaches are highly scalable.

However, scalability for some innovative models does have its limitations. While discussion forums, pop



up project fairs, and networking events were very successful in fostering local engagement, their success depended to a large degree on resources, institutional support, and community involvement that can vary considerably from region to region. The challenge is adapting these activities to regions with less resources or less established networks. While models dependent on direct exposure to professionals-for instance, through work placements or through university-business collaboration-suffer from scalability issues in areas where the number of such partners becomes inadequate.

Another important factor which is related to scalability and sustainability is the extent to which these innovative models can be integrated into existing structures of education and training. Some of the partners reported that although indeed the programs they had undertaken inducted practical learning and simulated reality, such learning was not necessarily embedded within wider structures of learning. For instance, internships and field trips that provide an opportunity for hands-on exposure to community-led enterprises are extremely effective but may be resource and time-intensive to replicate across other educational contexts. The challenge, however, remains that these innovative models are adaptable but also sustainable in various institutional frameworks.

To summarize, the wide range of innovative models incorporated through training programs effectively closed the gap between theory and practice. Most of the models, particularly those on co-creation, practical engagement, and solving real-world problems, had considerable potential for scale-up and replicability. Whereas some activities may lend themselves more easily than others to adaptation in resource-poor environments, particularly those programs that depend on local resources and professional networks, it is in addressing these particular challenges that confidence can be built in the scale-up and replication of the innovative models developed in these programs across diverse community contexts.

c) The competencies identified related to community-led (CL) projects.

These focus groups and interviews also identified a broad set of competencies that are necessary to develop and manage CL projects effectively. These range from leadership, financial literacy, and legal understanding to social engagement and innovation-those aspects that equip individuals with the ability to work their way through both operational and social issues in their enterprises. Across all focus group discussions, competencies were found which appeared common in nature and critical for sustainability and growth in CL initiatives.

The highest quantity of emphasis, in terms of competency, for all the focus groups is **leadership**. It was also mentioned several times that leadership is intrinsic in the movements of people with diverse backgrounds to a common direction, managing teams, and advancing projects to their completion. Community leaders in CL projects should inspire others through motivation and collaboration, while at the same time knowing how to negotiate complex interpersonal dynamics in their communities. This concerns **the management of internal teams and the involvement of external stakeholders** in the community's values and goals. The other aspect of leadership is the **ability to seize opportunities**, which involves framing areas of potential community development into deliverable projects. Leaders must be visionary and creative; they have to be ever-looking as to how they could make their communities better by identifying and meeting the needs in creative ways.

Other related key competencies include people management. In fact, the various reports shared showed participants reiterated that great leadership is about people-**management skills**: there were conflicts being sorted out, facilitation in the collaboration of community members, and all voices were heard. Similarly important is working collaboratively with a variety of stakeholders, given that many CL projects require groups of varied perspectives and skill sets. Teamwork and collaborative work were often cited as important competencies, pooling resources, ideas, and skills in the creation of projects reflective of the needs of all in the community. These guarantee that community-led enterprises maintain a democratic and inclusive approach to decision-making.

Financial literacy was another key competency that came through in reports from all participants. The participants identified the need for understanding financial management, budgeting, financial planning, and resource allocation. Most CL project leaders are unable to raise the necessary funds to support their projects because they lack proper knowledge in matters of money. This competency helps leaders make prudent decisions with regard to the financial health of a project and assists them in operating cost management and fundraising, including the design of real-time economic models. Financial literacy also encompasses the ability to create feasible financial plans that ensure the long-term sustainability of community-led enterprises.

Financial literacy aside, one of the key competencies required to manage CL enterprises is legal literacy. From a perspective based on the legality and applicability of laws that would govern these projects in terms of governance structure, the projects would be kept not only viable but also legally sound on issues such as taxation and regulatory compliance. Legal complexities have to be addressed by the entrepreneurs involved in CL projects so that the enterprises do not fall prey to any regulatory pitfalls. The participants brought out that legal literacy is not limited to compliance issues but extends to how governance structures can be utilized to ensure democratic decision-making processes and transparency regarding accountability in community-led projects.

The second important competence shared through the focus groups and interviews is **social sensitivity**, meaning the ability to understand certain community needs and dynamics within which a project is operating. Social sensitivity means the design of projects that address community problems firsthand, and their implementation ensures inclusiveness and social responsibility. Discussion participants argued that the leadership within the community-led enterprise should be capable of deep engagement in processes with the community, recognizing social issues and responding to them in a manner promoting social cohesion and empowerment. It will also involve balancing the mission on social justice with financial sustainability, whereby projects will meet both social and economic objectives.

Competencies related to **creativity and innovation** were identified throughout as being some of the important competencies that drive the projects forward. A leader needs the ability to think creatively and come up with innovative solutions for complex problems in the community. **Co-creation**, working with community members and stakeholders in generating ideas, was highlighted as part of innovation. In this regard, community ideation ensures that solutions are developed to meet the needs in the local environment and that the community owns such solutions. Community creative collaboration thus builds resilience and adaptability in community-led enterprises, translating into success within dynamic ecosystems. Digital Literacy and Digitization: Increasingly imperative competencies, with especial focus being given to their role in modern enterprise. Given the increased dependence on technology in project

management, communication, and stakeholder involvement, the participants emphasized that leaders must become digitally savvy. For many, digital tools have become critical to daily operations, from fundraising to outreach, now being executed online. Digital literacy would ensure CL leaders can use technology for smooth facilitation of processes, wider outreach, and data-driven decision-making.

