



Connecting Research to the Growth of Rural Entrepreneurship

Policy Recommendation Workshop with the participation of 19 representatives from research projects and ecosystem organisations

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Impact Hub Athens

Contents

- Introduction: The Policy Connect series of multi-stakeholder workshops
- Policy Connect Workshop #01: Connecting research to market for sustainable entrepreneurship and social innovation
- Context: Sustainable entrepreneurship and the need to connect research to market

- Methodology and participants
- Key insights and next steps
- Policy recommendations
- Conclusion

Introduction: The Policy Connect series of multi-stakeholder workshops

Impact Hub Athens, in collaboration with the Google Foundation and in the framework of its 10-year anniversary of empowering the social and environmental innovation ecosystem, launched a series of empowerment events in Athens and across the Greek regions. The series focused on joint proposal development, commitment agreements, and policy recommendations. Its objective was to open a structured dialogue among different ecosystem stakeholders and to co-create practical proposals that can strengthen social and environmental entrepreneurship in Greece.

The Policy Connect series began in Athens through six policy recommendation focus groups. In parallel, regional stakeholder events for empowering entrepreneurship were organised in six regions of Greece, with an implementation horizon extending to April 2024.

The purpose of the series was to co-create and document a roadmap for joint proposals and shared commitments from a broad network of participants. This network included representatives of the research community, embassies and funding institutions, CSR executives from private companies, civil society actors, and governmental and municipal representatives. The common objective was to empower the entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem, with a focus on environmental sustainability in Greece.

The initiative was based on the belief that positive change does not happen in isolation. For this reason, the series aimed to create a strong network of connected spaces, groups, communities, accelerators, and incubators. Through this network, the participants explored how sustainable and participatory development, entrepreneurship, and innovation can be strengthened in ways that support resilience and environmental sustainability.

Policy Connect Workshop #01: Connecting research to market for sustainable entrepreneurship and social innovation

On 23 November 2023, Impact Hub Athens and the REMEDIIES project hosted a policy recommendation workshop dedicated to the connection between research, the market, sustainable entrepreneurship, and social innovation. The workshop brought together representatives from research organisations, European projects, businesses, associations, and

ecosystem actors to examine how knowledge and innovation can be translated into long-term local value.

The workshop was designed as a co-creation space. Participants exchanged perspectives on the conditions needed for research outcomes, European programmes, citizen science, and public awareness to support local businesses and communities with environmental and social purposes.

The discussion was organised around three guiding questions:

1. How can interventions from European programmes and financial tools be adopted sustainably and in the long term by the local communities for which they are designed and implemented?
2. How can the monetisation of research outcomes be accelerated so that these outcomes reach local businesses with environmental and social purposes, allowing them to evolve and modernise?
3. How can citizen science and public awareness promote the development of sustainability-oriented businesses at local level?

Through discussions, brainstorming, and collaborative exercises, participants explored the complex landscape of social innovation and identified key challenges and opportunities for driving positive change in local communities.

Context: Sustainable entrepreneurship and the need to connect research to market

Sustainable entrepreneurship refers to business activity that creates positive social, environmental, and economic impact while remaining viable and resilient over time. It moves beyond conventional profit-driven models by integrating sustainability principles into business operations, from product design and supply chains to community engagement and impact management.

In a context marked by climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality, impact entrepreneurship with an environmental focus has become increasingly important. Entrepreneurs who prioritise ethical practices, environmental stewardship, and social responsibility can contribute to innovation, inclusive growth, and a more sustainable future.

Impact Hub Athens works to strengthen a sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial ecosystem across Greece through incubation and acceleration programmes, entrepreneurial support clinics, and collaboration with multiple actors from the social and environmental innovation ecosystem. Research centres and organisations can play a key role in this effort by funding initiatives, supporting capacity building, and enabling networking between knowledge producers and market actors.

Evidence collected by Impact Hub Athens from qualitative and quantitative research pointed to several needs within the entrepreneurial community. Over the years, Impact Hub Athens has supported around 4,000 aspiring entrepreneurs. The Sustainable Development Goals most

frequently addressed by these entrepreneurs include reduced inequalities, climate action, gender equality, industry, innovation and infrastructure, sustainable cities and communities, and good health and wellbeing.

The community identified several skills that remain in short supply, including business model development, financial management, impact measurement, KPI and OKR design, partnership building, use of technological tools, and sustainability management, including circular practices. These needs indicate the importance of continuous learning and access to updated tools and methodologies.

Entrepreneurs also identified barriers to organisational development, including difficulty selling products and services, limited capacity to compete in procurement procedures, difficulty securing funding, and limited ability to deliver products and services at scale. These barriers are particularly relevant when considering how research outcomes can become practical, market-ready solutions.

