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1 Executive summary

This document comprises the first part of INNOGROW activity ‘A5.1 Joint development of action plans’, namely the “Common methodology for the development of action plans’. The document aims to provide instructions to INNOGROW partners that will help them prepare the action plans to be implemented in Phase 2 of the INNOGROW project. The instructions provided are based on:

- a) The provisions of the INNOGROW project Application Form (Application Form hereafter)
- b) The suggestions of the Interreg Europe Programme Manual
- c) The deliverables of the INNOGROW project

To aid INNOGROW partners prepare the action plans, the document provides the following:

1. General definitions of action plans and descriptions of the approach for their preparation.
2. Explanation of the requirements for the preparation of INNOGROW action plans in particular.
3. Articulation of an approach to develop a strategic development pathway upon which all actions in the plan will be based so as to ensure coherence of actions and greater impact.
4. Policy recommendations based on A1 INNOGROW deliverables that will help partners understand which types of actions should be included in the plans.
5. Recommendations on how to find EU funding for specific types of projects based on A2.2 INNOGROW deliverables.
6. Methods to involve stakeholders in the implementation of action plans.
7. A three step process for INNOGROW action plans quality assurance, based correspondingly on three criteria.
8. Methods to conduct peer-reviewing procedures among the partners for the action plans and the approach for monitoring the implementation of action plans found in the Interreg Europe Programme Manual.
9. A template for the preparation of action plans largely based on the template found in the Interreg Europe Programme Manual.

2 Introduction

This document capitalises on Interreg Europe Programme resources and INNOGROW deliverables to develop a coherent guide for the preparation of action plans to be used by INNOGROW partners for the preparation of the implementation of policy measures to take place during Phase 2 of the INNOGROW project.

To build a coherent and cohesive methodology for action plans' development, the document outlines an approach based on the following:

- a) Development of an understanding of the task at hand and key definitions.
- b) Provision of information and data on the key parameters to complete the task at hand, and especially key policy recommendations based on INNOGROW deliverables.
- c) Guidelines on performing an ex-ante assessment of the action plan, to be performed by the partner that prepared it, and an ex-post assessment of the action plan, to be performed through peer-reviewing among INNOGROW partners.

As can be seen from the list above, the preparation of action plans will follow a classic step by step problem solving approach, i.e. a) development of an understanding of the problem, b) collection of data, c) choosing a course of action, and d) evaluation of the solution chosen. However, before proceeding with the description of this approach, it is necessary to point out that special efforts were made to ensure its congruence with the requirements of the Interreg Europe Programme.

3 What is an action plan?

3.1 Action plan definition

Action plans are usually defined¹ as ‘...sequences of steps that must be taken, or activities that must be performed well, for a strategy to succeed. An action plan has three major elements (1) Specific tasks: what will be done and by whom. (2) Time horizon: when will it be done? (3) Resource allocation: what specific funds are available for specific activities? Also called action program.’

Nevertheless, action plans developed in the context of Interreg Europe projects, like INNOGROW, can be described under a much more precise definition that further elaborates the one cited above. Hence, produced by each region, the **action plan** is a document providing details on how the lessons learnt from the cooperation will be implemented in order to improve the policy instrument that is addressed within their region. It specifies the nature of the actions to be implemented, their timeframe, the players involved, the costs (if any), and funding sources (if any). If the same policy instrument is addressed by several partners, only one action plan is required.

3.2 The process of developing and implementing an action plan

In general, action plans can be developed according to the following seven steps²:

1. Define the Problem(s):

Step 1 refers to the stage of evaluating the situation, so as to develop an understanding of the problem at hand and to start seeking its solution. It is in this step that those who prepare the plan need to check if all possibilities have been considered, so as to identify the problem in the most concrete way possible.

2. Collect and Analyse the Data:

¹ <https://extension.psu.edu/the-seven-steps-of-action-planning>

² <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/action-plan.html>

After defining the problem, it is now time in Step 2, to collect and analyse data to prove or disprove the assumptions about the nature of the problem and its potential solutions.

3. Clarify and Prioritise the Problem(s):

If there is more than a single problem, in Step 3 it is possible to prioritise them according to their importance.

4. Set the Goals of Each Solution:

After collecting all relevant data and comprehensively defining the problem(s), it is now time to set a number of concrete goals for the solution of the problem. The goals need to be SMART:

- *S – Specific:*
Specific goals are clear and focused, not broad, ambiguous, or general. Specific goals provide specific information on the behaviours that are associated with the goal. These goals indicate who will do what, when and how.
- *M – Measurable*
Measurable goals provide a measurable indicator of success, so that it becomes easy to monitor progress and determine when success has been attained. Measurements of success may be quantified with numbers or a simple yes/no determination.
- *A – Achievable*
Achievable goals are realistic, and well within the abilities, responsibilities and resources of the management and staff. This does not mean that goals must be easy to achieve. Every effort should be made to reach a higher level of performance. Sometimes "stretch" goals can encourage someone to step out of their comfort zone and tackle tasks in a new, challenging, yet achievable way that results in overall improvement for the operation.
- *R – Relevant*
A relevant goal is appropriate to a person who will be attempting to achieve it and to the overall goals and objectives of the farm.
- *T – Timely*

The attainment of a goal should not be open-ended, but set for a specific time. As much as possible, the exact date the goal is to be achieved should be determined. When a goal has a deadline, it provides a measurable point and speeds progress toward critical goals. Employees will generally put more emphasis on goals that have specific deadlines than on those for which no time for measurement has been established.

5. Implement Solutions: The Action Plan:

Step five is to write an action plan that addresses the problems. An action plan is written so that an organisation/person can do the task successfully alone and is followed much like a recipe. It converts the goal or plan into a people process.

It has three key parts:

- Based on the goal the action plans answers five questions - What? When? How? Where? Who?
- Lists Resources
- Lists Potential Barriers

6. Evaluate and Monitor:

The next step in the problem solving process is to design a method for monitoring the outcome. The method we select should assess whether the goal and action plan corrects the problem. In addition, a well-designed monitoring method will help the team to determine when the action plan needs to be improved.