The competencies of circularity and **environmental responsibility** were also identified as important in today's CL project management. The participants argued that leaders must ensure the projects are socially impactful but at the same time environmentally responsible through infusing sustainable practices into the projects. That includes designing projects with the purpose of circular economy principles by reduction of waste and enhancement of resource efficiency. These sustainability-based competencies are increasingly becoming relevant as communities strive to find a solution to environmental challenges just like social challenges.

This also shed light on the significance of **strategic thinking and critical thinking**, especially toward long term planning and problem-solving. Through strategic thinking, leaders are able to reflect on the bigger implications of the decisions that they make so that their projects serve the short-term needs of the community while meeting long-term sustainability too. This is because critical thinking allows leaders to view different aspects of challenges and devise new solutions that are effective but also adaptive. With strategic and critical thinking, a good leader will, therefore, be capable of devising a concrete plan that is proactive to potential pitfalls and minimizes risks.

Finally, **resources mobilization** was considered to be a competence that needed to be in place for successful management of the CL projects. This implies the mobilization of human and financial resources, involving a variety of persons with varied competencies, and project financing for start-up and sustainability, while skills are utilized for networks and partnerships for the purpose of facilitating development and sustainability of community-led projects.

The focus groups and interviews concluded that a wide range of competencies are required to support community-led enterprises, the most relevant of which are leadership, financial literacy, legal knowledge, social sensitivity, creativity, collaboration, digital literacy, sustainability, strategic thinking, and resource mobilization-essential keys for the CL projects in handling current complexities. These will help the individual develop operational, social, and financial competencies required to manage the project in support of creating community-led enterprises that create an impact and are viable or potentially sustainable.

d) Main challenges faced by CL projects

Other finding from the focus groups and interviews is a set of key challenges that both entrepreneurs and organizations face in CL enterprises. These challenges address financial, operational, leadership, legal, and social dimensions, which clearly reflect the complexity and barriers to growth and sustainability that face the CL projects. The consolidated summary below combines the findings from all partners on the main difficulties faced by practitioners involved in community-driven initiatives.

One of the most widespread problems for all focus groups and interviews is **access to finance**. In fact, this was seen as one of the principal obstacles for both the startup and the long-term viability of CL projects. Most enterprises face serious difficulties in accessing adequate and predictable funding. Lack of multiple



sources of funding creates tremendous barriers for a community-led enterprise to achieve economic viability. This, combined with a perception that social enterprises yield lower financial returns compared with conventional businesses, makes limited access to public or private funding a significant hurdle for projects implementing CL, particularly in countries where investors are either risk-averse or unfamiliar with social entrepreneurship.

A closely related challenge is a lack of financial literacy among people leading such enterprises. In most CL projects, participants often mentioned that they lacked sound budgeting, financial planning, and resource allocation. The situation induces operational inefficiencies and mismanagement of finances within the CL projects. This has created a gap in financial management knowledge that badly hurts the sustainability of the projects in that the leadership cannot develop strategies to ensure financial robustness thrive over time. Also, most of the leading heads of CL initiatives are not used to the fundraising techniques and financial models required to secure external funding, which also draws a tight rope on how they could further grow or scale their projects.

The second commonly cited issue was the **bureaucratic** issues entailing the setup and management of community-led enterprises. The registration procedures and bureaucratic obstacles are usually too lengthy, especially in areas that have not adapted regulations to comply with social or community driven projects. This discourages the entrepreneur, even to the point of dropping their plans due to the flood of paperwork and red tape surrounding the process. Tax incentives and government provisions for CL projects are also minimal.

Running parallel with these, and indeed interrelated to, bureaucratic issues is the single issue cited by all participants of the interviews and the focus group surveys: lack of legal knowledge. **Knowledge of the legal frameworks** governing community-led enterprises is necessary to support local regulatory compliance in matters regarding governance structures, taxation, and labour laws. Most leaders of CL projects lack the requisite legal know-how to negotiate such complexities, which culminates in delays, fines, or the failure of the enterprise. If proper legal guidance is unavailable, most CL initiatives cannot operate within the ambit of the law, therefore courting long-term risks.

The second important issue that cropped up in discussions was the **leadership** gap in communities. One of the major challenges identified by participants is the identification of people with the skills and motivation to lead community-led initiatives. Leadership is crucial for organizing community members and focusing projects on collective ends as well as sustaining projects over time. In many communities, few people are willing or able to assume such leadership roles; this becomes a major barrier to the development and success of CL projects. In fact, there is a gap in leadership, which marginalizes the growth and adjustment of projects to changing community needs since there are very few people with vision and capabilities to spearhead innovative change.

Lack of support from communities has been considered a common challenge. While some localities tend to be afraid of entrepreneurship, especially those unknown or risky, in other areas. The presence of such cultural resistance to entrepreneurship is most in evidence in regions where traditional work models prevail and where little experience with community-driven enterprises exists. According to the participants, social entrepreneurship projects flourish or stumble depending on buy-in by the community,

but sceptics or apathy are often difficult to overcome and, in particular, in communities unaccustomed to dealing with this type of social entrepreneurship. This is further exacerbated by a negative public perception towards entrepreneurship, in which it is perceived that founding a social enterprise is too complicated or simply not worth its costs.

