FoodCoP

Fueling Startup Villages with Circular Bioeconomy Strategies

Policy Brief: From Rural Experimentation to EU Policy – Scaling Startup Villages for Circular Innovation

Deliverable 6.3

WP6 Place-based actions and actionable insights

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DOCUMENT TITLE: Policy Brief: From Rural Experimentation to EU Policy – Scaling Startup Villages for Circular Innovation

DUE DELIVERY DATE: 30-05-2026

NATURE: Public

PROJECT TITLE: Fueling Startup Villages with circular bioeconomy strategies.

PROJECT ACRONYM: **FOODCOP**

INSTRUMENT: Collaborative Project

CALL IDENTIFIER: HORIZON-CL6-2024-CIRCBIO-01

TOPIC: HORIZON-CL6-2024-CIRCBIO-01-9 Circular bioeconomy start-up villages

GRANT AGREEMENT: **101182001**

Organisation name of lead contractor for this deliverable:

SERN

DELIVERABLE TYPE		
R	Document, report	

DISSEMINATION LEVEL		
PU	Public (fully open)	

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This project is supported by the European Union's Horizon Europe Coordination & support action (HORIZON-CL6-2024-CIRCBIO-01-9) under Grant Agreement No101182001.

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VERSION RECORD			
Version	Name (Partner)	**Description of changes**	Date
V1	**SERN**	**Drafting Policy Brief**	**11-05-2026**
V2	**SERN**	**Drafting Policy Brief** after 1st Validation Workshop	**26-05-2026**
V3	**SERN**	**Drafting Policy Brief** after 2nd Validation Workshop	**22-06-2026**
V4	**SERN**	**Final revision Policy Brief** after Reviewer	**29-06-2026**

VALIDATION	
Authors	**Reviewers**
Elisa von Fritsch	Reviewer 1: ClimateKIC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Europe, rural areas are increasingly recognised as essential actors in achieving the green and digital transitions. Through initiatives such as Startup Villages, they are already developing innovative, place-based solutions that combine entrepreneurship, circular bioeconomy practices, and community-led development.[2]

FoodCoP shows that rural areas are not only facing structural challenges; they are also emerging as strategic spaces for circular bioeconomy innovation, entrepreneurship, and new market creation. However, despite this growing dynamism, rural innovation ecosystems remain **structurally constrained**. Evidence gathered through the FoodCoP project shows that while local experimentation is widespread, it is rarely translated into systemic impact. Innovation remains fragmented, underfunded, and difficult to scale across regions.

This policy brief identifies a persistent gap between **bottom-up innovation processes and top-down policy frameworks**. While communities, entrepreneurs, and local authorities are actively testing new approaches, existing policy instruments are insufficiently adapted to support their continuity, replication, and integration into wider innovation systems.[3]

Addressing this gap requires a shift from supporting isolated projects to enabling interconnected innovation ecosystems. Rural innovation must be recognised not as a peripheral activity, but as a strategic component of Europe's competitiveness, cohesion, and sustainability agendas.

Building on stakeholder engagement, cross-regional collaboration, and pilot development, FoodCoP provides a unique evidence base to inform policy. It demonstrates how Communities of Practice can act as a **bridge between experimentation and policy**, supporting the co-creation of actionable insights and enabling the scaling of Startup Villages across Europe.

Key Messages for Policymakers

- Rural innovation is already happening, but not scaling
- The main barrier is a policy–practice mismatch
- Startups, SMEs and rural entrepreneurs are key actors in driving circular bioeconomy transition
- Innovation ecosystems require long-term, flexible support
- Interregional cooperation is essential to achieve critical mass
- FoodCoP provides a replicable model to bridge innovation and policy

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BIC- Bio-based Industries Consortium

CA – Consortium Agreement

CBE-JU Circular Based Europe Joint Undertaking

D – Deliverable

DoA – Description of Action

EC – European Commission

GA – General Assembly

H2020 – Horizon 2020 The 8th EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

HEU – Horizon Europe – the 9th framework Programme of the EC for research, technological development and innovation activities.

