Interreg Danube Region

Co-funded by the European Union

RISE

D3.3.1 Handbook of good practices

A3.3 POLICY LEARNING CAMP

Date of Report: 02.06.2026

Document Control Sheet

Document Summary	
Specific Objective Number	SO3
Specific Objective Title	POLICY LEARNING CENTER & CAPITALISATION
Activity Number	A3.3
Activity Title	Policy Learning Camp
Deliverable Number	D3.3.1
Deliverable Title	Handbook of good practices
Dissemination Level	Public
Responsible Partner	PP03 - WAB
Deliverable Reviewer (if applicable)	LP- PTP
Deliverable Due Date	02.06.2026

Versioning and Contribution History

Version	Date	Author/Editor /Reviewer	Contributors	Comments
_D01	00.00.2026	Eveline Wilfert, Thomas Böhm	WAB	Main Structure of the document (Draft of Content)
_D02	00.00.2026	Lili Schweitzer	PTP	Revision
_F01	02.06.2026	Eveline Wilfert, Thomas Böhm	WAB	Final version
Due Date of Deliverable		02.06.2026		

Contents

1 Executive Summary **4**
2 Introduction **5**
3 Methodology **6**
3.1. B2GreenHub Solutions 6
3.2. Piloting Process 6
3.3. Transnational Learning Camp 7
4 Good Practices **8**
4.1. Lead Partner 01 –PTP 8
4.1.1. Solutions 8
4.1.2. Piloting 9
4.1.3. Stakeholder Input 10
4.2. Project Partner 02 - STRIA 12
4.2.1. Solutions 12
4.2.2. Piloting 13
4.2.3. Stakeholder Input 14
4.3. Project Partner 03 - WAB 17
4.3.1. Solutions 17
4.3.2. Piloting 18
4.3.3. Stakeholder Input 19
4.4. Project Partner 04 – RPIC-RV 23
4.4.1. Solutions 23
4.4.2. Piloting 24
4.4.3. Stakeholder Input 24
4.5. Project Partner 05 - CEM 27
4.5.1. Solutions 27
4.5.2. Piloting 28
4.5.3. Stakeholder Input 29
4.6. Project Partner 06 - CCIS 32
4.6.1. Solutions 32
4.6.2. Piloting 33
4.6.3. Stakeholder Input 34

4.7. Project Partner 07 - RAPIV 37
4.7.1. Solutions 37
4.7.2. Piloting 38
4.7.3. Stakeholder Input 39
4.8. Project Partner 08 - HSPF 41
4.8.1. Solutions 41
4.8.2. Piloting 42
4.8.3. Stakeholder Input 43
4.9. Project Partner 09 – USAMV CN 45
4.9.1. Solutions 45
4.9.2. Piloting 46
4.9.3. Stakeholder Input 46
4.10. Project Partner 10 – DIH ONEX 49
4.10.1. Solutions 49
4.10.2. Piloting 50
4.10.3. Stakeholder Input 50
4.11. Project Partner 11 - AFC 53
4.11.1. Solutions 53
4.11.2. Piloting 53
4.11.3. Stakeholder Input 54
5 Main Findings 58
5.1. Transnational Strategy (A3.1) 58
5.2. Regional Action Plans (A3.2) 61
6 Summary across all Project Partners 64

1 Executive Summary

The RISE (Rising competences & skills in less developed Danube regions through food sector cross-topic innovations) project was developed to strengthen innovation capacities and improve entrepreneurial competences among SMEs in the food and beverage sector, particularly in rural and less developed regions of the Danube area. The project focused on supporting businesses in addressing current transformation challenges related to digitalisation, energy efficiency and material circularity through the development and testing of cross-sector mentoring approaches and regional support activities.

This Good Practice Handbook presents the experiences and outcomes generated throughout the project and provides an overview of solutions, piloting activities and stakeholder contributions collected across participating partner regions. The documented practices demonstrate how tailored support mechanisms, practical tools and stakeholder collaboration can support SMEs in identifying opportunities and implementing innovation-oriented solutions adapted to their specific needs.

The project activities highlighted that successful transformation processes require more than technological solutions alone. Mentoring activities, stakeholder engagement and stronger regional support ecosystems emerged as important factors for enabling SMEs to improve competitiveness and increase their readiness for digital and green transitions. The implementation experiences also showed that integrated approaches combining technological, environmental and organizational aspects often generate broader and more sustainable impacts.

The findings gathered through the Transnational Strategy and Regional Action Plans further emphasized the importance of knowledge transfer, cross-sector cooperation and long-term institutional support structures. Strong collaboration between SMEs, business support organizations, research institutions and public stakeholders was identified as a key factor for strengthening regional innovation ecosystems and ensuring sustainable implementation beyond project duration.

Furthermore, project outputs such as the B2GreenHub platform contribute to the long-term accessibility of knowledge, tools and support services developed throughout the project. By facilitating continued collaboration and exchange, these resources can support future initiatives and strengthen the transferability of project results across regions.

Overall, the RISE project demonstrates that supporting SMEs through practical mentoring approaches, integrated solutions and collaborative ecosystems can contribute to stronger innovation capacities and more resilient regional development pathways within the Danube region.

2 Introduction

This Good Practice Handbook has been developed within the framework of the RISE[1] project, co-funded by the Interreg Danube Region Programme. The handbook aims to provide a structured overview of the solutions, activities and experiences generated throughout the project, with a particular focus on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) of the food and beverage sector in their green, digital and circular transition.

The document brings together key elements developed and tested during the project, including the B2GreenHub solutions, the piloting activities carried out with SMEs, and the insights collected through stakeholder engagement across all project partners. These components form the basis for identifying and presenting good practices across the participating partner countries and regions[2].

The handbook is structured in a way that reflects the project implementation process. It first outlines the methodological approach, followed by a detailed presentation of good practices per project partner. Each partner section describes the applied solutions, the piloting experience, and the stakeholder input gathered during the Transnational Learning Camp in Austria in April 2026.

The final sections of the handbook summarise the main findings derived from the Transnational Strategy (developed under A3.1) and the Regional Action Plans (developed under A3.2), providing a consolidated view of the main findings of the project.

Overall, this handbook serves as a practical reference for understanding how the RISE project supported SMEs and which approaches and tools proved most relevant in practice.

[1] Rising competences & skills in less developed Danube regions through food sector cross-topic innovations (RISE)

[2] Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Germany and Austria

3 Methodology

This handbook is based on a structured approach that combines several project activities and data sources implemented consistently across all project partners. The objective of this approach is to ensure comparability of results while allowing each partner to reflect their regional context and the specific needs of the SMEs involved.

The development of the Good Practice Handbook follows the logical sequence of the project implementation: starting from the identification of solutions, continuing with their testing in real business environments, and complemented by stakeholder input collected at transnational level.

3.1. B2GreenHub Solutions

The starting point for the development of good practices were the solutions identified and structured within the B2GreenHub[3] framework (D1.5.4). B2GreenHub is an online platform that provides access to tools, resources, solution providers and learning materials to support SMEs in their green, digital and circular transition. It serves as a central orientation, knowledge pool and networking instrument for SMEs, enabling them to identify relevant solutions, access expertise and connect with partners. The platform is developed and enriched across multiple EU projects, making it a cross-project resource that consolidates knowledge, tools and solutions beyond a single project context. These solutions represent a curated set of approaches, tools and thematic focus areas designed to guide SMEs in identifying and implementing relevant improvements.

Within the project, the B2GreenHub platform supported partners and SMEs by providing access to relevant tools, learning materials, solution providers and practical resources related to digital, green and circular transition. Rather than functioning as a rigid implementation framework, the platform served as a flexible knowledge ecosystem that supported partners in identifying relevant solutions and adapting them to regional contexts and SME-specific needs. This approach enabled partners to combine common resources with tailored implementation pathways reflecting different maturity levels and sectoral characteristics of participating SMEs.

3.2. Piloting Process

The identified solutions were tested and further refined through piloting activities carried out by all project partners in direct cooperation with SMEs. This phase played a central role in translating the conceptual solutions into practical applications.

The piloting process included the use of structured assessment tools (Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool, and Material Circularity Readiness Assessment Tool), the identification of company-specific needs, and the development of tailored roadmaps for improvement. In order to ensure sufficient testing and validation of the

[3] https://www.b2greenhub.eu/

tools, each project partner engaged with at least 10 SMEs during the piloting phase. In addition, continuous exchange with the participating companies enabled the collection of qualitative feedback on the relevance, usability and applicability of the proposed solutions.

The results of the piloting activities were systematically documented through partner reports, cooperational matrices and feedback on piloting. These sources form the empirical basis for the good practices presented in this handbook.

3.3. Transnational Learning Camp

Further insights were generated through stakeholder engagement activities, in particular during the Transnational Learning Camp held in Austria in April 2026. This event brought together project partners, stakeholders and external experts from different regions to exchange experiences and discuss the results of the project.

The Transnational Learning Camp provided a platform for project partners and stakeholders from different regions to exchange experiences, present existing approaches and share good practices relevant to supporting SMEs in their green, digital and circular transition. The event facilitated knowledge transfer across regions and enabled participants to discuss practical experiences, regional perspectives and transferable approaches. The insights collected during the Learning Camp complement the piloting activities and contribute to a broader understanding of the applicability and transferability of the identified good practices.

4 Good Practices

This chapter presents the good practices identified, piloted and presented within the RISE project, structured per project partner to ensure clarity and comparability. For each partner, the section outlines the solutions derived from the B2GreenHub framework (D1.5.4), the corresponding piloting activities carried out with SMEs, and the stakeholder input presented and exchanged during the Transnational Learning Camp. The aim is to provide a transparent overview of how the different elements were applied in practice, highlighting the approaches used, the experiences gained, and the key takeaways from each regional context.

Supporting materials included in this chapter were provided by project partners and stakeholders. Responsibility for content ownership and sharing rights remains with the respective providers.

4.1. Lead Partner 01 –PTP

Pomurje Technology Park (PTP), Slovenia, acts as the lead partner in the RISE project and is an established business support organisation (ISO 9001:2015) and certified Digital Innovation Hub for smart manufacturing. As an active member of the national start-up ecosystem and with a registered R&D unit, PTP supports over 200 SMEs through innovation services, technology transfer and international cooperation. Within the RISE project, PTP focused on applying B2GreenHub solutions and piloting activities in close cooperation with regional SMEs, particularly in the food and beverage sector, leveraging its experience in digital innovation, entrepreneurship support and EU-funded projects.

4.1.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, Pomurje Technology Park (PTP) identified and applied solutions in the area of digital transformation, with a particular focus on digitalisation and connectivity in the food and beverage sector. One representative solution is the implementation of e-invoicing systems enabling real-time reporting and compliance with national regulations.

A key example is the “DDD Invoices” solution, which was implemented in a manufacturing SME in the food and beverages sector. The solution addresses regulatory requirements for mandatory e-invoicing and real-time reporting by enabling seamless integration with existing enterprise systems. In the presented use case, the company faced challenges in complying with new legal requirements due to limitations in its existing ERP system.

The solution introduced automated generation of e-invoices and real-time reporting through integration with the company’s SAP system. An interim “virtual printer” approach was used to ensure compliance during the transition phase, followed by full system integration via APIs. The

implementation was supported by collaboration between the solution provider and technical partners, ensuring smooth deployment and validation prior to go-live.

As a result, the company achieved full compliance with national e-invoicing regulations, improved the efficiency of its financial processes, and reduced the risk of errors and non-compliance. In addition, the solution provided enhanced visibility and analytics of invoicing and reporting activities, supporting better decision-making and operational transparency.

4.1.2. Piloting

PTP conducted piloting activities with a minimum of 10 SMEs across the food and beverage sector, applying the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool and the Material Circularity Readiness Assessment Tool within the Datamensio environment. The process combined interviews, operational data collection and structured assessments, followed by feedback sessions and the development of company-specific roadmaps.

Across the SMEs, several common challenges were identified. Many companies relied on manual or fragmented processes, with limited use of integrated digital tools for order management, inventory, production planning and data analysis. In the area of circularity, companies showed awareness of sustainability but lacked systematic material tracking, measurable indicators and formalised circular strategies. Regarding energy efficiency, monitoring practices were often basic, with limited use of data-driven optimisation and no structured targets.

Based on these findings, tailored roadmaps were developed for each SME. Typical recommendations included the introduction of predictive models for demand forecasting and production planning, implementation of digital twin concepts to improve process integration, adoption of IoT-based monitoring solutions for production and energy use, and gradual improvement of data management practices. In the circular economy domain, actions focused on improving packaging design, increasing the use of recyclable materials, and establishing measurable circularity indicators. For companies with investment-oriented challenges, the roadmap also addressed access to funding instruments and strengthening digital sales channels.

The B2GreenHub ecosystem was used as a supporting framework throughout the piloting phase. SMEs were guided towards relevant tools such as the Green Path Academy and the Toolbox, as well as external solution providers and free knowledge resources to build internal capacities and evaluate implementation options.