The problem of communication was a prevalent challenge indicated in the interviews and focus groups. Most of the participants emphasized that the low communications across project leaders and their target audience can deter the development of CL projects. Successful communication is the new media for involving community members, winning investors, and forming partnerships. However, most entrepreneurs face difficulties communicating their projects' social impact in terms that resonate with persuading supporters. This, in turn, led to a breakdown in effective communication that caused the disconnection between project value and key stakeholder perceptions, potentially leading to limited support and engagement.

The other limiting factor is the deficiency in **soft skills**, especially in such aspects as **communication**, **networking**, and **management**. While most business entrepreneurs have the technical ability to operate their projects, most lack interpersonal and managerial skills to generate collaboration amongst members of the community. Such soft skills help in the building of relationships, the management of a team, as well as interaction with stakeholders outside the project. Without these soft skills, the project leader will encounter it quite difficult to resource mobilization and seeking cooperation from community members, which at times frustrates the success of the projects.

These latter also pointed out the difficulty in establishing an **entrepreneurial culture** when entrepreneurship is not common in societies. Most of the people surrounding them are not used to what a community-led enterprise is, and sometimes there is hardly encouragement to do entrepreneurial activities, much less if such an entrepreneurial activity targets certain social or community objectives. The absence of an entrepreneurial culture in this regard makes it hard for the leaders to garner support for their projects, given that the community is oblivious to the benefits emanating from the CL initiative or sceptical of any success. According to participants, awareness campaigns and the sharing of success stories from other regions could have an effect on the psyche of the public to take up entrepreneurship as well.

Generally, these have been the major issues that have confronted community-led enterprises: financial instability, the shortage of funding opportunities, bureaucratic complexity, and also low levels of financial and legal literacy. Besides, other factors such as leadership gaps, resistance from the community, and poor communication further hold back these types of projects from developing and becoming sustainable. These challenges can be overcome by better training in financial and legal matters, strong strategies of engagement within a community, and capacities built toward leadership within these communities. Work in the above areas will help ensure long-term success and impact.

e) Digital tools use for CL projects.

The focus groups and interviews performed at the level of consortium showed that digital tools play an



important role in managing, communicating, and financially supporting CL projects. Digital tools enhance collaboration, organization, community involvement, and learning within projects. These factors are paramount in ensuring efficiency and effectiveness during the implementation of CL projects. Of course, through all discussions, categories of digital tools recurred time and again that were central to the operation of these projects, participants underlining how such tools make the day-to-day work easier to do, drive project outcomes, and enable them to be in touch with a larger community.

The first area in which digital tools are already being widely used is in **project management**. Tools such as Trello and Asana were consistently mentioned for giving a structure and organization to project workflows. These tools help CL project leaders to set up task breakdowns, allocate responsibilities, and track visually how work is being done so that teams can be on top of project deadlines and deliverables. Participants specifically pointed out the significance of having a clear system for project management especially where the initiative involves intricate dealings among the parties or different community members. These tools also create room for teams to change priorities in real time, thus adding flexibility when there are challenges in the implementation process of community-led enterprises.

Another core toolset that the focus groups identified was **communication platforms**. Tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Google Workspace were some of the suites of tools commonly used to enable internal flow in communication within team members involved in projects for smooth coordination. These tools allow for real-time and asynchronous communication, thus making it easier for teams that are geographically dispersed to stay in contact. Zoom and Google Meet were noted as vital in holding virtual meetings, workshops, and training. These video conferencing tools have been especially useful in carrying out activities remotely, enabling CL projects to engage participants in discussions and knowledge sharing without necessarily meeting physically.

Interactive learning tools contributed to the educational value of the CL projects. Among these, tools like Kahoot and Genially have been in wide usage for making learning more fun and entertaining, turning education into a game. These platforms are used for the presentation of complex information in a simple, interactive form that will enable the participants to learn more dynamically and pleurably. Besides that, throughout the workshops and training, some extra platforms such as Mentimeter were used to obtain live feedback, run polls, and provoke the interaction of the participants. This level of engagement ensures learning is not passive but active; hence, increasing knowledge retention and ensuring better participant involvement.

Financial management tools also help a lot in the sustainability of CL projects. Xero was mentioned as one important platform that helped budgeting and tracking expenses to ensure that financial planning is appropriate. These tools help project leaders keep track of their finances, an act that promotes accountability within the enterprise—a high level of accountability expected by externally funded, community-led enterprises. They also pointed to **crowdfunding platforms** as an important tool for raising financial resources. Through platforms like Kiva and other crowdfunding websites, CL projects are able to generate funds from a wide audience, hence limiting dependency on traditional financing mechanisms. Such platforms democratize access to finance, in that community enterprises can gain small contributions from a wide array of supporters. On the other hand, participants also emphasized the need for increasing levels of digital literacy training so that users can navigate these financial tools better and make optimal



use to sustain projects in the longer run.

Examples of these **collaboration tools** include Miro and Canva, which help with the creative and planning aspects of CL projects. The Miro platform could be used for visual brainstorming; hence, participants are likely to co-create in real-time the ideas and strategies to be applied on the project at hand. This helped especially at the initial planning phase of the community-led projects, where teams could map their objectives and show visually the interaction of different project elements. Canva was used on a more frequent basis in designing **visually appealing materials** such as presentations, infographics, and social media posts. These are vital materials in passing on the social effects of CL projects to internal teams and external stakeholders. When the project is specifically designed to inspire this significance, it becomes quite easy to visualize the impact and outcome of such projects in outreach efforts that eventually develop community support.