IPR – Intellectual Property Right

JU- Joint Undertaking

PC – Project Coordinator

FOODCOP- Fueling Startup Villages with circular bioeconomy strategies SC – Steering Committee

SME – Small and Medium Enterprise

WP – Work package

CoP – Community of Practice

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1. FRAMING THE PROBLEM: RURAL INNOVATION WITHOUT SYSTEMIC SUPPORT

Rural innovation is no longer an emerging phenomenon — it is already taking place across Europe. Startup Villages, as defined within the European policy context, represent local or networked ecosystems where innovation and entrepreneurship are leveraged to unlock development potential and improve well-being in rural areas. [1]

This makes Startup Villages not only rural development tools, but place-based innovation ecosystems where local assets, entrepreneurship, research, public authorities and communities can be combined to generate new economic opportunities.[10]

Findings from the conceptual work on Communities of Practice (D3.1), stakeholder engagement (D3.2) and the Startup Village case studies (D3.3) confirm this reality, demonstrating that rural innovation already exists across diverse territorial contexts. [10] [11][13] Across its activities, including stakeholder mapping, engagement events, and collaborative workshops, a wide range of actors — public authorities, SMEs, research institutions, and civil society — have demonstrated both the willingness and the capacity to engage in innovation processes.

Within FoodCoP, Startup Villages such as Fundão, Kočevje and Killorglin illustrate how different territorial assets can support rural innovation ecosystems: digital and agri-tech infrastructures, cooperative and forest-based resources, and digital entrepreneurship linked to circular solutions.[11] Together, these examples show that rural innovation emerges from the combination of local assets, community engagement and interregional cooperation.

Yet, despite this momentum, rural innovation remains **structurally limited in its impact.**

A fragmented innovation landscape

FoodCoP's stakeholder mapping identified a broad and diverse ecosystem of actors across Europe. However, this diversity is not matched by strong connectivity. FoodCoP evidence suggests that fragmentation is not caused by a lack of actors, but by insufficient mechanisms to connect municipalities, startups, SMEs, universities, research centres, civil society and innovation intermediaries around shared territorial strategies. Stakeholders operate within **weakly connected networks**, often lacking the mechanisms to collaborate effectively over time.

As a result, innovation initiatives tend to remain:

- locally confined
- dependent on individual projects
- disconnected from broader ecosystems

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This fragmentation reduces the potential for knowledge transfer, resource sharing, and scaling.

A structural funding and scaling gap
Findings from FoodCoP's sensemaking activities further highlight that **access to funding and scaling mechanisms remains one of the most critical barriers**.

While multiple funding sources exist (EU programmes, national schemes, local initiatives), they are often:

- short-term
- administratively complex
- insufficiently adapted to iterative innovation processes

Consequently, many promising initiatives fail to move beyond pilot stages. Innovation is not absent — it is **not sustained**. This results in a structural inefficiency, where resources are invested in innovation that fails to generate long-term territorial impact.

A mismatch between policy design and innovation realities
At the core of these challenges lies a fundamental misalignment between **policy frameworks**, which are typically structured, time-bound, and top-down, and **innovation processes**, which are experimental, evolving, and community-driven.

FoodCoP activities repeatedly show that rural innovation emerges through **trial-and-error, collaboration, and adaptation**. However, policy instruments rarely accommodate this dynamic.

This mismatch leads to:

- limited uptake of local solutions into policy
- underutilisation of tools and platforms
- weak continuity beyond project lifecycles

Table 1. Key systemic challenges limiting rural innovation impact

Problem	Consequence	Policy Gap
Fragmented ecosystems	Limited collaboration and knowledge transfer	Lack of coordination mechanisms
Short-term funding	Discontinuity of initiatives	No long-term ecosystem support
Weak scaling pathways	Local solutions remain isolated	No interregional scaling tools
Policy rigidity	Misalignment with innovation processes	Lack of flexible frameworks

Why this matters now

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Addressing this gap is particularly urgent in the current policy context.

First, rural areas are central to the **green transition**, particularly through circular bioeconomy models and sustainable food systems. Second, persistent disparities between urban and rural innovation capacity risk undermining **territorial cohesion**. Finally, ongoing policy developments, such as the New European Innovation Agenda and the Startup Village Forum, create a **window of opportunity** to better integrate rural innovation into EU frameworks.