7. Restart with a New Problem, or Refine the Old Problem:

The problem solving steps are cyclical. If the first cycle is successful the process starts over with a new problem. If the same problem persists, there must be refinement, so the process starts over with refinement of the original problem as more current data is analysed.

4 Components of Interreg EU action plans

According to the Interreg Europe Programme Manual the template for the action plans of INNOGROW partners (which can be seen in Annex 1) consists of the following parts:

Part I – General information: The role of part 1 is to aid all potential readers of the document identify quickly the role of the action plan, the context within which it was developed, the organisations responsible for its drafting, and, finally, the people that can provide more details. This is why Part 1 asks for the following information:

- Name of Project:
- Name of Partner organisation:
- Other partner organisations involved (if relevant):
- Country:
- NUTS2 region:
- Contact person:
- Email address:
- Phone number:

Part II – List of actions: The role of Part 2 is to list one by one all the actions to be implemented in the final phase of the INNOGROW project. The Interreg Europe Action Plan template asks for the following information that comprise a complete and clear description of each action:

- **Background:** lessons learnt from the project that constitute the basis for the development of the present action plan.
- **Action:** description of the actions to be implemented.
- **Players involved:** listing and description of the organisations in the region who are involved in the development and implementation of the action and explanation of their role.
- **Timeframe:** Description of the time and workplan needed for the completion of each action.
- **Costs:** Explanation of the costs required for the completion of each action.
- **Funding sources:** Explanation of the funding sources to be used for financing each action.

5 Developing strategic development pathways based on A1 results and policy instruments addressed

All actions in the INNOGROW action plans should be rooted on the outcomes of INNOGROW A activities, especially those pointing to specific policy recommendations that can increase the innovativeness and presence in the markets of rural SMEs. A1 activities prescribe the following types of recommendations for rural economy SMEs:

1. How to integrate, develop and utilise new technologies.
2. How to apply tested innovative business models.
3. How to improve relevant policy measures.
4. How to incentivise innovation adoption by rural economy SMEs.

Each public authority or other institution responsible for the preparation of action plans will have to juxtapose these recommendations with those of their policy instruments listed in the INNOGROW application form or with any other relevant policy instrument. This way, they will be able to uncover any shortages, and then propose measures/actions that will integrate the missing recommendations in the policy instruments. All in all, they will manage to develop a strategic development pathway towards achieving the aims of their policy instrument via the use of INNOGROW activities' outcomes. The following figure summarises this process:

Figure 1: Towards preparing a strategic development pathway in the INNOGROW action plans

As can be seen in the figure above the preparation of an action plan starts with Step 1, i.e. by having partners responsible for the action plans read the policy recommendations found in INNOGROW A1 deliverables and identify those that are most relevant for increasing the innovativeness and market orientation of rural economy SMEs in their territory. However, to make sure that they can have the most impactful interventions via this process, step 1 is followed by step 2, where partners will juxtapose A1 recommendations with those already included in their policy instruments. This way, they will be able to highlight recommended policy interventions that are not only relevant, but also absent from their policy instruments, and hence, bring something new to the policy mix for rural economies. Afterwards, step 3 can be described as the process during which the partners will join and organise all measures that survived the scrutiny of the previous two steps in the form of a plan. This plan should follow the suggestions of the Interreg Europe programme and consist of the three following types of interventions:

- **Type 1 - implementation of new projects:** Thanks to interregional cooperation, managing authorities and other relevant bodies can find inspiration in other regions and import new projects to be financed within their programmes. This type of impact requires the availability of funding in the programme, as is the case with Structural Funds programmes.
- **Type 2 - change in the management of the policy instrument:** Interregional cooperation can also influence the way policy instruments are managed. New approaches can be adopted thanks to lessons learnt in other regions. For instance, a new methodology for monitoring or evaluating a measure can be developed within the policy instrument. A managing authority or any other relevant body can also improve the way thematic calls are organised or the way projects are selected. The governance of the programme may also refer to the way environmental issues are integrated into the different measures of the operational programmes.
- **Type 3 - change in the strategic focus of the policy instrument:** The third type is the most challenging since it requires a change in the operational programme. To integrate the lessons learnt from the cooperation, some managing authorities can modify existing measures or even create new measures in their programme.

Finally, Step 4, is the final stage in the preparation process of action plans, when partners will describe in detail each action included in their strategic development pathway, according to the template provided by the Interreg Europe Programme Manual.

6 Background: Policy recommendations derived from INNOGROW A1 activities

As explained in the previous section, INNOGROW A1 activities have delivered specific policy recommendations that constitute the background of all changes in the implementation of partners' policy instruments that can be achieved through the INNOGROW project. The recommendations of each A1 activity are summarised in the subsequent sections.

6.1 Utilising new technologies to achieve increase the innovativeness of rural economy SMEs

New technologies and their integration in the rural economy are an excellent way to improve various aspects of the innovativeness of rural economy SMEs. The following figure summarises the main ways through which new technologies can increase the innovativeness and market presence of rural economy SMEs, as they were outlined in INNOGROW deliverable A1.1:

Figure 2: Impact of new technologies

More precisely, deliverable A1.1, proposes the following:

- 1) Integration of new technologies can lead to greater job creation if financial incentives are given mostly to SMEs of 10-49 employees of the primary and tertiary sectors.
- 2) When the policy goal is to help rural SMEs to enter new markets to increase their overall turnover, and become more competitive in the industry, policy makers should provide incentives for new technologies adoption especially to the following two categories of SMEs:

- a) SMEs of less than 10 employees, operating in the agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and aquaculture industries
- b) SMEs of 50-250 employees, operating in the tourism industry.

These categories of rural SMEs have showed greater potential and success on entering new markets due to the integration of a new technology, optimizing thus policies implementation.

- 3) In case that rural SMEs face difficulties in remaining competitive due to limited or no profitability, it is recommended that policy makers offer incentives related to funding sources for SMEs to adopt new technologies, as well as incentives to collaborate (vertically or horizontally) with other businesses to achieve economies of scale or to acquire access to knowledge, skills and specialisation that are currently not available inside the firm. To optimise policy implementation towards this goal, it is recommended to focus policy efforts on either firms with less than 10 employees or firms of 50-250 employees, which have showed greater potential on increasing their profitability through the adoption of new technologies, according to the current study.