Several focus groups and interviews identified the use of **Learning Management Systems-LMS**, particularly Moodle, core in delivering education content and also providing training to participants in the ongoing period. These platforms distributed online courses, training materials, and virtual classrooms, hence allowing participants to access learning content at any time of convenience. Moodle was particularly singled out as the platform that CL project leaders would host webinars, seminars, and online training modules, thereby making education much more accessible for larger groups of participants. This is particularly important for community-led enterprises that value capacity building and the development of skills among participants.

Besides the global platforms, some participants did report some **local digital tools** that are only relevant to their respective regions, such as Vesparama.It, which is used to connect community-led enterprises with funding opportunities and support. Locally focused tools ensure better contextualizing of projects and funding resources for the region in which they are operating. However, challenges of digital literacy were raised using this type of online platform, with a number saying that more training is required to enable leaders to filter and use the volume of information available online effectively.

These are used to engage CL projects with a wider audience: announcing events, sharing updates regarding the progress of a project, etc. **Social media platforms** such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were most frequent for community outreach and engagement. Besides this, it is used in sharing success stories, engaging with local stakeholders, and building an online presence that adds significant amplification to the visibility of community-led initiatives. Of course, it does demand time and know how to handle social media sites. Many participants also showed interest in the training on digital marketing so as to reap the best returns from their online outreach efforts.

Though these new technologies have surely helped in improving and realizing better performance of the CL projects, digital literacy is reported to be one of the common challenges identified within the focus groups. Many of the participants, especially those from rural areas or those that are badly technologically equipped, might not utilize these tools to their full potential since either they do not know or have never experienced this. Inability to raise their full potential will reduce the leverage of the digital platforms. This therefore calls for the dire need for continued training and capacity-building to enable the participants to, in fact, make sense of, navigate, and use digital tools at their disposal.



In total, this includes digital tools like Trello, Slack, and Zoom or Google Meet for project management and communication, which allow efficient coordination within projects, engagement, and pathways for funding. Digital literacy forms a barrier to maximize this, which therefore creates great importance in ongoing training and support for those people engaged in CL projects.

f) A list of key success factors for creating a community/network and for public private collaboration.

The key success factors in the focus groups and interviews conducted across the consortium identified a lot of factors that are fundamental in creating strong community networks and effective public-private collaboration in CL initiatives. These success factors will further help assure project sustainability, enhance community engagement, and improve the collaboration between the various stakeholders concerned with CL initiatives. Common themes emerged below that best convey the basic ingredients required for fostering successful community networks and partnerships within the distinctly varied contexts in which each partner operates.

Of these, one of the most important is the actual **establishment of good partnerships** among stakeholders from public institutions, private enterprises, universities, nonprofit organizations, and community groups. The partnerships are able to mobilize strengths and varied resources from many actors for an opportunity to realize a multi-discipline approach in problem-solving. The combination of several perspectives opens up the avenue for CL projects to tackle some very complex community needs. This would also give credibility to the project, stability, a form of legitimacy, and continuity. Where public-private actors collaborate in projects, they always tend to succeed with community earned trust and are likely to be more successful in the long term.

Another factor that came across in most respects was **mentorship**. Access to professional mentors offers guidance, advice, and insight for participants to better face and try to overcome these challenges and seek innovative solutions. Mentoring may enhance participants' own capacity to cope with CL projects' complexities, especially while working at multiple levels of stakeholder collaboration. Mentors act as guides but also serve as a source of inspiration for role models to strive towards goals related to long-term change. This was particularly so in public-private partnerships, where interest alignment requires guidance for the interests of different parties to fall in place.

Also, another imperative factor presented community engagement and **ownership** of the project. Projects which cultivate some sense of ownership among participants alone experience greater involvement, motivation and commitment. Their support for the long-term success of the project is ensured when community members are engaged in charting the direction of the project. This ownership develops resilience within the community and ensures sustainability in the longer run for the impacts created by the project. Inclusivity ensures the voices of all in the community are heard; hence, the social webbing of the project is stronger and more representative of local needs and priorities.

One of the key issues observed was that of communication in order to keep the networks and partnerships strong. It is here that projects with **clear and open communication** between stakeholders are better positioned to handle expectations, resolve conflicts, and generate trust among counterparts.



Communication tools, such as face-to-face interaction, remain imperative in developing the relational links between public and private actors, at least in the first stages. Trust developed in this way provides a sound basis for long-term partnership and assures that there is coincidence in the purposes pursued. Thirdly, community-level communication skills will raise the level of coordination and solving emerging issues that may lead to community members being informed about and involved at every stage of the project. Another success factor was the **networking opportunities**, especially with regard to public private collaboration. By facilitating spaces where stakeholders from various sectors can meet, share ideas, and collaborate, CL projects are able to expand their reach and build broader support networks. Networking also allows CL projects to tap into other resources, expertise, and sources of funding important in scaling the project. Interactions between different stakeholders create incentives to innovate and enhance knowledge-sharing for even more robust community-led solutions.

