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Rinnovalleys
Transforming regions into innovation valleys

**A TRANSNATIONAL
ACTION PLAN TO
TRANSFORM REGIONS
INTO INNOVATION
VALLEYS**

envolve
ENTREPRENEURSHIP



Startup Europe
REGIONS NETWORK

A8
ACCELER8

niú

HUNGARIAN
INNOVATION
AGENCY

ceai

ACCIÓ
Catalonia
Trade & Investment



Deliverable 5.3

Final Action Plan

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Executive Summary

The RinnoValleys project is a collaboration among six EU countries (Belgium, Catalonia-Spain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Malta) aimed at addressing the challenges and disparities faced by the five EU territories (Catalonia-Spain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Malta) in accessing the European Innovation Council (EIC) and fully leveraging its benefits for their innovation ecosystems. The project focuses on creating a joint transnational action plan to enhance the capabilities of these regions to connect with the EIC ecosystem and foster inclusive, gender-diverse, and connected innovation ecosystems in line with the New European Innovation Agenda.

The RinnoValleys project started in December 2023, and ran until November 2024. The project employs the Quadruple Helix Model, incorporating a participatory approach, peer learning, best practice sharing, development of a joint transnational action plan, capacity building, implementation support, communication, and dissemination to achieve its objectives. It engages stakeholders from government, academia, industry, and civil society in each region, covering five EU countries, including rural areas, while also promoting gender equality goals. The project's methodology ensures that the solutions developed are relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the unique needs and priorities of the participating regions.

By integrating these concepts and approaches, the RinnoValleys project addresses the challenges that EU regions face in accessing the EIC, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange, and enhancing the regions' innovation capabilities. Ultimately, the project seeks to build a more cohesive, connected, and balanced innovation ecosystem within the European Union, ensuring that all regions can thrive and prosper more equitably in the global innovation landscape.

The purpose of this Deliverable (D5.3) is to set out the Joint Transnational Action Plan (JTAP) in detail, on behalf of all the project partners. The action plan proposes strategies and actions in four thematic areas addressing the key challenges identified in the five target countries:

- Networking
- Awareness raising
- Capacity building
- Information sharing and process simplification

The methodology used to develop the JTAP includes analysis of research findings, sharing of best practices, scoping of local conditions - both gaps and opportunities, and a detailed

evaluation of the outputs from the various peer-learning activities which took place over the course of the project.

This Action Plan aims to encourage each region to enhance its capability to engage with the European Innovation Council and its various programs in the future. The expected timeline for action plan implementation is five years.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACCIÓ - Catalonia Trade and Investment Agency

Acceler8 - Innovation hub and venture builder based in Malta

CDTI - Centre for the Development of Industrial Technology

CEAI - Community Enterprise Association Ireland

EEN - Enterprise Europe Network

EIC - European Innovation Council

Envolve – Innovation Agency - Envolve Entrepreneurship based in Greece

EU - European Union

HE - Horizon Europe

HPSU - High Potential Startups

IPR - Intellectual Property Rights

JTAP - Joint Transnational Action Plan

KIC - Knowledge and Innovation Communities

NIÜ - National Innovation Agency of Hungary

NCP - National Contact Point

RIV - Regional Innovation Valleys

S3 - Smart Specialisation Strategies

SERN - Startup Europe Regions Network

SMEs - Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

TTO - Technology Transfer Office

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of RinnoValleys

The European Innovation Council (EIC) is Europe's flagship innovation programme to identify, develop and scale-up breakthrough technologies and game changing innovations. The EIC promotes breakthrough innovations with global scale-up potential and aims to support game-changing innovations throughout the entire product lifecycle, from early-stage research and proof-of-concept to technology transfer, financing, and the scaling up of start-ups and SMEs.

The RinnoValleys project is a collaboration among 6 EU countries aimed at addressing the challenges and disparities faced by five EU territories (Greece, Catalonia-Spain, Malta, Hungary, Ireland) in accessing the European Innovation Council (EIC) and fully leveraging its benefits for their innovation ecosystems. Although these countries have shared objectives within the EU, the obstacles they face in accessing the EIC need tailor-made approaches to bolster their unique innovation ecosystems and enhance their competitiveness on the European stage.

The RinnoValleys project started in December 2023, and ran until November 2024. The project has created this Joint Transnational Action Plan to enhance the capabilities of the regions to connect with the EIC ecosystem and foster inclusive, gender-diverse, and connected innovation ecosystems, in their own regions and in line with the New European Innovation Agenda.

Key characteristics of participating regions:

- **Greece** is an emerging innovation ecosystem with a growing start-up scene. However, the country faces challenges related to funding, infrastructure, and access to international networks, as well as connecting universities and innovation agencies with the start-up ecosystem.
- **Catalonia, Spain**, is a leading innovation hub in Spain with a strong start-up ecosystem. However, the region faces challenges in scaling up its innovation capacity and fostering cross-regional collaboration.
- **Hungary** has an emerging start-up ecosystem with growing support from the government. Hungary's innovation rate is 32.7 percent, significantly below the EU average. Therefore, our top priority is to increase the availability of seed funding and grants for early-stage innovators and start-ups, particularly those focusing on deep-tech and high-impact sectors.
- **Malta** has supported the emergence of a start-up ecosystem, with national schemes and initiatives for startups multiplying, but the country faces challenges

in accessing international networks, funding, and fostering collaboration. Maltese companies have significant challenges in accessing EU funds.

- **Ireland** is ranked as a strong innovator in the European Innovation Scoreboard with a commitment by the national government that the country will rank as an Innovation Leader by 2030. The Irish innovation ecosystem is characterised by strong inter-department policy objectives at government level, to which development agency functions are strongly aligned. The result is a vibrant start-up ecosystem with a strong focus on particular tech sectors, though notwithstanding certain challenges such as fully inclusive innovation ecosystems, disparity in performance in certain regions, particularly in rural areas. In June 2024, all three of Ireland's NUTS2 regions –were designated as Regional Innovation Valleys (RIVs) by the European Commission.

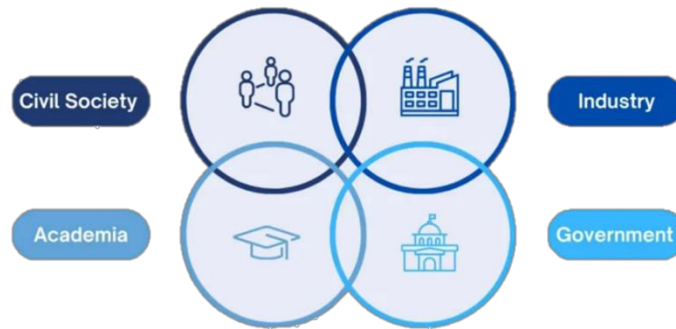
By choosing regions with diverse characteristics, the RinnoValleys project can carry out a thorough comparative analysis of their individual ecosystems. This analysis will enable the project to identify best practices, address region-specific challenges, and develop tailored strategies for enhancing the innovation performance of the participating regions, fostering collaboration, creativity, and innovation throughout the EU. This will ultimately be the starting point for the transformation of these regions into innovation valleys. The exchange of knowledge and experiences enabled regions to learn from each other's successes and failures, accelerating the pace of innovation and adaptation across these five regions.

The RinnoValleys project's methodology was designed to address the challenges faced by EU regions in accessing the European Innovation Council (EIC) and enhance their innovation capabilities. This methodology integrated research, stakeholder engagement, best practice sharing and adaptation, peer learning, action plan development, capacity building, and communication and dissemination to achieve the project objectives.

The following concepts, models, and assumptions underpinned the work:

a) **Quadruple Helix Model:** The project adopted the Quadruple Helix Model, emphasising collaboration among four key actors –government, academia, industry, and civil society– to foster innovation. This model was a vital tool for understanding and exploring the potential for transformative change contributing to the EU's innovation valleys. It provides a systemic approach to understanding the organisational structures, dynamics, and resources necessary for successful innovation. By aligning the interests of government, industry, universities, and civil society, the Quadruple Helix Model offers a framework for inclusive and sustainable regional development. Unlike the linear model of the academy-industry relationship, which is sequential and isolated, our ecosystem approach aligns well with the New European Innovation Agenda by promoting continuous collaboration and co-creation among academia, industry, and society. This collaborative

innovation model, as a main driver of change for regional ecosystems, highlights the need for strong public-private partnership mechanisms, integrated research activities, and investments in talent, technology, and infrastructure. The project aimed to engage stakeholders from all four helix in each region to ensure a holistic understanding of challenges and opportunities in connecting with the EIC.



b) Participatory Approach: The project methodology was grounded in a participatory approach, emphasising the involvement of diverse stakeholders to ensure more effective and inclusive solutions. Research underscores the effectiveness of participatory methods in achieving inclusive and sustainable outcomes, while the European Commission emphasizes the critical role of stakeholder engagement in advancing effective and context-sensitive research and innovation policies. The RinnoValleys project incorporated the participatory approach throughout its stages:

- **Identification of Challenges and Best Practices:** Engaging stakeholders from various sectors (government, academia, industry, and civil society) in identifying challenges and best practices leads to a comprehensive understanding of regional innovation ecosystems. Involving stakeholders with diverse expertise captured a wide range of perspectives, leading to more robust and context-sensitive findings.
- **Development of the Action Plan:** Involving stakeholders in developing the action plan ensures that proposed strategies and interventions are relevant, feasible, and tailored to each region's specific needs and priorities. This collaborative process fosters buy-in and commitment from stakeholders, crucial for successful implementation.
- **Monitoring:** Engaging stakeholders in the preparation and design phase of the action plan promoted transparency and accountability and facilitated learning and adaptation. Stakeholder participation helped identify potential challenges and opportunities, allowing for real-time adjustments.
- **Evaluation and Dissemination of Results:** Involving stakeholders in evaluating and disseminating project results fosters a sense of ownership and shared

responsibility, increasing the validity of the results. This participatory approach also contributes to knowledge dissemination, enabling other regions to benefit from the project's findings and best practices.