Without targeted policy adaptation, rural innovation risks remaining **experimental rather than transformative**, leaving rural areas peripheral to Europe's broader innovation landscape despite their growing potential.[2][3][4]

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2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This policy brief builds on a combination of **qualitative and participatory research methods** implemented within the FoodCoP project. The analysis draws on evidence generated across several FoodCoP work packages and deliverables, combining stakeholder engagement, participatory activities, platform implementation and validation exercises. In particular, the policy brief synthesises findings from the following sources:

1. Stakeholder mapping and engagement
Building on the Stakeholder Engagement Plan (D3.2) and the Engagement Report (D4.3), FoodCoP identified and engaged over 270 stakeholders[5][13] across Europe, including public authorities, SMEs, research institutions, and civil society organisations. A structured mapping approach, including power-interest analysis, enabled the identification of key actors within rural innovation ecosystems.

2. Participatory workshops and sensemaking processes
Drawing on the Sensemaking Report and participatory workshop findings (D7.2), FoodCoP analysed the main barriers, opportunities and collaboration mechanisms emerging from rural innovation ecosystems[6]. These activities allowed for the emergence of **bottom-up insights**, reflecting the real needs and experiences of stakeholders.[6]

3. Platform analytics and feedback mechanisms
Evidence from the implementation of the FoodCoP digital platform (D4.3) also provided insights into stakeholder interaction, user engagement, interaction patterns, and the uptake of tools and resources.[5]

4. Validation workshops and partner feedback
The draft policy brief was tested through internal and external validation workshops with consortium partners and external stakeholders, such as policymakers, managing authorities, Startup Villages, researchers, innovation ecosystem actors, and stakeholders involved in rural development and circular bioeconomy. The validation workshops were conducted through a structured Miro-based exercise, allowing stakeholders to provide written inputs on policy priorities, missing framework elements, key actors, support mechanisms and long-term visions for Startup Villages. This process helped validate the strategic direction of the brief and identify areas requiring further development, including concrete examples, stronger opportunity framing, clearer implementation mechanisms, and greater visibility of startups and SMEs. More specifically, the external validation workshop focused on testing the policy relevance and feasibility of the recommendations with stakeholders beyond the consortium. The resulting feedback was integrated throughout this policy brief, strengthening the recommendations on governance, funding, market access, ecosystem coordination and the role of key actors.

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Together, these methods ensured that the policy brief is grounded in **empirical evidence**, **stakeholder perspectives** and **practical experimentation**. This multi-method approach strengthens the relevance of the findings for policy design.

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3. FROM CHALLENGES TO SOLUTIONS: TRANSLATING PRACTICE INTO POLICY INSIGHT

One of the key contributions of FoodCoP lies in its ability to identify not only challenges, but also **emerging solutions developed directly by stakeholders**. Drawing on evidence from stakeholder engagement (D3.2), Startup Village case studies (D3.3), participatory sensemaking activities (D7.2), Climathons (D6.1) and cross-regional collaboration initiatives (D5.3), this policy brief synthesises findings from over 270 stakeholders engaged by FoodCoP, including public authorities, SMEs, startups, research institutions, civil society organisations and innovation intermediaries.

Rural areas are not only spaces where barriers must be addressed; they are territories where circular food bioeconomy, entrepreneurship, digital tools, social innovation and community-based solutions can generate new value.

Startups, SMEs and rural entrepreneurs should therefore be understood as key operational actors of the circular bioeconomy transition. They translate local resources, food system challenges and technological opportunities into practical solutions, products and services.

Across all project activities, a consistent pattern emerged: rural areas are already generating innovative solutions, but these remain isolated and lack the structural conditions needed for scaling.

Rather than proposing entirely new interventions, this policy brief highlights how **existing bottom-up solutions can inform policy design**. Rural innovation initiatives were largely fragmented, with limited opportunities for structured exchange and interregional collaboration. Through FoodCoP's Community of Practice and engagement activities, FoodCoP demonstrated the added value of connecting stakeholders, identifying common challenges, and co-developing solutions. However, the persistence of structural barriers highlights the need for policy frameworks to sustain and scale these dynamics. This approach builds on the conceptualisation of Communities of Practice as collaborative learning environments capable of strengthening rural innovation ecosystems through mutual engagement, knowledge exchange and shared territorial objectives. [10]

The table below summarises the main lessons emerging from FoodCoP activities.