At the same time, gaps remain between supply and demand across several parts of the ecosystem. Research does not always connect with market needs, legislators do not always connect with field realities, and funders do not always connect with the people and organisations directly driving change. Addressing these gaps requires social innovation understood as the process of developing, securing support for, and implementing novel solutions to social needs and problems. It also requires brokering dialogue across the public, private, academic, and nonprofit sectors.

Methodology and participants

The workshop welcomed representatives from research organisations, projects, businesses, and associations, including Cardimed, MC Greece, CIBOS, Athena Research Center, Piraeus Port Authority, Enterprise Greece, National Technical University of Athens, Dataphoria, Symbeeosis, P2P Lab, Helidoni Foundation, SYMBOLO, Urban Dig, and the Association of Producers and Traders of Fertilizers.

The methodology was based on facilitated co-creation. Participants were divided into three groups, each addressing one of the guiding questions. With the support of facilitators from Impact Hub Athens, each group identified opportunities and challenges, translated them into practical “do’s” and “don’ts”, clustered and prioritised them, and then sketched a roadmap identifying who should be involved, which resources are needed, and what type of action plan could follow.

Key insights and next steps

The first group focused on the long-term and sustainable adoption of European programmes and financial instruments for the benefit of local communities. The discussion underlined the need to design interventions that create lasting societal impact beyond the formal duration of a project.

The second group focused on the commercialisation and monetisation of research outcomes. The discussion highlighted the need to help research results reach local businesses more quickly, especially businesses with environmental and social purposes that need to modernise and grow.



The third group focused on citizen science and public awareness. Participants explored how community engagement, collective action, and accessible environmental knowledge can support local sustainability initiatives and impact-oriented businesses.

Top opportunities identified

- European funding opportunities can support local communities and societies. Relevant instruments include the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, Interreg programmes, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and Horizon Europe. These resources can enable communities to address local needs, strengthen social cohesion, support economic development, and foster sustainable growth.
- There is a growing trend towards local identity, authenticity, sustainability, and eco-friendly practices. Local production and conscious consumption are gaining ground, creating space for projects that reinforce sustainability and place-based value.
- Civil society activity around sustainability is increasing. Both informal groups and more organised initiatives are advocating for environmental action and seeking to maximise their impact within local communities.

Top challenges identified

- European programmes and financial tools do not always require direct collaboration with local entities and community groups. This can lead to weak local alignment, low trust, and limited long-term adoption. Innovative programmes may also be difficult for local communities to understand, while discontinuity, bureaucracy, and weak entrepreneurial culture can prevent pilots from reaching economic sustainability.
- The monetisation of research outcomes remains slow. There is often a disconnect between research results and local business needs, limited pathways for licensing or implementation, bureaucratic delays, lack of streamlined processes, and limited access to open market data in Greece.
- Citizen participation in local sustainability projects faces barriers linked to mistrust, inaccessible terminology, and the tension between personal and collective benefit. Sustainable practices often require effort and behaviour change, while citizens may be suspicious of external organisations or proposed innovations that affect existing local models.

Policy recommendations

Recommendation No1: Mandate the involvement of local organisations in consortia when actions target local communities.

Local organisations should be formally involved when programmes are designed for specific communities. Their participation can improve alignment with local needs, strengthen trust, support local businesses, and increase the likelihood that project results are adopted after the funding period ends.

Recommendation No2: Reduce programme discontinuity and create more stable pathways from research to implementation.

Funding bodies and programme designers should introduce measures that improve continuity, flexibility, and long-term impact. These may include more flexible eligible expenses, incentives for stakeholder participation, streamlined processes for translating research into marketable solutions, collaborative platforms linking research institutions and local businesses, and incubators focused on integrating research outcomes into business models.

Recommendation No3: Encourage citizen participation in the ideation, design, implementation, and evaluation of sustainable businesses.

Programmes should involve citizens throughout the full cycle of local sustainability initiatives. Participation should not be limited to awareness actions. Citizens should help define needs, shape proposals, support implementation, and evaluate outcomes. Clear motivations should be aligned with local community priorities to improve ownership and adoption.

Conclusion

The workshop confirmed that connecting academic research with entrepreneurship is essential for strengthening businesses that pursue long-term social and environmental impact. Research can provide evidence, innovation, and strategic insight, while entrepreneurs can translate this knowledge into practical services, products, and community-based solutions.

To unlock this potential, stronger links are needed between researchers, entrepreneurs, local communities, funders, policy actors, and support organisations. Collaborative structures, interdisciplinary approaches, and stronger research-to-market pathways can help create resilient, socially responsible, and environmentally conscious businesses.

The discussions also showed that sustainable entrepreneurship cannot grow through isolated action. It requires an ecosystem where research, entrepreneurship, policy, finance, and citizen participation interact continuously. Through this ecosystem approach, local communities can benefit from European programmes, research outcomes can become usable in the market, and sustainability initiatives can gain legitimacy and long-term relevance.