c) **Stakeholder mapping and local events:** A four-step process for stakeholder identification and engagement was developed that included:

- **Stakeholder Mapping:** Stakeholders have been identified in each country by creating a comprehensive map. This process ensured that relevant stakeholders from the Quadruple Helix framework were identified based on predefined categories and criteria, facilitating targeted engagement.
- **Database Creation:** A central database was developed to store stakeholder information, including roles, and areas of expertise.
- **World Café Events:** Stakeholder events were organised in Greece, Malta, Catalonia-Spain, Hungary and Ireland to facilitate open discussions and idea exchange between stakeholders, promote collaboration and innovation across the Quadruple Helix actors. The events helped uncover new insights and strengthen the involvement of diverse stakeholders.

d) **Peer Learning and Best Practice Sharing:** The adoption of peer learning and best practice sharing in the RinnoValleys project was supported by research demonstrating the effectiveness of these approaches in enhancing regional innovation capabilities and fostering collaboration. Studies show the positive impact of peer learning and best practice sharing in fostering innovation, improving problem-solving, and facilitating knowledge transfer. Moreover, the European Commission emphasises the importance of peer learning in promoting the exchange of experiences and good practices among EU regions. Therefore, the RinnoValleys project:

- Organised three peer learning events in Barcelona (Catalonia-Spain), Limerick (Ireland) and Valletta (Malta) to bring together stakeholders from participating regions, fostering dialogue, mutual learning, and development of shared solutions. Two stakeholder representatives from each of the RinnoValleys focus countries attended and participated in each event.
- Created a [repository](#) of best practices, drawing on the experiences and expertise of participating regions. This repository is accessible to all regions and serves as a valuable resource for learning and adaptation.
- Facilitated ongoing collaboration and knowledge exchange among regions by establishing [communication channels](#) for sharing experiences, ideas, and resources.

e) **Joint Transnational Action Plan Development:** The project methodology involves developing this 5-year joint transnational action plan based on research findings, best practices, local conditions and needs analyses, and peer learning event outcomes. This action plan will address identified challenges and outline approaches to enhance regions' capabilities to connect with the EIC and support deep tech start-ups.

f) **Capacity Building and Implementation Support:** The project acknowledged the importance of capacity building and support for regions in implementing the action plan. Through tailored workshops, training sessions, and a transnational task force, the project aimed to prepare regions for successful implementation. Specifically, RinnoValleys organised two online training sessions addressed to members and stakeholders: “EIC Training”, and “Interregional collaboration training”. Finally, a two-day task force kick-off meeting took place in Budapest.

g) **Communication and Dissemination:** Effective communication and dissemination are essential for engaging relevant stakeholders and raising awareness about the project and its outcomes. The project developed a communication and dissemination strategy, creating a project website and social media channels, and participating in conferences and workshops to share results.

By integrating these concepts, models, and assumptions, the RinnoValleys project methodology addressed the challenges faced by EU regions in accessing the EIC, foster collaboration and knowledge exchange, and enhance regional innovation capabilities, strengthening of innovation ecosystems that are supportive to high-potential startups (HPSUs) and innovation-driven enterprises, ultimately transforming regions into innovation valleys. This includes enhancing the synergy between businesses, academic institutions and research entities through incubators, accelerators and innovation hubs. Such collaborative environments are essential for fostering innovation and translating research into viable commercial ventures.

1.2 Mission and Vision

The European Innovation Council (EIC) represents a crucial mechanism for driving innovation and fostering economic growth across the European Union. However, many regions face challenges in effectively connecting with and benefiting from the EIC. To address these challenges and enhance regional capabilities, a Joint Transnational Action Plan (JTAP) is proposed. This JTAP aims to facilitate collaboration, provide support, and improve access to the EIC for regions across the EU. Its mission is to empower EU regions to fully embrace the benefits of the EIC and nurture their innovation ecosystems.

The mission of RinnoValleys is to bridge the gap between EU regions and the EIC, fostering inclusive, gender-diverse, and connected innovation ecosystems in alignment with the New European Innovation Agenda.

The goal of the action plan is to transform the capabilities of the participating regions into thriving innovation hubs, connecting them with the EIC. In these hubs, high-quality, knowledge-based ventures scaling breakthrough technologies and game-changing innovations will have seamless access to a wide range of funding and support, empowering them to turn groundbreaking ideas into global market leaders, thereby driving economic growth and societal progress. The mission of the action plan and its implementation task force is to foster thriving, supportive environments marked by continuous innovation and disruption, while building a robust, dynamic innovation ecosystem that is more resilient and competitive. We aim to enhance access to finance and expand support instruments for startups and scale-ups in the participating regions. By promoting a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation, we seek to help regions escape both the "middle-technology" and "middle-income" traps, enabling innovation ecosystems to reach a critical mass that significantly increases the likelihood of generating unicorns in Central Europe.

Table 1. Overall framework for the Action Plan

Action Plan Component	Description
Key challenges	Key challenges across the regions form the basis for action plan objectives
Objectives	Defines measurable objectives (KPIs), milestones and targets to address each key challenge
Strategies and Actions	Defines concrete actions and strategies for achieving the Objectives
Roles and Responsibilities	Defines roles and responsibilities for stakeholders to support the delivery of the finalised Action Plan
Monitoring and Evaluation	Defines an evaluation toolbox for monitoring the achievement of the actions and strategies through

1.3 Identification of Challenges and Insights from Different Countries

RinnoValleys project studied the diverse landscape of accessing EIC funds and support, aiming to gather insights from different regions. More specifically, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify the key obstacles encountered by the participating regions. Moreover, best practices from stronger innovator regions were identified and adjusted to meet the specific needs of the moderate innovation regions. Additionally, stakeholder interviews (approximately 8 per country) were conducted with representatives from the QH sectors to gather valuable insights and experiences from key actors in these regions. Finally, the collected data were analysed, and a research report was prepared, summarising the findings to inform the next steps of the project (a more detailed analysis can be found in the Deliverables 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3)

1.3.1 Challenges in Greece

Accessing funding through the EIC presents significant challenges for startups and innovators in Greece. One major obstacle lies in the insufficient branding and communication of the EIC program, especially when compared to other EU funding programs like Horizon Europe. This lack of visibility contributes to a negative reputation, compounded by slow procedures of national programs handled by individuals unfamiliar with market dynamics and opaque processes. Consequently, many innovators are discouraged from pursuing opportunities within such programs. Moreover, the complexity and inflexibility of the EIC mechanism further hinder accessibility.

While the program offers substantial budgets for innovation support, the procedures are perceived as cumbersome and time-consuming. Startups, particularly those eager to rapidly scale and address market challenges, find the application process arduous and unsuitable for their pace of growth. Additionally, the unfamiliarity with EIC application procedures and the divergence from traditional funding mechanisms create hesitancy among researchers and entrepreneurs accustomed to familiar processes, leading to a reluctance to engage with the program.

Awareness-raising efforts for EIC are lacking, and systematic information dissemination is scarce, exacerbating the perception of complexity and deterring potential applicants.

Furthermore, the different evaluation criteria, which prioritise market relevance over academic merit, further alienate researchers and startups, causing them to hesitate in navigating the unfamiliar landscape of EU programs. Overall, the perception of EIC as overly complex and resource-intensive underscores the need for streamlined processes, clearer communication, and targeted support to make EU funding more accessible and appealing to Greek innovators.

1.3.2 Challenges in Catalonia

The process of accessing funding through programs like the EIC presents a series of challenges for organisations and startups alike. One notable issue is the complexity of the funding scheme itself, leading to confusion regarding eligibility criteria and the objectives of each instrument, added to continuous modifications. Additionally, accessing the necessary materials, such as application templates can be problematic, with delays causing frustration for applicants. Transparency in the evaluation process is also highlighted as crucial, as stakeholders seek to understand how evaluators operate and interpret feedback, given their diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and considering the technical complexity of the projects.

Furthermore, the high level of competition inherent in these programs adds to the time-consuming nature of the process. Startups must invest significant effort in communicating the potential of their projects effectively, especially when they are at the proof-of-concept stage and far from market readiness. This necessity for clear and compelling communication often necessitates the involvement of external consultants, given the complexity of the process and the need for precise articulation of project differentiation and potential.

Overall, while universities and public entities may play a part in the application process, the intricate nature of securing funding through programs like the EIC necessitates external assistance. From crafting convincing narratives to navigating administrative constraints, the involvement of consultants becomes essential in maximising the chances of success, particularly in early-stage instruments like the EIC Pathfinder and Transition programs.

1.3.3 Challenges in Hungary

Hungary appears to lag behind the EU average in accessing EIC funds. This presents both challenges and opportunities, as the EIC has already recognized the issue and is taking steps to provide stronger support to the widening countries.

Hungary's past performance, along with that of the broader EU13, shows that these countries received less funding overall in the previous multiannual financial aid program compared to third countries. This is shocking and surprising data, and often Hungary is included in projects primarily because it is a widening country. Funding opportunities need to be better aligned at both the national and international levels. It is crucial to establish a strong culture that promotes Hungarian participation and success in these fields, enabling companies to win grants. However, we currently lack both a critical mass of companies and the necessary capacity. The situation could improve significantly if NIÜ develops talent through programs and fosters international collaborations via Horizon, Interreg, and other global initiatives.