The impact assessment process was implemented consistently across all SMEs, including ex-ante, interim and ex-post stages, carried out in parallel with Datamensio assessments. The companies were generally highly responsive and cooperative, which enabled a smooth implementation of the piloting activities. The combined methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of the SMEs' initial situation, their development needs and the evolution of their practices over time, forming a solid basis for the identification of good practices.

4.1.3. Stakeholder Input

The stakeholder exchange during the Transnational Learning Camp focused on the presentation of transferable good practices and support models that could strengthen the implementation of the future cross-sector mentorship programme. Rather than developing new solutions during the event, participants exchanged existing approaches and discussed how established support instruments could be adapted in different regional contexts.

The example presented by PTP highlights the value of integrated innovation support ecosystems for SME transformation. The EDIH DIGI-SI model demonstrates how combining testing environments, expert mentoring, skills development, funding support and networking opportunities through a single entry point can reduce implementation risks and improve SMEs' readiness for digital and green transition.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	Overview of EDIH DIGI-SI supporting SMEs in digital and green transformation via services funding EU
Solution Provider	**European Digital Innovation Hub DIGI-SI**
Solution Name	Association of organisations into a single entry point for companies, supported by the EU
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Slovenia*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Other*
General Focus Area	*Digital Solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Other*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	*SME development agency*
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Infrastructure Processes*

Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	Slovenian SMEs often lack access to advanced digital technologies, testing environments, and expert knowledge needed to implement digital and green transformation. High investment risks, limited internal capacities, and uncertainty around technology selection (AI, data, HPC) hinder adoption. Companies also struggle with assessing their digital maturity, developing viable business models, and securing funding. As a result, innovation remains slow, and competitiveness is reduced, especially in key sectors such as manufacturing, agrifood, tourism, and health.
Main project/service/solution features	EDIH DIGI-SI provides subsidised, non-financial support through four pillars: Test Before Invest (PoC, prototyping, access to AI/HPC/data environments, demo farms), Skills and Maturity (assessments, training, digital roadmaps), Support to Find Investment (business plans, funding access, market strategies), and Innovation & Networking (B2B events, AI helpdesk, ecosystem building). Services are delivered via a strong consortium of research institutes, universities, and technology parks.
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	SMEs successfully test and validate digital solutions before making investments, reducing risk and accelerating adoption. Companies improve their digital maturity, implement AI and data-driven solutions, and develop market-ready innovations. Increased access to funding and improved business strategies enable scaling and internationalisation. The project strengthens cross-sector collaboration and innovation ecosystems, leading to higher productivity, competitiveness, and sustainable growth among Slovenian SMEs.
Links to additional supporting materials	https://dihslovenia.si/en

4.2. Project Partner 02 - STRIA

The South Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency (STRIA), Hungary, is a regional innovation agency established in 2008 that focuses on innovation and competitiveness in line with the needs of the South Transdanubia region. Operating in a predominantly rural context with a strong food industry base, STRIA works closely with SMEs to strengthen competitiveness, resilience and sustainability, particularly in sectors such as meat, dairy and bakery production. As owner of the management body of the regional iFOOD Cluster, STRIA is well connected to industry, academia and public stakeholders. Within the RISE project, STRIA implemented relevant actions at regional level, focusing on digital and circular solutions to support SMEs in improving operational efficiency, resource use and market readiness.

4.2.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, the South Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency (STRIA), Hungary, focused on the application of both digital and circular solutions in the food and beverage manufacturing sector, targeting improvements in production efficiency, resource use and environmental performance.

One key solution applied is the “INDUSTREE – EchoEgg Digitalisation Project”, implemented in cooperation with Cubilog Ltd. This solution addresses inefficiencies in production monitoring and quality assurance processes, where manual data logging and limited integration of digital tools led to slower response times and reduced operational efficiency. The implemented solution introduced a digitalised production monitoring system integrating multiple data sources through advanced sensors, enabling real-time process visualisation and automated quality control.

The solution allowed continuous monitoring of production parameters, including energy consumption, and supported immediate corrective actions during operations. As a result, the company eliminated manual data logging, streamlined production processes, improved data accuracy, and enhanced overall production efficiency. In addition, real-time monitoring contributed to better energy management and environmental performance.

In parallel, STRIA applied a circular economy-oriented solution through expert advisory services provided by PhD. Áron Bóna, focusing on advanced membrane technologies for water purification and recycling. This solution targeted a mid-sized beverage manufacturer facing high energy and chemical consumption as well as increasing regulatory pressure related to water treatment.

The implemented approach combined reverse osmosis and ultrafiltration membrane technologies with a closed-loop water recycling system, supported by real-time monitoring tools. As a result, the company achieved a 35% reduction in energy consumption and a 40% decrease in chemical usage, while recovering and reusing up to 75% of treated water. These improvements significantly enhanced resource efficiency, reduced operational costs, and ensured compliance with environmental regulations.

Together, these solutions demonstrate STRIA's integrated approach, combining digitalisation and circular economy principles to support SMEs in improving operational efficiency, sustainability performance and regulatory compliance.

4.2.2. Piloting

STRIA conducted piloting activities with eight SMEs from the food and beverage sector, applying the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool and, where relevant, the Material Circularity Assessment Tool within the Datamensio environment. The process was implemented through structured mentoring sessions, combining company interviews, assessment results, feedback discussions and the development of tailored, step-by-step roadmaps.

Across the SMEs, the assessments revealed a consistent pattern of early to mid-level maturity. Many companies relied on manual or only partly digitised processes, especially in areas such as inventory management, customer communication, production planning and data handling. While several SMEs had already introduced basic digital tools or renewable-energy solutions, these were often not integrated into a structured, data-driven management approach. In the area of circularity, companies showed awareness and some initial practices, but lacked formal strategies, measurable indicators and systematic monitoring.

Based on these findings, STRIA developed practical and proportionate roadmaps focusing on achievable first steps rather than complex investments. On the digital side, recommendations typically included the introduction of cloud-based document management, basic workflow automation, improved cyber hygiene and more structured customer interaction supported by entry-level CRM tools. On the energy side, the roadmaps focused on establishing simple monitoring routines, defining baseline consumption, improving control systems and preparing phased renewable-energy investments. In the field of circular economy, the proposed actions addressed packaging optimisation, material-flow tracking, waste reduction and the introduction of basic circularity indicators.

A key feature of the piloting approach was the strong integration of mentoring and funding orientation. In several cases, the support went beyond general recommendations and contributed to the preparation of concrete investment or grant applications, linking identified development needs with realistic financing opportunities.

The B2GreenHub ecosystem was used as a supporting framework throughout the process, providing access to knowledge resources, tools and solution providers. SMEs were introduced to relevant materials and platforms, although in many cases direct use remained supported by the mentors, partly due to language and usability constraints.

The impact assessment was implemented consistently following the common ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post methodology. Overall, the piloting can be characterised as both awareness-raising and practically enabling: it helped SMEs better understand their current maturity level, identify realistic improvement pathways and, in several cases, initiate concrete development actions aligned with their capacities and resources.

4.2.3. Stakeholder Input

The transnational exchange highlighted the importance of strengthening cooperation models that connect local producers, food processors, gastronomy and tourism actors within regional ecosystems. The showcased good practice demonstrated that many rural regions possess strong individual products and services but often lack integrated structures that transform these separate activities into visible and sustainable regional value chains.

The "Flavours • Wines • Encounters" initiative demonstrates how cluster-based cooperation and storytelling approaches can strengthen short food supply chains and improve market access for SMEs. The presented use case illustrates a transferable good practice where networking, regional branding and stakeholder engagement create new business opportunities while strengthening regional identity and collaboration.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	*Flavours • Wines • Encounters builds regional food value chains through gastronomy*
Solution Provider	*iFood Cluster / iFood Nonprofit Ltd.*
Solution Name	*Flavours • Wines • Encounters*
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Hungary*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Food & Beverages*
General Focus Area	*Networking*
Specific Focus Area	*Short food supply chains and regional food ecosystem cooperation*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	*Cooperation and market-access model linking food processors, small-scale producers, restaurants, wineries and tourism stakeholders through joint gastronomy events, local sourcing, storytelling and regional branding.*
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Marketing and Sales / Business Development*

Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	Rural food regions often have strong food processors, small-scale producers, wineries and restaurants, but these actors usually build markets separately. This reduces joint visibility, weakens supplier links and makes it difficult to present a convincing regional identity to consumers, tourists and professional buyers. In Somogy/South Transdanubia, quality local ingredients and regional wines were already available, while the cooperation structure connecting processors, producers, gastronomy and wine tourism remained fragmented. The development need was therefore to create a low-barrier, repeatable cooperation format that could turn separate products and services into one shared market story, strengthen short food supply chains and open new business contacts for participating SMEs.
Main project/service/solution features	• Structured cooperation format: each event brings together a host restaurant, local small-scale producer, food processing company and winery; menus are based mainly on local ingredients and regional wines. • Cluster facilitation: iFood Cluster coordinates matchmaking, partner selection, concept design, branding, communication and event organisation. • Product storytelling: processors, producers and wineries meet guests personally, explaining the origin, use and value of their products. • Market access and stakeholder engagement: the format creates direct consumer visibility and supplier links with gastronomy and tourism actors; it can also be adapted as B2B tasting or matchmaking. • Scalable model: the initiative grew from a Kaposvár-based event into a broader regional wine-dinner series without major infrastructure investment.
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	The programme has moved beyond a one-off event and demonstrated visible scaling. In 2025 it brought together multiple restaurants, food processors, small-scale producers and South Balaton wineries, while local media reported around 240 guests and stronger participation than in the previous edition. The initiative generated new supplier relations, customer contacts and repeated cooperation opportunities. Restaurants gained differentiated menus based on local ingredients, while producers, processors and wineries reached new audiences in an experience-based context. The model strengthens regional

	identity and shows how clusters can connect food manufacturing, gastronomy, tourism, consumers and professional stakeholders into a visible local value chain.
Links to additional supporting materials	Project website: https://www.ifoodklaszter.hu/izek-borok-talalkozasok/ 2024 event page: https://www.ifoodklaszter.hu/izek-borok-talalkozasok-2024-szeptember-5/ 2025 event page: https://www.ifoodklaszter.hu/izek-borok-talalkozasok-2025-junius/ Cluster website: https://www.ifoodcluster.com

4.3. Project Partner 03 - WAB

Business Agency Burgenland GmbH (WAB), Austria, is the central business support organisation of the region, accompanying companies from initial idea and start-up to expansion and internationalisation. WAB combines advisory services with access to public funding, supporting investments in innovation, technology and development, as well as energy efficiency and low-carbon solutions. It also plays a key role in regional development and cross-border cooperation, including its role as Managing Authority of the Interreg AT–HU Programme and its cross-border cooperation with Slovenia, Hungary and Slovakia. Within the RISE project, WAB contributed by implementing energy efficiency and circular economy solutions, particularly in industrial and food-related sectors, while linking SME development needs with innovation support and financing frameworks.

4.3.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, WAB focused on the application of energy-efficient and circular solutions aimed at reducing environmental impact while maintaining operational efficiency in industrial processes.

One key solution is the implementation of a base load heat pump system, developed and tested by Forschung Burgenland GmbH. This solution addresses the challenge of high and continuous energy demand for both heating and cooling in industrial production environments. In the presented case, the system was implemented in a manufacturing setting to simultaneously manage heating and cooling requirements.

The heat pump utilises renewable and ambient energy sources, allowing for a significant reduction in fossil fuel dependency. Its dual functionality ensures a stable and flexible energy supply across different seasonal demands, improving overall system efficiency. As a result, the implementation led to a substantial reduction in energy consumption and CO_2 emissions, supporting the company's objective of achieving CO_2-neutral production while maintaining reliable operational performance.

In addition, WAB contributed a circular economy-oriented solution through the "Karlo Spoon" developed by Cardbox Packaging GmbH. This solution responds directly to the EU ban on single-use plastic cutlery by offering a fully recyclable alternative made from virgin fibre cardboard.

The solution combines sustainability and functionality, providing a food-safe, user-friendly product that can be easily integrated into existing production and consumption systems. The cardboard spoon is fully recyclable within standard paper recycling streams, significantly reducing plastic waste while supporting circular material flows. At the same time, it allows manufacturers of convenience food products to comply with regulatory requirements without compromising usability or product experience.

Together, these solutions illustrate WAB's approach of combining technological innovation with practical sustainability applications, supporting SMEs in both reducing environmental impact and adapting to evolving regulatory frameworks.

4.3.2. Piloting

WAB conducted piloting activities with 10 SMEs from the food and beverage sector, applying the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool and the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool, and where relevant the Material Circularity Assessment Tool, within the Datamensio environment. The process was organised through structured mentoring meetings, combining diagnostic assessments, result discussions and the development of practical, company-specific roadmaps.