6.2 Adopting and/or developing new business models based on best practices

INNOGROW deliverable A1.2 proposed a number of distinct types of innovative business models that can be considered best practices at an EU level and that can render rural economy SMEs more innovative and competitive. Key aspects of such business models that can be applied and advanced by partners through their action plans, are presented in the following figure per category:

Figure 3: Aspects of innovative business models

6.3 Policy recommendations on the improvement of existing policy measures

INNOGROW deliverable A1.3 was the most heavily focused on policies for the support of rural economy SMEs. The deliverable proposed improvements for a wide range of policies that can be applied by all INNOGROW partners in loci of their rural economy where there is shortage

of such policies. These types of policies are outlined in the following sections and summarised in the figure below:

Figure 4: Types of policy recommendations

6.3.1 Policies that ease access to finance for rural economy SMEs

Rural SMEs face a number of challenges whilst trying to become more innovative and active in local, national and even international markets. More precisely, rural SMEs encounter difficulties when they attempt to do the following:

1. Access financial capital while developing an innovation, especially during its early stages.
2. Match-make their financial needs with the investment preferences of suppliers of funds.
3. Find access to human resources, external markets and technological know-how for developing innovation practices.

4. Access composite funding schemes and synergies that are better suited for their innovative activity.

To counter these factors, it is proposed that public authorities can include in their action plans and eventually apply the measures outlined in the following figure:

Figure 5: Responses to challenges in financing innovation of rural SMEs

Challenges	Policy Responses
1. Access financial capital while developing an innovation, especially during its early stages.	1. Provide public funds policies for promoting availability of capital to business model innovative SMEs mainly on the early stages of an innovation to leverage private sector financing. Develop targeted financial instruments to support innovation (e.g. voucher schemes to give access to public research and education infrastructure), grant schemes to co-operate with university-based staff in joint research projects, as well as seed funds for innovative start-ups.
2. Match-make their financial needs with the investment preferences of suppliers of funds.	2. Recognise the need for proximity between suppliers of funds and those who require finance, particularly for small-scale investment. Establish regional and local equity initiatives to increase proximity between suppliers of funds and those who require finance, particularly for small-scale investment.
3. Find access to human resources, external markets and technological know-how for developing innovation practices.	3. Form an institutional set-up based upon the use of non-discriminatory measures which seek to support efforts made by SMEs themselves.
4. Access composite funding schemes and synergies that are better suited for their innovative activity.	4. Develop synergies with other instruments to maximise their effectiveness in terms of innovation and entrepreneurial outcomes. For instance, seed funds for start-ups could be combined with vouchers for training in managerial skills, while matched grants for innovation activities could be linked to credit-guarantee schemes on loans obtained from banks by SMEs.

6.3.2 Improve the institutional framework and operational environment

Achieving improvements in the innovativeness and market presence of rural economy SMEs would be impossible without ameliorating and—if possible—optimising the current institutional network promoting and supporting these factors on behalf of the public sector. The key interventions to public institutions that should be included in the action plan are the following:

- 1. Development of business model consultation tools and services targeted specifically to rural economy SMEs:** Action plans should be directed towards establishing a support ecosystem that accompanies innovative rural economy SMEs for a long period of time. In this context, regional authorities and relevant institutional bodies should develop business model consultation tools and services adapted to the needs of SMEs in their territories in collaboration with relevant stakeholders and experts. These tools and services will be able to guide and provide know-how to rural SMEs throughout the whole development and implication of their idea.
- 2. Develop clear and open policy reforms on innovation:** Action plans need to include interventions that will ensure that any institutional change will take place only after the provision of clear and accessible information about the intended policy reforms to stakeholders and the public as well as after the integration of their subsequent feedback.
- 3. Develop formal coordination mechanisms for rural SMEs policy among stakeholders:** A formal framework for interaction on SME policy making is needed to improve coordination among relevant ministries and government agencies. In addition, public-private consultations (PPC) on SME-related policies could also be strengthened to strike the right balance among the needs of all relevant stakeholders. Regular participation of rural SMEs representatives in such coordination mechanisms would ensure that private sector perspectives are taken into account when developing business-related regulations, thus improving stability and predictability of regulations over time.
- 4. Encourage SMEs to recognise, measure, and report intangible assets:** Reporting ICT skills, organisation, software and networks, intellectual property rights, new and small firm assets can be managed more effectively and more reliably both internally as well as by capital markets and investors.

- 5. Embed monitoring mechanisms to ensure that programmes in support of SMEs deliver measurable results:** Policies should be regularly monitored and evaluated to ensure implementation is efficient and effective. In particular, policymakers need to ensure that budgetary resources are available, that they are spent with care and that targets are being met. In this regard, a scheme to assess the level of implementation of the various actions should be updated regularly, identifying milestones, responsibilities, budget needs, deadlines, next steps and expected results for each practical action.
- 6. Improve SME statistics collection and dissemination:** Broadening and deepening the production of SME statistics could help build a more accurate picture of the sector's performance and further base policymaking on quantitative evidence. This would entail expanding the current basic structural business statistics by sector and size class (i.e. number, employment and value-added) to include more refined data on business demographics (e.g. birth rate, death rate, survival rate, high-growth enterprises), export performance (e.g. SMEs' share of export) and innovation (e.g. expenditure on R&D, technology absorption).