It is also encouraging that the government has committed to doubling the budget for the

Hungarian Research Network over the next three years (which will reach HUF 97 billion), with a 50% increase expected as early as next year. This is a significant step forward, provided the Research Network Act is adopted by Parliament later this year.

1.3.4 Challenges in Malta

Malta's connectivity and efforts to attract foreign companies offer advantages for accessing EIC funding. However, accessing funding opportunities like those from the EIC is hampered by limited awareness and visibility. Improving accessibility involves better dissemination of information and detailed guidance for applicants. Maltese stakeholders often aim for national-based calls, but also pursue larger centralised calls like Horizon for higher funding. Even though EIC offers higher funding potential, its competitiveness poses a challenge, and most innovative companies in Malta are not mature enough to qualify for EIC's stringent criteria.

Forming and maintaining consortia for funding applications is another hurdle. Ensuring partner commitment and handling partner turnover can be tough, but having experienced partners can significantly boost chances of successful funding. Regional specificities also play a role; finding suitable project partners can be difficult, and local investment and support are vital for securing EU funds. In this sense, there is an effort in providing funding opportunities to local companies to facilitate their access to EU funds, through network facilitation, funds to hire consultants and coaches etc.

To enhance funding access, stakeholders should increase awareness through webinars, provide detailed application guidance, and strategically invest in growth potential fields. The outlook for regional innovation is positive, with a focus on growth, new opportunities, and supporting academics in funding access. Malta's strategy to attract foreign companies and Gozo's unique position as a testing ground for innovative projects highlight regional advantages and specific challenges. Gozo's small size makes it a potential testing ground for innovative projects but faces challenges due to double insularity and limited transport options.

1.3.5 Challenges in Ireland

Navigating the complexities of accessing funding, particularly within the EIC Framework, presents several challenges. Key hurdles include managing the intricate application process, securing stakeholder engagement, and identifying suitable partners for collaboration. These challenges underscored the importance of comprehensive knowledge dissemination regarding the funding process, coupled with fostering internal engagement among colleagues and stakeholders. Moreover, forging strategic partnerships is essential for enhancing the quality of grant applications and maximising the likelihood of positive outcomes. Broadly, the lack of sufficient expertise in navigating the EIC Framework poses a significant challenge.

Addressing this challenge will require a range of capacity building interventions including project management skills, and partnership building across sectors and regions. e.

1.4 Key Challenges across Countries

Financial barriers are a significant obstacle for modest and moderate innovator regions within the EU. These regions struggle with limited funding opportunities, which restrict their ability to engage in research and development activities and bring innovative ideas to market. Addressing this challenge requires promoting the innovative capabilities of these regions, showcasing successful case studies, and fostering collaboration between regional innovators and investors to unlock investment potential and contribute to the broader European innovation landscape.

Modest and moderate innovator regions in the EU face significant **institutional and regulatory constraints** when trying to access the European Innovation Council (EIC). These regions often lack the necessary institutional **support structures** and often struggle with regulatory barriers related to intellectual property rights, compliance standards, and technology transfer protocols. The complexities of navigating legal frameworks, securing and managing intellectual property rights, and meeting compliance standards can be discouraging for regions with less experience in innovation. Additionally, the absence of clear guidelines and support mechanisms targeted at these regions exacerbates the regulatory challenges they face. This lack of alignment with EIC requirements hinders their ability to efficiently meet compliance standards and successfully transfer innovations from research institutions to the market. Addressing these regulatory challenges requires a strategic approach that considers the specific needs and capacities of these regions, in order to enable compliance to become a facilitator rather than a barrier to innovation. Additionally, a conducive regulatory landscape is critical for the flourishing of startups, particularly in the digital and technology sectors with the help of special tools, like operating regulatory sandboxes.

Furthermore, regional disparities present a significant challenge for modest and moderate innovator regions seeking to engage with the European Innovation Council (EIC). These disparities encompass infrastructure, research capabilities, and the overall maturity of innovation ecosystems, impacting the regions' ability to leverage EIC opportunities effectively. In terms of **infrastructure, regions with less developed innovation ecosystems** may lack state-of-the-art laboratories, innovation hubs, and technology parks, which are essential for robust research and development activities. Addressing these infrastructure disparities is crucial for ensuring equitable access to the EIC, as innovation thrives in conducive environments that support research and development. Moreover, while some areas have well-established research institutions and a skilled workforce, others face a shortage of research talent and limited collaboration opportunities. Bridging the gaps in research capabilities is key to creating a more inclusive innovation landscape where all regions can actively participate in and benefit from EIC opportunities.

The overall maturity of the **local innovation ecosystem** also plays a critical role. Regions with well-established innovation ecosystems foster entrepreneurship, collaboration, and knowledge exchange, while regions in the early stages of building their ecosystems face challenges in nurturing a similar culture. This maturity influences regions' readiness to engage with the EIC, as those with more developed ecosystems are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the innovation landscape.

Policy-related challenges also pose a substantial obstacle for modest and moderate innovator regions striving to capitalise on opportunities offered by the European Innovation Council (EIC). One key challenge is the lack of policies specifically targeting these regions, resulting in a deficiency of regulatory frameworks and support mechanisms tailored to their unique needs and contexts. Generic innovation policies, designed without consideration for the diverse challenges faced by regions at different stages of innovation development, often fall short in addressing the specific circumstances and requirements of these regions. It is crucial to consider the geographical context, including the location of scale-up cities, their strategic goals, and the needs of target groups, while consistently engaging key stakeholders within the ecosystem. This can lead to policy inadequacies that hinder innovation development and implementation, such as inadequate funding mechanisms or a lack of supportive infrastructure, limiting the ability of innovators in these regions to fully benefit from EIC opportunities.

Therefore, adapting policies to the specific needs of each region is crucial to ensure a regulatory framework conducive to innovation development and implementation, as the absence of tailored policies can restrict the potential for transformative projects that could contribute to the European innovation landscape. Additionally, governance gaps in innovation governance, characterised by **limited coordination mechanisms for implementing innovation policies**, can lead to fragmented efforts and hinder the seamless integration of these regions into the EIC. Addressing these governance gaps requires the development of robust structures that promote collaboration among stakeholders and ensure a coordinated approach to innovation governance.

Furthermore, policy challenges related to intellectual property rights (IPR) and technology transfer pose additional complexities in the policy landscape. Regions with less experience in innovation may struggle with IPR regulations and establishing efficient mechanisms for technology transfer. Clear and supportive policies in these areas are essential for encouraging knowledge dissemination and fostering collaboration with industry stakeholders. Developing policies that balance protecting intellectual property while promoting knowledge sharing is vital for creating an environment conducive to innovation.

In summary, the EU's modest and moderate innovator regions face significant obstacles in accessing the European Innovation Council (EIC), including financial barriers, institutional and regulatory constraints, regional disparities, and policy-related

challenges. These regions struggle with limited funding opportunities, lack institutional support structures, and face regulatory barriers related to intellectual property rights and compliance standards. Additionally, disparities in infrastructure and research capabilities hinder their ability to leverage EIC opportunities effectively. Adapting policies to the specific needs of each region and addressing governance gaps are crucial for fostering innovation in these regions. Clear and supportive policies related to intellectual property rights and technology transfer are essential for encouraging collaboration and knowledge sharing, ultimately driving innovation and economic growth within these regions.

Overall, while each country/region faces unique challenges in accessing EIC funding, they share common obstacles such as:

1. **Networking and Collaboration:** Limited networking opportunities and collaboration hinder regional access to the EIC.
2. **Limited Awareness:** Across all countries, stakeholders emphasised challenges in accessing EIC funding due to limited awareness and visibility of programs.
3. **Limited Capacity:** Some regions lack the necessary capacity to fully engage with the requirements of the EIC.
4. **Information Asymmetry:** Unequal access to information about EIC opportunities creates disparities among regions.

By addressing these challenges through strategic collaborations, increased awareness, capacity building, process alignment and targeted investments, stakeholders can maximise opportunities for accessing EIC funding and driving innovation within their respective ecosystems.

Table 2. Key challenges and corresponding Action Plan’s Objectives and Strategies.

Key Challenges	Action Plan Objectives	Strategies
<p>A. Networking and Collaboration: Limited networking opportunities and collaboration hinder regional access to the EIC.</p>	<p>Foster inclusive and connected innovation ecosystems.</p>	<p>A.1 Involve companies and research institutions in collaborative projects to foster innovation and promote knowledge sharing.</p> <p>A.2 Form strategic links based on value chains to support international expansion and maximise contributions to specific value chains.</p>
<p>B. Limited Awareness: Across all</p>	<p>Improve awareness of funding and</p>	<p>B.1 Establish clusters and showcase them at matchmaking events to enhance competitiveness for EIC funding.</p>

countries, stakeholders emphasised challenges in accessing EIC funding due to limited awareness and visibility of programs.

C. Limited Capacity: Some regions lack the necessary capacity to fully engage with the EIC.

D. Information Asymmetry: Unequal access to information about EIC opportunities creates disparities among regions.

opportunities provided by the EIC.

Promote innovation **capacity** in regions

Align regional innovation policies and practices

B.2 Engage in collaborative efforts with the EIC, including organising events and introducing investment programs, to drive innovation within the business community.

C.1 Promote regional/national support to encourage and assist EIC applicants, as well as facilitate their participation in EU funding programs.

C.2 Address language barriers to enhance international connections and promote collaboration among ecosystem stakeholders.

C.3 Overcome budget constraints by exploring and utilising alternative funding sources.

D.1 Streamline application processes and provide clearer guidelines to reduce excessive bureaucracy.