Table 2. Main lessons emerging from FoodCoP activities

What works	What remains challenging
Community of Practice model enables collaboration	Engagement is difficult to sustain over time

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Cross-regional cooperation strengthens ecosystems	Tools and platforms remain underused
Multi-actor participation improves innovation capacity	Lack of structured scaling mechanisms
Startups and SMEs generate practical circular bioeconomy solutions	Business support and market access remain uneven

These lessons show that FoodCoP has succeeded in activating collaboration, while also revealing the need for policy support to ensure continuity and broader uptake. FoodCoP's webinars and hybrid engagement formats further demonstrated how structured interregional exchange can connect local stakeholders with European-level actors, enabling knowledge sharing and the co-development of solutions beyond individual territories. Evidence from FoodCoP's Climathon activities further confirms this pattern. Across five European cities, 240 participants developed around 20 early-stage ideas addressing food systems and circular bioeconomy challenges, including food waste prevention, local value chains, water monitoring, regenerative agriculture and rural food access. However, most ideas remained at concept or pilot stage, highlighting the need for structured follow-up support, including mentorship, funding access and business development pathways.[7]

Participant insight - from FoodCoP – RDI Hub Climathon

"The Climathon in the RDI Hub was a great opportunity to begin working on real problems for our community. Since the event, we have begun implementing food waste changes in our locality. It has also been a strong foundation for developing a Community Climate Adaptation Plan." [7]

Connecting challenges, solutions, and policy gaps

The solutions identified through FoodCoP are closely linked to the challenges faced by rural ecosystems. For example, limited access to funding has led to the emergence of **cooperative and community-based financing models**, while low visibility has prompted the development of **shared storytelling and communication initiatives**.

Similarly, fragmented markets have encouraged stakeholders to explore **circular marketplaces**, and skills shortages have driven the creation of **training networks and knowledge-sharing initiatives**. For instance, the development of circular marketplace concepts within FoodCoP shows how local initiatives — as seen in Startup Villages such as Fundão, Kočevje, and Killorglin — can evolve into interregional value chains and structured innovation ecosystems when supported by appropriate governance and cooperation mechanisms. The circular marketplace concept emerged through the cross-regional collaboration activities documented in D5.3 and provides a concrete example of this logic: it aims to connect cooperatives, startups, SMEs and local producers across territories, transforming fragmented local circular practices into broader interregional value chains. [12]

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However, these solutions remain constrained by policy gaps. In particular, stakeholders identified the need for more flexible funding instruments, stronger mechanisms for cross-regional scaling, integrated approaches to skills and knowledge development, and coordinated frameworks for visibility and market access. This results in a situation where innovation is **locally effective but systemically limited**. This highlights a structural disconnect between the capacity of rural actors to innovate and the ability of policy frameworks to absorb, support, and scale these innovations across territories.

Systemic Challenge	Observed Bottom-Up Response	Policy Gap Identified
Limited funding	Cooperative models	Lack of flexible rural finance
Weak business support	Startup and SME-led circular bioeconomy solutions	Lack of tailored rural entrepreneurship support
Low visibility	Storytelling initiatives	No European-level narrative
Skills gaps	Training networks	Fragmented skills policies
Market fragmentation	Circular marketplaces	Weak market integration
Scaling barriers	Agro-living labs	No scaling mechanisms

Table 3. From FoodCoP bottom-up solutions to policy gaps

Feedback from the external validation workshop reinforced the need to move beyond general references to "scaling" and specify the concrete conditions that make scaling possible. Stakeholders highlighted that rural innovation ecosystems need flexible and multi-year funding, but also better policy and funding literacy so that local actors can identify and access existing instruments. They also stressed the importance of local knowledge integration, digital skills, and stronger links between research, society, municipalities and public authorities. Finally, market access emerged as a key enabling condition, particularly through better connections between rural producers, startups, SMEs, cooperatives and wider urban or interregional markets.