6.3.3 Promote skills development and entrepreneurial culture

The third way to achieve improvements in the innovativeness and market presence of rural economy SMEs is to develop the skills of their personnel and to promote and diffuse an entrepreneurial culture that does not regard innovation as something that is not essential. Types of such interventions that could be included in INNOGROW action plans can be seen in the following figure:



Figure 6: Actions improving personnel skills and promoting entrepreneurial culture

6.3.4 Support SMEs' internationalisation

Another way to increase the innovativeness and capacity to compete of rural economy SMEs is to support their internationalisation in the sense of promoting their importing and exporting activity. In addition, the latter has the capacity to lead to a positive feedback loop and in its turn make rural economy SMEs even more innovative and competitive³. INNOGROW recommendations for supporting SMEs' internationalisation can be seen in the following figure:

Figure 7: Actions supporting SMEs' internationalisation:

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/10008/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native>

6.3.5 Facilitate rural SMEs' innovation and R&D

The final way to increase the innovativeness and capacity to compete of rural economy SMEs is to directly support their R&D activities, with measures such as the following:

1. *Promote a “triple helix” notion of innovation.*

A “triple helix” type of partnership, involving academia, the private sector, and the public sector could facilitate the development of a dynamic innovation ecosystem in INNOGROW regions. While universities typically expand the knowledge base and provide research capacity, businesses can convert this knowledge into commercially viable products, and the government should create a supportive environment for innovation. Such a triple helix partnership improves the competitiveness of rural economy SMEs by building a more advanced, knowledge-based rural economy.

2. *Enable existing technological innovations to be absorbed by rural SMEs.*

Apart from triple helix partnerships, innovation policies should also focus on enhancing rural SMEs' capacity to absorb existing technologies. Policymakers should concentrate on creating a business ecosystem that goes beyond single-function innovations in order to include the broader concepts of technological and business model innovation.

3. *Foster collaboration between industry and academia.*

Linkages between businesses and universities could be encouraged to enhance applied research and SMEs' engagement in innovation activities. Research institutes could develop technical audits of rural SMEs, which could raise awareness among SMEs of their research flaws and capacities. For example, joint partnerships initiatives between SMEs and public research institutes could be established, with the former contributing financial resources and a market-oriented perspective and the latter providing experienced technical staff and research equipment. A cluster-type approach could be promoted, whereby SMEs co-ordinate their needs for innovation and engage with public research facilities with a shared objective.

4. *Strengthen international linkages between European, national, and local hubs of knowledge.*

Transfer of institutional infrastructure, best practices, paradigmatic policies, and expertise relating to innovation practices assists SMEs access to knowledge, networking opportunities, and encourages the exchange of experiences. Co-operation among all stakeholders – including SME associations, public agencies, and intermediary organisations – should correct deficiencies in existing sources of information.

5. Increase the participation of SMEs in innovative clusters.

Results from the comparative report show that rural SMEs lack resources in R&D. Interregional collaboration between rural SMEs and thematically related R&D institutions could assist dissemination of innovative practices to rural SMEs. Research networks and technology markets are decisive pools of knowledge from which rural SMEs could draw innovative resources from. For example, This could be achieved by building a culture of entrepreneurship at universities to promote university-based spin-offs (e.g. by including entrepreneurial features in curricula, or by fostering linkages with local start-up networks, incubators, or science parks), as well as by establishing dedicated technology transfer offices at universities to facilitate the transfer of R&D results to innovative SMEs.

6. Amend the legal framework for innovation.

The legal framework for innovation could be amended to facilitate the commercialisation of university-based research and innovation among SMEs. In particular, public universities and research centres should be allowed to own shares in spin-off companies and to commercialise their inventions and intellectual property (IP) rights generated through publicly-funded R&D. Improvements to the regulatory environment could also be made to encourage SMEs to invest in R&D, for example by fostering local competition (i.e. raising SMEs' need for innovation activities) and designing policies to enforce IP rights for SMEs.

6.4 Factors that influence rural economy SMEs to adopt innovation, enabling partners to realize the policy obstacles concerned

The final A1 deliverable of the INNOGROW project presented the main findings and conclusions drawn from the survey conducted with SMEs representatives regarding the factors that influence SMEs in rural areas to invest in new technologies and get involved in

new collaborative models. The factors are presented below alongside their implications for policy making that partners will have to take into account whilst developing the action plans:

1. Current state of innovation

When examining the current state of innovation among rural economy SMEs, 90% of respondents stated that their organisation has previously engaged with R&D activities or have participated in collaborative networks focused on stimulating innovation adoption at the business level. Overall, the majority of rural economy SMEs (64%) show a low level of innovation, having adopted only one or two types of innovation as part of their business strategy; the “Use of new production technologies and processes” seems to be the most common form of innovation among rural SMEs, followed by “Development of new products / delivery of new services”.

2. Motivations behind the adoption of innovation

Evidence shows that rural economy SMEs tend to invest in innovation for fulfilling their functional needs; the motivations to get functional benefits drawn from the production of new products, reduced production costs and internationalisation. In particular, the most important motivation behind the adoption of innovation for rural SMEs is the need to improve their operational efficiency. Altogether, five types of motivations underlie SMEs’ innovativeness: a) improve operational efficiency, b) access new markets, c) gain competitive advantage, d) increase client satisfaction / satisfy customer’s needs and e) increase profitability.

3. Constraints and barriers to innovation

Rural economy SMEs experience certain limitations to engage in innovation. Evidence show that they face difficulties in accessing funding, lack sufficiently qualified personnel in-house or receive limited support from regional authorities. The factors that can be referred as “the most pronounced barriers to innovation” are those related to funding, regulation and uncertainty over business benefits. This clearly indicates that financial constraints remain one of the biggest barriers, hampering SMEs’ potential to create innovative products that will deliver added value in the market. “Cultural and traditional issues” and

“Accountability/management problems” resulted as the least important factors hindering the adoption of innovation among rural SMEs.

4. Perceived enablers of innovation

The key enablers of business innovation can be grouped into three clusters: a) internal capacity and capability (e.g. availability of existing technological infrastructures, internal capital, employees with relevant skills), b) market structure (e.g. market potential, collaboration with other business actors across the supply chain, availability of business support) and c) the external environment (e.g. favourable regulatory framework, external funding). Overall, the regulatory framework was found the most pronounced driver of innovation, followed by market potential and employees with relevant skills. In any case, all examined factors were found to be perceived enablers of innovation.

5. Expected organizational impact

SMEs’ representatives assume that all examined factors/statements can be potential benefits for a rural enterprise actively investing in innovative technologies or/and participating in innovative collaboration networks. In particular, improvements related to productivity, service quality and operational efficiency appear to be the most expected benefits associated with the adoption of innovation.