Across the SMEs, the assessments indicated predominantly early to medium levels of maturity. Many companies already have basic elements in place, such as initial digital tools, partial energy monitoring or first sustainability practices. However, these elements were often not yet integrated into a systematic management approach. Common challenges included manual handling of customer communication and sales processes, limited use of automation and data analytics, lack of structured energy monitoring and targets, and only partially developed circular economy strategies.

Based on these findings, WAB developed pragmatic roadmaps focusing on realistic, incremental improvements. On the digital side, typical recommendations included strengthening online presence, developing webshops, introducing basic CRM systems, improving data protection practices (including GDPR-related aspects), and using simple tools for content planning and customer communication. On the energy side, the roadmaps focused on improving monitoring systems, introducing smart meters, defining baseline consumption and targets, and identifying opportunities for renewable energy integration. In the area of circularity, actions addressed packaging improvements, waste reduction measures and the introduction of simple monitoring and reporting practices.

A distinctive element of WAB's piloting approach was the strong link to hands-on support formats and funding opportunities. Several SMEs participated in additional support modules, including practical digitalisation workshops (Module A), individual expert consultations (Module B), where concrete implementation steps were developed, as well as expert support in implementing a social media campaign to promote the sales of regional products (Module C). In some cases, SMEs were informed about relevant funding opportunities, such as national digitalisation support programmes (e.g. KMU.DIGITAL), to support potential future implementation steps.

The B2GreenHub platform was introduced to all participating SMEs as a source of tools, knowledge and solution providers. While the platform was recognised as a useful resource, its practical application within the piloting phase was still evolving and was therefore often supported by mentors.

The impact assessment followed the common ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post methodology. Overall, the piloting can be characterised as primarily diagnostic and preparatory, but with clear practical effects: it enabled SMEs to better understand their current maturity level, identify concrete development opportunities and, in several cases, initiate first implementation steps or plan future investments.

4.3.3. Stakeholder Input

The transnational exchange highlighted the importance of transforming waste streams into valuable resources through innovative circular economy approaches. The showcased good practice demonstrated that many by-products generated in everyday business activities are still treated as waste despite their potential for creating economic and environmental value.

The BeanSaver® solution demonstrates how spent coffee grounds can be transformed into sustainable and marketable products through an upcycling approach. The presented use case illustrates a transferable circular economy practice that reduces waste, creates new value chains and combines economic, ecological and social benefits within one integrated business model.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	BeanSaver® turns coffee waste into products instead of disposal.
Solution Provider	Vera Amtmann
Solution Name	BeanSaver®
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Austria*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Other*
General Focus Area	*Green solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Waste Reduction and Recycling Technology*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Manufacturing Operations*

Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	Every year, billions of kilograms of spent coffee grounds are thrown away as commercial waste — in Vienna alone, over 20 million kg annually. The reason: when brewing coffee, only 1% of the coffee bean actually ends up in the cup. The remaining 99% is discarded, despite its untapped potential. Companies currently pay around €0.25/kg just to dispose of this waste — with no alternatives in sight. This is not only an enormous economic inefficiency but also a massive ecological burden, as valuable organic material is lost without any meaningful use. The coffee industry is sitting on a largely ignored resource — and the world is paying the price.
Main project/service/solution features	• **Upcycled Raw Material:** 100% sourced from spent coffee grounds — a byproduct otherwise destined for landfill. • **High-Value Output:** End-customer product value of €15–20/kg, compared to €0.25/kg disposal cost. • **Scalable Product Range:** Sustainable products derived from coffee grounds, designed for mass-market viability. • **Circular Economy Model:** Closes the loop on coffee waste, turning an ecological burden into an economic asset. • **B2B Integration:** Seamless collection and processing partnerships with coffee-producing businesses. • **Triple Impact:** Every product delivers economic, ecological, and social value simultaneously. • **Mission-Driven:** Built around the goal of utilizing 100% of the coffee bean — nothing wasted.
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	With BeanSaver®, spent coffee grounds are transformed into sustainable, high-value products — generating an end-customer value of €15–20 per kg instead of costing €0.25/kg for disposal. Companies turn a waste liability into a resource. The environment benefits from significantly reduced organic waste in landfills. And consumers gain access to products that are economically viable, ecologically necessary, and socially beneficial. The ultimate outcome: 100% of the coffee bean is utilized — economically, ecologically, and socially. A circular model that proves sustainability and profitability are not opposites, but partners.
Links to additional supporting materials	https://www.beansaver.at

Increasing regulatory requirements and sustainability expectations are creating a growing need for practical tools that help SMEs better understand and assess their environmental impact. The showcased good practice demonstrated that many companies face challenges in quantifying greenhouse gas emissions and translating sustainability ambitions into measurable actions.

The Carbon Footprint Calculator demonstrates how digital tools can support companies in estimating greenhouse gas emissions and creating a structured basis for sustainability-related decision-making. The presented use case illustrates a transferable good practice that strengthens transparency, supports target setting and helps SMEs identify opportunities for reducing their environmental impact.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	**Carbon Footprint Calculator** *The carbon footprint calculator is a tool that measures the total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions produced directly and indirectly by an individual, organization, event, or product. By quantifying these emissions, companies can identify key areas where they can reduce their environmental impact, comply with regulations, and improve operational efficiency.*
Solution Provider	Project CREDIT4CE Interreg Central Europe Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Co-funded by the European Union CREDIT4CE
Solution Name	Carbon Footprint Calculator
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Poland*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Other*
General Focus Area	*Digital Solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Other*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	*GHG monitoring, sustainability assessment and environmental performance measurement*
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Manufacturing Operations*

Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	As a business leader, understanding your company's impact on the environment is no longer optional—it's essential for staying competitive, sustainable, and profitable. Calculating your carbon footprint is a proactive step that delivers both environmental and economic benefits.
Main project/service/solution features	The tool/calculator estimates your company's GHG emissions by collecting data on various activities such as energy use, transportation, waste management and procurement. It then applies standardized emission factors to quantify emissions across Scopes 1 (Direct Emissions) 2 (Indirect Emissions from Energy Consumption) 3 (Other Indirect Emissions).
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	• Identify Emission Sources: Understanding where emissions originate helps companies target reduction efforts effectively. • Set and Achieve Sustainability Goals: Quantifying emissions allows for setting measurable targets and tracking progress over time. • Enhance Transparency: Reporting on carbon footprints can build trust with stakeholders, including customers, investors, and regulators. • Drive Innovation: The process can uncover opportunities for developing new, more sustainable products and services.
Links to additional supporting materials	https://carbonfootprint-credit4ce.eu/

Together, the presented use cases demonstrate how practical implementation examples can support SMEs in addressing different aspects of green, digital and circular transition by combining resource efficiency, sustainability measurement and innovative business approaches.

4.4. Project Partner 04 – RPIC-RV

The Rožňava Regional Advisory and Information Centre (RPIC-RV), Slovakia, is a non-governmental organisation operating as a business incubator in the Rožňava region. It supports SMEs and start-ups through project development and management, grant advisory, and initiatives in sustainable entrepreneurship, circular economy and employment. RPIC-RV has strong experience in cross-border cooperation and EU programmes (e.g. Interreg SK–HU and COSME), including the development of regional and green action plans and the organisation of stakeholder events. It works closely with local authorities, SMEs and the Technical University of Košice to engage entrepreneurs and promote innovation. Within the RISE project, RPIC-RV focused on leveraging data-driven and AI-based tools to improve operational efficiency and decision-making processes.

4.4.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, RPIC-RV applied solutions in the areas of energy efficiency and digital transformation, with a particular emphasis on data analysis and artificial intelligence.

One key solution is the “DAITAMONITOR” platform provided by DAITABLE, which focuses on real-time energy monitoring and predictive analytics. This solution was implemented to address challenges related to fragmented and non-centralised energy data, which limited the ability of organisations to effectively monitor and optimise energy consumption.

The platform integrates data from multiple sources into a single system, enabling comprehensive visualisation and real-time tracking of energy usage. In the presented case, energy data from multiple facilities were centralised, allowing for improved transparency and more accurate forecasting of energy needs. The AI-based analytics provided predictive insights and early warnings, supporting proactive decision-making and preventing inefficiencies.

As a result, the solution enabled optimised energy usage, improved resource efficiency and reduced operational costs. It also supported better planning and control of energy consumption, contributing to more sustainable and data-driven energy management practices.

In addition, RPIC-RV applied a digital solution through the “AI Sandbox” developed by the Regional Innovation Centre. This solution focuses on the use of artificial intelligence for process automation and data analysis, particularly in administrative and human resource management contexts.

The AI Sandbox enabled the testing and validation of AI-based tools in a real-world environment, supporting organisations in overcoming implementation barriers and assessing the practical benefits of AI applications. In the presented case, the solution was used to improve recruitment and HR processes, introducing automation in candidate screening and data processing.

As a result, the solution significantly improved efficiency, reducing HR processing time by up to 70% and lowering administrative workload. It also allowed organisations to focus more on strategic tasks and decision-making, demonstrating the practical value of AI-based solutions in non-industrial business processes.

4.4.2. Piloting

RPIC-RV conducted piloting activities with ten SMEs across various food-related sectors, applying the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool and the Material Circularity Readiness Assessment Tool (primarily Excel-based). The process consisted of introductory consultations, structured assessments and follow-up discussions leading to the development of practical, company-specific roadmaps.

Across the SMEs, the assessments revealed a consistent pattern of low to medium maturity levels. In the area of energy efficiency, many companies lacked detailed monitoring of energy consumption at process or equipment level, particularly in energy-intensive operations such as refrigeration, baking and food processing. In the field of circular economy, SMEs often showed a strong reliance on conventional packaging materials and limited systematic tracking of material flows and by-products. Regarding digitalisation, companies frequently used basic tools (e.g. social media), but lacked integration between systems, automation and structured data management.

Based on these findings, RPIC-RV developed targeted and practical roadmaps focusing on achievable improvements. Typical recommendations included the introduction of structured monitoring systems for energy and material use, optimisation of operational processes (e.g. equipment scheduling, temperature control), and the implementation of basic digital tools such as CRM systems and e-commerce integration. In the circular domain, proposed actions focused on improving packaging solutions, increasing recyclability and identifying alternative uses for organic by-products.

A specific feature of the piloting approach was the integration of external tools and platforms to support further analysis and implementation. SMEs were encouraged to use solutions such as the DAITABLE platform for energy benchmarking and optimisation, as well as to explore relevant solution providers and knowledge resources via the B2GreenHub platform.

The piloting activities demonstrated that the applied assessment tools are practical and accessible for SMEs, providing a clear structure for identifying development needs and translating them into concrete improvement steps. Overall, the piloting phase supported companies in gaining a better understanding of their current performance, identifying realistic optimisation measures and establishing a foundation for future digital, green and circular development.

4.4.3. Stakeholder Input

The stakeholder exchange highlighted the growing importance of immersive digital technologies for workforce development and operational safety. The showcased good practice highlighted how SMEs often face challenges in onboarding employees quickly while maintaining consistent training quality, particularly in environments where physical training is costly, time-intensive or difficult to scale.

The example presented directly by the stakeholder MATSUKO demonstrates how XR-based training solutions can support faster onboarding, improve knowledge retention and reduce operational risks. The MATSUKO use case illustrates a transferable good practice that combines

digital innovation with practical workforce development, showing how immersive technologies can strengthen both operational efficiency and employee safety across different sectors.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	MATSUKO XR Trainings for Safe and Quick Onboarding
Solution Provider	MATSUKO s.r.o.
Solution Name	XR trainings
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Slovakia*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Other*
General Focus Area	*Digital Solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Automation and Robotics*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Human Resource Management*
Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	Industries face growing pressure to onboard and upskill employees quickly while maintaining high safety standards and controlling costs. Traditional training methods, such as classroom sessions, manuals, or shadowing, are often slow, inconsistent, and fail to prepare workers for real-world risks. This leads to higher accident rates, operational errors, and costly downtime. At the same time, companies struggle with workforce shortages and the need to train large numbers of employees across locations. Physical training environments are expensive to replicate, limited in scalability, and cannot safely simulate critical or hazardous scenarios. As a result, organizations face a gap between training and real operational readiness, impacting both safety performance and cost efficiency.

Main project/service/solution features	Immersive XR training scenarios x Real-time holographic instructors
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	knowledge retention through immersive, hands-on learning. Employees gain practical experience in realistic scenarios, leading to safer behavior on-site and fewer workplace incidents. Companies benefit from reduced training costs by minimizing the need for physical equipment, travel, and instructor time. The solution enables consistent training quality across locations, ensuring standardized procedures and compliance. Faster skill acquisition shortens time-to-productivity, helping address workforce shortages. Data-driven insights allow organizations to track performance, identify gaps, and continuously improve training programs. Overall, MATSUKO XR trainings deliver measurable gains in safety, efficiency, and operational cost reduction.
Links to additional supporting materials	https://www.matsuko.com/trainings

4.5. Project Partner 05 - CEM

The Chamber of Economy of Montenegro (CEM) is the national chamber and a key intermediary organisation in shaping economic policy and supporting entrepreneurship in Montenegro. Through its close and continuous engagement with companies across multiple sectors, CEM has strong insight into business needs related to technological innovation, skills development and competitiveness. It supports SMEs through training activities, knowledge transfer and initiatives aimed at the adoption of advanced technologies and resource-efficient practices. With 13 board associations covering sectors such as agriculture, tourism, ICT, transport and energy, CEM provides a broad platform for sectoral networking and innovation support. Within the RISE project, CEM contributes by promoting the uptake of digital and green solutions, strengthening SME capacities and supporting the transition towards more sustainable and technology-driven business models.

