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Developing Community
Based Innovative
Business Models for
the Revival of the
Internal Areas in the
Mediterranean-
REVIVE

D.3.1.1 Mediterranean Digital Innovation Hubs Framework



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Euro-MED**Co-funded by
the European Union

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1. Introduction

This deliverable presents the Mediterranean Digital Innovation Hubs (MDIH) Framework developed within the Interreg Euro-MED Programme project REVIVE – Developing Community Based Innovative Business Models for the Revival of the Internal Areas in the Mediterranean. The framework supports the project's objective of strengthening research and innovation capacities and fostering the uptake of advanced technologies in internal Mediterranean territories.

The document defines the conceptual, operational and methodological framework guiding the establishment and functioning of the MDIHs in the pilot areas. It sets out common principles, service logic, and coordination mechanisms that enable partners to design and test digital innovation services tailored to local needs while maintaining coherence at transnational level.

Specifically, the deliverable aims to:

- Provide a shared structure and reference model for the MDIHs implemented in the different pilot regions;
- Clarify how MDIHs contribute to the development of community-based innovative business models and to the integration of advanced digital solutions in local value chains;
- Support the role of MDIHs as bridges between technology providers, research, public authorities and SMEs in internal areas;
- Ensure alignment between pilot testing activities, digital services, and the broader REVIVE framework for collaborative innovation.

The main target groups addressed through the MDIH Framework include:

- SMEs and micro-enterprises, particularly in rural, agricultural, tourism, cultural

and creative sectors;

- Public authorities and regional development agencies involved in innovation, economic development and digital transition;
- Research and knowledge institutions and technology providers supporting the deployment of advanced solutions;
- Local stakeholders involved in community-based cooperative models tested in the REVIVE pilots.

Through this framework, the MDIHs are positioned as operational tools to support the digital and green transition of internal Mediterranean territories, while reinforcing collaborative governance and innovation ecosystems at regional and transnational level.

2. What is a Digital Innovation Hub (DIH)?

2.1 Definition and mission according to the European Commission. DIH as an innovation hub

According to the European Commission, a Digital Innovation Hub (DIH) is a one-stop shop that supports companies¹—particularly SMEs—as well as public administrations in digital transformation processes. DIHs act as innovation hubs that facilitate access to advanced digital technologies, expertise, and experimentation environments, helping organisations improve their competitiveness, efficiency, and sustainability.

DIHs provide integrated services along the entire innovation journey, including awareness raising, skills development, testing and experimentation (test before invest), access to finance, and ecosystem networking. By connecting technology providers, research centres, public authorities, businesses and end users, DIHs play a key role in bridging the gap between technological development and real-world application.

Within the European policy framework, DIHs are recognised as strategic instruments to accelerate digital transformation across regions, reduce territorial disparities, and strengthen regional cohesion through more inclusive and resilient innovation ecosystems aligned with EU green and digital priorities.

2.2 Role in the digital and green transitions helping regional SMEs to innovate and digitalize

Digital Innovation Hubs play a crucial role in supporting regional SMEs in addressing the combined challenges of the digital and green transitions. By providing access to advanced technologies, including data platforms, AI, IoT and AR/VR solutions,

¹ [European Digital Innovation Hubs | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

technical expertise and tailored support services, DIHs help SMEs adopt innovative solutions that improve competitiveness while reducing environmental impact.

In the Mediterranean context in rural and internal territories, SMEs often face structural barriers such as limited access to innovation ecosystems, skills gaps, and fragmented value chains. DIHs respond to these challenges by acting as connectors between local needs and technological opportunities, enabling SMEs to test solutions, develop new service models, and integrate sustainability into their business processes.

Furthermore, DIHs contribute to the green transition by promoting resource efficiency, circular economy approaches and data-driven decision-making, supporting SMEs in developing more sustainable business models. Through collaboration with public authorities and regional stakeholders, DIHs also help align innovation activities with territorial strategies and policy frameworks, reinforcing the long-term impact of digital and green transformation at regional level.

Within the REVIVE project, Mediterranean Digital Innovation Hubs (MDIHs) are conceived as key operational enablers to strengthen regional innovation capacities, foster cooperation among stakeholders, and support SMEs in transitioning towards more competitive, sustainable and resilient community-based economic models.

2.3 Typologies and examples in the MED region



Cyprus

DiGiNN

DiGiNN is a one-stop-shop supporting companies and public sector organisations throughout their digital transformation journey. It provides end-to-end services including coaching and mentoring, access to advanced infrastructures and facilities, support to find investments, and networking within innovation ecosystems.

DiGiNN brings together key national actors in advanced digital technologies, including Centres of Excellence, research organisations, universities, business and industrial representation bodies, sectoral associations, incubators, start-up ecosystem actors and consulting organisations. Through this structured service framework, DiGiNN establishes a direct interface between technology providers and market demand.

The hub integrates leading expertise in Artificial Intelligence, High Performance Computing, Cybersecurity and other advanced digital technologies. It supports the full innovation cycle, from awareness and ideation to prototyping, pilot production, go-to-market and scale-up. More information: <https://www.diginn.eu>

Tuscany (Italy)

Tuscany X.0

Tuscany X.0 is a Digital Innovation Hub supporting the digital and green transition of SMEs and public administrations in the Tuscany region. It provides advanced technological services, digital maturity assessment, and targeted capacity-building activities, promoting effective technology transfer and strengthening the regional innovation ecosystem. The hub collaborates with European innovation networks to foster knowledge exchange, cross-border cooperation, and the development of shared digital solutions, contributing to improved competitiveness and resilience of regional stakeholders. More information: <https://www.tuscanyx.eu>

ARTES 5.0

ARTES 5.0 is a national Digital Innovation Hub focused on supporting the adoption of advanced digital technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence and Robotics, by SMEs and public administrations. It operates through a coordinated network of competence centres, offering training, test-before-invest services, and support to access investment opportunities. ARTES 5.0 contributes to the development of sustainable and resilient value chains and connects organisations to national and European innovation ecosystems, facilitating access to expertise, infrastructures, and digital transformation services. More information: <https://www.artes4.it/en>

South Aegean, Greece

Smart Attica

The South Aegean Region does not currently host a European Digital Innovation Hub (EDIH) within its territory. This absence limits direct, proximity-based access for micro and small enterprises to key services such as “test before invest”, hands-on experimentation and tailored digital transformation support, which are particularly relevant in insular and rural contexts. As a result, SMEs in the region are mainly served by national EDIHs located on the Greek mainland, most notably Smart Attica, based in Athens, which focuses on energy and environment, supply chains and mobility, and culture and tourism, as well as GR digiGOV-innoHUB, also based in Athens, which specialises in digital transformation of the public sector. Additional thematic hubs related to sectors such as health and agri-food also operate at national level, but without a permanent presence in the South Aegean islands.

At regional level, the University of the Aegean constitutes the core research and innovation actor, with departments distributed across several islands and a strong focus on digital, environmental and socio-economic challenges relevant to insular territories. Research organisations such as the Athena Research Center contribute indirectly through national research networks and innovation clusters linked to digital and creative sectors. Other key stakeholders include the Region of South Aegean, responsible for managing the Regional Operational Programme and implementing the RIS3 strategy, the Chambers of Commerce of the Cyclades and Dodecanese, and municipalities engaged in “Smart Island” initiatives addressing areas such as smart energy, mobility and waste management. Together, these actors form a fragmented but active innovation ecosystem, highlighting the need for more territorially embedded digital innovation support structures.

More Information: <https://www.smartattica.eu/>, <https://digigov.innohub.gr/>

Croatia

EDIH Adria

EDIH Adria is one of four Digitalisation Innovation Hubs in Croatia and is responsible for supporting the digital transformation of companies in Adriatic Croatia. EDIH Adria is based on two key technologies: artificial intelligence and high-performance computing. Its general goal is to support the digital transformation of Adriatic Croatia. The services of EDIH Adria are financed through the Digital Europe Programme and the 2021–2026 National Recovery and Resilience Plan. More information: <https://edihadria.eu>

Slovenia

DIGI-SI

DIGI-SI is the Slovenian European Digital Innovation Hub (EDIH) consortium, coordinated by the University of Maribor. It supports the digital transformation of Slovenian companies, especially SMEs, as well as public sector organisations. The hub focuses on key sectors aligned with Slovenia's smart specialisation strategy, including agriculture, healthcare, tourism and manufacturing.

DIGI-SI provides services such as test-before-invest, training and skills development, and support in accessing finance and innovation ecosystems. It promotes the uptake of advanced digital technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), High-Performance Computing (HPC), Big Data, Internet of Things (IoT), robotics, AR/VR, blockchain and cybersecurity. The hub is co-financed by the Digital Europe Programme and national funding. More information: <https://digi-si.eu/en/home>

Other key players in Podravje region are:

- University of Maribor: Provides R&D, labs, specialist teaching and links to industry; actively runs DIH activities and local outreach events.
- Technology parks & innovation intermediaries: Regional technology parks and innovation clusters (including national partners in the DIGI-SI consortium) support technology transfer, incubation and business support.
- Specialist companies & labs: Firms offering HPC, IoT, AR/VR demonstrations, cybersecurity, and AI proof-of-concept services operate locally or serve the region. These enable practical pilots for manufacturing, health and agri-food.
- Public stakeholders: Municipalities (Maribor, Ptuj and others), regional development agencies and chambers of commerce that support SME outreach, local digitalisation strategies and EU funding absorption.

North Macedonia

INNOFEIT

INNOFEIT (Centre for Technology Transfer and Innovations) operates within the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Information Technologies (FEEIT) at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. The centre was established to strengthen cooperation between academia and industry, facilitating technology transfer, innovation support and applied research activities.

INNOFEIT acts as an interface between university researchers, students and industrial partners, promoting the development and uptake of innovative technological solutions. Its activities focus on bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical application, supporting companies in accessing expertise, research results and emerging technologies.

Within the national context, INNOFEIT contributes to the development of the innovation ecosystem in North Macedonia by fostering collaboration, supporting entrepreneurial initiatives and participating in national and international research and innovation projects. More information: <https://innofeit-edih.mk/>

Spain

DIHBAI-TUR

The Digital Innovation Hub of the Balearic Islands focuses on Artificial Intelligence (DIHBAI-TUR) and plays a central role in the islands' digital strategy. It offers a range of services, free of charge, to entrepreneurs and SMEs, fostering a collaborative environment for digital growth. DIHBAI-TUR supports the digital transformation of SMEs and entrepreneurs, with a particular focus on tourism and agriculture, in line with the regional RIS3 strategy. The hub acts as a regional one-stop shop, helping companies enhance competitiveness through the adoption of digital technologies in business processes, production and services.

DIHBAI-TUR provides services such as test-before-invest, training and capacity building, networking, and support in accessing funding opportunities. By leveraging the technological infrastructure available in the territory, the hub facilitates access to knowledge, expertise and innovation ecosystems at regional and European levels.

The hub operates through a multi-entity cooperation model, involving research centres, universities, business associations, chambers of commerce, clusters and public administrations, while also maintaining links with external service providers to broaden the portfolio of available services. More information www.dihbai-tur.com/en

Other key actors are:

- University of the Balearic Islands (UIB) is a leading academic and research institution in the region. It plays a pivotal role in advancing digital transformation and fostering research excellence. The university promotes open science and digital access. Furthermore, research is a core mission: UIB hosts 4,117 researchers, 150 research structures, and has produced over 68,000 publications. It emphasizes multidisciplinary approaches, international collaboration, and technology transfer to society. For many years it had a small percentage of research personnel in its staff compared to other sectors, but since 2018, there has been growth that has led to, for the first time in 2021, surpassing the number of researchers in public research centers in the Balearic Islands.
- Fundació Bit: Implements regional innovation policies, manages ParcBit and CentreBit, and supports SMEs with digital maturity assessments.

- Clusters: BIOIB (biotech/biomedicine), Balearic Marine Cluster (nautical sector innovation), TurisTEC (ICT applied to tourism), TEIB (ecological transition), etc.. These clusters are recognized as key drivers of regional innovation and digital transformation, aligned with the Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) and supported by Fundació Bit and the regional government.

3. State of the art in Pilot Territories (needs and gaps analysis)

3.1 Rural Larnaca, Cyprus

Digital maturity and innovation capacities of the region

The Rural Larnaca pilot areas consists mainly of 2 municipalities and 39 small rural Communities of mountainous and lowland character. It has an area of 981,003 km², a population of 64,610 inhabitants and a density of 65.86 inhabitants / km². The intervention area is characterised by areas that are mountainous, semi-mountainous and lowland. In terms of the level of urbanisation, the area, according to the size of the Local Government Authorities (LGAs), as well as the population density, is characterised as purely rural. The economic activity of Rural Larnaca is dominated by the tertiary sector, with tourism (agritourism) and wholesale and retail sectors as the ones with the highest contribution to the local GDP. The secondary sector relies exclusively on very small or small and medium-sized enterprises, some of which are seasonal in nature, especially in the field of processing agricultural and livestock products. Also in the area, there are a variety of local traditional products that are highly interconnected with the tourism sector, mainly through experiential tourism.

Digitalisation across the local business landscape remains inconsistent. Many enterprises operate without a dedicated website due to gaps in technological know-how and limited digital competencies, and existing websites are often outdated. Businesses tend to rely on social media, which they update more regularly. Essential digital skills for building and managing online platforms are lacking, reducing online visibility and competitiveness. High costs, time constraints and limited resources are additional obstacles for small rural businesses.

Internet usage is high (94.4% weekly use), but disparities appear by age and education. Younger generations show near-universal adoption, while older adults engage less. Only half of the population possesses at least basic digital skills, with this figure much lower among older adults. Education level also significantly influences digital engagement.

Innovation capacity is emerging but still limited. Initiatives, introduced by The Larnaca Tourism Board, such as digital tourism tools (virtual tours, digital storytelling, digital museums) provide new opportunities. However, household-level innovation (e.g., smart technologies and advanced e-services) remains minimal and digital skills

remain a critical challenge; only half of the population possesses at least basic digital skills. Among older adults, this figure drops dramatically to 18.4 percent, underscoring the need for targeted interventions.

Strategic investments in training, affordable technology and community innovation are needed to unlock digital transformation potential. The digital divide persists due to low skill levels, limited awareness and affordability constraints. Strategic investments in training, affordable technology, and collaborative innovation hubs will be essential to bridge these gaps and unlock the transformative potential of digitalization for rural communities.

[Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems](#)

Cyprus has adopted a comprehensive approach to digital transformation through national strategies and EU-backed programs, aiming to strengthen its economy, enhance competitiveness, and foster innovation across all sectors, including SMEs and cultural institutions. These strategies also extend to regional development initiatives that benefit areas such as Larnaca.

The cornerstone of Cyprus' digital transformation is the National Digital Strategy 2020–2025, coordinated by the Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy. This strategy envisions Cyprus as a future-ready, knowledge-based economy enabled by digital technologies. Its objectives include creating a vibrant digital economy, fostering an inclusive digital society, and promoting a green digital transition. For SMEs, the plan emphasizes upskilling, access to digital tools, and guidance to adopt technologies that improve efficiency and competitiveness.

Building on this, the National Digital Decade Strategic Roadmap (2023–2030) aligns Cyprus with EU Digital Decade targets. It sets measurable goals for connectivity, digital skills, business digitalisation, and public service transformation. The roadmap addresses gaps such as low digital skills (only 50% of the population has basic skills) and aims to upskill 20,000 individuals by 2026.

The Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021–2026 allocates 23% of its budget to digital transformation, including 5G, fiber coverage, e-government services and SME digitalisation. Measures include connectivity vouchers, digital skills programmes and support for advanced technologies like cloud computing and cybersecurity.

Also, the local development strategy of Rural Areas for 2021-2027 (LAG-ANETEL) supports the development of digital skills and projects.

Several targeted schemes complement these strategies: Digital Upgrade Scheme for SMEs, Innovation Funding Programs and Digital Skills Action Plan 2021–2025 offers training for entrepreneurs, employees, and vulnerable groups to bridge the digital skills gap.

Main needs and gaps identified, both common to the Mediterranean area and specific to the territory

Common to Mediterranean region:

- Digital infrastructure disparities between urban and rural areas that still face incomplete coverage of high-speed broadband and Very High Capacity Networks (VHCN), creating a persistent digital divide.
- Low digital skills among vulnerable groups: Older populations and low-income households often lack basic digital competencies.
- Fragmented innovation ecosystems: Innovation hubs and research centers are concentrated in major cities, leaving rural areas with limited access to collaborative networks, funding, and advanced technologies.
- Limited SME digitalisation: Small businesses often lack resources and expertise to adopt digital tools, resulting in low competitiveness.
- Under-Digitalised cultural and creative sector : ICCs (Innovation and Cultural Centers) and heritage institutions struggle to digitize content and adopt immersive technologies, reducing their ability to attract digital tourism.

Specific needs and gaps in Rural Larnaca

- Significant digital skills gaps among households and SMEs. Rural Larnaca households and SMEs show significant deficits in digital literacy.
- Absence of local innovation infrastructure and dependence on national programmes.
- Limited entrepreneurial dynamism. Startup activity in rural Larnaca is minimal, and there are few incubators or accelerators to support new ventures in technology or creative industries.
- Connectivity gaps in remote villages. While fiber and 5G rollout is progressing, some remote communities still lack affordable access to high-quality digital services.

3.2 Tuscany, Italy

Digital maturity and innovation capacities of the region

The Appennino Pistoiese, located in the Tuscany region of central Italy, is a mountainous and foothill area characterised by extensive natural heritage and a population of 10,980 inhabitants across three municipalities: Abetone Cutigliano, Sambuca Pistoiese, and San Marcello Piteglio (Tuscany Region, 2026). Despite its environmental richness and a local economy traditionally centred on forestry, tourism, and mechanical industries, the region has experienced significant depopulation in

recent decades, especially among younger residents. This demographic decline is closely linked to limited employment opportunities and difficulties in accessing essential services—factors that also influence the region’s digital and innovation capacities.