7 EU funding models for the implementation of action plans

The European Union has emerged as a major funding source for the advancement of innovation and market expansion of the rural economy. Hence, INNOGROW partners should include in their action plans measures that have the potential to receive funding from European Union programmes. The content of such measures was a major discussion point in the public consultation meetings conducted in the INNOGROW project. These meetings provided specific suggestions for actions with immediate effect and measures to be taken in the proximate future. In fact, the meetings managed to make separate suggestion for each INNOGROW territory in terms of the actions with immediate effect.

7.1 Actions with immediate effect and their funding

As already mentioned, these measures are addressed separately to each region, in particular, to institutions responsible for the implementation of the INNOGROW territories' policy instruments.

7.1.1 Lombardy - Italy

For the region of Lombardy, the key suggestions of INNOGROW public consultation meetings had to do with diffusing the know-how about innovation of research organisations in urban centres towards the rural areas of Lombardy. This way, rural economy SMEs in the territory would overcome their reluctance towards innovation. This is of crucial significance to the most important sector in rural Lombardy, i.e. agriculture and tourism. Under this perspective, it is proposed to direct EU funding towards the recommended institutions and the types of projects found in the following figure:

Figure 8: EU funding suggestions for Lombardy

7.1.2 Molise - Italy

In Molise, one of the most agricultural regions of Italy with a number of related industrial sectors (mechanics, textiles, food, crafts) and clusters (Termoli, Campobasso-Bojano, Campobasso-Ripalimosani and Venafro-Pozzilli), the suggestions had to do mostly with the following:

- Facilitation of rural SMEs to expand in regional, national and international markets,

- Encouraging rural SMEs in innovations,
- Ensuring the accessibility to credits, investments (venture capital, seed and pre-seed capital) and risk management initiatives for agricultural SMEs,
- Rearranging of production by integrating innovative approaches and business models (ROP Molise 2014-2020).

Besides the support envisaged, consultations of stakeholders highlighted additional suggested measures, alongside potential institutions involved and funding sources:

Figure 9: EU funding suggestions for Molise

7.1.3 Nyugat-Dunantul - Hungary

Nyugat-Dunantul is the second most developed Hungarian territory, with a strong industrial (automobiles, machinery) and a developing service sector (tourism). Nevertheless, there is a relatively weak research and innovation capacity, especially in the rural sector. This is the reason why the meetings suggested measures akin to the promotion of business capability, the development of local business related infrastructure and ensuring services that facilitate the growth of the competitiveness of SMEs. Examples include:

- The support for the business incubators,
- The support for the innovation and logistics centres,
- The support for the rural SMEs, through such services as storage, cooling, sorting and packaging of the products (TOP Hungary 2014-2020).

The following figure presents detailed suggestions for EU funding, and the institutions to be involved in this context:

Figure 10: EU funding suggestions for Nyugat-Dunantul

7.1.4 Zemgale - Latvia

Zemgale region is located in the central part of Latvia, relatively close to the capital. The agriculture and related fields are the most important business sectors in Zemgale. Recently the development of crafts and local (rural) producers have been facilitated. There is a University of the Agriculture of Latvia located in Zemgale region thus providing a strong

capacity for the development of innovations and research within this region. Besides a number of scientific and research institutions related to the field of agriculture and forestry are located within this region (ZPR IAS 2015-2030). The support is envisaged for diverse support measures, including:

- Support for the promotion of the development of innovations within SMEs with higher growth potential, creation of new high value added products,
- Access to financing, such as, investments (venture capital, seed and pre-seed capital), credits, guarantees,
- Development of the business related infrastructure and consultancies, for instance, business incubators, clusters,
- Promotion of the internationalisation of SMEs.

The following figure presents detailed suggestions in this context:

Figure 11: EU funding suggestions for Zemgale

Recommendation	Responsible policy making body	Financing source
1. Promotion of the vertical and horizontal (among rural SMEs and with other stakeholders) partnership platforms for SMEs that can facilitate the creation and implementation of new technologies, products and business models	Ministry of Economy Additionally: Administration of Zemgale region, Latvian Investment and Development Agency, Higher education institutions	ERDF Additionally: Horizon 2020, territorial cooperation programmes
2. Especially regarding the rural non-agricultural SMEs, to encourage their accession in wider national and international markets	Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Agriculture Additionally: Latvian Investment and Development Agency, Rural Support Service, Chamber of Commerce, Administration of Zemgale region	ERDF, EAFRD Additionally: territorial cooperation programmes
3. To ensure the information and training of rural SMEs on the introduction of new business models and innovations	Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Agriculture Additionally: Latvian Investment and Development Agency, Rural Support Service, Chamber of Commerce, Administration of Zemgale region	ERDF, EAFRD Additionally: territorial cooperation programmes
4. To ensure specific support initiative/ measure for the	Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Agriculture	ERDF, EAFRD

development of innovations and new business models specifically in rural non-agricultural SMEs	Additionally: Latvian Investment and Development Agency, Rural Support Service, Chamber of Commerce, Administration of Zemgale region	Additionally: territorial cooperation programmes
5. To simplify the application and implementation of the projects supporting the development of new products and other innovative technologies	Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Finance, Additionally: Central Finance and Contracting Agency	ERDF

7.1.5 Pardubice region - Czechia

Pardubice region is characterised as the agricultural – industrial region of the Czech Republic. This region has long traditions of the primary agricultural production. The service sector is of minor importance and is gradually developing. The research and innovation ecosystem of the region is comparatively weak. The policy document addressed by the INNOGROW project is the Czech Operational Programme “Enterprise and Innovations for Competitiveness 2014-2020 (ERDF)”. There is a specific priority envisaged aiming in the development of the entrepreneurship and their competitiveness. This programme shall enhance the innovation capacity of SMEs and contribute to the Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3). The support is envisaged for diverse support measures, including:

- Support of the starting the business,
- Consultations to business related infrastructure and facilities, such as, business incubators, science and technology parks and innovation centres,
- Promotion of the internationalisation of SMEs.