4.5.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, the Chamber of Economy of Montenegro (CEM) applied solutions focusing on digital transformation in manufacturing as well as circular economy approaches addressing plastic waste.

One key solution is the “Common Data Stack (CDS)” provided by DeltaHes, which targets operational inefficiencies caused by fragmented data systems and limited real-time visibility in production processes. In the presented case, SMEs in the food and beverage sector faced challenges related to scattered data sources, manual monitoring and delayed decision-making.

The CDS solution integrates data from multiple systems (e.g. SCADA, MES and ERP) into a centralised platform, enabling real-time monitoring, predictive maintenance and data-driven decision-making. By improving data visibility and automating reporting processes, the solution enhances production planning and resource management.

As a result, companies achieved measurable efficiency gains, including reduced downtime, improved process continuity and a reported reduction of up to 15% in raw material waste. The solution demonstrates how digital integration and analytics can significantly improve operational performance and sustainability outcomes in manufacturing SMEs.

In parallel, CEM contributed a circular economy-oriented solution through “3D Soba – Recycled Plastic Filament and 3D Manufacturing”. This solution addresses the growing challenge of plastic waste, particularly PET bottles, by converting it into high-quality filament for 3D printing.

The approach combines recycling processes with advanced manufacturing technologies, enabling the production of customised and affordable products such as tools, furniture elements and promotional items. In addition to reducing plastic waste, the solution creates new value chains by transforming waste into usable production inputs.

The implementation resulted in improved material efficiency, reduced production costs and enhanced sustainability performance. Furthermore, the solution includes educational and training

components, supporting SMEs and local communities in adopting circular practices and 3D printing technologies.

Together, these solutions illustrate CEM's approach of combining digitalisation and circular economy principles to support SMEs in improving efficiency, reducing waste and fostering innovation in manufacturing processes.

4.5.2. Piloting

CEM conducted piloting activities with ten SMEs from various sectors, including food and beverages, agriculture and manufacturing. The piloting process applied the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool and the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool, supported by the Datamensio environment and complementary Excel-based analysis. The process consisted of structured assessments, mentoring sessions and follow-up discussions, leading to the development of tailored roadmaps for each company.

Across the SMEs, the assessments revealed predominantly low to medium maturity levels. Many companies relied on manual processes or basic digital tools, with limited system integration and structured data management. In the area of energy efficiency, companies often showed basic awareness but lacked systematic monitoring, clear efficiency targets and data-driven optimisation practices.

Based on these findings, CEM developed practical and step-by-step roadmaps focusing on feasible improvements aligned with the SMEs' capacities. On the digital side, recommendations included the introduction of basic IT infrastructure, digital workflow solutions, CRM systems and improved data management practices. In several cases, actions also focused on strengthening digital marketing and online visibility.

For energy-related challenges, recommendations addressed the introduction of structured monitoring practices, gradual optimisation of energy consumption and exploration of external support mechanisms for energy-efficiency investments. Companies were also encouraged to adopt a more systematic approach to data analysis in order to support operational and strategic decision-making.

A key feature of the piloting approach was the strong integration of external solution providers and support instruments. SMEs were guided towards relevant providers for digitalisation and energy optimisation, as well as financial instruments supporting future investments. The B2GreenHub platform was used as a complementary resource, offering training modules and knowledge materials tailored to SME needs.

The impact assessment followed the standard ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post methodology. Overall, the piloting phase was well received by participating companies, which highlighted the value of structured assessments and practical recommendations. While implementation of measures is expected to be gradual, depending on available resources, the piloting activities successfully supported SMEs in identifying improvement areas and initiating their digital and green transition.

4.5.3. Stakeholder Input

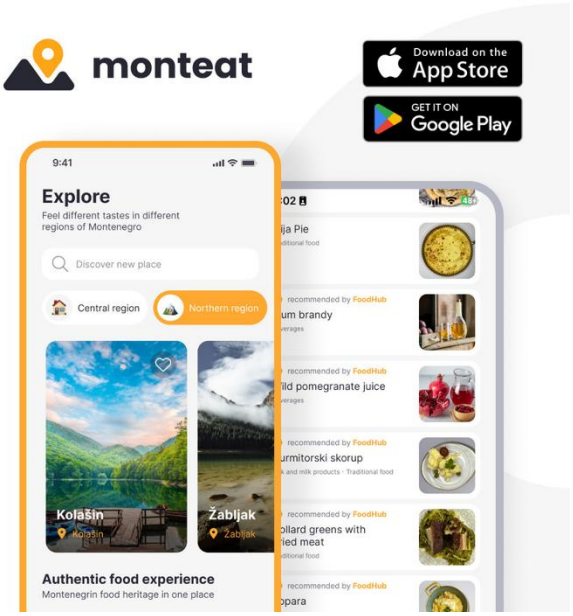
Bridging the gap between scientific research and practical business application remains an important challenge for many food SMEs, particularly in regions with limited access to advanced technologies and innovation support services. The showcased good practice demonstrated how digital tools, research expertise and practical support mechanisms can be combined to strengthen innovation capacity and competitiveness within the food sector.

The FoodHub CoE model demonstrates how integrated support structures can help SMEs improve product quality, increase market visibility and align with evolving food safety requirements. The presented use case illustrates a transferable good practice that combines scientific knowledge, digital innovation and direct business support to strengthen sustainable development in regional food ecosystems.

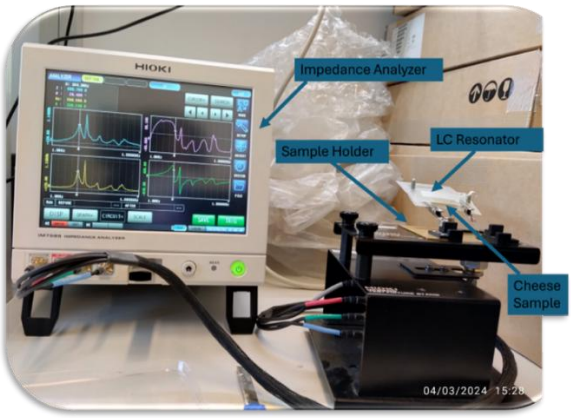
Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	Empowering food SMEs through digital innovation and science
Solution Provider	Centre of Excellence - FoodHub, University of Donja Gorica
Solution Name	FoodHub CoE – Centre of excellence for food safety and risk assessment
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Montenegro*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Food & Beverages*
General Focus Area	*Digital Solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Other*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	*Combination of biosensors, mobile applications, databases, AI tools and product development support tailored for food SMEs.*
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Technology Development*

Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	Food SMEs in Montenegro face multiple challenges: limited access to affordable quality control technologies, weak visibility on the market, insufficient digitalisation, and difficulties in aligning with EU food safety and authenticity standards. Traditional production methods are often not supported by modern tools, while research results rarely reach practical application. This creates a gap between science, industry and policy, limiting innovation and competitiveness of local producers.
Main project/service/solution features	• Development of digital tools (e.g. MontEat mobile app for visibility of local food and producers); • Biosensor technologies for real-time, non-destructive quality monitoring; • Support for new product development (11 innovative products, guides, catalogues); • Blockchain-based traceability solutions (wine sector); • Integration of AI, databases and food safety systems; • Direct support to SMEs through training, equipment and advisory services; • Strong link between research, policy and industry application; • Collaboration with international partners (EFSA, FAO, EIT Food, etc.).
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	FoodHub effectively connects scientific research with practical application by delivering concrete and scalable solutions for the food sector. It has enabled SMEs to access advanced tools for quality control, product development and market visibility, enhancing their competitiveness and alignment with EU standards. Digital solutions have increased the visibility of traditional products and strengthened links between producers, consumers and tourists. At the same time, research results have been translated into practical applications, policies and guidelines. The initiative has strengthened national capacities in food safety, quality and authenticity, supported the development of new products, and contributed to the digital transformation of Montenegro's food ecosystem. In addition, FoodHub has built strong international partnerships, positioning Montenegro within global food research and innovation networks.
Links to additional supporting materials	Official website: https://foodhub.udg.edu.me/

Picture 1. Monteat application



Picture 2. Biosensors for quality of cheese



Picture 3. A two-day advanced training course on hygienic engineering and design for food producers, industry representatives and stakeholders in Montenegro

4.6. Project Partner 06 - CCIS

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia (CCIS) is the national business association representing companies across all sectors in Serbia, with a network of 17 regional chambers and 9 international offices. It operates across key economic sectors including agriculture, industry and services, providing comprehensive support to SMEs in areas such as skills development, innovation, access to finance and internationalisation. CCIS has extensive experience in EU-funded projects (e.g. Horizon 2020, ADRION), particularly in supporting SME competitiveness, innovation capacity and sustainable business practices. Within the RISE project, CCIS contributes by implementing and testing transnational cross-sector mentorship approaches, supporting SMEs in adapting to market demands, strengthening skills and enhancing their positioning in domestic and international markets.

4.6.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia (CCIS) applied solutions combining digital innovation in agriculture with capacity-building approaches for sustainable business transformation.

One key solution is the “Plant-O-Meter: Multispectral Sensor for AgTech” developed by Bitgear. This digital solution addresses inefficiencies in traditional fertilizer application, which often lead to overuse of inputs, increased costs and negative environmental impacts. In the presented case, SMEs in the food and agricultural sector lacked precise tools for monitoring crop health and optimising fertilizer use.

The Plant-O-Meter enables real-time monitoring of plant conditions through multispectral analysis, supporting data-driven and variable-rate fertilizer application. By integrating precision agriculture techniques into existing farming practices, the solution allows more efficient use of resources while maintaining productivity.

As a result, the implementation achieved a reduction of approximately 15% in fertilizer usage while maintaining optimal crop yields. This demonstrates how digital tools and data analytics can contribute to both environmental sustainability and economic efficiency in agricultural production.

In parallel, CCIS contributed a capacity-building solution through training activities led by Tijana Sekulić CMC, focusing on “How to Initiate Sustainable Change Through Green Transition”. This solution addresses the lack of practical knowledge and implementation capacity among SMEs regarding circular economy principles and energy efficiency.

The approach is based on interactive workshops supported by specially designed tools such as key cards, which guide participants through core concepts of circular economy and sustainable business practices. The training combines theoretical input with hands-on exercises, enabling companies to identify concrete improvement measures tailored to their operations.

The implementation involved more than 120 SMEs across several cities, supporting them in developing practical solutions related to resource optimisation, waste reduction and energy

efficiency. As a result, participating companies improved their awareness, initiated concrete actions and strengthened their capacity to implement sustainable practices.

Together, these solutions illustrate CCIS's approach of combining digital innovation with skills development, supporting SMEs in both technological adoption and organisational transformation towards more sustainable business models.

4.6.2. Piloting

CCIS conducted piloting activities with ten SMEs from the food and beverage, agriculture and manufacturing sectors, applying the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool and the Material Circularity Assessment Tool. The process combined structured assessments, mentoring support and follow-up discussions, resulting in tailored roadmaps for each participating company.

Across the SMEs, the assessments revealed predominantly low to medium levels of maturity. Common challenges included limited use of structured data, lack of systematic monitoring (especially in energy and circular practices), and low levels of digital integration. Many companies relied on manual processes, had no formal strategies or targets, and lacked the internal capacity to implement more advanced solutions.

Based on these findings, CCIS developed practical and step-by-step roadmaps focusing on feasible improvements aligned with SME capacities. In the area of energy efficiency, recommendations typically included the gradual introduction of smart metering, definition of measurable efficiency targets and optimisation of equipment use. For circular economy challenges, actions focused on improving packaging, introducing recyclable materials, and establishing systems for waste reduction and return models. In the digital domain, recommendations addressed strengthening digital skills, improving online presence, and gradually introducing digital tools for monitoring, marketing and process optimisation.

A key feature of the piloting approach was the strong integration of solution providers and supporting platforms. SMEs were guided towards relevant providers such as Bitgear, Altaboxa and Farmit, as well as to free resources including the B2GreenHub platform and the national Circular Economy Serbia platform. This combination of practical tools and advisory support enabled companies to better understand available solutions and potential implementation pathways.

The impact assessment followed the standard ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post methodology. Overall, companies expressed high satisfaction with the mentoring approach, particularly valuing networking opportunities, access to solution providers and practical recommendations. However, implementation levels varied significantly depending on internal resources and engagement. While some SMEs initiated concrete improvements (e.g. energy efficiency measures), others remained at an early stage due to limited financial or organisational capacity.