Another key success factor is **the ability to demonstrate real-world impact**. Those projects that yield tangible, assimilated benefits at the community level can more easily attract consistent public and private sector support. The ability to prove clear outcomes through social, environmental, or economic impact effectively helps build credibility and reinforces the pertinence of the project in the community. Finally, the greater linkage between local work and global frameworks, such as the SDGs, increases their visibility and thus attractiveness to external stakeholders. Projects that incorporate global goals into clearly focused local relevance are generally better positioned to attract international partnerships and funding.

CL projects need good **financial management and skills of entrepreneurship** to keep the project sustainable. As indicated by participants, good financial literacy is basic for the proper management of resources, development of sustainable business models, and long-term funding. Besides, alternative financing methods were identified as key success factors, including community-based financial support and crowdfunding. The methods allow flexibility and access to diversified funding streams, thereby reducing dependence on traditional financing models, which might not always be available for CL projects.

The ones that were successful in the projects were the development of contextualized solutions, thus grounded in social, environmental, and economic needs pertinent in the community. These are solutions relevant to the local context in which the members of the community are more likely to resonate with and be adopted within the community by the stakeholders. Most of these are achieved by necessary critical social and environmental analyses that ensure the projects have a thorough grounding regarding challenges and opportunities within the community.

The second success factor was about the educational material and the training program **quality**. High quality training includes theoretical aspects along with practical, hands-on exercises to help participants transfer what they learn into everyday situations. Projects that **combined theory with practice** were much more effective in ensuring that participants acquired the skills needed to implement their projects successfully. The expertise of the trainers and the credibility of the hosting institutions further enhanced the training programs, ensuring the relevance of high-quality education supportive of project goals.

Also of importance to project success was agility, whereby the ability to adapt to circumstances could be readily accommodated. Projects ready and able to switch gears would be relevant and resilient. This, in



turn, would permit projects to adapt to changes in community needs, funding environments, or external conditions such that value delivery would still be possible even in unstable times.

Finally, **active participation and cooperation** were emphasized as crucial to the development of strong community networks. The projects that incorporate wide involvement of members, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders can be more interactive and less exclusive. This wide involvement ensures the solution space is populated with diversified views; hence, they are representative and comprehensive of the collective goals of the community.

Summary of Key Steps to Success:

- Strong collaboration between public, private, and non-profit sectors brings valued skills and resources together.
- Institutional backing, based on supportive policies, enables its work to be perceived as legitimate and therefore assures a certain continuity.
- Mentoring by seniors in the respective fields could give guidance to certain programs or projects, during and after implementation.
- Community involvement and ownership raise the level of commitment and therefore the sustainability of such development.
- Incorporation of social and environmental considerations forms part of the stated sustainability objectives.
- Communication and trust had been built through face-to-face interactions.
- Networking for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and resource exchange was possible. ➤ Demonstrated clarity about the real impact created and relevance to existing global frameworks, such as the SDGs.
- Strategic financial management and/or innovative, alternative approaches to financing projects, including community-based funding.
- Contextualized solutions informed by deep analysis of a specific community's needs ➤ High-quality training that balances theoretical input with practical, on-the-job training. ➤ Competency of trainers/institutional credibility assures learning
- Agility to adapt to changed circumstances for relevance and resilience of projects ➤ High levels of participation and collaboration; multiple perspectives represented, inclusive of diverse views.

g) Funding CL projects: Main financial resources and Barriers to accessing sources of funding

Financial resources for community-led projects also proved quite varied and differentiated across the focus groups in the consortium, though major barriers to access were highlighted. Discussion gave an



insight into the financial through which CL enterprises operate, both opportunities and challenges came into play. Funding strategies varied by region, but a number of shared themes were evident with regards to sources of finance and obstacles that constrain access to such funds.

Crowdfunding is among the most discussed financial resources for CL projects. Participants often referred to crowdfunding sites as important outlets for raising awareness and fiscal support of community-led projects. Crowdfunding allows CL projects to tap into the collective power of community members themselves by contributing directly to projects of their interest. However, there exist quite a few barriers in maximizing crowdfunding efforts. First, crowdfunding is highly dependent on a sound digital presence and community support if it is to be effective, which most CL projects still lack. In some instances, project leaders have low digital literacy or restricted outreach opportunities to fully exploit the potentials of these platforms. Training in digital marketing and financial management was a need that kept cropping up as imperative if crowdfunding is ever going to prove to be an effective financial tool.

Besides crowdfunding, **membership fees, social bonds, and donations** have also been emphasized as important sources of finance for a range of CL projects. Accordingly, membership fees, social bonds, and donations were identified by participants not only as successful ways of generating income but also as an avenue for creating community ownership and involvement. Membership fees ensure long-term financial commitment from a loyal constituency base, while social bonds will attract those investors who want to invest in projects that can show measurable results on society. Furthermore, donations and fundraising events are part of this effort to get financial support, normally combined with partnerships with local businesses for event sponsorship or direct financial contributions. As promising as these methods may be, however, participants identified that most entrepreneurs were uninformed about the different financial instruments available and did not have any knowledge regarding how to apply these models in their businesses.