The area hosts over 1,000 businesses operating across various economic sectors. However, the number of employees per 100 inhabitants (slightly above 33) remains well below the regional average (over 46) (GAL Montagna Appennino, 2023), indicating a weaker entrepreneurial fabric and limited absorption capacity. Digitalisation within the business ecosystem is uneven: not all enterprises have a dedicated website, largely due to insufficient technological knowledge and limited digital skills required not only to create but also to maintain online platforms. This gap directly affects the visibility and competitiveness of local firms.

At the household level, digital maturity reflects broader regional trends. Tuscany has seen steady improvements in internet access, with 84.8% of households equipped with home internet in 2023 and broadband coverage reaching 80.8% (Tuscany Region, 2024). However, rural and mountainous areas like the Appennino Pistoiese continue to face connectivity challenges due to low population density, geographical constraints, and higher infrastructure costs. These difficulties contribute to a persistent digital divide that limits both citizen access and business innovation capacity.

To address these issues, the Tuscany Region is implementing targeted initiatives to expand high-speed connectivity, including the deployment of ultra-wideband FTTH (Fibre to the Home, ≥ 100 Mbps) and FWA (Fixed Wireless Access, ≥ 30 Mbps) technologies. Significant investments, such as the allocation of over five million euros for fibre-optic installation in San Marcello Piteglio aim to enhance digital accessibility, support business competitiveness, and improve territorial attractiveness.

[Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems](#)

Within the ERDF Regional Programme Tuscany 2021–2027, the Region has launched targeted calls to support digital innovation in inland and rural areas, with a specific focus on SMEs, villages and community-based organisations. Under Action 1.1.3 (Innovation Services), dedicated schemes support digital innovation in small municipalities (under 5,000 inhabitants) and in Community Cooperatives, providing co-financing of up to 60% and 80% respectively. These measures enable the development of digital services, tools and innovation projects tailored to local needs, reinforcing territorial innovation ecosystems and supporting inclusive digital transformation in internal areas.

Main needs and gaps identified, both common to the Mediterranean area and specific to the territory

Common to Mediterranean region:

- Persistent digital divide (urban vs rural).
- Limited digital skills and literacy among SMEs.
- Cybersecurity vulnerabilities and lack of digital sovereignty.
- Insufficient investment in green and digital infrastructure and talent attraction.

Specific needs and gaps in the Appennino Pistoiese:

- Connectivity is still uneven across rural and mountainous zones.
- Many SMEs lack even basic digital presence (e.g., websites, social media) due to limited skills.
- Low digital maturity of local enterprises reduces competitiveness.
- Shortage of specialised tech workforce and advanced R&D capabilities.
- Low adoption of advanced technologies (AI, IoT).

3.3 South Aegean, Greece

Digital maturity and innovation capacities of the region

The South Aegean Region, comprising the Cyclades and Dodecanese island groups, is an area of significant economic importance, driven almost entirely by the tourism and services sectors. This economic model profoundly shapes its digital maturity and innovation profile.

Digital maturity shows a mixed picture. National initiatives such as the *Digital Transformation Strategy* and the *Greece 2.0 Recovery and Resilience Plan* have improved digital public services and connectivity, including investments in 5G and Very High-Capacity Networks. Many tourism businesses demonstrate high digital performance in customer-facing functions such as online bookings and digital marketing.

However, the regional economy is dominated by micro-SMEs, which often lack the financial capacity, scale, and advanced digital skills required for deeper digital transformation. Digital literacy among the general population and SME workforce remains a challenge, hindering the adoption of more advanced technologies like AI, big data, and IoT.

Innovation capacity is developing but remains constrained. The regional Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) prioritises sustainable tourism, the blue economy, and cultural and creative sectors. A key actor is the University of the Aegean, a multi-island academic institution contributing to research, EU projects, and human capital development. The region's designation as a Just Transition area also opens opportunities for green and innovation-oriented investments, particularly in

renewable energy and “Smart Islands” initiatives.

Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems

Digitalization efforts are guided by a multi-level policy framework.

National Level:

- Greece’s Digital Transformation Strategy (aligned with EU Digital Decade objectives)²
- Greece 2.0 Recovery and Resilience Plan, including programmes for SME digitalisation³
- NSRF/ESPA 2021–2027 Competitiveness Programme, supporting basic and advanced digital transformation of SMEs (with higher subsidy rates for transition regions)⁴

Regional Level:

- South Aegean Operational Programme 2021–2027 (ERDF), implementing RIS3 priorities⁵
- Regional RIS3 strategy, with digitalisation as a horizontal enabler⁶
- “Smart Islands” initiatives promoting integrated digital solutions in energy, transport, water, and waste
- Participation in Interreg projects focused on digitalisation of insular territories. The region is an active participant in Interreg programmes (e.g., Interreg Europe project "DIGITAL ISLANDS")⁷, which aim to build capacity and exchange good practices on digitalization for insular communities.

Main needs and gaps identified, both common to the Mediterranean area and specific to the territory

The South Aegean faces challenges common to Mediterranean islands, as well as highly specific local gaps.

² <https://digitalstrategy.gov.gr/>

³ <https://greece20.gov.gr/en/>

⁴ <https://pepna.gr/>

⁵ <https://www.espa.gr/>

⁶ <https://www.interregeurope.eu/digitalislands>

⁷ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU\(2021\)652239](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2021)652239)

Common to Mediterranean island regions

- Strong dependence on seasonal tourism
- Dominance of micro-SMEs with limited innovation capacity
- Brain drain and difficulty retaining skilled workforce
- Structural barriers to finance and innovation uptake: SMEs struggle with bureaucracy, access to diversified finance, and a mismatch between the skills taught in education and the demands of the market.

Specific needs and gaps in the South Aegean

- "Double Insularity" and connectivity challenges: The region's geography of many small, scattered islands creates immense logistical challenges. This "double insularity" [6] (remoteness from the mainland and from other islands) makes it costly to deploy and maintain high-speed broadband infrastructure, resulting in a persistent "digital divide" between larger islands (like Rhodes, Syros) and smaller, more remote ones.
- Absence of a locally based DIH: SMEs lack a "test before invest" environment and can't have easy access to expert advice, skills training, and advanced technology demonstrations.⁸
- Weak structured links between academia and micro-SMEs: Despite the presence of the University of the Aegean, the mechanisms for technology transfer and systematic collaboration between researchers and local micro-SMEs are weak and ad-hoc.
- Gaps in advanced digital skills (data management, cybersecurity, digital process optimisation)

3.4 Istria, Croatia

Digital maturity and innovation capacities of the region

According to the Regional Innovation Scoreboard (RIS) 2025, Croatia is classified as a *Moderate Innovator*. Within this framework, Adriatic Croatia (Jadranska Hrvatska) — which includes Istria — is categorised as an *Emerging Innovator*⁹.

Growing strengths of the region include¹⁰:

- Reduced air emissions from fine particulates
- Adoption of Cloud computing in enterprises and Broadband penetration

⁸ <https://european-digital-innovation-hubs.ec.europa.eu/>

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/assets/rtd/ris/2025/ec_rtd_ris-regional-profile-hr.pdf

¹⁰ Ibid.

- Growth in sales of both new-to-market and new-to-firm innovations
- Increased number of employed ICT specialists

Insights from the Digital Decade Country Report 2025 – Croatia indicate that the country has made significant progress in digital infrastructure and cybersecurity¹¹.

Highlights¹²

1. High-performance connectivity and foundational technologies for a competitive EU

- FTTP (Fiber to the Premises) and 5G networks have surpassed the EU average
- National cybersecurity capacities have improved

2. Digital skills and public services to protect and empower EU people and society

- Digital public services for citizens continue to improve
- Access to e-Health records ranks among the highest in the EU

3. Leveraging digital transformation for a smart and sustainable transition

- Continued progress in the digitalisation of energy infrastructure and water management systems
- Strong national focus on the green–digital nexus

Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems

Digital transformation in Croatia is guided by a multi-level policy framework, including:

1. Digital Croatia Strategy for the period until 2032¹³
2. National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021 – 2026¹⁴
3. National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030¹⁵

¹¹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/node/13712/printable/pdf>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ https://mpudt.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/RDD/SDURDD-dokumenti/Strategija_Digitalne_Hrvatske_final_v1_EN.pdf?lang=de

¹⁴ <https://zdravlje.gov.hr/programi-i-projekti/nacionalni-plan-oporavka-i-otpornosti-2021-2026/5833>

¹⁵ <https://mpgi.gov.hr/pristup-informacijama-16/strategije-programi-planovi-i-izvjesca/nacionalna-razvojna-strategija-republike-hrvatske-do-2030-godine/11531>

4. The Digital Transformation Strategy of Istria County¹⁶
5. The Development Plan of the County of Istria for the period from 2022 to 2027¹⁷

Additional regional initiatives include the Istria 5.0 digital¹⁸ and green transition framework and the Single Digital Gateway (SDG¹⁹), which support the integration of digital services and administrative simplification.

Main needs and gaps identified, both common to the Mediterranean area and specific to the territory

Challenges in Adriatic Croatia reflect many issues common to Mediterranean regions, including the need to strengthen SME digitalisation capacity, improve access to advanced digital skills, and support the adoption of emerging technologies. Despite improvements in infrastructure and public digital services, gaps remain in innovation uptake among smaller enterprises and in the diffusion of advanced digital solutions across traditional economic sectors.

3.5 Podravje, Slovenia

Digital maturity and innovation capacities of the region

The Podravje (Podravska) region, located in northeastern Slovenia, is a medium-sized and economically diversified territory with strong manufacturing, agri-food, and growing service and tourism sectors. The region benefits from solid knowledge and innovation assets, notably the University of Maribor, technology parks, and specialised companies, and acts as a focal point of Slovenia's national EDIH initiative through EDIH DIGI-SI²⁰.

Despite these strengths, digital maturity across the region is uneven. High-tech research and innovation capacities coexist with a large number of micro and small enterprises that remain at early stages of digitalisation, relying mainly on basic ICT tools and showing limited adoption of data-driven processes, automation, or

¹⁶https://www.istra-istria.hr/media/filer_public/72/d6/72d6bd92-2406-4caf-9f33-5c25a8050f6f/220914_digitalna_transformacija.pdf

¹⁷<https://www.istra-istria.hr/hr/izdvojene-stranice/plan-razvoja-istarske-zupanije-za-razdoblje-2022-do-2027-godine/>

¹⁸<https://www.istra-istria.hr/hr/clanci/istarska-zupanija-novosti/17114/donijeti-zakljucci-konferencije-istra-50-buducnost-istarskog-gospodarstva-u-digitalnoj-i-zelenoj-tranziciji/>

¹⁹<https://mpudt.gov.hr/jedinstveni-digitalni-pristupnik/28971> ; <https://www.istra-istria.hr/hr/izdvojene-stranice/jedinstveni-digitalni-pristupnik/>

²⁰ <https://digi-si.eu/en/home/>

advanced digital technologies. This limits the overall scale-up potential of innovation across the regional economy.

Podravje's main opportunities lie in expanding digital adoption in manufacturing, precision agriculture, health-related services and tourism, while addressing persistent gaps in digital skills, awareness, and the availability of sustained funding mechanisms that support the transition from pilot projects to full implementation.

Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems

National level:

Slovenia's Digital Decade roadmap & national strategies emphasise digital skills, AI, HPC, open data and public-sector digital services; Slovenia scores above EU average in some DESI indicators but continues to push strategic investments to cover regions and SMEs.

EU & national funding instruments (Digital Europe, Cohesion funds, Interreg) include programmes that finance pilots, upskilling and cross-border innovation relevant to Podravje.

Digital transformation in Slovenia is guided by a multi-level policy framework, including:

- DIGITALNA SLOVENIJA 2030 – Krovna strategija digitalne preobrazbe Slovenije do leta 2030²¹
- The Recovery and Resilience Plan (the RRP) (2025)²²
- Slovenia's Development Strategy 2030²³
- Strategy for the digital transformation of the economy 2030²⁴
- Smart Specialization Strategy of Slovenia 2021-2040 (S4)²⁵

²¹ https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MDP/Dokumenti/DSI2030-potrjena-na-Vladi-RS_marec-2023.pdf

²² <https://www.gov.si/en/registries/projects/the-recovery-and-resilience-plan/>

²³ <https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MKRR/Strategija-razvoja-Slovenije-2030/Slovenian-Development-Strategy-2030.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.si/zbirke/projekti-in-programi/strategija-digitalne-transformacije-gospodarstva/>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.si/zbirke/projekti-in-programi/izvajanje-slovenske-strategije-pametne-specializacije/>

- Program za uspešno digitalno Slovenijo 2030²⁶

Regional level:

Regional development programmes (2021–2027) integrate digitalisation as a cross-cutting priority.

- Regional Strategy for the Transition to a Circular Bioeconomy, Podravje Region 2023–2030²⁷

EDIH DIGI-SI services are tailored to national smart specialisation priorities (agri-food, health, manufacturing, tourism), offering grants/subsidised services, testbeds and training aimed at SMEs and public sector organisations.

Despite the availability of strategic frameworks and funding instruments, challenges remain in translating these opportunities into widespread SME uptake and in supporting the scaling of pilots from proof-of-concept to production.

[Main needs and gaps identified, both common to the Mediterranean area and specific to the territory](#)

Common to Mediterranean region

- Skills & human capital: Need for targeted upskilling in AI, data analytics, digital product management and cybersecurity.
- Access to testbeds & affordable experimentation: SMEs require low-cost environments to trial technologies before investing.
- Financing pipelines: Bridge funding from pilot to commercialization (proof-of-value to scaled deployment) is often missing.
- Digitalisation of services & tourism: Demand for digital visitor experiences, smart services and e-commerce in traditional sectors.

Specific needs and gaps in Podravje

- Increased awareness and targeted outreach to smaller firms and local municipalities regarding available EDIH services.
- Short, applied upskilling programmes tailored to SME managers and technicians (applied AI, predictive maintenance, data-driven quality control, precision farming basics).

²⁶ https://www.gzs.si/Portals/Panoga-ZIT/Vsebine/ZiT-Program_za_uspesno_digitalno_Slovenijo_2030.pdf

²⁷ https://rra-podravje.si/assets/docs/CCRI_RegionalStrategy_CBE_ENG.pdf

- Clearer micro-funding (matching grants, vouchers) and follow-on support mechanisms to enable scaling of digital pilots.
- Addressing connectivity and access constraints in peripheral areas.
- Strengthening systematic industry-academia matchmaking to support applied research and innovation uptake.

Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems

P4D 2025 – “Spodbude za digitalno transformacijo MSP”²⁸: National call supporting SME digital transformation in production and business processes. Covers digital technologies (software, hardware) and services (AI, Industry 4.0, data, cybersecurity). Grants up to €100,000 with 50% co-financing (budget: €17.8M). Supports digital business models and workforce skills.

Recovery & Resilience Facility (RRF)²⁹: A substantial share of Slovenia's RRF allocation (21.4%) targets digital transformation, including public administration digitalisation, digital skills, cybersecurity and SME digitalisation. It serves as a key instrument for scaling digital investment.

EU “Digital Europe” Programme: The Program for a Digital Europe (DIGITAL): Supports AI, supercomputing, cybersecurity, advanced digital skills and SME uptake of digital technologies. Slovenian entities can participate in EU calls for digital innovation and capacity building.

Vouchers (SPS)³⁰: Digital vouchers from the Slovenski podjetniški sklad provide small-scale support for first-step digitalisation (e.g., digital strategy, marketing, cybersecurity).

National Strategy & Institutional Support

“Digitalna Slovenija 2030”³¹ and the Digitalisation in Entrepreneurship programme frame national digital policy, combining grants, loans, training and consultancy. The National AI Programme (NpUI) supports AI uptake. DIH Slovenia provides test-before-invest and innovation support services.

European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH): Slovenia hosts two EDIHs: DIGI-SI (Maribor) and SRC-EDIH (Novo mesto), offering testing facilities, upskilling, innovation services and connections to research and finance.

²⁸ <https://www.podjetniskisklad.si/en/p4d-2025-incentives-for-the-digital-transformation-of-smes/>

²⁹ <https://www.gov.si/en/registries/projects/the-recovery-and-resilience-plan/>

³⁰ <https://www.podjetniskisklad.si/en/public-tenders-calls-programs/>

³¹ https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MDP/Dokumenti/DSI2030-potrjena-na-Vladi-RS_marec-2023.pdf

3.6 Northeast region, North Macedonia

Digital maturity and innovation capacities of the region

The Northeast Region of North Macedonia covers 9.3% of the national territory and represents 8.3% of the population, with low population density and a predominantly rural profile. The pilot municipalities (Kriva Palanka, Staro Nagoričane and Rankovce) are part of this region, which records the lowest GDP share (4.8%) and one of the lowest employment rates nationally. The economic structure is SME-dominated, with activities in agri-food, light manufacturing, construction, logistics, wholesale and a growing service and tourism corridor linked to the Bulgarian border.

The Republic of North Macedonia has full internet coverage, with high levels of mobile connectivity and household internet access (87.2% in 2024). However, the use of local e-services remains limited, partly due to uneven availability and quality of services provided by local governments.

In terms of digital maturity and innovation capacities, progress is visible but uneven. Urban SMEs tend to adopt basic digital tools, while advanced technologies (e.g. precision agriculture, IoT, traceability) remain at pilot level. Skills shortages and limited access to “test-before-invest” environments are recurrent constraints.