D.2 Prioritise initiatives around thematic areas to focus efforts and resources on specific areas of innovation and collaboration.

D.3 Cultivate cooperation among ecosystem stakeholders to build a supportive and collaborative environment for EIC applicants.

1.5 Consortium Partners and Action Plan’s Task Force

Partners of RinnoValleys project belong to different regions in Europe: Envolve (Greece), ACCIÓ (Catalonia), NIÜ ((formerly: Express Innovation Agency) Hungary)), ACCELER8 (Malta), SERN (Belgium), and CEAI (Ireland).

Table 3. Profiles of RinnoValleys project Partners

	<p>A venture builder and innovation hub, Acceler8 contributes its experience in hands-on deep tech ecosystem development and inclusive knowledge transfer in public-private-academia Open Innovation context. Their understanding of EIC’s and pan-European ecosystem agendas, goals, activities and hands-on participation in EIC partner ecosystem as well as in EIC action coordination has helped inform the project’s strategies and action plans. Moreover, the experience of staff members from all types of innovation regions, while being a key Maltese ecosystem player and a governmental body supplier, provides invaluable insights to efficiently activate the local, and other regions.</p>
	<p>ACCIÓ is the Catalan Government’s agency for business competitiveness. Belonging to the Ministry of Business and Labour, it is the public organisation working to contribute to the transformation of Catalan companies. As the regional economic development agency, Catalonia Trade and Investments brings experience in attracting investments, promoting internationalisation, connecting with the EIC and supporting innovation in the region. They provide insights into Catalonia's successful innovation ecosystem and contribute to the sharing of best practices. Their knowledge of public policy and regional innovation strategies will help inform the action plan development.</p>
	<p>Envolve Entrepreneurship is an innovation agency dedicated to supporting entrepreneurship and fostering innovation. With extensive expertise in developing start-up ecosystems and promoting inclusive innovation, Envolve plays a pivotal role in connecting with the entrepreneurial landscape in Greece. Its proficiency in social sciences, humanities, and open science practices provides valuable guidance for the research and analysis components of the project. As the official partner of the Greek</p>

	<p>Secretariat for Research and Innovation for the National Start-Up Policy and Registry (Elevate Greece), Envolve is well-positioned to secure government support for the implementation of the Joint Action Plan.</p>
 	<p>The national organisation for Innovation, subsidiary of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office, supporting the Hungarian innovation ecosystem. Focused on fostering innovation and supporting start-ups, the Hungarian National Innovation Agency (NIÜ) brings expertise in enhancing innovation capacities and facilitating cross-sector collaboration. Their knowledge of the Hungarian innovation ecosystem adds value to the project's research and analysis efforts. Their experience will be essential in understanding the challenges faced by modest and moderate innovator regions.</p>
 	<p>A representative body of community enterprise centres, this association brings expertise in fostering inclusive innovation ecosystems, particularly in rural areas, and ensuring gender diversity in the innovation landscape. They contribute their knowledge of Ireland's innovation ecosystem and experience in promoting inclusive growth.</p>
 	<p>A network of European regions, SERN provides expertise in promoting innovation and entrepreneurship at the regional level and has a strong network of regional innovation ecosystems across Europe. They offer valuable insights into the best practices and success stories from various European regions and facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration among project partners. SERN can leverage its network of regional innovation ecosystems across Europe to identify best practices from different regions. They can use their members to gather information and insights on successful innovation policies, initiatives, and practices implemented in their respective regions. Additionally, SERN will establish direct communication channels among other regions, where they can learn about Rinnovalleys.</p>

The Hungarian Innovation Agency (Express), with the support of all the country partners, established a transnational task force team comprising representatives from each region, including quadruple helix stakeholders, to oversee the implementation of the action plan.

The roles and responsibilities of the task force members were defined, ensuring that they are clear on their tasks and can effectively support the implementation process. The project team, led by Express, organized a kick off meeting for the task force team in Hungary in September 2024 to coordinate efforts, share updates and best practices, and address any challenges arising during the implementation of the action plan. During the action plan implementation period, regular task force meetings will occur online at least once per trimester.

In order to fulfil the mandate of the task force team, it is first of all necessary to ensure its smooth operation and sustainability. However, this requires identifying and exploring the synergies between the various measures in the Action Plan and the European and National programmes that will enable it to be developed further. Therefore, an evaluative analysis was conducted to set targets in the relevant international calls with their corresponding action plan measures. The analysis identified the most synergistic relationship between the pillar and measure structure of the Action Plan and the programme's scheme of aspects. In particular, the I3 open calls are relevant for supporting the implementation. Future Horizon Europe CONNECT- calls are also needed to improve the goals further and implement the action plan.

The involvement of stakeholders is essential for the successful implementation of the action plan. Engaging stakeholders ensures that the strategies and interventions are aligned with the unique needs and priorities of each region. We invite stakeholders to collaborate on the recommended actions for effective execution.

For more information on the recommended roles and responsibilities, please refer to Section 4.

2 Transnational Action Plans' Objectives

The RinnoValleys Project lays the foundation for long-term, transformative change across regions, aiming to implement an action plan that establishes new practices and ensures sustained progress. The overarching goal is to create a more cohesive, connected, and balanced innovation ecosystem within the European Union, allowing all regions to thrive and prosper more equally in the global innovation landscape.

The aim is to empower regions to become “Innovation Valleys” by equipping them with the tools, knowledge, and capabilities to overcome challenges and contribute to enriching the common ecosystem.

The **Transnational Action Plan** will focus on strengthening regional innovation capacities by:

1. **Foster inclusive and connected innovation ecosystems:** Involve companies and research institutions in collaborative projects and form strategic links based on value chains to support international expansion and maximise contributions to specific value chains.
2. **Improve awareness of funding and opportunities provided by the EIC:** Establish clusters and showcase them at matchmaking events, and engage in collaborative efforts with the EIC by organising events and introducing investment programs.
3. **Promote innovation capacity in regions:** Promote regional and national support to encourage and assist EIC applicants, address language barriers to enhance international connections, and overcome budget constraints by exploring and utilising alternative funding sources.
4. **Align regional innovation policies and practices:** Streamline application processes, provide clearer guidelines to reduce excessive bureaucracy, prioritise initiatives around thematic areas, and cultivate cooperation among ecosystem stakeholders to support EIC applicants.

The objectives address the key challenges in the target territories (Catalonia-Spain, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Ireland) and therefore consider the needs of the regions in these territories.

By targeting these key areas, the RinnoValleys project will generate a multiplier effect, enabling regions to attract investment, retain talent, and create innovative solutions that contribute to the EU’s broader economic growth and societal well-being, aligned with the relevant points of the new European competitiveness pact (so-called Budapest Declaration) especially a drastic simplification programme, to reduce barriers to business.

This is the ultimate aim of the project: outlining a strategic framework. Its successful implementation hinges on the collaborative efforts of a diverse stakeholder ecosystem represented in the quadruple helix model.

The developed recommendations and strategies can be applied at various levels (local, regional, national, transnational) based on participatory approach by relevant stakeholders involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of support instruments within the Action Plan.

3 Strategies and Actions

Based on the knowledge exchange practices and insights gained from the activities carried out in the RinnoValleys project, significant results have been achieved to support the development of a Transnational Joint Action Plan among the participating countries. The strategies outlined here are based on ten pivotal approaches identified to enhance the accessibility of the project's innovation ecosystems to the European Innovation Council (EIC) (Table 2).

A Challenge: Collaboration and Networking

A.1 Strategy: Involve companies and research institutions in collaborative projects

Proposed Actions:

A.1.1 Promote better connections between Academia and Enterprise through the development of new initiatives and implementation of best practices.

- Involve companies and research institutions in collaborative projects to foster innovation and promote knowledge sharing.
- Leverage existing platforms, such as Venture Alliances to facilitate matchmaking between Academia and Entrepreneurs and build on them by establishing collaboration with existing platforms and databases (Euraxess, OneDeal).
- Create a common lab2market platform where training and resources on research commercialisation for researchers and TTOS can be developed.

A.1.2 Encourage the formation of consortia to strengthen regional applications and increase their competitiveness.

- Facilitate matchmaking events and networking opportunities to encourage collaboration and consortium formation among stakeholders. Policymakers need to incentivize collaboration and consortium formation by providing support for matchmaking events, fostering partnerships, and offering financial incentives.
- Collaboration with experienced partners for successful funding applications and leveraging local investment networks for additional support.
- Establish support mechanisms for forming and maintaining consortia, including providing resources for partner identification and relationship management.

- Establish clear communication channels within consortia, fostering a culture of commitment and collaboration, and investing in networking opportunities.
- Dedicate support actors such as accelerators, incubators, and venture builders as contact points for consortium formation support.
- Provide tailored support for SMEs to navigate EU project requirements.

A.1.3 Local deep tech innovation radar to seek for new networking and innovation project opportunities.

- Make a specific regional actor responsible to become a local deep tech innovation radar. Maybe Technology Transfer Offices could play this role.
- The innovation radar will seek potential projects and cases, create a ranking of opportunities, and feed the cases into local calls or EU level calls.
- The ranking will categorise potential cases in three categories: world class, highly competent, and emerging.
- Detect the potential scaleup cities with many high growing innovation driven enterprises of the partner regions, and to promote their cooperation on a regional scale.
- Create a centralized portal for collaboration opportunities to streamline communication

A.2 Strategy: Form strategic links based on value chains

Proposed Actions:

A.2.1 Promote collaboration in smart specialisation sectors to strengthen innovation ecosystems and their interconnectedness.