Grants and public subsidies also regularly cropped up as an essential source of finance for CL projects. In fact, in many regions, the government funding program or state grants financially support community initiatives, in particular those projects answering social, environmental, or innovation objectives. However, across many of the focus groups, participants did raise an issue with the bureaucratic complexity in trying to access these funds. Applications for grants and public aid are often very lengthy and highly competitive, with heavy demands on financial planning and reporting, thus discouraging smaller or less experienced community-led enterprises. Furthermore, incompatibility among different types of aid and regulatory requirements can add to the challenges so that many entrepreneurs become frustrated by all the obstacles they have to go through in order to obtain financial support.

During the interviews and focus groups, ethical banking, social banking, and sustainable finance also emerged as new emerging alternatives, with the main motivation of supporting social and environmental impact, together with financial returns, hence making the financial transactions more CL enterprise-friendly. However, the participants said that traditional banks are less willing to support these cases due to the perceived low financial returns associated with projects of such type and their high risk. Examples include social impact bonds, whereby investors provide the upfront funding and are reimbursed based on the attainment of pre-agreed social outcomes. Despite these potentially improved models of funding, these innovative models of funding remain unknown or unreachable to most of the CL entrepreneurs, hence raising the need for awareness and financial literacy to bridge this gap.



Another useful source of finance was reported to be local **partnerships with businesses**, credit unions, and cooperatives. Thanks to such partnerships, the CL projects may be directed towards the attainment of common economic and social goals at the local level, for which reason high cooperation is typically achieved both from a project and an imminent community. **Social impact** bonds were mentioned as yet another mechanism, associated with attracting investors, who are repaid based on project performance in terms of the delivery of certain social outcomes. What participants did mention was that either due to utter ignorance or lack of financial literacy, the models were still not being utilized by the CL leaders. Most social entrepreneurs in many cases are still envious of heavy grants and donations because of sheer lack of awareness about these new innovative funding options.

A **lack of financial literacy** has emerged time and again across geographies as one of the serious deterrents. In fact, many respondents stated that the people in charge of CL projects are usually insufficiently trained to manage budgets, plan multi-year finances, or navigate the funding landscape. The adverse impacts of this shortfall are multilayered because restricted access to financial means also impacts the overall durability of projects. Financial management training was repeatedly stated as a priority need for assuring leaders of CLs make informed decisions on what funding is required and how to access it.

Besides financial literacy, a number of **bureaucratic issues** and **regulatory** obstacles were identified as major access barriers. Small- or less-experienced community-led enterprises particularly found the application process for public grants and subsidies quite cumbersome and time-consuming. The mountain of paperwork added to strict eligibility criteria normally deters the CL projects from trying to access this type of funding. Besides, the general shortage of angel investors and venture capital that is specifically available for social enterprises limits access to private investment, which is most often channelled into for-profit ventures rather than community-led initiatives with primarily social objectives.

Finally, participants underlined **the need to adopt a diversified funding strategy** in order to ensure longer-run sustainability of CL projects. Standing on single legs of funding-grants, donations, or crowdfunding alone-makes projects vulnerable due to the fluctuating nature of financial support. Diversifying the streams of finance through a combination of grants, crowdfunding, social impact bonds, and community-based financing makes the financial foundation of CL projects more resilient. This approach serves to reduce risks arising from dependence either on public or private funding sources that may be unstable or unreliable in the long run.

Summary of Financial Means:

- Crowdfunding platforms offer the opportunity for raising awareness and involvement by the community, but suffer from low levels of digital literacy and outreach capabilities.
- Membership fees and social bonds offer regular access to financial means and attract social investors who seek measurable impact.
- Grants and public subsidies are important, but application procedures and competitive conditions for access reduce these opportunities.
- Ethical and social banking seems to be supportive, alternative options to the traditional bank, but not



diffused.

- Local investments: Partnerships with businesses and credit unions provide focused funding in line with local priorities.
- Donations and fundraising events: All are widely used ways of securing financial input, especially for smaller projects that involve direct community participation.
- Social impact bonds: Provide a new but little-used way to acquire private investment with the promise of a return if agreed social outcomes are realized.

Barriers to Securing Financial Input:

- Bureaucratic complication: The time-consuming and complex procedures involved in applying for grants/subsidies discourage smaller projects.
- Lack of finance management skills: Most CL leaders do poorly in managing the budget, and their strategies to make the project financially sustainable are few.
- Rareness of knowledge on alternative ways of funding: One will notice that social impact bonds and ethical banking are not yet adopted due to unfamiliarity with these forms of financing.
- Cultural and financial barriers: Most of the CL projects are perceived as risky by traditional financial institutions.
- Unique source of financing: This is also one of the reasons why financial situations within projects are precarious.

h) Main topics to be included in a CL training course

Various interviews and focus groups at the consortium levels identified some of the key gaps in the prevailing training programs for CL enterprises. As a matter of fact, such discussions have brought out the essential requirement for more comprehensive and inter-disciplinary training to address not only the social concerns but also business concerns in managing the CL projects. Participants stressed the absolute need to **integrate hands-on practical experiences with theoretical knowledge** while ensuring that the training programs will specifically meet the challenges which community-led enterprises are facing. The following summarizes some of the key themes that a future CL training course could include, building on insights from all focus groups.

Hybridization of Knowledge Across Disciplines: Probably one of the more frequent messages put across by all focus groups was training at the interdisciplinary level that equips trainees with **wide-ranging skills to apply in different areas** of community-led enterprise. The participants emphasized that CL projects require knowledge from multidisciplinary areas of business, social entrepreneurship, legal frameworks, and marketing. Integration of these disciplines into one coherent training program will ensure that participants are capable of applying varied concepts to actual projects. This also enhances the method of working in teams and provides a greater understanding of how other sectors may complement each other in the



pursuit of community objectives.