Overall, the region shows early-stage digital transformation: basic digital uptake is emerging, but advanced technology use, R&I capacity, access to finance for digital investment, and data interoperability remain limited. Sustainability integration (energy efficiency and renewables combined with digital monitoring) is developing but not yet mainstream.

Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems

Digital and innovation policies are framed by several national and regional strategies that support SME and green–digital transition:

- National Development Strategy (2024–2044)
- Smart Specialisation Strategy (2024–2027)
- ICT / Digital Strategy (2023–2027)
- Regional Development Programme for the Northeast Region (2021–2026)
- IPARD III (2021–2027) supporting digitalisation and modernization in agri-food
- Interreg / IPA Cross-Border Cooperation BG–MK (2021–2027)

These frameworks provide strategic direction and funding opportunities but require stronger local facilitation to translate into SME uptake.

Main needs and gaps identified, both common to the Mediterranean area and specific to the territory

Common to Mediterranean region

- Limited digital maturity of SMEs and ICCs beyond basic tools, with gaps in ERP/CRM systems, cybersecurity and data analytics.
- Insufficient availability of interoperable public datasets and digital registries to support data-driven services and innovation.
- Uneven access to innovation support services and “test-before-invest” facilities, especially outside main urban centres.
- Structural financial barriers for digital and green investments, including limited SME collateral and slow grant procedures.
- Underexploited potential for integrating digitalisation with the green transition, particularly in agri-food and traditional sectors.
- Persistent rural broadband gaps and last-mile connectivity limitations.
- Low uptake of digital standards, quality systems and traceability solutions.
- Logistical frictions and weak cross-border B2B cooperation limiting the development of integrated value chains.

Specific needs and gaps in the Northeast Region

- Rural SMEs require hands-on mentoring and language/localisation support to adopt digital tools effectively.
- Municipal digital registries remain fragmented, and several administrative procedures are still partly manual.
- Need for mobile labs, local demonstration facilities and shared prototyping environments to compensate for limited physical innovation infrastructure.
- Requirement to combine grants with IFI credit lines and advisory support to help SMEs develop bankable digital and green investment projects.
- Irrigation efficiency and cold-chain monitoring in agriculture require significant capital investment and technical assistance.
- Need to address connectivity “white spots” and improve digital infrastructure in industrial zones and border areas.
- Food processors require support to implement digital traceability systems and improve access to laboratory services.
- Opportunity to leverage Corridor VIII and the Bulgaria border to strengthen e-commerce and cross-border testing and cooperation.

Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems

Some local initiatives related to applied digital technologies include:

- AviFly – drone-based services for agriculture
- Smart Farming Technologies – precision agriculture solutions
- AgFutura – advisory services in precision agriculture and project management

However, access to finance remains a key constraint, and stronger support through EU and donor instruments is needed to enable scaling of digital solutions.

3.7 Balearic Islands, Spain

Digital maturity and innovation capacities of the region

The Balearic Islands have made significant progress in digital connectivity: nearly 100% of companies have internet access, and 93% of firms with more than 10 employees interact digitally with public administration and 79.6% of the population of the Balearic Islands has interacted with the Administration via the internet. However, SMEs lag behind: only 35% have a website and 38% are active on social media. As for ICT equipment and use, 85.6% of Balearic micro-enterprises have internet connection, surpassing the national average (82.1%), and 89.6% already have a computer (3.5 points above the national average, INE (2022)³²).

The Balearic Islands is home to 40,000 enterprises, with a significant portion (20.5%) employing more than ten workers on average per company. However, only 86 of these enterprises have more than 250 employees. All in all, the majority of the enterprises are SMEs and MSMEs.

The region is positioning itself as a “Silicon Valley of Tourism and Technology”, leveraging AI, cloud, and immersive technologies for tourism and other sectors.

Regarding the science, technology, and innovation system, during the period 2015-2021, the Balearic Islands have been the second autonomous community (Spanish region) to experience the highest growth in R&D expenditure, with an increase of 63.8%, compared to the 31.0% average of all autonomous communities. The COVID-19 pandemic did not interrupt the growth trend, although it did slow down the pace. However, it remains at the tail end of investment as a percentage of GDP. The business sector has been the largest investor, surpassing the expenditure of the University of the Balearic Islands for the second consecutive year.

In the Balearic Islands, TURISTEC Cluster (a business cluster dedicated to tourism technology) has grown a lot for the last years exporting tourism technology abroad, specially to South America and turned into an ecosystem where supply and demand, together with public-private collaboration, are the key levers that drive our activity. Turistec was founded in the Balearic Islands with a clear mission: to accelerate the digital transformation of tourism through collaboration and knowledge transfer. Today, they are a leading ecosystem that connects companies, institutions and talent to deliver technology solutions that make a difference worldwide.

³² [Instituto Nacional de Estadística. \(National Statistics Institute\)](#)

Regional or national digitalisation strategies and plans supporting SMEs, ICCs, and innovation ecosystems

Digitalization in the Balearic Islands is spearheaded by a collaboration between the regional government, island councils, and municipalities, facilitated by the General Directorate of Innovation, and Digital Transformation. This collaborative effort is crucial for harmonizing digital initiatives across the islands and ensuring equitable access to digital resources.

Although there is a notable increase in the number of tourism micro and small companies that have opted for starting out in digital transformation or improving their digital and technological capacity, the tourism sector must achieve greater digital development. In this sense, although not all subsectors in tourism are at the same level of digitalisation, they are concentrated in the same range in the Digital Maturity Index (DMI).

Regional level:

The RIS3 Balearic Islands Strategy (2021–2027)³³: Smart Specialisation Strategy prioritising tourism, marine economy, and ICT is one guiding reference. Support to SMEs may stem from for instance the Innobal Office that coordinates innovation and digital transformation actions or grants for industrial modernisation and SME digitalisation.

National level:

Two main strategies stand out for reducing the digital gap, promote disruptive technologies, and strengthen innovation ecosystems:

- España Digital 2025³⁴: Focus on connectivity, 5G, digital skills, cybersecurity, and SME digitalisation.
- SME Digitalisation Plan 2021–2025³⁵: €4.6 billion investment, programs like *Kit Digital*, *Activa Industria 4.0*, and *Activa Startups*.

Main needs and gaps identified, both common to the Mediterranean area and specific to the territory

Common to Mediterranean region:

- Persistent digital division (urban vs rural, north vs south).
- Limited digital skills and competences among SMEs.
- Cybersecurity vulnerabilities and lack of digital sovereignty.

³³ [INNOVACIÓN-Estrategia regional de innovación para una especialización inteligente \(RIS3\)](#)

³⁴ [S.E. de Digitalización e Inteligencia Artificial y S.E. de Telecomunicaciones e Infraestructuras Digitales - España Digital 2025](#)

³⁵ [Plan de Digitalización de PYMEs 2021-2025 | España Digital 2026](#)

- Insufficient investment in green and digital infrastructure and talent attraction.

Specific needs and gaps in the Balearic Islands:

- SME digitalisation remains low despite a strong tourism sector.
- Insularity challenges: higher costs for infrastructure, transport and talent retention.
- Need for sector diversification beyond tourism.
- Shortage of specialised tech workforce and advanced R&D capabilities.
- Fragmented adoption of advanced technologies (AI, IoT) outside tourism

3.8 Common and specific needs identified by all regions

The analysis of the seven pilot territories shows significant differences in size, economic structure and innovation ecosystems (insular regions such as the Balearic Islands and South Aegean, mountainous areas like Appennino Pistoiese, rural territories such as Larnaca and Northeast North Macedonia, and more industrial regions like Podravje and Adriatic Croatia). However, a strong set of shared structural needs emerges across Mediterranean rural, internal and island areas.

Across all regions, SMEs show limited depth of digitalisation. Basic connectivity and use of digital tools are widespread, but advanced adoption (data-driven management, AI, IoT, cybersecurity, integrated digital processes) remains low. This is closely linked to digital skills gaps, especially among micro-enterprises, traditional sectors, and older populations.

Business ecosystems are dominated by micro-SMEs with low absorptive capacity, which struggle to engage in pilots, access advisory services, and scale innovation. Even where DIHs, universities or research centres exist, links between innovation actors and small businesses remain weak, and “test-before-invest” services are not equally accessible in rural and insular areas.

Financial barriers are also common: SMEs face difficulties investing in digital and green solutions due to limited resources and complex funding mechanisms. At the same time, the integration of digital and green transitions (resource efficiency, traceability, circular models) is still underdeveloped across tourism, agri-food and cultural sectors.

Specific territorial gaps include depopulation and weak entrepreneurial density (Tuscany, Northeast Macedonia), double insularity and lack of local DIH presence (Cyclades and Dodecanese island groups), low R&I capacity (Northeast Macedonia), uneven SME digital presence (Balearic Islands, Rural Larnaca), and the need to better translate strong academic assets into SME innovation (Podravje).

Overall, MDIHs are needed as territorial connectors to bridge SMEs, ICCs, research actors and public authorities, making digital and green innovation more accessible in Mediterranean peripheral regions.

4. Challenges faced by Mediterranean SMEs

4.1 Rural Larnaca, Larnaca (Cyprus)

Key digitalisation gaps and challenges in SMEs

SMEs in Rural Larnaca face persistent barriers to digital transformation despite improvements in connectivity through fibre and 5G deployment. Digital adoption remains uneven, particularly in remote villages, where access to reliable high-speed internet and digital services is still limited.

More critically, low levels of digital literacy among business owners and employees hinder the effective use and maintenance of basic tools such as websites, e-commerce platforms and cloud-based solutions.

The absence of local innovation support structures further constrains digitalisation. Rural Larnaca lacks proximity to Digital Innovation Hubs, research centres or structured innovation ecosystems, forcing SMEs to rely on distant or national-level services. This reduces opportunities for collaboration, knowledge transfer and experimentation with advanced technologies.

Financial constraints also play a key role, as many SMEs perceive digital and green investments as costly and risky, also they lack awareness and expertise. As a result, the integration of sustainability-related digital solutions (energy efficiency, smart resource management, circular models) remains limited, reinforced by fragmented policy implementation and low participation in EU sustainability programmes. While national strategies promote green and digital transitions, rural SMEs struggle to navigate these frameworks and apply them effectively.

Skill shortages or technological barriers

Digital skills gaps are one of the main obstacles to innovation. Many SMEs lack personnel with competencies in digital management, data use, cybersecurity or advanced technologies such as AI and IoT. These gaps are particularly pronounced among older business owners and in low-income contexts. Although national connectivity indicators are strong, affordability, uneven last-mile coverage and limited access to modern hardware and software remain barriers. The lack of local innovation infrastructure and fragmented support services further isolate SMEs, reducing awareness of available funding and advisory instruments. Addressing these issues requires targeted training programs, affordable technology solutions, and stronger local innovation networks.

Local economic and demographic challenges

Rural Larnaca is affected by depopulation and ageing, driven by the outmigration of younger generations seeking employment in urban areas or abroad. This reduces workforce availability, entrepreneurial dynamism and innovation capacity. SMEs operating mainly in traditional sectors such as agriculture and tourism face strong seasonal and competitive pressures, which are exacerbated by low digital maturity. Without targeted support, rural businesses struggle to access digital markets, modernise production processes or increase resilience. Addressing these challenges requires integrated approaches combining skills development, affordable digital solutions, incentives for young entrepreneurs and stronger local innovation networks.

4.2 Appennino Pistoiese, Tuscany (Italy)

Key digitalisation gaps and challenges in SMEs

SMEs in the Appennino Pistoiese face several structural barriers that slow both digital transformation and the integration of sustainability practices. Despite the presence of regional Digital Innovation Hubs (Tuscany X.0, ARTES 5.0), local SMEs struggle to access advanced services due to limited digital readiness, insufficient skills, and infrastructural constraints. Many micro and small enterprises, particularly in the tourism and agri-food sectors, lack even basic digital tools such as websites, online booking systems, or digital marketing capabilities. This limits their visibility, competitiveness, and ability to participate in wider innovation ecosystems. Moreover, sustainability-oriented innovation (e.g., energy efficiency, circular processes, sustainable materials) often requires technological knowledge and financial capacity that many small businesses do not possess. As a result, SMEs risk falling behind both in digital adoption and in transitioning toward more sustainable and resilient business models.

Skill shortages or technological barriers

- Low digital skills represent one of the strongest barriers: many SMEs lack the competences needed to adopt, maintain, and update digital tools, platforms, or websites.
- Limited technological knowledge makes it difficult for small businesses to engage with advanced technologies promoted by DIHs (AI, robotics, IoT, digital platforms).
- Inadequate digital infrastructure in rural zones (uneven broadband coverage, slower connections) reduces the feasibility of cloud-based services, e-commerce, or remote work.
- Financial constraints prevent SMEs from investing in digital upgrades, website development, or sustainability-oriented technologies.
- Low awareness of available regional support - many SMEs are not familiar with DIH services or innovation programmes, limiting uptake.

Local economic and demographic challenges in rural areas

- Depopulation and ageing reduce the local labour pool, creating difficulties in recruiting workers with digital or technical skills.
- Youth outmigration weakens the innovation capacity of the territory..
- Small and fragmented entrepreneurial fabric, with micro-businesses that often operate seasonally makes long-term digital investments difficult.
- Lower competitiveness compared to urban areas.
- Geographical constraints typical of mountainous regions increase the cost of digital infrastructure deployment and reduce private operators' incentives to invest.
- Limited digital culture across the territory slows the adoption of online tools essential for visibility (e.g., digital storytelling, destination branding, e-commerce, online booking).

4.3 Cyclades and Dodecanese island groups, South Aegean Region (Greece)

Key digitalisation gaps and challenges in SMEs

SMEs exhibit moderate digital maturity, with a low take-up of advanced technologies (AI, Big Data, IoT) compared to EU averages. The digital focus is often limited to basic, customer-facing services (e.g., social media), rather than holistic operational transformation necessary for integrating sustainability practices. Primary barriers are financial, structural (lack of dedicated IT staff), and a strategic reluctance to invest limited capital in complex digital projects.

Skill shortages or technological barriers

The most pronounced barrier is the acute digital skills deficit. Greece records a low percentage of ICT specialists in employment (2.4% vs. 4.8% EU average), directly impeding the ability of SMEs to adopt and utilize new digital tools effectively. This skill gap is exacerbated by the technological barrier of the island digital divide: fragmented and sometimes unreliable digital infrastructure in remote island areas increases connectivity costs and limits access to stable, high-speed networks essential for modern cloud-based solutions.

Local economic and demographic challenges

The economic over-reliance on a single sector (tourism) creates vulnerability to external shocks. Furthermore, the smallholder agricultural sector and critical resource management lack the necessary *specialized personnel* (e.g., *agricultural engineers*) *to implement precision digital solutions, undermining competitiveness and long-term sustainability.*

4.4 Buzet, Cerovlje, Lanišće, Lupoglav and Opatlj, Istria (Croatia)

Key digitalisation gaps and challenges in SMEs

- Limited digital skills - lack of advanced digital competencies (data analytics, e-commerce, online profiles)
- Rural and inland areas have weaker connectivity and fewer ICT service providers
- Many still see digitalisation and sustainability in SMEs as separate topics
- Many SMEs rely on external IT or consulting services for projects connected with digitalisation of the company

Skill shortages or technological barriers

- Digital literacy gap – lack of digital skills (e.g. data analysis, digital marketing)
- Shortage of qualified experts in the IT sector in SMEs
- Outdated equipment and limited access to advanced technologies, such as AI or IoT solutions
- Slow adaptation to digitalisation at local level

Local economic and demographic challenges

- Depopulation - many rural areas face population decline and ageing demographics
- Migration of young professionals to larger cities
- Lack of connectivity
- Challenges in adopting digital transition, smart and sustainable technologies, some SMEs are struggling to keep pace

4.5 Slovenske Gorice, Podravje (Slovenia)

Key digitalisation gaps and challenges in SMEs

SMEs in the Podravje region continue to face several systemic barriers that hinder their transition towards digitalisation, sustainability, and long-term competitiveness.

Digitalisation gaps persist across sectors: many enterprises still rely on outdated or fragmented IT systems, lack integrated digital business models, and have limited access to advanced technologies such as automation, data analytics or AI. The adoption of sustainable practices is also inconsistent, with many SMEs lacking the

tools and knowledge to measure environmental impacts, optimise resource use, or adapt production to circular economy principles. These gaps are particularly visible in traditional industries (agri-food, wood, tourism, crafts), where digital transformation is still gradual and investment capacity is low.

Skill shortages or technological barriers

Skill shortages represent a core barrier. SMEs often struggle to recruit or retain employees with digital competencies, especially in fields such as cybersecurity, digital marketing, e-commerce, and process automation. Many workers lack advanced digital literacy, making internal digital transition slow and dependent on external providers. Limited managerial understanding of digital strategies further constrains adoption. Technological barriers include poor integration of digital solutions, high investment costs, limited broadband coverage in more rural parts of Podravje, and weak interoperability between legacy and modern systems.

Local economic and demographic challenges

These challenges are intensified by local economic and demographic conditions. Podravje faces depopulation in rural municipalities, ageing of the workforce, and out-migration of younger talent to larger urban centres or abroad. This reduces the labour pool available for digital-intensive roles and weakens entrepreneurial dynamism. Rural SMEs often experience lower competitiveness due to limited infrastructure, smaller markets, and slower uptake of digital tools. Combined with post-COVID structural pressures and increasing sustainability demands, these trends create a widening digital divide between dynamic urban hubs (Maribor) and rural areas.

Overall, SMEs in Podravje must navigate intersecting challenges of limited digital capacity, workforce shortages, and regional demographic decline, all of which underline the need for targeted support measures, investment in skills, and stronger regional innovation ecosystems.