Towards systemic solutions

To overcome these limitations, the solutions identified through FoodCoP can be grouped into four strategic areas:

- **Financing and scaling mechanisms**, enabling long-term sustainability and replication
- **Visibility and market integration**, strengthening positioning and competitiveness
- **Skills and knowledge development**, addressing human capital constraints
- **Governance and stakeholder engagement**, ensuring coordination and continuity

These areas provide a foundation for targeted policy intervention. The experience gathered through FoodCoP demonstrates that the main challenge is no longer generating local ideas, but ensuring the governance, financing, and ecosystem conditions necessary for their long-term implementation and scaling.

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4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: ENABLING RURAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS TO SCALE

The evidence gathered through FoodCoP points to a clear conclusion: rural innovation does not require the creation of entirely new solutions, but rather the **alignment of policy frameworks with existing innovation dynamics**.

To achieve this, policy intervention must move beyond supporting isolated initiatives and instead focus on **enabling ecosystems, fostering interconnections, and ensuring long-term continuity**.

Given the multi-level nature of rural innovation ecosystems, this requires coordinated action at **European, national/regional, and local levels**. Addressing these challenges requires not only adaptation of existing instruments, but a strategic repositioning of rural innovation ecosystems within Europe's broader competitiveness and cohesion agenda.[14]

The recommendations below should be read not only as corrective measures, but as an opportunity agenda for rural Europe. With the right enabling conditions, Startup Villages can become strategic testbeds for circular bioeconomy innovation, rural entrepreneurship and place-based economic renewal.

The table below summarises how responsibilities can be distributed across governance levels.

Level	Policy Focus	Key Actions	Key Actors
EU	Enable scaling	Ecosystem funding, interregional pilots	European Commission, JRC, EU programmes, Startup Village Forum
National/ Regional	Adapt frameworks	Flexible funding, infrastructure, skills	Managing Authorities, ministries, regional governments, universities, research centres
Local	Activate ecosystems	Community engagement, municipal leadership	Municipalities, startups, SMEs, cooperatives, farmers, civil society, local intermediaries

Table 4. Multi-level policy action framework

4.1. European Union Level: Creating Enabling Frameworks for Scale

At EU level, the priority lies in establishing the **conditions for scaling and integration**, ensuring that rural innovation ecosystems can connect across territories and contribute to broader European objectives.

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The EU should further recognise Startup Villages as part of Europe's innovation ecosystem, ensuring their integration into relevant frameworks such as Regional Innovation Valleys, cohesion policy, rural development policy and bioeconomy strategies.

A first key area concerns the transition from **project-based funding to ecosystem-based support**. Current funding instruments, while extensive, are often structured around short-term projects with predefined outputs. As highlighted by FoodCoP findings, this approach does not reflect the iterative and evolving nature of innovation processes in rural areas. There is therefore a need to design funding schemes that support **long-term ecosystem development**, allowing territorial innovation processes to mature, adapt, and scale over time.

External validation feedback reinforced this point, with stakeholders stressing the need for multi-year funding and simplified access to EU instruments. This is particularly important for rural actors, who often lack the administrative capacity to navigate complex funding systems, despite having strong local innovation potential.

Closely linked to this is the need to **strengthen interregional cooperation mechanisms**. Rural innovation is inherently distributed, relying on networks of small places rather than individual hubs. EU instruments should therefore facilitate the development of **cross-regional pilots and collaborative infrastructures**, building on existing initiatives such as Regional Innovation Valleys and the Startup Village Forum. This would allow rural territories to pool resources, share knowledge, and achieve the critical mass required for scaling.

Stakeholders also underlined that interregional cooperation should not be limited to knowledge exchange, but should also support market exchange, shared infrastructures and stronger urban-rural links, enabling rural producers, startups, SMEs and cooperatives to access wider opportunities.

Another critical dimension concerns **access to finance**. FoodCoP evidence shows that traditional funding models are often ill-suited to rural contexts, where actors may lack the capacity to engage with complex funding schemes. Developing more **flexible and blended finance instruments**, including support for cooperative and community-based models, would significantly enhance accessibility and effectiveness.[3] EU-level instruments should better support rural startups and SMEs working on circular food bioeconomy solutions, including through simplified access to finance, matchmaking with investors, and support for market uptake. Particular attention should be given to strengthening circular bioeconomy value chains, enabling rural actors to capture greater value from local resources and innovation activities.