An important lesson learned from the piloting phase is that successful implementation depends not only on the quality of mentoring and recommendations, but also on the active engagement and readiness of SMEs. The piloting nevertheless provided a strong foundation for raising awareness, identifying development needs and supporting the gradual transition towards more digital, green and circular business practices.

4.6.3. Stakeholder Input

The transnational exchange highlighted the importance of circular solutions that transform food waste into new value streams within the agri-food sector. The showcased good practice demonstrated that many producers face significant losses due to strict market requirements, surplus production and limited processing capacities, which often result in avoidable food waste.

The Biosil solution demonstrates how fermentation technologies can convert surplus fruits and vegetables into high-value protein-rich animal feed, creating both environmental and economic benefits. The presented use case illustrates a transferable circular economy practice that reduces organic waste, improves resource efficiency and enables SMEs to generate additional value from previously unused raw materials.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	Biosil doo
Solution Provider	Biosil doo
Solution Name	The feed fermented bacterium protein
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Serbia*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Food & Beverages*
General Focus Area	*Green solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Waste Reduction and Recycling Technology*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Technology Development*

Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	The company identified two key challenges in its operations related to fresh fruit and vegetable production. Firstly, a significant share of produce could not be placed on the market due to strict buyer requirements for first-class products. Secondly, although the company operates a juice processing line, it lacked sufficient capacity to process all surplus raw materials and convert them into marketable products. As a result, food waste ranged between 20% and 40%, depending on the season. Similar challenges were observed across related sectors, with waste levels reaching up to 50% in the wine industry and around 20% in retail. Existing solutions such as composting or redistribution through donation and giveaway platforms were recognized, but they were not sufficient to address the scale and economic impact of the problem.
Main project/service/solution features	In response to these challenges, the company adapted an existing protected technology and developed an innovative solution based on fermentation processes. The Feed Fermented Bacterium Protein solution uses surplus fruits and vegetables as input material for fermentation, transforming organic waste into high-value protein-rich animal feed. While fermentation is a well-established process traditionally used in food production, this approach introduces a different application—where the primary goal is the production of high-quality animal nutrition. The technology enables the generation of feed with increased protein content, contributing to both resource efficiency and sustainability.
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	The implemented technology provides a sustainable solution for reducing food waste generated in both production and retail stages. By converting surplus fruits and vegetables into valuable animal feed, the company achieved multiple benefits: • reduction of organic waste,

	• creation of a high-quality product for animal nutrition, • positive environmental impact, • improved economic efficiency. The biggest advantage of the solution is its flexibility, as it can be applied to a wide range of fruits and vegetables, enabling the production of tailored feed for different types of animals.
Links to additional supporting materials	www.biosil.rs

4.7. Project Partner 07 - RAPIV

The Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovations – Varna (RAPIV), Bulgaria, is a non-profit organisation supporting regional economic development through entrepreneurship and innovation. It works closely with universities, public authorities and SMEs, providing mentoring, training and support services for start-ups and businesses.

RAPIV has broad experience in EU-funded projects and focuses on the promotion of innovation, development of action plans and transfer of good practices. As EIT Food Hub for Bulgaria, it plays a key role in supporting agri-food start-ups and strengthening entrepreneurial skills.

Within the RISE project, RAPIV contributes by supporting SMEs through mentoring and training activities, as well as by facilitating the exchange of good practices and strengthening regional innovation ecosystems.

4.7.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, RAPIV applied solutions focusing on energy efficiency and digitalisation in the agri-food sector, with a particular emphasis on smart farming and automated resource management.

One key solution is the “GRAS” system developed by Predistic Ltd, which addresses inefficiencies in climate control within greenhouse production. Traditional approaches often rely on manual adjustments and limited data availability, leading to suboptimal growing conditions and unnecessary energy consumption. The GRAS system introduces automated climate control based on real-time environmental data, including temperature, humidity, solar radiation and weather conditions.

By integrating sensors and automation technologies, the system enables dynamic control of ventilation, heating, shading and lighting. This reduces manual intervention and ensures optimal growing conditions for crops. As a result, the implementation led to improved energy efficiency, reduced operational costs and more stable production conditions, while minimising resource waste.

In addition, RAPIV applied a digital solution through the “ONDO” system provided by ONDO Solutions LTD, focusing on automated irrigation and precision fertilisation. This solution addresses challenges related to labour-intensive farm management and inefficient resource use in agricultural production.

The ONDO system enables fully wireless automation of irrigation and fertilisation processes, allowing remote monitoring and control via mobile devices. It integrates data-driven decision-making into daily operations, improving accuracy and responsiveness in resource application.

As a result, the solution contributed to increased crop yields, reduced labour requirements and more efficient use of water and nutrients. It demonstrates how digitalisation and connectivity can significantly enhance productivity and sustainability in agricultural SMEs.

Together, these solutions highlight RAPIV's focus on combining smart technologies and automation to support SMEs in improving resource efficiency, reducing environmental impact and increasing operational performance.

4.7.2. Piloting

RAPIV conducted piloting activities with ten SMEs from the agri-food and related sectors, applying the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool and the Material Circularity Readiness Assessment Tool. The process combined structured assessments, personalised consultations and follow-up mentoring, leading to tailored roadmaps for each company.

Across the SMEs, the assessments revealed predominantly low to medium maturity levels. Many companies showed strong motivation for green and digital transition, but relied on manual or only partially structured processes. Common challenges included limited integration of digital systems, lack of centralised data management, insufficient monitoring of energy and resource use, and only partially formalised circular practices.

Based on these findings, RAPIV developed practical, company-specific roadmaps focusing on gradual and achievable improvements. In the area of digitalisation, recommendations typically included the introduction of ERP or CRM systems, improved digital marketing and online sales, and better integration of production and administrative processes. For energy efficiency, actions focused on basic monitoring, optimisation of equipment use and exploration of renewable energy solutions. In the field of circular economy, proposed measures addressed packaging improvements, waste reduction and the definition of measurable sustainability objectives.

A key feature of the piloting approach was the strong use of personalised consultations and targeted matching with solution providers. SMEs were connected with providers such as Predistic and Commerce Finance to explore practical implementation pathways. In addition, companies were introduced to the B2GreenHub platform as a source of tools, training and technological solutions supporting their transition.

The impact assessment followed the standard ex-ante and ex-post methodology. Overall feedback from SMEs was very positive, particularly regarding the practical relevance of consultations and the tailored recommendations. Several companies reported concrete early results, such as reductions in material waste (up to 10%), improvements in energy efficiency (around 5%) and enhanced digital capabilities. In addition, some SMEs initiated funding applications or started implementing digital and energy-related solutions.

Beyond measurable results, the piloting phase contributed significantly to strengthening internal capacities, improving strategic orientation and increasing readiness for further investments. The results demonstrate that combining structured assessments with hands-on mentoring and access to solution providers is an effective approach to support SMEs in their green, digital and circular transition.

4.7.3. Stakeholder Input

The transnational exchange highlighted the importance of practical and accessible digital solutions for small agricultural businesses, particularly in regions where labour shortages and limited operational capacity create daily challenges. The showcase practice highlighted that automation technologies are most effective when they are easy to implement, financially feasible and directly address concrete operational bottlenecks.

The ONDO solution demonstrates how smart irrigation and precision fertilisation can significantly reduce manual workload while improving operational efficiency. The Roseberry Farm use case illustrates a transferable good practice where digital automation supports resource optimisation, reduces dependency on manual labour and makes modern farming more attractive and scalable for younger entrepreneurs entering the agricultural sector.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	**ONDO** - System for automated management of irrigat ion, precision fertilization and climate control
Solution Provider	ONDO Solutions LTD
Solution Name	ONDO
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Bulgaria*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Food & Beverages*
General Focus Area	*Digital Solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Digitalization and Connectivity*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Manufacturing Operations*
Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	*Roseberry Farm* specializes in cultivating American blueberries and producing blueberry jam. The owners balance office and fieldwork, managing irrigation and fertilization alone while seasonal workers handle harvesting. During peak season, daily watering and feeding demand excessive time, which they lack. From the start, they sought automation for remote management and monitoring. As new farmers, optimizing irrigation and fertilization is key to higher yields, reduced losses, and superior fruit quality. Additionally, they consult agronomists who require quick access to past irrigation and fertilization data to provide effective guidance.

Main project/service/solution features	In the blueberry plantations of *Roseberry Farm* (14 decares of arable land), ONDO has implemented a fully wireless automation system for irrigation and precision fertilization. The processes are managed using the ONDO Pro controller and a dual-channel FertiON nutrient unit, with the installation designed for future expansion, including an EC/pH control module for irrigation water and an additional FertiON channel. The farm owners remotely manage and monitor irrigation and fertilization processes via a mobile phone. This farm operates under ONDO's subscription-based business model in Bulgaria, allowing automation with a low initial investment.
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	*Roseberry Farm* has been using automated irrigation and precision fertilization with ONDO for three seasons. In the first season, they achieved a 90% reduction in labor and 0% losses from human error. They continuously monitor yields for each crop, optimizing their automation settings with agronomic support. Since adopting ONDO, they do not have a comparison baseline for water, nutrient, and energy savings. However, their main goal—eliminating the need for one person to spend 4-5 hours daily on blueberry irrigation—has been achieved. Their long-term goal is to optimize water and fertilizer usage with ONDO. ONDO also provides confidence and support to young people entering agriculture, showing that farming can be high-tech, offering opportunities for success and excellent profits despite sector challenges.
Links to additional supporting materials	https://ondo.io/bg/clients/roseberry-farm/

4.8. Project Partner 08 - HSPF

Pforzheim University (HSPF), Germany, combines expertise in design, engineering, and business, linking academic research with practical industry applications. Located in the industrial region of Baden-Württemberg, the university maintains strong cooperation with regional and international partners and is actively engaged in research and innovation networks. With specific expertise in digital transformation, circular economy and sustainable business models, particularly in the food sector, HSPF contributes to the RISE project by providing methodological input, supporting knowledge transfer and strengthening the conceptual development of innovative and sustainable approaches for SMEs.

4.8.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, Pforzheim University (HSPF) applied solutions focusing on energy efficiency, artificial intelligence and digital transformation, supporting SMEs in improving operational performance and sustainability.

One key solution is the “Enerchant-Tool” developed by Krumedia, which addresses challenges related to fragmented energy management and manual tracking of efficiency measures. The platform integrates planning, execution and monitoring of energy-saving actions into a single system, enabling real-time data analysis and improved transparency. As a result, companies were able to identify inefficiencies, optimise machinery performance and reduce excessive energy consumption while ensuring compliance with reporting requirements.

In addition, HSPF applied the “Virtual AI Environments” solution developed by the Institute of Smart Systems and Services (IoS3). This solution enables SMEs to test and validate AI-based applications in a secure and controlled virtual setting, overcoming barriers such as lack of expertise and limited access to infrastructure. The approach supports experimentation with automation, data analytics and process optimisation, allowing companies to better understand and implement AI technologies in their operations.

Furthermore, HSPF contributed expert-based advisory services through Prof. Dr. Bernhard Koelmel, focusing on digital transformation strategies for SMEs. The advisory approach combines analysis of business models with tailored recommendations for integrating digital technologies such as AI, IoT and data platforms. As a result, participating companies improved their strategic orientation, identified concrete digitalisation pathways and enhanced their operational efficiency and long-term sustainability.

Together, these solutions demonstrate HSPF’s approach of combining technological tools with expert knowledge to support SMEs in adopting digital innovations and improving energy and process efficiency.

4.8.2. Piloting

HSPF conducted piloting activities with ten SMEs from sectors such as food and beverage, events, retail and small-scale manufacturing. The process applied the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool and the Cooperational Profile Matrix within the Datamensio environment, combined with mentoring sessions and follow-up consultations to develop tailored improvement roadmaps.

Across the SMEs, the assessments revealed predominantly low to medium digital maturity levels. While several companies already had isolated digital tools in place (e.g. POS systems or basic online channels), processes were often fragmented and relied heavily on manual handling. Common challenges included limited online visibility, manual customer communication and order handling, lack of digital workforce coordination, and insufficient use of data for decision-making. In operational contexts, inefficiencies were identified in areas such as payment processing, inventory tracking and internal coordination.

Based on these findings, HSPF developed practical, low-threshold roadmaps focusing on feasible and cost-efficient improvements. Typical recommendations included the introduction of cashless payment systems, digital time-tracking and shift planning tools, basic inventory management solutions, and the development of online presence through websites and Google Business profiles. In addition, simple digital communication tools (e.g. newsletters or messaging services) and entry-level automation solutions were proposed to improve customer interaction and internal workflows.

A key characteristic of the piloting approach was its strong focus on pragmatic and easily implementable solutions adapted to SME capacities. Rather than complex system changes, the recommendations emphasised incremental improvements and the use of widely available tools. The B2GreenHub platform was introduced as a supporting resource, although in most cases its use remained complementary and mediated through mentors.