4.6 Kriva Palanka, Rankovce, and Staro Nagoricane, Northeast region (North Macedonia)

Key digitalisation gaps and challenges in SMEs

- Uneven basic digital uptake: Many micro and small enterprises still rely on spreadsheets and messaging apps instead of integrated ERP/CRM, e-invoicing or inventory systems.
- Fragmented data and processes: Low interoperability between accounting, sales, logistics and production, with limited use of real-time KPIs.



- Limited “test-before-invest” opportunities: SMEs often lack structured support to identify suitable vendors and assess return on investment before adopting digital solutions.
- Cybersecurity and compliance gaps: Weak security practices, absence of backup and disaster recovery systems, and limited staff awareness of cybersecurity risks.
- Finance and cash-flow constraints: High upfront investment costs and difficulties accessing or combining grants and credit without advisory support.
- Connectivity and last-mile issues: Rural “white spots”, unstable bandwidth for cloud services, and limited deployment of 5G or FTTx in peripheral areas.
- Management and change barriers: Digital transformation is often perceived as risky or secondary to short-term operational priorities.
- Sustainability gaps linked to digitalisation: Limited data use for resource management, weak circular economy practices, insufficient tools for supply-chain transparency, and compliance driven mainly by market requirements rather than strategy.

Skill shortages or technological barriers

- Advanced skills gaps: Shortage of specialised profiles: IoT technicians, PLC/SCADA operators, cybersecurity experts, and AI/ML specialists.
- Managerial and change-management capacity: Limited availability of product owners or change managers to lead digital adoption.
- Technological barriers: Risks of vendor lock-in, reliance on proprietary systems and lack of local technical support for specialised or niche solutions.
- Advisory and brokerage gaps: Insufficient access to neutral advisory, technology brokerage, and matchmaking services to guide SMEs.

Local economic and demographic challenges in rural areas

- Depopulation and ageing: reduce the available workforce and limit the capacity to adopt and sustain digital and innovative practices.
- Micro-enterprise dominance
- Thin markets and distance to buyers: physical distance from major markets increase logistics costs and reduce access to customers, suppliers and innovation networks.
- Rural competitiveness gap
- Institutional capacity: Limited administrative and technical capacity at local level

4.7 Mancomunitat del Pla, Balearic Islands (Spain)

Key digitalisation gaps and challenges in SMEs

- Low adoption among SMEs: While nearly all companies have internet access, only 35% of SMEs have a website and 38% use social media, limiting their digital visibility and competitiveness.
- Fragmented uptake of advanced technologies: AI, IoT, and big data adoption is concentrated in larger firms and tourism-related businesses; other sectors lag behind.
- Limited integration of sustainability in digital strategies: SMEs struggle to combine digital transformation with circular economy practices due to cost and knowledge barriers.
- Financial constraints: Many SMEs lack resources to invest in digital tools or green technologies without public aid.

Skill shortages or technological barriers

- Digital skills gap: A large proportion of SME employees lack formal training in IT, AI, and data analytics.
- Organizational and technical barriers: Missing internal capabilities, outdated systems, and lack of standards hinder transformation. SMEs often lack dedicated IT staff or strategic planning for digitalisation.
- Green and digital workforce shortage: The twin transition (digital and sustainability) requires specialized profiles that are scarce locally, increasing reliance on external talent.

Local economic and demographic challenges in rural areas

- Insularity and rural gaps: Infrastructure and transport costs are higher on islands due to insularity, and rural areas face slower digital transition, reducing competitiveness compared to urban hubs like Palma city.
- Tourism dependency: Heavy reliance on tourism makes diversification harder; SMEs outside tourism, lack incentives and support for digitalisation.
- Population trends: Although the Balearics have a relatively young population, attracting and retaining skilled talent is challenging due to housing costs and seasonal employment patterns. The population of the Balearic Islands has experienced a 46.3% growth between 2001 and 2024, due to foreign immigration whose workforce is low-skilled.

5. MDIHs as Territorial Strategy

Within the REVIVE project, Mediterranean Digital Innovation Hubs (MDIHs) are conceived not merely as service providers or technology access points, but as

territorial strategies that enable digital, green and social innovation in rural areas through place-based, participatory and community-driven approaches. Innovative Community Cooperatives (ICCs) play a central role in this model, as locally rooted collaborative structures that connect SMEs, communities and public actors around shared development goals. MDIHs act as intermediaries between policy objectives, innovation ecosystems and ICCs, supporting the co-design, testing and scaling of solutions aligned with real territorial needs.

5.1 MDIHs role to foster local innovation

MDIHs play a key role in activating local innovation ecosystems, especially in territories characterised by fragmented value chains, limited digital capacity and reduced access to innovation infrastructures. In REVIVE, MDIHs operate as brokers, facilitators and translators between advanced technologies and local communities, ensuring that innovation processes are understandable, accessible and relevant for SMEs, cooperatives and rural stakeholders.

Their role goes beyond technology transfer and includes:

- Identifying concrete local challenges (economic, environmental, organisational) together with ICCs and other actors in the territory;
- Connecting local needs with appropriate digital solutions, expertise and funding opportunities;
- Supporting experimentation and learning-by-doing, lowering the perceived risks of digital adoption;
- Embedding innovation within collaborative business models, strengthening trust, cooperation and shared value creation.

In this sense, MDIHs contribute to territorial resilience and competitiveness, enabling rural areas to transition from isolated digital initiatives to structured, community-based innovation pathways.

5.2 Creation of digital labs and transferability. Participative model with stakeholders

A core operational instrument of the MDIH approach in REVIVE has been the creation of digital laboratories (digital labs) as participatory spaces for experimentation, capacity building and co-creation. These labs have not been fixed infrastructures but flexible, context-adapted environments—physical, digital or hybrid—where stakeholders can test technologies, develop skills and collectively design solutions.

Digital labs are characterised by:

- Active involvement of ICC members, SMEs, public authorities, technology providers and civil society;

- Hands-on methodologies, combining demonstrations, pilot testing and practical training;
- Iterative feedback loops, allowing solutions to evolve based on real user experience;
- Transferability, as methods, tools and learnings can be adapted and replicated in other territories.

By anchoring digital labs within ICCs and Action Plans, MDIHs ensure that innovation is not project-driven or temporary but embedded in long-term territorial development strategies.

5.3 Synergies with immersive experiences and Action Plans

Immersive technologies are increasingly recognised as key enablers of the next generation of digital environments. These technologies, including virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and other extended reality (XR) applications, allow users to interact with digital content within highly interactive and engaging environments that blend physical and digital spaces. According to the European Commission³⁶, virtual worlds are understood as persistent, immersive environments based on technologies such as 3D and XR that enable the real-time integration of physical and digital worlds for purposes including collaboration, learning, simulation and service delivery. In this context, immersive technologies are gaining relevance across sectors such as tourism, cultural heritage, education and local development, where they support new forms of storytelling, user engagement and digital innovation.

Immersive experiences developed within REVIVE play a strategic role in linking MDIHs with territorial Action Plans, acting as catalysts for digital adoption and innovation uptake. By combining storytelling, interaction and technology, immersive experiences help translate strategic objectives into concrete, visible and engaging actions.

In several pilot regions, immersive experiences have:

- Supported territorial branding and market positioning, by showcasing local products, landscapes and production processes;
- Strengthened the connection between producers, communities and visitors, reinforcing the logic of collaborative economy models;
- Served as testing grounds for digital solutions, later embedded in Action Plans and ICC strategies.

Examples include the AI-powered holographic avatar in Rural Larnaca, which combines cultural heritage, education and tourism through real-time interaction; the 360° immersive storytelling of agri-food production and gastronomy in Appennine Tuscany, connecting producers, restaurateurs and visitors; and the immersive

³⁶ [Virtual Worlds fit for people | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

promotion of local agricultural products in Pla de Mallorca, using 360° videos and mixed reality to strengthen links between the primary sector and the tourism ecosystem.

Collectively, these experiences demonstrate how immersive technologies can support new business models, practices aligned with more sustainable and regenerative forms of tourism, and stronger producer–community–visitor relationships. They also reinforce the role of MDIHs and ICCs as facilitators of experimentation, learning and collaboration. A detailed description of each immersive experience, including technologies used and territorial relevance, is provided in the following sections of this document.

6. Innovative solutions developed in pilot areas

Within the REVIVE project, the engagement and co-design processes carried out with local stakeholders and Innovative Community Cooperatives have led to the identification, conceptualisation and testing of a set of innovative digital solutions tailored to the specific needs of each pilot territory. These solutions are the outcome of a participatory process aimed at strengthening local value chains, supporting sustainable and regenerative tourism, improving market access for local producers, and enhancing territorial visibility.

The solutions developed respond directly to the priorities defined in the local Action Plans, translating collaborative business models into concrete digital tools, platforms and immersive experiences. In this sense, digitalisation acts as an enabler of cooperation, knowledge sharing and innovation, reinforcing the role of ICCs as drivers of local development and resilience.

The following sections briefly describe the main innovative solutions developed in each pilot area. A more detailed description of the technological components, immersive experiences and implementation processes is provided in later sections of this deliverable.

6.1 Rural Larnaca, Larnaca (Cyprus)

The co-design process carried out in Rural Larnaca brought together local stakeholders—communities, small businesses, cultural actors, and tourism providers—to collectively shape a unified vision for the region’s tourism identity. This collaborative effort contributed to the creation of a global Marketing and Communication Plan, which included a refreshed branding strategy led by the Larnaca Tourism Board. Through this process, the region aligned its messaging around authenticity, sustainability, and year-round experiential tourism, ensuring that

promotional materials and digital tools reflect the true character and diversity of rural, coastal, and mountainous Larnaca.

A key outcome of this co-design process was the development of an online platform dedicated to the presentation, management, and booking of local experiences related to nature, culture, gastronomy, and heritage. The platform centralizes a wide range of experiential activities—such as tasting tours, traditional workshops, walking tours, water sports, village experiences, and rural adventures—and allows visitors to filter options by date, interests, group size, and accommodation. It streamlines the booking process while enhancing the visibility of authentic, locally rooted activities and continuously enriches its catalogue as new providers meeting quality criteria join the system.

Importantly, the platform operationalizes the collaborative business model developed by the ICC, giving local actors a shared digital space where they can jointly promote, manage, and coordinate their experiential offerings. By providing small enterprises and independent providers with direct access to digital markets, it strengthens the local economy, improves coordination among stakeholders, and expands international visibility for rural experiences that might otherwise remain hidden. The tool therefore serves not only as a booking engine but as a structural mechanism for cooperation, capacity-building, and sustainable destination development in Rural Larnaca. More Information: <https://larnakaregion.triggle.app>

6.2 Apennino Pistoiese, Tuscany (Italy)

The innovative solution developed for the Apennino Pistoiese pilot focuses on the creation of a shared visual identity for the Food Community and the development of a dedicated website conceived as the main digital access point to the initiative. Beyond promoting local products, the territory and the Food Community itself, the website hosts an interactive digital platform that enables users to explore the Food Community through multimedia and immersive content, including 360° VR experiences accessible also without the use of headsets, ensuring broad accessibility and engagement. More information: <https://comunitacibompt.it>

The 360° videos offer an immersive, authentic, and tech-enhanced experience that invites users to discover the Food Community, its products, and the surrounding territory, connecting digitalisation with rural development. By allowing users to virtually enter production spaces, the experience opens a window onto the Pistoiese Apennines and its landscapes. The immersive experiences will be used in restaurants and agritourisms through VR headsets, allowing guests to virtually enter production places while tasting local dishes. They will also be showcased during public events to

engage audiences and narrate the territory, its traditions, and identity. This immersive experience brings together a network of local actors: the farmers who cultivate the land, the breeders who care for cows, goats, and sheep, the artisans who transform blueberries into juices and jams, and the restaurants and accommodation facilities that celebrate these products in their dishes. Together, they shape the living ecosystem of the Food Community.

This digital solution responds to needs identified during the participatory process, particularly the lack of a common narrative, low visibility of local agri-food heritage and the need for accessible digital tools to support community-building, communication and territorial promotion, while providing a scalable digital backbone for future developments.

6.3 Cyclades and Dodecanese island groups, South Aegean (Greece)

The strategic initiative carried out in the South Aegean Region brought together local stakeholders across the islands to collectively shape a unified digital presence for the region's gastronomic identity. This collaborative effort contributed to a streamlined approach to promoting Aegean Cuisine, navigating the complexities of a region historically managed by two distinct Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CCIs). Through this process, the region aligned its messaging around authentic Aegean hospitality and culinary heritage, ensuring that digital tools seamlessly reflect the rich, diverse flavors of both the Cyclades and the Dodecanese islands under one cohesive umbrella.

A key outcome of this integration process was the development of an advanced AI assistant designed to bridge the gap between the two separately managed Aegean Cuisine portals. While the new Aegean Cuisine site shares a common landing page, it traditionally splits into distinct Cyclades and Dodecanese sections with separate hosting and divergent marketing approaches. The AI bot offers an interactive browsing alternative, collecting and summarizing culinary data efficiently across both networks. Instead of requiring users to search separately and risk getting lost in the dual portals, the bot centralizes the information, allowing visitors to easily navigate complex queries and seamlessly explore local recipes, restaurants, and regional ingredients.

Importantly, this interactive platform operationalizes a unified experience through a Custom Avatar designed to embody authentic Aegean hospitality. This digital persona serves not only as a friendly guide for visitors but also as the official mascot for the entire Aegean Cuisine network. By consolidating distinct regional datasets and providing an intuitive conversational interface, the AI tool strengthens coordination between the different CCIs and enhances the international visibility of the region's culinary offerings. The tool therefore functions not merely as a smart search engine, but as a structural mechanism for unifying, promoting, and sustaining the destination's distinct gastronomic identity across the South Aegean.

More information: <https://www.aegeancuisine.gr/>

6.4 Buzet, Cerovlje, Lanišće, Lupoglav and Oprtalj, Istria (Croatia)

In Croatia, the digital solution is a web platform designed as a collaborative digital space that connects businesses from agriculture, tourism and hospitality, creative industry, and other sectors (including the automotive sector; hairdressers, beauticians and massage therapists; construction workers; repair and maintenance services; transport providers; manufacturing; retail; and other service activities), together with public bodies and support organisations.

The platform brings together stakeholders from the pilot area, thereby creating a “virtual community”. Its objective is to simplify and strengthen connections, foster cooperation, and provide a virtual space for communication among local stakeholders. For business users, the platform enhances business opportunities by enabling them to promote and increase the visibility of their products and services, express demand for products/services or cooperation, and share other relevant information.

The platform also includes development support entities (public bodies and organisations, such as local authorities, Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), Local Action Groups (LAGs), various associations, initiatives, higher education and research institutions, and others), which provide support to business users by publishing news and providing relevant and useful information in one place.

The platform does not include transactional functions; instead, it focuses on promotion, connection, and the facilitation of joint initiatives. More information: <https://reviveistria.com/>

6.5 Slovenske Gorice, Podravje (Slovenia)

In Slovenia, the core digital solution is the development of a digital-first cooperative model (SGX Coop) that functions as a shared organisational and digital infrastructure for tourism and smart destination services. The cooperative provides a common framework for marketing, digital services, training and innovation, enabling local actors to jointly develop and manage digital tourism solutions aligned with sustainable and community-based development.

In the first phase, key 360° videos will be produced at selected viewpoints, vineyards, cultural heritage sites, cycling routes, and representative production spaces. These short, mobile-optimised immersive scenes will be accessible without the need for a dedicated application, ensuring low entry barriers for both domestic and international visitors.

The concept will be implemented through a clearly defined narrative framework based on the identity of Slovenske Gorice: hills, wine, panoramic views, slow rhythms, and authentic local stories. The 360° module will function both as a standalone promotional tool and as an entry gateway to thematic, digitally guided visits. For example, a panoramic 360° experience at a lookout tower will serve as a starting point, guiding users via interactive hotspots toward wine routes, cultural landmarks, family-friendly paths, or cycling itineraries. The interactive map will connect QR-coded points in the field with multimedia stories, short videos, and educational content. In the future, additional modules will include gamified family routes, cycling trails enriched with immersive viewpoints, location-triggered micro-stories at local farms and wineries, and the use of VR equipment in TICs and municipal spaces. Another strong element is the character Ovtar, which will be gradually introduced as a digital guide, strengthening destination identity and enhancing user engagement.

The strategic implementation will follow a phased roadmap (MVP - Minimum Viable Product → expansion → advanced features) to ensure long-term sustainability and realistic organisational capacity. In later phases, additional immersive content, advanced AR features, and personalised digital guidance may be introduced.

The 360° videos will be integrated into the cooperative's website, promoted via YouTube and social media channels, and used in educational modules for schools, public events, and destination presentations. Through this approach, the immersive experience in Slovenske Gorice will not be developed merely as a technological upgrade, but as a long-term strategic digital infrastructure supporting sustainable tourism, community-based development, and stronger regional visibility. More information: <https://visitgorice.si/en/>

6.6 Kriva Palanka, Rankovce, and Staro Nagoricane, Northeast region) North Macedonia)

The innovative solutions developed in the pilot area of the Northeast Planning Region of North Macedonia focus on strengthening the local beekeeping ecosystem through an integrated digital and community-based approach. At the core of these solutions is a comprehensive digital platform that combines a producer and product catalogue with a digital beekeeping logbook integrated with real-time meteorological data. This system enables improved apiary management, structured data collection, and evidence-based decision-making, while multilingual access ensures inclusiveness and accessibility for local stakeholders.