- S3 strategies tend to focus on areas where the region has added value and an existing ecosystem, making it more plausible to find strong EIC candidates within these sectors.
- Foster partnerships between academia, industry, and government to create a supportive environment for innovation and entrepreneurship, with a focus on existing Smart Specialization (S3) sectors in each region.
- Network and connect regions with other S3 regional and national stakeholders to explore synergies and collaborations within the sectors (possible sectors discussed included maritime, digital and health).
- Promote regions as a testbed for emerging technologies in S3 sectors

- Local investment networks and venture capital play a crucial role in supporting innovators to secure matching funds or additional support, providing pre-EIC capacity building, development, and funding, increasing chances of success.
- Practitioners should prioritise building strong regional innovation ecosystems, fostering cooperation among stakeholders and with other regions, and investing in key infrastructure and human resources.
- Synergies may be found with EU funding programmes such as the [13 instrument](#), which can fund synergistic activities to strengthen regional S3 ecosystems.

A.2.2 Facilitate matchmaking events, networking sessions, and brokerage events to connect regions with potential partners, investors, and experts.

- Promote collaboration in [common smart specialisation sectors](#) to strengthen innovation ecosystems and their interconnectedness.
- Leverage regional/national support structures, promote local investment networks, and capitalise on regional advantages such as well-connected markets or specialised industry focuses.
- Organise social entrepreneurial events to promote investment readiness and entrepreneurial academic collaboration.
- Research on researcher turned entrepreneurs, barriers, and motivation for research commercialisation in researchers, to understand different types of profiles and barrier identification to improve matchmaking process.

A.2.3 Form strategic links based on value chains to support international expansion and maximise contributions to specific value chains.

- Develop partnerships that align with globalisation efforts and provide essential support for value chain expansion.
- Create networks of organisations for strategic partnering, each contributing essential core capabilities to compete successfully in value chain networks.
- Engage with a community of manufacturing and supply chain experts to navigate internationalisation efforts.
- Establish a dedicated innovation hub to support value chain development

A.2.4 Foster interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaborations.

- Involve stakeholders such as private entities in decision making when defining priorities, new project ideas, project contents and collaborative action. Synergies may be exploited by the immaterial instruments with the help of Quadruple Helix Model securing the open innovation.

B Challenge: Awareness building

Across all four countries, stakeholders emphasised challenges in accessing EIC funding due to limited awareness and visibility of programs.

B.1 Strategy: Establish and showcase clusters

Proposed Actions:

B.1.1 Establish clusters and showcase them at matchmaking events to enhance competitiveness for EIC funding.

- Identify relevant stakeholders, such as research institutions, industry players, and local authorities, who share common interests in areas like climate, energy, and mobility.
- Present a given cluster's achievements, goals, and collaboration opportunities during matchmaking events.
- Showcase relevant profiles during matchmaking events to attract potential partners and investors.
- Leverage digital platforms, social media, and dedicated websites to promote a cluster. Highlight success stories, ongoing projects, and innovative solutions developed within the cluster.
- Collaborate with cluster members to identify EIC funding opportunities aligned with the cluster's objectives. Prepare strong project proposals that demonstrate the cluster's added value, impact, and feasibility.
- Offer funding opportunities to create new clusters in underrepresented sectors.
- Develop a mentorship program linking cluster members with EIC project veterans.

B.1.2 Promote stronger involvement of local and regional media in promoting innovation culture and opportunities.

- Elaborate case studies, profiles and success stories of ecosystem stakeholders, local researchers, innovators, and entrepreneurs in deep tech to increase coverage of deep tech innovation in local and regional media
- Recognition for innovation as well as new initiatives

B.1.3 State of the ecosystem report and an ecosystem map and health check with regular updates.

- Define an actor (for each country/region), if not yet defined, to carry out state of the ecosystem analysis consisting of an ecosystem map, health check, including stakeholders, regional and national funding instruments, key policies, recent developments, and success, and also failure stories.
- The report will help local and international stakeholders to navigate the ecosystem and its potential opportunities.
- The report should be updated every two years.

B.1.4 Forecasting and market intelligence.

- Determine appropriate levels (country, region, smart locations, university, clusters) to fund and carry out regular forecasting and market intelligence reports.

B.2 Strategy: Engage in collaborative efforts with the EIC

Proposed Actions:

B.2.1 Organise information sessions, workshops, and training programs to raise awareness about the EIC and its support mechanisms, with particular focus on EIC key criteria and complementary pathways to EIC (EEN, EIT Fast track, Plug in).

- Policy efforts should prioritise enhancing awareness of EIC funding opportunities through targeted campaigns, webinars, and educational initiatives.
- Launch multi-channel campaigns designed to raise awareness about EIC funding programs, instruments, and support services that are relevant to the specific needs of target regions.
- Develop an online learning platform offering courses, tutorials, and resources on EIC funding opportunities. This platform will include interactive modules, quizzes, and a certification process upon course completion.
- Increase dissemination of information and provide detailed guidance for applicants, which is a shared concern among stakeholders.
- Engage in collaborative efforts with the EIC, including organising events and introducing investment programs, to drive innovation within the business community.
- Detect possible candidate companies in the early stages to accompany them and prepare them better when the time of application arrives.

B.2.2 Broadcast EIC funding opportunities, success stories, best practices, and upcoming events.

- Provide tailored content considering the needs of emerging innovation ecosystems and regions.
- Disseminate inspiring success stories to increase awareness of EIC and deep tech innovation.
- Enable collection of success stories in a dedicated online open access repository. A best practice repository will be offered online through [RinnoValleys website](#) to be used by EU regions.
- Establish an "EIC Champions" initiative to recognize and utilize successful applicants as ambassadors
- Develop an EIC-tailored FAQ guide for applicants.

B.2.3 Ecosystem partner label for ecosystem supporters in the regions.

- Establish a label system for key innovation stakeholders who will be responsible for activities promoting the action plan objectives, such as awareness building or being a network intermediary at the local level.
- The entities should pass a training program to ensure they are familiarised with key instruments, stakeholders etc.
- The labelled organisations are part of the regional innovation ecosystem working group locally.
- The entities with an ecosystem partner label will be added in an online catalogue, improving awareness of these actors to promote ecosystem development.

C Challenge: Capacity building

Capacity-building initiatives play a pivotal role in enhancing the skills and resources available within local communities. The proposed activities to enhance innovation capacity of regions with limited capacity can include providing training programs, workshops, mentorship opportunities, and access to resources such as incubators and accelerators.

C.1 Strategy: Promote support to encourage and assist EIC applicants

Proposed Actions:

C.1.1 Establish regional helpdesks to provide personalised assistance to regions in navigating the EIC ecosystem.

- Offer regional/national support to encourage and assist EIC applicants, as well as facilitating their participation in EU funding programs. This support is highlighted as crucial in encouraging, selecting, and helping EIC applicants across all countries.
- Capacity building of innovation ecosystem stakeholders in EIC and other HE high TRL opportunities.
- Organise workshops face to face with national EIC NCPs and strengthen their connection, including through EEN.

C.1.2 Develop online resources and toolkits to guide regions through the EIC application process and provide necessary support.

Materials can be available online on an open access basis. We will look for synergies with existing EIC NCP projects or design a hosting organisation.

C.1.3 Build capacity to give pre-application assessment and guidance to key stakeholders.

- Stakeholders should invest in capacity building to improve expertise in preparing EIC applications, focusing on business implications alongside technological/scientific aspects, and consortium formation.
- Best practices, such as Centre's for the Development of Industrial Technology - CDTI's EIC pre-assessment tool, can be replicated in other countries to facilitate the assessment of suitability of startups for the EIC.
- A pre-application review board to provide early-stage feedback.
- Training programs to upskill grant writers and project managers.

C.1.4 Strengthen entrepreneurial capacity and commercialisation support to researchers.

- Replicate best practices in entrepreneurship training at all academic levels.
- Develop capacities in TTOs to provide hands on support to researchers for research commercialisation.
- Develop different tiers of entrepreneurship skills training and services for different types of researcher stages, profiles (early, late career, researcher to entrepreneur, researcher to collaborator with private sector, women entrepreneurs, IP aspects).
- Integrate innovation performance into the researcher evaluation system.
- Create Web 3.0 platform using blockchain to secure research results and their IP for researchers, facilitating and de-risking the lab to market process.

C.2 Strategy: Address language barriers to enhance international connections

Proposed Actions:

C.2.1 International learning and collaboration.

- Address language barriers to enhance international connections and promote collaboration among ecosystem stakeholders.
- Key stakeholders should have a strategic mandate to increase exchange and collaborate on joint projects.
- Coordinate among local actors and KICs, involving strong regional actors.

C.2.2 Stimulate Collaboration and Networking.

- Organize regional innovation forums to facilitate networking, knowledge sharing, and collaboration between academia and industry. These forums should include panel discussions, pitch sessions, and networking events.
- Establish inter-regional innovation networks to connect innovators across regions. These networks will foster collaboration through online platforms, regular meetings, and joint projects.

C.2.3 International talent attraction

- Act as a lobby to influence regulation for talent attraction, including faster and less bureaucratic process for work permits for international deep tech talent. An option is to create special programmes to pilot new approaches of talent attraction in specific deep tech domains or diaspora targeted instruments.
- Create language integration programs for international researchers and professionals.
- Develop a think tank for innovation-driven talent attraction.

C.3 Strategy: Overcome budget constraints by alternative funding

Proposed Actions:

C.3.1 Enhance Innovation Infrastructure.

- Enhance access to incubators and accelerators to support startups and SMEs. Foster financial support or grants to increase the number of startups participating in these programs.

C.3.2 Create a [funding opportunity tracker](#) with the calls that are relevant for capacity building of the key stakeholders.