Finally, there is a need to strengthen the **visibility and positioning of rural innovation at European level**. While numerous initiatives exist, they remain insufficiently visible within broader innovation narratives. Establishing a coordinated framework for

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communication and knowledge exchange, building on platforms such as the Startup Village Forum, would contribute to improving recognition, attracting investment, and supporting replication.[1]

4.2. National and Regional Level: Enabling Implementation and Adaptation

At national and regional level, the focus shifts towards **adapting policy instruments to territorial realities** and ensuring that innovation ecosystems can function effectively on the ground.

A central challenge identified through FoodCoP is the rigidity of existing funding schemes. National and regional authorities play a key role in introducing **more flexible, place-based approaches**, capable of supporting experimentation and reducing administrative barriers. This includes allowing for iterative processes, where solutions can be tested, refined, and scaled over time.

External stakeholders also highlighted the importance of policy and funding literacy at rural level. National and regional authorities should help rural actors understand available instruments, access finance, and connect local initiatives with regional, national and EU priorities.

Equally important is the role of **innovation intermediaries**, such as hubs, incubators, living labs, and cluster organisations. These actors are essential for connecting stakeholders, facilitating knowledge transfer, and supporting the development of innovation ecosystems. Strengthening their capacity, both financially and institutionally, should therefore be a priority. National and regional authorities should facilitate stronger links between rural innovation ecosystems and universities, vocational education providers, applied research centres and technology organisations.

Improved coordination between ministries, managing authorities, municipalities and EU-level bodies is also needed to reduce fragmentation and ensure that rural innovation support is coherent across governance levels. Managing Authorities are particularly well positioned to connect European funding instruments with local innovation needs and can play a key role in translating policy objectives into place-based implementation.

Example from FoodCoP Activities

FoodCoP activities also demonstrated the importance of intermediary spaces and collaborative infrastructures in supporting rural innovation ecosystems. Experiences such as local hubs, Climathons and community-based workshops showed that innovation often emerges when startups, municipalities, citizens, researchers and SMEs are able to interact around concrete territorial challenges.[7]

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Infrastructure also remains a critical enabling factor. While progress has been made, significant gaps persist in terms of **digital connectivity, access to shared facilities, and knowledge infrastructure**. Addressing these gaps is essential to ensure that rural actors can participate fully in innovation processes and access external markets.

In addition, FoodCoP findings highlight the importance of **human capital and skills development**. Rural areas continue to face challenges related to talent attraction and retention, as well as mismatches between available skills and local economic opportunities. Integrated approaches linking education, training, and entrepreneurship are therefore needed to strengthen local capacities.[8]

Finally, national and regional authorities should actively support **interregional cooperation**, enabling territories to collaborate beyond administrative boundaries. This includes facilitating joint initiatives, exchange programmes, and shared infrastructures, which can significantly enhance the scalability of local solutions. Where possible, existing instruments such as CAP Strategic Plans, ERDF, Interreg, LEADER/CLLD and Smart Specialisation Strategies should be used to support Startup Village ecosystems.

4.3. Local Level: Strengthening the Foundations of Innovation Ecosystems

At local level, the focus lies on **activating and sustaining innovation ecosystems**, building on the assets and capacities already present within rural communities.

Municipalities emerge as key actors in this process. FoodCoP activities consistently highlight their role as **facilitators of innovation**, capable of coordinating stakeholders, aligning local strategies, and mobilising resources. Strengthening this role, through capacity building and institutional support, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of local ecosystems.

Municipalities should be supported not only as administrative actors, but as ecosystem facilitators capable of convening startups, SMEs, citizens, researchers, farmers and local organisations around shared innovation priorities.

External stakeholders also emphasised the importance of local orchestrators or ambassadors who can connect community needs, entrepreneurs, farmers, municipalities and external support systems. These roles are particularly important in rural areas where innovation depends on trust, proximity and continuous engagement.