In addition to farm-level digitalisation, the pilot solutions enhance traceability, product quality monitoring, and collective visibility of honey and related products originating from Kriva Palanka, Rankovce, and Staro Nagoričane. Data interpretation tools support producers in analysing production trends and environmental conditions, strengthening both competitiveness and sustainability. By connecting producers within a shared digital environment, the solution reinforces the

development of local value chains under the Innovative Community Cooperative model.

Beyond technological innovation, the pilot solutions introduce a collaborative governance framework that enables coordination between beekeepers, local authorities, and support organisations. The integrated approach combines digital tools, capacity-building activities, and collective organisation mechanisms, contributing to increased resilience, market positioning, and long-term sustainability of the beekeeping community in the Northeast Planning Region.

6.7 Pla de Mallorca, Balearic Islands (Spain)

The digital solution identified for the Pla de Mallorca pilot area is the Nubia Market B2B platform. This solution responds to the need to strengthen links between local agri-food producers and the tourism and HORECA sector, facilitating responsible and circular procurement, and the consumption of local products.

Within the framework of REVIVE, a formal agreement was reached to integrate local producers and tourism establishments into the platform's centralised purchasing system, embedding criteria related to sustainability, local origin and circular economy. Nubia Market thus became the selected digital solution for the Mallorca pilot, enabling direct market access, improving coordination between supply and demand, and reinforcing short supply chains. More information: [Nubia Market](#)

7. Digital Laboratories Activities

7.1 Design of a series of 1-2 international courses

[7.1.1 First International course](#)

On 2 July 2025, the Chamber of Commerce of Mallorca, within the framework of the REVIVE project co-financed by the Interreg Euro-MED Programme, successfully organised an online international webinar introducing the concept, role and mission of Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) in the Mediterranean context. The event brought together 56 participants from across Europe, including representatives from public authorities, regional agencies, SMEs, cooperatives, academia and civil society.

The main objective of the course was to raise awareness of how DIHs, as defined by the European Commission, can support digital and green transitions, particularly in rural areas, agri-food value chains and cooperative models. The session presented existing DIH experiences in the Mediterranean region and provided practical insights into their governance, services and added value for SMEs. An interactive Q&A session allowed participants to exchange views and clarify key concepts.

7.1.2 Second international course

On 9 December 2025, the second international course was co-organised by the Larnaca and Famagusta Districts Development Agency, in collaboration with all partners of the REVIVE project. The course counted 35 participants, focused on exploring the potential of digital services and advanced technologies for the economic and social development of rural areas.

A central element of the session was the presentation of the Mediterranean Digital Innovation Online Platform (MDIH platform) developed within REVIVE. The platform was introduced as a shared, user-friendly digital space designed to collect, store and share data related to innovative supply chain processes, business models and digital solutions developed across the seven pilot areas, at both regional and Mediterranean level. In addition, project partners showcased the development of digital and immersive experiences, highlighting how these tools were adapted to the specific contexts, needs and characteristics of each pilot territory.

The event was open to a wide range of stakeholders, including local and regional public authorities, innovation agencies, SMEs, cooperatives, agri-food producers, business associations, digital enablers, technology centres, universities, Chambers of Commerce, local innovation promoters and project partners, as well as any actors interested in fostering digital and green transitions at local level. Main contents included:

- Overview of EU initiatives supporting digital skills and innovation in rural areas
- Presentation of the Mediterranean Digital Innovation Online Platform
- Development of immersive experiences across the seven pilot areas
- Exchange of practices and open discussion

The agenda combined strategic inputs with concrete pilot examples from Cyprus, Italy, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Slovenia and North Macedonia, concluding with a joint Q&A session that fostered exchange and peer learning among participants.

7.2 Digital laboratories (capacity building activities)

7.2.1 Rural Larnaca, Larnaca (Cyprus)

Digital Laboratory 1: Get to know DiGiNN

The first digital laboratory focused on introducing local stakeholders in Rural Larnaca to DiGiNN, the Cyprus Digital Innovation Hub, as a key support mechanism for SMEs and entrepreneurs in their digital transformation processes. The session (4/9/2025) presented DiGiNN as a one-stop shop providing access to advanced digital infrastructure, mentoring and coaching services, support in accessing funding, and connections to national and European innovation ecosystems.

Experts from DiGiNN showcased practical examples of how Digital Innovation Hubs can enhance competitiveness and sustainability in rural contexts, highlighting structured programmes for skills development, technology adoption and the integration of advanced solutions into traditional business models. The laboratory also included discussions on the role of immersive technologies in rural economies and how DIHs can help bridge the gap between technology providers and local enterprises.

The activity was complemented by study visits to CYENS Centre of Excellence, where participants were introduced to interactive media, smart systems and emerging technologies, and to the Thinker Maker Space (TMS) in Larnaca, a creative hub supporting young entrepreneurs and local innovators through hands-on, technology-driven projects.

Digital Laboratory 2: Introduction to Immersive Technologies

The second digital laboratory (24/9/2025) was dedicated to Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) and their potential applications in rural development. Participants were introduced to the fundamentals of immersive technologies and explored practical use cases relevant to Rural Larnaca, including virtual tours of villages and cultural heritage sites, AR-enhanced visitor experiences, and digital storytelling linked to local products and traditions.

Beyond technical aspects, the session encouraged stakeholders to identify concrete innovation needs and to reflect on how immersive technologies could be integrated into existing tourism, cultural and entrepreneurial activities. Guidance was also provided on resource matching, access to expertise, funding opportunities and equipment. A public demonstration complemented the laboratory, showcasing virtual diving routes developed by ANETEL in another project, combined with the promotion and tasting of local agri-food products, reinforcing the link between digital innovation and local identity.

Proposed future training or capacity-building needs: Digital Laboratory 3: The AI Holographic Avatar of Rural Larnaca

The third digital laboratory is for introducing participants to the AI Holographic Avatar of Rural Larnaca, one of the most innovative actions included in the regional Action Plan. The session will explain the concept and functioning of a life-sized, AI-powered holographic avatar capable of real-time interaction with visitors through natural language processing and adaptive communication.

Potential applications will be explored, particularly in tourism and education, such as welcoming visitors, guiding them through cultural and environmental exhibitions, and supporting interactive storytelling related to local heritage and products. The laboratory will highlight the strategic value of this solution in enhancing visitor

experience and positioning Rural Larnaca as a pioneer in digital rural tourism. The delivery of the third digital laboratory is for January 2026.

7.2.2 Appennino Pistoiese, Tuscany (Italy)

Digital laboratory on Communication, Digital Marketing and Emerging Technologies.

Two training sessions held on 18 and 30 June 2025 provided the Food Community of Montagna Pistoiese with strategic guidance on communication, digital marketing, social media engagement, and emerging technologies to support territorial promotion.

The training was designed around the following topics:

- Strategic Communication for Territorial Identity
- Digital Marketing and Online Reputation
- Social Media Communication: Platforms, Languages and Audiences
- Content Strategy and Storytelling
- Social Media Policy and Monitoring
- Emerging Technologies and the Role of Artificial Intelligence

Several successful cases of territorial innovation, such as the creation of interactive experiential trails, and creative food-related initiatives, were presented to inspire local actors and demonstrate how communication, creativity, and emerging technologies can promote the territory.

Digital laboratory “Managing WordPress web sites and integration of interactive platforms for the visualisation of the 360° VR videos”

The training was conducted on 25 November 2025 and designed to equip the community members with the skills needed to manage, update, and optimise WordPress website developed within the Tuscan pilot, as well as to integrate advanced multimedia tools - specifically 360° Virtual Reality (VR) videos into digital communication strategies.

The session provided technical guidance, enabling participants to enhance the online visibility of their territorial, cultural, or tourism-related projects through immersive and interactive digital experiences.

The training covered the following topics:

- Introduction to WordPress and content management

- Website customisation
- Introduction to 360° and VR Content
- Interactive Platforms for VR Visualisation

Onsite demonstration of the use of drones and VR production equipment.

Managing the VR Online Platform and VR Headsets

The training was carried out as planned on 28 February 2026. This training provided participants of the Tuscan ICC with the operational skills required to manage the VR equipment, operate VR headsets, and use the interactive online platform developed for the WP3 immersive experience activity. The session focused on the practical aspects of showcasing the newly produced 360° VR videos and communication materials, enabling restaurants, agritourisms, producers, and community representatives to integrate immersive storytelling into their visitor experience, events, and communication activities. The training ensured that each participant was able to independently manage VR demonstrations, guide users safely, and leverage the immersive platform as a strategic tool to promote the territory, its producers, and the culture of the Montagna Pistoiese.

Proposed future training and capacity-building needs:

- Strengthening existing traceability systems. Further training should focus on consolidating and upgrading current traceability systems through more advanced digital tools (e.g. integrated tracking solutions, QR-based storytelling). The objective is to reinforce transparency and more effectively communicate the link between products, production processes, and territorial identity.
- Collaborative innovation workshops. Workshops aimed at enhancing cooperation among local stakeholders and co-developing new products, dishes, and experiential offerings rooted in local tradition, thereby strengthening the collective territorial brand.

[7.2.3 Cyclades and Dodecanese island groups, South Aegean \(Greece\)](#)

Digital Laboratory 1: Utilization of Digital Tools for the Promotion of Businesses

Held on Thursday, December 18th 2025, READ S.A. (Development Agency of South Aegean) organized a specialized online webinar tailored exclusively for members of the Aegean Cuisine network. Led by speaker Elena Kontiza, the training aimed to upskill local business owners in digital content creation, which is a crucial asset for modern SME competitiveness.

Participants were provided with a hands-on guide to using Canva, a versatile graphic design tool. The objective was to empower local SMEs to create their own high-quality promotional materials, including menus, flyers, and social media graphics.

This training equipped participants to elevate their digital presence and enhance their brand visibility without high costs.

Digital Laboratory 2: Introduction to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and practical integration into the daily operations of catering/manufacturing businesses

Continuing the digital training series, READ S.A. hosted a forward-thinking online webinar on Friday, December 19th. Led by expert speaker Giorgos Anagnostopoulos, the session guided Aegean Cuisine members beyond theory and into the practical application of popular Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Gemini. The primary goal was to demonstrate how AI can act as a virtual assistant to help owners create high-quality marketing materials with speed and ease.

Participants explored several practical uses to simplify daily tasks:

Menu Localization: Effortless and instant translation of menus into multiple languages for international visitors.

Visual Content: Using AI to generate unique and engaging images to visualize dishes for menus and social media.

Multimedia Promotion: Generating scripts, voice-overs, and assets to create short promotional videos.

Proposed future training or capacity-building needs Based on the overarching challenges identified for SMEs in the South Aegean region, future initiatives should focus on

Advanced Digital Skills: Targeted training to address the acute digital skills deficit, moving beyond basic customer-facing services to include data management, cybersecurity, and digital process optimization.

Holistic Operational Transformation: Capacity-building that helps micro-SMEs overcome structural barriers, such as the lack of dedicated IT staff, to fully integrate sustainability practices into their operational models.

7.2.4 Buzet, Cerovlje, Lanišće, Lupoglav and Oprtalj, Istria (Croatia)

Digital laboratory with EDIH Adria

On 5th and 6th December 2024, the IPTPO team took part in the Bootcamp for Digital Innovation and Digital Transformation in Vodnjan, a workshop organised by EDIH Adria consortium. During the bootcamp, the team developed a digital solution concept for the REVIVE project to support the revitalisation and digitalisation of the rural areas in northern and central Istria.

Digital laboratory – Pilot Area

The Institute of Agriculture and Tourism (IPTPO) organised a stakeholder workshop at the Business Incubator Verzi in Buzet on March 10, 2025, to present the REVIVE project and introduce, for the first time, the concept of innovative digital solution. A representative from EDIH Adria presented the web platform, outlining its main functionalities and potential benefits for local stakeholders, particularly in terms of collaboration, information sharing and local development.

Digital laboratory – Validation and Prototype Presentation

A second stakeholder workshop was held on 20 October 2025 at the Business Incubator Verzi, involving representatives from local authorities, municipalities and the Buzet Tourist Board. IPTPO presented a prototype of the REVIVE web platform, conceived as a tool to support cooperation, promote local services and initiatives, and foster stakeholder engagement in sustainable rural development

Proposed future training or capacity-building needs

Future workshops will focus on training local stakeholders in digital skills and how to use the platform. This next capacity building workshop on digital transformation and inter-municipal cooperation will strengthen the local community to implement and maintain innovative digital solutions.

7.2.5 Slovenske Gorice, Podravje (Slovenia)

Digital laboratory 1: “Digitalisation in Tourism” – Slovenske gorice

On 29 September 2025, a national training session on *Digitalisation in Tourism* was held in Lenart, targeting stakeholders from the Slovenske gorice pilot area. The activity brought together tourism providers, municipalities, cultural associations and farms, and focused on the practical use of advanced digital tools for sustainable rural tourism. Participants were introduced to VR/AR applications, 360° video, holographic displays and AI-based solutions, combined with hands-on testing of digital equipment.

Digital laboratory 2: “Digital Marketing and Storytelling for Agritourism and Rural Businesses”

The national seminar “Digital Marketing and Storytelling for Agritourism and Rural Businesses,” held on 12 December 2025 in Lenart (Slovenske gorice), was organised to strengthen the digital marketing and storytelling capacities of rural tourism providers and local stakeholders. The training combined theoretical input with hands-on exercises, introducing participants to key digital channels (websites, social media, search engines) and practical tools such as Canva, Meta Business Suite, and Mailchimp. Special emphasis was placed on authentic storytelling as a core branding

strategy rooted in local identity, traditions, and personal narratives. Through group work and individual mentoring, participants developed draft promotional stories and digital presentations, gaining immediately applicable skills and reinforcing cooperation within the Slovenske gorice pilot region.

Digital laboratory 3: “Presentation of Innovative Digital Solutions and Latest Technologies in Practice – EXPANO Interactive Center”

The 3rd national seminar held on 18 December 2025 in Murska Sobota, was organised to provide rural tourism stakeholders with hands-on experience of immersive digital technologies. Through a guided presentation and interactive tour of the EXPANO Center, participants explored practical applications of VR, AR, and interactive installations in regional storytelling and destination branding. The seminar focused on knowledge transfer and the transferability of these tools to the Slovenske gorice pilot region, encouraging stakeholders to consider how immersive technologies can enhance wine tourism, cultural heritage promotion, and agrotourism development in rural areas.

Digital laboratory 4: “Digital technologies for SMEs – Interactive content and virtual assistants to support rural tourism”

The 4th national seminar held on 23 December 2025 in Jarenina, was organised to strengthen the digital capacities of rural SMEs and tourism stakeholders. The training introduced practical, low-threshold digital solutions such as QR-coded interactive boards, virtual assistants, and holographic presentations to enhance visitor engagement and storytelling. Through presentations, practical guidance on technology and funding opportunities, and a guided visit to the Alfi Nipič Museum as a good practice example, participants explored how immersive and interactive tools can be implemented in the Slovenske gorice region to improve visibility, accessibility, and the overall rural tourism experience.

Proposed future training or capacity-building needs

- Targeted training by sector: Advanced modules for winemakers, museums, agri-tourism providers, and other rural SMEs. Content will be tailored to sector-specific needs and designed for practical, immediate implementation.
- Hands-on content creation workshops: Practical sessions on VR/AR, 360° video, and digital storytelling, including the development of real prototypes. Participants will leave with ready-to-use materials for publication.
- AI-supported marketing: Training on using AI tools for promotion, content personalisation, and campaign planning. Emphasis will be placed on brand consistency, responsible use, and basic performance analytics.

- Post-training mentoring: Short follow-up mentoring cycles to support implementation and maintenance of solutions. This will include peer exchange within SGX Coop and guidance on funding opportunities for further scaling.

7.2.6 Kriva Palanka, Rankovce, and Staro Nagoricane, Northeast region (North Macedonia)

Innovative Community Cooperative (ICC) / LEADER training

The ICC participated in the “Building the Innovative Community” training delivered with the National Rural Network, which covered the LEADER approach, formal/informal cooperation models, and the operating frame of the ICC in North Macedonia. The sessions informed the Pilot Local Action Plan and clarified stakeholder roles and coordination between NGOs, municipalities, and producer groups.

Digitalization workshop (REVIVE)

The workshop was held at Europe House Kriva Palanka (30/09/2025) on the topic “Developing Community-Based Innovative Business Models,” focused on smart villages, tokenization, IoT, precision farming, e-commerce, and producer digital assistants. The format combined regional good practices with discussion groups for rural economies.

Drone agritech field training

The ICC joined for a one-day practical demonstration in village Radibush, Rankovce, on multispectral scouting and drone spraying. The training combined safety and regulatory briefings with live flights and interpretation of vegetation indices for decision-making.

Proposed future training and capacity-building needs:

- ICC and Cooperation: ICC operating model bootcamp: bylaws, MOUs, cost-sharing, and service catalog. Facilitation & brokerage skills for municipal and cooperative coordinators.
- Infrastructure & Data: Rural connectivity initiatives with ISPs; on-farm sensor starter kits. Data governance playbook: consent, sharing agreements, cybersecurity hygiene.
- Market Access: E-commerce accelerator: product listing, logistics options, payments, and customer service. Digital branding & storytelling for local products; tokenization pilots for traceability/loyalty.
- Monitoring & Sustainability: Monitoring tools for the Pilot Action Plan (adoption rates, cost savings, yield/quality, new markets). Youth & women inclusion pathways; peer-to-peer champion network.

7.2.7 Pla de Mallorca, Balearic Islands (Spain)

Digital laboratory 1: Digitalisation for rural farms

Held on 25th September 2025, organised by MCC with 21 participants targeted cooperatives, farmers and producers, this workshop focused on the practical use of digital tools for farm management, cost control and product traceability. The programme combined one hour of immersive experiences (360° videos, interactive routes and simulations) with three hours of training on optimisation tools, digital marketing and the application of artificial intelligence in rural farming contexts. The objective was to improve competitiveness and sustainability through hands-on digital skills.