- Find synergies with broader objectives and leverage resources to strengthen key stakeholders' capacities and local innovation system interconnectedness, support, and funding capacity.
- Overcome budget constraints by exploring and utilising alternative funding sources.

C.3.3 Regional funding for capacity building

- Create national funding programs connecting local innovators with national and EU funding sources. This should include initiatives such as seed funding, grants, and financial advisory services.
- Implement STEM education programs in schools and universities. These programs should include workshops, coding boot camps, internships, and scholarships aimed at cultivating a new generation of innovators.
- Offer entrepreneurship training programs to equip individuals and/or researchers/academics with the necessary skills to start and grow businesses. These programs should cover essential areas such as business planning, financial management, marketing, and legal aspects.

D Challenge: Information sharing and process simplification

D.1 Strategy: Streamline application processes and provide clearer guidelines

Proposed Actions:

D.1.1 Ensure transparency in the evaluation process and provide feedback to regions on their applications.

- Stakeholders struggle with lengthy evaluations, tight budgets, and conflicting assessments due to evaluator disagreements.
- Carry out meta-analysis of national applications to give consolidated feedback on key improvement areas for EIC applicant companies.
- Follow up Widening Countries EIC study with new participatory process from end users and NCPs to ensure implementation of targeted support measures, process streamlining and monitoring of progress and impact of measures in improving access to EIC in widening regions.

- Improve transparency of expert evaluator selection.

D.1.2 Streamline application processes and provide clearer guidelines to reduce excessive bureaucracy.

- EIC should streamline the application process with co-participation of end users and NCPs to ensure a relevant process, respectful of candidates' time.
- The application process should ensure to provide enough guidance to allow less entrepreneurially skilled companies to develop appropriate responses.
- Ideally key sections can be accompanied by a link to webinar videos where an expert explains what is expected.
- Introduce clear guidelines and templates to assist regions in preparing their applications. Namely, step by step guidance on what is expected and understood in the application forms is crucial to ensure more consistent understanding.
- Develop a region or country -specific EIC application guide with case studies.
- Create a "common mistakes" repository to help avoid pitfalls.

D.2 Strategy: Prioritise initiatives around thematic areas

Proposed Actions:

D.2.1 Diffuse EIC and related HE opportunities with Smart Specialisation clusters in each country.

- Prioritise initiatives around thematic areas to focus efforts and resources on specific areas of innovation and collaboration.
- Leverage existing S3 networks to diffuse EIC and related HE opportunities.
- Map local unique strengths to EU priorities for thematic alignment

D.2.2 Streamline the process for awarding co-funding in strategically important projects.

- Strategically important projects, considering the needs of a specific country or region, should be able to get confirmation of co-funding already at the application stage
- Coordinate the approach for seeking international support for local activities
- Pilot thematic innovation labs focusing on green and digital transitions

D.3 Strategy: Cultivate cooperation among ecosystem stakeholders

Proposed Actions:

D.3.1 Establish a mechanism for sharing knowledge and experiences among regions to facilitate mutual learning and collaboration.

- End users can submit feedback from their evaluation results and application process. This should allow consolidated feedback by evaluator, making it easier to pick up if there seems to be consistent bias.
- EIC NCPs, innovation ecosystem stakeholders and end users should have access to training material, programme information, masterclasses, and best practices on EIC.

D.3.2 Replicate good practice for diffusion (regular workshops, tailored diffusion...).

- Cultivate cooperation among ecosystem stakeholders to build a supportive and collaborative environment for EIC applicants.
- Create centralised information sources that can be used and adapted for training for different audiences.
- Create training course outlines, learning outcomes and accompanying tools (such as quizzes) to evaluate participants' knowledge.

D.3.3 Develop a Unified Regional Innovation Policy Framework.

- Develop a standardized framework for regional innovation policies to address common challenges and promote best practices. This unified policy framework should include key components such as funding mechanisms, regulatory support, R&D incentives, and collaboration initiatives.
- Create a stakeholder feedback loop for policy improvements
- Host annual innovation forums focused on cross-sector collaboration

4 Roles and Responsibilities for Implementation

The establishment of a dedicated task force team is essential for the efficient execution of the action plan. Involving stakeholders throughout the process ensures that the strategies and interventions proposed are aligned with the unique needs and priorities of each region. The task force also will ensure that the relevant stakeholders, as policymakers, enterprises, academic institutions, and regional organisations, are actively involved.

The first significant event in the execution of the Action Plan was the Task Force Team Kick-off Event, held on September 24th and 25th, 2024, at NIÜ premises in Budapest. This event set the foundation for future collaboration and was designed to establish a shared understanding among all partners and stakeholders involved. The event facilitated knowledge sharing, peer learning, and the introduction of key strategies and objectives.

The following table includes the actions and strategies and establishes the profiles responsible for their implementation. The table provides recommendations for specific sectors to take **a leading role** in implementing the action plan. However, the involvement of other sectors is also necessary to ensure comprehensive and successful execution.

Table 4. Roles and responsibilities for action plan implementation - Leading Stakeholder Category per Action

	GOVERNMENT	ACADEMIA	INDUSTRY	CIVIL SOCIETY
A. COLLABORATION AND NETWORKING				
A.1 Involve companies and research institutions in collaborative projects				
Promote better connections between Academia and Enterprise through the development of new initiatives and implementation of best practices.	X	X	X	X
Encourage the formation of consortia to strengthen regional applications and increase their competitiveness.	X	X		X
Local deep tech innovation radar to seek for new networking and innovation project opportunities.	X	X	X	
A.2 Form strategic links based on value chains				

	GOVERNMENT	ACADEMIA	INDUSTRY	CIVIL SOCIETY
Promote collaboration in smart specialisation sectors to strengthen innovation ecosystems and their interconnectedness.	X	X	X	
Facilitate matchmaking events, networking sessions, and brokerage events to connect regions with potential partners, investors, and experts.	X			X
Form strategic links based on value chains to support international expansion and maximise contributions to specific value chains.	X		X	X
Foster interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaborations.			X	X
B. AWARENESS BUILDING				
B.1 Establish and showcase clusters				
Establish clusters and showcase them at matchmaking events to enhance competitiveness for EIC funding.	X	X	X	X
Promote stronger involvement of local and regional media in promoting innovation culture and opportunities.	X			X
State of the ecosystem report and an ecosystem map with regular updates.	X			X
Forecasting and market intelligence.	X			X
B.2 Engage in collaborative efforts with the EIC				
Broadcast EIC funding opportunities, success stories, best practices, and upcoming events.	X			X
Ecosystem partner label for ecosystem supporters in the regions.	X		X	

	GOVERNMENT	ACADEMIA	INDUSTRY	CIVIL SOCIETY
C. CAPACITY BUILDING				
C.1 Promote support to encourage and assist EIC applicants				
Establish regional helpdesks to provide personalised assistance to regions in navigating the EIC ecosystem.	X			
Develop online resources and toolkits to guide regions through the EIC application process and provide necessary support.	X			
Build capacity to give pre-application assessment and guidance to key stakeholders.	X	X		
Strengthen entrepreneurial capacity and commercialisation support to researchers.	X	X		
C.2 Address language barriers to enhance international connections				
International learning and collaboration.	X		X	
Stimulate Collaboration and Networking.	X			X
International talent attraction	X		X	
C.3 Overcome budget constraints by alternative funding				
Enhance Innovation Infrastructure	X			
Create a funding opportunity tracker with the calls that are relevant for capacity building of the key stakeholders.	X			X
Regional funding for capacity building	X			
D. INFORMATION SHARING AND PROCESS SIMPLIFICATION				
D.1 Streamline application processes and provide clearer guidelines				
Ensure transparency in the evaluation process and provide	X			

	GOVERNMENT	ACADEMIA	INDUSTRY	CIVIL SOCIETY
feedback to regions on their applications.				
Streamline application processes and provide clearer guidelines to reduce excessive bureaucracy.	X			
D.2 Prioritise initiatives around thematic areas				
Diffuse EIC and related HE opportunities with Smart Specialisation clusters in each country.	X			
Streamline the process for awarding co-funding in strategically important projects.	X			
D.3 Cultivate cooperation among ecosystem stakeholders				
Establish a mechanism for sharing knowledge and experiences among regions to facilitate mutual learning and collaboration.	X	X	X	X
Replicate good practice for diffusion (regular workshops, tailored diffusion...).	X			X
Develop a Unified Regional Innovation Policy Framework.	X			

5 Monitoring and Evaluation

A specific Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Plan is designed to ensure the effective implementation and assessment of the RinnoValleys' Transnational Joint Action Plan. This plan outlines the approach to monitoring the progress of actions and evaluates the effectiveness of strategies in achieving the objectives set out in the Action Plan. The M&E process will ensure that the action plan remains on track, that resources (mostly Human Resources) are being utilized efficiently, and that any necessary adjustments are made to improve outcomes.

5.1. Monitoring Objectives

The monitoring objectives focus on tracking the implementation of the strategies outlined in the Action Plan and ensuring that they address the identified challenges. The key objectives for monitoring are:

- **Track Progress:** Ensure that all actions and strategies are being implemented, and monitor progress against the set objectives.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Involve all relevant stakeholders throughout the monitoring process to ensure inclusivity, and that regional needs and priorities are being met.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Maintain clear communication and reporting mechanisms, ensuring transparency in decision-making and accountability for deliverables.
- **Impact Evaluation:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and activities to determine if they are contributing to the overall success of the Action Plan.

