

# NEWS LETTER

## PARI – Paths for rural innovation: implementing Clusters for Social and Ecological Innovation to improve quality of life in rural areas

### What is the PARI project about?

The **PARI project** is a two-year action that is supported by the European Commission in the framework of the Single Market Programme (SMP). Started in September 2024, PARI intends to facilitate the setup or the consolidation in rural areas of a specific sort of clusters, named **Clusters of Social and Ecological Innovation (CSEIs)**.

Generally speaking, **clusters** are experiences of convergence of resources from different sources, aimed at pursuing objectives that could not be achieved by individual actors with the same success.

**Clusters** may have different natures: industrial clusters, territorial clusters, economic clusters, sectoral clusters...

**CSEIs**, in turn, represent a special case as they go beyond sectors or silo approaches, and aim at gathering resources of different nature to improve the systemic capacity to respond to social and environmental challenges through targeted innovation paths. One of the characteristics of this type of clusters is their entrenched nature, which makes modelling difficult. On the other hand, it is precisely this flexibility that allows them to be adapted to different contexts, provided that the communities that make up the clusters are equipped with the knowledge and implementation tools necessary to set them up, and not at least appropriate policy frameworks.

Based on these assumptions, **the PARI project aims at identifying and implementing pathways to accelerate the creation of CSEIs in rural areas**, through the improvement of capacities and operational frameworks for social economy actors, in partnership with local authorities, entrepreneurial actors (and other players) in the partner territories.



### The PARI project Consortium

The PARI project is coordinated by **REVES - the European Network of Cities and Regions for the Social Economy**, and is collaborative carried out by a consortium of six other partners:










**Diesis Network** (Belgium), **Region Östergötland** and **Cooperation Östergötland** (Sweden), **Gobierno de Navarra** and **ANEL** (Spain), and **Câmara Municipal de Torres Vedras** (Portugal).

<https://www.revesnetwork.eu/project/pari/>



# Distinctive features of PARI

## The “mission-based approach”



A defining feature of PARI is its mission-based approach, which prioritises learning from real-life experiences, practices, and expertise already present in partner territories.

Field missions serve as crucial tools for gathering first-hand data, observing local conditions, and understanding the unique challenges and opportunities of each rural context.

The PARI transnational se missions, designed as in-depth study visits, enable project partners to collect evidence and develop a shared understanding of key issues. The process is driven by mutual learning, where stakeholders exchange knowledge based on concrete data and real-world insights.



### Objectives

**By fostering a collaborative, evidence-based approach, the transnational missions act as a platform for exchange, discussion and mutual learning, facilitating further actions aimed at innovating strategies for local development, ensuring that these are deeply rooted in the partners' realities.**

## The integration of research findings into policy learning

The research in PARI aims to develop a clear and nuanced understanding of the CSEI concept. This entails going beyond generic definitions to investigate the multifaceted nature of CSEIs, drawing on established theoretical frameworks (such as cluster theory, social economy principles, and innovation studies) as well as concrete, real-world examples.

The objective is to articulate what defines a CSEI, how it differs from other forms of economic or social organization, and what its unique value proposition is, particularly in rural contexts. Additionally, the research seeks to identify the key characteristics, success factors, and challenges associated with CSEIs. The objective is to articulate what defines a CSEI, how it differs from other forms of economic or social organization, and what its unique value proposition is, particularly in rural contexts. Additionally, the research seeks to identify the key characteristics, success factors, and challenges associated with CSEIs.

The Capacity Building Workshop that was organised in Brussels on January 30<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2025, served as a key step in bringing together expertise, practical experiences, and collective problem-solving. It began with a comprehensive analysis of the current landscape of CSEIs across the EU, featuring insights also from the Rural Pact initiative and discussions on good practices, challenges and strategic approaches.



**Missions and mutual learning**



**Research and analysis**



**Local plans for CSEI setup**

## The local plans

In the form of “participatory local pilot experiences”, these processes will be carried out with the aim of formulating local plans for establishing CSEIs. In these experimental settings, diverse multi-stakeholder groups will be actively engaged to facilitate inclusive dialogue, share knowledge, and exchange practical experiences. These collaborative processes are intended to generate valuable insights and enrich the overall project approach through mutual learning. The emphasis is on moving beyond traditional siloed approaches and fostering a collective mindset grounded in systemic thinking.