Digital laboratory 2: Effective Use of the B2B Platform Nubia Market for HORECA sector

This training session organized by AETIB on 25th of November 2025 from 9.30 to 12.30h (morning session), focused on helping small tourism SMEs to use and integrate the platform into their purchasing management processes efficiently. The session addressed responsible and circular procurement, digitalisation of orders, invoicing, inventories, cost control, menu planning, product traceability, sustainability indicators and food waste reduction.

Digital laboratory 3: Effective Use of the B2B Platform Nubia Market for the agriculture sector

Training for agrifood producers to improve their digital skills focused on product registration, inventory management and order processing. The objective was to increase direct sales to the HORECA sector, improve production planning and enable transparent, agile digital management. The digital laboratory was implemented on 25th November 2025 from 14.30 to 17.30h (afternoon session) organised by MCC.

Digital laboratory 4: Digital Marketing and AI for Tourism SMEs

Held on 28th November 2025 from 9 AM to 2 PM organised by AETIB. This workshop targeted small hotels, agritourisms, cafés, bars and restaurants. It focused on digital tools for content creation, social media management, marketing strategies and the effective use of artificial intelligence to enhance visibility and competitiveness. The five-hour training supported participants in defining new digital marketing strategies, optimising management processes and leveraging emerging digital trends in tourism.

Proposed future training and capacity-building needs:

- Practical workshops on concrete immersive experiences development
- Digital skills to develop for increasing agriculture sales in the tourism sector

7.3 Lessons learned from all digital laboratories

- **Hands-on learning works best:** Practical demonstrations, testing equipment and real-life use cases generate higher understanding and engagement than purely theoretical sessions.
- **Strong interest in immersive and AI-based technologies:** Across pilot areas—particularly evident in Slovenia—local actors show a clear interest in adopting immersive (VR/AR/360°) and AI-based tools when they are presented in accessible and applied ways.
- **Digitalisation is most effective when anchored in local identity:** Adoption increases when digital tools are linked to local culture, products, landscapes and authentic territorial narratives, strengthening storytelling, visitor engagement and regional branding.
- **Creativity is as important as technical training:** Stakeholders require not only technical skills, but also creative guidance on how to apply digital tools effectively (storytelling, content strategy, experience design), as highlighted in Slovenia and Tuscany.
- **Build skills progressively:** A tiered learning pathway is essential, starting with basic digital literacy and gradually introducing advanced technologies, ensuring confidence and long-term adoption.
- **Immersive technologies support tourism diversification and seasonality reduction:** In rural regions such as Slovenske Gorice, immersive storytelling and digital experiences offer concrete opportunities to diversify tourism products, extend the tourist season and promote low-impact, experience-based tourism.
- **Bridge the rural digital divide:** Connectivity gaps, limited access to equipment and uneven digital competences remain structural barriers; capacity-building must be paired with adequate infrastructure and tools.
- **DIHs/EDIHs are key enablers:** Collaboration with DIHs/EDIHs/MDIH mechanisms improves access to expertise, infrastructure, mentoring and funding guidance, particularly in internal and rural areas.
- **Digital tools gain traction when solving concrete needs:** Adoption increases when technologies clearly address everyday challenges such as visibility, market access, coordination, procurement, cost control or traceability.
- **Technology awareness must be combined with integration support:** Capacity-building should include guidance on implementation, workflow integration, funding options and long-term sustainability.

- **Community engagement and governance are critical:** Early stakeholder involvement and clear ICC/cooperative governance models strengthen trust, co-ownership and sustained digital cooperation. Continuous stakeholder involvement will affect the success of the digital solution.
- **Partnerships multiply impact:** Collaboration among municipalities, chambers, ICCs, innovation hubs, technology providers and academia reduces costs and accelerates adoption.
- **Iterative improvement is essential:** Continuous feedback from users (producers, consumers and visitors) supports refinement of digital solutions and exploration of future expansion opportunities.
- **Compliance and safety matter.** Drone operations require standard operating procedures (SOPs), record-keeping, and alignment with national regulations—critical for scaling responsibly.

8. Immersive experiences: technologies

Within the framework of the REVIVE project, an immersive experience is understood as a digitally enabled experience that enhances user engagement by combining storytelling, interaction and technology, creating a deeper and more meaningful connection with a territory, its communities, products and values. This definition is aligned with the general understanding of immersive experiences as situations in which users perceive themselves as being “inside” a different environment or narrative than their everyday context, whether mediated by digital technologies or hybrid physical–digital settings.

In REVIVE, immersive experiences have not been limited to high-end or fully virtual solutions. Instead, they encompass a broad spectrum of accessible and pragmatic digital tools that allow users to explore, understand and interact with local realities in enriched ways. These may include, among others, 360° video, virtual or augmented reality (VR/AR), AI-driven conversational interfaces, digital storytelling platforms, interactive web environments, or hybrid experiences combining physical spaces with multimedia components.

In the specific context of rural and Mediterranean territories, immersive experiences are conceived as purpose-driven tools supporting local development objectives, rather than as purely technological experimentation. They are designed to be feasible for SMEs, cooperatives and local actors, taking into account territorial capacities, digital maturity and long-term sustainability. Immersive experiences thus function as enablers of digital transition, making abstract technologies tangible, understandable and relevant for local stakeholders.

Within REVIVE, immersive experiences serve multiple, interconnected purposes:

- Increasing the visibility and attractiveness of rural territories and local products, both for visitors and external markets;
- Strengthening the link between producers, communities and visitors, fostering trust, transparency and shared narratives;
- Supporting learning, awareness and knowledge transfer, particularly around production processes, sustainability and territorial identity;
- Fostering innovation, by enabling SMEs, cooperatives and ICCs to experiment with digital tools in a concrete, applied manner.

Importantly, each partner is responsible for defining and implementing an immersive experience tailored to its specific territorial context, needs and capacities, while aligning with this shared conceptual framework. The diversity of immersive solutions developed across the seven pilot regions reflects both the heterogeneity of Mediterranean rural areas and the flexibility of the REVIVE approach, which prioritises relevance, feasibility and long-term impact over technological uniformity.

8.1 Rural Larnaca, Larnaca (Cyprus)

Description of the immersive experience and technology used

The AI Holographic Avatar for Rural Larnaca

The AI Holographic Avatar for Rural Larnaca is an advanced immersive solution designed to enhance the visitor experience by combining cultural heritage with artificial intelligence and holographic technology. The life-sized avatar enables natural, real-time interaction with visitors, answering questions related to local history, cultural landmarks, directions and available digital experiences (virtual museums, 360° tours, storytelling statues).

The avatar is powered by AI-based natural language processing, a curated knowledge base, speech-to-motion synchronisation and a high-resolution holographic display system. It is custom-designed to represent *Marikou from Lefkara*, a 19th-century lace-maker and businesswoman, symbolising local entrepreneurship and cultural identity. Beyond tourism, the avatar also supports educational use in schools and cultural centres.

Conclusion and future needs

- The AI Holographic Avatar represents a key step in integrating advanced digital technologies into rural tourism and education in Rural Larnaca.
- Immersive digital tools have proven effective in enhancing visitor engagement, preserving cultural heritage and creating new economic opportunities.
- By combining authenticity with innovation, the initiative positions Rural Larnaca as a pioneer in digital tourism beyond traditional sightseeing models.
- Key future needs include strengthening digital infrastructure and improving local digital literacy to ensure effective adoption and long-term use.

- Further development should focus on multilingual capabilities, personalised narratives and integration with complementary VR/AR experiences.
- Continued collaboration with technology providers and innovation hubs is essential to sustain and scale the initiative.
- Aligning technological innovation with local cultural identity is critical to ensure authenticity, relevance and long-term impact.

8.2 Appennino Pistoiese, Tuscany (Italy)

Description of the immersive experience and technology used

The Pistoiese Mountains immersive experience consists of producing a series of 360° videos documenting the production processes of nine local producers of traditional products (pecorino, raw-milk cheese, wine, chestnuts, beer, honey), as well as the work of four local restaurateurs who use these products in their menus. The core objective is to create immersive and authentic storytelling content that brings people closer to the territory, its traditions, and its Food Community.

Two main types of content are being developed:

- **360° Immersive Videos:** Filmed with 360° cameras, these videos allow viewers to virtually enter production spaces - pastures, barns, forests, workshops - freely exploring the environment as if physically present. They will be accessible both through VR headsets and on the Food Community website (web-based 360° experience).
- **Traditional Videos:** Short horizontal or vertical videos acting as mini-documentaries to showcase each producer's identity, including daily work (breeding, harvesting, cooking, transforming), the natural context, and the faces and voices of local actors. These videos are suitable for websites, social media, and newsletters.

The immersive content will be used in three main contexts:

- a. Restaurants and agritourisms equipped with VR headsets, enabling customers to enjoy multi-sensory experiences connecting food tasting with immersive storytelling;
- b. Public events, fairs, and festivals, where the Food Community will present the videos via VR headsets or digital kiosks;
- c. An interactive digital platform, integrating 360° videos into a web-based virtual map embedded in the Food Community website.

Conclusion and future needs

Immersive technology represents a strategic asset for the Pistoiese Mountains, offering innovative ways to promote local products, strengthen territorial identity, and enhance tourism attractiveness. Looking ahead, the development of immersive experiences will aim to broaden the range of content by including seasonal cycles, traditional events, and additional production processes, while integrating 360° storytelling more deeply into tourism itineraries, visitor centres, and nature trails. At the same time, ensuring the long-term sustainability of these digital tools will require adopting solutions that are user-friendly, low-maintenance, and easily updatable by local stakeholders.

8.3 Cyclades and Dodecanese island groups, South Aegean (Greece)

Description of the immersive experience and technology used

For the South Aegean pilot, the immersive experience focuses on the digital revitalization of the "Aegean Cuisine" network—a collaborative initiative managed by the Chambers of Cyclades and Dodecanese. To address the fragmented geography of the islands, a new comprehensive digital ecosystem was developed. This features a "Unified Gateway" (a common first page) that branches into dual, distinctly managed portals for the Cyclades and Dodecanese, allowing for decentralized management and targeted marketing.

To seamlessly bridge the gap between these two regional portals and eliminate user friction, an advanced Aegean Cuisine AI Assistant was developed and integrated as the core immersive technology.

The technology and features used include:

- Digital Concierge / Custom Avatar: A specially designed digital persona embodying traditional Aegean hospitality to provide a friendly, engaging face for complex visitor queries.
- API-Trained AI Agent: The AI is trained via API using live, real-time content from both the Cyclades and Dodecanese portals. This includes a verified database of certified restaurants, an extensive traditional recipe library, and a comprehensive catalogue of local producers.
- Interactive Cross-Portal Navigation: Instead of forcing the user to manually search through separate regional sites, the AI assistant utilizes natural language processing to understand queries and instantly suggest personalized alternatives and recommendations from both island groups.

Conclusion and future needs

The development of the dual portal and AI assistant highlighted the importance of balancing regional autonomy with a unified global brand. By allowing local Chambers of Commerce to retain control over their specific content, the platform ensures

accuracy and agility. Simultaneously, the AI assistant proved to be a highly effective tool for unifying the visitor experience, tracking cross-archipelago visitor behavior patterns, and presenting the South Aegean as a cohesive gastronomic destination.

Based on the project's roadmap, the immediate future needs involve refining the immersive technology before full public deployment:

- **Beta Testing and Refinement:** Conducting rigorous beta testing of the AI bot to gather user feedback, improve response accuracy, and finalize the custom avatar's design based on Chamber specifications.
- **Full AI Integration:** Achieving full deployment of the AI Assistant to provide real-time, uninterrupted cross-portal assistance.
- **Continuous Digital Training:** As the portal launches, ongoing capacity-building (such as the digital marketing and AI utilization webinars) will be required for local SMEs so they can continuously update their offerings, ensuring the AI is pulling from a rich, accurate, and up-to-date data pool.

[8.4 Buzet, Cerovlje, Lanišće, Lupoglavlje and Oprtalj, Istria \(Croatia\)](#)

In Croatia, the immersive experience takes the form of a digital collaborative web platform that functions both as an innovation tool and as an immersive environment for the local business ecosystem. Rather than relying on VR or AR, the platform creates immersion through networked interaction, visibility and shared narratives among stakeholders in the pilot area.

The platform is designed to link businesses that offer products and services with those that are seeking products, services, or collaboration opportunities within the pilot area. In this way, the visibility of business entities is increased and their products and services are promoted. The exchange of information, knowledge, and experience, strengthening cooperation and mutual support among users may lead to joint initiatives—such as shared use of equipment, collective procurement of resources, joint promotional efforts, or other forms of collaboration.

Public bodies and organisations such as local authorities, Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), Local Action Groups (LAGs), various associations, and higher education and research institutions can also register. Their role is to share news and updates that support networking and the development of the area.

Users may also subscribe to the platform's newsletter. Registered users can receive email notifications about new offers, demands, collaboration opportunities, and other updates. The platform does not have a purchase function, its purpose is exclusively promotion, connection, and visibility. The platform is free to use and only registered businesses may create a profile.

Targeted users include registered business entities within the pilot area—farmers, food and beverage providers, accommodation providers, tourism service providers,

artists, creatives, craftsmen, producers, and similar stakeholders—as well as local authorities, DMOs, LAGs, associations and higher education and research institutions.

As an additional feature in the form of an immersive experience, the platform will include an audio-visual postcard of the pilot area. It will consist of static 360° shots from the area of City of Buzet and the municipalities of Cerovlje, Lanišće, Lupoglav and Opatalj, accompanied by binaural sound. The audio-visual postcard will enable viewers to immerse themselves in the authentic atmosphere and distinctive characteristics of these areas.

Conclusion and future needs

A virtual community, or a digital space that enables networking with local stakeholders, is a valuable tool for strengthening cooperation. Such cooperation can result in tangible outcomes, including the exchange and sharing of resources, joint initiatives, collective promotion, the sharing of information and knowledge, and mutual assistance and support - all aimed at fostering the sustainable development of the entire area. The active participation of each user has been recognized as key to the platform's success, as their engagement helps build a larger, more valuable network that benefits the entire community. Furthermore, it was concluded that offering users an immersive experience through an audio-visual postcard represents an innovative way of promotion, as it allows them to explore the area and may encourage their interest in becoming actively engaged on the platform.

Regarding future needs, it is important to monitor user feedback and, if there is a need, expand the platform's functionalities to enhance the user experience, stakeholder networking, and engagement. Additionally, to further promote collaboration and improve networking opportunities, the virtual community could be extended to include new areas within the Istria Region.

8.5 Slovenske Gorice, Podravje (Slovenia)

In Slovenske Gorice, the immersive experience is based on virtual reality and 360°/180° video storytelling to showcase the region's natural landscapes, cultural heritage and traditional practices. The content includes immersive videos of heritage sites, a virtual cycling tour through vineyards, and presentations of local production and services.

The experience will be delivered through VR headsets, websites, YouTube and social media, and will also be used across Tourist Information Centres (TICs) and municipal platforms. This multi-channel approach will allow users to explore the region virtually before arrival and will support low-impact, experience-based tourism.

In parallel, the region is conceptually developing future immersive experiences combining AR, gamification and GPS-enabled applications (e.g. Cycling Explorer, Vineyard Quest, AR Companion), aligned with sustainable and community-based tourism.

Conclusion and future needs

Future needs include interactive layers, multilingual content, on-site AR/VR deployment and continued training for local stakeholders. Sustained investment in digital storytelling will strengthen the regional tourism ecosystem and entrepreneurial capacity.

Within the REVIVE project, the destination of Slovenske Gorice has identified and conceptually developed more innovative immersive experiences that combine local heritage, digital storytelling, and interactive technologies to promote sustainable and community-based tourism. These experiences are still in the concept stage and are expected to be implemented in the next 3-5 years.

1. Slovenske Gorice Cycling Explorer – A self-guided digital cycling tour using a mobile app or tablet. The experience is enriched with GPS-triggered multimedia content including audio guides, video clips, interviews with local winemakers, and animated stories
2. Vineyard Quest: Gamified Trail for Families – An interactive walking trail featuring QR codes that unlock games, quizzes, and audio stories. Participants collect virtual grapes to earn small local prizes
3. 360° Castle & Heritage Trails – A series of immersive virtual tours of historical sites such as Hrastovec Castle, Cmurek Castle, and Zavrh Tower. The tours include 360° video, audio narration, reenactments, and clickable elements to discover local legends
4. Ovtar AR Companion – A geolocation-based augmented reality experience where a 3D character, Ovtar – a wise local spirit – guides visitors through cultural and natural landmarks while sharing regional folklore, wine knowledge, and family-friendly challenges

8.6 Kriva Palanka, Rankovce, and Staro Nagoricane, Northeast region (North Macedonia)

In North Macedonia, the immersive experience was designed to support an emerging Innovative Community Cooperative (ICC) composed mainly of micro and small agricultural producers, most of them beekeepers. Beekeeping and honey producing is widely represented in our region but brand recognition and popularity of honey products from this area is still insufficient. Through the meetings of the REVIVE project and the setup of our ICC (still informal community) and the development of the Pilot Action Plan, the community has come to understand that it needs to start to use digital technology for promoting its core values, philosophy and economic activity.

The immersive experience developed will serve the purpose of offering unique opportunities to the producers and consumers to collectively promote and indulge with using web page based tools tailored made to fit the narrative of our community.