The impact assessment followed the standard ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post methodology. Across all cases, the results show a consistent pattern: the main impact of the piloting phase was strategic and awareness-based rather than operational. SMEs reported increased understanding of digital opportunities, improved prioritisation of development areas and high satisfaction with mentoring support. However, due to the short project timeframe, most recommended measures were not yet fully implemented, and no measurable quantitative impacts (e.g. efficiency gains or revenue increases) could be documented.

Overall, the piloting activities can be characterised as diagnostic and capacity-building oriented. They successfully supported SMEs in identifying concrete digitalisation pathways and strengthening their readiness for future implementation. A follow-up phase with defined KPIs and post-implementation measurement could further support the capture of long-term business effects and validate the practical impact of the proposed solutions.

4.8.3. Stakeholder Input

The transnational exchange highlighted the importance of making advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence more accessible for SMEs. The showcased good practice demonstrated that many smaller companies are interested in AI applications but often lack the internal expertise, financial resources and testing capacities needed to explore these technologies independently.

The AI enablement approach presented by HSPF demonstrates how low-risk support services can help SMEs test innovation opportunities before making larger investments. The Brezelcast use case shows how academic expertise, student collaboration and real business challenges can be combined to support data-driven decision-making and strengthen SME readiness for digital transformation.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	AI Support (Consulting) and Enablement for SMEs to Support Digital Transformation
Solution Provider	Pforzheim University (HSPF) AI Lab Nordschwarzwald
Solution Name	Free AI Advisory session and Enablement Service for SMEs
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Germany*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Cross-sector*
General Focus Area	*Digital Solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Automation and Robotics*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Technology Development*
Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	A regional bakery with multiple sales locations faced challenges in accurately forecasting daily product demand. Decisions about how much bread, pastries, and other goods to produce were made manually, based on experience and factors such as weather, holidays, and seasonality. This often led to inefficiencies, including overproduction and waste or underproduction and lost sales. The company aimed to improve sustainability and operational efficiency but lacked the expertise to evaluate and implement AI-based forecasting methods.

Main project/service/solution features	The Brezelcast project is an example of a free AI consulting and support service provided through the AI Lab Nordschwarzwald: • Initial consultation and problem identification with the SME • Student-led project collaboration supported by academic experts • Evaluation of machine learning models for demand forecasting • Use of real company data (sales, external factors like weather) • Development of prototype forecasting approaches • Knowledge transfer and explanation of AI methods to the company The service is non-commercial and publicly supported, enabling SMEs to explore AI without financial risk. It combines academic expertise, student involvement, and real-world business challenge
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	The SME gained valuable insights into how AI can improve demand forecasting and production planning. Through the collaboration, the company was able to explore data-driven decision-making and test the feasibility of machine learning models in a real business context. The project reduced entry barriers to AI adoption and demonstrated concrete application potential without requiring upfront investment. Additionally, the company benefited from knowledge transfer and increased awareness of digital innovation opportunities. The collaboration also created a foundation for future AI projects and continuous improvement of forecasting accuracy.
Links to additional supporting materials	https://futurelab.hs-pforzheim.de/ki/brezelcast https://dl.gi.de/server/api/core/bitstreams/26de2bd3-5d9e-4639-9e16-3d99c43ebf93/content https://businesspf.hs-pforzheim.de/studium/studierende/bachelor/bw_wirtschaftsinformatik_management_it/detailsansicht/news/ai_meets_weckle

4.9. Project Partner 09 – USAMV CN

The University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca (USAMV CN), Romania, is a higher education and research institution with strong expertise in the agri-food sector, including food production, processing, quality control and food safety. The university combines research and development with practical knowledge transfer through training, mentoring and workshops, supporting SMEs particularly in rural and remote areas. With experience in international cooperation and innovation projects, USAMV CN contributes to strengthening entrepreneurial skills, promoting sustainable practices and facilitating the adoption of digital, energy-efficient and circular solutions in the food sector. Within the RISE project, the university plays a key role in enhancing competencies of SMEs and regional mentors, supporting knowledge exchange and fostering innovation-driven development.

4.9.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, USAMV CN applied solutions focusing on material circularity and digital approaches for consumer engagement in the food sector.

One key solution is the "RongoDesign Smart Lab – Smart Manufacturing and Customised Sustainable Panels". This solution addresses challenges in traditional manufacturing related to limited digitalisation, inefficient resource use and increasing environmental impact. By integrating Digital Twin technology and IoT platforms, the solution enables real-time monitoring of production processes and supports data-driven optimisation.

The approach combines advanced manufacturing technologies with sustainable materials, including the use of eco-friendly 3D printing filaments and additive manufacturing for customised panel production. As a result, companies improved resource efficiency, reduced CO_2 emissions and enhanced production flexibility, contributing to both environmental sustainability and operational performance.

In addition, USAMV CN applied the "Inspire Science" testing service, focusing on sustainable food solutions and digital consumer engagement. This solution addresses the challenge of limited consumer awareness and engagement regarding healthy and sustainable food choices.

Through targeted digital campaigns, including video-based content and educational materials, the approach supports companies in communicating sustainability and health-related topics more effectively. In the presented case, the initiative led to increased consumer engagement and strengthened brand positioning, demonstrating the relevance of digital communication tools in promoting sustainable consumption patterns.

Together, these solutions illustrate USAMV CN's approach of combining technological innovation in manufacturing with digital strategies for consumer awareness, supporting SMEs across both production and market-oriented activities.

4.9.2. Piloting

USAMV CN conducted piloting activities with ten SMEs from the agri-food sector, applying the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool and the Material Circularity Assessment Tool through the Datamensio platform. The process combined structured diagnostics, KPI definition and baseline mapping, followed by tailored mentoring sessions and the development of company-specific roadmaps.

The piloting phase covered a diverse group of SMEs, including producers, processors and food service businesses. Across all companies, the assessments revealed predominantly low to medium maturity levels, with strong motivation for innovation but limited formalisation of digital, energy and circular practices. Common challenges included manual processes, lack of structured data management, limited monitoring of energy and material flows, and the absence of formal sustainability strategies and KPIs.

Based on these findings, USAMV CN developed tailored and practical roadmaps focusing on gradual and feasible improvements. In the area of digitalisation, recommendations included the introduction of basic digital tools for inventory management, customer interaction and process monitoring, as well as gradual integration of data-driven decision-making. For energy efficiency, actions focused on improved monitoring, optimisation of energy use and exploration of renewable energy solutions. In the circular economy domain, proposed measures addressed waste reduction, sustainable sourcing, packaging improvements and the introduction of simple tracking systems for material flows.

A key feature of the piloting approach was the strong integration of mentoring, practical tools and external expertise. SMEs were connected with solution providers, experts and training resources, while also being introduced to the B2GreenHub platform as a source of tools, best practices and networking opportunities. In addition, companies received recommendations for free digital and sustainability tools supporting immediate implementation steps.

The impact assessment results indicate initial positive developments across several SMEs. Companies reported improvements in energy efficiency (typically between 5–10%), reductions in material waste (around 3–10%), adoption of new digital tools and the establishment of new business collaborations. Furthermore, employees were trained in digital and green skills, strengthening internal capacities for further transformation.

Overall, the piloting phase demonstrated strong engagement from participating SMEs and confirmed the relevance of the mentoring approach. While implementation levels vary depending on financial resources and internal capacities, the activities successfully supported companies in identifying concrete development pathways and initiating their transition towards more digital, energy-efficient and circular business models.

4.9.3. Stakeholder Input

The transnational exchange highlighted the importance of bridging scientific research and practical market application in the agri-food sector. The showcased good practice demonstrated that many SMEs face difficulties in accessing research capacities, participating in international innovation

projects and translating scientific knowledge into commercially viable products and communication strategies.

The INSPIRE SCIENCE model demonstrates how scientific consultancy, EU-funded research participation and market-oriented communication can be successfully combined to support sustainable innovation in the food sector. The presented use cases show a transferable good practice where SMEs benefit from access to research expertise, product development support and science-based communication strategies that strengthen both innovation capacity and market visibility.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	Science-led consultancy turning EU-funded R&D into agro-food innovations
Solution Provider	INSPIRE SCIENCE SRL
Solution Name	Integrated Scientific Consultancy & EU Project Participation Model
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Romania*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Food & Beverages*
General Focus Area	*Green solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Other*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	Circular economy, sustainable agro-food R&D, and green product development through EU-funded research partnerships and scientific consultancy
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Technology Development*
Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	Agro-food SMEs in Romania and across the EU face significant barriers to innovation: lack of in-house R&D expertise, limited access to EU funding mechanisms, and difficulty translating scientific research into marketable products. Companies such as Transavia (Romania's leading poultry producer) needed science-based communication strategies and sustainable positioning but lacked the scientific knowledge and digital capabilities to deliver this independently. Simultaneously, the agro-food sector urgently requires alignment with EU Green Deal targets and circular economy principles, yet SMEs rarely have the resources to engage with Horizon Europe research networks or develop validated food product prototypes.

Main project/service/solution features	INSPIRE SCIENCE's integrated consultancy model combines three pillars: (1) Scientific Consultancy – end-to-end support from R&D strategy and EU proposal development through to project management and dissemination; (2) Active EU Project Partnership – INSPIRE SCIENCE participates as an official partner in Horizon MSCA projects (RIA4FOOD, VALIAS), leading work packages in dissemination, compound recovery, and food ingredient formulation; (3) Industry-Facing Digital Strategy – science-led content creation and social media campaigns enabling food companies to build brand credibility and consumer trust. For Transavia, INSPIRE SCIENCE delivered YouTube nutrition campaigns, YouTube analytics optimisation, and sustainable brand positioning, generating 500,000+ views in the first six months and a 25% uplift in consumer awareness.
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	Through its consultancy model, INSPIRE SCIENCE has enabled tangible innovation outcomes: Within the RIA4FOOD Horizon MSCA project, INSPIRE SCIENCE led biochemical characterisation of sea buckthorn samples during a research mobility at CING (Cyprus), contributing to the development of a sea buckthorn energy bar with validated commercial potential. Within VALIAS (Horizon MSCA 101131441), INSPIRE SCIENCE leads WP4, recovering and characterising bioactive compounds from invasive alien species and formulating innovative prototypes for food, feed, and cosmetic applications – with consumer acceptance surveys underway. The Transavia industry case demonstrated that science-led digital communication can achieve 500K+ video views, a 25% increase in consumer awareness, significant growth in social media engagement, and a major uplift in website traffic, solidifying Transavia's reputation as a health-conscious, sustainable food producer.
Links to additional supporting materials	www.inspirescience.net, www.ria4food.eu, www.valias.eu

4.10. Project Partner 10 – DIH ONEX

Digital Innovation Hub ONEX (DIH ONEX), Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a key provider of digital innovation services in the Republic of Srpska, supporting SMEs in adopting advanced technologies and strengthening their competitiveness. With a strong focus on the agri-food sector, ONEX combines technological expertise with business development support, training and ecosystem building. Through its involvement in EU projects and cooperation with regional stakeholders, ONEX contributes to improving digital skills, fostering innovation and enabling SMEs to transition towards more sustainable and efficient business models.

4.10.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, DIH ONEX applied solutions focusing on material circularity and energy efficiency, supporting SMEs in improving resource management, reducing environmental impact and enhancing operational performance.

One key solution is the "Multi-Purpose Steel Structures and Waste Disposal Systems" provided by Vendom. This solution addresses inefficiencies in waste management and infrastructure within industrial SMEs, where outdated systems often lead to higher operational costs, environmental impact and safety risks.

The implemented approach combines customised steel structures with advanced waste disposal systems, including optimised collection, sorting and handling processes. By improving the organisation of waste management and integrating durable, tailored infrastructure, the solution enables more efficient operations and reduces environmental impact.

As a result, the implementation led to improved waste handling, reduced emissions and lower operational costs, while enhancing overall safety and sustainability performance in the company's operations.

In addition, DIH ONEX applied the "TELEMAX Smart Energy and Intelligent Solutions Suite" provided by Telemax, focusing on energy efficiency and smart infrastructure integration. This solution addresses challenges related to high energy consumption and limited visibility of energy usage in SMEs.

The solution integrates renewable energy systems, such as solar power installations, with smart energy monitoring tools that provide real-time insights into consumption patterns. This enables companies to better manage energy use, optimise processes and reduce dependency on traditional energy sources.

As a result, the implementation improved energy efficiency, reduced operational costs and supported more sustainable energy management practices. The combination of renewable energy and intelligent monitoring demonstrates how SMEs can enhance both environmental performance and competitiveness through integrated energy solutions.

4.10.2. Piloting

DIH ONEX conducted piloting activities with ten SMEs from the agri-food and related sectors, applying the Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, the Energy Optimisation Readiness Assessment Tool and the Material Circularity Assessment Tool. The process combined structured assessments, advisory sessions and the development of tailored roadmaps for each company, supported by the B2GreenHub platform.

Across the SMEs, the assessments consistently revealed low maturity levels in digitalisation, circularity and energy management. Most companies relied on manual processes, had limited data tracking and lacked structured monitoring systems. Common challenges included absence of digital tools, weak coordination of operations, limited visibility of material and energy flows, and low awareness of circular economy practices.