This OP just partly covers the future development needs of rural SMEs. Some suggestions for SMEs that can be derived from the policy instrument are found in the following figure:

Figure 12: EU funding suggestions for Pardubice

Recommendation	Responsible policy making body	Financing source
1. To ensure the support for the development of infrastructure	Ministry of Industry and Trade	ERDF
2. Promotion of the vertical and horizontal (among rural SMEs and with other stakeholders) partnership platforms for rural SMEs that can facilitate the creation and	Ministry of Industry and Trade Additionally: Pardubice region, Higher education institutions, Regional Chamber of Commerce,	ERDF Additionally: Horizon 2020, territorial cooperation programmes

implementation of new technologies, products and business models	Energy – Industrial Innovation Cluster	
3. To ensure more targeted consultations and the information specifically to rural SMEs on the innovation support available	Ministry of Industry and Trade Additionally: Pardubice region,	ERDF Additionally: territorial cooperation programmes
4. To simplify the application and implementation of the projects supporting the development of new products and other innovative technologies	Ministry of Industry and Trade	ERDF

7.1.6 Gorenjska – Slovenia

In Gorenjska, the most important economic sectors are manufacturing and tourism with ski resorts. Most rural economy SMEs are in the animal husbandry industry. The main policy document addressed by the INNOGROW project is the Slovenian Industrial Policy 2014-2020 (SIP). This is a national level policy document addressing the whole country. There are several objectives set to address the challenges related to the competitiveness and the innovation capacity of SMEs. It has a specific emphasis to contribute to the Smart Specialisation strategy (RIS3). The support covers several directions, such as:

- Support related to the promotion of non-technological innovations and new business models,
- R&D activities and support to industrial sectors with higher technological potential,
- Promotion of the internationalisation of SMEs (SIP).

In general, the support areas reflect the needs and further opportunities identified within this research. However consultations of stakeholders highlighted specific needs to be addressed regarding the rural SMEs. Some suggestions for SMEs that can be derived from the policy instrument are found in the following figure:

Figure 13: EU funding suggestions for Gorenjska

7.1.7 Stara Zagora - Bulgaria

Stara Zagora region has a favourable geographical location providing the easy access to important trading transport routes and operating as intermodal transport hub having connection to other cities of Bulgaria. This region has recently improved the ICT related infrastructure facilitating the use of digital technologies. The production of lignite coal and electrical energy are important business sectors of this region. Other major important business sectors are the construction, the production of the food and the cosmetics. Textile or clothing manufacturing has historical traditions, which are still kept by larger various entrepreneurs. The agriculture forms comparatively small share in the economy of this region.

The main policy document addressed by the INNOGROW project is the Bulgarian Operational Programme "Innovations and Competitiveness" 2014-2020. This OP is a national level planning document of EU structural funds. This document is aiming to increase the competitiveness of SMEs. It has a specific emphasis to contribute to the Smart Specialisation strategy (RIS3). The support is envisaged for diverse support measures, including:

- Accessibility to financing of SMEs through financial instruments combined with grants,
- Strengthening the productivity and export potential of SMEs,
- Support for specialized services to SMEs to develop and strengthen the management capacity, use of ICT.

In general, the support areas reflect the needs and further opportunities identified within this research. However consultations of stakeholders highlighted specific needs to be addressed regarding the rural SMEs. Key suggestions for rural economy SMEs that can be derived from the policy instrument are found in the following figure:

Figure 14: EU funding suggestions for Stara Zagora

Recommendation	Responsible policy making body	Financing source
1. Promotion of the vertical and horizontal (among rural SMEs and with other stakeholders) partnership platforms for SMEs that can facilitate the creation and implementation of new technologies, products and business models, for instance clusters or other initiatives	Ministry of Economy, "Economic Promotion Policies" Directorate Additionally: higher education and research institutions, the Chamber of Commerce, Stara Zagora regional Administration	ERDF Additionally: Horizon 2020, territorial cooperation programmes
2. Promotion of the technology transfer from the scientific institutions to rural SMEs	Ministry of Economy, "Economic Promotion Policies" Directorate Additionally: higher education and research institutions, Stara Zagora regional Administration	ERDF Additionally: Horizon 2020, territorial cooperation programmes
3. To ensure consultations on and support for rural SMEs for the registration of the intellectual property rights and trade marks	Ministry of Economy, "Economic Promotion Policies" Directorate Additionally: Stara Zagora regional Administration	ERDF
4. To ensure more targeted consultations and the information specifically to rural SMEs on the innovation development and funding available	Ministry of Economy, "Economic Promotion Policies" Directorate Additionally: higher education and research institutions, the Chamber of Commerce, Stara Zagora regional Administration	ERDF
5. Especially regarding the rural SMEs, to encourage their accession in wider national and international markets	Ministry of Economy, "Economic Promotion Policies" Directorate Additionally: the Chamber of Commerce, Stara Zagora regional Administration	ERDF Additionally: territorial cooperation programmes

8 Ensuring stakeholder participation

INNOGROW action plans are designed for the implementation of policies that will impact and are relevant to many different stakeholders, especially many distinct types of rural economy SMEs. This is the main reason why INNOGROW policy measures suggested in the action plans will be designed according to the concept of multi-organisational cooperative behaviours for the delivery of public services that has been described as an alternative, more effective and inclusive form of governance, in comparison with the limitations of rigid bureaucratic top-down approaches and the dominance of a restricted group of interests typical of market models⁴. As a result, stakeholder participation plays a key role to the successful implementation of policy measures included in INNOGROW action plans, and this is something that INNOGROW partners should always consider whilst designing them. What is more, the second phase of the INNOGROW project can focus on stakeholder participation in the implementation of policies, since they have already been consulted for their designing in INNOGROW public consultation and regional stakeholders' meetings. Precise types of rural economy stakeholders' participation in the implementation of action plans can be seen below:

1. Raising awareness of policy measures:

A first level of engagement to increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of policies is to work to improve their awareness and understanding of the measures for which funding is available, and how these are relevant to their current work and organisational objectives. For example, it is important to communicate to rural economy SMEs the opportunities derived from policy measures (in terms of funding and support) to develop their businesses, diversify their economic interests, and improve their innovativeness and access to markets.