These are the key tools that will be used on our platform:

- 360 videos used for promoting the area and its natural significance
- 3D models used to guide and explain consumers and producers of key product processes and product quality
- Augmented reality/ Virtual reality tools that will offer unique experience to visitors of the digital platform
- Real time meteorological station merged with beekeeper booklog

Conclusion and future needs

Future priorities include strengthening digital skills within the ICC, ensuring platform usability for small producers and gradually expanding immersive features to support marketing, education and sustainability monitoring.

8.7 Pla de Mallorca, Balearic Islands (Spain)

In the Balearic Islands, immersive experiences were based on 360° video storytelling documenting the production processes of selected local products (almonds, olive oil and almond-based products). The objective was to promote sustainable tourism and improve understanding between the primary sector and tourism businesses in the Pla de Mallorca pilot area, adding value to the selected local products.

The 360° videos offer a fully panoramic perspective, enabling users to visually follow the product journey from production to consumption. These immersive contents are made available to tourism establishments as well as agrifood producers for on-site use and for broader destination and product promotion, both within and beyond Mallorca. Technologies include virtual reality applications to visualise logistics, sustainability practices and local value chains.

Demos of the immersive experiences produced in the framework of REVIVE, were shown on 25 of September 2025 during the Workshop on Digitalization, immersive experiences and digital solutions for the agricultural sector, and at the Study Visit in Mallorca of REVIVE project partners group on 12 of November 2025.

In addition to that, MCC has acquired a set of virtual reality glasses to be made available by any ICC and stakeholder of the REVIVE project in the future, to display those immersive videos, as well as to promote the production of more videos. This in fact, is expected to bring the virtual reality glasses technology closer to both sectors, the agriculture and the tourism one as well as to encourage public actors to make the most out of this technology.

Conclusions and Future Needs

More efforts should be made in Digital Skills and training for SMEs to address the digital skills gap within the tourism and agricultural sector. Lessons learned from the initiatives highlight the importance of comprehensive training programs covering both digital and sustainability skills for the successful digitalization of tourism SMEs; the need for financial incentives to support investments in new technologies, and the role of collaborative platforms that facilitate peer learning and knowledge sharing.

Furthermore, targeted policy support and customized guidance are necessary to assist tourism SMEs in less developed areas in managing the challenges of digital transformation while ensuring alignment with sustainability objectives. SMEs and municipalities from rural areas of the project thanked the REVIVE project for making them “visible” as tourism destinations since they are unseen by the majority of tourists visiting our islands. Digitalization offers numerous benefits since it can help to improve operational efficiency, enhance customer experiences, and better market reach.

It will be key to disseminate information to the public about the production of the produced virtual reality videos as well as the possibility of using the virtual reality glasses for free in their events.

8.8 Lessons learned from all the immersive experiences

Across all regions, the core message is consistent: digital innovation succeeds when it is culturally grounded, community-driven, and supported by accessible infrastructure and partnerships. Immersive technologies offer powerful tools for rural development, but their impact depends on authenticity, collaboration, and long-term capacity-building.

Here are the main lessons learned highlighted by partners:

- **Technology as a Humanizing Force in Tourism.** Digital tools—especially AI avatars and immersive media—can enhance rather than replace human interaction. Visitors respond positively to lifelike, conversational interfaces that deliver cultural insights in engaging ways. Immersive storytelling and 360° videos help bridge the gap between producers and consumers, creating emotional connections with places and people.
- **Immersive Storytelling as a Catalyst for Visibility and Branding.** Embedding local heritage, personas, and narratives into digital innovation strengthens authenticity and supports place branding, especially in geographically isolated areas. Examples like the Marikou avatar show how technology can amplify tradition, not dilute it. Tailoring immersive experiences



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to real regional stories—family farms, crafts, winemaking, landscapes—resonates strongly with visitors.

- **Digitalisation as a Pathway to Market Access.** Combining storytelling with data (e.g., weather, production logs) increases transparency and trust. Digitalisation helps small producers differentiate their products and reach new markets. Immersive video is particularly effective in agriculture–tourism integration, especially in insular or remote contexts.
- **Digital Literacy and Infrastructure as Prerequisites.** Rural regions face gaps in skills, connectivity, and maintenance capacity. The experiences highlighted the need for simple, accessible, easy-to-maintain digital tools, ensuring long-term use by local stakeholders with limited digital skills. Advanced tools risk underuse without targeted training and simple, easy-to-maintain solutions. Long-term adoption depends on accessible technology that local stakeholders can manage independently. Producing VR videos is not significantly more expensive than regular video production.
- **Community Engagement as a Driver of Acceptance.** Early involvement of residents, producers, and cultural actors builds trust, enthusiasm, and ownership. Demonstrations, co-creation, and storytelling sessions help communities see the relevance of digital tools to their identity and daily life. Immersive tools can even support collective identity-building within emerging cultural and creative communities (ICCs).
- **Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration.** Collaboration with technology providers, innovation hubs, tourism actors, and local stakeholders is essential for accessing expertise, sharing resources and sustainable implementation. Joint work between producers, restaurateurs, and digital experts strengthens community cohesion and shared territorial promotion.
- **Support for Sustainable, Low-Impact Tourism.** Immersive and interactive tools align well with slow, experience-based tourism models. They encourage longer stays, deeper engagement, and wider local spending. In regions like Slovenske Gorice, immersive technology shows strong potential for sustainable tourism development.
- **Virtual community and networking of local stakeholders.** A web platform that enables networking of local stakeholders is a valuable tool for strengthening cooperation. Such cooperation can result in concrete outcomes, including increased visibility of products and services within the community, exchange and sharing of resources, joint initiatives, collective promotion, sharing of information and knowledge, and mutual assistance and support – all with the aim of fostering sustainable development of the entire area.

- **Immersive Audio-Visual Experience for Stakeholder Engagement.** An immersive experience on the platform promoting networking among local stakeholders, delivered through an audio-visual postcard with a 360° video and binaural sound, represents an innovative promotional tool. It allows users to explore the area and may encourage active engagement in the virtual community provided by the platform.

Across all participating regions, the immersive experiences demonstrated that digital innovation can significantly enhance rural development when it remains rooted in authenticity, community participation, and accessible technology. The integration of immersive tools—such as AI avatars, 360° videos, and digital storytelling—proved most impactful when these technologies were used to humanize interactions rather than replace them, strengthening emotional connections between visitors, local producers, and rural landscapes.

At the same time, the project confirmed that digitalisation is most effective when it directly supports local identity, heritage, and place-based branding. Immersive storytelling brought traditional knowledge, crafts, gastronomy, and rural narratives to life, helping small producers gain visibility and build trust with audiences beyond their immediate geographic area. This was particularly valuable in remote or insular territories, where immersive content serves as a bridge to new markets and reinforces a shared regional identity.

Finally, the experiences highlighted that long-term success depends on community engagement, digital literacy, and sustained collaboration across sectors. Rural regions require simple, low-maintenance tools and targeted capacity-building to ensure that local actors can confidently manage digital systems on their own. Strategic partnerships—among technology experts, tourism providers, cultural actors, and local institutions—are essential for maintaining momentum and ensuring sustainable, low-impact tourism development. Ultimately, the immersive pilots demonstrated that when digital innovation is co-created with communities, supported by training and cooperation, and focused on authentic storytelling, it becomes a powerful driver of inclusive, resilient, and culturally grounded rural revitalization.

9. Best practices in digitalisation for ICCs

Within the REVIVE framework, digitalisation is understood as a key enabler for Innovative Community Cooperatives (ICCs), supporting collaboration across local value chains, improving competitiveness, and fostering new community-based products and services. The following best practices illustrate how digital tools and platforms can strengthen collaborative economy models in agriculture, tourism, and creative and cultural sectors, while enhancing skills, market access, circularity, and community cohesion. These examples provide operational and learning-oriented

references that can be used in training activities and knowledge transfer within and across ICCs.

Larnaca, Cyprus

Good Practice: Portfolio of digital cultural tools

Description: The Larnaca Region has developed a portfolio of digital cultural tools, including Virtual Museums, 360° cultural walks, storytelling statues activated via QR codes, and historically accurate digital reconstructions. These solutions integrate multimedia content, audio narration, and interactive storytelling to enhance both remote and on-site visitor experiences. Several of these initiatives have received national awards for innovation in tourism.

Relevance for ICCs: These practices demonstrate how immersive and accessible digital tools can support cultural and tourism-based ICCs by increasing visibility, reinforcing local identity, and enabling new forms of community-driven storytelling and visitor engagement.

More information: <https://Larnacaregion.com/>

Tuscany, Italy

Good Practice: Community Cooperatives

Description: Community Cooperatives are a model of social innovation in which the citizens of a community organise themselves to be both producers and consumers of goods or services, fostering synergy, growth opportunities, and cohesion within the community. The Tuscany Region supported their establishment through two calls for proposals and a regional law approved in 2019. To date, there are about 40 active community cooperatives in Tuscany, generally formed by almost all the citizens of a village or town around a key idea or activity that encompasses different economic sectors capable of revitalising local development.

In addition to strengthening social cohesion and local economies, community cooperatives can also support digital innovation processes. In its calls for proposals, the Tuscany Region has highlighted the importance of promoting digitalisation as a lever for improving service provision, market access, and local competitiveness, thereby encouraging cooperatives to adopt digital tools and solutions.

More information: <http://coopdicomunita.toscana.it/perchè-le-cooperative-di-comunità>

South Aegean Region, Greece

Good Practice: Digital Skill MOOC for Creative Industries (DigiCulture)

Description: This example addresses the critical skills gap in small Cultural and Creative Clusters. The Erasmus+-funded DigiCulture project created a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) to improve the digital competences and social inclusion of adults with low digital skills working in Creative Industries (CI). The project's outcome is a sustainable and accessible online course covering 13 modules, including digital safety, using online media tools (audio/video editing), and digital management for business planning and social media engagement. This blended learning model provides open education resources (OER) specifically tailored to artists, actors, volunteers, and staff in small museums or craft businesses, ensuring essential digital survival skills are transferred directly to the cluster level for enhanced employability and marketability.

Relevance for ICCs: DigiCulture demonstrates how shared digital learning tools can enhance employability, inclusion, and collaboration within creative ICCs, reinforcing collective capacity building at community level.

More information: <https://digidculture.eu/en/the-digidculture-project-good-practice-example-in-erasmus-european-commission-programme>

Istria, Croatia

Good Practice: Online System for Direct Sale of Agricultural Products (OSIPPPIT)³⁷

Description: The OSIPPPIT initiative established a digital system to support direct sales of agricultural products in the Istria region. The project combined the development of a specialised web application with training workshops for farmers, awareness campaigns for consumers, and knowledge transfer from existing European good practices. The platform promotes short supply chains, transparent pricing, and direct producer–consumer relationships, without intermediaries.

Relevance for ICCs: The OSIPPPIT developed valuable digital tools for rural economy, it created a direct link between agricultural producers and consumers, strengthened short supply chains and encouraged networking within the local community.

More information: www.trznica-trg.eu/en

Podravje, Slovenia

Good Practice: Sustainable Local Food Cooperative – Dobrina³⁸

Dobrina is a local cooperative that brings together small organic farmers, schools, care institutions, associations, and citizens to promote sustainable local food systems in the Slovenske Gorice region. The cooperative operates an online store supporting short supply chains and fair trade, while coordinating logistics, training activities, and

³⁷ <https://www.trznica-trg.eu/en>

³⁸ <https://www.zadruga-dobrina.si/>

educational programmes. In parallel, Dobrina is developing a processing facility for preserving and freeze-drying local produce, strengthening value creation at community level.

Relevance for ICCs: Dobrina exemplifies how digital commerce tools combined with cooperative governance can reinforce food-based ICCs, enhance local value retention, and support long-term rural livelihoods.

More information: www.zadruga-dobrina.si.

Northeast region, North Macedonia

Good Practice: Community-Centred Digital Platform for Smart Beekeeping and Cooperative Management

Description: A key best practice in the digitalisation of Innovative Community Cooperatives (ICCs) is the development of integrated, community-centred digital platforms that combine operational tools with collective visibility mechanisms. In the REVIVE pilot area of North Macedonia, this approach was implemented through a multifunctional platform that integrates a digital production logbook, real-time meteorological data, producer and product catalogues, and data interpretation tools within a single ecosystem. The solution goes beyond individual farm management by embedding traceability, quality monitoring, multilingual access, and structured data collection into the cooperative model. Importantly, digital tools were introduced in parallel with targeted capacity-building workshops and training sessions, ensuring that technology adoption was accompanied by skill development, ownership, and collective governance mechanisms.

Relevance for ICCs: The digital solution directly strengthens the ICC model by enabling transparency, coordination, and evidence-based decision-making among cooperative members. By centralising production data and linking it to environmental indicators, ICC members can improve productivity, standardise quality, and enhance market positioning while maintaining shared governance principles. The platform also supports collective branding and traceability, reinforcing consumer trust and increasing competitiveness of local value chains in the Northeast Planning Region. Through this integrated digital and organisational approach, ICCs become more resilient, data-driven, and scalable, aligning with the broader objectives of REVIVE to foster innovation, sustainability, and transnational cooperation across internal Mediterranean territories. More information: <https://rhh.mk/>

Balearic Islands, Spain

Good Practice: Circular Hotels – Finhava by Circulare

Description: The Circular Hotels initiative, powered by Finhava by Circulare, connects hotel chains, public enterprises, agri-food producers, citizens, and tourists to foster a circular economy. The project transforms organic waste from hotels into compost and energy, later used by local agrifood companies to grow vegetables consumed in the same hotels. Hotels separate organic waste, which is processed in waste plants to produce compost and energy. This compost supports local agriculture, and hotels commit to purchasing vegetables equivalent to their waste contribution, informing tourists about the origin of their food. Activities include staff training, tourist awareness campaigns, and full traceability through the Finhava app.

Relevance for ICCs: This initiative illustrates how digital platforms can support collaborative circular business models, strengthen agriculture–tourism linkages, and create shared value across ICC supply chains in insular contexts.

More information: [Finhava by Circulare](#)

10. Policy positioning and strategic declarations, commitment with innovation, sustainability and digitalisation

10.1 Larnaca, Cyprus

Cyprus Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3Cy) 2023–2030

Type: National innovation and digitalisation strategy
 Scope: Economy-wide, SME-focused

The Cyprus Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3Cy) is the main national framework guiding innovation, sustainability and digital transformation. It prioritises Digital Technologies, Smart Cities, Digital Tourism, Creative Industries and Advanced Manufacturing, aiming to modernise traditional sectors through research, innovation and emerging technologies. S3Cy promotes collaboration between public authorities, academia and industry, and supports SMEs in adopting digital solutions aligned with the green and digital transitions.

More information: <https://www.research.org.cy/wp-content/uploads/stratigiki-eksypnis-ekseidikefsis-2023-20301.pdf>

Research, Technology Development and Innovation (RTDI) Strategy 2024–2026

The Research, Technology Development and Innovation (RTDI) Strategy 2024–2026 reflects Cyprus's national commitment to position research and innovation as key pillars for sustainable development and economic modernization. The strategy aims to strengthen the country's competitiveness and attractiveness as a regional hub for

innovation and entrepreneurship. Key objectives include: Accelerating digitalisation, Enhancing digital infrastructure and services for businesses and public administration, Supporting SMEs for innovation adoption, product development, and capacity building, Promoting sustainability, Strengthening governance and collaboration: Creating synergies between government, academia, and private sector to drive innovation ecosystems. The strategy aligns Cyprus with Horizon Europe and Digital Europe priorities.

More information: <https://www.research.org.cy/wp-content/uploads/stratigiki-eksygnis-ekseidikefsis-2023-20301.pdf>

Digital Services Factory (DSF) – Framework for Digital Government Services

The Digital Services Factory (DSF) is a whole-of-government program led by the Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy to scale user-centred, accessible, and secure digital public services. At its core is a Framework Agreement that creates a curated marketplace of suppliers who compete in mini-competitions to design, build, and iterate high-priority services, following a common Service Standard of 15 principles covering user research, agile delivery, open standards, APIs, security, and accessibility. The approach institutionalises innovation in governance and provides a replicable model for MDIH service orchestration.

More information: <https://dsf.dmrid.gov.cy>

National Digital Strategy 2020–2025

This strategy defines Cyprus' vision for a knowledge-based, digitally enabled economy. It supports SME digitalisation, digital skills development and the green-digital transition, while modernising public services and strengthening digital society.

More information : <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/actions/national-initiatives/national-strategies/cyprus-national-digital-strategy-2020-2025>

Scheme for the Digital Upgrade of Enterprises (THALIA Programme)

The Scheme for the Digital Upgrade of Enterprises is part of Cyprus' THALIA 2021–2027 Cohesion Policy Programme, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Its main objective is to accelerate the digital transformation of Cypriot SMEs, enabling them to adopt advanced technologies and improve competitiveness in the EU Digital Single Market.

This scheme provides grants to SMEs for adopting digital technologies such as ERP, CRM, AI, cloud computing, cybersecurity and digital marketing tools. It supports both technology acquisition and staff training, directly contributing to Cyprus' Digital Decade targets and SME competitiveness.

More information : <https://www.fundingprogrammesportal.gov.cy/en/call/scheme-for-the-digital-upgrade-of-enterprises-2/>

10.2 Tuscany, Italy

Tuscany Digital Agenda and Skills Strategy. Digital Enterprise Call (ERDF 2021–2027)

This ERDF-funded call supports SMEs in adopting advanced digital technologies through non-repayable grants (up to 70%). It is structured around three pillars:

- Digital & Smart: AI, blockchain, big data, AR, cybersecurity, advanced CRM;
- Digital & Sustainable: energy efficiency, circular economy and eco-innovation;
- Digital & Secure: data protection and production safety.