Based on these findings, DIH ONEX developed practical and step-by-step interventions tailored to each SME. In the area of digitalisation, actions focused on introducing basic monitoring and data management tools, improving process transparency and gradually integrating automation solutions. For circular economy challenges, the recommendations prioritised mapping material flows, introducing reuse practices and improving waste management systems. In the field of energy efficiency, interventions included basic energy audits, introduction of monitoring systems and initial optimisation measures.

A key feature of the piloting approach was the strong integration of external solution providers and accessible tools via the B2GreenHub platform. SMEs were guided towards simple, low-cost solutions and gradually introduced to more advanced technologies depending on their readiness level. The approach emphasised feasibility and stepwise implementation rather than complex investments.

Impact assessment is currently at an early stage for most SMEs. Initial indicators and baseline measurements have been defined, focusing on resource efficiency, energy consumption, production performance and adoption of digital and circular practices. While measurable results are still limited, the piloting phase successfully established a foundation for future improvements by increasing awareness, defining clear development pathways and initiating first implementation steps.

Overall, the piloting activities demonstrate that SMEs in less developed regions require strong guidance, simple tools and gradual implementation approaches. The combination of structured assessments, targeted advisory support and access to solution providers proved effective in supporting SMEs in their initial transition towards more digital, energy-efficient and circular business practices.

4.10.3. Stakeholder Input

The fashion industry faces increasing challenges related to environmental sustainability, material transparency and the growing demand for healthier alternatives for consumers with sensitive skin. The showcased good practice demonstrated how agricultural by-products that are often

underutilized can be transformed into valuable resources while simultaneously reducing waste and strengthening local value chains.

The Magbago approach demonstrates how plum agricultural waste can be converted into innovative bio-materials for sustainable textile production. The presented use case illustrates a transferable good practice that combines circular economy principles, local agricultural partnerships and material innovation to create environmentally friendly products while generating social, environmental and economic benefits.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	Sustainable Fashion for Sensitive Skin - Bio-Materials from Local Agricultural Waste
Solution Provider	Magbago
Solution Name	Sustainable and Skin-Friendly Clothing with Bio-Materials Innovation
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Bosnia and Herzegovina*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Other*
General Focus Area	*Green solution*
Specific Focus Area	*New Green Materials*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	Development of bio-materials from plum agricultural waste for textile production
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Manufacturing Operations*

Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	The fashion industry faces significant sustainability challenges: it is one of the largest global polluters, relies heavily on synthetic materials that cause skin irritation and allergic reactions in sensitive consumers, lacks transparency regarding material origin and composition, and offers limited sustainable alternatives in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian market. Consumers with sensitive skin struggle to find clothing that is both comfortable and environmentally responsible, while local agricultural waste (particularly from plum processing) remains underutilized despite BiH's strong agricultural sector.
Main project/service/solution features	Magbago develops innovative bio-materials from plum agricultural waste in collaboration with local research institutions, creating sustainable textiles that replace synthetic fibers. The clothing line features carefully selected natural and bio-materials that are gentle on sensitive skin and environmentally friendly, with minimalist design focused on durability and everyday comfort. Production follows circular economy principles, transforming agricultural waste into high-quality textile materials while supporting local farmers through raw material partnerships. The approach combines fashion innovation with local agriculture in a unique cross-sector model that strengthens community value chains.
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	Magbago delivers measurable impact across multiple dimensions: consumers receive clothing free of harmful chemicals and synthetic fibers that irritate skin, pioneering bio-material development creates sustainable alternatives that can transform the textile industry, textile and agricultural waste is significantly reduced through circular production models, and local farmers and communities benefit from direct partnerships and raw material sourcing. The company is positioned for EU market expansion with certified sustainable products, scaling bio-material production capacity from local resources, and building strategic partnerships with international brands and research institutions. Magbago demonstrates that responsible, healthier, and locally-rooted fashion is commercially viable while creating environmental and social value.
Links to additional supporting materials	Contact: Tamara Djuric, Founder https://magbago.com/ https://www.linkedin.com/in/tamara-djuric021-a7a3971b4/

4.11. Project Partner 11 - AFC

Digital Innovation Hub AgriFood Croatia (AFC), Croatia, is a non-profit, network-based organisation bringing together research institutions, public bodies and private companies with the aim of co-creating and implementing technological innovations in the agri-food sector. As the only Croatian DIH specifically focused on agriculture, aquaculture and food technologies, AFC provides specialised expertise, supports cross-border collaboration and facilitates the transfer of digital and innovative solutions into practice. With strong experience in EU projects, market research and stakeholder engagement, AFC contributes to strengthening cooperation between academia and business, supporting SMEs in adopting innovative technologies and improving their competitiveness and sustainability.

4.11.1. Solutions

Within the B2GreenHub framework, Digital Innovation Hub AgriFood Croatia (AFC) applied solutions focusing on automation in aquaculture processing and material circularity in marine resource management.

One key solution is the "Alutech Aquaculture Development Center" service, which addresses quality and market-access challenges in shellfish production. Traditional handling of mussels often leads to inconsistent quality, limited standardisation and barriers to entering higher-value markets. The solution introduces automated cleaning, sorting and packaging processes, ensuring consistent product quality and compliance with standards. As a result, SMEs improved product quality, streamlined operations and expanded their market reach through more professional processing and packaging.

In addition, AFC applied the "Test before invest" service, demonstrated through the FLUPSY (Floating Upweller System). This solution addresses challenges in sustainable shellfish production, particularly the dependence on natural juvenile catch and high mortality rates. The FLUPSY system enables controlled pre-growth of shellfish using continuous seawater circulation, improving survival rates and stabilising production. As a result, the approach supports biodiversity, reduces environmental pressure on natural populations and contributes to material circularity in aquaculture through more efficient and sustainable resource use.

Together, these solutions illustrate AFC's approach of combining automation and sustainability in the aquaculture sector, supporting SMEs in improving product quality, operational efficiency and environmental performance.

4.11.2. Piloting

AFC conducted piloting activities with ten SMEs from the agri-food sector, including wineries, food producers and family farms. The process was implemented through structured mentoring

sessions supported by an Excel-based Digital Transition Readiness Assessment Tool, combined with follow-up consultations and the development of tailored roadmaps.

Across the SMEs, the assessments revealed predominantly low to medium levels of digital and green maturity. Many companies relied on manual processes, had limited integration of digital tools and lacked structured strategies for digitalisation, sustainability and data-driven decision-making. Common challenges included weak online sales channels, limited digital marketing capabilities, absence of integrated systems and constrained financial capacity for investments.

Based on these findings, AFC developed practical and phased roadmaps adapted to the capacities of each SME. Typical recommendations focused on strengthening digital presence (e.g. e-commerce and marketing tools), improving data utilisation, introducing basic automation and gradually developing structured digital and sustainability strategies. In many cases, priority was given to financially feasible steps and preparation for future investments.

A key feature of the piloting approach was the strong focus on investment readiness. The piloting activities mainly focused on digital transition aspects, while green and circular topics were addressed only indirectly. Rather than directly implementing advanced digital solutions, many SMEs were connected with support structures such as “Platforma 22” or specialised partners to access national and EU funding opportunities and prepare project applications.

The impact of the piloting phase is mainly reflected in increased strategic clarity, improved prioritisation of development actions and strengthened readiness for digital and green transition. Several SMEs initiated concrete steps, such as adopting basic digital tools, establishing new partnerships or preparing funding applications (in some cases exceeding €100,000).

Overall, the piloting demonstrated that in less developed or resource-constrained environments, mentoring, structured assessments and access to financing mechanisms are key enablers for transformation. The approach effectively supported SMEs in understanding their current position, defining realistic development pathways and preparing for future implementation of digital, sustainable and circular solutions.

4.11.3. Stakeholder Input

The transnational exchange highlighted the importance of integrated rural support ecosystems for strengthening small agri-food businesses in remote areas. The showcased good practice demonstrated that many rural SMEs face structural barriers such as limited access to infrastructure, processing facilities, training opportunities and direct market channels, which often restrict their growth potential.

The Rural Business Incubator Krka model demonstrates how infrastructure, mentoring, knowledge transfer and market access can be combined within one regional support structure. The presented use case illustrates a transferable good practice that helps rural producers move from low-value raw material sales towards higher-value production, while strengthening local supply chains, entrepreneurship and long-term regional resilience.

Solution Template | Use Cases and Solutions	
Headline (max. 100 characters)	Strengthening Rural SMEs through Agri-Food Innovation and Business Support
Solution Provider	Municipality of Kistanje (Founder of Rural Business Incubator Krka)
Solution Name	Rural Business Incubator Krka Kistanje
Country where the Solution was Implemented	*Croatia*
Sector of manufacturing SME for whom the solution was implemented	*Food & Beverages*
General Focus Area	*Green solution*
Specific Focus Area	*Waste Reduction and Recycling Technology*
If you selected *Other as *Specific Focus Area* provide a short description	*N/A*
Primary Business Process Area for Improvement	*Manufacturing Operations*
Example of Successful Implementation	
Problem statement (max. 1000 Characters)	Rural areas in the Šibenik-Knin County face significant economic challenges, including depopulation, limited access to business infrastructure, and low competitiveness of small agri-food producers. Many local family farms and rural entrepreneurs lack access to modern production facilities, professional training, and market channels to process and commercialize their products effectively. As a result, valuable local resources are underutilized, and products are often sold as low-value raw materials instead of higher-value processed goods. Additionally, fragmented supply chains and limited cooperation among stakeholders further restrict growth opportunities for rural SMEs and startups. This creates a need for an integrated support system that combines infrastructure, knowledge transfer, and market access to strengthen rural entrepreneurship and enable sustainable local development.
Main project/service/solution features	The Rural Business Incubator Krka provides an integrated support system for rural entrepreneurs and SMEs, combining physical infrastructure, capacity building, and market access.

	Key features include access to modern production and processing facilities for agri-food products (fruit and vegetable processing), enabling value-added production. The incubator offers continuous education through a wide range of training programs, workshops, and mentoring services focused on business development, innovation, and entrepreneurship. It also facilitates networking and partnerships among local producers, institutions, and experts. Additionally, the solution supports market access through short supply chains, including the "ajmolokalno.hr" platform and the "Dobra Spiza" tasting room, which promote local products and connect producers directly with consumers. The incubator further strengthens rural development by organizing events and fostering collaboration within the local ecosystem.
Description of Outcomes (max. 1000 Characters)	The Rural Business Incubator Krka has delivered measurable economic and social impact in the region. By 2025, it has supported 35 contracted users, including around 30 active farms and SMEs engaged in product processing, and enabled the launch of 2 startups. The incubator has strengthened local production capacities, allowing producers to shift from raw material sales to higher value-added products. It has improved skills and knowledge through more than 25 training topics annually and fostered collaboration among stakeholders. Market access has been enhanced through the "ajmolokalno.hr" platform and the "Dobra Spiza" tasting room, creating direct sales channels and increasing visibility of local products. Overall, the solution contributes to job creation, higher competitiveness of rural SMEs, and supports sustainable rural development and population retention.
Links to additional supporting materials	https://www.inkubator-krka.eu/ 

5 Main Findings

This chapter summarizes the main findings identified through the development of the Transnational Strategy and the Regional Action Plans within the RISE project. The findings reflect common challenges, opportunities and strategic directions emerging across partner regions and provide an overview of key aspects relevant for strengthening long-term support structures for SMEs in the food and beverage sector.

5.1. Transnational Strategy (A3.1)

The following section summarizes the key findings identified within the Transnational Strategy developed under Activity A3.1 of the RISE project. A detailed description of the strategy approach, stakeholder roles, operational guidelines and recommendations is provided in Deliverable D3.1.2 “Transnational Strategy for Deploying Cross-Sector Mentoring Program Services”. The findings presented below highlight the most relevant common themes and strategic directions emerging across partner regions and provide a condensed overview of the main aspects relevant for the long-term deployment of mentoring services within regional ecosystems.

Need for structured support ecosystems

One of the main findings emerging from the Transnational Strategy was the need for stronger and more structured support ecosystems for SMEs located in rural and remote regions. Across partner regions, many companies reported difficulties in accessing specialized expertise, innovation services and supporting infrastructure necessary for implementing digital and green transition measures. Existing support structures often operate separately and provide fragmented assistance, making it difficult for SMEs to identify suitable opportunities and receive continuous support throughout their development process.

The stakeholder consultations and regional analyses demonstrated that insufficient access to guidance mechanisms, mentoring opportunities and innovation support can slow down transformation processes and reduce the ability of SMEs to react to changing market conditions. These challenges are particularly visible in remote areas where businesses often operate with limited resources and reduced access to external expertise. The absence of integrated support systems can additionally contribute to lower innovation capacities and limit long-term development opportunities.

The strategy therefore identifies the strengthening of regional support ecosystems as a key prerequisite for sustainable development. Establishing stronger links between SMEs, business support organizations, policy institutions and knowledge providers can improve access to services and create long-term support structures that contribute to stronger regional competitiveness, resilience and innovation potential.