2. Engaging stakeholders to shorten supply chains in rural economy:

Policy interventions can include actions that approach stakeholders so as to develop synergies that support the development of new market channels including direct routes to the consumer such as e.g. farm shops and participation in external events, markets and collaborative retailing.

⁴ <https://soc.kuleuven.be/io/egpa/org/2009Malta/papers/EGPA%202009%20Veronesi%20and%20Keasey.pdf>

3. Developing co-operation between producers:

For many rural producers, the ability to access larger markets is dependent on their capacity to provide consistency of supply, quality and volume to meet market demand. These demands are often difficult or impossible for smaller rural economy SMEs unless they are able to collaborate effectively. Policy measures can include action that develop the kind of cooperation necessary to achieve mutual business benefits.

4. Finding economic and environmental benefits

Many rural economy SMEs are highly motivated by environmental sustainability, but lack knowledge, skills or information on how to promote such objectives whilst delivering on the primary need to run a profitable business. The key to engagement of producers in this context is therefore in illustrating where they can meet their primary economic objectives in ways that also enable the achievement of environmental objectives.

INNOGROW partners are welcome to take these types of stakeholder engagement under consideration and to include those that are relevant and suitable for their territory in the INNOGROW action plans.

9 Three criteria for ensuring that lessons learnt will be integrated in the plans

After reaching a conclusion about the types of actions that need to be included in their own action plans, each INNOGROW partner will have to perform a review procedure to ensure that the policy measures proposed satisfy the following criteria.

1. They are relevant to the aims of INNOGROW.
2. They are described in detail and accurately.
3. They are impactful.

The following sections clarify the meaning of each of these criteria.

9.1 Ensuring relevance

The first criterion aims to ensure that proposed measures are congruent with a) the aims of the INNOGROW project, b) the investment priorities addressed by each policy instrument, and c) the suggestions of the deliverables of the INNOGROW project.

Firstly, all proposed measures should be congruent with the project objective, overall goal, expected changes and operational objectives of the INNOGROW project, as articulated in the INNOGROW application form:

- a) Overall goal:** INNOGROW aims to improve the policies on rural economy SMEs competitiveness as regards the integration of new production technologies and business models that lead to innovative products. The project will promote the adoption of innovation by rural economy SMEs, through sharing practices and experiences between regions and actors relevant to rural economy SMEs competitiveness and integrating lessons learnt into regional policies and action plans.
- b) Expected changes:**
 - i) Enhanced innovation support services for rural economy SMEs in partners' regions.
 - ii) Improved horizontal & vertical cooperation among SMEs in rural areas for products commercialisation.
 - iii) Increased capacity the staff of public administrations to effectively implement policies, stimulating innovation adoption by rural economy SMEs.

- iv) Unlock of investments to promote innovative technologies & new business models.

c) Operational objectives:

- i) Increase the capacity of regional administrations to effectively implement SMEs competitiveness policies, stimulating the adoption of innovative production processes and technologies by rural economy SMEs.
- ii) Develop and offer innovation support services to rural economy SMEs to promote adoption of innovation.
- iii) Unlock regional/national investments on promoting innovative technologies and on establishing start-ups relying on new business models.
- iv) Improve the implementation of SMEs competitiveness policies, promoting horizontal and vertical cooperation among SMEs in rural areas for the production and commercialization of products.
- v) Raise awareness among policy makers on the influence of regional policy measures on innovation adoption by rural economy SMEs.

Secondly, all proposed measures should abide by the investment priorities included in the policy instruments of each partner. Special emphasis should be given to the investment priorities thematically relevant to Priority Axis 2 and Specific Objective 2.1 of the Interreg Europe Programme, where INNOGROW belongs.

Finally, the proposed measures should be broadly congruent with the INNOGROW policy recommendations as found in this and other INNOGROW deliverables.

9.2 Ensuring detailed description

The second criterion aims to ensure that the action plan and all its measures are accurately described so as to be understood by any public sector member that is involved in the policy making and implementation procedures. With the term 'accurate and detailed description' we refer to the following:

- 1) **Description of the background:** Partners responsible for the preparation of action plans should make sure that they describe clearly and comprehensively the rationale of the measures they propose alongside the lessons learned from the INNOGROW project on which they are based. More precisely the describing the rationale means articulating the

strategic development pathway upon which the measures rely, as well as their position within existing policies towards which they are addressed.

- 2) **Description of the actions:** Proposed measures/actions should be described in a way that can be understood by any public sector member that is involved in the policy making and implementation procedures.
- 3) **Description of players involved:** Action plans should provide for each proposed measure/action a list of all participants and stakeholders as well as a detailed description of their role in policy making and implementation procedures.
- 4) **Articulation of timeframe:** Action plans should include a description of the timeframe and workplan for the implementation of actions/measures, if possible, in the form of a Gantt chart.
- 5) **Outlining of costs:** Action plans should provide detailed description of all expected costs accruing from the implementation of proposed actions/measures.
- 6) **Description of funding sources:** Action plans should provide detailed description of all funding sources for the implementation of proposed actions/measures, such as the following:
 - a) (Regional) Operational Programme funding
 - b) ERDF
 - c) Horizon 2020
 - d) Territorial cooperation programmes
 - e) ESPON
 - f) EAFRD

9.3 Ensuring impact

The final criterion refers to the magnitude of the potential impact of proposed measures and its ex-ante assessment. Before completing their action plan, INNOGROW partners should make sure that the proposed actions/measures as well as the strategic development pathway in its entirety abide by the following⁵:

⁵ <https://www.legislationline.org/documents/id/17155>

1. Proposed measures/actions have an overall positive impact and, if possible, in all of the following types of impact:
 - a. Fiscal impact.
 - b. Administrative impact.
 - c. Economic impact.
 - d. Social impact.
 - e. Environmental impact.
2. Proposed measures/actions were included only after all opinions about their implementation and impact exposed in the process of consultations were evaluated.
3. Proposed measures/actions conform to Government strategic priorities.
4. Proposed measures/actions are compatible with INNOGROW policy recommendations.
5. Proposed measures/actions take into account sectorial, intersectorial and stakeholder problems so as to ensure that they will not affect the implementation of measures.

