



FoodCoP

Fueling Startup Villages with Circular Bioeconomy Strategies

Sensemaking workshop report

Deliverable 5.1 (v1)

WP5 Community Building and Mobilisation

Task 5.1 Knowledge exchange and initial sensemaking workshops



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first sensemaking workshop of task 5.1 took place online on 28 April 2025. It gathered 7 Startup Villages (SUVs) and focused on learning extraction using a specific sensemaking methodology combining deep listening and reflective practices.

Each village shared one innovation project focusing on the challenges and learnings they encountered so far. A mix of projects was presented, depicting a few incubators but also specific projects like local herb supply chain in food products, fermented garlic, used cooking oils regenerated into cleaning products, etc.

Participants fully embraced the methodology, taking notes focusing on specific perspectives (ie. levers of change, stakeholder needs) but also participating in group reflections focusing on patterns, learnings, possibilities, and also key enablers for change.

Some of the key patterns emerging were the common need for funding, capacity development, deeper community engagement, and better communication tools, alongside the fact that they all need to influence policymakers more openly and strongly. The need to have more collaborative entrepreneurs, deeper farmer engagement, and a balance between social, economic, and environmental benefits was also strongly mentioned.

Regarding the possibility of accelerating change, the villages all agreed that staying connected and establishing regular meetings to exchange knowledge, support each other, but also co-designing together and even jointly applying for funding or drafting recommendations to policymakers, would be very beneficial.

The SUVs enjoyed the experience, we now need to keep the momentum going with further tasks in the FOODCOP project so that we can truly enable change through circular bioeconomy practices in food systems.

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INTRODUCTION

To facilitate knowledge exchange between Startup Villages (SUVs) part of the FoodCoP Consortium, Climate KIC organized a sensemaking workshop on 28 April 2025 to kick off the participatory approach of the project and start collecting insights and learnings. Knowledge exchange is essential to help villages learn from each other's experiences, avoid duplication of efforts, and co-develop solutions to shared challenges.

The main objectives of the session were to:

- Establish a community of practice between SUVs
- Enable knowledge exchange on food systems innovation (ambitions, connection points, broader learnings)
- Start thinking about possible actions and strategies to enable food systems transformation

The 6-hour workshop followed a specific 'sensemaking' methodology, combining deep listening and reflective sessions to be able to take multiple perspectives and generate insights.

Sensemaking is a way to make sense of the world so we can act in it. It encourages us to pause, take a step back, and reflect, but with the intention that it will help us advance further and make decisions to adapt, change, stop, or start new things. It is skewed towards action. Sensemaking is also a way to connect the dots, looking for interconnectedness, synthesis, emergence, feedback loops, dynamic equilibrium, and causality. It is therefore a very relevant methodology to connect the SUVs and support them to collectively work and learn together.

In the session, SUVs had a very active role by presenting and discussing some of their innovation experiments and then by taking part in group reflections to identify and explore potential synergies for advancing innovation in their field as well as unleashing potential new ideas for overcoming innovation challenges and capitalizing on opportunities that might emerge. The overall learning question of the session was 'How can we accelerate food systems transformation through circular bioeconomy practices to enhance environmental sustainability, drive economic growth, and community resilience?'

This report will follow the different steps of the methodology, first focusing on the SUVs' stories that were shared (the 'WHAT'), secondly on the reflections generated (the 'SO WHAT'), and finally on the ideas to take forward for implementation (the 'NOW WHAT').

1. WHAT IS HAPPENING? STORYTELLING FROM SUVs

In this storytelling session, SUVs presented a specific project (or infrastructure) of their village, answering the following questions:

- What is the goal of the project?
- What challenges have you encountered?
- What have you learned overall?
- What could accelerate change and the impact of this initiative?

While the SUVs were presenting, two harvesters (from Fundão and Killorglin) were taking notes on specific ‘sensemaking windows’. Sensemaking windows are a deep listening tool used to guide structured observation during discussions or presentations. Instead of taking general notes, each harvester listens through a specific “window”, a predefined lens or perspective, to extract targeted insights. This helps ensure that key dimensions of a complex conversation are captured in a focused and meaningful way.

One window was focusing on levers of change for innovation (ie. Individual behavior, organizational governance, policy, market structures, finance, technology, skills, information flows) and the other window was focusing on stakeholder needs mapping them on four quadrants (existing needs, emergent needs, unmet needs, met needs).

1.1 INNOVATION STORIES

The SUVs participating presented the following projects.

Fundão (Portugal) presented the Agrotech Centre, an old market place converted into an innovation lab gathering about 80 start-ups developing many different sustainability projects, such as fire prevention strategies for the village resilience and animal protection, cherry picking and local points of sales, or insect smart traps. The project plays a key role in modernizing local agriculture by providing innovative solutions and training to farmers. Challenges mentioned were around financial sustainability and expanding the network of partnerships.