More information: <https://www.regione.toscana.it/pr-fesr-2021-2027>

STEP Strategic Innovation Call

STEP supports complex innovation investments, including process, organisational and productive innovation, targeting higher technological maturity and long-term competitiveness.

More information: <https://www.regione.toscana.it/-/bando-innovazione-strategica-step-strategic-technologies-for-europe-platform->

Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) – Tuscany

The S3 directs R&I investments toward priority technological domains, including digital technologies, strengthening Tuscany's competitiveness and innovation capacity.

More information: <https://www.regione.toscana.it/pr-fesr-2021-2027/strategia-di-specializzazione-intelligente>

Regional Law No. 57/2024 – Governance of Emerging Technologies

This law updates the Digital Agenda and establishes principles for managing digital services and the ethical use of AI, positioning Tuscany as a potential regional “regulatory laboratory” for emerging technologies.

More information: <https://raccoltanormativa.consiglio.regione.toscana.it/articolo?urndoc=urn:nir:regione.toscana:legge:2024-12-09:57&pr=idx,0;artic,1;articparziale,0>

10.3 South Aegean, Greece

South Aegean Regional Operational Programme (ROP) & RIS3

The ROP, aligned with NSRF 2021–2027, decentralises EU funds to support innovation and digitalisation at regional level. Built on RIS3, it targets the transition from mass tourism to higher value-added services, linking SME competitiveness with ICT uptake, green energy and digital media.

More information: <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.pepnai.gr/> (South Aegean ROP) and <https://21-27.antagonistikotita.gr/en/> (NSRF "Competitiveness" Programme)

Digital Transformation of SMEs – Funding Packages

Through targeted calls, SMEs receive subsidies for digital equipment, software and services. As a designated *Just Transition* region, South Aegean SMEs benefit from higher aid intensity (up to 60%), accelerating the twin transition.

More information: <https://www.pepnai.gr/>
<https://21-27.antagonistikotita.gr/en/>

10.4 Istria, Croatia

Croatia has multiple strategic documents, initiatives and projects focused on sustainability, innovation and digitalisation. These frameworks provide a direction toward digital transition, which means a more competitive and resilient economy in the future. Some of the examples are:

The Digital Croatia Strategy for the period until 2032³⁹

This strategy defines a direction of national, European and private investments in the digital transformation of Croatia. Furthermore, it sets an objective about the digital development of an economy, the modernisation of public administration and justice, the development of digital connectivity, and fostering digital skills and jobs.

More information: <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/actions/national-initiatives/national-strategies/croatia-digital-croatia-strategy-period-until-2032>

³⁹<https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/actions/national-initiatives/national-strategies/croatia-digital-croatia-strategy-period-until-2032>

Croatia National Digital Decade strategic roadmap⁴⁰

The roadmap structures Croatia's digital transition around four pillars: digital economy, digital public administration, broadband development and digital skills/jobs.

More information: <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/actions/national-initiatives/national-strategies/croatia-national-digital-decade-strategic-roadmap>

The Digital Transformation Strategy of Istria County⁴¹

Istria County recognised the need for systematic investment in digital tools and for the creation of a strategic document that defines digitalisation priorities and a framework for the introduction of digitalisation in public administration and in everyday life of its citizens. The objective is to achieve digital transformation of society, businesses and public services by 2030.

10.5 Podravje, Slovenia

Slovenia's Development Strategy 2030⁴²

This strategy serves as the foundation for Slovenia's medium-term development plans. It aims to achieve a high quality of life for all citizens through balanced economic, social, and environmental development. The strategy acknowledges planetary limitations and emphasizes sustainable practices.

More information: <https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MKRR/Strategija-razvoja-Slovenije-2030/Slovenian-Development-Strategy-2030.pdf>.

⁴⁰ <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/actions/national-initiatives/national-strategies/croatia-national-digital-decade-strategic-roadmap>

⁴¹ https://www.istra-istria.hr/media/filer_public/72/d6/72d6bd92-2406-4caf-9f33-5c25a8050f6f/220914_digitalna_transformacija.pdf

⁴² <https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MKRR/Strategija-razvoja-Slovenije-2030/Slovenian-Development-Strategy-2030.pdf>

Strategy for the digital transformation of the economy⁴³

The Strategy covers the period from 2021 to 2030 and has been developed in parallel with the digitisation, informatisation and Digital Single Market processes already underway in the EU. It highlights current advanced digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, the internet of things, big data technologies, data chain technologies, high-performance computing, quantum computing and 5G technologies, which will be the engine of economic growth and competitiveness. It builds on existing digital technologies and initiatives, the findings of the European Commission's recommendations and the digitisation indicators tracked by European and global (OECD) statistics.

More information:

Regional Strategy for Transition to a Circular Bioeconomy (2023–2030) – Podravje⁴⁴

This strategy defines a structured transition toward a circular bioeconomy model in the Podravje Region. It emphasises resource efficiency, sustainable agriculture, digital solutions for biomass and waste-heat management, and business models linking local producers with innovation and technology.

More information: [Digital Health in the Circular Economy](#)

Living Labs for Bioeconomy and Digitalisation – RRA Podravje

Under the strategy, the Regional Development Agency Podravje – Maribor promotes living labs integrating digitalisation, bioeconomy and community engagement. These labs connect digital tools with real value chains and offer a replicable governance model for MDIHs aligned with EU Green Deal and regional resilience objectives.

More information: https://rra-podravje.si/assets/docs/CCRI_RegionalStrategy_CBE_ENG.pdf

Action Plan for Implementation of the CCRI Regional Strategy for the transition to a Circular Bioeconomy, Podravje 2025 - 2030⁴⁵

More information: https://rra-podravje.si/assets/docs/CCRI_Action-Plan_ENG.pdf

Smart Specialization Strategy of Slovenia 2021-2040 (S4)⁴⁶

⁴³ <https://www.gov.si/zbirke/projekti-in-programi/strategija-digitalne-transformacije-gospodarstva/>

⁴⁴ https://rra-podravje.si/assets/docs/CCRI_RegionalStrategy_CBE_ENG.pdf

⁴⁵ https://rra-podravje.si/assets/docs/CCRI_Action-Plan_ENG.pdf

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.si/zbirke/projekti-in-programi/izvajanje-slovenske-strategije-pametne-specializacije/>

This strategy identifies key areas for research and innovation (R&I) specialization in Slovenia. It focuses on areas with high growth potential and strong links to global trends. The goal is to foster collaboration between research institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders to drive innovation and economic growth in Slovenia.

More information: <https://www.gov.si/zbirke/projekti-in-programi/izvajanje-slovenske-strategije-pametne-specializacije/>

Program for a Successful Digital Slovenia 2030⁴⁷

The program is based on the fact that digitalization is no longer a development option, but the foundation of economic resilience, productivity and long-term sovereignty of the state. The key highlights of the document include:

- strengthening the domestic ICT sector as a driver of digital transformation,
- systematic investment in digital competencies and human resource development,
- accelerated introduction of advanced digital technologies into the economy and public sector,
- development of a modern, secure and efficient digital infrastructure,
- more effective integration of research, innovation and the economy.

At the same time, the program represents an expert basis for coordinating development policies, investments and legislative solutions in the field of digitalization and promotes closer cooperation between the state, the economy and development stakeholders.

More information: https://www.gzs.si/Portals/Panoga-ZIT/Vsebine/ZiT-Program_za_uspesno_digitalno_Slovenijo_2030.pdf

10.6 Northeast region, North Macedonia

National Development Strategy (NDS) 2024–2044

The NDS is North Macedonia's overarching policy framework, structured around six pillars including an innovative and competitive economy, balanced regional development and green transition. Implementation is ensured through rolling five-year programmes adopted by Parliament.

⁴⁷ https://www.gzs.si/Portals/Panoga-ZIT/Vsebine/ZiT-Program_za_uspesno_digitalno_Slovenijo_2030.pdf

Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) 2024–2027

The S3 focuses public and private investment on priority domains, embedding digitalisation across sectors such as smart agriculture and food systems. It is supported by an official Action Plan guiding implementation.

National ICT/Digital Strategy 2023–2027

This strategy sets the vision for digital connectivity, digital public services, cybersecurity and SME digitalisation, serving as a reference framework for reforms and international financing.

Balanced Regional Development framework

Law on Balanced Regional Development, the Strategy for Regional Development 2021–2031, and programmes for each planning region guide public investment and EU/IPA alignment. The North-East Planning Region Development Programme 2021–2026 is the operative mid-term plan for the region

National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) 2021–2030

Energy & climate transition and adopted NECP 2021–2030 (under update) targets higher RES share and a coal phase-out, backed by JETIP/ACT financing.

Green Agenda for the Western Balkans – Revised Action Plan 2025–2030

Regional alignment with the EU Green Deal; the Revised Action Plan 2025–2030 tightens timelines and indicators for decarbonisation, circular economy, biodiversity, and pollution control

EU Growth Plan / Reform & Growth Facility (2024–2027)

Performance-based EU funds that reward reforms in the green and digital pillars; complements IPA III.

Innovation and SME Support Instruments (FITD / INOVA)

The government innovation function (formerly FITD) has provided co-financed grants for innovation and digital transformation; in Aug 2025 it transitions to INOVA (new agency) to continue these roles.

Cross-border and Territorial Cooperation Instruments – IPA CBC Bulgaria–North Macedonia

Cross-border & territorial instruments – Interreg/IPA CBC with Bulgaria uses a Territorial Strategy that explicitly references the North-East Programme 2021–2026,

enabling joint projects on innovation, environment, transport, and digital public services along the border

IPARD III 2021-2027

IPARD III is the most relevant support instrument for rural areas. Measures include on-farm modernisation, processing and marketing, LEADER local strategies, rural infrastructure, diversification and advisory services, all supporting the digital and green transition of rural economies.

10.7 Balearic Islands, Spain

Balearic Islands Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) & Digital Innovation Framework for Tourism and Agri-food

The Balearic Islands' Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) constitutes the main policy framework guiding innovation, sustainability and digitalisation at regional level. RIS3 identifies tourism, agri-food systems and digital technologies as strategic priorities and promotes cross-sectoral collaboration, technology transfer and SME digital uptake, with a strong focus on sustainability and territorial balance.

Within this framework, the regional government has promoted digital innovation ecosystems combining public administration, research institutions (UIB), clusters, SMEs and Digital Innovation Hubs such as DIHBAI-TUR, positioning the Balearic Islands as a testbed for AI, data spaces, immersive technologies and digital platforms applied to tourism and primary sectors.

This policy approach explicitly supports:

- digitalisation of SMEs and micro-enterprises,
- short supply chains and local production,
- circular economy models linking tourism and agri-food,
- and skills development for digital and green transitions.

RIS3 is operationalised through regional funding schemes (ERDF 2021-2027), innovation calls, pilot projects and capacity-building actions, making it a replicable governance model for Mediterranean Digital Innovation Hubs focused on rural and island territories.

More information: [INNOVACIÓN-Estrategia regional de innovación para una especialización inteligente \(RIS3\)](#)

Sustainable Tourism Tax (ITS)

The Balearic Islands -Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza, and Formentera- are top tourism destinations, with over 19.05 million visitors in 2025. Ensuring long-term sustainability, the regional government introduced a Sustainable Tourism Tax (ITS) in July 2016

which is the most important initiative ever taken, it consists of a daily fee on overnight stays and cruise arrivals, which revenues are dedicated to environmental protection, water management, fight against climate change, cultural and historical heritage restoration, sustainable tourism, natural environment, social welfare, tourism diversification, training and employment, innovation, and research. It also supports actions against illegal tourism, improves safety and inspections, and fosters more responsible tourism through sustainability awareness.

Since it was introduced in 2016 until the 2024-2025 Call, a total of 297 projects have been approved for a total amount of around EUR 847 million financed by the tax, in 9 years of application. Last 2024-2025 Call for instance, is funding a total of 79 projects, valued at EUR 376.9 million.

More information: [Sustainable Tourism Investments | Illes Sostenibles](#) and [Guidelines for enabling climate-friendly](#).

11. Conclusions and next steps

11.1 Next step: Conceptualization and creation of the online platform

As a final and transversal output of the REVIVE project, an online Mediterranean Digital Innovation Hub (MDIH) platform, it's been developed to consolidate and capitalise the results generated across the seven pilot regions. The platform functions as a shared data and knowledge space, integrating an interactive map of pilot regions, a dashboard with quantitative indicators (with key information such as DIHs, digital infrastructures, technology centres and regional digital capacity), and structured catalogues of innovative solutions, service models, best practices, funding opportunities and training resources.

By enabling systematic data collection, visualisation and comparison at regional and Mediterranean level, the platform supports monitoring, while strengthening collaboration and knowledge exchange among MDIHs and territorial ecosystems beyond the project's lifetime

By enabling systematic and comparable data collection, visualisation and cross-regional analysis, the platform enhances monitoring, supports evidence-based decision-making, and provides a long-term mechanism for collaboration, peer learning and knowledge exchange among Mediterranean DIHs and territorial ecosystems beyond the lifetime of REVIVE.

11.2 Conclusions and framework recommendations

Ensuring the sustainability of the REVIVE MDIH Framework beyond the project duration requires moving from experimentation to institutionalisation, ownership and continuity. Based on the experience of the seven pilot regions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Anchor MDIHs within existing territorial governance structures

MDIHs should not operate as standalone initiatives. Their sustainability depends on being embedded within regional development agencies, chambers of commerce, LAGs, ICCs or DIHs, ensuring continuity of coordination, legitimacy and access to funding.

2. Strengthen ICCs as long-term innovation carriers

Innovative Community Cooperatives have proven to be effective vehicles for collective innovation. Supporting their formalisation, governance capacity and digital skills will allow ICCs to continue using and evolving digital tools, platforms and immersive experiences after the project ends.

3. Mediterranean Digital Innovation Online Platform as a repository of key information of pilot areas

The online platform is conceived as a common data and knowledge environment supporting collaboration, learning and innovation among pilot territories. It enables the systematic collection of qualitative and quantitative data from each pilot area through a shared template, ensuring comparability while respecting territorial diversity. The platform contributes to the creation of a Mediterranean repository of innovative solutions and business models, showcasing how digitalisation, sustainability and collaborative approaches are applied in rural contexts. Beyond data storage, the platform fosters data sharing and collective intelligence.

By enabling data integration and cross-pilot visibility, the platform strengthens networking, peer learning and cooperation between ICCs, SMEs and stakeholders, reinforcing the transnational dimension of REVIVE and supporting the long-term development of Mediterranean Digital Innovation Hubs.

4. Ensure capacity building as a continuous process

Digital skills, innovation management and technology adoption require ongoing support, especially in rural areas. Future digital laboratories should build on REVIVE's digital labs and immersive experiences, evolving from awareness-raising to advanced and sector-specific modules.

5. Diversify funding and policy alignment

Long-term sustainability depends on aligning MDIHs with regional, national and EU policy instruments. MDIHs should act as facilitators helping local actors access these opportunities rather than relying solely on project funding.

6. Strategic Use of Immersive Technologies for Rural Development

Experience across the seven pilot regions confirms that immersive experiences generate lasting value when they are conceived as integrated tools supporting territorial strategies, ICC business models and local value chains, rather than as isolated technological showcases. When aligned with concrete development objectives—such as learning, awareness-raising, diversification and sustainable tourism—immersive technologies contribute to innovation and creation of new possibilities and business models.

7. Focus on measurable territorial impact

Finally, sustainability requires demonstrating value. MDIHs should integrate simple monitoring mechanisms (adoption rates, SME participation, new collaborations, skills gained) to show tangible benefits for territories, reinforcing political and institutional support.

11.3 Creation of MDHI alliance

The implementation of REVIVE has demonstrated that Mediterranean Digital Innovation Hubs (MDIHs) can act as effective territorial strategies when they are embedded in local ecosystems, aligned with real community needs and connected across regions. The next strategic step emerging from the project would be the creation of a MDIH Alliance, conceived as a permanent, collaborative network among the pilot territories and their innovation actors.

This alliance is not intended as a new legal structure, but as a functional and operational framework that builds on the assets already developed within REVIVE—particularly the Mediterranean Digital Innovation Online Platform, the digital labs, immersive experiences and the ICC-based Action Plans. Through this alliance, MDIHs can coordinate efforts, share methodologies, reuse tools, and scale up tested solutions across Mediterranean rural and island territories.

The MDIH Alliance would serve four key functions:

- Knowledge and tool sharing, enabling regions to reuse digital lab formats, immersive experience methodologies, training curricula and governance models developed in REVIVE;
- Transnational brokerage, connecting ICCs, SMEs, technology providers, DIHs and public authorities across regions to foster collaboration, joint pilots and innovation transfer;
- Strategic alignment, ensuring coherence between local Action Plans, EU digital and green transition priorities, and future Interreg, Horizon Europe or Digital Europe initiatives;
- Platform-driven collaboration, using the Mediterranean Digital Innovation Online Platform as the technical backbone of the alliance, supporting data

sharing, visibility of solutions, matchmaking and monitoring of innovation outcomes.

In this sense, the MDIH Alliance would directly complement the objectives of WP3 and would capitalise on its outputs, transforming project-based cooperation into a scalable innovation ecosystem.

REVIVE has demonstrated that Mediterranean rural and island territories can successfully leverage digital innovation when it is rooted in community engagement, cultural authenticity, and accessible technology. Through immersive experiences, digital laboratories, ICC-based processes, and shared tools, the project has built the foundations of a sustainable, transnational rural innovation ecosystem. The new MDIH Online Platform and the proposed MDIH Alliance ensure that the project's achievements will not only persist but continue to expand, supporting long-term digital transformation, territorial cooperation, and inclusive rural development across the Mediterranean.

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