Importance of cross-sector mentoring approaches

Another important finding of the strategy development process concerns the role of cross-sector mentoring approaches in supporting SME development. SMEs frequently face interconnected challenges that cannot be solved through isolated interventions. Digital transformation, energy efficiency improvements and circular economy implementation often require knowledge from different sectors and disciplines, creating a need for integrated support structures and practical guidance mechanisms.

Stakeholder inputs highlighted that many SMEs possess strong technical knowledge within their own business areas but often lack expertise in emerging technologies, sustainability measures or strategic transformation processes. The mentoring approach developed within RISE therefore aims to connect businesses with experts and support actors capable of providing targeted advice and practical recommendations tailored to individual company needs and regional conditions.

The findings indicate that cross-sector mentoring not only supports knowledge transfer but also facilitates stronger collaboration between stakeholders and improves the practical implementation of innovation measures. By combining different areas of expertise, mentoring structures can help SMEs overcome barriers and strengthen their long-term competitiveness and adaptability.

Role of business support organizations and intermediary actors

The Transnational Strategy further highlighted the important role of business support organizations and intermediary actors within regional innovation ecosystems. Organizations such as chambers of commerce, regional development agencies, innovation hubs and business support centers often act as the first point of contact for SMEs seeking guidance, funding opportunities or strategic support. Their established networks and direct relationships with companies position them as key actors for supporting transformation processes.

Stakeholder feedback demonstrated that intermediary organizations play a significant role in connecting companies with relevant expertise, facilitating stakeholder cooperation and ensuring the practical implementation of support measures at regional level. Their role extends beyond information provision and includes activities such as organizing networking opportunities, promoting mentoring initiatives and supporting local adaptation of available services.

The findings suggest that stronger integration of business support organizations into mentoring systems can significantly improve outreach activities and increase the long-term sustainability of support services. Their involvement can contribute to more effective communication, stronger stakeholder engagement and a more structured integration of innovation services into regional ecosystems.

Need for stronger policy integration

The Transnational Strategy identified policy integration as an important prerequisite for ensuring the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of mentoring services and innovation support structures. While project-based initiatives can generate valuable results, stakeholders emphasized that many support activities risk ending after project completion if they are not embedded within

existing regional strategies and institutional frameworks. Long-term impact therefore requires stronger alignment between mentoring services, policy objectives and available funding instruments.

Regional consultations showed that public authorities and institutions can play an important role in strengthening support ecosystems by integrating mentoring activities into regional development plans, innovation strategies and Smart Specialisation frameworks. Linking mentoring programmes with existing support schemes, financial and public initiatives can improve visibility and accessibility while creating stronger synergies between different support instruments.

The findings indicate that institutional endorsement and stronger policy alignment can contribute significantly to long-term implementation. Embedding mentoring structures into strategic frameworks increases credibility, improves access to financial resources and creates favorable conditions for maintaining support mechanisms beyond project duration.

Importance of transnational cooperation and knowledge exchange

Transnational cooperation emerged as an important element for addressing challenges that individual regions often cannot solve independently. The strategy development process demonstrated that many participating regions experience similar barriers related to digitalisation, sustainability and innovation capacities, despite differences in geographical or economic conditions. The exchange of experiences between regions therefore creates opportunities for identifying common approaches and adapting successful solutions to local contexts.

The stakeholder engagement process highlighted that access to broader networks of expertise and good practices can support regions with limited local capacities and provide SMEs with opportunities that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Cross-border collaboration additionally facilitates the transfer of practical knowledge, innovative methods and examples of successful implementation from one region to another.

The strategy therefore recognizes transnational knowledge exchange as a key added value of the RISE project. The establishment of international expert networks and mentoring structures can strengthen learning processes across regions, reduce disparities and contribute to more effective and sustainable innovation ecosystems within the Danube region.

Success factors for sustainable implementation

The strategy development process identified several factors that are considered critical for ensuring the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of mentoring services. Stakeholder feedback repeatedly indicated that support structures should be designed in a practical, accessible and user-oriented manner in order to encourage participation and ensure continued engagement of SMEs and regional actors. Reducing complexity and simplifying access to support services were therefore identified as important conditions for successful implementation.

Several operational aspects were highlighted as particularly relevant, including user-friendly digital tools, simplified onboarding processes, dedicated support mechanisms and continuous communication activities. Stakeholders additionally emphasized the importance of adapting

services to regional needs and providing flexibility to address specific challenges and varying levels of SME maturity across regions.

The findings suggest that successful implementation depends not only on technical solutions but also on maintaining active stakeholder engagement and creating incentives for participation. Continuous communication, visibility measures, networking activities and recognition mechanisms can strengthen long-term commitment and support the integration of mentoring services into regional ecosystems.

5.2. Regional Action Plans (A3.2)

The following section summarizes the main findings emerging from the Regional Action Plans developed under Activity A3.2 and provided in Deliverable D3.2.1 of the RISE project. While the individual Regional Action Plans reflect the specific conditions, priorities and stakeholder needs of each participating region, several common patterns and strategic themes could be identified across the partnership. The findings presented below provide an overview of shared challenges, opportunities and implementation aspects relevant for strengthening regional support ecosystems and ensuring long-term support for SMEs in the food and beverage sector.

Need for tailored and region-specific support measures

One of the main findings emerging from the Regional Action Plans was that, although SMEs across participating regions face similar transformation challenges, their specific needs and priorities vary considerably depending on local conditions, sectoral characteristics and available support structures. Regional analyses and stakeholder consultations demonstrated that differences in economic structures, institutional environments and innovation capacities strongly influence how support measures should be designed and implemented.

Several regions identified specific needs regarding digitalisation, energy optimisation and circular economy approaches, while others emphasized challenges related to access to expertise, workforce capacities or market development opportunities. These variations indicate that standardized approaches alone would not sufficiently address regional realities and may limit the practical relevance of support measures.

The findings therefore suggest that mentoring services and future support activities should remain flexible and adaptable to local conditions. Tailored solutions responding to specific regional needs can improve stakeholder participation, increase implementation efficiency and strengthen long-term impact within regional ecosystems.

Importance of stakeholder collaboration and ecosystem approaches

The Regional Action Plans consistently highlighted the importance of involving a broad range of stakeholders in implementation processes and regional development activities. Business support organizations, public institutions, research organizations, universities, innovation hubs and SMEs were identified as important contributors to regional support ecosystems.

Regional consultations repeatedly demonstrated that isolated activities carried out by individual actors often provide limited impact, while coordinated actions involving multiple stakeholders create stronger synergies and more effective support structures. Collaboration between institutions allows resources, expertise and knowledge to be shared and can improve the overall efficiency of support measures.

The findings suggest that stronger ecosystem approaches can support knowledge exchange, reduce duplication of activities and increase access to services and expertise. Building stronger relationships between SMEs and regional actors therefore represents an important condition for successful long-term implementation.

Need for long-term sustainability and institutional embedding

Another recurring finding across the Regional Action Plans concerns the importance of ensuring long-term sustainability beyond project implementation periods. Stakeholders frequently highlighted concerns regarding the continuity of mentoring activities and support services once project funding ends. While pilot initiatives and project activities can generate valuable outcomes, maintaining long-term impact requires stronger institutional integration.

Several regions therefore emphasized the need to embed mentoring services and innovation support structures into existing policy frameworks, regional strategies and organizational structures. Institutional support can improve visibility, facilitate access to financial resources and increase the likelihood of long-term continuation.

The findings indicate that sustainable implementation depends on creating structures that remain operational beyond project duration and can continue supporting SMEs through stable governance and long-term planning approaches.

Digitalisation and sustainability require integrated support approaches

The Regional Action Plans also demonstrated that digital transformation, energy efficiency and material circularity are closely interconnected and should not be treated as isolated intervention areas. Stakeholder consultations showed that SMEs often face multiple challenges simultaneously, requiring integrated approaches rather than separate support activities.

Many regions emphasized that technological improvements frequently influence business processes, resource efficiency and sustainability performance at the same time. Addressing only one dimension may therefore limit the effectiveness and long-term impact of implemented measures.

The findings suggest that combining technological, environmental and business-oriented perspectives within mentoring activities can support more comprehensive transformation processes. Integrated support approaches can improve practical applicability and contribute to stronger and more sustainable results.

Continuous learning and adaptive implementation as critical success factors

The Regional Action Plans repeatedly emphasized that implementation processes should be considered dynamic and adaptable rather than fixed sequences of predefined actions. Stakeholders acknowledged that changing market conditions, varying SME needs and emerging challenges may require continuous adjustments throughout implementation.

Several regions highlighted the importance of monitoring activities, feedback mechanisms and regular evaluation processes in order to ensure that support measures remain relevant and effective over time. Continuous learning processes can additionally support knowledge transfer and contribute to improving future implementation activities.

The findings indicate that adaptive implementation approaches supported by stakeholder feedback and regular monitoring can strengthen long-term effectiveness and ensure that actions remain aligned with regional realities and evolving business environments.

6 Summary across all Project Partners

The implementation of activities across all project partners demonstrates that SMEs in the food and beverage sector, particularly in less developed and rural regions, face comparable challenges despite differences in regional conditions and economic environments. Throughout the project, recurring patterns emerged regarding digitalisation, energy efficiency, material circularity and access to innovation support structures. The experiences collected through the implementation of solutions, piloting activities and stakeholder exchanges provide important insights into factors that support successful transformation processes.

Digital transformation as an enabling factor rather than a standalone objective

Across all partner regions, digitalisation has emerged as an important enabler for improving business processes, resource management and competitiveness. However, the experiences from the project demonstrated that digital tools alone do not automatically generate positive outcomes. Successful implementation depends on the ability of SMEs to integrate technological solutions into their operational processes and strategic objectives.

Many participating SMEs initially operated with fragmented systems, manual processes and limited use of structured data. The project activities showed that even simple digital solutions can create substantial benefits when introduced in a targeted and practical manner. Incremental implementation approaches often proved more feasible and effective than complex large-scale investments.

Importance of mentoring and tailored implementation

One of the strongest observations across all project partners was the importance of personalised mentoring and company-specific support approaches. SMEs differed significantly regarding their maturity levels, capacities and priorities, making standardized approaches insufficient in many situations.

The use of structured assessment tools combined with mentoring support enabled the identification of specific development needs and facilitated the preparation of practical roadmaps adapted to individual circumstances. The findings suggest that tailored guidance not only supports better decision-making but also increases confidence and readiness for implementing future improvements.

Integrated approaches generate stronger impact

The experiences across all partner regions demonstrated that digitalisation, energy efficiency and material circularity are highly interconnected and should not be addressed separately. Many implemented solutions generated simultaneous benefits across several dimensions, improving

operational efficiency while also reducing environmental impact and strengthening business resilience.

The project highlighted that integrated approaches combining technological, environmental and organisational aspects can support broader transformation processes and increase the practical relevance of proposed solutions. Combining these perspectives can also improve resource efficiency and support long-term sustainability objectives.

Regional ecosystems and stakeholder cooperation as key enabling factors

The project further demonstrated that SMEs benefit significantly from cooperation structures connecting business support organisations, research institutions, solution providers, public authorities and regional stakeholders. Access to expertise, networking opportunities and external support frequently influenced the ability of SMEs to explore and implement new solutions.

The stakeholder exchange activities highlighted the importance of collaboration and knowledge sharing in creating supportive environments for innovation and business development. Strong regional ecosystems can facilitate knowledge transfer, reduce implementation barriers and contribute to more resilient local economies.

Long-term sustainability requires continuous support structures

While the project generated valuable outcomes and initiated important transformation processes, the experiences across all partners indicate that long-term impact depends on the continuation of support activities beyond project implementation periods.

Sustainable implementation requires institutional embedding, continuous mentoring opportunities and stronger integration into regional strategies and support mechanisms. The experiences of the RISE project suggest that transformation should be considered a long-term process requiring continuous learning, adaptation and stakeholder engagement.

In this context, the **B2GreenHub platform** represents an important long-term asset generated and strengthened through the project activities. Throughout the project, the platform supported partners and SMEs by providing access to tools, learning materials, solution providers and knowledge resources supporting green, digital and circular transition activities. Beyond its role during implementation, B2GreenHub creates opportunities for continued knowledge sharing and access to practical support beyond the project lifetime.

As the platform continues to evolve and integrate knowledge and solutions from multiple initiatives, it has the potential to function as a sustainable entry point for SMEs, mentors and support organisations. Its continued use can strengthen cross-regional cooperation, facilitate access to expertise and contribute to maintaining the long-term impact and transferability of the project results.

Overall, the experiences gathered within the RISE project demonstrate that successful transformation processes in SMEs are not driven by technology alone but by the combination of practical tools, tailored support mechanisms, stakeholder collaboration and long-term ecosystem

development. These findings provide valuable insights for future initiatives aiming to strengthen innovation capacities and support sustainable regional development within the Danube region.