Entrepreneurial Mindset and Mentorship: One of the essential ingredients of any CL training course is the development of an entrepreneurial mindset. According to the participants, this is a type of mindset that will nurture innovation, resilience, and adaptation. The training programs must, therefore, be structured to help participants think in a more creative and strategic way toward solving community problems through entrepreneurial approaches. The second overriding need articulated across all groups was mentorship, meaning improved coordination between training programs and support networks for entrepreneurship, particularly within universities. In mentorship, the participants receive advice; it enables them to solve various problems brought about when managing community-led projects.

Financial Management and Fundraising Strategies: Financial literacy was considered one of the main deficiencies in the current trainings. Participants wanted extensive training in financial management, budgeting, financial planning, strategies for fundraising, and impacts measurement. Indeed, it would form an important part of the long-term sustainability of CL projects, whose funding remains inconsistent. This should include training modules on how these varied sources of funding—grants, crowdfunding, or social bonds—can be tapped and managed. Training on measuring social impact from the courses was also suggested by participants, which is considered necessary for attracting investors and community support.

Social Innovation and Impact Assessment: There were also appeals in various focus groups for training that focuses exclusively on social innovation and social impact assessment. This is important in sustaining CL enterprises with their fundamental mission of meeting the needs in the community while being financially viable. As underlined, the current training programs have a strong commercial orientation, with frequent negligence of the social mission of such enterprises. Ethics, community involvement, and social responsibility could hence form other themes of courses that would help participants understand how their social objectives should be combined with business objectives.

Use of Digital Tools for Project Management and Communication: The other important area identified was the need for training on the best application of digital tools in managing CL projects. Participants observed that most community-led enterprises lack the necessary digital skills to automate operations and therefore improve communication among team members. However, it is recommended that in future training programs, special attention should be given to project management tools such as Trello, Asana, and Slack, among others, in addition to financial management software, in order to enhance operations. Furthermore, other areas where future training programs may have a focus are on the use of digital communication tools for stakeholder engagement, fundraising, and outreach.

Legal and Marketing Knowledge: Legal literacy and marketing skills were among the biggest gaps mentioned in current training. Participants underscored how important it is to be informed about the legal frameworks guiding community-led enterprises with respect to governance, taxation, and compliance. The training programs need to equip participants with the knowledge to confidently navigate such legal complexity. In addition, marketing and client management were seen as cardinal skills that would guarantee the visibility of CL enterprises in the market in terms of attracting customers and attracting investment. This involved, among others, training on branding, market analysis, and stakeholder engagement with a view to adequately equipping participants with the ability to raise their



project profiles and enhance interaction with community members and external partners.

Real Life Application and Experiential Learning: One of the most reiterated suggestions that emerged across all focus groups was the need for actual application of the skills during the training programs. Peer learning, business internships, and practical projects were highly valued by the participants as ways of giving them an opportunity to try and apply their theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting. There is fair agreement among respondents that experiential learning, such as case studies, project simulation, and exposure to practicing entrepreneurs, is another significant way to better training output. This approach would offer participants hands-on experience but, more importantly, stimulate creative group learning, which is key for successful community ventures.

Resilience and **Networking:** Participants emphasized that training should also include lessons on resilience against financial and operational misfortune. Most community-led enterprises operate in resource-constrained environments, and any training program should impart tenacity to overcome obstacles and also adapt to changing fortunes. Secondly, the networking was also judged helpful in building good relationships with stakeholders, partners, and investors. Participants pointed to opportunities to connect with potential collaborators, building strong networks that support their projects over time.

Personal Growth and **Citizenship Awareness:** Focus group discussions also pointed out the importance of personal development within CL training programs. In this respect, it was pointed out that both citizenship awareness and personal growth bear relevance in developing a sense of responsibility and involvement within communities. Participants have noted that training should transcend beyond business skills; it should help individuals to develop their leadership ability, empathy, and communication skills. These competencies form a critical base for developing robust community-led enterprises that have regard for both social impacts and the personal development of their members.

Need for **Idea Generation** to Implementation Gap Training: Finally, participants underscored that training programs need to bridge existing gaps between the generation and implementation of ideas. Many training programs take participants through processes of idea generation in creative ways but stop there without helping translate such ideas into projects. It is desired that in the future, courses should take participants through the development of concepts to practice, providing tools that can guide and ensure realization in the community where they work.

4. Conclusion

Discussions carried out and focus groups across the various partners of the PATHFINDER+ project have indeed shed light on the current situation regarding training programs concerning community-led enterprises. These have brought into focus their strengths, together with many gaps that presently exist. Such insights provide an overview of the competencies, skills, and tools needed to enable people and their communities to become leaders in sustainable and impactful projects. Throughout these reports, it has emerged that CL enterprises form a potent model, which combines entrepreneurial drive, community participation, and innovation to handle different social issues. Targeted and practical training programs, which should fill very specific gaps in knowledge, competencies, and resources, are needed for such models to blossom.



Indeed, the focus groups brought out several recurring themes and gaps that need to be addressed in designing and providing training programs for CL enterprises. One of the biggest gaps to appear in many reports is that of financial literacy. Many participants felt they did not have the requisite skills related to managing the financial aspects of their enterprises, which include budgeting, fundraising, financial management, and navigating funding options. This was compounded by unfamiliarity with alternative financing models that can provide the wherewithal for CL projects.