10 Peer-review processes

After completing the ex-ante assessment of measures/actions to be included in the action plans, INNOGROW partners will prepare the action plans. These plans will then go through a process of ex-post assessment which will consist of peer reviewing procedures by all other INNOGROW partners. These procedures will have to abide by the following principles⁶:

- 1. Effectiveness:** Peer-reviewing procedures should be systematic and not overly burdensome in the sense of providing an objective and coherent assessment of whether action plans are efficient, realistic, as short as possible, and congruent with the aims of the INNOGROW project and the Interreg Europe programme.
- 2. Fairness:** Peer-reviewing procedures ought to provide equal treatment for all INNOGROW territories under review. The review process should provide each partner with an adequate opportunity to respond to the assessment received by other partners.
- 3. Objectivity:** Peer-reviewing procedures must rely on objective criteria, in the sense that territories should be assessed against the EU approved principles of the Interreg Europe programme and the aims of the INNOGROW project in accordance with an agreed methodology.
- 4. Co-ordination with other organisations:** Peer-reviewing procedures should aim to avoid duplication of effort. If some partners finish their action plans after some other partners have already been peer-reviewed, they should take into account the feedback of peer-reviewing whilst they finalise their action plans.

An efficient way to make sure that peer-reviewing procedures adhere to the principles above, is to employ a common assessment form that is (by definition of the three criteria of section 9) based on Interreg Europe and INNOGROW aims and suggestions, and provides a common ground for establishing a comparable, fair and objective evaluation of each partner's action plan. Necessarily, the peer-reviewing form will abstain from making partners evaluate other partners' territory specific information that is included in the action plans. This is the reason why questions will not be derived from the third criterion (ensuring impact) since addressing these issues requires information mostly available to the authority responsible for the

⁶ <https://www.oecd.org/tax/transparency/about-the-global-forum/publications/revised-methodology.pdf>

preparation of each action plan, and not to all partners. The peer-viewing form can be seen below:

INNOGROW action plan peer-review form				
Questions establishing relevance:				
Question 1				
To what extent do you think the strategic development pathway described in the action plan is congruent with the overall goal and project objective of the INNOGROW project as found in the Application Form?				
Not at all	A little	Somewhat	To a large extent	To a great extent
Could you briefly justify your view?				
Question 2				
Are there any actions that are not congruent with a) the policy recommendations of INNOGROW deliverables, b) achieving the operational objectives of the INNOGROW project as found in the Application Form?			YES	NO
Could you list them and justify your view?				
Question 3				
To what extent do you think the strategic development pathway described in the action plan is congruent with the aims, objectives and policy making approach of the territory's policy instruments as described in the action plan?				
Not at all	A little	Somewhat	To a large extent	To a great extent
Could you briefly justify your view?				
Questions establishing accuracy and detailed description:				

Question 4				
How thorough, detailed and accurate was the description of the strategic development pathway in the action plan?				
Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
Could you please explain your view?				
Question 5				
How easy was it to understand the link between the strategic development pathway in the action plan and:				
a) the aims of the Interreg Europe programme				
Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
b) the aims of the INNOGROW project				
Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
c) the aims and policy approach of the policy instrument(s)				
Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
Could you please explain your view?				
Question 6				
How thorough, detailed and accurate was the description of the actions in the action plan?				
Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
Were there any that were not thoroughly and accurately described?				
Question 7				
How thorough, detailed and accurate was the description of stakeholder involvement in the actions in the action plan?				

Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
Were there any actions in which stakeholder involvement was not thoroughly described?				
Question 8				
How thorough, detailed and accurate was the description of the timeframe and workplan for the implementations of the actions in the action plan?				
Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
Were there any actions in which the timeframe/workplan was not clearly described?				
Question 9				
How thorough, detailed and accurate was the description of costs for the implementations of the actions in the action plan?				
Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
Were there any actions for which the description of costs seemed insufficient?				
Question 10				
How thorough, detailed and accurate was the description of funding sources for the implementations of the actions in the action plan?				
Not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite	Very
Were there any actions for which the description of funding sources seemed insufficient?				

11 Monitoring the implementation of action plans

Monitoring means regularly checking the extent to which the measures described in the action plans are implemented on the ground, evaluating the results of these measures and gathering evidence of success to be reported on to the programme.

Due to its particular focus, phase 2 has a more local/regional character. But interregional cooperation remains important for the following reasons:

- Partners should continue learning from each other during the implementation phase of the action plans. They can exchange and build on the success achieved or on the difficulties encountered.
- Certain measures of the action plan in one region may require the expertise of another region. In particular, when the measure relates to the transfer of a particular experience developed in one region, the 'importing' region may need the advice of the 'exporting' region on the best way to adapt the experience to its own context.
- In order to ensure proper project management and monitoring of the different action plans, the partnership needs to remain active, and the lead partner's role will be to consolidate the information received from the different partners.

12 Annex: the Action plan template

Part I – General information

Project: INNOGROW

Partner organization: _____

Other partner organisations involved (if relevant): _____

Country: _____

NUTS2 region: _____

Contact person: _____

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

Part II – Policy context

The Action Plan aims to impact:

Investment for Growth and Jobs programme	
European Territorial Cooperation programme	
Other regional development policy instrument	
Name of the policy instrument addressed:	

Part III – Details of the actions envisaged

Strategic development pathway (please describe the shortages of the policy instrument, the aims of the policy measures included and the lessons learnt from the project that constitute their basis)

ACTION X (to be repeated for each separate action)

1. The background (please describe the lessons learnt from the project that constitute the basis for the development of the present Action Plan)

2. Action (please list and describe the actions to be implemented)

3. Players involved (please indicate the organisations in the region who are involved in the development and implementation of the action and explain their role)

4. Timeframe

5. Costs (if relevant)

6. Funding sources (if relevant):

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Stamp of the organisation (if available): _____