Kočevje (Slovenia) presented a project called The Organic Herb Chain focusing on local harvesting, processing, packaging, and commercialisation of herbs, in that case as part of a chocolate bar. Another example of a company from the same incubator was presented, it is called Pr’ Polona (based on its founder’s name Polona) and is selling fermented garlic using unusable grown garlic for this locally produced product with many health benefits. Their challenges were mainly on stakeholder collaboration, the lack of facilitators in the incubator, the price increase of raw materials (for the herbs), time management, harvest management, as well as the importance of networking in their local community.

Penela (Portugal) presented about the HIESE incubator and more specifically about the EcoX startup transforming used cooking oils into eco-friendly cleaning products. One of

the main challenges mentioned was the need to raise awareness for the product to actually be sold, and the fact that we need strong, well-connected systems that deliver shared economic, social, and environmental benefits to deliver successful circular economy business models.

Thyrea and the Meraki people (Greece) presented about their bioeconomy training centre that focuses on educating and inspiring different audiences (ie. Youth, parents, corporates, governments, etc.) about bioeconomy, addressing local ecological challenges, and promoting regenerative practices to create sustainable nature-inspired business models. Their main challenges were the involvement of local people, the scaling of the new business models created, and how to integrate them into broader policy frameworks and ensure their long-term financial sustainability.

Killorglin (Ireland) presented a project called Inspired on the involvement of disabled people in local food supply chains. Some of the challenges encountered were about the project's sustainability in terms of funding and staff, and the willingness to expand it to cover more social inclusion and include corporates, and community-driven enterprises.

Camara de Lobos (Portugal) presented a project called Co.nTe - European Urban Initiative, which created a Resilience Living Lab, a community co-creation space to promote sustainable agricultural practices and local food chains. Some of the challenges mentioned were the lack of time of stakeholders and misaligned interests that may take place.

Startup Village	Country	Project Name	Focus Area	Challenges
Fundão	Portugal	Agrotech Centre	Agri-innovation lab, sustainability startups, fire prevention, local sales	Financial sustainability, expanding partnerships
Kočevje	Slovenia	Organic Herb Chain / Prâ€™™ Polona	Local herb processing and bio-product innovation (fermented garlic)	Stakeholder collaboration, raw material costs, incubator support
Penela	Portugal	EcoX	Used oil recycling into cleaning products	Product awareness, need for integrated systemic change
Thyrea (Meraki People)	Greece	Bioeconomy Training Centre	Education on bioeconomy and regenerative business models	Local engagement, policy integration, financial sustainability
Killorglin	Ireland	Inspired	Social inclusion in local food chains (focus on disability)	Funding, staffing, scaling for broader social inclusion

Câmara de Lobos	Portugal	Co.nTe - Resilience Living Lab	Community co-creation for local sustainable agriculture	Stakeholder time constraints, misaligned interests
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Table 1: summarizing the Startup Villages projects

1.2 EARLY REFLECTIONS AND PATTERNS

From the two window harvests (you can find screenshots in the appendix), we can see some patterns emerging among SUVs.

The key themes emerging from the levers of change window were the following:

- Funding is a big challenge, including long-term government funding to make incubators sustainable
- Low population and limited resources in villages lead to challenges around lack of time, stakeholder fatigue, lack of facilitators, etc.
- There is a need for skill training and support of start-ups to drive new products, services, and technology
- Knowledge sharing from innovative projects is key to engaging the communities

The key emerging needs identified from the stakeholder needs window were the following:

- Financial sustainability
- Deeper community engagement
- Expanding the network of partnerships
- Communication and dissemination of projects
- Building trust, ensuring transparency, and demonstrating tangible impact for effective stakeholder engagement
- Strong, well-connected systems that deliver shared economic, social, and environmental benefits
- Identifying and responding to real community needs for meaningful impact
- Scaling business models, integrating them into broader policy frameworks
- Using AI to analyze data, optimize processes, and find innovative solutions to the challenges mentioned
- Finding ways to increase local and sustainable food production
- Adapting agricultural and other activities to changing climate conditions
- Promoting resource reuse and waste reduction
- Expansion of social impact

The insights gathered through the two sensemaking windows, focused on *levers of change* and *stakeholder needs*, reveal a convergence of challenges and opportunities across the Startup Villages. Common barriers such as limited long-term funding, resource constraints, and the need for strong facilitation highlight structural issues that hinder innovation in rural contexts. At the same time, the stakeholder needs window

underscores the urgency for more strategic communication, inclusive community engagement, and the demonstration of tangible impacts. Together, these reflections point to a critical need for integrated, community-rooted approaches that combine financial sustainability, policy alignment, and technological innovation. These findings can directly inform the design of targeted interventions across FoodCoP work packages, ensuring that future activities are grounded in the real, evolving needs of rural innovators.

2. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR THE SUV'S? BALCONY REFLECTION

Following the initial project presentations and reflections, participants then engaged in two balcony reflections in breakout rooms.

The first reflection was high-level, focusing on the patterns they are observing (commonalities, exceptions, contradictions), the learnings, surprises, and inspirations emerging, as well as the possibilities they already see and the questions they are holding.

The second reflection was more focused and guided by the following questions:

- What conditions should be in place to accelerate change?
- What is needed to drive behaviour change?
- What is needed to drive structural change?
- What type of entrepreneur do we need to drive to enable circular bioeconomy innovation in agri-food?
- What role do farmers play in circular bioeconomies, and how to engage them in SUV initiatives?

2.1 FURTHER PATTERNS AND EMERGING LEARNINGS

To build on the patterns already mentioned in the storytelling part, other patterns (positive or negative), learnings, and reflections are listed below:

- There is a common strong will to make a difference; SUVs all have a desire to innovate, driven by a strong sense of community and similar concerns about environmental sustainability, economic growth, and social inclusion
- Communication tools stay quite safe and conventional, communication strategies should be prioritized, and be bolder (learning from big companies) to reach broader communities and have a lasting impact
- Funding is provided for the incubators, but it is not enough to drive new products and services in the bioeconomy sector and ensure that these new businesses do not die before they can scale and make a difference
- There is not enough buy-in from stakeholders to impact policy change at a national level
- The value of humility and openness — truly transformative projects need to listen deeply, adapt continuously, and invite collaboration, rather than assuming they already have all the answers
- The possibility to create big projects with small things and to adapt what others are doing into a local context
- Different strategies are needed for different audiences (ie communication, capacity building, etc.)
- Many projects mentioned how digital tools (for weather, soil management, planning) can speed up processes, make operations smarter, and reduce uncertainty
- A lot of innovative ideas presented were región-based, there is a question on how we can scale it nationally and/or spread in others parts of the country

- Gamification and Role play could Support innovation and decision making in these villages (for example considering Nature as a stakeholder having a seat at the table)
- There is a strong opportunity to share learnings on process, content and even form coalitions to raise funds and amplify impact together

Taken together, the reflections and observations reveal a strong alignment among Startup Villages in both ambition and the obstacles they face. Across geographies and project types, a shared commitment to innovation, sustainability, and community-centered transformation is evident. Yet common challenges, particularly in long-term funding, stakeholder engagement, and strategic communication, continue to hinder progress. There is a clear need to scale local successes, foster policy-level influence, and strengthen inter-village collaboration. Importantly, the insights highlight not only what is lacking, but also the creative potential within these communities: from leveraging digital tools to adopting adaptive, locally grounded strategies, and even reimagining participation through gamification. These shared patterns and aspirations form a crucial foundation for the next phases of FoodCoP and underline the need for collective learning, cross-regional support, and systemic approaches to rural food systems transformation.

2.2 ENABLING CONDITIONS

To deepen the learning from the Sensemaking Workshop, participants engaged in a second balcony reflection, allowing discussions to "step back" and collectively examine underlying patterns, systemic conditions, and leverage points for change. This reflective layer focused not on the individual projects, but on the broader enabling environment and transformations needed to make rural food system innovation effective and lasting.

Participants explored three interconnected dimensions:

1. **Conditions in place** – What enabling factors already exist in the ecosystem?
2. **Needs for Behaviour Change** – What mindsets, attitudes, and cultural shifts are necessary?
3. **Needs for Structural Change** – What systemic, infrastructural, and policy-level changes are required?

This reflection revealed not only recurring challenges but also powerful opportunities for targeted intervention. It emphasized the evolving roles of key actors, such as entrepreneurs, farmers, and policy advisors, and underscored the importance of community-led innovation, tailored communication, and structural support at every level.

The table below summarizes the main insights across these three dimensions, as gathered from workshop discussions, individual reflections, and real-life examples shared by the Startup Villages.