Another very important shortcoming was in the **development of business models**. Although most of the participants in the focus groups had very strong social and ethical motivations, the ability to translate those ideas into viable business models was often lacking. In this way, this lack usually resulted in problems of scaling projects or long-term viability. More comprehensive training in business planning, financial modelling, and strategic growth needs to be incorporated into programs so that participants understand how to develop and sustain businesses that will focus on social impact and economic sustainability.

One inadequacy which was repeatedly pointed out in many existing programs is a lack of practical application in a living environment. Many participants felt that training is too often theoretical and disconnected from the actual challenges of running a CL enterprise. There was a strong call for programs that include real-life case studies, hands-on projects, and mentoring from experienced entrepreneurs. Rather, the participants sought to learn from the direct experiences of those who have successfully launched and managed such initiatives, rather than pure classroom learning.

Indeed, the need for community engagement and social innovation emerged as two critical themes. Though most CL enterprises have community roots, participants outlined how most training did not provide sufficient means of engagement with communities effectively and efficiently. There needs to be programs on how to involve local stakeholders in decision-making, how to identify local resources and use them, and how to create ownership and a sense of collaboration within the community. Besides embedding social innovation, it was considered important that participants are encouraged to develop projects that would cater to both economic and social needs for long-term enterprise sustainability.

The reports from all partners identified the role that was increasingly being taken by digital tools in managing and scaling CL projects. What many of the participants wanted was training in the use of such tools as Trello for project management, Slack for team communication, and specialized software like Xero for financial management. Another highly repeated requirement was to have impact measurement tools in three successive rounds because most of the CL enterprises struggle to account for their social impact in measurable terms. Understanding how to track and measure financial and social outcomes, and then report on them, is becoming increasingly important for funding and support purposes.

A theme that was repeated often in the reports was that of networking or relationship-building. Most CL enterprises succeed in their work based on how well they can establish relationships with key stakeholders: funders, government agencies, and local communities. The training should place more emphasis on how these networks are built, as well as cultivated and maintained; in particular, how connections can be made to build resiliency and long-term support.

The other key competence was identified as resilience-identifying what affected the CL entrepreneurs



during economic or personal hard times. Almost all the participants seemed to stress a need for training that helps individuals build personal and organizational resilience to cope with difficulties and adaptation to circumstances as altered. Resilience also is related to the innovative ability and adaptability of importance within rapidly changing social and economic environments that surround the operation of CL enterprises.

Lastly, one of the most mentioned resource gaps of current training programs was mentorship and follow-through support. While many training programs offer initial guidance, participants noted that without long-term mentoring by more experienced entrepreneurs or sector experts, it is very difficult to translate learning into practice. Many participants also suggested further relationships with mentors over time who can provide advice from a practical point of view, help in making critical decisions, and provide support through situations that may be specific to their project or business idea. This mentoring needs to be encapsulated within the training programs-not as an added entity but as an inherent part, extending much beyond the formal learning period.

Moreover, it was put forth that the acquisition of such skills, necessary to lead community-led enterprises, could only be realized through practical and hands-on learning. According to the participants, being brought into contact with reality through internships, business incubators, and active exposure to the business community would raise the effectiveness level of the training programs. This way, the participants would have a chance to see how theoretical knowledge could be applied in real life and to learn through iterative processes based on immediate feedback.

One salient outcome concerned the disproportionately low social values represented in today's curricula. Many times, participants felt that much emphasis is being placed in these training programs on the commercial aspect of being an entrepreneur, but these programs do not focus on the ethics, social level, and community engagement levels that are so core to the identity of CL enterprises. Strong calls included the integration of social impact assessment, ethical business practices, and community engagement strategies as central components in any training to be offered the community-led enterprise. It is these social values that lie at the heart of what makes the CL enterprise different from a traditional business, and it is these values that training programs should aim to inculcate-by not only fostering entrepreneurial skills but, indeed, a deep commitment to social change.

The findings indicate explicitly that an integrated multi-dimensional approach should be used to develop an appropriate training program for community-led enterprises. In such a program, theoretical knowledge should be used hand in hand with practical exposure to adequately prepare and equip participants with the relevant competencies at both the business and social dimensions of the work. This includes the installation of solid financial literacy, understanding alternative financing models, and resilience in the face of adversity. In addition, digital literacy-especially with regard to project management and financial tracking tools-will further empower CL entrepreneurs to efficiently execute and increase the scale of their impact.

Mentorship, networking, and hands-on experiences-through an internship, a case study, or direct interaction with the business community-further ensure that participants experience the theory within a meaningful, real-world context. Inculcation of social values, ethics, and community engagement



methodologies at the curriculum level will ensure that the social mission is at the heart of these enterprises in their development and contribution to positive change within the community.

In summary, an addressed training gap in the existing programs will contribute more significantly to enhancing community-led enterprise capacity for creating both economic and social impact. The training programs will contribute to equipping the participants with the right mix of business acumen, social awareness, and practical tools that shall support growth in a sustainable, resilient, and impactful community-led project across Europe and beyond.

5. Appendix

National reports:

https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1I6ml2N4XCee6L65pCkD_GHqNSW7Wpy2x



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