Equally important is the promotion of **community-led innovation approaches**. Rural innovation is most sustainable when it is rooted in local ownership and participation. Policies should therefore support participatory governance models, enabling communities to actively shape innovation processes and outcomes.

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The development of **multi-actor collaboration** is another essential component. Effective innovation ecosystems rely on the interaction between public authorities, private actors, research institutions, and civil society. Encouraging and structuring these interactions can improve both the quality and the impact of innovation. Local ecosystems should also provide practical support to entrepreneurs, including mentoring, access to shared spaces, links to markets, visibility opportunities and support for testing circular bioeconomy solutions.

Such support should also include incentives for entrepreneurs, young people and new farmers to remain in or move to rural areas, as well as access to digital skills and tools that enable participation in emerging circular bioeconomy value chains.

Finally, enhancing **local visibility and identity** is critical to improving place attractiveness. Communication strategies, storytelling initiatives, and branding efforts can help rural territories position themselves more effectively, attracting talent, investment, and partnerships.

4.4. Towards a Systemic Policy Shift

Taken together, these recommendations point towards a broader transformation in policy approach.

Rather than focusing on individual projects or isolated interventions, policy frameworks should support **ecosystems rather than projects**, enable **connections rather than isolated actions**, and facilitate **scaling rather than replication in isolation**. This shift is essential to ensure that rural innovation can contribute meaningfully to Europe's broader objectives in terms of sustainability, competitiveness, and cohesion.

A Necessary Policy Shift

- Projects → Ecosystems
- Local pilots → Interregional scaling
- Fragmented initiatives → Coordinated frameworks
- Top-down design → Co-created policy

This shift does not require replacing existing instruments, but improving how they connect, sequence and sustain rural innovation over time. These recommendations directly support the New European Innovation Agenda, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, and Regional Innovation Valleys by translating rural experimentation into place-based innovation policy.[2][3]

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5. THE ROLE OF FOODCOP: FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO POLICY IMPACT

FoodCoP's added value lies in demonstrating how rural innovation can move from isolated activities to a structured learning and policy process. Building on the conceptual framework developed in D3.1, the stakeholder engagement activities in D3.2, Startup Village case studies in D3.3, cross-regional collaboration initiatives in D5.3, Climathon actions in D6.1, and participatory sensemaking activities in D7.2, the project offers a practical mechanism for transforming local experience into policy-relevant knowledge.

Beyond its project outputs, FoodCoP provides a **practical model for connecting experimentation, stakeholder engagement and policy development**. FoodCoP does not propose entirely new policy instruments; rather, it demonstrates how existing approaches can be connected through Communities of Practice, interregional pilots and policy dialogue to create a structured mechanism for scaling rural innovation.

5.1. A Community of Practice as a Policy Instrument

At the core of FoodCoP lies the concept of a **Community of Practice**, bringing together stakeholders from different regions and sectors. [10] This approach enables continuous interaction between practitioners and policymakers, creating a space where experiences can be shared, challenges discussed, and solutions co-developed.

The CoP approach also creates a feedback loop between practice and policy, allowing local actors to identify barriers while policymakers gain access to grounded evidence from rural ecosystems. [10] Through its activities, FoodCoP shows how such communities can function as **informal policy instruments**, supporting evidence-based policymaking by grounding discussions in real-world experiences. Rather than relying solely on top-down analysis, this approach allows policy to be informed by **ongoing experimentation and stakeholder input**.

Beyond idea generation, FoodCoP activities also contributed to strengthening local innovation capacities and community engagement. Evidence from FoodCoP Climathons showed increased participant confidence, collaboration skills, and understanding of local sustainability challenges, reinforcing the role of Communities of Practice as long-term capacity-building mechanisms.

Participant insight - from FoodCoP – Kočevje Climathon

"The Climathon contributed to early-stage transformation by strengthening community cohesion, encouraging cross-sector collaboration, and inspiring a more forward-looking, solution-oriented perspective within the local ecosystem." [7]

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5.2. A Replicable Model for Rural Innovation Ecosystems

The structure and methodology developed within FoodCoP are inherently **transferable**. The combination of stakeholder mapping, participatory workshops, digital tools, and pilot development provides a framework that can be adapted to different regional contexts.