**A key resource to know more about CSEIs**

European Commission (2021): [Clusters of Social and Ecological Innovation in the European Union, perspectives and experiences](#)



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# The Capacity Building Workshop and Mission



- Location :** Brussels and Charleroi/Monceau-sur-Sambre (Belgium)
- Duration :** 30-31 January, 2025
- Focus Areas :** Good practices, challenges and strategic approaches within a social and solidarity economy framework

**Empowering project partners as agents of local development requires more than traditional training.**

**It demands an integrated, participatory, and mission-driven approach.**

By combining knowledge transfer, experiential learning, collaborative co-design, and adaptive implementation, this methodology equips stakeholders with the tools to build resilient, inclusive, and sustainable territorial innovation clusters. The success of this approach lies in its emphasis on real-world engagement, shared governance, and continuous learning. By fostering networks of empowered actors, capacity building becomes a catalyst for long-term transformation, ensuring that rural communities across Europe can effectively harness their social, environmental, and economic potential for sustainable development.

The **PARI Capacity Building Workshop** represented a significant step in fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collective problem-solving among key stakeholders. The event brought together the project experts and policymakers, managers and practitioners, to deepen their understanding of Clusters for Social and Ecological Innovation (CSEIs) and explore strategies for their effective implementation in rural areas.



## Key Components of the Capacity Building Workshop

Capacity building in the context of local development is a multi-dimensional process that enhances the capabilities of individuals, organisations, and communities. The methodology adopted in the PARI project aligns with the following key principles:

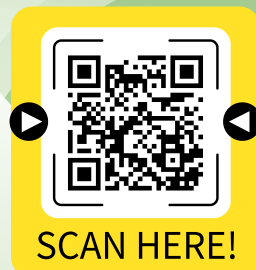
- **Participatory engagement**, ensuring that all stakeholders (e.g. social economy actors, local authorities, communities and local groups, entrepreneurs, etc.) actively contribute to the design and implementation of development strategies.
- **System thinking**, which allows to address social and ecological innovation holistically by considering the interconnections between environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and economic resilience.
- **Adaptability** and **context-specific learning**, recognising that each rural area has distinct needs, resources, and challenges, necessitating flexible and locally tailored capacity-building approaches.
- **Mission-driven methodology** that focuses on real-world applications through field visits, case studies, and evidence-based learning, ensuring that theoretical knowledge translates into practical action.



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# Focus on...

## The Mission to the Ceinture Alimentaire Charleroi-Métropole (CACM)



The Ceinture Alimentaire model demonstrated a complex interplay of governance, economic sustainability, and stakeholder engagement. Key observations included:

- **Governance structure.** The initiative employs a sophisticated governance model that balances power among diverse stakeholders while maintaining democratic decision-making.
- **Economic viability.** Competing on price remains a challenge; instead, the initiative builds strong relationships with consumers who value sustainable and local products.
- **Historical challenges.** Established in the 1980s, the initiative still struggles for recognition and financial support, even among social economy actors.
- **Adaptability and resilience.** A flexible governance model allows the initiative to evolve and respond to changing environmental and economic pressures.

These reflections prompted deeper discussions on scalability, sustainability, and the socio-political conditions necessary for similar initiatives to thrive elsewhere.

Identified challenges and opportunities

The research and discussions revealed common challenges and opportunities across the PARI territories attempting to implement CSEIs:

CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
Fragmentation of local initiatives	Building strong multi-stakeholder networks
Limited financial resources for social economy actors	Leveraging EU and national funding mechanisms
Low public awareness of ecological sustainability benefits	Targeted education and communication strategies
Political short-termism influencing resource allocation	Advocacy for long-term policy commitments
Lack of inclusion of vulnerable populations in projects	Designing projects with a social inclusion framework

A recurring theme was the necessity for proactive engagement with local governments, underpinned by thorough research and policy recommendations to sustain dialogue and secure institutional support.

The **Rural Pact** is a European initiative designed to strengthen rural areas by fostering collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including national, regional, and local governments, civil society organizations, businesses, academics, and citizens. As a formal framework for cooperation, the Rural Pact aims to amplify rural voices, enable networking, and encourage concrete commitments that support the long-term vision for EU rural areas by 2040, ensuring that rural areas are stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous.

To achieve these objectives, the EU has developed two complementary components:

- The **EU Rural Action Plan**, led by the European Commission, which outlines policy measures and funding mechanisms.
- The **Rural Pact**, a collaborative effort involving multiple stakeholders, aimed at implementing initiatives on the ground through cooperation and voluntary commitments.



### To know more about the EU RURAL PACT INITIATIVE

European Commission (2021): [The Rural Pact and the related platform](#), with access to diverse resources and the “community groups”



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# What's next?

- The transnational mission to Torres Vedras (Portugal), on 26-27 March 2025
- The analysis of additional meaningful practices from the project countries
- Local meetings and workshops with key stakeholders in Navarra, Östergötland and Torres Vedras... *Check with your local partners!*



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