Conditions in place	Needs for Behaviour change	Needs for Structural change	Entrepreneur role	Farmer role and engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collaboration and learning exchange along the value chain – from farmer to consumer ▪ Sustainability plans at the end of the project to make change last ▪ Communities of best practice in food systems ▪ Funding for sustained change ▪ Educational programmes to support and guide best practice ▪ Visible early successes: Show small wins quickly ▪ Strong local engagement from the beginning, listening local needs and adapting existing projects ▪ Cross-sector partnerships ▪ Education and awareness building incl. access to local experts, strong research educational partnerships ▪ Access to digital/physical infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leverage the power of community to create solutions addressing their needs, values, meaning ▪ Growth mindset - willingness to change and adapt to new ways of living ▪ Awareness of individual responsibility - Building self-confidence, autonomy, and having a voice, be more involved in local initiatives, and believing this can make a change ▪ Willingness to collaborate not compete – open dialogue and inclusive participation ▪ Government to provide resources for sustained change (ie rewards) instead of relying on the community to drive all the changes needed ▪ Tailored communication ▪ Farmers and local populations need to see how new practices improve their lives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Open dialogue with policymakers (consultation, crowdsourcing) ▪ Policy Support and development at every level – local, regional, national ▪ Education systems reform to increase employability incl. recognized training for different audiences (ex: disabled people horticulture, social Enterprise,...) ▪ A data base of innovative hubs and villages that can interconnect and knowledge share ▪ Funding structures to support long-term change ▪ Participation in a community-driven or nationally driven strategic plan supported by the government ▪ Positioning Hubs and villages as centres for innovation hosting regular workshops, training, and knowledge-sharing events for farmers, schools, and businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Food scientist ▪ Horticultural entrepreneur ▪ Business-focused farmers ▪ Mission-driven ▪ Collaborative innovators, willing to share knowledge and partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advisor to policy makers and entrepreneurs ▪ Entrepreneurs themselves – grab new opportunities (ie. source of income) ▪ Enhanced role in planning and coordination of crop production, ensuring quality standards are met incl. management of soil health ▪ Share their experiences and opinions to co-create solutions ▪ Engage them with tangible examples they can visualise/ experience ▪ Provide training and mentoring to them and them to others (two way Street) ▪ Farmers as biomass suppliers

Table 2: Discussions on enabling conditions for food systems transformations

3. NOW WHAT IS POSSIBLE TO ACCELERATE CHANGE?

In the last part of the workshop, participants reflected on the intelligence to take forward, thinking about what could happen concretely to progress change and amplify impact as a network of SUVs. Their reflections were guided by four questions:

- What synergies can we see between SUVs?
- What opportunities are emerging?
- What are some insights / ideas/ recommendations to take forward?
- What can we do concretely?

The main synergies discussed were the following:

- A similar drive for innovation and sustainability
- Willingness to work together and learn from each other
- Need for training
- Need for funding
- Data collection to influence policy change and innovative practices
- Sustainability of projects and innovations

The emerging opportunities and ideas to take forward were the following:

- Collaborate with similar SUVs to either resolve similar challenges or explore growth opportunities together (ie. on new initiatives, products/services)
- Combine data collection to influence policy change and pivot existing ideas/services
- Form a coalition to join forces on similar subjects and challenges for funding, policy impact, etc. Including joint funding applications
- Joint venture for market expansion of products and produce, for example, establish Community-to-community trading mechanisms
- Twinning villages
- Leverage the Foodcop platform as a main social media platform for communication and cooperation
- Create a climate village network at the EU level / internationally
- Leverage resources between SUVs

Finally the ideas about what they could do concretely were:

- Establish regular meetings of the community of practice between SUVs dedicated to specific subjects of interest – could be ideation workshops, bi-monthly meetings to discuss updates and progressions, Deep dives, etc.
- Create a central space/group/forum where SUVs can share challenges but also success stories and real examples to both seek help and support others
- Organise networking events for collaboration, showcase
- Draft policy recommendations together to bring forward to government bodies

This final reflection session brought into focus the collective potential of the Startup Villages network. It confirmed a strong willingness among participants to move from isolated experimentation to strategic collaboration. Despite diverse contexts, many common challenges unite the villages, particularly around funding, training, visibility,

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and long-term sustainability. The emergence of concrete, network-based ideas such as joint ventures, shared advocacy efforts, and twinning mechanisms demonstrates a clear appetite for scaling impact through structured cooperation. The FoodCoP platform is seen as a critical enabler for this next phase, serving not just as a repository, but as a dynamic hub for exchange, visibility, and co-creation. These discussions provide a strong foundation for shaping the next steps in WP5, WP6, and WP7, embedding collaboration and shared learning at the core of FoodCoP's transformation agenda.

4. CONCLUSION

This first sensemaking workshop was a great opportunity to gather SUVs together, to have them talk to each other, learn together, and above all create a sense of community where they can find support, inspire one another, and consider partnering on specific challenges to ultimately accelerate change and amplify the impact they are trying to have on food systems.

Participants expressed a great appetite to meet again and establish a community of practice to learn together but also gets their hands dirty as a collaborative community to co-design, collect data, establish potential markets and apply for funds together.

The next task in this work package will be to organise further collaboration sessions that will build on these ideas and keep the momentum going to establish this community of practice in the long-term. Some examples of collaboration sessions could be around funding, communication, stakeholder engagement, or innovative mindsets.

5. ANNEXES

a. PARTICIPANT LIST

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b. SENSEMAKING WINDOWS

Can be accessed here:

<https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVIErMAnY=/>