5.2. Monitoring Tasks and Responsibilities

Task Force Team Coordination: The Task Force Team is responsible for overseeing the monitoring process. This includes ensuring that all partners and stakeholders are engaged, that actions are on track, and that the overall strategy is being adhered to. The Task Force will meet at regular intervals (every 6 months) to assess progress and make necessary adjustments. Responsible team members: Task Force Team leaders and partner organizations (Acceler8, Envolve, ACCIÓ, NIÜ, SERN, NACEC (CEAI)).

Strategy-Specific Monitoring: For each strategy in the Action Plan, specific monitoring mechanisms will be established to assess progress:

- **Networking and Collaboration:** Monitor the number of new partnerships, events held, and consortia formed. Success will be tracked through participation rates and the outcomes of matchmaking events.
- **Awareness Building:** Track the success of awareness-building initiatives through the number of events held, the level of stakeholder engagement, and media coverage.
- **Capacity Building:** Monitor the success of training and capacity-building efforts through the number of programs offered, the participation levels, and feedback from participants.
- **Information Sharing and Process Simplification:** Track the implementation of simplified processes and the dissemination of knowledge through the number of updated guidelines and the use of knowledge-sharing platforms.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): KPIs will be developed for each strategy to measure progress quantitatively and qualitatively. Some sample KPIs include:

- **Networking:** Number of partnerships formed, number of consortia created, number of matchmaking events conducted.
- **Awareness Building:** Number of events organized, number of stakeholders attending, amount of media coverage generated, number of success stories shared.
- **Capacity Building:** Number of training sessions conducted, number of participants, quality of feedback, number of tools and resources created.
- **Information Sharing:** Number of guidelines produced, number of stakeholders accessing platforms, number of knowledge-sharing sessions held.

The detailed KPIs are presented in Tables below.

Feedback Mechanisms: Continuous feedback from stakeholders is essential to the monitoring process. This will be collected through surveys, interviews, and periodic stakeholder meetings, ensuring that the needs of all regions are being addressed. Participation rates in events, workshops, and training will be regularly monitored, and feedback will be analyzed to improve future activities.

Responsible team members: Task Force Team will coordinate feedback collection and analysis.

Progress Reports: Bi-annual progress reports will be prepared by the Task Force Team to assess the overall progress of the Action Plan. These reports will include:

- A summary of the activities and events conducted.
- An update on the progress of each strategy.
- Performance evaluation based on KPIs.
- A list of challenges and how they were addressed.

- Plans for the next phase of implementation, including any adjustments to strategies or timelines.

Final Evaluation: A final evaluation will be conducted to assess the overall effectiveness of the Action Plan in achieving its objectives. This evaluation will focus on:

- **Achievement of Objectives:** Assess whether the strategies and activities successfully addressed the regional challenges and met the objectives of the Action Plan.
- **Effectiveness of Strategies:** Evaluate the impact of each strategy in achieving its intended outcomes and contributing to the overall success of the project.
- **Sustainability:** Analyze the long-term sustainability of the initiatives and partnerships formed during the 5 - years Action Plan, including the continued impact on regional innovation ecosystems.
- **Lessons Learned:** Identify best practices, challenges encountered, and lessons learned to inform future initiatives.

In the following tables we present the KPIs that are analyzed for each proposed action and under each strategy, as were developed under the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (D.6.3) of the Action Plan. **Important Note:** The countries involved in the Action Plan vary in size, and the provided numbers are based on an average country with a population of 10 million. These numbers should be adjusted proportionally to reflect each country's or region's actual population and local needs.

A. Collaboration and Networking

Activity	KPIs
A.1 Involving companies and research institutions in collaborative projects	
<p>Promote better connections between Academia and Enterprise through new initiatives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of collaborations formed between academic institutions and companies per year. Target: 8 collaborations annually, Total: 40 over 5 years. ● % Increase in joint research projects. between academia and enterprise per 2 years. Target: 20% increase biennially. ● Stakeholder satisfaction rate (survey-based annually) post-collaboration events. Target: 80% satisfaction rate by Year 3, increasing to 90% by Year 5.

<p>Encourage the formation of consortia to strengthen regional applications</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of consortia formed (regional or cross-regional) per year: Target: 3 consortia annually, resulting in 15 consortia over 5 years. ● Annual % Increase in successful funding applications involving consortia: Target: 15% annually. ● Number of policymakers engaged in incentivizing consortia formation Target: 25 policymakers per year, reaching 125 by Year 5.
<p>Local deep tech innovation radar to seek new networking opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of deep tech opportunities identified and ranked. Target: 15 opportunities per year, totaling 75 by Year 5. ● Number of projects categorized as "world-class" or "highly competent." Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of cases submitted to local/EU calls based on innovation radar findings. Target: 10 annually, totaling 50 by Year 5. ● Stakeholder feedback on the effectiveness of the innovation radar. Target: 85%.
<p>A.2 Forming strategic links based on value chains</p>	
<p>Promoting collaboration in smart specialization sectors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of partnerships formed in smart specialization sectors. Target: 4 partnerships annually, totaling 20 by Year 5. ● Number of networking events held to connect stakeholders from S3 sectors. Target: 5 events annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Amount of funding leveraged for S3 sector innovation (including EIC, local investments). Target: €2M annually, totaling €10M by Year 5 ● % Increase in successful applications from S3 regions. Target: 15% annually.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of matchmaking events held. Target:

<p>Facilitate matchmaking events and networking sessions</p>	<p>12 annually, totaling 60 by Year 5.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of participants attending matchmaking sessions. Target: 400 participants annually, totaling 2.000 by Year 5. ● Number of new collaborations formed post-event. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Participant satisfaction rate post-event. Target: 85% by Year 3, increasing to 90% by Year 5.
<p>Forming strategic links to support international expansion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of strategic international partnerships formed. Target: 3 annually, totaling 15 by Year 5. ● Number of organizations involved in value chain development. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● % Growth in international trade or expansion (if applicable). Target: 2% annually. ● Number of value chain opportunities identified for internationalization. Target: 8 annually, totaling 40 by Year 5.
<p>Foster interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaborations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of <u>cross-sector collaborations</u> initiated. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● % Increase in the number of interdisciplinary projects. Target: 10% annually, achieving 50% by Year 5.

B. Awareness-Building

Activity	KPIs
B.1 Establishing and showcasing clusters	
<p>Establishing clusters and showcasing them at matchmaking events to enhance competitiveness for EIC funding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of clusters established and showcased at matchmaking events. Target: 1 cluster annually, totaling 5 by Year 5. ● Number of new partnerships and collaborations resulting from cluster matchmaking events. Target: 3 annually, totaling 15 by Year 5. ● % Increase in EIC funding applications linked to showcased clusters. Target: 10% annually, achieving a 50% increase by Year 5.
<p>Promote stronger involvement of local and regional media in promoting innovation culture and opportunities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of media outlets involved in promoting deep tech innovation. Target: 50 annually, totaling 250 by Year 5. ● Number of case studies and success stories published by local/regional media. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Engagement rate (shares, comments, likes) on social media platforms. Target: 20% annual growth, achieving a 100% increase by Year 5.
<p>State of the ecosystem report and an ecosystem map with regular updates.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of ecosystem reports and maps produced. Target: 5 reports (one every year). ● Frequency of updates Target: Yearly. ● Number of stakeholders using the ecosystem report to navigate opportunities. Target: 1000 by Year 5. ● Stakeholder satisfaction rate with the ecosystem report. Target: 85% satisfaction.
<p>Forecasting and market intelligence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of market intelligence reports produced. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of stakeholders engaged in market intelligence sessions. Target: 1000 by Year 5. ● % of stakeholders reporting improved market understanding after receiving intelligence reports. Target: 20% annually.

B.2 Engaging in collaborative efforts with the EIC	
<p>Organise information sessions, workshops, and training programs to raise awareness about the EIC and its support mechanisms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of information sessions, workshops, and training programs held. Target: 5 per year, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of participants in EIC training sessions. Target: 100 participants annually, totaling 500 by Year 5. ● % Increase in awareness of EIC funding opportunities among regional stakeholders (survey-based). Target: 10% annually, achieving 50% growth by Year 5. ● Number of new applicants who participated in EIC programs. Target: 15 annually, totaling 75 by Year 5.
<p>Broadcast EIC funding opportunities, success stories, best practices, and upcoming events.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of EIC funding opportunities broadcasted. Target: 5 opportunities annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of success stories and best practices disseminated. Target: 5 stories annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of engagements (views, shares) with broadcasted content. Target: 100 annually, totaling 500 by Year 5. ● Number of success stories collected and available in the online repository. Target: 25 by Year 5.
<p>Ecosystem partner label for ecosystem supporters in the regions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of ecosystem partners trained and awarded the partner label. Target: 5 per region annually, totalling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of ecosystem partners listed in the online catalogue. Target: 10 per annually, totalling 50 by Year 5. ● % Increase in local awareness of labelled ecosystem partners. Target: 20% annually, achieving 80% by Year 5. ● Number of activities led by labelled ecosystem partners (workshops, matchmaking, etc.). Target: 10 annually, totaling 50 by Year 5.