Importantly, the project demonstrates that rural innovation ecosystems do not need to be built from scratch. Instead, they can be strengthened by **connecting existing actors, resources, and initiatives**, creating networks that enhance their collective impact.

The external validation workshop confirmed that FoodCoP's value lies not only in producing recommendations, but in creating structured spaces where different actors can identify shared priorities. The repeated emphasis on "connected" and "interconnected" Startup Villages shows the relevance of the Community of Practice model as a practical mechanism for building long-term rural innovation networks.

This model is especially relevant for Startup Villages at different readiness levels, as it allows more advanced ecosystems to inspire, mentor and connect with emerging ones. This makes FoodCoP not only a project, but a **replicable model** for scaling the Startup Village approach across Europe.

5.3. Bridging Bottom-Up Innovation and Top-Down Policy

One of the most significant contributions of FoodCoP lies in its ability to connect **local experimentation with policy development**. Through its validation workshops and policy dialogue activities, the project creates structured opportunities to:

- translate practical experiences and territorial experimentation into policy insights
- test and refine recommendations with stakeholders
- ensure that local needs are reflected in policy discussions

In this sense, FoodCoP acts as a translation mechanism: it converts practical experience, stakeholder feedback and local experimentation into structured insights that can inform EU, national, regional and local policy. This bridging function is critical in addressing the mismatch identified earlier between bottom-up innovation and top-down policy frameworks. In this sense, FoodCoP contributes to transforming policy development from a top-down process into a more iterative, evidence-based and territorially grounded approach.

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6. CONCLUSIONS

Rural areas across Europe are already demonstrating their capacity to innovate, experiment, and contribute to the green and digital transitions. The challenge is no longer to initiate innovation, but to ensure that it can **scale, sustain, and integrate into broader policy frameworks**.

FoodCoP highlights that this requires a shift in perspective — from viewing rural innovation as a collection of isolated initiatives to recognising it as part of a **wider European ecosystem of rural innovation**. The recommendations presented in this brief synthesise the evidence generated across FoodCoP's Communities of Practice, stakeholder engagement activities, Startup Village case studies, Climathons, cross-regional collaboration initiatives, digital platform implementation and validation workshops.

By enabling these ecosystems, strengthening their connections, and aligning policy frameworks with their realities, Startup Villages can evolve from local experiments into **key components of Europe's innovation and cohesion landscape**. The opportunity is clear: if supported through appropriate governance, financing, skills, market access and policy alignment, Startup Villages can become engines of circular bioeconomy transition and rural competitiveness.

The policy recommendations presented in this brief are therefore intended not only to support Startup Villages, but also to inform wider European discussions on place-based innovation, rural competitiveness and the circular bioeconomy.

FoodCoP Policy Call: What Policymakers Should Do Next

Based on the evidence gathered, FoodCoP calls on European, national, regional, and local policymakers to:

- Integrate Startup Villages into mainstream innovation, cohesion, rural development, and bioeconomy policy frameworks.
- Support interregional rural innovation ecosystems, rather than isolated local initiatives.
- Develop flexible and long-term funding instruments tailored to rural innovation and circular bioeconomy experimentation.
- Strengthen links between policy design and local experimentation through validation workshops, policy dialogues, and Communities of Practice.
- Recognise municipalities, local intermediaries, startups and SMEs as key facilitators and drivers of rural innovation ecosystems.

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7. DEVIATIONS

No major deviations from the planned technical progress were identified in relation to Task 6.3.

The development of the policy brief evolved iteratively throughout the project, integrating evidence and insights generated across multiple FoodCoP activities, including stakeholder engagement processes, collaborative workshops, Climathon activities, and policy dialogue preparation. This resulted in a broader and more integrated evidence base than initially anticipated.

In addition, the policy brief was further strengthened through alignment with emerging European policy developments related to Startup Villages, rural innovation ecosystems, and interregional cooperation frameworks.

These adaptations did not negatively affect the implementation of the task or the achievement of its objectives. On the contrary, they contributed to enhancing the relevance, policy orientation, and practical applicability of the deliverable.

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