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C. Capacity Building

Activity	KPIs
C.1 Promoting support to encourage and assist EIC applicants	
Establish regional helpdesks to provide personalized assistance to regions in navigating the EIC ecosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of regional help desks established. Target: 1 help desk per region by Year 2, totaling 5 by Year 5. • Number of stakeholders assisted by helpdesks. Target: 40 per region annually. • % of EIC applicants reporting improved application process support. Target: 80% satisfaction.
Develop online resources and toolkits to guide regions through the EIC application process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of online resources and toolkits developed. Target: 3 by Year 2, with periodic updates in Years 3 and 5. • Number of online resources accessed/downloaded. Target: 1000 accesses/downloads per year, totaling 5000 by Year 5 (the target will be reassured with engagement of the Task Force in specific dissemination strategies). • % of stakeholders finding the resources helpful (via feedback surveys). Target: 85%.
Build capacity to give pre-application assessment and guidance to key stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of stakeholders receiving pre-assessment support. Target: 5 per region annually, totaling 125 by Year 5. • % of applicants reporting improved readiness after receiving pre-assessment. Target: 85% satisfaction. • Number of best practice tools, such as the CDTI's pre-assessment tool, replicated. Target: By Year 5, 10 tools replicated, ensuring full adoption across all 5 participating regions.
Strengthen entrepreneurial capacity and commercialization support to researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of entrepreneurship training programs conducted. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. • Number of researchers participating in

	<p>commercialization training. Target: 10 researchers per region annually, totaling 50 researchers annually, and 250 researchers by Year 5.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs) receiving capacity-building support. Target: 5 TTOs in year 1, 10 by year 5. ● Number of researchers transitioning to entrepreneurship post-training. Target: 10 per region annually, totaling 250 by Year 5.
<p>C.2 Addressing language barriers to enhance international connections</p>	
<p>International learning and collaboration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of international collaborations established. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of international joint projects successfully launched. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Feedback score on language and communication barriers addressed in international collaborations (Real-time translation Services during workshops/matchmaking events, Multilingual Resources- key documents, application guidelines, key info sessions-, Cultural sensitivity training) Target: Year 5, 90% positive feedback score, demonstrating effective and sustained resolution of communication barriers through comprehensive language support and cultural sensitivity training.
<p>International talent attraction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of new international deep tech talent attracted. Target: 5 per region annually, totaling 125 by Year 5. ● Number of regulations or policies changed to support talent attraction. Target: 5 by Year 5. ● Number of specific programs or initiatives launched to attract talent. Target: 1 per year.
<p>C.3 Overcoming budget constraints by alternative funding</p>	
<p>Enhance Innovation Infrastructure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of incubators and accelerators supporting startups and SMEs. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of new startups and SMEs participating

	<p>in /benefited by incubators and accelerators. Target: 50 annually, totaling 250 by Year 5.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Amount of financial support or grants provided to innovation infrastructure. Target: €2M annually, totaling €10M by Year 5.
<p>Create a funding opportunity tracker with relevant calls for capacity building</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of funding opportunities tracked and listed. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of stakeholders using the funding tracker. Target: 50 annually, totaling 250 by Year 5. ● Number of successful funding applications submitted by stakeholders. Target: 10 annually, totaling 50 by Year 5. ● % increase in regional funding applications compared to previous years. Target: 10% annually, achieving 50% by Year 5.
<p>Regional funding for capacity building</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of regional funding programs created. Target: 1 annually. ● Total amount of regional funding allocated to capacity building programs. Target: €1M annually, totaling €5M by Year 5. ● Number of startups or innovators receiving seed funding, grants, or financial advisory services. Target: 15 annually, totaling 75 by Year 5. ● Number of STEM education programs and entrepreneurial training programs implemented. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5.

D. Information Sharing and Process Simplification

Activity	KPIs
D.1 Streamlining application processes and providing clearer guidelines	
Ensure transparency in the evaluation process and provide feedback to regions on their applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● % of applicants' usefulness of feedback. Target: 85%. ● Number of targeted support measures implemented for regions based on feedback. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5.
Streamlining application processes and providing clearer guidelines to reduce excessive bureaucracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Time reduction in application processing compared to previous years. Target: 20% by Year 3, reaching 30% by Year 5. ● Number of guidelines and templates developed. Target: 2 annually, totaling 10 by Year 5. ● % of applicants who find the application process clear and easy to follow. Target: 85%. ● Number of webinar videos created for specific sections of the application. Target: 2 annually, totaling 10 by Year 5.
D.2 Prioritizing initiatives around thematic areas	
Diffuse EIC and related HE opportunities with Smart Specialisation clusters in each country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of thematic areas prioritized based on Smart Specialisation (S3). Target: 3 per region annually. ● Number of thematic events or workshops held to diffuse opportunities. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Percentage of regional stakeholders reporting increased understanding of EIC opportunities. Target: 80% by Year 3, increasing to 90% by Year 5
Streamlined and fast process for awarding co-funding in strategically important projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Time taken to confirm co-funding for strategically important projects. Target: Reduced by 20% by Year 3, reaching 30% by Year 5. ● Number of projects receiving early co-funding approval at the application stage. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● % of co-funding applications that are processed within the stipulated timeline. Target: 70% by

	<p>Year 3, increasing to 85% by Year 5.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of projects receiving international support due to coordinated efforts. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5.
<p>D.3 Cultivating cooperation among ecosystem stakeholders</p>	
<p>Establish a mechanism for sharing knowledge and experiences among regions to facilitate mutual learning and collaboration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of feedback submissions from end users and applicants. Target: 40 annually, totaling 200 by Year 5. ● Number of knowledge-sharing events organized (e.g., workshops, webinars). Target: 6 annually, totaling 30 by Year 5. ● Satisfaction rate of stakeholders on knowledge-sharing platforms and tools. Target: 85%.
<p>Replicate good practice for diffusion (regular workshops, tailored diffusion)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of workshops and diffusion events held annually. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of stakeholders attending diffusion workshops and events. Target: 500 annually, totaling 2.500 by Year 5. ● Number of new regions or actors adopting good practices shared in workshops. Target: 5 annually, totaling 25 by Year 5. ● Number of centralised information resources created and adapted for different audiences. Target: 2 annually, totaling 10 by Year 5.
<p>Develop a Unified Regional Innovation Policy Framework</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of regions adopting the unified policy framework. Target: 5 by Year 3, increasing to 15 by Year 5. ● Number of key components of the policy framework developed (e.g., funding mechanisms, regulatory support). Target: 5 by Year 5. ● Number of regional innovation policies aligned with the unified framework. Target: 10 by Year 5. ● Satisfaction rate from regional stakeholders on the effectiveness of the policy framework. Target: 85%.

5.3. Evaluation

The evaluation will take a comprehensive approach to assess both the process and outcome of the strategies implemented. It will include both formative and summative evaluations:

- **Formative Evaluation:** This will be conducted throughout the 5 years to assess the progress of activities, the efficiency of processes, and the immediate impacts of actions. It will help identify areas where adjustments are needed to improve the project's effectiveness.
- **Summative Evaluation:** This evaluation will take place at the end of the Action Plan's duration and will assess the overall success of the Action Plan in meeting its goals and objectives. It will focus on the outcomes, including whether the desired impacts were achieved and how the strategies contributed to addressing the key challenges identified in the Action Plan.

The evaluation methodology will include both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, such as surveys, interviews, and analysis of project outputs. Data from the monitoring phase will be analyzed to provide insights into the effectiveness and efficiency of each strategy. Additionally, stakeholder feedback and participation metrics will be integral in evaluating the relevance of the actions taken.

5.4. Stakeholder Engagement in Monitoring and Evaluation

Engaging stakeholders in both monitoring and evaluation processes will be of great importance in order to achieve success of this plan. The Task Force Team will ensure that key stakeholders from Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, and Spain (such as the Ministry of Development (Greece), Budapesti Műszaki Egyetem (Hungary), The Hatch Lab (Ireland), and Xjenza Malta (Malta)) are involved in both the monitoring and evaluation stages, ensuring that their perspectives and insights are integrated into the assessment process.

- **Stakeholder Involvement:** Regular feedback and evaluation sessions will be organized to gather input from all stakeholders involved in the Action Plan. This will ensure that regional perspectives are captured and that the strategies are continuously adjusted to meet evolving needs.
- **Monitoring Adjustments:** If monitoring identifies any barriers to success or challenges in implementation, the Task Force Team will act promptly to make necessary adjustments. This may involve reallocating resources, refining strategies, or revising timelines to ensure that objectives are met.

This Monitoring and Evaluation Plan is a critical tool to ensure the successful implementation of the Transnational Joint Action Plan. By systematically tracking progress, engaging stakeholders, and evaluating both processes and outcomes, the M&E plan will provide the necessary information to adjust strategies and ensure the sustainability of the initiatives. The overall goal is to foster a more connected, collaborative, and innovative ecosystem within the EU, with a lasting impact on regional development and cross-border cooperation.

6 Conclusion

The RinnoValleys project has outlined a comprehensive and strategic Joint Transnational Action Plan (JTAP) to address the key challenges and unlock the innovation potential of modest and moderate innovator regions in the EU, and improve access to the European Innovation Council. By leveraging the Quadruple Helix Model and incorporating participatory and inclusive approaches, the plan establishes a clear roadmap for fostering collaboration, raising awareness, building capacity, and simplifying processes across target regions.

The proposed strategies, promoting networking, awareness-building, capacity development, and process optimisation, address region-specific barriers to accessing the European Innovation Council (EIC). These actions aim to create connected, inclusive, and sustainable innovation ecosystems aligned with the New European Innovation Agenda (NEIA). This action plan also proposes measurable KPIs and monitoring, to ensure transparency and traceability of the objectives.

By focusing on the diversity of the partners, with different strengths and weaknesses, the RinnoValleys project envisions a more equitable and integrated EU innovation landscape. The Joint Transnational Action Plan establishes the foundations of a long-term project, enabling regions to capitalize on opportunities, attract investments, and foster innovation-driven enterprises that could improve their access to the EIC. This collaborative effort represents a critical step toward achieving a more competitive, inclusive, and sustainable European innovation ecosystem.

The involvement of stakeholders is crucial for the successful implementation of the action plan. Engaging stakeholders ensures that the strategies and interventions align with the unique needs and priorities of each region. We encourage stakeholders to collaborate on the recommended actions for effective execution.